

Yahweh and Allah -- the Essential Differences: Why Christians and Muslims Do Not  
Worship the Same God and Why it Matters

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### Abstract

The question of whether or not Muslims and Christians worship the same deity has become a heated debate in many theological circles. This debate, in particular, is a growing question for Christians in the West, as large numbers of Muslims are entering the population, and the answer given helps to determine interactions with them.

This study was made by a review of various literature materials. Primary sources included translations of the Qur'an and the Bible. Secondary sources included books written by prominent Christian apologists. An important book used was by Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf, which took the opposing side of the argument being presented in this thesis as well as his debate with Nabeel Qureshi on the same subject. As this particular topic is seeing a renewed interest in theological circles, much of the work is available in audio recordings from experts on the topic.

The conclusion of the research was that the two religions, in fact, hold to two separate concepts of deity and, as a result, do not worship the same god. This argument primarily came down to two major Christian doctrines. While many other differences could be discussed between the two religions, it is the Christian belief in the Trinity and the person of Christ, which essentially separates it from Islam. Finally, how people answer the question, of who God is, affects how they relate to persons of different religions since the doctrines in conflict are of soteriological importance to both groups.

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With the rise of Islam around the world and within the United States, it is becoming more important for Christians to have a proper understanding of the tenets of Islam, specifically in those areas where the two religions disagree. This understanding is necessary for proper Christian teaching within the church, and it is also necessary for effective evangelism to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Of all these doctrines, the most important deals with God Himself. What a person believes about God is foundational to that person's religious beliefs and worldview. In some circles, it is becoming common to suggest that Christians and Muslims worship the same god.<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to understand whether this claim is accurate, and it will be argued that they are not the same deity. This argument will be based on two major disagreements between the two religions' descriptions of the deity they worship, specifically disagreements on the Trinity and the person and ministry of Christ. In particular, this issue matters in three important areas of interaction between Christians and Muslims: intellectual integrity, honest dialogue, and soteriology.

Special attention will be paid to the Trinity because this foundational truth about God is vital to all the other issues within Christian theology. To deny the Trinity fundamentally changes the way God must be viewed. It will be argued that a non-triune

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<sup>1</sup> This belief is frequently being espoused in some liberal Christian circles as well as secular circles.

god would fundamentally change the nature of God.<sup>2</sup> While there are other factors that could be discussed in making this argument, these are the minimal ones necessary to make the argument work. These areas of disagreement are so fundamental to the debate that they decide the issue. It would seem that the same God could not conflict in areas essential to His nature or give conflicting information in these areas.

Finally, it will be important to discuss the significance of this debate. It is a growing debate in the West and one that has important implications for those on both sides of the issue. It will be argued that not only the answer but the way in which the answer is arrived at will have direct implications for those involved, specifically in the areas of intellectual integrity, honest dialogue between faiths, and soteriology.

Whether or not Christians and Muslims worship the same God is an important debate not only for the sake of theory but also for Christians to have positive interactions with Muslims. To argue anything else would be a disservice not only because it is condescending to assume this stance will close all dialogue, but also from a salvific standpoint as the decision about the God people place their faith in has eternal consequences. To argue anything less would not be loving.<sup>3</sup> Sharing his testimony,

Nabeel Qureshi writes:

So when I hear people say Islam and Christianity are basically the same, I have to try to restrain my incredulous response. Are Islam and Christianity the same? My parents certainly don't think so, nor do any of the dozens of friends I lost. This

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<sup>2</sup> Shabir Ally and Nabeel Qureshi, "What is God Really Like: Tawhid or Trinity?" (Video Debate, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries) Posted April 8, 2015. Accessed July 10, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWpqqqZn7Kg>

<sup>3</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 24-25.

cliché is a slap in the face to hundreds of thousands of converts who have left Islam for Christianity and vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

It must be acknowledged that some who study the issue take the other side of the argument and genuinely and sincerely believe their argument to be correct. The purpose of this thesis is not to disparage them but to honestly and openly discuss the concerns and questions this stance raises. However, some people also take this stance in deference to political correctness. This deference is a serious issue in the church, as it relates to evangelism and the way the Church cares for Muslims.

### **How the Argument Will be Conducted**

For those who wish to claim that this subject is simply a matter of interpretation, this thesis will argue from the standpoint of belief in objective truth; and therefore, the descriptions of these entities cannot both be true if they fundamentally contradict one another. William Lane Craig argued this point effectively in response to a recent attempt to defend the professor at Wheaton College who came under examination for wearing the Hijab. He argued that there is a fundamental difference between trying to speak about the same being with some details wrong and stating that two persons with distinct and incompatible characteristics are the same and simply described differently.<sup>5</sup> For him, the argument hinges on whether or not the two beings in discussion share “identical properties.”<sup>6</sup> The argument he gave in his response also hinges on the Trinity, and by

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<sup>4</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 25.

