

Do Muslims and Christians believe in the same God?

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'Some god direct my judgment!'

The Prince of Morocco in *Merchant of Venice*, Act II, Scene VII

This is the supplication made by the Prince as he is about to take the test which has been set for winning the fair Portia's hand: to rightly guess which of the three chests contains her portrait. Shakespeare may well have been engaging in a playful irony by having the Muslim Prince make this supplication. For he must have known that a central tenet of the Islamic mandate was, precisely, to put an end to polytheism. The Prince's supplication, though, helps us to see quite starkly the contrast, or rather incommensurability, between polytheism and monotheism: within the first system of belief, there are many gods from which to choose, while the second asserts that there is but one God from whom to seek help and guidance. We should see in the light of this contrast that it is illogical if not absurd to give anything other than an affirmative answer to the question put to us: 'Do Muslims and Christians believe in the same God?' If, instead, we were to ask Christians and Muslims the question: do you believe in one God—in a unique, ultimate Reality from which all things emerge, to which all things return, and by which all things are governed?, the answer would be: of course! If both parties agree that there is only one God, and not many from which to choose to believe or not believe; and if both parties affirm that they believe in God, then the conclusion follows inescapably: Christians and Muslims do believe in the same—the one-and-only—God. 'A false god has no existence in the real world', St Paul tells us, and goes on to affirm: 'There is no God but one' (Cor. 8:4). The Qur'ān states the same simple principle in the following verse, one of many which restate the first part of the basic creed

of Islam, *lā ilāha illa' Llāh*, 'no divinity but God': 'There is no God but the *one* God' (5:73; emphasis added). The Qur'ān then makes explicit the logical concomitant of this oneness, as regards fellow believers in this one God, by telling the Muslims to say to the Christians and Jews: 'Our God (*ilāhunā*) and your God (*ilāhukum*) is one' (29:46). Fellow monotheists, however much they may disagree about other matters, are as one with regard to the One: they all believe in God *as such*, as opposed to believing in such and such a god.

However, once we move from this straightforward monotheistic postulate and enter into theological discussion of the nature of this God in whom all monotheists believe, we encounter major problems. The most insurmountable of these are generated by the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity: is Jesus God incarnate, and if so, to what extent does this incarnation enter into the definition of the essential nature of God? Is belief in the Trinity an essential condition for authentic belief in God? One kind of Christian position, based on orthodox dogma, can be conceived as follows:

- 1) We affirm one God, but this affirmation is articulated in terms of a belief in a Trinity of three Persons: Father, Son and Spirit;
- 2) this belief constitutes an essential element of Christian belief in God;
- 3) anyone who does not share this belief cannot be said to believe in the same God.¹

Such a position not only answers negatively to the question posed—Muslims and Christians certainly do not believe in the same God—it will also elicit from the Muslim side a correspondingly negative answer: we agree with you, they will say to the Christians, we do not recognise our God, *Allāh*, in the divinity you describe, so we cannot believe in the same God.

It would seem that our answer to the question whether Muslims and Christians believe in the same God must therefore comprise both positive and negative elements, it has to be both yes and no: 'yes', objectively and metaphysically; and 'no', subjectively and

¹ This view, together with a stress on the centrality of the Incarnation to the Christian conception of God, has characterised the response of many leading Evangelicals to the *Common Word* interfaith initiative, an initiative to which reference will be made at the end of this essay.

theologically. But the objective, metaphysical ‘yes’ outweighs the subjective, theological ‘no’. In other words, Muslims and Christians do indeed believe in the same God, insofar as the ultimate referent of their belief is That to which the word ‘God’ metaphysically refers: the transcendent Absolute, ultimate Reality, the unique source of Being. However, when this same Reality is conceived by human thought, and this conception is framed in theological discourse, with reference to the attributes and acts of this Reality—such as Creator, Revealer, Saviour, and Judge—then fundamental differences between the two systems of belief will be apparent. These differences will remain in place for as long as—and insofar as—we remain conceptually bound by the limits of theology; but they can be resolved on the higher plane of metaphysics and the deeper plane of mysticism—planes which are not constrained, doctrinally as regards metaphysics or experientially as regards mysticism, by the limitations of theology.²

We will aim to substantiate this argument with reference to two chief sources: the revealed data of the Qur’ān, and the inspired data of the metaphysicians and mystics of both Christianity and Islam. The Qur’ān—and the Sunna or Conduct of the Prophet, which is an eloquent commentary thereon—provides us with compelling evidence that the supreme Object of belief and worship is God for both Muslims and Christians, even if the conceptions of God held by Muslims and Christians diverge and, at points, contradict each other. The perspectives of such mystics as Ibn al-‘Arabī in Islam, and Meister Eckhart in Christianity help to reveal the manner in which these divergent subjective conceptions of God fail to infringe upon the objective one-and-onliness of the Absolute believed in by Muslims and Christians. The Absolute referent of the word ‘God’ / ‘*Allāh*’, then, is one and the same when our focus is on the transcendent Object of belief, rather than the human subject adhering to the belief: if the word ‘belief’ be defined principally in terms of the divine Object rather than the human subject, then our answer to the question posed must be in the affirmative.

² If it be asked what is the difference between theology and metaphysics we would reply as follows, basing ourselves on the writings of René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon: theology is rational thought focused upon the data of revelation, while metaphysics is the rational expression of intellection, intuition, or inspiration, which is proportioned both to the substance of revelation and its source, that is, the Revealer, or the divine reality *per se*. The two are by no means mutually exclusive; indeed, as

Palamite ‘mystical theology’, in particular, demonstrates, theology can be enriched by the intellectual insights of metaphysics and by the experiential certitudes of the mystics.

We cannot of course ignore the subjective side of the question, for ‘belief’ implies both things, an object and a subject; but even here, we can answer affirmatively, if the belief of the human subject be defined more in terms of spiritual orientation than mental conception, focusing more on the inner essence of faith than on its outer form. This determination to focus on the essential elements of faith within the subject, rather than the relatively accidental features of conceptual belief, reflects our concern with what is most essential in the divine Object of faith—namely, ultimate Reality—rather than derivative, dogmatically expressed aspects of that Reality. Muslims will not be able to affirm belief in ‘the Trinity’ any more than Christians, on the plane of theology, can unequivocally affirm belief in what Muslims call ‘*Allāh*’; for this term has come to imply complex theological beliefs articulated in terms of a whole myriad of premises, assumptions, and foundations, the acceptance of all, or most, of which is necessary for the theological affirmation of belief in *Allāh*. If, however, attention is directed away from the theological definition of *Allāh*, and to its supra-theological or metaphysical referent—that ultimate Essence (*al-Dhāt*) which is absolutely ineffable and thus un-nameable; and if, likewise, we look beyond the theological definition of the Trinitarian conception of God, and focus instead on its supra-theological or metaphysical referent—the ‘superessential One’, to quote St. Dionysius, to whom we will turn later—then we shall be in a position to affirm that, despite the different names by which the ultimate Reality is denoted in the two traditions, the Reality thus alluded to is indeed one and the same. And we are justified in referring to this Reality as ‘God’, ‘Deus’, ‘Theos’ or ‘*Allāh*’, or whatever term stands for this Reality in any language, as long as it be made clear that we are not implying thereby all the theological ramifications of these different terms. Rather, we are using these terms to denote their ultimate transcendent referent.

This essay is composed of three parts: the first begins with a discussion of the Qur’ān, and proceeds to address the debates and polemics generated by the Trinitarian conception of God in Christianity. Here it will be seen that the very nature of theological debate renders it all but inevitable that fundamental disagreements about the nature of God will prevail, overshadowing or even undermining the elements of commonality in beliefs held by Muslims and Christians. The second part then shifts to the plane of metaphysics, beginning

with discussion of an act of the Prophet, an act of great symbolic significance, which resolves the apparent contradiction between, on the one hand, the Qur'ānic affirmation that the God of the Muslims and the Christians (and the Jews) is one and the same; and, on the other, the Muslim repudiation of the Trinity. The mystics of the two traditions help us to arrive at a position of divine 'objectivity', a conceptual point of reference derived from a spiritual perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*, a point of view from which the unique metaphysical Object of belief takes priority over the theologically divergent, subjectively variegated, conceptions of that Object. Finally, in part three, we return to the plane of theology in the context of contemporary interfaith dialogue, and evaluate the extent to which the well-intentioned efforts of Muslims and Christians to affirm that we do believe in the same God might benefit from the insights of the mystics, by maintaining a clear distinction between the level of spiritual essence, on which there can be agreement, and that of theological form, on which there is—and should be—respectful disagreement.³

1. Qur'ānic Revelation and Muslim-Christian Theological Disputation

The key theological controversy to be addressed here is, quite evidently, that surrounding the Trinitarian conception of God: does the Christian belief in a Trinitarian God necessarily imply for both Christians and for Muslims that Christians believe in a God quite other than that believed in by Muslims? The Trinity, expressing the belief that God is one and He is three; together with the Incarnation, expressing the belief that God became man, was crucified, and rose from the dead, thereby liberating humanity from sin—these beliefs fly in the face of the central tenets of Muslim faith. The most fundamental aspect of the Muslim creed is centred on an affirmation of divine oneness (*Tawhīd*), one of the most important Qur'ānic formulations of which explicitly rejects that which lies at the core of Christian

³ This is an application of the principle finely articulated by James Cutsinger, 'Disagreeing to Agree: A Christian Response to *A Common Word*' (unpublished, but see the online version at www.cutsinger.net/scholarship/articles.shtml). Cutsinger argues that Christians and Muslims can disagree on the level of theology in order to agree on that of metaphysics. This argument is based upon the teachings of Frithjof Schuon, whose perspective on this question is summed up in the formula: conform to holy separation at the base in order to realize holy union at the summit. See Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence—A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2009), p.195.

belief, the idea that God could have a 'son'. Chapter 112 of the Qur'ān, entitled 'Purity' or 'Sincerity' (*Sūrat al-Ikhlās*) reads as follows:

Say: He, God, is One,
God, the Eternally Self-Subsistent
He begetteth not, nor is He begotten
And there is none like unto Him.

There is evidently a theological impasse here, a fundamental incompatibility between the respective conceptual forms taken by belief in the same God. Even if Christians retort to the above verses by denying any kind of carnal relation in the 'sonship' of Jesus, insisting that the sonship in question does not occur in time and space, but is an eternal principle, of which the historical Incarnation is but an expression,⁴ it is nonetheless clear that the Qur'ān emphatically rejects the idea that 'sonship'—whether physical, metaphorical or metaphysical—should form part of any creedal statement regarding God. In other words, it rejects the validity of ascribing to Jesus the status of 'son of God', and in so doing rejects a belief which constitutes a cardinal tenet of Christian faith. Likewise, in relation to the Trinity: the Christians are instructed by the Qur'ān to desist from all talk of three-ness in relation to God: 'Say not "three"; desist, it would be better for you. God is but one divinity (*innamā Allāh ilāh wāhid*)' (4:171).

One God: Qur'ānic affirmations

Alongside this critique of certain aspects of Christian belief, the Qur'ān also contains a large number of affirmations, implicit and explicit, that the God worshipped by the Christians (and Jews) is none other than the God worshipped by Muslims; the Revealer of the Qur'ān is the Revealer of all the scriptures contained in both the Old and New Testaments; this Revealer is none other than the one God, Creator of the heavens and the earth. It is part of a Muslim's belief that God, as the source of life and love, wisdom and compassion, has

⁴ They also point out that the idea that Jesus 'became' the son of God when he was born, or when he was baptised, or at some other point in his life—all such ideas are strictly heretical, being so many forms assumed by the heresy known as 'Adoptionism'. See Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (London: Sheldon Press, 1965), p.127.

revealed messages concerning Himself to *all* human communities, in different ways, and at different times;⁵ and that these revelations, from ‘above’, are so many means by which our innate certainty of God from ‘within’ is aroused, awakened, and perfected. This belief is clearly articulated by numerous verses of the Qur’ān. The Muslim is enjoined by the Qur’ān to believe in ‘God and His Angels, and His Books, and His Prophets’ and to affirm: ‘we do not distinguish between His Messengers’ (2:285). More explicitly, the Muslim is instructed: ‘Say: We believe in God, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted’ (2:136). Given the fact that it is the one and only God who has revealed Himself to the Biblical Prophets, to Jesus and to Muhammad, it is this one and only God that, according to the logic of the Qur’ān, is objectively ‘believed in’ by Muslims, Christians and Jews in the measure of their fidelity to their respective revelations. The Absolute—however it be referred to in different languages, whether proto-Semitic, Hebrew, Syriac, Aramaic, Arabic or any other language—is That in which belief is invested; it is That which transcends not only the names and concepts by which it is approximately designated, but also the theologies which unfold from it, and by which it becomes enveloped and all too often obscured.⁶

The following verses are of particular relevance to our theme:

‘He hath ordained for you of the religion that which He commended unto Noah, and that which We reveal to thee [Muhammad], and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein ...’ (42:13). A single Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition is here being affirmed, one which is inwardly differentiated, each of the Prophets coming to affirm and renew what was revealed by his

⁵ ‘For every community there is a Messenger’ (10:47).

⁶ Al-Ghazzālī, despite being a master-theologian himself, was essentially a Sufi mystic, and says that theology can be a ‘veil’ over God; only spiritual effort (*mujāhada*) can disclose the true nature of God, His essence and attributes. See his *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), p.34; English translation by Nabih Amin Faris, *The Book of Knowledge* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1970), p.55. Eric Ormsby sums up well al-Ghazzālī’s calibrated approach to theology: ‘It was a weapon, essential for defending the truths of the faith, but not an instrument by which truth itself could be found ... it demolishes but it does not build.’ Eric Ormsby, *Ghazali—The Revival of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), p.64.

predecessor. The key characteristic defining the relationship between the different Prophets is *confirmation*:

And We caused Jesus, son of Mary, to follow in their footsteps [the footsteps of the Jewish Prophets], confirming that which was [revealed] before him in the Torah, and We bestowed upon him the Gospel wherein is guidance and light, confirming that which was [revealed] before it in the Torah—a guidance and an admonition unto those who are pious. Let the People of the Gospel judge by that which God hath revealed therein (5:46-47).

The very next verse, 5:48, begins with the following words, reinforcing this crucial role of reciprocal confirmation. ‘And unto thee [Muhammad] We have revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and as a guardian over it’.

The logical consequence of the assertions of the unique source of revelation for all three traditions is the Qur’ān’s categorical affirmation that the God worshipped by the Christians and the Jews (‘the People of the Book’) is the selfsame God worshipped by Muslims:

‘And argue not with the People of the Book except in a manner most fine—but not with those who are oppressors, and say: We believe in that which hath been revealed unto us and that which hath been revealed unto you; our God (*ilāhunā*) and your God (*ilāhukum*) is One, and unto Him we submit’ (29:46).

This verse gives us the most definitive answer to the question we have been asked, the *ilāh* or ‘divinity’ believed in by the Muslims and the ‘People of the Book’—Jews, Christians and Sabians—is one and the same. The word ‘*Allāh*’, it should be noted, is derived from the word *ilāh* together with the definite article, *al-*; the construct *al-ilāh*, ‘the divinity’, was transformed into the proper name, ‘*Allāh*’. This name, therefore, refers intrinsically and metaphysically to ‘the divinity’, to That which is worshipped, to the Absolute. It is also etymologically equivalent to the Hebrew *Elōh*, and the Syriac *Alāh*. All three Semitic forms of this name for the Absolute are in turn derived from the root ‘*lh*, meaning ‘to worship’.⁷ Similarly, in regard to the English word ‘God’, we should note that an identical meaning is

⁷ Umar F. Abd-Allāh, ‘One God, Many Names’, in *Seasons—Semiannual Journal of Zaytuna Institute*, vol.2, no.1, 2004, p.47.

conveyed by its etymological root: for it is the past participle construction of the proto-Indo-European root *gheu*, meaning ‘to invoke/supplicate’. The literal meaning of ‘God’ is thus ‘the One who is invoked (or supplicated).’ On this semantic plane, then, we should see no discrepancy between ‘*Allāh*’ and ‘God’—both are simply semantic forms of designating the divinity to which worship and prayer are directed.⁸

The argument deriving from the above verse can be reinforced by several other verses, amongst which the following is one of the most important. According to most commentators, this was the first verse revealed granting permission to the Muslims to fight in self-defence against aggressors. It is of particular pertinence to our theme, underlining as it does the duty of Muslims to protect fellow-believers in the Christian and Jewish communities—thus inducing a spirit of solidarity among all those who believe in the one and only God:

Permission [to fight] is given to those who are being fought, for they have been wronged, and surely God is able to give them victory; those who have been expelled from their homes unjustly, only because they said: Our Lord is God. Had God not driven back some by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques—wherein the name of God is oft-invoked (*yudhkaru fihā ism Allāh kathīran*)—would assuredly have been destroyed (22: 39-40).

