

The Love above Allah:

The Gap between Trinitarian Love and the Love of Allah

“*[God is] the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.*” –Dante, *Paradiso*

Introduction

Given the recent horrifying images of beheaded, burned, and murdered Christians by the hand of ISIS and other Muslim groups, one wonders how drastic is the divide between these two faiths. The violence by Middle Eastern Muslims, motivated no doubt by a complex web of religious devotion, hatred against the West, and the influence of powerful Muslim leaders, cannot help but instill within the mind of Westerners that Islam is not a religion of love and peace. Christians persecuted by Muslim groups and governments in the East no doubt feel an even greater skepticism to the claim of many Muslims that, given the similarities between faiths, Christians and Muslims can live in peace.

In an attempt to stave off further anger and bitterness between Christians and Muslims, a group of 138 Islamic leaders and thinkers joined together in 2007 to bridge the gap between Christianity and Islam, emphasizing the shared values of both faiths.¹ What came to be the “A Common Word between Us and You” Initiative (ACW) posited that Christianity and Islam are founded upon the same three basic principles: the oneness of God, love for God, and love for neighbor.² Indeed, on the surface this claim seems to ring true. As the Qur’an states, “He is God the One, God the Eternal. He begot no one, nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him.”³ And given His unity, everyone is called to “devote” themselves “wholeheartedly to

¹ *A Common Word Between Us and You*. Amman (Jordan: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), *English Monograph Series*, No. 20, 7.

² *A Common Word*, 53.

³ Q. 112:1-4. English translations of the Qur’an are taken from: M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford, 2012).

Him.”⁴ One must love Allah alone⁵ and have no rivals to Him, but must love Him uniquely.⁶ And Muhammad called his followers to love for their neighbor what they love for themselves.⁷ The leaders of ACW rightly note the similarity in language and concept between these pillars of the Muslim faith and the Jewish *Shema*.⁸ And, of course, Jesus emphasizes this concept several times in the Gospels, reiterating the Old Testament command to love God and love neighbor, at least in part because Yahweh is the One True God and worthy of worship and devotion.⁹ Given these similarities and the similar emphasis placed on love of God and neighbor in both faiths, the ACW concludes with a charge for peace between Christianity and Islam upon the shared foundation of love for the God who is one and love for neighbor.¹⁰

While it is quite charitable for Muslim leaders and scholars to attempt to create peace and unity between Christianity and Islam—and indeed such an endeavor should be undertaken by both faiths—the claim that Christianity and Islam share a common foundation of love for God and neighbor fails to prove true upon close evaluation. In fact, it is precisely because Christians and Muslims differ on the nature of God’s oneness that the common charge of loving God and loving neighbor fail to find synonymy. Upon closer evaluation of both faiths, it becomes clear that even the definitions of love differ according to the differences in the nature of God. The

⁴ Q. 73:8.

⁵ Q. 33:4.

⁶ Q. 2:165.

⁷ *A Common Word*, 53. The Qur’an also connects the concepts of worshipping God alone and loving neighbor, stating, “And worship God alone, and do not ascribe any divinity in any way to anything but Him. And do good unto your parents, and near of kin, and unto orphans, and the needy, and the neighbor from among your own people, and the neighbor who is from another community and who is a stranger, and the friend by your side, and the wayfarer, and those whom you rightfully possess” (Q. 4:36).

⁸ Deut. 6:4-5 states, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” All Bible quotes are from the English Standard Version, trans., *The Holy Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003).

⁹ “And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets’” (Matt. 22:36-40).

¹⁰ *A Common Word*, 65.

foundation for love in Islam (*Tawhid*)¹¹ is in fact the very reason why Allah is incapable of possessing a love akin to the love that Yahweh has within Himself as Trinity and the overflow of love He has for His creation. Because Allah is complete oneness, love cannot be a part of his essence, and therefore, no matter how loving he chooses to be, his nature is not founded on this love, and thus it cannot compare to the love of Yahweh, the God who is love (1 Jn. 4:8).

***Tawhid* and Trinity**

The fundamental difference between the love of Allah and the love of Yahweh primarily rests on the difference between the Muslim concept of *Tawhid* and the Biblical principle of God as “Trinity.” While it is true that both Christianity and Islam place great importance on affirming that their God is the One True God who has no rivals,¹² the nature of this oneness is very different. In fact, even the Qur’an speaks against the concept of Trinity.¹³ While Miroslav Volf and others claim that Christians and Muslims are in fact worshipping the same God—and Muslims merely have been confused as to what Christians mean by Trinity¹⁴—upon evaluation of the Muslim and Christian understandings of the nature of God as *Tawhid* and Trinity, it becomes apparent that these are very different deities, indeed.¹⁵ And because their natures are so

¹¹ “Etymologically, *tawhid* is derived from the Arabic word *wahadu*, which means that God is one without a second, without any other co-eternal entity, of complete supremacy, unrivalled, unopposed, unequalled, and unchallenged. In the context of Islamic theology, it is used to express the unity or oneness of Godhead.” Ilzamudin Ma’mur, “The concept of Tawhīd in Sunnī islam: (with special reference to al-Ash‘arī),” *Hamdard Islamicus* 25, no. 2 (April 1, 2002), 36.

