

Arguing with Muslims: God-talk on campus

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [November 16, 2004](#) issue

A while back a Duke student was telling me that he and his roommate were not getting along well. I asked him why. "Because he is a Muslim and I'm not." I asked him how that made a difference.

"When we moved in together, he asked me what my religion was. I told him that I was a sort of Christian. A Lutheran. I told him up front that my family and I weren't the very best Christians, that we only went to church occasionally, and it wasn't that big a deal to me. But my roommate has this nasty habit of asking embarrassing questions."

"What sort of questions?" I asked.

"Like after we had roomed together a few weeks, he asked me, 'Why do you Christians never pray?' I told him, 'We pray all the time. We just sort of keep it to ourselves.'

"He said, 'I'll say that you do. I've never seen you pray.' He prays, like, a half dozen times a day on his prayer rug in our room, facing East Durham.

"The last straw was Saturday morning, when I came in from a date, and he asked me, 'Doesn't your St. Paul say something about not joining your body with a prostitute?'

"I told him, 'Look, she is not a prostitute! She's a Tri Delt. I told you I am not the best Christian in the world. You shouldn't judge the Christian faith by me!'"

And I, hearing the torment in his voice, asked, "Well, how should he judge the Christian faith? I ought to write your Muslim roommate a thank-you note. If that Muslim keeps working on you, he may yet make you into a real Christian."

Such are the encounters between Christians and Muslims on campus these days.

I've enjoyed the series in this magazine, "Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?" (April 20, May 4, May 18, June 1, August 24). The comments on worship in Judaism and Christianity, compared with that in Islam, have been clarifying and helpful. But there were times in reading those articles that I wanted to protest: "But we have a much more interesting and difficult God than that!" I'm fond of saying to students that the modern question, "Is there a god?" is unbiblical. The Bible's big issue is, "*Who is the God who is there?*"

We have a most interesting God. But so do Muslims. And our God looks even more interesting when compared with their God. From my own experiences in a bubbling multifaith environment, when we interface with people of different faiths, the toughest task is to let the other be the other, to attempt to love our neighbor, as Jesus commanded us, in all the neighbor's differentiation and peculiarity, to bless the neighbor as the neighbor really is, not as the person we would have the neighbor become.

When it comes to faith, it's often the differences and the peculiarities that we love the most about our religion. This is what Diana L. Eck fails to recognize in books like *A New Religious America*. Her approach, like that of many, seems to be, "First make Muslims convert into liberal, Western universalists, then render your faith into an abstraction, a generality. Then we can talk." The great theological challenge for Christians is to demonstrate, in our interactions with Muslims, that we have God-given resources for letting the neighbor remain the other and still be the neighbor.

In his book *Clueless in Academe*, Gerald Graff says that the purpose of higher education is to teach students to argue. Our society, says Graff, is conditioned to avoid engagement with the ideas of others. Better simply to assert our beliefs than truly to listen and to respond to the beliefs of another, and to risk being changed in the conversation. The purpose of higher education is to begin an argument.

Yet most of us learn to converse with other people in such a way that either we don't encounter them as they are, in all their difference and particularity, or we rework them, making them over in our minds so that we are able to say to them, "Well, after all, we're both really saying fairly much the same thing, right?"

It would be a shame for us Christians to do that to our sisters and brothers in Islam. On campus I've found that our Islamic neighbors can be important allies in our attempt to walk by faith rather than merely to acquiesce to the American Way.

If you keep your attributes of God abstract enough—God is omnipotent, God is omniscient, loving, just—all three “Abrahamic” faiths appear to be on the same page, or talking about the same God, because to be Muslims, Christians and Jews all believe that God is omnipotent, loving and just. Trouble is, this sort of abstract reasoning is about as revealing as saying that “Mary Jones is a Caucasian, female android.” You haven’t said much. And who wants to talk to someone who is just like us?

When you get down to the scriptures of these faiths, the specific stories they tell about God, then the claim that all these often conflicting stories are talking about the same God seems simplistic and silly. Christians and Jews worship the same God because we share many of the same stories. We share Abraham, though we say very different things about him and Sarah. Two thirds of the Bible, and just about every one of our claims for Jesus, came to us as gifts of the Jews.

But I defy anyone to attempt to read through a translation of the Qur’an, the holy book of Muslims, and come away saying, “Well, Jesus and Muhammad are headed in much the same direction.” Muhammad routinely says things that just would not fit into the mouth of Jesus.

What do I really know about the God of Islam anyway? Islam, like Christianity, is more than a set of ideas; it’s a way of life. If I have not attempted to take up the practice of Islam, then my understanding of it will be limited. I recall the Hindu student who complained to me about the silly “World Religions” course that she was taking at Duke.

“The professor makes Hinduism sound like some sort of desiccated philosophy. Hinduism is what we eat, what we do, not some interesting explanation for the vacuity of American middle-class lives!” It was enlightening to see how faith wilts in the hands of detached, academically arrogant onlookers in the department of religion. Their idea seems to be that you must first kill something, then spread it out like a cadaver on an operating table, in order to think about it. The Hindu student’s comments made me embarrassed that I have not been incensed at what is done to my faith in the “Introduction to Christian Theology” class. Hindus and Muslims often remind Christians on campus that we have allowed our faith to be qualified and our intellectual life to be truncated by the limits of Western ways of thought and economics. Christianity, like Islam, is something that we eat and something that we do that makes us determinedly different from what the government would have us

be.

If my daily practice of my religion has taught me anything, it is that I have so often failed to live up to what I know about the God who is Trinity that—well, who am I to criticize others for misunderstanding the truth about God? Fortunately, my faith gives me resources that enable me constantly to confess my stupidity and infidelity. I don't know enough about the God who has met me in Jesus Christ to say conclusively just who does and who does not get this God absolutely right.

