

NEWS & OPINIONS

Faithfully Praying in the Same Direction—Together

Lindy Backues and Achmad Munjid

This article explores the development and impact of a profound interfaith friendship between an American Christian and an Indonesian Muslim, highlighting collaborative efforts to promote mutual understanding and respect amidst diverse religious backgrounds. The authors recount their individual journeys, their own cultural exchanges, and the challenges they have faced in bridging religious divides. By way of both academic analysis and personal reflections, the authors emphasize the importance of authentic, humble, listening religious dialogue, the limitations of secularism in accommodating deep religious convictions, and the transformative potential of interfaith solidarity and openness. The authors advocate for a conceptual shift from bounded to centered sets in religious identity, suggesting that genuine devotion and service to humanity do a better job of defining religious belonging. This approach aims to foster inclusivity without compromising individual faith tenets, offering a model for peaceful coexistence and cooperative action in pluralistic societies.

A Prayer for the Wounds of Surabaya (Doa Luka Surabaya)¹

Oh, Magnificent God of Glory!

This day, at mid-day, the UGM [University of Gadjah Mada] academic community gathers at our beloved Balairung Campus, bowing our heads and lifting our prayers to You with deeply wounded hearts, with thoughts sundered, with souls seared by sting.

Wounded are our hearts, torn are our thoughts, and our souls groan within us in pain, since we no longer are able to count the number of times we have been forced to endure such atrocious, terrorist acts—inclusive of those we are compelled to face this very morning. We will never tire trying to understand why persons can so ruthlessly be bent on obliterating the lives of others for the sake of an ideology filled with

hate. Yet, you decree in Surah al-Maidah 32, “Whoever kills an innocent human being, it is as if he had killed all of humanity”. Countless innocent victims have fallen all around us. Far too frequently, therefore, has all of humanity been murdered in this beloved land of ours.

Oh, Magnificent God of All Power!

We pray as children of this land, as persons deeply religious, as fellow human beings, we beseech that You would enable us to pass through this crisis in a spirit of deep togetherness, that we might see each other as family, as a community tightly united. This tragedy costs us greatly and it is difficult for us to bear. May the severe cost and the heavy burden this calamity now forces upon us draw us much closer to You and to each other, enabling us to emerge from chaos engaged once

¹This prayer was originally composed in the Indonesian language by Achmad Munjid and thereafter translated into English by Lindy Backues (Munjid & Backues 2018). Sadly, it was offered at a ceremony of mourning on the campus of University of Gadjah Mada on the 17th of May 2018, in response to suicide bombings that had taken place at churches in the city of Surabaya just a week prior.

The contents of the prayer, the fact that it *is* a prayer, and the fact both authors of the present article played an integral role in composing it, serve as a powerful example of the type of approach we advocate for here. For details of the tragic incidents that inspired this prayer, see (BBC News 2018).

again in deep peace and mutual respect. Enable us to take up the meaningful work of empowering one another. May our children grow and learn in joy, may they march forward into a future filled with hope cherished deeply within their breasts.

Oh, Magnificent God of Great Might!

Grant us Your strength that we might not shrink as we confront terrorists; endow us with collective boldness that we might proclaim Your truth. Clarify our thoughts, purify our hearts, enable us to recognize what is right, what is true, to identify what is merely vanity, to label that which is wrong as, simply, wrong. We are convinced that terrorism embraces no religion, that it springs not from authentic patriotism. It besmirches true religious values, it distorts the bonds of communal life, it smears and smudges the genuine face of humanity. We take refuge in You; protect us from distortions such as this. Bestow upon us, too, opportunities for repairing the breaches in our souls and bodies, a result accomplished only by way of principled efforts undergirded by patience and godly submission of prayers lifted to You.

Oh, Magnificent God of Deep Forgiveness!

We pray that you receive with compassion these victims who have fallen as a result of these acts of terrorism in Surabaya, for the victims in Depok too, as well as for those in other locations—receive them in Your magnanimous love, that love which springs eternal. Forgive them, Lord, and receive their good works of mercy, lay them to rest at that most precious place, by Your side, a site fit for the holy, for the sincere, for the fallen and the martyrs, for those rightly counted as noble. May the heartbreaking deaths of these victims heighten our awareness of how precious is the life of each and every soul, and how deeply valuable are good relationships between us; this fact, too, is mandated by the teaching of the Prophet and by our holy scriptures. With the deepest of sympathy do we lift our prayers for the families of the victims. Grant to them patience and steadfastness, by way of the embrace of Your safekeeping. We pray that events such as these never recur in our midst. We simply pray that there be no more victims like these here in our land. May You tend to the needs of these families and to the needs of their descendants, both during these difficult days, as well as in the days to come.

Oh, Magnificent God of Guidance!

We pray that you prick the conscience and open the eyes of the perpetrators of these terrorist acts, those who are still alive, who wallow yet in hate for their fellow human beings, for persons they do not know, for persons who know them not. We ask that you visit them with Your guidance and with a clarity of spirit, that they might hasten to return to Your truth, that they might leave behind the hate that infects their breasts. We also ask that you banish this ideology of malice from their families and their descendants, that the downward spiral of evil might be arrested before it claims other victims. May you enlighten as well those who sympathize with these terrorists, whether in ways that directly confront them with the truth or by way of means that lead them there indirectly. May we all rid ourselves of every variety of vengeance, not giving space to seeds of enmity that we too easily allow to grow within our hearts.

Oh, Magnificent God, the Most Just!

Bestow upon our police and upon our legislators the physical and spiritual strength they will need, so that they might perform their duties properly, bringing all perpetrators of these terrible acts and those in their networks to justice, standing firmly beside all that is just and in accordance with the dictates of law, prosecuted to its fullest extent, with wisdom and direction bestowed by Your hand.

Oh, Magnificent God of Guidance!

Impart as well strength and resolve to our political and community leaders, so that we might take steps into the future that are guided by a deep, clear, pure, and honorable vision. Prevent further conflict from materializing, the sort of disagreement that would surely sink us into mutual blame and accusation, since this is the hope of those who incited this tragedy, a hope based merely on narrow and misguided personal and group interests. Grant to our leaders accomplishment as well as guidance, so that they might prioritize the common good, goals in our nation's best interests based upon good conscience and clear reasoning.

Oh, Magnificent God of Love and Mercy!

Brighten our hearts with the bounty of Your love and care in order that we might overcome hate and malice, whether personal or collective. May the religious faith we personally embrace not be reduced to imprisoning walls of separation, but may it instead serve as a medium for mutual tribute and mutual cooperation between us, a respect based upon our common citizenship in this great land of ours. Keep us safe in body and spirit. Guide our words, our thoughts, and our actions so that we might arise as persons who humanize each other in a commonality that is safe, serene, just, peaceful, and tranquil, all in the shadow of Your merciful presence and love.

You are the One who hears, You are the One who bestows, You are the One who grants us our prayers. To You alone do we lift our prayers of petition for the healing of our wounded hearts, our lacerated thoughts, our battered souls. As the protector of all of creation, You only are the restorer of our spirits. In the end, all that we are and all on earth that is returns to You. Great God, hear this, our prayer, we pray.

Both of us are individuals of deep religious faith, actively engaged in academic and faith communities—one primarily in the United States and the other in Indonesia. A shared experience we often encounter is the potential marginalization of religious individuals in academia. Frequently, we find ourselves justifying our unapologetic religious perspectives to academic colleagues, a task made challenging by the increasingly secular nature of global higher education. This challenge is notably more prevalent in the global north compared to the global south. Over the years, we have supported each other in this shared quest, despite belonging to different faith traditions—one Muslim, the other Christian.

We have significantly participated in each other's religious communities, and we take pride in our deep understanding and mutual respect for each other's contexts. Our friendship is built on this profound

mutual fondness. However, the global faith communities we represent have often been at odds, sometimes with tragic results, such as the 2018 suicide bombing in Surabaya. We aim to offer hope to those seeking to overcome such animosity, believing that neither of our faith traditions is defined by these tragic outcomes. Our work together strives for peace through mutual understanding, exemplified by our support for each other's research and our fluency in each other's language.

