

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

This study guide is intended for use with five articles published in the *Christian Century* in 2004. Five scholars responded to the question: three Christians, one Jew and one Muslim.

The materials included in this study work with adult groups of any age. There are several options for using it in small group class settings:

a 4-week study—Use articles by Levinson and Abd-Allah, and choose one of the articles written from a Christian perspective. Use a fourth session as an introduction or conclusion.

a 6-week study—Use all 5 articles plus an introductory or concluding session.

an 8-week study—Begin with 2 weeks of introduction, study all 5 articles, and end with a concluding session.

Background for the study

In preparation for leading this study, leaders should do some additional reading about the Muslim faith tradition. One fairly recent and accessible source is Diana L. Eck's *A New Religious America, How A "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001). Chapter Five, "American Muslims: Cousins and Strangers" provides a wealth of information about the growing community of Muslims in this country. We recommend it for everyone in the class.

Another excellent resource is the CD-ROM, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America*. This was developed out of Eck's leadership with the Pluralism Project. For more information, visit www.pluralism.org, which offers a wealth of resources. Click on "images," for example, to select from a number of slide shows that describe religious diversity in this country. Showing one of these slide shows is an excellent way to introduce this topic.

Included with each of the *Century* articles was this statement:

In late 2003 President Bush said, in response to a reporter's question, that he believed Muslims and Christians "worship the same God." The remark sparked criticism from some Christians, who thought Bush was being politically correct but theologically inaccurate. For example, Ted Haggard, head of the National Association of Evangelicals, said, "The Christian God encourages freedom, love, forgiveness, prosperity and health. The Muslim god appears to value the opposite."

Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God? The question raises a fundamental issue in interfaith discussion, especially for monotheists. We asked several scholars to consider the question.

Introducing the study

Listed below are suggestions for beginning this study. Use them to design an introduction for your class:

- The Qur'an, which Muslims understand to be the revealed word of God, was inspired by Muhammad, and is a book of revelations that were revealed over 23 years. It contains 114 *surahs* or chapters. The beginning of the Qur'an is used as a daily prayer by Muslims:

In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
Praise be to God, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
Master of the Day of Judgment.
Thee do we worship and Thine aid we seek.
Show us the straight way;
The way of those on whom thou hast bestowed thy grace,
Those whose portion is not wrath,
And who go not astray.

- On June 25, 1991, Siraj Waha, imam of Masjid al-Taqwa in Brooklyn, New York, offered the first Muslim invocation in the U.S. House of Representatives. He wove into his prayer one of the most familiar verses of the Qur'an: "Do you not know, O people, that I have made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other."

In commenting on this prayer Diana Eck has said, "The moment was historic, and the Islamic prayer for life in a pluralist society was arresting. Our religious and cultural differences should not be the occasion for division but, on the contrary, the occasion for the biggest challenge of all: that 'we may know each other'."

- Muslims greet each other in this way: *slam alaikum*—peace be with you
- Discuss the quotes from President Bush and Ted Haggard, concluding with your own response to the question, "Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?"
- Using newsprint or board, list group response to these questions:
 - What do we know about Muslims and their faith tradition?
 - Where do we begin a study of a dialogue between Christians and Muslims?
 - As a Christian, what concerns are at the top of your list?

•Use these quotes from *A New Religious America* to start a discussion:

"Muslims are truly cousins in the so-called Judeo-Christian world of the United States, and yet to many they also remain strangers about whom most Jewish and Christian Americans know little beyond the rough-hewn stereotypes of mass culture." (Eck, p. 225)

"Islam is the most misunderstood of America's religious traditions. Ironically, Islam is also theologically and historically closer to Christianity and Judaism than the traditions of the East, which should make it easier to understand." (Eck, p. 233)

Discuss the ways that Islam connects with Christianity and Judaism.

- Islam comes from the root which means peace, submission and commitment. Islam is peace through submission to living under new management—God's management. . . God is *Allah* . . . God is One—no partners, no family members, no associates. The Oneness of God is where a Muslim life of faith begins.
- If the world were a village of 100 people, this is how the religions of the world would be represented:

32 are Christians

19 are Muslims

13 are Hindus

12 practice shamanism, animism and other folk religions

6 are Buddhists

2 belong to other global religions, such as the Baha'i faith, Confucianism, Shintoism, Sikhism, or Jainism

1 is Jewish

15 are nonreligious (David J. Smith, *If the World Were a Village, A Book about the World's People*, Kids Can Press)

- Invite participants to complete this quiz:

Muslim quiz

1. *Islam* comes from the Arabic word for _____ which is very close to the Hebrew word *shalom*.
2. The name of their of the religion means _____.
3. Islam call God _____.
4. The Muslim holy book is called the _____ and is the teaching that God gave _____ through the angel Gabriel.
5. There are five main ways that Muslims give over their lives to Allah. These are considered to be the five pillars of Islam:
 - ◆
 - ◆
 - ◆
 - ◆
 - ◆
6. The most important sentence in all of Islam is called the _____:
"There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God."
7. Muslims fast for the month of _____, which is the ninth month of the Muslim moon-time calendar.
8. Muslims number about a billion people in the world today; about _____ Muslims live in the United States.

