

What God Do Muslims Worship?

by Rick Brown



The rise of Islamist terrorism has enraged people across the world. Muslims have suffered the most from terrorists, and they have suffered from the Western backlash as well, so they are fearful and angry at the militants. Many Christians, on the other hand, have directed their fear and anger towards all Muslims and towards their whole culture. Many have expressed their anger by demonizing Islam, to the extent of accusing Muslims of worshipping a demon. A key element of this attack has been the claim that the name *Allah* refers to a demon or pagan deity, usu-

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ally the “moon god,” and that Muslims worship this pagan deity. Such claims are found in a multitude of books and websites. They have even been made by scholars who are otherwise reputable in their own fields, but who are poorly

acquainted with the language, culture and history of the Arab world. The Kingdom of God, however, is never advanced by untruths, and so this matter needs our careful consideration.

The Meaning of a Word

Lexical meaning has at least two components, its referential meaning (often called “reference” or “denotation”) and its conceptual meaning (often called “sense” or “semantic meaning”). Reference is the intentional act of using a word or expression to identify a particular entity. When I say to you

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the moon is full tonight, I am using the word *moon* to identify an object I am talking about, known as the “referent.” That is the word’s “referential meaning” on that occasion. The reference is determined by my intention and by my expectation that you will understand my intention. As for the conceptual meaning of a word, it is the cluster of properties commonly ascribed to the referents of that word, bundled together in the mind as a concept. So the concept moon includes attributes typically ascribed to a moon, and it is evoked by using the word *moon*. In the case of the word *Allah*, we need to examine both its usual referential meaning and its conceptual meaning. We also need to consider how a word like *Allah* gets a meaning, and how that meaning changes over time.

Meaning becomes associated with words as a social convention based on common usage. When people in a society use the same word to refer to the same things and to describe those things in nearly the same way, then by social convention that becomes its lexical meaning. In English, for example, people normally use the word *dog* in reference to canines and the word *cat* in reference to felines. It is normal, however, for lexical meanings to change over time, especially when the society and its conventions change. Recent examples in English include words like *gay* and *wired*. The word *conversation* has changed over the centuries. It occurs twenty times in the King James Version, always in reference to behavior (although Philippians 3:20 should have meant citizenship), but today the word *conversation* means talking, not behavior. Since there is continual change in the meanings of words, the meaning of a particular word must be determined by its contemporaneous usage rather than by its previous or subsequent usage. So when people use the word *conversation* in normal discourse today, it would be wrong to claim they mean behavior, and it would be wrong to interpret *conversation* in the King James Bible as a reference to talking. Similarly for those today who

call God *Allah* in their language: the meaning of the word is a function of its usage in their society today, not its alleged usage in some ancient society.

Consider the names of the days of the week in English. Most of them were named in honor of Anglo-Saxon gods. Wednesday, for example, is named after the Anglo-Saxon god Woden (= Norse Odin), from whom most of the Anglo-Saxon kings claimed descent, while Monday is named after the moon god Mona (= Norse Mani). For that reason there used to be pious English Christians, mostly Quakers, who refused to use these names and instead named the days *First day*, *Second day*, *Third day*, etc. Today, however, the word *Wednesday* has lost its pagan meaning and is used without hesitation by all Christians, even Quakers. People use it with no thought of referring to Woden. To claim otherwise, based on the origin of the word, is to commit the “etymological fallacy.”

To give another example, there were Christians in Holiness circles who avoided the word *enthused*, because it originally meant to be inspired by pagan gods. Its formerly pagan meaning, however, has long since disappeared, and when Christians today talk about “enthusiasm” they are not referring to spirit possession.

The ancient Canaanites used the term *El* as the name of the chief deity of their pantheon of gods. His wife was Asherah and their son was Baal. When Isaac, Jacob and their descendents adopted the language of southern Canaan (which came to be known as Hebrew), they used the term *El* to refer to the God of Abraham, who was the Most High God and the Creator of the universe. This was the intended reference of their usage, and it became a conventional reference among them. In this way they shed the pagan meaning of *El*, and in the Bible this pagan meaning survives in only one reference to a Canaanite temple (Judg 9:46).

