DO CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS WORSHIP THE SAME GOD?

J. Dudley Woodberry
Dean Emeritus and Professor of Islamic Studies
School of Intercultural Studies
Fuller Theological Seminary

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To answer the question, “Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?” it is helpful to distinguish between (1) the Being to whom we refer and (2) what we understand about the character and actions of that Being in the two faiths. As monotheists I believe we both refer to the One and only Creator God, but what we understand about the character and actions of God are both similar and different in significant ways.

As to the One to whom we refer, when the Qur’an speaks of God, it means the One Creator God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob (2:136). To the Jews and Christians it says, “We believe in the revelation that has come down to us and that which came down to you; our God and your God are One, and it is to Him that we bow” (29:46). Furthermore it adopted the name for God (“Allah”) that Arabic speaking Christians and Jews used and still do.¹

When we look at Muslim and Christian understandings of God’s character and actions, we encounter a number of issues. Muslims like the late Isma’il al–Faruqi say that in Islam God only reveals his will, not himself.² Christians on the other hand believe that God desires to reveal himself, and would say that the fact that humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), even if fallen, provides some

basis for some understanding of his character. The Qur’an does not state that humans were created in the
image of God, although later traditions attributed to Muhammad (hadith) do.\(^3\) The Qur’an instead says
“nothing is like him” (42:11), and he speaks “from behind a veil” (42:51).

The “most beautiful names of God” used in Muslim devotion have been used by Muslim
theologians to express the attributes of God even though they are more expressions of praise than
doctrinal statements. But they can provide windows to allow some comparison of Muslim and Christian
understandings of the character and actions of God.

When we look at similar descriptions in the two faiths, we see that they are not always as similar
as apparent. First, both Scriptures affirm that God is One (Qur’an 112:1; Deut. 6:4; Mk. 12:29) but do not
agree on how the unity is expressed. Second, both consider God transcendent above his creation (Qur’an
17:11; 42:11; Isa. 6:1). The Qur’an in turn expresses immanence by saying that God is “the Lord of the
heavens and the earth” (19:65) and nearer to people than their jugular vein (50:16). Yet outside of Sufi
mysticism the closeness of God to humans is not developed. By way of contrast the incarnation of Jesus
the Christ in the Gospels is understood as “Emmanuel…‘God is with us’” (Matt. 1:23). This, of course,
has implications for how God guides (Qur’an 22:54; Ps. 48:14) and reveals, whether primarily in words
(Qur’an 12:2; Heb. 1:2; Jn. 14:9).

A third cluster of descriptions of God have to do with the common themes of mercy (Qur’an
23:109, Num. 14:18) and love (Qur’an 85:14; 1 Jn. 4:8), which both Scriptures at times make conditional
(Qur’an 5:3; 3:31-32; Exod. 20: 5-6). However, the Bible goes beyond this to describe God as initiating
love and giving his Son (1 Jn. 4:10) while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8).

A fourth common description is the power of God (Qur’an 2:20; 1 Chron. 29: 11-12) which is
seen as control over all things. But in the Bible it is also expressed as a vulnerable power: the cross is the
power of God for those being saved through it (1 Cor. 1:18). Then God’s power over death is shown by
his raising Jesus from the dead (Eph. 1:19-20). Finally, God in Christ refuses to force his way into lives

\(^3\) E.g., \textit{Sahih al-Bukhari}, tr. M. Muhsin Khan (Beirut: Dar al-Arabia, 1985), v. 8, p. 160 (Bk. 74, trad. 246).
with his power: “Behold, I, stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and sup with him and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). Fellowship is what he desires.

We have looked at examples of descriptions of God that the Qur’an and Bible hold in common but which also turn out to be different on closer understanding. Now we turn to a description that is clearly different. These include the New Testament portrayal of a divine ‘triunity’ of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We need to remember that Jews who have not followed Christ also reject these beliefs; yet most Christians would say that they worship the same God but, from a Christian perspective, they have an incomplete knowledge of him. Thus, to return to the original question, 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 they do not have the same understanding about him in significant ways, even though they also agree in significant ways.

We have framed much of the comparison of the understanding of God around “the most beautiful names” of God used in Muslim devotion, but which for the most part express aspects of God that Jews, Christians, and Muslims hold in common. This phrase is found on the eastern gate of the Muslim shrine called the Dome of the Rock, which is on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, a place sacred to all three faiths. It is on Mt. Moriah where Abraham took his son to sacrifice him before God provided a substitute – a story that lends meaning to those names in all three traditions. Beneath the Rock of the shrine is a cave with a hole in the top, which is almost undoubtedly the foundation of the Altar of Burnt Offering of the Jewish Temple – the cave being “the hollow or pit which was under the altar” which gathered the blood from the lambs sacrificed together with the water from the ablutions. This further enriches the meaning of these names in two of the faiths. Beside that hill is another hill called Calvary beneath which is an empty tomb. For one faith these add a profound new dimension of meaning to the names that the followers of all three faiths use to worship the God of Abraham.

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