

# Admitted truth: Dealing with the overlaps between Christian and Muslim beliefs about the deity (cont. from p1)

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## 1. THEORY: ORIGINS AND MEANING OF THE NAME

The most likely origin of the word 'Allah' is the Aramaic 'alaha, used pre-islamically in, for example, Ezra and Daniel.<sup>1</sup> Lexical studies throw doubt on the popular theory that *al* (the) and *'ilah* (a god) contract to 'Allah'. The most important syllable in *al-'ilah* is *'il* (cognate with *'el*), the ancient Semitic word for the deity, and Christoph Heger has demonstrated that neither *'el* nor *'il* can contract with *al*. Rather, the final *a* in *'alaha* is the Aramaic definite article, which is often dropped in an Arabic cognate. Textual studies also support the theory that the name 'Allah' is derived from the Aramaic *'alaha* due to the influence of the Aramaic Bible on the Arabic New Testament. Historical studies indicate that use of the Semitic *'il* (cognate *'el*) by Abrahamic tribes in pre-Islamic Arabia contributed to 'Allah' being accepted as the name for the Deity.

Muslims understand the Deity through His attributes based on the Holy Names found in the Qur'an. While Christians understand the Deity principally through revelational incarnation in Jesus, many of the Islamic names are also found in the Bible, for example: *Quddus* (Holy) for the Deity as found in Surah lix:23 is mirrored in the term "the Holy (King)" in II Kings xix:2; *Jabbar* (Mighty) in Surah lix:23 is reflected by the Hebrew *Gibbor* (Mighty) as found in Jeremiah xxxii:18. The Divine Names shared by the Qur'an and Old Testament suggest that the 'intermediate view' best represents the evidence.

## 2. PRACTICE: TWO EARLY MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUES

The use of what I have called 'admitted truths' can be perceived in the literary dialogues of John of Damascus and the writings of Paul of Antioch.

### A. John of Damascus (675-753)

John of Damascus was from an influential family in Syria and served under the Caliph as an accountant. He articulated his views on Islam in two different ways. In *De Haeresibus* he pointed out the theological differences between Islam and Christianity. In *Disputatio Christiani et Saraceni*, he presented truths admitted in the Qur'an and the Bible which a Christian could use in dialogue with a Muslim.

John regarded the two admitted truths about Jesus being His (God's) Word and Spirit of God (Surah 4:169) as theologically important. In *Disputatio Saraceni et Christiani*, John advises a Christian engaging in dialogue to ask if the Muslim accepts the Qur'anic title of Jesus (*Kalimatuhu*) 'His Word'. When the Muslim assents, the Christian is to ask whether the Muslim believes 'Kalam' (Word) to be created or uncreated. When the Muslim acknowledges God's Word to be eternal, the Christian is to affirm that he also believes this (John 1:1). Finally, the Christian is to ask whether the Muslim deduces that Jesus is eternal as he has previously designated Jesus to be God's Word according to the Qur'an and affirmed that God's Word is eternal.

God as a Unity was another key admitted truth. John avoided the Islamic dilemma of holding to an Absolute Oneness which cannot simultaneously have ethical and relational attributes (e.g. omniscience requires at least a knower and the known in addition to knowledge). Islam's solution has been to attribute the Deity's attributes to his will, not to his essence.

All future dialogists owe their foundation to John of Damascus. The major extant example of the use of 'admitted truth' is the Nestorian Patriarch Mar Timothy's dialogue with the Caliph al-Mahdi (circa 781). However, Timothy was limited by the need to continually respond to the Caliph's misconceptions about the Trinity. It was not until Paul of Antioch in the 12<sup>th</sup> C that John's implied thesis about using truth admitted in the Qur'an and the Bible was exploited to the full.

### B. Paul of Antioch (d. late 12<sup>th</sup> century)

Little is known of Paul of Antioch apart from the fact that he was a monk and Melkite Bishop of Sidon who lived in the context of the Crusades. However, his *Risāla ilā ba'd ašdiqā'ihī 'l-Muslimīn* (*Letter to Muslim Friends*) was widely read. It seems that Paul reviewed the repetitive arguments in Muslim-Christian dialogue of the past 300 years, avoided the emphasis on theological disquisition which underpinned logical dialectic, and emphasized the use of truths admitted in the Qur'an and the Bible.

Paul goes further by breaking down the old categories and in some cases developing a completely new theological vocabulary. In

doing so, he attempts to explain the Christian conception of the Deity from a perspective more theologically understandable to the Muslim. For instance, instead of translating the term 'hypostasis' (the Greek term used to refer to the 'persons' of the Trinity) by *'uqnum* (substance), Paul uses the theologically more neutral term *ism* (name). This links in with the Islamic tendency to define the Deity by Divine Names.

Paul then reformulates the Nicene Creed using three Names to express the Divine Unity: as an existing Being (*shay'*), as a living Being (*hayy*), and as a speaking Being (*nāṭiq*). He suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity thus expressed conforms to the Qur'an (suras iv (al-Nisā'):171; and xix (Maryam):34). He further notes that in the Qur'an all the names and attributes of God stem from the three substantival attributes (*al-ṣifāt al-jawhariyya*) of existence, speech, and life. The second of these, he holds, explains the incarnation of the Word and the sonship of Christ. Thus, Paul uses traditional Arab analogies of a word proceeding from the mind as a picture of non-physical generation.

To comprehend just how important and far reaching Paul of Antioch's formulations were for Muslim-Christian dialogue one needs only to observe that Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), possibly the greatest Hanbali theologian of all time, responds to a later revision of Paul of Antioch's short manifesto in four volumes of 1400 pages.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude with the words of Samuel Zwemer who, while acknowledging some fundamental differences between Islamic and Christian theism, says *Islamic theism is so great and so strong that it often puts Western theism (timid of transcendence, shy of miracles, and confined to second causes) to shame....But as for its theology in a narrow sense - well, read al-Ghazālī or al-Sha'rānī, and be humble.*

## References

1. In the Aramaic sections of these books. Much of this paragraph follows Shehadeh, Imad. "Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (January-March 2004): 14-26 and references therein.