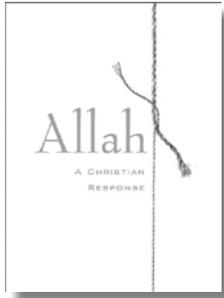


Book Reviews

Allah: A Christian Response, by Miroslav Volf (New York, HarperCollins, 2011, 326pp.)

—reviewed by Harley Talman



Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? Does it really matter? Miroslav Volf answers “Yes!” to both questions in a sophisticated, yet comprehensible theological, political, and practical approach. As the founding director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture and theology professor at Yale Divinity School, the author has scholarly

knowledge as well as experiential interaction with Muslim and Christian thinkers.

Volf argues that Christians and Muslims worship the same, one true God, understanding Him in similar, but partly different ways. While Volf does not directly address the soteriological aspects of their belief in the same God, the volume’s jacket cover will entice *IJFM* readers with these claims:

- What the Qur’an denies about God as the Holy Trinity has been denied by every great teacher of the church in the past and ought to be denied by Christians today.
- A person can be both a practicing Muslim and 100 percent Christian without denying core convictions of belief and practice.

In the introduction, “The One God and the Great Chasm,” Volf suggests that a common god not only provides “overlapping ultimate values,” but prods Christians and Muslims to utilize those values in overcoming their animosities (p. 9). Noting a parallel with Abraham Lincoln, he maintains, “The belief in the same God—the one true God of love and justice—puts pressure on those who maintain they believe to stop fighting and come to an agreement” (p. 10). Volf’s goal is to promote a “political theology” that helps Christians and Muslims to live harmoniously together “in *this* world,” working for the common good under the same government.

The author sets the stage for his thesis with discussion of Pope Benedict’s famous Regensburg speech and then notes John Piper’s criticism of his response to the “Common Word” declaration. Volf observes that the question of worship of the same God is not new. He contrasts two German Christian thinkers and leaders in contexts of threat of Muslim conquest: the admirable example of Nicolas of Cusa, a Catholic cardinal, in contrast to the animus

of Martin Luther. After the sack of Constantinople, the Pope called for a crusade; Nicolas called for dialogue as the solution. Volf profitably summarizes Nicolas’ strategy and presentation.

Volf stands with Nicolas in maintaining that quranic criticisms of Christian doctrines are directed at ignorant or heretical Christians, evidenced by a sample of Nicolas’ responses to quranic statements about the Trinity and sonship of Christ (pp. 53-55). He summarizes Nicolas’ demonstration of how the Trinity does not require Muslims to deny their fundamental convictions about God’s nature.

Rather shocking is Nicolas’ assertion that the infinite, incomprehensible God cannot be said to be “one or three or good or wise or Father or Son or Holy Spirit.” Why not? Because He “infinitely excels all such names. God is *beyond* the numbers one and three, because numbers are for creatures and they do not apply strictly to God.” (Nicolas is citing the theological and philosophical tradition of Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite (p. 52)—a tradition that was picked up by Aquinas and others). “The Trinity in God is no composite or plural or numerical, but is most simple oneness” and God is “one” only as “absolute unity” and not as “number.”

Part II addresses the question: “Two Gods or One?” The term “Allah” is the same designation for God, but is the referent the same? If they are not, then the only philosophical alternatives are untenable: He cannot be another God, if Christians are monotheists; or He does not exist (is a mere human projection) or is an idol. The last two are the same, since the apostle Paul declares that “no idol in the world really exists,” and “there is no God but one” (1 Cor 8:4). Other arguments for the same referent are the analogy of the Samaritans whom Jesus indicated worshipped the same God—albeit without true knowledge (John 4:22). In addition, Volf argues that both religions worship the same God on the basis of “sufficient similarities”:

1. There is only one God, the one and only divine being.
2. God created everything that is not God.
3. God is radically different from everything that is not God.
4. God is good.
5. God commands that we love God with our whole being.
6. God commands that we love our neighbors as ourselves (p. 110).

Since they agree on the preceding claims, then their worship of God must “refer to the same object.” In order to establish that Muslims and Christians do “in fact worship” the same God, Volf analyzes not just what they say about this God, but how they live. He contends that rightly relating to the one true God involves two elements: right belief and right conduct.

Volf exposes the fallacious analogy of comparing the two religions' understanding of God as true and counterfeit bank notes.... This mentality improperly uses God as a communal identity marker which inevitably leads to conflict.

