



christian-muslim interfaith dialogue

a look at the doctrine of God and its
role in the interfaith dialogue between
christians and muslims

adam b. cleaveland
sbn 458
introduction to islam :: dr. yasir ibrahim

I. INTRODUCTION

“The Spirit manifests itself in every religious universe where the echoes of the Divine Word are still audible, but the manner in which the manifestations of the Spirit take place differs from one religion to another. In Islam, the Spirit breathes through all that reveals the One and leads to the One, for Islam’s ultimate purpose is to reveal the Unity of the Divine Principle and to integrate the world’s multiplicity in the light of the Unity.”¹

“They are all violent and belong to an incredibly violent religion of Islam. They don’t want peace, only us Christians want peace. It’s just filled with all very violent teachings – it’s not a peaceful religion. They are even taught to be violent – especially against us Christians. I mean...if my sister even tried to marry a Muslim, I’d...”

These are statements that are simply wrong. One may wonder where statements like these come from? Conservative Evangelical Christians? Members of the Christian and Religious Right? Tele-evangelists like Pat Robertson? It’s very possible that they could come from those different people and groups. However, when I heard these statements during the summer of 2005, I was sitting on the porch of the home of a Palestinian in the West Bank town of Beit Jala, eating hummus and smoking shisha.² These statements came from some Palestinian Christians I met while traveling around Egypt, Palestine and Israel.

I had just gotten on the metro at the Ghamra station, east of the Nile River; I was heading out to the Giza metro station, where I would grab a taxi and head out to the Giza Plateau to experience the magic of one of the Seven Wonders of the World: Egypt’s Pyramids. I sat down and began to flip through my Lonely Planet Egypt travel guide. A

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), xv.

² For those who may not know, shisha is a form of tobacco that is smoked in the Middle East. In Egypt it is called shisha, while in Palestine and Israel it is called nargilah or hubbly bubbly.

young professional turned to me and asked, “What is your name?” I replied and he told me that his name was Muhammad. We talked for a bit, and he asked what I was studying in the United States. I told him I was studying theology and he asked, with a smile on his face, if I was a Christian. I replied, “Yes. Are you?” And then his smile got even bigger, “No, I am a Muslim. But it’s okay. Here in Egypt, we are brothers. You are Christian, and I am Muslim, but we...we are brothers. We can be brothers.”

Two very different anecdotal experiences from the same summer traveling around the Middle East. As I spoke with more and more people, both Christians and Muslims in Egypt and Palestine, there were even more opinions and variances in understanding the relationship between Christians and Muslims. After my interaction with Muhammad on the metro, I met with a Danish pastor studying in Cairo and working on a Ph.D. in Interfaith Dialogue and Relations between Christians and Muslims in Egypt. I recounted Muhammad’s words to me “You are Christian and I am Muslim, but we are brothers;” this pastor told me that in public, a Christian pastor and Muslim Imam can share civil discourse on the street, but as soon as they go to their church and mosque, respectively, they can each tell their congregations about the evils of the Other.

While these true anecdotes take place in the Middle East, and this paper focuses on the need for interfaith dialogue in the West, specifically North America, one could assume similar interactions to occur here in North America. In a nation where political correctness rules, it makes perfect sense how a pastor and imam could say one thing in public, and then preach very different messages. There is an increasing desire, and need, for interfaith dialogue among people of different religions, especially between Christians

and Muslims, considering the current foreign policies of the Bush Administration. One could argue that through President Bush's foreign policy, he has created huge obstacles to the understanding of Islam and relations between Islamic countries and countries in the West. North American Muslims have also been affected by current foreign and domestic policies that exist under the blanket 'necessity' for "Homeland Security."

Interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims could be an exciting and creative grassroots force that will be the beginning of a more appropriate relationship between two of the great world's religions. By focusing on aspects and doctrines that both religions have in common, adherents of both religions are able to more clearly understand one another and where they are coming from. This paper will serve as a brief survey of both Christian and Muslim doctrines of God, and how focusing on this specific doctrine could affect interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims in the West.

II. INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Before looking at the Christian and Muslim doctrine of God, it is appropriate to look at the idea of interfaith dialogue and discuss why it is something that is of utmost importance for religious understanding and experience today. The following is a commonly used saying: "Now, you don't want to assume. You know what happens when you assume right? You make an *ass* out of *u* and *me*." That is a crude way of explaining the current religious context that exists in the West. Much of our knowledge of other religions comes from wrongly-held assumptions, misinformation and lies spread as truths. As Christians, we have assumed much about Islam and the way in which Muslims live their lives in pursuit of the One. Immediately following September 11th, I remember a Palestinian student taken from my small, liberal arts college to the police station for

questioning. A Palestinian Christian, taken from a small Christian school in eastern Washington, because he may have had connections to some terrorist cell. It seems that it is not only Christians who are operating under wrongly-held assumptions and misinformation. Alternatively, I heard stories of pastors who immediately got in contact with their local imams after September 11th and invited them to their churches to speak and help inform their congregations about the truth and reality of the Islamic religion. Interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural experiences are critical to help correct our understandings of the Others in our midst, especially Muslims in North America.

In his book, The Intrareligious Dialogue, Raimon Panikkar offers a series of *rules of the game* for dialogue. The two most striking are that “It must be free from particular apologetics...and One must face the challenge of conversion.”³ On the idea of being open to the challenge of conversion, Panikkar writes that “the religious person enters this arena without prejudices and preconceived solutions, knowing full well that she may in fact have to lose a particular belief or particular religion altogether. She trusts in truth. She enters unarmed and ready to be converted herself. She may lose her life – she may also be born again.”⁴ Catholic missiologist and theologian Vincent Donovan also talks about the need for openness to conversion in his book The Church in the Midst of Creation: “When we enter this dialogue with all the cultures of the world...we must be open to conversion – conversion to a fuller truth...If we are not open to conversion, then we have no right to enter into true religious dialogue.”⁵

An element crucial in the postmodern era we find ourselves is the ability to exhibit a true humility. Both Christianity and Islam hold onto the belief that we cannot

³ Raimon Panikkar, The Intrareligious Dialogue (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 62-3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵ Vincent Donovan, The Church in the Midst of Creation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 116.

ever fully know God as God actually is – this is just one example of how humility will become an important element for interfaith dialogue. Each person will come to the table from their own religious tradition, having experienced the Ultimate Reality in their own ways; however, each person also needs to understand that their individual experiences do not contain all that the Ultimate Reality is, and they must be open to a more “fuller truth,” as Donovan states. Also, as Panikkar suggested, we must come to interfaith dialogue as committed followers of religions who “trust in truth,”⁶ and who trust that truth is not found solely in our religious traditions, but that truth is bigger than them.

Finally, there is one common objection to interfaith dialogue: “I don’t want to have to water-down my faith, or my beliefs. If I go into a dialogue with someone, and try to be tolerant of their beliefs, that’s weakening the importance of my beliefs.” If one evens skims the surface of writing on interfaith dialogue and relations, one will find that is often discussed and claimed to be a false assumption about the prerequisites for dialogue. M. Darrol Bryant, co-editor, along with S.A. Ali, of Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Promise and Problems, writes the following:

“There is often a misconception of what occurs in dialogue. Many believe that it is a polite meeting where the depths of our respective faiths are set aside in the name of easy tolerance. But this is a misconception. Genuine encounter and dialogue is a meeting of the deepest levels of our respective faiths, where we bear witness to what of the spirit and of God has been given to us. This we do not for the sake of persuading the other that we are right and they are wrong, but for the sake of bearing witness to what each has experienced and knows of the One who is beyond. When we meet in this way, when the dialogue goes this deeply, then both parties can grow not only in their own faith but in their recognition of the validity of the other.”⁷

⁶ Panikkar, 63.

