
CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM: THE SAME GOD AND SEMANTICAL EXTERNALISM

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This paper may be classified as belonging to the area of philosophical theology and to the analytical philosophy of religion too. Its central aim is to provide a semantical underpinning for the identity thesis (hereafter IT). IT claims that the term ‘God’ as used by Muslims and Christians has the same reference, and that there is a sufficient similarity in the understanding of God between Christianity and Islam that we may say that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. Put in the terms of Fregean philosophical semantics, IT claims that the term ‘God’ as used in Islam and Christianity has the same reference (Ger. *Bedeutung*) and sufficiently similar sense (Ger. *Sinn*) that we can say that the God of Islam and Christianity is the same. My central thesis in this paper is that a basic semantical underpinning for IT is provided by semantical externalism (SE). Let’s call this thesis SEIT. Beside those already mentioned, there are many other implications of the findings of this paper. One of them is reinforcing of dialogic universalism. Dialogic universalists believe that dialogue, ethical consensus, and cooperation between people belonging to different cultural and religious horizons are possible. An important foundation of this belief is the belief that most important religious and cultural horizons have a common ultimate origin. Therefore, arguments in favour of IT are the arguments for the one of most important pillars of dialogic universalism. A very elegant and attention-grabbing defence of IT was presented by a Christian Protestant theologian, Yale Professor Miroslav Volf in his book *Allah: A Christian Response*.¹ I develop my argument for SEIT mostly by reference to Volf’s defence of IT in the mentioned book. Such approach will make the points of my argument clearer and more understandable

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (Edition Kindle, 2011).

because it places them in a relatively well-known context. Furthermore, it makes clear that the “target” of the paper’s arguments is not a sort of strawman or some fictional opponent but that these problems concern a quite lively current debate. That our essay is not just shadowboxing becomes more understandable if we are aware of practical ethical implications and relevance of IT.²

The structure of the paper is the following. First, I present an outline of SE. Then I briefly sketch Volf’s argument for IT. In the third, concluding part, I show that SE is very relevant for the crucial components of Volf’s argument. These components concern the reference of Christian and Muslim believes in God, the understanding of love and its relationship to God, the Trinity, God as the Creator and as an omniscient being. My argument is twofold. On one hand, I argue that SE provides a very good semantical basis for Volf’s argument and IT in general. On the other hand, I argue that SE is compatible with the components of Volf’s argument. Among them is Nicholas of Cusa’s twofold argument for the Trinitarian nature of God. This argument Nicholas presented in his works *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*.³ It is partly based on the premise that Logos is an internal Image of God. Further, SE is compatible with the conception of God as the Creator, and God as an omniscient being. These last two claims are central integral parts of Christianity and Islam.

This paper philosophically reinforces Volf’s important theological contribution to the realization of peaceful and dialogical coexistence among Muslims and Christians. The importance of such coexistence is obvious in the face of violence in the contemporary world. The perpetrators of this violence present themselves as true followers of a particular God. Besides, Muslims and Christians represent a half of world’s population.

² Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, part IV.

³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the peace of faith (De pace fidei)*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond, accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.appstate.edu/~bondhl/bondpeac.htm>; Nikola Kuzanski / Nikolaus Cusanus, *O miru među religijama / De pace fidei* (Sarajevo: Connectum 2005) [Bilingual (Croatian–Latin) translation/edition of *Nicolai de Cusa Opera omnia, vol. VII*, Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, ed. Raymond Kilbansky and Hildebrand Bascour (Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1959)]; Nicholas Cusa, *A Scrutiny of the Koran or Cribratio Alkorani*, The Great Library Collection by R.P. Pryne (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Kindle edition, 2015).

I Semantical externalism

Hilary Putnam argued for the thesis that reference cannot be explained by intrinsic characteristics of representations (he opposed the so called magical theories of reference).⁴ In this framework, he presented - in his now classical essay "The Meaning of 'Meaning'" - the famous Twin-Earth thought experiment, and presented and explained theses and concepts of his semantic externalism: *intension (stereotype)*, *extension (meaning, reference)*, *division of the linguistic labour*, indexicality of the most terms, causal relations needed for reference ... According to Putnam, the error of the traditional philosophy of language is that it did not take into consideration neither the contribution of others (division of the linguistic labour) nor the contribution of the world (indexicality of most terms). A better philosophy and a better science about language must take into account both⁵. Putnam's work was importantly supplemented by Tyler Burge⁶ and some other philosophers. The main claims of semantic externalism are: 1. All meanings are not in the head; 2. We cannot individuate all meanings without taking into consideration some aspects of the environment of the person (organism); 3. Intension does not necessarily determine the reference.⁷

⁴ Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," in *Mind, Language and Reality, Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975), 215–271; Hilary Putnam, "A problem about reference," in *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991), 22–48; Hilary Putnam, "Two philosophical perspectives," in *Reason, Truth and History*, 49–74; Hilary Putnam, "A theory of reference," in *Renewing philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1992), 35–59.

