

Talking to Muslims about God: What *are* the Issues?¹

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Published under "Featured Article" at www.globalmissiology.org, October 2007

A Dutch Catholic bishop's recent admonition that everyone refer to God as Allah produced a storm of protest. The incident illustrates widespread polarization on who should use the term "Allah" and is indicative of the pervasive confusion as to who God really is. A Muslim spokesman for CAIR (Council of American-Islamic Relations) quickly endorsed the comment, a view that seems to be in line with the Qur'an: "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us...our God and your God is one" (29:46).² According to this theory, all Muslims, Christians and Jews believe in, and worship the same God.³ At the other end of the spectrum is Robert Morey, who for many years has popularized the theory that Allah was originally the moon god, worshiped in Arabia long before Muhammad.⁴ This paper will attempt to show that both positions are simplistic and fail to address the most important issues in our discussion with Muslims about God.

It is true that a moon god was worshiped in Arabia during the time of Muhammad, but Morey's theory fails to explain why Allah can be traced back to 4th and

¹ It is also very important that Christians talk to God about Muslims. One who did pray for Muslims is the late J. Christy Wilson, Jr., who launched Urbana in 1946 and served in Afghanistan for 22 years. His book, *More to be Desired than Gold* (Grand Rapids: Color House Graphics, 1998 4th edition) contains 100 of his favorite stories of individuals who came to Christ.

² See Imad N. Shehadeh's excellent, 4-part series, "Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161, January-December, 2004.

³ Ibrahim Hooper, ltm@ltm.penpal4u.net, August 16, 2007. CAIR is a Washington-based civil liberties and advocacy group. He made these comments during a FOX News interview.

⁴ Robert Morey, *Islamic Invasion* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992). Morey is the Executive Director of the Research and Education Foundation that concentrates on issues that affect Western culture and values. Author of at least 20 books, he is a hard-hitting Christian apologist who would say that Christians should never speak of God as "Allah."

5th-century New Testament translations.⁵ Neither does it account for the fact that Christians and Jews called God “Allah” long before the time of Muhammad and that most Arabic-speaking Christians still pray to him.⁶ Moreover, it overlooks an entire chapter in the Qur’an that forbids worshiping the moon and other celestial bodies.⁷ Most significantly, “Allah” is etymologically linked to "El-Bethel" and "El-Elohim" in Hebrew ("Elah" in Aramaic) and Allah/Allahu/Alah is found in at least 89 Old Testament verses.⁸ All this seems to suggest that the problem is not with the term itself.

What needs to be clearly spelled out is God’s *nature* in Christianity vis-à-vis God’s *nature* in Islam. Though Muslims and Christians are discussing the same God as subject, in reference to his attributes and actions, there are qualitative differences. In Christianity, God’s acts are always consistent with his unchangeable character. In Islam, God does whatever he decides to do (good or bad) as an act of his irrefutable will. He is wholly other and essentially unknowable. Christians, on the other hand, believe God desires to be known, loved and understood: “Let him who boasts boast about this that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight” (Jeremiah 9:1-24). One hundred years ago, Samuel Zwemer made a similar observation: “The word Allah is used for God not only by all Moslems, but by all Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians in the Orient. But this does not necessarily mean that the idea expressed by the word is the same in each case.”⁹

There are, of course, numerous misunderstandings to be addressed in Christian witness. According to the Qur’an Muslims think Christians worship three gods: “Say not

⁵ Muhammad was born in AD 570. Kenneth Bailey, “The Arabic Translations of the Bible: Some Thoughts on Its History and Importance” (Unpublished manuscript, 1979).

⁶ Arabic Bible translations call God “Allah.” In the beginning it was *Allah* who created the heavens and earth (Genesis 1:1) and *Allah* who loved the world and gave his one and only Son (John 3:16).

⁷ Surah 6. Chapters in the Qur’an are called *surahs*.

⁸ Members-COMMA, May 10, 2004.

⁹ Samuel Marinus Zwemer, *The Moslem Doctrine of God* (New York: American Tract Society, 1905), 18.

Trinity” (4:171), so Christians need skill in responding to Muslim assertions that Jesus did not die. They need grace and wisdom in responding to the perverse charge that “Son of God” suggests that God took a wife (Mary) and sired a son.¹⁰ Yet, there is a divine attribute, that when fully grasped is more precious to Muslims than any misconception that has been resolved. It is not about God’s power and sovereign rule but about his unconditional love: "God is love" (I John 4:8); “God commends his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”(Romans 5:8); "When we were still without strength, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6); and "While we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son (Romans 5:10).

This unconditional love of God for unworthy and unlovable sinners is evident throughout Scripture: “I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3), but perhaps best illustrated by the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). Jesus tells the story to show that God is like a father. The father does not disown him or send an army to force his return. He grieves and suffers with the boy until reconciliation takes place at the happy homecoming. In desperate straits, the prodigal repents, leaves his old lifestyle and returns home but he does so *only* because of the character and action of his father who wants to heal the rift, and restore the relationship. Muslims, by God’s grace, are responding to this good news.¹¹ One, a Pakistani Muslim who was working on his doctoral dissertation, came to the conclusion that the only way God could be both merciful and just was through the cross.¹²

¹⁰ Interestingly, several Qur’anic references seem to suggest he did in fact die (5:117; 19:19; 3:55). It is also helpful for Christians to realize that in the Qur’an Jesus is sinless (Qur’an 19:19) whereas Muhammad is not (36:27; 40:55; 47:19; 48:2).

¹¹ In “A Global Perspective on Muslims Coming to Faith in Christ” in *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way*, ed. David H. Greenlee (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Press, 2005), 12-13. J. Dudley Woodberry says the hand of God, at work through the glove of human circumstances, is using five different circumstances to draw Muslims to himself: political, catastrophes, migrations, need for power/blessing and ethnic/cultural resurgence. Muslims are coming to Jesus in unprecedented numbers.