⁷ M. Darrol Bryant and S.A. Ali, eds., Muslim-Christian Dialogue: Promise and Problems (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1998), 35.

We do not enter into dialogue to proselytize the Other. We do not enter into dialogue, having given up our most deeply-held beliefs. We enter into dialogue to acknowledge and learn from the Other. We enter into dialogue to seek and trust the grand truth that is greater than any one religious tradition; sometimes that truth we encounter may lead to a conversion experience to a greater truth. Bryant believes that if we enter into dialogue with this spirit, we may be able to overcome past issues related to our histories:

“Through meeting in a spirit of dialogue – taking the other seriously on their terms, listening profoundly and speaking truthfully, growing in appreciation of our shared humanity across tradition, and witness to the Ultimate who is the source and object of genuine faith – we can begin to overcome history and enter a new day in the relations between faiths.”⁸

III. CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF GOD

Note: Attempting to convey the Christian doctrine of God in a few short pages is difficult, especially, as is true in Islam, when there are a variety of different theologies when it comes to the doctrine and attributes of God. As one can only truly speak from within their own context, this section will be written from the Presbyterian/Reformed perspective.

As the reader will see in the section below, while Islam focuses on the Oneness of God, Christianity’s emphasis on the unity and oneness of God leaves one unfamiliar with Christianity with a puzzling idea: the triune God. Christianity, along with the other great monotheistic religions of the world, Islam and Judaism, believe in only one God. The Jewish Shema, similar to Islam’s shahadah, begins with “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”⁹ Having been constantly surrounded by polytheistic nations and the constant temptation of idol worship, the early Jews were very clear about their monotheistic belief and fought against any attempts to worship other gods.

As early Christianity emerged out of Judaism, that was one of the first and most virulent criticisms: people of this new “way” were now not only worshipping God, but

⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁹ Deuteronomy 6.4, NRSV.

they were worshipping some recently-killed Jesus and Holy Spirit. At first glance, it appeared that Christians had become tri-theists, and this is what many still believe about Christianity. Church council after church council dealt with this question and finally, after the Councils of Nicea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.), the early church was able to come up with the explanation that God is *one in essence, distinguished in three persons*.¹⁰ Thus began centuries and centuries of confusion over how the triune God actually worked out: Did God consist of three separate beings doing different jobs? Did God simply have different “hats” that God would put on when God had to perform different activities? Nevertheless, Christianity stands behind the concept of One unified God in three persons.

The triune God is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all. “In the beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”¹¹ Through the breath and words of God, all things were created, and unlike the Deists believe, God continues to care for and sustain the earth and all of God’s creation. After the Fall of humankind, God sent God’s son, Jesus, to the earth to redeem humanity – God redeems. God also sent the Holy Spirit to help console, sustain and be God’s presence to the earth and all humanity – God sustains.

¹⁰ Daniel Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 70.

¹¹ Genesis 1.1-3, NRSV.

There are many names in the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures¹² for God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is called *'El*, *'Elohim* (God), *'El Shaddai* (God Almighty), *'El 'Elyon* (God Most High), *'El Olam* (the everlasting God), *YHWH* (the LORD) and *Adonai* (lord).¹³ In the Greek Scriptures, God is called *Theos* (God), *Kurios* (Lord), *Pater* (“Father”) and *Abba* (“pappa” or “daddy”).¹⁴

Before summarizing some attributes of God, it is important to note that there is a strong strand within Christianity of *apophatic theology*. Dionysius the Areopagite, also known as Pseudo-Dionysius, wrote both *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* with the understanding that one can only speak about God in the negative: “Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. It is and it is as no other being is.”¹⁵ While it is important to be able to name attributes of God, it is also important to realize that God exists beyond all human capacity to understand or grasp God.

