

# Do Christians, Jews and Muslims ALL PRAY TO THE SAME GOD?

**D**ear Father Kerper: Muslims call their God “Allah.” Someone told me that “Allah” is a false God. But someone else told me that “Allah” is the same God that Christians worship. Who’s right? And I don’t understand how the pope can pray with Muslims. Please explain.

“Allah” is indeed the same God worshipped by Catholics and other Christians. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day.” (CCC, 841)

This identification of “Allah” with the God of Jesus Christ is not new. In 1076, Pope St. Gregory VII wrote a very beautiful letter to King Azir, the Islamic ruler of Mauritania. After thanking King Azir for his gifts, the Holy Father recalled God’s desire that “all men be saved and none to perish.” He then noted, “We and you must show in a special way to the other nations an example of this charity, **for we believe and confess one God, although in different ways, and praise and worship Him daily as the creator of all ages and the ruler of this world.**” (Emphasis added)

We find Pope St. Gregory’s position echoed in the sixth and seventh solemn prayers used on Good Friday.

In regard to the Jewish people, the sixth prayer refers to them as the people “to whom the Lord our God spoke first.” We then pray that they “may attain the fullness of redemption.” Regarding other people, including Muslims, who believe in the one true God, we pray: “Almighty and ever-living God, grant to those who do not

profess Christ that, by walking before you with a sincere heart, they may find the truth.” Both prayers express hope and trust in the infinite wisdom of God, who listens patiently to every voice raised to His ears.

Catholic insistence on the equivalence of “Allah” and God has also entered the legal realm. In 2009, the Catholic bishops of Malaysia powerfully defended the position of Pope St. Gregory VII. After the Islamic government prohibited a Catholic newspaper from using the word “Allah” for God, the bishops went to court, arguing that this state-imposed restriction of “Allah” to Islam actually violated the religious freedom of Catholics whose liturgical texts used “Allah” for God.

But how can Christians and Muslims use the same name for God when Christianity and Islam are so different? To escape this apparent quandary, we need to distinguish between the generic “name” God and the many personal names attached to the divine.

Contrary to widespread belief, “Allah” is not Islam’s personal name for God. Rather, “Allah” is a contraction of two Arabic words – *al-ilah* – which mean “the deity.” As such, “Allah” is not a “name” but an impersonal generic “term.” To put it another way, “Allah” is simply the Arabic equivalent of *Theos* in

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Greek, *Deus* in Latin, *El* in Hebrew, and *God* in English. These are all nouns, not names.

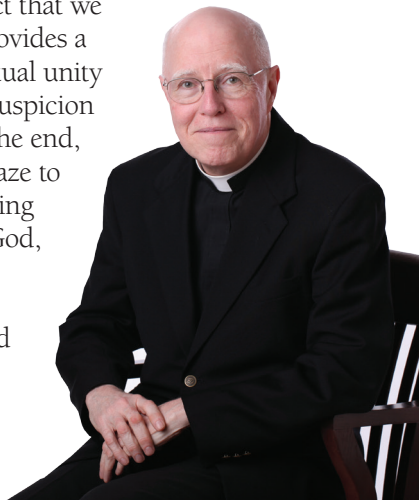
When believing monotheists – whether Christian, Muslim or Jewish – pray to God in whatever language they use, the prayers all terminate at the same point: the one true God.

True prayer can arise from worshippers who have wild misunderstandings of God. Indeed, both testaments of sacred scripture contain many examples of “unorthodox” people voicing prayers to the true God. This happens because all prayer somehow emerges from and through the influence of the Holy Spirit, “who blows where he wills.” The Holy Spirit operates within religious communities whose members misunderstand or fail to grasp the fullness of divine revelation.

God does not apply a preliminary theological test before listening to a person’s sincere prayer. If someone truly believes in God, even in a fuzzy way, and utters a simple prayer, the prayer necessarily moves toward the one true God. Where else would it go? Would the Father of Jesus refuse the plea of a destitute Somalian woman concerned for the life of her child because she called upon “Allah” and did not understand how Jesus could be human and divine?

Though all monotheists – Christians, Jews and Muslims – pray to the same God, this does not mean that we share the same religion. Not at all. Believers in Judaism and Islam regard Christians as profoundly mistaken about the nature and identity of Jesus Christ. Both of these religions, precisely in defending strict monotheism, reject the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, the teaching that Christ is a divine person with a human and divine nature. Indeed, some monotheists even regard Christians as polytheists who supposedly believe in and worship three separate “gods” – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Of course, we aren’t polytheists, but we *appear* to be so, especially some Muslims.

Despite wars, violence and mutual persecutions throughout the centuries, the Catholic Church has always upheld essential *monotheistic kinship* with Jewish and Muslim people. The fact that we worship a common God provides a crucial foundation for eventual unity in the midst of much fear, suspicion and misunderstanding. In the end, all monotheists turn their gaze to the same One. And by looking together toward “Allah” or God, perhaps we will gradually rediscover our common status as children of the God of Abraham, our father in faith. ■



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