

Chapter 2

A Christian Account of Why David Novak Is Right about the Same-God Question

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Ring them bells Sweet Martha for the poor man's son
Ring them bells so the world will know that God is one
Oh the shepherd is asleep
Where the willows weep
And the mountains are filled with lost sheep

—BOB DYLAN (A.K.A. ROBERT ZIMMERMAN) (1989)¹

DO JEWS AND CHRISTIANS worship the same God? Over the years, David Novak has addressed this question from a Jewish perspective in various venues,² most prominently on September 10, 2000 in a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*. Drafted by Novak and three other scholars, and signed by over 150 rabbis, the document, “*Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth) A Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity,”³ affirmed, among other things, that “Jews and Christians worship the same God.”⁴ The document offers this explanation: “Before the rise of Christianity, Jews were the only worshippers of the God of Israel. But Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Creator of heaven and earth. While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.”⁵

1. Dylan, “Ring Them Bells.”

2. See, e.g., Novak, “Because of What God Has Done,” 22–23; Novak, “Supersessionism Hard and Soft,” 27–31; Novak, “The Jewish Mission,” 39–43; Novak, “Les Juifs et les chrétiens reverent-ils le même Dieu?” 95–132.

3. It was republished, with only a partial list of signatories, in the periodical, *First Things*, November 2000, 39–41.

4. Brownfeld, “Jews Are Called Upon to Reassess Their Views of Christianity.”

5. “*Dabru Emet*,” *First Things*, 40.

In a 2003 article published in the French language, Novak suggests that Christians who reject the same God thesis have appropriated reasoning similar to that which gave rise to the Marcionite heresy, the view embraced by followers of the second-century Christian, Marcion.⁶ The Marcionites “rejected the writings of the Old Testament and taught that Christ was not the Son of the God of the Jews, but the Son of the good God, who was different from the God of the Ancient Covenant.”⁷ Although, as Novak rightly notes, “nowadays many Christians totally repudiate Marcionist-type Gnosticism,”⁸ there are many learned Christians—especially among Evangelical Protestants—who nevertheless reject the idea that Christians and Jews worship the same God. Their reasoning, though not technically Marcionite insofar as distinguishing an Old Testament “God” from a New Testament “God,” relies on Marcionite reflexes when its champions argue that the God of post-Christian Judaism is not the God of Christianity. In this chapter, I argue that this view is mistaken, that Christians ought to believe that they worship the same God as Jews worship. Since the case I make requires (or so I will argue) that the Christian must also believe that she worships the same God as Muslims worship, I mention all three faith traditions. I should note, however, that I am writing only to persuade my fellow Christians. I am not addressing my remarks to Jews and Muslims. For that reason, much of what follows appeals to authorities and arguments that I believe Christians should find compelling.

Christians and the Same God Question

Wheaton College is an Evangelical school in suburban Chicago, founded in the nineteenth century by Protestant Christian abolitionists. In December 2015 the institution became embroiled in a very public controversy. It had put on administrative leave Larycia Hawkins, one of its political science professors, who had written these words on her Facebook wall: “I stand in *religious solidarity* with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”⁹ According to the school, Hawkins’s statement was inconsistent with the set of theological beliefs that all of Wheaton’s faculty members are contractually required to affirm. These beliefs include the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation, both of which are denied by Islam, and both of which are essential to Christianity. So, the administration reasoned, if Professor Hawkins says that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, then it must be the case that she is either denying (explicitly or implicitly) the veracity of beliefs essential to the Christian faith or she does not understand the school’s doctrinal positions well

6. Novak, “Les Juifs et les chretiens reverent-ils le meme Dieu?” 105.

7. Arendzen, “Marcionites.”

8. Novak, “Les Juifs et les chretiens reverent-ils le meme Dieu?” 105 (my translation). (Original: “de nos jours, de nombreux Chrétiens répudient profondément le gnosticisme de type marcioniste.”)

9. See Graham, “The Professor Wore a Hijab in Solidarity—Then Lost Her Job.”

enough to assent to them in good conscience.¹⁰ Either way, she is not theologically fit to remain on the faculty at Wheaton.

Although I took the side of Professor Hawkins,¹¹ and still believe that her position is the correct one,¹² answering “yes” to the question of whether Muslims and Christians (and Jews) worship the same God need not entail a sappy-squishy-Kumbaya-around-the-campfire interreligious ecumenism, which I suspect is what Wheaton feared would be the inevitable long-term result of not disciplining Professor Hawkins when there still remained a critical mass at the college who harbored real doctrinal convictions. Wheaton was not yet prepared to install Professor Hawkins as the John Lennon Chair in Nothing to Kill or Die For and No Religion Too.

