

**Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?
Yes, and No: Exploring the Ontological and Theological Divide.**

By Daniel Janosik

There has been a great deal of confusion brought on by this question, especially in the aftermath of a Wheaton professor's comment affirming that Muslims and Christians do indeed worship the same God. After all, can there logically be more than one God in the universe? If there is only one God, and Muslims and Christians both worship this one God, then they must, by logic, worship the same God. On the other hand, Muslims do not accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and by extension the belief in a triune God. For Muslims, this is the greatest sin a person can commit, for God cannot have an associate. Thus, if Christians worship a triune God, and believe that Jesus Christ is the second person of this triune God, then Muslims would have to say that Christians do not worship the same God. Is there a way past this theological impasse? I believe there is. This paper will explore the Ontological and Theological divide as a way to bring clarity and resolution to this question.

A couple years back, as I was passing the State House in Columbia, SC, I noticed the Confederate flag waving in the breeze behind a large, decorated Christmas tree. The contrast of symbols caught my attention. To most people, the tree nominally symbolizes the season of Christmas and the focus on the first coming of Jesus Christ. For some people any representation of a spiritual reality on public property is a travesty against their rights. The flag, however, has become more controversial. For some, the Confederate flag merely symbolizes a past conflict, for others it represents a spirit of independence and state's rights, and for still others it is an ugly reminder of when one people group enslaved another. Thus, we have one symbol with several different meanings.

This is similar to the word “Allah.” For most Muslims, Allah is the only God and therefore must be the same God as the one that the Jews and Christians worship. Similarly, for some Christians, Allah is just another name for the one God of the universe. For others, however, the Muslim Allah and the biblical Yahweh are contradictory and cannot refer to the same being, for, they say, “how can the God of Muhammad be the Father of Jesus Christ?” The question before us, then, is whether the terms “Allah” and “Yahweh” are just two names for the same God, or are they referring to different Gods? (And since there can only be one true God, the ultimate question is, “if they are different, which one is the true God?”)

Let’s first look at the origin and meaning for the term “Allah.” Allah probably comes from the Aramaic compound term “al-ilah,” which means “the god.” It is a generic term for the highest god of the people, and in Arabia it was in use for centuries before Muhammad came on the scene. Apparently it was one of the 360 gods worshipped in the ka’aba in Mecca, and was the chief god for the Quraysh tribe, which was the tribe Muhammad belonged to. In the pre-Islamic time, Allah had three daughters, Al-At, Al-Uzza, and Al-Manat. In Muhammad’s campaign against polytheism he chose Allah as the one true God and rejected the notion that Allah could have any daughters or sons. The Allah from the Qur’an, however, is very different from the Yahweh of the Bible. For one thing, Allah is a distant, remote being who reveals his will but not himself. It is impossible to know him in a personal way. In his absolute oneness there is unity but not trinity, and because of this lack of relationship, love is not emphasized. Indeed, for the Muslim, Allah cannot have any associates. In fact, to claim that Jesus is God’s son is the greatest of all sins in Islam and is known as “shirk.” Allah is also an arbitrary God and is said to deceive people, especially unbelievers. In the end, even for the devout Muslim there is no guarantee of salvation

because in his arbitrariness Allah may reject the believer's good works and send him to hell. Thus, even if one's good works outweighed his bad works salvation is ultimately up to the Will of Allah, which is arbitrary at best.

When we look at Yahweh, however, who is the God of the Bible, we see a different kind of deity. First of all, the name "Yahweh" comes from the time that God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. At that time God told Moses to call him "I am that I am," or in Hebrew, "Yahweh." It is significant that Jesus referred to himself as the "I am" in John 8:58. The Jews realized that Jesus was referring to himself as God and took up stones to stone him for what they believed was blasphemy. This link between Jesus in the New Testament and the burning bush in the Old Testament demonstrates the unity of the one God manifested to both the Jews and the Christians. This cannot be said of the Muslim God because Muslims reject the deity of Jesus and therefore reject much of what the New Testament says about Jesus. We also find that the Bible portrays Yahweh in contrast to Allah. For example, Allah is considered to be too holy to have personal relationships with man, but Yahweh is often described as a loving God interested in our personal struggles. Yahweh is also depicted as unchanging and One who assures the salvation of the faithful. Finally, because there is unity in the Trinity with the one God also being three persons, God can be described as the Father of Jesus.

