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## “What Does God Care What We Call Him?”

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A retiring Roman Catholic bishop in the Netherlands has been making headlines around the world in recent days with his suggestion that Dutch Christians should pray to Allah.

Bishop Tiny Muskens of Breda, a former missionary to Indonesia, suggested that conflict between Christians and Muslims could be lessened if Dutch Catholics followed the lead of some Christians in Muslim-dominated lands and adopted Allah as the preferred name for God..

From *Catholic News*:

*Speaking on the Dutch TV programme Network on Monday evening, Bishop Muskens says it could take another 100 years but eventually the name Allah will be used by Dutch churches. And that will promote rapprochement between the two religions. Muskens doesn't expect his idea to be greeted with much enthusiasm. The 71-year-old bishop, who will soon be retiring due to ill health, says God doesn't mind what he is called. God is above such "discussion and bickering". Human beings invented this discussion themselves, he believes, in order to argue about it.*

Is there a valid linguistic basis for his argument? It is certainly true that the word Allah is the Arabic word for deity. Those supporting an argument like that of Bishop Muskens suggest that the Arabic word can be used as a generic term for deity.

In common English we use the word God as both a proper name and a noun. We differentiate between the two usages by capitalizing the word when we mean to refer to the specific personal God of the Bible, and by not capitalizing generic uses of the word. Thus, we might paraphrase the First Commandment like this: “God commanded His people to have no other gods before Him.” The correct interpretation of this sentence requires the use and understanding of the habits of capitalization.

Those making the case for a Christian appropriation of Allah must take their argument in one of two trajectories. The first trajectory is to argue that Allah can be used in a generic way to refer to any (presumably monotheistic) deity. This case will be very difficult to make. Language, theology, and worship are so closely intertwined that it is difficult, if not impossible, to argue for a generic use of Allah. Further evidence against this trajectory is the fact that non-Arabic speaking Muslims also use Allah when referring to their god.

The second trajectory presents even more of a problem. Those following this line of argument must make the case that Allah and God refer to the same deity. This represents a huge problem for both Muslims and Christians. Allah is not a personal deity in the sense that the God of the Bible is. Furthermore, the Qur'an explicitly denies that Allah has a son, and Islam considers the notion of a triune God to be blasphemy.

Thus, from its very starting point Islam denies what Christianity takes as its central truth claim — the fact that Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of the Father. If Allah has no Son by definition, Allah is not the God who revealed himself in the Son. How then can the use of Allah by Christians lead to anything but confusion . . . and worse?

The most dangerous (and theologically dishonest) part of Bishop Muskens' argument is found in these words:

*The 71-year-old bishop, who will soon be retiring due to ill health, says God doesn't mind what he is called. God is above such "discussion and bickering". Human beings invented this discussion themselves, he believes, in order to argue about it.*

According to *The Herald Sun* [Melbourne, Australia], Bishop Muskens commented: "Allah is a very beautiful word for God . . . . What does God care what we call him?" *What does God care what we call him?*

Has the bishop read the Bible? God takes his name with great seriousness indeed. Moses discovered this when heard God speak from the burning bush [Exodus 3:13-22]. God did not leave himself nameless, nor did He invite Moses to devise a name for him. Jesus used this name [I AM] to refer to himself.

The Christian faith is essentially and irreducibly Trinitarian. The Bible reveals that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Jesus is not merely a prophet; He is God in human flesh. This is precisely what Islam rejects. If Allah has no Son, he is not the Father.

This is the most significant theological obstacle in the way of the Christian use of Allah as a name for God. Jesus taught his disciples to pray to "our Father, who is in heaven" [Matthew 6:9] — thus disallowing any confusion concerning God's name. The most important names for God for Christians are "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit." In the four New Testament gospels, Jesus uses the word "Father" more than sixty times. No Muslim would refer to Allah in this same way. This is not what will come to mind when a Muslim hears a Christian pray to Allah.

So Bishop Muskens is disingenuous at best when he suggests that God does not care about His name. This is not a matter of mere "discussion and bickering." If the Bible is the Word of God, we can be assured that human beings did *not* invent this discussion.

There is one final and insurmountable problem with Bishop Muskens' proposal. Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize believers "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" [Matthew 28:19]. When this command is taken seriously and obeyed, the whole issue is greatly clarified — a Christian cannot baptize in the name of Allah.

If Allah has no son, Allah is not the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even if the case is made that Allah could be used in a generic sense to refer to God ( and I am not persuaded that it can), the word cannot be used to mean the Father in a Trinitarian affirmation. This is not mere "discussion and bickering." This is where the Gospel stands or falls.

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ADDENDUM: The particular question raised by Bishop Muskens was the use of the word "Allah" by Christians in the West as a means of lessening Christian-Muslim tensions. The question of using "Allah" to refer to god in a clearly missiological setting will raise other issues. If the word is understood as a generic term for God (and not exclusively as a proper name), the question would then be how a Christian must make clear that the God of the Bible—revealed as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ—is not the deity as described in the Qur'an (who explicitly has no son). The linguistic root of Allah may well be connected to Elohim (a name for God found in the Old Testament). This fact may help to clarify the possible use of the word in a missiological setting. The clarity comes in understanding that, even in the Old Testament, the name Elohim is, in itself, quickly accompanied by other names and words to make clear that the God of the Bible is the personal, monotheistic, covenant-making God of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. The New Testament makes clear that this God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ — indeed the God who in these latter days has spoken definitively through the Son [Hebrews 1].

In other words, it would seem best to think of Allah in this setting as a place to begin a conversation about God in a Muslim setting. The challenge from that point onward will be to make certain that there is no misunderstanding about the fact that the only true and living God is the Father of Jesus Christ the Savior.

The crucial questions here are these: First, can we assume that the deity central to Islam and known as Allah is, in fact, the same God worshipped by Christians and revealed in the Bible? The answer to that question must be negative. In that sense, Allah is certainly not the God of the Bible.

The second question is whether the word “Allah” can be understood, in Arabic and Muslim settings, as both a generic noun and a proper noun. Some credible Christian scholars and missionaries are certain that it can. The issue then becomes how contemporary Christians remain faithful to the Gospel in this setting even as the Apostle Paul remained faithful in Acts 17 when he visited Athens. Paul, we must remember, had to tell the religious Athenians that they had misunderstood the very nature and character of the true God. “Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” [Acts 17:23].

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