



# RCA Missionary Update

## from the Fords

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus seeks to train specialized evangelists who will help their congregations reach out in Christian love to their Muslim neighbors. As part of this goal, Peter Ford directs the program in Christian-Muslim Relations at Mekane Yesus Seminary. Through his teaching at the seminary and in various workshops, Peter enables Christian leaders to better understand the faith and practice of Muslims in the Ethiopian context, and how they can share the message of the gospel in an honest yet respectful manner.

### Ethiopia facts:

- Population: 65 million
- Size: 704,000 square miles (about twice the size of Texas)
- Major religions: Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, 48%; Islam, 35-40%; Evangelical Christianity, 12%



#### MINISTRY

Theological Education

#### LOCATION

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

#### PARTNER

Ethiopian Evangelical Church  
Mekane Yesus

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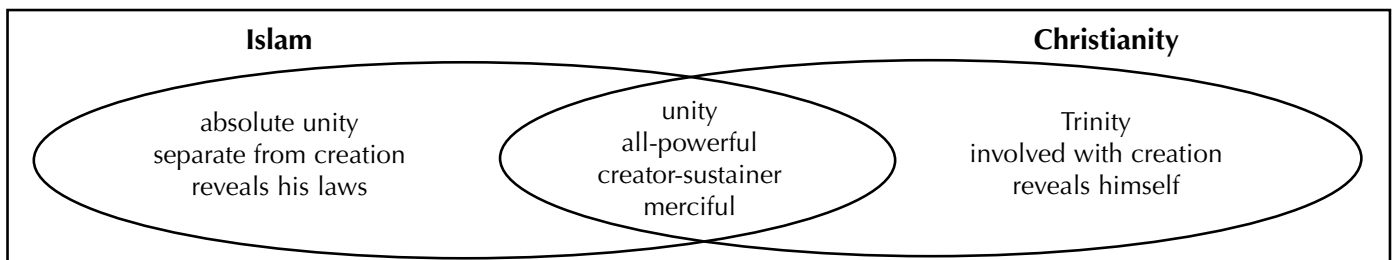
Dear Friends,

March 2008

Many of you who read these letters have written to me, saying how much you appreciate my comments about Islam, or to ask for further clarification, or sometimes to express reservations with my conclusions. Whatever our views on this or that issue, I think we all agree on the importance for Christians around the world to try to understand Islam better and to build positive relationships with Muslim neighbors where possible. So far, I have discussed two very fundamental aspects of Islam: the Qur'an as the scripture which Muslims believe came directly from God (April 2007); and Muhammad as the man whom Muslims believe was the channel for that scripture and who taught his community how to live according to its requirements (October 2007).

In those previous letters, I often referred to "God" as the one about whom Muhammad preached, instead of using

the Arabic name "Allāh." Yet many readers might well ask if this is appropriate. After all, many English-speaking Muslims insist on referring to the object of their worship as "Allāh" rather than "God," and this approach is also followed by several Muslim translations of the Qur'an into English. So in this letter I would like to deal with the important question: Is the God of Islam the same as the God of Christianity? My short response to this question is: "Yes and no." Other Christians will disagree with this, some insisting that the answer must be a definitive "yes," others a categorical "no." I believe, however, that we cannot escape the fact that there is *some shared truth* about God between Islam and Christianity, while at the same time there are important truths about God that Islam does *not* share with Christianity. This can be shown in the following illustration, with a few important characteristics about God listed as examples:



Each of these characteristics deserves further reflection, but I must leave that for another time. For now, let me point out an important feature of my initial short response: I *begin* with the “yes,” and then move on with the “no.” I think that it is important, in our conversations with Muslims, to establish the common ground first, and then after that to discuss the important differences in our beliefs about God. I am even willing to use the name “Allāh” when talking about God with my Muslim friends so that they can understand this common ground. Of course, if they are willing, it is important that eventually I talk about how, according to the Bible and Christian teaching, Allāh revealed himself (and not just his laws) through Christ. But it is easier to talk about the differences after we recognize the commonalities. There are also some other good reasons for adopting this approach:

