

## Wheaton and the Controversy Over Whether Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God

*Robert J. Priest*

I've watched with interest recent events at Wheaton College play out in the national news—events involving the move to dismiss tenured professor Larycia Hawkins for her comments related to Islam, and especially for her reference to Muslims and Christians “worshipping the same God.” As an evangelical, I've long appreciated the presence and influence of Wheaton in the wider world. I've spoken in Wheaton's chapel, have had Wheaton graduates in my classes, and have friends that are professors there. I love Wheaton and desire its best. Moreover, like many evangelicals, I view Wheaton as belonging not merely to the Wheaton board, faculty, administration, and alumni—but to the worldwide evangelical community. What Wheaton does affects us all.

As I've observed the unfolding drama, I've had concerns over the way Wheaton has framed the issues, over the repercussions of this for Christian witness, and over the failure to include missiologists and missionaries as interlocutors. That is, for most evangelicals in America, our encounter with people who are Muslim is relatively recent, relatively superficial, and all-too-often inflected by American culture-war impulses. The one category of American evangelical that has long nurtured close relationships with people who are Muslim is missionaries and mission professors (missiologists)—many of them Wheaton graduates. However, these individuals, who represent the

heart of evangelical gospel concern, and who represent a unique mix of professional expertise and accumulated wisdom acquired over decades of study and ministry experience, do not appear to have been adequately consulted (if consulted at all). With partial exceptions, most of the on-line and media discussion of the matter seems to have proceeded as if missionaries and missiologists had little to offer.

While I personally have no expertise related to Islam, I teach missiology at a leading evangelical seminary (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) and am a past president of the American

with professional expertise related to Islam, to write short essays addressing the following question: “What are the missiological implications of affirming, or denying, that Muslims and Christians worship the same God?” While the “affirming vs. denying” binary opposition is exemplified in the Hawkins vs. Wheaton administration conflict, I asked that missiologists address the question only, and refrain from commenting on the Wheaton situation. In addition to the evangelical Protestants that I invited to respond to this question, I also invited Edward Rommen, an Eastern Orthodox mission theologian, and Lamin Sanneh,

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Society of Missiology (ASM) and the current President of the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS). So I get to see missiology from a catbird seat. Thus, I am aware of many missiologists with unusual credibility because of long-term first-hand relationships with Muslims, and who are far more knowledgeable about the range of issues at stake than most who are conducting this conversation about Wheaton/Hawkins. In response to the recent newsmaking events at Wheaton, I invited a range of missiologists and missionaries located within mainstream evangelical institutions, all of them with doctorates, most

a Roman Catholic mission scholar, well-known for having converted to Christianity from a Muslim background. So their essays are also included here. This theme issue of the Occasional Bulletin includes these articles, in alphabetical order by author last name, preceded by a descriptive summary of the Hawkins/Wheaton College episode in Howell's article below.

As I've read the following essays, essays that articulate an array of viewpoints, I've been struck by how discordant many of them are from Wheaton's actions. I've also been struck by the idea that many American evangelical

missionaries and missiologists, and perhaps the Apostle Paul himself, would be in danger of dismissal if they taught at Wheaton College, since many of us arguably have been guilty of the very thing Wheaton College is sanctioning. The result is that I somewhat regret asking everyone to avoid commenting directly on the Wheaton episode, especially since the documents involved, both from Larycia Hawkins and Stanton Jones, are now available on-line for review. Moreover, all of us have a stake in how things develop at Wheaton. So with apologies, I will violate my own instructions, and will comment on the relevance of this OB theme issue to the Wheaton situation. My comments are not intended to reflect understandings that all EMS members will agree with, but are simply one ordinary missiologist's reflections intended to highlight the relevance of missiological considerations to this situation.

Wheaton College political science professor Larycia Hawkins passingly and approvingly cited the Pope's statement that Muslims and Christians "worship the same God." As I understand it, this was said in the context of wishing to

express love and solidarity with American Muslims in a time where they often experience hostility from Americans, including American Christians (see Howell below). When questioned about her statement, the questions carefully spelled out in a written letter from Wheaton Provost Stanton Jones, she clarified in writing that her reference to "worship" was not intended to

in Acts 17:23, where Paul referenced an Athenian altar to an unknown god who he said Athenians "worship," and where he then proceeded to treat this god as the same referent that he wished to tell them about. Clearly he did not intend us to understand his use of the term "worship" as implying something soteriological, that these Athenians were therefore in a saving relationship with

**It is worth noting** that Hawkins was using the word "worship" in the same way the Apostle Paul used the term in Acts 17:23.

communicate anything about "soteriology"—that is, whether or not people are saved or in fully right relationship with God – but was simply a reference to their "embodied piety." In response to her written letter and her refusal to relinquish tenure while undergoing a lengthier review process, the Provost recommended that Wheaton College dismiss her.

It is worth noting that Hawkins was using the word "worship" in the same way the Apostle Paul used the term

God. Like Larycia Hawkins, Paul meant only to reference their "embodied piety." Moreover, like Hawkins, seeking common ground, he was willing to assume a common referent, although not a shared understanding of that referent. [For a fuller exposition of referential meaning as it relates to this topic, please see Netland's helpful article below.] The Athenians had expected him to tell them about another god, a foreign god, a god discontinuous from their own lives. Instead, he referenced

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a God already implicitly recognized, a Creator “not far from any of us.” He did not use a foreign word for God, such as Yahweh or Elohim, but rather a common Greek word *Theos*. Astonishingly he establishes common ground in Acts 17:28 by quoting two Stoic philosophers who were explicitly writing about the sky-god Zeus, although in this case he reframes the referent as *Theos*: ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’ [Epimenides]. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’ [Aratus].

Missionaries who’ve entered new cultures have often struggled to decide what word in a given language should be used to refer to the God of the Bible. In no society did Christian missionaries encounter a pre-Christian word for God that entailed fully Trinitarian understandings. Even the Greek word that Paul used for God, *Theos*, did not come with such Trinitarian meanings. However, missionaries did, often, though certainly not always, encounter a word for a single high and good God, the Creator of the universe. Some missionaries insisted on using loan words for God from other languages. For example, among indigenous peoples of Latin America, some insisted on using the Spanish *Dios/Yus*. Such foreign loan words inadvertently signaled the foreign nature of the religious message, often hindering response. Alternatively, many evangelical Christian missionaries made use of indigenous terms for a high god to refer to the God of the Bible. [For examples of this, consult Don Richardson or Lamin Sanneh.] Like the Apostle Paul, these missionaries insisted their message was about a referent already to some degree recognized, but where fuller and corrected understandings of that referent needed to be explicated.

Around the world, such a Pauline missiological approach has borne fruit. Countless millions have embraced the Christian gospel and come to what evangelicals understand as a saving relationship to the God of the Bible, a God they continue to refer to as Hananim, if they are Korean, as Apajui, if they are Aguaruna, and as Allah, if they are Arab. Such new believers commonly do not see themselves as having repudiated an

earlier false referent for a new referent, but as now more fully understanding and appropriately responding to that same Being in the light of God’s special revelation in Scripture.

Islam, of course, poses unique issues. Unlike some “world religions,” Islam has a historical connection and proximity to Judaism and Christianity. The very word “Allah” was the word for God used by Arab Jews and Christians for hundreds of years before Muhammad, and used by Arab Christians today. Of course Arab Christians, as well as Larycia Hawkins, agree that our Christian understandings about God diverge in important ways from Muslim or contemporary Jewish understandings about God. However, bridge builders like the Apostle Paul are alert to possible common ground as a starting point for Christian engagement. Consider a prototypical missionary, Greg Livingstone, an alumnus of Wheaton College, and

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founder of Frontiers, a large missionary organization focused on sharing the Christian gospel with Muslims. In his award address when he was granted Wheaton College’s 2009 “Distinguished Service to Society Award,” he was asked “if there is any common ground between Christians and Muslims that makes it easier to reach them -- things we have in common?” Livingstone replied that he shared much more common ground with Muslims than with the secular French, and identified “God” and “the final judgment” as two of various things Christians have in common with Muslims. Christian missionaries have sometimes noticed that the Qur’an itself establishes a possible common ground when it affirms the truth of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, and when it asserts to Christians that “our God and your God is one” (Qur’an 29:46). While evangelical Christians do not accept that the Qur’an is revealed by

God, bridge-builders nonetheless may seek to avail themselves of the common ground afforded them by the Muslim explicit affirmation that the Bible is from God. Moreover, they may note that the Qur’an describes Allah in many ways that are consistent with the Bible. Allah is the creator of heaven and earth. Allah made the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. Allah flooded the earth at the time of Noah. Allah revealed himself to Abraham, gave the Torah to Moses on Sinai, and gave the Psalms to King David. Allah sent John the Baptist and then Jesus and his apostles to preach the gospel. The Qur’an affirms Jesus’ virgin birth, messiahship, and Second Coming. Thus, bridge-building Christians will be alert to continuities, and not merely discontinuities, in the understandings of God held by contemporary Muslims (and Jews) as compared with fully Christian understandings. Many mainstream evangelical

Christians are willing, as part of their Christian engagement with Muslims, to agree with both Jews and Muslims that the omnipotent and all-wise God of Abraham truly exists, and that we may proceed in our conversations with each other explicitly signaling a measure of shared understandings about this God, despite our equally important differences. Larycia Hawkins’ claim that we “worship the same God” is likewise an assertion of common ground, although an assertion that is deeply ambiguous without suitable caveats. For a systematic disquisition on the various possible meanings of such an assertion, see Netland below. Whether or not one believes that she initially failed to suitably qualify her intended meaning (as I, and most of our OB contributors, do), given her later explanation of what she meant, I personally do not see anything in what she’s written and intended

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# Wheaton College, One God, and Muslim-Christian Dialog:

## The Recent Past and the Difficult Present

*Brian M. Howell*

On December 7, in response to armed attacks carried out in San Bernardino, Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump announced at a campaign rally in South Carolina his support for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims coming into the United States.”<sup>1</sup> The comment echoed a call put out by Franklin Graham, CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, to ban Muslim immigration following an attack that left four Marines dead in Chattanooga, TN in July of that year.<sup>2</sup> Several days prior to Trump’s proposal, Liberty University President

In the announcement of her action, posted to her personal Facebook page on December 10, Dr. Hawkins published two photos of herself wearing a scarf over her hair, and a 366 word statement encouraging others to stand in “embodied solidarity” with Muslims as an expression of common humanity, and for Christians to do so out of religious solidarity. She called this act an expression of her “Advent worship” and called on everyone to document their experiences and post them to social media.

All of these actions drew considerable attention,<sup>4</sup> as well as criticism from various commentators on political and theological grounds, but one statement,

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Jerry Falwell, Jr., speaking at the weekly university convocation, encouraged students to apply for concealed weapons permits, stating that, “if more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in...”<sup>3</sup>

As a response to the political and religious rhetoric seeming to stigmatize Muslims as uniformly violent and dangerous, several members of the Wheaton College community took action to build bridges with Muslim members of the community and communicate love and concern. These actions included delivering flowers and notes to a local Islamic center, drafting an open letter to Dr. Falwell condemning his remarks, and, in what would become the most prominent gesture, the commitment by associate professor of political science Larycia Hawkins to wear a hijab in solidarity with Muslims throughout the remainder of Advent.

in particular, drew the vast majority of the focus. In calling for solidarity, Hawkins wrote, “I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God.”<sup>5</sup>

This was not the first time issues of Muslim-Christian relations had been raised at Wheaton College. In 2007, former Wheaton President Duane Litfin and current Provost Stanton Jones signed “Loving God and Neighbor Together,” a document drafted at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, outlining areas of agreement between Muslims and Christians. After the document came under fire from some evangelical leaders, including John Piper (Wheaton, ’68), Al Mohler, and Focus on the Family, they removed their names. President Litfin was quoted in the campus’ newspaper as saying that it was:

not carefully enough crafted to avoid encouraging that basic premise of civil religion, i.e., that we are all worshiping the same God, climbing the same mountain, just taking different paths. [...] To speak unqualifiedly of “our common love for God,” as if the Quran’s Allah and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ are one and the same, and as if what it means to “love God” in these two faiths means the same thing, is to say more than I am willing to grant. I do not criticize others who do not share these qualms. But as for me, I needed to back away.<sup>6</sup>

This event occurred in Hawkins’ first year at Wheaton, and it is not clear if she was thinking about this when she drafted her own statements. Yet, by citing Pope Francis, and later Yale theologian Miroslav Volf and Wheaton Advisory Life Trustee and former dean of Beeson Divinity School Timothy George (among others), Hawkins thought her words were within the college’s statement of faith and theologically defensible. What quickly became clear, though, as with the “Loving God...” statement, some constituents—including administrators—felt that the idea of Christians and Muslims worshipping the “same god” contradicted the theological commitments to which all faculty are expected to agree. On December 15, Hawkins was asked to meet with the Provost, other members of the administration, and faculty representatives, where she was informed that she would be placed on paid administrative leave, as well as required to provide a written explanation of her statements.

In the media firestorm that followed, there were articles in the New York Times, Washington Post, The Atlantic, The Guardian (UK), USA Today, and many more. Op-ed pieces were written on both sides of the debate. Muslim women wrote op-ed pieces both praising and criticizing Hawkins’ actions. Biblical scholars, historians, social scientists, and theologians from a number of traditions wrote pieces likewise expressing support and critique.

On campus, opinion was similarly mixed. Approximately 100 students on campus attended a protest and presented demands to President Phil Ryken for Dr. Hawkins’ reinstatement. A few turned out to voice support for

administrative action, and several others wrote blog posts expressing similar support. Faculty voice has been muted while legal and official institutional discussions are ongoing. There is unquestionably very strong support for Prof. Hawkins and concerns about process. At the same time, some faculty members have voiced support for the theological concerns expressed by administration actions.

Upon request of the administration, Hawkins provided the college with a written rationale of her statements. This document, made public on January 5 (and available for viewing at [drlaryciahawkins.org](http://drlaryciahawkins.org)), explained how she understood her statement that Muslims and Christians worship the same God as not meant to contradict commitments to Trinitarian theology, theology of salvation through Christ alone, and other explicit doctrines within the college's Statement of Faith, all of which she states that she continues to affirm.

## Upon request of the administration, Hawkins provided the college with a written rationale of her statements.

In describing her understanding of the notion of the "same god," she writes,

Like [Timothy George, John Stackhouse, Scot McKnight, Miroslav Volf, and the post-Vatican II pontifical writings] I acknowledge that the statement "we worship the same God" is a simultaneous "yes" and "no" to the question of whether Christians and Muslims (as well as Jews) turn to the same object of worship, namely, the "God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:6).

After receiving the document, college administrators asked that Hawkins provide further, in person, explanation to the Board of Trustees as a condition of remaining tenured. She refused this request, and as of this time, there are ongoing negotiations between lawyers representing both sides. On January 4, Dr. Hawkins was delivered a 38 page notice of termination. While this document has not been made public in its entirety, multiple statements to the

press have suggested that the cause for the revocation of tenure and dismissal from the faculty are both theological and contractual, having to do with "insubordination," or her unwillingness to participate in ongoing conversations apart from her secure employment.

It should be noted that the college issued a number of releases about the various statements made by Prof. Hawkins and other faculty and students, expressing their support for the freedom of Wheaton students and employees to express their views on religious solidarity. They were explicit that the decision to suspend Hawkins was not due to her decision to wear the hijab (although a number of commentators did criticize that action), but because of a "lack of clarity" around her statements deemed to be theological in nature, particularly that Christians and Muslims worship the "same god." They denied that race or gender were factors in their decision, as they were

aware that a number of observers had noted the dynamics of the only tenured Black woman professor receiving what was unarguably an exceptional administrative response.<sup>7</sup> As of this writing, Wheaton's administration has posted an FAQ page on their website addressing a number of issues that have been voiced around Dr. Hawkins' suspension.

