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Introduction

A number of years ago Larycia Hawkins, a tenured professor at Wheaton College, ignited a firestorm by suggesting that Muslims and Christians worship the same God (Smietana 2015). When Wheaton eventually let her go from her position there was considerable criticism and backlash. One of those who came to Larycia's defense was Miroslav Volf (2015) who penned a widely-read article in which he reiterated the conclusions from his book *Allah: A Christian Response* (Volf 2012), that Christians and Muslims do indeed worship the same God. The missiological world seemed divided by these events, as evidenced by the wide variety of views and responses in the Special Edition of the Evangelical Missiological Society (Priest 2016).

While missiologists often debate the "Same God Question" (SGQ) through theological or philosophical lenses, many believers around the world are faced with this question on a very practical level. The explosive growth of the majority world church (Jenkins 2011, 1) has coincided with a similar growth in Islam (Johnstone 2012, 74). This has meant that many more pastors, believers and missionaries around the world are wondering how best to speak of God as they witness to their Muslim neighbors on the one hand, and as they seek to teach fellow believers on the other. This reality calls for greater understanding of the issues surrounding the SGQ, clarification of terminology (see, for example, Netland 2017), and a way forward that is sensitive to today's multicultural and pluralistic context.

For many years, missionaries have been trained in the importance of communicating in a receptor-oriented manner (Kraft 1983, 23). This article suggests that a similar receptor-oriented approach should be applied to the conversations around the SGQ in order to decrease misunderstandings and strengthen evangelistic outreach. This article will not seek to provide a definitive answer to the SGQ. Rather, the aim is to bring clarity to the debate surrounding the SGQ by exploring the dynamic of how one speaks of God,

particularly through the lens of general and special revelation, tie that into communication theory, and then apply it to the discussion around the SGQ. Such an approach will allow one to speak of the Muslim God in relation to the Christian God in a culturally sensitive, yet biblically accurate way.

Revelation and the SGQ

Those that give an affirmative response to the SGQ—agreeing that Muslims and Christians worship the same God—usually do so on the basis that there is only one Creator God and, therefore, when monotheistic Muslims and Christians speak of Him they must of necessity refer back to that one Creator (see Beckwith 2019, 68; Volf 2012, 96; Ariarajah 2004, 30). However, this line of reasoning does not always sit well with others, including many Muslim Background Believers (MBBs), who recognize in the biblical concept of God something deeper than just a generic understanding of a Creator God. Lamin Sanneh (2004, 35), former Muslim and highly-acclaimed scholar, stated that the question of similarity “is adequate insofar as there is only one God, but inadequate with respect to God’s character, on which hang matters of commitment and identity, the denial of which would sever our ties to God.” Similarly, Nabeel Qureshi asserted,

For years I thought [they were the same], but I no longer do. Now I believe that the phrase ‘Muslims and Christians worship the same God’ is only true in a fairly uncontroversial sense: There is one Creator whom Muslims and Christians both attempt to worship. Apart from this banal observation, Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God. I do not condemn those that think they do, but the deeper I delve into the Christian faith, the more I realize that this assertion is not only untrue but also subverts Christian orthodoxy in favor of Islamic assertions. (Qureshi 2015)

When one studies the arguments of those both for and against an affirmative answer to the SGQ, a pattern develops which is founded on the distinctions between general revelation and special revelation. Those that affirm the same God position usually point to characteristics apparent through general revelation—the commonality of a Creator God that both Muslims and Christians seek to worship. On the other hand, those that reject an affirmative position usually do so out of a desire to uphold the truths of special revelation—the Trinity, Jesus’ deity, and the character of God as revealed in the Bible (see Farrokh 2016a, 11). With these different lenses and points of emphasis, both sides

often end up talking past one another. As Sanneh (2004, 35) wrote, “Muslims and Christians agree on the great subject that God exists and that God is one. They disagree, however, about the predicates they use of God. Much of the Christian language about God affirms Jesus as God in self-revelation, and much of the Muslim language about God seeks exception to that Christian claim.” It is this issue of God’s self-revelation in Christ and His salvific plan—which became known through special revelation, rather than general revelation—which causes much of the confusion in the SGQ debate.

General and Special Revelation

The term revelation comes from the Hebrew *gala* and the Greek *apokalupto*, both of which mean “the unveiling of something that was hidden so that it might then be seen and known” (McDermott 2010, 46). Over time—especially after the enlightenment—theologians began to differentiate between general revelation and special revelation in order to distinguish between the ways that God reveals Himself (McDermott and Netland 2014, 86).

