

## Right Questions, Wrong Answers: A Study of World Religions

### • Lesson Two •

#### Who Is God?

1. There is one God—the Lord
2. The one God is three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

## Worship

A meditation based on sections of: Psalm 14:1; 19:1-4,14; 96:4-6,8,9; 104:24,27-30,33,34; Romans 15:5,6,13

**Leader:** The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

**Group:** **The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.**

**Leader:** Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

**Group:** **There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.**

**Leader:** Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.

**Group:** **For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.**

**Leader:** Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

**Group:** **How many are your works, O LORD! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time.**

**Leader:** When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.

**Group:** **When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.**

**Leader:** May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Group:** **I will sing to the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD.**

**Leader:** May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Group:** **May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.**

**Prayer:** O Lord Almighty, the gods of the nations are idols. You are the Creator of the world. You alone are God, the one who is, who was, and who is to come. You alone give life. Lead us, through your living Word, to know and confess you as the one true God, the Maker and Preserver of all things. Enable us to see that any religion that proclaims someone other than you is false and

empty, no matter how spiritual and meaningful it may appear to be. Lord, so fill our hearts with trust in you that our mouths overflow with your praise, that all may know that you are God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Introduction

There are a lot of different ways to skin a cat. It seems that a large number of people in our world look upon religion with the same idea. For those who believe this, what’s the only conclusion they can come to in regard to the many religions that exist in the world?

They will conclude that all religions are equal. Each religion has something to offer. It’s simply a matter of choosing the one that fits your particular needs and interests. Each religion is merely a way to get to know God better and to worship God in a way the individual finds meaningful. There can be no right or wrong religion. Anyone who thinks otherwise is narrow-minded.

Who is God? The religions of the world offer many answers that seem more logical or reasonable than Christianity’s answer. Some even offer answers that seem to be more spiritual and emotional than Christianity’s answer. But this question has only one right answer. The one true God, intent as he is on the salvation of all, wants all to hear the answer and believe it.

## Studying God’s Word

### There is one God—the Lord

#### Read 1 Kings 18:16-40.

1. Ahab accused Elijah of troubling Israel. In reality it was the other way around. Explain why. (verse 18)

Ahab was the one who had “abandoned the LORD’s commands.” Ahab failed in his role as shepherd of the people of God. Part of the king’s responsibility was to see to it that the Word of the Lord was proclaimed to God’s chosen people. He was to preserve them from false doctrine. Ahab never did that. He allowed false doctrine. In fact, he espoused the false religion of Baal and led the people to do the same.

Elijah was given the task of calling out to the people of God to turn from their sin of idolatry and turn to the one true God. His preaching went against the natural, sinful bent of the people of Israel, but it was all spoken for their spiritual good.

2. What did Elijah (whose name means “My God is the Lord”) think about the Israelites’ current state of spirituality? (verse 21)

Though the people of Israel may have deemed their worship of Baal nothing more than an addition to their worship of the Lord, Elijah didn’t commend it. Though they may have considered themselves spiritual people, Elijah considered their spirituality to be blasphemy. True spirituality and true worship focus on the one true God—the Lord of heaven and earth. Elijah challenged the people of Israel to follow one God, not two, no matter how appealing Baal worship may have been to them.

3. Prove from verse 30 that the majority of the Israelites had rejected the one true God and was following a false god.

The altar of the Lord was in ruins. The place for sacrifices to the one true Lord, who had remained faithful to them all these years, had fallen into disuse. The people of Israel were not continually reminding themselves of the Lord’s grace and his promise to send someone to destroy the devil’s work.

4. It would have been miraculous enough to have the sacrifice consumed by fire. Why would Elijah dig a trench, fill it with water, and have water poured on the wood and the sacrifice? (verses 32-35)

Elijah wanted it to be perfectly clear that the Lord was the actor in this scene. Everyone would see that the Lord God had unlimited power, able to cause even water to be burned up. Lest someone claim that Elijah had doctored the sacrifices to cause some sort of spontaneous combustion, Elijah asked for the water to be poured over it all. He also wanted to silence the prophets of Baal and make them ashamed of their blasphemy.

5. Evaluate: The prophets of Baal failed because their prayer was not as sincere or focused as Elijah’s.

One can hardly question the sincerity of the prophets of Baal. They prayed earnestly. They wanted nothing more than to have their offering consumed with fire. Their prayers accomplished nothing because they prayed to a false god. The effectiveness of Elijah’s prayer rested not on Elijah’s sincerity or focus. Elijah’s prayer was effective because the Lord is effective. Prayer addressed to the Lord God is powerful because the Lord God is powerful.

