



B R O A D C A S T   T A L K S

# Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?

by Andy Bannister



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**W**e live in a highly pluralistic context in modern America, one of the most multicultural societies on earth. For example, here in Chicago, you can choose from Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, atheism, Islamism. You can even be a Chicago Bears fan; we call that masochism.

How do we navigate that maze of religious diversity? One answer that's increasingly common is to say that every religion is essentially the same, that everybody is worshiping the same God in his or her own way, that all paths lead to God, and so forth. A friend of mine who teaches at the University of Toronto has an illustration he likes to use to make this point. My friend Jeff says we should try to think of all the different religions in the world as being like paths up a mountain. There are hundreds of different paths, so just choose the path that fits you; why worry?, after all, all the paths ultimately lead to the top.

That sounds like such a simple idea, doesn't it? Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, all the world's different belief systems and religions are just different paths – and every path leads to the top of the mountain. But hang on a moment. As a hobby, I'm a mountaineer. I climb mountains whenever I can. A few years ago, I even made it to Everest Base Camp. And the thing is, I can confidently tell you this: every path does not lead to the top of the mountain. Some paths lead around the bottom of the mountain.

Some lead to sheer cliffs, because they were designed to get rock climbers to a great climb. Some lead in entirely different directions. Indeed, if the fog comes down in the mountains and you have no map and compass, following any path at random leads not to wisdom but probably to death. Furthermore, it also occurs to me that there's only one place you could be to know that every path leads to the top of the mountain, and that's suspended in the air a few hundred feet above it. In other words, my friend Jeff at the University of Toronto, without realizing it, was effectively claiming to be god himself.

The other problem with the all-paths-lead-to-the-top-of-the-mountain approach to religions is that it ignores the massive differences between the different religions of the world – and the claims of exclusivity built into each one. And claims of exclusivity – whether by Christians or Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus or atheists – shouldn't make us nervous. It is the nature of truth to be exclusive:  $2 + 2 = 4$ ; it isn't 7, 19, or 437.2, no matter what some economists may try to make you believe.

Now when it comes to religious truth claims, exclusivity – the claim that the God of the Bible and Jesus Christ are unique – is wired right into the Bible. It lies at the very heart of the biblical story. For example, in Exodus 15:11 Moses and the Israelites sing a hymn to celebrate God's rescue of them from Egypt, and one line runs like this: "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"

Elsewhere in the Bible, we read words like these:

*For this is what the Lord says – he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited. He says: "I am the Lord, and there is no other." (Isa. 45:18)*

And then, turning to the New Testament, Jesus says: “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Now that shocking claim of Jesus may make some of you nervous. Isn’t that incredibly narrow minded? How can Christians possibly hold onto claims of Jesus like this when we live surrounded by so many competing religions? Isn’t it more tolerant – more progressive – to say that all religions are essentially the same?

I’d like to explore this idea by using the world’s second-biggest religion, Islam, as a comparison. Islam is a great test case to explore the question of the exclusivity of Christ and the uniqueness of the biblical God. Because there’s a persistent belief – certainly held by Muslims, certainly held by many in our culture, and held by many Christians – that Allah, the God of the Qur’an, and Yahweh, the God of the Bible, are essentially the same.

But does this idea stand up? I’m a great believer that “contrast is the mother of clarity,” and so I’d like to compare briefly the biblical God and the Qur’anic god, and highlight four major differences – differences that I believe reveal to us just how amazing, how wonderful, how unique the God of the Bible is.

## **First, the God of the Bible Is a God Who Is *Relational***

This is the thrust of the whole story of Scripture, from the opening pages to the very last chapter. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we read of how God was to be found, walking and talking in the garden with Adam and Eve. God walks and talks with Abraham (Gen. 17–18), speaks to Moses face to face “as a man speaks with his friend” (Exod. 33:11), and, indeed God speaks with His people throughout the Old Testament. When human beings disobey, when sin comes between God and man, God seeks out and pursues

humankind, indeed the story of Scripture is the story of God winning us back. And at the close of the Bible, in Revelation 21:3, we are promised that in the age to come “the dwelling of God will be with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.”