It seems clear that this has become something of a Rorschach test for those wondering about the state of Wheaton College, evangelicalism, and even U.S. Christianity. For some it is further evidence of the narrow-minded, culturally- and racially-myopic nature of U.S. evangelicalism, sliding into irrelevancy. For others, it is a case of an institution standing up to the forces of liberalism and pluralism that would devalue the truth-claims of the gospel and Christian theological distinctives in the name of tolerance. However Dr. Hawkins' particular case is resolved, it is clear that

these questions and actions have struck on vital areas of Christian conversation and mission; they surely deserve thoughtful reflection that is scripturally, culturally, and theologically sound.

### Endnotes

1. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/07/politics/donald-trump-muslim-ban-immigration/>
2. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/evangelicals-condemn-franklin-grahams-call-to-ban-muslim-immigration-after-chattanooga-shooting-141697/pageall.html>
3. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/05/liberty-university-president-if-more-good-people-had-concealed-guns-we-could-end-those-muslims/>
4. The visit of Wheaton faculty to the Islamic Center of Wheaton was shared on social media more than 500 times, reaching a reported 50,000+ people. An open letter to Jerry Falwell, Jr. written by Wheaton students and originally published in the school's newspaper (the *Wheaton Record*) was reprinted in the *Washington Post*. Larycia Hawkins Facebook post was first reported by the *Chicago Tribune*, then by the online *Christian Post*, before circulating very widely among a vast number of online and print media outlets. The coverage would eventually extend to television, National Public Radio, multiple European outlets, and innumerable blogs and online posts.
5. One of the faculty members who participated in sending flowers and notes to the Islamic Center of Wheaton also wrote that Christians and Muslims share in worshipping the "one True God." Her note, on Wheaton letterhead, was posted on the ICW Facebook page and also drew criticism and administrative concern. She was also asked to provide a written response to the administration, which was accepted with no further action required.

6. See a more complete account here: <http://www.acommonword.com/wheaton-college-administrators-remove-names-from-christian-muslim-statement/>

7. The only other occasion in which a tenured faculty member was placed on administrative leave to occur within at least the past two decades was for a case in which a professor was charged (and later convicted) of possessing and trading child pornography.

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# Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?

Miriam Adeney

**W**hat other God is there? In all the universe, there is only one God. But human understandings of God vary. While God is the same everywhere, and is not changed by what we think of him, nevertheless the ways that people describe and understand God differ greatly.

None of our understandings is adequate. None of us comprehends God perfectly or wholly. Yet, incomplete as our expressions may be, a true apprehension of God must include the creator of the cosmos choosing to take on human form, entering into our pain and vulnerability to the point of death, and exploding out the other side to generate (or demonstrate) new power for living, resurrection power. The arc of this story shows an essential dimension of God's nature. It demonstrates a core part of who God is.

Do Muslims understand God this way? Both Muslims and Christians affirm that God is creator and sustainer of the universe and final culminator of history. God is omnipotent, God is holy, and God is merciful. Nor, having made us, does God abandon the human race. Instead, he continues to care for us by sending us prophets and scriptures. And all three of the Abrahamic faiths affirm that God is one. There is only one God, not a plurality of deities.

Yet Muslims do not believe that God took on human form in the person of Jesus. While viewing Jesus as a great prophet of God, and maintaining high respect for Jesus, Muslims do not worship Jesus as God. In fact, they condemn this. To worship Jesus would be an expression the greatest sin, *shirk*, treating something like God.

Nor do most Muslims believe that Jesus died on the cross. Although malicious men intended to kill Jesus, God did not allow his holy prophet to die the shameful death of a criminal. God snatched Jesus away, and an angel or an apparition or another person, possibly Judas, took Jesus' place on the cross. Clearly, then,

Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Do Muslims and Christians hold the same understanding of God? In part, but only in part. Together we celebrate God's mercies. In contrast to Buddhism and Confucianism, for example, the Abrahamic faiths affirm God's mercy expressed through his gifts in nature, human community, and scriptural wisdom and ethics and general guidance. Yet such mercy is a pale shadow of the shocking mercy that propelled Jesus to earth and to the cross. That radical mercy we call grace. If indeed the incarnation and death of Jesus are essential expressions of God's nature, then Muslim and Christian understandings of God are truly very different.

What about terminology, specifically the question of using the word *Allah* to refer to the God and father of Jesus? Historically and up to the present, the word *Allah* has been used in Bibles throughout the Muslim world, from Arabic Bibles to Indonesian Bibles. In these, Genesis begins, "In the beginning, *Allah* created the heaven and the earth." At this writing, Malaysian Christians—Catholics and all kinds of Protestants—are battling for the right to use the word *Allah*. The government demands that they use the word *Tuhan*, which means "Lord" or "Sir." But *Tuhan* does not connote the creator of the cosmos. It is too small.

So do Muslims and Christians worship the same God? That is hardly the right question. More appropriate is to ask where we can build bridges with Muslims through shared understandings (which I assume is what the Wheaton faculty member was attempting in good faith, in spite of her infelicitous wording)—and where we must clearly articulate difference, namely, in what the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus show us about the nature of God.

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## A Word from the Editor

Enoch Wan

I would like to express deep appreciation to the many contributors to this important theme issue, contributors who wrote essays under short time constraints. I wish also to thank Robert Priest for taking leadership in organizing this issue. While our *Occasional Bulletin* is normally only accessible for EMS members, this special issue is open to the public. Professors are free to make this available to students for class discussions. We hope this will bring missiology into connection with broad discussions and debates in our society and world. Those wishing to enter into a discussion on the matters discussed in this issue are encouraged to utilize the EMS **MissionScholar LISTSERV** to do so.



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is a good way  
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# "Spot the Difference" Puzzles: How to Help Christians Think about "Allah" and Contemporary Issues from a Missiological Perspectives

Leonard N. (Len) Bartlotti

**O**ver the holidays, I had the warm, wooly experience of playing the "same and different" game with a 3rd-grader. My grandson Cooper pulled out a book of "Spot the Difference" picture puzzles. On facing pages were increasingly complex drawings. At a glance, both pictures look exactly the same! However, look closely and you'll see there are ten or more "things that are different" between the pictures. (Note to self: 3rd graders are pretty quick!)

This practice of identifying objects that are "alike and not alike" is a learned life skill. Children have fun learning how to look carefully at details. But the puzzles, like life, get progressively more complex.

The current public debate over whether Muslims and Christians worship the "same God"—provoked by the comments of a hijab-wearing Wheaton College professor—is a case in point. Christians, students, pastors, and teachers are being challenged to go beyond casual Facebook observations, emotional responses (anger or sympathy), and hasty theologizing.

This is a "teachable moment" for the Body of Christ! Given the variety of close encounters between Islam and the West (viz. the flood of Muslim immigrants; Salafism and radical Islam; Sunni-Shi'a tensions), educators and pastors have unplanned, God-given opportunities to help believers learn "barefoot missiology" and relate their faith to everyday life!

As we consider the missiological implications of affirming or denying that we worship the same God, it is important to explore the pedagogical question embedded within it: *How can we as scholar-practitioners and missional leaders capitalize on this teachable moment and use it for instruction, discipleship, and missional formation?*

Before (or instead of) rushing to tell

students and congregations *what* to think, how can we help them explore *how to think* about the missiological implications of this and other issues that arise in our cultural and spiritual encounters with Muslims and others?

We can learn a lot about God from our encounters with those who differ from us. These experiences, including the controversial behaviors of others, have a powerful impact on our lives and how we approach others, and can inform what kind of people, leaders, and witnesses we want to be in a pluralistic multicultural world.

I would suggest that churches and educators use "same God" question and the incident at Wheaton as a missions *case study*, a kind of "find the difference"

## As we consider the missiological

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puzzle, to help Christians learn increasingly more complex lessons on how to engage thoughtfully and effectively with Muslims and others. In a case study, a real life problem is presented to a group for discussion. The goal is to help Christians think biblically, reflectively, dialogically, and prayerfully, in community.

There is more than enough material in the "same God" controversy at Wheaton to develop a concise two- to three-page "case study." The specificity of a case study—incorporating comments by the hijab-wearing professor, the college's and other responses, and details from news reports—may be as helpful as a pedagogical tool as more abstract lectures and writings.

For missiologists, the subject, the "text" under discussion, is not simply a Facebook post, online statement, or a point of theology to be defended or re-

buked in isolation. In missiology, *context* is critical. So helping believers explore the larger social, cultural, religious and geopolitical context of this controversy is central, both to evangelical understanding and praxis, and to the missiological project. This is an application of the "hermeneutic circle," the process of understanding a whole "text" with reference to its individual parts, and how individual parts or one element relates to the whole.

Re-framing the Wheaton incident or the "same God" question in this way leads us to explore how this one element relates to the broader contexts of theology; contemporary evangelical beliefs, practices, and institutions; the significance, symbolic function, and meaning of doctrinal statements; privileges and responsibilities of faculty; and contemporary evangelical responses to Islam and to Muslims living among us.

One could also fruitfully discuss contested meanings surrounding a

single element like the hijab (Muslim headscarf), and the symbolic clash of civilizations and values represented by the professor's (sincere, but ill-timed, thus ill-advised?) behavior undertaken during the universally sacred Christian month of Advent). This discussion is designed not to escalate the conflict, but to help us understand it as a part of a larger set of issues.

Thus, the issue itself (whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God) brings into stark relief the critical importance of helping students, leaders, churches and institutions learn *how to think missiologically*. In a globalized world, "cultural intelligence" or "CQ" is an essential component of Christian discipleship (e.g. see books and resources by David Livermore). That is, the process of answering the question posed is as important as the answers themselves.

Finally, this "case study" approach

suggests the potential value of “reflective practice” as a pedagogical approach to contemporary missiological issues such as this. As defined by Donald Schon, reflective practice involves “thoughtfully considering one’s own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline” (*Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1996).

Reflections are then related to “theory”—the body of professional knowledge, theoretical perspectives, concepts, case studies, and critiques in the literature surrounding a topic in one or more fields of study. The critical process and “thick description” is intended to equip those involved (e.g. students, or developing professionals like teachers, nurses, others) to become “reflective practitioners,” and to develop true “professional artistry” and “craftsmanship” in any field. The process is designed to bring to light a range of personal, conceptual, affective (emotional, intuitive), relational, and behavioral issues—much needed in the discussion of volatile issues.

In this case, people and students not involved in the actual incident could be guided, nonetheless, to link their beliefs and experiences to a larger conceptual framework and field of practice. Missiologists help envision and equip the Body of Christ for involvement in the *missio Dei*. The “artistry” we seek is Christlikeness, and “craftsmanship,” that of participating in the *missio Dei*, the grace, understandings, and skills needed to love, respect, and witness with clarity and see communities of faith established among all Muslim peoples

The controversy over whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God is a challenge to missiologists to find new ways to contribute to and shape the larger evangelical discussion and response to these issues. The kind of self-awareness and missional thinking required for cross-cultural workers, is what our entire evangelical community now needs.

In a pluralistic world, followers of Christ need to learn the critical skills of “same and different”: How to walk

uprightly in societies with upside-down values; to relate respectfully with others at the religious roundtable; to engage redemptively with a broken world; to think biblically about God, life, and the world around us.

Barefoot contextualization—the “spot the difference” puzzle of everyday life and witness—takes more than sympathy, tolerance, or simplistic identification with Muslims or others. More than ever, we need to be “filled with the knowledge

of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:9-10).

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## “I Cannot Worship a God Who Does Not Understand Human Suffering”

**David Cashin**

**W**e live in a post-modern age that values “sameness” as a source of inter-cultural understanding, tolerance, and knowledge. Wheaton College’s official reaction to the statement of one of their professors that “Christians and Muslims worship the same God,”<sup>1</sup> included her suspension. This conflict illustrates both a missiological and an epistemological problem.

mon ground. “We all believe in the same God.” “We believe in angels and the day of judgment just as you do.” “Muslims believe in Jesus, in fact, we respect him more than Christians do!” At this point, missiologically, they move to the key issue of differences. “We respect Jesus more because we do not attribute to him sonship to God, which we see as blasphemy.” “Where in the Bible does Jesus claim that he is the Son of God?” “The Bible has been changed as even your

**The shortest axiom of knowledge**, which I learned from a Jewish professor, is this: “No Contrast, No Knowledge.”

The shortest axiom of knowledge, which I learned from a Jewish professor, is this: “No Contrast, No Knowledge.” What this axiom essentially means is that knowledge is gained from differences, not from similarities. Differences are also the key to conversion. If there are no differences, then there is nothing to be learned and nothing to convert to. This is why dialogical efforts between Muslims and Christians rarely lead to conversions. The emphasis is on “sameness” and there is an implicit universalism that is a synonym for “sameness.”

I have sat dozens of times in masjids both in America and overseas listening to Islamic advocacy. Their missiology is very similar to ours. They always begin by sharing similarities. This creates com-

scholars have affirmed.” “The Qur’an we hold in our hands is exactly the same book as was dictated to Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, by the angel Gabriel.”<sup>2</sup> The missiological question is, was the Professor from Wheaton building bridges to reach her Muslim friends for Christ, or was she affirming the sameness of Christianity and Islam.

Here are two facts, one ethnolinguistic and the other missiological. First, Christians in the Arabic-speaking world use the word “Allah” for God. Clearly the Christian God is conceived of as very different from the “Allah” of Islam, but the term is used as a kind of bridge. Some Muslim governments recognize this and ban the use of the word Allah in Christian translations of the Bible.

The second issue is missiological. I have worked with Muslims for over 40 years. Every Muslim background believer I have ever met affirmed that the Allah they knew as a distant and foreboding absolute unity in Islam, they came to know as “father” in Christianity. Bilquis Sheikh, a Pakistani woman converted to Christ many decades ago, affirmed this in her classic book “I dared to call Him Father.”

Let me illustrate this further from the writings of a Pakistani Urdu poet named Daoud Rahbar. He pursued doctoral level studies in Islamic theology in Europe in the early 60’s. His studies culminated in a book on the nature of God in the Qur’an entitled “The God of Justice,” which was published by Brill in 1963. In it, Rahbar concluded that the nature of God in the Qur’an was one of “absolute justice.” That is to say, “mercy” and “grace,” which are terms really only functionally understood through relationship, remain unsubstantiated titles for God in the Qur’an. The words “bism’illah ar rahman ar rahmin” (in the name of God the merciful, the gracious) are on the lips of every Saudi/ISIS/al-Qaida/Yemeni/Pakistani executioner as they slice off the heads of their inmates/hostages/yeziddis. The words are meaningless titles, something hoped for but never demonstrated. Rahbar captured this in a single statement, “I cannot worship a God, who does not understand human suffering.”<sup>3</sup> He later became a Christian.

Missiologically it is essential that we build bridges to Muslims. Affirming Allah as God is essential to maintaining the relevance of the Christian message for the Muslim. On the other hand, faithfulness to the Gospel requires that we understand, and communicate the differences. Ismail Faruki, perhaps the greatest Islamic thinker of the 20th century said, “God does not reveal himself... God reveals only His will.”<sup>4</sup> This is why Shariah (law/Fiqh) is the essence of Islam. The concept of “knowing God” in an experiential sense is found directly 250 times in the Bible and thousands of times by way of inference. That is why Theology is the essence of Christianity. The concept of knowing God experientially does not occur in the Qur’an at all.

So, was the Wheaton professor mis-

siologically wrong to say that Christians and Muslims worship the same God? If she intended “sameness” as an affirmation of universalism, then this would, in my view, constitute appropriate grounds for her dismissal from Wheaton College. However, if her intention was to build bridges in service of a positive Christian presence and witness, while still affirming that salvation comes only in and through the work of Christ, then we are in the same camp together.

#### Endnotes

1. [http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Soci-](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Soci-ety/2015/1217/Wheaton-College-professor-Christians-and-Muslims-worship-the-same-God-video)

ety/2015/1217/Wheaton-College-professor-Christians-and-Muslims-worship-the-same-God-video, accessed December 29, 2015

2. These are approximate citations from a Wahabi imam I listened to at a mosque in Dearborn, Michigan, December 12, 2015.

3. Cited by Dr. Don McCurry who was a personal friend of Dr. Rahbar. Dr. Rahbar is now deceased.

4. Al-Faruki, Ismail R., *Islamic Da’wah Its Nature and Demands*, Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986, p. 17.

