A God by Any Other Name: Evangelicals and Allah

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From the Urban Dictionary (http://www.urbandictionary.com/)

meme mēm *noun*

2 : a pervasive thought or thought pattern that replicates itself via cultural means

The Allah Meme

One of the memes that has recently rooted itself deeply in the consciousness of some American Christians, particularly those who come from the more conservative side of the evangelical tradition, is the confident assertion that Muslims worship a different god from the Christian God. This is more than saying that we have different conceptions of God. This is a blunt and often combative claim that we are, in fact, talking about two entirely different divine entities. Billy Graham's son, Franklin, who heads up the diaconal ministry Samaritan's Purse, has been most strident in his public statements to this effect reaching back to the time just after 9/11. He first did so in an address he gave at the dedication of a North Carolina church that was quoted by an NBC Nightly news segment (as well as nearly every news source in the Muslim majority world) just two months after the 9/11 tragedy.

> *The God of Islam is not the same God. He's not the son of God of the Christian or Judeo-Christian faith. It's a different God, and I believe it [Islam] is a very evil and wicked religion.*[1]

Graham is not alone in this perception. It has, in fact, become a kind of theological maxim among more conservative groups, particularly after 9/11.[2]

[1] Quoted in a number of different sources based on statements Graham made at the dedication of a North Carolina chapel in October of 2001 as cited by NBC News sources (http://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/04/18/graham.pentagon/)

I discovered this in a personal way when I was approached about becoming full time pulpit supply at a church in a Chicago suburb during the years I was doing my PhD studies. I had first been invited to preach a sermon in this church about Christian-Muslim relations that was well received, enough so that the church board decided to invite me to preach on a full time basis as they carried on a search for a permanent pastor. But it wasn't an open invitation. I was first asked to justify the assumption some heard in my sermon that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. They were correct in what they heard as this has been an assumption of mine since the onset of my years of ministry and service in the Muslim majority world. But at this traditional Protestant Church such a belief was considered suspect, perhaps even bordering on heresy. So before I was given the invitation I was first required to write a paper giving justification to that assumption for the church board to review. I must have made a good case, as I got the invitation and it was never mentioned again.

What I discovered in this incident was the weight of this particular meme – strong enough that in certain circles it has become a kind of litmus test for evangelical orthodoxy. And while it should be said at the outset that there is a legitimate theological discussion to be had around the question posed by this meme – "do Muslims and Christians worship the same God" – the challenge it poses is related less to the way it answers this question than to its operative force as a test of evangelical orthodoxy. Simply put those who hold it are suspect of those who don't. That is the nature of a meme - the confidence with which it perpetuates itself as a kind of foundational truism for those who become its proponents.

[2] Richard Cimino's extensive research comparing pre to post 9/11 evangelical literature noted that this was a major shift in emphasis with the literature post 9/11. The possible reasons for this will be explored further in this present work. "No God in Common: American Evangelical Discourse on Islam after 9/11," *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Dec, 2005), p. 166.

Two Approaches

There are two ways to approach an examination of the assumption upon which this meme is built (that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God). The first is to examine it from a theological perspective. Here I recommend a book recently written by one of America's most celebrated Protestant theologians, Yale Divinity School's Miroslav Volf. The title of the book is *Allah: A Christian Response*.[3] Its purpose, as suggested by the title, is to probe the theological and philosophical issues surrounding the topic. What Volf acknowledges in the care with which he approaches the subject is that there is a legitimate theological debate surrounding this question with thoughtful Christians giving it different answers. At issue is the contrast between the Qur'anic & biblical revelation of divinity, particularly related to the Christian belief in the incarnation. The divine attributes are not completely equivalent. Does this, then, suggest that we are speaking of different "gods?" Some believe it does. Volf does not. His book offers well considered reasons why he doesn't.

I recommend Volf's book as one of the most comprehensive treatments of the subject from a theological standpoint. My interest, however, and the focus of this paper, is different. What interests me at least partly due to my studies in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, is to examine how key spokespersons in the evangelical tradition stretching back to the Reformation have conceptualized this question. The meme assumes that there is only one valid answer to this question for Bible-believing Christians: "no." What my exploration of this issue will show is that there are, in fact, a number of different ways Reformation-based Protestants have answered it, which more often than not contradicts the assumptions upon which this meme is built.

[3] Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: Harper One, 2012)

Historical Foundations

The key spokespersons whose views I have chosen to examine are representative figures from different eras in the development of what today is referred to as the "evangelical tradition." What characterizes them is their decision to move from a generalized to a more informed knowledge of Islam. All made an attempt within the limitations of their context to study Islam at a deeper level than others of their generation.

I begin my study with Martin Luther who was living at a time when Muslim armies were knocking on Europe's door. I turn next to the prominent eighteenth century American theologian, Jonathan Edwards and his nineteenth century missionary protégés who were the first Americans to venture out as evangelical missionaries to the Muslim majority world. I then take into consideration the thought of the Reformed Church in America's pioneering missionary, the Rev. Samuel Zwemer, who served as an evangelical missionary in the Muslim majority world from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and end my study with the writings of contemporary evangelical missionaries and scholars. What will be shown in this all too brief survey is that more often than not the question "Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?" has been answered in the affirmative, even by those who have held an otherwise highly negative view of Islam.