¹² Is. 44:6; Q 112:1-4.

¹³ “Those people who say that God the a third of three are defying [the truth]: there is only One God” (Q. 5:73); “[. . .] so believe in God and His Messengers and do not speak of a ‘Trinity’—stop [this], that is better for you—God is only One God” (Q. 4:171). Granted, the Islamic understanding of the Christian doctrine of Trinity is skewed—they confound Trinity with tri-theism in many respects, which explains much of their criticism. Nonetheless, even if understood properly, the Muslim would still fight against it, for the Christian conception of Trinity cuts against the strict monotheism found in the concept of *Tawhid*.

¹⁴ For a short summary of his thoughts, see: Miroslav Volf, “A Christian Response to Muslims: Allah and the Trinity,” in *Christian Century* (March 8, 2011), 20-23. For a longer work addressing the similarities and differences between Allah and the Trinity, see: Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012).

¹⁵ One might balk at this, citing the Jewish worship of Yahweh as a wholly One without the multiplicity of persons. The issue is beyond the scope of this essay, but there are several ways in which Jewish monotheism differs radically from the Islamic concept of *Tawhid* (some of which will be explained below). In short, the primary difference between Jewish and Christian conceptions of God is a matter of degrees of revelation, rather than essence or person.

different, these two deities exercise their love in very different ways, thus dramatically altering the concept of love in these two faiths.

Tawhid

For Muslims, the unity of Allah is the most significant concept in Islam. It is the bedrock upon which every other doctrine is laid.¹⁶ As the Creed of al-Tahāwi states, “We assert the unity of God, believing by God’s succor that God is one. He has no partner; nothing is like Him; nothing resembles Him. Nothing renders Him impotent. There is no deity except Him. He is existent from eternity, without beginning; He is enduring to eternity, without end [. . .].”¹⁷ Daily the Muslim is reminded of God’s oneness in the recitation of the *Shahādah*, which begins with “*La ilaha illa Allah*,”—“there is no God but Allah.”¹⁸ And with this affirmation of Allah’s oneness as God above all other beings, there carries the implicit charge that he alone should be worshipped with total devotion and conviction and that all men will eventually return to him.¹⁹

While all Muslims affirm the nature and importance of *Tawhid*, they differ as to how this unity and oneness is expressed in Allah.²⁰ *Sunni* Muslims believe that there are four different “modes” of *Tawhid* in Allah. First, they hold to *tawhid al-rububiyyah*: unity of lordship. Allah is the sovereign of the universe: creator and sustainer.²¹ The second principle is *tawhid al-uluhiyyah*:

Christians worship the same God as Jews, although their conception of Him is more fully formed—for Christians recognize that God has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, the difference between Christians (and Jews) on the one hand and Muslims on the other is far greater, for they conceive of God in radically different ways, as will be discussed below.

¹⁶ John Andrew Morrow, “Divine Unity,” in *Islamic Images and Ideas*, ed. John Andrew Morrow (London: McFarland, 2014), 8. “The very essence of Divine Unity is the be-all and end all of Islam: everything originates from it, and everything revolves around it. *Tawhid* is thus the very axis around which Islam revolved.”

¹⁷ W. Montgomery Watt, trans, *Islamic Creeds: A Selection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh, 1994), 41.

¹⁸ Morrow, “Divine Unity,” 8.

¹⁹ Ma’mur, “The Concept of Tawhid,” 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 35. It is important to recognize that Muslim theology differs at many points quite significantly, depending on the traditions and sects. Thus, it becomes difficult at times to make a holistic statement about an Islamic belief. When important, I will make a distinction between *Sunni*, *Shi’a*, and *Sufi* beliefs. Otherwise, my statements are generalizations aimed at describing “mainline” Islam.