6. What statement was the Lord making by consuming the sacrifice and the wood and licking up the water? (verse 38)

The Lord was demonstrating that he alone is God. His power is not limited in any way; he is not subject to the laws of nature. Baal is not God and is not worthy of praise or trust. The Lord showed that he is worthy of praise.

## Who do other religions worship as god?

**Islam:** The Koran says, and Muslims believe, that there is no god but Allah. He is the One—the Sole Creator and Preserver, the Merciful and Compassionate. Muslims call their god by 99 beautiful names. Islam has no use for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which it considers to be the worship of three gods.

**Judaism:** “The Lord our God, the Lord is One” (the Shema) is the confession of the Jew. Strict, unyielding monotheism marks Judaism. Judaism, like Islam, mistakenly rejects the Christian teaching of the Trinity as polytheism.

**Hinduism:** Hinduism is pantheistic. There is one ultimate reality behind all things, which are merely expressions of this one universal world soul. Brahman, the one high god, is the ultimate reality and reveals himself in nature and in other lesser gods. Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer are three lesser gods that are most often worshiped. There are hundreds of millions of gods under the umbrella of Hinduism, all of whom are merely ways to find the ultimate reality. Some Hindus worship one god, others worship many, and some think there is no god.

**Buddhism:** Buddha denied the existence of God in the sense of a higher being. Strict Buddhists do not rely on one god or many gods but seek to find escape from suffering in this world by the elimination of desire. Many Buddhists worship Buddha (the founder of Buddhism) and Tera (Buddha’s virgin mother). Ultimately, though, Buddhists rely on themselves for good.

### His Word in My Life

Muslims believe what the Koran says: “There is no god but Allah.” They reject the worship of more than one god. In fact, Muhammad was greatly bothered by the polytheistic practices he saw around him and continually urged his followers to reject such teachings.

1. Agree or disagree: We ought to applaud Muslims for their monotheistic faith.

Disagree. Monotheism is not God pleasing if the worship is directed toward a false god. Because Muslims reject the triune God, their monotheism is nothing but false worship. To applaud their monotheistic faith would be to give the impression that there isn’t that much difference between the two religions. Of course, no Muslim would be willing to grant that Christians are monotheistic, so confessing belief in one God might be a good place to begin your attempt to witness to a Muslim.

2. How might you use your Muslim friend’s belief in Allah as a starting point to share your faith?

“You’re right in saying that there is one God. Christianity teaches that there is only one God. This one God loves all people so much that he decided to rescue them from the punishment they deserve for failing to live perfectly. God invites all people to believe that he has punished their sins on Jesus and that he has given them eternal life through the sacrifice he offered on the cross.” The point, as always, is to bring the gospel to the forefront, to lead the Muslim to see the love of God before you try to explain the Trinity. Winning an argument rarely accomplishes what God wants: the rescue of a sinner ensnared by a false religion.

Hinduism allows for quite a bit of latitude in respect to the number of gods people should acknowledge and worship. Some opt to worship one god. Others choose to think that there are several gods. Still others decide to believe that there are multiple manifestations of one god.

3. Agree or disagree: Hinduism is less judgmental than Christianity.

From a human standpoint, this statement may be accurate. We would still disagree with the statement because it assumes that Christianity is judgmental. Christianity recognizes that the Bible reveals absolute answers to the basic questions of life. The Bible is clear that there is only one God. Since Christianity seeks the rescue of every soul redeemed by the blood of Christ and since Christianity confesses that there is but one way to life, Christians cannot help but reject polytheism.

4. Why might Christians give in to the temptation to overlook differences among religions?

Overlooking differences can make life a little easier. Rather than having to listen to the world accuse Christians of being out of step with the times and narrow minded, Christians may want to become broader minded. The old Adam may lead us to think that sincere spirituality is really more important than doctrinal truth. Truth seems so stuffy; spirituality seems so much more free-flowing and beneficial.

*The Lord, who graciously introduces himself to us in the Bible, is God; there are no gods besides him. Only he existed before the foundations of the world; only he will continue to exist when the world comes to an end. He alone is worthy of praise and trust, because only he has the power to act and the strength to save.*

## **The one God is three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**

### **Read John 14:15-31.**

1. The Holy Spirit is God, just as Jesus is God. How is that evident in verses 15 through 17?

Jesus calls him “another Counselor,” by which Jesus recognizes that the Spirit has power equal to his. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would be with us “forever.” The Holy Spirit must be God, because who but God can be with someone forever?

