

The Same God?

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The Difficulty of Supplying Grounds

"If someone asked us 'but is that true?' we might say 'yes' to him; and if he demanded grounds we might say 'I can't give you any grounds, but if you learn more you too will think the same.'" ¹ It is tempting to give a Wittgensteinian answer to the question, "is it true that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God?" In his book *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein warns us against assuming that we can use a one-size-fits-all set of rational criteria for adjudicating what it is we know and believe. What counts as good grounds for some kinds of belief does not count as good grounds for others. That there *are* good grounds for some of our beliefs does not mean that we should expect to find good grounds for all of them.

"A main cause of philosophical disease," Wittgenstein asserts, is "a one-sided diet"—nourishing our thinking with only one sort of example. ² The question "is this the same...?" comes up a lot in human life. Are those two wearing the same dress?

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit / On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright; trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), Entry 206, p. 28e. Further references to *On Certainty* will be made parenthetically within the text, using the abbreviation OC, followed by the entry number. All references will be to the English translation.

² Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees; trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1953), Entry 593, p. 155 e.

Are we thinking about the same house? Is he the same Daniel I knew in elementary school? The grounds on which I might argue sameness in each case differ significantly. Would it not be reasonable to assume that grounds for affirming sameness in the case of God would be radically different still, if it were even possible to find any?³ Might it not be appropriate to say with Wittgenstein that affirming that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God is a matter of learning more, rather than of supplying grounds?

For some of our most firmly held beliefs, Wittgenstein notes, we do not have anything like adequate grounds: "I cannot say that I have good grounds for the opinion that cats do not grow on trees or that I had a father and a mother" (OC, 262). In many cases our beliefs are stronger than any grounds we can adduce to support them. I can produce historical, devotional, ethical, and philosophical grounds for believing that Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God, but it is not clear that I am more certain of these grounds than I am of the original belief. "At the foundation of well-founded belief," declares Wittgenstein, "lies belief that is not founded" (OC, 253).

Jointly assenting to the claim that Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God does not oblige the three traditions to find grounds on which they can all agree. Jews and Muslims will each have their own grounds for assenting to the claim

³ Rowan Williams begins an article on identity and change within the Christian tradition in the context of feminist theological challenges with similar everyday examples, and concludes, "If we think of circumstances where we ordinarily discuss identity and continuity, it is clear that some or most of the appeals we might make in such a context do not apply if we are talking about God." "'Is it the Same God?' Reflections on Continuity and Identity in Religious Language" in John H. Whittaker, ed., *The Possibilities of Sense* (Basingstoke, England/New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 204-218, here p. 204.

that the three faith traditions worship the same God. Christians can, however, learn from the grounds they put forward, and may find interesting convergences with distinctively Christian grounds. In the next section I will be pursuing this theological task as a Christian.

The Christian Argument from Creation

The grounds I offer for the claim that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God are an implication of my belief in God as creator of all. In the words of the Presbyterian *Brief Statement of Faith* (1993), I believe in “One God, maker of heaven and earth, whom alone we worship and serve.” This Christian affirmation is of course indebted to the theological traditions of Judaism, and is also shared with Muslims. It functions as the theological precondition for the distinctive stories each tradition tells of God’s relation to humanity: the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim narratives of God’s revelation to and blessing of humanity are each built on the conviction that the one God is the source and ongoing sustainer of all life. That this affirmation, at least in its thin, abstract form, is something the three traditions can agree on makes it reasonable for Christians to be favorably disposed at the outset to the claim that Jews and Muslims worship the same God. This would not be true, for example, in the case of traditions which are polytheistic or which assert that the world was made by a kind of demiurge. However, rather than seeking theological grounds in a lowest-common-denominator approach, I will proceed by plumbing distinctively Christian understandings of God as creator of all.

Christians confess belief in “*One* God, maker of heaven and earth.” The oneness of God the creator is less a numerical observation than a confession of God’s radical otherness. God is the sovereign creator of all, not, in the scathing words of H.R. Niebuhr, “someone we try to keep alive by religious devotions, to use for solving our personal problems, for assuring us that we are beloved.”⁴ God’s reality is not dependent on human religious constructions. Asking whether Jews, Christians and Muslims address the *same* God in worship is thus a bit of a trick question. God, as understood by Christians, is not a member of a well-populated set, or a certain “kind” of object. It is reasonable to argue about whether two people are praising the same movie. In the case of God, however, I have every reason to believe that those who claim to be monotheists are worshipping the same God I am, even if their theologies diverge. The alternative is not that they are worshipping a “different” creator of heaven and earth, but that they are idolaters, failing to worship the one God at all, worshipping instead some part of creaturely reality. Christians have sometimes been quick to label other monotheists idolaters—John Calvin sometimes made this reckless charge against fellow Christians who were Catholics, for example—but the grammar of Christian belief (not to mention Christian charity) militates against this. It is more “grammatical” (if not more charitable) for Jews, Christians and Muslims to label each other heretics—that is, those who worship the one true God, but in fundamentally flawed ways. However I will argue that Christian

⁴ H. R. Niebuhr, “The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards,” in *Theology, History, and Culture*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 132.

understandings of God as creator cultivate instead the virtues of humility, generosity, and hopefulness in our interreligious dealings.

