

No God but God

BY A . CHRISTIAN VAN GORDER

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? The question is too simplistic. It is more helpful to ask, “What kind of God is revealed in Christianity and in Islam?” The traditions agree that God is one, but diverge widely on how that Oneness is expressed. This fact, vital to Muslims, is an important starting point for dialogue.

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? This question became a political as well as a theological “hot potato” when President George W. Bush, during an Iftar meal with Muslim guests at the White House in 2003, opined that indeed they do worship the same God. His statement alarmed many American evangelical Christians.

Perhaps a better question is, Why do people from these two faith traditions tend to “talk past each other” when it comes to understanding the nature of God and how God is revealed in the world? Since the events of September 11 we have been inundated with a wide variety of interpretations of what Muslims believe about the nature of God. Without discussing all of these, we can try to understand better how to interact with Muslim friends and neighbors when discussing with them Christian perspectives on God’s nature.¹

Just as not all Christians agree about the nature of God, neither is Islamic theology a monolith. Indeed, over one billion people in sixty countries call themselves Muslims. Nevertheless, attending to the primary sources within orthodox Islam, the Qur’an and the Hadith, provides a surprising wealth of commonalities. The opportunity to interact with followers of the world’s second largest religion may be difficult but it will also be quite rewarding. Our prayer in this task echoes the cry of Moses in the Qur’an, “O Lord! Relieve my mind and ease my task for me; and loose

a knot from my tongue that they may understand my sayings" (Surah 20:25-28, Pickthall).²

STARTING WITH GOD'S NATURE

Unfortunately, theological conversations between Christians and Muslims must begin in the context of a frayed and hostile history. Muslims first encountered unorthodox versions of Christianity that worshiped in a for-

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foreign language.³ Furthermore, many Christians have tried to communicate the Gospel without first understanding the Muslim concept of God and perception of Jesus, and this has led to confusion and frustration for both parties. Indeed, many Muslims have come to see Christianity as defiant of reason (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:21-25), and

some respond to Christian overtures by attacking the Bible while Christians probe for differences between the Prophet Muhammad and Jesus.

Yet a number of fruitful starting points for a dynamic Christian theological interaction with Islam remain. Both traditions care deeply about worshipping God as Creator, Supreme Lord, and Final Judge of the creation, and they agree that God gives moral revelation and spiritual guidance through prophets and the community of faith.⁴ Common themes in their worship include receiving forgiveness from God, extending forgiveness to one another, and submitting all of our life to the One God. Specific biblical teachings regarding prayer, fasting, and the family are quite similar to the Qur'an. Beyond these points, Christianity and Islam share in those aspirations that are universal to the broader spiritual venture of humanity.

Our first priority as Christians should be to gain, as best we can, a "self-understanding" of Islam through familiarity with its foundational ideas and history. In order to do this, we must listen to and learn from Muslims. Sadly, this may be more difficult than ever, for the centuries-old practice of demonizing Islam is alive and well with the spotlight on notorious characters such as Osama bin-Laden, Saddam Hussein, Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi, and the Ayatollahs of Iran. While unflattering images—brash terrorists, suicidal fanatics, and a host of others—dominate American media-generated pasquinades of Islam, too few of us bother to nurture a deep and studied appreciation for Islamic art, music, literature, architecture, and ethics. There is no justification for this continued ignorance and defamation. Yet, given this legacy of distortion, falsification, and political

bias, it is easy to understand why many have no hope for meaningful Muslim-Christian dialogue. What is more perplexing, however, is why we do not work harder to overcome these blockades and seek greater clarity in our theological interactions.

Unless we clearly understand the Muslim concept of God, the result will be murky presentations of Christianity. Here is one example of how our inaccurate grasp of the Muslim view of God will impede meaningful communication. Despite our eagerness to declare to Muslims the promise of relational intimacy with God, we should realize that, at least among non-mystical strands of Islam, humanity's distance from God is seen as a positive force that both defines and maintains creation. I once had a conversation with a Muslim about intimacy with God only to hear him respond that he was grateful that God was distant and uninvolved with the sinful details of his daily life. For this man, "bridging the gap" between God and man was not only impossible, but it was also undesirable.

It is instructive to contrast my halting efforts with Paul's exposition on the nature of God to the people at the Areopagus, or "Mars Hill," in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). Paul began by affirming elements of truth that he saw in their views of God before he carefully moved to a clear presentation of how God's nature had been revealed in Hebrew history. Only after Paul articulated God's nature did he allude to Christ's resurrection as proof of divine authority (Acts 17:30-31).