‘The name of God’ (*ism Allāh*)—the one and only, selfsame God—is ‘invoked’ in monasteries, churches and synagogues, and not just in mosques. Just as in Islamic theology, the one God has ninety-nine ‘Names’, without thereby becoming anything other than one, so the different ‘names’ given to God in the different revelations do not make the object named anything but one. The names of God revealed by God in these revelations are thus to be seen in stark contrast to those ‘names’ manufactured by the polytheists as labels for their idols. These false gods are described as follows: ‘They are but names that ye have named, ye and your fathers, for which God hath revealed no authority’ (53:23). One is reminded here of St Paul’s dictum, cited at the outset: ‘A false god has no existence in the real world’.

⁸ Ibid, p.51.

The various names by which God is named in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, on the contrary, do have 'authority'. They refer to one and the same Reality in a manner at once authoritative and authentic, precisely on account of having been revealed by that Reality. These names, therefore, resonate not only with that supreme Reality transcending all thought and language, but also with the innate knowledge of God which articulates the inmost reality of the human soul, the *fitra*.⁹ The point here is that it is the same God who creates each soul with innate knowledge of Him, the same God who reveals Himself to all souls in diverse ways, and the same God who is worshipped by the communities defined by these revelations. It is for this reason, among others, that the Qur'ān holds out the promise of salvation not just to Muslims but to 'Jews, Christians and Sabeans', bringing these three specifically mentioned religious communities into the generic category of believers who combine faith with virtue, these two being the key conditions—necessary but not sufficient¹⁰—for salvation:

'Truly those who believe [in this Revelation], and the Jews and the Christians and the Sabeans—whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds—their reward is with their Lord, neither fear nor grief shall befall them' (2:62; repeated almost verbatim at 5:69).

For our purposes, the key part of this verse is the category: 'whoever believeth in God'. The category is not restricted just Muslims, Jews, Christians and Sabians, but encompasses all those who believe in 'God' as such—whatever be the specific name by which God is referred to. This is repeated at the end of the verse: the reward to those who believe and act virtuously is given from 'their Lord', *Rabbihim*, whatever be the means by which the Lord as such is designated linguistically.

⁹ This primordial nature is the inalienable infrastructure not just of the soul, but also of the 'right religion'. There can be no revelation from on high without innate receptivity to that revelation being present within: 'So set thy purpose for religion with unswerving devotion—the nature [framed] of God (*fitrat Allāh*), according to which He hath created man. There is no altering God's creation. That is the right religion (*al-dīn al-qayyim*), but most men know not' (30:30).

¹⁰ For, according to a well-known saying of the Prophet, nobody is saved on account of his deeds: only the mercy of God affords access to Paradise.

The People of the Book are not told to first ensure that their conception of God corresponds exactly to the Islamic conception, and then to believe in the Last Day, and to act virtuously; rather, it is taken for granted that That which is referred to as *Allāh* is the God in whom they already believe, the God who created them and revealed to them the scriptures by which they are guided. Similarly, in the very same verse in which the Prophet is told not to follow the ‘whims’ (*ahwāʾ*) of the People of the Book, he is also told not only to affirm belief in their scripture, but also to affirm that *Allāh* is ‘our Lord and your Lord’:

And be thou upright as thou art commanded and follow not their whims. Instead say: I believe in whatever scripture God hath revealed, and I am commanded to be just among you. God is our Lord and your Lord. Unto us, our works, and unto you, yours: let there be no argument between us. God will bring us together, and unto Him is the journeying (42:15).

If, as we shall see below, there is indeed an ‘argument’ between the Muslims and the Christians, over the Trinity, for example, this argument does not pertain to the question of whether Muslims and Christians believe in the same God, or have the same Lord; rather, the argument is over something more contingent: the human conceptualisation of that Lord, together with His attributes and acts. *That* He is ‘our Lord’ is not disputed—we all believe in Him; how ‘our Lord’ is conceived by us—that is the subject of the dispute. Unity on the level of the divine Object goes hand in hand with diversity—and even contradiction—on the level of the human subject.

The verses which we have cited demonstrate that there is an essential and definitive aspect to faith in ‘God’ which takes precedence over the conceptual and dogmatic forms assumed by that faith. This essential faith is not necessarily annulled by an imperfect conception of That in which one has faith. The positing of two unequal degrees of faith, the one essential and definitive, the other formal and derivative, is principally based on the Qur’ānic verses expressing these two attitudes to the Christian ‘faith’, on the one hand affirmative and on the other critical; it is also derived, as we shall see later, from an act of the Prophet which serves as an implicit commentary, at once dramatic and eloquent, on these two aspects of the Qur’ānic discourse.

The Trinity: Muslim critique

Before looking at this crucial act of the Prophet, let us consider the critique of the Trinity found in the Qur'ān, and then elaborated in Muslim theology. Although the idea of 'threeness' is censured in a general way in the Qur'ān, the only specific 'trinity' mentioned in the Qur'ān is not the Trinity affirmed in Christian dogma. On the one hand, both the specific belief in Jesus as the son of God, and the general idea of three-ness is rejected:

O People of the Book, do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter about God aught save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was but a Messenger of God and His Word which He cast into Mary and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His Messengers, and say not: "Three"! Desist: it will be better for you. For God is One divinity (*Allāh ilāh wāhid*)—Far removed from His Majesty that He should have a son ... (4:171).

On the other hand, a specific configuration of the 'trinity'¹¹ is given in this verse: 'And behold! God will say: "O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, "Take me and my mother for two gods beside God?"' He will say: "Glory be to Thee! Never could I say that to which I had no right"' (5:116).

This 'trinity' is evidently one which all orthodox Christians would similarly reject. As for 4:171, let us look at how it is interpreted by one of the most influential commentators in the specifically theological tradition of exegesis, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī:

The first issue: the meaning is, 'Do not say that God, glorified be He, is one Substance (*jawhar*) and three hypostases (*aqānīm*). Know that the doctrine of the Christians is very obscure. What can be gleaned from it is that they affirm one essence (*dhāt*) that is qualified by three attributes (*sifāt*), except that even though they call them attributes, they are in reality essences (*dhawāt*) ... Though they call them 'attributes',

¹¹ Another form of the 'trinity' is given at 5:72: 'They indeed disbelieve who say that God is the third of three ...' This, similarly, refers not to the orthodox Christian Trinity, but to a heretical form thereof.

they are actually affirming the existence of several self-subsisting essences (*dhawāt qā'ima bi-anfusihā*), and this is pure unbelief (*kufr*) ... If, however, we were to understand from these 'Three as meaning that they affirm three attributes, then there can be no denying [the truth of] this. How could we [as Muslims] say otherwise, when we [are the ones who] say, 'He is God other than whom there is no god, the King, the Holy, the Peace, the Knower, the Living, the Omnipotent, the Willer etc.', and understand [as we do] each one of these expressions as being distinct from all the others. There can be no other meaning for there being several attributes. Were it unbelief to affirm the existence of several divine attributes, the Qur'ān in its entirety would be refuted; and the intellect would also be invalidated since we necessarily know that the concept¹² of God being Knower (*'āliman*) is other than the concept of Him being Omnipotent (*qādiran*) or Living (*hayyan*).'¹³

Even if the 'trinity' being refuted here is conceived as consisting of the Father, Jesus and Mary, the Muslim critique, based on such verses as those cited above, is focused on the Christian idea of three Persons being identical to the one Essence, each Person being absolutely identical to the Essence at the same time as being distinct from the other two Persons. This appears to posit three distinct essences rather than three attributes of one Essence, and thus contrasts sharply with the Muslim theologian's definition of the attributes-Essence relationship. Al-Ghazzālī, for example, gives the standard Sunni-Ash'ari position on the attributes, to which Rāzī also subscribed,¹⁴ as follows: the essential attributes of God—living, knowing, powerful, willing, hearing, seeing, speaking¹⁵—are 'superadded' (*zā'ida*) to the Essence; these attributes are uncreated and eternal (*qadīma*), but are not self-subsistent, rather they 'subsist through the Essence' (*qā'ima bi'l-dhāt*); they

¹² Literally: 'that which is understood from', *mafhūm*.

¹³ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dar Ehia Al-Tourath Al-Arabi, 2000), vol.4, pp. 271-272. I am grateful to Dr Feras Hamza for pointing out to me the importance of this passage.

¹⁴ See, for a helpful introduction to this theme, Nader al-Bizri, 'God's Essence and Attributes', in Tim Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), especially pp.129-131.

¹⁵ These are the 'essential attributes' (*sifāt al-dhāt*) as opposed to attributes of actions (*sifāt al-fi'l*); the essential attributes are most often deemed to be these seven, but sometimes there are just two (life and knowledge) sometimes eight, at other times 15, etc. There was considerable variation as regards what constituted an essential attribute.

are not identical to the Essence but neither are they other than it.¹⁶ Whereas these Muslim theologians maintain that the attributes subsist not through themselves, but through the Essence, with which they are co-eternal, they understand the Christian view of the Trinity to be, in contrast, a form of *shirk*, 'association' or polytheism, insofar as it posits three Persons who are all deemed to be God while also being eternally distinct from each other; each Person being eternally distinguished from the other two while sharing a common substance or nature (*homoousia*). Rāzī says, however, that if the Christians confined themselves to affirming only that God had three attributes, attributes which were clearly subordinate to the Essence which they qualify—thus positing a unique Essence which unambiguously transcended the Persons—then they could not be accused of *kufṛ* or of *shirk*.

The kind of reconciliation of the two theologies being proposed by Rāzī is one whereby the Christians uphold the transcendence of the unique Essence vis-à-vis the three Persons, or affirm the transcendence of the 'Father' understood as the Essence, who then manifests Himself through two attributes; this is meant to replace the conception of the Essence being, as it were, 'shared' equally by the three Persons who are simultaneously identical to the Essence *and* distinguishable as Persons within the Essence. Rāzī would contend that the distinctiveness of the Persons cannot be situated at the same level of absoluteness as the Essence: if the Persons are to be viewed as attributes, then they cannot be distinct from each other on the same plane on which their identity with the Essence is affirmed.

Various efforts were in fact made to narrow the gap between the two theologies along just these lines. These were formulated for the most part by Christian apologists living in Muslim lands, who attempted to do more or less what Rāzī proposed: present the Trinity in terms which resemble the relationship established within Islamic theology between the attributes and the Essence.¹⁷ For example, the Jacobite¹⁸ Christian Arab, Yahyā b. 'Adī (d.

¹⁶ *Al-iqtisād fi'l-i'tiqād* (eds. H. Atay and I. Cubkcu) (Ankara: Nur Matbaasi, 1962), pp.4-5.

¹⁷ Sidney Griffith effectively refutes Harry Wolfson's claim that the Muslim theologians derived their view of the attributes from the Christian Trinity, showing that it was the other way round:

974), writing in Arabic and making full use of Arabic terms drawn from the vocabulary of Muslim *kalām*, refers to God as being one ‘substance’ (*jawhar*) and three ‘attributes’ (*sifāt*), each of which is described as being distinct from the other two as regards ‘meaning’ (*ma’nā*).¹⁹ He was sensitive to the charge of polytheism, and refers to the ‘ignorant’ (*al-juhāl*) among the Christians who assert that the three hypostases each constitute a distinct substance. The proper conception of the Trinity, according to Yahyā, is based upon the doctrines of the Church Fathers, and it is this conception that is held by ‘the three sects of the Christians’, by which he means the Melkites, the Nestorians and the Jacobites. The one substance or *ousia* is defined in terms of the Arabic concepts *jawhar* (substance), *dhāt* (essence), and *māhiyya* (quiddity)—all of which were applied by Muslim theologians to God. Within this unique substance, however, one can distinguish between three Persons who are defined by unique ‘personal’ properties: paternity (*ubūwa*) for the Father, filiation (*bunūwa*) for the Son, and procession (*inbi’āth*) for the Spirit.²⁰

In the previous century, another Arab Christian, the Nestorian ‘Ammār al-Basrī (d.ca. 850) had rebutted the charge of tritheism levelled against the Christians by the Muslims, and articulated in his *Kitāb al-Burhān* (‘The Book of Proof’) a position very close to that proposed by Rāzī:

Before God, we are blameless of alleging three gods. Rather, by our saying Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we want no more than to substantiate the statement that God is

Christians in Muslim lands came to frame their Trinitarian theology in terms already established within Muslim *kalām*, as will be evident in what follows.

¹⁸ The Jacobites, Melkites and Nestorians were the main Christian sects in the territories conquered by the Muslims in the eastern part of the Byzantine empire, principally Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, in the first wave of the expansion of Islam. They were distinguished principally by different Christologies. As Sidney Griffith shows clearly, these Christian sects were not only granted tolerance by the Muslims, their identity was in large part forged by the culture of Islam which ‘fostered the articulation of a new cultural expression of Christian doctrine, this time in Arabic, and it provided the cultural framework within which the several Christian denominations of the Orient ultimately came to define their mature ecclesial identities.’ Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque—Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), p.4.

¹⁹ See Sidney Griffith, *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic—Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p.177.

²⁰ See Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp.335-336.

living (*hayy*), speaking (*nātiq*). And the Father is the one whom we consider to have life (*hayāt*) and word (*kalima*). The life is the Holy Spirit and the word is the Son.²¹

This presentation echoes that of St Irenaeus, one of the earliest Church Fathers (d. ca. 202), who referred to the Son and the Spirit as being akin to the ‘two hands’ of God the Father, by which He creates all things, such that the Father comes to creation through the Son and in the Spirit, and creatures go to the Father in the Spirit and through the Son. St Irenaeus refers to the Son as the Word of God, and the Spirit to the Wisdom of God; these two were eternally present in God and with God, without dividing Him into three: ‘since to Him is ever present His Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom He made all things.’²²

Here, the derivative aspect of the divinity of the second and third Persons of the Trinity, in relation to the first, is combined with the unity of the Godhead—the two ‘hands’ being inseparable from the ‘body’ of the person to whom they belong. To the objection that God is not composed of parts, and cannot be compared to a body with two hands, St Irenaeus would no doubt respond by saying that one has to apply to this analogy a strong *mutatis mutandis* clause: God’s ‘body’—the divine Reality—is absolute simplicity, thus non-composite; His ‘hands’—that is His Word and His Wisdom—are akin to the hands of a body only in one respect. Just as it is through the hands that the body acts, so it is through the divine Word and Wisdom that God creates. In another respect, however, there is no common measure between the two things compared, for the Word and Wisdom are inseparable from the very simplicity of God’s Reality, whereas the two hands of a body can be separated from the body of which they are relatively accidental parts, both the body and its hands being composite substances.

Another Christian Arab, the Jacobite Abū Rā’ita (d. ca.850) pursued a similar line of thought to that of ‘Ammār al-Basrī, making use of the Muslim attributes of knowledge and life. Just

²¹ Cited in Sidney Griffith, *Beginnings*, p.170.

²² St Irenaeus, *Five Books of S. Irenaeus Against Heresies*, tr. John Keble (Oxford & London: James Parker & co, 1872), Book 4, ch.20.1, pp.364-365.

as Muslim theologians accept that God is 'the Knowing' (*al-'Alīm*) and 'the Living' (*al-Hayy*), without these attributes being considered as 'partners' (*shurakā'*, sing. *sharīk*) alongside God, so, for the Christians, these two attributes are given the names 'Son' and 'Spirit': 'Furthermore, as perfect entities, God's life and knowledge must be considered not only as distinguishable, but also as simultaneously in union (*ittisāl*) with one another, and with His perfect being.'²³ God's life and knowledge are thus hypostases (*aqānīm*),²⁴ which are distinguished one from the other without this distinction rupturing the unity of the substance of God's being.

While such formulations may appear to bridge the gap between the two theologies in some respects, the rapprochement on this level is a fragile one. For the very insistence of the Christian apologists upon the eternal distinction between the Persons of the Trinity at the level of the Godhead, alongside the affirmation that each of the Persons is identical to that Godhead, ensured that most Muslim theologians would not accept the doctrine. Typical of the kind of argument made against the Christian Trinity is that of the philosopher al-Kindī (d.873). He argued that if, on the one hand, there is a sole substance within each of the hypostases, and on the other, each of the hypostases has a property, which is eternal in it, and which differentiates one hypostasis from the other, it follows that:

... each of the hypostases is composed of a substance, which is common to all of them, and a property, which is unique to each of them. But everything composed is the effect of a cause, and effect of a cause cannot be eternal, whence it follows that neither is the Father eternal nor is the Son eternal nor is the Holy Spirit eternal. Thus, things which have been assumed to be eternal are not eternal.²⁵

Yahyā b. 'Adī cites Kindī's critique and retorts: this argument holds only for created substances; the composite nature of created things is a concomitant of their temporality, cause and effect only taking place in time. In the case of the Persons of the Trinity, however,

²³ Griffith, *Beginnings*, p.183.

