

Fourth in a series

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

by S. Wesley Ariarajah

In Asian traditions a question can be answered in four ways: “yes”; “no”; “I don’t know”; and silence. “I don’t know” (or “maybe”) means that the issue is complex and that one needs to nuance the answer from a variety of perspectives. It also indicates that one needs to explore the subject rather than be rushed into giving a yes or no answer—which unfortunately is becoming an obsession among some groups of Christians.

Even though some questions can indeed, and perhaps should, be answered with a clear yes or no, in the field of ethics one comes across gray areas where clear-cut answers are less than helpful. What is right—pacifism or just war theory? Pro-life or pro-choice? We need to talk about such issues at some length. A simple yes or no does violence to the issue.

Then there is silence. Silence is used when the disciple needs to reflect further on the question itself. Not all questions are validly formulated; not all of them help deeper exploration of the issue; not all of them arise out of genuine concern to know. The guru’s silence sends the disciple back for further reflection. At other times the guru maintains silence because the question is on a matter beyond verbal response or intellectual exploration. The only assistance the teacher can give is to enable the disciple to have the experience necessary to know the answer for him- or herself.

The question “Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?” raises the possibility of a fifth kind of answer: yes and no.

The Jewish writer Chaim Potok powerfully lifts up the issues involved here in a story about a young rabbi traveling in Japan. At a Buddhist shrine the rabbi saw an old Japanese man deep in prayer. The young rabbi asked his Jewish companion, “Do you think our God is listening to him?”

“I don’t know . . . I never thought about it.”

“Neither did I until now. If he [God] is not listening, why not?”

“If he is listening, then—well, what are we all about?”

The question of whether Christians and Muslims worship the same God is not only a question about Muslims but one about all peoples of whatever religious tradition who raise their hearts and hands in prayer to the Divine Other. Is God listening to their prayers? If not, why not?

This has little to do with Abraham or Abrahamic faiths (as George Bush’s theology of political necessity would have it) but with the deeper issues of what it means to affirm the oneness of God and what consequences we draw from it for our attitudes and actions.

The Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions insist that there is one God and that God is the creator, provider and protector of all. “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it,” says the Psalmist (Ps. 24:1). The inspiration for this belief comes from the creation narratives and the universal covenant God is said to have made with the whole of creation after the flood. Therefore the Jewish tradition,

despite its strong sense of a covenant relationship with God, gradually began to insist that God is also, at the same time, the "God of the nations."

The dilemma here is an obvious one. Members of the Jewish community either had to worship Yahweh as their tribal god, allowing for the possibility of other gods who listen to the prayers of other nations, or they, as strict monotheists, had to draw the logical conclusion that God, whom they worshiped as Yahweh, is also the God of all nations. The Hebrew scriptures do not draw out the full theological implications of this strict monotheism, but we get glimpses of it in several parts of scripture. "'Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?' says the Lord. 'Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?'" (Amos 9:7).

The Book of Jonah is a protest against those who thought God listened only to the prayers of the people of Israel. Jonah felt completely betrayed and let down by God when God listened to the prayers of the gentiles of Nineveh. God could not do otherwise.

The problem is that most Christians, despite their lip service to monotheism, in fact are unconscious polytheists. They allow for other gods to listen to the prayers of their neighbors. They draw boundaries for "their" God and decide where and when their God is allowed to listen, act and bring about wholeness.

If Christians are true believers in the oneness of God, the inevitable conclusion has to be that God, whom we have come to know in Jesus Christ, is the same One who listens to the prayers all people, including the Muslims.

It is in this sense that the answer to the question is an unqualified yes. We all worship the same God. Who else is there to listen to the prayer of a Muslim, Jew, Hindu or Christian except the One in whom all live and move and have their being? For those who want to hang on to monotheism, there can be only one God and one human family.

But is this the whole story? If this is the only consideration, then all religions are the same, and there is no need for people to be Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians.

In fact, we are different because even though we worship one God, different religious traditions have different visions of who this God is, how God relates to humankind and what God requires of us. Here the diversity of perceptions about God makes us into different religious traditions.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam originated in the same geographical area and were in close relationship with each other. It is little wonder that Jews, Christians and Muslims share some parts of their scriptures, some common ancestors like Abraham and some common beliefs about God. But a closer look would also show remarkable differences in their concepts of God and the consequences they draw from them. In fact, as one familiar with the many schools within Hinduism, I as a Christian find myself in closer affinity with some of the Hindu concepts of God than those of the Jewish and Islamic traditions. Happily no one has a monopoly on God.

It should come as no surprise that religions are different and that their concepts of God, despite many commonalities, are quite different from one another. It is in this sense that the answer to the question can also be a qualified no. No, we are not praying to the "same" God as far as our images of God are concerned. In fact, this is why we need interfaith dialogue. We have much to learn from one another about God and God's ways with humankind.

The discussion does not end there. Does God listen to the prayers only of those who hold the "right" view of who God is and what God requires of us? Would God say, "No, I am not going to listen to the prayers of such and such a group, because they wiped out nations in my name, because they build unjust social structures in my name, because they have gone to war in my name, because they don't call me by the 'right' name, or simply because their doctrines do not quite correspond to who I am"?

If this, as some think, is God's attitude to prayer, which of us, Christian or Muslim, dare say that God is listening to our prayers! Jesus' own vision of God is that God causes "the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). For God cannot do otherwise.

What then can we say? Does God, whom we celebrate in Jesus Christ, listen to the prayers of a Muslim? If not, why not? Do we, as Christians and Muslims, despite the many ways we think about God, pray to the "same" God? How many Gods do we allow for in the universe?

We have seen that there are now five possible ways of answering the basic question. They are not "right" or "wrong" answers. But the answer we give says something about who we are and who our God is.

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