This brings us to the rationale for this article, centered around two main issues:

We clearly have a common problem as religious persons, especially in relation to the prevailing "neutral" secularism that we often encounter in our places of work. This supposedly impartial way of thinking, in our experience, at worst serves to systematically demote religious discourse to nonsense deserving ridicule, thereby belittling the contribution of persons like us in the academy. At best, secularism attempts to "necessarily" translate our "deep grammar" theological discourse into a disenchanted secular language divorced from its often-inherent metaphysical foundations (presumably, so that it might become something that everyone can embrace). We both contend that the type of speech most often faithful to our religious convictions is commonly secured by concepts not so easily translated into secular ways of speaking (i.e., we believe our convictions are often inescapably moored to religious conceptual justifications, ones that serve to undergird them and animate their logic). Thus, we are joined in a common cause: we would like to make room for authentic religious dialogue at the table of public discourse, whether that table be found in the academy or in public spaces located in society in general.²

At the same time, each of us deeply embraces a personal variety of a grand, historic, global faith tradition—one Muslim, one Christian. We both readily admit that these global faith systems differ profoundly in terms of their own deep grammar when it comes to understanding the divine and in terms of potential divine encounters. In a word, there are

² While we will not directly explore this first point in our conversation below, this article *will* serve as evidence of the type of speech that is permitted once "neutral" secularism is recognized as not actually being neutral. Nonetheless, many others *have* dived quite deeply into the assertion we make here; examples include (but should not be limited to): Appadurai (1996); Asad (2003); Asad (2018); Asad, Brown, Butler, & Mahmood (2009); Berger (1979); Browning & Schüssler Fiorenza (1992); Butler, Habermas, Taylor, & West (2011); Clouser (2005); Hamid (2016); MacIntyre (1981); MacIntyre (1988); Mahmood (2015); Masuzawa (2005); Milbank (1990); Newbigin (1988); Newbigin (1989); Polanyi (1974); Rahman (1982); Sharpe & Nickelson (2014); Taylor (2004); Taylor (2007); and Wolterstorff (1988).

clearly marked disagreements at the core of what might be called the historic, macro-Islamic religious point of view and the historic, macro-Christian, religious point of view. We frequently see things differently and we often hold dear theological tenets that are quite contrasting at various junctures.

Our Backgrounds and Our Journeys

Backues

I remember the first time we met, back in 2010 at St. Thomas Aquinas Roman Catholic Church in South Philadelphia, close to where I live. It was August 17th—Indonesian Independence Day—and my family and I were enjoying the celebration organized by the South Philadelphia Indonesian community. As my wife and I sampled treats that reminded us of Indonesia (we had returned to the States only two years prior), I noticed a young couple—clearly Muslim and Indonesian—with their children, standing quietly in a corner of the fellowship hall. Occasionally, Indonesians, both Muslim and Christian, approached them with warm greetings, indicating their respect and popularity in the community. Curious and eager to meet them, I walked up to introduce myself.

When I extended my hand and greeted you in Indonesian, both you and your wife seemed surprised and intrigued—a common reaction to a tall, large American man in his fifties speaking fluent Indonesian. That meeting marked the beginning of our long-lasting friendship, built on my 18 years of living in your birth country and your extensive cross-cultural experiences, including your time in Philadelphia as a Masters and then PhD student at Temple University. Your role as a founder of the first Indonesian mosque in South Philadelphia, now near my home, also played a significant part.

When we first met, I was a professor at Eastern University outside of Philadelphia and I was also an elder at *Philadelphia Praise Center* (PPC), an Indonesian Mennonite Church led by a mutual friend of ours. In 2006, PPC had generously lent their building to your Muslim congregation, Masjid Al-Falah, for Tarawih prayers during Ramadhan, an act that fostered a close relationship between our two faith communities. Though this act of kindness drew criticism from local church leaders, it was seen by PPC's leadership as the right thing to do, something

that embodied the teachings of Jesus. At the time, you were the head ustad and main imam at Al-Falah, a connection I only learned about later.

Our friendship fits seamlessly into the trajectory of my wife's and my life in Indonesia. We moved there in 1989, and despite occasional trips abroad, West Java was our home until our deportation in 2007. Our daughter, adopted at two months old, grew up in West Java, and our ethnically Javanese son spent his early years in Tasikmalaya. Our time in Indonesia spanned significant events, from two Gulf wars and a variety of local riots to the fall of Suharto and the 2004 tsunami. These experiences shaped our understanding of Indonesian society and deepened our bonds with the local Muslim community.³

As a faith-based development practitioner, I helped found three community development organizations in Indonesia, focusing on multicultural, multiethnic, and inter-religious cooperation. This work, while successful, eventually led to friction with the local government and our subsequent deportation. Despite the challenges, our integration into Indonesian society was profound. We lived like locals, navigated urban slums, and engaged deeply with Muslim communities to avoid being tokenized by local churches.

When we were in the US we struggled to adjust to Indonesian church culture, feeling more at home in the Muslim religious climate due to our close friendships with Indonesian Muslims. Our development work had been intentionally interfaith, reflecting the religious diversity of Indonesia. We believed in integrating various religious perspectives, fostering mutual respect and cooperation.

This rich history is what I brought with me when I approached you at St. Thomas Aquinas Church. Over the years, I've come to value your own deep devotion and interfaith experiences. Our relationship, built on mutual respect and understanding, serves as a testament to how individuals with different religious backgrounds can come together to explore and understand the divine.

Munjid

I grew up in an environment where everyone looked like me, spoke my language, practiced the same religion, and shared my traditions and culture. My devout Muslim family lived in a poor rural area of Central Java, Indonesia, where Islam is the majority

³The interfaith nature of Backues's work in Indonesia and the model that sustained it is outlined in Backues (2009).

faith, comprising 87% of the population. In this setting, I formed a specific image of Christians: they were rich, smart, good-looking, powerful, and dangerous. This stereotype remained unchallenged throughout my school years, from elementary to secondary school. Consequently, whenever I met someone who seemed smart, fancy, or from a higher social class, I immediately suspected they were Christian. When I did meet self-identified Christians, they often matched these superior attributes, reinforcing my stereotype.

Financial hardship during my high school years led me to seek employment, and my employer happened to be both Chinese and Christian. My limited encounters with Christians consistently confirmed my existing image of them, deepening my inferiority complex. I felt poor, incapable, ugly, powerless, and threatened in their presence due to the perceived power differential.

Christians were dangerous not only because of their visible power but also because of their missionary efforts to convert Muslims. They were seen as both politically hostile and theologically toxic. This view was reinforced by the theological teachings I received in Islamic boarding school. As a result, this stereotype of Christians became deeply ingrained in my psyche, evoking both admiration and suspicion.

My perception of Christians was also influenced by the historical context in Indonesia, where Christianity arrived bundled with Westernization, modernity, and colonialism. The simultaneous arrival of Christianity and Dutch colonialism from the 17th century onward linked Christianity with these aspects in the Indonesian mind. A common Javanese phrase derisively aimed at converts to Christianity was, “He is no longer Javanese, but he is not yet Dutch,” reflecting the perceived loss of cultural identity. For many Muslims, Christianity symbolized the ruling elite’s political power, intellectual sophistication, and moral cruelty.

In response, Javanese Muslims often framed the situation as an “us-them” dichotomy, believing that while Christians had power, Muslims possessed moral piety. During the 1970s and 80s, under President Suharto’s rule, policies favored Christians, further entrenching Muslim stereotypes about Christians. The dominance of Chinese Christians in the economy after

the 1965 communist massacre also reinforced these views. Muslims felt like a “majority with a minority mentality,” perceiving themselves as inferior despite being the demographic majority. This perception was compounded by global political dynamics and Indonesia’s colonial history, profoundly shaping my own views.

However, my perspective began to change slowly during my university years in Yogyakarta. Initially active in the Muslim Student Association at Gajah Mada University, I held a dualistic worldview, seeing the world as a battle between good (Muslims) and evil (non-Muslims). I believed that anything not Islamic was immoral and needed reform or elimination. Christians were seen as particularly dangerous due to their perceived goal of converting the Indonesian population (Shihab 1995).

During the mid-90s, as student opposition to Suharto’s authoritarianism grew, religious groups, including Muslims and Christians, began to unite against him. This shift in perspective influenced me personally. Through my studies and interactions with people of different faiths, I began to see Christians who did not fit my previous stereotypes. I made friends with Christians and other non-Muslims who were kind and sincere, challenging my preconceived notions.

