

ANDY BANNISTER

DO MUSLIMS  
AND  
CHRISTIANS  
WORSHIP  
THE SAME  
GOD?

'A NUANCED  
AND SENSITIVE  
EXAMINATION'

**TOM HOLLAND**

'A MUST-READ'

**AMY ORR-EWING**



‘There is something delightful about engaging with a sharp mind on his A-game, and that’s what we get with Andy Bannister in *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?* Few topics are more important in today’s world, and few authors are more qualified to address it. Thank you, Andy, for giving us this excellent and important book!’

**Bruxy Cavey**, Pastor, The Meeting House, and author of *The End of Religion*

‘A nuanced and sensitive examination, from an overtly Christian perspective, of how to negotiate a truth that is no less self-evident for being one that many prefer to draw a veil across: Christianity and Islam are not remotely the same.’

**Tom Holland**, author of *Dominion* and *In the Shadow of the Sword*

‘*Do Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God?* is a must-read in today’s culture of religious diversity. You will appreciate his deep understanding of both Islam and Christianity, as well as the British humour interjected into this crucial conversation. Muslims and Christians no longer live in separate communities but, rather, interact on a daily basis in schools and work settings. This book is a great resource to foster healthy dialogue and understanding.’

**Fouad Masri**, President/CEO, Crescent Project

‘We hear the question often: do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? Many in our pluralistic world want the answer to be a resounding “Yes”, but few are actually qualified to answer that question. We need thinkers who have studied both religions extensively. Andy Bannister is just such an expert and he helps us to wrestle with this important question with the depth and care it deserves.’

**Randy Newman**, Senior Fellow at The C. S. Lewis Institute and author of *Questioning Evangelism*

‘With warmth, wit and approachability, Dr Andy Bannister has drawn on his extensive knowledge of Islam and Christianity to bring us a book of real wisdom. He gets right to the heart of the questions and offers the reader accessible evidence to consider the essential claims of two faiths. I highly recommend this readable yet thoroughly researched book as a must-read for the curious, whether you have faith already or not. Prepare to be entertained, edified and gripped – I found myself unable to put it down.’

**Dr Amy Orr-Ewing**, President, OCCA The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics

‘In his latest book, Andy Bannister tackles one of the most challenging questions of Christian–Muslim dialogue. His arguments are lucid and his conclusions compelling. At the same time, he writes with respect, grace and humour. This book is a must-read for all interested in inter-religious issues, both believers and non-believers.’

**Peter G. Riddell**, SOAS University of London and Australian College of Theology

‘Andy Bannister’s profound grasp of both Islam and Christianity make this book a unique and accessible resource for an important debate taking place in our churches and wider communities. Andy’s good humour and capable scholarship bring clarity to a notoriously difficult yet increasingly significant discussion. He is persistently challenging, consistently provoking, deeply searching and endlessly witty! This book is for all who are concerned to think carefully about what it means to hold Christian beliefs faithfully in our contemporary multi-religious context.’

**Anna Robbins**, President and Dean of Theology, Acadia University

‘*Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?* is a sharp-witted, big-hearted and clear-minded romp through one of the most pressing religious questions of our time. You will laugh your way through

some of the key differences between Islamic and Christian belief, discovering just why they matter so much for humanity. This is classic Bannister and essential reading for those seeking both intellectual clarity and relational generosity in Christian–Muslim relations.’

**Dr Richard Shumack**, Research Fellow, Centre for Public Christianity, and Director, Arthur Jeffery Centre for the Study of Islam, Melbourne School of Theology

**Andy Bannister** is the Director of Solas, an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Arthur Jeffery Centre for the Study of Islam at Melbourne School of Theology and an Adjunct Faculty member at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto. Unusual in being a Christian academic and public speaker with a PhD in Islamic Studies, Andy frequently speaks and teaches throughout the UK, Europe, Canada and the USA. He regularly addresses audiences of all faiths (and none) on issues relating to faith, culture and society.

