

Do we worship the same God?

Dr Bernie Power

Saturday 4th August 2012

(<http://www.biblesociety.org.au/news/do-we-worship-the-same-god>, accessed 3 August 2016)

A Muslim student stood to his feet. “Can’t you just agree with us that we all worship the same God?” he asked, to much applause.

The event, a seminar called “What is at the heart of Islam/Christianity?” was held at Melbourne University late last year, and had been organised by the Christian Union and the Muslim Students Association. I was invited to compare the Muslim and Christian views of God.

At one point I quoted the famous Muslim theologian, al-Ghazali, who wrote: “Love is to sense a need of the beloved and since Allah cannot be said to have a need or an experience of a need, it is therefore impossible that Allah should love”. This contrasts with a key verse in the Bible, John 3:16, and the statement that “God is love” (1 John 4:8,16). The Muslim speaker responded vigorously, challenging the authenticity of the Bible and holding up his Qur’an as “the only true and unchanged word of God”. Some Muslims in the audience called out loudly, “Allah Akbar” (Allah is great). The lines were drawn and the atmosphere was tense.

“Do we worship the same God?” I responded. “Let’s test that.”

“Could I ask all the Muslim students to raise their hands? I am going to say something, and if you hear anything you disagree with, please put your hand down.” I began to recite the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” At the word “Father” some hands went down.

I continued: “And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.” Most hands dropped after this, but crept up momentarily as I said: “He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.” At this point every hand in the room went down. I turned to the questioner: “Look around, and you will see that not a single Muslim agrees with this early creed that almost every Christian accepts. How can you say that we worship the same God?” There was silence, and the meeting moved on to another topic.

Other Christians, such as Miroslav Volf, would take a different approach. They point to the linguistic similarities between the Hebrew “Eloah” and “Elohim” and the Arabic “Allah”. The Aramaic term that Jesus would have used for God was “Aalah”. The Qur’an claims that Muslims and Christians worship the same God (Q.29:46). The Torah (Deut 6:4), Jesus (Mark 12:29) and the Qur’an (Q.112:1) agree that there is only one God. He creates, reveals, loves, forgives, and judges. Surely, according to Muslims and some Christians, this must be the same God.

However, a closer inspection reveals some significant differences in the way these divine actions are carried out. In the Bible, God reveals himself as personal: for people can know God (Jer 31:34), most supremely through Christ (John 17:3). But the Islamic understanding is different. Muslim theologian Isma’il al-Faruqi states of Allah: “He does not reveal Himself. He does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way. God reveals only His will.”

The Bible proclaims God's love for all, including sinners (Romans 5:8). The Qur'an is less accepting. The nineteen references to those whom Allah loves include "the doers of good", the "pious" and "equitable" people. The twenty-eight references to those whom Allah does not love include "sinners", "transgressors" and "evil-doers". Allah's love is contingent on the recipient's prior behaviour. Daud Rahbar noted that "unqualified Divine love for mankind is an idea completely alien to the Qur'an...nowhere do we find the idea that God loves mankind. God's love is conditional." (Rahbar later became a Christian.)

According to the Qur'an, Allah forgives, but a frequent refrain is that "he forgives whom he wills, and punishes whom he wills" (e.g. Q.2:284) Allah's determination is supreme; many times it is stated that "Allah sends astray whom He wills and He guides on the Straight Path whom He wills" (e.g. Q.6:39). This is a far cry from the biblical representation of the God who "is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). He calls out agonisingly to people: "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die?" (Ezekiel 33:11).

God's forgiveness in the Bible is based on the death of Christ, and it is here that the greatest gulf exists between Islam and Christianity. The Qur'an denies the death of Christ, claiming that he was not crucified but taken up alive to heaven (Q.4:157).

According to Islam, the identity of Jesus is altered. He was "nothing but a prophet" (Q.5:75) and clearly not the Son of God (Q.9:30), for Allah does not have a son (Q.4:171). Allah is never described as "Father" in the Qur'an, which also gives a distorted view of the Trinity, consisting of God, Mary and Jesus (Q. 5:73, 116). The term "Holy Spirit" refers to the angel Gabriel (Q.16:102). There is a clear dissonance.

Imagine two old school friends discussing a former fellow student named Theo. One insists that Theo was tall and muscular, the captain of the football team, but the other says that Theo was short and fat, a member of the debating team. The characteristics are not lining up. A check of the yearbook photos shows that they are talking about two different Theos (bad pun intended!). An identical name and some shared characteristics (both Theos attended the same school) do not always indicate the same person.

As the Bible and the Qur'an describe God, there appears to be little agreement on the critical characteristics. The Bible tells of a Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). The Father, out of love for the world, sends his Son. Jesus is born, lives a perfect life and dies as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. After Christ's resurrection, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in those who believe in Christ. The Qur'an, however, denies the Trinity, and rejects the divine Sonship, incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. It presents Allah as an undifferentiated monad, a somewhat disengaged, unknowable and capricious being. It seems inconceivable that the God of the Bible and Allah of the Qur'an are the same God.

Dr Bernie Power, PhD, is a lecturer in Islam and Missions at Melbourne School of Theology (MST), and works with Professor Peter Riddell at MST's Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths.

'Do we worship the same God?' was the topic at MST's Annual Leonard Buck lecture, where Bernie was one of a panel of speakers outlining and responding to the claims outlined in Miroslav Volf's book.