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ALLAH, THE TRINITY, AND DIVINE LOVE

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The word *love* is a staple of the English language. We “love” to speak of love, to reflect on love, and to enjoy love’s warmth. We write songs, poems, and books celebrating love’s overwhelming power. Yet the human obsession with love is by no means limited to poetic musings and sorrowful ballads. Love has found a place of great interest among philosophers, psychologists, and theologians.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) claimed that “there is something so ambiguous and suggestive about the word love, something that speaks to memory and hope, that even the lowest intelligence and coldest heart still feel something of the glimmer of this word.”¹ Love is a sweet reality from which we cannot and would not easily escape.

The great monotheistic traditions have added their own ruminations on love by boasting of the perfect love of God lavished on His creation. The enduring love of God is expressed countless times by the psalmists and Old Testament prophets, while the apostle John goes so far as to declare that “God is love” (1 John 4:16).² Centuries later, Muhammad, the founder of Islam, would demand, “If you love Allah, follow me: Allah will love you, and grant you protection from your sins” (Qur’an 3:31). Such is the love of Allah that the title *Al-Wadud* (The Loving) has been listed among his 99 names.³

It is no surprise, then, that both Christian and Muslim alike have looked to God as the ultimate source of love. More than willed altruism and blind passion, divine love is viewed as good and kind, merciful and giving, powerful and fervent. Divine love is the model that human love imitates, so that when a man says to his wife, “I love you,” or when a mother says the same to her child, this is a reflection of God’s love. We love because God has given us the ability to do so. How then do Islam and Christianity differ in their theology of love?

Ultimately, which of these two, Allah or the Trinity, is the true source of love?⁴

LOVE AND THE UNITY OF GOD

Beginning with an examination of God’s being, it will become clear that Christians and Muslims are speaking of two different beings, and, hence, two different loves.

Though both teach God’s oneness, the philosophical foundation beneath each religion’s claim must be analyzed. Deuteronomy 6:4 declares, “Hear O Israel: the Lord

our God, the Lord is one.” Likewise the Qur’an claims that “Allah is One,” neither begetting, nor begotten (Qur’an 112:1–4). But what does this mean?

Allah’s absolute oneness is central to the Islamic understanding of God. The Islamic confession of faith asserts that there is no god but Allah. To ascribe any partner whatsoever to Allah is an unpardonable sin (Qur’an 31:13; 4:45; 5:72; 6:88; 39:65). It was this very zeal for Allah’s oneness and uniqueness that drove Muhammad and his armies to campaign against the idolatry that dominated early medieval Arabia and to eliminate any polytheistic beliefs that might contend with the one true God. One by one the cities of Arabia accepted this new religion or fell by the sword.⁵ Fervor for Allah’s unity led Muhammad to abhor the supposed abomination of the Christian Trinity (Qur’an 4:171).

Neo-Platonism

It is likely that Muhammad and his followers had been influenced by the Neo-Platonism that was being taught in the Greek schools throughout Arabia during the Middle Ages.⁶ Given Muhammad’s view of the Trinity, it is clear that he would have agreed with the Neo-Platonic view that unity is far superior to plurality. Anything less than complete unity must be less than God.

Christians should be hesitant to agree with the Islamic concept of God’s unity. Yes, God is one. But plurality of persons is not evil, nor is it ontologically impossible. In defense of the Christian Trinity, theologians Demarest and Lewis assert, “Only a substantial and essential oneness fits the scriptural data denying polytheism and affirming monotheism. The divine unity revealed in Scripture is not like a mystical Neo-Platonic ‘One’ beyond all categories of thought. The biblical oneness does not rule out distinguishable attributes and persons.”⁷

The possibility of God existing as three persons with one essence should not be ruled out simply because of conjectures purported by medieval Greek philosophy. The orthodox Christian view of God’s being is not based in the ideas of an ancient philosophical tradition, but in God’s revealed Word (2 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 4:12). And while Muslims may find the doctrine of the Trinity troubling, the Islamic formulation of God’s being is wrought with tremendous philosophical complications.

Such is the Islamic commitment to God’s oneness that some Muslim scholars are hesitant to acknowledge that Allah can know himself, even as a singular being.⁸ According to the Neo-Platonic metaphysics adopted by Islam, self-knowledge requires an intolerable plurality between the knower and that which is known.⁹ Similar unwelcome plurality exists whenever distinctions are made between God’s volition, His essence, His moral character, and His unchanging eternal revelation. Rather than risk accommodating divine plurality, both Islamic theologians and Neo-Platonists deny that God has a knowable essence, opting instead for the idea that He exists as pure will.¹⁰ Under this interpretation, Allah’s ability to love is hindered by his lack of an intrinsic nature. His love is dependent on his volition. He cannot love until he creates an object of love, and even then, his love is based not on his character, but on his will to love his creatures. The Christian God, however, is not limited in this way. The Trinity’s plurality

within oneness allows for interpersonal love as each person of the Godhead loves the others and is loved in return.¹¹

LOVE AND THE NATURE OF GOD

An examination of God's nature complicates the Islamic formulation of divine love. Allah may bear the name "the Loving," but is love to be counted among his attributes? Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb comment on the consensus between many Muslim theologians that Allah does not have a knowable nature.¹² Allah may be the loving, the merciful, and the compassionate, but these adjectives cannot be confused with attributes. Traditional Islamic teaching holds that Allah does not have a knowable essence. Allah loves because he has willed himself to love. Likewise, he is merciful because he has willed himself to be merciful. This is called divine voluntarism. Allah is "named for his actions."¹³

In contrast, the Trinity is a God who has a knowable nature revealed in Scripture. God is holy (Lev. 19:2), good (Mark 10:18), and loving (1 John 4:16). These are not mere adjectives inserted in the text to describe how God sometimes behaves; these words appeal to who and what God *is*. He loves not only because He wills to love, but because, in His nature, He is that kind of God *ontologically*. Christian orthodoxy teaches that God will not act in a way contrary to His attributes (James 1:17). God's holiness makes it impossible that He should be impure (Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:16). His truthfulness makes it impossible that He should lie (Heb. 6:18). His love does not allow Him to engage in blind, unjustified rage (Exod. 34:6–7). Because He is righteous, He will not act in any way that contradicts His righteousness (Ps. 75:2; 96:13).

