

Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?

Genesis 12:1-4; Acts 17:22-31

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on January 24, 2016]

I

Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois,
thirty miles west of downtown Chicago,
is one of the oldest evangelical Christian schools in the United States.

Founded in 1860 by abolitionists, Wheaton was a stop on the Underground
Railroad, and in 1866 graduated the first African American in the state of Illinois.

Wheaton is one of the leading liberal arts colleges in the nation
and has been called the “Harvard of evangelicals.”

It counts among its more famous alumni Indiana Senator Dan Coats,
the late horror film director Wes Craven,
and the Rev. Billy Graham.

Lately, however, Wheaton is becoming known for something else—
terminating professors who make controversial statements that the
administration does not like.

In December, Dr. Larycia Hawkins—
a tenured professor of political science,
the only full-time African-American female on the faculty—
posted on her Facebook page that she would show solidarity with American
Muslims by wearing a hijab, or head-scarf, during Advent.

She stated,

*"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".*

Well...it did not take long for the you-know-what to hit the proverbial fan.

The Wheaton administration suspended Dr. Hawkins and is now moving to terminate her for violating Wheaton's statement of faith.

My purpose today is not to comment on the merits of Wheaton's case against Dr. Hawkins—the college has every right to require faculty and staff to give assent to its statement of faith.

Rather, I want to reflect theologically on whether or not Christians and Muslims do worship the same God,
and if that is true, what are some of the implications for how we should relate to our Muslim neighbors.

In light of terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists in Paris, San Bernardino, Jakarta, Pakistan, and other places,
with a rise in discrimination and hate crimes directed against Muslims,
with politicians calling for a ban on Muslims refugees,
a reasonable and honest discussion of the relationship of these two faiths that comprise more than half of humanity is crucial to have.

If our understandings of God clash, it will be more difficult for Christians and Muslims to live together peacefully.

Embracing what we share in common with our Muslim neighbors, co-workers, and friends is crucial to building a more peaceful world.

II

So let us get right to the question: Are Pope Frances and Dr. Hawkins right?

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

If so, what are the implications of that?

There are several ways to approach this question.

One way is to look at it historically.

Hebrew, the language of the Hebrew Bible, and Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, are Semitic languages that are very close in terms of etymology.

Just as Spanish is close to Portuguese
and German is close to Dutch,
so Arabic and Hebrew share much in common,
including many common root words.

One of those common root words is the name for God.

In the Hebrew Bible the word *Elohim* is used many times.

Elohim is plural, referring to “the gods,”
but later came to be understood as “the one God,”
the Creator who revealed his covenant name, Yahweh,
to Moses at the burning bush.

The most common name for God in Arabic is *Allah*,
which comes from the same three-letter Semitic root as *Elohim*.

When Arabic-speaking Christians speak of God,
they use the word *Allah*.

So historically one can say that Jews, Christians, and Muslims do indeed worship the same God.

The Elohim of the Bible sent the patriarchs Abraham, David, Solomon, and prophets like Elijah and Isaiah to humankind.

Allah of the Qur'an is depicted as sending those same prophetic figures,
as well as John the Baptist, Jesus, and Muhammed.

In the Qur'an there is the Biblical story of Jacob asking his sons whom they will worship after his death.

Jacob's sons answer, “We will worship the God of your fathers”—
that is, the God of Abraham.

So we can say without equivocation that the God that Abraham worshiped,
the God that Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob worshiped,

and that Jacob's sons worshiped,
is the same God that Muslims worship today.

Both Elohim of our Old Testament and Allah of the Qur'an name a deity who has acted in history by sending some of the very same prophets and teachers.

It is also true historically that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their lineage back to the same source.

As theologian Miroslav Volf points out, in ancient times there was a man named Abraham who is revered in three of the world's great religions—
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Our lesson from the Genesis 12 tells of God's call of Abraham, and the Book of Genesis goes on to tell the story of Abraham and the birth of his two sons—
Ishmael, considered to be the father of the Arab peoples,
and Isaac, the father of the Jewish people.

Essentially, Abraham founded a religion that branched into *three different streams*:
Judaism,
Christianity,
and Islam.

All three of these are Abrahamic religions.

All three claim to worship and serve Abraham's God.

So from an historical perspective it is fair to say that Christians and Muslims do, in fact, worship the same God.

III

This brings us to a second question:

Do the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths understand the God they worship in the same way?