Some scholars want to emphasize the similarities between Yahweh and Allah, and point to a common belief in a monotheistic God who is Creator of all things, omnipotent and merciful. They argue that ontologically there can be only one God in the universe. Therefore, since Jews, Christians, and Muslims seek the one God, they are seeking the same entity. In a philosophical sense, this may be accurate. However, theologically Muslims and

Christians define “God” very differently.¹ Although both religions claim that God has sent prophets to reveal His will and produce scriptures to guide our lives, Allah and Yahweh cannot refer to the same person for the following reasons. First of all, their attributes are different. In Allah’s monadic oneness his attributes stem from his powerful Will which, because it provides no basis for relationship, often promotes capriciousness. Also, since his power is more important than his other attributes, there is an unequal emphasis on power over his other attributes. In the end, a follower cannot know Allah or even be sure of the consistency of his attributes. On the other hand, because Yahweh is by nature a triune unity his attributes stem from his nature. The eternal relationship within the Trinity promotes love within the Godhead and extends to his creation. Also, since his attributes are based on his unchanging nature rather than his powerful will, all his attributes are equal and promote trustworthiness rather than capriciousness. This means that believers can know God and be sure of his attributes. Second, Christians understand the nature of God to be triune (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), which is the only way that Jesus Christ, as the second person of the Trinity, could die on the cross to pay for our sins. If Jesus were not God himself, then his death on the cross would be meaningless. However, Muslims deny that Jesus died on the cross and they reject the belief in his resurrection from the dead. Only a triune God, defined as one essence and three persons, could become incarnate and still remain God of the universe, and yet this is the God that Muslims reject. For them, Jesus cannot be God nor can God be a Father, for he cannot have a son. Therefore, if Muslims reject God as the Father of Jesus, then Allah cannot be the same as the God of the Bible.

¹ It may help if one thinks of ontology as “general revelation” (there is a god) and theology as “special revelation” (this is what God is like).

But wait a minute, some will say. What about the Arabic Christians who call the God of the Bible “Allah”? Doesn’t this illustrate the fact that Allah and Yahweh are referring to the same God? Actually, when the Arabic Christians refer to “Allah” in their translation of the Bible, they believe that “Allah” is the Father of Jesus and they believe that “Allah” is triune. Therefore, the Allah of the Arabic Christians cannot be the same Allah of the Muslims! This semantic [shibboleth] strangulation can be cleared up if we remember that words have both a denotative and a connotative meaning. Denotation refers to a dictionary definition, so it would be correct to say that Yahweh and Allah both refer to the concept of God (ontologically), especially for their respective language groups. However, the connotation is determined by what a person conceives about the object of that word (theologically). For example, an Arab Christian may still use the word “Allah” to denote God, but his understanding of that term would be starkly different from a Muslim, for the Christian would recognize that Jesus Christ is God (Allah) whereas the Muslim would never consider that connotation. Thus, denotatively the word “allah” merely refers to “god, deity, etc.” (ontology). However, we understand the denotative use by our connotative presuppositions (theology). Therefore, “Allah” for the Muslim cannot be reconciled with the “Jesus is Allah” of the Arabic Christians. There is still a world of difference between the content of the word (connotation), even if the denotation is the same. Without this very important distinction made when we refer to “Allah” and “God” (Yahweh), a lot of Christians will be confused.

Let's look at some examples to see how this paradigm will help us determine a more precise understanding of the nature of this divide.