²¹ Morrow, “Divine Unity,” 9. This is affirmed in Q. 51:56-58: “I created Jinn and mankind only to worship me [. . .] God is the Provider, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.”

all acts of worship belong to Allah.²² The third principle, *tawhid al-asma' wa al-sifat*, is an affirmation of Allah's attributes and confirmation of the uniqueness of Allah—no one is like him.²³ The fourth principle is *tawhid al-hikimiyyah*: unity of law; Allah is the source of *shari'ah*.²⁴ While Twelver Shiites would affirm several of these principles, they prefer to speak of *Tawhid* in terms of Allah's unity of essence, attributes, and actions.²⁵ They regard Allah's essence as his eternal, unchangeable nature, unlike the attributes of anything created, and therefore unknowable.²⁶ Out of his essence flows his eternal attributes, "names of attributes whose opposite cannot be applied to God."²⁷ Of these attributes, seven are known to man: power, knowledge, life, will, hearing, sight and speech.²⁸ The "unity of actions" are post-creation manifestations of Allah's "names" that flow out of His essence.²⁹ According to both traditions, Allah is the Divine unity that brings together a multiplicity of attributes and actions. Thus He is one in essence, dual "in Divine names," and multiple in "manifestations."³⁰ Morrow quotes Sachico Murata in stating, "In respect to His Self, God possesses the Unity of the One, but in respect to His names, He possesses the Unity of Manyness."³¹

The "names" of Allah are the post-creation actions of Allah. These do not define or encompass all of Allah, but merely describe a part of Allah that he desired to reveal.³²

Traditionally, these names are numbered at 99 and can all be found in the Qur'an. However, lest

²² Ibid., 9. This is affirmed in Q. 39:3: "true devotion is due to God alone."

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Ibid., 9. Some *Sunnis* question this final principle.

²⁵ Ibid., 9.

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

²⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁸ *Islamic Creeds*, 16.

²⁹ Morrow, "Divine Unity," 9. Although the *Sunnis* don't discuss the essence, attributes, and actions of Allah in terms of *Tahid* like the Twelver Shiites, they nonetheless affirm the principle in many ways.

³⁰ Ibid., 14.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

³² Amira Shamma Abdin, "Love in Islam," *European Judaism* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2004), *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, 92.

Islam hints at a type of dualism or process theology, conservatives assert that these attributes, although expressed post-creation, are “eternal as well as concomitantly persisting in the Essence of God.”³³ Significant to this discussion is Islam’s understanding of love in its connection with the nature of Allah. For Muslims, Allah’s essence is unknowable, and it is only at the level of his “actions” that he bears resemblance to mankind.³⁴ Of equal significance is the fact that love finds itself as one among ninety-nine other attributes of Allah, and while there are verses in the Qur’an that speak of Allah’s love,³⁵ it is not held as a unique or more significant attribute than his other attributes. This understanding of love as one attribute among many which has no bearing on the essence of Allah bears significant differences with the Trinitarian concept of love as the foundational principle of the nature of God.³⁶

The Nature of the Trinity

Whereas in Islam, being is attributed to essence, and thus Allah has an essential nature that remains distinct from his attributes, actions, and relationship with his creation, within the Trinity, God’s being is defined not by essence but by personhood.³⁷ And because of this redefinition of ontology, God can subsist eternally within relationship—relationship with

³³ Zakaria Stapa, "A Discussion on the Concept of Tawhīd: The Viewpoint of Al-Ash‘arī," *Hamdard Islamicus* 23, no. 2 (April 1, 2000), 56. Mu’tazilites, in an effort to stave off any hint of dualism, assert that Allah has no attributes *but* His essence. It was al’Ash‘ari who created the distinction between Allah’s essence and his attributes, while affirming that both are eternal and that his attributes flow from his essence. Stapa, 57.

³⁴ Abdin, "Love in Islam," 92.

³⁵ “[. . .] my Lord is merciful and most loving” (Q. 11:90).

³⁶ Patriarch Alexy II, “Response by Patriarch Alexy II,” in *A Common Word Between Us and You*, (Amman, Jordan: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), *English Monograph Series*, No. 20, 182. Granted, many Christians may object to the notion that love is a more foundational principle to the nature of God than some of His other attributes, like His holiness, mercy, or aseity. The point is well-taken and bears significant weight. However, I would argue that love is not an attribute of God at all—rather, it is the very core of His essence and the overflow of His very nature as Trinity. When taken from the perspective of the uniqueness of God not only to His creation but also to the gods of every culture, it is God’s love as found in Trinity that distinguishes Him the most from all other deities, even the ones who also claim aseity, holiness, or mercy. Love is not merely the favorite name or attribute of God among others; it is set apart as distinct because it is the radius from which all His attributes flow.

³⁷ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Sophia, Apophasis, and Community: The Trinity in Contemporary Orthodox Theology,” in *The Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2011), 251.