If it is true that the three religions—
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—
are offering worship to *the same object*,
that is, Abraham's God—

is each religion describing the same thing?

The evangelicals who govern Wheaton College seem to be saying “no,”
the God of Christianity and the God of Islam are not the same:

*Same God yes, but that doesn't mean all three religions are equally true,
or that we are describing this God in the same way.*

Again to quote Miroslav Volf:

“There’s a difference between worshipping the right God,
and *worshipping the right God rightly.*”

Affirming the basic fact that Christianity, Judaism and Islam are three religions
attempting to worship and describe the same God
(Abraham’s God, whatever one calls him),
does that mean we are saying all three religions are the same,
equally valid, correct, or anything else?

Some evangelicals, including the administrators at Wheaton, it would appear,
argue that God and Allah are not the same (Abraham’s God) because Christians
and Muslims describe the character of Abraham’s God differently,
even in ways that conflict.

However, describing an object differently does not mean that two people are
describing two totally different objects.

For example, let’s say Jane and Henry both work for a guy named Jeff.

Jane says that Jeff is a great boss who treats people fairly,
is always pleasant,
and is a joy to work for.

Henry, on the other hand, describes Jeff as lazy and unavailable,
unpredictable and impossible to please.

The two people may be describing Jeff differently,
and one or both of them might be wrong in their understanding of Jeff.

But they’re still attempting to describe the *same object*.

Describing an object differently does not make it a different object.

Amy Plantinga Pauw, professor of theology at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, says Christians can have their own definition of God while still seeking commonality with Muslims and Jews.

"To say that we worship the same God," she writes, "is not the same as insisting that we have an agreed and shared understanding of God."

However, if having different understandings and opinions on the attributes of the object to which we offer worship were a legitimate point,
 one would have to say the *same thing* about Judaism,
 and even the various Christian denominations and traditions.

Evangelicals are quick to portray Judaism as our close brother,
 and will say that not only do we worship the same God,
 but that the Jews are God's chosen people.

However, Jews do not believe about God what Christians believe about God.

Christians accept Jesus as the Son of God,
 the Word made flesh,
 the Messiah,
 while Jesus was rejected by most of the Jews of his day,
 and the Jews are still waiting for the Messiah.

If this difference in understanding God's attributes or activity throughout history makes the God of Islam a different God than the one we are worshipping,
we would have to say the same thing about Jews.

Not only that, we would have to say it about other Christians, too—
 making the case that each denomination has its own God.

And this is where the logic of the argument falters—
 "You describe the object differently than I do,
 therefore it is a different object."

This logic opens us to all sorts of problems.

For example, plenty of Christian traditions—
 fundamentalists,
 some evangelicals,
 and some of the fringe sects such as Jehovah’s Witnesses—
 describe a God that many of us have a hard time recognizing.

IV

Let me share a story to illustrate this.

Years ago when I was pastoring in Indianapolis, one of the radio stations broadcast a program on Sunday afternoon that featured a conversation between Greg Dixon, pastor of the Indianapolis Baptist Temple, the largest fundamentalist church in Indianapolis, and Dr. Edgar Towne, professor of theology at Christian Theological Seminary.

(I listened to the program during my Sunday afternoon nap time, which just goes to show that a discussion of theology is always a good way to put a person to sleep—and some of you are about ready to fall asleep at this point in the sermon!)

Pastor Dixon and Dr. Towne were about as far apart theologically as two Christians can be, and they had some lively, yet respectful, discussions about a whole range of theological issues:

 the nature of God,
 Jesus Christ,
 the Bible,
 sin and salvation,
 heaven and hell,
 the second coming of Jesus, and so forth.

I spoke with Dr. Towne at a gathering at CTS and told him how much I enjoyed listening to his discussions with Pastor Dixon

And I recall Dr. Towne saying that Pastor Dixon placed a much greater emphasis on the anger, wrath, and judgment of God.

There is no doubt in my mind that the fundamentalists at the Indianapolis Baptist Temple worship the same God I do.

We may disagree on what that God is like,
 but it is not the object of worship that we disagree on,

but *the attributes* of the One being worshiped.

While Christians will disagree and sometimes even fight over these differences, we still have the charity and decency to affirm that all Christians are attempting to offer worship to the same object:
the God of Abraham.

That doesn't mean we think all Christian traditions are equally right or valid—we simply affirm that we are attempting to worship the same entity:
Abraham's God,
who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We extend this charity to other Christians.

