

More on whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God

December 20, 2015 by [Gerald McDermott](#)

Yesterday I posted a very brief comment on the flap at Wheaton College over the political science professor who said Muslims and Christians worship the same God. She was apparently influenced by evangelical theologian Miroslav Volf's affirmative answer to this question in his book *Allah* and subsequent blogposts and lectures around the country. I answered in the negative, citing the differences between the two pictures of God in the Bible and the Qur'an. I focused on the two sacred books because Volf did this in his book, and Volf was apparently her principal source.

Since this discussion has gone viral, and this is a complex subject, I need to go deeper. So I am attaching here a selection from the book which Harold Netland and I recently published, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions* (Oxford University Press). In this selection we explain why we cannot simply affirm that Muslims and Christians worship the same God.

[after a section refuting Volf's claim that the Qur'an teaches, as the Bible teaches, love for God] In short, the God of the Qur'an never commands his human creatures to love him. Sufis have a long tradition of recommending love for God, but their status as "normative mainstream" in Islam is debatable, and their conceptions of love for God and his love for humanity are significantly different from Christian conceptions. But what of Volf's second claim about the Islamic God's principal commands—that Allah commands love for neighbor as oneself? For evidence to support this claim, Volf goes not to the Qur'an but to the Hadith, written records of oral tradition about the sayings and deeds of Muhammad.[i] Volf concedes that Muslim sacred texts do not affirm love for enemies, but rests his claim for Muslim neighbor-love on the oral tradition (Hadith) of Muhammad's saying, "None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself." [ii]

Once again there are problems. The first is that the Qur'ān contains repeated admonitions to Muslim believers not to make friends with non-Muslims. For example, 3.118 reads, "O believers, do not take as close friends other than your own people." Similar warnings include 58.22 and 60.1. In the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, Denis Gril observes that "love or friendship between human beings is not fully recognized by the Qur'ān unless confirmed by faith." Instead there is conditional love: "One can truly love only believers, since love for unbelievers separates one from God and attracts one toward this world. . . . Adopting unbelievers as friends or allies . . . is equivalent to lining up on the side of the enemies of God." [iii] This is rather different from the command of Jesus to his disciples to love even their enemies (Mt. 5:43-48). Another difficulty is that, as we have already noted, there simply is no command to love one's neighbor in the Qur'ān. So one can talk about love for neighbor in the Islamic *tradition*, but not as something commanded by the God of the *Qur'ān*.

We have examined in some detail Volf's claim that Islam and Christianity both teach our obligation to love God with our entire being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We have seen that there are good reasons to believe that such obligations are not clear in the Qur'an or mainstream Islamic teaching. It is also unclear that Christians and Muslims agree in any unqualified way that God is "good" (Volf's fourth claim). For Christians, God's goodness is understood in terms of his love. Volf says rightly that "love is the divinity of God, and that's why only the absolute power of love deserves to be called divine." [iv] Yet the Islamic God is never said to *be* love, as the Christian God is (1 Jn 4:16). The Allah of the Qur'an never commands his creatures to love him, and the Islamic conception of love for neighbor is different from the Christian idea. It is never commanded as such, it is mostly limited to love for other Muslims, and the enemy is not considered a neighbor.

But even if we were to reject these claims to commonality between the two faiths, and recognize that his fourth claim about God's being "good" is also

problematic because of the two religions' differences on love, we must acknowledge that Volf's first three claims do indicate areas of commonality. Does this then mean that we should conclude that Muslims and Christians "worship the same God"?

At one level, of course, we have to say Yes, because as monotheists we all agree there is only one God. Ontologically there can be only one eternal creator God. But the question which Volf asks is whether Qur'anic descriptions of God are "sufficiently similar" to biblical descriptions of God, and here we must qualify our initial positive answer.

Christians and Muslims agree that there is an eternal creator God and, as Volf notes, there is substantial agreement on some of the attributes of God (omnipotence and omniscience, etc.). But in other respects Muslims and Christians clearly disagree on what this one creator God is like, and the major disagreement concerns the Christian doctrine of the Trinity with its entailment concerning the deity of Jesus Christ. Volf is fully aware of this difference, and he accepts the doctrine of the Trinity as an essential component of Christian faith. "The doctrine of the Trinity is central to the Christian account of God and to the Christian faith as a whole, not an optional extra. Take away the Trinitarian nature of God, and the Christian belief about Christ as the incarnation of God collapses, and, with it, the whole Christian faith." [v]

There is no question that the Qur'an has been understood as rejecting the idea that Jesus Christ is divine, and there are passages that are usually taken as repudiations of the doctrine of the Trinity (see 4:171; 5:17, 109-119; 9:30-31; 23:93; 112:1-4). Certainly most Muslims and Christians today think that the Christian teachings on the deity of Jesus Christ and the Trinity are incompatible with what the Qur'an affirms. Does this not make it impossible to claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God? Not necessarily, according to Volf. He argues that if "we have other good reasons to believe that Muslims have a common God with Christians, then their denial of the Trinity doesn't provide sufficient grounds to say that Muslims don't believe in the same God." In rejecting the Trinity