Himself.³⁸ Thus, God’s substance, which is inherently relational, can best be described as self-communion.³⁹ For someone to *be*, one must possess being (*hypostasis*), and “being” in relation. This ontology finds its derivation in the being of God.⁴⁰ Unlike Allah, God’s ontology lies not in the *ousia* (oneness of substance) of God, but in the personhood of the Father as the ground of the Trinity. Thus, God the Father is the ground of God’s being and the Son is the uncreated Other grounded in the substance of God as found in an understanding of being as communion.⁴¹ Contrary to Islam’s claims that the doctrine of the Trinity destroys the unity of God,⁴² the doctrine of the Trinity, as Timothy George states, “defines that unity in terms of a fecundity and a richness, a texturedness, so to speak, within the reality of the one who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”⁴³

Love in the Trinity

Teased out, this understanding of being as communion has radical implications for whether the god of Islam can actually exist at all, at least philosophically.⁴⁴ However, more to the point, it is only within this relational ontology, and a relational understanding of the nature of God, that the concept of God as love can make sense. Without the free flow of love between two persons, personhood cannot exist;⁴⁵ rather, God would be reduced to an impersonal force, so distinct from His creation that any possibility for relationship with it—or being understood by

³⁸ Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 273.

³⁹ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir, 1985), 84.

⁴⁰ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 86.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88-89. It is important to note that this understanding of the nature of Trinity and of ontology is not shared by all Christians; however, I believe this to be the most compelling understanding of ontology both philosophically and Biblically. And while the nature of the Trinity is shrouded in mystery—hence the great disagreement among Christians as to the nature and outworking of the concept of Trinity—the above understanding of Trinity seems consistent with the nature of the God as outlined in Scripture and provides a powerful picture of the nature of Trinitarian love.

⁴² Timothy George, “The Trinity and the Challenge of Islam,” in *God the Holy Trinity*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 112.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁴ This, of course, is far beyond the scope of this essay.

⁴⁵ Patriarch Alexy II, “His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II,” 182.

it—would be gone. This is why Christianity has always affirmed that God is a Trinity defined by the love between the three Persons.⁴⁶ As Patriarch Alexy II affirms, “God the Trinity is the fullness of love with each hypostatic Person bespeaking love towards the other two hypostatic Persons. The Persons of the Trinity are aware of themselves as I, and you: just as you are in me and I am in you (John 17:21).”⁴⁷ God is not a cut-off, impersonal being, isolated in eternal loneliness and self-love, but rather an eternal interchange of love flowing between the Three Persons.⁴⁸

Given this, it is clear that not only is the Trinitarian concept of God wholly distinct from Islam’s conception of *Tawhid*, but that Allah cannot truly be a God of love, because he is wholly one. Douglas Kelly quotes Richard of St. Victor, stating, “One never says that someone properly possesses love if he only loves himself; for it to be true love, it must go out towards another. Consequently, where a plurality of persons is lacking, it is impossible for there to be love.”⁴⁹ Whereas Scripture affirms that God *is* love (1 John 4:8;16), Allah is a distant entity that acts in love at certain times. For Islam, love can never be more than one attribute among many; because love doesn’t find its source in his personhood—for who could speak of Allah as a person at all?—his love is dependent upon outside forces for its implementation.

Because God is love within Himself, His creation of the world and mankind can be understood as an overflow of Trinitarian love. If God was merely a single-person entity, then He would not possess or share His love with another, and thus the creation of angels and man would have made him dependent on them at some level. But since God is Trinity, an ever-present, free

⁴⁶ As George concisely states, “The Father gives, the Son receives, the Holy Spirit proceeds. God is love.” George, 126.

⁴⁷ Patriarch Alexy II, “His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II,” 182.

⁴⁸ Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1*, 274.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 274.

flowing loving communion of the Divine Persons, the creation of mankind was purely out of His love, not out of a need.⁵⁰ As Moltmann states, “Creation is a part of the eternal love affair between the Father and the Son.”⁵¹ God’s love is completely self-satisfying: He is in no need of our love or relationship for satisfaction; rather, it is because the love within the Trinity is so great that it overflows into creation and love of that which is outside Himself.⁵² While Islam can affirm that Allah created the world for his glory⁵³ or for reasons unknown to mankind, it can never affirm that Allah created the world out of an overflow of his love. Indeed, Allah created the world not out of an overflow of his own love, but out of a desire to *be* loved by his creation⁵⁴—something that runs radically contrary to the Islamic understanding of Allah as completely distant and distinct from his creation.

*Islamic Understanding of Allah’s Love*⁵⁵

Given that love is not rooted in the personhood of Allah as it is in the Trinity, the understanding of love in Islam is subtly, but radically, distinct from Christian love. For Muslims, the “Divine Love” came first, and because of his love, he created the world.⁵⁶ Having made the world, Allah in love created the ability to love within mankind’s heart and instituted the duty of

⁵⁰ Carlos Madrigal, *Explaining the Trinity to Muslims* (Pasadena: William Carrey, 2011), 82-83.

⁵¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 59. Many conservative evangelicals find themselves uncomfortable—or even in direct opposition—with many of Moltmann’s claims about the nature of God and the atonement. While Moltmann definitely goes too far with many of his claims, conservatives would do well to reconsider many of his ideas about the Trinity as a powerful testimony to the love of God. Let us not throw out the meat with the bones.