<sup>5</sup> William Lane Craig and Kevin Harris, “Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?” Reasonable Faith. Org. Last Modified February 7, 2016. Accessed July 20, 2016. <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-god>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Islam's denial of this characteristic of God, the two religions cannot be describing beings with, as he states, "identical properties." He argued that based on this issue, as well as the issue of God's love, that Christians and Muslims are describing two separate concepts that are not the same entity.<sup>7</sup> This thesis will look into those claims to see if they hold any weight or whether they force the believer to hold to a logical contradiction. For instance, Christ must either be God or not be God; both beliefs cannot be objectively true, and both cannot describe Christ accurately. God is a unique being with distinct characteristics that distinguish Him from any other being or concepts of deity. These characteristics not only distinguish Him from His creation but also from any other description of a god that does not match His true being.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Trinity: Christian Affirmation, Muslim Denial, and Challenges Posed**

It is important to note, in arguing against this position that Christians and Muslims worship the same god, that there are two main arguments. First, scholars, such as Miroslav Volf,<sup>9</sup> who argue against this position, cite Jewish disbelief in the Trinity and suggest it does not differ from the Muslim rejection of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> The second

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<sup>7</sup> William Lane Craig and Kevin Harris, "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" Reasonable Faith. Org. Last Modified February 7, 2016. Accessed July 20, 2016. <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-god>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Miroslav Volf is a professor of theology at Yale. It is important to note for the purposes of this thesis that Miroslav Volf's arguments are included for two distinct reasons. First, he is an important scholar who is arguing opposite of the central claim of this thesis. Second, he represents an important example of how some Christians are adopting the belief that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. His argument is an important example of how adopting that point of view shapes other religious beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> Miroslav Volf and Nabeel Qureshi. "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" (Video Debate, Seeking Truth with Julie Roys) Posted January 22, 2016. Accessed July 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KU9k2OvfVvY>.

argument used is that Islam rejects an incorrect view of the Trinity. In other words, Muslims do not reject the true Trinity, but rather they reject a heretical view of the doctrine.<sup>11</sup> It will be argued that, while the Qur'an does, in some passages, describe and deny a false concept of what Christians believe the Trinity to be, the basic Islamic concept of deity excludes the possibility of belief in the true doctrine of the Trinity as well.

As for the first argument, Nabeel Qureshi argues that, while Jewish people are monotheistic, there is nothing in the Old Testament that denies the doctrine of the Trinity. Both Christians and Jews are strict monotheists; the difference is the Jewish unitarian Monotheism and the Christian trinitarian Monotheism. Christians argue that the Old Testament hints at the Trinity and that the New Testament more fully reveals and expands on what was already revealed in the Old Testament. No Old Testament Scripture is directly at odds with the Trinity. Jewish monotheism comes from the Jewish Scripture, specifically the *Shema*.<sup>12</sup> The *Shema* insists on a monotheistic God but does not necessitate that the Trinity is incompatible with Shema. The components of the Trinity are in the Old Testament, even if they are not recognized.<sup>13</sup>

This is in contrast to the Qur'an, which does not allow for the possibility of the Trinity. History shows that Mohammed was very opposed to polytheism, and, while

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<sup>11</sup> James R. White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an*. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishing Group, 2013), 75-80.

<sup>12</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4.

<sup>13</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 67-68.

Christians would argue that they too are against polytheism, Islam has no understanding of trinitarianism.<sup>14</sup> In Islam, anything other than a strict unitarian monotheism is considered *Shirk*, “placing something or someone in the position due to Allah.”<sup>15</sup> This view of monotheism is fundamental to Islam, and there is no possibility within Islamic understanding for a Trinity.<sup>16</sup>

The second argument given is in reference to Qur’anic verses that indicate that Mohammad believed that Mary, and not the Holy Spirit, was the third person of the Trinity. James White points out that this understanding of Trinity would be rejected by both Muslims and Christians.<sup>17</sup> There is good evidence, based on Qur’anic verses, that Mohammad did have this incorrect view of the Trinity.<sup>18</sup> It is true that the Qur’an describes the Trinity in this way, and both Muslims and Christians would view this understanding of the Trinity as heretical. However, it can also be argued that, not only do Muslims deny this heretical view of the Trinity, they deny the Trinity as understood by Christians as well. As explained, the strict unitarianism associated with Islamic Monotheism does not allow for a trinitarian understanding. The Qur’an rejects this and

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<sup>14</sup> George, Timothy. *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 57-59.

<sup>15</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 363.