The fall of Suharto in 1998 provided crucial lessons beyond practical politics. I realized that morality was not exclusive to Muslims. Suharto, a Muslim, was a cruel dictator, and his actions contradicted the Islamic values I cherished. This realization forced me to question my long-held theological doctrines and inspired me to pursue graduate work in religious studies and engage in interfaith initiatives.⁴

My journey eventually brought me to the United States in order to go deeper with my academic research. As a graduate student at Temple University, I met Lindy and his family in South Philadelphia. Lindy had recently returned to the US after 18 years in Indonesia as a social activist with a theological vision. We bonded over our shared scholarly and religious convictions, and our support of each other has strengthened our friendship over time.

⁴ For insight into Munjid’s ideas and experiences working toward interfaith understanding in Indonesia see Munjid (2008).

The Conceptual Bases for Our Admiration and Differences

Munjid

In the past, I firmly believed that all non-Muslims were “kafir,” a term often translated “non-believer” or “infidel.” I acknowledged that there were good Christians, kind Hindus, and very nice Buddhists who lived exemplary moral lives and were a joy to know. These individuals could be neighbors, colleagues, or even friends. However, I believed that unless they converted to Islam, they would ultimately go to hell. As a Muslim, I knew I needed to get along with these people in this life, but I did not believe they would be saved in the hereafter. To me, they were unfortunate—either ignorant of the truth or consciously choosing the wrong path despite the truth of Islam evident to them.

Conversely, I recognized that there were bad Muslims who committed sins and lived immoral lives. Nevertheless, if they affirmed the *shahada*—the Muslim confession of faith—they would go to heaven after accounting for their missteps. The equation was simple: Islam saves Muslims, and only Islam can save a person in the hereafter.

From this perspective, it seemed justifiable that non-Muslims would go to hell and Muslims to heaven. I saw God’s revelation in the Qur’an as clear and universal, presenting Islam as the only true path to salvation. Belief in or rejection of this truth determined one’s eternal fate, with consequences based on those choices. Being nice or not was a temporary condition, whereas a person’s faith—specifically, whether they embraced Islam—was the defining factor for their eternal destiny. God granted people the freedom to decide, and they received rewards or punishments accordingly. This view made perfect sense to me and seemed clear and fair.

This was my position, and I believe it is a view held by many Muslims today.

While these words are Munjid’s, similar sentiments could be expressed by Backues. In his early 20s, he too believed God would condemn to eternal perdition those who did not embrace the (Christian) truth as he did. This stance is still strongly held by a significant portion of conservative Christianity.

However, neither of us aligns with this position any longer. In the remainder of this article, we will explore several points related to how our views have evolved and what we now believe.

There is a word that often appears in Muslim circles (the idea is also present in Christian contexts), a term that is frequently misunderstood and misused by both Muslims and non-Muslims. We wish to clarify its meaning here to help the reader better understand how we currently view each other. The word is *kafir*, an Arabic/Semitic term usually translated “infidel” or “unbeliever” in English (we will examine this term in more detail below).

Given our previous discussions, the questions arise: how do we presently view each other? Perhaps more importantly, how *should* we view each other? And fundamentally, what should serve as the conceptual basis for our interactions now and our present views on each other’s “eternal destiny”? We come from two vastly different faith traditions with strongly delineated religious perspectives, outlooks that traditionally permit little, if any, crossover between us. In some circles, it might even be questioned whether our traditions can allow any crossover at all. These are crucial questions we feel compelled to explore, as they significantly influence our relationship and how we have learned to see each other over the course of the last several years.

Bounded vs. Centered Sets

We believe that a primary reason each of us previously excluded outsiders from God’s favor lies in how we maintained strict conceptual boundaries around our respective faith communities. Munjid’s statement above illustrates clear conceptual segregations, dividing all individuals into “in” vs. “out,” based on Islamic group membership. Those “in” for him were those who were self-described adherents of Islam (including Muslims not living admirable lives), while those “out” were non-Muslims, inclusive of all Christians. Similarly, Backues, early in his faith journey, drew analogous boundaries around his Christian community, where “in” encompassed Christians and “out” referred to non-Christians. Our perspectives on the outside world were framed by simple, unproblematic boundaries—or so we thought at the time.

Today, we draw religious categories in a completely different manner, though we still recognize the importance of boundaries. This conceptual shift can best be explained through an examination of “set theory,” a method of categorization derived from

mathematics, particularly as it has been explored in the work of Mennonite anthropologist Paul Hiebert.⁵

In a series of articles, Hiebert described three types of sets: (1) bounded sets, (2) centered sets, and (3) fuzzy sets. We have already encountered the first type—bounded sets—in our discussion above: in bounded sets, objects are statically contained within fixed, given, and unvarying domains. In is in, out is out. As Hiebert explains:

In creating a bounded set our mind puts together things that share some common characteristics. “Apple,” for example, are objects that are “the firm fleshy somewhat round fruit of a Rosaceous tree. They are usually red, yellow or green and are eaten raw or cooked” (Hiebert 1978, 26).

Given this way of thinking, such a conceptual categorization is quite necessary. Hiebert summarizes:

Bounded sets have certain structural characteristics—that is, they force us to look at things in a certain way

- a. The category is created by listing the essential characteristics that an object must have to be within the set . . .
- b. The category is defined by a clear boundary . . .
- c. Objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics . . .
- d. Bounded sets are static sets . . . (1978, 26)

However, the perspective changes drastically when one’s posture shifts to a “centered set” approach. Centered sets are organized . . .

- a. by defining a center, and the relationship of things to that center . . . Some things may be far from the center, but they are moving *towards* the center, therefore, they are part of the centered set. On the other hand, some objects may be near the center but are moving away from it, so they are not a part of the set. The set is made up of all objects moving towards the center.

- b. While the centered set does not place the primary focus on the boundary, there is a clear division between things moving in and things moving out. The set focuses upon the *center* and the boundary emerges when the center and the movement of the objects have been defined. There is no great need to maintain the boundary in order to maintain the set. The boundary *is* so long as the center is clear.
- c. Centered sets reflect variation within a category. While there is a clear distinction between things moving in and those moving out, the objects within the set are not categorically uniform. Some may be near the center and others far from it, even though all are moving towards the center. Each object must be considered individually. It is not reduced to a single common uniformity within the category.
- d. Centered sets are dynamic sets. Two types of movements are essential parts of their structure. First, it is possible to change direction—to turn from moving away to moving towards the center, from being outside to being inside the set. Second, because all objects are seen in constant motion, they are moving, fast or slowly, towards or away from the center. Something is always happening to an object. It is never static. (1978 28, emphasis in the original)

We must remember that both bounded and centered sets have clearly defined boundaries regarding group membership: in both, individuals are classified as either in or out. The difference lies not in the existence of boundaries but in how the boundaries are drawn. Bounded set borders are static and are based on clear, uniform, unvarying features that are shared by all members. In contrast, centered sets are defined first by establishing a center, and then by determining the direction each member is moving in relation to that center.

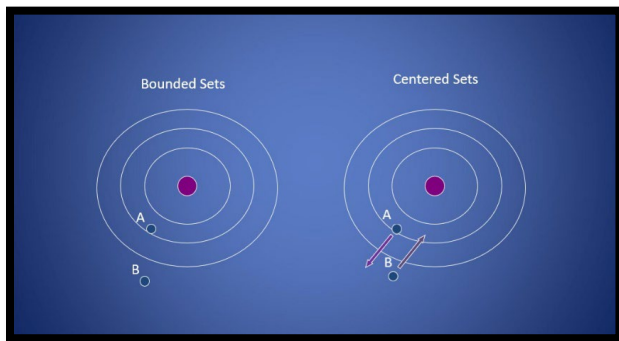
Hiebert also describes a third type of set, a configuration he calls “fuzzy” sets. In fuzzy sets, membership is not easily established, and boundaries

⁵ See Hiebert (1978) and Yoder, Lee, Ro, & Priest (2009).

are much less clear.⁶ Objects within fuzzy sets are not confined by clear mental boundaries; members simply “are,” with little emphasis on verifying group membership. While these sets are interesting, we will focus more on bounded and centered sets, as these will offer to us greater clarity for understanding our journeys. However, we *will* briefly return to fuzzy sets later, to clarify a particular aspect of set membership.