One of the chief obstacles to affirming that Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God is the presence of irreducible theological differences among them. Honesty and respect towards our religious neighbors will not permit ignoring or denying these differences. However, the radical distinction between the one Creator and all creation posited by Jews, Christians, and Muslims paradoxically supports arguments that they worship the same God by indicating the impossibility of capturing God's reality in our theological conceptualities.⁵ In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, as David Burrell likes to put it, God is not just "the biggest thing around," as measured by creaturely categories and concepts. Because all of our human resources are by definition inadequate when it comes to confessing faith in God, believers have to stretch and tear human language and concepts in an attempt to make them serviceable. God's reality always immeasurably exceeds our words and ideas. Christians can hear in Jewish and Muslim theologies the same stammering and groping for truth that we experience in our own theological tradition. It is not the case that each tradition claims a perfectly articulated, unclouded vision of God, so that a side-by-side comparison would be all that is needed to determine their compatibility. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, God is never an object for human beings to scrutinize but rather an active subject who

⁵David Burrell finds "the distinction" most clearly articulated in Christian theology, as a result of distinctive Christological pressures; but he also finds it in Jewish and Muslim reflection. See David B. Burrell, "The Christian Distinction Celebrated and Expanded," in *The Truthful and the Good: Essays in Honor of Robert Sokolowski*, ed. John J. Drummond and James G. Hart (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), pp. 191-206.

encounters us in mysterious and surprising ways. As a Christian, I confess with the church that all believers still see God “through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12); as a result, faulty theological assumptions and even ingrained error may coexist with genuine faith in the one, true God. Because God is not just “the biggest thing around,” large and irreducible differences in theological understanding do not automatically nullify the affirmation that the three traditions worship the same God.

It is worth noting that large and seemingly insurmountable differences in understandings of God occur not only *across* different religious traditions. They also come up *within* religious traditions. When I read portrayals of God by my fellow Christians Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their *Left Behind* series, for example, I have difficulty recognizing the God I worship. In fact, I sometimes find it easier to identify theologically with portrayals of God by some members of other religious traditions, for example those by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Though we are members of the same religious tradition, Tim LaHaye and I have gone down markedly different exegetical and theological paths, and as a result I often find his portrayals of God puzzling or offensive. But this difficulty does not make me inclined to doubt that Tim LaHaye and I worship the same God, even when I would seem to have reasons to doubt this. My confidence that we after all believe in the same God is grounded less in a side-by-side comparison of our theologies than in the larger constellation of my Christian convictions. I believe that we have both been brought by baptism into Christ’s body, a body with many different members. I believe that we are responding to the same summons to discipleship, and that obedience to that summons requires me to approach my fellow Christians with a generous spirit, confident that the Spirit

of Christ is at work in them and that God has gifts to give me through them. In this area, as in so many others, I walk by faith and not by sight, trusting that in Christ all Christians have in fact been made one, even when there is much that seems to divide us. While these explicitly Christian rationales do not all translate in the case of theological differences among Jews, Christians and Muslims, I can still appeal to creaturely finitude and divine otherness to argue that the large theological differences among us are not *prima facie* grounds for doubting that we worship the same God.

Within a Christian theological framework, the affirmation that the one God is maker of heaven and earth refers to a divine self-determination arising out of the fullness and perfection of the eternal triune life. The triune God wills that there should be a finite, creaturely counterpart to the unqualified joy and eternal self-giving that is God's reality *ad intra*. Christian theology holds together God's creative and redemptive work. Christians have seen that the grace poured out in Jesus Christ is not a narrow or stingy grace: it is given freely and without condition. The power, generosity and freedom displayed in this redemptive love give them a window on God's work as creator. God's creative work, too, is an unconditioned gift. This theological framework portrays the God who gives human creatures life and draws them into relationship as free, faithful, and generous. As we will see, each of these qualities suggests that God is not known and loved by Christians alone, and predisposes Christians to cultivate humility, hopefulness and generosity toward the theological claims of Jews and Muslims.

