



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 No God but God
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 11-17)

Suggested Article:

📖 God Is Greater
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 62-64)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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No God but God

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? The question is too simplistic. It is more helpful to ask, "What kind of God is revealed in Christianity and in Islam?" Though the traditions agree that God is one, they diverge widely on how that Oneness is expressed.

Prayer¹

O God, you are God, besides whom there is no God: the Knower of the unseen and the seen; you are the Beneficent, the Merciful.

You are the King, the Holy, the Giver of peace, the Granter of security, Guardian over all, the Mighty, the Supreme, the Possessor of every greatness. Yours is the glory.

You are God, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner. Yours are the most excellent names; whatever is in the heavens and the earth declares your glory. You are the Almighty, the All-wise.

As heaven and earth declare your glory, come to us, O God, and teach us to glorify your name. Amen.

Scripture Readings: Exodus 18:1-27; John 4:19-24

Reflection

Though Christians and Muslims often "talk past each other" about the nature of God and how God is revealed in the world, these topics are "fruitful starting points" for dialogue between the traditions. When we attend to the Bible and to the primary sources in orthodox Islam – the Qur'an and the Hadith (the collected stories about the life and teachings of Muhammad) – we find a "surprising wealth of commonalities" on God's nature.

"Both traditions care deeply about worshiping God as Creator, Supreme Lord, and Final Judge of the creation, and they agree that God gives moral revelation and spiritual guidance through prophets and the community of faith," van Gorder observes. "Common themes in their worship include receiving forgiveness from God, extending forgiveness to one another, and submitting all of our life to the One God."

Christians and Muslims disagree on God's relational nature. "Through Jesus we have come to know God as an active participant among humanity through divine love," he says. "In Islam, the primary affirmation is that 'God is One' and thus beyond the limitations of finite comprehension. Christianity calls individuals to enter into covenant relationship with God. Islam calls individuals to worshipfully assume a proper place of obedience before God's will and revelation." Nevertheless, he says the Gospel appeals to Muslims, for "the relationship that Christians have towards God is based on the revelation that God is 'our Father.' Expressed this way, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation may be viewed by Muslims not as a blasphemous absurdity but as the summation of God's Fatherhood." In our conversations with Muslim friends about God's nature, van Gorder urges us:

- ▶ *to understand the central ideas of Islam.* This requires listening and learning from Muslims, which may be more difficult than ever. "While unflattering images – brash terrorists, suicidal fanatics, and a host of others – dominate American media-generated



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pasquinades of Islam, too few of us bother to nurture a deep and studied appreciation for Islamic art, music, literature, architecture, and ethics," he notes. "There is no justification for this continued ignorance and defamation."

- ▶ *to speak clearly with love.* "If your brother does not understand you," an African proverb laments, "perhaps it is because you do not fully love him." The loving work of careful exposition requires us to be humble and patient, and to be inventive in crafting new theological language in response to how Muslims comprehend the Gospel. "Without apology, we should present our faith as filled with mystery – referring to the atonement Charles Wesley wrote, 'The Immortal dies! Who can explore this strange design?' Yet, we should make the effort to articulate logically what these mysteries mean to us."
- ▶ *to listen with humility.* We can present our claims of truth with the humility "of the Apostle Peter, who not only readily presented a message to Cornelius, but also received truth from him in a spirit of teachableness (Acts 10:28-48)," writes van Gorder. "Focusing too much on diplomacy, in fact, can inhibit the potential for genuine insight, for we may be confident that, as we interact with Muslims, God will bring us to greater insight just as He used Cornelius to direct Peter into deeper dimensions of biblical truth. By this posture of being willing to learn, we express our confidence in faith and we may engender a similar response of teachableness in others."

Karen Thomas Smith finds guidance for our conversations with Muslim neighbors in two biblical events – Jethro's visit to his son-in-law Moses, and Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. "We must bear the tension of living in the ambiguous domain of spirit and truth, where even those of alien faith may speak to us of the God who has poured himself out in saving love in Jesus Christ," she concludes. "Even where God has done this unique thing in Christ, we can expect others who do not share our faith to visit us and bless us even as we witness to them of the saving acts of God. And we may all wonder at the mystery of the God who is greater than our imagining."

Study Questions

1. What questions do you have about the Muslim view of God? Where do you turn for reliable information?
2. Discuss van Gorder's claim that "the central theological message for Christians interacting with Muslims is not that 'our God' is true and 'your God' is not, but the biblical revelation that 'God is love' and is actively seeking humanity to participate in a new covenant with God (Jeremiah 31:31-34)."
3. For Smith, how does Jethro's visit to Moses suggest that *Allahu Akbar*, or God is greater"? How is this theme present in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman?
4. How can your congregation prepare members for dialogue with Muslim friends and neighbors?

Departing Hymn: "Hear the Prophet Speak of Water"

[†]With phrases from Surah 59:1, 22-24 in Shakir translation of *The Holy Qur'an*.