The Bible uses highly relational language to describe God. He is described as a father, as a husband, as a friend. He is the relational God, the God who reveals Himself by name – Yahweh – and the Bible’s call is for us to be in relationship with Him. That’s what it means to be a Christian.

For the Qur’an, on the other hand, there is no such relationship to be had with Allah. Allah, the god of the Qur’an, is so distant, so transcendent, and nowhere does the Qur’an invite its readers to enter into a relationship with him. According to the Qur’an, Allah did not walk and talk in the garden with Adam and Eve. He is not present with his people in heaven. And he did not take on flesh in the person of Jesus. The only “relationship” that exists between humans and Allah according to the Qur’an is that of master and servant, not father or friend. Consider these words from Muslim theologian, Shabbir Akhtar: “Muslims do not see God as their father... Men are servants of a just master; they cannot, in orthodox Islam, typically attain any greater degree of intimacy with their creator.”

Just servants. In contrast, Jesus Christ said, “I no longer call you servants, but friends” (John 15:15).

This lies at the heart of the difference not just between Christianity and Islam, but also between Christianity and every other religion, and it is arguably what reveals Christianity to be far more than a “religion.” Religion says that if we follow the right rituals, obey the right rules, have the right mystical experience, then we can satiate the spiritual hunger within. Christianity, on the other hand, says



*...every path does not lead to the top of the mountain. Some paths lead around the bottom of the mountain.*

that none of our efforts can ever bridge the gap between us and God. But the gap can be bridged from God's side. Do all religions lead to God? The truth is that no religion leads to God; only God can lead us to God, and that is what is offered in Jesus Christ.

## **Second, the God of the Bible Is a God Who Reveals Himself and Who Can Be Known**

At the heart of the Christian faith stands not a list of doctrines, not a set of moral commands, but a relationship. The astonishing claim of the Bible (e.g., Rom. 8:15–16) is that by putting our trust, our faith, our hope in Jesus, we can be adopted into God's family and become not slaves, but children. The gospel is primarily about a relationship.

Of course, it's possible to have a relationship with somebody only if they make themselves known, and the God of the Bible is a God who does that consistently. From beginning to end, the Bible tells the story of a God who reveals not just His commands but His character, His very self. For example, in Exodus 3, in the story of the burning bush, God speaks personally with Moses, revealing His personal name, Yahweh, "I Am." Ultimately the biblical theme of God revealing Himself is seen in the person of Jesus, who tells His disciples in John 14:9 that "anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

Not only has the biblical God revealed His character, His heart, His name, His own person in His Son, Jesus, but because of that, He can be known. In Jeremiah 9:23–24, God says, "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they understand and know me."

Again, this is utterly different from how the Qur'an describes Allah, who does not reveal himself in this way or allow himself to



be known personally. For example, it's remarkable how in Qur'anic theology, even Muhammad did not have Allah reveal the Qur'an to him personally, but through an intermediary, the angel Gabriel. This is a contrast with the Bible, where, time and time again, God speaks with His prophets and His people face to face, such as the powerful encounter that Moses had at the burning bush or on Mt. Sinai. Listen to Muslim scholar Isma'il al Furuqi unpack this: "Allah does not reveal himself to anyone in any way. Allah reveals only his will ... Allah does not reveal himself to anyone ... that is the great difference between Christianity and Islam."

### Third, the God of the Bible Is a God Who Is *Love*

The Bible is very clear that one of God's primary characteristics is love. In Exodus 15:13, Moses and the Israelites sang of God's "unfailing love," a theme that runs throughout the entire Old Testament. Turning to the New Testament, the theme of God's love continues and is summed up in the amazing line in 1 John 4:16, "God is love." Love is not something the God of the Bible *does*, but something *He is*. Indeed, we love and serve a God who is Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and so at the heart of who God is lies a loving relationship.

When we turn to the Qur'an and its depiction of Allah, we see something very different. Nowhere are we told that Allah is love; indeed, because he is not triune, it would not be possible for him to be loving unless he first created something to love.