Andy is the author of several books, including *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (2014), *Heroes: Five leaders from whose lives we can learn* (2015) and *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist: Or: the dreadful consequences of bad arguments* (2015). He has also contributed to the multi-author volume *Healthy Faith and the Coronavirus Crisis: Thriving in the COVID-19 pandemic* (2020).

When not travelling, speaking or writing, Andy lives in Scotland with his wife Astrid and their two children, Caitriona and Christopher. He is an avid mountaineer and is busy climbing his way through the Scottish Munros. Andy can be found on social media at <@andybannister>.

# DO MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS WORSHIP THE SAME GOD?

Andy Bannister



There are a dozen views about everything until you know  
the answer. Then there's never more than one.

(C. S. Lewis)

Truth stands out clearly from error.

(The Qur'an)

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

(Jesus Christ)

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## Note to the reader

Throughout the book, quotations from the Qur'an are taken from various translations, including Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted: A translation* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955), Arthur J. Droge, *The Qur'an: A new annotated translation* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (London: Everyman's Library, 1992 [1930]) and Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an* (Birmingham: IPCI, 1999 [1937]).

Quotations from the hadith are taken from the digital editions at <[www.sunnah.com](http://www.sunnah.com)>.

Also, throughout the book, the word 'god' is found spelt both with a lower-case and an upper-case initial letter (that is, 'god' and 'God'). That's not a mistake nor sloppiness by the author, but quite deliberate. Where the word refers to a *specific* god (such as 'the God of the Bible' or 'the God of the Qur'an'), then a capital 'G' is used, as the word is clearly a title. Otherwise, a lower-case 'g' is used (as in 'the concept of god' or 'the gods of the ancient world'), as it's simply functioning as a humble noun.

All vowels used in this book were obtained from sustainable sources.

# 1

## Baptists, beards and burqas Common assumptions about religion

I was brought up in a very multicultural and multireligious part of south London. Where I lived, you could choose from a thousand and one different belief systems: from Buddhism to Judaism, Hinduism to Sikhism, Jainism to humanism, and more. You could even be a Wimbledon Football Club fan; we called that *masochism*. Within a mile or two of my home, there were Christian churches, a Sikh gurdwara and a couple of mosques. Had they found the funds, the Jedis would no doubt have set up a temple somewhere in the neighbourhood.<sup>1</sup>

As I grew up, religion was *everywhere* and, despite the predictions of many secularists that it would go the way of vinyl records and flared trousers, four decades on from my childhood, religion is still everywhere.

And it's *growing*.

According to the latest research from the well-respected Pew Research Center, by 2060 Christianity will have grown to 32% of the world's population, Islam to 31%,<sup>2</sup> and the number of people identifying as atheists or agnostics will have declined to 12.5%.<sup>3</sup>

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1 In recent decades, every time a national census has been taken, many Brits have enjoyed writing things like 'Jedi' in answer to the 'What religion are you?' question. They're clearly a force to be reckoned with.

2 See 'Projected change in global population, 2015–2060', Pew Research Center, 31 March 2017, <[www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/pf-17-04-05\\_projectionsupdate\\_changepopulation640px](http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/pf-17-04-05_projectionsupdate_changepopulation640px)>.

3 See 'Size and projected growth of major religious groups, 2015–2060', Pew Research Center, 3 April 2017, <[www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/pf-04-05-2017\\_-projectionsupdate-00-07](http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/pf-04-05-2017_-projectionsupdate-00-07)>.

## Baptists, beards and burqas

Those are the global statistics. But zoom in and you discover religion has not vanished here in the West either, no matter what some overly excitable journalists may claim. While some older, established churches have shrunk, more popular forms of Christianity have sprung up, often invigorated by immigration, which has brought lively forms of the faith from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Immigration has also imported a thousand and one entirely different religions to the West, everything from animism to Zoroastrianism – a literal A-to-Z of belief systems, all jostling for attention in the religious marketplace. Among these newcomers, particular attention has been focused on Islam, with over 30 million Muslims now living and worshipping in Europe and North America.<sup>4</sup>

Even among secular-minded Westerners, often tempted to view religion with suspicion while trying to pretend they're far too sophisticated for such things, religion has simply morphed into other forms. 'Spirituality', for example.

