

Do Christians and Muslims Believe in the Same God?

Reflections on Miroslav Volf's *Allah: A Christian Response*¹

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Introduction

First let me frame the terms of the question regarding the 'same God'. The Campion Hall essays on Christian responses to Islam either explicitly or implicitly relate to the question, 'Do Christians and Muslims believe in the same God?' The question has haunted the long and complex relationship between Muslims and Christians, both as a source of hope and mutual bridge building, as well as a cause of deadly rivalry and fierce criticism. Historically, many Christian and Muslim theologians have assumed that both religions believe in the 'same God'. But serious theologians on both sides have also argued that errors and misunderstandings are rife within the other's tradition, and some have gone so far as to question whether the religions 'as they are practiced' believe in the same God. This question of 'same God' bears an asymmetrical relationship to the Christian-Jewish relationship. It is worth attending to this briefly for it will indicate the complexity of the question we face.

Traditionally Christians claim they are formed out of the Jewish relationship with God, who is also the God of Jesus Christ. This means that for Christians the New Testament becomes the normative way in which to understand the God of the Old Testament. It also means that whilst Christians have always insisted that they believe in the 'same God' of the Jewish bible, they have not claimed that Judaism, after the time of Jesus, is thus a valid religion. For much of Christian history, it was argued that Judaism became invalid through the proclamation of the Christian gospel. This position is called supersessionism. In a different vein, other

¹ Volf, Miroslav (2011) *Allah. A Christian Response*, (New York: Harper Collins). All page citations given in the main body of text.

Christians have argued that Judaism was ‘fulfilled’ in Christ, not abrogated or superseded. That means Judaism will always have a religious validity, as these are God’s beloved, but these people find their fulfilment in Christ. Tragically, it required Auschwitz and the Holocaust to recover the Christian recognition of God’s fidelity to his covenant with the Jewish people, a fidelity that never wavers. Nevertheless, the status of Judaism post-Christianity is still contested and remains a thorny wound in the side of the Christian Church. It also deeply worries Jews. One can immediately see that teaching the ‘same God’ does not necessarily lead to mutual harmony. Such teaching can sprout deadly seeds of rivalry and fratricidal concerns regarding heresy and apostasy.

Muslims generally develop a supersessionist trajectory, claiming to be the abrogation of both Judaism and Christianity. Both Jews and Christians, runs the argument, failed to fully grasp the meaning of their original scripture, conveyed in the Qur’an, and both have either corrupted or at least misinterpreted what they now hold as scripture. In this sense the word ‘fulfilment’ is more applicable to the view that Muhammad fulfils the hidden prophecies in the *Taurat* (the Torah, referring to the first five books of the Jewish bible) and the *Injil* (the original gospel of Jesus). Furthermore, the nature of fulfilment/abrogation/supersessionism is different in the Islamic-Christian relationship than in the Jewish-Christian relationship in so much as Christianity has a ‘progressive’ understanding of ‘revelation’ and Islam does not. This can be categorised crudely as having three stages within the Christian narrative. Islam, on the other hand, has a ‘static’ view of revelation (not meant pejoratively) in the sense that the God testified to by the (Islamic reading of the) prophets and Jesus is exactly the same God testified to by the greatest and last prophet, Muhammad, in the pages of the Qur’an. There is no normative development in the stages of revelation viz. the ‘object’ of revelation, rather there is a normative development in the stages of the clarity and truthfulness of the subject, the Qur’an/Muhammad, of the ‘object’. In this sense, it is possibly easier for

Muslims to say they believe in and worship the ‘same God’ as Christians do. But unpacking this statement will always reveal that the term ‘Christian’ refers to those Christians who believe the Qur’an and cut away the false accretions within historical Christianity. Historical Christians who recite the Nicene Creed, however, will be understandably seen as having compromised the original gospel with the doctrines of trinity and incarnation. These according to many Muslims are falsely required because of the false doctrines of original sin and the need for atonement for this sin. The trinity (possibly *sic*, for historically this was rarely properly understood as taught by sophisticated Christians) is traditionally seen by Muslims as making God ‘three’ rather than ‘one’; and the incarnation is viewed as ‘shirk’, identifying God with that which is not God. From the Christian stand-point, the question of if the Christian God the ‘same God’ as Muslims worship is not addressed in Christian scriptures. Christian scripture affirms the God that the Jews believed in. To make sure we focus on the crucial question of ‘same God’, let me briefly outline the three stages of progressive revelation within most forms of Christianity.²

