

The *God* in Franklin Graham's words

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

January 27, 2016

Franklin Graham [wrote the other day](#) that “Islam denies that God has a son.”

Note the unqualified, singular, capitalized *God* in that statement. It seems like something you’d say if you believed that the monotheistic faiths have critical, even irreconcilable differences yet do at some level worship the same (i.e., only) God. Or, [as we *Century* editors put it](#), that Christians, Muslims, and Jews “may believe very different things about Abraham’s God, but it’s still his God.”

Graham, suffice it to say, very much does not believe this. “I can tell you,” he continued, “Islam and Christianity clearly do not worship the same God.”

Yes, you can tell us. But no, this is not at all clear, not even in your own statement.

I’m not just going for a cheap gotcha here. I get that for Graham, “Islam denies that God has a son” is essentially shorthand, a pithier sentence to write than “The deity that Islam believes in doesn’t have a son.” I’m reading it against his intent.

But the slipperiness of the language—the ease with which a person commenting on this subject might suggest the opposite of what they mean—is just the point. Christians and Muslims both believe in *God*—using similar language, and assigning some (not all!) of the same attributes. So if your aim is to emphasize the gap between the two faiths, talking about *God* complicates things considerably. It highlights the complexity of the subject at hand.

And what Graham and the other guardians of evangelical boundaries don’t seem to appreciate is that so many of us who support [Larycia Hawkins](#)—Wheaton alumni like me, [other faculty](#), [Hawkins herself](#)—haven’t signed up for the flip side of Graham’s black-and-white view. We don’t say “I can tell you—Islam and Christianity clearly *do* worship the same God.” The point isn’t that the two traditions’ concepts of God are equivalent in a simple or obvious way.

The point is that the “same God” question is a thorny one, even for orthodox Christians—and has been since long before Wheaton’s or Graham’s sense of evangelical particularity came on the scene. The tradition has answered the question both ways. [The college’s statement of faith](#) doesn’t even mention it. This should be—has been—something Christians can disagree about without being anathematized.

But the Wheaton administration [has made it clear](#) that they don't just answer to historic orthodoxy here, and they don't just answer to the college's statement of faith. They answer as well to the evangelical culture, where people like Graham have more influence than any theologian.

And while the people who write doctrinal statements for Christian colleges may have a healthy sense of *adiaphora*, that doesn't mean the people who look to Franklin Graham for leadership do. Popular evangelicalism has long had a tendency to list almost everything on the “essential” side of the ledger, to disagree to disagree. Stray outside some boundary, and you may be in trouble—whether or not it's the boundary of a central issue.

Also whether or not it is *explicit*. Faculty objections to the move against Hawkins have focused on this question of unstated boundaries, and rightly so. It's very hard to teach effectively if you can get fired for breaking rules that haven't even been articulated. And when such rules favor the blunt tribalism of American culture over the subtlety of Christian tradition, it must be pretty discouraging to even try.