Suggestions for concluding this study

- 1) Invite participants to spend a few minutes in silence, reflecting on what they've learned and on questions they have about the topic. Pass out index cards and invite people to write down something they've learned on one side of the card, and a question on the other. Use these responses for discussion.
- 2) Consider inviting one or several Muslims to come to the group to share the experience of their religious tradition.
- 3) Discuss the challenges of "levels of dialogue" raised in the article written by Umar F. Abd-Allah. What commitments can this group make to participation in dialogue with Muslim, Christians and Jews regarding the God we all worship?
- 4) Provide time for individual reflection and/or writing in response to the title of the series, "Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?"

Discussion questions for use with individual articles

"Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?" Jon D. Levenson

- 1) One of the problems of sharing understandings of God is that "the one God of the universe is rendered through narratives such as those in the scriptures and not through abstract absolutes." Do you think there are abstract absolutes about God that can be claimed by Christians, Jews and Muslim?
- 2) What are the commonalities and differences in the ethics of Christians and Muslims and "the deeds they mandate"?
- 3) Where do you see your own views represented in this article? In response to the last paragraph of the article, discuss the places in the article that made you stop to consider what you know and understand about Christianity. . . about Muslim tradition.

"Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?" Lamin Sanneh

- 1) Discuss Sanneh's question in the second paragraph: "Are Muslims and Christians misguided in the nominal distinctions they maintain between themselves with reference to the one God of their faith?"
- 2) Sanneh identifies "theological commonalities" shared by Muslims and Christians. What would you add?
- 3) What would it mean for your congregation to consider being "a community of reverence," "a converse of soul" in joint prayer and worship with Muslims?
- 4) Discuss responses to Sanneh's statement that "Religion today is all about crossing borders, physical as well as spiritual."
- 5) How do you respond to Sanneh's statement that "Muslims and Christians are within range of each other, rather than being mutually inaccessible?"
- 6) Where do you see your own views represented in this article?

"Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?" J. Dudley Woodberry

- 1) Discuss the four common points Woodberry identifies as descriptions of God: the one to whom we refer; how unity is expressed; the common themes of mercy; and the description of the power of God.
- 2) Woodberry also discusses the difference in the ways God is described in the Bible and in the Qur'an. What is the most beautiful name of God for you? (A resource to use in relation to this question is the children's book by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *In God's Name*, Jewish Lights Publishing.)
- 3) Where do you see your own views represented in this article? What would you like to add?
- 4) What are some of the commonalities and differences expressed in the viewpoints of the three authors of the articles in this series?

"Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?" S. Wesley Ariarajah

- 1) Ariarajah says that: "most Christians, despite their lip service to monotheism, in fact are unconscious polytheists. They allow for other gods to listen to the prayers of their neighbors. They draw boundaries for 'their' God and decide where and when their God is allowed to listen, act and bring about wholeness." How would you respond to this statement. In what ways does your practice of the Christian faith reflect monotheistic and/or polytheistic understandings?
- 2) Ariarajah writes that in Asian tradition, there are four ways to answer a Question: yes, no, I don't know and silence. He adds a fifth response—yes and no. **Yes**, Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Yet, because we have different visions of God, our religious traditions are different. **No**, Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God. Because we come to God through the experience and teaching of differing faith traditions, we bring different images of God. What else would you add in response?
- 3) Ariarajah says that "Happily no one has a monopoly on God." What do we most need to learn from each other as we engage in interfaith dialogue? (Ariarajah adds that the answer we give to this question "says something about who we are and who our God is.)

"Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?" Umar F. Abd-Allah

- 1) Discuss responses to Abd-Allah's question: "Can we undertake our query as an academic exercise and set aside its political context within the charged ambience of our times?"
- 2) When you think about your faith tradition. What shadows does it cast?
- 3) The author suggests that "unity in diversity is a lofty goal and requires candor about what separates as well as what joins us." When you think about

the topic of this series, what are the major things that separate us and unite us as Christians and Muslims?

4) The author discusses levels of dialogue, and distinguishes between the empirical level and the existential level when he says, "The clear-cut lines so essential to unified doctrine and distinctive creeds blur, and the world of faith becomes a kaleidoscope." If you were to enter a dialogue with a Muslim, what would be important for you to share with this person about the Christian faith from both an empirical and an existential level?

Muslim quiz answers

Islam comes from the Arabic word for **peace**, which is very close to the Hebrew word *shalom*.

The name of the religion means "**giving your life to God in a peaceful way.**"

Islam calls God **Allah**.

The Muslim holy book is called the **Qur'an** and is the teaching that God gave **Muhammad** through the angel Gabriel.

There are five main ways that Muslims give their lives to Allah. These are considered to be the five pillars of Islam:

- **five-times-a-day prayer—bowing down to face Mecca**
- **almsgiving—giving to the poor**
- **fasting during the daytime in the month of Ramadan**
- **saying the *shahadah*, a profession of faith in One God and the Prophet Muhammad—"There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God."**
- **travel to the holy city of Mecca at least once in a lifetime**

The most important sentence in all of Islam is called the **shahadah**:
"There is no god but god, and Muhammad is the messenger of God."

Muslims fast for the month of **Ramadan**, which is the ninth month of the Muslim moon-time calendar.

Muslims number about a billion people in the world today. About **5 million** Muslims live in the United States.