Prior to the coming of monotheism, the Greek word *theos* and the Latin word *deus* were used in reference to pagan deities, but the inspired authors of the New Testament used *theos* quite intentionally to refer to the Most High God, the Creator, the God of Abraham. Similarly in the Anglo-Saxon language, prior to the coming of Christianity the word *god* was used exclusively in reference to pagan gods. Now, however, *God* is used in English as the very name of the Supreme Being.

The list could go on. The point is that the meanings of a word are a matter of social convention and speaker’s intention, as revealed in context. Among the Hebrews it was the convention to use *El* in reference to the Creator, the Lord of the

universe, and among Greek Christians it was a convention to use *theos* with this same meaning. The words could have other meanings as well, but the Biblical authors used them with this manifest intention. Among the Jews, Christians and Muslims who speak Arabic, it is the convention to use *Allah* to refer to the Creator, the Lord of the universe, the God of Abraham and the prophets, and this is their intended reference when they use it. However, unlike the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English words for God, which have pagan origins, the word *Allah* has no other meaning in Arabic than the one true God, and as we shall see, it has no history in Arabic of ever having had a different referential meaning.

The Referential Meaning of the Name *Allah*

When speaking English, Muslims use both the words God and *Allah* to refer to the God they worship. By both convention and intention, they are referring to the one true God, whom the Qur’an affirms to be the Creator, the God of Abraham, the God of the Bible, and the God of the Christians (Qur’an 2:135; 6:73; 29:46, 61). The thought of Allah being the moon had never even entered the mind of a Muslim until they heard of this abhorrent claim being made against them by “missionaries” (which is their term for all anti-Muslim polemicists). Muslims regard this as slander against themselves and as blasphemy against God, leading them to doubt the honesty, piety and good intentions of Christian missionaries. Like all antagonistic approaches to Muslim society, this creates defensiveness and resistance to the Gospel.

Writing in the *Christian Century* (2004, issue 17), Dr. Umar E. Abd-Allah politely understates that “as a Muslim, I am naturally sensitive to attempts by others to define what I or my community believes.” As for the God Whom Muslims worship, he writes (p. 36),

From a Muslim’s perspective, the premise that Muslims, Jews and Christians believe in the same God—the God of Abraham—is so central to Islamic theology that unqualified rejection of it would, for many, be tantamount to a repudiation of faith.

The fact is, Arabic-speaking Jews, Christians, and

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Muslims all use the term *Allah* to refer to the one and only God, the creator of the universe, the sustainer of life, the bestower of blessings, the sender of prophets, the author of Scripture, and the judge of all nations. That is what the term *Allah* means for them, not a moon god. *Allah* is simply their name for God in Arabic, as it is in the Qur'an. Whatever meaning the word may have had in more ancient times is irrelevant to its monotheistic meaning in the Qur'an and current usage, just as the ancient pagan meaning of *El* is irrelevant to its usage in the Bible and in Modern Hebrew as a name for God.

Whereas Jewish scholars recognize seven names for God in Hebrew (*El, Elobim, Adonai, Yhwh, Ehyeh, Asher-Ehyeh, Shaddai, and Tseba'ot*), Muslims use only *Allah* as a proper name, although they recognize 99 or more divine epithets, or "attributive names". So wherever Muslims took the message of monotheism, they used the name *Allah*

for the one and only God. As a result, the name *Allah* has been borrowed into many languages and has been used by both Muslims and Christians in their worship and in their translations of the Bible. In many languages *Allah* is used in addition to indigenous names for God, such as *Khuda* (Persian), *Mungu* (Swahili), and *Tuhan* (Malayo-Polynesian).



Although Western Christians tend to associate the name *Allah* with Islam or even with Islamists, they should understand that for Christians from North Africa to Indonesia, *Allah* is a dear and highly revered name. A Christian leader named Rafique, writing in the 13:1 (1998) issue of *Seedbed*, made the following plea:

Speak, if you wish, against their book, the Qur'an, and against their Mohammed, but PLEASE never never against the glorious name of Allah, a name that has been loved and revered by millions of God's children down through the centuries.

Could Allah be a Moon God?

