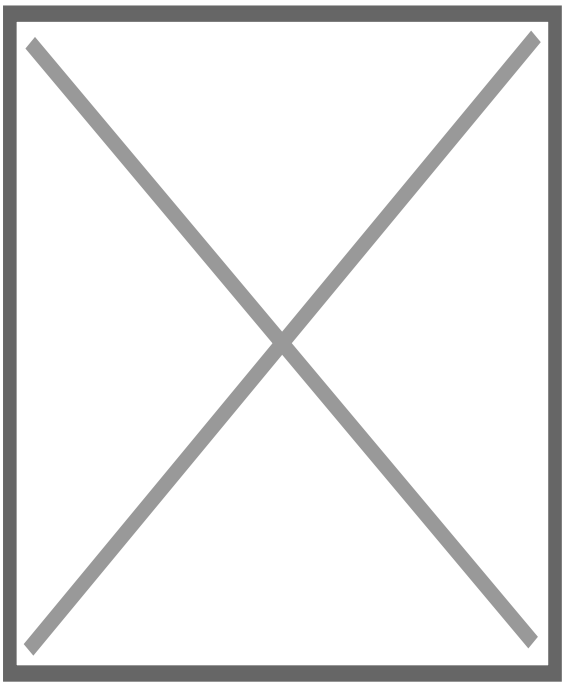
God(s) of Abraham: Sibling rivalry among three faiths

by Pim Valkenberg in the July 6, 2016 issue



Abraham's Departure, József Molnár, 1850.

These days, the course I teach to undergraduates on Christian-Muslim relations is more relevant than ever. Five years ago, I could maintain that the United States seemed quite resistant to the fever of Islamophobia, but lately politicians and others have made remarks that cast Muslims as the enemy. Fear of refugees, immigrants, and strangers is breeding an atmosphere in which Islam is equated with violence, danger, and evil.

Relations between Christians and Muslims have often been hostile, polemical, and even violent, but there is also a history of seeking a better way. Just over 50 years ago, in *Nostra aetate*, the Roman Catholic Church declared that Christians should turn away from enmity and work with people of other faiths for peace and justice. In regard to Islam specifically, it noted that Muslims adore the one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and that they revere Jesus as a prophet even though they do not acknowledge him as God.

A conversation between Christians and Muslims, pursued in humility and friendship, should acknowledge areas of agreement and disagreement. Such a conversation must address at least these three topics: God, Christ, and violence.

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? That is not only the question at stake in the dispute earlier this year between Wheaton College and faculty member Larycia Hawkins (who said that they do). It is also the question investigated by a number of books edited by some of the sharpest theological minds.

Yet the question is somewhat strange and probably wrongly formulated. “The same God” seems to suggest that there are a number of gods around, including “the Christian God” (the trinitarian God who is also the Father of Jesus Christ) and “the Muslim God” (who is almighty and maybe merciful but most certainly not the Father of Jesus Christ). Asking whether two people worship the same God sounds like one is asking whether two people drive the same car or have the same insurance company, or enjoy the same company of friends.

If we believe in a God who is Creator of all that exists, however, there cannot be a second candidate to share that name. As Thomas Aquinas reminds us, there is no general category of deities of which the Christian God would be an instantiation. On this point, Christianity agrees with Judaism and Islam: the Lord of Israel is One and there is no deity except Allah. If God is One and if the world is created by God, we simply cannot truly worship any God but God. We will most certainly worship this God in different manners, but it will be the One God who is God. The only other possibility is that we are worshiping something that is falsely claimed to be God.

In the theological tradition, the possibility of false worship is usually associated with the devil or the Antichrist. In the modern context, one thinks of people worshiping power, beauty, fame, or money. Since God created all that exists, we can never tell for sure whether we really worship God or whether we only think we are worshiping God but are really worshiping some ideal or idol that we have made for ourselves. The religious traditions tell us that we can detect what we are doing only by looking at our acts: if we worship fame or beauty, this will most probably be visible in the lives that we lead. If we worship the Creator, that will probably also become noticeable in the things we do.

Many Christians who deny that Muslims worship the same God as they do point to Jesus Christ as the focus of the difference. After all, Jesus testified that “nobody comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). And if we follow the old rule that the way of praying indicates the way of believing, we could also say that Christians pray to God through Christ (and sometimes pray directly to Christ) and therefore someone who does not follow this way seems not to worship the same God. This is the kind of theological reasoning that leads many Christians to deny any value or truth to the worship performed by Muslims, for they deny the divinity of Christ and therefore the Trinity, which is a necessary truth about the Christian God. Our God is trinitarian, theirs is not, so it is not the same God we worship.

But the trinitarian identity of the Christian faith is quite often used as a demarcation when it does not need to be. Consider, for example, that most prayers in the New Testament, such as the Lord’s Prayer, are not explicitly trinitarian—yet no Christian would say that the Father of Jesus Christ is not worshiped in those prayers.

The fact that the Lord’s Prayer is a Jewish prayer leads us to another point: often the same people who deny that the God to whom Muslims pray is the same God as the one to whom Christians pray have no problem identifying the God of the Jews with the Christian God, even though the esteem for Jesus in most forms of Jewish theology is far below the esteem for Jesus in the Qur’an and the Islamic tradition.

Why are Christians willing to confess worshiping the same God together with Jews but less willing to accept worshiping the same God together with Muslims? The answer is that Christians have learned to accept the Jewish origins of Christianity, and they often see their own religion as the fulfillment of the Jewish religion that remains attached to the same God nevertheless. This is the lesson that Christians have learned since the Shoah, and *Nostra aetate* clearly builds upon this formulation.

