**Annual Theology Sermon 2017**

**Trinity Sunday**

Will Fitzgerald

Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

June 11, 2017

Do Christians worship the same God as Muslims?

* Why ask the question?
  + May help in Christian-Muslim dialog and connection and collaboration
  + May help view Muslims as our co-religionists
  + Larycia Hawkins was fired, ostensibly, over saying so; was that right? (Jan 2016)
  + Pope Francis has stated so; is he right?
* This of course is a different question from: “Do Christians believe the same things about God that Muslims do?”
  + Muslims deny the trinity
  + Muslims see Jesus as a prophet, but only a prophet
  + Muslims believe God gave further revelations to Mohammed
  + Muslims believe Mohammed is the main prophet (There is no god but God, and Mohammed is his prophet)
* So, if we worship the same God

1. Muslims are wrong about some things that Christians are right about
2. Muslims are right about some things that Christians are wrong about
3. If we worship a fictional God, then we are all wrong
4. (1) and (2) can both be true, of course

* Some things crucial to the process of having this discussion:
  + Both Christians and Muslims believe there is only one God
    - So, at one level, if there is only God, and two people or groups worship the one God, then they worship the same God (even if their other beliefs about God are inconsistent)
  + Christians and Muslims believe very different things about God
    - So, if there is only one God, and we worship the one God, we need to not sweep under the rug these important differences
    - We believe, “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (1 John 5:12), so we desire that everyone have life in the Son
  + We want to live in peace with our Muslim neighbors, and all our neighbors
    - We live in respect for them
    - We welcome them, cooperate with them when it makes sense, etc.

One way to answer this question is to think of it on a gradient

Answer these questions:

* Do members of Mennonite Church USA worship the same God as Mennonite Church Canada?
* Do members of Mennonite Church USA worship the same God as Tanzanian Mennonite Church?
* Do Mennonites worship the same God as Church of the Brethren?
* As Lutherans?
* As Roman Catholics?
* As Egyptian Orthodox Copts?

How about polytheistic religions?

* Do Christians worship the same God as Hindus? (No)
* Do Christians worship the same God as the Athenians? No (But let’s listen to Paul)

Acts 17:16-31

**16**While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.  …

**22**Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. **23**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.

Paul attempts to build a bridge from Athenian polytheism to Christian monotheism via “the unknown God.” It’s clear that Paul is speaking *as if* this unknown God was the same as the God he worshipped (though *they* would have understood this unknown God to be one more in the list of gods).

But, this is basically one way that language works. We seek to understand, to be understood, to persuade, to cooperate. Language is used pragmatically. And so we often use shortcuts of ambiguity, vagueness, and metonymy in our speech and in our understanding.

For example, I might say, bring me a screwdriver; I want to tighten the screw in this chair. Although it seems precise, it’s somewhat vague or ambiguous (Philips head? Flat head? Size). I might bring a bunch of screwdrivers. I might bring a butter knife.

I claim: it is ambiguous whether we worship the same God as the Muslims, and that’s all right.

* It allows us to do what we want (live in peace, bring a gospel message, cooperate) while remaining honest.
* It allows us to be more precise when we need to be (and there will be times when we need to be).
* It allows us even be humble and learn from our co-religionists
  + for example, how do we fail to describe the Triune nature of God that cause Muslims to stumble?
  + How can the sharpness of Islamic belief about God encourage our own journey in faithfulness to God

So, let’s not fire people for saying we worship the same God.

Let’s use it as an opportunity (a somewhat high risk one, like it was for Paul) to build bridges of understanding.