The lexical argument above should be enough to demonstrate that Muslims use the term *Allah* to refer to the Omnipotent Creator, the God of Abraham and the Bible. Some polemicists, however, note that the symbol of the crescent moon adorns the tops of many mosques and is widely used as a symbol of Islam. So they claim that Islam stems

from worship of a moon god named "Allah," and that the crescent moon symbol has been passed down from an ancient moon religion to a modern moon religion called "Islam." Muslim scholars readily acknowledge that before the coming of Islam, many "gods" and idols were worshiped in the Middle East. That was true in ancient Israel as well, where many Hebrews worshiped the sun and moon and stars (Jer 8:2; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:3; 23:5; Deut 17:2-3). The name of the ancient Near-Eastern moon god, however, was *Sin*, not *Allah*, and he was not particularly popular in Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. The most prominent idol in Mecca was a god with the name *Hubal*, and there is no evidence that he was a moon god, in spite of claims to the contrary.

Polemicists have presented some highly dubious arguments for an Arabian moon religion. For example, the temple ruins at Hazor in Palestine have been presented as evidence of Arabian moon worship. This is based on a carving there of a suppliant wearing a crescent-like pendant. This site is not, however, an ancient Arab religious site but an ancient Canaanite site, destroyed by Joshua in about 1250 BC. As for the "crescent," it looks like the horns of a bull, which was a symbol of strength and a symbol of Baal, a Canaanite god.

Further evidence is claimed from an ancient temple in the ruins of the kingdom of Sheba (Saba), in Yemen, which includes inscriptions to the kingdom's patron god, with the name *Almaqah*. It has been claimed that he was a moon god, based on a partially excavated symbol that looked like a crescent moon. But as an article on "South Arabia" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* notes, when fully excavated the engraving turned out to be a bull's head with horns. In any case scholars now think Almaqah was a sun god.

The ancient Arabs worshiped hundreds of idols, including no doubt the sun and moon, but *there is no clear evidence that moon-worship was prominent among the Arabs in any way or that the crescent was used as the symbol of a moon god or that the name Allah was used for a moon god.* Furthermore, there is no evidence that any of these pagan gods were identified with Allah, in spite of claims to the contrary, and there is no evidence that the crescent moon was used as a symbol of Allah or anyone else in ancient Arabia.

In fact, the crescent moon was a political symbol originating in Christendom. It was used as one of the symbols of the Byzantine Empire and was seen wherever the imperial flag was placed. It evidently symbolized the empire's claim to rule everything

under the heavens. As it happens, many of the ancient Turkish tribes also used a crescent-like symbol, although it might have been derived from the horns of a bull rather than the moon. So when the Ottoman Turks completed their conquest of the Byzantine Empire in the 15th century, including the Middle East and North Africa, they retained the Byzantine crescent as a symbol of empire. In fact, they affixed crescent symbols atop public buildings throughout their empire as a symbol of their imperial rule. It also figured in the flags of their vassal states, even after the states became independent from Turkey. Once the crescent no longer represented Turkish imperial rule in these countries, it was reinterpreted as a symbol of Islam, and that is its modern significance. *So the crescent symbol has not been passed to Islam from a moon religion but is a recent symbol promoted by the Ottoman Turks for political reasons.*

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The Origin of the Name *Allah*

So where did the name *Allah* come from? Prior to the rise of Islam and for some time afterwards, Aramaic was widely used among Jews and Christians in the Ancient Near East and many Aramaic words were borrowed into Arabic. The usual term for God in Aramaic was *Alāh(ā)*. It is the term that Jesus would have used. It is used as the term for God in the books of Ezra and Daniel, in the Jewish translations of the Bible (the Targums), in the Talmud and in the Aramaic Bible used by many Middle-Eastern Christians today. When Judaism spread across Arabia, it brought many Aramaic names and terms, including *Alāh(ā)*. When Christianity followed, the Christians used Aramaic Scripture and liturgy in most of Arabia and Mesopotamia. As a result the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians introduced many Aramaic words and names into Arabic. In a research paper entitled “Who was ‘Allah’ before Islam?”, I present evidence from pre-Islamic inscriptions and manuscripts to show that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians were using *Allah* as the name of God in the centuries prior to the rise of Islam. (This is being published by William Carey Library in *Rethinking our Assumptions About Muslims*. A

prepublication version is available at www.contextualization.info/rickbrown.)

It should be noted that Muslim scholars do not like to admit that the Arabic of the Qur’an has loanwords, and they suggest that the name *Allah* is derived from the expression *al ‘ilah*, meaning “the God,” with the article of uniqueness. The word *‘ilah* is related to the Biblical Hebrew words *‘eloh* and *‘elohim*, meaning “God,” as well as to the Biblical Aramaic words *elāh* and *alāhā*, so regardless of the derivation, the word is related to the Biblical terms for God.

