

What do We Mean When We Say that “God is Love”?

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We read in the Holy Bible that “God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in them.” (1John 4:16)

اللَّهُ مَحَبَّةٌ، وَمَنْ يُنْبِتْ فِي الْمَحَبَّةِ، يُنْبِتْ فِي اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ فِيهِ.

Because of this verse, and others like it, Christians believe that God’s love is at the very center of their faith. Similarly we read in the Holy Qur’ān that one of the Beautiful Names of God is “Al-Wadūd,” that is, the Loving One.

However, in the months since the open letter “A Common Word between Us and You” was published, as well as the Christian response “Loving God and Neighbor Together” (known popularly as the “Yale response”), many Muslims and Christians have asked just exactly what we mean when we speak of the love of God, and whether we mean the same thing. In what follows below, I will attempt to address this question in relation to two more specific questions – one which has been raised by Muslims, and one which has been raised by Christians.

A question which has been raised by some Muslims is whether love is an eternal, essential quality (*sifa*) in God, or whether it is a “quality of act” (*sifat al-fi ‘l*). Many Western Christians are unaware that both Islamic thought and the Eastern Christian thought of the Syriac- and Arabic-speaking churches make the same distinction between qualities of God’s Essence and qualities of God’s acts. Qualities of Essence are those qualities which have subsisted in God from eternity, without reference to temporal created things. Qualities of act are those qualities about which one can speak meaningfully only in relation to the temporal (*muḥdath*) universe which God has created. Thus, Knowledge is a quality of Essence, since God has known God’s own self from all eternity, but Forgiveness is a temporal quality of act, since God forgives only in relation to sinful human beings who need to be forgiven.

So is God’s Love a quality of Essence or a quality of act? That is, is God’s Love eternal and uncreated? Most Christians would answer this question with a strong “yes.” In a moment I will address why I believe that Christians answer “yes,” and what they mean by that, but first let address what I understand that Muslims mean by this question (and I hope that you will correct me if I misunderstand).

The mainstream Sunnī theological tradition speaks of seven eternal, essential qualities in God. They are God’s Knowledge, God’s Power, God’s Life, God’s Word/Speech, God’s Will, God’s Sight and God’s Hearing. According to the Sunni tradition, these seven qualities are not God’s Essence, nor are they anything other than God; rather they are uncreated eternal meanings subsisting in God’s Essence. This doctrine was articulated by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī, the famous Muslim theologian from the 4th century A.H. So if God’s Love is not one of these seven qualities, then it must be a “quality of act.” That is, God loves in relation to created things, but

one should not speak of Love as a quality subsisting eternally in God. However, as I will suggest in a moment, al-Ash‘arī can be interpreted differently here.

Most Christians would hold that God’s Love is eternal and uncreated in God. This is partly because of the verse I have quoted above which says that “God is love.” It is also because of a tradition of theological reflection on other texts in the Bible, for example in Proverbs 8 which describes the relationship between God and God’s Wisdom before the creation of the universe and in God’s creation of the universe by God’s Wisdom. This passage of Scripture seems to describe the relationship between God and God’s Wisdom as a relationship of Love before the creation of the universe.

Perhaps the most influential Christian thinker in the Western theological tradition is St. Augustine, the 4th-5th-century C.E. bishop of Berber ancestry from what is today Algeria. In his book *De Trinitate*, on the Holy Trinity, he speaks of the first hypostasis of the Trinity as God’s *memoria* (*dhikr Allāh li-nafsihī*), and the second hypostasis of the Trinity as God’s Knowledge or Word (*intellectum, verbum*), and the third hypostasis of the Trinity as the bond of love (*vinculum caritatis*) between God and God’s Knowledge. This reflects Proverbs 8 and other texts. Thus, in the Western Christian tradition, love has eternally existed within God’s essence.

In the Eastern tradition of the Syriac- and Arabic-speaking churches it has been more common to speak of the third hypostasis of the Trinity (the Holy Spirit) as being God’s Life, noting passages in Scripture and in the Creed which refer to God’s Spirit as the Giver of Life (ζωοποιήτορ). Christian thinkers in this tradition often see God’s Love as being God’s Essence itself. Indeed in the 20th and 21st centuries C.E. this Eastern perspective on Love as the very Essence of God has also influenced many Western thinkers, as well.

But regardless of whether Christians see God’s love as being God’s Essence itself, or as being a hypostasis or quality subsisting in God’s Essence, nearly all would agree that God’s love is eternal and uncreated. Nearly all would agree that God has loved within God’s own self from before the creation of the universe.