1. To the extent that Christians and Muslims embrace the normative teachings of their religion, they believe in a common God.
2. To the extent that Christians and Muslims strive to love God and neighbor, they worship the same true God. (He notes that Muslims sometimes do this better than Christians).

This is not to deny that there are significant differences in what the two faith traditions believe about God—that is the subject of Part III: the Trinity and Love. Volf relates his discussions of the Trinity with the prominent cleric, Sheikh Habib Ali al-Jifri who acknowledged that they worship the same God, having been helped by the archbishop of Canterbury's response to the "Common Word" declaration. Dr. Rowan Williams stated that "God exists in a threefold pattern of interdependent action" but "there is only one divine nature and reality," and, "The doctrine of the Trinity is a way of explaining the God *is* love, not only that he shows love." Also noted is Seyyed Hossein Nasr's agreement, "The doctrine of the Trinity certainly does not negate Divine Unity in mainstream Christian theology" (p. 136).

Part IV "Living Under the Same Roof": Belief in the same God impacts Muslim-Christian relations as faiths (ch. 10 and 11), as well as fellow citizens of a state and occupants of the same planet (ch. 12-13).

Volf exposes the fallacious analogy of comparing the two religions' understanding of God as true and counterfeit bank notes. Otherwise, Christians would be compelled to say that the God that Jews worship is false; Catholics would have to say the God of the Orthodox is false. This mentality improperly uses God as a communal identity marker which inevitably leads to conflict—"our God against yours." Moreover, in many ways religious identity is irrelevant since it does not tell us what an individual actually believes and practices. Volf introduces the issue of hybrid identity with two examples: the defrocking of an Episcopal priest who after being impacted by Muslim devotional piety became Muslim—while remaining 100% Christian, maintaining, "I look through Jesus and I see Allah." Similarly, a scholar of the Qur'an decided to follow Jesus as a Muslim, concluding that the Qur'an allowed alternatives to the common anti-Christian interpretations. Volf offers several "rules for blending religions" acceptably. Allegiance, beliefs and practices taken in aggregate is the critical issue. He argues (from the Christian perspective) that Muslims may hold to many Islamic beliefs and practices, but they are also 100% Christian, if they are baptized, confess Christ as Lord and have received new life in Christ. Whether they are still 100% Muslim is for Muslims to answer—not Christians (p. 200)!

Volf pleads for political pluralism with religious freedom based on three principles:

1. No identity between religion and state.
2. No complete separation between religion and state.
3. Impartiality of the state toward all religions.

The concluding chapter pulls together major strands in the book for a multi-pronged approach to combating religious extremism. This requires reasoned debate about truth, acknowledgement of a common God, belief that God is loving and just, love for one's neighbor, a healthy fear of God and standing against injustice, prejudice, compulsion in religion, disrespect, and political exclusivism.

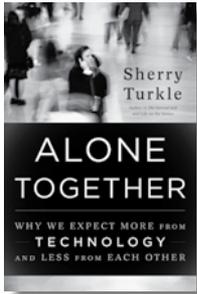
Overall, Volf offers clear and comprehensive reasoning in his presentation. However, I do have a couple of quibbles. One might wish that more prominence than an endnote might have been given to the common charge that Allah is the "moon god." Volf gently wonders how that can be reconciled with Surah 41:37 command, "Do not adore the sun and the moon, but adore Allah, Who created them." Elsewhere, he argues for the Trinity on the basis that for love to be operative there must be an "other" object of the "divine love"—in contrast to Islam's "divine self-love." However, the chink in this armor is buried in an endnote where Volf acknowledges that some "very prominent Christians," like the early Barth and Karl Rahner, come down on the "Muslim" side of this argument. Those who ignore the endnotes will miss numerous significant insights.

Allah: A Christian Response is an important book for all Christians to read (as well as Muslims who may be looking over our shoulders). Though it is not primarily directed to those engaged in Christian mission, there is considerable material that is extremely relevant—not only the aforementioned theological issues, but even a common code of conduct, based on the Golden Rule, for Christian evangelism and Muslim *da'wa*. While Volf's immediate purpose is to provide Christians and Muslims a political theology for harmonious co-existence and service, its achievement is likely to provide an atmosphere and relationships where soteriological dialogue can more readily and profitably occur.