This image highlights key differences between bounded and centered sets:

Figure 1
Bounded and Centered Sets



Both diagrams above include a Point A and a Point B, placed roughly in similar locations. To understand the key differences between these two arrangements we need to consider the meaning of the arrows in the centered sets diagram on the right.

In Bounded Sets, Point A is clearly a member since it lies within the concentric rings of the diagram; Point B, on the other hand, is outside the set, since it is outside all of the boundary rings. This represents a classic bounded set configuration where members are classified “in” and non-members “out” at a given, static point in time. Think of a snapshot.

In contrast, group membership of Points A and B looks quite different when viewed from a centered set perspective. Although Point A is within some rings and Point B is still outside all rings, a centered set perspective takes into consideration the movement

each evinces in relation to the center; this movement is indicated by the arrows. Trajectory and direction, rather than static position, determines set membership here. In this case, Point A is moving away from the center, while Point B is moving increasingly closer to the center. From this vantage point, B is a set member, while A is not, since A is drifting away from the center. Think of a motion picture.

This difference clarifies how the two of us have come to understand our own religious identities and the religious identities of those around us. Our thinking has shifted from a bounded set arrangement to a centered set one. We now embrace a center comprised of active devotion and worship, evidenced by one’s lifestyle—a lifestyle humbly aligned with God’s will, a way of living validated by ongoing, daily activities. We believe that, irrespective of how a person self-identifies (as Christian, as Muslim, or as secular), those demonstrating consistent care for others—especially for the poor and marginalized—are “authentic worshippers of God.” We classify these individuals as “in” within our religious set, since their trajectory aligns with a God-centered direction. Conversely, those who do not serve in this way, regardless of their static, bounded set membership within a religious community, are outside the centered set boundaries that we embrace. For us, these individuals are *not* authentic God-seekers.

This central factor has solidified our friendship over the years. We are drawn to each other because of this inclusive—yet still delimited—understanding of religious identity. Sometimes, we even feel more in sync with each other than we do with our own co-religionists, persons who often adhere to bounded set understandings of religious membership.

This camaraderie leads us to another point that offers insight into our bounded vs. centered set rubric. In interfaith dialogue, there is a common framework that divides interfaith theological positions into three types: (1) exclusivity, (2) pluralism, and (3) inclusivity. While this framework is at first blush helpful, we think it best to slightly rebrand this sort of nomenclature,

⁶ Yoder, Lee, Ro, and Priest outline fuzzy sets in the following way:

- Membership in a category is based on relationship to other things.
- The boundary is fuzzy with no sharp point of transition between one and the other.
 - Membership is one of degrees; varying distances exist from center.
 - Change or conversion is a process, not an instantaneous about-face. (2009, 180)

following the lead of Christian missiologist J. Andrew Kirk.⁷

Particularity, Universality, and Generality

We both now embrace a centered set understanding of religious group membership. Given this perspective, wouldn't it be easier to simply accept we worship the same God, albeit in different ways, and leave it at that? In other words, wouldn't this be the purest form of the centered set approach, focusing solely on the overall direction of one's spiritual journey and disregarding the specifics? A centered set acknowledges that each of us is oriented toward a common center—authentic and sincere worship of the one true God. Authentic worship, in this view, is expressed through one's daily acts of service, particularly toward the poor and the marginalized.

So, would it not be less complicated simply to overlook our differences and embrace the commonalities found in our beliefs, highlighting what unites us rather than what divides us? Interestingly, our shared answer to this question is both a firm “yes” and a firm “no”.

The truth is, we hold very different beliefs about God, with doctrinal and theological differences often almost incommensurable. At times this makes it challenging to bridge the conceptual divide between us. Our discussions over the years have delved deeply into these differences, leading us through many profound conversations. Therefore, we would like first to address the “no” side of the equation, and then we will

return to the “yes” to clarify our seemingly contradictory stance as to whether we indeed do worship the same God.

First, the “no.” The truth is, we do not mind if significant differences persist between us. As will soon be clear (and perhaps already is), these differences are not impediments to the healthy relationship we have built and we continue to enjoy. Undeniable contrasts like these have not prevented us from developing a sincere, warm, respectful, and mutually beneficial relationship. Instead, they have provided points for deeper discussions, topics that have piqued our interest, kept us curious, and encouraged our humility. In this way, we have ended up respecting each other not merely despite our differences but sometimes because of them. When we have pondered each other's very different faith positions—and responded to them with sincerity and integrity—true bonds of respect and attachment have emerged between us, almost as a gift from God. We pray this wonderful result shines through in this article, infusing our discussion here with light as we examine some very important themes together.

However, much depends on how we frame our differences, especially regarding what theologians call “salvation” and its relationship to “reprobation,” or the question of God consigning individuals to eternal punishment. Put differently, we might see this as how we each envision “the saveability” of the other.⁸ A

⁷ We agree with Fredericks when—speaking from a Christian perspective—he observes that “. . . exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism become less and less plausible the more we find out about the actual beliefs of our non-Christian neighbors” (Fredericks 1999, 166). Nonetheless, at this stage, we believe there is value in this type of three-fold division (or something like it), provided it serves as a heuristic device for illuminating issues involved in interfaith dialogue.

⁸ Catholic theologian Gavin D'Costa concisely isolates the principal questions from a Christian perspective (as Munjid's words above illustrate, a Muslim framing of the issue is equally imaginable):

“The difficulties can be conveniently focused in relation to two traditionally held Christian axioms. The first states that salvation is *through Jesus Christ alone*. If salvation is through Christ alone and there is no salvation outside Christianity (and Jesus did say according to John's gospel: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me’, John 14:6), can the Christian still believe in a God who desires the salvation of all humankind (Acts 14:17; I Timothy 2:4; Romans 2:6-7)? Could a loving God consign the majority of humankind to perdition because these people did not know Jesus, often through no fault of their own? . . .

Alternatively, if the stress falls on the second axiom that *God desires the salvation of all humankind*, is this salvation gained *through* or *despite* the non-Christian religions? If, on the one hand, salvation occurs through these religions, is there any need for mission? And what of Jesus' claim that he alone is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ and Christianity's claim to absoluteness? What of those within certain religions who do not even believe in a god, such as the Theravadin Buddhist or Advaitin Hindu? And what exactly is the status and worth of non-Christian scriptures, practices and beliefs? Are they all of equal value and if not, by what criteria should one decide?” (1986, 4, emphasis in the original).

three-fold taxonomy often appears in interfaith dialogue literature, focusing precisely on the central issue of who God saves. A brief exploration of this taxonomy will help clarify what we mean here.

D'Costa succinctly summarizes a classification system like this when he highlights the Christian form of the rubric:

Roughly speaking, pluralism is the position which claims that all religions, more or less, are equally valid ways in helping men and women find their way to God. Pluralists are usually critical of exclusivists, who hold that only Christianity (and often, a particular denominational version) is true, and exclusively capable of helping men and women to a full relationship with God. Pluralists usually argue that exclusivists have no grounds for real openness and tolerance toward other religions, nor have they anything to learn from these religions. The resultant attitude is politically translated into empire, imperialism, and aggressive mission. Of course, biblical, theological, and philosophical arguments are also employed by all groups. Inclusivism is often characterized as holding to the definitive truth of Christianity, but recognizing that other religions may be "lawful religions" (Rahner), even if in a provisional manner. (D'Costa 2000, 1, emphasis added)⁹

While we find this classification system helpful, we must realize that D'Costa's ideas here are not uniquely Christian. For instance, Muslim academic Fatimah Husein uses similar categories to evaluate Islamic community involvement in Muslim-Christian interactions in Indonesia.¹⁰ We apply a similar approach in examining our own faith traditions, whether Muslim or Christian. This framework

accurately reflects certain versions of these two grand traditions on a global scale.