The three stages of progressive revelation in Christianity

Stage one holds that God is known through conscience or/and God is known through nature and reflection on the natural world. These traces of God have been given different names: primal revelation, natural revelation, natural law, and natural theology. These realities are understood to operate by virtue of prevenient grace and/or reason and/or conscience. These constellation of terms indicate a complex and sometimes overlapping differences of understanding, but I will leave that aside. Stage one ‘revelation’ indicates that God has never left Himself without witness to *all* human communities, by virtue of the *imago dei*. That is, because God creates humans within the natural world, both bear in different ways, the marks

² Detailed accounts of this view and the complexities involved can be found in: Capéran, Louis (1912), *Le Salut des Infidèles: essai historique*, (Paris: Louis Beauchesne); Daniélou, Jean. (1957): *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament*, Longmans, Green & Co, London, trans. Felix Faber; and Dupuis, Jacques (1977), *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, Orbis), 53-157. Not all Christians would be happy to subscribe to it and it does not have a dogmatic status as such, but it seems a helpful way to proceed.

of their creator. This knowledge of God has been employed both positively and negatively, sometimes varying in emphasis according to Christian denomination. The positive usage tends to emphasise that this primal revelation of God provides the possible means of grace to all people that will eventually lead to their salvation, even if they have not heard the Gospel. This grace, in so much as it relates a person to the paschal mystery, is causally explained through the cross of Christ. This position is formally held by the Roman Catholic Church, the largest Christian denomination in the world.³ However, one must also keep in mind that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that all communities are marked by original sin, a theme strongly emphasised in the negative emphasis of this stage of revelation. This latter can be found in the writings of Augustine, and especially the great Reformers, Luther and Calvin, all claiming Pauline authority. Here, this natural knowledge of God becomes the source of condemnation, not salvation; for it allows women and men enough knowledge of the good to show that they are inveterate sinners and cannot save themselves through their own powers. Traditionally, Islam has fitted into this stage of 'revelation', understood as natural revelation, but with an added and interesting complexity: Muslims knew of Jewish and Christian traditions, so any further knowledge of God beyond the natural one is derived from these two traditions, not from Muhammad's teaching or from the Qur'an *per se*. This latter feature is now a disputed question for some in the Muslim-Christian debate.

Stage two is God's special revelation to Israel, marked by the covenant and law through Moses, but also found in the inspired teachings of the Hebrew prophets. This gives Judaism its special status as a religion of 'supernatural revelation'. Salvation comes from the Jews. In the Christian view of history, God intensifies, focuses, and develops His relationship with women and men through Israel. This radical choice of a chosen people prefigures the greater

³ See Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 1964, 14-16; and further elaboration in Gavin D'Costa, 'Catholicism and the World Religions: A Theological and Phenomenological Account' in ed. D'Costa, Gavin (2011) *The Catholic Church and the World Religions: A Theological and Phenomenological Account*, (London: Continuum), 1-33; and the working out of the salvific implications of this in D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, (Oxford: Blackwell-Willey), 2010, 161-211.

scandal of particularity found in the incarnation. By designating this activity ‘supernatural revelation’, Christianity accepted in perpetuity, the inspired nature of Israel’s scriptures, Jesus’ own scripture. Stage two is thus unique to Israel, although in current dialogues with Muslims, the question of whether there is in fact a tripartite ‘Abrahamic covenant’ founding all three religions has been raised.⁴ Since the Holocaust, as noted above, some radical Christian theologians have argued for parallel and dual covenants, such that Judaism be seen as one way to God – for the Jews, and Christianity, another, a route for the gentiles.⁵ Here, ‘same God’, turns into equal and different paths to truth and salvation. An analogical move has been made regarding Islam by some theologians, thus answering the ‘same God’ question with a strong affirmation. This move is novel in the history of theology and needs careful scrutiny. It *prima facie* seems to resemble what was traditionally called ‘indifferentism’, or in the modern period, ‘relativism’.⁶ Traditionally, it has been usually taught that all grace and truth come from Christ who is the fullness of God, but this position at face value seems to suggest otherwise.

