

# UNPARALLELED

HOW CHRISTIANITY'S UNIQUENESS  
MAKES IT COMPELLING



**JARED C. WILSON**



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This book is dedicated to Macy and Grace.  
May you treasure the truths of God's Word  
and experience his grace always.  
I have written this book praying for you most of all,  
that you would see the wonder  
and the beauty of your faith.

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# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

All I wanted was a haircut.

I hadn't planned on discussing life and death, good and evil, or heaven and hell. But God had other plans. And so did the hairstylist.

It happens to me almost every single time. I sit down in that neat-o hydraulic chair, get that flimsy vinyl apron wrapped around my neck, and the hair starts falling along with the pleasantries. It's not too long into the process until the hairstylist asks the question nearly every man is asked in these shoot-the-breeze type scenarios: "So, what do you do?"

I have a lot of options here, if I want to get creative. I could say, "Nothing, really. I just kind of sit around, mostly." Or I could say, "I ponder the limitless nature of cold, dark

space and our futile place in the dank blackness of it all.” You know, if I’m feeling cheeky.

But I know what’s really being asked: “What do you do for a living?”

She’s asking about my job. I have two honest and direct options to give here. If I want to avoid a religious debate, if my introversion is really flaring up that day, or if I just feel too weary of spiritual conversation, I could say, “I’m a writer.” But then I will always be asked about what I write. And that puts me right back in the position of my most honest response. So I just say it: “I’m a pastor.”

Now, if you’re cutting hair in the Bible Belt or some other religion-thick places in the United States, this may elicit no more than an arched eyebrow. Where I come from in the South, you can throw a rock out your window and probably hit a pastor. But where I most recently lived—in the least churched state in the least churched region of the nation—there is no way to avoid a serious conversation about religion. For the average Vermonter, having a conversation with an evangelical pastor ranks somewhere between seeing Bigfoot and getting abducted by aliens.

Okay, it’s not that rare. But it’s not common.

After I’ve shared that I’m a pastor, there is usually an awkward silence. Just for a few seconds. I know the hair-stylist is processing the information, trying to determine the correct response to my unanticipated information.

After she’s figured out where I pastor—a very little town in the county that even many locals aren’t too familiar with—she may ask about the community there or how my

kids like the schools. But the conversation usually comes around to this appraisal of my occupation: “That’s nice.”

And then she says what they all say. If I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard it, I could . . . well, I could probably afford a haircut. My interviewer almost always offers some variation of “I’m spiritual but not religious.”

The literal interpretation of this statement really boils down to this: “I think it’s nice you do that, but I’m not really into organized religion.”

“I’m spiritual but not religious.” I hear it a lot, not just from hairstylists. Lots of people in New England say things like this. And many of them really do subscribe to some kind of amorphous “spirituality.” In the little town where I pastored the only evangelical church in the community, there were weekly guided meditation meetings. There are gatherings on Halloween night to summon the spirit of the fire. We had channelers and psychics in our town, mystics and manipulators of crystals. Vermont can be pretty New Agey. Many people are spiritual but not religious.

Truth be told, however, what most people there who say, “I’m spiritual but not religious” really mean is, “I literally never think about anything spiritual *or* religious until somebody like you brings it up.” We live in a true post-evangelical, post-Christendom spiritual wilderness.

And yet here I am, just trying to get my hair cut, and I go and ruin this lady’s autopilot chitchat with my very livelihood. On this particular visit to the salon, I was prepared for the question and for the response. Part of me, I’m sad to say, was hoping to avoid the whole thing. I just wanted

a haircut! But I was also prepared for God's other plans. Our conversation went pretty much like this:

"I'm spiritual but not religious," she said.

"That's cool," I said. "How would you describe your spirituality?"

"Well, you know, I just try to be a good person. I think if you put positive things out there, positive things will come back to you. There's a lot of negativity in the world."

"Yep. There sure is. Would you say, then, that you think most people in the world are negative?"

"It seems like it. Not everybody. But lots of people."

"But not you?"

"Well, I'm not perfect, of course. But I do try my best to put positive energy into the world."

(A lot of Vermonters are really big on positive energy and the like.)

"So, for you, being spiritual is about doing good things," I said.

"Yeah, pretty much. Just try to be a good person, put more positive energy out there, try not to get too distracted by the negative, and just basically be kind and all that."

It's at this point I am reminded that this is the general outlook of *just about everybody in the history of the universe*. They may all describe it or define it in different ways, but this kind of moral calculus is the basic default setting of every human being, religious or irreligious, who has ever existed. *I just need to be good. I need to be more good than bad. If I do more good things than bad things, I am a good person. And since I am a good person, I can do more good things than bad things.*

There are exceptions, of course, but this is how most people think. This is why many Southerners go to church every Sunday and why many New Englanders don't. Because they're "good people."