No God but God

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Acts 17:22-31	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss Scripture Reading
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore the agreement between Christianity and Islam on God's nature.
2. To consider the key difference that God's incarnational self-revelation makes in the Christian understanding of God.
3. To discuss how we should approach dialogue concerning God's nature with Muslim friends and neighbors.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christianity and Islam (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Christian van Gorder urges us to seek a clear understanding of the Muslim view of God, for otherwise we may simply "talk past" our Muslim friends and neighbors. He gives this example of the problem: "Despite our eagerness to declare to Muslims the promise of relational intimacy with God, we should realize that, at least among non-mystical strands of Islam, humanity's distance from God is seen as a positive force that both defines and maintains creation. I once had a conversation with a Muslim about intimacy with God only to hear him respond that he was grateful that God was distant and uninvolved with the sinful details of his daily life. For this man, 'bridging the gap' between God and man, was not only impossible, but it was also undesirable" (*Christianity and Islam*, p. 13).

Indeed, God's coming to us in Jesus Christ defies everyone's expectations and escapes all of our explanations. How, then, do we share the truth of God's incarnational self-revelation with Muslim friends and neighbors in humility and love?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and lift one or more of these celebrations and concerns before God. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide; the leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Exodus 18:1-27 and John 4:19-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Dialogue between Christians and Muslims should begin with how the two traditions view God's nature, according to Christian van Gorder. He sketches their common themes concerning the nature of God before he focuses on their key difference on how God relates to the world. Christianity, drawing from God's incarnational self-revelation in Jesus Christ, starts with "God is love" and says that God calls us, despite our past sinful rebellion, into personal relationship. Islam starts with "God is One." From a Muslim perspective, the Christian view may appear to be a dangerous confusion about, or an arrogant denial of, God's Oneness and creative authority.

Van Gorder makes three suggestions about how to approach conversations with Muslim friends on the nature of God: (1) begin by understanding Islam, (2) speak clearly with love, and (3) listen with humility.

Under the second point he urges us to be content with expressing divine paradox and mystery, but to avoid needless confusion and careless nonsense in our speech. Enrich his third point by considering Karen Thomas Smith's sensitive discussion of the biblical stories of Jethro's visit to Moses and Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman.

If you decide to extend the discussion to a second session, members might reflect on van Gorder's account of the Christian and Muslim views of God's nature in one session, and on Smith's insights into Exodus 18:1-27 and John 4:19-24 in another session. The dual session plan above suggests that the Bible study for the van Gorder session might focus on Paul's conversation with the people at the Areopagus, or "Mars Hill," in Athens (Acts 17:22-31).

Study Questions

1. Encourage group members to share their questions. Where did they come from—reading the Qur'an, personal experience with Muslim friends and neighbors, TV programs, newspaper articles, books, or sermons? Did van Gorder's article raise questions for them? Among the sources of reliable information are the books reviewed in *Christianity and Islam* (pp. 84-93). Do knowledgeable Muslims live in your community? Are there local experts on Islam in your congregation? What sources have members found helpful in the past, and which sources were not reliable?
2. Why not simply debate whether 'our God' or 'your God' is true? What is wrong with this? For one thing, the very concept of "our God" is inappropriate, for it attempts to reduce and capture the transcendent God for Christians (or Muslims) only. Does God care only for some people? Do Christians (or Muslims) have nothing to learn about God from anyone else? These attitudes are neither humble nor patient, and do not reflect the mind of Christ.

Furthermore, they contradict the biblical truth that God dwells in mystery and is beyond human reason. Essential truth about God is available to every person (Romans 1:20), but in God's self-revelation through Israel and Christ we learn the depth of God's love for the creation and hear the call for all humanity to participate in a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; compare Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, and Hebrews 8). May Christians learn about God from others? May others help us to see facets of the covenant God has established in Christ?

3. "At the heart of Jethro's visit [to his son-in-law Moses] is a divine and, therefore, wonderfully baffling mystery: the salvation received as a gift through Israel's unique covenant with God is blessed at its birth by a priest who is outside that covenant," writes Smith. "Must our encounters with the descendants of Abraham who are outside the covenants of God with Israel and in Christ lead to a 'clash of civilizations,' as many pundits insist, or may they open us to God's blessing in rich ways we have yet to imagine?"
Smith calls attention to Jesus' radical words that God will not be captured by Samaritan or Jewish institutions, but will be worshiped "in spirit and in truth." She takes this to mean that "Even where God has done this unique thing in Christ, we can expect others who do not share our faith to visit us and bless us even as we witness to them of the saving acts of God. And we may all wonder at the mystery of the God who is greater than our imagining."
4. Brainstorm in small groups on how the congregation can help members achieve these three goals: to understand Islam, to speak clearly to Muslims with love about our faith, and to listen to Muslims with humility. Discuss specific local resources to learn about Islam, opportunities for dialogue with Muslims, and how special worship and learning opportunities might make us teachable by Muslims in a way that does not lead to syncretism.

Departing Hymn

"Hear the Prophet Speak of Water" is on pp. 50-51 of *Christianity and Islam*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.