A caveat is in order, though: it is at this point that we agree with missiologist J. Andrew Kirk when he notes that problems are prompted by the use of the three terms (1) exclusivism, (2) pluralism, and (3) inclusivism. "Exclusivism," says Kirk, "gives an immediate impression of narrow-mindedness, even bigotry." The emphasis seems to be on "exclusion" of others (as the expression implies), to the point religion becomes an exercise in gatekeeping, a filtering out of undesirables who might contaminate the religious system. On the other hand, "pluralism" often "[conjures] up the image of relativism, even a lack of concern"—a position averse to taking a prophetic stand against anything, a perspective so wishy-washy that it ends up with few solid resources for the type of meaning-seeking crucial to authentic religious commitment. Kirk claims that, with positions contoured in this way, a third position—"inclusivism"—ends up privileged, since it "appears to emphasise open-mindedness and tolerance." After all, as he goes on to note, does it not seem more "preferable to include than exclude, to be generous without being totally permissive" (2000, 127-128)? With this, the preferable position seems implied even before we explore the details involved. Like Kirk, we feel the terms exclusivism, pluralism, and inclusivism threaten to bias discussions from the outset, steering the conversation in a specific direction, reducing the appeal of two of the options, an unwise way to start such an important conversation. Therefore, we prefer—as does Kirk—three alternative terms: (1) particularity, (2) universality, and (3) generality (2000, 127-128). We will opt for one of these positions, but we aim to frame our initial investigations as fairly as possible, presenting equitably the choices before us.¹¹

⁹ See also D'Costa (1986). For a look at Karl Rahner's notion of a "lawful religion," see Rahner (1999). We will take a closer look at Rahner's thought just below.

¹⁰ See Husein (2005, especially 29-31).

¹¹ Yale Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck specifies three distinct types of doctrine or theological styles, each evincing its own logic or disposition. While we do not have space to fully delve into the comparison here, it is worth pointing out that we believe Lindbeck's categories resonate significantly with the *particularity*, *universality*, and *generality* system described here.

The first type of doctrine Lindbeck dubs classical *propositionalism*, a variety that "emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and stresses the ways in which . . . doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities. . . . For a propositionalist, if a doctrine is once true, it is always true, and if it is once false, it is always false" (1984, 16). As we will soon see, this variety seems to most closely resemble what we are calling *particularity*.

Particularity

The particularity position—known previously as exclusivism—asserts that saving faith can be realized only within the confines of a specific faith system and the doctrinal boundaries embraced by its community. For instance, Christian particularity generally attests that

God's gift of salvation is available only through the atoning death of the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, and is appropriated through explicit faith in Jesus and ratified by baptism and membership of the Christian community. There may be some difference among people who hold this view as to the means by which people come to faith. For most, faith must come through hearing the word of the Gospel (Rom. 10:17); but for some it may come through the less normal means of visions or dreams. (Kirk 2000, 128)

Likewise, Muslim varieties of this position understand salvation as available to those who are unmistakable members of the Muslim community, i.e., those who openly affirm the *shahada* (the Muslim confession of faith) and who explicitly carry out (or seek to carry out) the universally acknowledged six pillars of Islamic faith. For a particularist, there must be overt, recognizable, and confessed allegiance on the part of every believer, usually marked by a conspicuous point of conversion. One must be able to point to a conscious, mental submission to the overt tenets of the faith in question. Clearly, the "particularity position" fits within a bounded sets configuration, fixed to a point in time and linked to punctiliar inclusion in a guarded community bound by a curated body of doctrine. Both of us embraced such a stance in the past, and we acknowledge that—given certain assumptions—it is rational and logical in its details. It deserves to be taken seriously, given its assumptions.

But it is precisely at the level of assumptions where one finds difficulties. Specifically, it assumes a static "placidness" for all religious adherents, bound by

The second type of doctrine Lindbeck calls *experiential expressive*. Typical of theological liberalism and much of the work taken up in comparative religions, this variety often condenses all distinctions into a common experiential soup—it frames "different religions [as] diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience" (1984, 16) or as "an expression or thematization of a preexisting self or of preconceptual experience" (1984, 34).

In short, this second variety boils down all religious grand traditions into a unitary, globally-familiar, experiential kernel that is variously embraced but commonly experienced—irrespective of cultural backdrops or distinctive themes present. This style easily becomes a form of elitist intellectual insight, with scholars positioned as the sole arbiters truly aware that, although different religious adherents describe their experiences using divergent language, images and devices, they are in fact speaking of the same thing. Everyday religious adherents—these academics seem to suggest—are simply too simple to know they are speaking of (and sometimes worshipping) the same concept. In our opinion, this variety most closely resembles what we will describe as *universality*.

In contrast to these two options, Lindbeck endorses what he calls a *cultural-linguistic* alternative. This framework combines the content element of the first type with the experiential element of the second. In this way, a religious tradition should be

viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. It functions somewhat like a Kantian a priori, although in this case the a priori is a set of acquired skills that could be different. It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed. Lastly, just as a language . . . is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is also in the case of a religious tradition. Its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops. All this is involved in comparing a religion to a cultural-linguistic system. (1984, 33)

As will soon be clear—seeing as how this form is intimately tied to life-practice, to action, and to concrete experiences—this third type most closely resembles the *generality* pattern we will promote below.

group membership in the true “God-pleasing” community. Through our own journeys, we have come to believe these assumptions do not define religious allegiance. Instead, we view God as fully capable of reading the intentions of every heart, and it is God who ultimately decides who is in and who is out. Therefore, a person’s internal response to God’s desires is much more important in assessing religious commitment, as these desires are not hidden from God.

While we respect the particularity position, we reject it as a proper description of authentic religious piety, whether Christian or Muslim. Our stance aligns with the “centered set” model described earlier, which corresponds more faithfully with the generality stance we will explore below. But before we delve into that, let us first understand the second category: *universality*.

Universality

At the other end of the spectrum is the *universality* position—D’Costa calls this the *pluralism* perspective.

Kirk gets us started by outlining the Christian version of this position:

For the universalist, Jesus Christ is only one means of salvation among many others. God has devised not only different ways of attaining salvation through Christ, but a variety of ways of reaching him. Jesus Christ is one path among others. There has been a shift from a Christ-centred to a God-centred understanding of salvation. God’s salvation is universally available through many different channels. (Kirk 2000, 129-130)

While this viewpoint remains concerned with one’s salvation or “saveability,” it introduces a distinct difference regarding who can and will be saved: the inclusion aperture here opens very widely indeed. In this perspective, all will be “saved” in the end; ultimately, there will be no reprobation. This approach suggests that there is no one right way and no wrong ways—just different ways. Thus, while God’s favor rests

exclusively upon a select group of faithful persons in the particularity position, this position emphasizes that no grand religious tradition is ultimately unique: all religious understandings are equally salvific in nature (or, as Husein notes, universalists “tend to claim that all religions are the same” (2005, 31).¹²

On the surface, this seems a far more gracious stance, as it appears inviting, humble, and less self-assured compared to the particularity position. However, we find it has at least two significant pitfalls that give us pause.

First, this stance greatly devalues the particularities of *all* grand traditions,¹³ such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or any of the other historically rich, globalized paths that millions (sometimes billions) of people hold dear as they make sense of the world. Specific narrative details embedded in religious systems often matter a great deal; they are not easily discarded. Moreover, who gets to decide which details are superfluous and which are not? As serious adherents of two great religious traditions, we often find it challenging to identify the central points of our own traditions definitively. Isolating indispensable features in each of our faith traditions is tricky—separating significant thematic wheat from disposable metaphysical chaff is never easy, and it seems hubristic and even rude for disengaged non-adherents to propose how simple and uncomplicated that task is.

Furthermore, as was underscored at the outset, condensing various religious systems into one fungible truth position usually leads to “desacralizing the sacred.” Religious discourse is often “translated” (and thereby demoted) into a disenchanted, secular, so-called “value-free” perspective divorced from its specific, intrinsic, metaphysical foundations.¹⁴ Many of our central convictions are fundamentally theological and spiritual; they resist desacralization and simplistic translation into independent, “neutral” idioms. Religious people worldwide have voiced such an objection—it is not unique to us.

Interestingly, this “universality position” aligns best with Hiebert’s “fuzzy set” configuration. Fuzzy sets

¹² We saw this claim echoed in Lindbeck’s description of the second type of doctrine, what he labels the *experiential expressive*.

¹³ Except for an Enlightenment funded grand tradition lurking and hidden and covertly smuggled in under the guise of being neutral: secularism. We will dig below the surface of this just below.

