

## ISLAM, VIOLENCE, AND THE NATURE OF GOD

### WHERE AND WHY CATHOLICS AGREE—AND DISAGREE—WITH MUSLIMS

September 11, 2017 Dr. R. Jared Staudt Essay



Muslim worshippers attend Friday prayers during the holy month of Ramadan at the Data Darbar mosque in Lahore, Pakistan, Aug. 2, 2013. (CNS photo/Mohsin Raza, Reuters)

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Although the topic of violence in Islam is a controversial one, Benedict XVI placed it at the center of his treatment of our knowledge of God within his often misunderstood and misrepresented Regensburg Lecture, given eight years ago, on September 12, 2006. Put simply, false views of God's nature can lead to religiously motivated actions, such as terrorism and violent persecution, which are contrary to the nature and will of God. This discussion is all the more timely and important as the United States marks the anniversary of the attacks on September 11, 2001, as radical Islamist groups such as ISIS persecute Christians in Iraq and other countries, and as Catholics seek ways to move forward in authentic and meaningful dialogue with Muslims.

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? A number of prominent Catholic apologists and bloggers have addressed this question recently. This essay will briefly summarize and comment on each of their arguments. It will then present some further thoughts arguing that the question requires assistance from philosophy: how do we know God correctly, or more precisely, how do we get knowledge of God wrong?

## Recent arguments

The first piece addressing this question is Tim Staples' "**Do Muslims Worship the Same God Catholics Do?**" Staples attempts to strike the right balance on what Islam gets right and wrong. He quotes two of the key magisterial statements on the topic, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and *Nostra Aetate*, which seems, at first glance, to seal the argument: "The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men." Staples acknowledges that Muslims get much wrong about God and his will for men, and therefore, sets forth the following compromise on Islam:

Thus, we Catholics have to be careful to distinguish between the fact that Muslims believe in the one true God "living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth," and the fact that they get it wrong—*profoundly wrong*—when it comes to both who God has revealed himself to be in the New Testament, and what he has taught his people.

I think that Staples is largely right in this account. But the question pursued below goes even further on this first point, asking if we should even consider whether or not we are really in agreement with Islam.

The second piece is Mark Shea's "**When Better Than the 4th of July to Talk About Religious Liberty,**" in which he pushes the commonality of Christian and Muslim belief further:

One pernicious lie embraced by many Catholics since 9/11 is to imagine that Muslims "worship another god" despite the obvious teaching of the Church:

841. *The Church's relationship with the Muslims.* "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day" [CCC, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 16].

Many Reactionary Catholics protest this teaching of the Church and try to pretend that God and Allah are "two different Gods." The problem with this is twofold. First, there is only one God, not two. Second...Allah is just the Arabic word for the Deity, as Dieu is the French and Gott the German and Deus the Latin.

Some will claim that because Muslims are non-Trinitarian, they don't worship the same God as Christians. The problem is, Jews also reject the deity of Jesus, yet are mysteriously given a pass, as your friends demonstrate. That's because such Christians are willing to recognize that you can worship God while having an incomplete understanding of him—if you are a Jew. But because of anger of 9/11 and other Muslim crimes, they refuse to cut Muslims the same slack—and wind up

talking as though there are multiple gods and not one God who is understood in various levels of knowledge.

Although I think it is important that Shea defends against a reactionary position that simply dismisses the relation of the Muslim belief in Allah to the true God, there are also a couple of problems with his reasoning.

First, if you *claim* to worship the same God, but are in error about the nature of God, is it really the same God being worshipped? Just because there is only one God in actuality does not mean that some do not worship another fictitious deity that they have created and named “God” (one could explore the example of Mormonism in this regard). Second, just because “Allah” can be used for “God” in Arabic does not automatically mean that those who use this word mean the same thing. Maybe they do, but a common word does not guarantee it. Third, there is a difference between the Jews preserving a genuine revelation and covenant from God *prior* to the introduction of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and Islam forming *after* this revelation in explicit rejection of it.

One must say that the Jews believe in the true God because we know that the Old Testament is a genuine revelation of God. One could also say that the belief in the Holy Trinity is implicitly contained in the Old Testament and that without explicitly rejecting it, one could hold to it implicitly (as Aquinas argued for the Patriarchs before the Incarnation). This is substantially different from Islam, as Mohammed knew the teaching on the Holy Trinity and explicitly rejected it, as we see in the Koran: “So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a ‘Trinity’” (sura 4 [An-Nisa], ayat 17). Rejecting God’s revelation about himself would entail belief in a different God, in the sense that the belief in the one God would be a rejection of the fact that he is triune.

