

QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD:  
OVERCOMING SOME THEOLOGICAL BARRIERS  
IN MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

Belief in and worship of one God is the most basic tenet of both Muslim and Christian faith. This might be seen as a significant area of common ground, and yet there are theological barriers within sections of both communities that unnecessarily widen the gap between the two faiths. Some Christian leaders and writers have asserted the view that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God. This paper will argue that it is unhelpful to think in terms of Christians and Muslims worshipping two completely different entities by discussing (1) theological differences in the attributes and character of God and (2) Muslim denial of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Among Muslims there is often suspicion that the monotheism of Christians is severely compromised by their belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. This paper will argue that ‘mainstream’ Christianity, is a truly monotheistic faith and will seek areas of common understanding in moving forward in dialogue, while recognising continued differences.

Keywords: Monotheism, God-talk, Islam, Christianity, Trinity, Son of God, theophany

INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of both Christianity and Islam, it is hard to conceive of a weightier subject for reflection, dialogue and articulation than God. God is the Being of supreme value and worth, the One who alone is worthy of the worship of all creation, the One to whom we owe our first and ultimate allegiance, trust, obedience, submission and love. Islam and Christianity also both claim to be monotheistic faiths. ‘God is One’ is a point of agreement, at least one would think. But probe a bit further and one may find that it is not so simple. In recent decades in some Christian circles, there has been something called ‘the same-God controversy,’ in which a number of Christian leaders have asserted that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same

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God. While among Muslims it is rare to find such a stark differentiation, and indeed, the Qur'an seems to indicate that Muslims worship the same God as Jews and Christians,<sup>1</sup> there has nevertheless been a long-standing suspicion that among Christians, monotheism is severely compromised by belief in the trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

This paper will attempt briefly to deal with both these issues, arguing that while there may be significant differences in Muslim and Christian understandings of God, we should not think in terms of Christians and Muslims worshipping different Gods. It will also argue that 'mainstream' Christianity is truly monotheistic, and seek to outline areas of common ground or similarity with Muslim theology that will encourage moving forward in dialogue.

### THE 'SAME-GOD' CONTROVERSY

In 2016, there was a high-profile case in the USA in which Wheaton, a Christian college suspended a member of staff for affirming that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Both before and after this, a significant number of Christian leaders and writers have weighed in on the 'same God' question, some arguing that Muslims and Christians do worship the same divine Being,<sup>2</sup> others arguing against this.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See. Qur'an. Surah Al-'Ankabut 29:46 and Surah Al-Shura 42:15

<sup>2</sup> See. E.g. Francis J. Beckwith's and Joseph L. Cumming's contributions in chapters 2 and 5 of Ronnie P. Campbell & Christopher Gnanakan. (eds.). (2019). *Do Christians, Muslims, and Jews Worship the Same God? Four Views*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan. Ida Glaser and Hannah Kay (2016). See also *Thinking Biblically about Islam: Genesis, Transfiguration, Transformation*. Carlisle: Langham. Kindle location 5063. Martin Accad (2019). See also *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide*. Grand Rapids. Michigan: Wm. B Eerdmans. 75-81. See also Vinoth Ramachandra, "Pocket-Sized Gods." Online: <https://vinothramachandra.wordpress.com/2015/12/30/pocket-sized-gods/> (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022). Colin Chapman, (1995). *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity. 228-230

<sup>3</sup> See. E.g. Andy Bannister, (2021). *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?* London: Inter-Varsity. See also Al Mohler, "Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?" *Decision*, 1 February 2016. Online: <https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/december-2013/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-god/#> (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022). See also John Piper, "Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same Deity?" Online: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-deity> (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022). See also Gerald R. McDermott's and Jerry L. Walls' contributions in Campbell and Gnanakan. (2019). (eds.). op. cit. chapters 3, 4. A variety of views on the question can be found in the *Occasional Bulletin of the Evangelical Missiological Society*. Special Edition. 2016. Online: [https://www.emsweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OB\\_Fall\\_2016.pdf](https://www.emsweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/OB_Fall_2016.pdf) (accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022)

Of course, the issue is somewhat complicated by the existence of a number of varying, and sometimes mutually contradictory beliefs about God, not only between Christians and Muslims, but also *within* both faith traditions. Neither Christianity nor Islam are monolithic. Both faith communities contain wide variations in theology and practice. Some of these differences may be relatively minor, others of much greater significance. My purpose is not to minimise differences in theological belief, or to suggest that differences are unimportant. However, this paper will argue that it is unhelpful to think in terms of Christians and Muslims worshipping two completely different entities (which from the point of view of both traditions implies the other is worshipping an idol, a false god, or a non-entity).