General revelation can be defined as simply as “God’s witness to himself to all people” (Ramm, 1961, 17). Many theologians see general revelation as given in three ways—through creation, conscience, and through God’s influence within the ordering of history (Grudem 1994, 122). Evangelicals have traditionally concluded, based on Paul’s teaching in Romans chapter one and two, that while general revelation might be sufficient for awareness of God, and makes one responsible for sin, it is insufficient for salvation (Tennent 2002, 17; .

Unlike general revelation, special revelation, as the name suggests, goes beyond what can generally be perceived through either nature or conscience, to that which is specifically revealed by God. Ramm (1961, 17) defines it as “God’s word in a concrete form to a specific person or group.” Grudem (1994, 123) elaborates further, referring to it as “God’s words addressed to specific people, such as the words of the Bible, the words of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, and the words of God spoken in personal address.” Special revelation may also include God’s will revealed through means other than direct verbal declaration—such as dreams, theophanies, and angelic messengers (see Ramm 1961, 46-48). Demarest (1982, 14) concludes that special revelation entails “the modalities of God’s mighty acts in history, the teachings and deeds of Jesus Christ, and the writing of the Bible” through which “the divine salvific plan is unveiled.”

The Redemptive Center of Special Revelation

As noted above, general revelation has traditionally been viewed as insufficient for salvation. McDermott (2010, 51) has shown that both John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards considered that general revelation “points only to God the Creator, not God the Redeemer, and that knowledge of only the former is insufficient for salvation.” In other words, because general revelation does not unveil God’s redemptive plan of atonement, it cannot save. Special revelation, on the other hand, points to God’s work of atonement through His Son:

Special revelation is redemptive revelation. It publishes the good tidings that the holy and merciful God promises salvation as a divine gift to man who cannot save himself (OT) and that he has now fulfilled that promise in the gift of his Son in whom all men are called to believe (NT)...This is the fixed center of special redemptive revelation (Henry 1984, 946).

The Revelatory Scale (R-scale)

While helpful, these two levels of revelation (general and special) are somewhat simplistic in that they do not capture the full range of what may be revealed through God’s self-disclosure. This article suggests a spectrum or continuum, referred to as the “revelatory scale” (R-scale) to highlight the broader scope of the unveiling of God’s will. At the very beginning of this scale is general revelation, given to all humankind. This provides knowledge of God as Creator, but not His redemptive plan. Further along the scale would be the special revelation of God as seen in the Old Testament. While this type of revelation informs much more of God’s ways than general revelation, Old Testament revelation alone cannot save today. Rather, it provides a preparatory foundation, paving the way for the full revelation of redemption through God’s “Man of Promise,” Jesus Christ (see Kaiser 2009, 171). At the far end of the spectrum would be New Testament special revelation which reveals God’s salvific plan of redemption in Christ.

With the R-scale in mind, one could map out where people are in their understanding of God and communicate accordingly. Note that there could be many various points on the scale in between these numbers, which might lead to a change in communication methodology. Perhaps an individual may have understood very little about God from creation, placing them at 0.5 on the scale. Another may have only heard aspects of the Old Testament, but not in its entirety—perhaps they would be at 1.4 or

1.5 on the scale. Someone who grasps the main message of both the Old and New Testaments would be at the far end of the scale, at R3.

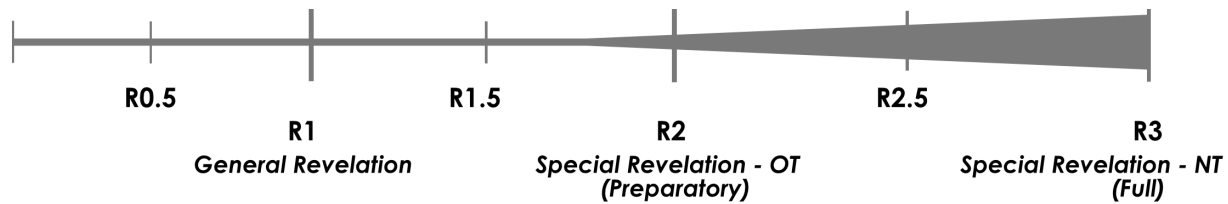


Figure 1.1. The Revelatory Scale. The phases of revelation, reaching their pinnacle in a clear revealing of God’s plan to reconcile the world to Himself in Christ.

