

# **Do Judaism, Islam, and Christianity Worship the Same God? A Reformed Theological Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

It is debated whether Judaism, Christianity, and Islam worship the same God. That they share the same roots in Abraham, the father of faith, makes some, including Christian scholars, conclude that they worship the same God. The question turns on the real substance of worship and its approval by God. Drawing from the classical Reformed view, we make a logical and exegetical argument that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may have shared the same broad categories about their supreme deities, but conclude that they actually do not worship the same God. That true worship of God is Trinitarian and Christ centered, which is unique about Christianity, makes it impossible to admit that the three religions worship the same God.

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## **Introduction**

**C**hristianity, Judaism, and Islam are regarded as Abrahamic religions because they originate from the Yahwist faith of the patriarch Abraham. Certainly, Christianity was established on the foundations of Jewish traditions, culminating in the fulfillment of the expectations of Old Testament Judaism that

centered on the divine Messiah, whom Christians identify as the person of Jesus Christ. This gave rise to a variety of interpretations against traditional Judaism, which rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Islam also adapted itself to the Judaic traditions with additional material but diverged significantly in its eschatological interpretations, centering on Muhammad as the final and greatest prophet, though not considering him a savior. Many believe that the three monotheistic religions worship the same God, though in different ways. As long as they have existed, there have been tensions and conflicts, and some scholars believe that this is owing to the stark differences between their beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, the global community is moving into a dangerous time, where religious persecution and oppression result in the torture of religious minorities, and this will affect the global economy, politics, and social ethics. Some believe that hostilities could be minimized if it were accepted that all three religions worship the same God. However, this perspective may not be helpful, as historical evidence has shown otherwise. The question is, Can the understanding that the same God is worshiped, though in different ways, reduce the tension between adherents of the three religions? Our thesis is that it is possible that Christians, Jews, and Muslims may have the same deity in view, but not all their worship is acceptable to him. Therefore, they cannot be worshipping the same God. God determines what acceptable worship is, and all must unite under such worship; however, since it is impossible for this unity to be obtained in this present life, religious conflicts will persist till the end of time. The nature of the question is not about the place, styles, and rituals of worship but about the definitive redemptive controlling principle of worship. The approach to this question is academic, confessional, and practical.

### **I. *Belief in the Same God Is Not a Solution to Religious Conflicts***

The basic concern of those who propose that Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same God is to minimize religious tensions and conflicts.<sup>2</sup> This has led some Christian theologians to compromise historic confessions to

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<sup>1</sup> Will Durant chronicles the religious divisions that bedeviled Islam and Christianity during the Crusades, which were motivated by political and economic interests. See Will Durant, *The Age of Faith: A History of Medieval Civilization—Christian, Islamic, and Judaic—from Constantine to Dante, A.D. 325–1300* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950), 588–92.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Mohler, “Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?,” Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, <http://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/december-2013/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-god/>.

accommodate Islam, with the hope that this will create peaceful relationships and tolerance between Christians and Muslims. Miroslav Volf expresses this concern when he states that Christians and Muslims “are at each other’s throats, if not literally, then in their imaginations. And we need to find ways we can believe peacefully together.”<sup>3</sup> The desire is to shape the attitudes of the Abrahamic religions in order “to build a flourishing democratic society” through enforcing “a common set of fundamental values.”<sup>4</sup> Volf points to the “*similarity in descriptions of God*” of Christians and Muslims to demonstrate “the claim that [they] worship the same God” as well as the “*similarity in God’s commands* in the two faiths to reinforce that claim.”<sup>5</sup> Muslims and Christians have “a common God” and “a common eternal destiny”;<sup>6</sup> and most likely present “two versions of the same thing”;<sup>7</sup> exclusive tendencies should be removed so the two faith communities can live without hostility.

But is this realistic? Must we have the same God, houses, cars, food, clothes, language, and so forth, in order to live harmoniously? Volf’s argument against exclusivism loses its force in the context of the differences in human existence. He makes, however, the important suggestion that all religions should be deeply concerned with seeking to destroy the “religious motivation to violence” and to encourage “motivation to care for others” in the pursuit of the common good of all.<sup>8</sup> Peter Kreeft argues that while we must disavow some aspects of Islam, there are good things that we can also emulate without necessarily conflating the differences between Christianity and Islam.<sup>9</sup> It might be good to ask at this juncture whether Jesus could have accepted Islam as a true religion and another way to God. Would it not contradict his claim that he is “the way, and the truth, and the life” and his

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Galli, interview of Miroslav Volf, “Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?” *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/april/muslimschristians-samegod.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Volf, introduction to *Do We Worship the Same God? Jews, Christians and Muslims in Dialogue*, ed. Miroslav Volf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), viii.

