

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

A Muslim recently gave me a tract that quoted verses from the Bible that said there is only one God and that God is the only Savior (Isa. 43:10-11, also Isa. 44:6, 45:21-23, and John 17:3). The point he tries to make is that Jesus cannot be divine or savior. How do we respond to those who say Christian beliefs about Jesus go against monotheism?

First off, orthodox Christianity really is monotheistic, even if sometimes Christians can sound like they believe in three separate gods.

All (or almost all) of the New Testament writers were Jewish and therefore raised on the fundamental Jewish belief in monotheism expressed in the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." So whatever they and the other early Christians believed about Jesus, they must have thought what they believed did not contradict there being only one God. If we read anything in the New Testament as a violation of monotheism, we misunderstand the writers' intent.

In orthodox Christianity, Jesus is not another god alongside God. (Although this is exactly what Muslims believe Christians believe.) Instead, in classic Christian theology Jesus is the eternal, uncreated Word of God that was manifested at a particular time and place in our world in the Incarnation ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....And the Word became flesh and lived among us," Gospel of John, chapter 1).

Interestingly, this is analogous to what Muslims believe about the Qur'an, their Scripture. In orthodox Islamic theology, the Qur'an is the uncreated, eternal Word of God (not of a different nature from God but of God's essence) that was revealed at a particular time and place to Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.

In orthodox Christian theology, God the Father (the Creator God worshipped by Jews and Muslims) is always the Source and Christ, the Word, is always the instrument or means. For example, when Christians say Jesus is the Savior, technically he is the means or instrument of salvation, God the Father (the Creator) being the source of salvation. So God can be the only Savior (as in Isa. 43:11) (as source) and Jesus the Savior too (as instrument or means) without implying two gods.

We see the idea of the Word as instrument in John 1, where it says, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." The same idea of instrumentality (and also divinity) is expressed in Colossians 1:15-20, "all things have been created through him....in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

Keeping in mind the monotheistic context in which these verses were written, we can see that Christian theology about Jesus does not make Christ into another god equal to God (the Creator, "God the Father" in Christian terms). Instead the Word is God "coming towards us," if you will, God revealing and manifesting Himself to the universe, God not as God is in Himself but as God as God reveals Himself and lets Himself be known.

This may be hard to follow and understand, but at least we can say that in Christian theology, Jesus cannot be separated from God as another god because Jesus, as the Word, is part of God (much as the Qur'an is part of God in Islam).

So whatever Jews and Muslims may think of us, we Christians believe in the same God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, as they do. We just believe God revealed Himself uniquely and supremely in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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