The third piece is from Dr. Taylor Marshall, **who brings St. Thomas Aquinas into the discussion**. After presenting Vatican II’s teaching, Marshall points to Thomas’ teaching on the *preambulae fidei*, affirming that Muslims can have rational knowledge of the Creator. He also points out that Islam has assumed some genuine revelation from Judaism and Christianity, while explicitly rejecting some elements of this revelation (which means they are not simply pagans). In order to explain how Catholics and Muslims both adore the Creator and have divergence of belief, Marshall states:

One can direct adoration in the right direction but not understand the target. For example, if you shot an arrow down range but your had poor eyesight and could not see the target, then you might shoot in the right direction without seeing the destination. You shot the arrow at the proper target but you don’t see, know, perceive, or understand the target. Moreover, in this case, the bow would be too weak to get the arrow to the destination. The arrow would fall short.

This “blind archer with a weak bow” is Islam. They shoot their arrow in the right direction (toward the “God of Abraham”), but they do not understand the target and their bow is too weak because their bow lacks the power of grace.

This is a helpful clarification, but I would still like to point out that we should not simply take for granted the affirmation of correct natural knowledge of God—and therefore the common target.

## Turning to philosophy for help

Although Aquinas affirms that we can affirm God's existence through reason, he also speaks of the limits of our knowledge: "For what He is not is clearer to us than what He is" (ST I q. 1 a. 9, ad 3). When we try to speak in detail of God's life without the aid of genuine revelation, it is easy to fall into error. Thomas himself describes how he will proceed in speaking of God's nature: "When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence. Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not" (ST I q. 3 prologue). What this really means is that we know God's nature by affirming that is not bodily, subject to change or imperfection, outside the limits of time and space, and devoid of any limit or defect.

Pope Benedict XVI's **Regensburg Lecture** takes us right to the metaphysical problem concerning the nature of God in Islam. He relates a dialogue between the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a Persian sage, which hits at the necessity of not affirming things that are contrary to God's nature:

Without descending to details...[the Emperor] addresses his interlocutor with a startling brusqueness, a brusqueness that we find unacceptable, on the central question about the relationship between religion and violence in general, saying: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." The emperor, after having expressed himself so forcefully, goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. "God," he says, "is not pleased by blood—and not acting reasonably (σὺν λόγῳ) is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats. ... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death."

The decisive statement in this argument against violent conversion is this: not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature. The editor, Theodore Khoury, observes: For the emperor, as a Byzantine shaped by Greek philosophy, this statement is self-evident. But for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality. Here Khoury quotes a work of the noted French Islamist R. Arnaldez, who points out that Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practice idolatry.

At this point, as far as understanding of God and thus the concrete practice of religion is concerned, we are faced with an unavoidable dilemma. Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, the first verse of the whole Bible, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: "In the beginning was the λόγος." This is the very word used by the emperor: God acts, σὺν λόγῳ, with *logos*. *Logos* means both reason and word—a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason.

Even though Benedict's text is fairly familiar to many readers, I quote it at length, because I believe this is the best answer as to whether or not Muslims worship the true God (and if you have not read how he continues to develop his argument, you need to do so!). The argument runs as follows: Our understanding of the Creator, even by reason, is one that affirms his utter perfection and rejects everything contrary to this perfection. These perfections include truth and love. Voluntarism affirms that God's will is not based in truth and an affirmation of religious violence is contrary to love. To affirm such positions of God is to violate correct knowledge of God's nature.

Aquinas takes this conclusion further, arguing that holding such an error on the nature of God entails that one does not believe in the true God. While commenting on the Gospel of John, **chapter 4** (see no. 603) Aquinas turns to the key issue of God's simplicity, which arises in the context of Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman, as they are discussing the difference between the worship of the Samaritans, which had mixed with paganism, and that of the Jews:

As to [Jesus's] saying, "You people worship," and so on, it should be pointed out that, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] says, knowledge of complex things is different than knowledge of simple things. For something can be known about complex things in such a way that something else about them remains unknown; thus there can be false knowledge about them. For example, if someone has true knowledge of an animal as to its substance, he might be in error touching the knowledge of one of its accidents, such as whether it is black or white; or of a difference, such as whether it has wings or is four-footed. But there cannot be false knowledge of simple things: because they are either perfectly known inasmuch as their quiddity is known; or they are not known at all, if one cannot attain to a knowledge of them. Therefore, since God is absolutely simple, there cannot be false knowledge of him in the sense that something might be known about him and something remain unknown, but only in the sense that knowledge of him is not attained. Accordingly, anyone who believes that God is something that he is not, for example, a body, or something like that, does not adore God but something else, because he does not know him, but something else.