²⁴ This is the plural of *uqnūm*, the Arabic transliteration of the Syriac *qnoma*, which translates the Greek *hypostasis*. Griffith, *Beginnings*, p.180.

²⁵ Cited in Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*, p.322.

the temporal condition is transcended: they have never not existed, thus they cannot have been brought into a composite form comprising substance and property. On the contrary, 'the substance is described by every one of these attributes (*al-sifāt*) and ... these attributes are eternal, without their having been produced in it after they had not been.'²⁶

Kindī would probably have responded that the composite nature of a compound is not contingent upon temporality alone; rather, it is a property of the substance of the thing itself: any substance composed of more than one element cannot but be regarded as composite, it cannot be simple. It is the fact of the existence of two or more elements that makes a substance compound, the question of time does not enter into the essential definition of substance.

In any case, Yahyā b. 'Adī is trying here to answer Muslim objections to the Trinity, while bringing the focus back to something he thinks is common between the Muslim and Christian conceptions of unity and plurality in relation to God. He argues that, like the Muslim attributes, the Christian Trinity is an eternally subsistent mode of plurality within unity, it is a three-ness pertaining to the unique substance of divinity, with the real distinctiveness of each Person being maintained within that one substance. But the problems remain, as is well demonstrated by the following polemical exchange—among the most protracted in all such exchanges that have been recorded in the history of Muslim-Christian polemics. The correspondence began with a letter written in the 13th century by Paul of Antioch, the Melkite Bishop of Sidon, to 'a Muslim friend'. This apology for the Christian faith went through various editions, one of which was sent by 'the people of Cyprus' to two Muslim theologians in Damascus, Ibn Taymiyya in 1316 and Ibn Abī Tālib al-Dimashqī in the following year. As regards the Trinity, the letter echoes the argument of 'Ammār al-Basrī, noted above. It asserts: 'The three names [Father, Son and Spirit] are one eternal and everlasting God: a thing living and articulate (*shay' hayy nātiq*), the Essence, speech, life. As we see it, the Essence is the Father, the speech is the Son, and the life is the Holy Spirit.' The response from al-Dimashqī concentrates on the distinction between the

²⁶ Ibid.

named entities, arguing that each named being is utterly different from the other two, ‘the Father is different from the Son, and utterly distinct from him, and similarly the Spirit is different from both of them.’ Given the affirmation of these three apparently discrete entities, the result can only be *kufr* (unbelief) and *shirk* (polytheism).

In this way you declare unbelief and polytheism by declaring that the Father exists by his essence, that is, He is eternal, and that he is living by the Spirit, and articulating by the Son; that the Spirit is living by its essence, that is, it is eternal, and that it exists by the Father, and is articulating by the Son; and that the Son is articulating by his essence, that is, he is eternal, and he exists by the Father and living by the Spirit. Thus you give the clearest indication of polytheism.²⁷

In other words, we return to the objection made by Rāzī: the Persons are not attributes (*sifāt*), but are in reality essences (*dhawāt*), each essence being defined by a property particular to it: existence is the eternally subsistent defining property—hence the eternal ‘essence’—of the Father; life is the eternally subsistent defining property—hence the eternal ‘essence’—of the Spirit; and articulation is the eternally subsistent defining property—hence the eternal ‘essence’—of the Son. We should make it clear here that Dimashqī’s response is based on the classical Ash‘arite formula, mentioned above by al-Ghazzālī: the attributes must be described as being neither God nor other than God. This ambivalent formula, alone, is deemed to satisfy the requirement of simultaneously safeguarding the divine unity whilst affirming the reality of the attributes in their distinctiveness. Let us look at this formula more closely:

1) ‘not God’: the attributes are truly distinct in their plurality, but they cannot be said to constitute different essences alongside God, and this is why, in their distinctive plurality, they must not be identified purely and simply with the Absolute: the attributes, in this respect, are thus ‘other than God’. And this is what the Christian formulations of the Essence-Person (or Essence-attribute) relationship fail to assert; they maintain, on the contrary, that each Person of the Trinity—even if this Person be described as a Muslim-

²⁷ Cited in Rifaat Ebied & David Thomas (eds.), *Muslim-Christian Polemic during the Crusades—The Letter from the People of Cyprus and Ibn Abi Tālib’s Response* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p.333 (translation modified).

sounding 'attribute'—is identified with God, at the same time as having its own distinctiveness as a Person.

2) 'not other than God': the Ash'arites add to the preceding denial the complementary affirmation that the attributes are 'not other than God', for the attributes have no self-subsistent essences of their own, and subsist only through the unique divine Essence. But this affirmation 'not other than God' can only be accepted if it be conditioned by the negation: the attributes are 'not God'. The resulting synthesis of the two complementary statements affirms the reality of the attributes without undermining the unity of God, while upholding the unity of God without denying the reality of the attributes. For the Ash'arites, then, all the attributes are co-eternal with the Essence, not being absolutely 'other' than It, nor being absolutely identified with It; thus they are *real* and not simply metaphors or mere names, but their reality does not introduce division within the one Essence.

At this point one should note that it is not just the Christians who fall short of the Ash'arite criteria of *tawhīd* on this issue, for both the 'attributionists' or 'assimilationists' (*al-mushabbiha*, literally: those who create a likeness or similarity), referred to as al-Hashwiyya, and the 'anti-attributionists', the Mu'tazilites, are regarded as holding erroneous and even heretical beliefs about God. The first group, basing themselves on a literal reading of certain Qur'ānic verses, ascribed to God quasi-corporeal attributes (a body, hands, a face, and so on), thus falling foul of assimilationism (*tashbīh*), or making God comparable to creatures, and anthropomorphism (*tajsīm*), leading to the 'sin' of association or polytheism (*shirk*); while their opponents, the Mu'tazilites, are deemed to stray too far in the opposite direction, stripping God (*ta'tīl*) of all attributes in a vain effort to safeguard His transcendent unicity. For them, God can be described as 'knowing', but not through an attribute called 'knowledge'; He is indeed omnipotent, but not through an attribute called 'power'.²⁸ It is pertinent to note here that the accusation of being a 'Christian' is made in the disputes over the attributes: the Ash'arite theologian al-Shahrastānī accuses the Mu'tazilite, Abū al-Hudhayl al-'Allāf (d. 841) of imitating the Christians in their view of the relationship

²⁸ Cited by Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trs. A.Hamori & R.Hamori (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.95.

between the Essence and the Persons, saying, ‘Abū Hudhayl’s affirmation of these attributes as aspects of the Essence is the same as the hypostases of the Christians.’²⁹

The Mu‘tazilite position is typically based on this kind of reasoning:

1. That which is eternal is divine.
2. The divinity is absolute unity, utter simplicity.
3. The unity and simplicity of God thus strictly excludes the plurality of eternal attributes.

God cannot therefore have attributes that are both eternal and multiple: to assert the contrary is to fall into polytheism.³⁰ In his argument against those ‘philosophers’ who deny that eternal attributes can be ascribed to God, al-Ghazzālī writes: ‘Why should it be impossible to say that, just as the essence of Him who is necessary of existence [*wājib al-wujūd*, ‘the necessary existent’] is eternal and has no efficient cause, so also His attribute exists with Him from eternity and thus has no efficient cause?’ As Wolfson notes, this argument is not so dissimilar from the Christian defence of the Trinity³¹—as we saw above, in Yahyā b. ‘Adī’s response to Kindī.

It is thus not surprising to find the Spanish scholar of the Zāhirī school of thought, Ibn al-Hazm (d.1064), sarcastically asking an Ash‘arite: ‘Since you say that co-existent with God are fifteen attributes, all of them other than He and all of them eternal, why do you find fault with the Christians when they say that God is the “third of three”?’³² The Ash‘arite, according to Ibn Hazm, lamely replies that the only mistake made by the Christians is restricting to two the number of things co-existing with God. In like fashion, the contemporary Iranian Shi‘ite scholar, Ayatollah Javādi-Āmulī, takes the Ash‘arites to task for believing in seven, eight or nine ‘gods’ rather than just the three of the Christians. It is

²⁹ Cited in Sidney Griffith, *Beginnings of Christian Theology*, p.178.

³⁰ See Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*, pp.132-143.

³¹ Ibid, p.139 and p.323. As regards Wolfson’s claim that ‘Muslims [were led] to adopt a Christian doctrine which is explicitly rejected in the Koran, and transform it into a Muslim doctrine... [They were] led to the substitution in Muslim theology of divine attributes for the Christian Trinity’ (ibid, p.128), it is clear that the differences between the two doctrines greatly outweigh their similarities.

³² Ibid, p.314.

the Ash‘arite affirmation of the attributes as being both eternal, on the one hand, and ‘super-added’ to the Essence (*zā’ida ‘alā’l-dhāt*), on the other, that leads Javādī-Āmulī to accuse the Ash‘arites of believing in more than one God: ‘If we accept that there are eight attributes of the Essence, in addition to the Essence itself, then we will have nine eternal existent entities.’³³ He mounts a strong argument in favour of the Shi’ite position which is neither that of simply stripping God’s Essence of all attributes (*ta’tīl*), as did the Mu‘tazilites, nor affirming them as being super-added to the Essence, as did the Ash‘arites. Rather, for the Shi’is, all of the attributes are viewed as being real, on the one hand, this reality being absolutely identical with the Essence; and, on the other hand, each of the attributes are distinct from the Essence, and thus from each other, only in respect of conceptual meaning (*mafhūm*).³⁴

Furthermore, the strict traditionalists—among them, Hanbalite literalists—pour scorn on *all* those who engage in theology (*kalām*), saying that the literal meaning of the Qur’ān and the prophetic Sunna suffice; the use of reason, argument, and disputation only leads astray. The great jurist al-Shāfi‘ī, founder of one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence said: ‘My verdict on the people of *kalām* is that they should be beaten with whips and the soles of sandals, and then paraded through all tribes and encampments, while it is proclaimed of them, “Such is the reward of those who forsake the Qur’ān and the Sunna, and give themselves up to the *kalām*”.’³⁵

³³ ‘Abd Allāh Javādī-Āmulī, *Tawhīd dar Qur’ān* [Tawhīd in the Qur’ān], vol.2 of *Tafsīr-i mawdū‘ī-i Qur’ān-i Karīm* (Qum: Isrā’ Research Centre, 1386 Sh./1998), p.301.

³⁴ Javādī-Āmulī, *Tawhīd*, pp.305-311. This perspective is based on such texts as the sermon no. 1 of the *Nahj al-balāgha* of Imam ‘Alī b. Abī Tālib. See our translation of and comment upon this seminal text, *Justice and Remembrance—Introducing the Spirituality of Imam ‘Alī* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), Appendix 1, pp.208-218. On the one hand, one’s conception of the Essence must be shorn of all attributes, insofar as these latter are susceptible to distinctive conception apart from the Essence, and on the other hand, the ontological reality of the attributes is affirmed, each attribute having no ‘binding limitation’, insofar as its substance is identified absolutely with the divine Essence.

³⁵ Cited by Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, op.cit., pp.110-111.

It would appear necessary, in the light of these intra-Muslim polemics, to ask the question: do all Muslims in fact believe in the same God?³⁶ The same can be said of the Christians, whose mutual anathematizations and excommunications are too many and complex to begin to mention here. Suffice to say that, on the theological plane which we are presently considering, we certainly need to ask the question whether and to what extent Catholics and Orthodox believe in the same God, if these two great branches of the Church could split so definitively and acrimoniously over the correct understanding of the Trinity: does the Spirit proceed from the Father alone, as the Orthodox maintain, or from the Father and the Son (*filioque*), as the Catholics maintain? If this question, going to the very heart of the Trinitarian conception of God, is disputed, then, in the measure that one's belief in God is predicated upon a proper understanding of the Trinity, it is not irrelevant or irreverent to ask the question: do Catholics and Orthodox believe in the same God? The question is by no means merely academic, nor of merely historical interest, pertaining only to the 'great schism' which was formalized in 1054. As recently as 1848, when Pope Pius IX issued an invitation to the Eastern churches on the subject of unity (in the apostolic letter *In Suprema Petri Apostoli Sede*) he met with a blistering response from the Eastern Patriarchs: how could they unite with the Catholics who professed the *filioque*, 'condemned by many Holy Councils ... subjected to anathema by the eighth Ecumenical Council'; the *filioque* which introduced unequal relations in the Trinity and, most seriously of all, 'destroyed the oneness from the one cause', i.e. the Father:

³⁶ As we shall see in the next section, Ibn al-'Arabī's metaphysics allows us to answer in the affirmative: yes, Muslims do believe in the same God, as regards the divine essence of belief, even if the human form assumed by belief contradicts other such forms. It might also be noted here that he offers a strictly metaphysical view of the divine attributes, arguing that they are certainly real, but only as the Essence (this being identical to the Shi'i position); but as regards their diversity, he argues that this is not only due to the diverse modes of perfection indistinguishably comprised within the Essence, the diversity is a concomitant also of the plurality of created being, with which the one Essence enters into so many relationships; the attributes are thus so many modes of relationship with the cosmos, they become outwardly diversified according to the multiplicity of the cosmos. The metaphysical 'oneness of being', and not just the oneness of God, is established by Ibn al-'Arabī through his assertion that the multiplicity of the cosmos is rooted in the 'fixed archetypes' (*al-a'yān al-thābita*), and these, in turn, have *no real existence*—no ontological substance. They 'exist' only in the consciousness of God, in a manner analogous to the subsistence of ideas within the mind of man. He thus can assert that there is nothing in being but God, and since God is one, being cannot but be one. See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge—Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989), pp.31-58, et passim.

The novel doctrine of the Holy Ghost proceeding from the Father and the Son is essentially heresy, and its maintainers, whoever they be, are heretics, according to the sentence of Pope St Damasus ('If anyone rightly holds concerning the Father and the Son, yet holds not rightly of the Holy Ghost, he is a heretic'), and that the congregations of such are also heretical, and that all spiritual communion in worship of the orthodox sons of the Catholic Church with such is unlawful.³⁷

It is the Catholic addition of the *filioque* that, so the Orthodox argue to this day, undermined the 'monarchy' of the Father as sole cause of the Godhead, and thereby ruined the balance between the unity of God—determined by the Father—and the threeness of God established by the Persons. If the Spirit 'proceeded' not from the Father alone, but also from the Son, then there are two sources or causes of the Godhead, instead of one. This is what is implied in the accusation that the very oneness of the cause of the Godhead, the Father, is 'destroyed' by the addition of the word *filioque* to the Creed.³⁸

Can one say, then, that the Orthodox conception of the Trinity, with its sole source of unity located in the Father, is more likely to meet Muslim theological criteria of *Tawhīd*? Not necessarily. For the Trinity remains central to Orthodox theology, and any effort to elevate the unity of God above the Trinity is fraught with problems. Even if the Father is described as the uncaused cause of the Son and the Spirit, one cannot call the Father 'superior' to them, for any kind of elevation of the Father implies a subordination of the other two Persons. Orthodox theologians firmly resisted any such 'subordinationism', as is clear from the following statement by St Gregory of Nazianzen:

I should like to call the Father the greater, because from Him flow both the equality and the being of the equals [i.e., the other two Persons] ... But I am afraid to use the word Origin, lest I should make Him the Origin of inferiors, and thus insult Him by

³⁷ *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*, Edward Siecienski (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2010), pp.188-189.

³⁸ See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972 [reprint]), pp. 218-223 for a concise explanation of the doctrinal implications of the *filioque*; and for a more extended theological exposition, Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2005 [reprint]), pp.51-66, et passim.

precedencies of honour. *For the lowering of those who are from Him is no glory to the Source ...* Godhead neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same, just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite connaturality of Three Infinite Ones, each God when considered in Himself; as the Father, so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three, one God, when contemplated together; each God because consubstantial; the Three, one God because of the monarchy (emphasis added).³⁹

For the Muslim theologian the principle of unity—‘one God because of the monarchy’—is fatally compromised by the assertion of trinity: ‘each God because consubstantial’. The logical consequence of this consubstantiality is that all attributes of the Godhead pertain to each of the three Persons of the Trinity in a quasi-absolute manner: each Person is fully God by dint of sharing the same substance (*homoousia*) of Godhead; they are of the same nature, while being distinct from the others only on account of a particular ‘personal’ quality: ‘begetting’ in the case of the Father, ‘being begotten’ in the case of the Son, and ‘proceeding from’ in the case of the Spirit, as we have seen above. In the words of St John of Damascus:

For in their hypostatic or personal properties alone—the properties of being unbegotten, of filiation, and of procession—do the three divine hypostases differ from each other, being indivisibly divided, not by essence but by the distinguishing mark of their proper and peculiar hypostasis ... The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one in all respects save those of being unbegotten, of filiation and of procession.⁴⁰

This statement helps us to perceive the reason why, on the theological plane, it is so difficult to formulate the Trinity in terms which fit within the frame of an Islamic conception of attributes. For according to the dogma of the Trinity—whether Orthodox or

³⁹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, op. cit., p.63. To introduce any kind of inequality within the Godhead is to fall into a kind of Arianism, against which St Gregory of Nazienzen railed: ‘We believe that to subordinate anything of the Three is to destroy the whole’ (from his attack on Arius in the treatise ‘On St Basil’).

