

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

by J. Dudley Woodberry

IN COMPARING Muslim and Christian beliefs 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 we both refer to the One and only Creator God, but what we understand about the character and actions of God are significantly different.

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 the Qur'an 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 use.

Muslims such as the late Isma'il al-Fariqi say that in Islam God reveals only his will, not himself. Christians, on the other hand, believe that God desires to reveal himself, and would contend 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 are created in the image of God, although later traditions attributed to Muhammad (hadith) do. 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" that appear in Muslim devotion have been used by Muslim theologians to express God's attributes even though they are more expressions of praise than doctrinal statements. But those

names 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 they may at first appear. While both scriptures affirm that God is One (Qur'an 112:1; Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29), they do not agree on how that unity is expressed. Both traditions consider God to be transcendent above his creation

In late 2003 President Bush said, in response to a reporter's question, that he believed Muslims and Christians "worship the same God." The remark sparked criticism from some Christians, who thought Bush was being politically correct but theologically inaccurate. For example, Ted Haggard, head of the National Association of Evangelicals, said, "The Christian God encourages freedom, love, forgiveness, prosperity and health. The Muslim god appears to value the opposite."

Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God? The question raises a fundamental issue in interfaith discussion, especially for monotheists. We asked several scholars to consider the question. J. Dudley Woodberry's article is the third in a series.

(Qur'an 42:11; Isa. 6:1). The Qur'an expresses God's 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 in Islam. By contrast, in the Gospels the incarnation of Jesus the Christ 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 himself, whether primarily in words (Qur'an 12:2; Heb. 1) or also in flesh (Heb. 1:2; John 14:9).

A third cluster of descriptions of God has to do with the common themes of mercy (Qur'an 23:109; Num. 14:18) and love (Qur'an 85:14; 1 John 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 position to describe God as initiating love and giving his Son (1 John 4:10) while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8).

A fourth common point is the description of 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 with his power: "Behold, I, stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat 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 examination. Now we turn to descriptions that are 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 have in-

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complete 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 in significant ways they do not have the same understanding about him, 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, located 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.

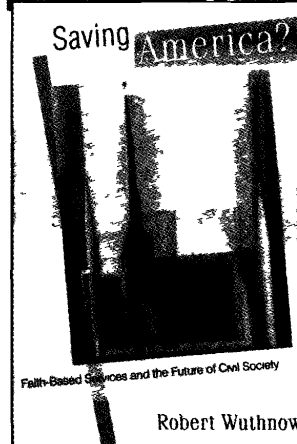
Beneath the Rock of the shrine is a cave with a hole in the top, which is almost undoubtedly the foundation of the Altar of Burnt Offering of the Jewish Temple—the cave being “the hollow or pit . . . under the altar” which gathered the blood from the sacrificed lambs together with the water from ablutions. This further enriches the meaning of these names in two of the three faiths.

Beside that hill is another hill called Calvary, beneath which is an empty tomb. These facts add a profound new dimension of meaning for one faith to the names that the followers of all three faiths use in worshipping the God of Abraham. ■

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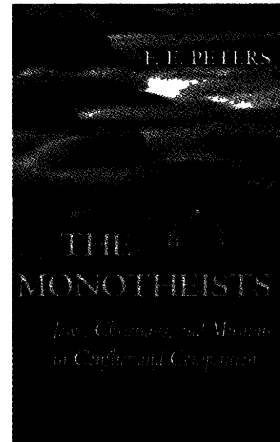
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