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## “Since We Both Worship Allah, Why Don’t You Become a Muslim?”

**John Cheong**

**L**ast year in Malaysia, I was invited to be a retreat keynote speaker that comprised of over six hundred high school students. I was asked to speak on Islamisation and to teach them to counter Muslim attempts in the country to convert them to Islam. After a brief 20-minute presentation on the basics of Islam, I opened the time for questions from students. Among the questions asked, the most piercing one was the following Muslim challenge: Since we both worship Allah, why don’t you become a Muslim?

For these Muslims, their concern was that Christians were using it as a ploy to draw Muslims to Christianity. For Christians, their religious right to use it for their own worship, liturgical prayers and in the bahasa Melayu language (or BM) bible, the Alkitab was threatened.

However, for almost 400 years, this was hardly a Muslim concern. A little known fact of mission history is that BM was the first non-European language translation of the bible in 1629 when the Gospel of Matthew was translated and Allah was used for God.

However, since the 1970s, Malaysia has experienced an Islamic revivalism

**If the God that Christians** and Muslims worship is the same, why should Christians not embrace Islam?

Indeed, even before the recent hijab controversy involving Wheaton College professor Larycia Hawkins exploded in the evangelical and wider American conversation, Malaysians had already been grappling with the implications of the use of the word Allah, on whether it was the same God of Islam and Christianity. Since 2008, the government has banned Christians from using the word ‘Allah’ on grounds that it was reserved for Islam only and that Christian usage of it would confuse Muslims of their faith.

that not long after, the use of Allah (and three other common Quranic words) were prohibited in Christian publications “to maintain public order and prevent confusion between Muslims and Christians” in 1986. Following this, Christians tussled with the state in many administrative battles for almost two decades over its usage. In 2006, Christians finally sought legal redress but in 2014, Malaysia’s supreme court decided that the use of the word Allah was prohibited for Christian usage, ruling that it was

non-essential to Christianity in spite of its long historical presence in the Alkitab. The result interestingly it generated Muslim opprobrium worldwide as even Middle Eastern Muslims thought it absurd; some local Muslim NGOs chided the government's decision, stating that the word predated Islam, and that it generally meant "God". The supreme court thus had flimsy grounds to ban Christians from using it.

Malaysian Christian support from such Muslims however did not prepare them for a new challenge that arose not long thereafter: Muslim missionary groups initiated "Street Dakwah" campaigns, (à la street evangelism of Christianity) in Malaysian cities while in some public schools, Muslim teachers and students aggressively tried converting Christians to Islam. Among the lines of questions posed to Christians were the same as that voiced by the student in my retreat: Since we both worship Allah, why don't you become a Muslim?

Against Malaysia's backdrop, the question as to whether Christians and Muslims worship the "same God" requires careful deliberation. If the God that Christians and Muslims worship is the same, why should Christians not embrace Islam? Indeed, Muslims have many Quranic support they need to convince Christians to do so. In Islam, the God of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David is the *same* God who later also calls Christians to heed the voice of Muhammad. He is Allah's final prophet, calling all humanity to Islam. So why should Christians who assent to the "same God" view stop at Christianity if is the same God (in Islam)?

However, if this God is not the same, then Muslims cannot make such bold claims. As Timothy George remarks in his book, *Is the God of Muhammad the Father of Jesus?*, how one answers the "same God" question depends on how Allah is defined. An initial and important step is that Christians must carefully examine how such terms are used and understood among a particular faith community (e.g., the Muslim usage of Allah) before one can properly assess how similar/dissimilar they are. When Christians make assertions that seem logical and compassionate on political

and humanitarian grounds, it also raises difficult theological and missiological questions. In Malaysia's case, it invites religious and political mischief-making among Muslim missionary groups as they muddy our understanding of God.

It thus behoves proponents of the "same God" view (i.e., Volf and Hawkins) to clearly answer this question. Missiologically, for workers who emphasize contextualization as a key to bible translation (by using local concepts that are understandable to the culture without compromising on the essential biblical fidelity of meaning), the usage of Allah must be carefully examined in different contexts (e.g, for Brunei and Malaysia, its use is banned). Additionally, should missionaries and the nationals continue using it in spite of its legal and

religious risks? Or should they deploy another word (such as Yahweh, as is the case among certain workers in Malaysia now) but risk introducing an alien word to local seekers and new converts?

So back to our original question: how did students at my retreat answer that poser? After a long silence, 14-year old schoolboy raised his hand, stood up and said: "Well, if that's true, why don't *you* Muslims become a Christian then?" The crowd erupted with enormous laughter and applause.

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## Musings on the Muslim God

**Timothy Paul Erdel**

**I**t would seem that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, the one and only true God, a God of grace and love, to whom we owe endless gratitude. Both Christians and Muslims worship the God of Abraham, the God, who heard Ishmael's cries, who spoke to his weeping mother, Hagar, who spared them both, and who promised to make Ishmael a great nation. So it only seemed appropriate when William Lane Craig revived the Medieval Muslim Kalam cosmological argument for the existence of God. So it only seemed natural when my warm-hearted Muslim student from Senegal, Abdou Aziz Thiandoum, would routinely raise his hand and ask me to remember specific needs in his life, that is, when I would ask if there were any student requests that I should pray for at the outset of each Introduction to Philosophy class last spring at Bethel College, Mishawaka, Indiana.

That same spring Aziz gave his senior farewell speech at the Bethel College Pilots men's basketball dessert banquet. No one had worked any harder in practice during his time at Bethel; but, due

to a series of extremely frustrating communication snafus and bureaucratic decisions, a prime post prospect (who had formerly been formally cleared to play NCAA I basketball) was never certified to play on the NAIA II level for Bethel. Not a single second in a regulation game. Nevertheless, his farewell speech was one of extreme gratitude for all that Bethel is and for what the Bethel family had done on his behalf. Although he began with an apology that he would not be able to adequately express his true emotions, since he "never cried," he soon broke down, sobbing uncontrollably, and finally, after repeated efforts to regain his composure, returned to his table, where he bowed his head and wept silently throughout the remainder of the banquet. The grace of God seemed far more evident in his life than in that of some other persons on campus who were confessing Christians.

To the contrary, the Christian God is the Triune God of historic Christian orthodoxy, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who is love in his very being from all eternity precisely because there is an eternal, triune relationship of love among those three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This Triune God, who

is denied by Muslims, created the entire universe, making humans in his image. This God of grace and mercy does not weigh our good deeds and bad deeds on balance scales to see whether we will go to heaven or hell. Rather, the God revealed in Scripture tips the scales radically in our favor, far beyond any possible merit on our part. He does so because of the atonement provided by his only begotten Son, who suffered and died on our behalf, enduring an unbelievably cruel sequence: betrayal, denial, desertion, mockery, beatings, scourging, and crucifixion. No one who overtly denies the salvific sacrifice of Jesus on the cross should expect to enter God's kingdom.

If some branches of Islam, such as Sufism, seem more open to divine grace and mercy than others, it is instructive that they are declared heretical by other streams of Islam. So the path to the God of grace and mercy is blocked by dogmatic claims denying the divine person and salvific work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

I answer that there is only one Judge, and we still see through a glass darkly. If our prayers are heard and answered, beyond all desert, hope, or expectation, who are we to determine whether or not God hears or responds favorably to the prayers and worship of a Muslim? Most of God's workings remain a mystery to us. Who are we to declare with finality what God does or should do in response to the cries and pleas and prayers and worship of those who are created in his image? While we need to preach and teach Christian truth as clearly and carefully as we can, never compromising the claims of Scripture, urging Muslims to come to true faith in Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, we are not in a position to make final determinations that are the province of God alone. It is for God, and not for us, to decide how wide his mercy is. I pray for the salvation of Aziz, as I pray for my own and my fellow family members. May God, in his great mercy, hear the prayers of his children.

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# The Question Underlying the "Same God Question," with Missiological Implications Thereof

**Fred Farrokh**

**A**s a Muslim boy, I was taught in the mosque by our instructor to fear optical illusions. Like most Muslims, we learned from an early age to recite *Sura Falaq*, which states, "*Qul a'oodhu bi Rabbil Falaq...min shirri nafathaati fil uqad*" ("Recite: I seek refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak...from the evil of those who blow into knots" (Q113:1, 4). "Those who blow into knots," we were taught, were magicians who made it appear they could untie big knots just by blowing into them—optical illusions.

In an optical illusion, there is always something unaccounted for behind the scenes. In the verse above, it is the magician's sleight of hand, an evil deception from which Muslims seek refuge. In the "Same God Question" (SGQ) there is also something—or Someone—that must be accounted for behind the scenes: the Lord Jesus Christ.

The "Same God Question" appears to me to be a theological optical illusion: "Christians worship one God; Muslims worship one God; physical creation itself points to One Creator. Therefore, Christians and Muslims must indeed worship the same God."

The question I pose to those who argue that Christians and Muslims worship the same God is: **Since the Bible teaches that Jesus is God and since Islam teaches that Jesus is not God, then how is it possible that Christians and Muslims worship the same God?**

I have never been able to reconcile this "Underlying Question." So, while I can concede that Christians and Muslims both seek to worship God, I believe it is impossible that they are worshipping the same God.

## Missiological Implications of Concluding We Do Not Worship the Same God

As a missions instructor now, I always teach students that theology must

come before missiology, not vice versa. We must first understand and internalize what we believe (theology) and then, from this basis, create strategy to invite others into God's family (missiology). If we conform our theology to a pre-determined missiology, then we get the paradigm backward. Error will ensue, and we actually become incapable of missionally assisting those whom we yearn to help—in this case Muslims.

Upon closer examination, much of the *missiological* controversy in ministry to Muslims stems directly from the *theological* SGQ. If we have correctly concluded that Muslims do not worship the God of the Bible, we will have tremendous motivation to reach them with the gospel. We will see their true lost-ness before God (though Muslims are not more lost than other unsaved people).

Though some may be concerned that my theological conclusion to the SGQ will create an adversarial climate in our relationships with Muslims, my response is that this is where missiological strategy begins. It is not necessary to argue with Muslims about the SGQ. We need not begin a conversation with a Muslim, "I would like to inform you, dear Ahmed, Fatimeh, Mustafa, etc, that you worship a different god than I worship." The point here is that our theological deliberation has created missiological urgency, and thus we at least then engage our Muslim friend with the gospel. Moreover, my theological conclusion to the SGQ does not forbid us from affirming the positive *intention*, or Arabic *niyya*, of Muslims regarding their faith and practice.

## Missiological Implications of Concluding We Worship the Same God

If we as Christians conclude that Muslims worship the God of the Bible, then myriad problems will flow from

this error. First, we will be drawn into the Christ-diminishing theology of Islam, and our glorious Savior Jesus Christ will shrink away to invisibility before our very eyes. This is the true tragedy of Islam: Muhammad's transfiguration of Jesus Christ from King of Kings and Lord of Lords to his own personal servant of servants. Indeed, Jesus' primary functions in Islam are: i.) to assure people he was neither divine nor allowed people to worship him (Sura 5:72, 116), and, ii.) to predict the coming of Muhammad (Sura 61:6).

Second, we will have no missional impetus to reach out to Muslims—if indeed they are already worshipping the one true God. One of my favorite missionaries was the luminary William McElwee Miller, a Presbyterian missionary who served in my ancestral homeland of Iran from 1919-1961. Urgently seeking the salvation of Iranians, Miller pled for a doubling in the number of missionaries sent to his field. Due to theological liberalism that invaded his denomination during his missionary tenure, the Presbyterian Church USA curtailed their missionary sending almost entirely, much to the anguish of Miller. Here, theological compromise resulted in missional collapse.

Third, with our remaining missiological breadcrumbs, we will tend to affirm Muhammad and the Qur'an, since we have concluded that Muhammad as messenger of the Qur'an points to the same God we Christians worship. Moreover, since Muhammad gave more recent revelations about God than did biblical prophets, we will be inclined to accept his views of God, laced as they are with anti-biblical ideas.

### Concluding Thoughts

I will conclude where I started from my own personal upbringing as a Muslim. We may think that we are being affirming and congenial toward Muslims by asserting we all worship the same God. Most Muslims, however, know that Christians worship Jesus as God. Therefore, any assertion that we all worship the same God is actually offensive to informed Muslims. Furthermore, shrewd Muslims who seek the expansion of Islam will detect by our

wavering spirit that we are theologically ripe for the picking for absorption into Islam. Since most Muslims operate on an honor-shame paradigm, they will respect us more if we are unashamed by our unique and exalted view of Jesus.

Rather than trying to remove the offense of Jesus, I advise that we as

Christians help Muslims understand that this Stumbling Stone does not ultimately intend to trip them up, but to lift them to heaven.

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## Building Bridges of Peace in the Midst of Religious Diversity

*Sarita D. Gallagher*

**T**he question—"Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?"—is one that is both compelling and potentially polarizing. In recent weeks, events at my alma mater Wheaton College have brought this conversation to a national platform. Throughout history theologians from both the Christian and Muslim worlds have discussed this pertinent issue including scholars such as Martin Luther, Nicolas of Cusa, John of Segovia, Ahmad

have sought to build bridges of communication and mutual respect with Muslim leaders and practitioners around the world. Understanding that Muslim peoples are created and loved by God has been foundational in this endeavor. The shared familial history of the two faiths through Abraham, the epistemology of the Arabic term "Allah," and the Islamic acceptance of portions of Jewish and Christian prophetic writings and scriptures, has for many missionaries been a platform for opening doors of respectful interfaith dialogue and Christian witness.

**According to the Quran,** Jesus was not crucified nor was he resurrected from death. Instead, God raised Jesus in his human state up into the heavens.

Ibn Taymīyah, and more recently Phil Parshall, Dudley Woodberry, Timothy George, Reza Shah-Kazemi, and Miroslav Volf. The question of a shared Abrahamic deity has been analyzed from a variety of perspectives: linguistic, theological, political, socio-cultural, historical, and missiological. Despite the centuries of discourse debating the nature and identity of the Abrahamic God, this issue remains relevant to our world today and requires fresh examination.

Within missiology, the discussion regarding the relationship between Islam and Christianity has focused primarily on the issue of contextualization of the gospel among Muslim peoples. Since the early missionary efforts of Christian leaders such as Francis of Assisi in the 13th century, Christian missionaries

While contextualization is widely accepted within missiology, the issue of a shared God is more controversial. The primary reasons for this division include the soteriological and Christological issues underpinning the discussion such as salvation through Christ, the divinity of Christ, divine revelation, and particularity versus universality. Behind the question of a shared Abrahamic deity, are a multitude of substantial theological implications. For example, if Allah is God, then is the Islamic religion from God? Did Yahweh speak to Muhammad ibn 'Abdullāh through the angel Gabriel in the Cave of Hira in 610 C.E.? If so, does the Quran contain new revelations from God? If that is the case, the Quranic teachings about Jesus of Nazareth must be considered. According

to the Quran, Jesus was born of a virgin (Surah 19:16-21) but was created by God (3:59). Additionally, Jesus is understood to be a human being and a messenger of God, but not God (5:75). According to the Quran, Jesus was not crucified nor was he resurrected from death. Instead, God raised Jesus in his human state up into the heavens (4:157-158). Finally, although Jesus will return during the end times, Jesus will openly reject that he is God in addition to denying the heretical teaching of the Trinity (4:159; 5:116-118).

In answering the question “Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?” the missiological implications of each response are vast. While replying to this inquiry with a simple “Yes” or “No” is tempting, careful theological reflection is required. As I met this morning with my interfaith dialogue group in Portland, Oregon, I was reminded of the value of building bridges of peace in the midst of religious diversity. In moving forward in this conversation, it is crucial that we acknowledge the unique theological differences between Christianity and Islam while also continuing our commitment to pursue peaceful relationships with our Muslim neighbors.

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# Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?