⁴⁰ Cited in *ibid*, p.54.

Catholic⁴¹—everything possessed by the Father is equally possessed by the Son and the Spirit; in other words, all the divine attributes such as knowledge, power, will, etc. are ascribed equally to all three Persons, who are distinguished one from the other *exclusively* according to their Personal properties. This view diverges radically from the Islamic conception of the attributes, all of which are possessed by one sole Essence, and each of which is distinguished from all the others by virtue of its particular property or quality; the attribute of knowledge, for example, cannot be equated with that of power, except by virtue of their common root and source in the Essence. According to the Trinity, however, both attributes are equally predicated of each of the three Persons, who are distinguished from each other, not as one attribute is distinct from another, but solely by a personal property defined in relation to origin: ‘the properties of being unbegotten, of filiation, and of procession’, as St John put it, describing, respectively, the Father, Son and Spirit.

According to this strict application of the dogma, it is difficult to see how the three Persons constitute different attributes of God, if ‘attributes’ be defined according to Muslim theology. For each of the Persons equally possesses all of the attributes of the other two, with the sole exception of the quality determined by their respective ‘personal’ properties. Apart from this sole distinction, each Person of the Trinity is deemed to be equal to the others insofar as all the divine attributes are concerned; so the Son and the Spirit are as omniscient and omnipotent as the Father, and the same applies to all the attributes. St Thomas Aquinas, for example, after defining the Son as the Word or the ‘understanding’ of God, writes that in God *‘to be and to understand* are identical. Therefore, the divine Word that is in God, whose Word He is according to intellectual existence, has the same existence as God, whose Word He is. Consequently, the Word must be of the same essence and nature as God Himself, and all attributes whatsoever that are predicated of God, must pertain also

⁴¹ St Augustine, for example, in his treatise on the Trinity, maintains that ‘there is so great an equality in that Trinity that ... the Father is not greater than the Son in respect to divinity.’ Cited by Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, vol. 1, ‘Faith, Trinity and Incarnation’, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), p.357. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are *equally* ‘divine’; so every attribute of divinity is to be equally attributed to all three Persons.

to the Word of God'.⁴² The same logic is applied to the Spirit, identified by Aquinas as the love of God for Himself.⁴³ Thus it is to all three Persons equally that all the attributes of divinity pertain, for each is nothing other than the one substance. It is precisely this 'sharing' of all divine attributes that is deemed by Muslim theologians to be a violation of *Tawhīd*, for it appears to posit three differentiated realities which are at once fully divine and yet eternally distinct from each other. It is this that makes theologians like Rāzī claim that, even if the Christians call the three Persons 'attributes' of one Essence, they in fact believe in three distinct essences.

The Christian might respond as follows: when it is asserted that the Son or Word possesses all the attributes of the Father, or the Essence, what is meant is that insofar as the divine nature is simple, on the one hand, and insofar as the Son is identified with this nature, on the other, the Son must possess all the attributes possessed by the Father. The Son does not possess all these attributes by virtue of that which defines him as 'Son'—his being begotten—but by virtue of his substance, which is identical to that of the Essence. The argument might be extended thus: you Muslims must regard each of the essential divine attributes as equally possessing all the other attributes—failing which the simplicity of the divine nature is violated. Each attribute must possess all the other attributes, not in respect of what distinguishes it as a specific attribute—wisdom, for example, as opposed to power; rather, it can only possess all the other attributes insofar as it is not other than the object of attribution, thus, insofar as it is the one Essence, to which all the essential attributes are ascribed. From this point of view, the Christian might conclude, Muslim belief in a plurality of essential attributes is not so different from the Trinitarian conception of God.

The Ash'arite might reply as follows, beginning with a reminder of the definitive formula: 'the attributes are not God and not other than God'; what is missing from the Trinitarian conception is precisely the apophatic element of the formula. The Christian only says that

⁴² *Aquinas's Shorter Summa—Saint Thomas's own concise version of his Summa Theologica*, trans. Cyril Vollert (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute, 2002), ch.41, p.38.

⁴³ See *ibid*, chs. 45-48. At the end of this essay we shall see the way in which Aquinas helps to build a bridge between the two theologies—a bridge constructed out of a philosophical conception of the absolute simplicity of the divine Essence.

each Person is not the other two, but as regards the divine identity of each Person, there is only affirmation and no negation. That is, the Christian only affirms the divinity of all three Persons, without making the negation which would register the relativity of the 'Persons' in relation to the pure absoluteness and untrammelled unicity of the Essence. The negation—'not God'—is required as the premise upon which the complementary affirmation—'not other than God'—is valid. The Shi'i theologian would also reject the Trinitarian conception, but for a different reason: the essential attributes are indeed nothing but the Essence, and are thus all equally 'God', given the divine simplicity; but what is missing from the Trinitarian conception, from this point of view, is the correct definition of what distinguishes the attributes from each other: they are distinguished not by personal properties of begetting, being begotten and proceeding, as the Christians would say, rather, they are distinguished only as regards their meaning, that meaning which is conceivable from the human point of view.⁴⁴ That which distinguishes one attribute from another is therefore eminently contingent. The Trinitarian, by contrast, not only conceives of the distinctions within the Godhead as being defined according to personal properties, but also conceives of these distinctions as being eternal: the distinctions by which the three Persons are distinguished are eternal distinctions. For both Shi'is and Sunnis, the Persons of the Trinity cannot be at once eternally distinct *and* equally divine. For all Muslim theologians, distinction implies relativity, while divinity implies absolute unity.

All such theological disagreement notwithstanding, the argument made earlier, based on Qur'ānic verses, that the Christians do indeed believe in and worship the selfsame God as the Muslims, is not necessarily invalidated. The question here, for the Muslims, is this: which aspect takes priority within the Qur'ānic discourse, rejection of Christian dogma or affirmation of Christian belief in the one God? Both aspects, of course, have to be accepted by the Muslim who wishes to be faithful to the Qur'ān, but the challenge is to determine

⁴⁴ This does not mean that the attributes are merely figments of human imagination, devoid of objective ontological substance; it means, on the contrary, that the one Essence constitutes the ontological reality of the attributes, and that what the human intellect conceives as distinct attributes is but a reflection of the infinite perfections of the Essence, perfections which cannot in any way be distinguished from the absolute infinitude of the Essence, that is: an absolute oneness which is infinitely perfect.

which is to be given priority in the process of synthesising the two aspects into one fundamental, definitive attitude to Christian belief. We would argue that the aspect of affirmation must take priority, insofar as the *objective* grounds upon which one can affirm that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God prevail over the *subjective* differences of conception of that God. The different conceptions have become embodied in theological dogmas, but we (Muslims) need to ask the question: do these dogmas define the essence of Christian belief in God? Or is it the case, rather, that the essence of Christian belief in God transcends the dogmas which attempt to define both God and orthodox belief in God? We also need to bring into the argument the crucial principle of intention: insofar as we regard the principle of spiritual intention, governed by the divine Object, as taking precedence over the rational conception, fashioned by the human subject, we can assert that what unites Muslims and Christians—belief in one God and not several gods—is infinitely more significant than what divides them, namely, their respective conceptions of the precise nature, the attributes and the actions of that God. The Qur’ānic assertion that the God of the Christians and Muslims is one and the same is an assertion relating more to objective reality and to ultimate principle than to subjective perceptions and dogmatic definitions: however the Christians subjectively define their God, the object of their definitions and the ultimate goal of their devotion is the one and only God. This kind of reasoning can help Muslims to arrive at the conclusion that the oneness of the divinity in whom the Christians affirm belief takes priority over the fact that their description of this God entails a Trinity within the Unity. However, in the measure that one’s reasoning follows a theological train of thought, the tendency will be in the opposite direction so that, for most Muslim theologians, Trinitarian dogma will be regarded as overshadowing if not eclipsing the unity of God.

2. Beyond Theology

The argument being proposed here might benefit from insights derived from a different approach to the issue, symbolic and metaphysical rather than ratiocinative and theological. An appeal has to be made to spiritual intuition. There is an incident which took place in the

life of the Prophet which calls out to be deciphered by precisely this kind of spiritual intuition. It demonstrates graphically that Christians believe in and worship nothing but the one true God. It also shows the importance of affirming solidarity with ‘fellow-believers’, and how this spiritual solidarity must ultimately prevail over all theological differences between them.

In the 9th year after the Hijra (631)⁴⁵ a Christian delegation from Najran (in Yemen) came to Medina to engage in theological discussion and political negotiation. For our purposes, the most significant aspect of this event is the fact that when the Christians requested to leave the city to perform their liturgy, the Prophet invited them to accomplish their rites in his own mosque. According to the historian Ibn Ishāq, who gives the standard account of this remarkable event, the Christians in question were ‘Malikī’ that is, Melchite, meaning that they followed the Byzantine Christian rites. These rites embodied all the fundamental dogmas of the Church Councils, so we are speaking here about an enactment of the very doctrines—Trinity, Sonship, Incarnation—that are criticised in the Qur’ān. Though we do not know exactly what form of liturgy was enacted in the Prophet’s mosque, what is known is that Christians were permitted to perform their prayers in the most sacred spot in the Prophet’s city—an act which would be unthinkable were these Christians praying to something other than *Allāh*.

Clearly, in this ‘existential’ commentary on the Qur’ānic discourse relating to the Christian faith, it is the supra-theological or metaphysical perspective of identity or unity which takes priority over theological divergence. The reality of this divergence is not denied by the prophetic act;⁴⁶ rather, the invalidity of drawing certain conclusions from this divergence is revealed: one cannot use the divergence as grounds for asserting that Christians believe in

⁴⁵ There is some discrepancy in the sources about the precise date of this event. See A. Guillaume (Tr.) *The Life of Muhammad—A Translation of Ibn Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford, 1968), pp.270-277; see also Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge, 1984), pp.324-325.

⁴⁶ Indeed, the dispute over the nature of Jesus was cut short by a revelation to the Prophet instructing him to challenge the Christians to a mutual imprecation (*mubāhala*): the curse of God was to be invoked on ‘those who lie’; see Q 3:61. The challenge was in fact not taken up by the Christians.

and worship something other than God. The act of the Prophet shows, on the contrary, that disagreement on the plane of dogma can—and should—coexist with spiritual affirmation on the superior plane of ultimate Reality, that Reality of which dogma is an inescapably limited, conceptual expression. Exoteric or theological distinction remains on its own level, and this distinction is necessary for upholding the uniqueness and integrity of each path: ‘... for each of you [communities] We have established *a* Law and *a* Path (5:48; emphasis added)’; while metaphysical identity is implied by spiritual intention: the summit is One, and the believer moves towards that oneness precisely by obeying the revealed Law and traversing the spiritual Path that leads to that summit: ‘Unto your Lord is your return, all of you, and He will inform you about those things concerning which ye differed’ (5:48, end of the verse).

The Prophet’s action thus reinforces the primary thrust of the Qur’ānic message regarding the God of the Christians: it is the same God that is worshipped, but that divinity is conceived differently—erroneously, as each would say about the other. The oneness of the divine Object takes precedence—infinity, one might add—over any diversity wrought by the human subjects; for that which is spiritually intended by sincere faith takes priority over the verbal and conceptual forms assumed by the intention: these forms are accidental, while the object intended is essential. This spiritual intention manifests an intrinsic ‘tendency’ towards the Transcendent, and this harmonises with an ‘in-tending’, or a ‘tending inwards’, a spiritually interiorizing movement, engaging the deepest point of the heart of the believer in the quest for God. What is shared in common is the fundamental aspiration to worship the one and only God—the objective, transcendent, unique, and ineffable Reality; that which is not shared in common is the manner in which that Reality is conceived, and the mode by which that Reality is worshipped: we have here a fusion at the level of the Essence, without any confusion at the level of forms. The dogmas and rituals of each faith remain distinct and thus irreducible, while the summit of the path delineated by dogma and ritual is understood to be one and the same. It might be argued that the degree of ambiguity attaching to Christian worship—worshipping God ‘through Jesus’—opens such worship up to the charge of polytheism. But one can retort that conceptual ambiguity in terms of reference is trumped by spiritual intentionality in sincere worship; conversely,

that which is sincerely intended cannot be invalidated by that which is ambiguously defined. Given that divine reality can never be exhaustively defined, the most one can aim at in this domain is less inadequate conceptions, accompanied by a spirit of humble acknowledgement that the divine reality forever eludes human attempts at comprehension. 'That there is a God is clear; but *what* He is by essence and nature, this is altogether beyond our comprehension and knowledge', as St John of Damascus put it.⁴⁷

One can and must accept that there is an irreducible theological incompatibility between Islamic and Christian conceptions of God, but one need not go further and claim that this incompatibility permits the Muslim theologian to say that Christians worship something other than God, that their worship is a form of polytheism. This would be justified neither by the Qur'ānic discourse pertaining to Christianity taken as a whole, nor by the Prophet's sayings, again, taken as a whole, and particularly in relation to his allowance of Christian worship in the mosque of Medina. Such an act on his part would be unthinkable were this worship to be qualifiable as 'polytheistic' in any sense. One can indeed imagine the Prophet receiving Arab polytheist leaders into his mosque, for it is true that the Prophet's mosque at that time was not only a place of worship, it also served as a kind of *dīwān* or court; but one cannot imagine the Prophet inviting any polytheist to pray to his gods in the mosque.

Nonetheless, some Muslim theologians might argue that the Prophet was only being 'diplomatic' and 'courteous' in allowing the Christians to pray in his mosque, and that one must not draw any theological implications from this act. The argument however backfires, for if the Prophet were willing to go so far, for the sake of diplomacy and courtesy, as to permit 'polytheistic' worship to be enacted in his mosque, how much more incumbent is this 'diplomacy' and 'courtesy' upon his followers, who must, according to the logic of this argument, refrain from characterising Christian worship as 'polytheistic', if only out of a diplomacy and courtesy in emulation of the prophetic example? For Muslims to accuse Christians of engaging in polytheism is, therefore, not only to go much further than the Prophet or the Qur'ān ever went; it also constitutes an implicit criticism of the Prophet for

⁴⁷ *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1:4; cited by Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, op.cit., p.217.

compromising an essential theological principle—distinguishing clearly between *Tawhīd* and *shirk*—for the sake of something so eminently contingent as ‘diplomacy’ or ‘courtesy’.

The metaphysical principle expressed by the Prophet’s act can also be discerned in an eschatological event described by the Prophet. The following saying—which exists in slightly different variants, in the most canonical of *hadīth* collections—concerns the possibility of seeing God in the Hereafter. The Muslims are confronted by a theophany of their Lord, whom they do not recognize: ‘I am your Lord’, He says to them. ‘We seek refuge in God from you,’ they reply, ‘we do not associate anything with our Lord’. Then God asks them: ‘Is there any sign (*āya*) between you and Him by means of which you might recognize Him?’ They reply in the affirmative, and then ‘all is revealed’, and they all try to prostrate to Him. Finally, as regards this part of the scene, ‘He transforms Himself into the form in which they saw Him the first time,⁴⁸ and He says: “I am your Lord”, and they reply: “You are our Lord!”.’⁴⁹

Ibn al-‘Arabī and the ‘god created in belief’

The consequences of this remarkable saying are far-reaching. God can appear in forms quite unrecognisable in terms of the beliefs held by Muslims; and if this be true on the Day of Judgment it is equally so in this world. In the Sufi tradition, Ibn al-‘Arabī provides arguably the most compelling commentary on the cognitive implications of this principle. In so doing he also furnishes us with strong grounds for answering in the affirmative the question posed to us in this consultation. The essence of his commentary is that one and the same Reality can take a multitude of forms, hence It must not be confined within the forms of one’s own belief. The divinity conceived by the mind is not, and cannot be, the pure Absolute, but is, rather, the ‘god created in beliefs’ (*al-ilāh al-makhlūq fi’l-i’tiqādāt*). This ‘created’ god, however, far from being a source of misguidance for the creatures, is itself the consequence of the merciful radiation of the God who loves to be known, in

⁴⁸ The wording here is extremely important: *wa-qad tahawwala fī sūratihī allatī ra’ūhu fihā awwal marra*.