Universal and Non-Universal Special Revelation

In considering the revelatory spectrum, one can further distinguish the difference between universal special revelation (that intended to be proclaimed to all people), and non-universal special revelation (God directing certain people by way of special revelation). This refers to the scope of the revelatory intent of the primary message—whether it remains normative for all people, or was revealed to a person or persons for one specific occasion only (Coleman 2011, 85). So the passage “There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12)¹ would be normative for all people, while God’s special revelation to Joseph to flee to Egypt (Matt. 1:13) is not, though it makes up part of God’s inspired word in Scripture.

Direct and Indirect Revelation

Another distinction can be made between direct and indirect revelation. Direct revelation refers to God’s initial act of revelation—whether directly spoken by God himself, or given through an intermediary (such as the angel Gabriel), or by the word of the prophets. Indirect revelation would refer to God’s revelation passed on by the initial receptor, which could then be repeated by others countless times. For example, Moses received God’s direct revelation of the ten commandments, but the repetition of that direct special revelation would be considered indirect special revelation. So today one might read the Ten Commandments, which still constitutes God’s special revelation, though thousands of years removed from the direct revelatory event. Furthermore, an individual could be introduced to aspects of special revelation through other forms of media. The mere inclusion of R2 or R3 information would not therefore make such

¹ All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

media in itself revelatory or on equal footing with the special revelation of Scripture. For example, a movie such as *Ben Hur* (Wyler 1959), which recounts—in an indirect and partial way—some aspects of special revelation (such as fleeting portrayals of Jesus and the cross) would not therefore be considered special revelation in and of itself. The importance of this will be seen below.

Repurposed Indirect Revelation

Furthermore, partial and indirect R2 and R3 revelation could be intentionally repurposed or twisted—such as happened in the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Scorsese 1988). In that case, although the movie contained aspects of special revelation (by mentioning Jesus, the cross, the disciples, and so on), the purpose of the movie was contrary to the initial purpose of God’s special revelation. This false narrative, or repurposing of the story, erases any value in the (partial and indirect) revelatory content used. That being said, if the only exposure one had to Christianity was by having seen *The Last Temptation of Christ*, it could possibly be used as a bridge—though a very flimsy one—from which to introduce the real Christ, and guide the person to a fuller biblical truth and understanding of Jesus and God’s redemptive plan.

Islam and the Revelatory Spectrum

With this understanding of revelation as a foundation, it will be helpful to consider where Islam fits within the revelatory spectrum. Doing so will aid in focusing the terminology and understanding surrounding the SGQ. Evaluating the Qur’an in relation to the revelatory spectrum can be complicated because the Qur’an includes parts of both the Old and New Testaments, yet much of what it contains has been changed or repurposed.

While some have tried to confer a type of revelatory status to Muhammad and the Qur’an (Talman 2014), such a position is difficult to maintain in light of the fact that Qur’anic material clearly opposes the redemptive plan of God in Christ—directly contradicting the R2 and R3 narrative of Scripture. Former Muslim, Fred Farrokh (2014), notes that “the Qur’anic Jesus is an Islamic figure that serves Muhammad and the Islamic theological agenda...Jesus’ two main purposes in Islam are to herald the coming of Muhammad and to rebuke Christians for worshipping him.” He later writes,

Muhammad saw as a central part of his mission the demolition of the biblical belief regarding the Incarnation of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Muhammad transformed Jesus into a fictional character who advances the Islamic theological narrative by announcing the coming of Muhammad (61:6) and assuring all who will listen to him that he never allowed anyone to worship him. (Farrokh 2016b, 470)

In other words, in the Qur'an the partial and indirect R2 or R3 revelatory content of the Bible has been distorted, changed, or removed so that there remains no connection to the redemptive, salvific plan of God in Christ. Even the fragmented portions of the Gospels which the Qur'an includes have the atonement, salvation and the divinity of Jesus expunged. Because of this repurposing of biblical material, the Qur'an cannot be held to be R2 (preparatory revelation), as the Old Testament was. It is far different than the revelation of the Old Testament, in that the Old Testament does not repudiate the idea of the atoning Messiah, while Islam clearly does. Because of this, the Qur'an cannot be seen as "a continuation or fulfilment of the biblical revelation, not because of any disdain for Muhammad and his book, but because of a firm belief in the finality of Christ as God's self-revelation and the achievement of our salvation at the cross" (Accad 2019, 175).