Similar concerns seem to motivate some Christian writers who argue that Jews and Christians do not worship the same God. For example, Evangelical philosopher and literary scholar, Lydia McGrew, argues that “in one sense Christians and modern religious Jews worship the same God; in another sense they don’t. Old Testament Jews, of course, didn’t reject the Trinity and the incarnation, since those doctrines hadn’t been revealed. If one emphatically rejects these truths about God, however, and explicitly worships God as non-triune and non-incarnate, then this makes a pretty good case that, in one sense, such a person does not worship the same God whom Christians worship.”¹³ This leads McGrew to the seemingly odd conclusion that modern Christians worship the God of the ancient Jews, but modern Jews don’t.¹⁴ Another Evangelical philosopher, Jerry Walls, holds a similar view.¹⁵ Relying on a theory of reference defended by philosopher Gareth Evans,¹⁶ Walls argues that the distinctly Christian doctrines of divine tri-unity and the incarnation are so central to our idea of the Christian God that to claim that one is worshipping the one true God minus those doctrines is no different than claiming that the term “Saint Nick” refers to both the historical Saint Nicholas and the fictional Santa Claus. Just

10. That encapsulates the reasoning implied by several pointed questions addressed to Professor Larycia Hawkins by then-Wheaton provost, Stanton L. Jones, in a December 15, 2015 memo (on file with author).

11. Beckwith, “Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?”; and Beckwith, “Why Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God.”

12. See, e.g., Beckwith, “All Worship the Same God: Referring to the Same God”; and Beckwith, *Never Doubt Thomas*, chapter 3.

13. McGrew, “The ‘Same God’ Debate Is Too Important to Leave to Philosophers.”

14. McGrew writes: “In another sense, however, Christians can say to modern religious Jews: [‘]The true God who called your forefathers out of the land of Egypt, who gave the law at Sinai, who chose you as his beloved, chosen people, really is the one who sent Yeshua the Messiah to die for our sins. We worship the God who really did found Judaism thousands of years ago, who really did give the Torah. And we are here to tell you more about him.[’]” McGrew, “The ‘Same God’ Debate.”

15. Walls, “None Worship the Same God: Different Conceptions View.”

16. Walls champions Evans’s view as it is presented by Tomas Bogardus and Mallorie Urban in their article, “How to Tell Whether Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God.” Bogardus and Urban cite two works by Gareth Evans: “The Causal Theory of Names”; and *The Varieties of Reference*.

as the fictionalizing of the historical Saint Nicholas over time resulted in a reference shift—what we refer to as “Santa Claus” is not the real figure from which the fictional one emerged—the acceptance by Christians of both the New Testament and creedal revelatory claims about God’s tri-unity and incarnation means that when Christians refer to God they are not referring to the figure to which Muslims and Jews refer when they claim to be worshipping God.

Although I think that Wheaton College and Professors McGrew and Walls answer the same God question in the wrong way, their concerns about the theological integrity of their faith tradition should not be gainsaid, just as it should not be for non-Christians like Novak who give an opposite answer to the same God question while rightfully guarding what they believe are theological truths that cannot be compromised without courting apostasy.¹⁷ For this reason, in what follows, my affirmative answer to the same God question tries to avoid two extremes: the sort of reasoning that gave rise to the Marcionite heresy and the relativist reflexes that underwrite the hope of some for a woke confessional church.

Sense and Reference

One way to show it is *at least possible* that the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths refer to the same God, despite their differences, is to make a distinction between sense and reference. Consider these examples.

Imagine two fraternal twins, Tony and Tessy. They are separated at birth. Tony continues to live with their mother, Ruby, while Tessy is adopted by their uncle, Joe. The reason for this arrangement is that their father, Simon, abandons them in their infancy. When they reach the age of fifteen, Tony and Tessy are told that they are not really cousins, but brother and sister. Unsurprisingly, each wants to know more about their father, Simon. Joe, Simon’s brother, tells Tessy that her father was a wonderful man, but that he had to move to a faraway country and change identities because he was a CIA agent who could not remain with them without endangering his family. Ruby, on the other hand, tells Tony that his father was a risk taker who changed his name and abandoned them for a life of international travel in order to rid himself of the burden of caring for a wife and children. Tessy concludes that her father was a hero, while Tony concludes that his father was a cad. Tony and Tessy know they are referring to the same person, even though they have different senses about him. St. Thomas Aquinas seems to imply this sense/reference distinction when he writes that “to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter

17. “Aucun tribunal juif ne pourrait accepter qu’un chrétien demande de se convertir au judaïsme [giyyour] sans qu’il renie le Christ. De même, la conversion d’un Juif au christianisme est plus que de l’hérésie ; c’est de l’apostasie [shemad].” Novak, “Les Juifs et les chrétiens reverent-ils le même Dieu?” 127. Translation: “No Jewish tribunal could accept a Christian who requests to convert to Judaism . . . without denying Christ. Likewise, the conversion of a Jew to Christianity is more than heresy; it is apostasy. . . .” (my translation).

is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching.”¹⁸ In other words, two people, like Tony and Tessy, can have the same reference—“that man who is approaching” (or “that man is my father”)—though one may have the sense that it is Peter (or a hero) while the other may have the sense that it is Judas (or a cad).