⁵ "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," 271.

⁶ Tyler Burge, *Foundations of Mind: Philosophical Essays, Volume 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007); Tyler Burge, "Individualism and the Mental," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4: 73–122, reprinted in Tyler Burge, *Foundations of Mind: Philosophical Essays, Volume 2*, chap. 5; Tyler Burge, "Cartesian Error and the Objectivity of Perception" in *Subject, Thought and Context*, ed. Phillippe Pettit in John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 117–136; Tyler Burge, "Individualism and Psychology," *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 3–45, reprinted in Tyler Burge, *Foundations of Mind: Philosophical Essays, Volume 2*, chap. 9; the same, "Individuation and Causation in Psychology," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 70 (1991): 303–322, reprinted in Tyler Burge, *Foundations of Mind: Philosophical Essays, Volume 2*, chap. 14.

⁷ Among critics of semantic and methodological externalism it is worth to mention Fodor (Jerry A. Fodor, "A Modal Argument for Narrow Content," *Journal of Philosophy* 88 (1991): 5–26; Jerry A. Fodor, *A Theory of Content and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); Jerry A. Fodor, *The Elm and the Expert: Mentalese and Its Semantics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts

It seems that naturalism (ontological or methodological) doesn't imply semantical internalism or externalism. So for example, Jerry Fodor is a naturalist and at the same time internalist; Fred Dretske⁸ is a naturalist as well, yet he is an externalist. Philosophers involved in the discussion about externalism (antiindividualism) *versus* internalism (individualism) are (mostly), at least in some respects, all naturalists or at least they naturalistically limit the area of their discussion. That is the reason why it took (more than) twenty years that somebody⁹ realized the importance of semantic externalism for philosophical theology; since many philosophical theologians are anti-naturalistically oriented and for that reason they (alas) do not know important works and discussions of naturalistic philosophers at all (they are simply not interested in them) or they do not understand them very well.

Claims of SE have important philosophical implications or effects. Let me mention only two of them: 1. SE is the basis of one of the most important anti-sceptic arguments in modern philosophy, which is based on the brain-in-a-vat thought experiment, which was presented by Putnam in the article with the same title. On the basis of SE, Putnam inferred a justified conclusion that brain in a vat is not possible. 2. American philosopher Robert Howell has presented arguments for the thesis that SE is incompatible with the creationist theism.¹⁰

The essence of Putnam's argument from his article "Brains in a vat"¹¹ is maybe most easily to explain by comparing the following two statements: 'I am a brain in a vat' and 'I do not exist'. Putnam argues: If I do not exist then the statement 'I do not exist' is false. So, 'I do not exist' is necessarily wrong if it is true that I do not exist. Similarly, it holds true for the statement 'I am a brain in a vat'. If I am a brain in a vat then the statement 'I am a brain in a vat' is false. Consequently, the

and London, England: MIT Press, 1994). (Putnam-Burge version of) SE was rejected also by Davidson (Donald Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 310–311).

⁸ Fred Dretske, *Naturalizing the Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: A Bradford Book, The MIT Press, 1995).

⁹ Robert Howell, "The skeptic, the content externalist, and the theist," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 (2011): 173–180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hilary Putnam, "Brains in a vat," in Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, 1–21.

statement 'I am a brain in a vat' is necessarily false, if I am a brain in a vat. The statement 'I am a brain in a vat' is in the case of a counterfactual situation, if I were a brain in a vat, false, if SE is true, because it claims that we are only a brain in a vat on the brain's "picture", and not a real brain in a vat. In short, it says that we are something else as a real brain in a vat (and consequently it is false). This is Putnam's argument for the thesis that the hypothesis that we are a brain in a vat is self-defeating. Formally speaking we can say that for the statement 'I am a brain in a vat' the following holds true (the same as for the statement 'I do not exist'): If p, then 'p' is necessarily false. Putnam pointed out, that nevertheless a brain in a vat is physically possible, it is not really possible. This possibility is eliminated by philosophy, not physics.¹²