I have found, in this largely non-Christian culture, that this kind of conversation leads to an incredible evangelistic entry point. By and large, people in my community have rejected organized religion and all that goes along with it, because they have determined that they can be "good people" just fine without it. And here's the kicker: *they can.*

You can work on your positive energy output, on making sure the good side of your scales bears more weight than the bad side, all without the help of a church or a sacred book or any of the stuff that comes with an actual religion. You can be "spiritual but not religious." And many try it. In my part of Vermont, families who worship no divine being at all teach their children manners; homeschool them; don't let them watch TV; train them to reduce, reuse, and recycle; and all that. They are, as far as trying to be "good" goes, good people. They've figured out they don't need the church to do any of those good things, and they're pretty much right.

So it's my job—and the job of every Christ-following believer everywhere—to do the wonderful job of exploding all this tidiness with the most radical notion these folks have ever heard: *trying to be good isn't the point.*

When I want to share the message of Jesus with someone, I nearly always ask what I then asked my hairstylist that day: "What would you say the message of Christianity is?"

I have literally never heard an unbeliever reply with the message Christians call “the gospel.” Never. Their response is always some variation of what they’ve already said they try to do without the help of a religion: “be a good person.”

I don’t know if they think the message of Christianity is “be good” because they’ve never heard the gospel or because the evangelical church has done a terrible job of making the gospel clear. I suspect it’s a fair amount of both. In any event, the door is now wide open to correct the misunderstandings, to clear the air, to present the good news.

Make no mistake, in the public marketplace of religious conversation—in the entire world of spiritual, unspiritual, religious, irreligious, theistic, deistic, polytheistic, atheistic, political, moral, liberal, conservative, moderate, or whatever kind of ideas—Christianity is at a great advantage. Why? Because in the midst of this murky multi-ideological fog, Christianity stands alone and above, a solitary light-house shining real light. The truth claims of Christianity are unlike those of any other religion, philosophy, or system in the world.

See, the world of “spiritual but not religious” people think all these religions and philosophies are really all the same. Atheists argue that all spiritualities are alike. Universalists claim all sacred roads lead to the same place. Moralists find their legal foundations in all great ancient texts, not to mention in politics and in art. But Christianity is utterly different.

“What if I told you,” I said to the lady holding sharp scissors near my head, “that the message of Christianity was that none of us is really good deep down”—I usually

add, “including pastors”—“and that we can never be sure our good stuff is greater than our bad stuff, but that God loves us anyway and will consider bad people good?”

This is usually confusing. But intriguing. If no rational person would consider a bad person good, how could God?

“The essential message of Christianity,” I said, “is not that we should be religious or try to do lots of good works. The essential message of Christianity is that God loves bad people so much that he sent Jesus to die on the cross to forgive them, so that if anyone stops trusting their own good works and starts trusting Jesus, they will be declared good forever and be saved from judgment.”

I will be honest in that I have not seen one hairstylist, including this one, receive Christ as their Lord and Savior through this conversation. But plenty have heard the actual message of the Bible for the very first time.



It is my conviction that as Christians press forward into this brave new world of growing unbelief and skepticism, we must learn what makes Christianity so different from all the rival philosophies the world thinks all blend together. We will not stand out by first of all “being good.” The unbelieving world has learned they can try to do that without our Jesus. Especially since so many of us who follow Jesus can’t seem to get the “being good” thing right ourselves.

And a lot of this kind of thinking in the modern world has become more intellectual. The rejections of the Christian faith today are much more sophisticated (and hostile)

than they used to be. Christianity is only seen as another variation of a universal set of truths. Cynics and critics argue, in fact, that Christianity's essential truth claims are only repackaged versions of ancient myths and folk stories.

But are they?

It is a well-worn truth that to spot the counterfeit, you must study the real thing. Christians have to get back to the basics of our faith and its implications and really see how different Christianity actually is. The more familiar we get with the truth claims of our faith, the more we see how utterly unique they are. From the Bible's teaching on God himself to Christ's work, from our message to our mission, Christianity is unlike anything else.

I know there are plenty of books on apologetics and worldview that help Christians defend against challenges to the faith. But we can't learn these answers just to win arguments. That is the way everybody else in the world talks religion. Christianity has never made converts primarily by winning arguments but rather by capturing hearts.

What's great about the Christian faith isn't just that it's right but that it's *powerful*. The apostle Paul writes, "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Rightly understood and appropriately shared, what the Bible teaches can dismantle its opponents' objections while captivating their souls.

The basic tenets of biblical Christianity answer the intellect's most nagging questions, and at the same time the heart's deepest longings (Ecc. 3:11; Acts 17:23; Rom. 8:23).

