

# God is love: A basic Christian claim

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue

What do Christians mean when they say that God is love? How do we answer that question in a dialogue between Muslims and Christians, which is to say, in a tension-filled intellectual space of wrestling to understand and articulate our similarities and differences with regard to what it means to love God and neighbor?

To answer this question briefly, it is best to go back to 1 John 4:7-12:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Properly understood, this text sums up the whole of the Christian faith. As it turns out, it also names a number of Christian convictions on which there are major differences between Christians and Muslims. Some may suggest that it is unwise to discuss in an interfaith setting a text which mentions these controversial Christian convictions in such a blunt way. But failing to discuss them will not make them disappear from scripture or from the hearts of its Christian readers. Sweeping the distinctiveness of our respective faiths under the rug is mostly a form of (unintentional) falsehood and (well-meaning) dissimulation. Nothing good can come of it. Instead, motivated by care for those of other faiths as well as for the common good, we should bring those differences into the open, work to understand them accurately, present them without unnecessary stumbling blocks and learn from each other.

Admittedly, the designation of Jesus Christ as "the Son" and the description of God as sending "his only Son" is a major stumbling block to Muslims. The Qur'an considers anyone who calls Jesus the "offspring of God" to resemble *kaafirs* (infidels)

from the past. Most Muslims hear in the phrase "Son of God" a blasphemous claim that Jesus Christ was the offspring of a carnal union between God and a woman and that he is therefore an "associate of God."

From the Christian point of view, this is a major misunderstanding—but unfortunately one whose force many Muslims feel at a psychologically deep level. Christians unambiguously and emphatically reject any notion that Jesus Christ, let alone the eternal Son, is the offspring of a carnal union between God and an object of God's creation, and they reject equally the notion that the eternal Son is God's associate. In the scriptures, the Son is a metaphor for the particular closeness of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, to God and his special status as revealer of God. In later tradition, the Son is again a metaphor expressing the conviction that the Word, which was with God from eternity, is not some lesser divinity associated with God but is of the same "substance" with God and therefore belongs to the very being of the one and unique God. The irony of this particular stumbling block is that Christians not only do not mean by "Son of God" what most Muslims fear they mean, but are actually using the phrase to deny what most Muslims fear it expresses.

The pivot of 1 John 4:7-12 and the pivot of the whole of the Christian faith is the simple claim that God is love, or, as Gregory of Nazianzus puts it more poetically, that God's "name is love." Both the author of 1 John and his readers embrace this claim with such powerful conviction that he can introduce it in a subordinate clause (he will repeat it soon in a main clause). To say "God is love" is not a static way of saying "God loves." Clearly, the author affirmed that God loves; he states so explicitly twice in our text and 46 times in the whole epistle. Indeed, a major thrust of our text is that God loves—actively (God is engaged with humanity so that "we may live") and abundantly (out of love God sends "his only Son," which is to say, God's very self).

The claim that God is love says more, however, than only that God loves. It names the character of God's being, not merely the nature of God's activity. It describes the divine Fountain from which the river of divine love flows. God's very being is love—so much so that the great church father St. Augustine could, maybe a bit too daringly, invert the claim and write "Love is God." This is not just any kind of love, of course, and not love as mere interhuman activity, as though Augustine had anticipated Ludwig Feuerbach, the great 19th-century critic of religion whose method consisted in transmuting all claims about God into claims about humanity. But love properly understood *is* God, and God *is* properly understood love.

The relationship between God's being and God's activity is a complicated matter—in one important sense "God is" and "God loves" are identical. That does not need to occupy us here. It will suffice to note one momentous consequence of the claim that God's active loving of humanity is rooted in God's being as love. Since the eternal God is love, God loves irrespective of the existence or nonexistence of creation; according to John 17:24, the Father loved the Son before the world began. If God's love were in any way tied to the creation, then the creation would be necessary for God to be love. But creation is not necessary for God, and God does not become love with creations coming into being. Instead, the contingent world is created by a God who already is love and just because God is love.

Commenting on 1 John 4:9, Protestant reformer John Calvin writes:

For if it be asked, why the world has been created, why we have been placed in it to possess the dominion of the earth, why we are preserved in life to enjoy innumerable blessings, why we are endued with light and understanding, no other reason can be adduced, except the gratuitous love of God.

Similarly, Julian of Norwich grounds creation in God's love:

And in this love he has done all his works, and in this love he has made all things profitable to us, and in this love our life is everlasting. In our creation we had beginning, but the love in which he created us was in him from without beginning. In this love we have our beginning, and all this shall we see in God without end.