¹⁴ Debate over the translatability of religious language is the primary sticking point between Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor as they consider the proper role of religious speech in civil discourse. For an example of their discussion concerning this, see Butler, Habermas, Taylor, & West (2011, 60-70).

have boundaries and borders that are not clearly established; from a universality stance, groupings are of little concern since all truth is unitary and distillable, making compartmentalized classifications unnecessary. In fuzzy sets, all-inclusive group membership describes the relationship between all things, with no central, teleological center advocated or desired. Moreover, since fuzzy sets paint everything as being of one essence, there are no sharp points of transition or moments of conversion; membership is ultimately guaranteed, and change for every member is a slow, linear process with no about-faces or turnarounds truly possible. In the other two systems, boundaries are where the transfer of membership occurs, from one set to another. In this view, everyone is on the right road; some simply need to wake up and realize that. For universalists, emphases on the particularities of religion only confuse, complicate, mislead, and exclude.

We find the universalist position unappealing and inaccurate; it does not properly describe the world we live in. In our experience, all roads do not lead to the same Rome; all traditions are not identical. Faith traditions embrace distinct—as we hinted above, often incommensurable—details that render them beautiful, even when they sometimes confuse or repel.

Generality

This third variety—which we call generality rather than inclusivity (following Kirk)—fits us best, as it aligns closely with the centered set approach we advocated above. Kirk effectively describes the Christian perspective of this viewpoint, and it is worthwhile hearing from him at length.

[The generality] position also affirms that salvation is available exclusively through Jesus Christ. However, it makes the means of appropriating salvation more general than the previous one. Whereas the best means may be through hearing the good news and responding affirmatively, there may be good reasons why this is not possible. For example, most people will never hear the Gospel in their own language during their lifetime. Even if they do, they may hear it in such a way that the message is obscured, either by the presentation or by the life of the messenger. It could be said, then, that millions of people will never have an adequate opportunity to respond to the offer of salvation in Christ.

According to this view, where people respond to the spiritual illumination they have, seeking in their religious practices God's mercy and forgiveness and attempting to live out a life of peace, reconciliation and justice, God's salvation in Christ is available to them. Or, to put the matter the other way round, those who do these things already demonstrate God's salvific grace at work in their lives. (2000, 128-129)

Fatimah Husein presents a description quite like this—though she uses the older terminology we have set aside—when she outlines a Muslim, Indonesian perspective. We adjust the terminology below to make it clearer.

- (1) As [generalists] perceive Islam as an evolving religion[,] they apply a contextual reading to the Qur'an and *sunna* [Islamic tradition]. This approach advocates reinterpreting the foundation texts of Islam. In this context, the role of *ijtihad* [scriptural interpretation] is central in their thinking.
- (2) Unlike the [universalists], who tend to claim that all religions are the same, the [generalists] hold that Islam is the best religion for them. Nevertheless, they believe salvation is also possible outside Islam, and therefore tend to be more tolerant of the faith of the "other". Within the [generalists'] writings, one will scarcely find harsh expressions directed towards other religious believers, more specifically Christians.
- (3) [Generalists] argue for the separation of Islam and the state. For them, the present structure of the Indonesian state is adequate. They acknowledge the validity of the Indonesian constitution, although it may seem secular to the [particularist] Muslims in that it does not clearly say that the state is responsible for religious matters in society. The [generalists] hold that within the Indonesian state both Muslims and non-Muslims should enjoy the same rights. In addition, they do not support the effort to implement the sharia [Islamic canonical law] in day to day life, as they do not perceive it as a set of rules but rather as moral guidance. (2005, 31)

The generalist position, as described above, aligns seamlessly with centered set arrangements. It is

characterized more by activities of worship and devotion and the nuances of a centered set lifestyle, emphasizing a humble posture toward others and God. The focus is on the direction one is heading rather than their current position. This involves aligning daily activities with God's will, maintaining a consistent pattern of truth-telling, and performing tangible acts of service to others, regardless of their faith or static categories of belonging.

Do We Worship the Same God?

We now turn to the “yes” side of the question: “Do we—one of us a Muslim and one a Christian—worship the same God?” This is a timeless question that has been explored throughout the ages. As we have already admitted, our views about God differ significantly. For example, the theological concept of the Incarnation (God becoming human) is a major point of contention between us. It is central to Christian theology but deeply contradicts core Muslim beliefs about the nature of God. Clearly, we have different ideas about who God is and what God is willing to do.¹⁵

Despite these differences, we firmly believe that we worship the same God, a perspective that is crucial to our dialogue and the respect we have for each other. We see each other as co-journeymen on the same path, even though our paths may look different. Our confidence is supported by a centered set view of the faith journey, which fosters respect for each other's spiritual path. We end up gladly supporting and edifying each other's faith journeys, even when we disagree.

To clarify this notion, let's consider some classic English sentences that describe qualities of the divine.

“God is great”¹⁶ is a universal Muslim confession, while “God is love”¹⁷ is a well-known Christian one. Do these sentences describe qualities of different gods? Is there a Muslim “great God” who is completely different from the Christian “loving God” described in the Bible? Christians often speak of God's greatness with deep sincerity, and many Muslims extol God's love while remaining authentically Muslim. We can assert that these statements describe the same being, even if the details emphasize different qualities.

The reason is that the subject of each sentence is the same: “God.” The differences appear in the predicate, where descriptive details highlight different aspects of God. In one case, the focus is on God's greatness and power; in the other, it is on God's love and affection.

Anglican cleric Michael Nazir-Ali, drawing on the thoughts of Christian Islamicist Kenneth Cragg, addresses this issue in the following way:

In ‘God-talk’, as far as Cragg is concerned, the subject is always the same but the predicates used of God may, and do, differ widely. In dialogue between Christians and Muslims, this becomes apparent when each party finds that it can affirm some of the attributes of God asserted by the other while disagreeing about others. Cragg admits that this disparity affects the subject, but that it is disparity regarding the one subject is, for him, obvious. The question here is: at what point does disparity in predicates used of apparently the same object lead to the recognition that the subject may not be the same? (1991, 19)¹⁸

¹⁵ We are reminded of the relatively recent case of Professor Larycia Hawkins and her departure from the Christian liberal arts institution Wheaton College (Wheaton, Illinois), owing to repercussions surrounding this very issue. See Dampier (2019) for a review of that case. For a contemporaneous critical analysis of it, see Volf (2015).

¹⁶ *Allāhu akbar*: اللهُ أَكْبَرُ.

¹⁷ *Theos agapē estin*: Θεός ἀγάπη ἐστίν.

¹⁸ Cragg, himself, says this: “Inasmuch as both Christian and Muslim faiths believe in one supreme sovereign Creator-God, they are obviously referring, when they speak of God under whatever terms, to the same Being. To suppose otherwise would be confusing. It is important to keep in mind that though apprehensions differ, their theme is the same. The differences, undoubtedly real, between the Muslim and the Christian understanding of God, are far-reaching and must be patiently studied. But it would be fatal to all our mutual tasks to doubt that one and the same God over all was the reality of both. Those who say that Allah is not “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” are right if they mean that God is not so described by Muslims. They are wrong if they mean that Allah is other than the God of the Christian faith.

Nazir-Ali's last assertion is very illuminating. Each sentence shares the same subject, giving us a common focal point. From this starting point, we are invited (by God, we believe) to explore the variations each of the predicates suggest. If it becomes evident that the differing predicates require significant modifications to the base concept—the shared subject—then we might find ourselves focused on different goals.¹⁹ However, until that point, we must assume a common subject, as we are on a similar journey. Therefore, we wholeheartedly agree with the following humble statement of invitation and openness:

If we engage the matter by accepting one another's approaches to devotion as good-faith *attempts* to worship the one true God, even if some of us may consider one another's attempts to be ultimately misguided, then we can discuss the salient issues with dignity and respect. In the end, it is perhaps best to answer the question of whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God in terms more like "Well, I'm not sure. We both *desire* to worship the one true God and we both *claim* to be doing so. But our worship and our beliefs about God differ in significant ways, and this leaves us a lot to discuss. Let's start talking . . . (Saperstein, Love, & Cumming 2009, 184-185, emphasis in the original).

