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GOD BY ANY OTHER NAME?

If a Muslim believes one thing, he or she believes that there is but one God. In fact, that's the cardinal confession of Islam: "There is only one God, and Muhammad is his messenger."

A Muslim child may have that confession recited over him or her thousands upon thousands of times before the child is even able to speak. And the first act of converts to Islam is to make this confession: "There is but one God . . ."

For the Muslim, the radical unity of God—that there is only one God with no partners and no parts—sets Islam apart from all the pagan religions of the world. The highest blasphemy in Islam is *shirk*, associating others with or making others partners with God. To the Muslim mind, nothing could be more foul and dishonoring to God.

When I converted to Islam, the simple and radical unity of God was a very appealing doctrine. Like many people, I struggled with the complexities of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. How could God be one and yet three persons? And how could one of the persons of the Trinity, Jesus, be

both fully God and fully human? The Trinity defied comprehension, and Islam offered a view of God conformable to human reason.

EMBRACING THE MYSTERY

Today, the Christian's task of proclaiming the gospel and persuading their Muslim neighbors and friends depends, in part, on faithfully embracing the mystery of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Many Christians have a slippery grip on this cardinal doctrine of the faith, and it makes for rather uneasy discussions with our Muslim friends. But what could be more appropriate than that we should stand in awe of God, overwhelmed not only by His acts but by His very person? After all, *He is God*.

Why should the litmus test for our view of God be human reason when both Muslims and Christians agree that God is infinitely above all that we can imagine or think? How could we ever know God unless He stooped to reveal Himself to us?

So from the outset, any discussion of God requires a certain humility. This is why James exhorts his readers to “humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (James 1:21). We could never know God unless He revealed Himself to us. And if that's the case, embracing *whatever* He reveals of Himself is both necessary and humbling.

REVEALED RELIGION

Both Islam and Christianity claim to be revealed religions. That is, they both depend on sacred texts wherein God dis-

closes Himself and His will to mankind. So both the Muslim and the Christian should assume a posture of receiving when it comes to identifying the character and work of God. They receive from God's hand what God desires them to know.

That raises a very important question. How are Christians to think of the Quran, and how are Muslims to think of the Bible?

For the purposes of explaining and applying the good news of Jesus Christ to our Muslim neighbors and friends, Christians don't have to spend a lot of time attacking the Quran.¹ Instead, our focus should be on helping our Muslim friends understand why they should humbly accept the Bible as revelation from God and therefore believe its message.

In God's marvelous kindness to Muslims and to Christians doing the work of evangelism, the Quran itself states ample enough reason for the Muslim to accept the Bible. In several places, the Quran affirms parts of the Bible as revelation from God. Those key passages, coupled with eagerness among many Muslims to try and refute the Bible, are enough to lead the conversation onto biblical and gospel-fertile soil.

The Quran teaches, for example:

No just estimate of Allah do they make when they say: "Nothing doth Allah send down to man (by way of revelation)." Say: "Who then sent down *the Book which Moses brought?—a light and guidance to man.*" (Sura 6:91, all italics added)

And it is your Lord that knoweth best all beings that are in the heavens and on earth: We did bestow on

some prophets more (and other) gifts than on others:
and We gave to David (the gift of) the Psalms.
 (Sura 17:55)

The Great Terror will bring them no grief: but the angels will meet them [with mutual greetings]: “This is your Day, . . . [the Day] that ye were promised.” The Day that We roll up the heavens like a scroll rolled up for books [completed], . . . Even as We produced the first creation, so shall We produce a new one: a promise We have undertaken: truly shall We fulfill it. *Before this We wrote in the Psalms, after the Message (given to Moses):* “My servants the righteous, shall inherit the earth.” (Sura 21:103–105)

And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Law that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Law that had come before him: a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah. Let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein. (Sura 5:46–47)

The first quote addresses pagan unbelievers who do not believe God has spoken. The proof brought forward in the Quran is not the Quran itself but “the Book which Moses brought . . . a light and guidance to man.” In other words, the Torah or Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, is offered as reliable proof to pagans and to Muslims of God’s sending down divine revelation. So, those books should be acceptable and sufficient ground for evangelistic discussions with Muslims.

And notice in the last quote (Sura 5:47) that “the people of the Gospel” are told to judge all things by what is put in the Gospels. Six hundred years after Christ, the Quran records that even the prophet Muhammad understood and taught that the Gospels were reliable for arriving at the truth. Sura 10:94 reads: “If thou wert in doubt as to what We have revealed unto thee, then *ask those who have been reading the Book from before thee: the Truth hath indeed come to thee from thy Lord: so be in no wise of those in doubt*” (see also 16:43; 21:7). Here is a Quranic admission that the Bible is sufficient for matters of faith and conduct, requiring Muslims not to be among “those in doubt” about this fact. Early Muslims were even told to seek clarification from Christians who had been reading the Bible before them!

If that were not enough to establish the Bible’s reliability as revelation from God, throughout the Quran Muslims are taught that “*there is nothing that can alter the words of God*” (6:34; 10:64; 18:27). According to the Quran, Allah promises to watch over the revelation and guard it from corruption (15:9).