While there are obviously some similarities between the Christian faith and other religions, I want to show you in the chapters ahead how Christianity's utter uniqueness makes it utterly compelling. There really is no other philosophy, message, or way of life like it.



# The Great Big Personal God

HOW THE CHRISTIAN GOD  
IS NOT LIKE THE OTHERS

“Take terrorism, for example,” said our Muslim cab driver.

I confess I got a little tense. Sometimes, before I even know it, I find myself in religious conversations. And sometimes I actually go looking for them. Though I wrestle with it at times, for me this is an important part of what it means to be a Christian. I believe in a personal God who wants people to know him, and I believe he has tasked Christians with the mission of bringing the good news about this personal relationship to other people. If I really

love God, I will love my neighbors. And if I really love my neighbors, I will want them to love God. And if I really want them to love God, I will tell them about God.

And this is why, when my friend Jonathan and I were in a taxi cab in Washington, DC, one sunny afternoon, we initiated a religious conversation with our driver. It turned out he was Muslim, but he admitted he didn't go to mosque that often and wasn't a very strict practitioner. Still, he had been raised in the faith by devoted parents and had some very strong beliefs about God—and he did use the word *God*, not *Allah*—that he was eager to share with us.

Over our too-short drive, we discussed the biblical history of the patriarchs, the nature of the prophets, and the justice of God. I don't remember our driver's name, so I'm going to call him Omar. We were in bustling capitol traffic, winding our way among many important government buildings, when Omar brought up the subject of Islamic terrorism.

“If I were to murder many people,” he said, “even if I claimed I was on jihad, there is no way God could forgive me for that.”

“No way to get forgiveness at all?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “because if I murder someone, there can be no restitution. If I steal from you, you can get restitution. I can pay you back what was taken. I can be punished in a way that would give you satisfaction. But if I kill you . . .”

I smiled to mask my nerves.

“That is not something I can make restitution for. So if you cannot forgive me, then God cannot forgive me.”

“So when a terrorist gets to heaven, what happens? He doesn't get paradise?”

“No,” Omar said. “There is no way God can let him enter. Murder is so horrible that God cannot forgive it.”

On the one hand, I really appreciated how strong a view of justice Omar appeared to have. He rightly knew that murder was a serious offense. In the Bible God forbids it, of course, but he does seem to provide some measures of restitution, mainly in the form of capital punishment. And yet, I could grant his point that “forgiveness” may be a different sort of animal altogether than simply “restitution.”

“In Christianity,” I said, “we believe that God can forgive anything, so long as someone believes in Jesus Christ.”

Omar replied, not angrily or argumentatively, but straightforwardly, “God cannot forgive these things because they are too terrible.”

“What do you believe about Jesus, though?” Jonathan asked. “That he was a prophet?”

“Yes,” replied Omar, nodding. He had a great way of gesturing with his right hand while talking, almost as if directing an invisible orchestra, while his left hand gripped the steering wheel. “Jesus is one of God’s prophets. Like Moses and Abraham and Jacob.”

“You don’t believe he died for people’s sins?”

“On the cross? No.”

“What happened to him?” I said.

“God took him into heaven.”

At some point, and I don’t know how we got there, because it was a very short ride to our destination, we began talking about some of those prophets and comparing the Old Testament narratives with what he had been taught about them. Most of the basic storylines were the same.

For instance, he did believe that Abraham took his son Isaac up a mountain to sacrifice him at God's command, but that in the end, God provided a ram in the thicket as the substitutionary sacrifice. The appearance of that ram basically rescued Isaac.

For Muslims like Omar, this is a wonderful example of the kindness of God. For Christians, it is certainly that but it is also a foreshadow of the mission of Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed in our place, satisfying the justice of God and sparing our lives.

“Doesn't that story make you think of what Christians believe about Jesus?” I asked.

“I can see what you're saying,” Omar said. “It is interesting.”

We didn't press our friend for any kind of response or ask him to pray any kind of prayer. But before we exited the cab, we made sure that he had heard that God can and does forgive sins—even the worst kinds of sins—because he has punished them at the cross where his Son Jesus died, paying the penalty for these sins.

I've thought about that encounter a lot over the last couple of years, praying for Omar that the seed planted for this good news took root and that perhaps he was compelled to look further into information about Jesus. But I also think about what that encounter taught me about human nature and religious ideology and people's various views of God.

See, it is much easier today to dismiss what others believe in, because we live in the culture of sound bites and caricatures. Very few people are actually studying what their opponents believe about religious subjects, or even

about political or cultural issues, because this is the age of snark, of clickbait, of slogans. I don't have to interact with what you believe to reject it; I don't even have to *know* what you actually believe. All I have to do, really, is turn your beliefs into a superficial catchphrase. In the field of logic, they call this "creating a strawman."