God's freedom is predicated on God's otherness and self-sufficiency as creator. The triune God stands in a relation of asymmetrical dependence to all that is. All creation depends on God for its very existence but God does not depend on it; even the creator-creature distinction itself is the result of God's free agency. This means that God does not create or interact with humanity out of some need or lack on God's part, or because God is propelled by some external force. Christians stand on common ground with Jews, Muslims, and the rest of humanity in our utter dependence on God: God's constant energy and action sustains everything that exists. Divine freedom reminds Christians that God does not need us to be God, and thus that we can claim no inherent divine obligation towards us, much less any monopoly on God's favor. "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, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7) Divine freedom prompts humility in Christian self-understanding vis-à-vis other religious traditions. We confess God as the source of all truth, including all true knowledge about God. When Jews and Muslims claim to know and love the One God, maker of heaven and earth, a Christian acknowledgement of God's freedom leads us to trust their claims.

God's faithfulness as creator clarifies that divine freedom is not to be construed as arbitrariness or unpredictability. God is "at one," not torn by conflicting impulses. God is self-consistent in all God's dealings with humanity, faithful even when human creatures are rebellious and ungrateful, and even when they are resentful of God's faithfulness towards others. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim 2:13). God's faithfulness as

creator of all that exists must serve as the baseline of Christian understandings of God's particular faithfulness towards us. We have been perennially tempted to construe divine faithfulness towards us as a reward for the faithfulness of the Christian community, a special divine favor towards those who alone know and worship God aright. This construal has necessitated a supersessionist view of our relation to God's people Israel, even though the logic of this supersessionism contradicts the very divine faithfulness it claims: if God has broken covenant promises to Israel, how can God's commitment and forgiveness be trusted in our own case? God's faithfulness to us in Christ should be seen instead as a strategy within the overall economy of divine blessing, not an exclusive divine acknowledgement of our right belief. God's bent is toward the well-being of the entire creation and that the faithfulness of God in bestowing particular gifts to Israel and through Jesus Christ belongs within this larger frame of reference. Knowing God's particular faithfulness to us against the backdrop of God's faithfulness as creator, we are predisposed to accept and even rejoice in Jewish and Muslim praise for God's faithful and providential dealings with them. We trust God's faithfulness to our fellow children of Abraham, even when our comprehension of this "providential diversity of religions" falls short.⁶ We hope for what we do not see.

God's creative activity is characterized by generosity: the abundance and diversity of the world reflect the wideness of God's purposes for creation's flourishing. God's self-consistency and faithfulness are not in service to the unity

⁶ J.A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

and exclusive welfare of a particular people or nation.⁷ The praise and devotion of Jews and Muslims should be taken as evidence of God's generosity to them, and should stir in Christians new gratitude to God. Christian trinitarianism encourages a distinctive understanding of divine generosity as embodying a deep responsiveness and receptivity. As Rowan Williams says, Christian faith has a "picture of the divine life involving receiving as well as giving, depending as well as controlling." The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ shows us that "what we understand by 'God' can't just be power and initiative; it also includes receiving and reflecting back in love and gratitude."⁸ This intratrinitarian dimension of God's generosity likewise shapes the contours of our own generosity in estimations of God's work and presence within other communities of faith. Unlike missional paradigms in which Christians are always the ones sent, always the ones called to give witness to the truth, Christian understandings of generosity within God's own life call us to expectations of receiving and depending on others. Joyful receptivity and responsiveness towards the faith of our closest religious relatives is one way we acknowledge and mirror divine generosity.

It will be clear by now that the "grounds" I have provided for asserting that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God fall well short of a generally convincing argument. I have addressed my argument to fellow Christians, insisting that our own theological convictions provide grounds for trusting the claims of Jews

⁷ This is not to argue that the three monotheistic faiths have consistently resisted the temptation to make this argument. See Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁸ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), pp. 66, 68.

and Muslims to worship the “One God, maker of heaven and earth.” My argument thus diverges from what is commonly called a *pluralist* approach. Pluralists often regard it as a kind of moral imperative for enlightened Christians to see “the great religious traditions as different ways of conceiving and experiencing the one ultimate divine reality.”⁹ They usually proceed to ground this claim by attempting to stake out a theologically neutral common ground that is more basic than the elaborations of any particular theological tradition, and then encouraging particular traditions to relinquish claims that stand in the way of their constructed consensus. I have instead tried to supply distinctively Christian grounds for resisting the domestication of the God we worship, and for trusting in a divine generosity that exceeds our own theological understanding. Rather than asking Christians to minimize the elements in their doctrine of God that set them apart from Jews and Muslims, (such as the notion of receptivity and dependence within the divine life, for example), I ask them to plumb these distinctive riches to provide grounds for approaching Jewish and Muslim theological claims and religious practice with humility, generosity and hopefulness. The freedom, faithfulness and generosity of the God I know in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit lead me to acknowledge the authenticity of other claims to know and love God. Because of the particularities of my Christian faith, not in spite of them, I am justified in taking Jews and Muslims at their word when they profess to worship the “One God, maker of heaven and earth.” In short, I have tried to sketch grounds for a sympathetic,

⁹ John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), p. 102.

generous construal of their religious practice that does not require downplaying theological differences.