With Islam, however, things are different, since it is a later religion that originated when Christianity was already well established. A new revelation in the form of the Qur’an revealed to the prophet Muhammad seems to undermine the central position of Christ in Christianity. It is easier for Christians to recognize their elder sister Judaism than it is to recognize their younger sister Islam.

The genealogical relationship of the three religions leads to an asymmetry: it is easier for Christians to accept Judaism as a true religion worshiping the one God than it is for Jews to accept Christianity as such; and it is easier for Muslims to accept both Judaism and Christianity as authentic messages revealed by God than it is for the two older religions to accept the new message sent to Muhammad.

The genealogical relationship also may explain the violence found in the foundational scriptures of these three religions. Judaism reacted negatively to the new religion that made Jesus the origin of a new covenant because it did not need such a new covenant; Christians argued that the Jews did not see the truth in their own scriptures and were blind to the fact that Jesus Christ fulfilled the messianic prophecies. Even though we do not find a full-fledged supersessionism in the New Testament—the claim that the old covenant is no longer valid after the coming of the new covenant—we do find an oft-repeated trope according to which the law is no longer determinative of true religion now that Christians have received the truth in Christ.

In a similar way, the Qur'an argues that God has revealed himself to Jews and Christians through the messages sent to prophets Moses and Jesus, and if Jews and Christians had taken their own scriptures seriously, they would have seen that it was possible for God to reveal himself again through the prophet Muhammad. Instead, Jews and Christians trusted their own traditions rather than trusting God's mercy.

In the case of the Qur'an, the negative judgments of Jews and Christians became mingled with a political situation in which Muslims fought against Jewish tribes and a Christian empire. The Islamic hermeneutical rule of abrogation caused later, more belligerent texts to outweigh earlier texts, and thus violence became the default mode for dealing with Jews and Christians.

The principle of abrogation (*naskh*) has been invoked by Muslims to explain discrepancies between different passages in the Qur'an by connecting them to different contexts. God revealed the Qur'an during a period of some 23 years, and some passages reflect the minority situation of the first Muslims. The regulations announced in these passages are regarded as abrogated by later regulations that were announced when Muslims had formed a politically stable community.

The rules on drinking wine are an example. The first revelations seemed to appreciate the joy of drinking while limiting its use during times of prayer. Later revelations restricted and finally prohibited all use of intoxicants. The idea that a divine pedagogy is at work in this sequence of interpretation is not unknown to Christians, who use a similar approach to explain some of the institutions of the Old Testament: at first God permitted customs such as polygamy, but they were abrogated by Jesus.

In the case of the Qur'an, such interpretations are necessary to deal with seeming contradictory rules of law (Shari'a). Some exegetes have used the rule of abrogation with respect to other matters as well. That is how texts advocating good relationships with Jews and Christians began to be overshadowed and even outlawed by texts advocating violence against them.

Many Muslims today think that this was a wrong development, and they seek to reverse the procedure, arguing that the original revelations of the Qur'an in Mecca are the most universal and the later regulations revealed in Medina are secondary and limited. They also point out that the Qur'an clearly implies that the three Abrahamic religions go back to the divine revelations to Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Nevertheless, the Qur'an also suggests a process of corruption (*tahrif*) according to which Jews and Christians did not remain true to the original covenant with God. Many statements about Christians and Jews in the Qur'an declare, for example, that "some of the Jews and Christians are true believers, but some are idolaters and not to be trusted." Many of these statements indicate an era of economic conflicts and suggest that Jews and Christians cannot be trusted theologically and politically if they steal from the poor or act without justice. The prophetic message of the Qur'an becomes secondary when the Muslim community becomes more politically powerful.

In the later texts of the Qur'an, God often seems to endorse violence, most significantly when it labels Muslims who do not venture to fight against nonbelievers as hypocrites. In these texts, it seems that God demands warfare. It is difficult to reconcile such texts with the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. So it sometimes does

seem as if Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God.

Yet it is not difficult to find texts of different kinds in all three religions' scriptures—including texts with different assessments of violence—and the differences can often be explained in light of the context in which they were written. Christians in the first three centuries did not have the same economic and political power that they did under the emperor Constantine in the fourth century. The wandering group of Jews that followed Moses out of Egypt did not have the same power as the Jewish community at the times of Joshua or Ezra. And the small group following Muhammad in Mecca did not have the same power as the burgeoning Muslim community in Medina.

Power corrupts, and people can seek to compensate for the lack of power by using belligerent language, which is what we see in the books of Maccabees or the book of Revelation. It is what we see in Islamic counterstates nowadays.

When I become doubtful about the future of relationships between Muslims, Jews, and Christians, I often go back to the story of where it all began: with God calling Abraham to start something new. Reading this story makes me realize how much religious violence is already present in Genesis—violence against women, children, visitors, and strangers. It is as if God is saying to Jews, Christians, and Muslims: you need to learn to confront this problem together.

The common claim to be a part of the history that God started with Abraham at least offers a point of departure for a better understanding. Of course, our common reading of and reflecting on these texts will not end the violence between the three religions, and it will certainly not end the misuse of religion by those who are hungry for power. Yet such common reading may help us understand the rivalry a bit better and seek ways to navigate the differences. It will help us realize that no one is free from negative images of religious and cultural others. Above all, it may help us understand that violence is not advocated in any religious text itself but in the persons who interpret and explain these texts with certain goals in mind.

Christians who argue that they do not worship the same God as Muslims may cite theological reasons, but very often they are driven by political goals. Whenever that is the case, it is helpful to remind ourselves that Christ has taught us to aim not for power or political gain, but for justice and peace. If we can learn to seek justice and peace together, we will realize that we all worship the God who wants justice and peace.