

First in a series

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

by Jon D. Levenson

In I Kings 18, the prophet Elijah, confronted with widespread defection to Baal among his countrymen, poses a stark challenge: “If the LORD [the conventional English rendering of the four-letter Hebrew name of the God of Israel] is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” When the people refuse to commit themselves, Elijah proposes an empirical test, which, despite the best efforts of Baal’s own prophets, the Canaanite deity fails, and the LORD alone passes. The people shout out the obvious lesson: “The LORD—He is God! The LORD—He is God!”

Elijah’s initial challenge implies that the Israelites are worshiping two deities, either separately or syncretistically, but it also implies—and the people tacitly agree—that there is but one “God,” the only open question being who he is. Elijah does not accuse his hearers of polytheism or atheism; he accuses them, rather, of catastrophically misidentifying the one particular being who alone is worthy of the title “God.” The prophet readily acknowledges that the apostates believe in God, but insists that they do not properly or adequately know the LORD.

An argument can be mounted that since monotheism means that there is only one God, no monotheist can ever accuse anyone—certainly not another monotheist—of worshiping another god, only (at most) of improperly identifying the one God that both seek to serve. This is all the more the case with the three religious traditions that claim to worship the God of Abraham, since these exhibit complex patterns of dependence and reciprocal influence. The charge that the two other traditions have seriously misidentified the God of Abraham—a charge made by each in various ways and times—is not necessarily the same as the claim that they worship another god.

To the extent that God is characterized by attributes such as uniqueness, omnipotence, foreknowledge, justice, mercy and the revelation of his will in prophecy and scripture, then Jews, Christians and Muslims can easily detect the selfsame God in the LORD of Judaism, in the triune God of the church, and in Allah (which is simply the word for “God” used by Arabic speakers in all three traditions). There is a problem with such reliance on attributes, however, for it actually describes a Supreme Being who is closer to the God of the philosophers than to the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob. To state the point differently, to the extent that the one God of the universe is rendered through narratives such as those in the scriptures and not through abstract attributes, the claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God cannot but appear, if not false, then certainly simplistic and one-sided.

Part of the difficulty here is that Christians and Muslims share no scriptures. The Muslim attitude toward both testaments of the Christian Bible has traditionally run a spectrum that ranges from respect to a charge that large parts of them are rank forgeries (the figure of Ezra is a major villain in the latter view). But even the respect comes with a claim that Christians have dangerously misinterpreted their own holy writ—for example, in failing to recognize that passages about the Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel foretell the coming of Muhammad.

At times, the Qur’an manifests so much anger at Jews and Christians for failing to see that its teachings constitute the completion of their own scriptures that it pronounces

them to be enemies doomed to destruction. For their part, Christians have often seen the variations between the two sets of scriptures as Muslim distortions of the Christian Bible, as if the latter, and not the Qur'an, were the highest standard of truth—as indeed for them, but not for Muslims, it is. Even when the two sets of scripture speak of the same figure—such as Abraham, supposedly the common father of all three traditions—they tell some different stories and draw markedly different lessons, and this makes the term “Abrahamic religions” more problematic than at first seems the case. Abraham appears in the Qur'an as an important link in a chain of Muslim prophets that culminates with Muhammad.

Another term used to describe those three related traditions, “monotheistic,” is even more problematic. Although the Qur'an speaks respectfully and appreciatively of Jesus (and Mary as well), it insists that he is only a man, and not God or the son of God: “They are unbelievers who say, ‘God is the Messiah, Mary’s son.’” And since Islam also presents no counterpart to the Christian doctrine of original sin, it can only find all the more alien the orthodox Christian kerygma that God assumed human form to die willingly an excruciating death in atonement for the sin that has affected all humanity since the fall in the Garden of Eden. Indeed, the Qur'an goes out of its way to deny that Jesus died on the cross at all. To the extent that the Christian understanding of God entails the doctrines of Trinity, incarnation and atonement, it is therefore an understanding very different from that of Islam and one that has historically appeared to Muslims to be (at best) less pure and less majestic than their own monotheism.

It might be countered that we should not concentrate on doctrines, but on the ethics of the two traditions, the deeds they mandate. Carried to the extreme, this objection renders utterly irrelevant the question of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God (which, it should now be clear, is not the most helpful way to pose the issue). In less extreme form, however, the objection implies that one may productively learn about the identity of the God from the practices of his worshipers. Here, too, there are both commonalities and differences.

Jihad, much in the news since 9/11, is one aspect of Muslim ethics that for Christians occasions distress and causes some of them to deny that its practitioners worship the (Christian) God who commands the love of enemies and the practice of nonretaliation. Although a cottage industry has sprung up to define *jihad* exclusively as an internal struggle to gain self-mastery in order to act morally, the classic Muslim tradition also uses the term to denote war against unbelievers to extend the territory governed by Islam (an idea not without its historical analogues in Christianity and Judaism).

This is not, of course, to deny that the meaning can change or that many Muslims sincerely object to the violent denotation that the word has had. But some do not object, and their position is too well rooted in the tradition to be treated as a contemporary aberration, as if the whole Islamic tradition had somehow been hijacked along with four airliners on 9/11. One of the great ironies of contemporary Christian-Muslim relations is that some Christians who proclaim as a point of principle that there are many ways to be a Christian act as if there is only way to be a Muslim—the way of nonviolence and interreligious respect. It would be helpful for them to remember that Muhammad is a rough analogy not only to the religious visionary Jesus, whose kingdom was “not of this world,” but also to the conquering ruler Constantine, whose kingdom was very much of

this world; Islam has consequently had a vastly harder time abandoning its theocratic aspirations.

And it would be helpful for all Christians to acknowledge that their tradition, having mostly abandoned its own theocratic aspirations, has lost control of the culture in ways that cause distress to devout Muslims (but not them alone). I am thinking in particular of the narcissistic body culture and the preoccupation with sexual fulfillment and personal choice that increasingly characterize the West, suggesting to some Muslims a dangerous reversion to paganism and perhaps the moral impotence of Christianity as well.

In the last analysis, the Christian and the Muslim conceptions of the one God have enough in common to make a productive comparison possible, but as in any responsible comparison, the contrasts must not be sugared over. Were a modern Elijah to devise an empirical test to determine which tradition knows God best and worships him most appropriately, the test would, alas, quite fail to convince the members of the other tradition. The dialogue and dispute between Christians and Muslims, which goes back to Muhammad's own lifetime, will surely continue. One hopes it will do so without terrorism, demonization, political correctness or underestimation of the diversity internal to each religion.

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