The attributes of God are many, and I will be using Princeton Theological Seminary theologian Daniel Migliore’s breakdown of attributes, who believes that “the attributes of God are best interpreted in pairs that point to the being and act of God as the

¹² These are more commonly called the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) and the New Testament (Greek Scriptures). However, when Christians especially refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as the Old Testament, it carries with it notions of chronological-snobbery as if our “New” Testament supercedes the Jews’ “old” Testament. Therefore, the author prefers the designation of Hebrew and Greek Scriptures.

¹³ Dorman, Ted. *A Faith for All Seasons* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 54-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-7.

¹⁵ Colm Luibheid, ed. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, from the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 50. Dionysius also ends his *Mystical Theology* with the following quote: “It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial” (*Mystical Theology* V, 1048B, pg 141). God is most certainly seen as above humanity and out of the reach of any of humankind’s ability to reason.

one who loves in freedom.”¹⁶ It is my understanding that Migliore’s discussion on the attributes of God points back to traditional and Reformed ideas of God’s nature, while being open to the “changing, surprising ways”¹⁷ in which God can act. Migliore focuses on the grace and holiness of God, the constancy of purpose and new and changing actions of God, the vulnerable yet unconquerable love of God, the power and love of God, the infinitely deep wisdom that is exercised with gracious patience, the reality that God is present everywhere but everywhere freely present, the unity of the triune God that exists in communion and the eternity of the triune God which ends in God’s glory.¹⁸

There are a few attributes that are particularly important for our current conversation: God’s power, love, grace and unity. “Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases.”¹⁹ God is completely sovereign and in charge of the universe. God created the heavens and the earth, which is another indicator of the sovereign power that God has. However, while God is ultimately sovereign, God, in his sovereignty, gave freedom to humanity, that they might freely seek God and worship God. This is a good example of God’s love for humanity. God’s love is seen in an infinite number of ways, but it is seen most clearly in God’s giving of Godself in the cross through Christ, bringing about redemption of the world. Migliore writes that “Because God’s omnipotent love is God’s own, it does not work by domination or coercion but is sovereign and effective without displacing or bludgeoning God’s creatures.”²⁰ Flowing out of this expression of God’s love is God’s personal nature; God *became* a person in order to become *personal* and intimately involved in the lives of God’s creation.

¹⁶ Migliore, 84.

¹⁷ Ibid., 85.

¹⁸ Ibid., 84-7.

¹⁹ Psalm 115.3, NRSV.

²⁰ Migliore, 86.

God's grace is evident throughout all of creation, redemption and life-everlasting. "The grace of God is expressed in God's gift of life to the creation at the beginning"²¹ and God's grace is seen in the forgiveness of humanity when they seek and turn to God. Finally, it is important to once again mention that the unity of God is an important aspect of God's character. Migliore rightly highlights the fact that the unity of God is not a unity of three completely separate beings, but rather the "unity of the triune God is in communion."²² While some may still argue that Christianity is a tri-theistic religion, it is clear in the Hebrew Scriptures, which are part of the canon of the Christian scriptures, that God is One: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one."²³ The above is a brief look at some of the key aspects of a Christian doctrine of God; as we turn to look at a Muslim doctrine of God, there will be both similarities and differences. The attempt in this essay is to look at the similarities and see if those will help lead to greater understanding of Islam and more opportunities for interfaith dialogue and relations between Christians and Muslims.

IV. MUSLIM DOCTRINE OF GOD

Note: All quotations taken from the Quran will be from A. J. Arberry's translation.²⁴ All references will be in-text citations, given in the following format: (X, Y), with X being the Roman Numeral for the sura, and Y being the number corresponding to the ayas quoted.

"And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then repent to Him; surely my Lord is All-compassionate, All-loving" (XI, 90). "Surely it is He who originates, and brings again, and He is the All-forgiving, the All-loving" (LXXXV, 13-14). As one can see, these are not texts out of the Christian scriptures, but out of the holy scriptures of Islam, the Quran.

²¹ Ibid., 84.

²² Ibid., 86.

²³ Deuteronomy 6.4, NRSV.