A related issue is what is meant by ‘worship.’ Suffice to say for our purposes that, according to both faith traditions, there can be worship of God that is acceptable to God, and worship which is unacceptable, as illustrated in the story of Adam’s sons Cain and Abel.<sup>4</sup> It could be added that it is also possible to profess monotheistic belief and worship as a Christian or Muslim, but to follow the idols of one’s heart, be they money, possessions, family, status, power or something or someone other than God.

#### AN ILLUSTRATION

Suppose you and I both know a man called Hameed. We begin discussing Hameed and discover that we have significantly different understandings of him. You think Hameed is a coffee-drinking, cricket-playing, short, stout extrovert; I think that Hameed is a tea-drinking, hockey-playing, tall, thin introvert. Now one possibility is that there are actually two Hameeds, whom we initially think of as one and the same, but later realise we are speaking of two distinct individuals who happen to have the same name. That would represent the view of those who say that Muslims and Christians worship different gods.

Another possibility is that we both know one and the same Hameed, but have different experiences of him, or different degrees of how well acquainted we are with him. Hameed could be both a tea and coffee drinker depending on the company and situation, he could play both cricket and hockey. He could hardly be tall and short, or thin and stout, but this could be due to at least one of us having an indistinct memory of meeting Hameed – in other words, we might be wrong about some details of what Hameed is like, but it is still the same Hameed we are referring to.

This latter scenario is I believe, the more helpful illustration. Muslims and Christians believe in and worship the same God (the only God there is), but have some different

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<sup>4</sup>. See. Bible. Genesis 4:2-7. Qur’an. Surah *Al-Mā'idah* 5:27

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understandings and beliefs about Him, some of which may be of considerable significance. The objections to this view among Christians take two main forms: (1) theological differences about the attributes and character of God, (2) Muslim denial of the trinity.

### THE ATTRIBUTES AND CHARACTER OF GOD

Some argue that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God, based on divergent views of God's character and attributes within Christianity and Islam. An example of this is found in Andy Bannister's book, 'Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?'<sup>5</sup> Bannister says, "There are five key characteristics of Yahweh, the God of the Bible, that are central to his identity throughout the Old and New Testaments..."<sup>6</sup> According to Bannister, these are, that God is relational, can be known, is holy, is love and that he has suffered. Bannister maintains that the Qur'an teaches none of these, and therefore the God it presents is a completely different entity from the God of the Bible. It is highly questionable that these are *the* five key characteristics of the God of the Bible. What of God as creator and ruler of all things, of God's justice, his aseity, that he is eternal, merciful, wise, all-knowing...? All of these happen to be vitally important characteristics of God according to the Qur'an, *and* also, according to the Bible.

Bannister's thesis does not do justice to the diversity of thought within Islam or within Christianity. With regard to whether or not God is knowable in Islam, *The Study Quran* in its commentary on 10:100, says, 'As the early Sufi figure Dhu'l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859 or 248/861) is reported to have said, "I came to know my Lord through my Lord. Had it not been for my Lord, I would not have known my Lord"'.<sup>7</sup> These comments suggest that for this Sufi Muslim at least, God *is* regarded as knowable.

On the other hand, Bannister's assertion that one of the five key characteristics of the God of the Bible is that he has suffered, would be viewed as controversial by Christians down through history. A large body of Christian thought views God as impassible (incapable of suffering or feeling pain). Presumably Bannister would not say that Christians who think God is impassible worship a different God from those Christians who believe God can suffer.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>. op. cit. Bannister, (2021)

<sup>6</sup>. ibid. 100

<sup>7</sup>. Nasr et al, (eds.). (2015). *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperOne. 741. See. Comments on Surah 18. verse 31. 563

<sup>8</sup>. For two opposing Christian views, see. Donald Macleod, (1995). *Behold Your God*. Tain: Christian Focus. 232-238. Kevin DeYoung, "Tis Mystery All, the Immortal Dies: Why the Gospel of Christ's

Those who argue that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God on the basis of divergent views of God's character and attributes within Christianity and Islam, tend to minimise the attributes in common and maximise the differences. Granted, there is an opposite extreme – that of minimising all differences and saying the respective theologies are virtually the same. However, the commonly held attributes mentioned above point towards a considerable degree of overlap in Muslim and Christian understandings of God.