Stage three marks the self-revelation of the one God, who chooses to unite Himself with human nature, in the person of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jewish monotheism is transformed and deepened, not necessarily abrogated or cancelled or denied, into Christian trinitarianism. (This at least is the position I would argue for but the jury is out on the matter). In so much as the transcendent God reveals Himself in history in the incarnation in a unique and eschatological irreversible and final way, the trinity comes to be the defining mark of monotheism. Tom Michel rightly calls this the radicalisation of monotheism, helping to explain both God’s transcendence and God’s action in contingent

⁴ See the new edition of Peters, F. E. (2006) *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, new edition); and eds. Norman Solomon, Richard Harries & Tim Winter (2005), *Abraham’s Children. Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*, (London: T & T Clark).

⁵ For example, see, Ruether, Rosemary Radford (1980), *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press). See my questioning of this position in ‘Mission to the Jews?’, *Theological Studies*, 2012 issue, with two responses.

⁶ These are the terms used in *Dominus Iesus*, 2000, 22; a formal document from the Roman Catholic Church.

history.⁷ Michel goes an important step forward by arguing that ‘trinity’, while always needing defence against tritheism, also goes some way to challenge Judaism and Islam to explain aspects of God’s activity testified to in parts of their traditions. One might say that the trinity is the fulfilment of *any* true monotheism.

Stage three is not a road block on further reflection – but is on further revelation within Christian orthodoxy. On the one hand, traditionally, revelation is ‘closed’ with the death of the last apostle. Thus any claim for revelation after the resurrection is likely to be called into question by Christians. Thus, on the other hand, Muslim claims about the Qur’an as the ‘final’ revelation cannot be acceptable to Christians, both in itself, formally, and in some of its claims, materially. But it is also important to note that ‘closed’ here does not mean that God somehow leaves the stage and cannot act freely, but rather the ‘closed’ might be understood hermeneutically that the truth of God’s actions are now to be measured by this revelation, for God cannot contradict Himself, and has given Himself in the triune revelation of Father, Son, Spirit.⁸ The idea of the ‘development of dogma’ allows us to see that God’s activity in history constantly helps the Church’s deeper understanding and testimony to the truth to which it has been given. It grows and learns – as well as teaches. Positively, this means that Christianity can grow and learn from encountering Muslim communities and the truthful elements within Islam. Negatively, it means that certain claims by Muslims, might not be acceptable to orthodox Christians.

New questions and challenges

Some modern Christian theologians have pleaded for a serious rethinking about both trinity and incarnation in relation to the biblical evidence and in relation to how Christians relate to other religions. This problematically moves back to monotheism without trinity and Jesus as

⁷ See ‘Trinity as Radical Monotheism’, <http://www.thomasmichel.us/tr/trinity-monotheism.html> (accessed May 2011)

⁸ See Karl Rahner (1961), ‘The Development of Dogma’, *Theological Investigations*, Volume 1, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd), 39-77.

a Jewish rabbi.⁹ Is this the only way Christians and Muslims can affirm the ‘same God’? If so, Christian orthodoxy might have serious difficulties. However, Miroslav Volf *Allah. A Christian Response*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2011. All page citations given in the main body of text) is to be applauded for suggesting that Christian orthodoxy and Muslim belief in God might not require such liberal accommodation, possibly unacceptable to the majority of both groups, but mutual acceptance might happen with a full blown Trinitarian theology. Volf suggests Trinitarian Christianity can affirm the ‘same God’ as Islam, but without being supersessionist or claiming fulfillment. He does not explicitly make the latter claim, but it is implied throughout his work. Volf asks: do Christians and Muslims believe in the same God? His answer, developed over thirteen chapters is basically ‘yes’, although he does not deny differences. Volf also argues that by giving a positive answer, the future of religious harmony and world peace are finally properly served. I will outline the core of Volf’s thesis in relation to this single question, leaving aside many important issues that he raises. There is much to commend and praise in Volf whose other works have made a significant contribution to Trinitarian theology, but brevity requires that my gratitude to Volf is shown by the questions put to him.

