

Do Christians and Muslims Serve the Same God?

Does God care what we call Him? Do **Muslims** and **Christians** worship the same God? These are questions many Christians are asking these days, and for good reason.

For some time now, feminist theologians and a host of others have suggested that Christians should adopt new names for God. One denomination went so far as to affirm names like “Giver, Gift and Giving” in place of “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” to be used in **worship**. Feminist theologians have demanded that masculine pronouns and names for God be replaced with female or gender-neutral terms. But to change the name of God is to redefine the God we reference. Changing the name of God is no small matter.

As a matter of fact, God takes His name very seriously, and the **Ten Commandments** include the command that we must not take the name of the Lord in vain. We are to use the names God has given for Himself, and we are to recognize that God takes His name seriously because He desires to be rightly known by His human creatures. We cannot truly know Him if we do not even know His name.

Moses understood this. When he encountered the call of God that came from the burning bush, Moses asked God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” (Ex. 3:13, ESV). God answered Moses, “I Am Who I Am” (v. 14). God told Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (v. 15).

As these verses make clear, we are not to tamper with God's name. We are to use the names whereby God has named Himself, and we are to recognize that any confusion about the name of God will lead to confusion about the nature of God, if not to idolatry.

Christians must keep this central principle from the **Bible** constantly in mind as we consider some of the most urgent questions we face in the world today. We must certainly have this principle in mind when we think about Islam.

Several years ago, a bishop in the Netherlands attracted controversy when he argued that **Christians** should call God "Allah" in order to lower theological tensions. He also argued that calling God "Allah" would be commonplace in Christian churches within a century and that this would lead to a synthesis of Islam and Christianity.

More recently, an Islamic court in Malaysia ruled that only Muslims can use the name "Allah" in print publications. "The usage of the word will cause confusion in the community," the chief judge ruled. Oddly enough, Christians may well agree with this Islamic judge. To call God "Allah" is to invite confusion.

In the **Bible**, God reveals Himself to us in many names. These names are His personal property. We did not invent these names for God. To the contrary, God revealed these names as His own.

We have no right to modify or to revise these names—much less to reject them. Jesus Christ made this abundantly clear. In the simplest way imaginable, Jesus teaches us to know God as Father, and to use this name in prayer. The **Lord's Prayer** begins with the words "Our Father, who is in heaven." By the grace that God has shown us in Christ, we can truly know Him as Father.

Muslims do not speak of God as their heavenly Father. In the Islamic faith, Allah is not only a different name for god; the

deity it designates is far more impersonal than the God of the Bible. *Father*—the very name that Jesus gave us as the designated name for use in prayer—is a name that simply does not fit Allah as depicted in the Quran.

Furthermore, Muslims claim that Allah has no son. This represents a head-on collision between the God of the Bible and Allah. For as the Bible makes clear, the one and only true God is most perfectly revealed as the Father of the Son, Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, Jesus repeatedly teaches that no one has truly known the Father, except by the Son. In one of the most clarifying verses in the New Testament, Jesus declared Himself to be “the way, and the truth, and the life,” adding, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Because Muslims deny that God has a son, they explicitly reject any Trinitarian language. From the very starting point, Islam denies what Christianity takes as its central truth claim: the fact that Jesus Christ is the only begotten of the Father. If Allah has no son, then Allah is not the God who reveals Himself through the Son. How then can calling God “Allah” not lead to anything but confusion—and worse?

Islam teaches that the doctrine of the Trinity is blasphemous. But the Christian faith is essentially and irreducibly Trinitarian. The Bible reveals that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Holy Spirit is God. Jesus is not merely a prophet, as acknowledged by Muslims; He is God in human flesh. This is precisely what Islam rejects.

The Trinitarian language is the language of the Bible, and it is essential to Christianity. Indeed, the Christian faith points to Christ and announces that we can only know the Father through the Son. Confusing the God of the Bible with Allah of the Quran is not only a mistake, it is a dangerous distortion of the gospel of Christ.

The Trinitarian nature of God is embedded within the Great Commission. Jesus tells His disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations and to baptize them “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Christians are those who bear the names of God even in our baptism, and those names are Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This has become a matter of significant controversy in recent years as some Christians, including some serving with mission agencies, have argued that Christians can use the name “Allah” in talking about God. In some languages, especially those based on an Arabic source, there is no generic word for *god*. In such a situation, it might be necessary to begin a conversation by using this word, but the Christian cannot continue to call God “Allah.” It is hard to imagine that anyone can hear the name “Allah” without thinking of him as claimed in the Quran. Indeed, Muslims who speak languages other than Arabic use “Allah” as the name of god. But as soon as the Christian begins to explain that the true living God is the Father of Jesus Christ the Son, the Christian is making clear that the true living God is not Allah but our heavenly Father.

Continuing to use the name “Allah” to refer to the **God** of the Bible in such situations invites deep confusion. Some now argue that Muslims who come to faith in Christ can even remain within the mosque and continue to worship God as Allah. It is hard to see how that is anything other than a theological disaster.

We can now see that the name of God is no small matter. The deity we name is the God we believe in. Christians believe in only one God, and He is the Father who sent the Son to save us from our sins. Allah has no son, and, thus, Christians cannot know God as Allah. In this light, Muslims and Christians do not only use different names for God; in reality, these different names refer to different gods.

God takes His name with great seriousness, and so must we. Thankfully, we are not left in the dark, groping for adequate language. God has revealed His names to us so that we can rightly know Him. We are not called to be clever or creative in referring to God, only faithful and accurate.

We are living in challenging days. One of the most pressing challenges of our times is the task of speaking rightly about God. This is particularly challenging when Christians encounter Muslims, but it is also a challenge when Christians encounter secular people in Western cultures. But this really isn't a new challenge. It was the same challenge faced by the children of Israel as they encountered the Canaanites and the same challenge faced by the apostle Paul at Mars Hill.

Our challenge is to speak truthfully about God, and the only way we can do that is to use the names God gave Himself. The God of the Bible is not Allah, and Allah is not the God of the Bible. Any confusion about that undermines the very gospel we preach.

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