What Do Our Neighbors Believe?

Questions and Answers on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

SECOND EDITION

Micah Greenstein
Kendra G. Hotz
John Kaltner

With Howard R. Greenstein

WJK Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville • Kentucky

Contents

Chapter Five

Beliefs

1. How is the human condition understood in the religion?

Judaism. Judaism teaches that a person is neither inherently good nor inherently evil. Every individual is born with two conflicting inclinations. One is called the *yetzer hatov*, the impulse for doing good; the other is called the *yetzer hara*, the aggressive impulse which can lead to wrongdoing. The *yetzer hatov* is the innate drive for all creative and constructive action—music, poetry, art, as well as moral concern for justice, love, compassion, and righteousness. By contrast, the *yetzer hara* is the innate drive for aggrandizement—the competition, greed, lust, and temptation to succeed at any cost. This aggressive impulse, however, is not entirely negative or destructive. According to a midrash, it may even be channeled into positive directions. As the sages noted, "For were it not for the *yetzer hara*, no man would build a house, or marry a wife, nor beget children, nor engage in a trade" (Kohelet Rabbah 3.11).

Elsewhere in the midrash, the aggressive impulse is reduced almost to a neutral force that a person may then manipulate for good or evil purposes. A constructive application of that impulse will follow the proper observance of the Torah, as the midrash explains: "Like iron, out of which man can fashion whatever implements he pleases when he heats it in the forge, so the aggressive impulse can be subdued to the service of God if tempered by the words of Torah which is like fire" (*Avot of Rabbi Nathan*, Perek 16).

With this set of premises about the nature of the human condition, the rabbinic sages concluded that sin or wrongdoing was a state of action, not a state of being. They taught that Adam's disobedience in the garden of Eden was not the original sin that contaminated all future generations of

humankind, but that it was the kind of transgression to which all people may succumb as a result of their own imperfections. The "fall" of Adam is an object lesson in the inevitable limitations of finite creatures. The rabbis carefully emphasized the full responsibility of every individual for one's own sin despite the effects of Adam's "fall." They emphasized God's response to Cain after killing his brother, "Sin couches at the door, . . . but you may rule over it" (Genesis 4:7 AT).

Nowhere in its literature does Judaism require a person to atone for some burden of guilt inherited from the past, even though the Torah acknowledges (Exodus 20:5) that the errors of earlier generations invariably affect the predicament of later generations. No sacrifices in the ancient Temple at Jerusalem, however, were ever associated with an eternal transgression or even with intentional sin. No ceremonies or rituals even hinted at such a concept. Judaism also never embraced the hope that God would in some manner intervene in the affairs of a doomed humanity to remove the curse of this guilt from Adam's descendants and to redeem people from their presumably corrupt, evil nature.

In Jewish tradition, the sin of Adam did not extinguish human moral freedom or initiative. The major focus has always centered not on the origin of sin but on the avoidance of wrongdoing and on ways to eliminate it. No person is condemned to sin, but all people are capable of it simply because all people are endowed with free will and the power to choose between good and evil.

Jewish theology teaches that if a person has committed a sin, one may repent and be forgiven. The initiative, however, must come from the individual, not from God. The psalmist declared that "the LORD is near to all who call on him . . . in truth" (Psalm 145:18). The prophet Malachi assured his listeners, "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:7).

In Judaism the highest of virtues is repentance. No other religious literature is more explicit on the subject. The Talmud teaches that "in the place where a repentant sinner stands, even the righteous who have never sinned cannot stand" (*Berakhot* 34b). This comparison does not necessarily imply that repentant transgressors are better than the wholly righteous, but only that they occupy a very special place on a divine scale of values.

Furthermore, repentance in Judaism is not a mystery or a sacrament. It does not imply any miraculous transformations in the individual or the rebirth of one's soul. Rather, repentance is largely a human undertaking. It involves a four-step process that begins with a readiness to acknowledge

a wrongdoing, followed by acts of compensation for the injury inflicted and genuine resolve to avoid a repetition of the same sinful deed. Only then can a person continue with the fourth and final step of praying for forgiveness and cherish the expectation of receiving God's mercy. "And God responded: I forgive, as you have asked" (Numbers 14:20 AT).