There's another fascinating feature in the Qur'an, when one looks at how it uses the Arabic word *yuhibbu* (love) in connection with God. Of the twenty-eight times the word appears in the Qur'an, twenty-two of them (79 percent) are negative – the Qur'an telling us who Allah does not love (those who reject faith; those who disobey; those who do wrong; those who boast; those who are



*God demonstrates his own love for us  
in this: While we were still sinners,  
Christ died for us.*

Romans 5:8

ungrateful, the list goes on). The remaining six times the word is used, it's used conditionally (Allah loves those who do something for him first).

Indeed, because of this, some Muslim theologians go further. Islamic scholar Murad Hofmann wrote: "Allah is self-sufficient ... this fundamental self-description excludes that Allah is in love with his creation ... [I]t is safer and more accurate not to speak of 'love' when addressing His clemency, compassion, benevolence, goodness, or mercy."

This is a profound contrast from the Bible's understanding of God, who we are told on numerous occasions, loves everybody, even the sinner. This is beautifully illustrated in the most famous of the stories that Jesus told, the so-called parable of the Prodigal Son, where the father, who represents God, is full of love and compassion both for his younger, errant son and his older, uptight, hyper-religious son. The Bible claims that God loves us so much that He made the first move; as Romans 5:8 says, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this – while we still sinners, Christ died for us."

## **Fourth, the God of the Bible Is a God Who *Suffers***

We live in a world that is broken, a world in which there is evil, a world in which there is suffering, a world in which there is pain. And the remarkable thing about the God of the Bible is that He does not stand aloof from that world but knows what it means to suffer.

In Psalm 23 and numerous other biblical passages, we hear that the God of the Bible is with us as we journey through life, even in our very darkest moments. He understands suffering, because, in Jesus, He has been through it Himself, because of His great love for us.

The love of the God of the Bible is also demonstrated in what He has done to deal with the sin and shame that separate us from Him. The Bible tells us that God grieves for His people, grieves over their sin, rebellion, and unfaithfulness. And that ultimately, through Jesus and the cross, God paid the price to deal with that sin and brokenness; as Isaiah 53:4 says, He “took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”

This is all very different from the Qur’an’s understanding of God. The god of the Qur’an is not a god who suffers. Allah feels no grief as a result of our sins or pain or suffering. Allah in the Qur’an certainly gets angry at sin, and that anger is expressed in wrath and judgment. But there is no heart response and nothing done by the Qur’anic god to deal with the problem of sin. As Muslim theologian Muhammed-al-Burkawi puts it:

Allah can annihilate the universe if it seems good to Him and recreate it in an instant. He receives neither profit nor loss from whatever happens. If all infidels became believers and all the wicked pious He would gain nothing. And if all believers became infidels it would not cause Him loss.

Indeed, according to Qur’anic theology, the Muslim must carry the weight of one’s own sin, hoping that on the day of judgment one’s good deeds outweigh the bad. As the Qur’an puts it in Surah l-Isr’ 17:15: “No bearer of sin can bear the sin of another,” ... although fascinating, this hints at the idea that a sinless one could bear another’s sins. In Christianity and in Jesus, whom both Muslims and Christians affirm as sinless, that has happened.

When we look, the God of the Bible, love and suffering, judgment and forgiveness are inextricably linked. The God of the Bible is a God who is relational and can be known, a God who is love and whose love for even the sinner saw Him willing to pay the price of the cross.

This is a huge contrast to the God of the Qur'an, who according to the Qur'an is not relational, does not make himself known, is not a god of love, and is not a god willing to take on our sorrows and infirmities.

## Mercy and Justice

But there's one last difference between the God of the Bible and the Allah of the Qur'an that's important to mention; it concerns mercy and justice.

God's mercy and God's justice is an idea at the heart of many religions. God's mercy and justice is certainly something the Bible and the Qur'an both talk about.

But have you noticed something? There's a problem, because "mercy" and "justice" conflict. Think about this: mercy is always executed at the expense of judgment and justice. You stand before the judge, guilty of the crime. If he sentences you to the punishment your crime deserves, he has been just but not merciful. Conversely, if he lets you off, he has been merciful but he has not been just.

