

# The Concept of God in Islam and Christianity

(Transcribed from Program One of the “Islam vs. Christianity” debate conducted by The John Ankerberg Show)

Tonight on The John Ankerberg Show you will hear a debate between the truth claims of Islam and Christianity. Representatives from each side will present the evidence for their position concerning the concept of God in Islam and Christianity.

John’s guests representing Islam are Dr. Jamal Badawi, Chairman of the Islamic Information Foundation, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Dr. Hussein Morsi, Director of the Islamic Cultural Center of Chicago, Illinois. Representing Christianity are Dr. Anis Shorrosh, a Palestinian Arab Christian who received his Ph.D. from Oxford Graduate School and Dr. Gleason Archer who holds degrees from Princeton, Suffolk University and received his Ph.D. from Harvard. Dr. Archer is currently professor of Semitic Languages and Old Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. We invite you to join us in listening to this important debate.

Dr. John Ankerberg: Welcome. We are glad that you joined us. We are talking about Islam and Christianity tonight. We have four guests that are ready to speak to you and present their positions. The topic that we are going to take a look at in this program is what does the word “God” mean to both Christianity and Islam? You know, today the Word of God or the word God is one of the most widely used, but vague and undefined terms in our language. People like Einstein define God as a pure mathematical mind. There are others today that are making movies and saying that God is a force. There are a lot of people that are urging us to simply agree to use the word God and not define it at all lest we breed division. It is obvious, however, that if God is, His existence and His nature do not depend on what anyone thinks about him. And, if God is there, He has got to reveal to us what He is like. The book of Hebrews says it this way: “God at sundry times and diverse manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets.” Both Islam and Christianity believe that. Where we disagree is in the words that follow: “and hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.” But tonight, what are the differences concerning the concept of God for both Christianity and Islam? Ultimately, if there are differences, we want to know, “How will they impact you in your belief?” Because you are going to have to choose, after you listen to these folks.

Tonight, we are going to have each side present the evidence for their position on this topic: the Concept of God. Who is Allah, who is the God of the Bible? We will start with Dr. Jamal Badawi.

Dr. Jamal Badawi: It is a pleasure to participate in this overdue dialogue between Christians and their Muslim brethren. Both are members of the same human family inhabiting the same global village. Both identify themselves with the Abrahamic ethical monotheism based on faith in the one and only true supreme creator, sustainer and cherisher of the universe—God in English, Allah in Arabic, even though most Muslims are not Arabs. There are at least three common beliefs that unite both communities of faith. First, the belief that God is not a myth, is not a dry or remote philosophical concept. God is not identical with the universe or nature that He created. God did not create the universe and retire and become inactive in history. God is not a despotic being who demands our obedience for His own benefit or enjoy tormenting and punishing His creation.

Secondly, both communities believe that while the nature and essence of God is beyond our comprehension, we can relate to God's divine attributes. Some of these attributes relate to our personal intimate relationship with Him such as love, mercy and forgiveness. Other attributes relate to God's majesty, transcendence such as supremacy, creation, power, perfect knowledge and wisdom, pervading presence, justice, righteousness and holiness. All these are mentioned in the Koran.

Thirdly, both communities are united in the belief that faith in God is not a mere dry dogma, but an experience of closeness, trust, love and willing submission to God. It should be a dynamic faith which gives life a meaning and direction. While these three common beliefs are very essential to the Muslim, however, oneness of God means more than believing in the one Creator of the universe. There are three additional conditions.

First, God is one in essence and in person. This excludes the presence of equal divine persons in the same Godhead. Neither tritheism nor trinity, however explained, is compatible with the pure Islamic monotheism. Two, God alone is worthy of worship and unqualified devotion. None is to be worshiped instead of Him or along side with Him as "co-equal," nor is God to be worshiped through any creature whether religious institution, clergy or even the greatest of the prophets. The third condition in Islam for monotheism is that any shortcoming, man-like weaknesses and limitation is not befitting to the glory of God. This excludes any notion of God incarnate and any other quality or action which is ungod-like or unsuitable for the majesty of God.

To the Muslim any deviation from any of these conditions means to associate or join others with God in His exclusive, divine attributes. It is regarded as a serious compromise of pure and long-standing monotheism taught by all prophets. In fact, Muslims believe that prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was sent by God to restore and clarify the same pure concept of monotheism that was taught by all of the prophets.