In Jewish tradition, life is entirely a matter of choices. One may choose either good or evil. From the moment of birth every person is a free agent. One may sin, or one may avoid it. One surely is not perfect, but every person is perfectible; and one's purpose in life is to achieve as much of that moral potential as one's humanity will allow. The task is not to eliminate aggressive inclinations but to control them and channel them. Persons can be all that God meant for them to be, or any person may ignore the opportunity. All depends on individual choice.

Christianity. Christians believe that human beings were created in the image of God. To understand what it means to be human, then, one needs to understand something of the divine life. Christians believe that God's existence is marked by infinite, loving justice and that God is internally relational; that is, God is a Trinity of three coequal persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who live in such perfect cooperation and love that they are one God. Christians also believe that God is personal, not simply an impersonal force of nature, and rational, that God acts with intention. To say that humanity bears the image of God, then, means that human beings were created to live in loving, just relationships with one another. It also means that our capacity to think and act rationally is a crucial marker of our humanity and that true rationality is inseparable from love and justice.

To say that human beings bear the image of God, though, also highlights the fact that human beings are not God; they are creatures: finite, embodied, and mortal. Christianity affirms the fundamental goodness of creation. Because creation flows from the infinite goodness of God, it exists as the embodiment of God's goodness. Being human entails living as an embodied soul, as ensouled flesh, and this union of body and soul is both essential to our humanity and good. In other words, Christians celebrate the goodness of embodiment and reject the notion that the soul is trapped in the body from which it hopes to escape at death. Likewise, Christians do not accept the idea that souls can migrate from one body to another. To be human is to live an earthly life, body and soul. Christians extend this affirmation of the goodness of earthly life, body and soul, to their vision of redemption. Christians anticipate that when God's reign is

fully come to earth, the earth will be made new and human beings will be raised from the dead to live bodily lives in joyous communion with God and one another.

Although Christians believe that humanity was created good, they also affirm that we have fallen from God's original intention for humanity so that we no longer live in loving, just relationships with one another, and our rationality no longer perfectly conforms to the standards of love and justice. Instead, we use our rational powers for destructive purposes and live in communities that do not display the love and justice that God intended for humanity. Christian theology names this fall from God's intentions "sin." Sin indicates two things for Christians. First, it names the particular ways and specific acts through which we violate the will of God. Second, sin indicates an underlying condition, a brokenness of the spirit, which expresses itself in particular sins. This underlying condition is known as original sin, a condition of separation from God shared by all people that prevents humanity from living as God intends. Sin leads to spiritual and physical death. Because of original sin, all persons are in need of God's redeeming grace, even children who have not yet committed any actual or particular sins. Original sin is also, therefore, the origin of our particular sinful acts, which emerge from the underlying brokenness the way a disease manifests itself in particular symptoms.

One theologian, Augustine, described original sin as a prideful rejection of our status as creatures. The first human beings, said Augustine, wanted to be gods and not creatures; they wanted to live for themselves, rather than living for the glory of God. When they rejected their status as creatures, they damaged the image of God in themselves, with the result that they and all of their descendants now suffer from original sin.

The human condition, then, is one of living as the fallen image of God so that humanity suffers both spiritual and physical death. Christians affirm that in Christ, God works to redeem humanity so that we may live in conformity with God's will and in joyful communion with God and one another. Human salvation is achieved through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, whom Christians affirm to be perfect in humanity and perfect in divinity. Christians believe that, in Jesus Christ, God entered human existence in order to restore humanity to the image of God. Jesus Christ's life and death reconcile humanity to God so that we are no longer alienated, no longer subject to spiritual death. In Christ's resurrection from the dead, God overcomes even physical death so that humanity may live forever in the kingdom of God in joyful obedience and delightful communion.

Islam. Islam celebrates the diversity that is found within humanity. Qur'an 49:13 states that the differences among people are ultimately a gift from God that enables us to learn about each other: "Oh, humanity! [God] has made you male and female, nations and tribes, so that you might know one another. Truly, the most noble among you in God's eyes is the most devout." The variety within human life should therefore be recognized as a God-given opportunity for growth and knowledge. This perspective on human diversity is what has encouraged many Muslims to engage in interreligious encounters and experiences with members of other faiths. The possibility to know and learn from those with different backgrounds is considered to be a divine gift that should be embraced for the betterment of the human community. Interfaith gatherings have often been initiated by Muslims in order to introduce non-Muslims to the Islamic religion.