Due to these factors, this article argues that Islam cannot be placed at the R2 or R3 level of the R-scale. While there are scattered pieces of biblical revelation in the Qur'an (such as the naming of Old Testament prophets, or the mention of Mary and Jesus), what happens to be included is used either to promote Muhammad, or to negate the original revelatory intent: that of the salvific work of Jesus the Son of God. As noted earlier, just because a text (or any other form of media) may contain traces of biblical fact does not give that text revelatory status. Such quotations might be useful as a bridge for reaching the one reading it, but the inclusion of disjointed or repurposed aspects of special revelation, does not mean that the end product equals R2 or R3 revelation.

General Revelation and Volf's Similarity Thesis

Understanding the revelatory spectrum can help in evaluating claims of similarity as advocated by affirmative views to the SGQ. For example, Volf (2012, 110) proposed that the Christian God and the Muslim God are "sufficiently similar" to be called the same. His six points to establish this were:

1. There is only one God, the one and only divine being.
2. God created everything that is not God.
3. God is radically different from everything that is not God.

4. God is good.
5. God commands that we love God with our whole being.
6. God commands that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

These six points, however, are all basic enough that they can be categorized as belonging to general revelation, or at the R1 level of the revelatory spectrum. Demarest (1982, 243) provides a list of twenty characteristics that general revelation makes known about God. From his broader listing, the following are areas that parallel Volf’s six points mentioned above:

1. God exists and is uncreated.
2. God is Creator.
3. God is transcendent.
4. God is good.
5. God should be worshipped.
6. People should perform the good.²

From this it can be seen that the similarity which Volf perceives between the Muslim God and the Christian God are all on the level of general revelation. This strengthens the position that Islam at best functions only akin to an R1 level of revelation. Because the revelatory content included is second-hand, indirect, and repurposed, it cannot function at the level of R2 or R3 revelation.

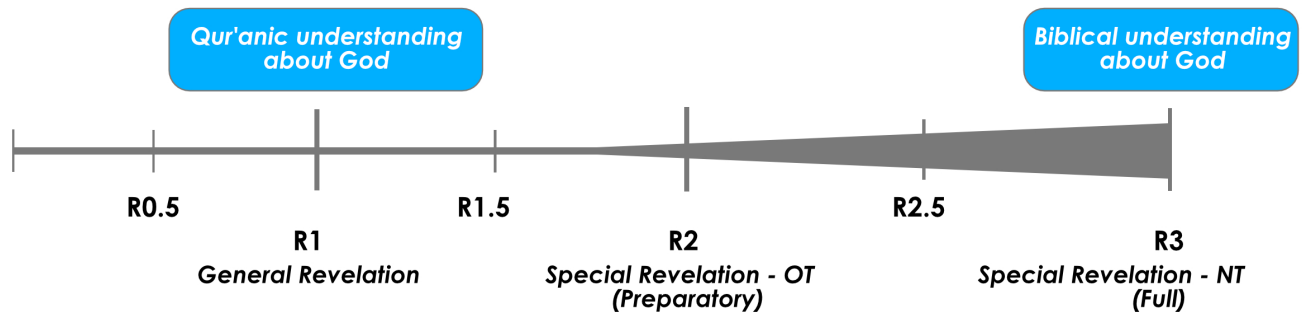


Figure 1.2. The Revelatory Scale. Marking out the different understandings of God in the Qur’an and the Bible, in relation to special revelation.

² Demarest lists them in a different order, these are rearranged to parallel Volf. Some might argue that these points do not overlap exactly. While that may be true, the points can be inferred. For example, from Demarest’s statement in point six that “people should perform good,” it can be inferred that people should then love their neighbors, since this is good. One should also remember that this parallels the type of reasoning-by-inference that Volf performs to arrive at these points in the first place. His conclusion that God commands people love their neighbors as themselves is itself an inference—not from the Qur’an (no such command exists in the Qur’an), but from the Hadith.

