Michael Nguyen, SVD*

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE WITH ISLAMIC FAITH: GOD HAS NO SON

The Christian conception of a Trinitarian God requires explanation in interreligious dialogue, particularly with Islam. This article summarizes the fundamental Islamic notions of God and enquires into the Prophet's religion and the corresponding understanding of Trinity. From these findings, the author highlights a few important elements for a fruitful dialogue with Muslims.

Introduction

Being a prophet of Islamic faith, Muhammad had a prophetic mission to lead the Muslims through the guidance of the Koran to the transcendent and one God. In other words, God has revealed the Koran to the prophet as a guidebook in order to direct the Muslims to the absolutely absolute Allah. This God of grandeur, as presented in Sura 6:101, has no Son. Nevertheless, Sura 9:30 asserts, "The Jews call 'Uzayr a son of God, and the Christians call Christ the son of God. That is a saying from their mouth; they but imitate what the Unbelievers of old used to say."[1] Obviously, Islam appears as having conflict with Judaism and Christianity over its own belief that God has no Son.

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* Michael Nguyen was born in Saigon, Vietnam. In 1982, he fled the Communist regime by a fishing boat that eventually brought him and the other 62 Vietnamese to Malaysia. In 1984 he arrived in the US. He earned an Electrical Engineering degree from San Jose State University in May 1991. In 1997 he joined the SVD in Chicago, Illinois. He graduated from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago with a Master of Divinity degree in May 2001 and with a Master of Arts in Theology degree in May 2002. He taught the Scriptures in Divine Word College, Epworth, Iowa, between 2001 and 2005, and at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne, Australia, between 2006 and 2009. In December 2009, he left Melbourne for the ministry to the Aboriginal Australians in Central Australia. Since May 2016, he has been in the Philippines for his Ph.D. studies in Missiology in the Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies (DWIMS) in Tagaytay.

[1] All the Koranic verses in this essay, unless otherwise indicated, come from Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Quran,* New Delhi: Goodword Books 2013.

In this paper, the author comes up with a proposal concerning how to dialogue with the Muslims in regard to this Islamic belief. In order to reach this objective, the author touches on three areas: (1) how the Koran presents the core belief that Allah has no Son, (2) the religious background of the prophet Muhammad, and (3) the way the prophet understood the theology of the Trinity. After these three compartments, the author will draw a proposal for interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims in relation to this particular theology.

1. The Core Belief: Allah Has No Son

As guided by Allah in the Koran through the founder, the Muslims believe in one God or Allah. The word Allah is linguistically derived from two Arabic words, *al*, the definite article like "the" in English, and *ilah*, meaning god or deity.[2] Reading this compound term *al-ilah* together, Allah is therefore not the name of God but "the God" or, simply put, God. In this context, the one God in Islam remains a God who has no name, while in Judaism and Christianity, this God is addressed as Adonai and Abba respectively. Despite having no name attached to Allah, there virtually exist ninety-nine characters attributed to the Islamic deity.[3] The two foremost and outstanding ones are listed in the beginning of the Koran, Sura 1: The Gracious and the Merciful.

Allah is the one God, and there is no other. Above all, Allah in Islamic theological views is not only one God but also an almighty deity. In the Arabic sociocultural context, the conclusion one can draw from this premise is that Allah virtually has no son. This core belief of Muslims is elaborated on two principles. First, in order to have a son, Allah must have a consort. But who on earth can be fitting to this position? Secondly, as a common Arabic belief at the time of the prophet, a person must be really weak if he was unable to defend himself or fulfill the task assigned to him.

However, God in the Koran is described as:

– The only Creator of the universe who is the only one of God's "kind." Thus, we read Sura 6:101, "To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth: How can He have a son

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2   John Renard, *In the Footsteps of Muhammad: Understanding the Islamic Experience*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1992, 18.

3   Thomas Robinson/Hillary Rodrigues (eds.), *World Religion: A Guide to the Essentials*, Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers 2006, 127.

when he has no consort? He created all things, and He has full knowledge of all things."

– Being self-sufficient, God needs neither helpers nor partners! Thus, we read Sura 22:64, "To Him belongs what is in the heavens and on earth. Truly, God is self-sufficient, and praiseworthy!"

– Being the one and only absolutely Absolute, God self-exists. Thus, we read Sura 112, "1 Say: He is Allah, the One; 2 Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; 3 He begets not, nor is He begotten; 4 And there is none like unto Him."