I lived for some years in Canada. Shortly after emigrating to what friends had told me was a very secular country, I took a short flight from Vancouver to Vancouver Island on a tiny plane that bounced around the sky like a ping-pong ball in a tumble dryer. To distract myself from thinking about unhelpful things like metal fatigue and terminal velocity, I pulled out the in-flight magazine, a glossy little production of about a dozen pages. Six of those pages were given over to an article on ghosts – how to know if your house has one, how to befriend it, how to ensure it brings positive vibes to your life and so on.

Later, waiting to catch the return flight back to Vancouver, I got chatting to a man at an airport coffee stand who told me that he was off to attend a conference to help him discover his inner divinity.

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4 See 'Europe's growing Muslim population', Pew Research Center, 29 November 2017, <[www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population](http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population)>; and 'New estimates show U.S. Muslim population continues to grow', Pew Research Center, 3 January 2018, <[www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow)>.

'I am God,' he announced, 'and so are you. By the way, do you know where the washroom is?'

All of this in *secular* Canada. In other Western countries, even atheists have got in on the spirituality act, publishing books on topics like how to find 'spirituality without religion'.<sup>5</sup>

Given that religion is everywhere and growing, perhaps the biggest question facing us is: how can we live together despite our differences? How do we all get along? A very common answer is: let's affirm that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere. If Christianity works for you, that's great; but if Islam floats your boat, then go for it. After all, aren't all religions *essentially* the same?

That was certainly my assumption growing up in south London. I belonged to a Christian family; every week we attended the local Baptist church and, as a teenager, I enjoyed youth group, Bible studies and, with my friends, working out ways to pass the time during boring sermons, such as rolling marbles beneath the pews and seeing who could get theirs closest to the front of the church without getting caught.

While on the weekends most of the friends I hung out with were Christians, at school it was an entirely different matter. The high school I attended was full of many different nationalities, especially from the Indian subcontinent, and many of my classmates were Muslims. (London's first Muslim mayor, Sadiq Khan, went to the same school as me. If only I'd had the foresight to get his autograph before he became famous.)

Some of my closest friends at school were Muslims, including my friend Ahmad who, like me, was an avid member of the school chess club; he and I had both made the same very practical discovery that joining the chess club got you out of playing rugby in the rain.

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5 Just two of many examples: Sam Harris, *Waking Up: Searching for spirituality without religion* (London: Transworld, 2014); Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A non-believer's guide to the uses of religion* (London: Penguin, 2013).

## Baptists, beards and burqas

I was a Christian, Ahmad was a Muslim, but we didn't talk about religion. I think we just saw each other as 'religious', whatever that meant.

As a teenager, I never really spent any time at all wondering what my Muslim classmates and friends *actually* believed. If you'd asked me, I think I would probably have assumed it was broadly similar to what I believed. After all, I went to church, they went to mosque; I read the Bible, they read the Qur'an; I believed in Jesus, they believed in Muhammad. And all of us got the mickey taken out of us by the atheists in the class (a small but noisily vocal minority) who liked to call all of us, Christians and Muslims alike, 'religious nutters'.

So it seemed to me that we were all worshipping the same god, in some vague not-quite-sure-how-it-all-fits-together kind of way. In my mind, Muslims were just like Baptists, only with beards and burqas.

## Assuming similarity

The idea that Muslims and Christians are essentially the same is still doing the rounds today. My naive teenage assumptions have gone mainstream. In particular, one frequently hears people lump together the three major monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam under the general term 'Abrahamic faiths'. To many people it seems obvious. Muslims, Christians and Jews all believe in one god, they all believe in scripture, they all believe in heaven, indeed they even have figures like Abraham in common,<sup>6</sup> so surely it's clear that these three religious traditions are branches of the same tree, cousins in the same family. For example, Anglican vicar and journalist Giles Fraser wrote: 'Christians should remind themselves that Muslims