Setting the Parameters for the Study

The Rev. Colin Chapman, who served for many years with the Middle East mission of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) sets the parameters for the exploration upon which this paper is built when he begins his treatment of the subject in this way:

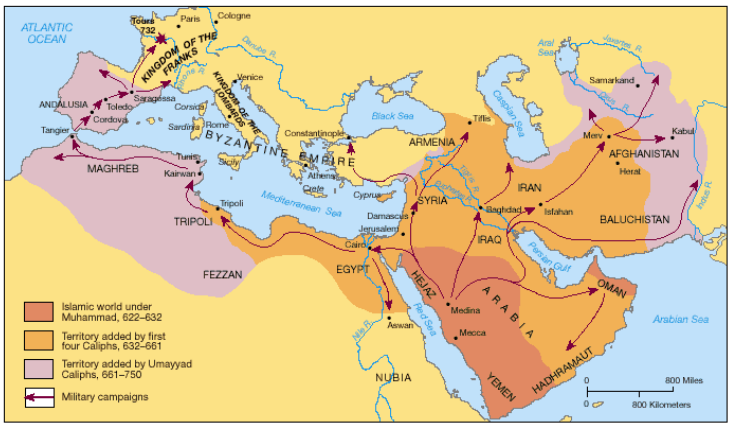
> The question itself is a kind of trick question, because it forces us to answer with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. What we need to do is to break the question down into several smaller questions, such as:
>
> - Is the Christian *idea of God* the same as the Muslim's idea of God? Most Christians would answer 'No.'
> - Is there anything in common between the Christian's idea of God and the Muslim's idea of God? Most would not hesitate to answer 'Yes.'
> - Is *there enough in common* between the Christian's idea of God and the Muslim's idea of God for us to be able to use the same word for God? This is probably the crucial question.[4]

For the purposes of this paper the later question is the "crucial question," as it highlights the way the representative figures I have studied chose to answer the question. All would agree with Chapman's generalized answers to the first two questions. They would affirm that the Christian *idea* of God is not the same as the Muslim idea of God. They would also affirm that there are commonalities between the contrasting ideas. Where they differ is in the answer they give to the third question, either due to their own creative reflection on the issues or based on viewpoints handed down to them from previous generations. In at least one case and possibly two, the view adopted had as much to do with inherited prejudices and perceptions as it did with a thorough examination of the issues. This was certainly the case with Martin Luther who may have been a revolutionary when it came to grace, but was a child of his time when it came to perceptions of Islam. It was also true to a certain extent with Jonathan Edwards who drew heavily on the normative perceptions of his era. But even in these cases it can be shown that the norm was not to give a negative response to the question, but rather a nuanced affirmation.

We start this exploration with a brief overview of Christian perceptions of Islam prior to the Reformation.

[4] Colin Chapman, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam* (Leicester, UK: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 228

Early Christian Responses to the Advent of Islam



The Spread of Islam. The rapid spread of Islam created within a century a unified cultural and economic zone from India to the Atlantic Ocean within.

When the armies fueled by Islamic expansionism swept out of the Arabian peninsula into the Eastern realms of the Christian Empire in the middle of the seventh century C.E. Christians in general (even the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox who in some cases welcomed the Arab armies as liberators from a century of deprivations visited on them by the Chalcedonians) reacted with what can best be described as incredulity. Seventh century Christendom operated with a near monolithic mindset that assumed the triumph of the Christian faith. Islam came in this case as an invasion not only of armies, but ideology, offering an alternative religious vision that Christians found difficult to categorize, particularly those Christians in the western reaches of the Empire who were not in the path of the conquering armies. R.W. Southern labels this initial response of Western Christians to the rise of Islam an "ignorance of confined space."

> This is the kind of ignorance of a man in prison who hears rumors of outside events and attempts to give shape to what he hears, with the help of his preconceived ideas. Western writers before 1100 were in this situation with regard to Islam. They knew virtually nothing of Islam as a religion. For them Islam was only one of a large number of enemies threatening Christendom from every direction, and they had no interest in distinguishing the primitive idolatries of Northmen, Slaves, and Magyars from the monotheism of Islam, or the Manichaean heresy from that of Mahomet.[5]

[5] R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 15

This remained the situation through much of the early part of the Middle Ages which gave Western Christians a creative license to indulge their fantasies about a religion and culture about which they knew next to nothing. This was not the case in the East where Christians experienced Islam not only as the faith of an invading army, but within a relatively short span of time the dominant faith of an Empire that would subvert the Christendom paradigm and relegate its Christian residents to dhimmi status.