Pat takes a constitutional every morning. When he looks up in the sky on a clear day he never fails to see *the morning star*. Pat’s wife, Liz, takes her constitutional every evening. When she looks up in the sky on a clear day she never fails to see *the evening star*. At dinner they sometimes discuss their astronomical observations, with both believing that the morning star and the evening star are two different objects with two different sets of properties (much like their dogs, Blackie and Rebel). It turns out, however, the morning star and the evening star are not two different stars, but one planet, Venus. Pat and Liz not only have different senses of the same thing, but unlike Tony and Tessy, they do not know that they are referring to the same thing.

The comic book character Superman is the alter ego of *The Daily Planet* reporter Clark Kent. Superman, whose given name is Kal-El, is not a human being. He is a child of the planet Krypton, sent to earth by his parents, moments before the planet’s destruction. Superman’s girlfriend is Lois Lane. Clark’s girlfriend is Lana Lang. Lois believes her boyfriend is a non-human with superpowers, while Lana believes her boyfriend is an ordinary human being. When talking to others about Superman and Clark, Lois and Lana think they are referring to two different beings, when in fact they are referring to the same being, Kal-El.

Tom is a big fan of YouTube boxing videos. Over the past couple of years he has become enamored with the 1960s fighter, Cassius Clay. In the midst of telling you about Clay’s May 1965 first round knockout of Sonny Liston, Tom asks, “Whatever happened to Clay?” For some reason, Tom does not realize that Clay changed his name to Muhammed Ali and continued to fight until 1981. Until you tell him the truth, Tom will continue to believe that Clay and Ali are two different fighters.

We can see in each of these cases the distinction between sense and reference. In the first, Tony and Tessy have different senses about what they know is the same thing, their father Simon. In the other cases, the senses are so disparate that the parties involved—Pat, Liz, Lois, Lana, Tom—come to believe that they are talking about two different things—morning star/evening star, Superman/Clark, Clay/Ali—rather than one thing. For our present purposes, the point of these illustrations is simply to show that it is possible that contrary senses of the same thing can still have the same reference, even when those who harbor these senses do not know (or believe) they are referring to the same thing. However, the reason why we can see this is because we *know* that the morning and evening stars are the planet Venus, that Superman and Clark are Kal-El, and that Muhammed Ali is Cassius Clay’s Muslim name. With the same God question it’s a bit more tricky, since we can’t secure the reference to God *in the same way* we can secure the references to Venus, Kal-El, and The Greatest. This

18. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, q. 2, a. 1, ad. 1. (ST, hereafter.)

is because God—as understood by Christians, Muslims, and Jews—is not a creature *in the* universe, but the one and only being with underived existence on which the universe depends and who discloses himself in a variety of different ways, such as mystical experience, general revelation, and Sacred Scripture. In what follows is a way to secure this reference to God while at the same time accounting for disagreements between Christians, Muslims, and Jews about that God.

Securing the Reference to God

Ahmed, Benjamin, Cecilia, and the Preambles of Faith

In Fall 2018 Ahmed, Benjamin, and Cecilia were freshmen at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), where they were all enrolled in Dr. Gray Matter's Philosophy of Atheism course. Each arrived on campus as a religious believer: Ahmed was Muslim, Benjamin was Jewish, and Cecilia was Christian. But after taking Dr. Matter's class they became atheists. In Spring 2019, another UNLV philosopher, Dr. Sophia Mind, caught wind of this. Convinced that Ahmed, Benjamin, and Cecilia had not carefully thought through their conversions to unbelief, Dr. Mind invites each of them to take from her during the upcoming summer session a special independent study course on the rationality of belief in God. In the course, Dr. Mind exposes the three students to a rigorous examination of the arguments for God's existence in the works of the Muslim philosopher Avicenna (980–1037),¹⁹ the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204),²⁰ and the Christian philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74).²¹ After completing the course, each student comes to Dr. Mind individually to confess that he or she now believes in God. Ahmed admits he found Maimonides's argument convincing. Benjamin explains why he was persuaded by Avicenna's case. And Cecilia concedes that she was moved to belief by Aquinas's reasoning. What Dr. Mind finds fascinating is that each of them believes virtually the same things about the nature of God: He is *the one, uncaused, perfect, unchanging, self-subsistent, eternal Creator and Sustainer of all that which receives its being from another*. (To clarify, any being "which receives its being from another," like you, me, the toaster, or the planet Venus, only exists because another existing thing[s] caused it to be and/or keeps it in existence.) At this point, none of the former atheists identifies with his or her prior faith, but simply believes, as a consequence of rational argument, that God exists. You can say that Ahmed, Benjamin, and Cecilia are now *mere theists*. You can also say, on Aquinas's understanding of faith and reason, that they

19. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*.

20. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

21. Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*.

now know one of the *preambles of faith*, those beliefs that “are a necessary presupposition to matters of faith” that one *may know* by means of reason.²²

Ahmed, Benjamin, and Cecilia go on to tell Dr. Mind that there can in principle be only one God. For if there were “two Gods,” they would have to differ in some way, and if two beings of the same kind (or genus) differ in some way, one must have what the other lacks and vice versa, and there must be a cause to account for that difference. But this cannot be true of God, who is unchanging, perfect, uncaused, and the source of all contingent being. For this reason, God is not one in the sense that He is one of a kind, like the last Dodo Bird was one of a kind. Rather, He is one in the sense that He is that which is metaphysically ultimate and has underived existence, the Creator and Source of all kinds that by their nature require a cause to account for their existence. Because, as Novak points out, “[i]n the primordial sense, the logic of strict monotheism requires that God be apprehended as the One who is uniquely ‘without limit’”;²³ to think otherwise would be to acquiesce to the logic of polytheism, “where each god’s power is limited by the power of some other god with whom he or she has to exist.”²⁴

What’s more, because God has underived existence, it means that it is God’s nature to exist. But this is not true of any creatures, since they are brought into and kept in existence by things external to their being. Thus, if it were not God’s nature to exist, then He too would require an external cause to account for His existence. But this would mean, as Aquinas notes, that God would be “a being by participation,”²⁵ and thus would not be that which is metaphysically ultimate and has underived existence. “He will not therefore be the first being—which is absurd. Therefore God is His own existence.”²⁶

At this point it seems uncontroversial to say that the former Muslim, Ahmed, the former Jew, Benjamin, and the former Christian, Cecilia, all ex-atheists, are now theists who *believe in the same God*. To employ concepts we learned in section II, Ahmed, Benjamin, and Cecilia are using the term “God” with the same reference and in the same sense.

But Ahmed, Benjamin, and Cecilia are not satisfied by the philosophical sterility of *mere theism*. Even though they are convinced that God exists, they long for spiritual depth and meaning in their lives. For this reason, each begins a yearlong intensive examination of the three great Abrahamic faiths, carefully studying their scriptural, historical, apologetical, and ethical claims as well as observing their various liturgical and devotional practices. At the end of the year, Ahmed, the former

22. ST I-II, q. 1, a. 5, ad. 3. Here is the quotation from Aquinas in its context: “Things which can be proved by demonstration are reckoned among the articles of faith, not because they are believed simply by all, but because they are a necessary presupposition to matters of faith, so that those who do not know them by demonstration must know them first of all by faith” (ST I-II, q. 1, a. 5, ad. 3).

23. Novak, *Covenantal Rights*, 38.

24. Novak, *Covenantal Rights*, 38.

25. ST I, q. 3, a. 4, *resp.*

26. ST I, q. 3, a. 4, *resp.*

Muslim, becomes a Christian, Benjamin, the former Jew, becomes a Muslim, and Cecilia, the former Christian, becomes a Jew. Together they visit Dr. Mind to tell her of their newfound faiths. Curious about their conversions, Dr. Mind asks them: "Do you each still believe that God is the one, uncaused, perfect, unchanging, self-subsistent, eternal Creator and Sustainer of all that which receives its being from another?" In almost perfect unison, they answer, yes.²⁷ "So," Dr. Mind continues, "you continue to believe that God is *He who is metaphysically ultimate and has underived existence*." The three UNLV students nod their heads. "But," Dr. Mind asks, "surely, given your new beliefs, you do have different ideas about God and His actions in history, don't you?" Again, they answer, yes. Ahmed explains that as a Christian he now believes that God has specially revealed through the New Testament and Church tradition that God is a Trinity and that Jesus is the Son of God. Benjamin candidly admits his disagreement with Ahmed, for as a Muslim he accepts the authority of the Qur'an, which affirms: "[God] begetteth not nor was begotten" and "It befitteth not (the Majesty of) Allah that He should take unto Himself a son."²⁸ Cecilia says that as a Jew she is now required to reject the authority of both the Christian and Islamic sources of revelation, though she agrees with the Muslim Benjamin that beliefs in the Trinity and Jesus's divine sonship are mistaken. Dr. Mind interrupts, "Is it then fair to say that each of you now believes that you know more about God than when you were mere theists?" They answer, yes. When she then asks them, "But do you know less?" they reply with an emphatic NO. To use the language of Aquinas, when the three UNLV students were mere theists they held to one of the preambles of faith—"the existence of God and other like truths about God"²⁹—and thus they all believed in the same God: the one, uncaused, perfect, unchanging, self-subsistent, eternal Creator and Sustainer of all that which receives its being from another. But when they converted to Christianity, Islam, and Judaism respectively, Ahmed, Benjamin, and Cecilia did not abandon that understanding of the true and living God. They merely assented to more beliefs about God and salvation history that were not contrary to what they had believed as mere theists. So, it seems that the Christian Ahmed, the Muslim Benjamin, and the Jewish Cecilia, when speaking of God, are referring to the same God, even though they have different senses about God.