As Christians, we know that these sentiments find their expression in the Bible first. “Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens” (Psalm 119:89; see 1 Peter 1:24–25). And Jesus taught, “It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law” (Luke 16:17), and “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt. 24:35).

If our Muslim friends are consistent with their own teachings, they must accept the Torah, the Psalms of David, and the Gospels as uncorrupted revelations from God. In our evan-

gelism, the point is not to concede that the Quran itself is inspired revelation from God, but to lovingly push our Muslim neighbors and friends to the logical conclusion *the Quran requires*—the Bible is trustworthy revelation from God.

We can have complete confidence that the Bible, when read and applied in the power of the Holy Spirit, will accomplish God's saving plan. "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:10–11).

The critical question for Muslim neighbors to consider and for Christians to press is: what, then, does the Bible reveal about God that we should humbly accept?

COMMON GROUND

Some things are not disputed between Muslims and Christians when it comes to many of God's attributes. Muslims cheerfully agree with Christians that God is sovereign, omniscient, omnipotent, merciful, just, holy, righteous, benevolent, and so on. Both groups maintain belief in the moral perfections of God. And both groups believe there is only one God.

There are at least two implications of this substantial agreement. First, the Muslim and the Christian stand in the same relationship to God as Creator to creature. We both

acknowledge the unassailable right and reality of God's rule, and our duty to Him as His creatures.

Second, then, we both acknowledge that all mankind will have to give an account to God for our lives on earth. And because God is morally perfect, He will judge all unrighteousness and punish the wicked. We can then talk with one another as people with a sobering, vitally important question in common: how will anyone be reconciled to God and enter His presence?

The answer to that question is inextricably connected to who God reveals Himself to be. In other words, the doctrine of God and the person of God cannot be divorced from the work of salvation. This is where Muslims and Christians divide and where Christians must hold fast to the Trinity.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME?

A few years after leaving Islam and embracing Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, I had the privilege of visiting my hometown for a debate with local Muslims. The organizers planned the roundtable discussion focused on the questions "Who is God?" and "What is He like?"

An hour into the discussion, we were getting nowhere. One of the participants continually avoided discussing the differences in Islam and Christianity by proclaiming, "We serve the same God. It's the same God with different names."

I confess. I was frustrated with that glib and unhelpful response. I wish that I had been more patient and more biblical in my attitude, but my retort seemed to drive the

point home. I turned to this gentleman, whom we'll call "Rahim," and said, "Pardon me, *Tony*."

He looked befuddled for a moment and said, "Excuse me?" I replied again, "Excuse me, *Tony*," waiting for Rahim to answer me.

He looked out at the audience as if to say, "What's going on here?" I pressed on, looking directly into Rahim's eyes, and asked, "*Tony*, could you please pass me that Bible on the chair in front of you?"

Now Rahim was frustrated and said, "Man, my name is not Tony. It's *Rahim*."

To which I replied, "If you expect to be properly addressed and known for who you are, why do you think God is okay with being addressed by any name and defined by those who call upon him?"

I wish I hadn't let frustration ruin my tone at that point. I wish I had been more patient and charitable. I don't recommend engaging anyone in this way. Instead, we should speak the truth in love. Yet sometimes we have to draw sharp lines in order to be understood. The debate moved on with much more substantive engagement from that point. When we draw lines, we should do so with love because we're representing a loving God we wish to make known.

CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

Throughout the Bible, calling upon the name of the Lord is synonymous with receiving His salvation. We find Abraham calling on the name of the Lord after the Lord revealed Himself to Abraham (then Abram), made promises to him,

and delivered him from troubles (Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 21:33).

The psalmist pictures the saving deliverance of God as a result of calling on the name of the Lord.

*The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me;
I was overcome by distress and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“LORD, save me!” . . .
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.* (Ps. 116:3–4, 13)

The prophet Joel foresaw a day of great and terrible judgment, when only those who call upon the name of the Lord would be saved (Joel 2:31–32). The prophets Zephaniah (3:8–10) and Zechariah (13:8–10) foresaw similar judgments and pictured escape or salvation in precisely the same terms—“they will call on the name of the Lord.”

It’s no surprise, then, that the New Testament writers picture salvation as calling upon the name of the Lord. The apostle Peter, in the first recorded sermon in the early church, quotes the prophet Joel (Acts 2:14–21) and applies his message directly to the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as “both Lord and Messiah” (vv. 21–38). In Acts 4, Peter contended that it was by “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” that a crippled man was healed, and that “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10–12). The apostle Paul also quotes Joel 2:32 when he writes to the church in Rome and says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”

(Rom. 10:13), explicitly equating calling on the name with salvation from sin and judgment for Jew and Gentile alike.

But to “call on the name” does not narrowly mean saying Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It certainly includes that, but it includes more. In the Great Commission, the Lord Jesus Himself charges His disciples with making other disciples, in part, by baptizing them “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Notice that “name” is singular in this verse. The name of God most fully is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To call upon the name of God is to call fully upon the Godhead, the blessed Trinity, one God in three persons.

WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS CLING TO THE TRINITY?