If these grounds seem underwhelming, it should be noted that the grounds I offer for my conviction that Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God should not be confused with the *source* of my conviction. The grounds for believing that these three communities worship the same God are a bit like the grounds I might offer for being a Christian. I can set some out, and in certain contexts, it might be important to offer reasons why Christian faith is not wholly implausible or irrational. But those grounds are not the source of my Christian faith. For this, I would point to the work of the Holy Spirit through the various means made available in the practices of the Christian community. Reminiscing about her journey to Jewish faith, Allegra Goodman writes,

And yet, inexorably, some of my own religion rubbed off on me. Might that be the way belief works for some people? Not a sudden epiphany, but a long, slow accumulation of Sabbaths. No road-to-Damascus conversion but a kind of coin rubbing, in which ritual and repetition begin to reveal the credo underneath.¹⁰

I suspect that the cause of my belief that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God is likewise a “slow accumulation of Sabbaths.” As in the case of my own coming to Christian faith, I attribute this process to the work of the Holy Spirit. Prayer and theological reflection, and above all common projects with and sympathetic listening to Jews and Muslims have gradually “revealed the credo underneath.” As a result of these practices and experiences, I find myself with the

¹⁰Allegra Goodman, “Counting Pages,” *The New Yorker*, June 9 and 16, 2008, p. 90.

conviction that we worship the same God. But I would not point to these practices and experiences as grounds for that conviction.

Offering grounds is a second-order exercise. Most of the time the claim that Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God seems to function, not as a conclusion reached on the basis of clearly argued grounds, but rather, as the “scaffolding of our thoughts” (OC, 211). For example, we can see the claim functioning in this way in the recent interfaith statements *Dabru Emet, A Common Word between Us and You*, and *A Common Word for the Common Good*, produced by Jews, Muslims, and Christians, respectively. While it is a worthwhile exercise to articulate grounds for the claim that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God, this exercise is not a prerequisite for using the claim as scaffolding for interfaith explorations.

Thin and Thick Theology

In the face of divine mystery that immeasurably exceeds human powers of comprehension, Christian theologians from St. Paul forward have tended to shift into doxology when their theological arguments run aground (cf. Romans 11:33-36). Recognizing the chronic inadequacy of their theological articulations of God’s reality, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers have always insisted that God is known most deeply in worship. However the practice of worship itself presents a deep paradox in theological reflections on whether Jews, Christians, and Muslims

worship the same God, for in worship Jews, Christians, and Muslims feel at the same time the deepest commonalities and the deepest differences.

When Jews, Christians, and Muslims witness each other at worship, they instinctively recognize their deep connections. Worship provides the keenest and most visible common acknowledgement of their existence as creatures oriented in dependence and gratitude towards God their creator. They feel the common impact that God's active presence has on them, despite their theological differences. Prayer to God which confesses sin, expresses devotion, and offers heart-felt praise is one of the deepest impulses of all three faiths. In the Muslim discipline of fasting and Jewish songs of praise, Christians find deep resonances with our own expressions of costly devotion and joyful adoration of God. And yet at the same time, worship is where the particularities of each faith are most clearly brought to the fore. Worship practices distill the distinctive narratives of God's presence with each community. That is why interfaith worship which reaches for a lowest common denominator is so bland and unsatisfying. It fails to nourish and be fed by the deepest springs of religious faith and conviction.