So for instance, you've probably heard phrases—or even said them—such as "I don't believe in magical sky fairies," or "I don't believe in old men in outer space who grant wishes."

Well, guess what? Christians don't believe in sky fairies or elderly wish-granting spacemen either.

### **Everyone Agrees on the "Idea" of God**

In fact, one of the best ways to engage in substantive religious conversations with people who claim not to believe in God is simply to ask them to describe the deity they don't believe in. More than likely, you will be able to tell them you don't believe in that guy either.

What I learned from Omar the cab driver is that Islamic theology is more nuanced than the version criticized by Christians on Facebook or analyzed by Fox News. And I also learned that Omar, like most people, has a strong sense of justice built into his belief system.

Omar could not fathom the idea of a God who could forgive murder. I don't think this is unique at all. In fact, I think we find this "justice of God" concept at work both in the liberal theology of progressive Christianity and in the general relativism and subjectivism found among many

atheists. Nearly every sane person either believes in a God who takes evil seriously or believes that *if* God exists, he ought to.

In the progressive wing of Christian faith, the mercy and kindness of God is highlighted, often to the distortion or marginalization of the holiness of God as depicted in Scripture, so the common perception is that the progressives' God is quite tolerant. But at the same time, progressives are very interested in justice, in overcoming evil, and in driving out spiritual darkness. They, like all biblical Christians, believe in a just God. They may not believe in hell or in wrath, and they may not talk too much about sin, but they do believe there are things that are wrong and that God takes these wrong things seriously.

Similarly, even logically consistent atheists understand the concept of a God who takes evil seriously. Evil is a serious problem for atheism, which is why today's "new atheists" expend lots of rhetorical and philosophical energy on exposing the evils of Christendom and religion in general. They do not believe in any divine being, of course, but they will acknowledge that if there *were* a God, he would have a lot of explaining to do. And if there were a God who sent evil people to a place like hell, nearly every atheist would admit that people like Adolf Hitler and Jeffrey Dahmer would deserve to go there.

It turns out that the idea of God's holiness is not as foreign a concept as many people think. All of us are hard-wired for justice, for moral absolutism. You can prove this by stealing an atheist's grandma's VCR. (Because their grandma likely still has a VCR.) They probably will not

think this is an okay thing to do. Or, if you really want to see someone's sense of right and wrong revealed, simply share your view concerning gay marriage. This cultural hot button has become the issue of our day to determine who's "right" and who's "wrong."

Of course, adherents of the major world religions will disagree with many irreligious people on what is actually right and wrong, but we agree with all sane persons in the world that there *is* such a thing as right and wrong. Atheists may attribute morality to our evolved cultural consciousness (or whatever), but whatever has been designated as the basis for their moral standard is their functional god. We religionists, however, believe that in fact there is a very real God who has been quite specific on what is right and what is wrong and that he will not leave those who fail to order their lives accordingly unpunished. Factoring in a few distinctions unique to each religion, all three of the major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—believe that God takes sin seriously and will sooner or later do something about it.

Does this mean, then, that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God? While all three agree that God is holy, each makes unique truth claims that distinguish their view of the one God from the others.

### **Goodness, Gracious**

I really appreciated that Omar took sin so seriously. I also liked that he believed God could be forgiving. Both of these truths—that God is holy and that God forgives—are

important to understanding the one true God, and yet the three monotheistic religions each approach holiness and forgiveness differently.

In Omar's religious worldview, God could not under any circumstances forgive sins of great gravity like murder. I'm going to assume Omar would also include things like rape and sexual abuse in this category. He is on the right track.

But as a Christian, I don't like that he could not conceive of any other alternative to this view of God. God forgives some sins but not others? Christians believe that God forgives some people but not others. This is obviously not the same thing. Christians believe that some people who commit murder will go to heaven, and they believe that some people who do not commit murder will not. So what makes the difference?

The first thing to say is that, from the Christian perspective, it is not the type of sin that one commits that deserves punishment from a holy God but the presence of sin itself. Because God is perfectly holy, we believe, the sin of gossip deserves wrath just as the sin of murder does. Now, we do acknowledge that murder is a more serious sin than gossip. We can see the degrees of types of sins in the real-world punishments God commands for corresponding offenses in the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. But this does not mean that there are some sins God "lets slide" while there are others he cannot under any circumstances forgive.

The apostle Paul makes this point in his letter to the Romans:

As it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:10–12, 23)

This assertion indicts everyone, the gossip and the murderer, the thief and the abuser, the gluttonous and the gay. It indicts both religious people and irreligious people. And, yes, it includes those who mark “Christian” on religious surveys as well as those who mark “Jewish” or “Muslim.” Compared to the light of God’s holiness, every human being stands guilty, and God “will by no means clear the guilty” (Nah. 1:3).