⁵² Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1*, 322-323.

⁵³ Q. 51:56.

⁵⁴ Abdin, “Love in Islam,” 93.

⁵⁵ The reader will note that far more space will be spent describing the love of Yahweh than the love of Allah. This is primarily due to the great imbalance within Islamic writings and the Qur’an which places far more weight on what Allah requires or his other attributes than on the nature of Allah’s love. This is in great contrast to the dearth of Christian sources discussing the nature of God’s love—and, more significantly, the great weight the Bible places on the love of God.

⁵⁶ Abdin, “Love in Islam,” 93. Interestingly, Abdin wouldn’t produce a verse from the Qur’an explicitly stating this. Rather, he cites a verse that states that Allah created the world according to the “inner Truth” (Q. 15:85) which Abdin interprets as a reference to love.

responding in love to him and others because he gave them the ability to love.⁵⁷ Having created the world, Allah cannot show his love in a creative way anymore. Thus, most Muslims when discussing the love of Allah equate it with his mercy or his sustaining power or his provision. This love, however, is contingent upon the love that Allah's followers have for him. According to the Qur'an, those who do good works, will earn his love.⁵⁸ If a Muslim will truly love God, then he will be loved by God:⁵⁹ "If you love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins."⁶⁰ If a Muslim is mindful of Allah, then he will love him.⁶¹ If a Muslim loves and forgives his neighbor, then Allah will forgive him his sins.⁶² But if the Muslim is disobedient or evil, he will lose the love of Allah.⁶³ Allah does not love traitors,⁶⁴ or the prideful,⁶⁵ or the wasteful.⁶⁶ Thus, while the love of Allah was the initiating factor in creation, now his love is contingent upon the love that his people have for him.⁶⁷

Trinitarian Understanding of Love

While Allah's love is in response to the love of another and generally is manifested in the giving of mercy or material blessings, at its heart, the Trinitarian understanding of love is defined by radical self-giving. Because each member of the Trinity is God, their love is based not on provision, but on mutual deference and self-giving. Von Balthasar sees this exemplified in the

⁵⁷ Abdin, "Love in Islam," 92.

⁵⁸ Q 19:96: "But the Lord of Mercy will give love to those who believe and do righteous deeds."

⁵⁹ "A Common Word between Us and You," 60.

⁶⁰ Q. 3:31, 134.

⁶¹ Q. 3:76.

⁶² Q. 24:21: "Tell the believers to pardon and forbear, do they not love that God should forgive them their sins?"

⁶³ Q. 4:107.

⁶⁴ Q. 22:38.

⁶⁵ Q. 16:23.

⁶⁶ Q. 7:31.

⁶⁷ The only possible exception would be in Q. 5:54, which states, "God will bring a new people: He will love them and they will love him." Some Sufi writers interpret this as saying God is loving first. Daniel Midigan, 171. He states, "Sufi writers have observed that God's love for human beings precedes their love for God, and if it were not for the fact that God had favoured us by His primordial love, mercy, and compassion, humanity could never have loved God and His creatures." Whether this is the case or not, it surely describes a minority opinion among Muslims, and more importantly, a minority teaching within the Qur'an and the Traditions.

Father's eternal begetting of the Son as God the Father strips Himself of His Divinity in self-surrender and gives His divinity to the Son.⁶⁸ In order for God to fully exercise His Personhood as Love, He must be in an eternal act of self-giving within the Trinitarian relationship. As Kelly quotes Staniloae in stating, "In perfect love, persons do not merely engage in a reciprocal exchange of self; they also affirm themselves reciprocally and personally, and establish themselves in existence through giving and receiving."⁶⁹

God's self-giving and self-emptying love doesn't remain fixed within the Trinity, however. Rather, God shows His great love for His people by the giving of Himself through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son on our behalf.⁷⁰ Through Christ's kenosis, expressed so beautifully in Philippians 2, God expressed his Divine Love for us in the most glorious of ways.⁷¹ Christ cannot separate Himself from His communication of Divine Love. We cannot know Him without knowing His love and vice-versa. And it is only by His grace that we can enter into this and know it. Christ's love is kenosis, self-emptying. And therefore, it creates a fullness of love without limit.⁷² In Christ's pouring out, He becomes the fullness of God's love for us.⁷³ As Von Balthasar beautiful states,

⁶⁸ Karen Kilby, "Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity," in *The Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2011), 211. Of course, this language might may some Reformed Christians uncomfortable. And, indeed, it is somewhat speculative, given the scarce insight Scripture gives into the nature of the Godhead before time. The overall point remains the same, however.

⁶⁹ Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1*, 275.

