

CHRISTIANS CONFESS “I BELIEVE IN ONE GOD”, JEWS QUOTE THE OLD TESTAMENT, “HEAR, O ISRAEL, THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD”, MUSLIMS CONFESS “THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD”. GIVE AT LEAST TWO ARGUMENTS FOR SAYING THAT THE THREE MUST ALL REFER TO THE SAME GOD, AND AT LEAST TWO ARGUMENTS FOR SAYING THAT THEY ARE NOT THE SAME GOD

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1 Introduction

The three great monotheistic religions all proclaim that they worship “the one God”; the theology of Christianity argues that their God is the same as that of the Jews, while the theology of Islam argues for the same God in all three cases. In this essay we seek to assess whether or not there are good reasons to believe that the God who is worshipped is the same.

2 The Same God?

Several of God’s attributes can be seen as common across the faiths (Woodberry 2004). These include that God is in each case transcendent – above, beyond and apart from his Creation. See Sura 42:11 of the Qur’an which calls Allah “Creator of the heavens and the earth!” quoted identically in Genesis 14:19, while Romans 1:25 calls him “The creator – who is ever praised”. He is immanent (inside the universe, filling it with his spirit) in the Qur’an as Allah says of man “We are closer to him than his jugular vein!” (Sura 50:16). For a Judeo-Christian¹ parallel see Psalm 139:5 “You hem me in - behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.” Allah is said to be merciful in the Qur’an “you are the most profuse in mercy” (Sura 23:109) and Numbers 14:18 “The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion”. But his mercy links to obedience; Sura 5:3 sets out dietary laws believers must follow, where as is stated in 5:2 “God is stern in retribution” against sin. Meanwhile Exodus 20:5 states that “I...am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me”. Finally in both traditions God is powerful and in control of all things, see Sura 2:20 “Allah is able to all things!” and 1 Chronicles 29:11-12 “you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.”

¹ We contend that use of Old Testament quotes is in most cases valid for Christianity as well as Judaism, except where the New Testament has clearly superseded the Old.

A further point suggesting the same God is historical continuity - the fact that the Scriptures of the later religions encompass the events of the older ones, and thus adherents can claim to be worshipping the same God. Hence, Christianity claims that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, whom the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob sent to redeem mankind (see Acts 3:13) in the way the Law of Moses could not. Early Christians did not consider themselves separate from Jews, and certainly saw themselves as worshipping the same God (Romans 3:29). Marcion, who claimed that the God of the Old Testament was not the same as God the Father of Jesus, was condemned by the early church as heretical. Islam in turn claims to be to have the same basis as the Jews and Christians, according to the tradition of the Preserved Tablet (Sura 85:22) kept in heaven and the common source of revelation to Moses, David, Jesus and Mohammed (LBC 1998). This is why Christians and Jews are called “the people of the book”, thus emphasising the common religious heritage; Sura 29:46 states of Christians and Jews “Our God and your God are one and we submit to him”.

The third argument for saying they are the same God is in terms of monotheism per se; that they all worship “one God” who could logically be seen as the same God. Jews quote the Old Testament, “Hear, O Israel, The Lord Our God Is One Lord” (Deut 6:4) also quoted by Jesus in Mark 12:29. Muslims confess “There is no God save Him” (Sura 6:102). The belief that one God is also the same God is implicitly held by the Catholic church in the encyclical *Nostra Aetate* (which defines attitudes to other faiths) and which notes that “the Church regards with esteem also the Muslims...they adore *the one God*...creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men”. As noted by Waldman (2003), “Thomas Aquinas wrote *Summa Contra Gentiles*...to refute the Muslim Ibn Rushd but never tried to make the argument that Muslims were praying to a different God”. Waldman contends that the similarity is expressed linguistically also; Allah in Arabic is a contraction for al-ilah, "the-God," and as such is cognate with Hebrew eloh, "god" (plural of abstraction, elohim, "deity").

On the other hand, one should not exaggerate what this third argument proves, as “two men may be married to one woman, but that does not mean they are married to the same woman” (Mizzi 2004). In a similar vein, Elijah implies that there is only one God, but sees the Israelites as misidentifying the one God as Baal and not Yahweh in 1 Kings 18:21 “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him”.

3 Or major differences?

Furthermore, it is important to add that despite the agreements, there are major differences that cast doubt on the idea of the same God.

Despite the similarities cited above, we can note differences in God’s attributes across the three religions. Jews and a fortiori Christians see God as willing to enter into relationship with mankind and be reconciled, the former in the story of God’s relationship with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and the nation of Israel, and the latter also in the incarnation of Jesus. For Christians and Jews God is knowable (Exodus 33:11, 2 Timothy 1:12), personal, caring for his people (Nahum 1:7, 1 Peter 5:6-7), and faithful, keeping his promises (Joshua 21:45, Hebrews 10:23).