So the Christian view holds the same seriousness about sin as Islam, only more so, because it leaves no wiggle room in terms of degrees of sin.

But this is not all there is to believe about the Christian God.

We see God’s justice and judgment, the perfect application of his holy wrath, throughout the Bible, in both Old and New Testaments. But we also see the perfect application of his holy love. Consider the following:

- “The LORD is slow to anger” (Nah. 1:3, the same passage where we learn he will not clear the guilty).
- “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” (Ps. 136:1).
- “Great is your mercy, O LORD” (Ps. 119:156).
- “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression?” (Mic. 7:18).

- “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people” (Titus 2:11).
- “God [is] rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4).
- “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

The God that Christians believe in is perfectly holy and gracious. Of course, both Muslims and Jews believe that God can forgive sins. That part is not unique to Christianity. But *how* he forgives sin is something entirely different.

See, in every other religion, including in the other two major monotheistic religions, the way one receives pardon from God is through some kind of achievement—doing enough good works, faithfully attending worship services, “having your heart in the right place,” or even simply being or becoming a member of the religion. Only Christianity says that while all those things are good things, they cannot earn us the forgiveness of sins.

Again, this is not because good works or church attendance or identifying with the Christian religion are bad things. It is only because all of our religious and spiritual efforts will always be tainted somewhat by our guilty hearts. We have self-interested motives and imperfect practices. This is a perfectly holy God we have here!

Thus, in every other religion where God is said to forgive, he has to do so by in some way compromising his holiness. In other words, he sort of tips the scales toward his mercy and away from his righteousness. He kind of “bends the rules.” He sacrifices one part of himself in order that we might take advantage of another.

But the God that Christians worship does not compromise one bit. He bends no rules. In fact, he punishes every single sin. Not a single sin throughout all of history slips through the cracks.

So how can he forgive sinners like us while maintaining the perfection of his holiness?

He puts our sin on Jesus Christ.

God has declared that he will by no means clear the guilty. So he instead makes guilty people righteous. But to do this in a way that is just, he must make a righteous person guilty. And he accomplishes this, the Bible reveals, by punishing our sin by punishing his Son Jesus.

Jesus then goes to the cross as personally sinless but nevertheless bearing the sins of the world, willingly and undeservedly taking upon himself the condemnation that we all deserve but wish to avoid.

In this way, all sin is accounted for. Whether by the wrath of hell or by the wrath of the cross, every single sin is accounted for.

And in this way, the grace of God is revealed. Christians therefore believe that if anyone wants to stand before a holy God and be declared holy enough to escape judgment, they must reject trust in their own good works and instead accept the good work of Jesus Christ as their own.

The cross of Jesus Christ, then, shows us how God is both perfectly holy and perfectly loving, totally just and yet totally gracious. It is through the cross of Christ that God, according to the apostle Paul, “[showed] his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom.

3:26). Former Muslim—now a Christian pastor—Thabiti Anyabwile puts it this way:

By Jesus' sacrifice, God reveals and defends His justice in two ways. First, Jesus' suffering for the sins of His people means that any sins unpunished beforehand are now fully punished in Christ. God leaves no sin unpunished. Mercy and grace do not come at the expense of justice. Second, because the sins of the faithful are fully punished in Jesus, God may justly declare righteous those who have faith in Jesus. That's what it means to be justified in God's sight—to be declared righteous by faith in Jesus. The cross, rightly understood, is God's own answer to any objection that He is unfair to substitute Jesus for the unrighteous.<sup>1</sup>

The God of Islam and Judaism is just. But only through a variety of human religious effort could he be said to be a justifier. The Christian God is both *just* and *justifier*, and he does his justifying as an act of sheer grace, forgiving sinners not by their obedience (because we could never obey well enough) but by Christ's.

This may seem like a rather thin line to draw, especially between Christianity's view of God and Judaism's view, but through the lens of the subsequent revelation of the New Testament we can see that what the God of Judaism and Islam demands, the God of Christianity both demands and *provides*. We will explore more deeply how God does this in chapter 7, but we will keep coming back chapter after chapter to the concept of grace, because, with all due

1. Thabiti Anyabwile, *The Gospel for Muslims* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 75–76.

respect to other religions' claims of salvation, only Christianity offers salvation by grace.