The prophet of Islam claimed to preach a continuation of the message of the Jewish prophets and the Messiah Jesus, so it stands to reason that he would use the same names that Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians were using. Evidence for this is found in the Qur’an itself. For example, it cites the claim of Christians that Jesus is Allah. This claim is rejected in the Qur’an, which says, “In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary” (Sura 5:17, Yusuf Ali translation). The very next verse in the Qur’an criticizes Jews and Christians for claiming that they are “sons of Allah” (Sura 5:18). So in addition to other historical evidence for the pre-Islamic use of *Allah* by Christians, the Qur’an itself reflects a situation in which Christians were already using *Allah* as the name of God.

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Different Conceptual Meanings of the Name *Allah*

Concepts vary somewhat among individuals. For example, if one’s concept of dogs is built on bad experiences with mongrels, it will be somewhat different from the concepts held by a dog-lover, a hound hunter, or a canine patrolman. Concepts vary among cultures as well. In Muslim cultures, dogs are viewed as unclean animals that should remain outside the house.

Societies also have different concepts of God. Even within cultures that share a Christian heritage, sub-cultural conceptions of God can be quite different. Mormons, for example, think of God as a man who became a god, created the earth, joined with spirit women to beget spirits for human

babies, and coupled with Mary to beget Jesus. My mission to Mormons is not to change their terms for God and Jesus but to redefine them, and that requires a change of their concept of God.

Jews and Muslims typically think of God as one and indivisible, without distinctions of person, and without being incarnate as the Messiah. But Jews conceptualize God as favoring Jews over others, whereas Muslims think of God as preferring Muslims to Jews. Like Jews and Muslims, Jesus-only Protestants are non-Trinitarian, but unlike Jews and Muslims they view Jesus as God. Liberal Protestants do not view God as incarnate in Jesus but as simply revealing his characteristics and message through Jesus. Some Christians view God as punitive and requiring regular propitiation through the sacrifice of the mass. Deists view God as distant, uncaring, and uninvolved. And then there are Evangelical conceptions of God. All of these people use the same word 'God' to refer to the same being, yet they have different concepts of who God is. Similarly in the Middle East, Jews, Christians, and Muslims use the same word *Allah* to refer to God, but their concepts of God differ. The significance is this: *One cannot change a person's concept of God merely by changing the name he uses for God. Any name that denotes God for someone will evoke that person's concept of God. What is required for reconceptualization is new information about God that will change the concept itself.*

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Fortunately God has designed the Bible in such a way that it builds and revises one's concepts of God and man, creation and destiny, sin and holiness, Jesus and salvation, and so on. It is through reading or hearing the Word of God, especially in one's mother tongue, that one's concepts and worldview are reformed. This change in one's concept of God may involve eliminating some attributes of one's God—concept (such as capriciousness and dispassionateness) and adding new attributes (such as sympathy and joy, consistency and reliability, purposefulness in guiding history). It may involve increasing the strength of existing attributes of one's God—concept (lovingness and holiness), and decreasing the strength of others (such as vindictiveness). It may also involve adding new information to one's concept of God, such as God existing as Father, Word and Spirit,

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What if the Qur'an was Inspired by a False Spirit Speaking in God's Name Allah?

There are a few polemicists who accept that *Allah* was the pre-Islamic name for God in Arabic, but they still object to its use on the dubious grounds that it was used in false prophecy. Although most non-Muslims assume the Qur'an is a human composition, and scholars cite sources for parts of it, others say it was inspired by a demon. According to Islamic accounts, the prophet of Islam received the texts of the Qur'an from the angel Jibreel (Gabriel), and when he first heard Jibreel speak to him in a cave, he thought Jibreel was a demon. This reminds some Christians of the event recorded in 1 Kings 22:23, where God allowed a false prophet to be inspired by a lying spirit and to speak messages in the name of God; the false prophet's messages were not actually from God, and the foretold events did not come to pass.

How should God's people respond to false prophecies? Deuteronomy 18:22 gives the following directive:

"When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him." (Note: The Hebrew text actually says the name Yahweh, not the title Lord.)