<sup>16</sup> James R. White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an*. (Minneapolis, MN; Bethany House Publishing Group, 2013), 75-104.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-104.

<sup>18</sup> Qur’an 5:116 and 9:30.

considers it heretical.<sup>19</sup> The denial of the deity of Christ in Islam also means that Muslims cannot believe in the doctrine of the Trinity as truly it is understood by Christians.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the Qur'an denies a false description of the Trinity, but its unitarianism and its denial of the divinity of Christ also exclude belief in the doctrine of the Trinity as properly understood by Christians.

Second, the Qur'an specifically rejects the deity of Christ.<sup>21</sup> In Islam, to view Jesus as anything more than a prophet is to commit *Shirk*. The idea that God would take on humanity, as Christians believe Jesus did, is blasphemous to Muslims. Their denial of the deity of Christ combined with their strict unitarianism denies the Trinity by necessity. For this reason, even though it is true that the Qur'an denies an incorrect view of the Trinity, it must be recognized that the accurate Christian concept of the Trinity is denied in Islam as well. The Trinity is not just denied, but it is also regarded as the ultimate blasphemy against Allah.<sup>22</sup> For these reasons, scholars, such as Miroslav Volf, who wish to assert that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, must look elsewhere to stake their arguments.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> James R. White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an*. (Minneapolis, MN Bethany House Publishing Group, 2013), 75-104.

<sup>20</sup> Qur'an 9:31.

<sup>21</sup> Qur'an 4:171.

<sup>22</sup> James R. White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an*. (Minneapolis, MN Bethany House Publishing Group, 2013), 59-68.

<sup>23</sup> Miroslav Volf and Nabeel Qureshi. "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" (Video Debate, Seeking Truth with Julie Roys) Posted January 22, 2016. Accessed July 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KU9k2OvfVvY>.

The argument about the Islamic view of Allah's love is quite contrary to the Christian concept of God as perfectly loving. William Lane Craig points out that the Qur'an states that Allah does not love all people. For instance, he points out that the Qur'an denies Allah's love for nonbelievers. This exclusion, William Lane Craig points out, is in fundamental contrast with the Christian view that God is all loving and that he loves all people.<sup>24</sup> John 3:16 states, "For God so loved the World...."<sup>25</sup> According to Romans 5:8, God loved humans "while we were yet sinners."<sup>26</sup> This is in direct contrast to the description of Allah's love as described in the Qur'an. In the Bible, God hates sin, but He loves human beings and desires to save them from sin and death. There is no such concept presented in the Qur'an; indicating that Allah wishes to save people. Paradise, in the Qur'an, is attained not from grace, but from rigidly following Allah's laws, from one's good deeds outweighing the bad deeds, and ultimately from the arbitrary decision of Allah.<sup>27</sup> For Christians, God's grace is not arbitrary. Christians can trust that God will relate to them as He promises in His word, and unlike Allah, who is almost indifferent concerning the fate of his creation, the God of the Bible takes great interest in the salvation of people. The Christian God greatly desires for people to be saved and, in a

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<sup>24</sup> William Lane Craig and Kevin Harris, "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" Reasonable Faith. Org. Last Modified February 7, 2016. Accessed July 20, 2016. <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-god>

<sup>25</sup> NIV.

<sup>26</sup> NASB.

<sup>27</sup> William Lane Craig and Kevin Harris, "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" Reasonable Faith. Org. Last Modified February 7, 2016. Accessed July 20, 2016. <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-god>

great act of love, sent His Son. This self-sacrificial love is notably absent from the Muslim understanding of Allah.<sup>28</sup> In fact, as Nabeel Qureshi states, the belief that Allah would lower himself in such a way is not only in direct conflict with Islamic belief, but it is also considered a great offense. To suggest to the Muslim that Allah would lower himself or sacrifice for his creation in such a way is blasphemous.<sup>29</sup> This idea runs contrary to a belief in a God who would “humble himself” out of love for His creation.<sup>30</sup>

The Muslim denial of the Trinity also affects Muslims’ view of Allah’s love. Christians believe that God is all-loving and that His love is perfect. Nabeel Qureshi argues that this hinges on the Trinity. How can God perfectly love when, before creation, there was nothing or no one for Him to love? He could have been all-loving in theory, but this love could not be demonstrated unless there was an object to receive His love. His answer is that this love was complete and expressed within the Godhead. For this reason, God was complete in Himself, not needing a created object to which He could express His love. For this reason, God’s act of creation can be seen as an act of perfect, selfless love, and not an act to fulfill a need. It was out of the perfect love within Himself that God created and loves His creation. Christians believe that love is a necessary attribute of

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<sup>28</sup> Nabeel Qureshi. *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 21-26.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Philippians 2:7.