Finally, a few examples of what the Koran says about God. God is forgiving, full of loving compassion, close to mankind, God begets not, nor was begotten and there is nothing comparable unto Him. There is no God but He; the living, the self-sustaining, the eternal. No slumber can seize Him, nor sleep. His are all things in heavens and on earth. And finally, God is the Knower of the visible and the invisible, most gracious, most merciful, the Sovereign, the Holy One, the source of peace, the Protector unto whom all submit and love in devotion.

Thank you very much.

Ankerberg: Thank you very much. Dr. Gleason Archer, we are going to ask that you would speak on behalf of Christianity concerning the concept of God.

Dr. Gleason Archer: In the first place, we should observe that Islam and Christianity are closer to each other than to any other religions. And they share so much in the way of conviction concerning the sacredness of life and the ideals of marriage and family. We do rejoice that so many who are of that background have come at last to a country like America where they have an opportunity to make a choice in regard to their understanding of God and their purpose in life, a choice which perhaps is far more open than would be in a Muslim country where it is a matter of death penalty if anyone ever leaves the Muslim faith.

Now, the God who is presented in the Holy Scripture is not simply a sterile monad. He is a trinitarian God who is observable immediately in Genesis, the first book, the first chapter and the first three verses. Because in the first verse we are told that God, Elohim, created the

heavens and the earth. And then in the second verse, we are told that the *Ruach* Elohim, the Spirit of God, brooded over the waters in the initial stage of the earth's development. And then in the third verse we are told that God said, "Let there be light." And this, of course, evokes the creative word of God which is explained in the gospel of John, the first chapter in the first three verses: "In the beginning was the Word, the logos, and the logos was with God and the logos was God. All things came into being through the logos."

Now, it is true that in Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, verse 4, we have that fine statement which is basic to the faith of Israel, and I think basic also to Islam and Christianity. "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is One." The term used for one, by the way, is *echad* which is like the Arabic *Ahab*, meaning one. But it is very interestingly used in Genesis 2:24 of what happens with man and wife become married. They, too, shall become one flesh. Well, of course, this does not mean that there is just a husband or just a wife, but the two of them are one. In verse 26 of Genesis 1, we read in connection with God's creation of man, "Let us make man in our image."

Now, this could not possibly refer to angels joining with God in the matter of furnishing a model for man. It does seem to imply a plurality on the part of the one God. Now, of course, it is true that in later times, certainly in Koranic times, the first person plural pronoun "we" was frequently used in a majestic way. Allah is quoted very often in this fashion. But the thing that is important to observe is that in no ancient language of the B.C. period do you find such usage. If a person means I, he says I, he does not say we. Therefore, on historic linguistic grounds we are forced to say that there is an implication of plurality in the Godhead in this account of man's creation.

Ankerberg: All right. Thank you very much. As we continue this discussion, my first question is going to be to Dr. Hussein Morsi.

I am going to read a passage from the Koran, and then I am going to ask you a question. In the Koran, in Sura 5:47-51 it says, "It was we who revealed the law [talking about the Law of Moses], therein was guidance and light. By its standards have been judged the Jews, by the prophets, [now we've got the prophets], who bowed to God's will by the rabbis and the doctors of the law for to them was entrusted the protection of God's book. [So, the law and the prophets are said to be God's book.] And in their footsteps [after that] we sent Jesus the Son of Mary confirming the law [the Torah] that had come before him. We sent him the gospel therein was guidance and light. Let the people of the gospel judge by what God has revealed therein [—the law, the prophets, the gospel—] If any fail to judge by what God has revealed they are no better than rebels. To thee we sent the Scripture in truth [—that's the Koran—] confirming the Scripture that came before it [—that's the Bible—] and guarding it in safety. So judge between them by what God has revealed and do not follow their vain desires diverging from the truth that has come to thee."

Now, it's called truth. If the Christian is to obey the teaching of the Koran, he is going to read the books of Moses, the law. He is going to read the prophets. He is going to listen to what Jesus said in the gospels. He is going to listen to the apostles. And, when he does that, he is going to find out that first in 2 Peter 1:17 the Son is declared to be God for He received honor and glory from God the Father.

Second, the Son is declared to be God in John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word and Word was with God and the Word was God." Third, the Holy Spirit is declared to be God in Acts 5:3-4. Then, Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit? What made you think of doing such a thing? You

have not lied to men, but to God.”

And finally, when you look at the prophets and you look at the law of Moses, Deuteronomy 6:4 says, “Hear O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is One.” You put all that together, the Christian says, God revealed it to us. He is the one who should know what He is like and He said in the Koran it says you were to look at that. You put them together, these three persons are the one God whether we understand it or not. Why? Because He revealed it to us. There is only one God who manifests Himself to us as three persons, the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. So, Jesus in Matthew could say, “Go and baptize in the name [singular] of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” We don’t understand it, but God has revealed it to us. How do you get around obeying that and not holding on to the concept of a triune God when the Koran points us right to that information?