⁴⁹ This version of the saying comes in the *Sahīh Muslim* (Cairo: Īsā al-Bābī al-Halabī, n.d), chapter entitled *Ma’rifā tarīq al-ru’yā* (‘knowledge of the way of vision’), vol. 1, p.94.

accordance with the well-known saying, cited more by the Sufis than the theologians: 'I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known'. Ibn al-'Arabī comments on this in many places, but here, the most important aspect of the saying concerns the mercy inherent in the love to be known: 'After the Mercy Itself, "the god created in belief" is the first recipient of Mercy.'⁵⁰ God is said to have 'written mercy' upon His own soul, according to the Qur'ān (6:12, and 6:54). Being Himself the essence of Mercy, the first 'form' receiving that mercy is the quality of mercy itself, the fount of radiant creativity. Thereafter, the 'god created in belief' receives merciful existentiatio, and this refers not just to the diverse modes of theophanic revelation to humankind, but also to the capacity of each human soul to conceive of God, thus, in a sense, the power to 'create' God in one's belief. 'Since God is the root of every diversity in beliefs ... everyone will end up with mercy. For it is He who created them [the diverse beliefs] ...'⁵¹

According to this perspective, the various revelations, along with diverse beliefs fashioned thereby, constitute so many ways by which God invites His creatures to participate in His infinitely merciful nature. Recognition of such realities means that it is 'improper' to deny God such as He is conceived in the beliefs of others:

Generally speaking, each man necessarily sticks to a particular creed concerning his Lord. He always goes back to his Lord through his particular creed and seeks God therein. Such a man positively recognizes God only when He manifests Himself to him in the form recognized by his creed. But when He manifests Himself in other forms he denies Him and seeks refuge from Him. In so doing he behaves in an improper way towards Him in fact, even while believing that he is acting politely towards Him. Thus a believer who sticks to his particular creed believes only in a

⁵⁰ *Fusūs al-hikam*, translated as *Bezels of Wisdom*, by R. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 224-225. See our *Paths to Transcendence—According to Shankara, Ibn al-Arabi and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), the chapter on Ibn al-'Arabī (pp.69-129) for a discussion of this theme of universality in the context of his metaphysical teachings.

⁵¹ Cited by William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge—Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989), p.388.

god that he has subjectively posited in his own mind. God in all particular creeds is dependent upon the subjective act of positing on the part of the believers.⁵²

In other words, God mercifully and lovingly reveals Himself to His creation in theophanies which cannot but conform themselves to the subjective limitations of the creature; but there is a dynamic interaction between the human subject and the divine Object, between the accidental container and the substantial content: the human is drawn into the divine, to the extent that the conceptually circumscribed form of belief gives way to the spiritual realization of the content of belief. If this spiritual movement or tendency from the form to the essence, from the subject to the object, from the container to the content, does not take place, then one envisages the opposite: the human subjectivisation of the divine, the relativisation of the Absolute, the individual becoming blinded by the contingent form of his belief from its essential content.

As mentioned above, the different beliefs are a priori determined by the 'heart', but the capacity of the heart itself is in turn fashioned by an initial cosmogonic effusion of grace from the merciful Lord. So human subjectivity is itself the result of divine creativity, and cannot therefore intrinsically relativise the Absolute, even while appearing to do so. God not only creates man, but in a sense allows man to create Him, which he does by conceiving of Him and believing in Him and worshipping Him according to the modes determined by the form assumed by his belief. God, however, is truly present and active within that belief—or at least one dimension of divinity is. For Ibn al-'Arabī distinguishes between the absolute Essence of God—sometimes referred to as *al-Ahad*, the all-exclusive One—and the Lord (*al-Rabb*), also called the 'divinity' (*al-ulūhiyya*), or simply the 'level' (*al-martaba*), or *al-Wāhid*, the all-inclusive One. These two dimensions of the one and only divinity help us to see that the distinctiveness of the divine qualities is conceivable only at the first degree of Self-manifestation. It is only at this level of theophany that the perfections hidden within the supra-manifest 'treasure' of the divine Oneness are distinctively affirmed as a plurality; it is only at this level that there is a foreshadowing of the manifestation of the infinite perfections of the all-exclusive One, this anticipation of multiplicity not detracting one iota

⁵² Cited by Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p.254 (translation modified).

from its oneness. For the plurality of its perfections is still located at the principal, supra-manifest level, that of a oneness which is 'all-inclusive', *al-wāhidiyya*. The distinction between these two dimensions of oneness, *al-wāhidiyya* and *al-ahadiyya* (or the oneness of the many, *ahadiyyat al-kathra*, and the oneness of the one, *ahadiyyat al-ahad*) is crucial in the metaphysics of Ibn al-'Arabī; and what must be stressed about this distinction is that it pertains to the divine nature and nothing else; it refers to two dimensions of oneness within the absolutely indivisible divine nature, one dimension pertaining to the Absolute as such, and the other to the Absolute with its 'face' turned towards creation. As we shall see below, this distinction can help us to demonstrate the compatibility between the Trinity, metaphysically or supra-theologically conceived, and the principle of *Tawhīd*.

We can only know, and relate to, the names and qualities of the Lord, or the 'divinity', or the 'level'; but there can be no direct, unmediated relationship between us and the Essence. This is because the Essence has nothing to do with creation; the only possible kind of relationship between the divine Reality and creation is mediated by an intermediary principle, which is the Lord, the 'divinity' or the 'level': a principle at once divine *and* relative. It is this degree of relativity within divinity which can be conceived, and thus believed in and worshipped. This is the first degree of theophanic Self-determination proper to the Essence which remains, nonetheless, forever transcendent in relation to all that flows forth from this Self-determination, and *a fortiori*, all that takes place within creation: 'It is not correct for the Real and creation to come together in any mode whatsoever in respect of the Essence'; the Real and creation can only be brought into relationship 'in respect of the fact that the Essence is described by divinity.'⁵³

The Essence becoming 'described' by divinity means that It is *transcribed* within relativity by this theophany, without in any way sacrificing its immutable transcendence. It is this divinity or Lord that, alone, can be conceived and worshipped. Ibn al-'Arabī expresses this principle in various ways, amongst which the most striking is the following exegesis of 18:119: 'Let him not associate (any) one with his Lord's worship'. The immediately apparent meaning of the verse relates to the prohibition of *shirk*, or associating false gods

⁵³ Ibid, p.59.

with the true divinity or with the worship of that divinity, but Ibn al-‘Arabī makes the ‘one’ in question refer to the Essence, and interprets the verse thus:

He is not worshipped in respect of His Unity, since Unity contradicts the existence of the worshipper. It is as if He is saying, ‘What is worshipped is only the “Lord” in respect of His Lordship, since the Lord brought you into existence. So connect yourself to Him and make yourself lowly before Him, and do not associate Unity with Lordship in worship ... For Unity does not know you and will not accept you ...’⁵⁴

The degree of divinity that can be conceived of, believed in, and worshipped cannot be the pure untrammelled unity of the Essence. There is no room, in this metaphysical unity, for the multiplicity presupposed by creation. To speak of the Creator is to speak of the creature, to speak of the Lord is to speak of the vassal: but the One has no ‘other’ to which it relates, if it did, it would cease to be the Absolute, it would be relativized by its relationship to the relative. We must not, therefore, ‘associate’ Unity with Lordship: in terms of Unity, the creature is a pure non-entity, it is only in relation to the Lord that the creature has any existence, and the *raison d’être* of the creature is to worship the Lord whom it can conceive. The One, however, forever evades the conceptualisation which is the basis for forming belief. We can conceive that it is, but not what it is. It is for this reason that the Prophet asserted, in various sayings: meditate on the qualities of God, but not on His Essence.⁵⁵

As we shall see with both St Dionysius and Eckhart, this apophatic approach to the supreme Reality opens up a path which transcends all divergences as regards theological descriptions of God. To continue with this brief exposition of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective, let us note that despite the transcendence of the One above all beliefs concerning it, God is nonetheless ‘with every object of belief.’ This statement evokes the divine utterance: ‘I am

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.244

⁵⁵ Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, a major lexicographer of the Qur’ān, writes in his explanation of the Qur’ānic concept of *fikr*, ‘meditative thought’: ‘Meditation is only possible in regard to that which can assume a conceptual form (*sūra*) in one’s heart. Thus we have the following saying [of the Prophet]: Meditate upon the bounties of God but not on God [Himself, His Essence] for God is above and beyond all possibility of being described in terms of any form (*sūra*).’ *Mu’jam mufradāt alfāz al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), p.398.

with the opinion My slave has of Me.⁵⁶ The word 'with' translates *'inda*, which might also be translated as 'present within/as/to'⁵⁷: God thus declares that, in a sense, He conforms to whatever form of belief His slave has of him. Ibn al-'Arabī continues: 'His [i.e. God's] existence in the conception (*tasawwur*) of him who conceives Him does not disappear when that person's conception changes into another conception. No, He has an existence in this second conception. In the same way, on the Day of Resurrection, he will transmute Himself in self-disclosure from form to form...'⁵⁸

Ibn al-'Arabī is here referring back to the principle of the divine capacity to undergo *tahawwul*, according to the prophetic saying cited earlier. What is true of God on the Day of Resurrection is true here and now. Whether it be a case of different individuals, different schools of thought within Islam, or different religions: God is truly present within all these diverse conceptions and beliefs concerning Him, without this resulting in any fundamental contradiction, given the unlimited forms by which God can reveal Himself. What we are given here is a picture of radical relativism, but one which, paradoxically, 'proves' the one and only Absolute. For the Absolute is that which transcends all possible powers of conception, and yet immanently and mercifully pervades all those conceptions of Him which stem from authentic divine theophanies. One of the most useful images employed by Ibn al-'Arabī to reconcile the two terms of this paradox is this: water takes on the colour of the cup. The cup symbolises the form of belief, while the water contained therein stands for the Object of belief.

He who sees the water only in the cup judges it by the property of the cup. But he who sees it simple and noncompound knows that the shapes and colors in which it becomes manifest are the effect of the containers. Water remains in its own definition and reality, whether in the cup or outside it. Hence it never loses the name 'water'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ This is a strongly authenticated *hadīth qudsī*, or divine utterance, transmitted by the Prophet. It is found in Bukhārī, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah. See *Forty Hadith Qudsi*, selected and translated by E. Ibrahim and D. Johnson-Davies (Beirut: Dar al-Koran al-Kareem, 1980), p.78.

⁵⁷ The translators of the above-mentioned work render the saying as follows: 'I am as My servant thinks I am.'

⁵⁸ *Sufi Path*, p.337.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.341-342.

In this image, the cup symbolizes the form of the 'preparedness' or 'receptivity' (*isti'dād*) of a particular belief; the water in the cup symbolises the theophany which has adapted itself to the form and shape of the belief. The substance and colour of water as such is undifferentiated and unique, but it appears to undergo changes of form and colour on account of the accidental forms of the receptacles in which it is poured. This recognition enables one to realize that the 'water' (or theophanies) in 'cups' (or beliefs) other than one's own is just as much 'water' as is the water in one's own cup. One can thus affirm the veracity of all beliefs or rather: all those beliefs whose 'cups' contain the water of authentic Revelation, even if these beliefs are also forged by the unavoidable relativity of the creaturely faculty of conception.

This principle is explicitly reaffirmed in the following important passage:

He who counsels his own soul should investigate during his life in this world, all doctrines concerning God. He should learn from whence each possessor of a doctrine affirms the validity of his doctrine. Once its validity has been affirmed for him in the specific mode in which it is correct for him who upholds it, then he should support it in the case of him who believes in it. He should not deny it or reject it, for he will gather its fruit on the Day of Visitation. . . . So turn your attention to what we have mentioned and put it into practice! Then you will give the Divinity its due. . . . For God is exalted high above entering under delimitation. He cannot be tied down by one form rather than another. From here you will come to know the all-inclusiveness of felicity for God's creatures and the all-embracingness of the mercy which covers everything.⁶⁰

In answer to the question, how does one ascertain the 'validity' of a doctrine or belief, Ibn al-'Arabī would answer in terms of revelation: those doctrines which clearly derive from or are rooted in a revelation of God are to be accepted. This answer emerges from the following sentence, dealing with the legitimacy of prostration to something 'other than God'—as did the angels to Adam, or the family of Joseph to Joseph: 'He who prostrates himself to other than God seeking nearness to God *and obeying God* will be felicitous and

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp.355-356.

attain deliverance, but he who prostrates himself to other than God *without God's command* seeking nearness will be wretched' (emphasis added).⁶¹

Doctrines and beliefs which are man-made are thus clearly rejected—we are far from an 'anything goes' attitude which accepts all doctrines as true in an indiscriminate manner. Rather, we are being urged by Ibn al-'Arabī to be open to all receptacles which contain beliefs rooted in divine revelation, and to judge them according to their content, rather than be misled into judging the content according to the accidental properties of the container. What is 'accidental' here includes even the dogmas of the different faiths, none of which can claim to exhaust the mystery of that Substance to which they allude.

To affirm only the 'God' created within one's belief is thus tantamount to denying Him in all other beliefs: 'He who delimits Him denies Him in other than his own delimitation. . . . But he who frees Him from every delimitation never denies Him. On the contrary, he acknowledges Him in every form within which He undergoes self-transmutation.'⁶² The consequences of this denial will be a diminution in one's receptivity to the loving mercy contained within the beliefs of others. However, attaching oneself only to the 'water' within one's own cup still results in mercy, given that the theophanic form is still a true theophany, it is God and nothing but God, even if the form assumed by God be extrinsically limited by the form of one's belief: there is an absoluteness of content, combined with a relativity of the container, but that absoluteness is not relativized by the container. Rather, what is excluded by the container is the infinite forms of theophany filling the containers of other beliefs. In other words, it is not the case that God is relativized by the specificity of one's belief, by the limited container; rather, the relativity of the human belief is displaced by the absoluteness of its own content, in the measure that this content is realized through spiritual assimilation, and not just conceived by rational thought. For then one perceives—or drinks—water as such, the substance of which is identical to that contained in all other

⁶¹ Ibid., p.365.

⁶² Ibid., pp.339-340. See our *Paths to Transcendence—According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), for further discussion of these themes in the context of the quest for transcendent realization, according to these three mystics.

containers. So the very absoluteness of the content of one's realized belief leads to an assimilation of the infinitude proper to that absoluteness. 'Drinking' the water within one's own cup means drinking water as such, and thus, in principle, one has drunk the same substance as that which is contained in all the other cups. As we said at the outset, one believes in God as such and not such and such a god.

Even if this total realization is not attained, the believer will nonetheless benefit from his capacity to recognize God in beliefs other than his own, for he has a glimpse of the felicity which flows from the unrestricted beatific vision of God in all His forms. The beatific vision experienced by the believer in the Hereafter will conform to the nature of his conception and attitude towards God in the here-below. This is clearly asserted by Ibn al-'Arabī in the course of describing the 'share' accorded to the highest saint: he enjoys the felicity which is the fruit of all forms of belief held by the faithful of the different religions, because he recognizes their correspondence to real aspects of the divine nature.⁶³ This direct and plenary participation in the felicity that is contained within the forms of beliefs concerning God is thus seen to be a reality already in this life—a prefiguration of the higher celestial states.

Thus, Ibn al-'Arabī urges the believer to make himself receptive to all forms of religious belief both for the sake of objective veracity—that is, 'the true knowledge of the reality' that God is immanent within all forms of His Self-revelation—and in the interests of one's posthumous state—the 'great benefit' that accrues to the soul in the Hereafter in proportion to the universality of the knowledge of God which it has attained on earth. The vision that results from this openness to the diversity of theophanies within the forms of different beliefs is beautifully expressed in the most famous lines from Ibn al-'Arabī's poetic masterpiece, *Tarjumān al-ashwāq*:

My heart has become capable of every form:
it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

⁶³ See M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des Saints* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p.73.

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba,
and the tables of the Torah and the book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take,
that is my religion and my faith.⁶⁴

It is clear that in these lines Ibn al-'Arabī is not affirming that the forms mentioned are all equally legitimate religious forms; only that they are all, *qua* forms, equally manifestations of the divine reality. He is making an ontological and not specifically religious affirmation. Everything manifested in being is a manifestation of God, since God is being; on this basis, he interprets the verse: 'Thy Lord has decreed that you shall not worship any but Him (17: 23) as a descriptive statement rather than as a normative injunction, for God is 'identical with everything toward which there is poverty and which is worshipped'.⁶⁵ Everything that is worshipped is therefore divine, but as regards the specifically religious criterion for authentic worship, this, as seen above, is derived upon the principle of God's scriptural revelations, which are concrete and specific, not on the divine self-disclosures within the domain of manifestation, which are universal and inescapable.