Putnam thinks that hypothesis that I do not exist is self-defeating. Here he agrees with Descartes. Self therefore exists. Afterwards he proves that the hypothesis that we are a brain in a vat is self-defeating, that outer world exists (we are in causal relations with it). But the world which is the object of my thought and of my speech may be pretty different from what I think. I grasp the world and parts of the world with which I am in a causal and reference relation only through my concepts (intensions or stereotypes); but the real world or its structure may be different from my grasping of it and it has layers and structures which are unknown to me. I cannot grasp the world in any other way but only through my intensions or stereotypes. That is Putnam's inner realism. It is inner because I cannot grasp the world differently but only through my stereotypes and intensions, and realism because the object of my thinking is nevertheless the real world with which I am in a causal relation. This is really a variant of Kant's philosophy. Kant: There must exist a world on its own, a thing in itself. What would otherwise affect my senses? Yet only the world of phenomena is accessible to me. Putnam: There exists a real and objective world (world on its own) which has causal effects on me, but I can grasp it only through my stereotypes. Further, we can say that by Putnam's distinction between reference and stereotypes in a way Frege's distinction between sense and reference is preserved: references are referents of my thought (things with which we

¹² Putnam, "Brains in a vat," 15.

are in a causal relation), and senses are stereotypes through which we experience or grasp those referents.

Tyler Burge has in a series of articles presented several thought experiments in favour of the externalist (or as he called it anti-individualistic) position. He ingeniously and convincingly argued for the thesis that the representational natures of mental states of persons/organisms can be different despite the identity of individualistic descriptions of persons/organisms. To put the same claim in other terms: person's'/organism's broader states can be different despite the identity of their narrow states. Burge's thought experiments are of two kinds. The first are supposed to show that the representational features of some mental states depend on the mental or social environment of their subject. Experiments of the second kind suggest that the representational properties of some mental states depend on the non-mental environment of their bearer. Burge enriched Putnam's achievement with different examples (thought experiments) which help us understand better the implications and scope of Putnam's discovery and of SE in general.

Before we go on, let me make another very important remark. The opponent of Putnam and Burge is semantic internalism, sometimes called also (semantic) individualism. Internalists claim that all mental states can be properly individuated - regarding their representational properties and for the needs of explanation of behaviour -, independently of the aspects of the environment of the subject of mental states. So strictly taken it is enough one counterexample for externalists to falsify the account of internalists (individualists). And, that is what Burge and Putnam has done. They don't claim that semantical properties of all linguistic terms/mental states depend on environment, that there is no meaning without environment, and that it is not possible that there is a thought about something that doesn't exist. This is not an adequate definition of SE that Putnam and Burge defend, and of the position that I call SE in this essay. SE is a more moderate position. It claims only that there are *some* linguistic terms and mental states whose semantical properties can't be explained without taking into account the environment of their bearer. If we define SE as a position that the semantic features of *all* linguistic terms and mental states depend on the environment, then we get a caricature of SE, a strawman that is easy to refuse

justifiably. Robert Howell¹³ did this mistake and that is the reason why his argument about the incompatibility of SE and creationist theism is flawed. But on the other hand, I should add, for the sake of clarity, that the reference of the terms ‘God’ as used by normative Christianity and Islam are a kind of terms that are semantically dependant on particular aspects of the environment – including historical causal social chains - of their users.

Important part of the IT and SE compatibility is the compatibility of SE and the omniscience of God because the last is part of both, normative Islam and normative Christianity. I think that SE is compatible with the traditional Christian idea of God who created the world with His intention. God is omniscient, so God’s descriptions or intensions always correspond to the thing to which God refers. God knows all (secret) structures. Because there are no secret structures for God, all His intensions completely correspond to the thing to which He refers. Let’s take as an example God’s idea of light. God had an image of light. This image covers all the knowledge about light that He created. There can be nothing in God’s environment that it is not already in God’s mind. And God is the only such being. There can be nothing in God’s environment that it is not already in God’s mind, and at the same time God is aware of everything what is in His mind and also of that that He is aware of that. And for God only holds true that He is such a being that there can be nothing outside His mind what is not already in His mind. So God is the only being for whom it is impossible that He is in identical narrower states, and in different broader (semantic) states. An identical narrow states/different broader states situation is possible only with beings who have not got absolute knowledge about things they refer to. So it is possible that a human being does not know that the chemical structure of the liquid they refer to as water is H₂O.

