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DO JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS BELIEVE IN THE SAME GOD?

Introduction

When the first Muslim minister in Germany, Aygül Özkan, was sworn in in the Parliament of Lower Saxony on 26 April 2010, she used the formula: “So help me God.” Did this mean she was referring to the same God as her Christian colleagues who used the same words during that same ceremony? Özkan’s response to this question was, “As a practising Muslim, I refer explicitly to the one and only God who is common to the three monotheistic religions.”¹ The spokesman for the regional church of Hannover, Johannes Neukirch, on the other hand, stated to the newspaper *BILD* that it was “a very unspecific image of God” if one claimed that all three monotheistic religions worshipped the same God: “We Christians certainly see a clear difference between our God and Allah.”² The evidence he provided was the difference in the understanding of Jesus in the three religions. The president of the head office of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Hermann Barth, voiced another opinion. There were certainly considerable differences in the image of God and the understanding of Jesus Christ, but the reference to God in the wording of the oath was not limited to the Christian understanding of God alone, he told the EPD (Protestant Press Service). The same applied to the mention of God in the preamble to the German constitution (see note 2).

The former moderator of the EKD Council, Wolfgang Huber, had already answered this question a number of years earlier in an interview with the German weekly news magazine *Focus* on 22.11.2004: “We have to leave it to God to decide if God is the same God. As human beings, we can only judge the way God is confessed. We as Christians have no grounds for saying that we confess the same God as the Muslims.”³ I should like to start from this statement in my

¹ <http://www.neue-presse.de/Nachrichten/Politik/Niedersachsen/Ayguel-Oezkan-vereidigt-So-wahr-ihr-Gott-helfe> (accessed 29 January 2011).

² See <http://www.evangelisch.de/themen/religion/kirchen-ohne-klare-haltung-zu-oezkans-amtseid16629> (accessed 29 January 2011).

³ http://wap.ekd.de/print.php?file=/aktuell/041122_huber_islam_focus-interview.html (accessed 29 January 2011).

search for an answer to the question if Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. Huber made three statements on this. First, the question if it is the same God in whom Christians and Muslims believe cannot be answered. Second, we have to distinguish between the reality of God and the confession of God, between God in his very being and believers' grasp of this reality. Third, the ways of confessing God are fundamentally different, however, in these three religions. So there are no grounds for saying that Christians confess the same God as Muslims.

The Viewpoint

When Huber claims there is a difference between the Christian and the Muslim belief in God, he is not only stating the quite obvious fact that Christians do not confess Allah as the God who revealed the Qur'an and that their understanding of God differs from that of Muslims. Huber does not merely want to state factual differences from the quasi-neutral viewpoint of an observer. He is speaking as a theologian and expressing a theological judgement: he denies the theological assumption that the God whom Christians confess is "the same God" whom Muslims confess. That is more than the description of a fact of religious phenomenology; it is a theological prescription.

In the reflections by Udo Tworuschka, a specialist in comparative religion at Jena, on the question, "Does everyone believe *in* the same God?" these two approaches are clearly contrasted (Tworuschka 2005). Comparative religion is not concerned with the reality of God but with the expressions of belief in God, namely, religion. From the point of view of the history and phenomenology of religion, there is an infinite variety of names for and images of God. In her *Guide to the Gods*, Marjorie Leach lists more than 20,000 deities (Leach 1992). Each one is connected with a different conception of the deity's reality and activity. In the history of religion strategies have been and are presented repeatedly for transcending this variety to identify a final, divine reality. Thus, for example, Celsus, the opponent of Christianity in the late classical period, is supposed to have said, "In my opinion, it makes no difference whether one calls Zeus the highest or Zen or Adonaios or Sabaoth or Amun, like the Egyptians, or Papaïos like the Scythians."⁴

Tworuschka views the assumption that Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in the same God in the light of such identification strategies. His judgement is:

Comparative religion ... cannot answer the question whether the various gods can be projected onto one and the same God—and which one would that be?—or are only different names for one, single reality. Scholars of comparative religion feel profoundly uneasy about this anaemic, imaginary, average god. (Tworuschka 2005: 39f)

⁴ Celsus, *Alethes Logos* 5,41^a, quoted in Lona 2005: 300.