Finally, let us look at the remarkable interpretation given by Ibn al-'Arabī to one his own lines of poetry in this work. This gives us one possible way of understanding the meaning of the Christian Trinity from a mystical Muslim perspective. The line in the poem is as follows:

'My Beloved is three although He is One, even as the Persons are made one Person in essence.' The interpretation given by the poet himself: 'Number does not beget multiplicity in the Divine Substance, as the Christians declare that the Three Persons of the Trinity are One God, and as the Qur'ān declares: "Call upon God or call on the Merciful; however ye invoke Him, it is well, for to Him belong the most beautiful Names" (17:110).'

⁶⁴ *The Tarjuman Al-Ashwaq*, R.A. Nicholson, (trans.) (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1978), p.52.

⁶⁵ Cited by W.Chittick, 'Towards Sainthood: States and Stations', in M. Chodkiewicz (ed.), *Les Illuminations de La Mecque* (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), p.319.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.70.

The most beautiful Names of God, *al-asmā' al-husnā*, can be seen as the archetypes of all possible modes of theophany, and thereby, of the diverse—even contradictory—beliefs of God fashioned by those theophanic modes of self-revelation. The names are diverse, referring to the different aspects of the Named; beliefs fashioned by the revelation of those names are thus likewise inescapably diverse, but all the beliefs are nonetheless at one in the supreme Object of faith. Ibn al-'Arabī unreservedly identifies the three Persons of the Trinity as three aspects or 'names' of the one Essence, thus resolving multiplicity within unity in a manner which is analogous to that by means of which the ninety-nine 'names' refer to but one Essence in Islam. For 'number does not beget multiplicity in the divine Substance'. As we shall see below, this is a mirror-image of what Eckhart says about the Trinity, about number within the divinity, and about 'a hundred' Persons within the one God. Both Eckhart and Ibn al-'Arabī situate plurality within the divine nature on a plane which is below that of the Essence, a plane which pertains to the relationship between the Essence and the domain of manifestation. To speak of 'relationship' is thus ineluctably to speak of relativity, and it is on this plane of relativity—still within the divine nature itself, but relativity nonetheless—that one can ascribe plurality to God. The Essence, however, transcends this relativity and is 'one' not in any numerical sense of unity which can be distinguished, on the same plane of number, from plurality; for then we would still be on the plane of relativity, asserting one 'unit' or thing as opposed to other similarly located units or things. Rather, the Essence is one in a properly metaphysical sense, a sense which goes beyond *physis* or nature, understanding by nature all that which pertains to the created order, and number evidently pertains to this order. Number as applied to God must then be applied in a consciously metaphysical manner: if one is to speak of God in terms of the contingent category of number, then one should assert that God is indeed 'one', for, on the plane of number, 'one' is the most adequate symbol by which the Absolute can be described.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ As Frithjof Schuon writes, in his irrefutable critique—and also inspiring interpretation—of the dogma of the Trinity: 'Only Unity as such can be a definition of the Absolute; in the realm of number, unity alone represents an element of absoluteness, as does the point or the centre in space, and the instant or the present in time...'. This is from the essay entitled 'Evidence and Mystery' in his *Logic and Transcendence*, op.cit., p.91. For another compelling interpretation of the Trinity, see Schuon's *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1994), p.53.

Spiritual receptivity to the realization of the Essence is deepened by the capacity to conceive of the inescapably limited nature of *all* conceptions: the intrinsically inconceivable nature of ultimate Reality can be realized, to one degree or another, in spiritual vision, that vision which arises in proportion to the effacement of the individual (*fanā*). This shift from conceptual limitation to spiritual vision is well expressed by Ibn al-‘Arabī in relation to Moses’s quest to see God. Ibn al-‘Arabī records the following dialogue he had with Moses in the course of his spiritual ascent through the heavens:

[I said to him] . . . you requested the vision [of God], while the Messenger of God [Muhammad] said that ‘not one of you will see his Lord until he dies’?

So he said: ‘And it was just like that: when I asked Him for the vision, He answered me, so that “I fell down stunned” (Q 7, 143). Then I saw Him in my [state of] being stunned.’ I said: ‘While (you were) dead?’ He replied: ‘While (I was) dead. . . . I did not see God until I had died’.⁶⁸

This is the consummation of the apophatic path: ‘extinction within contemplation’ (*al-fanā’ fi’l-mushāhada*), this being precisely the title of one of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s most explicit treatises on the theme of *fanā*.⁶⁹ As we shall see in a moment, the similarities between this perspective and those of both St Dionysius and Meister Eckhart are striking.

Christian apophaticism and superessential identity

The perspective of Ibn al-‘Arabī, we would argue, is mirrored in the apophatic tradition of mystical theology within Christianity. It is in this tradition that all dogmatic formulations of the ultimate Reality are seen as falling short of adequately explaining or describing It. As with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ‘god created in beliefs’, mystics of this tradition insist on the need to

⁶⁸ Cited by James W. Morris, ‘The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn ‘Arabī and the *Mi’rāj*,’ *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.108, 1988, p.375.

⁶⁹ See Michel Valsan’s translation, *Le Livre de l’Extinction dans la Contemplation* (Paris: Les Éditions de l’Oeuvre, Paris, 1984).

transcend all conceptual expressions, and the very source of those concepts, the mind itself, in order to glimpse with the eye of the heart, and finally to realize in the depths of one's spirit, the ineffable mystery of God. We would argue that it is through understanding this process of radical deconstruction at the conceptual level, grasped as the prelude to an 'unthinkable' spiritual 'reconstruction' at the transcendent level, that the oneness of the God believed in by Christians and Muslims stands out most clearly. For if the mind and all that it can conceive is transcended by the spiritual realization of That which is inconceivable, then *a fortiori* all designations of the Ineffable are likewise transcended, even those designations which form the core of the Trinitarian dogma.

Let us note first of all the importance of the following point made by Vladimir Lossky about this tradition of 'thought' in general: it is one in which thought itself is subordinated to 'being', to an existential transformation of the soul:

Apophaticism is not necessarily a theology of ecstasy. It is, above all, an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God. Such an attitude utterly excludes all abstract and purely intellectual theology which would adapt the mysteries of the wisdom of God to human ways of thoughts. It is an existential attitude which involves the whole man: there is no theology apart from experience; it is necessary to change, to become a new man. To know God one must draw near to Him. No one who does not follow the path of union with God can be a theologian. The way of the knowledge of God is necessarily the way of deification. ... Apophaticism is, therefore, a criterion: the sure sign of an attitude of mind conformed to truth. In this sense all true theology is fundamentally apophatic.⁷⁰

Further on in this seminal text, Lossky refers to the ultimate function of the dogma of the Trinity: 'The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought.'⁷¹ We understand this to mean that the dogma of the Trinity is not intended to function as an 'explanation' or 'description' of God; rather, it is a means of thinking the unthinkable in order to efface all thought within the mystery that is intrinsically incommunicable. This principle is brought

⁷⁰ Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, op.cit., p.39.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.66.

home clearly by St Dionysius in his prayer to the Deity 'above all essence, knowledge and goodness' at the very beginning of his treatise *The Mystical Theology*: '... direct our path to the ultimate summit of Thy mystical Lore, most incomprehensible, most luminous and most exalted, where the pure, absolute and immutable mysteries of theology are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their Darkness...'⁷²

The purpose of defining the ultimate reality in terms of darkness, and as that which is even 'beyond being', is not simply to shroud that reality in utter, impenetrable obscurity, but rather to precipitate receptivity to that reality by showing the inability of the human mind in and of itself to attain comprehension of, or union with, that reality. It is the contrast between ultimate reality—as utter Darkness—and mental abstraction—apparent light—that is in question. He continues, addressing his disciple:

Do thou, dear Timothy, in the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and non-being, that thou mayest arise by unknowing towards the union, as far as is attainable, with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and of all things, thou mayest be borne on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness.

He then refers to the 'transcendental First Cause', and criticizes those who identify God with 'the images which they fashion after various designs'. This resonates deeply with Ibn al-'Arabi's image of the cup and the water. The similarity between the two perspectives is deepened when we read that this transcendent Reality 'reveals Himself in His naked Truth to those alone who pass beyond all that is pure and impure, and ascend above the summit of holy things, and who, leaving behind them all divine light and sound and heavenly

⁷² Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies* (Fintry: The Shrine of Wisdom Press, 1965), p.19.

utterances, plunge into the Darkness where truly dwells, as the Scriptures declare, that One Who is beyond all.’⁷³

This One is evidently beyond any conceivable notion of threeness—but it is also, as we shall see, equally beyond any conceivable notion of oneness. First, let us note that, like Ibn al-‘Arabī, Dionysius uses Moses’s quest for the vision of God to bring home the point that God cannot be seen, but He can be realized. God cannot be seen because ‘the divinest and highest things seen by the eyes or contemplated by the mind are but the symbolical expressions of those that are immediately beneath Him Who is above all.’ It is only through being plunged into the Darkness, and after ‘all his reasoning powers’ have been silenced, that the soul can be ‘united by his highest faculty to Him who is wholly unknowable; thus by knowing nothing, he knows That which is beyond his knowledge.’⁷⁴

We are reminded here of what Ibn al-‘Arabī said in relation to the Lord/divinity/level: it is that aspect of Reality which, in contrast to the Essence, *can* be conceived; it is that degree of being, beneath the Essence, to which belief and worship are directed and proportioned. Likewise for St Dionysius, vision, conception and contemplation pertain only to the penultimate ontological degree, not to ultimate Reality: ‘the divinest and highest things seen by the eyes or contemplated by the mind are but the *symbolical expressions* of those that are *immediately beneath* Him Who is above all.’ All doctrines and dogmas, even those reaching up to the ‘divinest and highest’ cannot even be regarded as symbols of ultimate Reality itself, they can only symbolize what is ‘immediately beneath Him.’ The function of the symbols, then, is to induce receptivity to That which cannot even be adequately symbolized let alone explained or described by concepts. We would propose, on the basis of this apophatic understanding of symbols, that the Trinity constitutes just such a symbol of penultimate Reality; it cannot be applied to the ultimate Reality, for this latter cannot in any way be symbolized.

⁷³ Ibid, p.21

⁷⁴ Ibid, pp.21-22.

If all visible and intelligible forms are alike 'symbolical expressions' of the penultimate Reality, they must therefore be 'seen through', just as one must see through the 'cup' of one's belief to the water it 'contains'. This capacity to appreciate the symbolic nature of one's beliefs, and indeed of one's entire conceptual apparatus, is the pre-requisite for taking the plunge into that Oneness which is inconceivable, being beyond even the notion of oneness. In this light, the essential nature of the divinity affirmed by Christians and Muslims can be intuited as one and the same Reality, that Reality which can only extrinsically be conceived of or symbolized. The most faithful or least inadequate means of alluding to this Reality, however, is not through affirmation, but through radical denial. The Transcendent One is described as not being 'one or oneness ... nor sonship nor fatherhood'.⁷⁵

Both the Christian dogma of the Trinity and the Muslim doctrine of *Tawhīd* are here being challenged—as *concepts*. The ultimate Reality cannot be described in terms of number, nor *a fortiori*, in terms of any dualistic relationship such as is implied by 'fatherhood' and 'sonship'. Both the idea of oneness and that of trinity are alike to be grasped as symbolic of the threshold of Reality, and are not to be taken literally as definitions of that threshold, or, still less, as definitions of the Essence of that Reality. The first testimony of Islam, *lā ilāha illa'Allāh*, 'no divinity but God' can be metaphysically understood to refer to the apophatic principle being described here: no conceivable divinity, only the inconceivable Absolute. One can conceive that the Absolute is, but one cannot conceive exactly what it is. It can be intuited as absolute Reality, the source of all being and existents, or as absolute Goodness, the source of all felicity and love, or as absolute Consciousness, source of all wisdom and knowledge, but what the *absoluteness* of these qualities really means cannot be put into words.⁷⁶ There is therefore something communicable about the nature of the Absolute, as

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.29.

⁷⁶ We have elaborated upon this theme in our *Paths to Transcendence—According to Shankara, Ibn 'Arabi and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006). The three mystics studied in that work are at one in affirming that while the Absolute is indeed ineffable and incommunicable in its essence, it reveals something of its nature in the ultimate spiritual realization, and that 'something' is described by each of these mystics in strikingly similar terms. In this, we believe, there lies an answer to the questions posed in Denys Turner's excellent paper in this volume, 'The "same" God: Is there an "Apophatic" solution, or, Who's to Know?' The crux of his position is summed up in this

well as something incommunicable; it is ineffable in its essence and yet reveals something of that essence to the prophets, saints, sages and mystics. It might be spiritually glimpsed by the 'eye of the heart' of the spiritual seeker, an 'eye' whose opening is predicated upon some degree of self-effacement, initially, and 'extinction', ultimately. In the wake of this vision, however, it is still impossible to adequately describe in words the Reality glimpsed. As al-Ghazali put it: 'He who has attained the mystic state need do no more than say: "Of the things I do not remember, what was, was; think it good; do not ask an account of it".'⁷⁷

Eckhartian Trinity and Metaphysical *Tawhīd*

Let us now turn to Meister Eckhart, and look in particular at the daring manner in which the Trinity is articulated in the wake of the realization of the Absolute. His exposition of the Trinity has the merit of rendering explicit some of the key premises which may be implicit in the assertion by Christians that the Muslims do believe in the same God as themselves, even if they, the Muslims, deny the Trinity: they believe in the Essence of that Divinity which can 'assume' dogmatically, and at a lower ontological degree, the aspect of three-ness. It also has the considerable merit of showing Muslims that there is a presentation of the Trinity which not only harmonises with *Tawhīd*, but indeed brings to light dimensions of *Tawhīd* in a manner comparable to the greatest of the mystical sages of Islam who have asserted, quite paradoxically, that the *concept* of 'monotheism' can be a veil over the One,

sentence: 'For the absolute unknowableness of "ultimate reality" eliminates all content on which any criteria of sameness and difference can get a grip.' On this basis, Turner argues that there is no 'apophatic solution' to the question of whether or not Muslims and Christians worship the same God. We would argue, however, that for the mystics we studied the impossibility of acquiring full cognitive knowledge of ultimate Reality paradoxically goes hand in hand with spiritual realization of that reality. This realization produces a certain degree of knowledge of Reality, such knowledge being the trace or, to use Shankara's term, reflection (*abhasa*), of Reality left within the consciousness of the mystic after his return to 'normal' modes of awareness. One who only sees the sun as it is reflected in a mirror will know *something* of the nature of the sun, but nothing of its true dimensions in space. Likewise, the mystic, upon the return to normal awareness, will be able to speak of the reflected image of the reality attained in the moment or state of enlightenment, but cannot convey anything of the 'dimensions'—absolute, infinite, perfect—of that reality as it truly is. As Ibn al-'Arabī writes: 'Gnostics cannot impart their spiritual states to other men; they can only indicate them symbolically to those who have begun to experience the like.' Quoted by R.A. Nicholson in *The Mystics of Islam* (London: G. Bell, 1914), p.103 (translation modified).

⁷⁷ Al-Ghazzālī is citing a saying from Ibn al-Mu'tazz in his autobiographical work *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl* ('Deliverance from error'), translated by Montgomery Watt, p.61.

just as much as polytheism is. That is, it helps the Muslim to transform a dogmatic and formal conception of oneness into an existential, spiritual and transformative awareness of that which is beyond being and thus, *a fortiori*, infinitely beyond the realm of number.

This, indeed, is the ontological shift of consciousness which the Sufis insist on: God is one, not just in the sense of being 'not two' or 'not multiple', but in the sense of excluding all otherness. The theological affirmation of one God is transformed into a spiritual realization that there is but a unique reality, which is outwardly differentiated by virtue of its own infinite radiance. To think otherwise, for the Sufis, is to fall into a 'hidden' polytheism or *shirk*.