The prominent eighth century theologian, John of Damascus, was one of the earliest Eastern Christian writers to study Islam which he did from a unique perspective as an administrator for the Caliph in his Damascus palace. John's study would lead him to the conclusion that Islam was a Christian heresy, which by its very classification assumes a common deity. This is seen clearly in a section of his *Fount of Knowledge* dedicated to the Islamic 'heresy' in which he counters Islam's rejection of incarnational theology by using the Qur'anic reference to Word and Spirit. It is an argument that only makes sense if Muslims and Christians are speaking of the same God:

> . . . we say to them: 'As long as you say that Christ is the Word of God and Spirit, why do you accuse us of being Hetaeriasts? For the word, and the spirit, is inseparable from that in which it naturally has existence. Therefore, if the Word of God is in God, then it is obvious that He is God. If, however, He is outside of God, then, according to you, God is without word and without spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the introduction of an associate with God you have mutilated Him. It would be far better for you to say that He has an associate than to mutilate Him, as if you were dealing with a stone or a piece of wood or some other inanimate object. Thus, you speak untruly when you call us Hetaeriasts; we retort by calling you Mutilators of God.[6]

John's accusation of Islamic heresy, with its assumption of a distorted view of the God Christians meet in the incarnate Word, would re-appear much later in western sources, after western Christians themselves began to study Muslim sources and hear Muslim stories first

[6] Cited in http://www.stpeterslist.com/11698/islam-as-a-christian-heresy-8-quotes-from-st-john-damascene-a-d-749/

through travelers and crusaders heading east, then through access gained to the rich cultural heritage of Islamic Spain in the years when Catholic rulers began what they labeled the *reconquista* which reached its goal of Christian domination in the fifteenth century. Prior to this - during the time defined by the "ignorance of a confined space" - western perceptions of Islam more often than not took on the form of invented narratives that associated Islam with known idolatries or located it in apocalyptic schemes.

The Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) was one of the first western Christians to record his impressions of this upstart religion and its adherents whom he and others of his era called "Saracens." While at times suggesting that they were a "quasi-Christian" cult, Bede also associated them with idolatry as he did in his commentary on Acts 7:43. This verse mentions a time when the Israelites lapsed into idolatry worshiping Molek and "the star of Rempham." This star, Bede explained, "is Lucifer, into whose cult the race of the Saracens is enslaved in honor of Venus."[7] Here was the accusation of idolatry that would continue to inform western Christian perceptions of Islam in other eras and in other ways, an accusation in this case that had more to do with a felt need to give biblical definition to an unknown entity than an attempt to understand what Islam actually taught about God. And this, according to John Toland, would come to shape western Christian perceptions of Islam for the next several centuries.

> Over the next several centuries, the authors north of the Pyrenees who have anything to say about Islam will (with few exceptions) describe the Saracen invaders in the same way: a violent scourge of God, vaguely associated with idolatrous cults.[8]

Norman Daniel, whose book, *Islam and the West*, stands alongside Tolan's book and Southern's book as a definitive source for our knowledge of early Christian perceptions of Islam, suggests that while Tolan's perception is more or less correct for the earliest western perceptions

[7] Ibid, 73
[8] Ibid, 74

of Islam, that, in fact, for most of the Middle Ages "educated mediaeval writers" were well aware that Muslims were monotheists (sans a Trinitarian lens). He goes even further to say that this has been the default position of most educated Christians even in eras of great conflict.

> It has always been perceived, even by its enemies, that the essential message of Islam is to proclaim the unity of God. It has also been admitted at least that this was always the ostensible purpose of the Prophet's mission. Educated medieval writers fully understood this, although there were poets who spoke of the 'worship' of Muhammad, and of other idols, probably because they were not concerned with facts at all; there were soldiers who fed their hate by believing that their enemies were idolatrous; occasionally there were serious writers who knew better but carelessly repeated false or exaggerated statements. The supposition of idolatry in Islam was very rare among the educated, and perhaps did not exist among the learned.[9]

What Daniel and Southern reveal in their work is what Toland acknowledges in his – that western Christian perceptions of Islam, including accusations of idolatry, had less to do in the years prior to the Reformation with a studied reflection on Muslim teaching than with polemics fueled by the Islamic conquests, first at a distance, then by the Crusades with their demand for an otherized enemy:

> Armed with self-righteousness, the Christian soldier could strike with a clear conscience, knowing that he was fighting for Christ against paganism.[10]

Martin Luther

This background is crucial to understanding the development of the earliest Protestant perceptions of Islam as this was the legacy inherited by Martin Luther. He, too, formulated his perceptions of Islam at a distance, albeit a distance shortened by the very real threat the Ottoman Turks posed to European Christian hegemony. It was only three decades before Luther's birth that the Ottomans had conquered Constantinople (1453). And this was just the beginning of a

[9] Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1960), 60
[10] Toland, 123

westward surge that reached its apex under Suleyman the Magnificent in the 1540s, during the last years of Luther's life. Islam in this case was experienced by western Europeans as it had been experienced by Christians in the eastern part of the empire in earlier years – as an existential threat.