Methodologically, Volf argues that when addressing the question we must make a decision: to either emphasise commonality, while recognizing differences; or emphasise differences, while recognizing commonalities (91). He opts for the first based on biblical and moral arguments. Biblically, despite the exclusive identification of God the Father with Christ in John 14:7-9 and other passages, there was never a question whether ‘Jews worshipped the God revealed by Jesus. John’s Gospel assumes they did. When it came to the question of God, in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ approach was that the commonalities were more important than the differences.’ (93) Morally, the command to love one’s neighbour as one’s-self, means the

⁹ See for example: Küng, Hans (2007), *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, (Oxford: Oneworld).

Christian's 'stance should be that of discerning generosity toward others... as persons as well as toward their beliefs and practices.' (94) To follow this path is to be 'like a generous and wise lover' (94). We must engage Islam in this fashion. Furthermore, Volf assumes throughout, that 'only' if these religions worship the same God, can they truly come together to promote peace and respect for each other: 'A common God 'nudges' people to actually employ those common values to set aside their animosities.' (9; see also 35-6, 246) Finally, Volf is clear that each religion must represent itself in answering this question and internal diversity will always be present. Volf claims to represent mainstream Christian trinitarian theology. So much for the methodology. Volf's generous spirit shines through.

Substantitively, chapters seven to nine deal with the doctrine of God. Earlier chapters explore modern responses to Islam (Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II, evangelical American Christians, the Common Word and the Yale response – in which Volf is major contributor), followed by some ancient responses to Islam (Nicholas of Cusa and Martin Luther). Volf establishes a bridgehead: those deeply critical of Islam (Luther), and those more positive about Islam (Cusa), both affirm that Muslims believe in the same God as Christians. In terms of *my* framework outlined above, both saw Islam as operating in stage one: Cusa, as a kind of natural religion, to be followed by the law (Moses - Judaism), and finally Jesus; Luther, instead saw the affirmation of God in Islam as damnation to those who turned their back on Christ. What should have been a pointer to the truth of the cross instead became a lie. The main point Volf is keen to establish is that God is the 'same' in both religions. From here, Volf moves to the major stumbling block: if this is the same God, what of the trinity and incarnation?

Chapter seven is a brilliant orthodox defence of trinity as fundamental monotheism, compatible with Islamic monotheism, preserving as it does the numerical identity of the

divine essence through the concept of three ‘persons’.¹⁰ Volf argues that ‘three’ never undermines the numerical identity, but is a way of speaking of the action of God in Christ. (Volf might have looked at Melkite theology which has sought to affirm the trinity in Arabic language in an environment where Muslims were, to use Schleiermacher’s terms, the ‘cultured despisers’.) If Muslims are not convinced by Volf’s presentation, he asks his Christian readers to treat Islam’s denial of the trinity as equivalent to the Jewish denial, based on misunderstanding, but justified in the name of preserving God’s oneness (145). This is an important move in the debate.

In chapter eight, Volf dismantles what he sees as a history of prejudice that contrasts various qualities of God between Islam (negatively) and Christianity (positively): arbitrary will and wrath versus reason and love; unconditional submission versus free response; harsh enforcement of law versus love of neighbour and respect for their freedom; and hostility towards the infidel versus love for all, including enemies. Volf shows why ‘love’ might be understood as a weakness in Islamic terms, for it indicates ‘need’, and thus cannot be attributable to God, whereas ‘mercy’ is more apposite in Islam (153-58). Volf strongly argues for the overlaps between the Christian emphasis on love and the Muslim’s on mercy.