God.<sup>31</sup> In 1 John 4:8, it states “God is love.”<sup>32</sup> A denial of the triune nature of God changes the way His love must be viewed, and it fundamentally changes what it means for Him to interact with His creation in love.<sup>33</sup> Nabeel Qureshi states:

Most people who say Christians and Muslims worship the same God are aware of this difference, but they treat it as relatively inconsequential. This is not a trivial difference, though; it has major implications. Since mankind is made in the image of the triune God, love is woven into our very nature. The Trinity gives us the most consistent, most powerful basis for being self-sacrificial and altruistic.<sup>34</sup>

This argument can also be applied to the relationality of God as well as His self-sufficiency. The argument made by Nabeel Qureshi is simply that, in order to be relational, God must have someone with whom to be relational; otherwise, while there is potential for relationality, He cannot act on the ability.<sup>35</sup> Before proceeding, it is important to define what Nabeel Qureshi means by the word relational. Nabeel Qureshi states, “It is important to note here I am using the word relational not in the sense of intimacy but in the sense of existing in relation to something else.”<sup>36</sup> The question then becomes, how can someone be relational when they have no one with whom to be relational? The examples Nabeel Qureshi gives are the Qur’anic descriptions of Allah

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<sup>31</sup> Shabir Ally and Nabeel Qureshi, “What is God Really Like: Tawhid or Trinity?” (Video Debate, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries) Posted April 8, 2015. Accessed July 10, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWpqqqZn7Kg>

<sup>32</sup> NIV.

<sup>33</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 65-67.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-67.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

being inherently merciful and gracious, but, in order to be merciful and gracious, he would need someone to relate to in this way. This means that he created beings to whom he can be merciful and gracious. In other words, Allah is not truly self-sufficient, and his creation was not a truly selfless act, but rather was done in order to fulfill a need.<sup>37</sup>

This depiction is different than the God described in Christianity. While Christians would describe God as being self-sufficient and relational, the Trinity provides grounding for this belief that cannot be found in Islam.<sup>38</sup> Nabeel Qureshi writes:

On the other hand, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that the three persons of God have eternally loved one another with a self-less love. God has always been relational, always been loving. His mercy and justice are not contingent upon his creation, because they are the expression of his eternal love towards humans. That love was never contingent upon mankind's existence. *Because of tawhid, Allah depends on mankind in order to be Allah. Because of his triune nature, Yahweh is truly independent and self-sufficient.*<sup>39</sup>

From a Muslim understanding, the doctrine of the Trinity is wrong, because it is too complex. They also believe that the Triune God, being one in nature and three persons, is self-contradictory. For this reason, complexity and rationality are offered as reasons for rejecting the Trinity. There are two arguments that address this concern. As Nabeel Qureshi argues, ultimately this question comes down to what God states about Himself. If God reveals to humanity that He is triune, then this cannot be denied simply because human beings cannot perfectly understand how He can exist in this way.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 65-67.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-67.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Secondly, as Nabeel Qureshi writes, “By definition, we cannot comprehend God. If God created our minds, then he must be greater than our comprehension. Who are we to demand that he be simple enough for us to understand him?”<sup>41</sup> For this reason, complexity is not a problem for Christianity, but it actually makes better sense of the way God can be viewed.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Essential Role of Christology in the Discussion**

This next topic couples with the doctrine of the Trinity. For Christians, the Trinity and the person of Christ are inseparable. To uphold belief in the Trinity is to uphold the divinity of Christ, and, by contrast, to deny the deity of Christ is to deny the Trinity. These two doctrines speak directly to who the Christian God is, and this is what definitively separates Yahweh from Allah. Christians believe that Yahweh has revealed Himself to be triune and that Christ is the second person of the Trinity. Muslims believe that Allah is by his very nature a unitarian deity and that Jesus was a human prophet of Allah.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, the person of Christ is at the center of this debate.

To deny Christ’s deity results in the implicit if not explicit denial of the Trinity. For Christians, it also results in the denial of the only possible source of salvation provided by God to man. That God, while fully retaining His deity, became fully human, lived a human life, was killed, and rose from death is essential to Christianity. Without this core set of beliefs, the essential nature and character of the Christian religion

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<sup>41</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 65.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>43</sup> Josh, McDowell and Don Douglas Stewart. *Handbook of Today's Religions*. (San Bernardino, Calif: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), 393-395.

changes. Confusion on this topic causes confusion in other areas of faith. The god that is worshiped by a religion shapes the character of the religion and gives it definition. For this reason, to change an essential attribute of a deity has direct implications for the practice of a religion.<sup>44</sup> A. W. Tozer writes in his book on the attributes of God that, “Man’s spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its ideas of God.”<sup>45</sup> He goes on to write:

Before the Christian Church goes into eclipse anywhere, there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, ‘What is God like?’ and goes on from there. Though she may continue to cling to a nominal creed, her practical working creed has become false. The masses of her adherents come to believe that God is different from what He actually is; and that heresy is the most insidious and deadly kind.<sup>46</sup>

For this reason, a proper theology of God is essential. For both Christianity and Islam, Jesus is at the heart of their definition of deity. Islam provides a very different definition of who Jesus is and, in so doing, a different definition of deity.