David Greenlee, in the EMS Occasional Paper, related the response of a Central Asian Muslim who converted to Christianity:²

“Of course I didn't switch gods when I trusted in Jesus Christ. Why would you even think something like that?” Greenlee then adds, “Among Muslims I know who have turned to faith in Jesus Christ, most—but not all—would say more or less the same thing.”

The idea here is that most Muslims who come to Christ would not say that when they became a Christian the God they now worship is different than the God they were seeking before. Most would say that God became real to them, or personal in a way that He was not when they were a Muslim. I would answer this by saying that when they were a Muslim they only knew the Ontological God and not the Theological one. They only knew God from a distance, and not personally. This is similar to the contrast between General Revelation and Special Revelation. Through General Revelation (Rom. 1:18-20) we can know that God exists, and we can determine some of his general attributes. However, we can only know God relationally when He reveals Himself to us, and that is the purpose of His Special Revelation. We know of His love for us not only because He revealed this love in the Bible, but even more so because the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. Ontologically, then, God reveals his existence through General Revelation; it is through his Special Revelation that He reveals His nature as Theos (and this is the study of theology).

² David Greenlee, “Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God? Missiological Implications of Answering a Divisive Question,” EMS Occasional Bulletin, Special Edition, 2016, 13.

Fred Farrokh, in the same journal, said the following:

“The ‘Same God Question’ appears to me to be a theological optical illusion: “Christians worship one God; Muslims worship one God; physical creation itself points to One Creator. Therefore, Christians and Muslims must indeed worship the same God.”

The question I pose to those who argue that Christians and Muslims worship the same God is: ***Since the Bible teaches that Jesus is God and since Islam teaches that Jesus is not God, then how is it possible that Christians and Muslims worship the same God?***

I have never been able to reconcile this “Underlying Question.” So, while I can concede that Christians and Muslims both seek to worship God, I believe it is impossible that they are worshipping the same God.”³

Farrokh states that he has not been able to reconcile the “underlying question” as to how Muslims and Christians can seek to worship the one God. I agree with him that since Islam rejects the deity of Jesus Christ it is impossible that Muslims are worshipping the same God. However, I believe that this conclusion can be reconciled when it is understood that when someone says that both Christians and Muslims must be worshipping the same God since there is only one God, this is only on an ontological basis and not a theological one. What I mean by this is that ontologically, since there is only one God, any religion that seeks to worship the one God would be doing so in the sphere of General Revelation. If there is a rejection of the revealed nature (essence) of God, which is in the realm of Special Revelation, then I would say that particular religion is following after a false god, or at least a distortion of the True God. Thus, when Islam rejects the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection, this clearly demonstrates that the

³ Fred Farrokh, The Question Underlying the “Same God Question,” with Missiological Implications Thereof.” EMS Occasional Bulletin, Special Edition, 2016, 11.

theological understanding of God is not at all the same as it is for Christianity. The divide between the two religions, I believe, becomes insurmountable.

Larycia Hawkins:

On December 15, 2015, Wheaton College placed one of its professors, Larycia Hawkins, on administrative leave for “theological statements that seemed inconsistent” with the Wheaton doctrinal convictions. Prior to this decision, Larycia Hawkins donned a hijab in protest to how she felt Muslims were being treated and stated on Facebook, “I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”

These were the words that shot around the world and brought the SGQ (“same God question”) to the stage. However, if Dr. Hawkins had only understood that Muslims and Christians only worship the same God on an ontological level, and not a theological one, then perhaps the outcome would have been much different. Thus, she might have said something like this: “Since Muslims and Christians both believe in One God, who alone created the universe, they at least share an ontological similarity. However, unless Muslims also accept the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the actual resurrection of Jesus, then these theological differences will preclude us from acknowledging that they believe in the same God.