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 97 (emphasis his). Volf is influenced at this point by Nicholas of Cusa, to whom he appeals a number of times. Nicholas was also motivated by the Islamic invasion of Constantinople to seek ways of mitigating the attacks. See James E. Biechler and H. Lawrence Bond, eds., *Nicholas of Cusa on Interreligious Harmony*, *Texts and Studies in Religion* 55 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990), xii–xiii. On the side of concurrence in this debate are Peter Ochs, Miroslav Volf, Reza Shah-Kazemi, Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Amy Plantinga Pauw, Christoph Schwöbel, and Denys Turner, in *Do We Worship the Same God?*

<sup>6</sup> Volf, *Allah*, 188.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Between Allah and Jesus: What Christians Can Learn from Muslims* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 10–12.

words “no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6 ESV)? Moses prophesied about a prophet coming after him (Deut 18:15; cf. Acts 3:22), and no subsequent prophet after him never claimed to fulfill this prophecy; Jesus not only fulfilled the prophecy, but also never prophesied that anyone would come after him.

On the other hand, Volf notes that when it comes to a “description” of God, one must deal with such fundamental differences as the concept of the Trinity in Christianity, which is absent in Islam and latent at best in Judaism. He claims that Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same God, and it is in their understanding of him that differences arise. Volf looks at what appears to be the cause of the similarities and differences. According to him, orthodox Christians and mainstream Muslims believe in one supreme deity. Muhammad himself claimed that Allah is the Jewish synonym of Yahweh with all similar attributes,<sup>10</sup> and one fundamental teaching from God that should drive Christians and Muslims to learn how to live peacefully together is the command to love one’s neighbor.

Denys Turner argues, in line with Volf, that a common principle exists concerning God in all three religions: “What links the end with the beginning is a single, unbroken, spatiotemporal process of change, or, as we might say, a single narrative of space and time coordinates.”<sup>11</sup> Though it is true that God is the central principle of all reality, this does not imply that God functions in the same way in the three worldviews.

The question is not about the names of God, such as Allah and God or Yahweh, as some propose for the differences of the deity in question.<sup>12</sup> In other tribal religions, though there are a variety of deities, one supreme deity is acknowledged, in whom Christians, Muslims, and Jews believe. So the differences properly speaking are not so much about the names of God as about right worship. This is where the difference lies. Muslims believe in the way of worship that Muhammad showed them, and Judaism holds to the prescriptions of the Torah. But for Christians, Jesus Christ clearly states that he is the way, the only way to God. Even though Pope Gregory VII held that Muslims and Christians worship the same deity as the basis for his argument in favor of peaceful coexistence, the majority of Christians today or even in his own time did not hold his view.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Durant, *Age of Faith*, 184.

<sup>11</sup> Denys Turner, “Christians, Muslims, and the Name of God: Who Owns It, and How Would We Know?,” *Do We Worship the Same God?*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Volf, *Allah*, 81–84.

<sup>13</sup> John Bohnstedt, “The Infidel Scourge of God: The Turkish Menace as Seen by German Pamphleteers of the Reformation Era,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 56.9 (1968): 42. He was citing Surah Ali ‘Imran, 3:48.

John Bohnstedt argues that Muhammad also “generously accepts the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as divinely revealed,” and accordingly, “God has given man 104 revelations, of which only four have been preserved—the Pentateuch to Moses, the Psalms to David, the Gospel to Jesus, the Koran to Mohammed; whoever rejects any of these is, in Mohammed’s view, an infidel. However, the first three suffered such corruption that they can no longer be trusted; and the Koran now replaces them.”<sup>14</sup> Charles Kimball also argues, “Jews, Christians, and Muslims are talking about the same deity.”<sup>15</sup>

Nabeel Qureshi acknowledges the “enormous tensions in Christian-Muslim relations.”<sup>16</sup> He rejects claims that Christians and Muslims worship the same God on the basis of the confessions that define the distinctiveness of the Christian religion. Islam and Christianity view the oneness of God differently. The testimony of the Christian Scripture, which reveals God as three persons in one essence, forms the basis of the understanding of the Christian God. Qureshi’s response to this matter is interesting: “Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God, but given the complexity of the matter we all ought to stop demonizing those who disagree with us.”<sup>17</sup>