This was evidenced to me by an experience I had earlier this year. At the beginning of Ramadhan, I began every day to send to a number of Muslim friends a verse from the Bible that corresponded to one of the *Asmā' u llāhi l-husnā*, the 99 Beautiful Names of Allah of Islamic tradition, and I continued this for 99 days. Very occasionally I had to look hard to find a corresponding Bible verse for a Name, but usually the problem was which verse to choose from a wide choice of verses corresponding to a particular Name of Allah. This may not be the most scientific method of comparison, but it does indicate a considerable degree of common understanding.

#### MUSLIM DENIAL OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The argument usually goes something like this:

‘Christians believe that God is tri-une - One God eternally existing as three “persons”, the Father, the Son/Word, and the Holy Spirit. This is fundamental to a Christian understanding of God, but Muslims deny this. Therefore, Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God.’

It is true that understanding God as tri-une is of fundamental importance to most informed historic ‘mainstream’ Christians and Churches. However, there are examples in the Bible of people who very clearly did not accept any form of the doctrine of the trinity, and yet who are presented as worshipping the same God as the early Christians.

We will leave aside those Jews and ancient Israelites who lived before the time of Christ. In the New Testament, we meet many Jews after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus who rejected that he was the Messiah, let alone that he was divine in any sense. The most famous of these is Saul of Tarsus (a.k.a. Paul), who vehemently and violently set about persecuting the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. On the road to Damascus he had a dramatic and life-changing encounter with Jesus, and became one

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Suffering is More Glorious Because God Does Not Suffer.” [https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/static-blogs/kevin-deyoung/files/2010/04/T4G-2010-KDY-v\\_2.pdf](https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/static-blogs/kevin-deyoung/files/2010/04/T4G-2010-KDY-v_2.pdf) accessed 19th August 2022

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of the chief preachers of this new movement.<sup>9</sup> For our purposes, what is significant is that when Saul/Paul looks back at his former way of life as a persecutor of the Jesus-movement, he never suggests that when he set out from Jerusalem to Damascus he was worshipping one god, and that by the time he arrived in Damascus he was worshipping another. Speaking to Jews who did not share his faith in Jesus as Messiah about his former way of life, he says, ‘I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today’ (Acts 22:3) – it is the same God. What had happened was that he had come to a radically new understanding of this God.

Some Christians might want to argue that for Saul/Paul it was different because he was a Jew who believed the entire Old Testament Scriptures upon which the New Testament is founded. That may be the case, but such an argument is *not* based on whether or not one accepts the trinity, because Saul would have emphatically rejected the trinity or any proto-Trinitarian understanding of God before his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, since he rejected Jesus, who in Christian thinking is the Son or Word of God, and as such, integral to the trinity.

### IS CHRISTIANITY MONOTHEISTIC?

While among Muslims it is rare to come across the view that Christians worship a wholly different God, there is often suspicion that the monotheism of Christians is severely compromised by their belief in the trinity and the divinity of Christ, with at times the accusation of *shirk* (ascribing partners to God) being levelled against Christians. We will argue that ‘mainstream’ Christianity (admitting the difficulties in defining ‘mainstream’), is a truly monotheistic faith, and we will seek areas of common ground in moving forward in dialogue, while recognising continued differences. Mun’im Sirry sums up this suspicion well:

The Muslim conventional argument is that God’s absolute monotheism cannot be compromised at any cost, because any attempt to place other beings alongside God and then venerate them as equal to God is considered as a *shirk* (associationism, p.146, polytheism), which is the only unforgivable sin in Islam (Q.4:116). To ascribe divinity to Jesus, or any other person, is to associate (*ashraka*) something in the created order with the uncreated deity in a way that attempts to divide God’s oneness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>. See. Bible. Acts 9:1-19. 22:1-21. 26:1-23

<sup>10</sup>. Mun’im Sirry, (2014). *Scriptural Polemics - The Qur’an and Other Religions*. Oxford Scholarship Online. 145-146