In chapter nine, Volf argues that the Christian claim is not only that God loves (for this is present in Islam), but rather that God ‘is’ love. This is the internal shape of God requiring internal relations in the Godhead. It is precisely why Thomas Aquinas argues that ‘is’ is ‘relation’, thus changing the Greek meaning of ‘substance’. Volf is clear that this point is difficult for Muslims. He notes that for al-Ghazali, the purest form of love in God must be self-love and therefore, ‘creatures are ultimately unreal’, ‘for the absolute unity of all reality is affirmed as identical with the unity of God; all individuality; all multiplicity is then ultimately an illusion.’ (169) Volf says that ‘al-Ghazali ... is in many ways the most

¹⁰ This had already been argued by Nicholas of Cusa, and more recently by authors such as Rowan Williams, Christian Troll, Robert Caspar and others.

representative Muslim thinker you'll find, from any period.' (169) Volf also accepts this asymmetry in exploring the question of whether God loves the ungodly, and the call for people to love their enemies. Christianity has not always been consistent of course, but Volf makes a frank acknowledgement of real difference on these issues (183-84). Volf critically recalls Luther's argument that while Muslims worshipped the same God, they 'had a seriously distorted understanding' of that God (183). Volf, in contrast, is still inclined to 'elevate pervasive similarities', despite these differences, because his primary concern is 'the ability of Muslims and Christians to live a peaceful, well-ordered life in this world.' (183-4).

Assessment of Volf

Has Volf moved us on in this matter? I have some reservations which in no way should detract from Volf's massive achievement in this pioneering book. I want to emphasise that I agree with Volf that Muslims believe in the same God as Christians – but my question is: 'God' at what stage and 'God according to whom'?¹¹ Methodologically, there are two questions I'd put to Volf. First, should commonalities simply outweigh differences? Perhaps truth, not commonality or difference, should determine the balance? Volf's biblical and moral arguments are problematic in the form presented. Biblically, Volf cannot use, without a lot more justification, the *sui generis* nature of Jewish relations to argue the same may be true about Islam, precisely because that relationship is *sue generis*. Historically the God of Judaism is Jesus' God because of the unique covenant history that is mutually shared in the scripture. The difference lies in the two interpretative communities acknowledging the authority of one text (the 'Old Testament' and 'Hebrew bible'). Neither religion claims that this shared scripture is adulterated. By making this analogical move viz. Islam, Volf seems to smuggle in a substantial conclusion, rather than methodologically set the scene. He incorporates Islam into a 'type' of Judaism, even if not on the basis of a shared scripture. This

¹¹ See my other Campion Hall essay, on interfaith prayer between Muslims and Christians.

analogizing also implies that stage two of progressive revelation is attained in Islam – again a matter of substance, not method.

Finally, methodologically, Volf's moral argument, while commendable, fails to secure any conclusion on the question of truth. Of course, we must be generous and kind to others (as persons and in sympathetically trying to understand their beliefs), but this hermeneutical generosity pertains to issues of representation, not to substantial truth claims in their beliefs. I think Volf emphasises commonality because of a possible category mistake. He seems to assume that if we do not admit, 'Muslims worships the same God as Christians', we are doomed to tension and hostility. Believing in the same God is the only route to working together peacefully and freely. This is a precarious argument. The history of Judaism and Christianity shows otherwise. Furthermore, an unintended but serious implication would mean there can be no social peace or cooperation between monotheists and non-theists. This is historically false and theoretically problematic. If Volf actually means a shared monotheism is the best route for harmony, rather than the only route, that still requires a lot more argument. But he may be right. If Volf means that shared monotheism allows for shared ethical overlaps, that might well be so, but it is not a necessary condition for shared ethical concerns. In my opposition to nuclear weapons, I find that a lot of western Hindus and Buddhists were marching alongside me. We did not require a common monotheism to protest against these immoral weapons.

Volf often cites Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom* to support his argument, but fails to register that the dignity of the human person, which grounds this freedom, is not predicated upon a person's beliefs, but on the fact that they are created in the image of God and are all equally God's creatures. If Volf did not intrinsically link 'same God' with 'same beliefs and values', he would perhaps not push the commonality line. Joseph Ratzinger

writes: ‘the encounter of the religions is not possible by renouncing the truth but only by a deeper entering into it.’¹² This may relate to Volf’s thesis regarding method.