But belief in the same God does not necessarily amount to the same belief in the particulars of God, which consequently renders such claims ambiguous. In Christianity, as in Islam and Judaism, various sects have emerged because of divergent views of the one God professed. Historical records show that sects in the three religions were often in conflict. In Judaism, “there were pro-Babylonians and pro-Egyptians,” “pro-Persians and pro-Greeks,” “pro-Egyptian Hellenizers and pro-Seleucid Hellenizers” and “pro-Romans and pro-Seleucids,” and in the New Testament, there were “Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and other sects.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, “the Christian church as a whole was divided into five apostolic sects at the beginning of Islam, located in Rome, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Alexandria.”<sup>19</sup> This situation is replicated in Nigeria, as Islamic sects contradict themselves on textual interpretations, which often results in violence. This

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2002), 50.

<sup>16</sup> Nabeel Qureshi, “Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?,” Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, <http://rzim.org/global-blog/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> George Wesley Buchanan, *The Book of Daniel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 450.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Smith, “Muslim-Christian Relations—Historical and Contemporary Realities,” Oxford University Press, <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-11>.

fragmentation is responsible for violent crises that have occurred in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. The divergent interpretations and applications of Islamic texts have always exacerbated tensions and violence between Islam and Christianity.

The Roman Catholic Church embraces the God of Islam to be one with its confession: “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with *us* they adore the one merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day.”<sup>20</sup> The implication of this is that Catholicism has no business evangelizing Muslims. Yet there are inconsistencies in Catholic theology when it professes that

true prayer can arise from worshippers who have wild misunderstandings of God. Indeed, both testaments of sacred scripture contain many examples of “unorthodox” people voicing prayers to the true God. This happens because all prayer somehow emerges from and through the influence of the Holy Spirit, “who blows where he wills.” The Holy Spirit operates within religious communities whose members misunderstand or fail to grasp the fullness of divine revelation.<sup>21</sup>

The problem with this view is the place of the Holy Spirit in Christianity and Islam. In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is understood to be the third person in the Trinity, whose function is to regenerate hearts and lead them to the saving knowledge of God in Christ. Scripture testifies to this truth: “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom 8:8 ESV). Furthermore, “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit” (1 Cor 2:14 NIV).

Since Islam does not believe in the Trinitarian God of Christianity, how does this Catholic view explain actions in Islam with relation to the Holy Spirit? Does the Holy Spirit inspire Islamic violence? The Holy Spirit operates with special graces and gifts, and the only ground where they are eminently present is in Christ because “whosoever Christ had been soundly and thoroughly preached the visible graces did also appear.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Kerper, “Do Christians, Jews and Muslims All Pray to the Same God?,” *Parable* (May/June 2016): 10, Catholicnh.org, <http://www.catholicnh.org/assets/Documents/Catholic-Faith/KerperFAQ/SameGod.pdf>, emphasis mine. He was answering an enquiry from one of his members and citing *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 841. I think the word “us” here refers to the Catholic Church rather than the entire Christian church.

<sup>21</sup> Kerper, “Do Christians, Jews and Muslims All Pray to the Same God?,” 11.

<sup>22</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Albany, OR: Ages Digital Library, 1998), 632.

## II. *Do All Three Religions Worship the Same God?*

The question is not whether Christianity, Judaism, and Islam worship one God but rather whether they worship the same God. An affirmative answer depends on the worship of the three religions being acceptable to God. It is false comfort to claim that God accepts all human ways of approaching him.<sup>23</sup> There are surely many ways, but not all ways are true; the Psalmist presupposes many ways, some of which are false. There is one definite way, indicated by the singular construct and absolute: “I have chosen *the* way of faithfulness” (Ps 119:30 ESV). This is certainly a reference to worship of Yahweh in the context of other religions that surrounded Israel and constantly attracted the chosen people of God.