The conclusion one can draw from these three Suras is that if God has a son, this son will negate all that is solemnly proclaimed in Suras 6:101, 22:64 and 112.[4]

Both Abrahamic older siblings, Jews and Christians, proclaim the absoluteness of the same God who is Creator of the universe. However, Christians believe in the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, which in Islamic eyes contradicts the nature of the one and self-sufficient God. The mystery of the Trinity thus is considered invalid to Muslims. In Islamic theology, both Jews and Christians henceforth commit the grave sin of *shirk* or, in theological language, associationism. According to Thomas Mooren, while *shirk* is commonly interpreted as polytheism, *sharak* is understood as a trap. These two words however share the same root, *sharika*, meaning to share or to participate. Thomas Mooren therefore prefers associationism over polytheism, for *shirk* in the Arabic language is not concerned with the number of gods, but with "power sharing! *Shirk* means, to have associates, partners in business or exercise of authority."[5] Thus, we read Sura 4:171,

> O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, was (no more than) a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not "Trinity": desist: it will be better for

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[4]   For more information on this Islamic core belief, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism & Interreligious Theology,* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2017, 147-158.

[5]   Thomas Mooren, "Prophethood and Holiness: From the deathbed of Muhammad *Rasul Allah* to the peaceful valley of Ibrahim *Khalil Allah,*" in: *Introduction to Islam*, Tagaytay: Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies 2017, 8. For more information on *shirk*, see also Id., September 11th 2001 and the Future of Monotheistic Religions: *Mission* IX (2002) 48-50.

you: for Allah is One God: glory be to Him: (far Exalted is He) above having a son.

Similarly, we read Sura 5:116,

> And behold! Allah will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Did you say unto men, 'Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah'?" [Jesus] will say: "Glory to You! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, You would indeed have known it. You know what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Yours. For You know in full all that is hidden."

Likewise, Sura 9:30 asserts,

> The Jews call 'Uzayr a son of God, and the Christians call Christ the son of God. That is a saying from their mouth; they but imitate what the Unbelievers of old used to say. Allah's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth.

'Uzayr in this Sura is Ezra, a figure in the Hebrew Bible. Actually there is no record in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament that points to the claim of Ezra's divinity, except the non-canonical book entitled *The Fourth Book of Ezra*, probably composed in the 1st century AD. In this non-canonical text, Ezra is called by God "my son." Furthermore, Muslim scholars in the 11th century asserted that the belief that Ezra is a son of God was actually circulated among the Jews who lived in the Arabian Peninsula during the 7th century AD; however, this sect had already died out. Jewish scholars nevertheless used this piece of information to argue that the Koran in fact contains inaccurate information or patent falsehood.[6]

Having discussed theological arguments revolving around the belief that God has no Son, we now move to the next discussion about the prophet's religion. To understand why the prophet attempted to protect the monotheistic aspect of Allah by any means, one has to understand the religious background of Muhammad. Once one has grasped the religion that he had followed, the reader will understand why the prophet strongly believed in and consistently defended the belief that Allah cannot have a son.

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[6]   For more information on this topic, see Michael Lodahl, *Claiming Abraham: Reading the Bible and Qur'an Side by Side,* Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press 2010, 37-43; Jason Yoder, The Trinity and Christian Witness to Muslims: *Missiology* XXII:3 (1994) 339-346; and also Jonathan Brown, "The Qur'an, the Jews and Ezra as the Son of God," *Al-Madina Institute,* July 27, 2016, http://almadinainstitute. org/blog/the-quran-the-jews-and-ezra-as-the-son-of-god (accessed April 13, 2018).

2. The Prophet Muhammad's Religion

Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 AD. He belonged to the Quraish tribe which gained the control of and thus governed Mecca during the 6th century AD. When reaching adulthood, like many other young Meccan men of his age, Muhammad worked for a caravan business, a common trade in Mecca and its surrounding areas during the 7th century AD.