Despite that diversity, however, there is a firm belief in Islam that, at their core, all human beings are the same. As finite creatures that have been created by God, we all share the same basic human condition regardless of differences in gender, race, nationality, and religion. The thing that cuts through the distinctions among us is our complete dependence on God for our life and our survival. That reliance is vividly portrayed in the account of human origins in Qur'an 15:28–29, when God addresses the angels and tells them how humanity will be formed: "I am creating a human being from clay, formed mud. When I have fashioned him and breathed in him my spirit, prostrate yourselves to him." God animates Adam, the first human being, with the breath of life that allows him to become a sensate, thinking person. This is the paradigm that explains how all subsequent humans are created.

Consequently, Islam teaches that all people are born muslims. Not Muslims, which designates those who follow the religion of the Prophet Muhammad, but muslims, in the sense of "submitters." Our birth is completely out of our control. We are each brought into existence by God, who breathes the spirit of life into us, and that divine act puts us in a position of submission whether we realize it or not. As we grow and mature, we can choose to reject or ignore our dependence on God, but that does not change the fact that we are muslims until the day we die. We constantly submit ourselves to the divine will because that is what it means to be a human being. A distinction can therefore be made between voluntary and compulsory Muslims. The former are those who freely choose to embrace the religion of Islam and express their membership in the *ummah* by engaging in the practices and holding the beliefs that

are incumbent upon Muslims. Those who are not formally affiliated with Islam are compulsory muslims because they, too, are submitters, but of a different type. Atheists and agnostics fall under this category as well because as finite human beings who will one day die, they ultimately do not have complete control over every aspect of their lives.

Islam does not teach that humanity fell from a perfect state and that the effects of that fall are passed on to succeeding generations. In other words, it does not ascribe to the notion of original sin that characterizes many Christian denominations. According to the Qur'an's version of the events in the garden, humanity disobeyed God, but that transgression did not lead to a change in the human condition. The account in Qur'an 7:22–25 picks up the story after Satan (not a serpent) has tricked the couple.

> Their Lord called out to them, saying, "Did I not forbid you to approach the tree, and did I not warn you that Satan is a clear enemy to you?" They said, "Our Lord, we have harmed ourselves. If you do not forgive us and have mercy on us, we shall surely be among the lost." He said, "Go! Some of you will be enemies of each other. For a while, the earth will provide you a dwelling and life's necessities. There you shall live and there you shall die, and from there you shall be brought out."

The outcome of this version is different than what we find in Genesis 3:14–19. In the Bible the couple is punished, and they are told that they will die because of their disobedience. The Qur'an does not present such a bleak picture of the aftermath. Adam and Eve are the same people at the end of the text that they were at the beginning. They are expelled from the garden, but God does not curse them, and it seems that mortality has always been part of their human condition because they are not threatened with it in the Qur'an if they eat of the tree.

In the Muslim understanding, humans were created mortal and with an innate capacity to do good. The first couple was tricked into disobeying, but that does not make them the first link in an unbroken chain of human sinfulness. If a Muslim does sin, it is their own fault and not the consequence of some primordial transgression. One of the most drawn-out and contentious debates within the Muslim community was that of free will versus predestination. Are humans truly free to make their own decisions, or are all acts predetermined by God? Prominent intellectual heavyweights lined up on both sides of the issue, but it was eventually decided that humans are free and responsible for their own actions.

The Islamic teaching on free will can be seen in the dramatic story of Noah's son that is told in the Qur'an (11:36–47) but is not part of the biblical tradition. Noah urged his son to board the ark in order to avoid the deluge, but the younger man rejected his father's advice and chose instead to take refuge on a nearby mountain. Before he could reach safety, the son was swept away by the water and lost his life. In this way, Noah's son opted to exercise his free will and not listen to the prophet, but he paid the ultimate price for his decision.

Islam's lack of belief in original sin means that there is no preordained guilty condition from which humanity must be "saved." All people are born good, and it is up to each of us to make the proper choices as we exercise our free will. Muslims believe that the surest way to do this is to submit one's own will to God's will as it is revealed to them through their religion. When they do so they become an example to those around them, and they inspire others to do the same. A frequently cited verse from the Qur'an describes the healthy competition that results from this situation. "If God had wished, He could have made you one community, but he intended to test you through what He has given you. So compete with one another in doing good things, for all of you will return to God. He will then advise you regarding that about which you differed" (5:48b).