> The threat that the Turks posed to Christian Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century was unprecedented. Never before had the Latin West, except when they invaded Muslim lands during the heyday of the crusades, been so close in physical proximity to the Muslim world.[11]

As would be expected in such a context of conflict, Luther was quick to condemn Islam even as he sought to understand it in a way that western Christians in earlier generations hadn't. He condemned it as a Satanic threat, joining the voices of those who tied Muhammad and the 'imposture'[12] he created to an apocalyptic scheme that united Catholics and Muslims as the two personifications of the anti-Christ. "The Pope," said Luther, "is the spirit of the anti-Christ, and the Turk is the flesh of the anti-Christ. They both help each other to choke [us] the later with body and sword, the former with doctrine and spirit."[13]

This allowed Luther, like the crusaders of an earlier era, to feel justified in urging Christian resistance not only to the physical, but also the spiritual threat posed by the Ottoman invaders:

> . . . in battling the Turks one was fighting against an enemy of God and a blasphemer of Christ, indeed, the devil himself.[14]

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[11] Adam S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam: A Study in Sixteenth –Century Polemics and Apologetics* (Leiden: Brill Publications, 2007), 64

[12] This word makes a constant appearance in Christian assessments of Islam related to Christian perceptions of the role Muhammad played in creating it throughout the Middle Ages and into the late 19th century. This was particularly true after the publication of a "Life of Mahomet" by Humphrey Prideaux (which will be cited below) as this was the term he used to describe the Arabian prophet. Few Christian writers after Prideaux would mention the name of Muhammad and Islam without the use of this term.

[13] Luther quoted in Francisco, 83

[14] Ibid, 77

Given this combative stance, it is perhaps surprising to learn that Luther was eager to learn all he could about Islam from its sources. That was a difficult task at the time, as very few Islamic writings had been translated into Latin much less the vernacular, which meant that Luther's sources tended to be polemical Christian writing. But it was more possible for him than previous generations due to the growing availability of the first Latin translation of the Qur'an dating back to the work of a twelfth century British monk named Robert Ketton. This was hardly an objective work as Ketton's Qur'an came complete with mini commentaries in the margin pointing out to the reader the "insanity" "impiety" "ridiculousness," "stupidity," "superstition," "lying" and "blasphemy" of the text.[15] But it did for the first time give western readers access to the book upon which Muslims built their faith system. Instead of hearsay, rumors and fabrications, Christians could now access (albeit in a poorly rendered, polemically drawn translation) the primary text of Islam.

It was not easy for Luther to get his hands on this translation which he attempted to do as early as 1530. "Although I have eagerly desired for some time to learn about the religion and customs of the Muhammandan . . . I have tried in vain to read the Coran itself."[16] When he finally did obtain it twelve years later he was disappointed to find that it was what he declared to be a 'poor' translation.[17] But having no other options at this point (beyond the polemical texts of the few Christian authors to whose works he also had access) Luther made this his primary source for assessing the religion of the enemy at the gates.

For the purposes of this paper what is most interesting about the perspectives Luther developed as he dug into his less than perfect sources was his assumption that Muslims spoke of the same God as Christians did, albeit in a highly distorted and non-salvific form. This is seen

[15] Tolan, 156
[16] Francisco, 96
[17] Ibid, 103 As to how Luther realized it was a poor translation is anybody's guess.

primary in the arguments Luther developed to refute Muslim teaching as they only make sense with the assumption of a common deity. Among these arguments was one that brings to mind John of Damascus' attempt to convince Muslims that the Qur'anic identification of Jesus as a word from God can only be interpreted through a Trinitarian lens:

> Citing sura 3:45 and 4: 171 where Jesus is identified as the word from God, it [Luther's *Verlegung*] began by boldly stating that Muhammad 'confessed to be sure, that Christ is God's word.'[18]

Other arguments Luther made to counter Qur'anic teaching make the same assumption: Muslims and Christians are speaking of the same deity. Hints of this belief are also found in other places in his writings about Islam including this quote:

> All who are outside of the Christian Church, whether Turks, Jews or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only one true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is towards them. They cannot be confident of his love and being.[19]

What is notable here is that Luther is not affirming Islam even though he acknowledges a common monotheism. The issue for him was not alternative gods, but the Muslim *perception* of God. To Luther this perception was so diabolically distorted that it was, in the words of Adam Francisco, "tantamount to idolatry"[20] even as it remained monotheistic in its foundational teaching.

The point here is to note that Luther's line of reasoning in his theoretical debates with Muslims ("theoretical" as there is no evidence that Luther ever actually met a Muslim) depend on an assumption that Christians and Muslims are speaking of the same God in different ways. The Muslim denial of the Trinity was in this sense "tantamount to idolatry", but not *actual* idolatry as would be the case if Muslims were worshiping a totally different divine entity. It is, as

[18] Ibid, 203
[19] Ibid, 120
[20] Ibid

Colin Chapman says in his treatment of this issue, like two groups of people trying to make sense of the sun. One group sees it through clouds, the other through clear skies. They have different perceptions of the sun, but are essentially dealing with the same entity.[21] And that, according to Luther, was the fatal flaw of Islam. They couldn't see God for who he really is. His true nature was hidden behind a dark cloud created by Muhammad's 'imposture.'

