

Yale Divinity School

BIBLICAL GOD AND ALLAH ARE ONE, SAYS MIROSLAV VOLF

By Ray Waddle

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Many say it can't be done, shouldn't be tried and will never succeed—agreement between Christians and Muslims that Islam's Allah and the God of the Bible is the same God.



Miroslav Volf

Miroslav Volf, the Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology at YDS and director/founder of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, says we must try—and succeed. The world depends on it, and our faith commands it.

Volf's new book, *Allah: A Christian Response* (HarperOne), makes the case that the biblical God and the Muslim Allah is one. Volf is addressing one side particularly—Christians. Muslim responses to the God of the Bible are a subject for Muslims to explore, he says. But if followers of Jesus insist on characterizing Allah as a false god, the world situation will only worsen.

“I reject the idea that Muslim and Christian ‘civilizations’ are bound to clash,” he writes.

“Because they worship the same and similarly understood God, Christians and Muslims have a sufficiently robust moral framework to pursue the common good together.”

Volf believes the two faiths overlap at crucial points in their moral codes, in their belief in a compassionate God, and in their hopes for the common good. Christians and Muslims should forge alliances and realize theological common ground. A true understanding of the Trinity, he says, does not undermine the oneness of God treasured by either religion.

Volf's arguments fly in the teeth of politically charged hostilities between two global faiths in an era of war and terrorism. Volf defies the resistance, too, of high-profile Christians who denounce Islam's God as a lesser deity incompatible with gospel values.

But Christians and Muslims *can* inhabit the same endangered world peacefully, Volf believes. This is not wishful thinking or empty sloganeering but an urgent, pragmatic undertaking: he says Christians and Muslims can learn to live together by going deeper into their own teachings about love of neighbor and the mercy of God. They should rally around shared values that enhance peace and reduce extremism. These values include:

- belief that the one God is loving and just
- a healthy sense of the fear of God
- a stand against injustice, prejudice and disrespect
- a stand against compulsion in religion
- a stand against political exclusivism

“In an interconnected and interdependent world, commitment to the one God and to love for all people demands pluralistic political institutions in which each religious group’s voice can be heard and in which the state is impartial toward all overarching perspectives on life,” he writes.

Volf’s thinking about Muslim-Christian relations is shaped by long experience, including his early background in the polyglot Balkans as well as, in recent years, his fruitful encounters with Muslim scholars and friends.

In 2007, 138 Muslims intellectuals and clerics produced an international open letter that declared common ground with Christians. That open letter, called *A Common Word Between Us and You*, inspired a public Christian response primarily drafted by Volf and shaped by other Yale Divinity scholars – Dean Harold Attridge, Academic Dean Emilie Townes and Joseph Cumming, director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture’s Reconciliation Program. The Yale document, called *Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You*, declared:

“We receive *A Common Word* as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians worldwide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors.”

The Yale initiative in turn won the endorsement of some 300 Christian leaders who publicized their agreement in a full-page ad in the *New York Times* in November 2007.

Volf’s book examines obstacles to dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and the peacemaking potential of unity around belief in a common God.

“For me the issue of Christian-Muslim relations was simmering as a question for years,” says Volf. “Then 9/11 made the question more urgent. Then I was nudged along further after *A Common Word*.”

In a time when most of the world’s population is now either Christian or Muslim, he says it’s naïve to argue that we can take religion out of the discussion of how to ease global violence. Secularism isn’t the solution.

“The world is not becoming a less religious place but more religious,” he says. “Any hope for peace that excludes religious convictions is misplaced. I don’t think we can expect 3 billion people to convert to the New Atheism. No, what we all need to find are deeply religious reasons for respecting others. The better Christian I am, the more loving I will be to others. Peace will have to go through deep religious convictions.”

Religion can contribute mightily—if it is de-coupled from political tribalism and extremism, he says. Volf’s early years in a strong Protestant-minority community in communist Yugoslavia infuses the book with special poignancy. He was jailed and intimidated for his beliefs and later saw how politico-religious violence destroyed his native country. As *Allah: A Christian Response* suggests, what endures from those days is the personal conviction of the power of faith to help human beings flourish, and a solidarity with other monotheists in a turbulent, multicultural milieu. The book’s dedication page reads: “To my father, a Pentecostal minister who admired Muslims and taught me as a boy that they worship the same God I do.”

Despite persistent and important differences between Christians and Muslims, Volf’s book concludes that belief in the one God can delegitimize the violence between the two groups and stir new engagements around the common good.

His advice to individual Christians: Go deeper into one's faith. Read the great Muslim thinkers and writers. Meet ordinary Muslim people.

“This book is about the extraordinary promise contained in the proper Christian response to the God of Muslims for easing animosities and overcoming conflicts,” he writes. “More, it is about opening up prospects for lasting peace.”

Recently published writings by Volf on the topic:

[Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?](#) *Huffington Post*, March 3, 2011

[Allah and the Trinity](#), *Christian Century*, Feb. 25, 2011

Posted: 03/07/2011