⁷⁰ John 3:16; 1 John 4:9-10. As Rowan Williams states, "The mutual self-giving love that is the very life of God is made real for our sake in the self-giving love of Jesus." Rowan Williams, "The Most Revd. and RT. Hon. Rowan Williams," in *A Common Word Between Us and You*, (Amman, Jordan: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), *English Monograph Series*, No. 20, 194.

⁷¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 54. As von Balthasar powerfully states, "[this is] the radiant paradigm of divine love itself: precisely in—and *only* in—the kenosis of Christ, the *inner* mystery of God's love comes to light, the mystery of the God who "is love" (1 Jn 4:8) in himself and therefore is 'triune.'" (83). Again, the idea of *kenosis* is not received with the same weight by all theological traditions. However, all Christians affirm that Christ in some way emptied Himself and gave up something of worth in order to redeem mankind.

⁷² Because Christ *is* gratuitous love—and thus self-defining and self-justifying—He is Truth that is at once necessary and also irreducible.

⁷³ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 86.

Obediently identifying himself with his mission, he himself is his mission in person, and therefore, in his kenosis as the “servant of God”, he becomes the manifestation of God’s eternal love for the world. But, for the same reason, he becomes the manifestation of his eternal majesty and kingship, which reveals itself most definitively in the servant’s ultimate humiliation.⁷⁴

Thus while Allah’s love for his people remains distant, impersonal, and at no cost to himself, the love of God for His people is communicated through an emptying of Himself by which He gives Himself fully to His people in the great sacrifice of kenosis. Yet in an act so powerful and incomprehensible, the God of Trinity, so united in love and mutual interest, out of Trinitarian love and obedience (Luk. 22:42; Jn. 17:4-5) underwent a radical break as the wrath of the Father was poured out on the Son (Rom. 3:24-25) in the cry of dereliction: “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁷⁵ Thus, God was made like us (Heb. 2:17) and sacrificed Himself for us (Eph. 5:2), so that we might be made like Him (Rom. 8:29), and abide in Him (Gal. 2:20), no longer as an enemy (Rom. 5:10), but as a child of God (John 1:12).

Because God’s love is fundamentally self-giving, it is also fundamentally initiatory—otherwise, His own Person, as Love, would be contingent upon something else. Whereas Allah demands that men step forward in love and obedience in order for Him to show mercy, Yahweh steps out in love and mercy first, as Paul so marvelously states in Romans 5:6-11.⁷⁶ Christianity

⁷⁴ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 86-87.

⁷⁵ Matt. 27:46. There is much debate over the significance of the cry of dereliction and whether the ontology of the Trinity was changed at all as God’s wrath was poured out on the Son. It is apparent that their relationship as Father and Son didn’t change, given Christ’s prayer soon afterwards, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). This debate is far beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, however, that even if only the human aspect of Christ was separated from the Father, this still marks a radical act of love and self-sacrifice that is completely foreign to the distant, self-protective god of Islam.

⁷⁶ “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by

is thus first and foremost not a teaching, but an action of the Trinitarian God on behalf of His world.⁷⁷ As George asserts,

God's divinity does not consist in his ability to push things around, to make and break, to impose his will from the security of some heavenly remoteness, to sit in grandeur while all the world does his bidding. Far from staying above the world, he sends his own glory into it. Far from imposing, he invites and persuades. Far from demanding service from men in order to enhance himself, he gives his life in service to men for their enhancement.⁷⁸

And it is in this radical initiatory love that the great difference between Allah's love and God's love lies.

Thus, in contrast to Islam, God's utter distinction from human beings isn't merely a matter of degree or mystery. Rather, His utter uniqueness of character is found precisely in the nature of his love. Because God's love is so self-giving and so unconditional, it alerts the sinner to how utterly different God's love is from any other love.⁷⁹ God's love is so unlike human love that it is a scandal, an offense, that if a man stumbles over and recognizes that thus he has had no footing in the first place, he can understand this scandal for what it is: "a love that runs after him, pulls him out of the pit, casts aside his chains and places him in the freedom of divine [love]."⁸⁰ Even Scripture defines love, not as our love for God, but as His love for us: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our

the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Rom. 5:6-11.

⁷⁷ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 70. As he states, "The key to understanding the actions lies solely in God's presentation of Himself to human beings on the stage of human nature, by virtue of the identity of the divine 'author', the divine human 'actor', and the divine Spirit who exists identically in both and who interprets the action for those whom the Actor has brought into the drama."

⁷⁸ George, "The Trinity and the Challenge of Islam," 127.