27. "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the Lord is one" (Deut 6:4; JPS); "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "What We Believe,"); "He is God: there is no god other than Him. It is He who knows what is hidden as well as what is in the open, He is the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. He is God: there is no god other than Him, the Controller, the Holy One, Source of Peace, Granter of Security, Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, the Truly Great; God is far above anything they consider to be His partner. He is God: the Creator, the Originator, the Shaper. The best names belong to Him. Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him: He is the Almighty, the Wise" (Qur'an Al-Hashr 59:22–24).

28. Qur'an 112:3; 19:35, as quoted in *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, 454, 223.

29. *ST I*, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1.

The Project of Contemporary Christian Apologetics

Since the mid-twentieth century, there has been a renaissance of Christian apologetics, mostly, though not exclusively, among Protestants who identify as Evangelical.³⁰ (Ironically, C. S. Lewis, a traditional Anglican, is the writer often credited as being the most influential figure in launching this renaissance.) As far as the same God question goes, the most dominant methodology found in this apologetic literature should lead one to an affirmative answer. To see why, let us consider the works of several leading Christian apologists.

In his book, *Reasonable Faith*, Evangelical philosopher William Lane Craig makes a case for the truth of Christian theism. After addressing the relationship between faith and reason and then arguing for the absurdity of life without God, in the next two chapters he defends the rationality of belief in God. One of the arguments he offers is the *kalām* cosmological argument,³¹ whose proponents include the Muslim philosopher Al-Ghazali (1058–1111).³² Craig concludes that the argument shows that “a personal Creator of the universe exists, who is uncaused, beginningless, changeless, immaterial, timeless, spaceless, and unimaginably powerful. This, as Thomas Aquinas was wont to remark, is what everybody means by ‘God.’”³³ Following his two chapters on God’s existence Craig then moves on to defend the possibility of both historical knowledge and miraculous events as well as the reality of both Jesus’s self-understanding as divine and the historicity of his resurrection.

Now suppose we had a time machine and we could transport Ghazali to the year 2019, give him an Arabic translation of *Reasonable Faith*, and ask him to read it. It is not difficult to imagine after reading Craig’s book he would tell us that he is delighted that Craig has published a powerful rendition of his *kalām* argument. But, as a good Muslim, Ghazali would likely go on to say something like the following: “Although I agree with Craig that my argument establishes that ‘a personal Creator of the universe exists, who is uncaused, beginningless, changeless, immaterial, timeless, spaceless, and unimaginably powerful,’ I think that Craig is mistaken about Jesus’s divinity and resurrection.” Consequently, it cannot be the case that Ghazali and Craig—and by default Muslims, Christians, and Jews—are *not* referring to the same God, though each believes different things about that one God and his revelation in history. (Ironically, Craig does not once in his book offer a defense of God’s tri-unity, even though the book’s subtitle is *Christian Truth and Apologetics*).

Craig’s apologetic procedure is fairly typical among Christian thinkers. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis first introduces the reader to the concept of the one true God by way of the moral law, distinguishing that concept from the God of pantheism and

30. See Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 325–67; Dulles, “The Rebirth of Apologetics.”

31. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 111–56.

