

## Is Allah of Islam the same as Yahweh of Christianity?

As I was passing the State House in Columbia, SC, I noticed the Confederate flag waving in the breeze behind a large, decorated Christmas tree. The contrast of symbols caught my attention. To most people, the tree nominally symbolizes the season of Christmas and the focus on the first coming of Jesus Christ. For some people any representation of a spiritual reality on public property is a travesty against their rights. The flag, however, has become more controversial. For some, the Confederate flag merely symbolizes a past conflict, for others it represents a spirit of independence and state's rights, and for still others it is an ugly reminder of when one people group enslaved another. Thus, we have one symbol with several different meanings.

This is similar to the word "Allah." For most Muslims, Allah is the only God and therefore must be the same God as the one that the Jews and Christians worship. Similarly, for some Christians, Allah is just another name for the one God of the universe. For others, however, the Muslim Allah and the biblical Yahweh are contradictory and cannot refer to the same being, for, they say, "how can the God of Muhammad be the Father of Jesus Christ?" The question before us, then, is whether the terms "Allah" and "Yahweh" are just two names for the same God, or are they referring to different Gods? (And since there can only be one true God, the ultimate question is, "if they are different, which one is the true God?")

Let's first look at the origin and meaning for the term "Allah." Allah probably comes from the Aramaic compound term "al-ilah," which means "the god." It is a generic term for the highest god of the people, and in Arabia it was in use for centuries before Muhammad came on the scene. Apparently it was one of the 360 gods worshipped in the ka'aba in Mecca, and was the chief god for the Quraysh tribe, which was the tribe Muhammad belonged to. In the pre-Islamic time, Allah had three daughters, Al-At, Al-Uzza, and Al-Manat. In Muhammad's campaign against polytheism he chose Allah as the one true God and rejected the notion that Allah could have any daughters or sons. The Allah from the Qur'an, however, is very different from the Yahweh of the Bible. For one thing, Allah is a distant, remote being who reveals his will but not himself. It is impossible to know him in a personal way. In his absolute oneness there is unity but not trinity, and because of this lack of relationship, love is not emphasized. Indeed, for the Muslim, Allah cannot have any associates. In fact, to claim that Jesus is God's son is the greatest of all sins in Islam and is known as "shirk." Allah is also an arbitrary God and is said to deceive people, especially unbelievers. In the end, even for the devout Muslim there is no guarantee of salvation because in his arbitrariness Allah may reject the believer's good works and send him to hell. Thus, even if one's good works outweighed his bad works salvation is ultimately up to the Will of Allah, which is arbitrary at best.

When we look at Yahweh, however, who is the God of the Bible, we see a different kind of deity. First of all, the name "Yahweh" comes from the time that God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. At that time God told Moses to call him "I am that I am," or in Hebrew, "Yahweh." It is significant that Jesus referred to himself as the "I am" in John 8:58. The Jews realized that Jesus was referring to himself as God and took up stones to stone him for what they believed was blasphemy. This link between Jesus in the New Testament and the burning bush in the Old Testament demonstrates the unity of the one God manifested to both the Jews and the Christians. This cannot be said of the Muslim God because Muslims reject the deity of Jesus and therefore reject much of what the New Testament says about Jesus. We also find that the Bible portrays Yahweh in contrast to Allah. For example, Allah is considered to be too holy to have personal relationships with man, but Yahweh is often described as a loving God interested in our personal struggles. Yahweh is also depicted as unchanging and One who assures the salvation of the faithful. Finally, because there is unity in the Trinity with the one God also being three persons, God can be described as the Father of Jesus.

Some scholars want to emphasize the similarities between Yahweh and Allah, and point to a common belief in a monotheistic God who is Creator of all things, omnipotent and merciful. Both religions also claim that God has sent prophets to reveal His will and produce scriptures to guide our lives. However, Allah and Yahweh cannot refer to the same person for the following reasons. First of all, their attributes are different. In Allah's monadic oneness his attributes stem from his powerful Will which, because it provides no basis for relationship, often promotes capriciousness. Also, since his power is more important than his other attributes, there is an unequal emphasis on power over his other attributes. In the end, a follower cannot know God or even be sure of the consistency of his attributes. On the other hand, because Yahweh is by nature a triune unity his attributes stem from his nature. The eternal relationship within the Trinity promotes love within the Godhead and extends to his creation. Also, since his attributes are based on his unchanging nature rather than his powerful will, all his attributes are equal and promote trustworthiness rather than capriciousness. This means that believers can know God and be sure of his attributes. Second, Christians understand the nature of God to be triune (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), which is the only way that Jesus Christ, as the second person of the Trinity, could die on the cross to pay for our sins. If Jesus were not God himself, then his death on the cross would be meaningless. However, Muslims deny that Jesus died on the cross and they reject the belief in his resurrection from the dead. Only a triune God, defined as one essence and three persons, could become incarnate and still remain God of the universe, and yet this is the God that Muslims reject. For them, Jesus cannot be God nor can God be a Father, for he cannot have a son. Therefore, if Muslims reject God as the Father of Jesus, then Allah cannot be the same as the God of the Bible.

But wait a minute, some will say. What about the Arabic Christians who call the God of the Bible "Allah"? Doesn't this illustrate the fact that Allah and Yahweh are referring to the same God? Actually, when the Arabic Christians refer to "Allah" in their translation of the Bible, they believe that "Allah" is the father of Jesus and they believe that "Allah" is triune. Therefore, the Allah of the Arabic Christians cannot be the same Allah of the Muslims! This semantic [shibboleth] strangulation can be cleared up if we remember that words have both a denotative and a connotative meaning. Denotation refers to a dictionary definition, so it would be correct to say that Yahweh and Allah both refer to the concept of God, especially for their respective language groups. However, the connotation is determined by what a person conceives about the object of that word. For example, an Arab Christian may still use the word "Allah" to denote God, but his understanding of that term would be starkly different from a Muslim, for the Christian would recognize that Jesus Christ is God (Allah) whereas the Muslim would never consider that connotation. Thus, denotatively the word "allah" merely refers to "god, deity, etc." However, we understand the denotative use by our connotative presuppositions. Therefore, "Allah" for the Muslim cannot be reconciled with the "Jesus is Allah" of the Arabic Christians. There is still a world of difference between the content of the word (connotation), even if the denotation is the same. Without this very important distinction made when we refer to "Allah" and "God" (Yahweh), a lot of Christians will be confused.

After comparing the Allah of the Qur'an and the Yahweh of the Bible, it should be apparent that they could not be referring to the same God. Either the Muslim Allah is the true God or the Christian Yahweh is the true God, or neither is true. As the Law of non-Contradiction teaches, they both cannot be true. One thing should be sure, though, the God of Muhammad cannot be the Father of Jesus.

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