⁷⁹ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 73.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

sins.”⁸¹ It is in the kerygma of Divine Love manifested in the Logos made flesh that God declares Himself distinct from us, and one is left with no other response but to fall down and worship.⁸²

Islamic Love as Devotion and Petition

In Islam, worship, service, and devotion define the nature of the love that humanity is supposed to have for Allah. Given that Allah is creator and sustainer, sovereign over all and wholly other, nothing short of total devotion and worship is required of man.⁸³ Many passages in the Qur’an speak to such devotion and service. One must love Allah alone⁸⁴ and have no rivals to him, but must love him uniquely.⁸⁵ Mankind must be totally devoted to Allah because he is totally sovereign.⁸⁶ They must be grateful and rejoice in his mercy, especially his mercy on the Day of Judgment.⁸⁷ The oneness and sole sovereignty of Allah demands this holistic devotion, as reflected in the common prayer from the *Sunna*: “There is no god but God, He Alone, He hath no associate, His is the sovereignty and His is the praise and He hath power over all things.”⁸⁸ While there are many debates among Muslims as to how total devotion to Allah is fleshed out in practice,⁸⁹ they all agree that love and complete devotion to Allah is the pinnacle and purpose of every person’s existence.⁹⁰

⁸¹ 1 John 4:10.

⁸² Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 57-58. The “glorious majesty” of Divine Love throws us down in worship and service. As Von Balthasar says, “It shines out as the last word leaves one no choice but to respond in the mode of pure, blind obedience.” 57.

⁸³ As the Qur’an states, “[. . .] devote yourself wholeheartedly to Him. He is the Lord of the east and the west. There is no god but Him” (Q. 73:8-9).

⁸⁴ Q. 33:4.

⁸⁵ Q. 2:165.

⁸⁶ Q. 67:1.

⁸⁷ Q. 1:1-7.

⁸⁸ Quoted in: *A Common Word*, 62.

⁸⁹ The Ash’arites believe believers can also love those things that bring them closer to God (like worship), or God’s rewards. By contrast, the Hanbalite school argues that Allah alone should be loved and loved for His own sake (and love others as a way of loving and obeying Allah). Sufi’s focus more on the experience of loving God as the Muslim learns to abide in the presence of Allah and learns to love nothing else but Him. Abdin, 92-93.

⁹⁰ Abdin, “Love in Islam,” 96.

This love and devotion to Allah renders the Muslim nothing short of a slave, and in this slavish submission, he becomes a friend of God.⁹¹ As Abdin states,

“To love God in Islam is to become His slave, to submit totally to Him and to the means of His worship [. . .] If you are very lucky, you become God's slave [. . .]. To be the slave of God is the ultimate dignity, to be the servant is the ultimate honour. To feel this servitude to God alone is the ultimate freedom, because you will never be a slave to anything else beside Him.”⁹²

This understanding of love is reflected in the name of Islam itself, meaning “submission.” Yet this slavish type of love is not without affection or desire for Allah, for the *Hadith* states, “‘My slave does not cease to draw near unto me through devotion, with his own free will, until I love him.’ What God asks of the believer is adoration out of free love, free rejoicing, free blessing.”⁹³ While Allah demands full submission, he desires it to be out of a heart of love and affection for him, not out of rote action or fear of his punishment. Total devotion requires a holistic love for Allah that engages, the mind, will, and affections.⁹⁴ And in response to obedience and love, Allah promises to love, bless, and show mercy. Therefore, in Islam, love of Allah is in response to His greatness and power, engendered by the whole being, fleshed out in total devotion and slavish servitude,⁹⁵ for the sake of Allah’s reciprocal love and mercy.

Christian Love as Response

While Christianity affirms with Islam that Christians are slaves of God (1 Cor. 7:22), that they should worship and love God for His greatness (Ps. 150:1-2; Deut. 6:4-5), that they should

⁹¹ Abdin, “Love in Islam,” 96.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹³ *Hadith Qudsi* 2:115, qtd. in Abdin, “Love in Islam,” 96.

⁹⁴ *A Common Word*, 62.

⁹⁵ Lest we assume that Allah views his slaves as only slaves, it is important to note that the term “friend of Allah” is used at times to discuss those of whom receive Allah’s love and good will. John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 192.

love God with their whole being (Matt. 22:37), and that God loves and blesses those who love and serve Him (Prov. 8:17),⁹⁶ this does not define the foundation for the Christian's love of God. First and foremost, the Christian loves and worships God in response to God's initiatory love through Christ for the wicked, those who were enemies of God (Rom. 5:10). "We love because He first loved us," writes John (1 John 4:19). As Volf states, "Our love springs from and is nourished by God's love for us. It cannot be otherwise since the Creator who has power over all things is infinitely good."⁹⁷ Our imperfect human love presupposes—and proves—the perfect love within the Trinity and finds its "explanation" and foundation in the divine love.⁹⁸ Because God is love within Himself, and because He poured out His love on us through Christ, we are then enabled to love and motivated to love in response.