Jesus also said that the Holy Spirit would be “in” the disciples. Who else but God can live within not just one person but many people at the same time?

2. Jesus, on the night before he would die, told his disciples that he would rise. What conclusions about Jesus were the disciples to draw from his resurrection? (verses 19 and 20)

Though Jesus doesn’t specifically mention it, the obvious conclusion is that he is God. Only God has power over death. The disciples were also to conclude that they too would rise from the dead. They should conclude as well that he had done what pleased his Father and had fulfilled the Father’s plan to rescue sinners (“I am in my Father”).

3. If Jesus is not God, the words he spoke in verse 21 are blasphemous. Why?

Jesus told his disciples that he wanted his commands to be obeyed and that he wanted their love. In other words, he desired their worship. Since only God is to be worshiped, Jesus’ words would be blasphemous if he were not God. Jesus also equates obedience to his commands with obedience to the Father.

4. The Lord, the one God, is three persons. How does verse 26 demonstrate that? (See John 15:26 as well.)

The Counselor is obviously God, because he will teach the disciples *all* things and remind them of *everything* that Jesus taught. The Spirit’s knowledge and power testify to his divinity. The Father and Son together will send the Spirit to the disciples (“the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name”). Only God can send God.

5. Evaluate: Jesus cannot be God in the same way the Father is God. Jesus himself says, “The Father is greater than I.” (verses 28-31)

Remember that Jesus was still in his state of humiliation. He had decided not to make full and constant use of his power so that he might redeem us. He knew all things (and occasionally revealed that, telling his disciples exactly what would happen to him), but he chose to know less than the Father. He had all power (and occasionally revealed that), but he chose to put aside that power unless his heavenly Father wanted him to use it. Jesus took our place under God, submitting himself to God in every situation and circumstance so he could then go to the cross and be judged guilty of our sins and die in our place. If Jesus had not humbled himself and submitted to the Father, he could not have redeemed us. Thank God for all that Jesus did!

6. What does Jesus indicate about the sufferings and death he was about to endure? (verses 30 and 31)

He indicates that his sufferings and death were not the result of his weakness, but his love. The prince of this world has no hold on him, yet Jesus would allow himself to be crucified because of his love for all people. He goes to the cross willingly to obey his Father out of love for him. Though he knew what was going to happen, he didn’t plot an escape; he wanted to rescue all people from the punishment their sins deserve.

## Do other religions serve one god or many?

**Islam:** Muslims serve only one god, Allah. Since they reject the triune God of the Bible, their monotheism is idolatry.

**Judaism:** Jews serve the Lord alone. Since they reject the triune God of the Bible, their monotheism is idolatry.

**Hinduism:** Hindus are free to find a way to Brahman through worship of one god, many gods, or no gods.

**Buddhism:** Though some Buddhists have added Hindu ideas to their thinking and may worship Buddha or Tera, strict Buddhists find serving a god counterproductive in their search for freedom from desire.

### His Word in My Life

The Koran says, “They say, moreover, ‘Become Jews or Christians, that ye may have the true guidance.’ Say: Nay! The religion of Abraham, the sound in faith, and not one of those who join gods with God is our religion!”

1. What do Muslims evidently think about Christianity?

Muslims think Christians worship more than one God. They contend that Christians “join gods with God” in teaching that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Some Muslims think Christians teach that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is God.

2. Evaluate: Once you have convinced a Muslim that God is triune, everything else will fall into place.

In one sense, the statement above is probably accurate. If a Muslim comes to believe that God is triune, then other things will begin to fall into place. But this is probably not the best place to begin. It would be wiser to start with the chief teaching of Scripture, that God has declared all people innocent of all sin in the life and death of his Son. Since Muslims essentially believe that people must earn their way into God’s favor, the most important issue to discuss with them is the way to life through Jesus. When the Holy Spirit graciously leads Muslims to believe that Jesus is God and, therefore, the Redeemer of the world, then the Lord will lead them to understand the other truths of Scripture.

### His Word in My Life

3. Most Jews confess that God is absolutely one. Can you think of some ways to explain the Trinity to a Jewish friend? (Keep in mind that the Jews consider the Old Testament alone to be authoritative Scripture.)