We also extend this charity to Judaism,
which rejects the Trinitarian God of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yet, when it comes to Islam, some in the Christian faith—
notably administrators at Wheaton College—
refuse to extend this same charity.

There is much that Christians and Muslims disagree on theologically.

However, like it or not, both religions are *attempting to worship the same entity*.

And *that* is the God of Abraham.

V

And this brings us to a final question: **What about Jesus?**

Is there any place for common ground with Muslims on our Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God,
the Word made flesh,
sent by God to be the Savior of the world?

In our New Testament lesson, Acts 17, the Apostle Paul arrives in Athens,
the most educated and sophisticated city of the ancient world.

He proceeds to Mars Hill, the ancient site known as the Areopagus,

the gathering place of philosophers, intellectuals, and students looking for a debate.

There, in an attempt to find common ground with his hearers,
 Paul proclaims “the unknown God,”
 the One “in whom we live and move and have our being,”
 the One who gave assurance to all by raising his Son Jesus the
 Christ from the dead.

Believe it or not, here is where Muslims and Christians can find common ground.

To the surprise of most Christians,
 Jesus holds a particular and unique status in Islam.

For one thing, Jesus and Muhammad stand together because in Islam there was no prophet that stands between them.

Jesus is mentioned in 59 verses in the Qur’an,
 more than Abraham and the Prophet Muhammed,
 who is mentioned only five times.

His mother Mary even has a chapter named for her,
 the only woman so honored in the Qur’an.

There are literally hundreds of stories and sayings of Jesus recorded in Muslim literature outside of the Qur’an.

Some have clear connections to our Gospels.

Others have parallels with early Christian writings that did not make it into the New Testament.

Others are completely original.

In Islam, Jesus is held in high esteem.

You will find many different titles for him in the Qur’an and in other writings.

His Arabic name is *Isa* and he is most often referred to as *Ibn Maryam*, Son of Mary, because Muslims, too, believe that he was born of a virgin.

Other titles for him include “Servant of God,”
 “Word of God,”
 and “Spirit of God.”

But whatever title is used, when Muslims speak the name of Jesus,
 they follow it with the phrase, “peace be upon him.”

While it is true that Muslims deny that Jesus is the Son of God,
 he is revered as a great prophet,
 like Abraham,
 Moses,
 and Muhammad.

In fact, belief in his prophetic mission is required of Muslims.

They also believe that Jesus performed many miracles
 and that he was God’s righteous messenger to the Jews.

Muslims do not believe that Jesus died on the cross,
 but that God rescued him and raised him to heaven like Elijah.

Jesus will return one day to continue where he left off,
 and will reign over all people in justice and in peace.

After forty years—
 in other words, after completing his lifespan—
 he will die a natural death and be buried in the city of Medina,
 right next to Muhammad.

We might even go so far as to say that Jesus was a good Muslim
 because throughout his life he submitted himself to the will of the one God.

That is what being a Muslim means—
 the word *Muslim* means “one who submits.”

But Jesus was also a good Muslim because his message to us was the message of
 all the prophets.

That common message is this:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself...do this and you will live.” (Luke 10:27-28)

VI

So for Muslims, the way to God is through submitting to the will of God.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, took on flesh and blood to show us what submission to God looks like.

Anointed by God, Jesus went where God wanted him to go and said what God wanted him to say.

He brought good news to the poor,
 proclaimed release to the captives,
 and recovery of sight to the blind.

He let the oppressed go free
 and announced the coming of God’s kingdom. (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus the Messiah healed the sick,
 fed the hungry,
 and confronted injustice.

He spoke truth to power even when doing so endangered his life.

He offered acceptance and love to all those on the margins of society and prayed for those who persecuted him. (Matthew 5:39-44)

In all things, Jesus did the will of God who sent him.

In that sense, I will dare to say that Jesus is the way not only for Christians,
 but for Jews and Muslims as well,
 though not in quite the same way.

I believe that for us as Christians, Jesus is,
 as he said to his disciples in John 14:6,
 “the way, and the truth, and the life.”

But even if we could all agree on that statement,
it would by no means erase the significant differences
between the Jesus of Christianity and the Jesus of Islam.

Nevertheless, it gives us a constructive place to begin to talk to and listen to one
another about our differences,
to grow in mutual respect and understanding,
to clarify what we believe as we learn what others believe.

There is no better way to deepen our faith
than to have to explain it
and practice it for someone else.

And that would please both the Prophet Muhammad and Jesus the Christ,
peace be upon them both.

Amen.

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