The whole creation—everything that is not God—comes into existence on account of and within an already existing field of God's love, which defines the very being of God. As a character of God's being, God's love is as eternal as God is.

Many Christian theologians through the centuries have seen a close connection between the claim that God is love and the claim that God is the Holy Trinity. Love implies, indeed requires, an object; "to love" is a transitive verb. If love is an essential attribute of God independent of the existence of everything that is not God, how could God be love if God were not, precisely as One God, somehow also differentiated in God's own being? Our text brings up the topic of divine differentiation implicitly in that it names two actors in the drama of God's love for the world: God and God's Son (for Christians not an "offspring" or an "associate," as I

have said earlier). Our text itself is pretrinitarian, but to make proper sense of it we need to presuppose that God is the Holy Trinity—in relation to the world as well as in God's own being apart from the world.

Before exploring the relation between love and the triunity of the One God, it is important, especially in the context of a dialogue between Muslims and Christians, to state plainly what Christian theologians do not mean when they say that God is triune. First, God is uncompromisingly one. For Christians to affirm God's triunity is not to deny God's unity. In the first Christian centuries, all the intense and intricate debates about the Trinity were carried on precisely because the church fathers refused to compromise on the unity of God. Jesus, after all, affirmed the signature confession of his own Jewish people: "The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Mark 12:29). God is either one or there is no God. By definition, anything of which there can be two or three or more cannot be God in the proper sense of that term. Because the oneness of God was so important in the tradition of the great Christian thinkers, they insisted that the three divine hypostases subsist in a single, numerically identical divine substance.

Second, God is utterly unique. God alone is God. All else that exists is non-God. Moreover, there is a categorical, not merely a quantitative or even qualitative, difference between God and the world. God is not a member in a common household of being with other entities in the world. God is utterly unique. The text we are considering expresses this thought with a simple claim: "No one has ever seen God." The reason why no one has seen God isn't that people have not looked hard enough or that they could not get to a place from which it would be possible to spot God; rather, God is such that God cannot be seen with physical eyes at all. As St. Augustine says, "Not with the eye but with the heart must He be sought"; and the condition of seeing God with the eye of the heart is a transformation of the whole person to be "like God" (1 John 3:2).

Third, God is beyond number. This affirmation follows from God's categorical uniqueness. It is impossible to count God as one among many other things that can be counted—all the different things in the world plus one more object, maybe the biggest of them all and containing them all, called God. So when we say that there is only one God, we do not mean it in the same sense as when we say that there is only one sun or even only one universe. Similarly, great theologians of the past believed that it is impossible, strictly speaking, to count *in* God—naming one after another, as discrete "objects," all the different "things" that are in God. So when we

say that there are three hypostases in God, we do not mean it in the same way as when we say that Jesus took three disciples with him to the mount of Transfiguration. All human language about God, including language about God's oneness and triunity, is inadequate. Both the talk of "one" and of "three" is analogous when applied to God.

If the One God is utterly unique and beyond number, why do Christians speak of divine triunity? Christians believe that the word was made flesh in Jesus Christ. From this belief, it follows that the one, utterly unique God, who is beyond all counting, is internally differentiated as the Speaker, the Word and the Breath. In speaking about God's sending God's Son, our text employs names more usual in the New Testament and in the tradition: Father and Son, to which Holy Spirit is added on the basis of other texts and weighty dogmatic considerations. The designations may differ, but what they designate remains the same: they name the internal differentiation of the One God, who is beyond number and categorically different from everything else, which is not God.

How is the internal differentiation of the One God related to the claim that God is love? If God's being were not internally differentiated, how would we be able to say that God is love in God's own eternal being, and that God loves apart from God's relation to the world (because the world is contingent rather than necessary)? We could not. Without internal differentiation, God would love simply God's own self and be more properly described as Self-Love than as Love. As an incomparable and unique unity, however, God is an internally differentiated unity: there is other in the One God. And because there is other in God, there can be genuine love—love that does not merely affirm and celebrate the self, but love that gives to the other and receives from the other. "You see a Trinity if you see charity," wrote St. Augustine in *De Trinitate*, his famous book on the Holy Trinity.

Because God is the Holy Trinity, God's eternal love can be self-giving love rather than self-centered love. Consequently, God's love for humanity is a freely given love rather than a love motivated by the benefits that the object of love holds for the one who loves it. The one true God does not need anything from humans but exists as self-complete and yet not self-enclosed plenitude of self-giving and other-receiving love. This circulating love, which is identical with the being of the One God, is the source of the world—the creaturely and therefore radically different other of God—and all its benefits.