32. See Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 42–49.

33. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 154.

calling it the view “held by Jews, Mohammedans and Christians.”³⁴ Lewis identifies this God as the one who “made the world—that space and time, heat and cold, and all the colours and tastes, and all the animals and vegetables, are things that God ‘made up out of His head’ as a man makes up a story.”³⁵ It is only later in *Mere Christianity* that Lewis explains to the reader the idea of Jesus as divine and the doctrine of the Trinity.³⁶ J. P. Moreland, in his *Scaling the Secular City*, spends considerable space defending the existence of God before moving on to distinctly Christian concerns, including the historicity of the New Testament and the resurrection of Jesus.³⁷ At the end of his chapter on cosmological arguments for God’s existence, Moreland concludes that “it is most reasonable to believe that the universe had a beginning which was caused by a timeless, immutable agent[,] . . . that the world had its beginning by the act of a person.”³⁸ And like Craig, Moreland does not offer a defense of the Trinity. One finds similar treatments in the works of Stuart C. Hackett (*The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim*) and Norman L. Geisler (*Christian Apologetics*). Prior to offering direct defenses of Christian claims about Christ and Scripture, Hackett and Geisler each establishes the existence of God. Hackett defines “God as an absolutely necessary Being, characterized by personal intelligent will, and constituting essential or absolute Goodness—a Being, furthermore, whose relation to the contingent world order . . . is that of creative Causality, sustaining Ground, and providential Direction, while at the same time this Being transcends in existence and nature that world order of which it is thus the ultimate foundation.”³⁹ Geisler, an Evangelical Thomist, maintains that if Aquinas’s principle of existential causality is sound, then there must exist an Uncaused Cause who is “Infinite, Unchanging, All-Powerful, All-Knowing, and All-Perfect.”⁴⁰ The great Reformed Christian philosopher, Alvin Plantinga (*Warranted Christian Belief*), though not including natural theology as part of his case for Christian belief as one finds in thinkers like Craig, Lewis, Moreland, Hackett, and Geisler, nevertheless argues, following John Calvin, that God has implanted in human beings a *sensus divinitatis*, “a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity.”⁴¹ So, for example, “you see the blazing glory of the heavens from a mountainside at 13,000 feet; you think about those unimaginable distances; you find yourself filled with awe and wonder, and you form the belief that God must be

34. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 24.

35. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 26.

36. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 32–37, 84–97. Lewis does mention in the preface the Christian belief “there is one God and that Jesus Christ is His only Son,” but he does so just to introduce the reader to the book.

37. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 15–132.

38. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 132.

39. Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim*, 87.

40. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 247 (italics removed).

41. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 173.

great to have created this magnificent heavenly host.”⁴² This God, according to Plantinga, is “the all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe . . . with properties of being infinite, transcendent, and ultimate.”⁴³ Plantinga calls this the “theistic component” of Christian belief, distinguishing it from “the uniquely Christian component,” which includes such doctrines as Jesus’s resurrection and his divine sonship.⁴⁴

If the arguments for God’s existence offered by Craig, Lewis, Moreland, Hackett, and Geisler could be accepted by a devout Jew or Muslim, and if Plantinga is right that God has implanted in human beings a *sensus divinitatis* that under the appropriate conditions triggers belief in the same God that may be arrived at by the arguments of natural theology, then it seems that Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same God, even if they disagree over what Plantinga calls the “unique Christian component.” Thus, by first securing the reference to God, the Christian apologist establishes that Christians, Jews, and Muslims share the same understanding of what constitutes a divine nature, despite the fact that their beliefs diverge as a result of what each group accepts (or rejects) as specially revealed truths about God found in its inspired scripture (or the other groups’ inspired scripture).

Moses, Paul, and Athanasius

Christianity, Judaism, and Islam believe that Moses encountered God in the burning bush on Mt. Horeb.⁴⁵ The book of Exodus records their exchange: “Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “I am has sent me to you”’” (Exod 3:13–14). Christians, following Maimonides,⁴⁶ have traditionally interpreted God’s name—“I am who I am”—as a description of His ontological status.⁴⁷ He is the fullness of being, the self-existent One, the metaphysically ultimate and underived Source of everything that receives its being from another.⁴⁸ As Aquinas notes: “God is the first being, with nothing prior to Him. His essence is, therefore, His being. This sublime truth Moses was taught by our Lord. When Moses asked our Lord: ‘If the children of Israel say to me: what is His name? What shall I say to them?’ The Lord replied: ‘I AM WHO AM [. . .]’ By this our Lord showed that His own proper

42. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 173.

43. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 4.

44. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, vii.

45. For the Qur’an’s account of Moses at the burning bush, see Qur’an, Ta-Ha 20.

46. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, I, 63.

47. See, e.g., St. Jerome, “Letter 15” (ca. 376); St. Augustine, *On the Trinity* (400–428) 5.2; and Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.22.10.