## Missiological Implications of Answering a Divisive Question

David Greenlee

**W**hen Bob Priest interrupted my New Year’s weekend with a request to contribute to this conversation, my mind went back to the joke, first told by Emo Phillips 30 years ago,<sup>1</sup> of two men who met on a bridge. Not only were they Christians, they rejoiced, they shared roots in the Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region. When they discovered, though, that one was Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, the other of the Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912, the first cried “Die, heretic!” and pushed the second off the bridge.

Humor comes dangerously close to experience. In recent years my heart was often heavy as I watched friends

Internet dissemination of the Wheaton situation offers no benefit to Christian minorities in Muslim societies.

**Poorly-framed questions and poorly-chosen sources of information lead to poor missiology.** “Truth” as heard by a jury is filtered through carefully constructed questions posed to the witnesses. Customer satisfaction surveys push me toward certain responses (and auto-respond if I am not “highly satisfied” at every point).

Confirmation bias is the tendency we all have to look for and interpret information in ways that confirm our preconceptions. Rather than interact with the strongest opposing views, we create straw men; few of us strengthen our arguments by seriously pursuing evidence that we might be wrong.

A Central Asian, responding to comments raised by members of our home

**Muslims who have come to faith** in Jesus from Arab societies tend to ask questions like, “Is Allah, as identified by Muslims, the same God as YHWH, identified by Jews and Christians from their scriptures?”

“pushed off the bridge” by some who, self-appointed, considered “Council of 1912” to be the only right answer. As an MK and seminary professor’s son, I know that pushing heretics off the bridge is not a new pattern of “Christian” behavior.

**Be careful: doing missiology can be dangerous.** I do not know Larycia Hawkins, and have only a distant acquaintance with Wheaton; it would be presumptuous for me to try to explain or endorse either of their actions. However, the first missiological implication I draw is to *be careful; it can be dangerous to answer a divisive question*. And, whatever happens to the protagonists,

group in Switzerland a few years ago, said, “Of course I didn’t switch gods when I trusted in Jesus Christ. Why would you even think something like that?” Among Muslims I know who have turned to faith in Jesus Christ, most—but not all—would say more or less the same thing.

A danger for me, then, is to heap up evidence in that direction because I am more comfortable listening to friends and reading articles sharing that view, rather than listening with an open mind to those who hold other positions. But, missiological reflection is misinformed when we frame our questions in ways that shed only filtered

light on the object of study.

**Language and culture affect my questions, and thus my answers; by myself I only see part of the picture.**

A television closed-caption translator, I am told, was puzzled. The English-language speaker had stated, "We don't believe in Allah; we believe in God." To put that into Arabic she would have to write (back-translated) "We don't believe in God; we believe in God." My somewhat simplistic example serves to remind us that *our questions and thought-patterns are shaped by language.*

Richard Jameson describes the impact of culture on questions about God, faith, life, and the world. Arabs he knows tend to focus on sharp boundar-

question? Discretion is (still) a virtue, and all the more so in our Internet age. *Valid questions, asked or answered the wrong way and with wrong motives, can become theological litmus tests intended to separate and divide, barbed wire to keep us in control and those we fear away.* Committed to truth, as James was, can we express it, as he did, in ways that will "not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19)?

Still, I wonder, can we even answer the question "Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?" Which Muslims? Which Christians? "Worship" in the sense of ritual and tradition, or in the sense of lives as living sacrifices? "Same" in terms of the ontological fact

Does peace matter? Unlike the situation of most Christians in most places I have lived, issues of religious pluralism were, until recently for Americans, issues for theological argument rather than application to daily life. Questions long commonplace elsewhere now unsettle us.

Knowing what we believe, and what others believe, is important; unilateral declarations about what others believe does little good in building peace among communities. In considering the increasing fear in American society, rather than talking *about* them, could we more often talk *with* Muslims and others in a sort of kitchen table discussion (to adapt a term Valdir Steuernagel expressed in Iguazu fifteen years ago)? If, at least for a time, we leave aside the old points of debate, *we might find that sensitive exploration not just about what we believe about God, but what we hope for our children, could contribute to peacemaking in a fearful, increasingly fractured world.*

**God is defined by who he is,** not by what I believe about him. Rather than focusing on worship or belief, a more fruitful question for missionaries, if not for missiology, might be "Do we know the same God?"

ies and difference; Indonesians focus on harmony. Muslims who have come to faith in Jesus from Arab societies tend to ask questions like "Is Allah, as identified by Muslims, the same God as YHWH, identified by Jews and Christians from their Scriptures?" while Indonesian believers he refers to ask questions like "Is there enough truth about Allah as identified by Muslims to use this truth as a starting point in leading a Muslim to a full knowledge of the God of the Bible?"<sup>2</sup>

Both approaches are valid, both incomplete. Whether speaking of a deeply-held theological framework or culture-rooted worldview, *I need others to help me, not only to see the fuller picture, but to even know where to look.*

**Am I building bridges or barriers?** Is it always right to answer every

of one Almighty God, Creator of all things, or "same" in sufficient congruence in the details of belief?

If I opt for the second approach to sameness I find myself wondering, how many mistakes can there be in my belief for me to be worshiping God and not a false god? Is the loving Father a friend testifies to knowing the same being as the angry ogre she thought he was as a teenager? Do we worship the same God as liberal Protestants, "Jehovah" of the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the Jesus of "Oneness Pentecostals"?

What we believe matters; but God is defined by who he is, not by what I believe about him. Rather than focusing on worship or belief (important as they are), *a more fruitful question for missionaries, if not for missiology, might be "Do we know the same God?"*

**Endnotes**

1. Emo Philips, "The Best Good Joke Ever—And It's Mine!" *The Guardian* (online), September 28, 2005. <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>

2. Richard Jameson, "Respecting Context: A Comparison of Indonesia and the Middle East," *IJFM* 29,4. [http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/29\\_4\\_PDFs/IJFM\\_29\\_4-Jameson.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/29_4_PDFs/IJFM_29_4-Jameson.pdf)

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**Do you want to have further discussion with scholars of Christian mission, regarding the ideas in this Occasional Bulletin?**

You can participate in a conversation on Christianity and Islam, as well as many other important issues in missions by joining the MissionScholar listserv. The email group is also a way to network, share resources, and ask questions of other professionals and professors of missions. To join the mission scholar listserv, send a blank email to: [MissionScholar-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:MissionScholar-subscribe@yahoogroups.com). To talk with the administrator of the listserv, contact Kenneth Nehrbass at [kenneth.r.nehrbass@biola.edu](mailto:kenneth.r.nehrbass@biola.edu)

# What are the Missiological Implications of Affirming or Denying that Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?

Mark Hausfeld

**T**he missiological implications of identifying the sameness, or not, of the God from Muslim theology and Christian theology is at the core of missiological presuppositions for all that determines further missiological orthopraxy. Missiological practice is rooted in theological orthodoxy. The question for Muslims and Christians is: What is the theological foundation for your beliefs? For the Muslim, the theological foundation of belief rests on the Qur'an and perhaps the Hadith (the supposed sayings of

degree turn. The God of the Qur'an and Mohammed is most similar in theology to the God of the Bible in the understanding as "one God" and God as a creator. Even the concept of "one God" quickly begins to bifurcate, as the God of inspired Scripture is a Godhead ... God in three persons, blessed Trinity. Of course, this is blasphemous to Muslims, so even this has limited commonality. Yet this is not a hindrance to developing theologically sound missiology to engage Muslim people in relationships for the sake of the gospel.

In my own efforts to reach Muslims,

**Often my Muslim contacts** and friends say, "We serve the same God." I let it be. There is no need in the initial development of my relationship with a Muslim to come out and say, "No, we do not."

instruction of Islam's prophet Mohammed), while the Christian's theological epicenter of belief and practice relies on the Bible. Absolute truth regarding the sameness of God, as perceived by the Muslim or Christian, depends on the sacred text the individual sees as absolute truth, not merely philosophical reasoning or emotional desire. The individual decides the difference or the "sameness" of God from this basic presupposition.

When I served as a young missionary in South Asia in a very conservative Muslim nation, I initially believed in the sameness of the God of Islam and Christianity. However, over time, experience with Muslim people, reading through the Qur'an several times, and becoming acquainted with the Hadiths of Mohammed, I made an 180-

I develop relationships with them at the Mosque, restaurants and the major state university in our city. Often my Muslim contacts and friends say, "We serve the same God." I let it be. There is no need in the initial development of my relationship with a Muslim to come right out and say, "No, we do not." It is not relevant to the proclamation of the gospel when my Muslim friend has not had the opportunity to read the Bible. To do so, my biblical understanding would be left unknown to him. Therefore, since my understanding of God comes from the context of the Bible, my Muslim friend will come to such understanding of who God is through his engagement with the Bible by reading it for himself. After all, I say, "I have read your holy book multiple times and come

to my own conclusions. Why not read my Holy Book and come to your own conclusions?" The results from the following survey reinforce the primacy of the God of the Bible being at the core of our missiological engagement with Muslim peoples.

A survey of 750 Muslims who converted to Christianity identifies five predominant reasons why they chose to follow Christ. The respondents represent thirty countries and fifty ethnic groups. Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Intercultural Studies prepared the survey and was reported in *Christianity Today*.

The lifestyle of Christians. Former Muslims cited the love that Christians exhibited in their relationships with non-Christians and their treatment of women as equals.

The power of God in answered prayers and healing. Experiences of God's supernatural work—especially important to folk Muslims who have a characteristic concern for power and blessings—increased after their conversions, according to the survey. Often dreams about Jesus were reported.

Dissatisfaction with the type of Islam they had experienced. Many expressed dissatisfaction with the Qur'an, emphasizing God's punishment over his love. Others cited Islamic militancy and the failure of Islamic law to transform society.

The spiritual truth in the Bible. Muslims are generally taught that the Torah, Psalms, and the Gospels are from God, but that they became corrupted. These Christian converts said, however, that the truth of God found in Scripture became compelling for them and key to their understanding of God's character.

Biblical teachings about the love of God. In the Qur'an, God's love is conditional, but God's love for all people was especially eye-opening for Muslims. These converts were moved by the love expressed through the life and teachings of Jesus. The next step for many Muslims was to become part of a fellowship of loving Christians.

Note the fourth reason for conversion: "These Christian converts said, however, that the truth of God found

in Scripture became compelling for them and key to their understanding of God's character." The Bible reveals the true character of God and this truth is of vital missiological importance.

To say that the God of the Qur'an (Islam) is the same as the God of the Bible (Christianity) is also inconsistent with presuppositions applied to other sects. Is the Jesus of the Church of Latter Day Saints' Book of Mormon and Doctrines and Covenants the same Jesus of the Bible? How about the Jesus of the Jehovah's Witness New World Translation of the New Testament? Both books spell the name of Jesus the same, but the person and work of Jesus, as He known in the Bible, is heretical. The use of the word Jesus is not wrong, but the context of the word Jesus is corrupted by the error of the context and meaning that defines the Person and work of Jesus as revealed in the Bible. The same is true for God. The word God is not misleading in itself, but the context of the Qur'an defines a different God in nature and character.

A Muslim friend responded to a Facebook post where I referred to the "Holy Spirit." As a Sufi Muslim, he inquired why I used "Holy" to describe the Spirit of God. I responded to him that the content and the context of the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, uses the nomenclature "Holy Spirit." The content in context addresses the meaning.

In conclusion, our missiological responsibility is to lead our Muslim friends and contacts into the truth of the revealed nature and character of the God of the Bible. From this presupposition, the gospel will be planted, grow, and produce eternal fruit in the life of the convert.

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# Reflections on Reaching Muslims by a Late Learner

**David J. Hesselgrave**

*No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him (Gr. *exegeomai*, "made him known" ESV) John 1:18 NKJV*

**I cannot remember encountering even one Muslim during my tenure in Japan** throughout the 1950s and in the early 1960s. Nevertheless, when appointed to the faculty of the "new" Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in 1965, it fell to my lot to teach the history of religions. Missions to Muslims were not high on the priority lists of most missions at the time, so my unfamiliarity with Islam was not a major liability. However, that was about to change. Gradually, Islam came more and more into focus. At Trinity, things changed quite rapidly after Francis Steele gave a chapel message in which

**"Allah" was central in the pantheon** of Arabia when Hagar, Ishmael and Esau and their descendents lived there.

he pleaded with faculty and students to devote more concern to the need of Muslims for the Gospel. Certain questions soon came to the fore including the questions before us here: namely, "Do Muslims believe in the same God as Christians or in a different god?; and, "What are the implications in either case?"

I soon became a "late learner" of the basics of Islam. Obviously, monotheistic Islam was is not like polytheistic Shinto. And yet, in some ways, the two religions pose similar problems for national pastors, evangelists and missionaries. As for Shinto, its beginnings are shrouded in a myth recorded in the Kojiki (712) and the Nihon Shoki (720). It is a complicated story, but various gods including Izanami, Izanagi

and Amaterasu Omikami (the Sun Goddess) are some of the major players. In any event, Shinto means "way of the kami (gods)" and both etymologically and practically the word *kami* allows for myriads of gods. Since *kami* (in honorific forms *Kamisama* and/or *Omi-kamisama* when used alone) is regularly used by Christians, it is necessary for missionaries and national pastors to distinguish clearly between the one true God and seemingly myriads of false gods. This is often done by using descriptive and prescriptive words and phrases such as "the True and Living *Kamisama*," "the Eternal *Kamisama*," "the Creator *Kamisama*," "the *Kamisama* of the Bible" and so on.

As I say, there would seem to be no comparison between Japan and the Islamic world in this regard. However, that may not be the case. "Allah" was central in the pantheon of Arabia when Hagar, Ishmael and Esau and their

descendants lived there. Since the times of Muhammad, millions of Muslims daily express the Islamic creed, "There is no deity except Allah." However, as Islam expanded beyond Arabia and experienced divisions into different schools, the word "Allah" took on a variety of different nuances once more.

I do not possess the competence necessary to speak with authority on the significance of all of that. However, coupled with Islamic disdain for orthodox Christian Trinitarian teaching to the effect that God is "One in Three Persons" and "Three Persons in One," it is evident that differences at this point are not just etymological and incidental but are fundamental. The Muslim confesses "The Lord our God is One Lord

Continued on page 31

# A Missional Response to an Ever Provoking Question

C.S. Caleb Kim

**E**ver since the rise of Islam in the seventh century, Christians have been challenged by the question: *Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?* Muslim polemicists also use this same question when they dispute with Christians. In fact, as a monotheistic religion borrowing a lot from Judeo-Christian traditions, Islam has many similarities with Christianity in its theological discourses regarding God and Jesus.

The Qur'an declares, "Our God [in Islam] and your God [in Judaism and Christianity] is one" (Sura 29:46). Ontologically speaking, both Christianity and Islam seem to refer to the same God since neither of them allows of the idea of the existence of more than one God. In the ontological sense, the question of "whose (or which) god is the true God" is not valid because it presupposes more than one god in existence so as to choose one; both the religions admit that this is not the case.<sup>1</sup> Then, the real problem is epistemological rather than ontological.

When we take a very close look at the presentation of God and Jesus in Islam, we can discover that the Islamic view of God is significantly different from the Christian understanding. Despite many resemblances between the two traditions, the overall description of God and Jesus in the Qur'an conflicts seriously with the Biblical (both OT and NT) presentation of the same. In Islam, God cannot be a father of anyone, and Jesus was a mere human being (though perceived to be the most excellent prophet of all) and did not die on the cross, hence no resurrection. (This also relates to the Islamic denial of the need of redemption based on its view of human nature.)

Reading the Qur'an very carefully from a Muslim viewpoint, one cannot help getting an impression that the Islamic monotheism (called *tawhid*)

must have been designed to refute specifically the Christian Trinity. This has been creating a serious obstacle to the Christian witness of the gospel among Muslims.

Evangelistic efforts to correct the Muslim's misunderstanding of God and Jesus do not seem to have been so successful as often expected. Innumerable apologists and polemicists in history tended to focus mostly on theological differences in the attempt to present the gospel to Muslims, but challenges were exacerbated. Ironically, Christian apologetic or polemicist approaches aroused many Muslim counterparts against the Christian doctrine of Trinity.