2. How is the nature of God understood in the religion?

Judaism. Ethical monotheism is a uniquely Jewish religious concept affirming that all existence was created and is governed by a single God. That deity is also the source and paradigm for moral action. This idea was a revolutionary development in the history of religions. Many knowledgeable students of religion maintain that this proposition is the greatest single contribution of Judaism to the spiritual heritage of Western civilization.

This extraordinary understanding of the nature of God rests upon an appreciation of its three major aspects. The first is the belief that God is one and not many. The ancient Jewish people, unlike their contemporaries, did not believe that the world was fragmented under the domain of several different gods. They posited the existence of only one Supreme Being, who alone accounted for all the diversity in the universe. This Being was the Creator and Sustainer of all there is. This first hypothesis implies several corollaries that emphasize the uniqueness of this concept.

One corollary entailed a belief that the unity of God encouraged much greater unity among the people who worshiped such a deity. If people

worshiped many gods, favorites would inevitably emerge among them, and factions would develop; each faction would promote the supremacy of its own choice. Monotheism theoretically precludes such conflicts. "In days to come," declares Isaiah, "the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains. . . . Many peoples shall come and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths'" (Isaiah 2:2–3). From its earliest beginnings, Judaism taught that the unity of humankind was a corollary of the belief in one God. That is clearly a distinctive quality of the concept of monotheism.

When Judaism proclaims that God is one, it means that God is not simply a numerical unity, but also a qualitative unity. That is the second major aspect of monotheism in Judaism. God is not only one: God is also unique as the Source and Sustainer of all moral values. God is not only one unto himself: God is the only one of his kind in the universe. There is no other "One" like God. During the rabbinic period (200 BCE–500 CE), the Roman emperor often enjoyed the title of "king of kings." To emphasize the singularity of God, the rabbinic sages acclaimed God as "the King of the kings of kings."

To hold that God is the Source and Sustainer of moral values is to insist on an objective status for ethical ideals. They are not the impulsive fabrication of human minds but are grounded in the very bedrock of creation. Moral laws have objective validity similar to the laws of physics. They are not our invention, but it is for us to discover them. Just as it would be foolish to defy the law of gravity and hope to escape its consequences, so also it is perilous to presume that a human infant can grow to emotional maturity without ever being loved or cared for. In both cases the penalty for ignoring the law is a natural consequence of defying the given realities of the universe. The uniqueness of God in this context is the complex but delicate blend of both physical and spiritual reality in a single deity that accounts for the balance, harmony, and order of nature within us and without.

The uniqueness of God, as Judaism has taught it, includes still a third aspect that clearly set ancient Israel apart from all other peoples. Evidence abounds that from earliest times, God in Judaism was not simply the supreme moral authority but also the supreme moral agent. Because God limited God's range of operations by imposing particular moral laws, God's credibility henceforth would rest not only on legislating truth but also on being identified with truth. God could not violate either physical or moral laws without seriously compromising God's own integrity.

A biblical passage that clearly reflects this principle is the conversation between God and Abraham concerning the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:17–33). God decides to disclose to Abraham God's plans to destroy the two cities because of their flagrant transgressions of moral decency. Abraham, however, objects to such a decision that would indiscriminately obliterate the innocent with the guilty and calls God to account on the basis of God's own ethical standards.

"Wilt thou indeed," asks Abraham, "destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (RSV). He then proceeds to negotiate with God on behalf of the innocent. He begins by speculating whether there may be as few as fifty righteous people in the cities. Would that not be sufficient to annul the decree? God concedes that Abraham's argument is legitimate and agrees that for the sake of fifty righteous people, the cities will be saved if Abraham can find them. Abraham proceeds to inquire for the sake of forty, then thirty, twenty, and finally just ten. In each case God is willing to alter God's judgment if such innocent numbers can be found.

Eventually, not even ten innocent people can be found, and God proceeds to destroy the cities. The point, however, is not Abraham's defeat but his acknowledged right to challenge God and hold God personally accountable for the laws God had commanded.

Ethical monotheism is not just a way of talking about God. It is a way of understanding human experience; it is a way of organizing the world in which we live. It is a faith that attempts to explain what we do not know by beginning with what we do know. We do know that our awareness of this world is rooted in a unity of our own senses. We do know that defiance of moral law invites a disaster as devastating as any contempt for the laws of physics or chemistry or biology. We know, in short, that we cannot fathom it all and that this world is ultimately grounded in mystery. And that singular ethical mystery is what we call God.

