

Christ or Allah

Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

—Jesus, John 17:3, NASB

For demonstrating solidarity with Muslims by wearing a head scarf and stating that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, a Wheaton College professor was recently placed on administrative leave by that evangelical Christian institution. This incident again raises issues about the compatibility of Christianity and Islam. With Pope Francis, Christians are stating both religions worship the same God, and that between the deities the Bible and Koran reveal there's no essential difference (Or for that matter, with the God of Judaism either.).

The reasoning promoting sameness might go something like this:

Judaism is monotheistic;

Christianity is monotheistic;

Islam is monotheistic;

Therefore, all three religions worship the same God.

But before dealing with the question as to whether Muslims and Christians worship the "same" God, some preliminary points need to be made regarding the issue.

Love

Both Jesus and Paul ordered that Christians are to love, pray for and do good to all people, neighbors and enemies (Luke 10:27). Counteracting the established attitude of His day—"You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy"—Jesus said, "But I say unto you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44). The Apostle Paul added that Christian believers are to "do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Galatians 6:10; Compare Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14.). So the Christian faith gives no warrant for its believers to hate and do violence toward those people whose religions do not agree with theirs.

Unfortunately, Christian history informs us that Christians have not always acted the way Jesus tells them to, whether to those inside the church or outside the faith (e.g., martyrs, Crusades and Counter-Reformation, etc.). **[1]** So all confessed Christians should share Miroslav Volf's belief that, "Commitment to the properly understood love of God and neighbors makes deeply religious persons . . . into dedicated social pluralists." **[2]** Even though their faith differs, Christians are to seek to peacefully coexist with Muslims. But the overriding question becomes, will Jihad and the Islamic vision of a worldwide Caliphate or Christian Dominionism allow for it?

The Crusades

In an effort to seek some moral equivalency between Christianity and Islamic terrorism, some news commentators attempt to make an analogy between the Christian Crusades of the past and Islamic Jihad today, as if what the Crusaders did then provides understanding, if not justification, for what Islamic Jihadists are doing now. But between the two there is no equivalency, either historical or moral.

First, the historical circumstances are different. This is the modern world and not the Middle Ages (1096-1290). Though Christians used the sword back then, they do not appear to be doing so now. (To this point, it should be pointed out that the United States is not a Christian nation, either politically or morally. Where in any of this nation's founding documents do you see Christ's name mentioned? Do you think that the moral filth promoted in and by our culture arises from a "Christian" nation?) Furthermore, to the extent that Crusaders used the sword then they disobeyed Christ even if the goal was to liberate Christian holy sites from Muslim control. We should also note that today Islamists, not Christians, are pursuing Jihad. Islamic extremists are decapitating Christians. Christians are not decapitating Muslims. And finally, the goal of radical Islam is to establish a world government on earth (a Caliphate) governed by Shariah law as codified from *The Quran* and Muhammad's sayings (i.e., the *hadith*). The difference between the Crusades on the one hand and Jihad on the other is that of liberation as opposed to domination. When the kingdom comes then let Jesus bring it (Matthew 6:10). Until He does, we are to remember what Jesus told His disciples.

My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.
 —John 18:36, NASB

In short, there is no moral equivalency between the Christian Crusades of the Middle Ages and Islamic Jihad today. This having been stated, we turn now to the question: Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

The Question

On the dedication page of *Allah: A Christian Response* (the book which stimulated the Wheaton professor Larycia Hawkins to take her public solidarity-stance with Muslims), Yale theologian Miroslav Volf dedicated his book as follows:

To my father, a Pentecostal minister who admired Muslims, and taught me as a boy that they worship the same God as we do. [3]

In advocating some sort of solidarity between the Gods (i.e., Christ and Allah, and by implication, Jehovah too), Volf is not alone. [4] In 2009, in a document titled *A Common Word Between Us and You*, scores of Muslim leaders and scholars sought reconciliation with Christians for purpose of mutual understanding and peace between the great monotheistic faiths descended from Abraham; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. [5] In response, numbers of Christian leaders, in a full page advertisement that appeared in the New York *Times*, responded

to the overture by publishing a document titled, *Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You*. The document's signatories included such well known evangelical and emergent church leaders as Leith Anderson (President of the National Association of Evangelicals), Bill Hybels (Founder and Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church), Tony Jones (Emergent Village), Brian McLaren (Author, Speaker and Activist), Bob Schuller (The Crystal Cathedral), Rick Warren (Saddleback Church), George Verwer (Operation Mobilization) and Jim Wallis (Sojourners). **[6]** Further, in a recent translation of the Bible into Arabic, Wycliffe Bible Translators have substituted name of Allah for God. **[7]** All of which is to say, the Wheaton professor's stance only spotlights again an issue (called a "conversation") that has been simmering among Christians, evangelical and liberal, for some time.