## CHRISTIAN MONOTHEISM

There is a plethora of passages throughout the Bible which express belief in and radical commitment to monotheism.<sup>11</sup>

Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.<sup>12</sup>

For this is what the Lord says –  
he who created the heavens,  
he is God;  
he who fashioned and made the earth,  
he founded it...  
he says:  
I am the Lord,  
and there is no other...  
And there is no God apart from me,  
a righteous God and a Saviour;  
there is none but me.  
Turn to me and be saved,  
all you ends of the earth;  
for I am God, and there is no other.<sup>13</sup>

The New Testament (NT) also consistently affirms monotheism. On one occasion Jesus is asked, what is the most important commandment in the Torah. He replies by quoting from the *Shema* ' in Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.<sup>14</sup>

## CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES

Traditional Christian language of the doctrines of the trinity and deity of Christ is often taken from the creeds of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. These creeds are accepted

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<sup>11</sup>. For a further non-exhaustive sample from the Jewish Scriptures, see Bible. Deuteronomy 4:28, 35. 5:6-7. 6:4-5. 32:17-18, 39. 1 Kings 8:60. 2 Kings 6:15. 19:18-19. Psalm 96:3-7. Isaiah 43:10-11. 44:6-8. Jeremiah 16:19-20

<sup>12</sup>. See. Bible. Deuteronomy 4:39

<sup>13</sup>. *ibid.* Isaiah 45:18-22

<sup>14</sup>. *ibid.* Mark 12:29-30. For a further non-exhaustive sample, see. John 17:3. Romans 3:30. 1 Corinthians 8:4-6. James 2:19

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by most “mainstream” Christians and churches, but they were formulated around 300 years after the public career of Jesus of Nazareth. These creeds can be regarded as contextual theologies, using the language, concepts and answering the questions that arose in the contemporary Greek-speaking world.

The earliest ‘Christianity’ (although it wasn’t called that then) emerged in a quite different context – that of 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Judaism. All the earliest disciples of Jesus were Jewish monotheists, whose foundational statement of belief was the *Shema*.<sup>15</sup> In the last three decades or so, many scholars have come to a consensus that a ‘high’ or ‘divine’ Christology emerged very early and in a Jewish milieu.<sup>16</sup> Rather than basing a Christian presentation of Christology (the question of the identity of Christ) on the creeds, a more fruitful line of enquiry might be to trace the journey of the earliest monotheistic Jewish disciples, asking *what* they came to believe about Jesus and *why*.

Now the formulators of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. creeds understood their statements to be based on and consistent with the teaching of the NT. That is indeed arguable, but the language, concepts and thought world are, for the most part, very different. The creeds are concerned with ontology, with the nature of beings, and express themselves in concise statements. The NT, in continuation with the Jewish Scriptures, expresses itself in a narrative framework in which the identity of its characters, including those of God and Jesus Christ, are developed in the narrative of their activity and in their relationships to other characters.<sup>17</sup> A more complex and nuanced picture emerges, one which in the long term, may be richer and more fruitful in the context of interfaith dialogue.

## REASON AND REVELATION

Somewhat parallel debates have raged in Christian and Muslim history over the relationship between reason and revelation. Dr Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri has said,

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<sup>15</sup>. See. Bible. Deuteronomy 6:4-5

<sup>16</sup>. See. E.g. Bauckham, R. (2008). *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Essays on the New Testaments Christology of Divine Identity*. Milton Keynes, Paternoster. See also Larry W.

Hurtado, (2003). *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids, Michigan. Wm. B. Eerdmans

<sup>17</sup>. Rowe, K. C. (2006). *Early Narrative Christology - The Lord in the Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker. See also Nina Henrichs-Tarasenkova. (2006). *Luke’s Christology of Divine Identity*. London: T & T Clark



Allah's ineffability means that He is too great, high and exalted to be comprehended...Man's reasoning faculty, imagination and comprehension are far too inferior to know and comprehend Him.<sup>18</sup>