²⁴ A. J. Arberry, The Koran Interpreted (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955).

One of the key reasons that interfaith dialogue is important is so that Christians, and others in the West, can learn what types of texts actually are found in the Quran. These are not texts of a vengeful, violent God, but of a God who loves God's creation.²⁵

Similar to Christianity, when one begins to talk about the Islamic doctrine of God, one must start with the negative. Allahbakhsh K. Brohi writes, "The Quranic view of God is that He is indescribable and that there is nothing like unto Him and, furthermore, that no matter what one says about Him, He is completely beyond it."²⁶ In Islam, there is a clear humility that acknowledges that Allah²⁷ is beyond any human ability to comprehend the One. The well-known Islamic phrase, *Allahu akbar*, is often translated *God is great*. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes this phrase: "*Allahu akbar*, usually translated 'God is great,' means in reality that God is greater than whatever is asserted and affirmed about Him." This idea of negation and apophaticism is also clearly shown in the first line of the shahadah *La ilaha illa'Llah*.²⁸ Nasr goes on to explain that this first line of the shahadah begins with a prefix, *la*, that is negative in Arabic; "for to assert anything of the Divine Essence or God in His or Its Supreme Reality is to limit It by that very assertion."²⁹ The Quran goes on to say a very similar thing: "There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him" (XLII, 2).³⁰ Nevertheless, there are still around ninety-nine names for God which can be found in the Quran and Hadith: "He is God, the Creator, the Maker, the Shaper. To Him

²⁵ In the Quran (II, 30), it quotes God saying, "I am setting in the earth a viceroy." God's plan for humanity was that they should become stewards and care-takers, in a sense, for God's creation. This is very similar to God's command to Adam and Eve in the Judeo-Christian Genesis account of Creation.

²⁶ Allahbakhsh K. Brohi, "The Spiritual Significance of the Quran," in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 16.

²⁷ Many conservative Christians believe that "Allah" is somehow a different Being than God. However, many Christians don't realize that Allah is the name used by Arab Christians to refer to the Christian understanding of God. Allah is simply the Arabic word for "God."

²⁸ The first line of the shahadah is *There is no god but God/Allah*.

²⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 59-60.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, *Islam*, 60.

belong the Names Most Beautiful. All that is in the heavens and the earth magnifies Him; He is the All-Mighty, the All-wise” (LIV, 24).

One of the most important paradoxical aspects of the Muslim doctrine of God is God’s ultimate transcendence and immanence:

“At the heart of the Quranic message lies the full and plenary doctrine of God as both transcendent and immanent, as both majesty and beauty, as both the One and the source of the manifold, as both Origin of Mercy and Judge of all human actions...as the suprapersonal Essence beyond all creation, and as the personal Deity Whose Will rules over all things...”³¹

One false assumption many have about Islam is that they view God as a violent, strictly-sovereign God. Many are taught that grace and love and God’s *immanence* are simply doctrines of the “Christian” God, but it is clear that this is wrong. Over and over again throughout the Quran, there are texts that speak to God’s love, mercy, compassion, grace and God’s immanence. “He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the *Inward*; He has knowledge of everything” (LVII, 3). A God that exists high and mighty and outside of God’s creation would not be described as the God who has knowledge of everything and is called *Inward*. One important Quranic verse that speaks to this idea of immanence is the following: “We indeed created man; and We know what his soul whispers within him, and We are nearer to him than the jugular vein” (L, 15).³² Here one has a beautiful portrayal of the intimate connection that exists between Allah and Allah’s creation. This is not just a God who comes near God’s creation to hear their conversations, but a God who is so intimately connected with created humanity that God can hear and understanding what the *soul whispers*. In the same vein, the Quran says that “God stands

³¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “God,” in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 311.

³² I am not exactly sure as to the meaning of the pronoun “We” in this section of the Quran, since the Muslim understanding of Allah is that God is One, but nevertheless, the *We* in this section is user for God.

between a man and his heart” (VII, 24). While the Quran portrays a God whose immanence is clear, it still equally portrays a God whose power and awe is unmatched.