Until Muslims are able to appreciate what Christians mean by "God," all other doctrinal issues will be secondary. Why should we expect Muslims to be able to articulate concepts such as the atonement or the Holy Spirit, if they cannot first comprehend the Christian revelation of God's nature?

SPEAKING WITH LOVE

Not only *what* we say about God, but *how* we say it is important. Polemical monologues are not effective interfaith communication. Our personal deportment should be consistent with the humility and patience of Jesus. Indeed, the incarnation of Christ among us is a divine revelation of openness and of the patient and sensitive exposition of truth.

Our task, which is to present the message of God with confidence and clarity, must be grounded in love. "Perfect love casts out fear," the writer of 1 John assures us, so when we speak in love among Muslim friends, we may express ourselves with confidence and without tension. Our language must be as clear as possible. "If your brother does not understand you," as the African proverb laments, "perhaps it is because you do not fully love him." We must be about the loving work of careful exposition.

The biblical revelation about the nature of God is a message that is "receivable" to Muslims if it is presented appropriately. After hearing an explanation of Christianity, one Muslim retorted, "Complexity is one thing, incoherence is another. Paradox is one thing, but nonsense is something

else.”⁵ Without apology, we should present our faith as filled with mystery—referring to the atonement Charles Wesley wrote, “The Immortal dies! Who can explore this strange design?” Yet, we should make the effort to articulate logically what these mysteries mean to us.

Our theological vocabulary will develop gradually as we craft new language in response to how Muslims comprehend the Gospel. Jesus can be

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our model for this. Thoroughly rooted in the world of his hearers, he spoke to farmers, fisherman, and zealots with appropriate vocabulary. That Jesus made the effort to speak to others with clarity says volumes about the nature of God and the Kingdom he was announcing.

We may be confident that contemporary engagement between Christians and Muslims can be equally

dynamic because God has used human language and experience in the Incarnation of Christ to reveal divine truth. Christian doctrine emerges over time within the church to answer tough questions that are raised. This process continues today as Muslims and Christians interact with each other. Christian theology is not just a science to codify orthodoxy; it is also a tool to explain afresh cherished ideas in new situations and in response to new questions.

LISTENING WITH HUMILITY

Sadly, many Muslims sense little humility or sympathy from Christians who rely on strident, time-worn, and dismissive arguments. This often leads Muslims to conclude that Christians believe heretical ideas about God’s nature. As confident people of faith, however, we should be able to talk to Muslims with an attitude of genuine respect.

Many Christians fear that genuine dialogue with Muslims inevitably leads to compromise and syncretism. Because Christianity teaches that Christ is divine, there can be no “negotiated compromise” in the process of dialogue, and our faith convictions cannot be replaced by a consensus distilled from various religions.

Yet our claims of truth should lead to a posture of humility and not arrogance. We should approach Muslims with the openness of the Apostle Peter, who not only readily presented a message to Cornelius, but also received truth from him in a spirit of teachableness (Acts 10:28-48). This en-

counter with Cornelius broadened Peter's vision of God's love (10:34-35). We grasp truth only partially and we never comprehensively own it. Consequently, what we hope to gain in dialogue is not simply polite *savoir faire*; we seek a present-tense revelation of God's holy presence. Focusing too much on diplomacy, in fact, can inhibit the potential for genuine insight, for we may be confident that, as we interact with Muslims, God will bring us to greater insight just as He used Cornelius to direct Peter into deeper dimensions of biblical truth. Through this posture of being willing to learn, we express our confidence in faith and we may engender a similar response of teachableness in others.

Once again the Apostle Paul set an example in Athens. Walking around the city, he became "greatly distressed" (*paraksuno*) to see it was brimming with idols. Yet he chose not to translate his disdain for their worship into condescending or castigating diatribe. Instead, Paul reasoned with patient exposition on the question of how God had revealed Himself in Christ (Acts 17:17). Paul's heart of passion spurred him on to the kind of dialogue (*dialegomai*) and reasoned care in which Christians should be involved.

Since Islam claims to be *al-din al-hanif*—the primordial religion of absolute truth, the final revelation, and the summary and synthesis of knowable truth⁶—why should Muslims engage in theological conversations with Christians? Toleration, not dialogue, may be the guiding principle for most Muslims in theological interaction with Christians. Indeed, many Muslims with whom I've interacted look askance at "dialogue" with Christians because they fear it is a subterfuge that conceals our ulterior and mainly evangelical motives. Yet Christians may remind Muslims that the Qur'an itself calls them to listen carefully to our message:

And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation) unless it be with those who inflict wrong: But say, "We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which has come down to you: Our God and your God are One; and it is to Him that we bow" (Surah 29:46).

This sentiment is paralleled in Surah 10:95: "And if thou art in doubt concerning that which We reveal unto thee, then question those who read the scripture before thee."