In Islam, the matter was contested in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century CE debates between the hugely influential Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (died 936) and the more rationalistic Mu'tazilī theologians. The prevailing opinion, in Sunni Islam, at least, was the Ash'arī position, that reason was sub-ordinate to revelation. Revelation was not irrational, but super-rational. We recognise the limits of our understanding and accept what is revealed even when it strains and exceeds the limits of our understanding, and appears paradoxical. We affirm what is revealed even though we do not know how it can be true - *bi lā kayf* - 'without asking how.'<sup>19</sup>

The relationship of God's names and *ṣifāt* to his essence were debated in the early centuries of Islam. Al-Ash'arī commented favourably on Ibn Kullāb's teaching, He used to say that the names of God and His *ṣifāt* of His essence are not God, nor are they other than He (*lā hiya Allāh wa-lā hiya ghayruhū*), but that they are subsistent in God (*qā'ima bi-Allāh*).<sup>20</sup> Joseph L. Cumming comments,

To say that God's knowledge, power, life, etc. are "not His essence, nor are they other than He," but that they are "underlying realities eternally subsisting in His essence" is to embrace the paradox that seems inherent in the Qur'ānic texts on the subject. This paradox may be beyond the finite capacity of the human mind to fully understand. But, then, Ibn Ḥanbal and other traditionalists did not hesitate to say that there are certain things (like God's hands, God's sitting on the throne, etc.) which we affirm to be true because the Qur'ān asserts them, even though we do not know "how" they are true, nor do we ask. God is infinite, and we are finite.<sup>21</sup>

Cumming proceeds to draw some parallels as well as differences between Al-Ash'arī's doctrine of God and the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity. According to Mun'im Sirry:

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<sup>18</sup>. Tahir-ul-Qadri, M. (2017). *The Book on Divine Oneness (Kitāb al-Tawhīd)*, Volume 1. London: Minhaj ul-Qur'an. 53

<sup>19</sup>. op. cit. Accad, (2019). 126

<sup>20</sup>. *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*. Ritter edition. 169. Lines 10ff. Quoted in Joseph L. Cumming, (2012). *Ṣifāt al-Dhāt in Al-Ash'arī's Doctrine of God and Possible Christian Parallels*.

[http://www.josephcumming.com/pdf/ashari\\_chapter\\_for\\_woodberry\\_festschrift.pdf](http://www.josephcumming.com/pdf/ashari_chapter_for_woodberry_festschrift.pdf) accessed 29th August 2022

<sup>21</sup>. op. cit. Cumming, (2012). 16

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The question whether reason is the supreme arbiter in deciding what is true and what is untrue is highly contestable in Islam... the vast majority of Muslims... maintain that revelation in Islam, as in Christianity, takes precedence over rationality.<sup>22</sup>

This common view of reason subordinate to revelation may be a stepping stone in mutual understanding. We may set this out in the form of a conversation between two interlocutors, X and Y.

X: God is one. There are three who are called God, the Father, the Word/Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are eternally distinct and in relationship with each other. Nevertheless, the three are not three gods, but one God.

Y: That sounds irrational and contradictory

X: We say this because it is revealed in the Scriptures. Our human minds, limited and finite as they are, may not fully comprehend the reality, but that should not surprise us when we are considering the infinite eternal God. How can a cup contain the ocean?

How can our finite minds grasp the infinite God?

Of course, many Muslims and others may not accept either that what Christians regard as revelation actually is that, or that Christians have interpreted it correctly, but I hope this will help to demonstrate that Christians believe in the trinity, not necessarily because they understand it fully, but because they believe it to be revealed, and that many Muslims may have a degree of sympathy with that position

## SOURCES OF REVELATION AND AUTHORITY

Arguably there is a considerable body of common Scripture held by Jews, Christians and Muslims. Christians accept the Jewish Scriptures, the *Tanakh* (Torah, Prophets and Writings). The Qur'an speaks only in the highest and most positive terms about both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The Qur'an confirms that the Torah and *Injil* or Gospel is 'sent down' by Allah and 'a guidance to mankind.'<sup>23</sup> The people of the *Injil* are to 'judge by what God has sent down therein.'<sup>24</sup> The people of the Book are told 'You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel',<sup>25</sup> and believers

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<sup>22</sup>. op. cit. Sirry. (2014). 154

<sup>23</sup>. See. Qur'an. Surah *Āl-`Imrān* 3:3-4

<sup>24</sup>. See. Qur'an. Surah *Al-Mā'idah* 5:47

<sup>25</sup>. See. Qur'an. Surah *Al-Mā'idah* 5:68

are told to believe ‘in the Book He revealed to His Messenger, and the Book He revealed before (*Injil*)’.<sup>26</sup>