Let me now turn to the doctrinal questions about the ‘same God’. Please note, none of what follows intends to deny the affirmation, but to signify that it requires a lot more argument and some serious qualifications if it is to be accepted by orthodox Christians. Volf’s major achievement is to show that the doctrine of the trinity is not incompatible with Islamic monotheism. This establishes that Christianity and Islam are agreed about the nature of God’s essence viz. God’s ‘oneness’. But even if philosophical agreement can be reached on God’s oneness, does this mean that there is any agreement on the actual claims of the doctrine of the trinity which for Christians constitute who God ‘is’. A Muslim philosopher could legitimately say: ‘yes, I agree with Volf, that logically, the doctrine of the trinity is compatible with monotheism but only if it does not involve the claim of Jesus’ incarnation, for Jesus’ incarnation is not true and is denied by the Qur’an. And if the incarnation is not true then surely the Christian trinity is not true?’ Agreement then exists at the philosophical level about God’s undivided unitary essence. This does seem in principle possible. But has Volf moved us beyond this level of natural theology/stage one? The oneness is after all only part one of the dogmatic agenda in traditional theology. It is followed by trinity. But the one God is not sufficient in itself to confess how God acts and saves the world. That God ‘is’, the three monotheistic religions agree. But ‘who’ that God is, and how He ‘acts’ is of supreme importance. The differences within the ‘narrative’ levels of tradition become seminal.¹³

If self-giving, other-serving, reaching out to the enemy, love, is not the primary character of Islam’s God (the ‘who’), the ‘same God’ thesis requires very serious qualification. This is obviously not to question aspects of Islam’s truth and beauty, its majesty and nobility, but rather to attend to a truth claim at the heart of each religion. Herein lies the stumbling block:

¹² In *Many Religions. One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), trans. by Graham Harrison, 109

¹³ See my earlier essay in this volume regarding the category of ‘narrative’.

Christ crucified. Volf hardly touches on this matter. The very nature of God's love, who God 'is', is revealed in the abjection of the cross and the glory of Christ's resurrection. There are two very significant claims here. First, that Christian trinitarian language is generated by the truth of the incarnation, the truth of the narrative of revelation at stage three. The 'trinity' give conceptual shape to attest to the character of God who become incarnate, teaches, loves and forgives, and dies for our sins, through the power of the Spirit. The language of this reflection is generative of the community bound through their witnessing to this triune truth. Put baldly, there is no Christian God without Christ and his Church.¹⁴ To say the 'same God', in the manner Volf does, seems to say something that omits both these claims.

Further, a logical prerequisite for a Muslim to affirm the 'same God', which is the goal of Volf's project, is that such a Muslim must deny the authority of the Qur'an that refuses the truth of the incarnation and the historical reality of Jesus crucified. I suspect this is why Vatican II omitted any mention of the Quran and Muhammad in its affirmation of Muslim beliefs. While there are different ways of interpreting the Qur'anic verses about the cross, if Volf wishes to focus on mainstream Islam, then this problem does not dissolve. Otherwise, the most a Muslim could affirm regarding a 'same God' is (in my terms outlined above) at stage one of God's progressive revelation. For many Christian theologians this would not be a problem, and is sufficient for developing ethical commonalities and working together for the common good. Natural law ethicists have argued that common ethics is possible between those who follow their conscience and the natural law, whose author is God.¹⁵

A related question is whether the Christian God of 'love' is really about the same reality as the Muslim God of 'mercy' at a conceptually defensible level. Volf seems to elide the differences entailed between love and mercy. In the former, reciprocity within the Godhead and reciprocity between humans and God is central; in the latter, both forms of reciprocity are

¹⁴ See Volf's own (1998): *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), which makes this point.

