The following was abstracted from a lengthier article titled "A Genuine Monotheism for Christians, Muslims, Jews, and All" that was published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies,* 2017, 52: 575-586. It is used here by permission of Paul Chase at Penn Press Journals.

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Identification Spirituality and the Union of Jesus and God

Along with most Christian theologians, Volf has insisted that the Trinity is absolutely essential for understanding the Christian doctrine of God's incarnation in Jesus, that is, how Jesus was one with God, as proclaimed in Jn. 10:30. As he explained, "Take away the trinitarian nature of God, and the

[55] See *A Common Word between Us and You*, pp. 62–67.

Christian belief about Christ as the incarnation of God collapses, and, with it, the whole Christian faith."[56] Of course, he had in mind his own version of the social or interpersonal model of the Trinity. Yet, the whole of Christian faith definitely will not collapse without that, because, as we now know, other authentically monotheistic models of the Trinity have a venerable place in Christian tradition and thought. From the outset we should recognize that "mystery" applies just as much to the union of Jesus and God as it does to our understanding of the attributes and nature of God.

The most serious problem about "I and the father are one" is that there are many ways in which two or more things can be "one." Closely related, as Volf indicated, even "one" can have metaphorical, nonliteral, and downright mysterious meanings. "One" may indicate or include both resemblances and differences rather than perfect identity. Two or more distinct people can be of one mind, one heart, one soul, one team, one body of Christ, etc., without being perfectly identical in all respects. Husband and wife become "one flesh" in marriage. God and the mystic become one pure consciousness in mystical ecstasy, according to some mystics. All phenomenal egos might belong to one underlying noumenal ego, as Kant suggested. All could be manifestations or appearances of one underlying Brahma, as some Hindus believe. The Gospel of John does not explain how Jesus and God were one, so every explanation is a fallible or "merely human" interpretation. Christian traditions offer diverse accounts of how this works.

Another problem is that, since the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., Christian orthodoxy does not proclaim simply, "Jesus was God." Rather, it proclaims that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, so being one with God in John's Gospel could not mean complete identity. Unlike the other three Gospels, the fourth has Jesus say, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9), and "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30). It also has him say, "The Father is greater than I" (Jn. 14:28), and it portrays Jesus as praying to God, not to himself (Jn. 11:41–41). Fathers and sons can fully identify with one another in love without being ontologically identical. Jesus clearly believed in only one God who was other than himself. So, even in John's Gospel, "one" clearly does not connote perfect identity. Relevant also is Lk. 18:19, wherein Jesus asked, "Why do you call me good?" and an-

[56] Volf, *Allah*, p. 145.

swered, "There is none good except God alone." Maybe Jesus himself did not claim to be absolutely perfect and divine. That this text survived all the doctrinal winnowing is quite amazing.

Just how the Jesus of history could be "one" with God, yet possess "two natures," both divine and human, has always been a great puzzle—if not an incomprehensible paradox. Yet, for Christian orthodoxy, losing track of either the human or the divine in Jesus is heresy. Jesus was God without ceasing to be fully human, and God was Jesus without ceasing to be God. How could this be? What could this mean? For millennia, Christians have tried to figure this out.

Explained next is a proposal about how this might work in a thoroughly monotheistic theology—without the tritheism of three mutually loving but distinct self-aware divine subjects with overlapping or intertwined properties. No understanding of Jesus will solve all problems or satisfy everyone, but please consider the following "identification spirituality" account of how Jesus and God were one. Written from a Christian perspective, it may seem exaggerated to some non-Christians and to scholars who question the "perfection" of Jesus.[57] Portraits of Jesus tend to be idealistic, but the following seems to capture his dominant values and spiritual sensitivities.