Allah by contrast is depicted in the Qur’an as transcendent and unknowable, not entering into relationship with believers. For example in Sura 42:50 it is written “It is not vouchsafed for any mortal that God should speak to him...” except in exceptional circumstances, and in descriptions of Paradise, nowhere does it state believers are to be with God personally. Al-Ghazali a foremost Islamic scholar, says “it is absolutely impossible for them (believers) to know Him” (Shehadi 1964). Allah is capricious; Sura 3:54, says that "Allah was the best of deceivers". The Muslims call God proud, which is not an attribute recognised by Jews or

Christians. He is unpredictable and changeable as in the “doctrine of abrogation”; in Sura 2:100 the Qur’an teaches, “And for whatever verse We abrogate or cast into oblivion, We bring a better or the like of it; knowest thou not that God is powerful over everything?”² Christians see God as being love (1 John 4:7-16), a name never given to Allah, who rather demands submission of his believers (as Surah 2:131). Compare 2 Peter 3:9 “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish....” with Surah 25:77 “Little cares my Lord if you do not invoke him...” As noted by Williams (2003) “the...concepts of God are so divergent that they cannot both be true, and both “Gods” cannot exist as conceived”³.

Major differences arise in beliefs about the nature of Scripture, which cast further doubt on whether God is the same, since his history is thus cast into doubt. Whereas Christians acknowledge the Old Testament as canonical, Jews do not reciprocate for the New. According to Muslims, the Christians and Jews were held to have corrupted their biblical material (Surah 2:76), thus accounting for differences with the Qur’an, which they claim is the direct word of God. Islam takes into account non-canonical books that are disclaimed by orthodox Christians, such as the Gospel of Barnabas. Furthermore, there are major distortions in the Qur’anic account of the Old Testament stories, with, for example, Solomon having control over the winds and Haman appearing in Egyptian and not Babylonian times. These cast doubt on whether Allah of the Muslims is the same as the God of the Christians and Jews. Some would go further and argue that unlike the Old and New Testaments, that are strongly internally consistent, the Qur’an is self contradictory, for example in its attitude to Christians and Jews – at times preaching tolerance and at others violence, thus requiring the “doctrine of abrogation” cited above⁴.

² This itself contradicts Sura 10:64 “There is no changing the words of God; that is the mighty triumph.”

³ Some see Allah as “cold, haughty, unpredictable, unknowable, capricious, distant and so purely transcendent that no “relationship” is possible”, (Trifkovic 2002).

⁴ Trifkovic (2002) maintains as a consequence that the Qur’an “looks feels and sounds like a construct entirely human in origin and intent”.

Like Arius the heretic, both Muslims and Jews would deny the central claim of Christianity, that Jesus is the divine Son of God, but in different ways. As Jesus is himself part of the Triune God (2 Corinthians 13:14), this implies that the God worshipped is not in that way the same for the three faiths. The Muslims claim Jesus was a special prophet, who was taken directly to heaven – he was not even crucified, an impostor was crucified instead. They claim it is against reason to assume God would need the crucifixion to allow Him to forgive sins – that would limit his power. For Muslims such forgiveness is in any case unnecessary as the Fall is not part of Islamic belief (Cotterell 1990). In explicitly denying the Trinity, the Qur'an states "Far is it removed from his (Allah's) transcendent majesty that he should have a son" (Sura 4:171). Meanwhile the Jews would claim that Jesus is strictly human and was one of a long line of impostors claiming to be the Messiah, and a blasphemer for claiming to be Son of God (as stated by the High Priest in Matthew 26:65). So prayer should be only to God the Father, who is, however, the same Father as for Christians (Romans 3:29).

A theological question is whether the same God could with justice and mercy accept some followers and reject others, declaring as such in divinely inspired Scripture. Yet from parts of the Qur'an, Muslims claim that only they can attain salvation, as the Jews and Christians rejected God's messenger Mohammed, and Christians "blasphemously" claim that Christ is divine. It is said of the Christian "God will forbid him the garden and the fire will be his abode" (Surah 5:72). The corollary is that the God worshipped is not the same. In contrast, for Jews and Christians, God's desire for all to be saved is clear in 1 Timothy 2:4 that he is "not willing that any should perish, but desires that all men come to a knowledge of the truth", see also Old Testament passages such as Jeremiah 3:17 and Isaiah 60:3 claiming the nations will come to know the one God.

Finally, it can be argued that Islam contains a great many pagan aspects that both Christianity and Judaism would reject. This again casts doubt on whether God is the same for them as for Christians and Jews. These include the concept of Paradise as a form of brothel, genies (jinn, the Spirit of the Desert) and the Angel of Death, as well as the bridge across which all must pass on the Day of Judgement. All of these are taken from Zoroastrianism.

Conclusion

Although some superficial similarities can be discerned, the main thrust of this essay is that theologically, whereas Jews and Christians do worship the same God, differing in their views of Jesus as Messiah, this is not the case for Muslims. Their God has different attributes, different accounts of his actions and of the afterlife sufficient to prove he is a different God. Arguably, only an atheist, for whom no God exists, can maintain that the Gods are the same – or alternatively a liberal believer in one of the faiths seeking for political and social reasons to promote interfaith dialogue.

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