

“Thinking it over...” Issue #15

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This is the fifteenth in an occasional pamphlet series of theological reflections on timely challenges facing churches of the Lutheran communion. It is produced by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, but does not represent official positions of the Lutheran World Federation.

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MY GOD—YOUR GOD—OUR GOD?

CHRISTIANS, MUSLIMS AND GOD

Christian-Muslim relations are high on the agenda with debates on the social and political dynamics of these relations taking place almost everywhere. When, every now and then, theological questions surface, the atmosphere changes immediately. People get nervous and there is a tendency to shy away from such theological questions as, Do we, Christians and Muslims, believe in the same God?

Some months ago, a girl in my confirmation class raised this question. She was convinced that there could be only one God, even though Muslim faith and practice seemed to her rather different from Christian faith and practice. She was puzzled and asked whether Christians and Muslims can together speak of God as “our God”? No doubt, the strangeness the girl sensed had a lot to do with cultural differences, but still, important theological matters needed to be clarified regarding monotheism, Jesus Christ, truth claims, and our personal relationship to God.

AFFIRMING THE BELIEF IN ONE GOD

For Christians as well as Muslims, one core conviction is that there is only one God, although as Christians we understand this one God as a Triune God. We have to oppose the idea that there could be several gods, with each religion having one for its own. The plurality of religions cannot be projected into heaven and lead to the assumption of a plurality of gods. On the contrary, for Christians as well as Muslims, the belief in one God is fundamental: God is God of all creation and all humanity; through God we are all brothers and sisters.

WITNESSING TO DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF GOD

Difficulties arise when we come to the questions, Who is God? What is God's will? and How does God relate to humanity?. For Christians, God has been revealed in Jesus Christ. For Muslims, God's will is revealed in the Qur'an. Rather than vague, general notions of transcendence and God, we have distinct understandings of God as do Muslims. These distinctions shape our relationship to God and ways of life. In this sense, theology and anthropology are closely related.

For example, for Christians, Christ is at the center of faith because human beings are regarded as being fundamentally entangled in original sin and therefore in need of redemption by God. In Islamic anthropology, human beings are regarded as being able to be faithful stewards in God's world if they follow God's guidance. In this sense, the Qur'an is the central reference point for guidance in life. Thus, in light of the different understandings of God in relation to humanity, we cannot just say *my* God equals *your* God, and therefore, is *our* God.

Furthermore, we cannot simply say that religions are complementary, with each revealing a part of the truth or a part of who God is. On the contrary, each religion has a consistent and comprehensive concept of God. Whereas some traits might be similar to other concepts, as a whole it is not necessarily congruous with others. Thus, we cannot say *my* God plus *your* God is *our* God.

Moreover, Christians as well as Muslims are convinced that the way in which they conceive God is not simply made up by themselves. Their faith is not a human attempt to try to relate to God. It is Godself who has called them and made Godself known to them. Here, the theological differences can have a conflictual and even explosive potential. If there is only one God, who has revealed Godself to us, then is only one of way of thinking of God true, and all

others false? Do we have to say: *my* God is true, *your* God is false, and there is no such thing as *our* God?

EXPLORING THE RELATIONAL NATURE OF TRUTH

How do we understand “truth” in theological terms? Truth is not like a gift that one receives, unwraps and then gazes at its beauty. Martin Luther rediscovered the important insight that truth is not a “thing,” a substance out there, but a relationship. God’s justice is not a fact that we look at from the outside, but a relational dynamic into which God draws us. What are the implications of truth being relational, such that it cannot be objectified?

First, theological truth is more than just a statement about God. Truth is an experience through which I realize that what is said about God is something that happens to me: God liberates me, consoles me, justifies me, etc. The experience of truth is the experience of God being present for me, of God relating to me and thereby transforming me. At the heart of this experience is a process in which I realize that I belong to God, that *I am God’s*. Being existentially touched in that way, I respond to God: “You are my God” (Psalm 31:14).

Reflecting on the relational nature of truth shows that the response “my God” is originally situated in prayer. It is a faithful response to the experience of being God’s. By saying “my God” I address myself to God in order to affirm the relationship with God, not in order to distinguish myself from others. Consequently, there is a radical difference between the expression “my God” and the term “your God.” I regard my God from an inside perspective, because I experience directly the relationship with God. But, I view your God from an outside perspective, judging your relationship with God as if it could be objectified. Consequently, the expressions “my God” and “your God” are on two completely different planes. Thus, a comparative approach to “my God” and “your God” cannot adequately reflect the relational nature of truth.

“My God” is not a definition, but a confession to God. “Your God” can at best be a description from outside. We do not have the inside perspective to judge if it is true or false. Since “my God” and “your God” are statements of two very different categories, it is therefore difficult to speak of “our God.” If we take seriously the relational nature of theological truth, then whether Christians and Muslims have the same God remains an open question.

LISTENING TO THE OTHER, EXPERIENCING GOD'S PRESENCE

This does not hinder but it fosters relations between Christians and Muslims. It encourages us to listen to each other's understanding of God. Through such interfaith experience each of us might get a deepened sense of what it means to say "my God." This was affirmed by a recent LWF theological consultation on Christian-Muslim relations: "The experience of dialogue does not compromise, but can deepen our own faith understandings."¹

The girl in my confirmation class continues asking questions about God. She now wants to know what people think and feel when they say "my God." Hopefully, she will find a Muslim friend with whom she can delve more deeply into this question. May they experience God's presence in this encounter, so that together they may know that they are God's.

SIMONE SINN

You are encouraged to share your perspectives on this topic with Rev. Simone Sinn, theological assistant, Department for Theology and Studies at ssi@lutheranworld.org

NOTES

¹ "Beyond Toleration. Toward deeper relationships with Muslims." A consultation message to churches of the Lutheran communion (LWF). December 2006, para 14, available at <http://www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwi/en/1960.en.html>

For more theological responses to multifaith challenges, see the papers posted and join the LWF Theology in the Life of the Church discussions at <http://www.luthersem.edu/lwfdiscuss>.

The Lutheran World Federation

Department for Theology and Studies
150 route de Ferney, (P.O. Box 2100),
CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
Tel. +41/22-791 61 59 Fax +41/22-791 66 30
E-mail: ssi@lutheranworld.org Web site: www.lutheranworld.org