The religious conflict between Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 provides some insights into this question, since Cain and Abel represent two religions. It would appear *prima facie* that they worshiped the same God, but closer examination suggests otherwise. The God who accepted Abel’s worship rejected Cain’s worship, so it is right to argue that they had the same divine object in view. But that God rejected Cain’s worship shows by implication that he was not worshiping that same God. Rather, he was worshiping his own graven image, the idol of his heart, so his God was not the same God of Abel. To worship God truly is to turn away completely from idolatry. Since religion is essentially a matter of the heart, Cain’s heart was not right with God, “for he lacked a right disposition toward God,”<sup>24</sup> which was the reason for his rejection, whereas Abel’s heart was right with God, and he was accepted (Heb 11:4; cf. 1 John 3:12; Jude 11). Accordingly, ancient Hebrew worship laid emphasis on the “heart, motive and disposition,” which is the seat of religion.<sup>25</sup> Gordon Wenham adopts the generally accepted view,

<sup>23</sup> Pluralist Christian philosophers such as John Hick and Paul F. Knitter have devoted extensive scholarly work to the defense of this position. They even believe that all other religions apart from the three in view here worship the same God and all their worship is acceptable to God. See John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); John Hick, “Jesus and the World Religions,” *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); “Incarnation and Atonement: Evil and Incarnation,” *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, ed. Michael Goulder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); “Whatever Path Men Choose is Mine,” *Christianity and Plurality*, ed. Richard J. Plantinga (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). I have refuted their position in Philip Tachin, “A Critique of John Hick’s Christology and Reaffirmation of the Exclusiveness of Christ,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 2.2 (2011): 112–31, <http://orthodox-theology.com/media/PDF/IJOT2-2011/08-tachin-hick.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur B. Fowler, “Cain,” *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. D. Douglas et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 181.

<sup>25</sup> Scot McKnight, “Cain,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 108.

that it is the “different approach to worship that counted and that this was reflected in the quality of their gifts.”<sup>26</sup> Biblical history shows that God rejects syncretism, in which worshipers draw near to God and to other gods simultaneously.

The human heart does not operate in a vacuum or in neutrality. Cornelius Van Til was right to argue that “the idea of ‘neutrality’ is simply a colorless suit that covers a negative attitude toward God. It ought to be plain that who is not *for* the God of Christianity is *against* Him.”<sup>27</sup> This stands against the claim of theological pluralism that all human ways are acceptable to God. Jesus clearly taught, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21 ESV). The hearts of Abel and Cain were directed to different objects, though they had come for worship into the presence of the same God. To be in the presence of God does not necessarily mean to worship him, as the human heart’s desires are subtle. God accepts worship when it is truly and properly submissive to him. It was according to this principle that God condemned Israel’s worship: “And the Lord said: ‘Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men ...’” (Isa 29:13 ESV; cf. Matt 15:8–9; Mark 7:6).

Explaining God’s differentiation between Cain and Abel, John Calvin argues, “God will regard no works with favor except those the doer of which is already previously accepted and approved by him.”<sup>28</sup> This favor comes through God’s initiative of regenerating human hearts to worship him by faith. Calvin highlights in God’s words to Cain the need “to worship God sincerely and without dissimulation” and in “true purity of heart.”<sup>29</sup> These were lacking in Cain’s case, and warranted rejection. Furthermore, “God not only repels his unjust complaint, but shows that Cain could have no greater adversary than that sin of his which he inwardly cherished.”<sup>30</sup>

Pre-Christ worship was permeated with human errors and consequently rejected by God. Even when God prescribed acceptable worship in the Old Testament, it was constantly diverted by sin and degenerated into idolatry. The core of religious life that God demanded was to walk in “obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 10:12 NIV). The goal of this demand was that obedience

<sup>26</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 104.

<sup>27</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 7–8.

<sup>28</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* (Albany, OR: Ages Digital Library, 1998), 120.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>30</sup> Mohler, “Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?”

would be the channel through which God's love and blessings would flow in the land for the good of all. When later generations deviated from this demand, Micah reiterated it, using practical terms such as acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God (Mic 6:8). Humility is vital, since the qualities of justice and mercy only flourish where religion is structured on humility. Pride destroys the soil in which virtues thrive. Free mercy from God implies absence of merit and requires absolute humility in fellowship with him and other people. Absence of humility in religious practice nurtures discrimination and violence, even in the name of God. God is fully aware of the human heart, for which reason he instructed that we walk humbly with him. These qualities are relational categories that make human society blossom according to God's original intention for it. Israel could not practice this because under the law human depravity and sinful arrogance was exposed. In addition to spiritual decadence, it bred social injustice, which the prophets decried.