If the eternal God is love in God's own self and in relation to creation, an important consequence follows: God's love is not a reactive love. That takes us straight back to our text. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us" (1 John 4:10). A few verses later St. John writes that God's love is always "first," never second. St. Paul makes a similar point at the pinnacle of his epistle to the Romans: God never gives "in return" (Rom. 11:35). So God's love is always the first love; it is never simply a response to the character or behavior of things that are "outside" God. It cannot be otherwise if love is the very being of the eternal God.

In his *Heidelberg Disputation* Martin Luther famously and a bit too sharply contrasted God's love for creatures and human love: "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it." For humans, an encounter with what is pleasing elicits love; we experience something lovable—eating a gourmet meal, viewing a beautiful work of art, holding a newborn baby—and love is born in us. With God it is different, Luther claimed. Objects do not elicit God's love by their qualities; God's love creates objects together with their qualities. If God does not find what is pleasing in an object—if human beings have become ungodly—God does not abandon the object in disgust until it changes its character. Instead, God seeks to re-create it to become lovable again.

God loved us first—before we loved God. This theme is common in the Old Testament. God's love is not elicited by any special virtues of the people of Israel. Even more radically, according to the prophet Hosea, God's love remains first notwithstanding Israel's vices. The New Testament picks up and highlights the strand in the Old Testament that speaks of God's love notwithstanding human abandonment of God. In Romans, St. Paul writes of God's love for the weak, the ungodly, the sinners and the enemies. Similarly, St. John underscores that out of love God sent Jesus Christ into the world "not just that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9) but, most pointedly, to be "the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10) and the sin of the whole world. God's love is first even toward sinners, the ungodly and the wrongdoers, and is not a response to anything they do—to their movement toward God or their emergent love of God.

For the most part, Muslims and Christians disagree about whether or not Christ died on the cross, and if he did, whether he died as the atoning sacrifice for the sin of humanity. Here is not the place to discuss this important issue. As our interest is in the meaning of the phrase "God is love," I shall explore what Christ's atoning

sacrifice implies about the character of God's love.

First, God's love is immeasurable. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). Similarly, Jesus addresses his disciples: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). The greatest human love is a window into the infinity of divine love.

Second, God's love is utterly gratuitous and therefore completely unconditional. God does not love only those who are worthy of God's love, but loves all people, without any distinction. As Jesus Christ said according to St. Matthew, "God makes his sun rise on [both] the evil and on the good" (Matt. 5:45).

Third, God's love is universal. The One God is the God of all humanity; therefore the love that God is, is the love for all humanity, irrespective of any differences or divisions that exist between human beings. Absolutely no one is excluded and no deed is imaginable that would exclude anyone from God's love (though irredeemable wrongdoers—if there prove to be such people—will be excluded from heaven as God's world of love, and be excluded not despite but because God's love is universal).

Fourth, God's love is indiscriminately forgiving of every person and for every deed. God is not just generous even to the unrighteous; God also forgives their unrighteousness so as to lead them through repentance back to the good they have abandoned. "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Finally, the goal of God's love is—love. The term 1 John uses to express this goal is "communion"—communion of human beings with God—indeed, mutual indwelling of God and human beings, and communion of human beings with one another.

That God's love is immeasurable, unconditional, universal and forgiving is the consequence of the simple fact that God is love. Is then the all-loving God indifferent to human sin, condoning of ungodliness and wrongdoing? No, God is not indifferent to ungodliness and wrongdoing. The whole epistle distinguishes sharply between light and darkness, love and hatred, truth and lie, justice and unrighteousness, good and evil, God and devil, Christ and antichrist, life and death. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that just a few verses after our text St. John writes about God's judgment.

How is God's love related to God's judgment? God's love has different effects on people, depending on the basic orientation of their being and the moral character of their deeds. When we do what is right (basically, when we love), we experience God's love as delight and approval, as God's face "shining on us." When we do what is evil (basically, when we are indifferent or we harm others), we experience God's love as wrath and condemnation—not because God does not love us, but so that the loving God can return us to the good from which we have fallen.

Whether God is angry with us or delights in us, whether God approves of us or condemns us, God loves us with the same unchanging divine love rooted in, and indeed identical with, the very being of God. That is why those who remain in love and thereby remain in God have confidence in the day of judgment and need not fear.

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