Consistent Character

The foremost implication of this doctrine is that the Trinity demonstrates pure and true love for the world. God is quite capable of loving something as wholly depraved and unlovable as humanity. He may despise their sin, and He may judge them in righteous wrath, but He will never fail to be a God characterized by love. For the Trinity, love is never a fleeting emotion, a capricious fit of passion, or a willed decision of selflessness. Love is what the Trinity eternally is (John 17:24).

Here, Christianity and Islam once again diverge, since Allah is not bound to any one set of characteristics or behaviors. He is not only the loving; He is "the One who leads astray," "the One who brings damage," "the Bringer-down," "the Tyrant," and "the Haughty."¹⁴ He is bound by nothing but His will (divine voluntarism). He can choose to be malevolent, deceitful, and spiteful. Knowing no moral limits, Allah is free from a determinative loving character. This lack of a consistent divine standard only serves to discredit love as a virtue worth emulating.

LOVE AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

While Christians and Muslims do not agree on the being and nature of God, they will both concur that God is sovereign over His creation. He determines times and places and is not limited in His knowledge of the world past, present, or future (Acts 17:26;

Eph. 1:4–6, 11). God’s sovereignty is also seen in how He loves His creation. But as this sovereignty plays out in time and space, it is evident once again that the Christian and Muslim are speaking of two very different gods and, therefore, two very different loves.

According to the *Al-Nasafi Creed*, Allah creates all actions, including those of belief and disbelief. Allah’s decrees reflect his desires just as his desires reflect his will. The Qur’an even suggests that Allah coerces unbelief and forces hell in a fatalistic manner (Qur’an 7:178–79; 36:7–10). Here, love and hatred have nothing to do with human responsibility but with pure divine will. Allah becomes the creator and cause of hatred in a morally passive universe where man is not responsible for his actions. If we love, this love is nothing more than the will of Allah expressed through human agents. Likewise, if we hate, our hatred is nothing more than divine hatred implanted in us.

Free Will vs. Fatalism

In contrast to the fatalism of Islam, the Trinity holds humanity responsible for the choices it makes. Rebellion against God will be rightly judged, since man has chosen rebellion by his own depravity. We sin because we are sinners by nature. The Christian can rightly say that when he hates his brother, he is guilty of rebellion and responsible for his own recalcitrance. Yet, he can also say that when he loves his brother, he has done so because of God’s grace, which allows the human being to move beyond his desire to gratify his sin nature. While the Triune God loves by His very nature, Allah does not have a nature.¹⁵ While the Triune God loved us though we hated Him (Rom. 5:1–8), Allah loves only those who loved him first.¹⁶

It was the Trinity who loved us with such profound and holy love that the Son gave His life that we might be forgiven of our sins and justified by faith (John 3:16; 1 Cor. 10:31). The cross of Christ is the greatest demonstration of love that we will ever know (John 15:13). God’s love has been poured out on the world that He might sustain and redeem it by His love. No other love can repair the damage of sin by melting the ice that encases our hearts and that keeps us far from God. Our response to God’s love must be reciprocal, leading also to love for our fellow man (Matt. 22:37–40). And the most loving thing the Christian can do for his Muslim neighbor is to announce the love of the Trinity (Rom. 5:8). As Nietzsche suspected, there may indeed be something ambiguous about the word *love*, but what we may find as ambiguous, God has clearly revealed from Heaven in Jesus Christ, His Son.

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NOTES

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Mixed Opinions and Maxims," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kauffmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), 65.
- 2 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
- 3 www.islamicity.com/Mosque/99names.htm. For Qur'anic support see Qur'an 11:90 and 85:14.
- 4 For a refutation of Islam's claim that it has replaced Christianity as the final religion, see Douglas Groothuis, "The Challenge of Islam," *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).
- 5 See Robert Spencer, "Muhammad: Prophet of War," *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam and the Crusades* (New York: Regnery, 2005).
- 6 F. E. Peters, "The Origins of Islamic Platonism: The School Tradition," in *Islamic Philosophical Theology*, ed. Parviz Morewedge (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979), 36.
- 7 Bruce A. Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology: Three Volumes in One*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 271. See also Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
- 8 See Jonah Haddad, *Leaving Dirt Place: Love as an Apologetic for Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 67.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 John 17:24 speaks of the eternal love that exists between the Father and the Son. Ephesians 1:3–14 also shows the unified work of the Trinity in bringing about God's loving redemptive plan. If God is love (1 John 4:16), then this is a quality shared by each member of the Trinity.
- 12 See Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 141–45.
- 13 Ibid., 143.
- 14 Drawn from Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 43. For corroboration from authoritative Islamic sources, see, e.g., Qur'an 7:178–79 and Hadith Qudsi 19 (hadithqudsi.sacredhadith.com/hadith-qudsi-19/).
- 15 Ibid., 81.
- 16 Ibid.