The religion of the law alone fashioned stony hearts and lip service, whereas the gospel promises hearts of flesh held obedient to the word of God. The entire Old Testament therefore looked to the coming of Christ, when worship that is acceptable to God would be instituted. Christ made very clear, as no one else before him, that he is the way to the Father, through which proper worship of God can be in spirit and in truth.

Christianity's claim that Christ is the center of worship makes it impossible to admit Judaism and Islam as worshipping the same God. Christ made the love of God and fellow humans the cardinal principle of the Christian religion, thus summing up Micah's call to religious practices of justice, mercy, and humility in human society. Where these three qualities reign, religious violence is impossible. This means submission of hearts to the rule of God so that true worship is no longer anchored on legalistic rituals but true, heart-level communion with the Lord. The Holy Spirit, who agrees with the person and work of Christ, effectually transforms hearts; religion is a religion of heart and deed. Any worship of God outside of Christ and the Holy Spirit is futile, no matter how well organized and pious it might appear. Eternal life consists in the knowledge of God through Christ alone (John 17:3).

Christ not only denied that the Samaritans and Jews worshiped the same God (John 4:22), he called the Jews children whose father was Satan (John 8:44) because, though they believed in one God, they rejected him as God's Son, who together with the Father would send the Holy Spirit. From this, it follows that true worship is Trinitarian. Jews and Muslims cannot strictly be said to worship the same God, inasmuch as they disagree with the

essential particulars of his revelation of himself in the Bible. Belief in some of the basic aspects of deity does not necessarily amount to worship of that deity. In many religious societies, though people believe in a number of gods, they also hold some basic beliefs about the one eternal God as found in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. For instance, African traditional religions believe in one supreme deity who is the creator of the universe and who is almighty, hears prayers, and saves people. Yet they cannot be said to be worshipping the God of Christianity. To flatten the significant distinctions undermines the gospel call to repentance, including to Muslims and Jews.

It is possible to concede that Christians and Muslims worship the same God if this refers to the general concept of one supreme deity, the creator of the universe, the almighty and supreme judge of mankind. However, in the Qur'an the personal attributes of God in Christianity are heretical. According to Qur'an 5:73, "They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One Allah. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy), verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them."<sup>31</sup> But to some extent, the Qur'an still admonishes Muslims with respect to Christians and Jews: "Our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender" (29:46).<sup>32</sup>

The fundamental differences between the two religions are logically irreconcilable. It is impossible for God to be God without Trinity, and those who believe in him as unity without Trinity cannot worship the same God. Whatever overlap there is between the Christian and Muslim beliefs about God is superficial: "What God has done or whom He has sent is far less of a defining characteristic than what He is and who He is; though Islam and Christianity overlap at points on the former, they differ fundamentally on the latter."<sup>33</sup> Qur'an 3:85 says, "And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers."<sup>34</sup>

### III. A Classic Reformed Approach

Reformed scholarship holds that general revelation, especially the concept of *sensus divinitatis*, warrants overall human belief in the existence of one

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<sup>31</sup> Yusuf Ali, citing Sura 5:73. Cited at "Islam and the Trinity," Department of Christian Defense, [http://www.christiandefense.org/isalm\\_Trinity.htm](http://www.christiandefense.org/isalm_Trinity.htm).

<sup>32</sup> Qureshi, "Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?" Citing the Qur'an.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> David R. Reagan, "Do Christians, Muslims and Jews Worship the same God?," Lamb & Lion Ministries, <http://christinprophecy.org/articles/do-christians-muslims-and-jews-worship-the-same-god/>.

Creator God.<sup>35</sup> The connection between worship, belief, and reference grants that ultimately all religions, irrespective of whether they are true or false, have God in view.<sup>36</sup> With reference to the basic descriptive categories of creatorhood, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, the three Abrahamic religions refer to the same God, but the Reformed view goes beyond basics to personal ontological categories for God, and so Christianity differs significantly from the other two.<sup>37</sup> Special revelation introduces categories that are alien to Judaism and Islam. However, it is possible that the three Abrahamic religions refer to the same God in spite of “their considerable differences of opinion about his exact properties.”<sup>38</sup>

Though the above view presents good and cogent arguments, it also opens itself to certain misunderstandings. For instance, it claims that “insofar as other religions have also arisen from *genuine* cognitive contact with God that *isn't distorted* by fundamentally mistaken beliefs about what kind of being He is, they too refer to the same God.”<sup>39</sup> These questions follow: What are those religions, given that religions such as Hinduism do not conceive of God in the way Christianity, Judaism, and Islam do? Such blanket assertions are not helpful in establishing a case. Can such genuineness be measured, and does “genuine cognitive contact with God that isn't distorted” square up with the noetic effect of sin that Paul speaks of in Romans 1:21–23? When God disowned his own people in the prophetic writings, was it not because of what amounts to a distortion of their theistic cognitive content?

