



## Developing a Christian Theological Understanding of Islam

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### Introduction

Conversely, all religions claim to be unique in relation to their traditions, or at least, a central belief. In the light of this, it is quite challenging then to conclude that all religions are one, since overarchingly, all religious worldviews claim exclusivity. Nonetheless, it is vitally important to understand the religious other for a symbiotic relation within the human ecology? Considering Islam and Christianity, as a case here, the question is, what could possibly be a Christian theological understanding of Islam? According to Imad N. Shehadeh, "Islam and Christianity believe in the same God, yet they differ widely on what they believe about His nature."<sup>1</sup> This is quite fascinating, in that, discourses about God have both converging and diverging points in these two religions. Miroslav Volf accounts Sheikh al- Jifri position on the oneness of God that, "In the Qur'an, it is written: 'our God and your God is One.'<sup>2</sup> It seems clear in here that, for

Sheikh al-Jifri, views about God in both Islam and Christianity is the same. Now, my motivation in this work is to understand, as a Christian, the Islamic doctrine, or if you will, philosophy about God. Therefore, this paper has its objective to find out the particular challenges in developing a Christian theological understanding of Islam, and further ascertain what might such a theology looks like. In doing so, I will examine the worldviews about God in the religions of Islam and Christianity. This would follow by scholarly reflections, particularly, in the works of Imad N. Shahadeh and Miroslav Volf. Finally, I will be involved in the ongoing conversation, and possibly draw my conclusion, of course, without a confessional bias.

### Worldviews about God in both Islam and Christianity

Tradition has it that, both Islam and Christianity share a common ancestral root in Abraham. Given this tradition,

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<sup>1</sup> Imad N. Shehadeh, "The Predicament of Islamic Monotheism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161, no. 642 (2004): 142.

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, "Allah and the Trinity: A Christian Response to Muslims," *The Christian Century*, (2011): 20.

claims about how Muslims and Christians serve the same God is clearly ubiquitous.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Islam and Christianity uphold a tradition about God that is different, both theologically and philosophically. According to Imad N. Shehadeh, there is a theory that even doubts whether or not Allah is one and the same as the one true God of the Christian.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the theory proposes that the historicity of Allah is a derivative of one of the pantheon of gods in the then Arabic peninsula, precisely, the moon god.<sup>5</sup> Contrast to this theoretical position, Imad N. Shehadeh argues that, “Muhammad initially adopted the name “Allah” as it was used by the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians of his day in referring to the true God of the Bible.”<sup>6</sup> Further supports and evidences emerging from “textual, lexical, historical, and theological”<sup>7</sup> studies provide huge spatial fields of coherence that the God of Christians is one and the same as who Islam refers to as Allah. This, for me,

offers more convincing evidence about the basic knowledge of God shared by these two religions linguistically. According to Imad N. Shehadeh, “Islam and Christianity differ widely on what they believe about the nature of God.”<sup>8</sup> This notion of disparity that exist between Islam and Christianity about the nature of God is fundamentally philosophical despite being a religious tradition. In Christianity, the one true God is triune in nature, and exist as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> According to this Christian philosophy, the one true God is trinitarian in nature and has undivided essence and unity.<sup>10</sup> This view is quite polemic in Islamic theology, if you will, philosophy. Interestingly, the latter do not only vehemently refute the doctrine of the Trinity, they also accuse Christianity of being polytheistic with such a claim.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the idea of monotheism is a considerable challenge in thinking of developing a Christian theology of Islam. Notably, Islam “adhere to a

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<sup>3</sup> Shehadeh, “The Predicament of Islamic Monotheism,” 142.

<sup>4</sup> Imad N. Shehadeh, “Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161, no. 641 (2004): 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Shehadeh, “The Predicament of Islamic Monotheism,” 142.

<sup>9</sup> Miroslav Volf, “Allah and the Trinity: A Christian Response to Muslims,” *The Christian Century*, (8 March 2011): 20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

particular concept of the oneness of God that results in an explicit denial of the Trinity and the Incarnation.”<sup>12</sup> This concept, or if you will, philosophy is called “monadic monotheism.”<sup>13</sup> According to Islamic belief, specifically, in the Surah, “Allah forgiveth not (the sins of) joining other gods with Him; but forgiveth whom He pleaseth other sins than this. One who joins other gods with Allah hath strayed, far away.”<sup>14</sup> From this premise, devout Muslims would argue that Christians have strayed from the one true God in their theology of the Trinity.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the train of thought about the Christian dogma of the Trinity grounds in the notion of “unity,” the idea that God is in relation with Himself. Given the fact that discourses on monotheism between these two religions is enigmatic, particularly, in relation to the trinity, Miraslov Volf takes an easy approach to assert that “if the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit cannot be understood as one, according to Muslim interpretations of God’s unity, then

Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Works of Imad N. Shahadeh and Miroslav Volf: On Monotheism and Nature of God**

So far, the debate between Muslims and Christians is about the nature of God. These two religions, both claims to be monotheistic but understand the oneness of God differently. Therefore, arguably, a suspicion of whether or not they both incline to the same God is of great concerns. In the light of this, it is a herculean task to develop a Christian theology of Islam, I would say. Therefore, I find it reasonable to attempt this from the positions of these two scholars, Imad N. Shehadeh and Miroslav Volf.