You can find a loving conception of monotheism in both Judaism and Islam, but only in Christianity does this love manifest itself in a one-way work of salvation of sinners apart from religious effort. For this reason, C. S. Lewis has famously said of Christian faith, "We trust not because 'a God' exists, but because *this* God exists."<sup>2</sup>

There are, of course, many Jews, Muslims, and Christians who believe all three faiths worship the same God, just through different expressions. We see this view suggested even in the Muslim's Koran:

Do not dispute other than in a good way with the people of Scripture, except for those of them who do evil; and say: "We have faith in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. Our God and your God are One, and to Him we submit [ourselves]." (Surah 29:46)

Jews and Christians, also, have much good theology in common. It has become common among people in both faiths to refer to "Judeo-Christian values." This is a real thing, and in many cases, a completely legitimate expression. In a 2007 interview, President George W. Bush said, "I believe in an almighty God, and I believe that all the world, whether they be Muslim, Christian, or any other religion, prays to the same God. That's what I believe."<sup>3</sup>

2. C. S. Lewis, "On Obstinacy in Belief," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1988), 25.

3. Mona Moussly, "Bush Denies He Is an 'Enemy of Islam,'" *Al Arabiya News* (October 5, 2007), <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/10/05/39989.html>.

This belief is practically mainstream within all three of these faith traditions.

But I think we come at this answer too easily, too thoughtlessly, simply assuming that because these three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are all monotheistic and share some historical heritage, they must worship the same God. In truth, lots of people worshiping one God does not mean they are worshiping the same God.

### **Do Jews and Christians Worship the Same God?**

This is a very complex question, actually, but the short answer is no.

You may flinch at such an assertion. It is not a necessarily popular belief, even within evangelical Christianity, where many simply believe Jews worship what they know of God. It is said that they worship the one true God but simply have an incomplete vision of him. But couldn't this be said of any religious faith whose object of worship bears striking similarities to the God whom Christians worship?

Complicating the question are the various threads within both Judaism and Christianity. One Jewish scholar has said, “The fact is that there is no single Jewish understanding of God.”<sup>4</sup> This makes it difficult to distinguish Christianity from Judaism, if only because we aren't dealing with Judaism so much as Judaisms. On the other hand, Christianity has remained almost entirely unified for two thousand years

4. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “God Between Christians and Jews—Is it the Same God?” Paper presented at the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, [http://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/goshen\\_final\\_paper\\_0.pdf](http://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/goshen_final_paper_0.pdf).

on the central matters of its theological claims. But one stark contrast between the Christian view of God and the Jewish view is this thing called grace.

Now, drawing the line at the concept of grace may seem too narrow a division. The God revealed in the Jewish Tanakh displays abundant grace constantly. Christians would affirm that. We do not believe that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament. We affirm with our Jewish forebears that there is one God. And we affirm that grace is abundant throughout the Tanakh. We simply believe that the New Testament provides the fuller revelation necessary to understand the Old. The unity between the two books demonstrates not just that God has always been gracious but that God has also always been gracious through his eternal plan for salvation in Jesus Christ.

Christians believe that we must believe about God what God has revealed about himself, and that to disbelieve what God has revealed about himself and to worship some more preferred version of God is in fact to worship an idol. In the historic account of the children of Israel worshipping the golden calf, in fact, we see that Aaron and the Israelites attributed their worship of this false god to God (Exod. 32:5).

When Christians talk about grace, however, the thing that makes Christianity utterly unique among all faiths, we aren't simply referring to a disposition of God or a personality trait. We are referring to those things too, of course, but more specifically we are referring to the way God has expressed his grace, namely through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It is at Jesus, in fact, that Judaism and Christianity part theological ways.

This is not simply a matter of opinion. It is a matter of diametrically opposed truth claims. And we see this opposition recurring over and over again throughout the teaching ministry of Jesus depicted in the Gospels of the New Testament.

In John 8, orthodox Jewish leaders are once again spying on Jesus, trying to trip him up, expose him, defame him, and shame him. You have to understand that the Pharisees of Jesus's day were not fringe characters in the Jewish religion. They were the religious elite, but theologically speaking they represented mainstream, "contemporary" Judaism. They shared much of the same theology as Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees represented the faithful reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. They believed in the covenantal history, in a future resurrection, and in applying the revelation of God to everyday life. They would be the equivalent, probably, of the fundamentalist strain of Christianity today—culturally zealous and a little rough around the edges, but on all the majors, pretty much theologically correct.

So it is no little thing that Jesus and the Pharisees butt heads here in John 8. This is not simply a clash between nice Jesus and mean leaders. It is much more than that. It is a fundamental disagreement on the very identity of God.

Jesus is doing what Jesus always does: making everything about himself. In this instance, he claims to be the Judge, the Light of the World, the Way to freedom from sin, and a few other equally provocative things. This is not the

kind of thing a normal religious leader says. We don't tend to take seriously religious leaders who make such claims about themselves.

Jesus then says something even stranger:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” (John 8:56–58)

What does he mean?