Hussein Morsi: What you are concluding here are theological doctrines that were never taught by Jesus, were never taught by Moses, were never taught by Abraham, were never taught by any of the prophets. Now, you brought up multiple points that I would like to address them if I had the time one by one, but at least I will address the most important one for just the sake of time. No where does “we” mean trinity. If we say “we” it means plural. Anyone that is familiar with the semitic language like Greek, Hebrew and Arabic will know that there is a plural of respect and there is a plural of number; that we and the us that is mentioned in the Old Testament and in the Koran refers to the plural of respect of God Almighty. Even the Queen of England, John, says we and it does not mean that there is multiple Queens there. This is number one. Number two: if God is a triune God, then Jesus does not have to beat around the bush, and does not have to rely on theologians; He does not have to rely on interpretations, He would have just came out when one asked of Him, “what is the first of all the commandments?” He said, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is a triune God.” Yet, he did not. He said, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God. Therefore, you should worship the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy mind, with all thy strength and with all thy spirit.” This, in essence, is the core expression of faith in Islam: there is no one to be worshiped but the one and only mighty God.

Now, let me remind you also, John, that Jesus, peace be upon Him, put his forehead to the ground and prayed to God. Jesus referred to God Almighty as my Father, your Father, my God and your God. So, no where does it say that God is triune. This is the by-product of the theology of the council of Nicea the year 325 if you study the history of Christianity, you will find out they said God is two. And then the second conference of Nicea added number three to it. So, this had nothing to do with Jesus.

Badawi: Can I add one thing about the interpretation of the Bible, John, because I think there are two major mistakes. First of all, you’re implying that the Koran confirms the Bible. No where in the Koran does it confirm the Bible; never mentions Old Testament, or New Testament or gospels in plural. What the Koran deals with is the Torah given to Moses and that does not even include the Pentateuch because the Pentateuch speaks about the death and burial of Moses. It speaks about God’s revealed and....

Ankerberg: All right. Hold on. Let me ask one question to you. Then I’m going to come to these men because we have got such short time. The verses I was reading—Matthew 28:19, 1 Peter and Acts—what is that literature?

Badawi: That literature is the combination of biography about Jesus by Matthew and statements of faith and belief by the other writers, not what the Koran teach about, which is the teaching of Jesus Himself. It does not regard them as the same.

Ankerberg: Where is that teaching that you are talking about?

Badawi: That teaching is partly included in the gospels; partly lost, but the Koran, as you quoted yourself, keeping it in safety; that means the Koran came to confirm what remains intact. So, our criteria as Muslims that anything in the gospel that is consistent with the Koran which is the last revelation and criteria is regarded as the teaching of Jesus. It is there.

Ankerberg: All right. We have got only four minutes left. So, Gleason, there are four questions that have come up. First of all, is the material that we were quoting—Matthew, Acts and Peter—is that not the gospels, is that not from the eyewitnesses, how do we know that? Second, about this plural “we?” Third is the fact of Jesus talking about my God and your God. I think that is a good way to bring it out because He did say my God and your God for a reason. Would you comment on those three things?

Archer: Yes. Well, first of all, I apparently did not communicate successfully to these gentlemen the fact that there is no recorded use in any ancient language in the B.C. period or in the classical Roman or Greek period where the pronoun “we” is ever equivalent to “I.” Therefore, the only honest thing you can do in the interpretation of language is to recognize the fact that when the Hebrew used “let us make”, it was talking about more than one.

Ankerberg: What about this material that we are reading? I asked you that question and they said that it has been lost. The gospels and so on.

Morsi: Jesus said, “I have not spoken of myself, but God had given me a commandment of what I should say and what I should believe.”

Ankerberg: Yes, but what I want to know is what about the original manuscripts. Have they been lost?

Archer: I think it should be pointed out that we, today, still have manuscripts of the New Testament and the Old Testament that go back four, five or even eight centuries before the Koran was revealed to Muhammad. And, they are identical, or virtually identical in wording, to what we have in our scholarly editions of the Old and New Testaments today. Therefore, it is contrary to reason to suppose that there was some other form of gospel or of Old Testament or Torah which is different, for which there is not one line, one word of manuscript evidence.

(The complete video tape or audio cassette tape version of this debate is available through our on-line catalogue. Look for Islam vs. Christianity.)