Jonathan Edwards and His Missionary Disciples

This paradoxical view of Islam as monotheistic and idolatrous; heretical and borderline Christian was echoed in the writings of other Protestant thinkers who followed in Luther's wake, including America's celebrated eighteenth century theologian, Jonathan Edwards. Edwards' primary focus and passion was revivalism with the belief that what was happening in America during what came to be known as the First Great Awakening would soon break forth in other parts of the world as a herald of the arrival of millennial glory. This led Edwards to develop a deep interest in other religions in hopes of finding a way to extend revival fervor outside the boundaries of Christendom.

> Edwards read voraciously about other religions; he knew of, tried to get and perhaps read, many of the travelogues, dictionaries, and encyclopedias of religion available at the time. The books included in his 'catalogue' include George Sale's translation of the Qur'an.[22]

Sale, whose eighteenth century English translation of the Qur'an was the best English rendition of the Arabic original, made no hesitation in promoting the idea that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. He stated it clearly in his introduction. "How much soever Muhammadans are to blame in other points," he said, "they are far from being idolatrous, as

[21] Chapman, 228
[22] Gerald McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92

some ignorant writers have pretended."[23] This sentiment is echoed in Sale's extensive and relatively accurate (for the time) coverage of the origins and teachings of Islam in the preface to his translation. The assumption throughout is of a common Christian/Muslim deity.

The fact that this was one of Edward's primary sources for information about Islam suggests that he had access to a far more accurate and thorough treatment of Islamic history and teaching than Luther did. His interest in other religions also led him to develop his own formulation of the patristic concept of *prisca theologia* which says that vestiges of true religion can be discerned in non-Christian religions.[24] This would indicate that Edwards should have been more open to finding commonalities between Islam and Christianity than Luther had. But Edwards, like Luther before him as well as many other orthodox Protestants of his era, read Islam primarily through an eschatological lens; the left arm to the Catholic right arm of the anti-Christ. "Edwards' interest in Islam," says historian Thomas S. Kidd, "had primarily to do with its place in eschatology, its inferiority to Christianity, and its role in the on-going debates with Deists. He made Muslims prominent in his millennial theology, arguing that as the millennium approached they would be destroyed."[25]

Kidd's note about Edward's interest in Islam as part of his "on-going debate with Deists" is worth noting here, as it underscores a trend seen throughout the history of Christian attempts to categorize and explain Islam. This is the tendency for Christian observers to interpret Islam through the lens of either ideological or actual conflict, sometimes with little reference to Islam. As previously noted, in the early years of the encounter between Christians and Muslims Islam

[23] Elwood Morris Wherry, *A comprehensive commentary on the Qurán : comprising Sale's translation and preliminary discourse, with additional notes and emendations; together with a complete index to the text, preliminary discourse and notes* (London: Trubner & Company, 1882), 37
[24] McDermott, 95
[25] Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 16

was read through the lens of actual conflict related to the Islamic conquest of Christendom. In Edwards' time the issue was an ideological conflict between orthodox Protestants and Deists whom Edwards considered to be the greatest threat to the Christian faith in his generation. The Anglican priest, Humphrey Prideaux set the stage for linking this conflict to Islam with his late seventeenth century biography of Muhammad which had a huge influence on shaping American Protestant attitudes towards Islam in Edwards' time. The ostensible purpose of this book was to expose "the Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet" (as per its title). It's actual purpose, however, was revealed in the subtext of the title which reads: "A Discourse Annexed, for the Vindicating of Christianity from this Charge; Offered to the Consideration of the Deists of the Present Age." [26]

It was this battle against Deism that led Edwards to affirm Islam's essential monotheism while denying its salvific efficacy. The prompt in this case was the provocative preference some Deists claimed for Islam over Trinitarian Christianity as they declared Islam to be a more 'natural' religion than Trinitarian Christianity due to its reliance on natural revelation. But, countered Edwards, Islam does not rely on 'natural' revelation. Its monotheistic foundations are, in fact, rooted in biblical revelation. This is how historian Gerald McDermott characterizes Edwards' thought on this point:

> It was only because of the revelation provided by Christianity that the Islamic world condemned polytheism, and all the truth found in Islam was taken directly from Christianity.[27]

With Edwards as with Luther we find an apparent paradox that affirms a common Christian and Islamic deity while giving no validity to Islam's other truth claims. We worship

[26] Humphrey Prideaux, D.D. *The True Nature of the Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet with A Discourse annexed, for the Vindicating of Christianity from this Charge; Offered to the Consideration of the Deists of the Present Age.* (London: Printed for William Rogers, at the Sun Against St. Dunftan's Church in Fleetstreet, 1698)

[27] McDermott, 173

the same God, said Edwards, but due to the 'imposture' of Muhammad, Muslims are tragically blind to God's true nature which is hidden behind thick clouds of ignorance and demonic delusion.