To summarize, then, this section has considered general and special revelation and introduced the revelatory spectrum to highlight a fuller range of revelatory understanding. Further, it argues that Islam can only be considered R1 (akin to a general revelation understanding of God) as it repurposes and redefines biblical material, eliminates the redemptive center, and negates the salvific role of Jesus Christ. Merely mentioning names or terms (the Messiah, Jesus, Mary) does not equate to a full R2 or R3 understanding of God. Having looked at general and special revelation, this article now turns to communication theory to consider its impact on the SGQ.

Communication Theory and the SGQ

As mentioned earlier, communication theory highlights the importance of a receptor's viewpoint. Specifically, it advocates that messages should be given in such a way that the receptor can understand the communication in the clearest way possible. If care is not taken the message will be misunderstood since "receptors, in response to the stimulus of messages, construct meanings that may or may not correspond to what the communicator intended" (Kraft 1979, 34).

David Hesselgrave (1991, 46) states that one "must establish a 'commonness' with someone to have communication. That 'commonness' is to be found in mutually shared codes." This article suggests that due to the difference in revelatory understanding, the "codes" for the word God are different between those who have an R1 level understanding of God, and those with an R3 level. In other words, the SGQ revolves around codes that, though similar in terminology or form, do not necessarily have the same meaning for all people. "We must account for an awareness of the meaning that receptors ascribe to the communication based on their context, community, and worldview" (Shaw, Engen, and Sanneh 2003, 71). See this illustrated in Figure 1.3 where the meaning of the term God is ascribed by the context and community of the receptor—whether that be the Qur'anic or biblical context, the community of the Ummah or the church. Furthermore, "receptors bring an understanding of their world that creates certain theological assumptions on their part" (Shaw, Engen, and Sanneh 2003, 157). So any use of the word "God" would come along with the theological assumptions of the community.

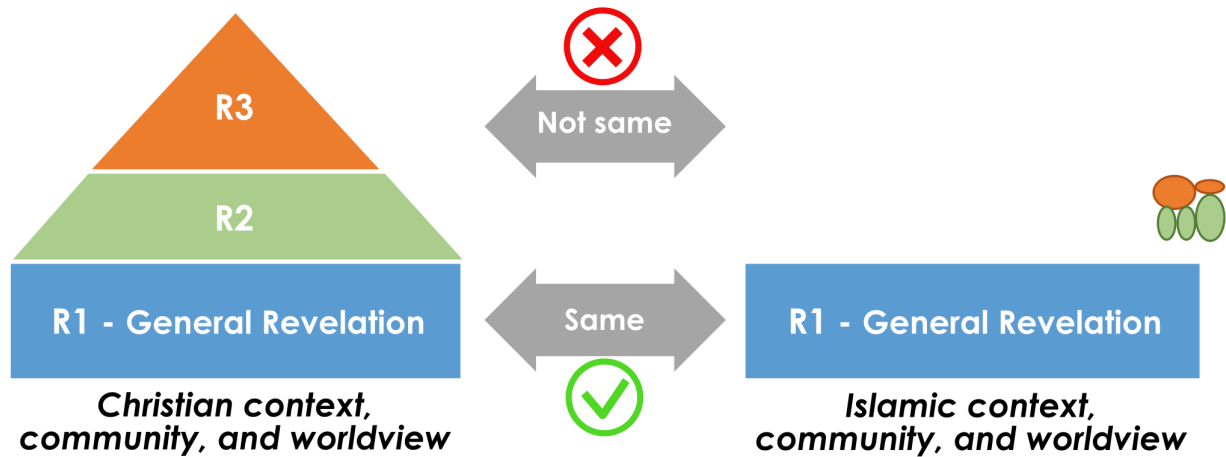


Figure 1.3. Comparing the Christian and Islamic understanding of God according to the R-Scale, especially with regard to the particular faith’s context and worldview.

Note that in the Islamic context, the biblical R2 and R3 content has been reinterpreted and repurposed. This figure shows that Christianity and Islam could both say “same God” when it comes to a general revelation understanding of God, but not in terms of special revelation.

In light of the above, one can see that tensions could arise between R1 and R3 communities as they seek to speak of God. Whether or not the God of Muslims and the God of Christians is somehow the same “Referent,” (Volf 2012, 83) becomes immaterial—for what people hear depends not on a vague ontological referent, but on the meaning their context has ascribed to a certain symbol—in this case to the term God. Those in an evangelical R3 context could misunderstand the communication of others—whether Muslims, missionaries, theologians, or philosophers—who are looking at God from an R1, or a general revelation viewpoint. The latter may look through an R1 lens for a number of reasons: perhaps, in the case of the average Muslim, that is their faith context; perhaps, in the case of missionaries, such a viewpoint is due to trying to reach people in an R1 context. Therefore, when someone from an R1 viewpoint says “same God” to someone else with an R1 viewpoint, there would be little problem or confusion. However, when someone from an R1 perspective says “same God” to someone with an R3 understanding of God, misunderstandings occur.