2 Volf’s argument for identity thesis

Why is IT important? Volf answers that God is a condensation of the fundamental values of a believer. Therefore, if the God of Muslims

¹³ Howell, “The skeptic, the content externalist, and the theist.”

and Christians is the same then they (can) agree about the fundamental values. This fundamental convergence is very important for peace and coexistence among Muslims and Christians. Volf does not deny that Muslims and Christians have some different views regarding God. This is an obvious fact. His thesis is that we may claim that despite those differences the God of both is the same. What are his arguments for IT? The main argument is that both, Christians and Muslims, accept two commandments as central: “Love your God” and “Love your neighbour”. Let’s call this the love commandments thesis (hereafter LCT). He argues that the genuine sense of understanding of these two commandments is not so different that we could say that they are two different commandments in Islam and Christianity. His argumentation for IT and LCT is based on the views of reputable and representative scholars and leaders of Islam and Christianity. From the side of modern Christian he mentions Pope John Paul II who said that the God of Muslims and Christians is the same.¹⁴ The second is Pope Benedict XVI (hereafter Benedict). However, in his case the matter is a bit more complicated.

Volf starts with the commentary of Benedict's famous speech at the University of Regensburg.¹⁵ In it, Benedict makes a distinction between a God who is Reason, and a God who is so transcendent that we can say nothing adequate about Him in our categories and therefore we may describe Him as totally transcendent Will. One may interpret Regensburg lecture as claiming that the first God is a Christian God and the second is Muslim.¹⁶ This suggests that the God of Muslims and the God of Christians is not the same. In addition, Benedict quotes the statement of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus that the new thing that Islam has brought is only violence¹⁷, and many got the impression that Benedict actually agrees with the Emperor.¹⁸ But accord-

¹⁴ Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 27.

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” September 12, 2006, accessed December 7, 2017, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.

¹⁶ Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 19, 23–25.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections.”

¹⁸ Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 22.

ing to Benedict, the fundamental illness is not violence but rather “a profoundly mistaken idea about the nature of God, namely, that God is an unreasonable and capricious deity.” Violence is only a symptom of it.¹⁹

This lecture caused a stormy response of Muslims.²⁰ Benedict gave it only seven months after he commented events connected with the Danish cartoons affair. In the comment of the cartoons affair, Benedict opposed the desecration of religious symbols, but at the same time he refused as improper any violent reactions to such desecration. The last was his criticism of Muslims who reacted violently. However, it seemed that, in sum, he basically agrees with the Muslims and he is an ally of them in this case.²¹ Thus the surprise and (correspondingly) indignation among Muslims were so much bigger after his Regensburg lecture. Their response was so indignant that the Catholic Church was forced to respond. So two weeks after the lecture, on September 25, 2006, Benedict gave additional statements in the Castel Gandolfo where he invited the Muslim leaders.²² He quoted *Nostra Aetate*. His words about the relationship between Christian and the Muslim faith may be interpreted as an expression of his account that nevertheless the God of Muslims and Christians is the same. Benedict confirmed his standpoint from the Castel Gandolfo in his speech on May 9, 2009, in al-Husseini bin Talal mosque in Amman, Jordan.²³ So at the end we may conclude that Benedict too shares Pope John Paul II’s standpoint about IT.

However important it may be the Christian opinion about what is the genuine Muslim faith, Wolf thinks that regarding this issue the Muslims’ own interpretation is the most relevant. Also in this respect, he can allege very convincing evidence. The first is the already mentioned open letter to Benedict. The second is a representative document writ-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20ff. There was a lot of fury but the main response was rational and measured. This was an open letter signed by reputable Muslim scholars and leaders: “Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI,” <https://archive.secondspring.co.uk/media/openletter.pdf>, December 7, 2017. The letter confronted pope’s claims about Islam from the lecture. For the Wolf’s comment on the letter see his *Allah: A Christian Response*, 25ff.

²¹ Wolf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 19–20.

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

²³ *Ibid.*, 37–38.

ten by highly reputable Muslim leaders from all over the world – who belong to different branches of Islam - titled “A Common Word Between Us and You”.²⁴ It was published on October 13, 2007, exactly one year after the “Open letter”.²⁵ This longer document also refuted the negation of IT. “A Common Word Between Us and You” was followed by the so called “Yale Response” to “A Common Word Between Us and You”. It was published originally in the *New York Times* in November 2007 under the title “Loving God and Neighbour Together: A Christian Response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You'”.²⁶ Volf says that it “did not address directly the question of whether God of the Bible and the God of the Qur'an are the same God. But the drafters – I was among them – worked with that assumption.”²⁷

This is an outline of Volf’s starting point in his book *Allah: A Christian Response*. In the rest of it, he argues in more detail in favour of his central thesis, IT, and explains its significance and implications. As a truly paradigmatic, representative and influential Muslim thinker whose views are in favour of IT, he takes the Islamic scholar and theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1056-1111). Among our contemporaries, we should as first mention the Islamic philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr as Volf’s “ally”. Volf’s Christian historical “heroes” from the past are Nicholas of Cusa and partly Martin Luther. Let us first briefly present Nicholas’ view about one God for all.²⁸