¹² Doud Rahbar, *God of Justice: A Study in the Ethical Doctrines of the Qur’an* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960). After becoming a Christian he taught in the United States.

As for the Qur'an, the message is that God is loving (*al-wadud*), but unable to fully love the sinner: "Allah loves those who act aright" (3:76) and "... [does] not one given to perfidy and crime (4:107). His love is the mercy of a king, not the compassion of a father, and for this reason most Muslims cannot say: "God is love." Even though every *surah* (chapter) in the Qur'an (except the 9th), begins with "*Bis milla ur-Rahman ur Rahim*" ("In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate"), his mercy is subordinate to his sovereign power. He is all-powerful and distant, not personally involved with people. The supreme will of God is inevitably the decisive factor that determines the destination of every soul. Able to pardon whomever he will and condemn whomever he will, his judgment is: "Some to heaven, some to hell and I care not." Heaven then is a divine fiat, an arbitrary decision by Almighty God, who has the power, but not the will to save lost sinners. God in Islam is not delighted by obedience, nor displeased by sins, nor merciful to the believer, nor disgusted with the forgetful, nor hostile to the arrogant. He is above all associations and above all emotions.¹³

One new convert to Islam poured out her desperation and frustration to fellow-Muslims in a computer bulletin board message. She said,

I've been a Muslim for about four years. Islam is a difficult road for me to walk, but I believe with all my heart that I'm doing the right thing. ... I want to be a Muslim forever, but I feel there is so much to do in Islam ... sometimes I think I'm going crazy trying to remember all this...I want to be a good servant to Allah but learning all this is too much for me. I've talked to my husband and he thinks I have a *jinn* (evil spirit) ... I am desperately looking for answers that will help me to be successful.

Another (Muslim) became very fearful when he read in the Qur'an: "Not one of you there is, but shall go down to it [hell]; that for thy Lord is a thing decreed, determined" (19:71). Then came another blow:

Had thy Lord willed, He would have made mankind one nation; but they continue in their differences excepting those on whom thy Lord has mercy.

¹³ Conversely, the Bible says God even loves his enemies" (Romans 5:10) and is "not willing that any should perish" (II Peter 2:15).

To that end He created them, and perfectly is fulfilled the word of thy Lord: 'I shall assuredly fill hell with *jinn* (evil spirits) and men all together' (11:119).

He concluded there was no hope of salvation and his despair deepened when he read the tradition, written by Ibn Masud, these words by the Arabian Prophet:

Every one shall enter hell. Afterwards they will come out of it, sooner or later, according to their works. Those who will come out first will do then like a horse at full speed, afterwards like a swift rider, then like a man springing, and finally, like the walk of a man. Tirmizi and Darimi have handed down this Tradition.¹⁴

The Christian response is that according to the Bible God cares for people and even cries with them. His judgments are holy, just and good, not arbitrary, whimsical or capricious. He can always be trusted. Discovering this precious truth about God has brought peace to many a troubled Muslim heart. One, a wealthy Muslim woman in Pakistan, was encouraged by a Christian woman to pray to God as a friend and father. She said:

I got on my knees and tried but it seemed ridiculous and I could not bring myself to do it. I thought, 'Isn't it sin to try to bring the 'Great One' to our level?' I fell asleep more confused than ever and awoke to remember it was my birthday. I said, 'Suppose I do call Him father.' Shaking with excitement, I fell to my knees, looked up and said, 'My father.' I was not prepared for what happened! I spoke His name aloud and something broke through and I found myself knowing he had heard me. The room was no longer empty for I sensed his presence.¹⁵

God does forgive in Islam but the trouble is *how* he forgives--arbitrarily, whimsically—even irresponsibly, as if it does not matter. A forgiveness that is more like an amnesty leaves the Muslim heart fearful, anxious and uncertain. Such was the response of South Asian Muslim students who realized the utter hopelessness of their situation. Upon reading in the *hadith* (Traditions) that Muhammad could not guarantee the salvation of his own daughter, they said, "If the Prophet said he could not even save his own daughter

¹⁴ The Moslem World, 18, no. 2 April, 1928.

¹⁵ Bilquis Sheikh, *I Dared to Call Him Father* (Lincoln, VA: Word of Life Publications, 1980).

Fatimah, how do we know he can save us?"¹⁶ Others (Muslims) were troubled by the call to prayer that echoes five times a day from mosques equipped with loud speakers: "Come to success, come to salvation," when they themselves had no assurance of salvation and peace. In Christian understanding, forgiveness is costly in that it involves sacrifice and suffering as the "Lamb of God" dies for the sins of the world. It is also victorious in that the Savior rises from the dead and defeats the last enemy, death. God cleanses the sinner from shame and guilt so thoroughly that "there is now no condemnation" (Romans 8:1).

In conclusion, the Bishop's statement was not unorthodox, but it was irrelevant.¹⁷ What Muslims need to hear and understand is that the Christ of the Qur'an is God incarnate who can save completely and be trusted implicitly. Christians can share with their Muslim friends the invitation of Jesus: "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

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¹⁶ *Al- Bukhari*, vol. 6, p. 277. *Sahih Al-Bukhari* (Vol. 1-9. Beirut: Dar Al Arabia), 1981. This is most famous and reliable source for the sayings of Muhammad.

¹⁷ Timothy George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002). George basically says "yes" and "no," but perhaps the "no" should be capitalized and emboldened for emphasis. The topic is far too important to leave any room for ambiguity. But in any event, the title underscores that the issue is Jesus.