Reverse Contextualization

With these different ways of viewing the problem, it is no wonder that confusion surrounds the SGQ, and highlights the need for communication with the receptor in mind. In recent years, missionaries have grown in their attempts to present the Gospel in contextually sensitive ways. What also needs to happen is reverse-contextualization—when missionaries or theologians present their missiological conclusions to a Christian audience in a contextually sensitive way. Confusion especially arises when an R1 witnessing approach is used to communicate to those in R3 environments. Ignoring Christian receptors' R3 understanding of God and speaking as if God only has R1 characteristics can easily cause misunderstandings and may unintentionally alienate a Christian audience.

To summarize, when someone says “same God,” what the receptor understands by the term God results from their contextual idea of God, which itself has been informed by the level of revelation they know and accept. To a Muslim, this would be the Qur'anic perception of God, which aligns with general revelation (R1) and—from an Evangelical perspective—is non-redemptive. In contrast to this, for many Christians the term God would be understood in a way that aligns with special revelation—what this article refers to as an R3 understanding of God. Missiologists and theologians, therefore, should be as contextually sensitive in regards to communicating with Christians as they are in communicating with people of other faiths, lest they alienate their audience. Furthermore, if one looks closely at Scripture, it becomes apparent that this is the type of communication that Paul used in his ministry. He was very sensitive to the revelatory level of his audience, whether they were Jew, Gentile, or a follower of Jesus.

Revelatory Awareness in Scripture

The apostle Paul seemed to understand these differences and the book of Acts clearly shows how he spoke according to the level of the revelatory understanding of his audience. Time and again Paul spoke about God on their level of understanding—not because there was ontological similarity between Yahweh and the Greek gods, but precisely because there was revelatory dissimilarity with his audience. Paul therefore used a receptor-oriented way of communicating, for he realized his audience knew no other level of understanding God. Paul, however, would not stop at that level, but would always draw his audience to the next level of the revelatory spectrum.

Examples of Paul and Revelatory Awareness in Acts

In Acts 13 Paul uses R2 level communication to connect with his hearers—starting from the testimony of the Old Testament and messianic prophecies. He then intentionally led his listeners to the next level of revelatory awareness, what this article calls an R3 level: “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus...through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (13:32,38). So Paul began with their level of awareness, then went on to use that understanding as a bridge to introduce them to the greater revelation about Jesus.

Similarly, in Acts 17, Paul started with an R1 level of understanding about God in communicating with the Athenians. This article asserts that Paul was speaking to the Athenians generally, on an R1 level, not because the God he was proclaiming was ontologically similar to the Greek gods (see Dieppe 2019), but because his audience only knew general revelation and were at an R1 level in their understanding of the concept of God. After establishing some common ground, he quickly moved the conversation from an R1 level of a Creator God to a higher revelatory level and spoke of Jesus as the one appointed to judge the world, who died and rose again. Once more, for Paul this was not a matter of ontology, it was a matter of communication. His point was not to equate Yahweh with the Greek gods, it was to communicate to their level of revelatory awareness, with a goal of introducing them to the redemptive plan of God in Christ.

Other Biblical Examples of Revelatory Awareness

When one has this realization, such communication methods can be seen throughout the New Testament. In a similar manner Jesus approached the woman at the well and spoke to her on an R2 level because that is what she knew (John 4:1-26). This did not mean her conception of God was completely correct or accurate. Rather, this language helped to start the conversation, using shared mutual codes, based on her level of revelatory awareness. Jesus did not leave the conversation at an R2 level, however. He took the opportunity to shift her understanding further along the revelatory scale by explaining that He was indeed the Messiah and, as the Samaritans later realized, the “Savior of the world” (John 4:42). This same pattern can be seen elsewhere as well, including Philip’s conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:35), and Peter’s interaction with Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43). In all of these cases, the biblical pattern shows that good communication starts at one’s level of revelatory awareness, but then moves them along the R-scale to understand the fullness of God’s redemptive plan in Christ.