Applying Aquinas' teaching to Islam only strengthens the argument made by Benedict. If someone holds to something incorrect about the nature of God, then that person, or religion, does hold to a true *belief* in God, but to a false *idea* of God. If someone holds that God is a material being (as Augustine did in his youth), this would preclude a genuine belief in God. We could say the same to a God that stands against reason, freedom, goodness, and love.

### **Why does this matter?**

What, you might ask, is the purpose of pointing out this metaphysical disparity in our belief about God with Islam? I think the purpose is akin to Aquinas' goal in writing the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (SCG), which was written largely as an apologetic work for his fellow Dominicans to use in evangelization, for an audience that included Muslims. Here is how Aquinas describes his intention in writing the work:

The Mohammedans and the pagans, do not agree with us in accepting the authority of any Scripture, by which they may be convinced of their error. Thus, against the Jews we are able to argue by means of the Old Testament, while against heretics we are able to argue by means of the New Testament. But the Muslims and the pagans accept neither the one nor the other. We must, therefore, have recourse to the natural reason, to which all men are forced to give their assent. However, it is true, in divine matters natural reason has its failings. (Bk 1, ch. 2)



The SCG was written from a philosophical and apologetic basis to show the rationality of Christian belief, but more fundamentally to lay a foundation for belief by establishing clearly what can be known by reason (the preambles of the faith). Thomas saw clearly that Muslims needed to be taught even the basic elements of what can be known about God from reason, against natural failings. This is important, because removing obstacles and errors of reason in relation to God can help lead to faith.

Thomas made a distinction between knowledge of whether God exists (*an sit*) and knowledge of God's nature (*quid sit*). In this sense, one can know that there is one God who is Creator (*an sit*) and still be incorrect concerning the nature of God (*quid sit*). Pope Benedict in addressing the Catholic-Muslim Forum on November 6, 2008 seemed to hint at this distinction, focusing simply on a common worship of a Creator, even with difference in belief: "I am well aware that Muslims and Christians have different approaches in matters regarding God. Yet we can and must be worshippers of the one God who created us and is concerned about each person in every corner of the world." This helps us to understand how the Church can affirm that both Catholics and Muslims worship the Creator and yet Benedict can point to false knowledge of God's nature.

The SCG has had much more influence with Christians than with Muslims, which I think is telling. Understanding the differences in belief is essential for Catholics so that we can also use reason to think rightly about God. This has become a real challenge in the West, with many holding that metaphysics is a part of religion instead of philosophy. Pope John Paul II fought against this in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* and Pope Benedict had this in mind in his Regensburg Lecture when he spoke of "disturbing pathologies of religion and reason which necessarily erupt when reason is so reduced that questions of religion and ethics no longer concern it." He saw this pathology not only in placing violence within God's nature, but also in the secularized West.

### **What are the implications?**

Some readers may be hesitant to accept this conclusion, because it would seem to contradict the teaching of the Church and would damage religious dialogue. Rather, I think that it helps to understand better the connection we have with Islam and also the distance that still separates its beliefs and ours. It should also help us to understand why real dialogue is so difficult. Nonetheless, even after the violent response to the Regensburg Lecture, the Pontifical Council of Inter-religious Dialogue could still reach a **joint declaration** on the relation of faith and reason with Islamic scholars from Iran.

How can we still affirm connections with Islam? Even if Islam is fundamentally wrong about the nature of God, as voluntarist and violent, it does hold to one God, who is Creator and Judge, as the Church affirms. In that sense, it is not that our belief of God is the same, but that we hold to some similar doctrines about our distinct beliefs in God. Islamic belief is closer to us on the nature of God, than to Mormonism and other Eastern religions, but still stands further apart than some may suspect.

As Catholics we should be cautious about either too readily acknowledging or denying our connections to Islam. The truth is that we do have connections in our belief, but that some radical differences emerge, even on the nature of God.