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If references to the “one” or “same” God are to be understood in that way, this would indeed amount to a “very unspecific image of God,” such as Neukirch lamented. The meta-god constructed in this way is a mere postulate of religious reason—precisely the anaemic, imaginary, average god whom Tworuschka finds so repulsive, a god of the lowest common denominator obtained via abstraction from all the concrete features ascribed to him by the religions. That is certainly not the God on whom “Christians can set their hearts” (“an den Christen ihr Herz hängen können”) to use a formulation often quoted from the EKD publication *Klarheit und gute Nachbarschaft* (Clarity and Good Neighbourliness). But it is also not the God to whom Muslims are devoted or who is a present reality for the Jews in their narratives. In short, this way of talking about a common reference to God must be ruled out. Over against the Enlightenment’s religion of reason, Schleiermacher objected that religion exists only in the religions and not above them. The same applies by analogy to the relationship with God.

Tworuschka’s article takes an exciting turn at the end—and this expresses the other approach.

Many years ago, when my eldest daughter Mirjam asked me if our God and the God of my highly esteemed Islamic colleague and friend ... Abdoldjavad Falaturi ... was the same, I answered the question with a clear “Yes” without any reservations or loophole (“Hintertür”). But that was a religious answer, not an answer from comparative religion. (Tworuschka 2005: 40)

Thus, Tworuschka distinguishes between the two viewpoints mentioned above: the “neutral” viewpoint of an observer (3rd person perspective) and the committed, participatory viewpoint of someone who is involved (1st person perspective). The answers he gives from the one viewpoint or the other are in tension with each other, but they are not mutually exclusive. With this insight in mind, we come back to Huber, who spoke from the “religious” viewpoint.

God and Divine Mediators

What is the theo-logic that leads Huber to state that there are no theological grounds for assuming that Muslims and Christians pray to the same God? The basic idea can probably be summarised as follows. God has identified himself in Christ once for all in a normative and definitive way; he has bound himself to the Christ event and to the name of Jesus Christ. Therefore God’s nature—the nature of unconditional grace—can thus be seen only if one starts with Christ. And, therefore, one can also only confess God as he revealed himself in Jesus Christ. There can be no God without the divine mediator; the mediator determines the image of God. But the mediation of God through Jesus Christ is different from the mediation of God through the Qur’an, and Christians believe in the God mediated by Christ.

This basic idea was also expressed by the present moderator of the EKD

Council, Nikolaus Schneider, in a television debate with the Islamic woman theologian, Hamideh Mohagheghi, after Aygül Özkan was sworn in as a minister.⁵ The Christian image of God is fundamentally determined by Jesus Christ, he said. It shows us a God who is not far removed from human suffering, who himself suffers and undergoes the experience of death and accomplishes redemption in precisely that way. Schneider's partner in the debate replied that that was not the image of God in Islam. Suffering contradicts God's good creation, and God helps human beings overcome it. The conception of a compassionate God or a God who even suffers himself is profoundly alien to Islam and repulsive to Muslims. The merciful God would never allow his messenger to die like that.

Despite all the common features that can be found between the "God of the Qur'an" and the "God of Jesus Christ," the conceptions of God are fundamentally different. In this respect, one is reminded of experiences in the context of Christian ecumenism. The elements that the confessions have in common relate to different frameworks of reference. And therefore even what they have in common is perceived in different ways.

But, both in this discussion and in ecumenism, it can be stated that believing in God in different ways is not at all the same as believing in different Gods. Might it not be that not only the religions' ways of believing but even the revelations on which they are based point beyond themselves because they make a distinction between themselves and the reality of God that transcends them? Then the God "above the God of theism" (Tillich 1982: 138), of whom Tillich spoke, would not be an anaemic abstraction but the God whom the Bible says dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). He would be the God to whom Jesus Christ points, proclaims, and embodied. And he would also be the God to whom the Qur'an refers. He would be the God whom Nicholas of Cusa said is *supra opposita*, beyond all contradiction, the God whom Anselm of Canterbury argued is greater than anything that can be conceived.

The heart of Anselm's argument for the existence of God is precisely that a distinction must be made between the reality of God on the one hand and conceptions, images, ideas, and confessions of God on the other. The argument runs: if one conceives of God, one must conceive of him as the reality that goes beyond all conceptions of God, as the real reality that can only be understood as the limit of all thought. It is not possible to grasp this reality within the horizon of thinking because one would then need to conceive of something more comprehensive. It is the all-encompassing horizon that is always receding. We can know it is there, but we cannot grasp it.

⁵ <http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/video/1038174/>

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The revelations of the religions do not speak *about* God but from *within* God. They understand their disclosure not as solving a riddle, which would then make God's truth plain for all to see, but as God's mystery opening itself up while remaining a mystery even where it is revealed. It is revealed *as* a mystery. This is particularly emphasised by the Christian theology of the cross, namely, that God's hiddenness does not lie *behind* but dwells *in* his revelation.