By the time Edward's theology had been adapted to a post Revolutionary America, these basic elements of an evangelical perspective towards Islam had become cemented in place. They remained in place through the Second Great Awakening in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century which produced the vision that would give rise to America's first organized global mission effort. It began with a group of students at Andover Seminary which was started by Edwards' disciples among the New England Calvinists in protest over Harvard's liberalization. These students convinced their elders to give legs to their global mission vision through the creation of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1810. By 1812 this Board had sent their first missionaries to India. In 1819 they did the same for the Muslim majority world, sending as their representatives the newly ordained Congregational ministers, Pliny Fisk and Levi Parsons.

Pliny Fisk was the centerpiece of my doctoral research. What I discovered among other things in examining his record as well as the record of his traveling companion, Levi Parsons, is that he accepted without question that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. It was a given among the students at Andover. In fact, by the time Fisk was set to embark on his pioneering journey to the Ottoman Empire he had become convinced that Islam had much to commend it. He said so in the sermon he preached to a packed church in Boston the week before he left.

> Mahommedans believe, that Moses and Jesus were true prophets; that Jesus was the greatest of prophets except Mahommed; that the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the Prophets, and the Gospels were revelations from God, but have been so much corrupted by Jews and Christians, as to deserve but little credit. They assert the unity of God, the

> immortality of the soul, and future rewards and punishments. They have, indeed, much of the truth in their system.[28]

When I made the assumption that Muslims and Christians worship the same God in a sermon preached at a church in Chicago in 2008 my orthodoxy was called into question. When Fisk did the same in a sermon he preached to a revival-fired congregation in Boston in 1819 no one objected. Clearly at this point in the development of the evangelical narrative the assumption of a common deity was a generally held belief. But this by no means suggests that Fisk or any others of his generation had become pluralists or universalists. Nothing could be further from the truth. Fisk was an evangelical minister embarking on an evangelical mission to bring the light of Christ to a place (in his eyes) of great spiritual darkness. Even as he spoke in his sermon of Muslims having "much of truth in their system" he would also say:

> All the inhabitants of the country believe in one God, and the leading facts recorded in the Old Testament. Here are no gods of brass or wood; no temples to Juggernaut, or the Grand Lama; no funeral pyres; no altars stained with the blood of human victims. Everywhere you see a faint glimmering of light, through the gross and almost impenetrable darkness.[29]

Samuel Zwemer

When Samuel Zwemer was a student at New Brunswick Seminary in New Brunswick, New Jersey in the 1880s he and two other students - James Cantine and Philip Phelps – reached the prayerful conclusion that God was leading them to establish a Christian missionary presence in the world's most difficult and challenging location for Christian missionaries. They considered various options, but finally settled on the Arabian heartland of Islam under the influence of their Old Testament professor, Dr. John Lansing. Lansing had just returned from an extensive tour of Egypt and was himself convinced that Arabia was the field they needed to

[28] Pliny Fisk, *The Holy Land an interesting field of missionary enterprise: A sermon preached in the Old South Church Boston, Sabbath evening, Oct. 31, 1819, just before the departure of the Palestine mission* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1819), 5
[29] Ibid, 7

'occupy.'[30] The fact that Lansing had spent considerable time in the region himself suggests that the missions landscape had changed considerably in the seventy years since Fisk and Parsons made their pioneering journey to the Ottoman Empire. When this pioneering pair went to the Ottoman Empire little was known about Islam and Arab culture beyond what could be gleaned from the writings of travelers and earlier missionaries. Fisk and Parsons were able to read the Qur'an, but only in translation. Lansing, in contrast, was able to introduce his students to a more scholarly study of Islam based on his Orientalist's knowledge of Arabic and original Islamic sources. This ensured that Zwemer and Cantine (Phelps would stay home to take care of his parents) had a much better grounding in Islam than previous missionaries. Zwemer himself would go on to master Arabic and become a respected scholar of Islam during his long sojourn in the Arab world. Even those who did not agree with his evangelical convictions admired him for the depth of his knowledge about Islam and the Muslim majority world.

In his early years in Arabia Zwemer's views more or less reflected the usual evangelical critique of Islam, including the long standing accusation of Muhammad's (deliberate?) distortion of biblical revelation about God. It was a subject about which Zwemer showed a great interest as evidenced in his publication of a book in 1905 entitled *The Moslem Doctrine of God: An Essay on the Character and Attributes of Allah According to the Koran and Orthodox Tradition.*[31] The book begins with this statement:

> Jews, Christians and Mohammedans believe in one God and yet differ widely in their interpretation of this idea. . . . Our purpose in these pages is to learn the extent and content of this idea; an idea which holds the Moslem world even more than they hold it.[32]

[30] A term often used in this era to speak of Christian mission work suggesting the spiritual conquest of lands otherwise belonging to other religions.
[31] Samuel Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God: An Essay on the Character and Attributes of Allah According to the Koran and Orthodox Tradition* (Boston: The American Tract Society, 1905)
[32] Ibid, 7

This is what Zwemer develops in this book – the widely different interpretation of the *idea* of God held by Muslims. What Zwemer shows is that this *idea* is not even remotely akin to the Christian *idea* of God. Typical is what Zwemer says through a quote he approvingly includes from a German critic of Islam:

> What Mohammad tells us of God's omnipotence, omniscience, justice, goodness and mercy sounds, for the most part, very well indeed, and might easily awaken the idea that there is no real difference between his God and the God of Christianity. But Mohammad's monotheism was just as much a departure from true monotheism as the polytheistic ideas prevalent in the corrupt Orientalist churches. Mohammed's idea of God is out and out deistic. This is why Islam received the warm sympathies of English deists and German rationalists; they found in its idea of God flesh of their flesh and bone of their bones.[33]

In an earlier study I did of Zwemer's views on Islam [34] I was led to conclude from this and other passages in his early works that he denied that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. The weight of his arguments in this book and elsewhere lends itself easily to such a conclusion as his intent is to push Islamic categorizations of God into an entirely separate category, so separate as to assume something akin to idolatry or worse.