I do know that it's wrong to paper over and sugarcoat our differences with Islam. Jesus, our image of God—the Son of God, Savior of the World—is notably different from much that is said about God by Muhammad. If Muhammad is a prophet of the true God, as all Muslims know him to be, then that God seems not at all like the God Jesus taught us to call "Father." Muhammad was a sort of knight, an astute military man, a government official and a wise teacher who ended his life in serene beatification. Jesus was a teacher who brutally died at the hands of the military, the government and the religious establishment, refusing to lift a hand in self-defense, and then was raised from the dead. Watch the expression on the face of a Muslim when you tell that story. Forgive Muslims and Christians for having difficulty finding points of contact between our two faiths.

True, both faiths talk "love," "peace," "justice," but once again we have remarkably different ways of defining or obtaining love, peace, and justice—so different that, well, it's almost as if we were worshipping a different God.

Sometimes students have asked, "What did Jesus say about Muslims?" Of course, the answer is, "Nothing." There's not one word of condemnation of other religions and other faiths in the teaching of Jesus, except for Roman emperor worship. No, when Jesus is in his most condemnatory, judgmental mood, it's his own disciples that he beats up on the most. For the Bible, judgment begins not against other faiths but rather with God's own house, with God's own people, *us*.

Last year, during Islamic Awareness Week, Duke had a panel discussion involving an imam from Chicago, a local rabbi and me (representing all Christians everywhere, even though you didn't vote for me to represent you). During the discussion, the imam said, "Islam is a very tolerant faith. In the Holy Qur'an, if an unbeliever attacks a believer, I am under obligation to punish the unbeliever. If my brother here, the Jew, is attacked by an unbeliever, the Holy Prophet commands me to punish the

persecutor.”

The rabbi seemed pleased by this. For my part, I said, “Gee, I wish Jesus had said something like that! I’ve got people that I want to punish, folk who need killing. Unfortunately, even when we tried to defend Jesus, he cursed us and told us to put away the swords!”

Frankly, I think Muslims have got it right when they say that Christians in the West appear to have produced, or at least acquiesced to, a pagan, sex-saturated, violent, materialistic society. Muslims seem to despise us not because we’re so free (wrong, G. W. Bush) or because we’re so very Christian (wrong, Jerry Falwell) but because we’re so awfully pagan.

And on campus many Christians have found that we really need Muslims to help us withstand the assaults of pagans in the department of religion and at the local shopping mall. I’ve watched conservative evangelical, Bible-thumping Christian students link up with conservative, Qur’an-thumping Muslim students—they are brought together by the realization that in many subtle and disturbing ways the modern university is aligned against belief in and fidelity to any God. In many subtle and powerful ways the modern university is designed to produce people who have no god to worship but Calvin Klein and The Gap.

Furthermore, we Christians need to admit that—considering our lamentable infidelity to the God of Israel and the church—it’s no wonder that most Muslims are distinctively unimpressed with our God. We invoke God’s name as we bomb, occupy and dominate Islamic countries. We may say on our money “in God we trust,” but Muslims suspect that oil, power and wealth are our true hearts’ desire. I wonder if Muslims look at us and think, “You’re going to have to look a lot more redeemed before I’ll believe in your redeemer.”

I find it deeply disturbing that terrorists justify their murderous work with appeals to the Qur’an, though from my reading of the Qur’an I can see their point. Perhaps I should find it even more disturbing that the people who led us into the war in Iraq—and, I presume, most of the young people who have committed abuses in our Iraqi prisons—are all this day praying to Jesus.

Recently I was asked by a reporter if I thought it was moral for the Southern Baptists to send missionaries to Iraq (I’m not sure that the Southern Baptists are awaiting my approval on this!). I replied that I don’t see any harm in sending Southern Baptist

missionaries to Iraq, but I wonder how many Iraqi folk you can convert to Jesus, Prince of Peace, Lamb of God, after you have bombed them into oblivion. Not many, I'd wager (if Methodists were allowed to wager).

The God of Islam and the God of the church and synagogue appear to look enough like God to make dialogue possible, but also different enough to make for an interesting conversation.

I know this: Our God, the God we meet in Jesus the Christ, has given us our Islamic sisters and brothers and commanded us to go and to tell, to witness, and to live our lives in service to the Trinity in such a way that our sisters and brothers might say, "Wow, you really have an interesting God. Tell us and show us more."

I can fully understand why Muslims aren't that interested in the Trinity, considering our sorry record of fidelity to Jesus, but we Christians are trying to believe what the Jews taught us: that there is only one God (and it's not us)—Lord of heaven and earth, God of love—who commands us to deal with our sisters and brothers as this gracious, forgiving, receiving God has dealt with us.

In strange ways, the modern university campus can be a great place to think about these matters. Years ago there was a student whom I met his first day of the school year. He was tall, utterly white, utterly blond, utterly southern. I saw him walking on campus sometime later, hand in hand with a young woman who was short, utterly brown and (as I was to discover) utterly Muslim and Ohioan. Sure enough, I got a call from his mother. "Have you met Thomas's girlfriend?" she asked. "Talk to him! They're serious!"

I called him in for a chat and eventually asked, "Thomas, tell me about Miranda." He told me that they were very much in love, that she was a wonderful person and that they were planning to be married right after graduation.

I said, "Really? Tell me what brought you together."

He said, "We had so very much in common."

I said, "Thomas, you're from South Carolina, you're blond and Baptist. She's Muslim, brown and from Ohio. What in the world could you possibly have in common?"

He said, "Well, you know me—I don't drink on weekends and don't believe in casual sex. And I'm not really into the success-at-any-cost thing. She was the only girl I met

who had the same values as mine.”

How do we Christians hope to survive on campus without Muslims?