I will mention only three examples from the Islamic and Jewish-Christian tradition in which one can perceive the distinction made between the revelation and the revealer. The Qur'an states: "Though the sea became ink for the Words of my Lord, verily the sea would be used up before the Words of my Lord were exhausted" (18:109; cf. 31:27). Here the Qur'an is relativised as an "earthly" book in reference to the transcendent word of the "heavenly" Qur'an as the "mother of the scriptures" (43:4), and, finally, in reference to the subject of the revelation, God. In the Torah it is reported that Moses, the mediator of revelation, was not allowed to see God's face. For him, too, God remains an unfathomable mystery. The Johannine Christ, who is already portrayed as participating in the glory of God, also clearly distinguishes himself from God as the mediator of this glory: "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). The divinity of Jesus Christ resides not least in his not wanting to be like God. As the divine mediator, he can say, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30).

This applies all the more to the understanding of God. To distinguish between our religious understanding of the divine reality and this reality itself is a criterion of authentic faith. We always "see" God only in the mode of a particular divine disclosure, in our case: in the revelation in Christ. But precisely in this disclosure one can also "see" that the reality of God is more comprehensive than the disclosure. Thus, to recognise that the reality of God goes beyond all the disclosures of that reality does not mean that we abandon the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim faith or adopt a supposedly higher standpoint above all faiths. These revelations themselves teach this: even in the fundamental disclosures of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we encounter the awareness that God's reality is not restricted to these disclosures, however authentically and reliably they may witness to it. To exaggerate a bit: the revelations relativise themselves in relation to God. This in no way abolishes their truth but, on the contrary, really expresses it as a derived truth—a truth derived from the truth of God that goes beyond them. God speaks *through* them.

So, we have to be more specific about the initial question: Do Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in the same God? Their beliefs about God undoubtedly differ, but the reality of God to which those beliefs relate could be the same—as an "ultimate point of reference" (Gordon Kaufman). This is similar to what is related in the well-known Buddhist story of blind people feeling separate parts of an elephant's body and receiving quite different impressions of the ele-

phant's appearance. The images differ, but they all point to the same reality of the elephant that lies beyond them.

An indication of this kind of reference can also be found in the words of Aygül Özkan. She said, "However different the dogmatic teachings may be that the individual religions have elaborated about God, it is still clear that they all refer to one and the same God."⁶

Praising the Greatness of God

We are unable to claim that Jewish, Christian and Muslim images of God refer to the same God. For that, we would need to have the perspective of an enlightened person at our disposal—as in the story of the elephant. But we have no access to that. According to Paul, we can only be assured of the reality of God through faith but cannot see it. Huber was quite right to say that we cannot make any statements about the reality of God as such, at least no descriptive statements.

But believers in all ages have still found a language to put this incomprehensible, inexpressible reality into words; the language of doxology, the praise of God's greatness that is beyond all words. Would it not be an expression of this praise if we were to say: this God is the one who encompasses everything, the history of the faith of Jews and Muslims, and of all other human beings to whom God is kindly disposed has its place in him?

Again, it is a question of one's viewpoint. If we look at it from the viewpoint of the human awareness of God and of religious conceptions of God, then we have to say "no" to the question if Jews, Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. But if, on the contrary, we start with God—and precisely with the God who made himself known in Jesus Christ—then we can perhaps give the positive answer that Tworuschka gave, without any reservations or loopholes, in praise for the greatness of God who has revealed himself as an inexhaustible mystery, just as human beings are "more" than all their self-revelations. The inviolable dignity of human beings also goes beyond their words and deeds.

The emphasis on the greatness and universality of God certainly does not reduce or diminish the Christians' dedication to Jesus Christ. In the intensity of his relationship with God, Jesus was God's "son" who did not just transmit an image of God but led his disciples of all ages to God—as the way to the truth of life. The God who went with him into death and of whom one can since

⁶ <http://www.bild.de/BILD/regional/hannover/aktuell/2010/04/28/erste-muslimische-ministerin-in-deutschland-vereidigt/welchen-gott-meinten-sie-frau-ayguel-oezkan.html> (accessed January 2011).

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claim with certainty that he is still present, even in the darkest corner of human despair, is the God on whom not only Christians can set their hearts. This good news should not be kept from anyone.