> Islam is proud to write on its banner, the Unity of God; but it is, after all, a unity to the Unknown God. Christianity enters every land under the standard of the Holy Trinity – the Godhead of revelation. These two banners represent two armies. There is no peace between them. . . . We must conquer or be vanquished. In its origin, history, present attitude and by the very first article of its very brief creed, Islam is anti-Christian.[35]

This was my earlier assessment of Zwemer's thought which seems to give weight to the argument of separate deities. But I am now convinced that a different conclusion should be reached from what Zwemer writes, which is that Zwemer, like Luther and Edwards and the ABCFM missionaries before him believed that while the *idea* of God is different, the deity

[33] Ibid, 21
[34] John Hubers, "Samuel Zwemer and the Challenge of Islam: From Polemic to a Hint of Dialogue," International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Vol. 28, No. 3, July, 2004
[35] Zwemer, 120

behind the idea is the same. "Jews, Christians and Mohammedans believe in one God . . ." is how Zwemer begins this book. It is foundational to all that follows. His arguments against Islam make no sense apart from this conclusion as they all focus on distortions of a common reality. We have different *ideas* about God, but behind those ideas is the same God.

This is the early Zwemer. In later years he would come closer to affirming not only a common deity, but common *ideas* about that Deity. This was a growing conviction with Zwemer that developed particularly after WW I when his immersion in Arab culture had become nearly complete. The extent to which his thoughts changed on this subject can be seen in an article he wrote for *Theology Today* in 1946 when he was a professor at Princeton Seminary. This is how I characterized the transformation in my earlier study of Zwemer's views on Islam:

> The mature Zwemer, while still feeling that Muhammad's portrayal of God was inadequate, no longer believes it was inadequate enough to justify the harsh language of his early years. In an article he wrote for the journal *Theology Today* in 1946,[36] we see an emphasis less on what Muhammad got wrong than on what Muhammad got right. . . Zwemer celebrates Muhammad's role in calling the Arabs "back to the worship of one *living* God." Zwemer also now finds that the ninety-nine attributes of Allah, with only one or two exceptions, to be equivalent to the attributes of Jehovah in the Hebrew scriptures.[37]

And this isn't all. In this same article Zwemer makes what might be considered an even stronger case for commonality, this time based on testimonies of Muslim converts to Christianity. This is the argument I have always found to be the most convincing.

> No Jew since Paul's day, any more than Paul himself, was conscious of a change of 'gods' when he accepted Christ as Savior and Lord. The same is true of every Muslim convert today.[38]

[36] Samuel Zwemer, "The Allah of Islam and the God of Jesus Christ," *Theology Today* 3 (April 1946): 66–72
[37] Hubers, 120-121
[38] Zwemer, *Theology Today*, 70

Contemporary Evangelical Perspectives

Zwemer set the stage for what would follow as evangelical missionaries picked up not where he had begun his journey, but where his journey ended: with a more accepting appraisal of Islamic theism giving strong affirmation to a common Muslim-Christian belief in a Creator God. What needs to be made clear here is that Zwemer had not slipped into what today would be labeled pluralism or universalism. To his dying day Zwemer remained convinced that the highest calling for Christians was to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with our Muslim neighbors in such a way that it would bring them to a point of faith conviction and a fuller revelation of God's true nature. But his long experience of living and working among Arab Muslims led him to temper his critiques in his later years. He could no longer accept that what Muslims believed about God was "tantamount" to idolatry; and certainly not idolatry itself. In fact there was much that Muslims and Christians shared in their perceptions of God.

And this is where most if not all of the evangelical community of missionaries and evangelical scholars of Islam are today in their appraisal of Islam. It is seen in nearly all the books that have been penned by those who, like Zwemer, have dedicated their careers to a winsome evangelical ministry among Muslims. My own education in Christian-Muslim relations was shaped by those who went several steps beyond Zwemer in finding commonalities upon which to build bridges of understanding with Muslim neighbors without leaving the evangelical camp. I include on this list people like Colin Chapman as well as the highly regarded Anglican scholar of Islam, Bishop Kenneth Cragg. I would also add here Phil Parshall who served for many years as a missionary with SIM in Bangladesh and the Philippines writing extensively on the need for Christians to develop a more communally based witness to our Muslim neighbors, even to the point of considering the creation of Christian mosques. Others on

my list include my mentor from Northwestern College, Dr. Lyle Vander Werff and former professor of world missions at the Fuller School of World Missions, Dr. Dudley Woodberry. All operate with the assumption that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. In this case one has to ask the question why this perspective is being challenged by other evangelical leaders today. What is the reason for this? And why *now*? The answer, I believe, lies in fears raised by pluralism and religious relativism in post 9/11 America.