Volf distinguishes two approaches. One is dialogical, the other is exclusivist. Volf’s example for the second is Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (1405-64), later Pope Pius II, who urged the sultan Mehmed II to become a Christian.²⁹ But this same person also worked for the Crusade.³⁰

²⁴ “A Common Word Between Us and You,” accessed December 7, 2017, <http://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>; Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁶ Harold W. Attridge et al., “Loving God and Neighbour Together: A Christian Response to 'A Common Word Between Us and You'.” <http://www.acommonword.com/loving-god-and-neighbor-together-a-christian-response-to-a-common-word-between-us-and-you/>, December 7, 2017.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 40ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

Nicolas was different and instead of the Crusade, he picked up what he called conversation. With it, he meant the discussion in which we seek the truth in a way that we are explaining positions and arguing for or against them. But the aim is not to overcome the opponent but rather to find the truth. Nicholas' argumentation is complicated and sophisticated, but there are some central components of it that can serve us for its outline. Volf reconstructs it from Nicholas' works *De pace fidei* and *Cribratio Alkorani*.³¹ Nicholas' starting point is a "Platonic" position. Like Plato, he believed that what all people desire is the good.³² Their representations about the good might be - and in fact are - different, they might be false or wrong, but the intended object of all human desires is nevertheless the good. The main line of his argumentation is that the God of Muslims and Christians is the same. Truth, they have different beliefs about him, but despite that their God is the same.³³ The central Muslim's reason for their refusal of Christian faith is the Christian belief that God is a Trinity. When one interprets this claim as saying that God is not one, then of course IT is not acceptable, neither for Muslims nor for Christians. But according to Nicholas, this is not true. The starting point of his argumentation is that God is transcendent and that our categories for Him are not appropriate. But still, there is something we can know about God. This knowledge is accessible to us through revelation. And according to revelation, and also according to great Christian tradition (Augustin, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Aquinas ...), God is one. God is prior and beyond any numbering, because numbers and numbering are categories pertaining to the immanent world and God is radically transcendent. But why is then revealed that God is a Trinity, why God must be a Trinity? There are two reasons for that. The first (1) is that God is the Creator; and the second (2) that God is Love. Ad (1): God is the Creator of the world. If He is the Creator of the world then He must have had - according to Nicholas - an internal image of the world before its creation.³⁴ But this is possible only if God is a Trinity. There is no doubt according to

³¹ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

³² Nicholas of Cusa, *On the peace of faith*, paragraph 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 4 and 5; Nikola Kuzanski, *O miru među religijama*, editors' notes 6, 7 and 8.

³⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the peace of faith*, paragraph 23.

revelation – both Muslim and Christian - that God is the creator of everything. So, He must be a Trinity. One more thing must be stressed here in order to make this argumentation understandable. This is a distinction between *having* and *being*. God is the only being about whom we may say that there is nothing that He has. If we speak correctly, we must say for every God's attribute that He *is* this attribute and not that He *has* it. For God every *having* is *being*.³⁵ So it isn't true that God has an internal image, He is an internal image. This internal image is internal logos, internal word, which is Word or Logos. This Logos is Jesus Christ, the Son. But it is not true that God has the Son, He is the Son. Similar argument Nicholas applies in case of love. God *is* Love. God doesn't just have love and the object of his love. He *is* Love and He *is* the object of his love. This entails that God is a Trinity.³⁶ For both Muslims and Christians there is no doubt that God is only one, that there is no other God beside God, that God is a perfect being, and that He loves. Likewise there is no doubt that both believe that God is the Creator of everything. But what the Muslims according to Nicholas don't "know" is that this implies that God is a Trinity.

In a nutshell, Nicholas' twofold argument for the thesis that God is a Trinity is the following: 1. God is perfection; 2. If God is perfection then He is the Creator and He is the supreme love, i.e. Love; 3. If He is the Creator and Love then His creating and Love must be independent of everything that is not Himself, i.e. God; therefore 4. God is a Trinity. Both Muslims and Christians accept (1) that God is the Creator and that His love is supreme. Hence, it follows that also Muslims should

³⁵ *Ibid.*, paragraph 26.