We will never eliminate all the mystery, but occasionally we can push back the darkness ever so slightly. What sense can we make of the claims that, in Jesus, God and humanity are one, and Jesus and God are one? How so? As indicated, two separate and distinct things can be "one" in many different ways, so, when Jesus said, "I and the Father are one," might this mean something that many if not most Christians, Jews, and Muslims could accept? Christian orthodoxy insists that Jesus was one with God without ceas-

[57] Whether or not Jesus was perfect is now a seriously discussed issue. For references, see Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, eds., *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p. 288, n. 184. See also Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 391–394. Blanshard found excessive vengefulness in Jesus' threats to those who will not help the poor and needy or accept his messages (as in Mt. 25:41 and 46; Mk. 9:43–49; and Lk. 16:22–24), and he suggested that Jesus did not adequately respect the property rights of others when he drowned the Gadarene swine (Mt. 8:28–34) and when he ordered his disciples to appropriate someone's colt in a nearby village (Mt. 21:2). What happened to the pigs that belonged to someone else was also cruel to and bad for them; they had done nothing to deserve their fate. Even if Jesus was not absolutely perfect in every conceivable respect, he approximated moral and spiritual identification with God far more than most of the rest of us do.

ing to be a human being, without ceasing to be the unique, concrete, finite, temporal, human person that he was; and he continues to be fully God and fully human even now as he "sits at the right hand of God" (metaphorically speaking). Correspondingly, God was one with the finite human Jesus without ceasing to be God, the infinite, everlasting, creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe, the all-inclusive reality in whom we live and move and have our being. How could this be?

We will never have completely adequate answers. We will always disagree about many things, and we will always envision such things only in part, dimly, mythically, metaphorically, figuratively, poetically, nonliterally, as through a murky glass. However, the psychological concept of "identification," much emphasized by psychoanalysts[58] (though with too little attention to its moral and spiritual significance), may help to resolve this paradox and shed a little light. Without being the whole story, "fully God and fully human" may mean that Jesus fully identified with God, while God fully identified with Jesus.

Many Christians might claim that perfect identification with God was true *only* of Jesus, but not of the central figures or founders of other religions. Some non-Christians may doubt that this was true even of Jesus. This is actually another open question, worthy of further interfaith discussion. As those of other faiths consider what follows, they might ask whether something like this could be true of their own founders and saints.

The meaning of being "fully identified with God" requires further explanation. When two humans fully and mutually identify with one another, they do not cease to exist as ontologically distinct and definite individuals, even though experientially and evaluationally they lose their spiritual, evaluational, moral, and psychological distinctness. They continue to be who they are, while also being or becoming one with others in heart, soul, mind, strength, and spirit. Their ontological differences are still very real, but they no longer matter and may not even be noticed. In identification experiences, what happens to others happens to oneself, for better or for worse. Identifiers think, feel, and act toward others as toward themselves. In identification experiences, souls merge, intertwine, and mutually indwell. They become

[58] See David D. Olds, "Identification: Psychoanalytic and Biological Perspectives," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol. 4 (2006), pp. 17–46; and search for "psychological identification" on the Internet.

"members of one another." In spiritual-union-in-identification experiences, they discover their own deepest personal and social reality and fulfillment. They find their own truest and deepest selves in moral and spiritual union and solidarity with others. Their existential differences still exist intact, but these no longer matter or make much difference spiritually, mentally, evaluationally, morally, psychologically, or practically. Ego is lost in intense concentration on and absorption into the other, and no sense or thought of self remains.

Christians believe that Jesus was born of the flesh *and* born of the spirit, while the rest of us are born of the flesh and require *rebirth* into the spirit. Perhaps this means that Jesus, fully a human, was so sensitive and open to God's presence and purposes that he totally and constantly identified himself with God, who he still called "greater than I." Perhaps he identified with God while praying to, thinking about, speaking the words of, absorbing the values of, and doing the works of God. Perhaps Jesus identified so fully with God that his thoughts, values, words, feelings, and works were God's thoughts, values, words, feelings, and works (usually? always?). His compassion was God's compassion. His suffering was God's suffering. His love was God's love. His choices were God's choices. His deeds were God's deeds. These were all God's, yet they were also fully his—fully divine, yet fully human. We mere mortals can grasp or comprehend this mutual identification between God and Jesus better from the human perspective than from the divine side, but God also fully identified with Jesus, just as a loving human father identifies with his son or daughter—but infinitely more so.