“Glory be to Him! High be He exalted above what they describe” (VI, 100)! This previous Quranic verse gives the reader a strong impression that God is beyond all that to which created humanity could say about God. The opening chapter of the Quran gives one of the most clear texts concerning the transcendence and sovereignty of God:

“In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.
Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being,
the All-merciful, the All-compassionate,
the Master of the Day of Doom.
Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour.
Guide us in the straight path,
the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
not of those against whom Thou art wrathful,
nor of those who are astray.” (I, 1-5)

While it is clear that Allah is a God of love, mercy and compassion,³³ it is also clear in this passage that God is a God of wrath. The Quran continues: “And call not upon another god with God; there is no god but He. All things perish, except His Face. His is the judgment, and unto Him you shall be returned” (XXVIII, 88). The Quran helps readers come to a whole vision of a God who created the world, is overwhelmingly transcendent and sovereign, but not so much so that God would not be intimately involved in God’s creation and choose to be All-merciful and All-compassionate. Also, the Quran gives an image of God that allows for the freedom of humanity to choose the path they will embark on. Throughout the Quran, it warns what will happen to those who stray from the straight path, and urges followers of Allah to continue to turn back for God is All-Merciful, All-Compassionate and forgiving.

³³ All but one of the 114 suras begin with “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.”

Central to the Muslim doctrine of God, is the Oneness of God. Nasr writes that “Allah is first and before everything else One, and it is the Oneness of God that lies at the center of both the Quranic doctrine of God and Islamic spirituality.”³⁴ Below is a Quranic summary of that doctrine entitled “Sincere Religion”:

“In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
Say: ‘He is God, One,
God, the Everlasting Refuge,
who has not begotten, and has not been begotten,
and equal to Him is not any one’” (CXII).

This is probably one of the key elements within Muslim theology that departs from the conception of God within Christianity. This summer as I walked the streets of Nablus, Palestine with a young Palestinian Muslim college student, she kept asking me, “How can you believe in three Gods? It doesn’t make any sense? How can there be more than one God?” This gave me an opportunity to help her with some wrongly-held assumptions about Christianity, but this is still a point of conflict that many Muslims have with Christianity. “According to the traditional teachings of Islam, in fact, the greatest sin that man can commit is the denial of this Divine Oneness or of accepting a partner (*sharik*) for God...at the heart of all Islamic spirituality stands the doctrine of God’s Oneness and its implications for and ramifications within the human soul.”³⁵ The Quran reads “God says: ‘Take not to you two gods. He is only One God; so have awe of Me’” (XVI, 51). The Muslim idea of Divine Oneness and the Christian conception of the trinity, or the triune God, have never been compatible. The Quran even speaks against the Christian idea of the trinity: “They are unbelievers who say, ‘God is the Third of Three.’ No god is there but One God” (V, 77).

³⁴ Nasr, “God”, 312.

³⁵ Ibid., “God”, 313.

The Quran and the traditional Hadith are filled with the Divine Names of God. While Allah is known to be the Supreme Name, the holy scriptures are filled with many more, traditionally numbering ninety-nine. Just a few of these names are below, given by Nasr: “God is both merciful and just. he is *al-Rahman* (‘the Infinitely Good’), *al-Rahim* (‘the All-Merciful’), *al-Karim* (‘the Generous’), *al-Ghafur* (‘the Forgiver’),...*al-Qahhar* (‘the Ever-Dominant’), *al-Adil* (‘the Just’), *al-Mumit* (‘the Giver of Death’), and *al-Muntaqim* (‘the Avenger’).”³⁶ As one can see, much like the variety of names given to the God of Judaism and Christianity in the Hebrew Scriptures, Allah is presented in Islam as God with an amazing diversity of names. Some of these names present God as the immanent, forgiving and loving God; others present God as the stern, judging and wrathful God. Both sides of God are represented in both Islam and Christianity’s doctrines of God, which leads us to now consider some of the various points of contact.

