

Professor suspended for saying Christians, Muslims 'worship the same God'

by [Lucy Schouten](#), [The Christian Science Monitor](#); and [Christian Century staff](#)

This article appears in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue.

A Wheaton College professor has been placed on leave because, in explaining why she wanted to show solidarity with Muslims by wearing an Islamic headscarf, she wrote that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Her comments have sparked fierce theological debate.

"I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book," Larycia Elaine Hawkins wrote in a Facebook post December 10. "We worship the same God."

Her employer disagreed, placing the tenured political science professor on administrative leave on December 15 "in order to give more time to explore theological implications of her recent public statements concerning Christianity and Islam."

[Wheaton administrators noted](#) the faculty and staff sign a statement of faith, and they said her view that Muslims and Christians worship the same God "appears to be in conflict" with that statement.

"Dr. Hawkins's administrative leave resulted from theological statements that seemed inconsistent with Wheaton College's doctrinal convictions and is in no way related to her race, gender, or commitment to wear a hijab during Advent," Wheaton's statement says.

Prominent Christians, including evangelicals, have made similar claims to the one Hawkins made. George W. Bush regularly expressed the sentiment during his presidency.

"I believe the God that the Muslim prays to is the same God that I pray to," President Bush told Al Arabiya News in 2007. "After all, we all came from Abraham."

Several dozen Wheaton students held a protest December 16 during which they delivered [a letter to the college's administration](#) demanding that Hawkins be reinstated.

The students wrote in their letter to the president and provost, "There is nothing in Dr. Hawkins's public statements that goes against the belief in the power and nature of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit that the Statement of Faith deems as a necessary requirement for affiliation with Wheaton College."

In a Facebook post December 13, Hawkins responded to the initial criticism she had received. She wrote that "asserting our religious solidarity with Muslims and Jews will go a long way toward quelling religious violence and enervating religionist fear of the religious other. Whether or not you find this position, one held for centuries by countless Christians (church fathers, saints, and regular Christian folk like me), to be valid, I trust that we can peacefully disagree on theological points and affirm others."

In [a statement released December 11](#) on "Christian Engagement with Muslim Neighbors," Wheaton had outlined its position on the debate: "While Islam and Christianity are both monotheistic, we believe there are fundamental differences between the two faiths, including what they teach about God's revelation to humanity, the nature of God, the path to salvation, and the life of prayer."

Charles Kimball, an ordained Southern Baptist minister and professor and director of religious studies at the University of Oklahoma—Hawkins's alma mater—said he likes to highlight the differences in people's understanding of God, even within the same congregation, by asking members to share their understanding of God with each other.

"There is in my view no ambiguity at all that Muslims, Christians, and Jews are talking about the same God," Kimball said. "What I have found is that this is more of a device that Christian religious leaders use to drive a wedge between Christians and Jews on the one side and Muslims on the other."

Kimball has not heard of such debate within Islam. Muslims have no doubt they worship the same God as Christians because according to Islamic self-understanding, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were all given from God as the same original truth, he said.

Kimball noted that Arab Christians of all sects use *Allah* as the word for God.

Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Illinois, [wrote on his blog, Jesus Creed](#), that between the Abrahamic traditions “there are dramatic—religion-splitting—differences on who God is and how God is understood.”

Those differences are expressed in beliefs in the incarnation and the Trinity, McKnight wrote.

“We can agree to some degree at a generic level,” wrote McKnight, “but we don’t worship God in the generic. We worship either the God of Abraham and Moses, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, or the God of Mohammed. The God in each of the faiths is understood differently enough to conclude that saying we worship the ‘same’ God muddies the water.”

*This article was edited on December 31, 2015.*