Christians believe, at least implicitly, that Jesus internalized God by receiving God into himself, by recognizing without hindrance God's presence within himself and all of creation—experientially, psychologically, evaluationally, morally, and spiritually. No magic was involved, only complete interpersonal identification. Jesus wanted and endeavored to be Godlike, and Christians believe that he succeeded. In succeeding as a human being, he showed us what God is like and what God wants us to be like. In him, we can see God. He was Love and Word incarnate through mutual identification—both Jesus with God and God with Jesus. In praying to God and acknowledging that God "is greater than I," he recognized that he and God were both alike and different, both one and many, but the differences did not matter given his complete and overwhelming intrinsic bonding and spiritual

union with, sensitivity to, absorption in, moral harmony with, and intense psychological identification with God. Jesus valued God intrinsically, for God's own sake. God valued Jesus intrinsically, for Jesus' own sake. Through moral and spiritual identification, God became an integral part of Jesus' own unique personal reality, identity, values, ideals, expectations, experiences, intrinsic goodness, and common humanity. Through God's moral and spiritual identification with Jesus, Jesus became an integral part of God's own unique personal reality, identity, values, ideals, expectations, experiences, intrinsic goodness, and divinity.

Jesus was and lived what God expects of us; he lost or emptied himself (his constricted, self-centered, selfish, worldly, and merely human ego) and thereby found himself (his incalculably more inclusive moral-spiritual-identification-with-Godself). Psychologically, evaluationally, morally, behaviorally, and spiritually, God was an integral aspect of his own total human personal identity. As one with God through moral, spiritual, and personal identification, Jesus made all things holy by intrinsically valuing and identifying himself with everything (except evil) in every value dimension, that is, by identifying himself in his full humanity and individuality with all systemically, extrinsically, and intrinsically valuable realities in all of creation (at least, all that was humanly possible). He identified with all goodness, but he also took all the sin, suffering, and woe of the created world into himself and compassionately suffered them with and for us. Most if not all major world religions highly commend profound empathy, compassion, and their formal expression in the "Golden Rule."

In God, and as fully identified with God, Jesus loved wisdom, the world, goodness, and all of us, all of creation. In Jesus, and as fully identified with Jesus, God loved wisdom, the world, goodness, and all of us. We may at least speculate that, for Jesus, intrinsic identification experience was almost constant, everyone and everything was sacred; and God was experienced as all in all, as present in all. His spiritual union with God was almost uninterrupted—as much as humanly possible—except perhaps at the last, on the cross, when he felt God-forsaken.

When mere mortals approach Christlikeness or Godlikeness, they approximate such complete spiritual identification with God and, through God, with all in all. Christians find a route to this through Jesus. Others find other roads, good roads, to God. God is not an exclusivist, because God

loves every creature that God has made (both human and nonhuman). Just as Jesus imitated and identified with God, Christians strive both to imitate and to identify with Jesus—so much so that they can say meaningfully with St. Paul, "Not I, but Christ within me" (1 Cor. 15:45; Gal. 2:20). Muslims strive to imitate Muhammad, just as Christians strive to imitate Jesus.

Nancy Roberts, who regards herself as a Muslim Christian, explained convincingly and in depth that the imitation of Christ and the imitation of Muhammad both have the same end—the imitation of God.[59] After comparing Jesus and Muhammad with respect to such things as combativeness, forgiveness, kindness, and beauty, Roberts concluded, "Jesus Christ remains the more perfect exemplar, the more perfect guide to the *imitatio Dei*."[60]

Of course, not all will agree, but in love we can agree to disagree. Not all Christians are pacifists. Cobb pointed out that Mohammed, Moses, and David were military and political leaders who engaged in some violence and did not conform strictly to the pattern of nonviolent resistance usually exemplified by Jesus (except with the moneychangers in the temple). He suggested that, for some people, "a teaching and example that can actually guide behavior on the world stage may be seen as superior to one that is applicable only in limited contexts. For this reason, despite the great reverence in which Muslims hold Jesus, Mohammed is seen as standing above or beyond him as the supreme prophet."[61]

Jesus fully identified with all of God's children, as well as with God—so much so that he could say almost literally of the poor and needy that "inasmuch as ye have done it (given help, relief, etc.) unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," and with the dire admonition, "Inasmuch as ye did it not [give help and relief] to one of the least of these, ye did it not unto me" (Mt. 25:45). Jesus made no distinction between insiders and outsiders (such as the Samaritans), though he had to learn this from a Samaritan woman. Most Christians live by such distinctions, especially those who relate to Muslims and Jews as outsiders, strangers, aliens. Christians must constantly ask themselves if they are that sensitive and responsive to the poor and to the needs, aspirations, and intrinsic worth of everyone. Do Christians

[59] See Nancy Roberts, "*Imitatio Christi, Imitatio Muhammadi, Imitatio Dei*," *J.E.S.* 47 (Spring, 2012): 229 and 248.