To make the situation worse, political relationships between Christendom

**Ontologically speaking,** both Christianity and Islam seem to refer to the same God since neither of them allows the idea of the existence of more than one God.

and the Muslim world in history made the doctrine-based evangelism perceived as part of the Christian imperialistic invasion of the Muslim world. So many Christian missionaries, especially in the past many decades, felt led to lean more on similarities between Christianity and Islam than disparities. Those deeply sympathetic with Muslims for an evangelistic purpose or for a relational reason began to underscore a number of common elements between Islamic and Christian understandings of God.

In this line, many gospel communicators made continuous efforts to "contextualize" the gospel for Muslims. Along with these contextualization efforts also arose controversial issues. For instance, the so-called C5 contextualization (or "Insider Movements") approach has emerged recently, and quite a number of missionaries have turned to it from conventional methods. As many are aware, it has become

a new controversy heatedly debated among missiologists today. In the C5 approach, the issue goes even beyond doctrinal differences; a more inflamed debate has arisen as to how one should interpret the whole entity of "Islam" itself. Is Islam just a religion of tawhid that denies all that Christianity holds or a culture that is capable of being freed from its religious tenets embedded in it? It seems to me that the recent controversy around the statement made by a tenured professor at Wheaton College is similar to the controversy around some radical forms of C5 approach these days. I don't intend to discuss this hot issue here, but at least I am suggesting that issues relating to the Christian approach to the Muslim world need to be examined from a broader missional perspective.

How can we prevent any polarization of the seemingly antithetical responses to this hard question but reconcile

them instead? *Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?* As pointed out above, epistemologically the answer is clearly "No." Then, whom do Muslims worship? I hear some radical Christians say extremely that, since the Quranic Allah is incompatible with the Biblical God, they worship Satan as pagans in the OT worshipped idols like Baal. But, as I pointed out, an ontological problem may come up to complicate the issue.

The actual problem is quite epistemological; it is more with the problem of human ignorance that has resulted from sin (cf. Eph. 4:18). Then, we may need to learn an attitude and strategy from Paul. He preached the gospel to his Athenian audience, who ignorantly worshipped an unknown God, without having to tell them that they worshipped a wrong god (Acts 17:22-23). Can we also share the gospel in a way that helps Muslims to come to a better understanding of who the true God is

in Jesus without necessarily focusing on their wrong understanding of God? I am positive that a good chance of this correction will come eventually when the time is ripe through the establishment of a trustful relationship.

In fact, while Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders seek to educate their people (that is, internal *jihad*) in terms of the Islamic law (*shariah*), ordinary Muslims do not always measure up to its requirements. Having researched Muslim cultural phenomena in East Africa for years, I have encountered many Muslims whose idea of God seems similar to a monotheistic concept of God in African Traditional Religions rather than the strict concept of *tawhid*. This may suggest some missiological practicalities (perhaps, particularly in sub-Saharan contexts). Our primary concern should be directed more toward helping Muslims to open their hearts to listen to the gospel via our personal engagement with them in life context. This requires us to patiently begin our engagement at where they are rather than what Islam stipulates.

In light of my own personal experiences, it usually takes much time for even an open-minded Muslim person to give their ears to what we'd love to communicate. In some contexts, I have seen it quite effective in communicating when I share my Christian faith in the Triune God, which is certainly opposite to what Muslims believe, with candidness and sincerity of my own conviction yet politely in a way that respects their religiosity and does not disgrace their cultural values.

#### Endnote

1. And this logic may be applicable even to other monotheistic ideas in other cultures or religions besides the three monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). This can also be explained in terms of "general revelation" or "common grace" (cf. Romans 1:19-20).

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# Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God? Missiological Implications

*Paul Martindale*

**T**here has been a great deal of discussion on the topic of whether the Allah of the Quran and the God of the Bible are the same. There are two distinct questions that must be dealt with. One is the ontological question of whether this refers to two distinct entities and the other question concerns the degree of overlap between the Muslim and Christian doctrines of God. On one side are those searching for doctrinal common ground that might serve as a foundation for genuine dialogue and effective witness. Some even attempt to harmonize the two doctrines in a process of dialectical

**Serious attempts** have been made to find areas of theological overlap between the doctrine of God found in the Bible and the doctrine of Allah described in the pages of the Quran.

synthesis. On the other side are those who sound cautionary warnings that this must not lead to theological compromise and in the process undermine an orthodox witness. In this brief article I would like to identify some of the missiological implications that should be kept in view as this issue is discussed and debated.

Serious attempts have been made to find areas of theological overlap between the doctrine of God found in the Bible and the doctrine of Allah described in the pages of the Quran.<sup>1</sup> However, it is clear that the areas of similarity and overlap are smaller than the extent and the degree of the differences.<sup>2</sup> Some aspects of the two doctrines would have to be termed mutually contradictory. Theologically, one can only conclude that the descriptions of Allah in the Quran and of God in the Bible do not correspond with enough consistency to

say for sure that they are describing the same being. This leads to more than one possible conclusion:

1. The descriptions are inconsistent, but they still refer to the same entity. Muslims and Christians worship the same God.

2. The descriptions are inconsistent, and they refer to two different entities. Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God.

3. The descriptions are inconsistent, the texts describe two partially similar but overall different doctrines, but the followers of Islam believe that they are following the same God as the Christian God.

4. The descriptions are inconsistent. One of the descriptions is the correct

one, and one is false, but the followers of Islam believe that they are following the correct description (Quran) and the correct God (Allah).

We must begin with a carefully nuanced theological interpretation if we are to have a good missiological understanding and draw useful implications. If our starting point is unclear, it will tend to confuse the issue leading towards faulty approaches not to mention giving the potential for theological compromise. In my thirty plus years of interacting with Muslims, I have yet to meet a Muslim who believes that Allah is a different God from the Yahweh of the Bible. Popular Islam teaches that the God of the Bible and the Allah of the Quran are the same One, True, Creator God. Most former Muslims would also say that they had been attempting to worship the same God, but they later realized that the teaching and system of

worshipping God in Islam were to some extent incorrect, false, and misleading.

Conversion studies have shown that the greater the degree of congruence between Islam and Christianity that is perceived by the Muslim inquirer the more likely it is that he or she will seriously consider Christianity as a viable alternative to Islam.<sup>3</sup> As the differences between Islam and Christianity are emphasized, they become more of a barrier to conversion. Therefore, one of the first implications of denying that God and Allah are the same is that this creates a much higher barrier in the communication of the gospel. The Muslim is less likely to consider Christianity when we deny that Allah is the God of the Bible. In my experience watching several dozen Muslims leaving Islam and entering Christianity, I never had to take the position with them that Allah and the God of the Bible are not the same.<sup>4</sup> In reading the Scriptures for themselves over a period of time they were all able to come to the conclusion on their own that the description of Allah in the Quran was not the correct one, that Mohammed was not a prophet inspired and sent by God, and that Islam was not the true religion.

Years ago, a wise, senior missionary cautioned me that if I were too dogmatic in my discussions with Muslims that I would “win the argument and lose the Muslim.” Telling a Muslim that they worship a false God or that they are following a false prophet is offensive to them, and they will typically avoid us after that and perhaps see us as an enemy of Islam. In the process, we lose the possibility of further communication with them and can unwittingly contribute to an “us-them” mentality. Another factor that I have observed is that it is very destabilizing for the Muslim person when they begin coming to the realizations that the Quran and the prophet Mohammed are not reliable and may have misled them.<sup>5</sup> When the foundational paradigms holding up a worldview are challenged people often choose equilibrium over truth.<sup>6</sup> The implications here are those of communication, nurture, and discipleship. Our commitment not to compromise truth must not lead us to undermine

the process of leading someone towards Christ. Jesus told his disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, I do not believe that we are obligated to tell the unsaved person everything we know or think in the moment. With an infant, we start them out with milk, then pureed baby food, later pieces of fruit and vegetables, and once they have teeth and the digestive ability, we eventually feed them whole foods including meat.

How much we communicate with Muslims at different stages in their journey should be among our primary concerns. The position one takes on this issue must take into account how a Muslim will perceive and understand it. The implications for full communication and discipleship are at stake. If a Muslim thinks that he or she is worshipping the same God as the Christians, it is far more important to take them from that point on and lead them towards a full understanding of the gospel. We can point out to them the flaws and contradictions in the Islamic doctrine of Allah later on.

The discussion on this issue is generally motivated by a desire to communicate the gospel effectively with a Muslim without theological compromise. However, what often results is a compromise of relationship, communication, and discipleship. A clear and orthodox theological starting point is important but so also is an understanding of communication and conversion theory. All three are necessary to form a good missiological understanding and practice. A flaw in any of these will lead to a weak approach with Muslims and may also contribute to the polarization of the discussion between Christians. The theological differences between the two sides may in fact not be as great as we might think they are when properly understood.

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? There is only One, True, Creator God. The Bible is clear that there is no other God. Muslims are attempting to worship this very same God but with a flawed understanding, faulty description, and a false system of worship. They are not attempting to worship a different God. The word

Allah in Arabic means literally “The God.” Is the Quranic doctrine of Allah a complete and accurate reflection of the One True God? No, it is not. However, not all elements of the Islamic doctrine of Allah are false either. Theologically, the two concepts are not completely identical. All the more important that we lead Muslims to the full and perfect truth reflected in the person of Christ without compromising relationship, communication, or the gospel.

#### Endnotes

1. Miroslav Volf, *Allah. A Christian Response*, see chapters 4 and 5.
2. Christine Schirmacher, *The Islamic View of Major Christian Teachings*, see chapter 4.
3. David Greenlee, *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way*, p. 44-45
4. I also never needed to explicitly express that I did not believe that the Allah described in the Quran is the One, True, Creator God.
5. Charles Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, see chapter 22 on stability and worldview change.
6. *Ibid*
7. Crossway Bibles, *ESV*, John 16:12
8. I tell my students that this falls into the category of “useless information” in approaches to Muslims. We may be able to identify the errors, false doctrines, or untruths in Islam but this information does not help us to lead that Muslim person closer to Christ and may in fact drive them further away.
8. Isaiah 45:5. “I am the Lord, there is no other, besides me there is no God.” So ontologically I would find it difficult to argue that there are two different gods being worshipped.

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# Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God, 'Allah'?

Hanna G. Massad

**O**ne of the big questions today is this: *Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?* Arab Christians in the Middle East and around the world use the same word in Arabic, 'Allah', when they refer to God. Does that mean that we worship the same God? And how is it that both religions use the same word to refer to God?

Christians used the word 'Allah' in the Pre-Islamic period (before the life of Mohamed 570-632 AD). At this time, both Jews and Christians who lived in Arabia used the colloquial Arabic word long before Islam appeared. The word 'Allah' derives from other Semitic languages, including 'Elah' in the Aramaic language. (The Arabic language has borrowed many words from the Aramaic language), such as 'El' in Canaanite, and 'Elohim' in Hebrew. More than that, Jesus used the Aramaic form of the word 'Allah' when he said in Matthew 27:46, "My God, my God, why you have forsaken me?" Also in Acts 2:9-11, when there were representatives of 14 different ethnic groups listening to the apostles, one of those groups was Arab. Further evidence is that the name of Mohamed's father was 'Slave to Allah' (Abed Allah).

Thus, the question arises: if Christians and Muslims both use the same word for God, 'Allah', does that mean that we worship the same God? My answer is: 'No, it doesn't.' My reason for saying this is because, despite the fact we use the same word for God, theologically the Christian God is very different in his character from the God of the Muslims. For example, Christians believe in and worship the Triune God of the Bible - the Father, who loves us, Jesus the Son who died for us, and the Holy Spirit, who lives within us. The Incarnation, where God came down to us in the man, Jesus Christ, is based on the Trinity. At the same time, we see God as our Father in heaven and the Holy Spirit who is our ever-present

Helper. This view of God is completely antithetical to the Tawhid in Islam.

Also, if you look at the 99 names of God in Islam, many of these names contradict how we understand the Triune God in Christianity. There is much more to say concerning how we see 'Allah' as Arab Christians, about how God revealed Himself to us through Christ and about our understanding of the Bible. And, of course, there are many things taught about 'Allah' in the Quran that we Christians do not accept.

So, I hope you can see why I say that the Christian God and the Muslim God are not the same God. At times, the Christian view of God and the Muslim view of God are totally contradictory!

However, having said all that, it is important that Christians try to find common ground with Muslims so that we may find a starting place for serious and genuine dialogue with each other. We can do this without compromis-

ing our beliefs. As ever Scripture is our guide. In Acts 17:22-31 we find Paul doing just this - finding common ground with the religious people of his day and then using that common ground as a launch-pad to share the truth about Jesus. Not only can we do this. We MUST do this in order to find ways of sharing the gospel of Christ with our Muslim friends. God loves Muslims, and he wants them to know who He truly is! So finding common ground, a place where we can begin dialogue together, is vital if we are serious about sharing the Good News with Muslims.

So, rather than get into debates about whether we worship the same God or not, which can be confrontational, my approach is to find common ground with Muslims which can then be used as a foundation from which we can reach out to our Muslim friends with the love of God, which is found in Jesus Christ.

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## Who Decides If Allah Is God? A contextual consideration of the use of the term "Allah" for the God of the Bible

Mark Naylor

**G**od is a God of accommodations. He speaks to us in and through our context, culture, and daily experiences. It is as we are enculturated into a particular language and setting that we gain the tools needed to engage God in prayer and the reading of Scripture. As Newbigin<sup>1</sup> notes, we have been given "lenses" from our web of relationships through which we engage the world. Thus, our concepts about God are formed by cultural traditions and language and continue to be developed through dialogue as we engage others in the study of God. Language as communication can only have meaning in community, and it is these

localized vehicles of communication that are used by God to engage humanity. Thus, God speaks to Old Testament prophets in Hebrew, to the apostle Paul in Aramaic, and to churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire in Greek. Whoever comes to God in Christ perceives him first through the lenses they have developed in their cultural context. Because these lenses are human derived they simultaneously reveal and distort; they are limited yet they are the sole gateway by which humanity may approach God.

This perspective suggests that the question of whether or not the God of Islam and the God of Christianity is the same God can be addressed by examining how people come to Christ from a

Muslim background. How do Muslims who explore and accept the Gospel engage the message of Jesus through their view of God? Does Allah remain the same for them but with a reshaped understanding, or do they abandon Allah in order to embrace a totally different God? How does their concept of God compare with and contrast the Father of Jesus? As they come to faith are the similarities sufficient so that the identity of God remains constant in their understanding, or is there a point when they shift allegiance to another God?

Abdul<sup>2</sup> came regularly to visit and study the Bible. We read a chapter of Romans each time and at the end of chapter nine, he turned to me and declared, "I now believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but what about Islam?" I had sufficient experience to understand the significance of his question. What he meant was that he had a great love and respect for Islam and the God of Islam, and he wondered how the religion of his

had been taught to serve.

Such experiences moved me to examine the conversion process of Muslims in my area of ministry. In 2013, I submitted my D.Th. Thesis<sup>3</sup> that examined "theological trajectories" of Muslims who had come to faith in Christ. In particular, I asked the question, "How has their perspective of God changed?" Both the control group of Muslims and the group of those who had become followers of Jesus reflected on the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) to express how the character and nature of God was revealed. During the exercise, neither group questioned the identity of God or sought to distinguish a Christian God from a Muslim God. For all participants, God is one and to question the identity of the Father of Jesus as Allah was outside the realm of possibility or even discussion. What had changed for the believers was their orientation to and perspective of God. The Muslim control group was consistent in their view of God as Master and themselves

perspective, the best answer to the question "Is Allah God?" is not determined by the understanding of outsiders but by insiders. Because the answer is receptor-oriented, there is not one correct answer since it is predicated on the individual's or people group's understanding of Allah. If their experience of the God of Islam is negative and harsh with the love of Christ seen as a contrast to their understanding, then they may turn away from Allah to embrace the servant God who cares for all nations.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, if they love the God of Islam who is gracious, merciful and forgiving, but feel distant from him, then the invitation of Christ as the way, the truth and the life who brings us to a living relationship with the Father is appealing as the pathway to know Allah. God remains the same, it is their orientation towards him that changes.