Muslims “are misunderstanding the true nature of God.”[vi] Moreover, Volf maintains that what is rejected in the Qur’an is not the orthodox Christian teaching on the Trinity but rather certain aberrant, heretical views circulating at the time of Muhammad. He argues that “the rejections of the ‘Trinity’ in the Qur’an do not refer to normative Christian understanding of God’s threeness, and that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity does not call into question God’s oneness as expressed in Muslims’ most basic belief that there is ‘no god but God.’ What the Qur’an may be targeting is misconceptions about God’s nature held by misguided Christians.”[vii]

A number of scholars have indeed pointed out that what is rejected in the Qur’an does not seem to be the orthodox Christian teaching on the Trinity so much as various heretical views common among some Christian communities at the time. Geoffrey Parrinder, for example, states, “The Qur’an denies Christian heresies of Adoption, Patripassianism, and Mariolatry. But it affirms the Unity [sic], which is at the basis of trinitarian doctrine.”[viii] Similarly, Timothy Tennent notes that “some objections [to the doctrine of the Trinity] are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Christian doctrine actually teaches.”[ix] Surah 5:116, for example, seems to assume that Christians believe that Mary, mother of Jesus, is one of the three members of the Trinity. But rejection of the Trinity by Muslims cannot be explained simply as due to misunderstandings. For even when common misunderstandings are clarified, it is not unusual for Muslims to insist that the Christian belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit as God compromises the unity of God. At the heart of the dispute is the question of the deity of Jesus Christ.[x] Lamin Sanneh brings us to the heart of the matter: “Muslims and Christians agree on the great subject that God exists and that God is one. They disagree, however, about the predicates they use of God. Much of the Christian language about God affirms Jesus as God in self-revelation, and much of the Muslim language about God seeks exception to that Christian claim.”[xi]

In light of the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for Christian faith, Volf's claim that denial of the doctrine by Muslims need not imply that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God is problematic. As is by now apparent, the question itself needs careful clarification and cannot be given a simple "yes" or "no" answer. The relations among Father, Son and Holy Spirit are integral to the Christian understanding of God, so that the doctrine is not simply a curious abstraction that can be set aside. The Trinitarian relations also have implications for our understanding of God as love, which is central to Volf's discussion. The Trinitarian rule (*opera Dei triune non divisa sunt*) reminds us that the Father's works are not to be divided from the Son's. The Son helps identify the character of the Father, for the Father's character is revealed by the Son: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). If the Son told his disciples that God loved the world (Jn 3:16), that they should love God with all their hearts (Mt 22:37), and that they should love everyone including their enemies (Mt 5:44), we can infer that the Father has said and commanded the same.

Hence, we conclude with Lamin Sanneh that the question of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God "def[ies] a simple dismissal or acceptance of the claim." [xii] Woodberry rightly points out, "Christians, Muslims and Jews as monotheists refer to the same Being when they refer to God – the Creator God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob. But in significant ways they do not have the same understanding about him, even though they also agree in significant ways." [xiii] In fact, the Christian teaching on the Son transforms even the most basic predicates ascribed to God and the Father of Jesus. For example, both Christians and Muslims say that God is one. But while Muslims insist that God is numerically one without differentiation, Jesus showed and taught that oneness is also triune.

Another predicate shared by both religions is that God is all-powerful. Yet the Son's demonstration that true power is found in the weakness of the cross is emphatically rejected by Muslims. [xiv] Therefore if the Father is

not divided from the Son, and in fact is revealed by the Son, even the most basic predicates of God as understood by Muslims and the biblical God are different. Hence we must agree with Sanneh that affirming the sameness of the Islamic understanding of God and the biblical God “is adequate insofar as there is only one God, **but inadequate with respect to God’s character, on which hang matters of commitment and identity.**”[xv]

In other words the answer to the question posed after all of the discussion above is NO ! It is a definite NO that they are not talking about the same God. Allah and Yahweh are NOT THE SAME. THESE ARE MY NOTES; MICHAEL PALMER

[i] Volf, *Allah*, 105.

[ii] Ibid., 108, 105.

[iii] Denis Gril, “Love and Affection,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, gen. ed., *Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 234, 235.

[iv] Volf, *Allah*, 101.

[v] Volf, *Allah*, 145.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Ibid., 143.

[viii] Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 137.

[ix] Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 153-54. See also Kenneth Cragg, “Islam and Incarnation,” in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions*, ed. John H. Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 126-39; and idem, *The Call of the Minaret*, 3rd ed (Oxford: Oneworld, 1985), 232-35, 278-89.

[x] See Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999); Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’an*; and Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1991).

[xi] Lamin Sanneh, “Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?” 35.

[xii] Ibid., 35.

[xiii] Woodberry, “Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?” 37.

[xiv] This idea of the Son transforming the most basic predicates which the Islamic and Christian conceptions of God share was suggested to us by Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, (2007), 40-41.

[xv] Sanneh, “Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?” 35.