Mercy is always exhibited at the expense of justice, and the same applies to God. If God executes justice and we get what we deserve, hope fails. But if God does not execute judgment, justice fails. This is a contradiction in most religions, including Islam.

The simple fact is that mercy and justice contradict each other, and thus there is no hope for the future, for us or the world, unless we can resolve this tension. I believe that only in Christianity is this problem solved, because in Christianity God does not exercise mercy at the expense of justice, but through His justice, through the justice of the cross, where judgment and mercy meet. The Bible says that God stepped into history in the person of Jesus Christ, and Jesus offers to make Himself one with those who trust

Him. When we trust in Jesus, our sin, our rebellion, becomes His sin; He takes the injustice we have done into Himself and He pays the price. At the cross, every sin was punished. Every penalty paid in full. Justice was upheld, not ignored. The law was fulfilled. At the cross, Jesus paid for us and only because of that is mercy possible.

The Bible says that God will judge the world, and everything that has taken place will be revealed and brought into the light: every injustice, every sin, every crime, every evil, every secret thing. Every wrong will be punished. If we are forgiven and welcomed into heaven, it won't be because God says "your wrongdoing doesn't matter." It will be precisely because it *does* matter; in the cross, God passed judgment on it, said it's worthy of death, and then, if we are one with Jesus Christ, He takes our place. We are forgiven because sin matters; it matters so much that Jesus paid a high price to deal with it. If we accept Christ, we are forgiven because He has paid. If we reject Him, we will be judged and we will pay. Either way, the price of justice has to be paid.

If I lend you my new iPad and you break it, and I say to you, "Don't worry about it; I'll take care of it," you've been forgiven. But that doesn't mean that nobody pays, it means I have to pay. Jesus Christ pays for us. God's justice is fulfilled and His mercy is extended because of the cross and because of His love.

## Love

One last thing. I've spoken several times about the love of God. I meet so many people, both Christians and Muslims — and those of other faiths — who tell me they believe that God is a God of love. Perhaps you're a Muslim or a member of another faith community, and you believe that. But I want you to think about something for a moment. What is the greatest possible form of love that can be

expressed? Interestingly, Jesus provides the answer to that question when He said, “Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

And we all know this to be true, don’t we? If a truck is roaring down the street and my three-year-old daughter is playing out there, oblivious to the danger she is in, and I run from the house, push her to safety, but am struck and killed in the process, what would you infer from this? How deeply I loved my child that I was willing to give my life that she might live.

And this raises a fascinating observation. If God is a God of love, then, of course, God is the greatest being; that’s what it means to be God. And that means that if God demonstrates love, it must be the greatest, the highest conceivable form of love. And if the highest form of love is to lay down one’s life, do you see why the life of Jesus and who He is becomes so crucial?

You see, if Jesus is who He claimed to be, God come in the flesh, God stepping into space and time, getting His feet dirty with the dust of the world and His hands bloody with the nails of the world, then what we see in Jesus’ willingness to go to the cross — to deal with our brokenness and our mess and our hang-ups — is the greatest possible act of love by the greatest possible being, who loved us so much, even while we were His enemies, that He was willing to give His life for us.

The God of the Bible loves us. Tremendously so. He knows what you are really like. There is nothing you can hide from Him. But in spite of that, despite knowing *exactly* what you are like, God came into the world and offers to make us one with Him, pay for what we have done wrong, and grant us forgiveness as a gift. A very costly gift. A price was paid, but we didn’t pay it. We didn’t earn it – the greatest possible act of love by the greatest being, to

demonstrate the greatest gift of all, forgiveness and mercy, but not at the expense of justice.

In the Bible, in Romans 5:8, we read: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

If God were merely an abstract principle who had set the universe running, then left it – that God would be utterly irrelevant. But the God of the Bible didn’t do that. The God of the Bible has stepped into history in the person of Jesus Christ, and that changes everything. The God of the Bible is a God who is relational, knowable, love, has suffered, is truly merciful and truly just, and is truly love. There is quite simply no other God like Him.



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