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

Framing Muslim-Christian theological interaction with the question "Do we worship the same God?" is too simplistic. It is more helpful to ask, "What kind of God is revealed in Christianity and in Islam?" Though the traditions agree that God is one, they diverge widely on how that Oneness is expressed.⁷ This fact is vital to Muslims and an important starting point for dialogue.

The basic distinction between Islam and Christianity is a difference in

the conception of God's relational nature. Christianity begins with "God is love" and thus participant. In Islam, the primary affirmation is that "God is One" and thus beyond the limitations of finite comprehension. Christianity calls individuals to enter into covenant relationship with God. Islam calls individuals to worshipfully assume a proper place of obedience before God's will and revelation. Both religions conclude that the other's view of God is decidedly anthropocentric.

Other discussions between Muslims and Christians will be mired in controversy until the fundamental question is addressed: "Who is God?" The way that Muslims view Jesus is predicated on how they view God. In Islam, God is the giver of guidance (*huda*) and inspiration (*wahy*); in Christianity, God gives Himself in incarnational revelation. The relationship that Christians have towards God is based on the revelation that God is "our Father." Expressed this way, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation may be viewed by Muslims not as a blasphemous absurdity but as the summation of God's Fatherhood.

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15, parallels). Through Jesus we have come to know God as an active participant among humanity through divine love. The goal for the careful expositor is to present this conviction with such clarity that Muslims might understand how his disciples can respond, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (16:16).

CONCLUSION

In my interactions with Muslims over twenty years in more than twenty different nations I consistently have felt both their respect for and their interest in the person of Jesus Christ. Looking back on these experiences, I'm reminded of the story told in church history about St. Christopher's decision as a young man to find and worship "the strongest of Lords." At the end of his search, St. Christopher came to the conclusion that the infant child Jesus, born in obscurity and poverty in a disheveled animal manger, was actually the divine ruler of the world.⁸ God, by coming in the child Jesus, certainly does not do what Muslims would expect and defies their expectations about what God should be like.

The central theological message for Christians interacting with Muslims is not that "our God" is true and "your God" is not, but the biblical revelation that "God is love" and is actively seeking humanity to participate in a new covenant with God (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The revelation that "God is love" cannot be proven, but it can be easily discredited by strident advocacy. Our pride and prejudice do not facilitate an open reception to the Gospel. Before God could use Peter among the Gentiles, He had to root out the fisherman's arrogant bias (Acts 10:1-48). Jesus commissioned the disciples to go to "Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria," thereby confronting their ethnocentric resistance to working with people who were different

from themselves (Acts 1:7-8). God's Holy Spirit at Pentecost slashed dramatically through cultural and religious boundaries (Acts 2:5-11).

God, who is revealed in Christ, leads us to interact with Muslims in a way that echoes the first prayerful intercession in the Bible, the cry of our mutual father Abraham who pleaded, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight" (Genesis 17:18). May Muslims who interact with those of us who follow Jesus benefit from meeting us; may they gain a clearer understanding of the Father heart of our great and loving Creator God. There is no other God but God.

NOTES

1 Two books that can assist Christians in interactions with Muslims have become "classics": Bishop Stephen Neill's *The Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) and Bishop Kenneth Cragg's *The Call of the Minaret* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956; third edition, Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 2000).

2 Cited from the translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*. Because the Qur'an was revealed by God in Arabic, Muslims stress that all "English Qur'ans" are merely translations and are not trustworthy.

3 Two of the largest groups of Christians in Arabia at the time of Muhammad were the Modalists and the Assyrian Church of the East. Both were beyond the pale of orthodoxy. The Modalists reduced the three persons of the Trinity to different "modes" of God's interaction with the world—as Father in creation, Son in redemption, and Spirit in sanctification. The Assyrian Church believed that Christ had dual natures that coexisted together. Christian services in the Arabian Peninsula at that time were held in Aramaic rather than Arabic, and Christians did not use an Arabic translation of the Bible.

4 Interestingly, Muslims believe it is Jesus who will return to earth on the final Day of Judgment.

5 Reported by Shabbir Akthar, *A Faith for All Seasons: Islam and the Challenge of the Modern World* (London: Loewellew Publishers, 1990), 178.

6 At the same time, the Qur'an emphasizes that "there is no compulsion in religion" (Surah 2:256; 109:6).

7 A. H. Mathias Zahniser's excellent but unpublished paper, "The Christian View of God's Unity," communicates these ideas for a Muslim context.

8 I recount the story of St. Christopher in the conclusion of my study, *No God but God: A Path to Muslim-Christian Dialogue on God's Nature* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).



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