Before addressing directly the Trinity, it is worth noting that Eckhart's approach to thought generally coincides precisely with that of Dionysius and Ibn al-'Arabī. All mentally articulated attributes fall short of 'describing' the divine reality: 'It is its nature to be without nature. To think of goodness or wisdom or power dissembles the essence and dims it in thought. The mere thought obscures essence ... For goodness and wisdom and whatever may be attributed to God are all admixtures to God's naked essence: for all admixture causes alienation from essence.'⁷⁸

Its nature is 'without nature', that is, it is devoid of any specific nature, or attributes that can be adequately expressed in human language; one must not relativize the divine reality by equating it with any attributes which are susceptible to mental articulation. It does possess these attributes, intrinsically, but It also transcends them, and this is the key point: it is this transcendence of every conceivable attribute that makes it the Absolute. The Absolute possesses all positive attributes, but also transcends them: one is reminded here of the Ash'arite formula: 'the attributes are not God', for the Absolute transcends all attributes; but 'the attributes are not other than God', for the Absolute possesses all attributes, and that which is possessed by the Absolute must be one with it, on pain of violating the divine simplicity, and attributing divisible parts to the Absolute.

⁷⁸ *Meister Eckhart: Sermons & Treatises*, tr. M.O'C Walshe (Dorset: Element Books, 1979), vol.2, pp.32 & 39.

Eckhart's insistence that our conception of God be shorn of any 'nature' or attribute is echoed in the following words of 'Alī b. Abī Tālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, fourth caliph of Islam, and first Imam of the Shi'a Muslims.⁷⁹ This is how he comments on the meaning of *ikhlas*, literally 'making pure', referring to the purification of one's conception of God:

The perfection of purification (*ikhlas*) is to divest Him of all attributes—because of the testimony of every attribute that it is other than the object of attribution, and because of the testimony of every such object that it is other than the attribute. So whoever ascribes an attribute to God—glorified be He!—has conjoined Him [with something else] and whoever so conjoins Him has made Him two-fold, and whoever makes Him two-fold has fragmented Him, and whoever thus fragments Him is ignorant of Him.⁸⁰

God of course possesses attributes—the ninety-nine 'names' of God being the names of these attributes. Imam 'Alī clearly is not denying the reality of these attributes as such, for earlier in the sermon cited above, he affirms that God's attributes have 'no defined limit'. They can have no limit because the attributes are ontologically identical to the Essence as such, and have no self-subsisting reality apart from that Essence. One can identify the attributes with the Essence, but not vice versa: it is an act of *shirk* to identify the Essence either with Its own attributes or, still worse, with our understanding of these attributes. Thus, Eckhart's view of the Absolute as transcending all mental conceptions, specific nature, and even (as we shall see in a moment) the Trinity, can easily be read by a Muslim as rooted in the avoidance of subtle *shirk*, and as a commentary on the meaning of the first testimony of Islam, *no divinity but God*.

⁷⁹ He is aptly described by Frithjof Schuon as the 'esoteric representative of Islam *par excellence*'. See his *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (tr. Peter Townsend) (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), p.59. See our *Justice and Remembrance—Introducing the Spirituality of Imam 'Alī* (London: IB Tauris, 2006) for discussion of some of the major themes articulated by this seminal figure of nascent Islam.

⁸⁰ Cited in *ibid*, p.208.

This is particularly clear when we look at the way in which Eckhart deals with the question of God's 'being'. For he stresses in many places that God is 'beyond Being', and thus transcends all possibility of being described by the attributes proper to Being. God, he says, is as high above being as the highest angel is above the lowest ant?⁸¹ 'When I have said God is not a being and is above being, I have not thereby denied Him being: rather I have exalted it in Him. If I get copper in gold, it is there ... in a nobler mode than it is in itself.'⁸² The denial, then, of the specific, conceivable attributes of God—including even that most indeterminate and universal attribute, Being itself—means an exaltation of all of these attributes in their undifferentiated essence. This appears to be identical to what Imam 'Alī means when he negates the divine attributes, on the one hand, and sublimates them on the other. The attributes are more fully and really themselves in the divine oneness than they are in their own specificity, and *a fortiori* in the mental conceptions we have of them. So the denial of the attributes is a denial on the purely mental plane, it is not a denial of their intrinsic substance: conceptual apophasis paves the way for an eminently positive opening to the transcendent substance of the attributes.⁸³ This substance is one, but it is outwardly articulated in conformity with the differentiated planes upon which its inner infinitude outwardly unfolds. This leads to the following important point pertaining to the non-numerical nature of the Trinity:

For anyone who could grasp distinctions without number and quantity, a hundred would be as one. Even if there were a hundred Persons in the Godhead, a man who could distinguish without number and quantity would perceive them only as one God ... (he) knows that three Persons are one God.⁸⁴

This echoes the point made earlier by Ibn al-'Arabī: 'number does not beget multiplicity in the divine Substance'. God can relate to multiplicity in a variety of ways, but this does not introduce multiplicity into the divine nature; the multiplicity comes from the created or

⁸¹ *Meister Eckhart*, op.cit., vol. 2, pp.150-151.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ One is reminded here of a cognitive principle within the school of Advaita Vedānta: 'That which cannot be expressed is expressed through false attribution and subsequent denial (*adhyaropa-apavada*).'⁸³ It should be noted that the Sanskrit *apavada* is cognate with the Greek *apophasis*. See our *Paths to Transcendence*, op.cit., pp.2-8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, vol.1, p.217.

manifested realm: from the world, not from God. But for both Eckhart and Ibn al-‘Arabī, the level of divinity which can assume multiple relations with the realm of relativity is itself perforce relative; it is a level or degree of divinity which is transcended by the Essence of divinity. Thus, this Essence—Eckhart’s ‘Godhead’—transcends all conceivable distinctions. All that can be said of it, provisionally, is that it is absolutely one. Mental conception—and thus all dogma predicated thereupon— is incapable of expressing the reality of God, and yet one has to make an effort to conceive of the divine Essence as pure and untrammelled unity. However, even the conception of oneness is tainted by its very form as a conception: ‘the mere thought dims the essence’. One is thus left with the task of conceiving of the One while at the same time knowing that this conception is inescapably flawed: one has to conceive oneness by spiritually piercing the veil of that very conception. As mentioned earlier: one has to conceive of That which is inconceivable; for it is possible to conceive *that* it is, but impossible to conceive *what* it is. It is a ‘something’ as he says in the passage below, ‘which is neither this nor that’.

So truly one and simple is this citadel, so mode and power transcending is this solitary One, that neither power nor mode can gaze into it, nor even God Himself! ... God never looks in there for one instant, in so far as He exists in modes and in the properties of His Persons ... this One alone lacks all mode and property ... for God to see inside it would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties: all these He must leave outside ... But only in so far as He is one and indivisible (can He do this): in this sense He is neither Father, Son nor Holy Ghost and yet is a something which is neither this nor that.⁸⁵

This metaphysical perspective, clearly indicating the relativity of the ontological plane upon which the Trinity is conceivable, can help Muslims to see that belief in the Trinity does not necessarily imply any compromise as regards the absolute oneness of God; indeed, the sensitive Muslim might come to see the Trinity is a legitimate doctrine accounting for the mystery of God’s self-revelation, becoming thereby analogous to the

⁸⁵ Ibid, vol.1, p.76. One might note here that Nicholas of Cusa says something very similar. He writes that in His ineffable infinitude, God cannot be described as ‘one or three or good or wise or Father or Son or Holy Spirit’. Rather, God ‘infinitely excels and precedes all such names.’ This is from his *Cribratio Alkorani*, p.88, as cited by Miroslav Volf in his forthcoming book, *Same God ...*

doctrine of the divine names and attributes in Islam. The Persons, like the divine attributes in Islam, are identical to the Essence, which is absolute simplicity; but the converse is not true: the Essence is not exhaustively identifiable with any of the Persons. Just as the Persons are distinguished from each other in terms of origin, otherwise being equal in all respects *qua* nature or substance, so the attributes are distinguished from each other in terms of their specific properties, but are equal to each other *qua* Essence: each attribute is identical to the Absolute, the object of attribution. In both cases, there is an outward differentiation which does not infringe upon an inward identity, or unicity of substance. The 'names' are distinguished in terms of the specific, hence exclusive, properties they denote, but they are also indistinguishable by virtue of their common root, the Essence. Each name is thus identical to the Essence, in one respect, and distinct therefrom in another; as being identical to the Essence, each name is thus identical to every other name. This view of the relationship between the names and the Essence in Islamic metaphysics can be seen to correspond to the relationship between the Persons and the Godhead in Eckhartian metaphysics. According to Eckhart, the three Persons are identical to each other only at the transcendent level of Beyond-Being, the level which transcends the level of Being or divinity upon which the Persons are distinct as Persons.

One of the clearest expressions of the distinction between the level of the Trinity and the level of the pure Absolute is given by Eckhart when he speaks of the soul being borne up in the Persons, according to the power of the Father, the wisdom of the Son and the goodness of the Holy Ghost—these three being the modes of 'work' proper to the Persons.⁸⁶ He goes on to say that it is only above all this 'work' that 'the pure absoluteness of free being' is to be found; the Persons, as such, are 'suspended in being'. Here, we have a double lesson: not only is the Trinity relativized in the face of the pure Absolute, it is also rendered conceivable as the deployment of the divine graces by which the soul attains spiritual

⁸⁶ Ibid, vol.2, pp.174-175. In terms of strict Trinitarian dogma this interpretation might be regarded as depriving the Persons of their full divinity, by ascribing to them only one particular 'work' or divine quality. All three Persons, so it might be argued, do all kinds of 'work', as each of them is as much God as the other two Persons are, distinguishable one from the other only as regards the single characteristic defining their Personhood: 'begetting' for the Father, 'being begotten' for the Son and 'proceeding' for the Spirit.

realization. It is made subordinate to pure or absolute being, on the one hand; and, on the other, it is grasped as the deployment of divine power, wisdom and goodness which, alone, carry the soul towards its goal and its source, to that 'place where the soul grasps the Persons in the very indwelling of being from which they never emerged'.

The Persons 'never emerged' from the 'indwelling of being', because that 'indwelling of being' is nothing other than Beyond-Being, or the Godhead, and the essential reality of the Persons 'resides' in that Essence; now their essential reality is their true reality—their apparent 'emergence' therefrom, *qua* distinct Persons, is just that: an appearance. We are reminded here of what Ibn al-'Arabī says about the divine Names having two connotations: 'the first connotation is God Himself Who is what is named, the second that by which one Name is distinguished from another'; so, on the one hand, 'the Name is the Reality', while on the other hand, 'it is the imagined Reality'.⁸⁷ More explicitly, as regards the apparent reality of the Names: 'The Names in their multiplicity are but relations which are of a non-existent nature.'⁸⁸

So, for both Eckhart and Ibn al-'Arabī, the pure Absolute is identified in terms of an essential oneness which precedes—not so much temporally as ontologically—the degree of being at which any distinctions become discernible. When Eckhart says that the Persons as

⁸⁷ Cited by Ralph Austin, *The Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p.125.

⁸⁸ Cited by Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p.161. In referring to the Names as 'relations' one thinks of St Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of the Persons: they, too, are called by St Thomas 'relations'—but he would most likely have problems defining these relations as being 'non-existent'. He may accept, however, the argument that they are not 'existential', in the sense of 'standing apart' from God's *Esse* (Being): they are 'non-existent' because absolutely identical with God's *Esse*, subsisting above all contingent things, all 'existents', and are thus 'supra-existent'. This is similar to Ibn al-'Arabī's view in one respect, but quite different in another: for Ibn al-'Arabī, the Names are non-existent (*'adam*) only in their aspect of specificity, hence exclusivity—the fact that in one respect each Name is distinct from and thus excludes all others—because non-existence is the defining feature of this exclusivity proper to multiplicity. In another respect, however, the Names are real: they are real insofar as they are identical to the Named, the Essence, pure *wujūd* (Being), which is absolutely one, and absolutely universal: absolutely unspecifiable, or non-delimited, and yet also, not delimited by this non-delimitation. 'Do not declare Him nondelimited and thus delimited by being distinguished from delimitation!' he warns us: 'For if He is distinguished then He is delimited by His nondelimitation. And if He is delimited by His nondelimitation, then He is not He.' Cited by Chittick, *Sufi Path*, op.cit., p.112. Cf. Denys Turner's illuminating discussion of the meaning of God as *esse indistinctum* (indistinct Being) in Eckhart's perspective, *The Darkness of God—Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 162-167. See also the following note, 91.

such are 'suspended' at the level of being, this is another way of saying that the Persons 'boil over' (*bullitio*) from Beyond-Being into being, from the unique Godhead into and as the Trinitarian God.⁸⁹ However, the Trinitarian God is not something other than the Godhead: it is, to paraphrase Ibn al-'Arabī, the Essence 'described' by divinity. It is the oneness of the one (*ahadiyyat al-ahad*) becoming discernible as the oneness of the many (*ahadiyyat al-kathra*):⁹⁰ that which is distinct and discernible as a plurality in the latter is nothing but the initial, metaphysical prefiguration of the perfections which are hidden and undifferentiated in the former. Both Ibn al-'Arabī and Eckhart, then, reveal the inadequacy of *all* mental conceptions of divine unity in the face of the overflowing infinitude of the One. For the purely conceptual affirmation of God's oneness smacks of *shirk* in the measure that it implies that God's oneness is a 'countable' or numerical one, that God is simply one unit among other similar units. Imam 'Alī expresses this principle in the following saying. He is asked about the meaning of God's oneness, and refers first to the error of the person 'who says "one" and has in mind the category of numbers. Now this is not permissible, for that which has no second does not enter into the category of numbers.'⁹¹

This statement resonates deeply with the following words of Eckhart:

One is the negation of the negation and a denial of the denial. All creatures have a negation in themselves: one negates by not being the other ... but God negates the negation: He is one and negates all else, for outside of God nothing is. All creatures are in God, and are His very Godhead, which means plenitude ... God alone has oneness. Whatever is number depends on one, and one depends on nothing. God's

⁸⁹ One of Eckhart's boldest claims is to be identified with the undifferentiated Godhead in his uncreated essence. To quote Turner's summary of Eckhart's claims: '.... not merely does the Father give birth to me in the Son, before all that I was in the Godhead in its absolute, primitive oneness, a oneness which "precedes" all the differentiations of the Trinity of Persons, that "seething and boiling" or *bullitio* ... my existence in the Godhead is beyond all distinctions, in the undifferentiated oneness of the Godhead, it cannot be distinct from the Godhead as such. Therefore I existed in the Godhead *before God*, in God's very "own ground". If I was there in that ground at the birth of the Trinity, *a fortiori* I was there before my own creation.' *The Darkness of God*, op.cit., p.145.

⁹⁰ 'In respect of His Self, God possesses the Unity of the One, but in respect of His Names, He possesses the Unity of the many.' Cited by Chittick, *Sufi Path*, op.cit., p.337.

⁹¹ *Justice and Remembrance*, op.cit., p.

riches and wisdom and truth are all absolutely one in God: it is not one, it is oneness.⁹²

Referring to the non-numerical oneness of God as being 'that which has no second' is Imam 'Alī's way of referring to the unique reality of God, outside of whom 'nothing is', as Eckhart's formulation has it. Similarly, Imam 'Alī's negation of the attributes, and his identification of them all with the simplicity of the divine Essence, is expressed by Eckhart's insistence that God's 'riches and wisdom and truth are all absolutely one in God'; and Eckhart's correction of himself 'it is not one, it is oneness' can be read as a deliberate encouragement to his listeners to shift their consciousness from a static numerical conception of unity, standing opposed to an equally static conception of multiplicity, to a dynamic spiritual conception of the eternal integration of multiplicity within unity and the overflowing of the inner riches of that unity within multiplicity. This reciprocal integration is one aspect of metaphysical *Tawhīd*, and is referred to by the Sufis in terms of 'the multiple One' (*al-wāhid al-kathīr*) and the 'unique multiplicity' (*al-kathīr al-wāhid*).⁹³

God alone is absolute Reality, for both of these mystical authorities, and this sole reality is at once all-exclusive, by virtue of its ineffable transcendence, and all-inclusive, by virtue of its inescapable immanence. The 'negation of negation' is tantamount to pure affirmation, but affirmation not of a countable oneness, rather, of an all-inclusive oneness, within which all conceivable multiplicity is eternally comprised. Imam 'Alī's way of expressing Eckhart's 'negation of negation' is as follows. 'Being, but not by way of any becoming; existing, but not from having been non-existent; with everything, but not through association; and other than everything, but not through separation; acting, but not through movements and instruments; seeing, even when nothing of His creation was to be seen; solitary, even when there was none whose intimacy might be sought or whose absence might be missed.'⁹⁴

⁹² *Meister Eckhart*, op.cit., vol. 2, pp.339 & 341.

⁹³ See the discussion of this principle, in the context of al-Kāshānī's Sufi commentary on the Qur'ān, in R. Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One—The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2006), ch.2, section 1, entitled 'The One in the Many, the Many in the One', pp.76-97.

⁹⁴ Cited in *Justice and Remembrance*, op.cit., pp.208-209.