Christianity. God is understood, first of all, to be the one sovereign creator of all. God alone is infinite and eternal. God stands alone among all reality as God. Everything else that is real—living things and inert things, rational beings and the unintelligent, everything from the angels and human beings, to the animals and plants, to the planets, minerals, and elements—is a creature. All creatures owe their existence to God, whom they were made to glorify. The good of all creatures, therefore, is found in God, to whom they return in obedience and love.

The nature of the one, sovereign God who is creator of all is most essentially love. God is love. God's nature as love is communicated to

creatures through God's goodness, beauty, mercy, and justice. These qualities all flow into creation because God wills other beings into existence out of nothingness and endows them with God's own qualities. The creation, then, is a finite and imperfect reflection of God's infinite and perfect love, goodness, and beauty.

The gap between what God is infinitely and what creation is in a finite way has led Christian theologians to the conclusion that our language about God never perfectly names what and who God is. Our language is a rough approximation of divine reality. It gestures us toward God without precisely capturing God's essence. We use analogies from the created order to indicate some truths about God, being careful not to confuse creator and creation. For instance, God is often referred to as the "rock of salvation," which points to God's steadfast faithfulness without identifying God with an inert mineral. Likewise, Christians call God "Father" to indicate God's loving, parental oversight of humanity, but they do not assert that God is male. In fact, Christians have always insisted that God is neither male nor female.

The question of how precise our language can be in gesturing toward God has led to a debate among theologians about some of the attributes of God. The majority of theologians throughout Christian history have held that analogies from creation are always deeply flawed because they rest in some basic creational assumptions that do not apply to God. For instance, creatures are governed by time, but these theologians point out that God is eternal, which means that God exists outside of time. Likewise they affirm that God is immutable (changeless), omnipotent (all-powerful), and exists without needs of any kind. Many modern theologians, however, have questioned these classical attributes, claiming that the analogy between creation and God is much closer than the tradition has assumed. They claim, for instance, that God moves through time as creatures do, but never comes to an end. That is, they claim that God is everlasting, not eternal. These theologians also believe that God changes and responds through relationships with creatures and that God needs creatures so that God may live in loving relationship with others. They also believe that while God is very powerful, God is not all-powerful and cannot be held responsible for evil in the world. This debate remains unsettled, with both sides making faithful efforts to attend to the biblical witness and to human experience.

In addition to believing that God is one, sovereign, and loving, Christians also believe that God exists as a Trinity of three persons. Christians have always insisted that belief in the Trinity does not conflict with

monotheism, but they have often had trouble articulating precisely how this can be. The challenge has been to affirm that God is really one, but also really three. Some have proposed that God only appears to us as triune, that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are but three names for different ways God is revealed to us. The church rejected this way of thinking about the Trinity at the first Council of Constantinople in 381, the second ecumenical council.

Instead the church affirmed that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons who live in a perfect and permanent cooperative bond unlike any kind of creaturely unity because it exists outside the limitations of space and time. A fourth-century theologian named Gregory of Nyssa explained that because creatures are united to one another only imperfectly and temporarily, two or more creatures never truly live as one. But the three persons of the Trinity always operate in perfect unity, and this perfection of unified operations ensures that the reality of being one God is as certain as the reality of being three persons. The three persons of the one God live a life of love, delight, and mutuality. Human beings may catch a glimpse of this delightful, loving triune life of God when they enter into relationships of love, reciprocity, and hospitality even though such relationships are always limited by our creaturely condition of being spatial and temporal.

Traditionally controversies about the nature of God have focused on metaphysical questions such as whether God is eternal or everlasting and how it is possible for God to be both three and one. More recent questions about the nature of God, however, have focused on what God's nature means for the social and political order. Christians aligned with liberation theologies believe that God actively chooses the side of the oppressed. Just as God chose to free the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt, so God still chooses liberation for the outcasts of society. The people of God are, therefore, called to work to correct structural injustices such as racism and patriarchy and to build an inclusive community. For Christians aligned with Evangelicalism, the focus falls on God's nature expressed in the desire for personal holiness. The work of the Christian is to resist the temptation of worldliness and to seek purity in matters such as sexual conduct and practices of personal devotion. In the social and political sphere, the Christian is to endorse practices and policies that encourage such holiness.