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<sup>6</sup> As well as appearing in the Bible, in both the Old Testament (the part of the Bible also sacred to Jews) and the New Testament, Abraham is frequently mentioned in the Qur'an, with an Arabized form of his name (Ibrahim).

are our brothers and sisters with whom we share a faith in the living God.<sup>7</sup> While across the Atlantic, in the run-up to the 2020 US presidential election, Joe Biden cheerfully announced: ‘I wish we taught more in our schools about the Islamic faith . . . [What people] don’t realize is that we all come from the same root here in terms of our fundamental, basic beliefs.’<sup>8</sup>

This is not just a popular assumption; one can also find it being expressed by serious-minded scholars. Miroslav Volf, an incredibly highly regarded Christian theologian based at Yale University, wrote a popular book addressing this whole question of the relationship between Christianity and Islam. In the opening pages of *Allah: A Christian response*, Volf writes: ‘Christians and Muslims worship one and the same God. They understand God’s character partly differently, but the object of their worship is the same. I reject the idea that Muslims worship a different God than do Jews and Christians.’<sup>9</sup> The leader of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, during a trip to Morocco in 2019, also leapt on the hey-isn’t-it-great-we-believe-in-the-same-god bandwagon, choosing to pontificate in, of all things, a tweet: ‘We Christians and Muslims believe in God, the Creator and the Merciful, who created people to live like brothers and sisters, respecting each other in their diversity, and helping one another in their needs.’<sup>10</sup> To be fair, Pope Francis wasn’t entirely innovating here, but reflecting a theme that goes back some sixty years to the Second Vatican Council, which stated that Muslims ‘together with us adore the one, merciful God’.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Giles Fraser, ‘The Hagia Sophia is for prayer, not pictures’, *UnHerd*, 10 July 2020, <[www.unherd.com/the-post/the-hagia-sophia-is-for-prayer-not-pictures](http://www.unherd.com/the-post/the-hagia-sophia-is-for-prayer-not-pictures)>.

8 ‘Joe Biden speech at the Million Muslim Votes Summit transcript July 2020’, *Rev*, 20 July 2020, <[www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-speech-at-the-million-muslim-votes-summit-transcript-july-20](http://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-speech-at-the-million-muslim-votes-summit-transcript-july-20)>.

9 Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian response* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 14.

10 Pope Francis, @Pontifex Twitter account, 29 March 2019, <[www.twitter.com/pontifex/status/1111697027107184640](https://www.twitter.com/pontifex/status/1111697027107184640)>.

11 Pope John Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, II.16, 21 November 1964, <[www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)>.

## Baptists, beards and burqas

A fascinating survey in 2018 of British and American Christians revealed how versions of this idea are seeping down from the lofty world of theologians, vicars and popes into the wider church. The market research company ComRes surveyed thousands of Christians about their beliefs and, as part of their survey, asked respondents whether they would agree with the statement ‘God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam’; 63% of British Christians and 80% of American Christians said that they would.<sup>12</sup> While this may be a watered-down version of the full-fat, super-sized ‘same god’ idea, nevertheless, it’s still very much in the same ballpark and is one more indicator of how the assumption that religions in general (and Christianity and Islam in particular) are essentially the same (at least in most of the important ways) is becoming ever more mainstream.

### Putting assumptions to the test

The problem with assumptions is precisely that: *they’re assumptions*. Whether it’s a mildly innocuous one, like the assumption that the humble tomato is a vegetable (it’s not, it’s a fruit, although pointing that out still hasn’t made my five-year-old willing to eat one), or a piece of folk medical advice, like ‘Don’t swim within an hour of eating or you’ll get cramp’ (not true; besides, if it’s the British seaside you’re swimming at, you’ll freeze to death long before you get cramp), or my soon-corrected assumption that ‘when you get married you can carry on all your bachelor domestic habits and your wife won’t complain’ (that one survived less than a month), the thing about

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<sup>12</sup> You can explore the whole survey at <[www.thestateoftheology.com/uk](http://www.thestateoftheology.com/uk)> (for the UK results) or <<https://thestateoftheology.com>> (for the USA results). And by way of illustration, see the letter in the *Church Times* of 24 July 2020 by Paul Reynolds, which casually remarks that ‘the God whom Muslims worship is the same God as we worship’: <[www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/24-july/comment/letters-to-the-editor/letters-to-the-editor](http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/24-july/comment/letters-to-the-editor/letters-to-the-editor)>.

assumptions is that it often isn't until we *put them to the test* that we discover they don't hold up.