This goes beyond the general contextualizing of a message in words or forms that a hearer understands. This article suggests the need to recognize the level of revelatory understanding of the audience and to speak in a clear receptor-oriented way in regards to God, yet with the intentional aim of expanding their revelatory awareness to fully understand the redemptive plan of God in Christ. Such an approach does not advocate a type of theological relativism or hypocrisy (saying one thing to one audience and something different to another). What it advocates is better communication, keeping in mind the level of revelatory awareness of one's audience.

Communication of the SGQ in Light of the Revelatory Scale

With the revelatory scale in mind, this article suggests that it would be acceptable for a follower of Jesus, in speaking to a Muslim friend, to assert that they both worship the same God. So, for example, Larycia Hawkins could have used language of “sameness” with her Muslim neighbor, since her neighbor would have an R1 conception of God. The biblical pattern, however, would be to eventually lead that person to an R3 understanding of God. This does not necessarily mean that the ultimate referent is the same in every way, nor does it seek to answer the SGQ in the affirmative. In fact, almost any talk of referents can end up appearing “the same” if one slides far enough down the revelatory scale to the R1 side and holds to a perspective of God based on general revelation.

In speaking to Christians who already have an R3 understanding of God's redemptive plan in Christ, however, “same God” could be very confusing and misleading—which the incident with Larycia Hawkins showed. In speaking to Christians, it is important to keep in mind their context and worldview—that of an R3 level of their concept of God. So while the God that Christians and Muslims worship might be considered the same when looked at from an R1 level, when looked at from an R3 perspective, there are many differences.

MBBs and the Revelatory Scale

As noted earlier, some MBBs (see Qureshi 2015, and Farrokh 2016a, 11) have been hesitant to say that the God of Islam and the God of Christianity are the same, once they grew in their awareness of His revelation in the Bible. Lamin Sanneh (2004, 35) declared simple statements of similarity as “inadequate,” for they overlook God's character as revealed in Scripture. When, over time, these MBBs arrived at an R3 level of understanding, they could no longer say the concept of God they previously had was

equal to their new Christian understanding. Contrary to what Volf (2015) stated when he claimed that a denial of the SGQ was a result of “anti-Muslim bigotry,” if MBBs grow in their perception of God and see discontinuity with their past beliefs the more R3 revelation they comprehend, that is within their rights. They may not have articulated such an understanding using the terminology of this article, but they were expressing a similar sentiment.

To summarize, for the sake of clarity in communication, one can speak to the level that the receptor is at. Additionally, the further along the revelatory scale one goes, the greater the need for clarity and the more inaccurate the statement “same God” becomes. If one speaks to an audience well aware of an R3 knowledge of God—that God in His reality consists of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that this God has centered His redemptive plan in Christ—then to say that an R1 representation of God equals an R3 knowledge would be false. This would be why there has been such pushback from evangelicals to the SGQ. However, if one works in missiological or philosophical contexts, wherein they communicate to R1 receptors, then language of similarity could be permissible. It should be noted however that the biblical *modus operandi*, mentioned earlier, would include intentionally leading the receptor further along the R-scale to a greater awareness and understanding of God’s redemptive plan in Christ.

Answering Objections

One objection to the R-scale may be in regards to the Jewish perception of God. Some could claim that since the Old Testament reveals an R2 level understanding of God, that according to the R-scale some Christians could claim Jews do not worship the same God. This would be false for a number of reasons. First, the Old Testament sets forward God’s redemptive plan, to be fulfilled in the coming “Man of Promise,” mentioned earlier. So the New Testament fulfills and completes the Old Testament understanding, unlike the Qur’anic view which replaces and repurposes the Old Testament understanding. Second, the Qur’an “repudiates the concept of God found in the New Testament” (Craig 2016)—something the Old Testament obviously does not do, since it was written long before the New. Likewise Gavin D’Costa (2013, 156) argues that the continuity between the Testaments and their shared covenant history shows that the God of Jews and Christians is already of the same kind (“*sui generis*”). For a more thorough treatment of the significant differences between the Islamic and Jewish perceptions of God and how they relate to the SGQ see Willoughby (2022).