Buddha is a Hindu, Jesus is a devout adherent of Judaism, and Muhammad is a Hanif. In other words, Muhammad is a member of the Hanif religion. This religion has its roots from Abraham and the stories of how he had wholeheartedly submitted himself to God as reported in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Koran. Though living in the midst of a polytheistic environment, Abraham surprisingly believed in and totally devoted his whole life to this particular one God. Abraham believed God so much that he was even willing to sacrifice his son who is Ishmael as presented in the Koran (Sura 37:101-107). The Hanif religion therefore comprises two essentials: to believe in the absolute oneness of this almighty God and to surrender completely to God. Since God is transcendental, there is no effort to attempt to define this God. Thus, Allah has no name. To discern God's will for them, members of the Hanif religion devote themselves to individual prayer and fervent meditation on the transcendental Allah. The Hanifs were not reluctant to show their disdain to those who worshipped idols. Note that the religions of the people in Arabia at Muhammad's time consisted of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hanif and the rest who worshipped many gods.[7]

Hanif as a religion is also mentioned in Sura 30:30:

> Set, Muhammad, your face towards Hanifism, which is God's original creation with which he has created humankind. There is change in God's creation. This is the upright religion, but people do not know it.[8]

As a devoted adherent of the monotheistic Hanif religion,[9] quite often the married Muhammad spent time in solitude for prayer and

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[7]   Yahiya Emerick, *The Life and Work of Muhammad,* Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books 2002, 28.

[8]   Thomas Mooren, "Prophethood and Holiness," 12.

[9]   Class Handout, "Muhammad and the Rise of Islam," in: *Interreligious Dialogue*, Tagaytay: Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies 2018, 45. For more information on his prayer life, see M. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, *Prayers of the Prophet,* New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan 1980, 1-63.

meditation in a cave located in the outskirts of Mecca. One night he encountered the messenger of God for the first time as indicated in Sura 53:1-10.

During the prophet's time, Mecca was famous as a trading center of Arabia. The city during the 7th century AD was also a place of worship of many gods. The Ka'ba is a religious shrine of Mecca. The altars of these gods were placed inside the Ka'ba. Muhammad himself is a member of the Quraish, the tribe that looked after the Ka'ba and thus earned enormous benefits from the donations of the Arabic businessmen who came to the Ka'ba to worship their own gods or the many gods while they were in the city. A Quraish he was; however, being a Hanif, Muhammad, as expected, did not approve of polytheism. To the mind of the Hanif Muhammad, Jesus is plainly a prophet, a noble one. Being a noble prophet, Jesus is mentioned by the name "Isa" twenty-five times in the Koran. His mother Mary is also venerated in the sacred text. However, Jesus is absolutely not divine. Above all, Muhammad asserted that Jesus cannot be God's Son because God cannot have a Son. Due to this commonality, the Koran contains many accounts from the New Testament. The sacred book of the Muslims records some stories of Jesus which present Jesus as merely a prophet who was conceived through divine intervention. His death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead however are not mentioned in the sacred Scripture of Islam. One of the reasons to account for this absence is that these episodes certainly divinize Jesus or make Jesus divine. Fundamentally speaking, Islam through the prophet Muhammad comes into the world in order to protect the integrity of the *oneness* of the Absolute. This core belief about Allah must be respected, guarded and protected by any means. Those who violate this belief have already committed a grave sin: *shirk* or associationism.

3. The Way the Prophet Understood the Trinity

Based on the way the prophet argued the belief that Allah has no Son as being presented in Sura 5:116, the reader can see that the prophet had actually misunderstood the theology of the Trinity of Christianity.

Let us look at Sura 5:116, fully quoted above. The Trinity according to Sura 5:116 is not listed as God, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but rather as God, the Son and Mary. In this Sura, Allah confronts Jesus with a direct question, "O Jesus the son of Mary, did you say unto men, 'Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah?'" Jesus, as expected, responds to this question with a direct reply

also, "Glory to You! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, You would indeed have known it" (Sura 5:116).

Why such a fatal misconception could have come to the surface of life during the 7th century AD and then eventually was perpetuated in the Koran is a question the reader may ask. An appropriate answer to this question comes from the religious background of Arabia during the prophet's time. Historically speaking, the peninsula during the 7th century was a common place for the Arabic majority, and then the Jews and the Christians. As a worker for a caravan company, surely the young Muhammad was exposed to the Jews and the Christians in Mecca, Medina and the rest of the Arabic area. For instance, tradition tells a story about the encounter between the twelve-year-old Muhammad and Bahira, a Christian monk, who predicted Muhammad's great prophetic call after seeing a birthmark on the back of the young Muhammad.[10] Also during the persecution by his native Meccans, the prophet had sought refuge in Saint Catherine's Monastery. Thus, through the geographical and economic conditions of Arabia during the prophet's time and above all through the Koran, it is clear that Muhammad had acquired a certain knowledge of the New Testament and also the theological debates among the Christians concerning the nature of the Trinity. Exactly how the prophet had grasped the core understanding of the Trinity remains unclear. However based on the content of Sura 5:116, the reader can tell that the way the prophet understood the core belief of the Trinity is obviously *not* the way Christianity understands the mystery of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In addition, in order to dialogue with Muslims over the belief that God has no Son, Christians should also understand the concept of God's self-manifestation in Hinduism. Hinduism is a religion that appears as polytheism since a Hindu worships many gods. However, Hinduism is actually monotheistic for the Hindus believe in only one God, who has been revealed to people of different periods with different manifestations or avatars. Under this approach, Jesus, as God's self-revelation, can be viewed also as an avatar in Hinduist perspective.[11] Similarly, Christianity is also a monotheistic faith since the religion believes in only one God, who is addressed as Abba. This Abba has been revealed to people through different periods: God the