Islam. The Arabic word *allah*, the standard Islamic term for God, translates literally as "the deity." It is not a personal name or title but conveys more or less the same sense the English word "God" does. From

the Muslim point of view, the defining quality of God's nature is oneness, a view summed up succinctly in Qur'an 16:23: "Your God is one God." Neither of the other two monotheistic faiths places the emphasis on the unity and indivisibility of God that Islam does. The term for this aspect of God's nature is *tawhid*, which is etymologically related to the Arabic word for "one."

According to Islam, the worst thing a person can do is somehow to violate the unity of God. The term for this offense is *shirk*, which comes from an Arabic root that describes the act of associating or sharing something with something else. Someone guilty of this offense associates something from the created world with the uncreated nature of God, thereby dividing up and denying the oneness that is the essence of the divine. This can be done physically, by setting up an image or an idol as a sign of God; or intellectually, as when one believes some individual or object shares in the divine nature. According to the Qur'an, *shirk* is the greatest sin and the only offense that God cannot forgive. "Truly, God will not forgive having something associated with him, but he will forgive anything short of that as he pleases. Whoever associates something with God has committed a very grave offense" (4:48).

This is the main reason why Islam does not permit paintings or other representations of God, a prohibition often extended to include images of any living being. One of the most noticeable differences between a mosque and many churches is that the former lacks any artwork depicting humans or animals. This is avoided because such representations could be improperly associated with God and therefore lead to *shirk*. The absence of such art is also sometimes explained by the belief that only God has the right to create living beings. The artist who produces such images is therefore guilty of trying to usurp God's power and authority. These views have not resulted in mosques and other Islamic buildings that are devoid of all artwork. Rather, they are typically adorned with very elaborate script and ornate geometric patterns like arabesque that are quite beautiful and aesthetically pleasing.

According to mainstream Muslim belief, God is a transcendent reality that is ultimately unknowable to humanity. Despite that divide, there is a long-standing tradition in Islam that claims humans can know something about God's nature even if we are incapable of grasping the totality of the divine essence. Several times in the Qur'an, reference is made to the names of God: "Allah—there is no God but he. To him belong the most beautiful names" (20:8). These texts are the basis for a tradition that claims God has ninety-nine names, each describing some aspect or

quality of the deity. Many of these names come from the Qur'an, and the list includes designations like the following: "the Highest," "the All-Seeing," "the Living," and "the Giver." Many pious Muslims memorize the entire list of names or portions of it and recite them in their personal prayers. In this way, they are able to know and reflect on certain qualities that God possesses.

Another very important quality of the deity in Islam is mercy. This can be seen in the fact that every chapter of the Qur'an but one begins with the phrase "In the name of God, the merciful one, the compassionate one." God's ability to extend mercy is further illustrated throughout the pages of the Qur'an as many people express remorse for their offenses and are forgiven. A good example of this can be seen in the Islamic text's version of the biblical golden calf story in Exodus 32 that is set during the time of Moses as the Israelites begin their forty years of wandering in the wilderness after escaping Egypt. In the Bible's version of the events, the people sin by having the calf built by Aaron, Moses' brother, and they suffer the consequences for what they have done but they never repent or acknowledge their mistake. In the Qur'an's telling of the story in 7:148–154, the Israelites are quick to admit that they have sinned, and they beg God's forgiveness for what they have done. The deity accepts their repentance and urges them to remain faithful as their relationship with God is restored. This same pattern of human sin followed by remorse and divine forgiveness is mentioned often in the Qur'an, and it highlights one of the defining traits of the Islamic understanding of God.

A final facet of the Muslim understanding of God deserving mention is the belief that this is the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians. According to the Qur'an, in various times and places throughout history God's word has been revealed to prophets, who were then charged with the task of communicating that message to their people. The names of many of these individuals are familiar to Bible readers. Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus, as well as other biblical figures, are among those identified in the Qur'an as prophets. This highlights an important belief about God's nature that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all share. As faiths that are based on revelation, they all maintain that God is an active conversation partner with humanity, even to the point of initiating contact with them in order to convey the divine will. Despite the radical monotheism of Islam that leads to a transcendent view of the deity as totally other, it teaches that God is deeply concerned about human beings and their destiny.