Both religions place a great emphasis on a person’s response to and belief about Jesus. For Christians, it is essential that a person believe in Christ as Lord for salvation as Romans 10:9, John 14:6, and John 6:47, and Acts 16:31 state. Islam believes Jesus to be the Messiah and a prophet. They believe that he was born of a virgin and that he was sinless. Islam, however, rejects the deity, death, and resurrection of Christ.<sup>47</sup> For this

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<sup>44</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1963), 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Josh, McDowell and Don Douglas Stewart. *Handbook of Today's Religions*. (San Bernardino, Calif: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), 393-395.

reason, this difference is fundamental. The biblical verses referenced show the Christian conviction that belief in Christ's divinity and resurrection are essential, but in Islam, those beliefs are considered blasphemy.<sup>48</sup> Miroslav Volf asserts:

What matters is not whether you are Christian or Muslim or anything else; instead, what matters is whether you love God with all your heart and whether you trust and obey Jesus Christ, the Word of God and Lamb of God. I reject making religious belonging and religious labels more significant than allegiance to the one true God.<sup>49</sup>

This raises several important questions. First, can Jesus be followed in this way if His divine nature is denied? Second, would Muslims view Jesus as “the Word of God and Lamb of God”?<sup>50</sup> The answer to these questions seems to be no. If this is the case, then it raises two other important questions. If they are in error in these areas, is their love and trust truly placed in Christ or a false view of Him? Can you truly love someone in this manner, if you have a wrong concept of who that someone truly is? For the Christian, this issue is extremely important. For the Christian, it is not possible to adequately accept Christ while at the same time denying His position within the Godhead. For the Muslim, it is not possible to truly serve Allah and believe that Jesus is divine.<sup>51</sup> For this reason, Miroslav Volf, while his intentions seem good, is wrong in his assertion that it is possible

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<sup>48</sup> James R. White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Qur'an*. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishing Group, 2013), 66-68.

<sup>49</sup> Miroslav Volf. *Allah: A Christian Response*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), 14.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Josh McDowell and Don Douglas Stewart. *Handbook of Today's Religions*. (San Bernardino, Calif: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), 394-395.

to truly have “allegiance to the one true God”<sup>52</sup> while holding fundamentally contradicting beliefs about His essential nature.

The question then is, are those two concepts of Jesus’ being or nature in conflict? It is first necessary to examine what Muslims believe about Jesus and what areas of belief have overlap with Christian teaching. It will also be necessary to see what the earliest Church thought and believed about Christ and what He taught and believed about Himself in order to fully understand why Christology is a defining part of theology.

Jesus Himself indicates that there is both a right and a wrong answer to the question of who He is. One instance occurs in Luke 9:18-21, where Jesus asks His disciples to tell Him who they believe Him to be, and He commends Peter while also dismissing the incorrect answers. The most direct passage is Matthew 7: 21-23. In this passage, Christ calls people to know Him in a relational way; but in order to know someone relationally, it is important to have a true understanding of who that person truly is. It is not possible to have a relationship with a person when a completely distorted or incorrect view is held of that person. Eventually, the discrepancies become so great that a completely different person is being described from the one that actually exists. Jesus makes clear in this passage that many who claim to know Him will not be saved, and that truly knowing Him is of eternal importance, and, for that reason, it is consequential to understand what Muslims believe about Jesus. It is important to understand because, for Christians, the person of Christ speaks directly to the heart of who God is.

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<sup>52</sup> Miroslav Volf. *Allah: A Christian Response*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), 14.

**The Person of Christ: His Divine Status, Death, and Resurrection and the Islamic Response**

Muslims, as previously stated, recognize Jesus as a historical figure who lived in the first century. They believe that he is a significant person in Islam. They believe that he was Mary's son and that she was a virgin when he was conceived.<sup>53</sup> They believe that Jesus was a great prophet in Islam<sup>54</sup> As a result, there are areas of overlap in Christian and Muslim belief, and bringing these out in dialogue can be constructive. However, the essential differences cannot be overlooked.

