Fifth in a series

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

by Umar F. Abd-Allah

As a Muslim, I am led by my understanding of religious history, languages and Islamic theology to say unequivocally that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. But at the outset I wonder if it is appropriate to ignore the political setting for discussing such a topic and its possible bearing on human lives. The quotations from George Bush and Ted Haggard—the first timely, the second reckless—give the appearance of offering theological clarifications, while each is firmly grounded in political bedrock. Can we undertake our query as an academic exercise and set aside its political context within the charged ambience of our times?

It is suggested that we not be encumbered in the discussion by what is politically correct. Political correctness is good etiquette and sensible advice for not getting punched in the nose. But this topic implicates much weightier concerns than mere political correctness—like fundamental considerations of moral responsibility and human rights.

As an educator, I have rarely encountered students who liked being told what they are to think; as a Muslim, I am naturally sensitive to attempts by others to define what I or my community believes. Few Jews or Christians would delegate to others the definition of themselves or their private and collective devotion. While welcoming the *Christian Century*'s commendable undertaking of this discussion, I remain as fundamentally interested in the current implications of the question "Do we worship the same God?" as I am with answering it. Will the question be taken as inquisitive or Inquisitorial? Who carries the burden of proof? Do we make similar inquiries equally of all groups? Would a negative answer—the preference of Ted Haggard and others on the Religious Right—imply negative consequences? If we were to insist that Christians did not worship the same thing as Buddhists or Hindus—not to mention agnostics and atheists—would that jeopardize basic rights, constructive dialogue and positive social engagement?

I take pride in Islam's centuries-long eminence as a global civilization, upholding religious tolerance at a time when it was little known and less practiced elsewhere and fashioning arabesques of unity in diversity out of the races and major denominations of Eurasia and Africa. I am also soberly conscious of the challenges of our time and the damaging, culturally predatory effect of religious fundamentalisms among us all. Human beings cast shadows, and so too the religious traditions in which they have a part.

Unity in diversity is a lofty goal and requires candor about what separates as well as what joins us; an arabesque begins with the integrity of its smallest parts. In 21st-century America, the quest for God's wisdom in our plurality is a religious aspiration worthy—and, I would add, natural—for us all. But as we continue along this path, we do well to keep the Islamic adage in mind, "When the scholar slips, thousands fall." Not all questions are dispassionate; some affect people's lives and well-being and should not be battered about in the political winds of the time.

We must first be clear about what we mean when we ask if Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Is it a question of indication and identity or of attributions, character and actions? Are we talking about subjects or predicates?

Ultimately, we must talk about both. By focusing on the subject—the ontological identity of the object we worship and the names we use to set it apart—we enter into an area of common understanding and broad consensus.

Etymologically, Jews, Christians and Muslims originally called God by virtually identical names. The Arabic All_h comes from the same root as the biblical "God" (El_hîm, h_-El_hîm and h_-Elôh) invoked by the Hebrew prophets or the Aramaic/Syriac Al_h_ presumably used by John the Baptist and Jesus. Historically, we have identified our "object of worship"—probably the literal proto-Semitic sense of All_h, El_hîm and Al_h_—as the God of Abraham. And, in general, homo religiosus—within and without the Abrahamic traditions—makes remarkably similar allusions to God, creator of the heavens and earth.

If, however, we insist on the predicates, then we enter into the difficult terrain of theological dispute and creedal dissonance. But predicates should not be forever avoided; they are detrimental only when emphasized to the exclusion or concealment of the subject.

We must, however, get our predications right. Closeness to God within Islam is not undeveloped or limited to the domain of mysticism; Islamic theological traditions affirm explicitly that God is at once both transcendent and immanent—temporal opposition does not pertain to the uncreated—and day-to-day Muslim culture reflects discernible intimacy with God even in mundane affairs.

Neither is the affirmation that humanity was created "in the All-Merciful's image"—an issue central to Jewish and Christian theology—foreign to Islam. It is, in fact, more frequently attested in Islam's authoritative scriptures than in the Bible and cannot be facilely attributed to "later traditions." While rejecting anthropomorphism, major traditions of Islamic thought—within and without the domain of mysticism—have given such texts a profoundly theomorphic explication, especially in conjunction with the epiphany of God's names in creation.

Although Muslims and Christians do not share identical scriptures, the traditional Islamic view of the biblical narrative is nuanced and often very well informed. We must also be careful not to oversimplify marginal positions that, in our time, may owe more to the legacy of German scholars like Julius Wellhausen than they do to the Islamic tradition, which, for example, debated not whether Ezra was "a major villain" but whether he was a prophet—and therefore infallible according to Islamic theology—or a righteous Israelite.

