Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?

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Muslims and Christians can work together to depose dictators and assert the power of the people. We’ve seen it happen on the Tahrir Square in Cairo during the 2011 revolution in Egypt, with devout Muslims and Coptic Christians protesting side by side. But can Muslims and Christians work together to build a democratic society in which rights of all are respected, the rights of minority Coptic Christians no less than the rights of majority Muslims? They can, if they have a common set of fundamental values. But do they? They do, if they, both monotheists, have a common God.

Ever since 9/11, the most common question I am asked when I speak about these two religions is whether or not Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Muslims don’t push the question. But Christians do, vigorously — in Europe, Asia and Africa no less than in North America. Maybe that’s not surprising. In the manual of the terrorists who flew the planes on a suicidal mission it read: “Remember, this is a battle for the sake of God.” In the name of God and with expectations of glory in this world
and rewards in the next, they killed themselves and thousands of innocent civilians. To many Christians it seems obvious that the God who spills the blood of the innocent and rewards suicidal missions with paradisiacal pleasures can't be the God they worship.

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The question, however, isn't mainly about the terrorists and their God. It’s about Muslims generally. It draws its energy from a deep concern. To ask: “Do we have a common God?” is to worry: “Can we live together without bloodshed?” That’s why whether a given community worships the same god as another community has always been a crucial cultural and political question and not just a theological one.

Here are the realities we all face:

- Christianity and Islam are today the most numerous and fastest growing religions globally. Together they encompass more than half of humanity. Consequence: both are here to stay.

- As a result of globalization, ours is an interconnected and interdependent world. Religions are intermingled within single states and across their boundaries. Consequence: Muslims and Christians will increasingly share common spaces.

- Since both religions are by their very nature “socially engaged” and since their followers mostly embrace democratic ideals, they will continue to push for their vision of the good life in the public square.
Consequence: tensions between Muslims and Christians are unavoidable.

Growing, intertwined and assertive — communities of Muslims and Christians will live together. But can they live in peace building together a common future?

At the height of the Iraq War in 2004, influential TV evangelist and former U.S. presidential candidate Pat Robertson said: “The entire world is being convulsed by a religious struggle. The fight is not about money or territory; it is not about poverty versus wealth; it is not about ancient customs versus modernity. No. The struggle is whether Hubal, the Moon God of Mecca, known as Allah, is supreme, or whether the Judeo-Christian Jehovah God of the Bible is supreme.” Fighting words these are! Two supreme divine beings always means war.

The fact of the matter is this: fearful people bent on domination have created the contest for supremacy between Yahweh, the God of the Bible, and Allah, the God of the Quran. The two are one God, albeit differently understood. Arab Christians have for centuries worshiped God under the name “Allah.” Most Christians through the centuries, saints and teachers of undisputed orthodoxy, have believed that Muslims worship the same God as they do. They did so even in times of Muslim cultural ascendancy and military conquests, when they represented a grave threat to Christianity in the whole of Europe.

After the fall of Constantinople (1453), the city named after the first Christian emperor and a seat of Christendom for more than 1,000 years, Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, a towering intellect and an experienced church diplomat, affirmed unambiguously that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, albeit partly differently understood. Significantly, in response to the fall of Constantinople and the Muslim threat, Nicholas of Cusa advocated “conversation” rather than “crusade,” a strategy pursued doggedly though unsuccessfully by his friend, Pope Pius II. For Nicholas believed that war could never solve the issue between Christendom and Islam.
We live in a different world than Nicholas and Pius II did, but our options are roughly the same. We should resolutely follow Nicholas. The terrorists must be stopped. As to the 1.6 billion Muslims, with them we must build a common future, one based on equal dignity of each person, economic opportunity and justice for all and freedom to govern common affairs through democratic institutions. Muslims and Christians have a set of shared fundamental values that can guide such a vision partly because they have a common God.

On Feb. 18, during the “Day of Celebration,” Sheik al-Qaradawi — one of the most influential Muslim clerics in the world, exiled from Egypt since 1961 — addressed the crowd of over one million. He began by noting that he is discarding the customary opening “Oh, Muslims.” In favor of “Oh, Muslims and Copts.” He praised both for bringing about the revolution together. And he added, “I invite you to bow down in prayer together.” Such prayer, addressed to the common God in distinct ways, lies at the foundation of hope for a new Egypt.

Whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God is also the driving question for the relation between these two religions globally. Does the one God of Islam stand in contrast to the three-personal God of Christianity? Does the Muslim God issue fierce, unbending laws and demand submission, whereas the Christian God stands for love, equal dignity and the right of every individual to be different? Answer these questions the one way, and you have a justification for cultural and military wars. Answer them the other way, and you have a foundation for a shared future marked by peace rather than violence.

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