If Allah is the same God, though understood and worshipped somewhat differently by Muslims and Christians, the implications are significant and promising. Volf makes a strong case for his thesis—I would even describe it as a "compelling" case—but given the intensity of animosity of the opposing current, we may expect that some minds (or hearts) may not be moved. But this book should surely turn the tide in Volf's direction.

Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other by Sherry Turkle (New York: Basic Books, 2011, 360pp.)

—reviewed by Brad Gill, Senior Editor, IJFM



You can smell a new anxiety brewing in mission circles. Grey hair dominates most mission gatherings and betrays an absence of younger leadership. It seems our priorities on mission elsewhere can catch us unaware of cultural transformation on the home front, that very place from which we expect a new generation of mission personnel to arise. Astute

sociologists have been offering their assessments for some time, and it's clear that 20 and 30-somethings are changing our mission sending base.¹ And there are encouraging signs that mission associations are beginning to address the issue.²

In her recent book, *Alone Together*, anthropologist Sherry Turkle takes another step in the analysis of a younger technology-driven generation emerging across the globe. As a faculty member at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for 30 years, she has studied how computer-mediated communication and culture is changing people. Her previous book, *The Second Self*, looked at how computers foster a new reflection on self, a mirror for our identity. She now claims that this metaphor doesn't go far enough. The one-to-one relation of individual to computer morphed in the 90's, and now new, more portable devices allow people to lead virtual lives 24/7.

In *Alone Together* Turkle shows how these new technologies as tools provide "space for the emergence of a new state of the self." (p.16) She applies her ethnographic skill to observing the impact of two technologies: 'sociable' humanoid robots and computer-mediated communication devices. The first section on robotics seems a bit of a stretch when it comes to mission applicability. But I recommend patience, for her observations on global culture may be keen premonitions of a culture-warp soon to come. It's in the second part of her study, where she draws from interviews with 450 young 'digital natives' over a fifteen year period, that she offers the most insightful portrait of virtual identities. A bank of quips and titles to her chapters and sections allow one to catch the drift of her insights: robots are *alive enough, true companions* and *built as a Thou*. Computer-mediated culture is characterized by *always on, growing up tethered, hide and stalk, and performance anxiety*.

But it's her basic thesis that is most compelling, namely that "technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies." (p. 1) She's able to clarify the ironies and contradictions of this emerging mentality, that which "offers

the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship." (p. 1) These technologies cause new solitudes to generate new identities, and new identities to generate new solitudes. And she admits that she was troubled by what she calls the costs of simulation. "These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time." (p.xii).

Her insights into how these technologies transform us and play into our vulnerabilities can be valuable for mission in at least two directions. First, she helps us understand with greater precision that strata of youth that bulges in high percentage among many people groups of the world. Secondly, it exposes the cultural drift of a new generation in the church that can potentially commit itself to mission.

In regard to that global strata of youth, this journal has recently brought its readers articles on Japan and China that reflect the importance of Turkle's insights.³ Gary Fujino's assessment of Tokyo youth seems to support Turkle's concern for the hollow nature of virtual sociality, that tendency to hide in anonymity. Turkle herself devotes a lot of analytical attention to Japan, a perennial leader in the application of both robotic and communication technologies. The overlap is fascinating. And Eugene Kim's evaluation of the YEU (the young, educated and urban Chinese) also seems to reflect Turkle's assessment of virtual networks and their sense of belonging. But in both cases Turkle's anthropologically astute portrait extends our grasp of how the nature of self and belonging is being transformed in a younger generation. Our field missiology would do well to heed her analysis.

Closer to home, Turkle's sober picture may extend to a younger generation in the church, one that is often as tuned in to these devices as those outside the church. Might they too be selves "split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology." A grey haired generation may scratch their head, wondering whether God can redeem this generation and its cultural tendencies for his purposes. But I'd encourage us to use Turkle to comprehend some of the social and cultural realities in a new generation God would wish to use in frontier mission. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Wuthnow, Robert, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. Princeton University Press, 2007.

² www.TheMissionExchange.org/reset

³ Fujino, Gary "Glocal" Japanese Self Identity, IJFM 27:4, pp 171-82; Eugene Kim, "Christian Virtual Community in China, IJFM 27:4, pp 183-88; Keith Williams and Leith Gray, *The Little Phone That Could: Mobile Empowered Ministry*, IJFM 27:3, pp 139-145.