We certainly believe that God is one. But the one God reveals himself in the Bible as three persons in that one God. In Genesis 1:26,27 God speaks in the first-person plural (“Let us make man”) and in the third-person singular (“in the image of God he created him”). Because God is three persons in one God, both pronouns are appropriate. In Isaiah 6:8 the first- and third-person pronouns again show themselves: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” Ultimately, we need to remember that this is a matter of faith, not logic or reason. We want to share the message of Christ, which God promises is powerful and effective in creating faith. We’ll leave the results to God.

*We believe that God is triune not because it is humanly reasonable but because the Bible describes God in that way. We believe it not because we choose to do so but because God leads us to believe it. If people from other religions consider us polytheistic, we must try to correct that misconception using God’s Word.*

### Summary

Agree or disagree: Only those who believe in the triune God will be saved.

Agree. There is only one God, and he has revealed himself as triune. Though many may believe sincerely in their false gods, those gods remain false and, like Baal, unable to come to our rescue. We might be tempted to think there are other ways to get to heaven than faith in the one true God, but God does not give us the freedom to think that way.

If a woman introduced herself to you, it would not be right for you to argue with that introduction. If she honestly says her name is Mary, you cannot say, “No, that’s not right. You are Elizabeth.” When God introduces himself to us in his Word, we cannot argue with that introduction. He is who he says he is. He is God, and all the other gods of this world’s religions are idols. He is three persons in one God, undivided in essence. Most important, he is the Savior-God, who entered our world to give us the life that will never end.

### Life with God

Day 1: Read Isaiah 44:24–45:13. The Lord alone is God.

Day 2: Read Isaiah 45:14-26. The Lord is the only God who saves. Day 3:

Day 3: Read Acts 5:1-11. Lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God. Day 4:

Day 4 Read Isaiah 6:1-8. Holy, holy, holy is the triune God.

Day 5: Read 2 Corinthians 13:5-14. The blessing of the triune God is yours.

Day 6: Read the Athanasian Creed (page 132 in *Christian Worship*). This creed summarizes the Bible’s teaching of the Trinity.

Here’s the short, clear answer: Muslims generally do not consider Christians to be monotheists in the proper sense, even though they acknowledge that Christians intend to worship one God. But the reasons behind that are worth unpacking, especially for your teaching and pastoral work.

### How Muslims Typically View Christian Belief in God

#### 1. Islam affirms that Christians claim to worship one God

The Qur’an repeatedly refers to Christians (and Jews) as *Ahl al-Kitāb*—“People of the Book.”

Muslims recognize that Christians confess one Creator, not multiple gods.

So in that sense, Muslims see Christians as aspiring to monotheism.

#### 2. But Islam rejects the Trinity as true monotheism

This is the decisive point.

Islam defines monotheism (*tawḥīd*) as the absolute, indivisible oneness of God.

Any division of persons within the Godhead is seen as compromising that unity.

Therefore:

- The Christian confession of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is viewed as *shirk*—the association of partners with God.
- The Qur’an explicitly denies that God has a Son.
- Some Qur’anic passages even misunderstand the Trinity as God + Jesus + Mary, which reinforces the Islamic rejection.

So from an Islamic theological standpoint:

#### 3. Muslims often say Christians are “*mushrikūn*” (those who associate partners with God)

Not in a hostile sense, but as a doctrinal classification.

To a Muslim theologian:

- Jews = monotheists
- Christians = near monotheists, but ultimately not monotheistic because of the Trinity
- Pagans = polytheists

This is why Islamic apologetics often frame Christianity as “tritheism,” even though Christians deny that.

#### 4. In dialogue, Muslims may politely call Christians monotheists

In everyday conversation, many Muslims will say:

- “Christians believe in one God.”
- “We worship the same God, but differently.”

But in formal Islamic theology, the verdict is consistent:

### A Confessional Lutheran Angle (since this is your world)

This is one of those places where the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a hinge point for witness:

- Christianity: God is one in essence and three in persons.
- Islam: God is one in essence and one in person.

So the question “Are Christians monotheists?” becomes a window into:

- the deity of Christ
- the personhood of the Holy Spirit
- the relational nature of the Triune God
- the gospel itself

It’s a fruitful place for patient, careful conversation.

If you want, I can help you craft a concise explanation suitable for a Bible class, or a comparison chart for your “World Religions” study.