³⁶ Nicholas Cusa, *A Scrutiny of the Koran or Cribratio Alkorani*, loc. 1175–1184. There Nicholas argues that if God is the supreme happiness then He shouldn't lack neither fatherly nor filial love. And if God is the Fecundity then He himself has to be fecund as a parent. Therefore God has to be a Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Love to the Son who is the Holy Spirit (Nicholas of Cusa, *On the peace of faith*, paragraph, 24). In this same paragraph Nicholas explains the terms 'Father,' Son,' 'Spirit,' the relationship between them etc. The Word says the following: "Some call the unity 'Father,' the equality 'Son,' and the nexus 'Holy Spirit,' since these terms, although not proper terms, nevertheless, appropriately signify the Trinity. For from the Father is the Son and from the unity and equality of the Son is the love or Spirit". About the Spirit as the connection between the Father and the Son see also editors' note 32 in Nikola Kuzanski, *O miru medu religijama*.

accept that God is a Trinity. But they don't accept it because they misunderstand or misinterpret the claim that God is a Trinity.

Luther's account was on one hand in accordance with Jesus' answer to the Samaritan woman who asked Jesus whether the God of Samaritans or the God of Jews is the true God. "You [Samaritans] worship what you do not know," Jesus responded, and added: "We [Jews] worship what we know, for salvation is from Jews".³⁷ For Luther, Christians are like Jews and all others – heathens, Jews, Muslims, even "false" Christians are like Samaritans. They worship the same and the one true God, "creator of heaven and earth and moral lawgiver". But this is only one side of his paradoxical position. On the other side, Luther said that although it is true that the object of worship of Christians and Muslims is the same, Muslims distort this object almost beyond recognition because they do not believe that God is a Trinity, and that His Son died on the cross. So on the other hand Luther claimed that – despite the same object of reference of the Christian and Muslim worship – "Muslims heats and mouths this true God morphs into no God at all".³⁸ Another "paradoxical" feature of Luther's attitude was the following. He claimed that what non-Christians - including "false" Christians - don't know about God is that God's love is gratis and that it doesn't depend on good deeds. However, Luther's own actual attitude and actions were not in accordance at all with such gratis love. Nevertheless, he firmly believed in IT.

After Volf pointed to the two great Christian theologians who argued for IT, he has turned to his own argumentation. The reason is that despite the brilliancy of Nicholas and Luther, he doesn't find their argumentation entirely satisfactory and he in general thinks that today we must reflect upon this issue afresh. He starts with the remark that according to the Muslim's view, Muslims and Christians share the same revelation and therefore they refer to the same God.³⁹ But on the other hand, Muslims and Christians don't share the same scripture. Therefore, we need to demonstrate that their understandings are similar enough so

³⁷ Jn 4: 22.

³⁸ Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 70.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 88.

that we may say that IT is true. Thus, the key term of Volf's approach is "similar enough". The premises upon which he builds his further argumentation are:⁴⁰ 1. The descriptions of an object/God don't have to be identical in order to refer to the same object/God; 2. In order to refer to the same object/God the descriptions of an object/God may not be radically different. There are two positions possible. One is that we claim that for God being the same a total identity is necessary. The other is that we stress common characteristics although we at the same time pay attention to differences. But not every difference is decisive in the sense that it makes IT false. From the book of Halbertal and Margalit, Volf draws the moral that it depends on the particular religion which of the mentioned two accounts we choose.⁴¹ So which is appropriate from the Christian point of view? According to Volf, it is the second because it stresses the commonalities. He justifies his choice by referring to St. Paul's conception of love. Love rejoices in truth and it doesn't see only the wrong.⁴² Afterwards, he deals with the following questions: Are the beliefs of Muslims and Christians similar enough - and in relevant ways - for IT to be true?

Volf points out that the truth of the claim that the descriptions of Muslims and Christians are similar enough depends on which Muslims and Christians one refers to. He himself has in mind Muslims and Christians who accept and take into account what Volf calls "normative versions of their religions".⁴³ These versions are connected with the Bible and Qur'an with robust ties. They appreciate the tradition of interpretation and discussion about these holy texts. These believers are majority mainstream in both religious traditions. They take their faith seriously and are at the same time aware that many great teachers have diverged about many important questions and have discussed about them. Among these questions are also those concerning the nature of God.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴¹ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 93.

⁴² Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 96.