Jesus is saying two incredible things here. First, he claims to have been in existence before Abraham. This is an overt claim to preexistence, in fact to eternity and omnipresence. And by saying “I am”—asserting that thousands of years ago, not only *was* he, but he *currently is*—he is applying the sacred name of Yahweh (“I AM”) to himself. This may sound subtle to modern readers but it's not subtle at all. Jesus is in fact claiming to be God. We know the orthodox Jews understood him to be making this claim, because the very next thing they do (v. 59) is pick up stones to kill him, which is exactly what any good first-century Jew would feel inclined to do when confronted with such blatant blasphemy.

Again, this is not merely a matter of opinion. This is not simply a case of the Jewish theologians worshiping the same God in a different way. If Jesus is in fact God, and you try to kill him, how could you say in any legitimate way that you worship and believe in God?

Jesus makes this very point, actually, earlier in the same chapter.

Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” (vv. 39–47)

To summarize, Jesus is saying that if somebody worshiped the true God they would worship *him*, because he is of the same nature as the true God. And he is saying that if anyone rejects him they reject the one true God. And further, he is saying that if anyone—including these orthodox Jews—does not believe in him they are more aligned with the enemy of God, Satan himself.

I share that lengthy passage so you will see that I am not making this up. Jesus said it. And you are welcome to disagree, and you are welcome to be offended. But you should plainly see that Jesus is himself saying that to reject

him is to reject God, deny the truth, and reveal oneself as being “not of God.”

In John 10:30, Jesus doubles down on these claims, and says, “I and the Father are one.” Once again, the Jewish theologians take up stones to murder him, which they would not have done if all he meant was that he and God were “on the same team.” Verse 33 makes their motive explicit: “The Jews answered him, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.’”

I believe it is very important that we understand this important contrast if we want to understand both orthodox Christianity and the orthodox Judaism that developed from the time of Christ onward. The conflict between Jesus and the unbelieving Jews of his day did not rise or fall on how nice Jesus was compared to how mean the Pharisees were. That’s a very superficial reading of Jesus’s relationship with the religious leaders, which is probably why it’s the most common understanding in the secular world of why Jesus was killed.

But while Jesus was a faithful and religious Jew, his beef with the Pharisees and scribes is not simply some intramural personality clash. It is a fundamental clash of worldviews. Namely, Jesus is orienting the world around himself, putting himself in the center of everything. He is in fact claiming to be God. And if he is right—as I believe he is—then to disagree with him is to disagree with God. To deny him is to deny God. To reject him is to reject God. And to worship God at the exclusion of Jesus is to worship another god altogether.

Christians believe that God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin named Mary, and who grew and developed into mature, real, tangible manhood.

So, do Jews worship the same God as Christians? The Christian faith has its roots in the Jewish culture and religion, and the two faith traditions share a common sacred history, but as it really counts—meaning, as it really applies to a relationship with the supreme deity who actually exists—the answer is no. Because if God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, if indeed Jesus Christ is God, if indeed God is a Trinity, then to reject these truths about his very nature—which is not the same as being mistaken about certain attributes of God or not understanding certain aspects of his personality—means rejecting God himself.

Jesus Christ makes all the difference in the world.

### **Putting Skin in the Game**

It is true that one general commonality between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is the personal nature of the relationship that is said to be possible between God and humanity. In each of these religions, God is seen as “coming near” to people. How he does this differs, but there is a striking shared sense of a “personal God.”

In that same 2007 interview with Al Arabiya news, President Bush also said this:

I believe there is a universal God. I believe the God that the Muslim prays to is the same God that I pray to.

After all, we all came from Abraham. I believe in that universality.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting that the president mentions Abraham. It is often said that the major monotheistic religions are complementary “Abrahamic traditions.” They share that universality Bush refers to. It’s with the historic account of Abraham, in fact, that we see one of the most important traits of the one true God: his relationality.

Islam of course generally affirms the Abrahamic history of the Hebrew scriptures, but it is Judaism and Christianity that follow the narrative most closely.

When Abram—later renamed “Abraham” by God himself—enters the biblical scene, civilization has once again degenerated after the great flood of Noah’s day. The most emblematic historical moment in this postdiluvian world is the construction of the Tower of Babel, which the Bible tells us is an extreme exercise in monumental hubris. When God disperses the people of that time into numerous tongues—and thus, tribes—civilization continues to spread but so does animosity, barbarism, and paganism. The world is full of polytheistic idolatry, and this fellow Abram is right in the thick of it, minding his own business, when God shows up.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who

5. Moussly, “Bush Denies He Is an ‘Enemy of Islam.’”

dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:1–3)

The promise we find in this passage is the beginning of God’s covenant with Abraham, a commitment to a relationship that is personal and eternal. This covenant is unlike any relationship any person ever before was said to have with any of the so-called gods the world’s cultures worshiped. This God was initiating a relationship with this person, and the relationship was of the nature that Abraham and God could be called *friends*!