Abdullah Saeed, Sultan of Oman Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, writes;

‘The Qur’an shows utmost respect and reverence for what the Qur’an calls “the *Tawrat*” (Torah) of the Jews, revealed to Moses, and the *Injil* (Gospel) of the Christians, revealed to Jesus. It never makes disparaging statements about these “Books,” but instead refers to them as coming from God. The only denigrating remarks in the Qur’an are about certain individuals or groups of People of the Book (Jews and Christians) and their actions...

‘The Qur’an consistently refers to the Torah and Gospels as “Books of God,” revealed to Moses and Jesus. We know from the history of these two religious traditions that by the time the Prophet was preaching, the scriptures of both Jews and Christians were established and documented. Since the Qur’an was referring to those scriptures that existed in the seventh century, its references to them should equally apply in the modern era.’<sup>27</sup>

In view of this, a strong case can be made for Muslims to read the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as sources of revelation, indeed, to read them as Muslim Scriptures.

#### ‘SON OF GOD’ LANGUAGE

The term ‘son/s of God’ is used in a number of ways in the Bible, all of them depicting a non-physical, non-biological relationship. Adam, the Israelites, the son of David/Messiah, and disciples of Jesus are all at different times referred to as sons or children of God.

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<sup>26</sup>. See. Qur’an. Surah *An-Nisā*’ 4:136. See. Surah *Āl-‘Imrān* 3:84

<sup>27</sup>. Saeed, A. (2011). “How Muslims view the Scriptures of the People of the Book: Towards a Reassessment?” Chapter 10 in *Religion and Ethics in a Globalizing World: Conflict, Dialogue, and Transformation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Kindle Location. 4117 - 4320

In this essay, Saeed surveys classical commentaries on the Qur’an such as Razi, Tabari, Qurtubi and Ibn Taymiyya and comments that “the Qur’an and a number of Muslim scholars take a more nuanced and positive view of existing Jewish and Christian scriptures and their authenticity.”

For a comparable view of medieval theologian Al-Biqā’ī (d. 885/1480), see. Walid A. Saleh, (2008). *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and Introduction to Al-Biqā’ī’s Treatise*. Leiden, Brill.

Muslim scholar, Joseph E. B. Lumbard states, “It would be contradictory for the Quran to speak of the efficacy of judging by the Torah and the Gospel if it were to also maintain that these scriptures have been abrogated or excessively distorted.’ op. cit. Nasr et al., (2015). 1767

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In the Hebrew and Aramaic idiom of the time, ‘son of X’ often meant someone with the characteristic of X. For example, Luke 10:6 speaks of ‘a son of peace’. Peace cannot literally have a son; it means one who is characterised by peace.

When the NT speaks of Jesus Christ as ‘Son of God’, it is *not* teaching that God took a wife, or that he physically begets children. Even the language of Jesus being the ‘only-begotten son’ of God is arguably a mistranslation of the Greek *monogenés*, which means ‘unique’: Jesus is the unique son. But even those who retain the language of ‘begotten son’ are not claiming that this begetting is of a physical, biological nature.

Abdulla Galadari recognises this when he states, ‘the Qur’an may not necessarily speak against God having children as long as it emphasizes that these are to be understood spiritually and not physically.’<sup>28</sup> Sidney Griffith has translated a confession of faith written by Elias bar Shīnāyā, Metropolitan of Nisibis, of the Nestorian Church of the East (975–1046), submitted to the vizir, Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī al-Maghribī (d. 1027), in July 1026 CE, as follows:

[We also declare ourselves quit] of everyone who believes that He (God) has married or will marry, has sired anyone or will sire anyone, or that He has taken a female consort.<sup>29</sup>

The language of this confession is not so far from the Qur’anic denials of God taking a son (*walad*).