Semantic Game—does "similar" mean "same"?

Some evangelicals equate that because Christianity and Islam are monotheistic faiths (belief in one God), Christians and Muslims worship the same God, the synthesis being labeled, "Chrislam." **[8]** Mega church leader Rick Warren called the merger the King's Way. **[9]** Advocates for the fusion of the faiths view that any differences between the two religions are but superficial. So to promote an ecumenism between the two faiths, the word "same" is skewered to mean "similar." **[10]** The Gods both faiths espouse are thought to be "sufficiently similar" so as to be understood as identical. **[11]** The difference between the Gods therefore becomes one of semantic metaphor (i.e., depending upon what the meaning of "is . . . is."). So to promote similarity, ecumenists appeal to the "nobler side" of the two faiths; that is, the common ground of religious experience or feelings for which metaphors give vague expression. **[12]** This of course, is mysticism, and entails all devotees—whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.—worshipping at the shrine of shared religious experiences. **[13]** Any cognitive differences between various faiths are lost in the sea of subjectivity or existential dump. After all, in the cosmos "sufficiently similar" experiences of God in the immediate can only mean that all religions worship the "same" God in the ultimate; never mind that Yahweh told Israel, "you shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3; See Deuteronomy 6:4-5.). Should it be accused that Christians break the 1st Commandment by worshipping a god besides Yahweh, it should be stated that Jesus declared Himself to be the "I am" of the Old Testament (Compare Exodus 3:14 with John 8:24, 28, 58). According to Holy Scripture, to worship Jesus Christ is to worship Jehovah. But the converse is not true. To worship Jehovah, but reject Jesus, is not to worship Christ.

So the gods are all believed to be the same because religious experiences of worship are similar. One can only wonder whether this subjective template works in real life. For example, in the counterfeiting industry, whether it be fake dollars, brand name products, art, and so on, whether "sufficiently similar" qualifies as "same." I don't think so, and neither does the law! We turn now to the impassible gulf which exists between the Gods of Christianity and Islam.

Who God Is

Of His being, the New Testament declares, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). Love defines the essential inter-personal nature of the Triune God out of which all His actions and relationships arise. **[14]** But loving is not a separate activity of God, but rather is integral to all that He does! Out of love God created the universe and in love He rules and judges it. In all of this, God loves

personally, this heavenly love being mirrored in the most sensitive of human relationships—the earthly love of family and other people created in the image and likeness of God. So whether to Israel or the church, Scripture pictures God as either married or betrothed to His people (Isaiah 54:5a; Revelation 19:7; Ephesians 5:25-32). In God’s family, believers are His “children” and His “sons.” As the Apostle declares,

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage [i.e., ‘slavery,’ NASB] again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

—Apostle Paul, Romans 8:14-15, KJV

Because humans have been created in God’s image, we desire to be accepted and loved. But because Islam denies the Trinity, the religion possesses no ontological basis for affirming God is love. In its view, God is essentially will. So in comparing the Christian God to Islam’s, Samuel Zwemer (1867-1952), noted scholar of and missionary to Muslims, commented:

The human heart craves a God who loves; a personal God who has close relations with humanity; a living God who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities and who hears and answers prayer. Such a God the Koran does not reveal. **[15]**

Zwemer then takes this theological observation a step further by noting that, “A being who is incapable of loving is also incapable of being loved.” **[16]** This essential difference causes fallout between what the two religions believe about and how they practice their distinct faiths.

Submission

Because Allah is not love, there can be no reciprocal love between subject (God) and object (humans) and vice versa, only submission; and that is the meaning of the distinctive name Mohammed chose to promote his religion. “The word Islam . . . means ‘submitting [oneself or one’s person to God]’.” **[17]** In other words, a Muslim is one who submits, period. Because ideas have consequences, the role of submission colors the whole fabric of the Islamic way of life, in everything from the way women dress to saying Daily Prayers to practicing The Five Pillars and to being governed by Sharia law (i.e., living in strict agreement with and submission to the law contained in *The Quran* and *hadith*, Mohammed’s sayings).

The Muslim religion is one of will, not emotion, of action, not affection. The essence of being a Muslim is submission to Allah and observing Islam’s Five Pillars (e.g., profession of faith, prayer five times daily, alms giving, fasting during Ramadan, and pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime). Even the head, face, and body coverings worn by Muslim women communicate submission to Allah, their husbands and governing authority. Islam expects veiled women to submit without equivocation to their husbands and the state. If anyone, male or female, does not submit, they are considered *kafirs* (unbelievers) or apostates, the latter category possibly being punishable by death.