For Imad N. Shehadeh, Islam incline to the notion of “monadic monotheism.”<sup>17</sup> This notion posits a monotheism that is atomic and does not allow any association with God. This Islamic philosophy precludes Christianity from being monotheistic. Also, Shehadeh argues how hard it is to reconcile the

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<sup>12</sup> Shehadeh, “The Predicament of Islamic Monotheism,” 144-145.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 145; see also Surah 4: 116.

<sup>15</sup> Shehadeh, “Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?” 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>17</sup> Shehadeh, “The Predicament of Islamic Monotheism,” 144.

Islamic understanding of the oneness of Allah. His point is, Islamic theology gives little emphasis on “unity” or even tries to explain away the idea of unity in Allah?<sup>18</sup> Another perspective Shehadeh observes within the Islamic thinking is that, “the attributes of God stem out of His will and not from His nature.”<sup>19</sup> This idea invites a complex philosophical challenge in Islamic theology, or if you will, philosophy. The point is, this Islamic position suggests arbitrariness in the character or nature of God in His divine attributes. Take for example, the attributes of love. If this attribute is not the nature of God but only an expression of His will, then this love is contingent and not perfect. This notion of unpredictability of Allah in Islamic thinking makes this “God” difficult to be related with or be trusted, since such a God is capricious.<sup>20</sup> A further interesting perspective Shahadeh observe in Islamic theology, or if you will philosophy, is Allah’s anthropomorphism within the Qur’anic text.<sup>21</sup> Shahadeh explains how Islam in its tradition has explain away qualities

of man expressed by God and left into being an irreconcilable gap between Allah and His subjects in the attempt to posit the sovereignty of Allah.<sup>22</sup> In conclusion, Shehadeh takes the position that, Islam and Christianity are different in their philosophy about God but they both infer to the same God.

For Miroslav Volf, Islam is very convinced that “Christians aren’t true monotheists,”<sup>23</sup> Volf argues in favour of Christianity that, the nature of God is much unexplained in Islamic theology. Islam only takes an a priori positions just to misconstrue the sacred traditions of the Christian faith. Take for example the notion of Christology. Islam argues that, the Son in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not possible because God never had physical intimacy.<sup>24</sup> Volf explains that this has never been the Christian idea about the Son in the Trinity. Rather, the Christian idea about the Son is wrap up in the idea of the “begotten,” which denotes that “the Word which was from eternity with God, is neither a creature nor some sort of a lesser divinity, but is the very

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<sup>18</sup> Shehadeh, “The Predicament of Islamic Monotheism,” 145.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>23</sup> Volf, “Allah and the Trinity: A Christian Response to Muslims,” 20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

uncreated God.”<sup>25</sup> In explaining the undivided essence of God in the unity of the Trinity, Volf argues that “when God acts ‘toward the outside’- creating, redeeming, and bringing the world into completion- God’s acts are undivided and inseparable. Every act of one person of the Trinity is always caused by all three.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the other persons of the Godhead are always in inseparable actions with one. In here, a very important example Volf uses is the doctrine of the incarnation.<sup>27</sup> He asserts that, “though only one person of the Trinity incarnated, all three persons are present and act in that one person who became incarnate. Thus, the incarnation doesn’t require any division of God’s essence.”<sup>28</sup> In conclusion, Volf affirms the unity of God in the Trinity, but also argues that, there is no radically different understanding of God between the Christian and the Muslim.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, both Imad N. Shehadeh and Miroslav Volf have all touched on the oneness of God. In fact, they understood the importance in the

discourse about the nature of God, philosophically. Interestingly, both Shehadeh and Volf affirm the claims of monotheism by these two religions. Again, these scholars agree on the disparity that exist between the claims Islam and Christianity make about the nature of God. In all, I would totally agree with both Shehadeh and Volf on their profound theses. Further, Volf suggests that there is no radically different understanding of God in the religions of Islam and Christianity.<sup>30</sup> clearly, this assertion offers an open window in the development of a Christian theological understanding of Islam. Yet, although I revere Volf’s intellectual prowess, I would disagree with him on that count. My thesis is represented in the following two arguments. One being that, since Islam discredits the Christian view of the Trinity, any Christian theological understanding of Islam has to ignore this dogma. In my opinion, such an enterprise is never “Christianity” in the first place. My second position is that, the notion of developing a Christian theological understanding of Islam is

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<sup>25</sup> Volf, “Allah and the Trinity: A Christian Response to Muslims,” 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

philosophically grounded on a bias hypothesis of Islam. That is to say, such an enterprise is a reductionist approach. In conclusion, the idea to develop a Christian theological understanding of Islam might be intelligible to me privately as a Christian, since this would help me to honestly examine my

beliefs. So, in sum, I would suggest the development of a graceful apologetic approach that would answer questions and doubts about the Trinity, a Muslim might have. And, the way to this approach has to be guided by love, and not out of vociferous argumentative spirit of debate.

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