As I mentioned earlier, the Sunnī Ash‘arite school of thought holds that God has seven eternal qualities of Essence – Knowledge, Power, Life, Word/Speech, Will, Sight, and Hearing. At first glance one might suppose, then, that Love is not an eternal quality in God, but is a quality of act. But al-Ash‘arī’s prominent disciple Ibn Fūrak offers us a different understanding of al-Ash‘arī.

Ibn Fūrak (d. 406/1015) was one of the leading Ash‘arite theologians of his time, and only one generation stood between him and al-Ash‘arī himself. In his book *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Ash‘arī* he sets forth not his own ideas, but rather the ideas of al-Ash‘arī himself in al-Ash‘arī’s own words. Since al-Ash‘arī wrote more than sixty books, and only five of them have survived until today, Ibn Fūrak must also be considered an important primary source on the thought of al-Ash‘arī.¹

¹ Daniel Gimaret argues, “Je n’ai pas besoin de redire l’intérêt considerable de ce texte : chacun désormais pourra en juger par lui-même. La pensée d’Aš‘arī, certes, ne nous était pas complètement inconnue, du moins pour l’essentiel, grâce en particulier au K. al-Luma‘ édité par McCarthy. C’était cependant bien peu de chose par rapport à la profusion d’information que nous apporte le Muğarrad, et le mot de résurrection, en l’occurrence, n’est peut-être pas

Ibn Fūrak tells us that al-Ash‘arī said that more than one word could be used to refer to the same quality of Essence. Thus Ibn Fūrak writes:

وكان يقول إن معنى القادر والقوي والقدرة والقوة سواء... وكذلك كان لا يفرق بين العلم والدراية والفقه والفهم والفتنة والعقل والحسن والمعرفة.

“[Al-Ash‘arī] used to say that the meaning of Powerful (*qādir*) and Strong (*qawī*) and Power (*qudra*) and Strength (*quwwa*) is the same... Likewise he did not distinguish among Knowledge (*‘ilm*) and awareness (*dirāya*) and understanding (*fiqh*) and comprehension (*fahm*) and sagacity (*fiṭna*) and reason (*‘aql*) and sense (*hiss*) and cognition (*ma‘rifa*).”²

Regarding God’s Love, Ibn Fūrak tells us the following about the teachings of al-Ash‘arī:

فأما ما يوصف بأنه مُجَبِّ راضٍ أو ساخطٍ مُعَادٍ فذلك عنده يرجع إلى الإرادة وهو أنه كان يقول إن رضا الله تعالى عن المؤمنين إرادته أن يُثيبهم ويمدحهم، وسُخْطُهُ على الكافرين إرادته أن يعاقبهم ويذمهم. وكذلك محبته وعداوته.

“As for what is predicated by saying that He is Loving and Pleased, or Displeased or Hostile, for [al-Ash‘arī] that was a reference to His Will. He used to say that God’s pleasure (exalted is He) over believers is His Will to reward them and to praise them, and His displeasure over unbelievers is His Will to punish them and to censure them. The same is true of His Love and His enmity.”³

According to Ibn Fūrak’s understanding of al-Ash‘arī, God’s Will is an eternal quality of God’s Essence. And God’s Love is simply another way of speaking of God’s Will. Thus, in this sense, God’s Love is an eternal quality of God’s essence. Interestingly, the Western, Augustinian Christian tradition also sees speaks of God’s Love as being God’s Will.⁴

I said that I would take up two questions in this paper – one which has been raised by Muslims, and one which has been raised by Christians. On the question of whether Love is an eternal, essential quality in God, I believe that there is room for common ground.

The second question, which has been raised by many Christians, is this: when we speak of Love, do we mean that the one who loves must give of himself/herself? Or do we mean only that the one who loves gives gifts external to himself/herself? For example, in a human family, if the father of the family gives his children food and clothing and shelter, but stays far away and does

trop fort. Car, pour ceux qui pourraient encore en douter – tellement le personnage a été victime d’idées fausses –, c’est bien l’authentique pensée d’Aš‘arī qui nous est ici restituée dans son intégralité : l’attestent non seulement l’autorité d’Ibn Fūrak, ainsi que les abondantes références aux œuvres du maître (trente titres cités, dont certains plus de dix fois), mais aussi la parfaite conformité des thèses énoncées avec celles du K. al-Luma‘ ou avec celles rapportés par Baġdādī, Ġuwaynī, Abū l-Qāsim al-Anṣārī, etc. Gimaret, “Introduction” to Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Fūrak, *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Shaykh Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī*, Daniel Gimaret, ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1987), pp. 11-12.