Why does all this matter? Why should Christians make a fuss over God being one God in three persons? Why not merely focus on Jesus and avoid the difficulties of talking about the mystery of the Trinity? Or why not settle for the use of the term *God* and allow the listeners to give it whatever meaning is comfortable for them?

There are many reasons. But I think it’s important to keep at least three in mind.

First, we are bound in humility to accept what God reveals of Himself. After all, we are creatures and He is the Creator; we are finite and He is infinite. Accepting and maintaining the Trinity as central to the Christian faith is to say to God, “I believe *You*—not others and not myself—as You reveal

Yourself.” In short, believing and defending the Trinity is essential to genuine Christian faith and witness.

Second, to deny the Trinity is to commit idolatry. Here the Christian and the Muslim come to irreconcilable differences. We may not maintain that God is one God in three persons and at the same time accept that God is radically one with no persons in the Godhead as Muslims believe. That would be to accept a contradiction. And it would deny the revelation God gives of Himself, making an idol graven with the tools of our own imagination. God is jealous for His name. He calls His people to “worship [Him] in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Surrendering the Trinity turns us to idolatry and away from true spiritual worship of the only living God.

Third, apart from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit there is no possibility of eternal salvation. If we surrender the Trinity, or weaken our presentation of who God really is, we in effect deny the gospel. Each person in the Godhead plays an essential part in redeeming sinners from judgment and bringing them to eternal life. Consider the roles of each:

- *God the Father* “chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (Eph. 1:4–6). Apart from the Father’s election and predestination, there is no rescue of sinners.

- *God the Son* provides our “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Eph. 1:7). Apart from the sinless sacrifice of God the Son, there would be no satisfactory atonement for sin (Rom. 3:21–25a) and no way for sinful humans to enter the presence of a holy, righteous, and just God (Heb. 2:17–18). “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). The God-man Jesus Christ offers the only sacrifice without blemish that is able to purify us and satisfy the Father.
- *God the Holy Spirit* produces in the sinner the marvelous work of the new birth (John 3:3, 5–8). God the Holy Spirit becomes for the believer the “seal” and “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:14). The Spirit of God preserves us until the day of our complete redemption, when we shall be ushered into the presence of God and be satisfied with seeing His face (Ps. 17:15).

THE ONLY TRUE GOD

My debate colleague in my hometown called upon the name of Allah. In calling that name, he was not simply calling upon God in a different language. While it is true that the term *Allah* means “god” and is used by both Arab Christians and Muslims, what each group *means* by that name could not be more radically different. When the Muslim calls on the name of Allah, though he is sincere, he calls upon a name that cannot hear and that cannot save.

It's critical that we understand this when it comes to evangelism, missions, and Christian-Muslim dialogue. For example, in an effort to reach Muslim communities, some Bible translators have attempted to translate the Bible in ways that avoid offending Muslim sensibilities. They were concerned about Muslim perceptions of committing *shirk*, or making partners with God. These translators sought to translate biblical names "Father" and "Son," or "Son of God," into terms more acceptable in Muslim contexts. That meant putting the terms "Son" or "Son of God" in footnotes to some texts and using less literal terms for "Father." So "Father" became "God, your supreme guardian," "God, the exalted one," "guardian," or more simply "God" or "Lord." "Son" and "Son of God" became "Messiah."

Supporters of the translation strategy justified the changes with an appeal to evangelism and contextualization. Opponents of the changes questioned whether such changes did not in fact alter God's Word and God's revelation of Himself. In other words, "Father" and "Son" were not merely word choices and flexible titles, but central aspects of God's identity and character. To surrender these terms in response to the anti-Trinitarian biases and misunderstandings of Muslim communities was to give up too much.

The Bible defines eternal life very clearly as knowing "the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom [God has] sent" (John 17:3). When the Christian calls on the name of the Lord, she or he calls upon the only name given under heaven where salvation may be found (see Acts 4:12).

Muslims and Christians agree that God is holy, just, righteous, and our judge. But our Muslim friends do not

understand that that holy, just, and righteous Judge is none other than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Unless they come to see this, they will enter eternity and be stunned with eternal grief to find waiting there the Son of God whom they rejected in this life.

What's in a name? When it comes to spiritual matters, everything! For only those who call upon the name of the Lord—and mean the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—will be saved. This is the name we wish for our Muslim friends to call upon in faith.

My Christian friend, be humble and confident in what the Lord has revealed of Himself. He has told us what He is like—one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And He has told us that eternal life depends upon knowing Him for who He is. We have come to know God through faith in His Son. Now we hold fast to what we have received so that we may introduce others to the triune God who alone gives life.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

1. Muslims and Christians largely agree about the basic attributes of God (holiness, justice, etc.). This provides a friendly starting place for discussions.
2. The Christian view of the Trinity is essential to any notion of salvation from sin and judgment. We accept the Trinity ultimately because God reveals Himself to us in the Bible as one God in three persons.

3. Since Islam claims to be a revealed religion that affirms the Torah, the Psalms of David, and the Gospels, intellectually honest Muslims must also accept the revelation of God's triune nature. We could not know God except He has revealed Himself to us in His Word. Be confident that He is who He says He is.