However, on a positive note, this view holds that “belief in God requires more than mere reference, so the fact that the Reformed view can be taken to imply that users of ‘God’ in these religions all refer to the same God doesn't automatically mean that Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe in the same God.”<sup>40</sup> And more forcefully,

The conclusion we draw from this is that the question whether Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in and worship the same God doesn't allow for a firm univocal answer. On the one hand, since belief in the same God requires commitment to the same characterization of God's basic nature, they do not believe in the same God and hence do not worship the same God.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jeroen de Ridder and René van Woudenberg, “Referring to, Believing in, and Worshiping the Same God: A Reformed View,” *Faith and Philosophy* 31.1 (2014): 50.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

In the final analysis, “It follows from the Reformed view that, strictly speaking, adherents of the Abrahamic religions do not believe in and worship the same God.”<sup>42</sup>

The irreconcilable differences between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam concern the critical issues of revelation, sin, and redemption. Harold Spencer writes, “In the light of God’s character we understand the nature of sin and our need for the salvation which Christ brings.”<sup>43</sup> God reveals himself and the human condition, explaining the difference between original creation and the state after the fall, and the need of salvation. The natural person blinded by sin and ignorant pride does not and cannot understand his own actions. Even the Apostle Paul still did not understand his own actions even after having received Christ (Rom 7:15).

Calvin offered a classic approach to this difference with the uniquely Christian idea that Creator and Redeemer are two aspects of the revelation of the one God, teaching that “in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator.”<sup>44</sup> General revelation is a religious cognitive point of common ground for all religions. Commenting on Psalm 19, Calvin admits the common knowledge of God: “It is very evident that the inspired poet here treats of the knowledge of God, which is naturally presented to all men in this world as in a mirror.”<sup>45</sup> This first step of the revelation of God is primary and open to humanity in all religions. But the second aspect of God’s revelation takes a unique stance that is extraordinary. This was necessitated by the distortion of mankind’s clear vision of God and the impaired relationship between the creature and its Creator.

On account of sin, mankind not only rebelled initially but continued in its covenant-breaking attitude and character. Paul says that “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them,” but “although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:19, 21 esv). It is this striking reality of the human condition that made it necessary for the revelation of God as Redeemer. Calvin comments,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Harold Spencer, *Islam and the Gospel of God* (New Delhi: Printsman, 1976), 1.

<sup>44</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.2.1 (1:40).

<sup>45</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Albany: Ages Digital Library, 1998), 1:304.

For as God, the Creator of the world, pours forth upon us the brightness of the sun, and gives us eyes to receive it, so, as the Redeemer, in the person of his Son, He shines forth, indeed, upon us by His gospel, but, as we are blind, that would be in vain, if He did not at the same time enlighten our understandings by His Spirit. His meaning, therefore, is that God has, by His Spirit, opened the eyes of our understandings, so as to make them capable of receiving the light of the gospel.<sup>46</sup>

The Pelagians generated controversy with the claim that “everyone well grounded in whatsoever religion will be saved.”<sup>47</sup> However, the starting point in discussing the uniqueness of God in Christian theology is the sin factor, which necessitated the special revelation of God that climaxes in the incarnation. While Christianity, and indeed Reformed theology, underscores the magnitude of sin, “Islam denies that humans have a deeply sinful human nature, claiming that we sin because we are merely weak and ignorant.”<sup>48</sup> This means that humanity is not actually in need of salvation from God but can earn it only by overcoming weakness and ignorance.

Calvin laid the foundation for the classic Reformed view that the three Abrahamic religions are not praying to, serving, and worshiping the same God. God as Redeemer is closer to humanity in a personal way. Calvin took seriously human incapability to meet the holy requirements of God and escape the consequences of the fall. God’s initiative is to come down to fallen humanity in his chosen way, and fallen humanity ought to seek redemption only in Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Calvin did not underestimate the grave consequences of the fall, especially as it affects our natural ability to know and worship God. There must be a way acceptable to God, since he is not careless in his ways. “Therefore, since we have fallen from life into death, the whole knowledge of God the Creator that we have discussed would be useless unless faith also followed, setting forth for us God our Father in Christ.”<sup>50</sup> On this note, “no worship has ever pleased God except that which looked to Christ.”<sup>51</sup> William Barr states that in religious and theological enterprise, “thinking and speaking of

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. See also John Calvin, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Albany: Ages Digital Library, 1998), 92.