² Ibid., p. 44.

³ Ibid., p. 45.

⁴ E.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 20, Art. 3.

not spend time with his children, giving of his own self to them, can we say that he loves as he should?

The Christian answer to this question is rooted in the Christian understanding of God. That is, for Christians it is very important to affirm that God's love is such that God gives of God's own self.

The 8th-century C.E. theologian John of Damascus described the relationship among the hypostases of the Holy Trinity with the Greek word "perichoresis" (περιχωρησις). What this concept implies is that each hypostasis of the Holy Trinity gives of itself to the others and opens itself to the others.

In the Christian view, when God created the human race, this same self-giving, self-opening love was reflected in God's love toward the human race. Thus, in the Christian view, God does not remain aloof from us, but rather God gives God's self to us and opens God's self to us.

Christians agree with the verse in the Holy Qur'an in which God says:

ونحن اقرب اليه من حبل الوريد.

"We are closer to [humankind] than their jugular vein." (Sūrat Qāf (50):16)

God does not only give us gifts which are external to God: in the Christian view, God gives us from God's very self.

That is why it is impossible for Christians to think about the love of God toward humankind without thinking about God's eternal Word taking our human nature into himself and becoming manifest to us in human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ (p). And because human beings are tragically inclined toward sin against God, Christians also cannot think about the love of God toward humankind without thinking about Jesus Christ responding with self-giving, forgiving love when the human race rejected him on the Cross.

Of course the Christian doctrine of God's Word being manifest by taking on a human nature, and the doctrine of the Cross, have been historic points of disagreement between Muslims and Christians, and it is not my intention to address that disagreement here. In another article, which is on the website of the Yale Reconciliation Program, I have analyzed the views of the major Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an (al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, al-Bayḍāwī, etc.) on the question of the death of Christ, and I will not repeat that analysis here.

But even if Muslims may not agree with Christians about the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (p), I believe that Muslims and Christians alike (and also Jews) will affirm the idea that Christians should behave toward others with the same kind of self-giving, forgiving love that Christians believe Jesus demonstrated on the Cross. If Christians would give of themselves in love to and for Muslims and Jews, forgiving any wrongs committed by others, then the world would be a better place.

As a Western Christian it is difficult for me to speak to Muslims, Jews and Eastern Christians about the idea that the Cross calls Christians to give themselves in love for others. This is because for many the idea of the Cross reminds them of the Crusades. That is why I believe that the Yale response to the Common Word letter had to begin with an apology for the evil of the

Crusades. Let me repeat here that I ask our Muslim, Jewish and Eastern Christian neighbors to forgive us for that evil.

I believe that the Crusades were evil not only because the atrocities committed were wrong, but especially because they were committed under the banner of the Cross. The Holy Bible tells us the following about love and the Cross:

وَمِقْيَاسُ الْمَحَبَّةِ هُوَ الْعَمَلُ الَّذِي قَامَ بِهِ الْمَسِيحُ إِذْ بَدَّلَ حَيَاتَهُ لِأَجْلِنَا. فَعَلَيْنَا نَحْنُ أَيْضاً أَنْ نَبْدُلَ حَيَاتِنَا لِأَجْلِ إِخْوَتِنَا.

“This is how we know what love is: that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and so we should lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” (1John 3:16)

وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ بَيَّنَّ مَحَبَّتَهُ لَنَا، لِأَنَّهُ وَنَحْنُ بَعْدُ خُطَاةٌ مَاتَ الْمَسِيحُ لِأَجْلِنَا.

“But God demonstrates his love toward us in this: that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

In the Yale response to the Common Word letter we also quoted Jesus’ prayer on the Cross:

اغفر لهم لأنهم لا يعرفون ما يعملون.

“Forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34)

Thus the Christian understanding of the Cross describes a love which gives itself for the other and forgives the other, and it calls Christians to imitate Christ in demonstrating this love toward others. Thus the Crusades distorted the Cross to mean the exact opposite of what it should mean. Instead of being a symbol which calls Christians to lay down their lives in forgiving love for others, it became a symbol which called Christians to kill others without forgiveness.

Even if not everyone will agree with the Christian doctrine, I believe that everyone will agree that if we would forgive one another and give ourselves to one another and for one another in love, the world would be a better place. I believe that in Islam and Judaism there also exist Scriptural and theological resources for understanding God’s love as self-giving and forgiving, and therefore for calling us to give ourselves for one another in forgiving love.

Peace be with you and the mercy of God.