

Is it true all religions worship the same God?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Having devoted most of my vocational life to interfaith work, building relationships among people of various religious beliefs and world views, I gravitate to stories that reflect that positive side of religion. In the Pacific Northwest county where I lived half my life, a new mosque is opening in a beautiful country setting. A Muslim leader said: "Sometimes, you forget to see the beauty that is all around us ... I can see God easily through his work." (HeraldNet, Everett, Washington, July 26, 2021). This feeling is understandable in that region given the deep green forests, clear rivers and snow-capped mountains in virtually all directions. In my early years I would have said the same thing – natural beauty and supernatural

belief sometimes converge like the creeks.

Representatives of diverse faith traditions and other community leaders were invited to celebrate the end of Ramadan at the site of the new mosque. A faith leader described the intent: "Respect finds its true meaning when you're able to respect people who see the world with a different perspective, people you may think are wrong."

Another faith leader at the ceremony remarked: "We all worship the same God." At a later stage of my winding and wandering faith journey I would have said this too. Don't believers, especially in the Abrahamic traditions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – essentially follow the same deity? And if Hindus, Mormons, Buddhists, Sikhs and Taoists reverence one High God or Creative Force in the universe, don't they worship an identical divinity in different forms – the many faces or "masks" of God?

But not all creeks converge, do they? Not all rivers flow into the same lake or sea. And not every trail leads up the

same mountain. In his important book, "God is Not One," Stephen Prothero, professor of Religion at Boston University, makes this point clear: "The world's religious rivals do converge when it comes to ethics, but they diverge sharply on doctrine, ritual, mythology, experience, and law. These differences may not matter to mystics or philosophers of religion, but they matter to ordinary religious people" (Prothero is also the author of "Religious Literacy"). He goes on to explain the claim that all religions are one "is neither accurate nor ethically responsible. God is not one. Faith in the unity of religions is just that – faith."

This view presents some uncomfortable challenges to respected teachers such as the Dalai Lama or scholars such as Huston Smith. It's one thing to bring various representatives together to dialogue or even collaborate on specific projects that reflect similar ethical commitments. It's quite another thing to extrapolate from this that the religions are basically the same.

This recalls Wilma Dykeman's de-

scription of the French Broad river whose source in Western North Carolina (near Devil's Courthouse!) is both the North Fork and the Big Pigeon rivers. "Though they rise less than a mile apart, the French Broad does not receive this second largest tributary for almost a hundred and fifty miles and in another state [Tennessee]" ("The French Broad," 1955). Are these rivers the same? Does the fact they meet up and flow together at a later juncture allow us to conclude that since they have a common destination therefore they are "one river"? Not at all.

The Muslim leader at the new mosque said some people in the surrounding community were unhappy and unwelcoming. They started a letter-writing campaign to stop the mosque. He feels these angry and fearful people simply don't know them, the congregation, or Islam (a usual issue with any interfaith work – people are either willing to learn, or not). And part of the learning

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for all of us is to admit we don't know that much about all these belief systems and it's up to us to choose to meet those with different beliefs. If we choose not to "cross the line" of difference, that's on us – we have no place judging the "other" if we don't know them.

This is the balance, isn't it? The religions are not the same, the gods are not the same, and it doesn't help to run them all together into a big bubbling river. Religion is not one peak of piety but a mountain range (with many valleys). We can appreciate the va-

riety of rivers, mountains and paths, willing to face the fact of faith's diversity. As I see it, healthy, non-fear-based religion seeks the similarities and values the differences too. Streams, like mountains, must be viewed individually. Yes, it's all water, land – individual and communal experience of meaningful life and ethical living – but each one may consist of many paths, myriad streams. And each must be critically considered. Not every stream offers pure water. Every mountain need not be ascended.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.