When I as a Christian witness the worship of devout Jews on Yom Kippur or devout Muslims during Ramadan, I feel what Krister Stendahl called "holy envy." I admire the kind of devotion to God that is expressed and made possible within the specific contours of their faith traditions and practices. But I admire it while recognizing that those particular spiritual excellencies are beyond my grasp. They are not available to me any more than the particular forms of devotion to God made possible by cloistered Christian communities are possible for me to obtain as a

married person with children. Worship both transcends and reinforces the theological differences among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

In worship, the three faith communities declare their belief in “One God, maker of heaven and earth.” However this belief is the theological equivalent of what Michael Walzer has referred to as “thin” moral agreement, or a “moral minimum.” In his book *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, he introduces “two different but interrelated kinds of moral argument—a way of talking among ourselves, here at home, about the thickness of our own history and culture... and a way of talking to people abroad, across different cultures, about the thinner life we have in common.”¹¹ Similarly, intramural theological agreement among Christians will be thick: “richly referential, culturally resonant, locked into a locally established symbolic system or network of meanings.”¹² Theological agreement across religious traditions is by contrast thinner, focused on convergence points “that are seen to be similar even though they are expressed in different idioms and reflect different histories and different versions of the world.”¹³ In worship the thin convergence around God as creator is embedded within the thick theological traditions of each community of faith.

In this essay I have attempted to support thin theological agreement across traditions by appeal to thicker theological grounds that emerge from within a particular tradition. Thin theology follows and abstracts from thick theology. Walzer

¹¹ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1994), p. xi.

¹² *Thick and Thin*, p. xi.

¹³ *Thick and Thin*, p. 17.

insists that it is a mistake to think that men and women everywhere begin with some common idea or principle or set of ideas and principles, which they then work up in many different ways. They start thin, as it were, and thicken with age, as if in accordance with our deepest intuition about what it means to develop or mature.¹⁴

Rather, he insists, “morality is thick from the beginning,” becoming thin for special occasions of solidarity. “We march for a while together, and then we return to our own parades.” Similarly, agreement among Jews, Christians, and Muslims that they worship the God who is creator of heaven and earth is a theological minimum. It provides a basis for them to come together, but “by its very thinness, it justifies [them] in returning to the thickness that is [their] own.”¹⁵ Even Christian accounts of this theological minimum will always reflect the distinctiveness of our thick theology. There is no theological Esperanto. Or rather, just as Esperanto is much closer to European languages than to any others, so any attempt to construct a theological version of Esperanto will inevitably reflect particular thick theological traditions.¹⁶ A theological version of Walzer’s approach is both more respectful of genuine theological difference and more reflective of their particular historical trajectories.

Walzer insists that the minimal morality that different peoples share is not substantively insignificant or emotionally shallow—“this is morality close to the bone.... In moral discourse, thinness and intensity go together.”¹⁷ Likewise, agreement that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the “One God, maker of

¹⁴ *Thick and Thin*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Thick and Thin*, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Thick and Thin*, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Thick and Thin*, p. 6.

heaven and earth” is significant and powerful. But it is dependent on and arises from the full-fledged theologies of the three faith communities.

In keeping with Walzer’s recognition of the importance of “thick” discourses, the Scriptural Reasoning movement has pioneered a promising avenue for deep interfaith sharing. Jews, Christians, and Muslims meet to read and discuss specific texts from their respective scripture, meditatively reading the text together and then exploring its various meanings. As David Ford notes, through intense focus on each other’s scriptures, participants learn “to recognize the strength of our bonds in the family of Abraham and the call to live patiently with our deep differences; and throughout to conduct our reading according to an ethics, and even politics, of justice, love and forgiveness.”¹⁸ Here humility, hopefulness and generosity about each other’s deepest faith convictions can thrive.

In these kinds of interfaith discussions, the thin common conviction that Jews, Christians and Muslims worship the same God is gradually thickened by a deeper awareness of their indebtedness to one another. Understandings of God within any religious tradition can never claim to be fully “homegrown.” They are always, to a degree that is impossible to measure precisely, imported from or at least genetically modified by the traditions of other religious communities. That is particularly true for the Christian tradition, which developed in *media res*, after the foundational covenants of Judaism, but before the claims of Mohammed’s privileged

¹⁸ David F. Ford, “Faith in the Third Millennium: Reading Scriptures Together,” address at the Inauguration of Dr Iain Torrance as President of Princeton Theological Seminary and Professor of Patristics, Thursday 10th March 2005.” This address and other writings on Scriptural Reasoning are available at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/writings.html>

prophetic status for Islam. From the beginning to end, Christian views of God have been indebted to those of their fellow children of Abraham. At the most basic level is the Christian dependence on the writings of the Tanakh. But since religious traditions are not static, but always in formation, Christians must also acknowledge other influences on our understanding of God along the way, from the vibrant medieval interdependencies among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians, to 20th-century European Christian efforts to unlearn “teachings of contempt” towards Judaism, to the theological commonalities that contemporary southern Christian churches find and cultivate with classical Islam. Every constructive interfaith conversation among Jews, Christians, and Muslims is an occasion for their mutual theological indebtedness to grow. As Wittgenstein would say, each conversation is an opportunity for them to come to think the same by learning more from each other about the God they worship.