1. The name “Allāh” is the natural name for God in Arabic, for both Muslims and Christians.

Some people say that the Arabic name Allāh referred to a pagan god from the time before Islam, but this is not accurate. It is true that before Islam came, most Arabs believed in many gods. But they also believed in the existence of the high God Allāh. Unlike other gods who had limited powers and who could be represented as idols, Allāh was considered to be all-powerful – just distant and unconcerned with daily affairs. Muhammad taught that *only* Allāh should be worshipped, and that other gods were really no gods at all. We must also note that there were Jews and Christians in Arabia at the time of Muhammad. We do not know much about their beliefs and practices, and it seems that they did not even have an Arabic translation of the Bible at that time. But it is quite clear that when they talked about God – the God of the Bible – they used the Arabic word Allāh. Following Muhammad’s death, as Islam spread across the Middle East and North Africa, Arab Christians who lived under the rule of Islam continued to use the name “Allāh” for God. Christians began translating the Bible into Arabic *after* the rise of Islam, and they consistently used the word “Allāh” when translating the Hebrew and Greek words for “God.” This practice has continued up to modern times. Today, millions of Arab Christians pray every day to Allāh as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and would never consider using a different name. Our Arab Christian brothers and sisters accept that Muslims believe in the same Allāh, but that they have some different understandings about what Allāh is like.

2. We make no distinction between Jewish and Christian concepts of God.

Today, millions of Jews claim to believe in God, basing their view of God on the Hebrew Bible, which is the same as our Old Testament. The Old Testament speaks of God as the one God who is all-powerful and holy, who created all things and is concerned about his creation, especially people. Thus, God sent various prophets and laws to his special people Israel, in the hopes that they would show the world what the one true God is like. In fact, it would be very difficult to develop a doctrine of the Trinity based on the Old Testament alone. Christians

accept the view of God in the Old Testament, but they supplement this view with the New Testament, where we see that this same God revealed himself through his Son, Jesus Christ, in order to work out our salvation. Of course, Jews do not accept any additional revelation such as the New Testament. But do we as Christians say that they worship a different God? No; even though the Jewish understanding of God has no room for Jesus as God’s Son, we say that Jews worship the same God – only that their understanding of God does not incorporate the Christian gospel. In many ways, the Jewish view of God is very similar to Muslim view: the one true God is all-powerful, has created all things, and has sent prophets and laws to people in order to guide them into right living. Is it right for us to say one thing about the Jewish belief about God, and to say something different about the Muslim belief about God?

3. Starting with the common ground has biblical precedents.

In the book of Jonah, we read that the people of Nineveh repented from their sins based on what Jonah preached to them. Now, Jonah did not tell them everything he knew about God. He did not want the Ninevites to repent; they were his enemy, and so he wanted God to judge them. He simply told the people “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned” (Jonah 3:4). He said nothing about God’s mercy, about the possibility that God might forgive them if they repented; they had to figure this out for themselves. Yet God was willing to forgive them based on their limited understanding about him. In Acts 17, we read about Paul’s preaching to the pagan citizens of Athens. Although they believed in many gods, Paul noticed that they had an altar dedicated “to an unknown god.” “Now what you worship as something unknown” said Paul. “I am going to proclaim to you” (v. 23); and he began to preach to them about the one true God who had sent Jesus into the world. Paul used the same Greek word *theos* for both the God of Christianity and the “unknown god,” using the common word as a link to help the Athenians learn something new about this God. Paul started with what they already knew about God, even though it might have been very limited or even mistaken; he went on to give them more truth about God, as much as they were willing to accept.

Talking about God with Muslims can be challenging. But this approach of recognizing common ground – and beginning our discussion there – can help lead the conversation to a deeper level where we can share specifically Christian truths. Other evangelical Christians have more or less reached a similar conclusion, and you might want to read what they have to say: Colin Chapman in *Cross and Crescent*, especially chapter 25; Kenneth Cragg in *The Call of the Minaret*, especially chapter 2; Timothy George in *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?*; and Phil Parshall in *The Cross and the Crescent*, especially chapter 1. Let us reflect on this matter carefully, and try to put it into practice the next time we have the opportunity to talk with a Muslim on our respective beliefs about God.