48. See Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, chapter 2; and Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, 54; Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 94.

name is HE WHO IS. Now, names have been devised to signify the natures or essences of things. It remains, then, that the divine being is God's essence or nature."⁴⁹

In John 8:58, as Christians have traditionally read this passage,⁵⁰ Jesus reveals himself as the self-existent one in the burning bush who conversed with Moses: "Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, *I am*'" (emphasis added). But, of course, God did not disclose to Moses that He was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for this would have to wait until the writing and dissemination of the New Testament and the establishment of an ecclesiastical council, the Council of Constantinople (AD 381),⁵¹ that would issue an authoritative pronouncement on the matter. (It goes without saying that Judaism rejects trinitarian theology as revealed truth.) This is why it would seem strange to claim that because Moses (or Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob) did not affirm that the self-existent One includes the eternally begotten Son (along with the Holy Spirit) that the great patriarchs worshipped a different God than Christians worship.

Consider now St. Paul's famous sermon that he preached on the Areopagus in Athens to a crowd of pagan listeners:

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." (Acts 17:22b–28)

But St. Paul's sermon does not end there. He goes on to explain to his audience the relationship between this "unknown God" and what He will reveal, and has revealed, in history through the person of Jesus of Nazareth: "[God] has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man [Jesus Christ] whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). Notice what St. Paul is doing here. He first secures the correct reference to God—"The God who made the world and everything in it . . . [he in whom] we live and move and have our being"—and then presents to his Athenian audience a

49. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.22.9–10.

50. Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics*, 40–41, 63–64.

51. "What We Believe." See generally Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*.

very brief summary of the gospel message. Contrast this with what is recorded in the earlier portions of Acts 17 (vv. 1–9), in which we are told about a journey made by St. Paul and Silas to Thessalonica. While there they visited a Jewish synagogue where St. Paul argued for a suffering and resurrected Messiah who he identifies as Jesus. Not surprisingly, this presentation was not warmly received by most of the congregants. Nevertheless, unless he supposed that both he and his Jewish listeners were referring to the same God, it does not make any sense for St. Paul to have argued that Jesus was the true Messiah sent by God. We cannot, for example, coherently argue over whether Madison Hemings is really the son of Thomas Jefferson unless we suppose that we are referring to the same Thomas Jefferson.

In Acts 17 we see how St. Paul engages two different groups, pagans and Jews. With the latter, the right reference to God is secured in the very preaching of the gospel, since St. Paul is making the case that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah promised by the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. With the pagans, on the other hand, St. Paul procures a different strategy. He first secures the right reference to God—“[He in whom] we live and move and have our being”—*and then* moves on to introduce his Athenian listeners to the Christian message. In both venues, the many who walked away without accepting the Christian message did not fail to “change Gods.” Rather, what they failed to do was to embrace St. Paul’s claim that the one and only true and living God specially revealed himself in history in the person of Jesus.

It was not until the fourth century at the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325) that the Christian church issued an official account of what it means to say that Jesus is the Son of God. At the time, the Church included two warring factions. One group sided with Arius of Alexandria (256–336),⁵² who took the position that the incarnate Son of God had not always existed, was a creation of the Father, and thus was *not* “God of God, Light of Light, True God from True God.”⁵³ The other faction was led by Athanasius of Alexandria (296–373). He defended the view that Jesus as the Son of God is in fact fully God, the pre-incarnate Word revealed by St. John at the beginning of his Gospel (John 1:1).⁵⁴ So, the dispute that was resolved at Nicaea was between those who with Arius held that the Son of God was made, not begotten, of a different substance than the Father, and those who with Athanasius held that the Son of God was “begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.”⁵⁵ Although the council declared Arianism a heresy, there was no doubt that both factions were referring to the same one and only true and living God—that which is metaphysically ultimate and has underived existence—with their dispute being over the question of whether *that* God has an eternally begotten Son that is of the same substance. Consequently, what divided Arius and Athanasius is not unlike what divides Christians from Jews and

52. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 226–31.

53. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “What We Believe.”

54. Athanasius, *De Synodis*.

55. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “What We Believe.”

Muslims: the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and his relationship to the divine nature. But if Arius and Athanasius worshipped the same God, despite their disagreement, then it stands to reason that Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same God, even though they differ on the nature of God's internal life.

Conclusion: Answering McGrew and Walls

In light of what we covered in sections II and III, we can now respond to McGrew and Walls.

McGrew raises the question: Why should the idea of God as Creator—which Christians have in common with Muslims and Jews—take precedence over distinctly Christian beliefs about God, such as the Trinity, the incarnation, and so forth?⁵⁶

There is a kernel of truth in McGrew's question. She correctly implies that what separates Christianity from both Judaism and Islam is its understanding of God's internal life (whether or not God is Triune) and the extent to which he has revealed himself in human history (whether or not Jesus is God Incarnate). However, on the question at issue here—whether or not Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same God—the Christian distinctives do *not* take precedence over what constitutes a divine nature. To understand why, we will have to enlist the help of Tony and Tessy, the fraternal twins we met when we discussed sense and reference.

