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Response Paper #1

“We must be far more intentional about fostering a more engaged, mission-focused theology that is informed by actual global realities. The effectiveness of our global witness as the church of Jesus Christ depends on it” (Tennent, pg. 21). So states Timothy Tennent in his chapter on the prickly question, “Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?” Through each of the etymological, ontological, and pastoral lenses, Tennent challenges Christian readers, who may have often avoided difficult conversations with our neighbors, to dive into the deep for the sake of our global witness for Christ.

Tennent first takes on the etymology of the word Allah, as it is understood by Arabic-speaking people to mean ‘God’. Though he points out some of the difficulties of explaining the origin of the word, he comes to the conclusion that the term was used widely by monotheistic Arabic-speaking people over a span of time. He brings the point that the difference in the word usage starts to diverge at ontology and the predicates used in conjunction with the word Allah. Since Muslims, Christians, and even Jews are monotheistic, the reference to ‘Allah’ or ‘God’ has some sense of it being attached to the one God being served. Tennent points out that while there are plenty of ontological overlaps between Islam and Christianity, answering the stated question goes deeper still. It is the distinctive nature of the predicates attached to each’s ‘one God’ that has drastic implications for interaction with the conflicting communities of faith.

It is the foundation from which these predicates spring that Tennent explores most fully in this chapter. He points specifically to two predicates, ‘God is one’ and ‘God is powerful’, that while identical in both the Qur’an and Biblical descriptions of God, the theological significance of each statement is interpreted in a completely antithetical fashion by either side. While it is true that both Islam and Christianity are monotheistic, the Trinitarian doctrine of God that is so integral in Christianity is viewed as an “erosion of the purity of monotheism in Islam” (Tennent, pg.13). This then further plays into the understanding of both incarnation and redemption, which are ideas that only the Trinitarian doctrine of

God can contain. When looking at God as all-powerful, both faiths can agree on God's power in creation and that nothing is too difficult for the almighty one. However, when the Bible displays God's ultimate power through the seeming weakness of the incarnation and the salvific death of Jesus, traditional Islamic teaching can't reconcile that with the all-powerful One.

Tennent touches on the importance of Muhammad as a prophet and even includes his praise for the movement away from idolatry and towards monotheism. He also points out that while "Allah" as a word is understood as "God" in its broadest sense, because it is a word that is a living expression of a community of people, it has been imbued with significance that is tied to much closer to the Islamic faith. It is understanding these crucial distinctions that must guide us in conversation with our Muslim neighbors if we are to build the "bridge for Islamic peoples to cross over and receive the Christian gospel" (Tennent, pg. 17).

This chapter was timely and poignant for me as some of the teens I work with are Muslims. We are a blatantly Christian program, a fact that we make clear in our interview process, and yet they still decide that they want to be part of our community. Tennent's statement at the close of his section on evangelistic and pastoral concerns resonates deeply. Even further, his reference to the pluralistic encouragement that we 'all worship the same God', is one that I've heard from the lips of teens who don't claim a faith tradition at all. He speaks of Pascal's "God of the philosophers", and that the "living God of revelation has been traded in for the bland, generic God of rational speculation" (Tennent, pg. 20). My heart breaks when I hear my teens speak of 'being a good person' or wanting to put 'good vibes' out into the world. The foundational lack of knowledge of the one, true God has elevated us past theoretical discussions and word-parsing. As Tennent states, it is truly life or death, because even with the acknowledgment that there is an actual monotheistic God, without the incarnation and redemption, hell awaits even the best of people. This is something I simply cannot allow my teens to experience without the fight of my life. For the church at large, we must recognize that we are no longer able to live in a vacuum of "an unassailable Christian plausibility structure" (Tennent, pg. 2). Until we understand the claims about God from those around us, we will not be able to effectively minister the saving gospel of Jesus Christ.