#### Endnotes

1. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 38.

2. The name has been changed.

3. Mark Naylor, *Mapping Theological Trajectories That Emerge In Response To A Bible Translation*. (Unpublished, 2013).

4. *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities* edited by Harley Talman and John Jay Travis (Pasadena: Wm. Carey, 2015) provide a number of examples.

Nabeel Qureshi is a convert from Islam who represents this position. See his article "Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?" on the Ravi Zacharias International Ministries website accessed Jan 2, 2016, <http://rzim.org/global-blog/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god>.

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**From a missiological perspective,** the best answer to the question "Is Allah God?" is not determined by the understanding of outsiders but by insiders.

family that provided morality and social stability would ally with a commitment to Christ. I gave him the example of Jesus' interaction with the rich ruler (Lk 18:18-30) as a parallel to his situation: a man with loyalties to a well-respected religion, but who was unsatisfied spiritually. The ruler in the story was faithful to his religious duties yet had a hunger for more than his path of obedience could provide. The comparison resonated with Abdul and just as Jesus called the man in the story to follow him without rejecting the good aspects of his religion, so Abdul committed his life to Christ as the way to know and love the Allah he

as servants. While not rejecting this relationship, those who had become followers of Christ now embraced a new relationship with God as Father and themselves as loved children.

These findings do not reflect all Muslims who come to faith in Christ, only those who were the subjects of this study. Nonetheless, it seems evident from this and other studies worldwide<sup>4</sup> that many Muslims do come to Christ without changing their allegiance to another God. Their perspective is altered as they come to understand God in Christ, but the identity of the divine Creator remains intact. From a missiological

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**The American Society of Missiology invites proposals for papers** for its annual meeting, June 17-19, 2016, at University of Northwestern—St. Paul, in St. Paul, Minnesota. This year's conference theme is "*Missiology and Public Life: Mission's Engagement with Societies, Change, and Conflict*." The deadline for paper proposals is January 31, 2016. For a full description of the theme and other conference details, see the ASM website. Questions? Contact Alison Fitchett Climenhaga at [afitchet@nd.edu](mailto:afitchet@nd.edu).

# Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God? Clarifying Some Issues

Harold Netland

## Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

What seems like a simple question with a clear answer actually is ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations and agendas. For American Christians, the focal point of these agendas is conflicting perceptions of Islam. For some, Islam is a religion of peace, and it is obvious that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Others (including many evangelicals) regard it as equally obvious that Islam is evil and that the "Allah" of Islam has nothing in common with the God of Christianity. Sadly, events of the past three decades have produced in the U.S. a highly charged social and political environment such that important theo-

inter-religious encounters but also are present in intra-Christian debates as well.

## The Broader Missiological Context of the Question

Question (A) is not a new issue for Christians. It is an example of a broader set of issues concerning the relation of the Christian gospel to surrounding cultural and religious contexts with which Christians have struggled over the centuries. To what extent is there similarity in meanings between biblical and local terms and concepts? The Jesuits and Dominicans in China in the seventeenth century, for example, debated the appropriateness of using the ancient Chinese term "Shang Di" to refer to the God of the Bible. Some Jesuits argued that what ancient

unacceptable assumptions are rejected.

It is significant that American evangelicals tend to use the Arabic term "Allah" when referring to the God of Islam and the English "God" when speaking of the God of the Bible. While understandable, this not only accentuates the perceived differences between Christianity and Islam but also ignores the fact that Arabic-speaking Christians before and after the time of Muhammad used "Allah" to refer to the God of the Bible. Many Christians today worldwide continue to do so. Arabic translations of the Bible today use "Allah" to refer to the God of the Bible. Moreover, we must remember that the English term "God" is itself a translation of a number of Hebrew and Greek terms in the Bible used for the one Creator. Insisting that "God" refers to the Biblical deity but "Allah" refers to the Islamic deity obscures these realities.

## Distinguishing Questions

In order to clarify the ambiguity in (A) we might consider the following questions:

(1) *Do Christians and Muslims both agree that everything apart from the Creator was created by an eternal Creator God?*

The answer to (1) clearly is "yes". Ontologically, that is, in terms of what actually exists, there can be only one such Creator God. So the ontological referent of "Creator" in (1) must be the same for both the Christian and the Muslim. In this sense, Muslims and Christians are referring to the same divine being when speaking about God the Creator. But we must follow up with a second question:

(2) *Do Christians and Muslims agree in their respective understandings of God?*

While there is significant agreement among Muslims and Christians on certain issues relating to God's nature (God is omnipotent and omniscient), there is also fundamental disagreement on other matters. The primary disagreement is, of course, over the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ. So, while we can answer question (1) in the affirmative we cannot do so with (2) without significant qualification.

**We must remember** that the English term "God" is itself a translation of a number of Hebrew and Greek terms in the Bible used for one Creator.

logical and missiological issues concerning Islam often become conflated with concerns about terrorism and national security. Given globalization, it is crucial that American evangelical leaders become more sensitive to the complexity of our culturally and religiously diverse world and comfortable navigating knotty missiological issues.

In what follows I will focus on the following question: (A) Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

There are many significant missiological issues embedded in (A), but I will confine myself to clarifying what might be involved in asking the question. In so doing, however, I will locate (A) within the broader set of missiological issues addressed by contextualization and conclude by suggesting that the issues raised by (A) are not unique to

Confucians worshiped as Shang Di was indeed the biblical God; Dominicans and Franciscans denied this. Similarly, in the late nineteenth century there were extensive debates among missionaries in Korea over the appropriateness of the term "*Hananim*" for the biblical God, and among missionaries in Japan over the use of the Shinto term "*kami*" for the God of the Bible. The contentious debates today over the "insider movement" and the C4 / C5 approaches to ministry among Muslims hinge in part on the degree of continuity in meanings between Christian themes or teachings and certain terms, teachings or practices in Islamic settings. Contextualization of the gospel message presupposes that there is some continuity between biblical understandings and the indigenous idiom, even as

Question (A) speaks of Christians and Muslims worshipping the same God. However, what does “worship” mean here? If it includes the idea of being in a proper, salvific relationship with God, then (A) could be understood as follows:

(3) *Are Muslims and Christians, as they act upon the core beliefs within their respective theological systems, in a proper, salvific relationship with the one Creator God? (Are Muslims who live faithfully according to Islamic teaching saved?)*

Most evangelicals would find (3) unacceptable on biblical grounds. The important point here is that (A) can be interpreted in terms of any of the three subsidiary questions, each of which needs to be treated on its own terms. Before one can respond to (A) it must be clear which question is being considered.

### Similarities, Differences, and Identity

Answering (A) involves making a judgment about identity relations between the referents of two concepts. Under what conditions can we legitimately conclude that two or more concepts, or descriptions, refer to the same thing? Clearly there are many cases in which the same individual can be referred to under different concepts or descriptions. The same person can, for example, be described as the father of Jim, the man who won the Chicago marathon last year, and the manager of the Toyota dealership. Some people might know him under one description but not others, but there is nothing implausible about maintaining that it is the same person throughout. In other cases, the descriptions might be such that it makes no sense to hold that they all refer to the same individual. Moreover, in still other cases we simply may not be able to determine whether it is the same person.

In a classic essay philosopher Gottlob Frege made an important distinction that is helpful in sorting out issues of identity (Frege, 1952). Frege distinguished between the denotation (or reference) and connotation (or sense) of terms. Two terms or concepts can have the same referent or denotation while

having different connotations or senses. Frege noted that the following two statements are both true and that “Morning Star” and “Evening Star” both have the same referent although the statements also differ significantly in meaning:

(4) The Morning Star is identical with the Morning Star.

(5) The Morning Star is identical with the Evening Star.

Although we now know that both statements are true and that in both cases it is the planet Venus that is being referred to (denotation), there clearly are differences in meaning (connotation) in (4) and (5). Whereas (4) is a simple tautology and thus is obviously true, there was a time when the truth of (5) was not known. But we now know that although “Morning Star” and “Evening Star” have different senses they have the same referent—the planet Venus.

The issue, then, is whether some of the descriptions of Allah in Islam and of God in Christianity can plausibly be understood to be denoting the same divine being. So long as we focus on

norance, etc.) whereas two individuals can use different terms to refer to the same divine reality without engaging in worship of that deity.

### How Much Difference in Meaning is Acceptable?

It is not just when we deal with “other religions” that we confront the problem of differences in conceptual understandings of God. This occurs among Christians as well. For example, even the most theologically astute Christians have understandings of God that are at best partial and inadequate, and thus, we must distinguish the following:

(6) God as he is in reality.

(7) God as revealed in the Incarnation and Scripture.

(8) The particular understandings of God that any individual or theological tradition has.

While (7) is an accurate reflection of (6), it is partial in the sense that there is much more to God than what has been revealed to us. And given our finitude and sin, there will always be some

**Given the significant differences** in the understandings of God among various Christian groups, we might ask whether they all do worship the same God.

question (1) this makes good sense. But if we turn to (2) then it is not so clear that the denotation is the same. Thus it is misleading to give a simple “yes” or “no” to (A). Dudley Woodberry wisely observes, “Christians, Muslims, and Jews as monotheists refer to the same Being when they refer to God—the Creator God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob. But in significant ways they do not have the same understanding about him, even though they also agree in significant ways” (Woodberry 2004, 37).

It is also important to keep the question of the identity of referent of two terms distinct from that of whether those using the terms are worshipping the same God. The concept of worship includes a dispositional response to the object of worship which is either appropriate or inappropriate (genuine worship, false worship, worship in ig-

gap between (8) and (7). Our goal as maturing disciples of Jesus Christ, of course, is to bring (8) in line with (7) as much as possible.

But given the significant differences in understandings of God among various Christian groups, we might ask whether they all do worship the same God. Do ordinary laypeople attending First Baptist Church, for example, worship the same God as a Baptist theologian teaching in a seminary? Truth be told, many in our pews probably harbor views about the Trinity and Jesus Christ which have been condemned historically as heretical. Did Athanasius and Arius worship the same God? What about Calvinists and Arminians? Jonathan Edwards and Clark Pinnock? Our understandings of God are, to some extent, influenced by our historical and cultural location. Do

Japanese Christians, Bolivian Christians, and Danish Christians worship the same God? Do twenty-first century American Christians worship the same God as seventh-century Irish monks? In each of these cases, there will be both similarities and some differences in the respective understandings of God, yet most of us would acknowledge that, as far as we can tell, most if not all of these are worshipping the same God. The broader issue then becomes, (9) *How much variation in understandings of God is acceptable when we say that two or more groups are referring to or worshipping the same God?*<sup>1</sup>

We are generally willing to accommodate some differences in understandings of God among those identified as Christian, even if not all of these perspectives can be accurate. Despite clear differences on certain points, we acknowledge that it is the same God we are referring to.

But when the issue is differences in understandings across religious boundaries then we are usually much less willing to acknowledge a common referent. Differences over God's nature among Christian thinkers are one thing; differences between Christians and Muslims are something else. To be sure, there are real differences in belief between Muslims and Christians which should not be minimized.

Belief in the Trinity serves as a kind of boundary marker for Christians; rejection of it places one outside the orthodox Christian community. Maintaining proper boundaries is essential. But focus only upon boundary markers such as the doctrine of the Trinity can also obscure other ways in which Muslims and Christians might have significant commonalities. Moreover, as Christians, we should remember that all people, including Muslims, are created by God as divine image bearers, and thus we should expect a measure of similarity in understandings across even religious boundaries.

In our missiological engagement with religious others, including Muslims, we should build upon what we have in common, encouraging all to embrace Jesus Christ as Lord, to mature in their understanding of God as revealed in the Bible and to worship him in biblically appropriate ways.<sup>2</sup>

### Endnotes

1. This question must be distinguished from the question, How clear and comprehensive must one's understanding of God be in order to be saved? This is a question about the necessary and sufficient conditions for salvation whereas (9) is addressing the issue of the conditions under which we can affirm that two or more conceptual understandings refer to the same being.

2. Thanks to Tom McCall for helpful comments on an early draft of this essay.

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## Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?

Roy Oksnevad

**The answer to this question is more complicated than it initially might seem.**

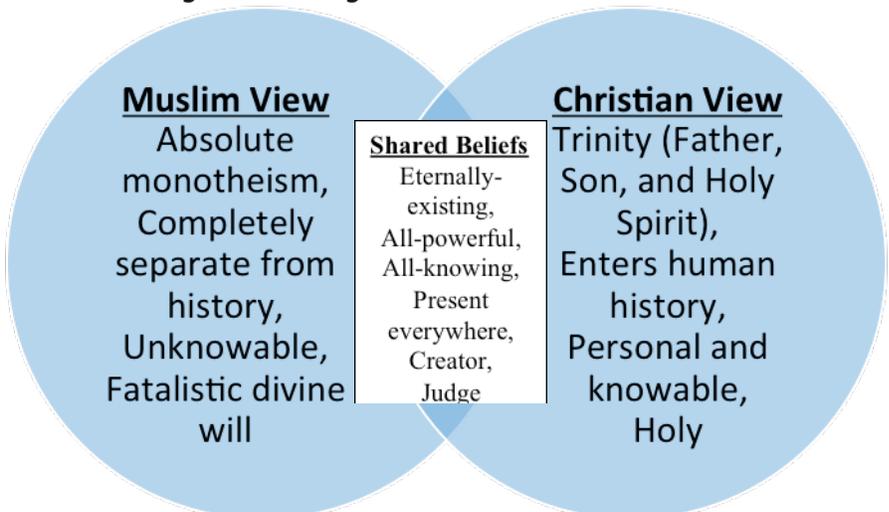
For instance, from an apologetic point of view, both Muslims and Christians would say no. The central and defining doctrine in Islam is Tawhid. It declares absolute monotheism—the unity and uniqueness of God as creator and sustainer of the universe. In Christianity, the central and defining doctrine is the Trinity. The Trinity declares the oneness of God as to his essence but three in person—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

From an interfaith dialogue point of view, both Muslims and Christians affirm that they believe in the same God. However, they recognize that their

witness concerning God diverges on specifics.<sup>1</sup> (See figure 1) Often, Muslims assume that when we are speaking of God, we mean God, who is only One, the Creator, the Loving, the Just, the Holy, the Merciful, the Living and Eternal, the Wise and knowing One.<sup>2</sup> Christians refer to the areas of overlap between the two faiths, but also recognize the distinct special revelation of God as found in the Bible. Lamin Sanneh writes that the identification of Allah and God "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."<sup>3</sup>

Muslims, who come to Christ, also have mixed perspectives concerning whom they worshiped when they were Muslims. For some, when they come

Figure 1: Divergent and Similar Views of God



to Christ they affirm that they found the Allah they have been looking for, or they were seeking Allah, but finally found him in Christ. Others affirm that the God of Islam is a false God, and he is the cause of all the troubles in the Muslim world. The modern father of mission to Muslims, Samuel Zwemer, states, "Mohammed, outside of the Koran, was silent regarding the nature of God's being."<sup>4</sup> The great Imams would fall back on negations concerning the nature of God as found in Islamic teaching.

The world in which we live is moving to what Don Carson calls the New Tolerance,<sup>5</sup> in which holding in particular to a Christian understanding is considered "intolerant." The presupposition of the new tolerance is that our opinion should promote the public good or support moral relativism. Anything less is believed to promote intolerance that leads to sectarianism or some phobic perception of the "other." It becomes a social response instead of a truth response. Modern men and women see nothing worse than to be surrounded by the narrow prejudices of ignorance and racial intolerance.