When focusing on the diversity of religious predicates, we might ask: "Does anyone worship the same God?" Can any faith or its followers sport an essentialist label? Which religion can claim to have held a monolithic theological view even within its creedal schools? Hillel and Shammai—the sagely Pharisaic "pair"—sat together at the head of the Great Sanhedrin but posited sharply divergent visions of God's character and actions. The Alexandrian Fathers and their counterparts in Antioch were not always affectionately immersed in Christian fellowship. For that matter, earlier Jews and Christians not only differed from their Hellenistic brethren on how they viewed God and Christ but held jarringly different notions of the basic structure of reality.

In Islam, the disparity between theological discourse of earlier and later centuries stands out visibly. Muslims can also hear to this day the echoes of earlier theological

battles between the literalists and the rationalists, whose formulations often stand in sharp contrast to those of the great theosophical Sufis like Rumi or Ibn ‘Arabi.

At its inceptive and most basic level, religion is unpredicated—a direct experience, often numinous and ineffable, but in all cases utterly individual. Creeds and theological predicates bring religion’s original spiritual domain within the reach of reason. Experience is translated into thought and discourse; definitions and propositions delimit numinous reality. Parameters demarcate lines of inclusion and exclusion, standards of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and, in due course, religion constitutes the basis of collective identity and social reality.

At the level of the worshiper, however, religious experience has a tendency to seek out its place of origin. Notwithstanding all of religion’s creedal statements and outward dimensions, worship grounds itself at the perceptual level within the heart and mind, where direct apprehension necessarily reveals patterns of infinite individuation. When a creedal formula is shared, each person sharing it forms, nonetheless, a unique psychological construct for what he or she believes about it. At the empirical level—alone with God—all believers, the religious and the less deeply religious alike, posit their own predicates and have their own compelling or not-so-compelling vision of God. At the existential level of living faith and inner constructs of belief, the clear-cut lines so essential to unified doctrine and distinctive creeds blur, and the world of faith becomes a kaleidoscope.

From a Muslim’s perspective, the premise that Muslims, Jews and Christians believe in the same God—the God of Abraham—is so central to Islamic theology that unqualified rejection of it would, for many, be tantamount to a repudiation of faith. From the Qur’anic standpoint, Muslims, Christians and Jews should have no difficulty agreeing that they all turn to the God of Abraham, despite their theological and ritual differences. Historical arguments between their faiths have rarely if ever been over what to call Abraham’s God or who was invoked by that call, and Islamic salvation history is rooted in the conviction that there is a lasting continuity between the dispensations of Muhammad, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and the biblical and extrabiblical prophets.

The Qur’an instructs Muslims to acknowledge openly and forthrightly that their God and the God of biblical religion is the same: “Do not dispute with the people of the Book [the Bible—Jews and Christians] but in the best of manners, excepting those of them who commit oppression, and say [to them]: ‘We believe in what was revealed to us and what was revealed to you. Our God and your God is one, and we are a people in [willing] submission to him” (Qur’an 29:46).

As Jacob Neusner, Tamara Sonn and Jonathan E. Brockopp have cogently demonstrated in *Judaism and Islam in Practice: A Sourcebook* (Routledge, 2000), Judaism and Islam share a “concentric character,” and their judgments about what matters between God and humanity generally agree. One would presume that, if Christians can accept partnership with Jews as worshiping the same God, they should have no insurmountable problems with Muslims, who historically have seen themselves as occupying the theological middle ground between Jews and Christians.

Bertrand Russell wrote, “The opinions that are held with passion are always those for which no good ground exists.” Many of the grounds enflaming passions today

between Muslims and non-Muslims have no good ground. If Judaism and Islam are concentric, Christianity and Islam have never been radically far apart. Not infrequently, they have been "too close for comfort"—geographically and theologically—although historically this was truer for Catholics than Protestants, to whom the Ottoman Empire gave active backing during the Reformation.

Süleyman I the Magnificent grounded his foreign policy on the defense of Germany's Lutheran princes and the Huguenots of France. Safiyya Baffo, a Venetian convert and Ottoman queen with some influence over Turkish foreign policy, wrote to her friend Queen Elizabeth in 1594, addressing her as "chosen among those which triumph under the standard of JESUS CHRIST" (her capitals) and emphasizing how Elizabeth's Protestant policies had stirred hope in Muslim hearts.

The 21st century may turn out to be a time of acute religious rivalry. New religious movements seem to be born every day; on all continents and in all faiths, fundamentalism is unlikely to prove transitory; and even liberal Christianity may find itself threatened by a new reformation emanating from the geographic South. Interfaith dialogue and cross-denominational understanding have never been more important. Perhaps the conviction that all the Abrahamic family worships the same God will help us triumph under his standard and stir hope in believing hearts.

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