My own assumption that Christianity and Islam were broadly the same survived my school years and lasted until the late 1990s. Then one weekend, a visiting speaker came to our church and gave a seminar on how, as Christians, we should engage with our Muslim friends and neighbours. This was the first time that I'd ever really heard anything taught in a systematic way about what Muslims believed. Of course, I'd sat through the mandatory Religious Studies lessons at school, but those had been pretty cursory and about as exciting as a wet weekend in Milton Keynes.

But this speaker was very different. Jay was lively and dynamic and, over several hours, gave a fascinating overview of Islamic beliefs and history, as well as sharing some of the new discoveries scholars and academics were making about the Qur'an and the origins of Islam that challenged the traditional story of how the religion began.

Then Jay explained how, every Sunday afternoon, he was taking groups of Christians to Speakers' Corner to dialogue, debate and talk about Christianity with the many Muslims to be found there. Speakers' Corner is part of Hyde Park in London and since the mid-nineteenth century has become affectionately known as the world centre of free speech. At Speakers' Corner, no matter who you are, you can stand on a ladder or a soapbox and talk about *anything* – politics, philosophy, religion, sport – and, if you're informed, witty or entertaining, you can draw a crowd. Jay had discovered that Speakers' Corner was a great place for Christians to meet and debate with Muslims.

I'd never heard of anything like this before in my life. The Christian tradition I'd been brought up in was fairly quietist. Christians, in my experience, stood on the sidelines, usually dressed in bad knitwear, and politely raised their hands when they wanted to speak or coughed until somebody noticed them and asked their opinion or offered them a throat sweet. But Christians standing on ladders,



talking publicly about what they believed, debating Muslims, getting heckled . . . It sounded incredible, it sounded amazing, it sounded frankly terrifying.

‘Oh, it’s *easy*,’ said Jay, when I chatted to him over the lunch break. ‘Why don’t you come to Speakers’ Corner next week and see what we do?’

So the next weekend I found myself standing outside Marble Arch London Underground station, on a soggy Sunday afternoon, not quite sure what I was doing there. A tap on my shoulder startled me and I turned round to see Jay, carrying two stepladders, one slung over each shoulder.

‘Why have you got two stepladders?’ I asked.

‘One for me, one for you,’ he replied nonchalantly.

‘I thought you said I should come to *see* what you do.’

‘Well, the best view of Speakers’ Corner is from the top of a ladder. Besides, everyone should try street preaching.’

‘But I’ve never “preached” on the street.’

‘It’s *easy*. Now come along – the Muslims are waiting.’

‘But I’ve never debated with a Muslim before.’

‘That’s easy too.’

And so it was I found myself, twenty minutes later, balanced atop a wobbly stepladder, surrounded by a crowd of a couple of hundred Muslims, giving a very public demonstration of the fact that just because a large, enthusiastic, bearded American extrovert says something is ‘easy’, it isn’t necessarily so.

To say that my first attempt at street preaching went ‘badly’ is to flirt wildly with understatement, on a par with describing Mount Everest as ‘bigger than a duck’. While it’s true, it probably misses something fairly fundamental. Jay had suggested that I try speaking about something simple, for example, tackling the topic ‘Why I’m a Christian’. And so I rambled on for a couple of minutes in a feeble voice, barely making myself heard above the rain and the traffic rumbling past on nearby Park Lane.

## Baptists, beards and burqas

The crowd stared in polite bemusement until I eventually dried up.

Jay decided to try to help me out by prompting me with a few questions. He was an old pro and had a voice like a foghorn, so the crowds began to wake up again, but I just froze with fear.

So far, so awful, but then the heckling began.

‘Look at the Christian – he has nothing to say!’

