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Of Things Unseen
Jack Miles

The God of Abraham, Jesus, and Muhammad

The author of *God: A Biography* says that, yes, of course Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God.

A week ago, President Bush scandalized some of his evangelical fans by innocently asserting, during his trip to England, that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. [Richard Land, speaking for the scandalized](#), has now rebuked the President for what Land calls playing “theologian-in-chief.”

Land writes: “When President Bush concludes that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, he is simply mistaken.” In my view, Bush is, at least on this point, a better theologian than his evangelical critic.

Though Land neither confirms nor denies that Jews and Christians worship the same God, surely he would concede that the first Christians, Jews all, did not understand Christian discipleship to entail switching to a new God. But what of the first Muslims? If they, too, understood themselves to be worshipping the God of the Jews, then were they not necessarily worshipping the God of the Christians as well?

The Qur’an identifies Allah as none other than the God to whom Abraham offered “submission” (‘islam) in the episode Jews and Christians know so well from Genesis 22, the story of the binding of Isaac. As the paradigmatic Muslim or “submitter,” Abraham then made the original, paradigmatic pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims believe, accompanied by the very son, Ishmael, whom Allah had rescued so dramatically.

Jews and Christians have always believed that Muhammad got this story wrong. It was Isaac, not Ishmael, who was bound, they believe, and Abraham made no such pilgrimage to Mecca. But have Jews and Christians also believed, historically, that Muhammad had the divine protagonist wrong as well—to the point that he was referring to another deity altogether?

This, it seems, is Land’s assumption when he writes: “There is only one true God, and His name is Jehovah, not Allah.” As it happens, centuries of Jewish and Christian thinkers have assumed just the opposite. When Muhammad first preached to the Jews of Arabia, the Jews definitely thought he had got their God wrong, but they just as definitely did not think he had got the wrong God.

As for the name, ‘*allah*’ in Arabic is a contraction for ‘*al-‘ilah*,’ “the-God,” and as such is cognate with Hebrew ‘*eloh*,’ “god,” (plural of abstraction, ‘*elohim*,’ “deity”). In both languages, the common noun meaning “deity” or “god” can function in monotheistic context as a proper name for the only actual instance of such a being. (Note that neither Hebrew nor Arabic employs capital letters to make a God/god distinction.)

Linguistic technicalities aside, what matters is that back in the seventh century, the first Muslims were using the same kind of word in Arabic that the Jews were using theologically in Hebrew and using it in the same way. Much the same could be said of seventh-century Christians speaking of God in Syriac or Coptic, Semitic languages then still widely used.

That Jews, Christians, and Muslims have always assumed their differences to be about the character rather than the identity of God is abundantly witnessed centuries later in late medieval Spain where the three religions mingled freely and the best scholars were bi- or even trilingual in

Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew. During that era, a number of famous theological debates took place in which all participants transparently assumed that all other participants were speaking of—and, of course, disagreeing about—the same divine subject.

Perhaps the most strenuous of all such medieval wrestling matches was the silent, private bout between [Thomas Aquinas](#) and [Ibn Rushd](#), the earlier Muslim philosopher whom the West knows as Averroes. Aquinas wrote his immense [Summa Contra Gentiles](#) in good part to refute Ibn Rushd, but the Angelic Doctor never saw fit to take what would have been the terribly convenient shortcut of claiming, in the manner of Richard Land, that whatever his Muslim forebear had said about God was irrelevant because the man was simply speaking of another god.

Muslim assumptions on the same point are, if anything, even more formally enshrined in tradition than Jewish and Christian assumptions. Muslims battled those who worshipped false gods, beginning with the Arab polytheists of Mecca and Medina, but they officially tolerated Jews and Christians because they understood the latter to be worshipping the one true God, the God or, in Arabic, Allah. Regrettably, or so Muslims believed, Jews and Christians had adulterated the primeval, pure 'islam of Abraham with an assortment of pagan errors, but all the same these "peoples of the book" were not worshipping a false god.

I do not mean to deny either that theological differences exist among Jews, Christians, and Muslims or that these differences matter. Can God have a son who is also God, or does such a belief detract from the purity of monotheism? Can God properly be spoken of as humankind's father, or is such a notion an anthropomorphic holdover from paganism in which every god had his goddess and all life sprang from their loins?

The theological differences are many, yet there remains an immense common holding as well. One need only view the three Abrahamic religions from the [Benares](#) or [Kyoto](#) to realize this. All three believe that God is the Creator and that God will someday end the world that he created. All three believe that God is a judge as well, that he will show himself as such on the last day, and that the criterion for his judgment will be not worldly greatness but moral integrity. And this list can be extended just as easily as the list of differences.

As for the political context of the President's remark, it has to matter to all Americans that, thanks in part to evangelical aggressiveness, much of the Muslim world believes that the American war on terror is a war on Islam or, worse, an American-led Christian war on Islam. The President—in his proper capacity as political rather than theological leader—ought to miss no opportunity to repudiate this view. His London remark, however impulsively made, put him squarely in the Christian mainstream and should be welcomed as a small step in the right direction.