V. CONCLUSION: POINTS OF CONTACT FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

*“More than at any time in the past, we need to search – each faith in its own way – for a way of living with, and acknowledging the integrity of, those who are not of our faith. Can we make space for difference? Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a culture not our own? Can we see the presence of God in the face of a stranger? Do we speak to and within the circumscribed loyalties of our faith, or does our sense of the all-encompassing nature of the divine lead us to recognize the integrity of the search for God by those outside our faith?”*³⁷

Let me be clear from the outset: I am not unaware of the major differences between Christianity and Islam. It is clear that the Islamic central focus on the Unity of God and the Christian view of the triune God (one God in three persons) can clash in dramatic ways. It is also clear that one of the essentials of the Christian faith, the divinity

³⁶ Nasr, *Islam*, 62.

³⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 4-5, 9.

of Jesus the Christ, is widely refuted in both the Quran and Islamic theology. However, let me also be clear about something else: I do not believe that these differences should continue to be used as roadblocks for interfaith relations, dialogue and even interfaith worshipping opportunities. Through a brief look at the Christian and Muslim doctrine of God, there seem to be two primary points of connection between Islam and Christianity's doctrine of God: the apophatic mysteriousness of God and God's love and grace.

First, it is clear that there exists in both Christianity and Islam a clear humility about one's ability to speak about God. Both religions clearly believe in the mysteriousness nature of God, as both use apophatic language and theology to speak about God. There is first and foremost talk of what and who God is *not* and then an acknowledgment that God is above *any* statement or affirmation. This humility and acknowledgement of mystery should lend itself to an increased mutual acceptance and respect for one another in dialogue. When two parties come to the table humble and acknowledging their understandings are limited, and being open to the idea that God is bigger than either of their individual traditions, true dialogue will be able to take place. This humility could also have important implications for the question of whether the "Christian God" is the same God as the "Muslim God." In her book, Encountering God, Diana Eck writes about the phrase *Allahu akbar*: "As Muslims put it, '*Allahu akbar!*' It means not only 'God is great!' but 'God is greater!' Greater than our understanding, greater than any human idea of God. This would leave room for the self-understanding of both Christian and Muslim and would be a pluralist view."³⁸

³⁸ Diana L. Eck, Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 50.

Second, while contrary to many notions of Islam, the Muslim doctrine of God presents a God of love, grace and mercy. For many Christians, once they realize this, it will help them to have a more holistic vision of Islam. The way in which the love, grace, forgiveness and mercy is talked about in Islam is different than Christianity because of the understanding that this all comes from the Divinely One God, and the role of Jesus the Christ is not mentioned, as in Christianity. However, I think one must remember that in the Quran, it is mentioned that God is all-Merciful, all-Compassionate, and forgiving. For both Christians and Muslims, who come from traditions of love, grace, mercy and forgiveness, this should serve as a good reminder of how each person should treat all people, especially someone else who is from another religious group. The interactions around the table of interfaith dialogue should be marked by the same love, grace, mercy and forgiveness that the God of *both* Christianity and Islam exemplify.

Interfaith dialogue is first and foremost a “truth-seeking encounter.”³⁹ It is not first and foremost a form of proselytizing. In interfaith dialogue, we seek to learn more about our own faith tradition and the faith traditions of others. It is my hope that Christians and Muslims would be able to join together in acknowledgment of their common heritage and work together to bring about greater awareness of their traditions. I will close with a quote from Diana Eck about the hopes of interfaith dialogue:

We do not enter into dialogue with the dreamy hope that we will all agree, for the truth is we probably will not. We do not enter into dialogue to produce an agreement, but to produce real relationship, even friendship, which is premised upon mutual understanding, not upon agreement. Christians...may find we agree on many things. We share prophets like Abraham and foundational values like justice. But a clear understanding of difference is as precious as the affirmation of similarities.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 197.

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