As in the previous discussion of the Trinity, Islam is fundamentally unitarian in its belief about Allah's unity.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the Trinity is denied and, along with it, the divinity of Christ. This brings the debate to mutually exclusive claims; either Jesus is God, or He is not. He cannot be both, and therefore, Muslims and Christians cannot believe in the same God. They are describing two different entities. The Qur'an denies the possibility of Allah having a son: "Say, 'He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him.'"<sup>56</sup> For Christians, Christ's divinity is essential to His work in salvation; to deny this is to deny God's

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<sup>53</sup> Qur'an 21:91.

<sup>54</sup> Qur'an 2:257.

<sup>55</sup> Josh McDowell and Don Douglas Stewart. *Handbook of Today's Religions*. (San Bernardino, Calif: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), 393-394.

<sup>56</sup> Qur'an 112, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

salvific plan to restore and redeem humanity.<sup>57</sup> Islam denies the incarnation.<sup>58</sup> Muslims also deny the death and resurrection of Christ. Surah 4:157 states, “They did not kill him nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that...” This brief explanation of Muslim belief demonstrates very important differences between the two religions.

To further explain the necessity of this part of the discussion, it is important to understand what the earliest Christians believed about Christ and what Christ Himself spoke about Himself. Starting with Scripture, there is an indication of what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus. The opening chapter of the Gospel of John makes this clear.<sup>59</sup> Of essential importance from that passage, Jesus is the Word of God, preexistent, and was uncreated and active in the Creation.<sup>60</sup> Notably, Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God; anyone who has seen Him “has seen God.”<sup>61</sup> This places the Son as an equal to the Father. Philippians 2:6-11 describes the incarnation and makes clear that Jesus was an equal member of the Godhead. Philippians 2:6-11 is believed to be an early creed or hymn preserved by Paul but constructed before the Epistle was written.<sup>62</sup> Paul, in

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<sup>57</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*. (The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, Chicago IL, 1969), 120-122.

<sup>58</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 21-26.

<sup>59</sup> John 1:1-17.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>62</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*. (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2011), 144-145.

Colossians 1:15, calls Him “the image of the invisible God”.<sup>63</sup> All three of these passages of Scripture give an indication of some of the earliest beliefs of the church.

The incarnation is another essential Christian doctrine denied by Islam, as it would be considered blasphemy for Muslims to say that God humbled himself in this way.<sup>64</sup> Christians, however, believe that this is essential to their faith. This is because they believe Jesus to be God and that He voluntarily became fully human while retaining His full divinity. Islam, on the other hand, denies the divinity of Christ, and by necessity, denies the Incarnation and, as a result, has no one to atone for sin.<sup>65</sup>

Also important to note is the importance the Apostles put on the death and resurrection of Christ. Notably, Paul, according to Gary Habermas, preserves another early creed in 1 Corinthians 15 which speaks of Christ’s death and resurrection as well as the eyewitnesses to those events. This creed is most likely one of the earliest affirmations of Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>66</sup> These essential beliefs about the work of Christ are also denied in Islam.<sup>67</sup> For Christians, these elements of Christ’s work are essential for salvation. Romans 9:10 is a notable example of the necessity of

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<sup>63</sup> NIV.

<sup>64</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 21-26.

<sup>65</sup> John F Walvoord . *Jesus Christ Our Lord*. (The Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 1969), 120-122.

<sup>66</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus: Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*. (Joplin MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2011), 146-175.

<sup>67</sup> Josh, McDowell and Don Douglas Stewart. *Handbook of Today's Religions*. (San Bernardino, Calif: Here's Life Publishers, 1983), 393-394.

belief in the work of Christ as real events. They are considered the ultimate demonstration of God's love for humanity in Romans 5:8. Christ's work is an action that speaks to the heart of who God is and His relationship to mankind. Islam rejects this loving relationship, in which God gave his Son for humanity.<sup>68</sup> Not only do these events have direct implications for Christian soteriology, but they speak to the character of the God worshiped by Christians.

The God of Christianity loves people selflessly and sacrifices for them. This is different from the love of Allah expressed in the Qur'an. Andy Banister, when lecturing to the C.S. Lewis Institute, stated that there are more than twenty references in the Qur'an where the word "love" is used, but only six times is the word used in a way that is not negative. The rest designate who Allah does not love, including those who sin against him.<sup>69</sup> Christians believe that people are inherently sinful and that it is by sending His Son to die as an atoning sacrifice, while humans were in the midst of their sin, that God performed His greatest act of love. He goes on to cite 1 John 4:8, "God is Love."<sup>70</sup> This difference cannot be understated, and it is related directly to the Cross of Christ. It relates first for reasons of soteriology, but also because it speaks to the heart and character of the God of the Bible. The Islamic denial of the work of Christ is significant to the discussion of whether Islam and Christianity worship the same God, because, for

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<sup>68</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 21-26.