God's love is not just the grounding for love of Him, however; it is also the grounding for the love of others as He calls His people to imitate His initiatory, self-sacrificial love for neighbor and enemy alike. Through the power of God's love working in the believer, and out of love for God, the Christian is then enabled to love his neighbor as himself.⁹⁹ The Christian gives generously because God gave without reservation.¹⁰⁰ The Christian loves those who don't love him because this is what God did to him, His enemy.¹⁰¹ The Christian's love is unconditional

⁹⁶And similar to the passages in the Qur'an about Allah's hatred of evil-doers, Scripture similarly discusses God's hatred of the wicked (Ps. 11:5).

⁹⁷ "The Yale Response," 145.

⁹⁸ Staniloae in Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Vol. 1*, 322.

⁹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 340. He puts it well: "Love for God and love for the world are not two different loves but two aspects of the one, indivisible love. Through this love, the total synthesis of mankind comes to realization in a single identity, in which each individual exchanges his own being with the rest, and all with God. Unified in the love of Christ, who is love and therefore unity, the members of his body are also one with each other, so much so that they come to know each other's hearts and thoughts."

¹⁰⁰ Susan Wessel, "The Theology of *Agape* in Maximus the Confessor," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (January 1, 2011), 326.

¹⁰¹ Rowan Williams, 203.

because God's love is unconditional.¹⁰² As God emptied Himself and gave Himself for the Christian, so the Christian must show the same humility and service to others.¹⁰³ And the Church presents this love to the world as an outpouring of God's love, imitating Christ through loving the world while they anticipate future union with Him.¹⁰⁴

Thus, while it is true that Christ taught His followers to love God and love each other, this was only in the broader context of His mission to die in love so that He might redeem the world, and out of that redemption, make love for God and neighbor possible. The Passion is the crux of Jesus' teaching, pre- and post- Passion. It is out of that Act of love and sacrifice that the rest finds its meaning and power. Thus, His call for His Church to be self-sacrificial and loving takes its "form" in Jesus' self-sacrificial act of love at the cross.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Even in a brief survey of Islamic and Christian conceptions of God and love, it is clear that there remains a vast gap between the two. The God of the Bible stands head and shoulders above Allah as a God of love, grace, and self-sacrifice. Whereas Allah remains distant and withdrawn in his acts of love and mercy, God submits Himself to the world He created and pours Himself out for the sake of His people. Allah loves because man has loved; God loves so that man might love. Allah shows mercy to the righteous; God shows mercy to the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Allah requires self-sacrifice for his people; God sacrificed Himself for His people. Love is one of ninety-nine attributes of Allah; Love is the foundation and essence of the Person

¹⁰² "The Yale Response," in *A Common Word Between Us and You*, (Amman, Jordan: The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2012), *English Monograph Series*, No. 20, 146.

¹⁰³ Phil. 2:3-11.

¹⁰⁴ Von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 90. In a beautiful passage, he exclaims that the church loves the world "while God's Spirit seeks a comprehensive answer from the from the whole of creation to God's loving Word in Christ and helps give birth to this answer through the most intense labor pains (Rom 8:19-27); God's love from below sighs for God's love from above, until the miracle of love brings about the perfect nuptial union (Rev 21:9f)."

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

of God. Allah requires that man pursue him; God pursued His people first, so that they might be able to pursue Him. Allah requires total obedience and devotion to him; Christ was totally obedient and devoted to God so that man didn't have to be. Allah is distant; God is Immanuel. The differences between Allah and the God of Christianity are vast because the nature of Allah as one cannot compare with the richness of the loving Trinity, out of which flows a love so wholly greater and more powerful than anything Allah could ever conjure out of his eternal essence.

Given the powerful differences between the Allah and Yahweh, many practical applications can be made. Most obviously, it seems clear that one cannot claim that Christians and Muslims are worshipping the same God. And because of this, it seems rather dangerous for Christians to affirm "Insider Movements" and encourage converts from Islam to remain consistent with the Muslim faith. To worship Allah while a Christian is nothing short of idol worship, for Allah cannot compare in greatness to the nature of Yahweh. Just as significantly, this great gap between the love of Allah and the love of Yahweh might be one of the greatest points of evangelism for Christians to Muslims. Given the immense weight placed on Muslims to try to merit the love and mercy of a distant Allah, the words of God's immanent love through Christ are truly a lifting of the yoke. As the Muslim grasps the great love of the Trinitarian God that overflows into His relationship with His creation, he cannot help but see that Christ's yoke, as compared with Allah, is easy, and His burden is light (Matt. 11:30). And so as the Christian faithfully presents the Gospel as the message of God's initiatory love for His creation, he can pray that the Muslim's eyes will be opened to see God for the first time and exclaim with joy: this is Love.

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