Richard Cimino: Evangelicals and Islam after 9/11

Sociologist, Richard Cimino, published an article in the *Review of Religious Research* in December of 2005 which gave the results of a comprehensive study he did of American evangelical discourse on Islam following 9/11.[39] What interested him in particular were public statements made by evangelical leaders like Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, all of whom vilified Islam. All made headlines with their denunciations none more controversial than Southern Baptist leader Jerry Vines' comment that Muhammad was a "demon possessed pedophile." These comments were widely criticized by other Christians, including President Bush. But, says Cimino, "the public statements revealed a pattern of anti-Islamic polemics that is found in much of the literature of evangelicals and charismatic Christians in the period after 9/11."[40] Having followed the development of this literature myself over the years I would affirm Cimino's observation, noting that if anything it has gotten to be more wide spread and even more vociferous in more conservative evangelical circles making it difficult for Christians to relate to their Muslim neighbors in anything but stereotypical ways.

[39] Richard Cimino, "No God in Common: American Evangelical Discourse on Islam after 9/11, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Dec, 2005), p. 162-174
[40] Ibid, 163

Essentially what Cimino discovered is that since 9/11 American evangelicals (I would add "conservative" evangelicals) have become more apt than others to oppose Islam. 62% of Evangelicals versus 44% of Americans in general say that what they believe is "very different" from Islam. And one of the reasons has to do with the meme upon which this paper is built as it has the effect of accentuating the gap between our two faiths which may be the real reason for its tenacious hold on the evangelical imagination.

What Cimino posits in this article based on his study of everything written by evangelicals about Islam between Sept 11, 2001 and the time he wrote this article in 2005, is that the perpetuation of memes in the evangelical community such as the one we are examining has less to do with conflict between evangelicals and Muslims (particularly given the fact that very few evangelicals have any kind of personal acquaintance with Muslims) than it has to do with fears of relativism and syncretism. In such a conflict with modern American society," says Cimino, "I argue that such anti-Islamic polemics function to strengthen the subcultural identity of evangelicals.[41]

Cimino makes a solid case for this thesis with a thorough examination of the sources. He also notes what I have noted in this paper, which is that anti-Islamic polemics are far less prevalent (nearly nonexistent) among missionaries or others who have extensive contact with Muslims than it is with evangelicals in general. And in every case the driving force is the fear of syncretism and religious relativism:

> The fear and criticism of religious relativism and syncretism in an increasingly pluralistic society is common in most of the books and articles analyzed in this article. While the concern with pluralism is most evident in the apologetic literature, the message of the charismatic and prophetic literature also reflects the theme that the true nature of Islam is

[41] Ibid, 161

> obscured in a "politically correct" and godless society, as well as in that society's treatment of the global competition between Islam and Christianity.[42]

An Inconclusive Conclusion

What Cimino has uncovered in his research is in line with what has been noted at different times in our all too brief historical survey, picking up here on three trends. First is the polemical treatment given to Islam when it is either perceived to be or actually experienced as a threat. This has certainly been the case in America since 9/11 leading some to actually go so far as to call for banning Islam altogether from American society.[43] It is telling in this sense that strong statements about Christians and Muslims worshiping different gods didn't become prevalent in evangelical circles in America until 9/11.

Second, Cimino's insights fit well with the observation that those who make the most negative and inaccurate statements about Islam are usually those who are at the furthest distance from it (i.e. western Christians after the Islamic conquests). That those evangelical leaders who have spoken out most forcefully about the lack of similarity between Islam and Christianity are also those who are the most existentially and intellectually removed from it is no coincidence. Distance in this case breeds contempt.

Third, Ciminos' observation that the issue driving evangelical anti-Islamic polemic has more to do with evangelical fears of religious relativism than Islam itself, fits well with what has been observed about Jonathan Edwards' battle with Deists. Islam in both cases serves as a kind of cannon fodder for intra-Christian battles.

A final observation in assessing what this means in terms of the meme which has served as the impetus for this paper, is to note that what Cimino points out may give the reason why it is so difficult to counter the force of this meme. If, indeed, its source is a deeply held fear of religious relativism; if it exists primarily to strengthen the sub-cultural identity of evangelicals, then logical challenges will do

[42] Ibid, 169

[43] "Nearly a Third of Iowa GOP Want to Criminalize Islam" Web link: http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow-show/poll-nearly-third-iowa-gop-wants-criminalize-islam

little to dislodge it. Logic doesn't drive it. Logic won't counter it. My hope in this case is that it is not as deeply embedded in the evangelical consciousness as it sometimes appears to be. The fact that I was able to overcome it with a three page paper written for a consistory in a suburban Chicago church tells me that such is probably the case. I will continue to hang on to that hope.

John Hubers

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