To the undiscerning ear, this moral relativism sounds to be the moral high ground; yet, it dilutes and homogenizes convictions and beliefs to the point where to hold to certain traditional beliefs is tantamount to being intolerant. The impact of modernity and globalization forces believers in Christ to rethink their unchallenged religious beliefs in light of a global world. Modernity is forcing religion to take a secondary position to the perceived more important agenda of economics or social response.<sup>6</sup> Muslims, particularly in North America, are brandishing Islamophobia as a tool to silence anyone who would present Islam in what they perceive a negative light.<sup>7</sup>

What are the missiological implications of affirming or denying that Christians and Muslims worship the same God? I believe the discussion is more nuanced than whether we should affirm or deny that we worship the same God. This question places us into an exclusivism/inclusivism dichotomy. The question that should inform the discussion is:

*Do Muslims have a full, partial, or no understanding of who God is? Or again, Christians should ask: Is my response to Muslims and a Christian understanding of God formed through the lens of not wanting to be accused of bigotry? Or is it more like Jesus' response to Philip, who asks to see the Father: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'" (John 14:9)?*

How should Christians respond to the growing Islamic presence and global resurgence? Muslims I interact with want Christians to be Christians. Muslims find Christians who are fuzzy about their identity frustrating. Wearing a hijab does not convey solidarity with Muslim victims of Islamophobia, but recognition of the superiority of Islam. Fasting like Muslims during Ramadan does not express camaraderie with Muslims and thus opening more opportunities to share Christ. Instead, it conveys mixed signals. Rather than making declarations that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, which the Qur'an claims in 29:46, we should be

engaged in rigorous discussion concerning God's self-revelation as found in the Bible. Missiologically, we do not want to convey mixed signals. Instead, we want to take every opportunity to share the God who entered history, revealed the Father, and redeemed humanity.

#### Endnotes

1. Kateregga, Badru D. and David W. Shenk. 1980. *Islam and Christianity: A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. For a fuller discussion see chapter 1 and 13 as each discusses their understanding of God.
2. *Ibid*, p. 88.
3. As quoted in Timothy Tennent 2007. *Theology in the context of World Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, p38.
4. Zwemer, Samuel. 1905. *The Moslem Doctrine of God*. New York, NY: American Tract Society, p 30.
5. Carson, D. A. 2012. *The Intolerance of Tolerance*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
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7. Oksnevad, Roy, "Islamophobia" March 16, 2015, [http://commanetwork.com/dig\\_deeper/islamophobia/](http://commanetwork.com/dig_deeper/islamophobia/).

**Roy Oksnevad**, *ReachGlobal Muslim Ministries*.

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## Inquiry on the Abrahamic Faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

**Kurt Anders Richardson**

**American Evangelical controversy in interreligious apologetics has become quite divisive on the question: Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?** But because this question has become very precisely defined by core doctrines of the Christian faith: Christological, soteriological, Trinitarian, we might simplify the question: *Do Christians and Muslims practice the same worship? Obviously, the answer is 'no'. But how did this question get asked in the first place?*

According to strict theological methodology, to raise a worship question is to raise a liturgical, confessional or denominational question. Indeed, the

question regarding overlapping Christian and Muslim views of God is not a "worship" question but a theological and philosophical one. The impropriety of this worship question is that it sets an extremely high bar of judgment, one that connects, e.g., with inter-confessional / -denominational questions of admission to the sacrament, the recognition of ordination, and most sensitive of all, of saving faith. Defined in this way, it cannot apply to separate faiths and is or has become a bad question.

Earlier in 2015 the question looked only like an exquisite muddle; but now that it is causing so much reputational damage at multiple levels, it has become truly pernicious and should not be asked. In the history of pernicious

religious questions, one is reminded of the answer, “Is that your own idea...?” (Jn 18:34) – Jesus answering Pilate with a question. In this “worship question” devised by apologists to get a swift victory in their polemical routines, everyone is harmed when asked in the context of Christian faith and mission.

Since this case presents a near equivalence between “worship the same God” and “practice the same worship” competent theologians in the broadest sense can recognize that this is one of the highest possible bars to set. In strict confessional contexts “same worship” means that non-Catholics are not admitted to the Roman Eucharist, Wesleyans are not invited to Reformed pulpits, infant baptism is not recognized by Baptist churches, and mandatory celibacy for priests is rejected by the Orthodox. All of these conditions prevent “unqualified solidarity” among Christians. And yet the vast majority of Christian theologians and clergy professing orthodoxy, Eastern and Western, regard Muslims as having a faith in the same God as Jews and Christians. Indeed, the God of Abraham as the key point of reference behind the now standard term: the Abrahamic faiths, makes it something of a requirement to be theologically competent and sympathetic in understanding Judaism and Islam from the standpoint of Christian faith.

Scholars of Judaism have regarded Muslims since the time of Mohammed as worshipping the same God while being of separate faiths. This is quintessentially the case with Maimonides, the medieval master of Judaism who regarded Muslims as “perfect monotheists”. By this, he meant that they followed the law of God against idolatry without defect.<sup>1</sup> In Judaism, any human community living according to the “Noahic laws” of Genesis 9-11, i.e., essential monotheism, worshiped the same God. Of course on the question of Mohammed’s prophethood, for Israel, they did not accept it, but for polytheists, the answer was yes.

The rejection of polytheism as a result of Mohammed’s preaching was evidence to the Jews that prophecy had been transmitted and heard by those

who repented of their idolatry—analogue to the effect of Jonah’s prophecy on the Ninevites. Indeed, because of the strictness of Muslim monotheism, Judaism permits Jews to pray with Muslims. Maimonides was quite agitated by the fact that Christians maligned Mohammed, perceiving slander in their caricatures and misinformation about Islam; their statements were not to be answered as he cited Proverbs 26:5.<sup>2</sup> So, if the Jews stand in Noahic, covenantal relationship with Muslims and Christians, what does that mean for the Christians who stand in covenantal relation with Jews?

The next place to look for understanding relations is among Christian churches historically located within Muslim majority regions, particularly those which use Arabic and Arabic cognate languages in their liturgical worship. In the Syrian Orthodox Church as well as the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, whose liturgies date to the 7th century, Allah is the word for God. To Allah, the one true God, all petitions are addressed; Allah is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the God of mercy and grace.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Eastern Christian communities practice such a thoroughgoing cultural exclusivity that they have very little in the way of missional vision for the Muslim world all about them. This is certainly connected to mutual hostilities over the many centuries.

Some have suggested that natural revelation to the truth of the one God is the best approach to identifying the commonalities between Christians and Muslims. Their respective philosophies of religion cross-fertilized through debate and mutual appreciation for centuries and still does.<sup>4</sup> But even this basic monotheism is more than standard Muslim caricaturing apologetics realizes. Muslim philosophers of religion acknowledge a personal deity of theism. And on the level of exegesis, the Qur’an begins with calling upon humanity to remember the mercy of God whose nature is fundamentally merciful. Islamic religious traditions are full of legalistic practices, but these are not vital to experiencing the mercy of God according to the Qur’an. All of

this has been debated among competent theologians of Christianity and Islam for centuries. Early relations among the three faiths reveal in-depth theological conversations on such matters as the divine attributes of the one true God.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, what is difficult is to be closely related to a faith that has many centrally overlapping points, indeed, the Qur’an really cannot be fully understood without detailed knowledge of the Bible, and yet citing many errors which creates the permanent separation. Nevertheless, we must avoid caricature or we miss what Muslims and their own scholars are saying, e.g., having joy in the knowledge of God.<sup>6</sup> If the question is to continue to be asked, it should be understood in the way that the Catholic / Orthodox majority of theologians have answered it: “yes, but”<sup>7</sup>—meaning not in any liturgical or soteriological sense. The mission continues; banish the fear.

#### Endnotes

1. Cf., Maimonides. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Ma’achalot Asurot* 11:7. Tr., Rabinowitz and Grossman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965.

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3. Cf., Anaphoras. *The Book of the Divine Liturgies according to the Rite of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch*. ed. Metropolitan Mar Athanasius Yeshue Samuel. Lodi, N. J.: 1991, pp. 5-52.

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6. Cf., Brock Bingaman, “A Common Vision: John Cassian and al-Ghazali’s Correlative Conceptions of the Spiritual Life”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. 20. 2 (2009) 171–182.

7. Cf., Gavin D’Costa, “Interreligious prayer between Christians and Muslims, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. 24. 1 (2013) 1-14.

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# An Eastern Orthodox Perspective

Edward Rommen

To elaborate on the missiological implications of denying or accepting the idea that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, we will first have to consider the theological conditions under which the affirmation or denial of that equation can or should be made.

## 1. Theological Context

Eastern Orthodox theology maintains that God exists, without dependence on anything or anyone else, as one nature (essence) in three persons, that is, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even though God's essence is incomprehensible, he has revealed himself by creating and manifesting himself in the world, which is maintained by his constant provision. Furthermore, this personal God has expressly replicated himself

**Every human being** has been created in the image of God, which is never lost no matter how sinful they are or how distorted their understanding of God might be.

in the creation of human beings in his own image, breathing into them divine breath, by which they all become persons with the capacity for personally knowing and relating to God. Unfortunately, that ability has been damaged by sin and humankind has developed any number of erroneous, distorted, and even demonically inspired perceptions of the one God. Nevertheless, God's desire to personally relate to and correct (save from death and sin) his creatures caused him a) to establish a series of covenants (with Adam, Noah, Abraham), each one bringing an increasingly specific knowledge of God, and b) to send the Son (the Word) into the world in the form of a human being to personally establish a new and final covenant. By doing so, he dramatically increased the specificity of the available knowledge of God. Seeing Christ is seeing the Father. Thus, Christ becomes the standard against which all

representations of God and his salvific work are measured. After Christ's ascension, the Father sent the Holy Spirit into the world to validate the truth of Christ's revelation, to continually mediate his ongoing presence among us, to convict human beings of their sinfulness, and to draw them to the Savior. These theological affirmations speak both for and against the equation.

### 1.1. Conditions for Allowing an Equation

1.1.1 "Irrespective of what people have or have not believed at different times, there is one God and one God alone."<sup>1</sup> To the extent that a person is honestly seeking God, then the object of that search must be, can only be, the one true God, since no other gods actually exist.

1.1.2 Every human being has been created in the image of God, which is never lost no matter how sinful they are

or how distorted their understanding of God might be. This common origin also gives everyone the ability to perceive God and to express that in the form of some religion. For that reason, we believe that every individual ultimately desires a relationship with God and has the ability to gain some, if even faint, knowledge of God by means of reason.<sup>2</sup> So even if their perception of God is distorted, we may allow for at least some seminal understanding of God's true nature.

1.1.3 Every human being has been included in at least one of the divine covenants.<sup>3</sup> While the earlier covenants may not contain the fullness of the knowledge of God afforded by the covenant in Christ, if the individual is acting in faith in what they do know, then they must be responding to the one true God.

**1.2 Conditions for Rejecting an Equation.** Even though our evaluation of the objects of other religions' worship needs to be very differentiated, in the

final analysis, they must be measured against the knowledge of God provided by Christ in the incarnation. I suspect that as the masses practice it, the object of Muslim worship is, in fact, not the one true God of Christian teaching.

1.2.1 If, as is the case in Islam, the God of any other religion cannot be conceived of as existing in three persons, then it must be declared fundamentally different from the Christian understanding. The non-trihypostatic Allah is not the God of the Christian faith.

1.2.2. If the theology of any other religion, Islam included, denies the deity of the incarnate Son, then it is not worshiping the same God. If Allah has not begotten the Son and if the Holy Spirit does not proceed from Allah, then he is not the God of the Christian faith.

1.2.3 If the soteriology of any other religion, such as Islam, does not allow for the sacrificial, atoning death and resurrection of Christ, then it cannot be worshiping the same God as orthodox Christians.

## 2. Missiological Implications

2.1 If theological conditions allow us to accept some form of equation, then we must acknowledge the universality of human religiosity as a God-given faculty. That means treating the adherents of all other belief systems with respect and dignity and seeking as much common ground for dialog as is possible. If we can assume that the individual is not in possession of the fulness of the knowledge of God as provided by Christ, but has acquired even just a spark of divine truth, and is sincerely searching based on that inkling, then our primary task becomes one of affirmation, support, and instruction, patiently filling in the missing information.

2.2 If the theological conditions require us to deny the equation, then our evaluation of the institutionalized, unified systems of belief will have to be critical. In that case, we are called upon to speak the truth in love, to expose the erroneous perceptions, to correct and resist, to challenge the false gods that exist only in the thoughts, emotions, and practices of those not worshiping the one true God. This may bring

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# What are the Missiological Implications of Affirming, or Denying, that Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?

*Lamin Sanneh*

If the issue about whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God seems a little confounding, it may be because either the question is unanswerable, which seems doubtful, or it is muddled, which is possible. If we look at how Christians and Muslims practice their faith, it is clear that what is most distinctive about them is that their respective worship life is very different. Since that is so, it would be willful in the extreme to content that, if we grant belief in one God, Christian and Muslim differences are misguided and illegitimate. It would be a strange conclusion to draw, for it would make belief in one God the justification for discounting difference in the worship of God. Church and mosque would be seen as barriers to a true knowledge of

newly arrived in the country to have his public endorsement. It was not long before the campaign to advance interfaith understanding started to bear tangible fruit with successful subscriptions for a major mosque and educational center, accompanied by a call for educational reform, including introducing the teaching of Islam in the school curriculum. In time, Muslims would demand seats on school boards with power to appoint school heads. In a short period Muslims made tremendous strides in their drive for recognition and influence. Although their numbers were relatively small, Muslims carried real clout, thanks to supporters like John Hick, who commanded national attention. Local politicians, too, began to take the Muslim presence seriously—votes would be at stake down the line.

In itself, the interfaith endeavor

to God. I recall a Muslim leader of the commission charged with responsibility for the mosque construction project then underway saying to a group of Muslim religious officials that the patronage of non-Muslim British allies was a necessity in the movement to improve the life of Muslims in Britain but that that had no bearing on Islam's truth claims. Support for Muslims should not be at the price of betraying Islam. As Christian restitution, the interfaith endeavor should be distinguished from the demand for mutual compromise.

Something else struck me: the one-sidedness of interfaith relations did not seem to jostle Hick, and I did not know whether that was because he thought he was simply laying the foundation for future understanding in which, like him, Muslims would also embrace an analogous stripping of Islam's theological core by adopting an idea of the Qur'an that rejects the Qur'an's infallible status, treating Scripture as a historical construction. Muslims saw that Hick was sitting lightly to the notion of religion as divine revelation, and used him to wager for concessions that they did not have to reciprocate.

As it is, there has been no general or local Muslim stampede to heed the call for theological relativism, and so it must give cause for thought why that is the case. Here the issue of whether we all worship the same God should be instructive. Simple common sense tells us that for Muslims worship as constituted in salat is absolutely exclusionary. Non-Muslims as non-Muslims cannot be admitted to the ranks of worshippers, not because Muslims are inhospitable or bigoted, but because that would require them to abandon the ground that defines them as Muslims. In both the specific sense of enjoined liturgical practice and the general sense of submission to God, worship remains fundamental to Islam's *raison d'être*,

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**Non-Muslims as non-Muslims** cannot be admitted to the ranks of worshippers, not because Muslims are inhospitable or bigoted, but because that would require them to abandon the ground that defines them as Muslims.

God for which the cause of interfaith convergence would suffice. This way of approaching Christian-Muslim relations has been a characteristic Western view, but, instructively, it is not a standard Muslim view.

Many years ago as a young graduate student in England I trotted behind John Hick as he knocked on doors in the immigrant Muslim neighborhood of the city of Birmingham in his campaign of "All Faiths For One Race," AFFOR, an organization he founded and directed. Hick was not only my professor, he was also a friend whom I much admired. The Muslim men received him warmly while their womenfolk remained behind doors. Hick held a prominent academic position with an international reputation, and it was reassuring for Muslims

seems laudable, even self-evident, and there was little in it that conflicted with the agenda of Muslims for integration in British life. In fact, it added to the momentum for a coordinated Muslim campaign in the Midlands and beyond. However, I was struck by the fact that the stripping that John Hick said was necessary in order to rid Christianity of its obsession with the "myth of God incarnate," was the last thing Muslim leaders were thinking of doing to Islam. For Hick, the matter of Christian worship was a distraction from the elevated task of belief in a God refined in the acids of theological abstraction. In this thinking, religion is a cognitive process, and life is incidental to it, producing a dichotomy which sees God as being accountable to humans, not humans

# Muslims and Christians Worshipping the One True God: Missional Implications

John Jay Travis

**T**ogether with my family, I have lived most of my adult life in tight-knit Muslim neighborhoods in Asia. Based largely upon my experiences in talking to hundreds of Muslims about God, being involved in Bible translations for Muslim readers and in praying with Muslims for healing, I see three major missiological implications if we tell Muslims that they and we worship a different God.