¹⁵ See, for example, Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 1993, 4, 12, 40.

rejected. If we are claiming that revelation discloses God as God really 'is', then these are not the 'same God'. A different ontology, soteriology, and communitarian shape (ecclesiology) is generated by an intrinsically relating, loving, self-sacrificing reality. This is not to say that Christianity has been historically unvarying in such teachings. Volf rightly points out how historically Christians have sanctioned persecution of enemies, eradicating falsities (people, not just ideas), and seen love to be limited only to the chosen. But the doctrinal core of the Christian tradition can also be used to criticise these 'deviations' and the line of continuity ensures a development of dogma on the matter of 'love'. All this would require much argument, but grant me in principle this is possible for the argument to proceed. Daud Rahbar has argued, after close analysis, that 'there is not a single verse in the Qur'an that speaks of God's unconditional love for mankind.'¹⁶ Whose interpretation of the Qur'an should we follow? I do not mean this polemically or critically, but indicate this is a serious question about interpretation and community.

Finally, Volf's use of Islamic sources to show that Islam's God has the same positive characteristics as Christianity's God may be seen as skewed and far from employing mainstream sources. Various hadith, Sufism, and the writings of some brilliant and inspired modern thinkers like Reza Shah-Kazemi and Seyyed Hossein Nasr are employed, especially Shah-Kazemi – but is this really mainstream historical Islam? Both these thinkers are from the 'perennial philosophy' school. This school is not normally judged as mainstream Islam (at least historically or currently).¹⁷ Why is the Qur'an marked by its absence in these key sections in Volf's book, especially as Volf says at the outset that he is concerned with the God of the Qur'an? I do not ask this combatively or polemically, but simply as a question of 'representation'. Is Islam being represented, or an Islam that has been shaped in the modern

¹⁶ Muhammad, Daud Rahbar (1960) *God of Justice: A study in ethical doctrine of the Qur'an* (Leiden: Brill), 225; and see the excellent discussion in David Marshall's, *God, Muhammad and the Unbeliever. A Qur'anic Study*, (Surrey: Curzon), 1999, 78-88.

¹⁷ See further, Damian Howard, *Being Human in Islam: The Impact of the Evolutionary Worldview*, (London: Routledge), 2011, 87-119.

period and through significant interaction with Christianity? I am unable to answer this question as I am not an Islamist. I personally find Shah-Kazemi's work persuasive and deeply attractive and wish all Muslims would follow his teachings. He sees his type of Islam as having a long historical pedigree and would contest its marginality. It has only been eclipsed in recent times.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in terms of current history, is Volf presenting a minority thematic as a majority one? Of course, traditions change and develop, and no one has a self-evident right to freeze any religion according to its first, eighth or thirteenth century form. The 'same God' question then morphs into a question about continuity and development. The weight of my concerns amount to saying Volf's answer is perhaps premature, if it is supposed to be representative of mainstream Islam. And regarding Christianity?

I am not sure where Volf is pitching his tent. At the third stage of progressive revelation? Does he want to claim that the God of Islam *is* the trinity, but Muslims just do not realise this, although this is implicit in their doctrine of God? This would then take us back to a fulfilment thesis. Or does Volf want to claim that the God of Islam is like the God of Judaism, pure monotheism, and thus push up the 'same God' claim from stage one to stage two of progressive revelation – and argue that Judaism and Islam have a similar relationship? But that has serious problems if one omits bringing differences into the picture, especially the traditional claim of the *sui generis* nature of Judaism. Or does Volf want to leave the claim at stage one? It would appear not, but I am not sure. Or would Volf prefer to shelf my question as it creates unnecessary obstacles? I think Volf would resist my categorisations, but without relating his proposal to the tradition, it is difficult to see the contours of his new map. But a map is required for this new country and the future of Christian - Muslim dialogue. We are in Volf's debt for reminding us of this central question which will not go away and for the pioneering courage of drawing fresh maps.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Reza Shah-Kazemi for his generous critical response to this paper. I am also indebted to Sven Ensminger, Rev. Dr Damian Howard, Rev Dr. David Marshall, Reza Shah-Kazemi and especially to Prof. Miroslav Volf who engaged in his customary generous and charitable exchange regarding two early drafts.