But we should also not forget that the theology of the suffering God, which is seen by Nikolaus Schneider and many others as the specific characteristic at the heart of the Christian understanding of God in contrast to Islam, has only been highly esteemed in the past few decades. "Theology after Auschwitz," Dorothee Sölle, and Jürgen Moltmann have brought it into the foreground. It is based on Luther's Christology with its *communicatio idiomatum* doctrine and, for Moltmann, it results from an interpretation of the Trinity in close connection with a theology of the cross. It is more or less unfamiliar to other Christian confessions. For example, it has little to do with Calvin's theology of the glory of God. To claim that it demonstrates the main characteristic of the Christian understanding of God is a short-sighted view of the history of theology and a narrow approach to the variety of Christian confessions. This does not in any way neglect the truth of Luther's insight that God is not only the *Deus semper maior* but also the *Deus semper minor*. Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that this is not *the* Christian understanding of God.

Reasons for Assuming It Could be the Same God

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all teach that there is only one God. And this God is the God of the whole cosmos who permeates the whole of history and thus also the history of religion with his spirit and in this way presents himself to the followers of all religions. If one accepts the biblical understanding according to which God is not only a tribal God concerned about his people, i.e. Jews and Christians, but is at work in creation as a whole, has not left himself without witness to any person and is near to everyone in the spirit, then, in my view, there are certainly good grounds for assuming that the God to whom Christians pray in the name of Christ is none other than the God to whom Muslims turn in submission.

The main reason for this assumption resides in the universality and unconditionality of God's will for salvation proclaimed and practised by Jesus that, according to 1 Timothy 2:4, "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Is it then conceivable that God could have made his gracious concern dependent on a particular belief in God? That would contradict the teaching and practice of Jesus. It would also contradict the Protestant doctrine of justification. After all, the latter states that we are accepted by God not on the basis of our faith but only through God's grace, and that we grasp this in faith as the first gift of justification. If God had tied his salvation exclusively to Christian belief in God, then this offer of salvation would not be universal. God's relationship with human beings cannot be conditioned by and dependent on their conceptions of God.

Nor can the answer to the question of the sameness of God be dependent on human conceptions of God. If that were the case, I would have a different God from my fellow Christians who have another image of the Christian God, who believe, for example, in a God who allows the larger part of humankind to follow the broad path to the abyss of condemnation. That is a God in whom I cannot believe without any reservations or loopholes. The conceptions of God *within* one religion can be just as diverse as the conceptions of God *between* different religions. But here too, it must be stated that *believing differently in God does not imply believing in a different God*, and that is why I assume that even such fellow Christians believe in the same God as I do.

The apostle Paul informs the non-Christian Athenians: “I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship. I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What you therefore worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23) The Athenian pagans revere the God whom Paul proclaims even though they understand God in a quite different way.

If the assumption that Christians and Muslims pray to the same God is rejected, then the question arises as to how the God to whom people pray in the mosque should be judged theologically. Is he God at all? Or is he a desert demon as Christian polemics have repeatedly claimed and still claim today? Is he an “idol like all other idols,” as Karl Barth put it (Barth 1938: 57), or a human projection? If he *is* God, is he then another God? Then we should be faced with various gods—and that would violate the first commandment. Should one think instead that the one and only God is being presented and revered in a wrong way? Or should one refrain from all of these “speculative” considerations?

Is it possible, however, to refrain from such speculative reflections? Such considerations result to some extent necessarily from Huber’s position and from the position of all those who cannot see any grounds for the assumption that Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in the same God. These considerations are speculative only if they are taken out of the context of theological reflection and the practice of faith. In many practical acts, implicit answers to this question are presupposed. We can take the issue of a Christian-Muslim marriage ceremony as an example. Whether the pastor is willing to get involved at all in such an adventure and how he/she defines his/her role during the ceremony and conducts the service depends not least on theological pre-decisions. Every practice is guided by “implicit axioms” (Dietrich Ritschl). If the pastor acts on the assumption that the Christian-Muslim couple addresses their prayer for blessing their marriage to the same God, he/she will choose different formulations for conferring God’s blessing and for the prayers than if he/she assumes that the Muslim partner will receive the blessing not through but despite his/her faith. Every practice includes a preconception (*Vorverständnis*). In order to develop theologically reflected forms of pastoral practice, this precon-

ception needs to be discussed and subjected to clarification. This clarification cannot be obtained by means of unequivocal judgements but rather by searching for arguments, namely for the grounds which Huber claimed do not exist.

Huber was speaking only about Christians and Muslims but not about the Jews. If we include the Jewish understanding of God in our examination, it becomes even more difficult, in my view, to accept his judgement. This is so because, if one argues that God identified himself in Jesus Christ and that there is therefore no reason to assume that Muslims believe in the same God, then this judgement must also apply to post-biblical Judaism. The God who revealed himself according to the tradition in the Jewish Holy Scriptures, the Tanakh, the Talmud, and the Midrash did not disclose his identity in Jesus Christ. If we take Judaism's self-understanding seriously, we must then logically state that there are no grounds for assuming that Jews believe in the same God.