‘He has nothing to say because the Bible has no answers!’

‘That Christian needs the Qur’an!’

‘Islam is the answer!’

*‘Allahu akbar!’*

Feeling that this was one horrible mistake, I stepped down from the ladder, thinking it best to leave public speaking to the experts, and was promptly surrounded by a throng of Muslims who had a barrage of questions ready for me. ‘Hasn’t the Bible been corrupted and only the Qur’an perfectly preserved?’ asked one man and, before I could think what to say, another piped up with ‘Why do you Christians blaspheme by worshipping Jesus (peace be upon him) who was just a prophet of Allah?’ I turned to face this new questioner when somebody from behind shouted, ‘You Christians say you believe in one God but talk about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Yet one plus one plus one equals three, not one!’ Occasional cries of *‘Allahu akbar!’* would drift up from the crowd whenever somebody lobbed what the others thought was a particularly tricky theological zinger. I had answers to *none* of them. So much for Christianity and Islam being broadly the same! My new Muslim friends were very clear that the two religions were *wildly* different; only one of them was right, and that was self-evidently Islam.

‘Well,’ said Jay, stroking his beard thoughtfully as we debriefed later over a coffee. ‘That didn’t go too badly for your first time, all things considered.’

‘Not *too* badly?’ I muttered, drowning my sorrows with a swig of caffeine.

‘Oh, sure. The last newbie I had on the ladder was so traumatized, he never came back. Moved to Canada in the end, I think.’

## Looking for the evidence

On the train home I reflected a lot about what had happened at Speakers’ Corner. About how when I had the chance to talk about my Christian faith, I had nothing to say. And how when my new Muslim friends had asked questions, I had no answers. But they seemed to know everything about what they believed, and had a hundred and one reasons why they thought Islam was true, why they thought Christianity was false and why they believed I should become a Muslim.

I thought about this all the way home and all through the evening, and later I lay awake in bed, still chewing things over. Were there *no* good reasons to be a Christian? Did the Muslims have better answers because Islam was *true*? I stared restlessly up into the darkness of the bedroom as I pondered these troubling questions until, finally, about 3 a.m., my wife, whose patience knows almost no bounds, poked me in the ribs and asked why I was tossing and turning and keeping us both awake. I explained what I was struggling to process and her wise words were: ‘Maybe you should read a book or something – ideally in the morning.’

Deciding this was a good plan, the following morning I caught the bus into town and paid a visit to the local bookshop, which was one of those delightfully old-fashioned establishments packed to bursting point with rambling miles of endless wooden shelves, creaking under the weight of books of every possible size and shape. I explained my predicament to the man behind the counter, who peered thoughtfully over his glasses at me.

‘Young man,’ he said kindly, ‘you need apologetics.’

‘Apolo-what-ix?’ I asked. I thought it sounded like some kind of breakfast cereal.

‘Apo-lo-ge-tics,’ he repeated. ‘It’s the part of theology concerned with giving reasons and evidence for the Christian faith. You’ll find it down there.’ He pointed down an aisle. ‘Turn left at epistemology, first right at eschatology and then straight on past hermeneutics.’

Rather than ask who Herman was, why he was drunk and why he was into escapology, I scurried off among the shelves and returned a while later with a small pile of books that had caught my eye, all of which, in various ways, promised to equip me with answers to big questions about the Christian faith or enable me to better understand what my Muslim friends believed and ask them probing questions too.<sup>13</sup>

For the next few weeks I read voraciously, regularly revisiting the bookshop to purchase more, and when, a month later, I returned for a second visit to Speakers’ Corner I was feeling decidedly more chipper. I was well read, I felt prepared, I felt confident, I was ready with answers to all the questions and challenges my Muslim friends had asked the last time. What could possibly go wrong?

They had *new* questions.

*Lots* of new questions.

Once again, I was surrounded by a throng of Muslims eager to overpower a Christian with objections, difficulties and dozens of reasons why they thought that, far from Islam and Christian being similar, Islam was *superior*.

Thus, the following day it was back to the bookshop, left at epistemology, right at eschatology and straight on past hermeneutics, to return with another pile of reading.