<sup>69</sup> Andy Bannister. "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" C.S. Lewis Institute on YouTube. Last modified October 12, 2016. Accessed January 3, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35w9LVOk-ik&t=2298s>

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Christians, Christ is the ultimate revelation of who God is.<sup>71</sup> In John 14:9 Christ said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”<sup>72</sup> For Christians, the ministry of Christ on earth is a window into the character of their God.

The early church clearly believed the death and resurrection of Christ.

Christ in the Gospels clearly reveals Himself as the Son of God and an equal member of the Godhead.<sup>73</sup> Michael F. Bird writes:

...Jesus’ aims should be located within the context of Jewish restoration hopes for the future, and chief among those hopes was the return of YHWH to Zion. Jesus believed that in his own person this return was happening, God was becoming King, and the day of Judgement and salvation was at hand. Jesus’ belief on this point can be correlated with several actions and activities he undertook that suggest he not only spoke with an unmediated divine authority, but that he acted in such a way as to identify himself with God’s activity in the world.<sup>74</sup>

He predicts His death and resurrection.<sup>75</sup> He states that coming to Him is a requirement for eternal life.<sup>76</sup> Craig A. Evans discusses the Parable of the Wicked Tenants and explains how the parable illustrates how Christ saw Himself. He states, “When the parable is interpreted in its context, we see that the vineyard owner is God, the tenants represent ancient Israel, and the servants represent prophets. The point is clear: God sent his son. Otherwise, he would just be one more messenger, one more prophet. No---- now

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<sup>71</sup> John 1:17.

<sup>72</sup> NIV.

<sup>73</sup> Michael F. Bird. *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus’ Divine Nature*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 70.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Matthew 8:31-38.

<sup>76</sup> John 14:6.

he has sent his son, and that is Jesus himself.”<sup>77</sup> It is clear from these and other passages in Scripture that Jesus saw Himself as divine and the only way to salvation.

Belief in these core doctrines was not only essential in the Scripture, but it was evident in the church from the second century onward.<sup>78</sup> While the final expression of these doctrines was fleshed out by the early church fathers, the essential components can be seen in their writings as well as early creeds of the Church.<sup>79</sup> These beliefs were confessed in the creeds of the church, notably the Nicæan and Apostles creeds, but other early creeds also mention these doctrines.<sup>80</sup> Many early fragments of creeds are found in the Pauline epistles.<sup>81</sup> Early baptismal statements required affirmation of belief in these doctrines. Many of these are preserved from the fourth century but claim to come from earlier traditions. Early creedal material containing these doctrines can be found in the writings of the apostolic fathers and other early writings including: The Didache, The Letters of St. Ignatius, and Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians, and the writings of Justin Martyr.<sup>82</sup> Justin Martyr wrote:

For in the name of this very Son of God and first-begotten of all creation,  
Who was born of a virgin, and became passible man  
And was crucified under Pontius Pilate by your people,  
And died,

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<sup>77</sup> Craig Evans. (2007). Quoted in Lee Strobel. *The Case for the Real Jesus*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 60.

<sup>78</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*. (New York, NY: Longman House, 1972), 6-13.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-23.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-21. Examples of the early creeds listed by J.N.D. Kelly are: 1Corinthians 15:3, 1 Timothy 3:16 and Romans 1: 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-49, 62-75.

And rose again from the dead,  
 And ascended into heaven,  
 Every demon is exorcised conquered and subdued;...  
 Jesus,  
 Whom also we regard as  
 Christ the Son of God,  
 Crucified,  
 And risen again,  
 And ascended to the heavens,  
 Who will come again as judge of all men  
 right back to Adam himself.<sup>83</sup>

The early affirmation of these doctrines by Christians is essential to recognize because they clearly understood that belief in Christ's divine nature, incarnation, death, and resurrection, were essential to their faith. They also sought to guard against any teaching that contradicted these beliefs.<sup>84</sup> Josh McDowell and Jim Walker write:

What is at stake is remaining true to the idea that God is unchanging through eternity and that he has revealed the truth about himself through His Son, Jesus, and through the Scriptures. The Christians who debated, argued, and fought for this definition of God understood that if worshiping a false God is punishable by sin then it behooved them to get it right. This had eternal consequences for all men. Of all things, they needed to understand and present God accurately. The early Christians worshiped Jesus as they worshiped God...<sup>85</sup>

In light of this, the Islamic denial of these beliefs is a serious conflict.

Christology plays an important role in the debate over whether Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. For Christians, it is essential to believe in His deity. For Muslims, it is essential to believe that he was only a prophet of Allah. These diametrically opposed views of Christ mean that Christians and Muslims cannot believe

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<sup>83</sup> Kelly, J.N.D., *Early Christian Creeds*. (New York, NY: Longman House, 1972), 74-75.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-75.