Did you not, our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend? (2 Chron. 20:7)

But you, Israel, my servant,  
Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
the offspring of Abraham, my friend. (Isa. 41:8)

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. (James 2:23)

To understand the significance of this, you really do have to see how people worshiped in this age. Abram lived not just in an idolatrous culture but in a desperately wicked one. He resided in Ur of the Chaldeans with his brothers in his father Terah’s home. Ur is a pagan place. And all of the names of the people here in Abram’s family, including his wife, Sarai, indicate they come from a tribal people who worship the moon. And what archaeologists and historians have been able to uncover about these people in Ur, of which Abram was almost certainly a part, was that

they carried out horrific atrocities in their moon worship, including sexual depravity and human sacrifice. It's likely Abram witnessed such things; they were a normal part of his culture.

So Abraham was a polytheistic, spiritually wicked pagan man. He wasn't sitting on his rooftop every day reading his *Jesus Calling* devotional book, drinking coffee from his "YHWH Is My Homeboy" mug. He didn't know God, he didn't want God, and he didn't seek God. But God knew him, wanted him, and sought him.

God saw this pagan, idolatrous, moon-worshiping dude Abram and said, "This guy is totally hopeless, totally clueless, totally spirit-less. Now *that* I can work with," and he redeemed him. This is that one-directional, gracious initiative that distinguishes the God of the Bible from all other alleged deities. We know, in fact, that Abraham was not saved by God because he was a good person, because he was not a good person when God called him. And we also know this because the Bible says it. Genesis 15:6 tells us that Abraham's salvation was not based on his works but rather God's grace received through faith. The New Testament later affirms this (Rom. 4:3).

Judaism obviously has Genesis 15:6 and the entire Abrahamic narrative in their Bible. But they do not have the whole story. Once again, we see that Jesus Christ is the dividing line, not just between religious perspectives but between opposing truth claims.

In every other religion people seek God. Only in Christianity does God seek people. Judaism's God certainly initiates with humans, but there is still that distance. When

the prophetic door closes at the end of the biblical book of Malachi, Judaism's God stops speaking; the revelation is done. But when the pages of the New Testament begin, the one true God of Israel continues to speak.

But it's even more exciting than that. He actually comes down and lets you look him in the eye. It is actually this kind of face-to-face personal relationship that the Old Testament pages are pointing to, hinting at, and foreshadowing.

Abraham's faith, not his obedience, is credited to him as righteousness. In the New Testament book that most explicitly fleshes out the meaning of the Jewish Bible, Abraham is commended for this humble faith. It is his trust in God that receives for him the holiness he needs to please God. In that book, we read, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

So what was the vision Abram saw that he believed in? What would cause him to leave all that he knew, all that he held dear, all that seemed certain in his life to follow God into the place he had yet to be shown (Gen. 12:1)? Through his faith, he was seeing something he could not see.

Jesus says this vision was of him: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

Once again, Jesus makes all the difference.

See, in Christianity, what we have is not simply a personal God who seeks relationship with humankind but the personal God who seeks relationship by *becoming a man*. This is completely incompatible with the truth claims of the

Judaism of Jesus's day and of today, which sees much that it admires and even affirms in Christian heritage and morality but sees the radical claims of Jesus Christ as something to be utterly rejected. The Jewish religion denies that Jesus Christ is both Lord and Savior. And as Jesus himself says, to disbelieve in him is to disbelieve in God.

The Christian doctrine of incarnation draws a very visible line in the religious sand. If one does not affirm that Jesus is God, one does not worship the same God as Christians.

But the monotheistic distinctions are even more specific than that, because Christianity's understanding of God's nature is fundamentally and radically different from Judaism's and Islam's. Jacob Neusner says, "In its classical sources, normative Judaism does not recognize any other religion as monotheistic like itself."<sup>6</sup> This is largely the case because Christianity worships three Persons as one God.

And in fact, Christianity's Trinitarianism answers an elemental ache in the human soul. Deep down, we long for justice and for forgiveness, and God provides through his Triune self.

I wish I'd said that to Omar the cab driver. I wish I'd told him that the heavenly Father can forgive these terrible sins against us because his Son had taken the terrible justice—indeed, paid the ultimate price of death—to make the restitution he didn't think was possible. And I would've told him that the Holy Spirit then applies this payment to

6. Jacob Neusner, "Do Monotheist Religions Worship the Same God? A Perspective on Classical Judaism," *Do Jews, Christians, and Muslims Worship the Same God?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 28.

anyone who will trust in the Son. It's like getting saved by a ram in the thicket.

And I also wished I'd told him that the Trinity, in fact, speaks in a much greater way to the human need to “be square” with both God and each other.