Another objection may be that children who cannot fully grasp the Trinity could be said to be worshipping a God who is not the same as a full R3 understanding of God (Volf 2012, 90). However, having an elementary understanding of God does not mean the God being spoken of is not the same. A speaker should communicate according to the revelatory understanding of the receptor, while leading them to a full R3 understanding of God. So while recognizing a child's current understanding, it would be appropriate to teach them until they grow in knowledge and move further along the scale.

Third, it could be pointed out that there are those like Volf or other theologians and missiologists who obviously have an R3 understanding as Christians, yet affirm the SGQ. Likely, they do so out of a desire to build bridges with their (R1) colleagues, friends, or community. This does not negate the reality of the R-scale. However, it calls for such people to recognize the worldview of those who see things primarily from an R3 perspective, and to adjust their communication accordingly.

A final objection could be that the R-scale seems condescending to Muslims. However, it must be stated that the R-scale speaks not of status of education but the acceptance of revelation. There are many brilliant people who reject both the R2 and R3 understanding of God, and so would be at an R1 level in their understanding, from a Christian perspective. Furthermore, Muslims themselves would have a similar perspective, only in reverse, since they claim that Christians worship the same God—provided they deny the biblical revelation regarding the Trinity. Even the supposedly conciliatory document “A Common Word” (The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute 2007) calls Christians to reject the deity of Christ in order that both Muslims and Christians can say they worship one God. It concludes by quoting Surah 3:64, which calls on Christians not to insist that Jesus is partner with, or equal to, God. In fact, any religious body that holds to their own accepted revelatory content could see other religious bodies on a scale ranging from similar to less similar—and therefore would need to contextualize their understanding of God (or Reality) in a way that would make sense to the receptors.

Practical Application

As churches are planted in Muslims areas, and as majority world believers often live in proximity to Muslims contexts, there remains the potential for confusion in regards to the SGQ, as well as a genuine fear of syncretism. This article proposes that understanding the R-scale provides a reasonable, theological rationale that allays such fears and avoids confusion. It allows those witnessing to Muslims to use terminology of sameness, based on a general revelation understanding of God. They do not need to

refer to Allah as a different god or a false god. Yet it avoids syncretism and confusion because it recognizes that the Muslim concept of God (R1) does not equal the full biblical understanding of God (R3). Furthermore, it encourages Christian workers to intentionally help their audience grow in their understanding of the true nature of the biblical God, by bringing them along the scale to a more complete R3 understanding. This is not theological relativism, but a recognition of the differences in revelatory understanding of the receptor, and the need to contextualize the message for that primary audience. At the same time, pastors are free to clarify with their (R3) congregation the great difference between the Muslim concept of God and the biblical concept of God.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was not to answer the SGQ, but to investigate how one could speak of the Muslim God in a biblically accurate yet culturally sensitive way, especially in regard to the SGQ. A number of important points were investigated:

First, the article noted the two categories of God's self-revelation which have been described by theologians as either general revelation or special revelation. The Revelatory Scale (R-scale) was introduced to bring greater clarity to the specific content of these forms of revelation. It was also shown that revelatory content could be repurposed for something different than the original intent.

Second, keeping in mind key elements of communication theory, this article suggests that when speaking to someone it is appropriate to begin at their level of revelation—whether that be R1, R2, or R3. Scripture shows that both Jesus and Paul followed such a pattern. However, it also shows that they did not leave the revelatory content at R1 or R2, but sought to bring in something of the next level of revelation, specifically the redemption found in Jesus the Messiah.

Third, in the SGQ debate, lack of clarity in regards to the revelatory level of the recipient leads to misunderstandings. To say an R1 level of understanding of God equals an R3 level can bring great confusion. This article emphasizes that the farther along the R-scale one goes, the greater the need for clarity and accuracy in terminology.

Finally, this article concludes that (a) it can be appropriate to use “same God” terminology to an audience at the level of R1 (for example, Muslims), since that is what they know. However, (b) to an evangelical audience that understands R3 revelation,

saying “same God” can be greatly misunderstood and invites confusion. For the sake of clarity and unity, missionaries and theologians (among others) should take as great a care in communicating to an R3 audience as they do in communicating to an R1 audience.

Again, this article does not attempt to posit an answer either for or against the SGQ. Rather, it argues for the need to understand the different levels of revelation, and to communicate according to the revelatory understanding of the receptor. It is the hope of this author that understanding the various levels of revelatory awareness will bring greater clarity and enable believers to speak of God in a more biblically accurate and contextually sensitive way.

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