Of course, the two of us have been talking for some time, and we will continue to talk, exploring differing predicates—differing views about God—at length. But it is important to recognize that we have always started with the same subject. As we have explored our differences, we have tried to be careful not to be misled by wrong questions or by misguided assumptions. As Saperstein et al. imply, it is crucial to approach our conversation with the utmost humility, as such a stance provides us with the greatest opportunity for learning and for gaining rich insights from each other. This humility is conceptually funded by deeper understandings of the predicates the other embraces concerning who our partner believes God is.²⁰

They also raise an additional concern, pointing in a direction that seems vaguely familiar:

If there exists only one true God, and if [we] claim to worship that one God, then perhaps the question "Do Muslims and Christians (and Jews) worship the same God?" is not the right question at all. A more appropriate question might be, "Do Muslims and Christians (and Jews) all worship God truly?" Perhaps the substance of our discussions . . . should focus more on how we might more truly know and worship the one true God, rather than on whether we are all in practice actually doing so. (2009, 183)²¹

The source of the confusion of thought encountered here is that to say who God is necessarily goes beyond saying that God is. If we agree on the second, what we say relates to the same theme or subject, even though we may differ markedly as to the first. No faith or believer, of course, can say that God is without being involved to some degree in what God is. But unless there is radical inconsistency within the very concept of existence itself as applied to God—the sort of difference that does not obtain between Muslim and Christian—we are speaking of the same subject" (1985, 30).

¹⁹ R. Marston Speight puts it this way: "It seems clear that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. Some Christians contest this affirmation, but no Muslims disagree with it. If we do not worship the same God, then we must find another name either for their God or our God. Allah, the word for God in the Qur'an, is the same word that is used by Arab Christians in their religious life. To say that we worship the same God does not mean that we share the same interpretations of the mystery of God's nature. Of course there are enormous differences of understanding" (2001, 108).

²⁰ For a chapter-length examination from one of us concerning the notion of humility and the role it plays, both from a theological as well as from a cultural anthropology perspective, see Backues (2017).

²¹ Speight offers these helpful insights: "The centrality and reality of the one true and living God is the basic rallying point for Christians and Muslims. Living daily as conscious and grateful recipients of the gifts of an Almighty and Gracious Creator, we have a scope for mutual understanding as broad as any human experience. What is more, we talk about God with many of the same words: Just, True, Beneficent, Wise, Powerful, Loving, Holy, Exalted, All-Hearing, All-Knowing.

We both believe in prophets who were God's instruments in human history to draw men and women from unbelief into the life of faith. History is taken seriously by our two religions since both faiths are founded on concrete historical events.

The place of Jesus differs enormously in the Muslim and the Christian systems, but the fact that he is known and respected in both is an important point of meeting" (2001, 113-114).

Note the question, “Do we both worship God truly?” This is obviously a centered set question, one that focuses not on the boundaries separating theological positions but, on the tangible, real-life acts of devotion that demonstrate the sincerity of a worshipper’s commitment. At its core, this question asks whether we are both facing the right direction.²² We believe our common focus should be on dedication to God and service to our neighbors—a center that keeps us moving together in solidarity. In doing so, we seek to exalt the same subject: the God of love who cares for us, the God of power who reaches out to humanity, especially to the poor and marginalized who face injustice and inequity.

An Anonymous Muslim and an Anonymous Christian in Conversation

Let us revisit the questions posed earlier, particularly our concerns with the term “kafir” (often translated “infidel” or “unbeliever”). Given our discussion, how should we now view each other? More specifically, how should we consider each other’s “eternal destiny”? To put it bluntly, what do we do with the word “kafir”—are either of us infidels?

Clearly, we do not believe this word is appropriate to describe either of us. We take delight in treating each other as persons of deep religious faith, a position that contradicts the usual connotation for “kafir.” While we differ in how we describe the divine, we have no doubt that we worship the same God. Neither of us are infidels; rather, we see each other as “fidels” (taken from the Latin word “fide” = “faith”).

Such a perspective aligns well with Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan’s view when he says that, from a Muslim perspective, the word “kafir”

has a strict normative sense; it defines those who, *with knowledge and forethought*, deny God and/or the truth of the last Revelation and the mission of Muhammad. It cannot be used to stigmatize or to insult and must be employed with the greatest caution, as *it is impossible to determine if a person who denies the existence of God has sufficient knowledge to assert as much, or if that person’s denial is the result of ignorance, in which case it is not conscious negation*. In addition, Revelation points to the relationship to be maintained with

those who negate religion, and who reject it in full knowledge. The formula is clear: “Unto you, your religion, and unto me, mine!” (109:6). The principle of freedom of conscience is inextricably linked to the basic requirement of justice for all, without distinction based on religious belief, skin color, or social status. Nor can it be an option to retreat behind the walls of one’s own community. (2017, 204, emphasis added)

Ramadan cautions against using the word too casually, for two reasons: (1) only God knows what is in a person’s heart, and (2) religious principles of justice require that others be free to believe as they choose.

Ramadan is not alone in this view. Many years ago, noted Islamic jurist Asaf A.A. Fyzee also warned against the cavalier use of this term. As he stated,

belief is a matter of conscience and this is the age which recognizes freedom of conscience in matters of faith. What may be said after proper analysis is that a certain person’s opinions are wrong, but not that “he is a *kafir*.” (Cragg & Speight 1979, 224)

Thus, we can conclude that the word “kafir” simply does not belong in our conversation and will not appear in any sort of work we do together in the future.

But we would like to take things a step further. Inspired by the views of noted Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, we believe we can view each other as “anonymous believers,” that is, within the context of our own specific religious traditions. This perspective is inviting and gracious; it does not arise from an academic concern for meticulously drawing boundaries, but it arises by way of the warm relationship we enjoy with each other, a bond that seeks to honor our shared dedication.

Thus, it might be helpful to unpack Rahner’s thinking a bit more. His approach was like ours: he embraced a pastoral concern for those who found themselves outside the realm of clear theological evidence about God. He recognized that excluding individuals who had received a garbled theological message was neither just, nor was it compassionate. Worse yet, such a perspective painted a picture of a coldhearted and harsh God, one that contradicted the image of God Rahner himself encountered in the

²² It is interesting that this raises a wonderful historic Muslim question: do we have our *qiblah*—the rightful direction of our prayer—oriented correctly?

biblical narrative.²³ Therefore, he believed that Christian theology must

account for the very large numbers of people, past and present, who have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ . . . How are we to make sense of the existence of so much unbelief and what Rahner called “inculpable atheism” in the world? How do you situate Christianity within the larger context of a world in which two-thirds are non-Christian? To answer these complex questions Rahner comes up with the idea of the anonymous Christian. (Lane 2005, 95)

Or in his own words,

until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity which is the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men [sic] as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason [sic] a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a *lawful* religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it. (1999, 293, emphasis in the original)

Broadening this principle brings significant clarity to our conversation. As mentioned earlier, we see each other as “anonymous believers,” recognizing the other’s faith position as deeply and honorably embraced. For Munjid, Backues can now be seen as an “anonymous Muslim”; for Backues, Munjid an “anonymous Christian.” This view postures the two of us as co-religionists, persons who respect each other’s spiritual journeys, trajectories centered on worship, on enhancing and edifying the common good, and towards a shared goal of honoring God in all the ways we know how.

This mutual respect allows us to pray, to work, to reason, and even to debate theology together, without denigrating the other’s faith, without questioning the other’s sincerity, or without diminishing the quality of the other’s insights. In short, neither of us ends up “kafir-ized” (an awkward neologism, we know). This is the foundational stance that underpins all of our interaction.

As somewhat of a punctuation to all we have just explored, we would like to bring our analysis to a close by having a close look at a deeply touching and very relevant human story. In much that we have explored above, we have been turning over in our minds ideas and concepts. But, as both of us know intimately, the thoughts explored here have real, existential, human implications. So, let us turn to a case study of sorts, a real-life, moving example that weaves together several of the strands that we have just discussed above.

²³ There is a reliable reading of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans that comports with this. Such a reading turns significantly upon whether a comma is included in Romans 1:18.

Note these two variant translations of verse 18, with significant punctuation differences on display.

1. “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” (NIV)
2. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” (NRSV)

A comma appears in option 1., causing the word “all” to modify “people.” In this reading, all people (inclusive in scope) are described as “ungodly” and “wicked,” at least to some degree. This results in God’s wrath being directed toward all of humanity, universally. Such a reading aligns well with the particularity position as described above.

In contrast, no comma appears in option 2. Because of this, the word “all” modifies “ungodliness and wickedness,” as opposed to “people,” which is the case in the NIV translation (“people” in the NIV is rendered “those” in the NRSV). This reading limits the scope of persons referred to, with God’s wrath directed, *not* toward everyone, but *only* toward “all ungodliness and wickedness” of “those [persons] who by their wickedness suppress the truth.” This way of glossing things seems similar to how Rahner saw things and—once again—it aligns best with the generality position above.