[60] Ibid., p. 245.

[61] Cobb, *Process Perspective II*, p. 179.

really do unto others as they would be done unto? Are Christians that Christlike? Most Christians are Christlike or Godlike only intermittently and by degrees, but totally inclusive moral and spiritual identification, both with God and with the poor and "least of these," is an ultimate goal of ongoing sanctification or spiritual development. Note that al-Jifri called it "spiritual ascension."[62] All monotheists recognize the importance of constant moral and spiritual growth. "Sanctification" is a common Christian word for this.

Ideally, growth in identification spirituality culminates in complete awareness of and complete psychological/evaluational identification with all good-making properties of everyone and everything, everywhere and always. Abundant living consists precisely in including all positive value everywhere within oneself through identification with it, thereby becoming a profoundly transformed self, a more Godlike self. This inclusive internalization of external goodness is not restricted to moral goodness, though that is a significant part of it. Ideally, we should endorse, affirm, identify with, and rejoice in every desirable moral and nonmoral trait or property of everyone and everything—including persons of other faiths. Thereby, all goodness can become our own goodness in an unselfish way that rejoices in goodness for others, not in goodness exclusively for oneself. Thereby, our lives can attain maximal richness or abundance. Thereby, we rejoice empathetically with all who rejoice, while weeping compassionately—at least internally or metaphorically—with all who weep. And, we do something about it: We bear one another's burdens.

In practice and in our finitude, we actually know and identify ourselves intimately with the goodness in and of a mere handful of others, but we can at least cultivate the spiritual disposition to identify ourselves with all goodness in all and for the sake of all. God is indeed all in all and present in all, and God loves every creature that God has made for their sakes as well as for God's own sake, but in our finitude we will never be God (or Christ, or Muhammad, or Moses). Through growth in grace and spiritual identification, we can participate ever so slightly in supreme goodness in our own unique cultural, human, and individual ways. Persons of all monotheistic faiths may aspire to such abundant living and identification-union and solidarity with God and others, though all must answer for themselves.

[62] al-Jifri, "Loving God and Loving Neighbor," p. 83.

Identification spiritualists in all times and places endeavor to identify with and include within themselves all the good-making properties of the founders, sages, and saints of the great historical religions. Christians identify most specifically with Jesus and his disciples; Muslims, with Muhammad and his successors; Jews, with Abraham, Moses, David, etc. Saints of all faiths identify with the goodness of all in all and respond forgivingly, compassionately, and correctively to the badness of all in all.

As Volf indicated, Christians distinctively insist that Jesus' death on the cross "takes away the sin of the world."[63] Technically, this is called "atonement." We cannot explore this in depth here, but there are many theories of atonement—the substitution theory, the ransom theory, the moral example or influence theory, and many others. No one of them counts as orthodoxy or is universally accepted as precisely the correct and only account of *how* Jesus "takes away the sins of the world."

Identification spirituality offers another understanding of how Jesus redeems vicariously and how the saints can participate vicariously in that redemption. Through Jesus (the Suffering Servant, God's metaphorical Son), God so loved the world and took the sins, failures, and sufferings of the world upon and into Godself—as and while Jesus himself did so. God internalized and fully identified with Jesus from beginning to end, even on the cross. God suffered with Jesus. God forgives sinners, as Jesus forgave those who crucified him. Through identification with others, Jesus took human suffering and wickedness upon and into himself as he identified intensely, empathetically, compassionately, forgivingly, and responsively with everyone's pain, loss, poverty, social inferiority, and sinfulness. In his own identification experience with others, all such things really were "done unto him." Jesus wept and agonized over such things, as does the Christian God—as would any God of love. God wept as Jesus wept.

