

Second in a series

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

by *Lamin Sanneh*

If you accept, as Muslims and Christians do, that there is only one God, then it seems theologically imperative to say the God of one religion is none other than the God of the other. Was not the name “Allah” of Arabian Islam the same as the “Allah” of pre-Islamic Arab Christianity? Accordingly, it makes no sense on linguistic or historical grounds to make exclusionary claims for the name “God.”

If, on the other hand, Muslims and Christians worship essentially the same God, why do they not call themselves by one common name? Are Muslims and Christians misguided in the nominal distinctions they maintain between themselves with reference to the one God of their faith?

Such tough questions defy a simple dismissal or acceptance of the claim that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. It would seem that President Bush’s claim is adequate insofar as there is only one God, but inadequate with respect to God’s character, on which hang matters of commitment and identity, the denial of which would sever our ties to God.

The Five Pillars of Islam, for example, lay down the boundaries of Muslim practice and identity, with the suggestion that conflicting or different things said about God cannot be equally valid. The Qur’an proclaims: “The true religion with God is Islam” (3:17), and “Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion” (5:5).

Jesus made a corresponding exclusionary statement: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). Islam and Christianity both agree (and are similar here) that truth cannot coexist with its opposite, and is embodied in obedience.

It can be argued that what Christians and Muslims have in common theologically is more important than what divides them. This is Kenneth Cragg’s view, as in his remarks on the prayer tradition in Islam and Christianity (*Alive to God: Muslim and Christian Prayers*, 1970). Cragg also observes that Muslims and Christians no longer live in an isolated world. People of faith do not have the option of shutting themselves in. Can religious loyalties, he asks, “not be opened in their sympathies and fulfilled, outside their inner shape, in some exterior relationships?” Population, migration, production, development, health and medicine, family life, education—are not all these in the Muslim and Christian traditions common invitations to worship and prayer rather than secular sanctuaries from which the divine is excluded?

The theological conversation about interfaith relations is important, Cragg accepts, but he thinks there is an equally urgent need to move beyond theological propositions and to be informed by what he calls “a community of reverence,” “a converse of soul” in joint prayer and worship. The real test of dialogue is whether people in one faith community can make their own the prayers of another faith tradition, without making faith traditions predatory or obsolescent.

Cragg sees, for example, a bond between Lancelot Andrewes and Shah ‘Abd al-Latif, between Francis of Assisi and al-Ghazali, and between Søren Kierkegaard and

‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani. Turbaned or not, Muslims are not exempt from a similar challenge. Religion today is all about crossing borders, physical as well as spiritual.

The desire for unity among religions, Cragg thinks, is a holy one. Yet that desire should not make us impatient with what sets us apart. Muslims and Christians agree on the great subject that God exists and that God is one. They disagree, however, about the predicates they use of God. Much of the Christian language about God affirms Jesus as God in self-revelation, and much of the Muslim language about God seeks exception to that Christian claim.

The question, then, is whether their differences condemn Muslims and Christians to estrangement before God as subject. If predicates divide, the subject unites, or should unite. In the things they do and say about God, religious people diverge quite sharply. Yet Muslims and Christians both agree that it is the one God about whom they differ so strongly. They would not have differences without having in common this one God who inspires them and who lays a fundamental claim on their separate loyalty.

Christians pray “Hallowed be thy name,” and Muslims declare “Thee only do we worship.” Both ask for God’s guidance, but use different terms for this guidance even though finally it is God who does the guiding. “Guide us in the straight path,” the Muslim says in the fatihah, and “Deliver us from evil,” the Christian pleads in the Lord’s Prayer. In form and intention there is little to separate the two sides. Their disagreements are family feuds; their mutual jealousies, because of common ancestry; their sibling rivalry, on account of a common parentage.

People fight not just because they are different, but often because they are similar. Monotheist traditions are too close to ignore each other, with the effect that even their mutual compliments raise hackles, as the president’s remark demonstrates.

The bridge for interfaith understanding and peace grows from the principle of respect for the other. This respect offers an approach other than that of simplistic condemnation or approbation. It does not deny truth claims. On the contrary, affirmation of the other is based on truth claims: love of God and of neighbor, for example, is not just a polite suggestion, but the exacting absolute injunction of God who created us “in the image and resemblance of God.” It is when God and the neighbor become relative values as matters of individual preference or personal convenience that red flags should start to go up.

This respect for the other, accordingly, is not the preserving of the status quo, which one interpretation of President Bush’s remark might suggest. A Muslim as Muslim cannot be content with mere comparative curiosity about and postponement of Muhammad and his achievements. He or she would commend public commitment to Islam’s truth claims. By the same token, a Christian as Christian may not be content with the view of Jesus as only an ethical example. She would plead personal faith in him as divine truth.

To commend faith in that fashion is to concede that Muslims and Christians are within range of each other, rather than being mutually inaccessible. Their separate or exclusive commendation of faith elicits their proximity to each other, at least enough so that they may engage in mutual scrutiny.

That very process of scrutiny and commendation will likely change previous understandings and attitudes, and will most likely produce commensurate alterations in their faith traditions: conversion causes not just numerical change but mental shifts as

well. No faith tradition stands still or alone, except as a relic. Such are the implications of distinction in religious pluralism.

Lamin Sanneh teaches at Yale Divinity School.