So having studied Islam for several years, Marvin Olasky noted that the “father-son”

relationship existing between God and Christians is unknown to Muslims. Islam means “submission,” and the Islamic model of the divine-human relationship is therefore that of “master-servant,” a relationship that becomes mirrored throughout the Islamic world. **[18]** In comparison to Jesus’ command to Christians to “make disciples of all nations,” the order for Muslims is to make subjects of all nations, and Bill Warner notes that, “political Islam has subjugated civilizations for 1,400 years.” **[19]** Dominion theology, it seems, is not only the “domain” of some Christians. In short and in contrast to Christianity which is based upon love, grace and faith, Islam is a religion based upon submission, laws and works, and these beliefs affect behavior. So it becomes difficult to see how two polar approaches to God and life can derive from the same deity. In their beliefs, observations and applications to life the religions are neither similar nor same. So in his argument that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, Miroslav Volf admits to the impasse between Christianity and Islam:

In addition to contesting the Trinity and the incarnation, Muslims also contest the Christian claim that God is love—unconditional and indiscriminate love. There is no claim in Islam that God “justifies the ungodly” and no command to love one’s enemies. But these are the signature claims of the Christian faith. Take redemption of the ungodly and love of enemy out of the Christian faith and you un-Christian it. **[20]**

Worship

The evangelical church today has demeaned worship to mean feeling good about ourselves and God, something Ralph P. Martin called “the tyranny of subjectivism.” This is the level at which evangelicals find “sameness” in the worship of God. But worship is not whipping up enthusiasm to give people a psychological boost. As Martin tells readers, “God’s love expressed in Christ’s cross, suffering, and victory is no cheap idea or sentiment.” **[21]** So in its simplest understanding, worship is the acknowledgement of the “worth-ship” of God. But who are Christians to worship?

To cut to the point, Christians worship, as Jesus affirmed, the Triune God who in the being of His divine essence eternally subsists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). As regards worship of the Triune God, Scripture informs us that the heavenly reality of it accords with “the seven Spirits” before the throne who direct worshippers to give glory, honor and praise equally to the Throne-sitter and to the Lamb (Revelation 5:6, 11-14; See Hebrews 1:6.). In and by the Holy Spirit Christians are to worship the Lord Jesus Christ who is ascended to the right hand of Majesty on High (Hebrews 1:3; 8:1). It is He to whom the Spirit bears witness (John 15:26). As one theologian, with whom I disagreed on many issues while he was yet alive, bluntly stated, “Worship, if done in response to anything other than the mystery of God in Christ, is idolatry.” **[22]** So the worship of the church on earth ought to mirror the Christ-centric worship the Bible describes as taking place in heaven. This brings us to the heart of the matter concerning whether or not Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

In contrast to orthodox Christians, no Muslim would ever confess “Jesus is Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3) or worship Him as God (John 20:28; Jude 24-25). Granted, Jesus is declared to be a high ranking prophet by *The Quran*, but Islam considers it blasphemy to believe He is God (See John 10:30-33.). **[23]** Therefore because they do not worship the Lord Jesus Christ, Muslims, as well

as Jews, do not worship the same God as Christians. We worship the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:9-11), and one day so will the rest of the world. Muslims cannot, do not and will not worship “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). To imagine a hypothetical, but straightforward, conversation between a Christian and his/her Jewish or Muslim friend, the Christian might ask, “Do you worship Jesus Christ?” If the answer is: “No!” (And invariably if the Muslim or Jew is informed regarding his or her faith, the answer will be, “No!”), then the only response of the Christian can be, “Then we do not worship the same God for I worship the Lord Jesus Christ and you do not.”

Conclusion

When this impasse is understood, the best we can do therefore, is peacefully agree to disagree and let God sort all this out in the end, something that personally, I am comfortable with (Revelation 20:11-15). Hopefully, neither religion will fanatically demand that its devotees can nowise tolerate or abide the others’. Meanwhile, Christians ought to understand that as the Apostle John stated,

We are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.
—Apostle John, 1 John 5:20b-21, NASB

It is evident that Christians (some deliberately, many mistakenly and others naively) are equating that because Christianity and Islam are monotheistic (believing in one God) faiths, they worship the same God. To the contrary, in that Christians worship Christ and Muslims will not, we do not worship the same God.

Endnotes

[1] See John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, W. Grinton Berry, Editor (Fincastle, VA: Scripture Truth, n.d.). To this point, historians note that during the 20th Century greater numbers of people were put to death in the name of irreligion (i.e., Hitler, Stalin, etc.) than in previous centuries. People, it appears, have far more to fear from the state than from the church.

[2] Scot McKnight, “The ‘Same’ God? Volf Speaks,” *Jesus Creed*, December 16, 2015 (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/12/16/the-same-god-12/>). In his blog post McKnight references Volf’s book (p. 32) on this point.