Volf argues for IT in two steps. First, he demonstrates that there is a sufficient similarity between descriptions of God. Then he argues that there is a sufficient similarity in God's commandments. At the same time, he points out that he argues from a distinctively Christian point of view. Muslims might agree with him, or they might not and rather have their own approaches to this issue. Let us look now at the first step, a sufficient similarity of descriptions.⁴⁴ Volf starts with the discussion about three claims/beliefs that are central to both, Muslims and Christians and are components of a sufficient similarity between the Muslim and Christian views: 1. There is only one God, one and only divine being;⁴⁵ 2. God created everything what is not God;⁴⁶ 3. God is different from everything what is not God.⁴⁷ (Volf 2011, 97-98) Latter on Volf points to the fourth claim: 4. God is good.⁴⁸ Thus we have four important beliefs about God about which Muslims and Christians agree. They are - according to Volf - sufficient for IT. All who accept these four claims about God refer to the same "object" when they speak about God.⁴⁹

The second part of Volf's argument for IT concerns God's commandments. Firstly, he points out the following: If we agree that Muslims and Christians accept the same commandments as the commandments of God, this fact alone doesn't entail that they have the same God. But if we prove independently that their God is the same then the fact that they accept the same commandments additionally reinforces the claim that they have the same God. Then he carries out a comparison of the commandments. He starts with two great commandments.⁵⁰ Jews, Christians and Muslims agree about the first and greatest commandment – "Love your God with all your being".⁵¹ The same is true about the second great commandment – "Love your ne-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 97ff.

⁴⁵ Mk 12: 29; Qur'an, Muhammad, 47: 19.

⁴⁶ Gen 1: 1; Qur'an, Al Shura, 42: 11.

⁴⁷ 1 Tim 6: 16; Qur'an, Al An'am, 6: 103.

⁴⁸ 1 John 4: 16; Qur'an, Al Buruj, 85: 14.

⁴⁹ Volf 2011, 101.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 104ff. Cf. Vojko Strahovnik, "Divine command ethics, cosmopolitanism, fundamentalism and dialogue," *Annales* 27, 2 (2017): 379-386.

⁵¹ Matt. 22: 37, citing Deut. 6:5; Qur'an, Al Zimar, 39: 45.

ighbour as yourself” - which is as important as the first.⁵² He further points out that for every commandment of the Decalogue, there is a corresponding commandment in Qur’an. The only exception is the one about Sunday. Afterwards Volf makes a comparison, commandment after commandment, and alleges six claims about God about which Muslims and Christians agree:⁵³ 1. There is only one God, who is one and the only divine being. 2. God created everything that is not God. 3. God is radically different from everything that is not God. 4. God is God. 5. God commands that we should love Him with all our being. 6. God commands that we should love our neighbours as ourselves. Christians believe that this agreement entails that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. The first four theses imply IT. The other two, which summarize the basic God’s commandments, reinforce IT. This is true about normative Christianity and Islam, i.e. two religions, expressed in their holy books and interpreted by great teachers of their traditions.⁵⁴ Regarding God and love, Muslims and Christians have in common the following three beliefs: 1. God loves; 2. God is just; 3. God’s love encompasses God’s righteousness. God’s love is primary and basic in relation to the justice/righteousness. Love is the foundation of justice. Later on he adds – to the three claims above – the fourth claim of agreement between Muslims and Christians: 4. People should love their neighbours as they love themselves.⁵⁵ Then Volf turns to more detailed scrutiny of what is meant with ‘love’ and ‘neighbour’, who is neighbour etc. and he provides additional evidence for the similarity between Christian and Muslim understanding of love. At the end, this way leads him (back) to God and God’s love. To summarize his analysis and conclusions, we may say the following: The bottom line of Volf’s argument is that Christians and Muslims worship the same God and that their understandings of God and God’s commandments partly but sufficiently overlap for IT being true. In the first line, the overlapping consists of the claims that God is one, benevolent, and that He commands us to love Him with our entire being and our neighbours as

⁵² Matt. 22: 39; Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 105.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 109–110.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

ourselves. At this point, I will stop with the presentation of Volf's argument for IT because what I have said thus far suffices as a basis for the justification of SEIT and some other relevant conclusions.

3 Conclusion

SE is very relevant for the discussion about the question whether Muslims and Christians have the same God. SE was introduced by Hilary Putnam. Putnam convincingly argued that not all meanings are in the head, and that the reference of the majority of terms is determined by their causal relations to the aspects of the person's or organism's environment. In the case of the term God the reference of 'God' depends on the causal relations of the speaker, no matter how they understand or represent "in their head" the nature or characteristics of the referred object. To put the same point in different terms: the extension, i.e. reference of the term is not determined by the intension (in Putnam's terminology stereotypes in the speaker's head) but rather by the causal relations between the speaker and the referred object. So Muslims and Christians can have the same God even if their understanding, i.e. representations or descriptions of God, differs. What matters is only that they are connected with the causal chain to the same object, i.e. God. This causal chain is by majority of speakers of a social nature. It is determined by the original act of naming or referring. The speech acts of Abraham/Ibrahim, who is recognized by both Muslims and Christians, can be accepted as such original acts of reference to God. Muslims and Christians, and their linguistic communities, are connected - through historical and social linguistic causal chains - to Abraham's/Ibrahim's utterances about God, and via them with their referent, i.e. God. So they refer to the same God as Abraham/Ibrahim. The reference of their uses of the word "God" is determined by the reference of Abraham's/Ibrahim's use of it.