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[10]   John Renard, *In the Footsteps of Muhammad*, 40. For more information on this story, see Yahiya Emerick, *The Life and Work of Muhammad,* 34-35.

[11]   Ambrose Mong, Jesus, the Avatar: *Verbum SVD* 58 (2017) 124-135.

Abba, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit corresponding to three different salvation periods. The beginning of creation until the moment the Logos is born in Bethlehem is under the realm of God the Abba. To redeem God's creatures from corruption, God through the manifestation of the Logos took flesh and was born of a woman. After the Logos returned to heaven, God through the manifestation of the Spirit came down on Pentecost to sanctify and remain with God's creatures until the end of the world.

Having clear images of how the prophet mistakenly understood the concept of the Trinity, and also how the Trinity can be viewed through the concept of God's self-manifestation in the Hindu religion, we now move to the next section of the paper, i.e., a proposal for interfaith dialogue between Christianity and Islam about the belief that God has no Son.

4. A Proposal for Interfaith Dialogue: God Has No Son

Before coming to the objective of this paper, the author will present how pluralist in the religious sense Allah is as presented in the Koran.

Actually the belief that God sends God's messengers to people of different languages due to different sociocultural contexts does appear in the only Sacred Scripture of Islam: the Koran. The Koran indeed has a variety of verses pointing to this plurality, for instance, Suras 5:48, 10:47, 14:4 and 35:24.

In Sura 5:48, we read, "To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you." What is interesting about this Koranic verse is that Sura 5:48 confirms the core of religious pluralism as defined by theologians in general and Peter Phan in particular: religious plurality is a matter of *de jure,*[12] that is, this reality is virtually God's plan for human beings. More interestingly, though Christian theologians appear to have no explanation for the reason why religious diversity is a matter of principle, Sura 5:48 provides to the field of religious pluralism a rather succinct statement to account for this reality: God would like to "test you in what He has given you." To test in this context would imply the submission of a particular adherent to the God who is disclosed in that particular religion.

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[12]   Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously,* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2004, 65.

The Koranic teaching that to each sociocultural group a prescribed/designated messenger is sent from God is confirmed through Sura 10:47. Unlike in the case of Sura 5:48 that the divine agent is sent so people would have opportunities to be tested through the messenger's teachings, the messenger as mentioned in Sura 10:47 would play the role of a judge who settles disputed matters between the messenger's people. And his judgment would surely be accurate. Consequently Sura 10:47 declares, "To every people (was) sent a Messenger: when their Messenger comes (before them), the matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged."

Similarly, according to Sura 14:4, "We sent not a Messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them." The core teaching of Sura 14:4 is that due to the various languages, a messenger from God was sent to God's people so this particular ethnic group will have no difficulty in figuring out for themselves the implications of and then embracing God's word into their hearts.

Finally Sura 35:24 asserts, "Surely We have sent you in truth, as a bearer of Glad Tidings, and as a warner; and there never was a people without a warner having lived among them (in the past)." This Sura confirms that in every culture, there indeed exists a messenger of God who brings God's Good News to the people and who also functions as a warner, meaning to say, he leads people toward God.

From these four particular Suras mentioned above, a major theology has been solemnly disclosed; that is, the Absolute has revealed God's self in different manifestations to all existing religions in the world. As indicated in Sura 14:4, one of the reasons that account for this phenomenon is that this way the people of a particular culture will have a solid understanding of God's salvific plan for them in their own way of life.