<sup>47</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.4.1 (p. 9).

<sup>48</sup> Douglas Groothuis, “Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?” (citing Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* [Vancouver, BC: Regent University Press, 1977], 89–90), Denver Seminary, <http://www.denverseminary.edu/do-christians-and-muslims-worship-the-same-god/>.

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.6.1.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.6.1 (1:341).

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.6.1 (1:342).

God must be done in the midst of and in relation to a world in which there is massive suffering and terrible acts of cruelty.”<sup>52</sup> The God who reveals himself as Redeemer considers the human predicament destructive enough to deliver us from it.

Calvin’s theology did not credit the three Abrahamic religions, including Roman Catholicism, with worship of the same God, even if the referent may be the same. In his sermons, he consigns Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam to the realm of false religions which stand against the things of God.

Although the Heathen keep still their dotages; although the Jews [alias the Judaists] be wilful in maintaining these false expositions of the law; although the Turks hold still their Mahomet’s *Al-Coran*; although the Papists be still entangled in their superstitions—all is one! For they [all of them maintain or] hold fast this principle, that there is a God. ... Meantime, they ... worship a puppet, and ... have transformed the Majesty of God [*viz.* the one and only true Triune God]—though their intent was to worship the living God. ... The Papists do, who protest that they worship God the Maker of heaven and earth. And likewise the Turks, who say the same thing. And so also do the Jews [alias the Judaists]—notwithstanding that they abhor Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup>

Calvin’s reaction against the Turks, or Muslims, was based on the distortion of Christian theology in their beliefs, which leads to violent actions.

Calvin reasoned that God in his infinite majesty is unapproachable other than through the incarnation of his Son as mediator. To reject the Son and yet claim to have a personal relationship with God and to worship him truly is false: “For even if many men once boasted that they worshiped the Supreme Majesty, the Maker of heaven and earth, yet because they had no Mediator it was not possible for them truly to taste God’s mercy, and thus be persuaded that he was their Father.”<sup>54</sup> This view places Judaism and Islam together: by not accepting Christ, both possess “a fleeting knowledge of God.”<sup>55</sup> On Muslims, Calvin states, “So today the Turks, although they proclaim at the top of their lungs that the Creator of heaven and earth is God, still, while repudiating Christ, substitute an idol in place of the true God.”<sup>56</sup> Equally, when Judaism took the sacrificial system to be a means of getting right with God, it missed the point of the law. Calvin insisted that the prophets indicted Judaism because “the law was not devoid of reference

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<sup>52</sup> William R. Barr, ed., *Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 107.

<sup>53</sup> Francis Nigel Lee, *Calvin on Islam* (El Paso, TX: Lamp Trimmers, 2000), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.6.4 (1:347).

<sup>55</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.6.4 (1:348).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

to Christ.”<sup>57</sup> He even considered that “the two horns of the Anti-Christ and the two legs correspond with Islam and the Papacy.”<sup>58</sup>

Francis Turretin wrestled with Socinians and Remonstrants, who denied that “no one can be saved who is not placed in Christ by true faith,” and affirmed that sin warranted redemption in Christ alone.<sup>59</sup> Arminius argued that for anyone who makes “right use of the light of nature, the light of grace can be obtained, and by grace admission to glory.”<sup>60</sup> Although Turretin stated that “certain first principles of religion are common to all men,” the more important question for him is whether such principles sufficiently constitute true religion, which he denies.<sup>61</sup> He asserts instead that “since the Scriptures testify that Christ is the only way of salvation (without whom no one can come to the Father), it is criminal to suppose an extraordinary way without him.”<sup>62</sup> He maintained the position of Calvinism: “It is one thing to allow some knowledge of God as Creator and preserver however imperfect, corrupt and obscure; another to have full, entire and clear knowledge of God as Redeemer and of the lawful worship due to him.”<sup>63</sup> The knowledge of God as Creator of the universe is sufficient to leave all without excuse for not believing, but this does not impart salvation, which is revealed in Christ alone, who is the express will and mercy of God for humanity.