On the basis of SE, we may defend another thesis, which is even more general: If all genuine revelations are revelations of the same transcendence, although in different intensions and from different aspects, and if speakers about this transcendence, to whom it was revealed, bear causal relations to the same transcendence, then they speak about the

same “object” or about the same God. Their understanding⁵⁶ of this transcendence might be different but the referent or extension of their speech and thoughts about transcendence/God is the same.

If having the same God is of high ethical importance, because it is a positive factor of agreement about basic values, then SE is of high ethical relevance. Another example of ethical and theological relevance of SE is the argument of Nicholas of Cusa - that if God is the Creator then He must be a Trinity because Creation demands an internal Image or Word (Logos) in God. Here we should point out that Nicholas’ position doesn’t contradict SE. SE claims only that solely in case of speech acts/thoughts which do not create things to which they are directed the meaning is determined by the aspects of the speaker’s/thinker’s environment. In other cases - we can call the thinkers/speakers involved in such cases ‘creators’ - the meaning is given already by their intensions, by what is “in” the original and creative speaker/thinker. God is, according to Nicholas, Christianity, and Islam, the Creator. In God’s case, there can be no mismatch between intensions and extensions of God’s thought/speech. So there is no contradiction between SE on one hand, and Nicholas’ standpoint, Christianity and Islam on the other. Maybe someone would say that this is a reduction of SE and that it simply means that SE is not valid for creators, therefore for God. I don’t find this formulation appropriate. Nothing what we have said above limits SE. SE claims that the meaning depends on the relevant aspects of the thinker’s/speaker’s environment. Meaning depends on the environment if there is relevant environment. But in the case of creators, there is no relevant environment. Yet the utterances or thoughts of creators, before their creations exist outside “their heads” are not meaningless, they are meaningful. But what does give them their meaning? The only rational answer that I see is: their representations of the object that doesn’t exist (yet), their intensions/stereotypes about it. In order to avoid thinking that SE and creationism are incompatible we must bear in mind that SE doesn’t claim that thoughts/utterances about non-existing objects are as such meaningless. Nor it claims that a creator as such can’t have false

⁵⁶ In other words, their representations – or in Putnam’s terms their stereotypes, their intensions – of it.

ideas about their creation. According to Christianity and Islam, God is omniscient and this option is excluded. But SE doesn't say anything about (non)omniscience of creators. What SE excludes is only that if there already is a relevant aspect of environment then it, and not intentions in the head of the speaker/thinker, determines the meaning.

To conclude: It is clear that SE provides semantical foundation and reinforcement of IT. It is mostly relevant for the first constituent of IT, i.e. the thesis that Islam and Christianity refer to the same God. But the truth of this thesis is relevant also for the second part of IT, i.e. that genuine Muslim and Christian understanding of God is sufficiently similar to say that their God is the same. If the revelation to Muslims and Christians has the same origin, i.e. the same God, than the thesis that IT is not true - if we interpret Islam and Christianity truthfully – seems unconvincing. Thus the crucial question is whether we recognize or not that the same God was revealed not only to Jews and Christians, but also to Muhammad; or, to put the same question in the terms of SE, whether Abraham, Moses, the prophets, apostles etc. on one hand and Muhammad on the other were “causally connected” to the same God, or not. If we believe that there is only one God, the question may be put even shorter: Has God revealed Himself to all, not only to Jews and Christians, but also to Muhammad, or not? If our answer is positive, we are faced with many difficult questions as for instance: Should Muhammad be recognized by Christians as a prophet?⁵⁷ But regardless the answer to this last, and other similar questions the positive answer on the former question about revelation makes denial of IT unconvincing. And if we accept IT, then also the formulation that there is only a “strange kinship”⁵⁸ between Christianity and Islam maybe doesn't sound as exactly an appropriate one.

⁵⁷ Wolfgang Pfuller, “Sollte Mohamed aus christlicher Sicht als Prophet anerkannt werden? Eine veraltete Fragestellung,” *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 65 (2014): 131–144.

⁵⁸ “Ich schlage vor, im Blick auf den Islam mit Carsten Colpe von einer fremden Verwandtschaft zu reden.” This is a quotation from Michael Weinrich, “Glauben Juden, Christen und Muslime an denselben Gott? Systematisch-theologischen Annäherungen an eine unzugängliche Frage,” *Evangelische Theologie* 67 (2007): 259.

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