One could put this idea more pointedly and provocatively and ask if we really believe in the same God in whom Jesus believed. The more strongly one emphasises that Jesus was, after all, not a Christian but a Jew, the more pressing this question becomes. For this same reason, it also became pressing for Adolf von Harnack and for Marcion who forced the church into a major debate with his hypothesis that the Jewish scriptures proclaim an "alien God" (cf. Von Harnack 1996). In this debate, the church decided in favour of an unequivocal answer. It is not just an equivalent or similar God but the same God.

Just as it is an essential part of the Christian understanding of God that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as the God of unconditional grace, it is equally impossible to state that the "pre-Christian" God of Israel who revealed himself on Sinai and the "post-Christian" God confessed by post-biblical Judaism and whose characteristics are also different from the "Christian" God is a different God from the one whom Jesus Christ called "Father."

What Do the Others Say?

According to the New Testament tradition, Jesus led people into a renewed relationship with God, based not on observance but on trusting devotion, but he venerated no other God than the God of his Jewish ancestors. The Muslims confess this God even though they deviate from the image of God in the Christian tradition in many respects, including central ones. The Qur'an gives a clear answer to the question if Jews, Muslims, and Christians revere the same God. According to Surah 29:46, Mohammed assumes that "our" God is the same as the God of the Jews and Christians. And Jews, likewise, as a rule (to which there are exceptions) do not raise the question if Christians and Muslims pray to the same God. In *Dabru emet*, the "Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity" issued in the year 2000, the result of the "National Jewish Scholars Project" in the USA and was signed by 220 scholars, it is stated that "Jews

and Christians worship the same God”, because “Christians also worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, creator of heaven and earth” (point 9). And the Roman Catholic Church during and since the Second Vatican Council has also explicitly recognised the sameness of God as the addressee of both Christian and Islamic worship and has included the Muslims in God’s universal will for salvation: “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohammedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind” (*Lumen Gentium* 16). In his address on the occasion of his encounter with Muslim youth in Casablanca on 19 August 1985, Pope John Paul II stated, “We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection” (cf. CIBEDO 2009: Text 2200).

It is obvious that all these statements presuppose that one can believe in the same God even when God is understood and worshipped in different ways. There are profound and, in part, insurmountable differences between the faith traditions. But one cannot conclude from these differences between the religions in their conceptions of faith that there is a difference in the divine foundation to which they relate, and Huber does not assume so either. One can only look for reasons that undergird the one assumption or the other.

Sensus Fidei

I believe there are good reasons for assuming that Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in the same God, even if they believe in him differently. The first reason is based on the Jewish-Christian-Muslim basic confession of the oneness of God, the second reason is the understanding of God as the reality encompassing all reality, and the third reason is the assurance of God’s universal will for salvation. A fourth reason could be deduced from the consideration of the consequences that a denial of this assumption would have—theologically in relation to the three reasons just mentioned but also practically in relation to the way in which interreligious encounters would be conducted.

Naturally, our concern cannot be to adapt theology to the ideal of interreligious understanding. On the other hand, interreligious encounter can become a context for discovering knowledge of God⁷. There is a kind of theological sensitivity that develops in practice. Perhaps we can use the scholastic term *sensus fidei* or *fidelium* (in an extended and figurative sense) to describe this sensitivity. Heinrich Ott once put it in the following way.

⁷ I have tried to provide some theological reflections on the relation between the Christian faith and non-Christian religions. See Bernhardt 2007.

In the encounter with and attentive study of another religion, we are sometimes suddenly overcome by a feeling of proximity. Is not that which people experience in the other faith close to what I experience in my faith? It is not something identical, not agreement, not even something comparable or related that we come across here (because what standpoint is there for a comparison?). It is merely “proximity”—or “neighbourhood,” a term that Martin Heidegger sometimes used and described as *Gegen-einander-über* (opposite and facing one another), like referring to neighbouring farms, for example, which cannot be defined appropriately by any spatial parameter. (Ott 1991: 41).

Navid Kermani gave a very good example of this feeling of proximity when, as a Muslim—with all his objections to the Christian theology of the cross—he said after having viewed Guido Reni’s picture of the crucifixion in the Church of San Lorenzo in Lucina in Rome. “[I] found the sight so impressive, so full of blessing, that I did not want to stand up again. I thought for the first time that I—and not just someone—could believe in a cross.”

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