Reformation theology stood on the biblical premise that God created the world, and that mankind was endowed with the capacity to relate with him, and even before the fall, human fellowship with God was regulated by God, not humanity. God told Adam everything that he needed to do for the well-being of the creation. However, sin has infected humanity to the extent that “what the world judges right is often crooked and perverse in the judgment of God, who approves of no other manner of living, than that which is framed according to the rule of his law.”<sup>64</sup> Divine light became necessary for people to walk uprightly with God. Thus the Psalmist acknowledges, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105). The metaphors of “feet” and “path” here allude to human conduct in relationship with

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.1 (1:349).

<sup>58</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 162.

<sup>59</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.4.1 (1:9); citing Socinus, *Praelectiones theologicae* 2 (1627), 3–7; Curcellaeus and Adolphus Venator (Adolph de Jager) were defending their beliefs against the ministers of Dort.

<sup>60</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.4.1 (1:9–10). Turretin refers to Arminius, “The Apology or Defence of James Arminius Against Certain Theological Articles,” 15–17, in *The Writings of James Arminius* [1956], 1:322–29.

<sup>61</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.4.3 (1:10).

<sup>62</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.4.5 (1:10).

<sup>63</sup> Turretin, *Institutes*, 1.4.6 (1:11).

<sup>64</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:568.

God and humanity. So the word of God is “a guide in leading a holy life.”<sup>65</sup> God came to redeem his creation from sin and its effects, the most prominent of which is death. And the only person who defeated death is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. No other prophet, in Judaism, Islam or another religion, was able to defeat death for mankind. This is God’s chosen way to deal with the human condition, and Jesus is the final authentic eschatological spoken word of God (Heb 1:1–3).

Herman Bavinck added a third dimension to that of Calvin, making it Trinitarian. He emphasized the centrality of the Trinitarian God who is manifest as “Creator, Redeemer and Perfecter.”<sup>66</sup> Bavinck succinctly presented the unique position of Christian faith: “And the essence of the Christian religion consists in the reality that the creation of the Father, ruined by sin, is restored in the death of the Son of God and re-created by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God.”<sup>67</sup> Bavinck underscored a critical factor, namely, sin, which forms the basis for appreciating the special redemptive revelation of God, not only as Creator but also as Redeemer. God created the world for the good of mankind, but sin ruined it. Sin is an offense to a personal, holy God. Any god who does not take the offense of sin seriously cannot be a personal and holy God. The gravity of sin and its consequences cannot be remedied by mankind, which has lost the power to please God. Mankind is a victim of sin, and the remedy for sin can only be provided by God. Only God, who created mankind in his own image, can re-create mankind for his purpose.

## Conclusion

Belief that Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same God cannot be established. The variance between the three is critical, especially the uniquely Christian idea that Christ is the *sine qua non* of true worship of God. While proponents of the idea that all worship the same God cite the Qur’an’s recognition of Jews and Christians as people of the book and the words of Nicholas of Cusa or Pope Gregory VII, they have not shown similar evidence from the Bible. The Old and New Testaments know nothing of these claims. Although the Old Testament looks to the New Testament,

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 112. He drew from Bonaventure’s articulation.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. See also John Bolt, “Editor’s Introduction,” citing Bavinck in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 18.

since the time of Jesus and the apostles Judaism has never recognized such a fulfillment. Naturally, Judaism and Christianity, its offshoot, should have common worship, but their theological trajectories are at variance as to the core tenets of faith, the Trinity and the Messianic redemption of Christ. Though Judaism and Islam sprang from the Abrahamic family and faith, Muhammad laid the foundation of Islamic variance from Judaism. The Jewish rejection of Muhammad as prophet heightened the tension, and the divergence has widened.

Classic Reformed theology has sufficiently demonstrated why worship differs. The revelation of the Creator God to all mankind has been blurred by sin, and God alone has taken the initiative to reveal himself again as Redeemer of fallen creation. Islamic theology fails to take sin seriously and misinterprets the redemptive activity of God in the person of Christ, who died and rose again for the sake of mankind. This redemption is operative until the consummation of time, when all things will be perfectly renewed. This is the work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, three persons, but one God. This makes the Christian religion unique, and it cannot be compromised for the sake of peaceful coexistence. The hope of common ground with Islam has never and probably will never result in the peaceful coexistence its proponents expect. While we encourage humility in our interactions with adherents of other religions, we hold our central principle of worship to be true and unique.