This verse instructs us to ignore the claims made by false prophets and not fear them. It does not say to quit calling God *Yahweh*, *Adonai*, *Elohim*, or *Alaha*, just because a false prophet and his followers used that name for the Supreme Being. The Biblical prophets did not stop using those names for God, just because some false prophets had used them! Consider an English example: Most Christians regard the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith to be a false prophet, but they do not stop using the name *God* just because it was used in the Book of Mormon. Yet a few people are saying that if the Qur'an was inspired by a spirit who spoke falsely in the name of God, which in Arabic was *Allah*, then Christians should never call the Supreme Being *Allah*. In other words, in the many languages where for centuries Christians and Muslims have been referring to God as *Allah*, they should stop doing so, because a lying spirit once used that name when it claimed to speak in the name of God. It seems evident that this rationale owes more to fear and prejudice than to Scripture and logic.

Implications for the Gospel if the Name *Allah* is Rejected

There is another aspect to this issue, and that is the barrier to communication raised by rejecting the use of *Allah* in languages where it is the name of God. If I am speaking the language of people whom I hope to influence with the Gospel, and if the normal word for God in their language is *Allah*, then any refusal on my part to use that term will distance me from the very people I am trying to reach, and it will distance them from the Gospel message itself. My insensitivity to the linguistic conventions of their society will signal a lack of genuine care for them and a lack of respect for their culture, heritage, and identity. My rejection of their preferred terminology will signal a rejection of them personally and of their community in general. Thus my attempt to draw them will actually repel them because I reject their way of talking about these things. So it is important to use their language authentically, as they themselves use it, without communicating rejection by refusing to use their names and terms. To put it another way, *if we wrap the message of salvation in the language of rejection, we provoke our listeners to reject it.*

Kevin Greeson describes it this way: If missionaries refuse to use the names and terms customarily used by their audience, then in effect they are saying, "I do not love you enough to communicate with you beyond *my* comfort level. If you want to hear the Gospel of salvation, then *you* must come out of *your* comfort zone and come talk with *me* in terms that *I* am comfortable with." Kevin adds, however, that he does not know of any missionaries who still reject the name *Allah* for God.

The Yale professor Lamin Sanneh, in his book *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*, draws a significant conclusion from his study of the spread of Christianity across the non-Western world. He notes that wherever a society's traditional name for God was used in translations of the Bible and in Christian outreach and expression, it facilitated social and cultural renewal.

More significantly, "in the relevant cases *Christian expansion and revival were limited to those societies that preserved the indigenous name for God*" (pp. 31-32, emphasis added; cf. p. 79). Need one say more?



Modern Turkey, for example, has two main Muslim subcultures: modern Turks and traditional Turks. Modern Turks use a "Turkified" language in which traditional Arabic and Persian loanwords have been replaced with words based on Turkish, while traditional Turks retain many of the Arabic and Persian loan-words, especially those pertaining to religion. The Turkish Bible Society has produced an excellent new translation of the Bible that suits modern urbanized Turks quite well. But traditional

Turks, especially ones who are highly religious, refuse to read it, even though many of them long to know what the Bible says. This is because the modern translation has replaced the word *Allah* with the Turkish word *Tanrı*, and religious Turks consider *tanrı* to mean "god" in a pagan sense. In their view, if the Bible does not contain their name for God, *Allah*, then it does not come from God. So the very group of Turks who are the most concerned about spiritual issues and the most eager to hear God's Word are locked out of the Bible by the total absence of the word *Allah* in the translation.

Conclusion

The "Allah" whom Muslims worship is the Creator, who alone is God; they do not worship a moon god or idol. Nevertheless, their concept of God is incomplete and distorted without the revelation of God that is presented in the Bible. In this respect they are like non-Messianic Jews, whose concept of God is uninformed by the New Testament revelation. The Apostle Paul wrote about this in Romans 10:2, saying, "For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge." Many Muslims have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with Biblical knowledge. They want to please God and attain salvation, but they lack the benefit of Biblical revelation regarding the nature of God and his provision of salvation through Jesus Christ. The problem is not their name for God but their concept of God. The concept of a holy, loving, consistent, triune God comes from absorbing the worldview revealed in the Bible. What leads Muslims to a fuller concept of God is not the use of a different divine name but the revelation of the Word of God, illuminated and confirmed by the Holy Spirit and the testimony of the saints. f