Before proceeding to the proposal, let us go to the Koran in order to grasp for ourselves one more profound theology: "Word of God." Besides being the most venerated prophet in the Koran, Jesus is also viewed as "Word of God" and "Spirit of God" as presented in Sura 4:171: "Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, was a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him." Actually there is no one in the Koran who is presented as "Word of God" and "Spirit of God" but Jesus. "Word of God" in Sura 4:171 resonates with the christological theme that appears in the Johannine gospel: Jesus is the incarnation of the Logos, namely, the Word of God. Subsequently, the Koran and the Johannine gospel converge at this theological title, which serves as the common ground for the dialogue about the belief that God has no Son.

Picking up from the above discussion that God reveals God's self in God's way to all religions, the reader can see that to the adherent of Islamic faith, God reveals the "Word of God," manifested in the sacred book: the Koran, through which the Muslims are guided to God as indicated vividly in Suras 1:1-7; 2:2.[13] To be more accurate, as Sura 14:4 asserts, to the Arabians, that the Koran in the Arabic language is revealed to them through an Arabic Hanif man: the prophet Muhammad. Likewise, to the adherents of the Christian faith, God reveals the "Word of God," manifested in the person of Jesus, Son of God, through whom the Christians will be saved from condemnation as indicated in John 3:16. The title "Son of God" theologically connotes the love relationship that God has for the Christians just like the love an Abba has toward his child. Therefore the title "Son of God" cannot be viewed in physical implication but rather points to God's agape for all creatures. Similarly the title "Koran" theologically connotes the sacred call of God to the Muslims. This heavenly call directs and guides the Muslims to God. Theologically speaking, the sacred Koran signifies God's call to all humanity, and the title "Son of God" connotes God's love for all creatures.

Thus, when in the stage of interfaith dialogue with Muslims, Christians might approach the issue with the two following suggestions:

First, Christians must clarify that "God begets a Son" in Christianity never implies a physical implication. God in Christianity remains the one and grand Allah who is Creator of all creatures. Indeed God in Christianity is the God that the Jews and also the Muslims believe in. This God, as Deuteronomy 6:4 solemnly declares, is "The LORD our God, the LORD is one."

Secondly, to the Muslims, the Koran is revealed as a self-revelation of God's *Call*; and to the Christians, the Son of God has been disclosed as a self-revelation of God's *Love*.

Conclusion

This paper followed the methodology of See—Judge—Act. The author commenced it with the Islamic core belief: God has no Son. He developed the essay through three subtopics: Why did the prophet believe that God has no Son? What is the religious background of the

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[13] Sura 1:1, 5, 6 reads "1 In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. 5 You do we worship and Your aid we seek. 6 Show us the straight way." And Sura 2:2 reads "This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah."

founder of Islam? How did the prophet understand the concept of the Trinity? The author then came up at the end of the paper with a proposal which consists of two main points for those who get involved in the interfaith dialogue with Muslims about the topic "God has no Son."

Overall, that God has no Son remains a valid statement to the Christian faith since it declares the oneness of the Abba. This Islamic theology can be perceived as positive when Christians embrace it as a friendly and valid reminder concerning the doctrine of the Trinity which, theologically speaking, remains a mystery to all Christians. Since it is a mystery, no human mind is capable of grasping divine implications. All efforts to explain this mystery are appreciated. However, explanations must not be elaborated in a way that fails to respect the integrity of the one and only one almighty God, which the prophet Muhammad guarded and protected in his lifetime.

ABSTRACTS

Das christliche Verständnis eines dreifaltigen Gottes verlangt allerhand Erklärungen im interreligiösen Dialog, speziell mit Muslimen. Dieser Beitrag fasst die wesentlichen Begriffe des islamischen Gottesverständnisses zusammen und fragt nach der Religion des Propheten und dem damit zusammenhängenden Verständnis der Trinität. Mit diesen Ergebnissen hebt der Autor einige wichtige Elemente hervor, die für einen fruchtbaren Dialog mit Muslimen wichtig sind.

La comprensión cristiana de Dios como trinidad demanda alguna explicación en el diálogo interreligioso, particularmente con el Islam. Este artículo resume los conceptos musulmanes acerca de Dios y analiza la religión del Profeta y la comprensión de la trinidad correspondiente. Con base en estos resultados, el autor destaca algunos elementos importantes para un diálogo fructífero con los musulmanes.

S'agissant du dialogue interreligieux, la conception chrétienne d'un Dieu trinitaire demande une explication, spécialement avec l'islam. Cet article résume les notions de Dieu fondamentales en islam et enquête sur la religion du Prophète et la conception de la Trinité qui y correspond. À partir du résultat de sa recherche, l'auteur souligne quelques éléments importants pour un dialogue fructueux avec les musulmans.