<sup>85</sup> Josh McDowell and Jim Walker. *Understanding Islam & Christianity: Beliefs That Separate & How to Talk About Them*. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2013), 105.

in the same God. Either Jesus is God, or He is not, but He cannot be both. The answer that one gives to this question must answer who their God is.

### **Why the Debate Matters**

This issue is not of merely academic significance, although it should be of academic interest. The working out of such complex theological definitions and concepts should be of academic interest because theology is an important field of study. What makes theology so important is the significant impact it holds in everyday life and beyond this life. For this reason, academic answers to theological questions bear an eternal weight that should not be dismissed.

In particular, this issue is important from three specific areas: intellectual integrity, honest dialogue, and soteriology. The last of the three reasons bears the most significance, but it cannot be achieved without the other two categories.

The issue is one that is important for intellectual integrity because the subject needs to be approached from the perspective of desiring truth and recognizing that an objectively true answer exists. Many approach religion as a subjective matter, where they can pick and choose which tenets to hold to for their personal belief. This is not possible in this academic debate. Christianity and Islam both make specific truth claims about the nature of the deity whom they worship. Furthermore, the defining claims about both Allah and Yahweh are in direct conflict with one another and cannot be held simultaneously. While the issue has become controversial in order to maintain intellectual integrity; it must be examined with the understanding that two mutually exclusive essential characteristics cannot be held by the same being.

The second issue at stake is that of honest dialogue. The incident at Wheaton College is an example of the need for honest dialogue and willingness for discussion on both sides. It shows that, to many, this is a controversial topic.<sup>86</sup> It should be acknowledged that many scholars such as Miroslav Volf come down on a different side of the argument than this thesis, and it is assumed that their motives are honest. Miroslav Volf also makes it clear that his purpose is to create dialogue between Christians and Muslims.<sup>87</sup> This is a good intention. It should be the goal of those who disagree with Miroslav Volf to also nurture honest dialogue because, if this answer is correct, it has direct implications for Muslims, whom Christ calls His Church to love. Finding an honest answer to this question matters because the lives and futures of people are impacted by its answer. Only by seeking honest answers will it be possible to talk openly and honestly about the differences between the two religions.

Finally, this debate is important because, as stated previously, the answer has a direct impact in how Christians share the Gospel with Muslims. This should not be taken lightly. The answer to this question has direct soteriological implications, and Christians are called to take that seriously. C. S. Lewis writes in *The Weight of Glory*:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these

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<sup>86</sup> Miroslav Volf and Nabeel Qureshi. "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" (Video Debate, Seeking Truth with Julie Roys) Posted January 22, 2016. Accessed July 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KU9k2OvfVvY>

<sup>87</sup> Miroslav Volf. *Allah: A Christian Response*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), 1-20.

overwhelming possibilities; it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all plays, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization--- these are mortal, and their life to ours is as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit--- immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.<sup>88</sup>

What Christians believe about their God will affect their evangelism, and it will affect their own spiritual growth. In the end, what one believes about God shapes their actions and behavior. For this reason, Christians should take the answer to this question seriously. The debate should not be decided on a desire to act upon modern culture's new definition of tolerance and society's inclination towards pluralism. It should be decided by a careful examination of each religion's claims about the deity they worship with the recognition that the answer carries eternal weight.

Christians have a growing theological interest in Islam. This is occurring as a growing number of Muslims enter Western society. This presents Christians with an excellent opportunity to share the Gospel. It also carries with it a new set of theological and apologetic challenges that, in particular, Christians in the West have not had to face as commonly. Among those challenges is the question of whether or not Christians and Muslims worship the same deity. While there are some similar claims and terminology used by the two faiths, they differ in significant ways, in particular in this area of concern. It has been argued that those fundamental differences are great enough, as well as mutually exclusive, so as to mean that the two religions cannot be describing the same entity with different wording. They are describing two fundamentally different concepts

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<sup>88</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. (New York: NY: Macmillan, 1979), 15.

of God. In particular, they are distinct from one another in two major areas. First, Christians hold to a belief in the Trinity; while Muslims hold to a doctrine of Tawhid. These are two conflicting attempts to describe unity. By denying the Trinity, Islam also denies the divinity of Christ, which is at the heart of the Christian faith. By also denying the death and resurrection of Christ, Islam denies those doctrines which Christians believe are necessary for salvation by proclaiming them to be blasphemy. The answer to the question of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God is significant for intellectual integrity and honest dialogue. Most importantly, the answer is important because how a person answers the question of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God holds salvific importance.

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