After graduating from high school, Tony and Tessy attend UNLV, where they take a course taught by Dr. Mind, the same philosophy professor who helped Ahmed, Benjamin, and Cecilia return to belief in God. Tony and Tessy, like their three peers, become convinced of God's existence after reading Aquinas, Avicenna, and Maimonides. Several months later, Tony goes on to become a Catholic, and thus is required to assent to what the Church teaches, including its beliefs on the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Tessy, on the other hand, becomes a Latter-day Saint (LDS), and confesses to have faith in all that the LDS Church teaches, including its beliefs on the Trinity⁵⁷ and Christ's deity.⁵⁸ Although Tony and Tessy seem to believe the same

56. McGrew phrases her query exclusively in terms of Islam, though given what she says about modern Judaism, it is fair to extend it to include both faiths: "Islam says more than that God doesn't happen to be triune or that God didn't in fact come down as man. Islam insists God cannot be triune or incarnate. It denies Jesus could be the Son of God, much less God himself. Why is the fact that Allah (as conceived in Islam) is the Creator more important to the question at hand than the fact that he cannot be triune or incarnate?" (McGrew, "The 'Same God' Debate").

57. "The Trinity of traditional Christianity is referred to as the Godhead by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon). Like other Christians, Latter-Day Saints believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost)" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, "Godhead").

58. "The incarnation is the foundational Christian teaching that Jesus Christ, who was God (Jehovah) in the premortal existence, 'was made flesh, and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). . . . The Great Jehovah, the Creator of all things (Mosiah 3:8; 5:15), the Eternal Father of heaven and earth (Mosiah 15:4), took upon himself the tabernacle of a mortal body" (Skinner, "The Incarnation/Incarnate God," 319).

distinctly Christian doctrines, they no longer believe in the same God, since Tessy, by embracing LDS doctrine *denies* that God is the one, uncaused, perfect, unchanging, self-subsistent, eternal Creator and Sustainer of all that which receives its being from another. According to the LDS Church, “Church teachings about the Godhead differ from those of traditional Christianity. For example, while some believe the three members of the Trinity are of one substance, Latter-Day Saints believe they are three physically separate beings, but fully one in love, purpose and will.”⁵⁹ This is why the Catholic Church accepts the validity of Protestant baptisms if the correct formula is used (“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”), while rejecting LDS baptisms, even though the LDS affirm the Trinity and seemingly use the same formula. As noted in a summary of a 2001 decision issued by the Catholic Church’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: “There is not a true invocation of the Trinity because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, according to the *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, are not the three persons in which subsists the one Godhead, but three gods who form one divinity. One is different from the other, even though they exist in perfect harmony. . . . The very word divinity has only a functional, not a substantial content, because the divinity originates when the three gods decided to unite and form the divinity to bring about human salvation. . . . This divinity and man share the same nature and they are substantially equal.”⁶⁰ What this means is that getting the doctrine of the Trinity right requires the correct understanding of the divine nature: he who is metaphysically ultimate and has underived existence. Because, under Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, there can in-principle be only one such being, one can have the correct reference to God while getting some things about him wrong. This is, after all, one of the many lessons of Eve’s encounter with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Although they both had the right reference to God, Eve came to accept a false belief about him (Gen 3:4–5). So, to answer McGrew’s question, getting the divine nature right is in fact more important, even though it does not prevent one from holding what others may think are wrong beliefs about God. Perhaps this is why in Acts 17, St. Paul first secures the right reference to God before telling his audience about Jesus.

Our answer to McGrew also answers Walls’s claim that the Christian understanding of God constitutes a reference shift from the Jewish understanding. For unlike Walls’s Saint Nicholas/Santa Claus illustration, in which the radical disparity between the two figures undermines the same reference, in the case of Judaism and Christianity (as well as Islam) the same reference to God is established because there is agreement on what constitutes a divine nature *per se*: God is the one, uncaused, perfect, unchanging, self-subsistent, eternal Creator and Sustainer of all that which receives its being from another. To claim, for example, that God is a Trinity

59. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, “Godhead.”

60. Ladaria, “The Question of the Validity of Baptism Conferred in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,” 4.

as the Council of Constantinople understood the term, requires that one first know what a divine nature is. After all, the council was trying to figure out the best way to explain how he who is metaphysically ultimate and has derived existence, the one and only true and living God worshipped by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, could be one substance and three persons. If that is the problem that the council was addressing—as it indeed seems to be—then Christians and Jews (along with Muslims) worship the same God, even though they hold contrary understandings of that God and what they take to be revealed truth.

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