### QUR’ANIC ‘ANTI-TRINITARIAN’ PASSAGES

A careful reading of the Qur’anic so-called ‘anti-Trinitarian’ texts will find that they are not engaged with mainstream Christian orthodoxy. That is in no way to invalidate those texts – they clearly are engaged with beliefs held by some people in the orbit of 7<sup>th</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> century Arabia, and scholars debate the identity of these groups. Muslim scholar Joseph Lumbard writing in *The Study Quran*, quotes the ‘anti-Trinitarian’ passages *an-Nisa*’ 4:171 and *Al-Mā’idah* 5:73 and comments:

This, however, is not a direct condemnation of Christian theology, for Trinitarian theology does not make God one of three, but rather speaks of the triune God, Who is both one and three in a manner that transcends human

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<sup>28</sup>. Galadari, A. (2018). *Qur’anic Hermeneutics: Between Science, History, and the Bible*. London: Bloomsbury. 101

<sup>29</sup>. Griffith, S. (2018). “The Complexity of Monotheism in Islam - A Christian Response to Asma Afsaruddin.” Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall, (eds.). *Monotheism and its Complexities: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*. Georgetown University Press. Kindle Location 1563

understanding. Viewed in this light, 5:73 does not oppose the various forms of orthodox Trinitarian doctrines that have prevailed for most of Christian history. Rather, it appears to oppose crude misunderstandings of it that would lead one to believe that there are three gods instead of one.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Professor Asma Afsaruddin of Indiana University, USA has said,

In other verses, the People of the Book are specifically admonished not to say “Three” (Surah *al-Nisā*’ [4]:171; Surah *al-Mā’ida* [5]:72–73) when referring to God; this admonition is widely understood to be a critique of the standard Christian doctrine of Trinity. But this cryptic Qur’ānic utterance has also instigated discussion among scholars about whether this numerical reference might constitute a critique of specifically tri-theism (that is to say, belief in three distinct gods) rather than the orthodox Christian doctrine of the triune God. Al-Ṭabarī’s explication of this verse suggests that it is tri-theism that is being condemned in the verse.<sup>31</sup>

What the Qur’an denies, informed orthodox Christians would also deny.

#### THEOPHANY AND INCARNATION

Theophany is a visible manifestation or appearance of God. Both the Bible and the Qur’an contain accounts of theophany, though these are more numerous in the former. In Genesis 12:7, we read,

The LORD appeared to Abram (later Abraham) and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

The LORD appears to Abraham at least a further three times in the Biblical narrative, and later appears to Isaac, Jacob, Moses and to others. Moreover, a well-known theophany is that of God appearing to Moses in the flames of a burning bush, recorded both in the Torah and the Qur’an.

The angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. <sup>3</sup>So Moses thought, ‘I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.’ <sup>4</sup>When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, ‘Moses! Moses!’ And Moses said, ‘Here I am.’

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<sup>30</sup>. op. cit. Nasr et al., (2015). 1779

<sup>31</sup>. op. cit. Afsaruddin, Mosher and Marshall. Kindle Location. 1148

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<sup>54</sup>‘Do not come any closer,’ God said. ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you. . . are standing is holy ground.’ <sup>6</sup>Then he said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’ At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.<sup>32</sup>

Parallel accounts in the Qur’an appear in Sūrah *Tā-Hā* 20:9-14 and in Surah *al-Naml* 27:7-8,

Hast thou heard tell of Moses, 10 when he saw a fire and said unto his family, “Stay here. Verily I perceive a fire. Perhaps I shall bring you a brand therefrom, or find guidance at the fire”? 11 Then when he came to it, he was called, “O Moses! 12 Verily I am thy Lord. Take off thy sandals. Truly thou art in the holy valley of Ṭuwā. 13 I have chosen thee, so listen to what is revealed. 14 Truly I am God, there is no god but I.

[Remember] when Moses said unto his family, “Verily, I perceive a fire. I shall bring you some news therefrom, or a brand, that haply you may warm yourselves.” 8 Then when he came to it, a call came unto him, “Blessed is the One in the fire, and the one around it. And glory be to God, Lord of the worlds!”<sup>33</sup>

That this was a theophany, an appearance of God, seems to be confirmed in Surah *An-Nisa* 4:164, where we read: “and unto Moses God spoke directly”. Asma Afsaruddin, referring to the Sūrah *Tā-Hā* account, comments, ‘In a powerful theophanic moment, God “reveals” himself to Moses.’<sup>34</sup> *The Study Quran*, commenting on Surah *Al-Naml* 27:8, says, ‘The One in the fire is understood to refer to God Himself.’