Which one is correct given the biblical text? We must first realize that Koine Greek contains no punctuation; the way it appears in our English versions is the product of an editorial—read, an “interpretive”—decision. We contend that—in this epistle—the second option here comports best with the flow of Paul’s argument, especially as one traces the flow of thought on display in the next two chapters (Romans 2-3).

A Centered Set Life of Religious Service; Quietly Lived and Tragically Cut Short

On March 6th, 2011, Rehab El-Buri passed away from cancer at the tender age of 26. Though we did not know her personally, it is clear she was an exceptional young woman. A devout Islamic activist, Rehab touched many lives and dedicated her short years to serving others tirelessly. This seemed to be the testimony of all who did know her.

After graduating from the University of Missouri's celebrated journalism program in 2007, Rehab—newly married—secured an entry-level desk assistant position at ABC News. Her hard work and her dedication soon paid off as she advanced within the company. Rehab eventually joined the ABC News Investigative Unit (ABC News Investigative Team, 2011), where her ability to uncover stories of the overlooked earned her recognition from the network.

In 2008, Rehab was instrumental in developing a 20/20 report that investigated how some high-ranking international diplomats in the U.S. would abuse and exploit the domestic workers brought with them from their home countries. The most challenging aspect of this report was finding workers from poor and underprivileged backgrounds who were willing to speak out against their powerful employers.

"Rehab combined a strong drive to uncover the facts with a calm and reassuring presence," said producer Joseph Rhee. "This proved invaluable in finding a way to crack this difficult story."

Rehab was able to contact a young Indonesian woman named Siti Aisah who worked for the then-ambassador to the United Nations from Qatar. Rehab gained Aisah's trust, meeting her on weekends and gaining permission to shoot footage of Aisah on her own with a small video camera. When Aisah finally spoke on-camera to ABC News, she told a powerful and heart-wrenching account of being treated harshly by the extremely wealthy and privileged family of the ambassador. (2011)

In short, Rehab was a person "committed to reporting on the plight of those who could not speak out on their own" (2011), a goal she fulfilled with style and effectiveness. "Rehab was wise beyond her years

and brought important insights to all of ABC News," said Brian Ross, chief investigative correspondent" (2011).

But then came her diagnosis: malignant melanoma. Just two short years later, she would be gone.

Even during her treatment—enduring grueling chemotherapy, surgeries, and radiation therapy—Rehab stayed focused on the needs of others. While lying in the hospital,

despite her own illness, she raised over \$20,000 through a bake sale for a friend who needed an operation. And when she learned from a chaplain at Memorial Sloan-Kettering hospital, where she was treated, that a program for pediatric patients was short on funding, she snapped into action.

"Rehab, completely exhausted, with tubes coming out of her chest and IVs running into every possible vein, looked up at him and promised she would get him the money," her husband, Zaied Abbassi, said. "Less than three weeks later, she handed him a check for \$1500." The money ensured the program would be funded for not only one year, but two.

"She said she would do something, and she did it," Abbassi said. (2011)

Those who knew Rehab noted that her passion for helping others, often at the expense of her own comfort, was driven by her faith in God. As a devout Muslim who had worn a hijab since childhood, Rehab's commitment to her beliefs was evident. This was especially clear in her blog entries written just after her diagnosis, at a time when she realized she might not survive. The words she penned are powerful and moving.

I know I ended my last post pretty abruptly. At the time I was writing it, going through the play by play was difficult.

It took me about three days to accept my death. On the first day, as you read, my mind was in chaos. On the second day, I was numb. And on the third day, my husband and mother began talking sense to me, and I finally came to some important realizations:

1. We are all going to die. The people who took the news of my disease calmly and those who panicked—they are going to die one day too.

Death is one of the few realities we can be certain of in this life, and yet we somehow slip into thinking that we are exempt.

2. We live this life for the next. I was living my life as a Muslim . . . praying and fasting, but I had somehow allowed my real goal in life to be swallowed by buying salad plates for my next dinner party, and trying to get free shipping on my next jcrew [sic] order, and finding pillows that popped against my creme sofa. In between being a consumer and entertaining myself to death, I let what really matters in my life slip away from me. If I was truly living my life for the Hereafter, I should not be so fearful of the future I had created for myself. The Quran says, “And this life of the world is nothing but a sport and a play; and as for the next abode, that most surely is the life—did they but know!” [29.64]

3. I am in the same boat as everyone else. None of us are given any guarantees in life. Our health, our wealth, and our families are trusts given to us by Allah—and they are His to take when He, in his infinite wisdom, deems fit. We all claim to believe this, but in practice we often falter. I don’t know why I thought I could push the thought of death out of my mind for at least a good 30 or 40 years. Allah (SWT) could claim any of us at any time. I am in the same boat as everyone else—I have no idea when my time is, but I should try to live everyday as if it is my last.

4. Each day is a gift. Receiving this wake up [sic] call is such a blessing in that each day Allah grants me is an opportunity to do some more good and try to make up for some of the mistakes I made in the past. For some reason, the mornings are usually a little rough for me. I think it’s just waking up from my dreams and realizing that I still have to live with this disease. But every morning I try to tell myself, “Alhamdulillah, I feel good today, what good can I do today?”

These realizations, and the support of my mother, husband, his mother, my sisters, his sisters, my father, his father, my friends, and my community have helped me not merely cope with what I’m going through, but actually seek the reward of going through this trial, and try to sincerely accept what Allah wills for me. (IslamicSG Networks 2011)

Soon after this, Rehab El-Buri was gone, leaving behind these poignant reflections, likely shared beyond her blog, perhaps repeated in prayer to her God up until the very day she died.

Conclusion

So, it is appropriate for us to now ask: what did God do with Rehab? What did God do with her prayers? She undeniably lived a good and exceptional life, as evidenced by the testimonies of her friends and acquaintances, and by her own words in her final months. However, as we have seen, both Islam and Christianity teach that no one can earn God’s favor solely through merit. Both faiths agree that if Rehab were to receive God’s welcome, it would be on the basis of divine mercy, that is, it would be a reflection and outpouring of God’s unmerited compassion. Rehab’s own writings confirm that she believed this, too.

So, we must ask ourselves: how merciful do we think God is? How merciful can God be? Perhaps most importantly, how merciful do we think God *should* be? Would a loving God, after receiving sincere, heartfelt prayers like the ones we heard coming from Rehab, turn her away because she unfortunately belonged to the wrong faith? If our God is bounded-set in nature, what does that say about how we understand God’s mercy? How happy are we that the mercy and compassion of God can be that bounded, too? In what real ways can we call a God merciful if that means God must reject someone like Rehab, if God is bound not to hear her prayers?

As for the two of us, we believe God heard Rehab’s cries, we believe God knew her heart, we believe God was moved by her plight, we believe God blessed her for her service, and we believe God welcomed her into divine fellowship, offering final healing in response to her pain and her consistent devotion. Our discussion above justifies why we can embrace such a belief.

However, this is not just an intellectual exercise. As persons who long for justice and fairness, we need to believe in a just and a fair God, a compassionate and a caring God, a God worthy of our worship. As the Muslim confession affirms, we seek a “God who is great”—Allāhu akbar: اللهُ أَكْبَرُ—a God focused on centered-sets, a God who welcomes with compassion those who approach with tender and open hearts, individuals who are devoted and centered on worship of God. We believe we know such a God, and we

believe our common conviction strengthens the bond of our shared faith.

Thus, we choose now to faithfully pray together in the same direction, side-by-side.

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Lindy Backues, PhD (University of Leeds) is Associate Professor of Business and Leadership at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia USA. For close to twenty years, he worked as a theologically informed community development practitioner in Indonesia. The focus of his work has been on grassroots development theory and practice undertaken within institutional structures promoting interfaith dialogue. He has also written on anthropology, theology, and epistemology.

Author email: lindy.backues@emu.edu



Achmad Munjid, PhD (Temple University) is a faculty member in the Department of Intercultural Studies, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, University of Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. While completing his PhD at Temple University, he lived in Philadelphia and served as the head imam (*ustadz*) at the mosque in South Philadelphia. His research includes Muslim-Christian relations, freedom of religion, religious pluralism and tolerance, religious fundamentalism, secularization, religion and violence, trauma and memory, death and dying, and world literature.

Author email: munjid@ugm.ac.id