- It immediately shuts the door to communication about the good news of Jesus, thus hurting the cause of Christ.
- It makes it nearly impossible to read Scripture with Muslims, since a very significant percentage of Bibles found in predominately Muslims parts of the world use Allah.

**Muslims see Allah as the one true God**, maker of heaven and earth, the one spoken of in the Bible and worshiped as well by Jews and Christians.

• It makes it very difficult to pray with Muslims for healing of their hearts and bodies, two extremely crucial parts of our Christ-centered witness.

1. By telling Muslims that they and we worship different Gods, an important door of communication is immediately closed and our witness for Christ is thus hindered. We need to be aware first of what Muslims mean when they use the term, Allah. Even though Muslims and Christians have a number of different concepts about God, they are talking about the same God; consider the following.

Muslims see Allah as the one true God, maker of heaven and earth, the one spoken of in the Bible and worshiped as well by Jews and Christians. Were they to read John 17:3 they would say, yes, we worship the “only true God” the

one who sent Jesus Christ. According to Muslim teaching, Allah created Adam and Eve and guided Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, Joseph, Moses, Job, Solomon, David, Elisha, John the Baptist, Jesus in their earthly missions. Muslims believe that Allah is the one who divinely inspired the scriptures of the Jews and the Christians, with specific mention of the Torah (*Taurat*) of Moses, the Psalms (*Zabur*) of David and the Gospel (*Injil*) of Jesus. Though not all Muslim teachings about these Biblical figures are entirely in line with creedal Christian understandings,<sup>1</sup> the similarities are more than just striking—they are proof that when Muslims speak of Allah, they are referring, as the Quran says, to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This common belief in God, the prophets, and the Scriptures is a great

advantage for our witness to Muslims compared with our witness to Buddhists, Hindus, and animists.

A missiological implication of this is that we should not focus on rejecting their name of God but rather we should affirm that we are both looking to the same God, the maker of heaven and earth, and then focus on studying Scripture together to improve our understanding of God, particularly as he is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. One Muslim we know well came to follow Jesus after years of Bible study. Today as a follower of Jesus, and a highly gifted evangelist, we often hear her say, “my people have always had God (Allah), the problem is they have been without a savior! Now *Alhamdulillah* (“praise be to God”), through Jesus my people and I have eternal life, and we know more fully

the God we have always cried out to.”<sup>2</sup>

2. Telling Muslims that they and we worship different Gods makes it nearly impossible to use the dozens of Bible translations available that use the term, Allah. As the story above indicates, reading Scripture with Muslims is essential to our Christ-centered witness. Inductive Bible study is a key way to be of assistance in helping Muslim discover Jesus. Most Muslims have heard of the *Taurat*, *Zabur*, and *Injil* but have never opened them. When they do, and they find the name Allah there, ah, they breathe an immediate sigh of relief!

Many Bible translations over the centuries have used the name Allah for God. All translations in Arabic dating back to the 9th century used Allah, and this name is still on the lips of millions of Arabic-speaking Christians today. Arabic-speaking Christians, in fact, used the name Allah centuries before the dawn of Islam, as did Arabic-speaking Jews, saying it was the Arabic form of the Aramaic word for God. (It is interesting to note that when Jews translated the OT from Hebrew into Arabic in the 10th century, they used the name Allah). These facts indicate that Allah can be seen as simply the common word for God in the Arabic language. Similarly, translations in Indonesian and Malaysian beginning with the first Malay Scripture portions in the early 1600s have always used Allah.

Many smaller but still significant languages that have historically used Allah include Javanese (90+ million speakers), Sundanese (30+ million speakers), Hausa, Bambara, Fulfulde, and Malinke.<sup>3</sup> In the last twenty-five years, scores of new Bible translations using Allah have been produced all across the Muslim world. In some cases such as with Urdu, Turkish and Bengali, some translations do not use Allah, and others do. (I have collected many of these Bibles, and although I do not have an exact count, I would estimate that well over 30 world languages, generally in areas with Muslim majority populations, have a translation that uses Allah). They use the term Allah because it is the common term for God in their language, often because they lacked a word for God before the ar-

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# A Missiological Response to Wheaton College Professor Larycia A. Hawkins' Statement that Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God

Darrell Whiteman

**T**he recent news frenzy over Wheaton College Professor Larycia Hawkins' posting on her Facebook that "Muslims and Christians worship the same God" has revealed a huge chasm in the different ways Christians interpret her statement.

The public reaction to this event reveals very deep fault lines in our understanding of Muslims' and Christians' perception of the God revealed in the Bible and the Qur'an, and indeed of the Gospel itself. We can use this opportunity to pause and reflect on what Hawkins, as a follower of Christ, wrote about her actions to show support for persecuted and marginalized Muslims. In this essay I will attempt to note some missiological principles that could guide our thinking and frame

**All the many names for** and concepts of God in the world are human beings' best efforts to reach out, to connect with and understand the supernatural.

our response to this volatile situation. The question before us is, what are the missiological implications of affirming or denying that Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

The first missiological implication is if we affirm that Christians and Muslims (and Jews) worship the same God, then we are consistent with our monotheistic faith that there is only One True God in the universe. There is not a pantheon of gods, there is only One, and therefore Muslims are correct in affirming there is only One True God. The name they most often use for this One True God is Allah, a name that has been used by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians for centuries before Islam appeared in the 7th century. The Arabic term Allah derives from the

Aramaic and Hebrew words for God, and so etymologically the word "Allah" has a nobler history than the English word "God," which is derived from a Germanic term for pagan deities. All the many names for and the concepts of God in the world are human beings' best efforts to reach out, to connect with and understand the supernatural. And here those secular anthropologists who deny the existence of God are correct when they assert that human beings naturally have a tendency to imagine gods in their own image.

Professor Hawkins' assertion that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, affirms three truths: one, monotheism, two, a high view of Scripture, and three, the creation affirmation that the image of God, the *imago dei*, lies within all people created by God (Acts 17:22-31), and that "what may

be known about God is plain to them" (Rom 1:19 NIV). The missiological implication is that we now have a starting point for relating to and building relationships with Muslims, namely our common belief in the one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who created the universe, inspired the Hebrew prophets, and sent the Messiah.

As a missiologist, I would suggest that Muslims are our spiritual cousins because we both trace our spiritual lineage back to Abraham. This present controversy is a "family feud" where emotions run high because each believes they are defending truth. If we could understand that we are spiritual cousins we would have a key for reducing the animosity and tension. We would have a starting point to pray together, read

the Scriptures together, and share our faith journeys with one another.

To affirm what we have in common, however, does not mean we have the same concept of who God is. We may be able to affirm that we worship the same entity, the One True Creator of the universe and creator of all peoples, but Christians differ from Muslims and Jews in their conception of God. For Christians, the Jewish-Muslim conception of God is incomplete, because the character of God is made known primarily through Jesus who is the incarnate Word (John 1:1-18) and whose mission is to reconcile and redeem God's creation (John 3:16). That is a significant difference. We may worship the same entity as God, but how we conceive of God and his nature is different. We acknowledge that Christians, Muslims, and Jews have different conceptions of their God, but God remains the same unique God, regardless of how people conceive of him. Furthermore, Christians worship and praise God as revealed by our Lord Jesus, which Muslims and Jews do not. Even though Muslims have a very high view of Jesus they do not recognize the divinity of Jesus, nor do they believe in the finality of the Gospel.

Another missiological implication is if we disagree with Professor Hawkins' affirmation that Muslims and Christians worship the same eternal God, who never changes, then we are more likely to relate negatively to Muslims, portraying them as the enemy of God and potentially our enemies, accusing them of worshiping a moon god, or worse, a demon or deceiver. Unfortunately, many misinformed Christians are doing exactly this. Missiologically, this misconception of Muslims destroys any bridge of mutual understanding that could carry the weight of the Gospel's encounter with Muslims, and it reduces our ability to discern where God may be already at work among Muslims.

Today there are many Muslims in the world who are becoming followers of Jesus after reading the Gospels, encountering Jesus in a dream or vision, or meeting people whose lives have been transformed by the Gospel and are experiencing God's love through them. These followers of Jesus don't begin praying to a different God, they continue to pray to the same God they always have, but now with a different conception and understanding of who God is as they experience the Holy Spirit in their lives and discover more about Jesus in the Gospels.

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**Wheaton College, One God** continued from page 3

that contradicts Wheaton's doctrinal position.

What is it that I fear if Hawkins is dismissed based on the publicly stated reasons and evidence? I fear that the significant bridge-building Christian witness of the only tenured female African-American faculty member at Wheaton College will be nullified. I fear this episode will damage our evangelical witness and credibility with the Muslim community, with Black America, and with a secular watching world. I fear lost credibility that will negatively affect our legitimate legal rights to claim religious liberty protections. I fear this case will establish a precedent that threatens the jobs of mainstream evangelical missionaries and missiologists. After all, many missiologists, and I include myself, have written approvingly of the idea that missionaries may appropriately signal that we share a common referent when speaking of Apajui, Hananim, or of Allah. I fear that evangelicals who wish lovingly, creatively, and entrepreneurial-ly to establish relationships of positive witness with Muslims and others will be overly inhibited and held back by fear of fellow Christians and how they might react. I fear that women and minorities,

especially, may learn to fear suspicious surveillance in our communities, and fail to live out their God-intended missional vocations in confidence, joy, and freedom. I fear that Muslims will learn the idea that faith in Jesus requires a repudiation of Allah as evil, and that this will pose an enormous barrier to consideration of the truth and goodness of the Gospel. Many missionaries with extensive first-hand experience guiding Muslims to faith in Jesus testify that this is a missiologically problematic message to send, counter-productive to gospel witness (see, for example, Greenlee, Naylor, Travis).

However, as a Christian, I know I should live with hope and prayer, not fear. So what is it that I hope and pray for? I hope and pray that the parties involved will reconsider exactly what is at stake, while listening to the wisdom of others (including missiologists). I hope and pray that in wisdom, humility, and fearlessness they will jointly arrive at a way forward that will honor God and commend the Christian gospel to others. Moreover, whatever happens at Wheaton, I hope and pray that the evangelical community in America will be energized to wisely show love and appropriate forms of respect to Muslims in America—and that this will contribute toward an openness in gospel witness, as well as to a peaceful civil society. Finally, since our venue is that of missiology, I hope and pray that missiologists can take the insights and understandings they've forged in distant places, and articulate those understandings courageously and clearly for American evangelicals today, whether for seminar-ians, college faculty and administrators, or businesspeople and board members. I hope and pray that we can help others understand that good intentions are not enough, that dramaturgical acts and pronouncements are best underpinned by deep understandings of all relevant meanings, both cultural and doctrinal, in order that we avoid ambiguities, misunderstandings, and even heresies. Alternatively, I hope we can adequately appreciate that the front edge of improvisational engagement with "social others" is always necessarily messy, that the judgments of those not similarly en-

gaged is often profoundly off the mark, and that such front-line workers need our appreciation and support. Finally, I hope and pray that we can turn this into a teachable moment that benefits our whole evangelical community, both in our gospel witness, and in our civil-society participation.

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and Muhammad is his prophet" (the *Shahada*). The Christian confesses, "In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity...."; and also "The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father...." (The Westminster Confession).

Clearly, the upshot of this (and more) is that, as Japanese people need to be able to distinguish between the true and living God of the Bible and the numerous kami of the Shinto pantheon, and between Christ and other "ways" of salvation; Muslims need to be able to distinguish between the Allah of the Qur'an and the God of the Bible, and between the Muhammad of Islam and the Christ of Christianity. Ultimately, only the Holy Spirit can accomplish this, but as is often done in the Japanese context, descriptive words and phrases should be used—words and phrases such as "the Triune God," "God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," and "in the name of the Creator and Sustainer of all things—the Lord Jesus Christ," and so on.

This is by no means the end of the matter, but may it not be a beginning?

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rival of Islam. However, there are other languages spoken by Muslims that have local indigenous terms for God, such as the term *Khoda*, that is used in parts of Iran and Central Asia.

The term *Allah* is used by Christians in their Bibles in the many languages of Indonesia, in Arabic, in most Turkic languages and in many parts of Africa. This should give us pause before we tell Muslims that the one they call *Allah* is not really the God of the Jews and Christians.

3. Telling Muslims that they and we worship a different God, makes it very difficult to pray with Muslims for healing of heart and bodies, two extremely crucial parts of our Christ-centered witness.

My experience has been that a key part of our witness, as it was for Jesus and the early church, is to pray with and for those hurting in body, soul and spirit. I have prayed for physical healing, inner healing and deliverance with scores of Muslims in cities, villages and often, hospitals. Muslims automatically assume that we are praying to the same God as they are since we are Christians, and there is only one true God (and it would be blasphemy to a Muslim to pray to some other deity). If they ask me I assure them we are praying to God Almighty and then begin to speak to them of Jesus as healer, asking if I could pray in his name (or with his authority). I have had the privilege to pray for Muslims in numerous parts of the Muslim world, in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, and only once has a Muslim refused my offer to pray to God for them in Jesus' name. However, having an open door to pray with Muslims all starts with an assumed common ground that we are praying to the same one true God.

### Endnotes

1. The most obvious difference is that Muslims, like Jews, do not see God as Father, Son and Spirit.

2. Her comment brings to mind John 17:3: "Now this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" –my own emphasis added)

3. See UBS translation consultant Ken-

neth Thomas' article "Allah in Translations of the Bible" originally appearing in *The Bible Translator: Technical Papers*, Vol. 52:3 (July 2001) and reprinted in the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (23:4 Winter 2006.)

4. For a further description of these more recent translations for Muslims readers see John Travis, "Producing and Using Meaningful Translations of the Taurat, Zabur and Injil" *The International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 23:2 Summer 2006

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### What Are the Missiological Implications

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defining its mission to make and keep converts as a supreme obligation of faith. The same is true more or less for the Orthodox traditions of Greece, Russia, and Ethiopia, to take random examples. Muslims would recognize something of their view of worship in these traditions. Even for churches with a low-church tradition, it would be hard to see how Muslims could fulfill the obligation of *salat* simply by participating in a goodwill ritual of unity—such participation liberal-minded Muslims would regard as only supernumerary. For these reasons, the worship life of Muslims and Christians could not be more important and more different.

I have often wondered if Hick would rethink his theological position if he were able to walk in the shoes of Muslims, who see faith commitment in a very different light. The issue would be whether the argument that interfaith accommodation demands abandonment of claims to religious truth is something Muslims would accept. Muslims have consistently rejected that argument because truth as a rule of getting along with others would be expendable if that is required by getting along for other reasons, of which fact Hick must be aware. In that case, did he nurse an unspoken condemnation of the Muslim refusal to match his theological openness? It is hard to see how to reconcile his interfaith mission, based as it is on retracting orthodox Christian teaching, with Muslims' stand on fidelity to Qur'anic orthodoxy, or how he could

pursue that mission if silent disrespect accompanies it. The intellectual merits of the case for interfaith accommodation, therefore, seem elusive at best, which is why I find the discussion so pretzel-like in its meandering flow. If interfaith progress is to be made, it cannot be made as a unilateral cause of one side of the relationship. The recognition of difference is not evidence of bigotry or intransigence; it is evidence of mutual honesty and respect. Only a cruel solidarity can demand the repudiation of the integrity of our respective traditions and leave us at the mercy of the vagaries of current fashion.

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confrontation, and we may be called to suffer for Christ's sake.

### 3. Conclusion

It seems to me that the answer to the question of whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God is both yes and no, depending on the theological conditions framing the discussion. In any case, the missiological bottom line is that since the divine origin of every individual "is never lost, even if his or her religious conceptions and beliefs are mistaken, then every human being was created 'in God's image' and is, therefore, our sister or our brother."

### Endnotes

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