[3] Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York, NY: HarperCollins eBooks, 2011) Front Matters, Kindle Sample (http://www.amazon.com/Allah-Christian-Response-Miroslav-Volf/dp/0061927082/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1450723872&sr=1-4#reader_0061927082).

[4] Miroslav Volf, “Wheaton professor’s suspension is about anti-Muslim bigotry, not theology,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2015 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/17/wheaton-professors-suspension-is-about-anti-muslim-bigotry-not-theology/>).

[5] *A Common Word Between Us and You* (Jordan: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, January, 2009). A copy of the document is available at: http://www.acommonword.com/downloads/CW-Booklet-Final-v6_8-1-09.pdf.

[6] *Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You*. A copy of the advertisement is available at:

http://www.yale.edu/divinity/news/071118_news_nytimes.pdf. Joe Schimmel of *Good Fight Ministries*, has produced a DVD with the title, *The Submerging Church*. In the presentation, he draws attention to evangelicals and emergents who attempt to merge Christianity and Islam. For a cameo from the video, see <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/blog/?p=9076>.

[7] Michael Carl, "Wycliffe Defends Changing Titles for God," *WND Faith*, February 2, 2012 (<http://www.wnd.com/2012/02/wycliffe-defends-changing-titles-for-god/>.) Carl notes: "Involved is the removal of any references to God as 'Father,' to Jesus as the 'Son' or 'the Son of God.' One example of such a change can be seen in an Arabic version of the Gospel of Matthew produced and promoted by Frontiers and SIL [i.e., Wycliffe's Summer Institute of Linguistics]. It changes Matthew 28:19 from this: "baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"; to this: "cleanse them by water in the name of Allah, his Messiah and his Holy Spirit."

[8] Rob Kerby, "What is 'Chrislam' and who preaches it?" *beliefnet: Inspiration. Spirituality. Faith*. (<http://blog.beliefnet.com/news/2011/10/what-is-chrislam-and-does-anybody-really-preach-it.php>).

[9] Rob Kerby, "Internet spreading new accusations connecting Rick Warren with 'Chrislam'," *beliefnet: Inspiration. Spirituality. Faith*. (<http://blog.beliefnet.com/news/2012/03/internet-spreading-new-accusations-connecting-rick-warren-with-chrislam.php#ixzz1oDUUhV8S>).

[10] Recognizing that the post modern mindset argues about what the meaning of "is" "is," the noun same deserves a dictionary definition: "Same = one in the same "1. Being the very one: IDENTICAL. 2. Alike in kind, quality, quantity, or degree. 3. Conforming in every detail . . ." See *Webster's II New College Dictionary* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995): 977.

[11] In a war of meanings, Volf advocates that "sufficiently similar" nuances "same."

[12] Scot McKnight, "The 'Same' God? Volf Speaks," *Jesus Creed*, December 16, 2015 (<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/12/16/the-same-god-12/>).

[13] Rapprochement between Christianity and Islam may be found at the level of the experiential-expressive model of religion which theorizes there's "a common experience of the divine which is nevertheless expressed in different terms and concepts." This approach, hypothesized by neo-liberal George Lindbeck (1923-), is both ecumenical and mystical. Lindbeck's experiential-expressive approach "interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations." See Michael J. Vlach's review of Lindbeck's book *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion & Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984). Review online at the *Theological Studies* website (<http://theologicalstudies.org/resource-library/book-reviews/322-the-nature-of-doctrine-george-lindbeck>).

[14] I would argue that absent the Trinitarian understanding of God, there exists no ontological reason for believing that God is love (e.g., Jesus to the Father, "You loved Me before the foundation of the world," John 17:24, NASB). A divine monad is incapable of love for in eternity past there was no one interpersonally to love.

[15] S. M. Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God* (New York, NY: American Tract Society, 1905): 111.

[16] Ibid.

[17] H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1970): 1.

[18] Marvin Olasky, "Brutality and dictatorship: How Islam affects society." *World: Special Issue*, November/December, 2001, 19. The whole issue was devoted to the religion of Islam.

[19] Bill Warner, "A Short Overview of Sharia Law," *Political Islam*, February 23 2009 (<http://www.politicalislam.com/a-short-overview-of-sharia-law/>).

[20] Volf, "Wheaton Professor's Suspension," *The Washington Post*.

[21] Ralph P. Martin, *The Worship of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982): 5.

[22] Ibid: Quoting J.R. Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1979: 105.

[23] In that Jesus was the Prophet of God who Moses predicted would come, I choose to believe Jesus' claim that He and the Father are one in essence. To Jews and Muslims I would respectfully say that you cannot both affirm Jesus was a true prophet and not believe what He said about His relationship with the Father; that is, that they are one. The Jews who heard Jesus make this claim understood it, for they picked up stones to stone Him "for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make yourself out to be God" (John 10:33).