When Nabeel Qureshi first became a Christian, he believed that Muslims worshiped the same God as Christians, but simply misunderstood the God of the Bible. However, as he studied the Bible more deeply he came to realize that Muslims could not believe in the

same God because they rejected the very nature of the God of the Bible.⁴ The crucial difference, then, is determined by the essence rather than mere existence. Both Islam and Christianity believe that God is one and that He exists. However, when Muslims reject the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the resurrection, then they have rejected the God of the Bible, and therefore cannot worship the same God as Christians. In the end, Qureshi concluded, "I am confident of my position: *Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God.*"⁵

The Qur'an:

Doesn't the Qur'an say that Muslims and Christians worship the same God? The Qur'an tells Muslims to say to the Jews and Christians, "Our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender" (29.46). According to Muslims, this should settle the matter. However, as we have noted, since Muslims believe that God is a singularity instead of a Trinity, that Jesus is just a human messenger instead of the Word of God and God himself, and that Jesus was not even crucified on the cross, let alone resurrected from the dead, then there is no place for concluding that superficial assent to General Revelation is enough to claim Theological equality. Ontological similarities do not necessitate theological compatibility.

Volf's challenge:

Finally, Miroslav Volf insisted in a debate with Nabeel Qureshi that, "Christians and Muslims worship one and the same God, the only God. They understand God's character partly differently, but the object of their worship is the same. I reject the idea that Muslims

⁴ <http://rzim.org/global-blog/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god>

⁵ <http://rzim.org/global-blog/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god>

worship a different God than do Jews and Christians.”⁶ Volf emphasizes that both Muslims and Christians describe God as loving and just, and therefore, despite their differences, both religions worship the same God. However, knowing “about” is different from “knowing personally.”

⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Allah*, 14.

Ontological	Theological	
General Revelation	Special Revelation	
Denotation	Connotation	
Similarities (common traits)	Differences (distinguishing traits)	
“What He does” (doingness)	“Who He is” (beingness)	
Existence	Essence	
	Allah	Yahweh
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both believe there is One God • Both believe God created the universe • Both believe God is sovereign, omnipotent, and that he will judge the wicked • Both believe that God has spoken to man through messengers (prophets), angels, and the written word 	God is a singularity	God is Triune (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); one in essence and three in persons
	Allah cannot have a son (Sura 19:88-92; 112:3)	The Father has eternally begotten the Son Jesus is the Son of God and God Himself (John 1:1, 14; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:2-3; 1 John 1:1-3; 4:9-10)
	Allah sent a written word	The Father sent his Son who is the living Word
	Man must pay for his own sins (Sura 7:8-9; 21:47)	Man can never pay for his own sins, for the standard for the God of the Bible is complete perfection (Matt. 5:48; Rom 3:23)
	Allah does not love those who sin and do wrong (Sura 3:140; 4:107)	Yahweh proved his love for us that while we were yet sinners He died for us. (John 3:16)

After comparing the Allah of the Qur'an and the Yahweh of the Bible, it should be apparent that they could not be referring to the same God. As Nabeel Qureshi states,

Christians worship a Triune God: a Father who loves unconditionally, an incarnate Son who is willing to die for us so that we may be forgiven, and an immanent Holy Spirit who lives in us. This is not what the Muslim God is; it is not who the Muslim God is; and it is not what the Muslim God does. Truly, the Trinity is antithetical to Tawhid, fundamentally incompatible and only similar superficially and semantically. Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God.⁷

Either the Muslim Allah is the true God or the Christian Yahweh is the true God, or neither is true. As the Law of non-Contradiction teaches, they both cannot be true. Therefore, how can we continue saying that “the Allah of Muhammad is also the Father of Jesus”?

You have heard the phrase, “East is East, and West is West, but never the ‘twain shall meet.” However, in our case, at least theologically, “Allah is Allah, and Yahweh is Yahweh, and never the ‘twain shall meet.”

⁷ <http://rzim.org/global-blog/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god>