But for all the hard mental effort of thinking, investigating and really working out what I believed and why, this was actually fun. And so it became my routine for the next six months. Speakers’

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13 I still have three of those first purchases on my shelves: Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1979); C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1990); Norman Geisler and Abdu Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The crescent in the light of the cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993).

Corner on Sunday afternoons, reading during the week and occasional comments from my wife as to whether a different hobby – stamp collecting, competitive cheese-making or lion taming – might be easier.

Those six months of hard graft, of having my Christian faith challenged at Speakers' Corner, of being forced to read deeply to find out if what I believed was true – and to investigate the foundations of what my Muslim friends believed – all the reading, conversations and debates slowly began to do something to me. They gave me a passion for talking publicly about what I believed and learning to defend it; they kindled a love of learning (I hadn't been to university at this point – I wasn't from a university-attending kind of family); and they stirred in me a love for Muslims. I loved their questions, I admired their passion for what they believed and I enjoyed their willingness to talk about it boldly without apology.

All of this excited me so much that I clearly needed to pursue it further. Before long, I had applied for a three-year degree course in Philosophy and Theology. That degree eventually led to doctoral studies and, to cut a long and winding story short, I found myself, some years later, at the end of my academic journey with less hair, a large overdraft and a PhD in Islamic Studies, my thesis focusing on the way that the oral environment of seventh-century Arabia had left its mark on the text of the Qur'an.<sup>14</sup> When I went into full-time study I had promised my wife, 'This will only take three years.' It had taken eleven.

Over those eleven years, I studied Christianity and Islam in tremendous detail. I had to learn the languages of the Bible and the Qur'an and study the original texts. I dived deep into the origins of the two faiths and looked at their histories. I immersed myself in the biographies of their founders: Jesus in the case of Christianity, Muhammad in the case of Islam.

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<sup>14</sup> My thesis was published as *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (New York: Lexington Books, 2014).

The more I studied Christianity and Islam at the highest academic level, the more I was drawn, inexorably, to two conclusions. First, there were *major* differences between the two religions. Far from being broadly the same with superficial differences, Islam and Christianity were fundamentally different, with mere cosmetic similarities. My old idea that they were all but identical had been based on ignorance. Just as somebody who says, ‘Every book in the library is essentially the same – it’s only booksellers out for a quick profit who tell you differently’ isn’t displaying wisdom but exposing a startling lack of reading, so the person, like my younger self, who opines that Christianity and Islam are more or less the same probably hasn’t taken the time to study them in detail. Once you do, the differences become ever more apparent.

More than that, the more deeply I studied them, the more I put in the long hours of forensically examining Islam and Christianity, especially looking at the *evidence* for the claims made by these two faiths, the more I came to the conclusion that Christianity was true, that there were excellent reasons to believe the Bible, that the claims of Jesus could be put rigorously to the test and they stood up.

After eleven years of painstakingly examining the evidence, I had come to the firm conclusion that Christianity was true – uniquely, exclusively true – and Islam was not merely wholly different, but also *false*. The claims of Jesus bore the weight of careful scrutiny, while the claims of Muhammad did not.

Now, to some people’s ears, words as bold as these will sound incredibly arrogant and breathtakingly narrow-minded. We live in an age where people are very nervous of exclusive claims about truth. So, in the next chapter let’s address the elephant in the room: whether it is a problem to say, ‘My religious beliefs are true and yours are false.’

## Key takeaways

- Religion is growing, both globally and in the West. Far from ours being a secular age, it is an increasingly religious age. This means that one of the greatest questions facing us in the twenty-first century is: how can we all live together despite our deep differences in beliefs?
- The idea that Muslims and Christians worship the same god, that Christianity and Islam are (along with Judaism) part of a great tribe of 'Abrahamic faiths', is widespread, at both academic and popular levels.
- The assumption that 'all religions are essentially the same' is usually held by people who haven't studied any of them properly. Once you begin studying and comparing any of the world's major faith traditions more deeply, the differences quickly become apparent.

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