The Torah account says that the angel, or messenger of the LORD appeared to Moses, but then we read that God himself called to him from within the bush (Exodus 3:4) and also that ‘Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God’. Similarly, in the Qur’anic account, the voice from the fire says, ‘Verily I am your Lord...’ (Surah *Ta-Ha* 20:12) and “O Moses! Truly I am God, Lord of the worlds!” (Surah *Al-Qasas* 28:30). It seems from both the Biblical and Qur’anic accounts that in some way, God has appeared in the flames in the tree.

Other theophanic moments indicated in the Qur’an are the Lord manifesting himself to the mountain and it crumbling to dust in response to Moses’ request, “My Lord,

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<sup>32</sup>. See. Bible. Exodus 3:2-6

<sup>33</sup>. See. Qur’an. Surah *Al-Qasas* 28:29-30

<sup>34</sup>. op. cit. Afsaruddin, Mosher and Marshall. Kindle Location. 1161

show me, that I might look upon Thee.” (Surah *Al-A'rāf* 7:143), an account somewhat similar to one found in Exodus 33:18-23.<sup>35</sup> There are also passages in the Qur'an that speak of an eschatological coming of God to earth in judgement and all people having to appear before God.<sup>36</sup> These have some resemblance to texts in the Hebrew Bible that speak of a future day of the Lord's coming.<sup>37</sup> Other passages speak of believers seeing the face of their Lord in paradise: 'Faces that Day shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord.'<sup>38</sup>

There is a profound mystery to these theophanies, often indicated by God appearing in cloud and fire – much remains hidden as well as revealed. However, it presents us with Scriptural data that, while on the one hand God is everywhere present,<sup>39</sup> He can in some mysterious way manifest Himself at a particular time and place and to particular people. There appears to be some level of agreement here between Bible and Qur'an, and between Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologies.

This conceptual background of theophany arguably provides one of the precedents for what Christian theologians term 'incarnation' – God appearing, coming to earth in and as a human being, while at the same time still ruling the universe, which is what Christians believe happened in the coming of Jesus Christ to earth. I appreciate this may seem an enormous or even impossible step for many Muslims, but I hope it will help to at least demonstrate from a shared conceptual background that informed 'mainstream' Christians do not believe in the deification of a man, or in three gods, but are genuinely monotheistic in their faith. Mun'im Sirry offers a fair assessment:

I would argue that the difference between Christianity and Islam over the doctrine of the Trinity is not a question about the oneness of God. It is a question about the nature of that oneness. Both faith traditions affirm without hesitation the absolute uniqueness and unity of the one God over against all idolatry and polytheism. While Muslims emphasize the unity of God in its strict sense, Christians believe that it can allow differentiation without fragmentation. In other words, both Muslims and Christians speak of the unity of God, but they differ in the way to express it.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>. See. Qur'an. Surah *Maryam* 19:52

<sup>36</sup>. See. Qur'an. Surah *Al-Baqarah* 2:210. Surah *Ya-Sin* 36:49-53. Surah *Az-Zumar* 39:67-70

<sup>37</sup>. See. Bible. Psalm 50:3-4. 96:12-13. 98:8-9. Isaiah 35:3-6. 40:3-5, 9-11. 52:7-10. Zechariah 2:4-5. 10-12. 14:1-5. 6. 9. 16. Malachi 3:1-4

<sup>38</sup>. See. Qur'an. Surah *Al-Qiyāmah* 75:22-23. See also Surah *Al-An'am* 6:127

<sup>39</sup>. See. Bible. E.g. 1 Kings 8:27. Psalm 139:7-12. See. Qur'an. Surah *Al-Baqarah* 2:115, 255

<sup>40</sup>. op. cit. Sirry, (2014). 166

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have merely skimmed the surface of some extremely profound topics, but if it encourages Christians and Muslims to come together in humble, respectful and enquiring dialogue that seeks both to understand and be understood, then it will have achieved its purpose.

‘Guide us upon the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those who incur wrath, nor of those who are astray.’<sup>41</sup>

Show me your ways, Lord,  
teach me your paths.  
Guide me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are God my Saviour.<sup>42</sup> ■

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<sup>41</sup>. See. Qur’an. Surah *Al-Fātihah* 1:6-7

<sup>42</sup>. See. Bible. Psalm 25:4-5