Like God and Jesus, Christian saints (all saints everywhere?) forgive, bear burdens, and carry crosses (metaphorically speaking). They live abundantly, but they also suffer and make sacrifices. They put people over systemic formalities (for example, doctrinal, legalistic, and ceremonial "purity"), just as Jesus did. Saints forgive, as Jesus forgave, and as God forgives. Saints have the right beliefs and do the right thing for the right rea-

[63] Volf, *Allah*, p. 152.

sons, just as Jesus did, but they acknowledge their own fallibility and allow others to live and let live and to think and believe for themselves. They take care of the poor and needy, just as Jesus did. They do unto others as they would be done unto, as Jesus did. Saints have the right motives, desires, affections, dispositions, and deeds, as Jesus did. Saints identify positively and intensely with all excellences everywhere, and they suffer with and from all evils everywhere, as Jesus did. In such ways, Jesus had it all. He excelled in all value dimensions—so Christians believe. Can this be said of other spiritual "avatars"? This genuinely open question invites further consideration.

As far as humanly possible, and by degrees, nonsaints (most religious people) also take the goodness, righteousness, excellences, shortcomings, and sufferings of others into and upon themselves when they identify intrinsically with them. "Bearing our sins, griefs, and sorrows," together with "vicarious goodness or righteousness," makes very good sense in identification spirituality. Jesus did it and had it. Like Jesus, their foremost example, Christian saints become suffering servants who forgive and bear burdens and crosses, their own and others'. They walk in his steps—all the way to the cross if necessary. Just as Jesus fully identified himself with God, who fully identified with Jesus, Christians strive to identify themselves as fully as possible with Jesus and his goodness and, through him, with God as present in and to all – including all who sin, all who suffer, all who believe and worship otherwise, and all who flourish, excel, and rejoice. Ideally, they live and act accordingly. For Christians, having the heart, soul, mind, and strength of Christ means identifying fully with him and, through him, with God—and through God with all in all. The sinlessness of Jesus becomes their sinlessness through identification. Muslim saints relate in similar ways to "the Prophet Muhammad's complete and utter devotion to God"[64] as their example for holy loving and living. By degrees, the saints succeed. By degrees, even the greatest human saints also fail.

Loving someone means fully identifying with that one without losing one's own personal identity. Christians believe that Jesus was love incarnate, both human and divine. Some theologians may object to "psychologizing" Jesus, but, if Jesus was not a forgiving, loving, compassionate, and "God-intoxicated" person, then what was he?

[64] *A Common Word between Us and You*, pp. 60 and 76, n. 11.

Would an identification spirituality explanation of how Jesus and God were "one" appeal to Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Unitarians? This is an open question. All must answer for themselves. The Jewish Scriptures preceded Jesus, so they say nothing about him. The Qur'ān, which came much later, does speak of Jesus in—what seems to Christians—both positive and negative terms. Some of these negatives are based largely on taking such words as "Son" and "Father" much too literally, too crudely, too pseudobiologically. As Volf successfully explained, Christians do not do this. Even for Christians, "Father" and "Son" are metaphorical words.[65] Not even Christian fundamentalists are quite that literal-minded.

Christians may have other problems, beyond the scope of this discussion, with the Qur'ān's portrait of Jesus. Differences among Christians, Muslims, Jews, and other monotheists will always remain, even after they agree on One God of Love and the necessity for loving one another. Yet, perhaps all could relate lovingly, peacefully, and respectfully in a common world for the common good. Perhaps all could resolve to live and let live, think and let think, and agree to disagree on many issues, just as most Christians agree to disagree with other Christians, most Muslims with other Muslims, and most Jews with other Jews. Perhaps all could live in profound love, fellowship, respect, justice, repentance, forgiveness, and peace with one another and with all others. On that day, God's realm will have come.

Finally, some very important questions remain for interfaith dialogue. Is the sort of abundant living, identification spirituality, and loving union or identification with one God and with one another outlined here a good thing, a desirable thing? Would our lives be richer or poorer for it? If so, why do we not do it? How can we learn to do it? Do or should monotheists have this much in common? Are counterparts to identification spirituality present in faiths other than Christianity? Christian and non-Christian monotheists must answer for themselves.

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[65] Volf, *Allah*, pp. 133–138.