God is 'with everything, but not through association': He is not some separate entity conjoined to the creature, for this would entail a duality—God and the things He is 'with'; and 'other than everything, but not through separation': His inaccessible transcendence does not imply that He is separate from what He transcends, for this would again entail a duality—God and the things He transcends. Multiplicity is thus integrated within an ontological unity according to Imam 'Alī's perspective, and this, we believe, is what Eckhart means when he says that 'outside God nothing is': the apparent multiplicity of existence is integrated within the true unity of the One—Beyond-Being—in a manner which reflects the way in which the apparent multiplicity of the Trinity is rendered transparent to the unity of its own Essence. To repeat: we should be able 'to grasp distinctions without number and quantity', and thereby come to see that Persons or attributes can exist within the Godhead which, nonetheless, remains unique and indivisible.

This uniqueness, however, must be conceived as transcending number. Neither three-ness nor one-ness can adequately describe this one-and-onliness. Eckhart therefore says that everything uttered about the Trinity 'is in no way really so or true ... because every name or in general every thing that denotes a number, or makes a number come to mind, or be conceived, is far from God.' He then quotes a saying from Boethius: 'That is truly one in which there is no number'.⁹⁵

It is important to repeat here the crucial principle enunciated by Frithjof Schuon, referred to earlier: 'Only Unity as such can be a definition of the Absolute; in the realm of number, unity alone represents an element of absoluteness, as does the point or the centre in space, and the instant or the present in time...'

The metaphysical perspectives of Eckhart and Ibn al-'Arabī, St Dionysius and Imam 'Alī, help us to perceive the grounds upon which we can affirm unequivocally that Muslims and Christians do believe in the same God. This God can be conceived as That which transcends the domain within which all existential categories subsist, including not just the categories time, space, form, matter, and number, but also all distinct divine attributes. It is thus a Reality which cannot be adequately described, whether by attributes or Persons, for both

⁹⁵ *Meister Eckhart—Teacher and Preacher* (ed. B. McGinn), (New York/Mahwah/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1986), pp.210-211.

attributes and Persons are relativities by dint of their very susceptibility to conception in distinct terms, this distinctiveness being an inescapable concomitant of their 'ex-istence', taking this word according to its etymological roots, *ex-stare*: their 'standing apart from' that all-embracing Reality which cannot be conceived, this inconceivability being the extrinsic, apophatic concomitant of its intrinsic, 'super-essential' mystery.

3. Contemporary Witness and Philosophical Theology

A Common Word

On October 13, 2007, a ground-breaking interfaith initiative was launched by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute in Amman, Jordan.⁹⁶ An open letter entitled 'A Common Word Between Us and You', signed by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars representing every major school of thought in Islam, was sent 'to leaders of Christian churches everywhere.' This was an invitation to engage in dialogue on the basis of love of God and love of the neighbour, these being recognised as the two 'great commandments' enjoined by both traditions. The overwhelmingly positive Christian responses from the leaders of all the major Churches implied that the basic, albeit unspoken, premise of the text—belief in the same God—was accepted. Some responses made this more explicit than others. For example, in the response of the Yale Divinity School, we read: 'We applaud that *A Common Word Between Us and You* stresses so insistently the unique devotion to one God, indeed the love of God, as the primary duty of every believer.'⁹⁷

In his response, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, not only affirms that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God, but also goes to great pains to point out that the Trinitarian God is in essence not other than the One God believed in and worshipped by Muslims, even going so far as to apply—whether consciously or not—two

⁹⁶ See www.acommonword.com for the text itself, and the responses thereto.

⁹⁷ See, for the full text, 'A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You', *New York Times*, Nov.18, 2007.

Muslim 'names' of *Allāh* to the Trinitarian God, that is, *al-Hayy* (the Living) and *al-Qayyūm* (the Self-subsistent). The meaning of the word 'God' according to the Archbishop, is 'a nature or essence – eternal and self-sufficient life we speak of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit", but we do not mean one God with two beings alongside him, or three gods of limited power. So there is indeed one God, the Living and Self-subsistent, associated with no other.'⁹⁸

Such explicit affirmation of the identity—the sameness—of the Christian and Islamic God is by no means restricted to our times. The following are some of the noteworthy precedents in the history of Christian-Muslim dialogue:

1. Timothy I (d.823), Catholicos and Patriarch of the Church of the East, who lived most of his life in Baghdad, centre of the Abbasid empire, was summoned to the court of the Caliph al-Mahdī (r.775-785) to respond to various questions. He asserted clearly his belief that the Prophet Muhammad called people to the one true God:

Muhammad deserves the praise of all reasonable men because his walk was on the way of the Prophets and of the lovers of God. Whereas the rest of the Prophets taught about the oneness of God, Muhammad also taught about it. So, he too walked on the way of the Prophets. Then, just as all the Prophets moved people away from evil and sin, and drew them to what is right and virtuous, so also did Muhammad move the sons of his community away from evil and draw them to what is right and virtuous. Therefore, he too walked on the way of the Prophets.⁹⁹

2. Pope Gregory wrote to the Muslim King Anzir of Mauritania in 1076, expressing gratitude for a charitable act performed by the latter: 'We believe and confess one God, although in different ways, and praise and worship Him daily as the Creator of all ages and

⁹⁸ See the full text of the Archbishop's response on www.acommonword.com.

⁹⁹ Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque—Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (New Jersey & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp.104-105. Timothy's statement is all the more remarkable given his refusal to explicitly acknowledge that the Qur'an was indeed a divine revelation. He believed nonetheless in the sincerity of the Prophet's summons to believe in the one true God and to lead a life of virtue in consequence thereof.

the ruler of this world. For as the apostle says: “He is our peace who has made us both one” (Eph. 2.14).¹⁰⁰

3. Pope Pius XI said, when dispatching his Apostolic Delegate to Libya in 1934: ‘Do not think you are going among infidels. Muslims attain to salvation. The ways of Providence are infinite.’¹⁰¹ If Muslims are not ‘infidels’ they must be included in the category of ‘believers’—those who believe in the one and only God.

4. Similarly, some two decades later, Pope Pius XII (d.1959) declared: ‘How consoling it is for me to know that, all over the world, millions of people, five times a day, bow down before God.’¹⁰² Muslims, then, worship the one and only God, the God worshipped by Christians.

Let us now return to the question posed at the beginning of this essay about the degree to which the Trinity is central and indispensable to Christian belief, and ask: what do such affirmations by Christian authorities imply for the status of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian belief? Three implications might be posited here:

- 1) The doctrine of the Trinity is not an essential element in the Christian belief in one God. That is why we can embrace Muslims as fellow-believers in the one God even if they do not believe in—and indeed, repudiate—the Trinity.
- 2) The doctrine of the Trinity is essential to Christian belief in God, and it accurately defines the true, objective nature of that one God; so Muslims who truly believe in the one true God cannot but believe in the Trinity, objectively and in reality, even if

¹⁰⁰ See J. Neuner & J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1983), pp.276-277

¹⁰¹ *L’Ultima* (Florence), Anno VIII, 1934; cited in William Stoddart, *What do the Religions say about Each Other?—Christian Attitudes to Islam, Islamic Attitudes to Christianity* (San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008), p.12.

¹⁰² Cited in *ibid*, p.12. Abundant material of a similar nature can be found in this valuable compilation of William Stoddart. One should also note here such statements as the following; Pope John-Paul II said to a group of Moroccan Muslims (August 19, 1985): ‘We believe in the same God, the one God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection.’ For this and other similar statements by modern Popes, see <http://www.usccb.org/seia/textsislam.shtml>

they are unaware of the fact subjectively, and fail to register it dogmatically. The task for the Christian here is to say to the Muslims what St Paul said to the Athenians: 'Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you' (Acts, 17:23).¹⁰³

- 3) The Trinity is essential to Christian belief, but it is possible to conceptually abstract this aspect of belief, and still retain an adequate conception of the Essence of God, the Essence of that divinity believed in and worshipped by Muslims. So Muslims may not believe in the Trinity, but insofar as they believe in God's unicity and simplicity, transcendence and perfection—together with most if not all of the other attributes ascribed to the divine Essence by Christians—they believe in the selfsame Essence or nature of God as posited and articulated in Christian faith.

We have seen in the previous section how Eckhart provides us with grounds upon which this latter position, 3), might be metaphysically articulated. The One, the Ground, the Godhead is 'beyond Being', while the Persons of the Trinity are 'suspended' at the level of Being, there where God is definable as God in relation to creatures. It was also seen that this corresponds closely with Ibn al-'Arabī's distinction between two degrees of oneness within the divinity: the oneness of the One, and the oneness of the many. In both cases, plurality within divinity is affirmed without detriment to the unity, simplicity or transcendence of God, such plurality being situated upon an ontological level transcended by the One, the pure Essence. However, one might ask: is there a way of articulating this perspective in theological terms, doing so by reference to authorities within the Christian tradition who are less controversial than Eckhart? We believe that it is, and this essay will be concluded with a necessarily brief attempt to sketch out such a perspective, doing so in relation to the writings of St Thomas Aquinas.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ A variation on this position is given by such figures as Abelard and Bonaventure. Abelard affirmed that no Jew or Gentile—nor any person with 'common sense'—could doubt that 'God is Power, Wisdom and Goodness'. *Trinity in Aquinas*, p.8. Similarly, Bonaventure gave a host of 'natural reasons' which proved that God was a Trinity. See *ibid*, pp.19-20. As we shall see shortly, Aquinas strongly rejects this position: belief in the Trinity requires a leap of faith, and is by no means a logical or natural concomitant of belief in the oneness of God.

¹⁰⁴ One might also choose such figures as St Gregory Palamas and St Maximus the Confessor, within the Orthodox tradition, whose articulation of the concept of the divine Essence would also provide

St Thomas Aquinas and the Common Ground of Transcendence

After addressing the question of sacred doctrine in general, Aquinas begins his *Summa Theologica* with a treatise on the unity of the divine Essence. There is little, if anything, in this treatise with which a Muslim could disagree. One reads about God's unity, simplicity, indivisibility, together with such fundamental attributes as the divine perfection, wisdom, and goodness; about divine existence being identical to divine essence, together with a host of explanations pertaining to God's necessary existence—nearly all of which could easily have come from the pen of a philosophically-minded Muslim theologian in his description of God.¹⁰⁵ As regards the meaning of the word 'God', it is important to note that Aquinas assumes that all of those who speak of 'God' have in mind an identical signification, the word or concept always indicating an identical referent: 'The name God signifies the divine nature, for this name was imposed to signify something existing above all things, the principle of all things, and removed from all things; for those who name God intend to signify all this.'¹⁰⁶ The word 'God' thus signifies that supreme reality which transcends all things at the same time as being the source of all things.

As regards the unity of God, Aquinas goes to great pains to assert that the one God is not composed of parts, even though it comprises infinite perfections. Although the divine nature or Essence is absolutely one and non-composite, it is conceived by the intellect in inescapably multiple ways. Thus, in the effort to understand something meaningful about the nature of God, the human intellect forms conceptions 'proportional to the perfections flowing from God to creatures'; these perfections pre-exist in God 'unitedly and simply', whereas in creatures 'they are received, divided and multiplied'. To these variegated

us with strong grounds for asserting commonality, if not identity, with the Muslim conception of the divine Essence.

¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the influence of such philosophers as Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī (and such mystical theologians as al-Ghazzālī) on fundamental themes of Aquinas's ontology, philosophy and theology has been amply demonstrated by contemporary scholarship. See, for example, A.M. Goichon, *The Philosophy of Avicenna and its Influence on Medieval Europe* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969).

¹⁰⁶ *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trs. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1981), vol.I, p.68, I.13.8, reply to objection 2.

conceptions of different perfections, however, 'there corresponds one altogether simple principle', a principle 'imperfectly understood' by the different conceptions.¹⁰⁷

He continues thus, in his reply to objection 3 in this article: 'The perfect unity of God requires that what are manifold and divided in others should exist in Him simply and unitedly. Thus it comes about that He is one in reality, and yet multiple in idea, because our intellect apprehends Him in a manifold manner, as things represent Him.' Again, none of this would be objectionable to the Muslim theologian. Indeed, the latter might regard such statements as these to be strong evidence for the subjective nature of the doctrine of the Trinity: it is but a mode of 'plurality' subsisting in the mind of the creature, not in the objective reality of the Creator, who is 'one in reality' and only 'multiple in idea'.

In his so-called 'shorter' *Summa* (entitled *Compendium of Theology*) Aquinas makes even clearer the way in which the unicity of the nature/Essence is rendered mentally compound only by and within the human intellect; and he stresses the need to see through our own creaturely categories in order to grasp God's utter unity and simplicity: 'If we saw His essence as it is in itself, a multiplicity of names would not be required; our idea of it would be simple, just as His essence is simple. This vision we hope for in the day of our glory; for, according to Zechariah 14:9, "In that day there shall be one Lord; and His name shall be one".'¹⁰⁸

Again, this sounds very much like Islamic *Tawhīd*. Indeed, Aquinas sums up this part of the discussion dealing with the nature of God by writing: 'The truths about God thus far proposed have been subtly discussed by a number of pagan philosophers', by whom he means both Greeks and Muslims. However, when discussion turns to the Trinity, there is an abrupt change of tone:

But there are other truths about God revealed to us in the teaching of the Christian religion, which were beyond the reach of the philosophers. These are truths about which we are instructed, in accord with the norm of Christian faith, in a way that

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, vol.I, p.63 l.13, 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Aquinas's Shorter Summa*, ch.24, p.26

transcends human perception. The teaching is that although God is one and simple, as has been explained above, God is Father, God is Son, and God is Holy Spirit. And these are not three gods, but are one God.¹⁰⁹

While ‘pagan philosophers’ might well understand such ‘essential attributes’ as divine goodness and wisdom, they cannot grasp the personal properties of the essence, such as paternity and filiation¹¹⁰—nor can the Christian prove the existence of such properties by means of the intellect. Aquinas quotes Hilary’s statement, from the treatise on the Trinity: ‘Let no man think to reach the sacred mystery of generation by his own mind’; and Ambrose: ‘It is impossible to know the secret of generation. The mind fails, the voice is silent.’ He then adds: ‘Since, therefore, man cannot know, and with his understanding grasp that for which no necessary reason can be given, it follows that the trinity of persons cannot be known by reason’.

He goes so far as to say that any attempt to prove the Trinity by means of reason ‘derogates from faith’, and this in two ways. ‘Firstly as regards the dignity of the faith itself, which consists in its being concerned with invisible things that exceed human reason’. In other words, belief in the Trinity does not derive from anything that reason can deduce from its conception of the divine Essence; rather, it comes exclusively from faith in the specifically Christian revelation, transmitted by authority, and received in a spirit of humble obedience by the faithful soul of the Christian believer. Those things which ‘exceed human reason’ cannot be proven by human reason. Faith is the only means by which these things can be understood: *credo ut intelligam*—‘I believe in order to understand’, as St Anselm’s famous dictum has it.

The second way in which the attempt to rationally prove the Trinity derogates from faith concerns the question of ‘drawing others to the faith’. He writes:

For when anyone in the endeavour to prove the faith brings forward reasons which are not cogent, he falls under the ridicule of the unbelievers: since they suppose that we stand upon such reasons, and that we believe on such grounds. Therefore we must not attempt to prove what is of faith except by authority alone, to those who

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, ch.36, p.35.

¹¹⁰ *Summa Theologica*, vol.IV, p.2040, III.3, 3.

receive the authority; while as regards others, it suffices to prove that what faith teaches is not impossible.¹¹¹

The necessity of the Trinity, then, cannot be demonstrated by reason, there are no arguments which carry sufficient weight to prove the Trinity; but the doctrine might be shown by reason to be 'not impossible'. In terms of intellectual exposition, then, this is a modest claim: the Christian cannot prove the logical necessity of the Trinity, in the way he *can* prove the necessity of the divine Essence. He can at most demonstrate that the Trinity is 'not impossible'. This means that while non-Christians can never be taught by reason to believe in the Trinity, they might come to see that it is 'not impossible' that the essential attributes which they can logically deduce from the existence of the Essence might be brought into some kind of correspondence with, or approximation to, the properties of the Persons. Hence:

The philosophers did not know the mystery of the Trinity of the divine Persons by its proper attributes, such as paternity, filiation and procession, according to the Apostle's words, 'We speak the wisdom of God which none of the princes of the world'—i.e., the philosophers—'knew' (I Cor. ii.6). Nevertheless, they knew some of the essential attributes appropriated to the Persons, as power to the Father, wisdom to the Son, goodness to the Holy Ghost.¹¹²

Here one can see a theological bridge connecting the two traditions. Aquinas accepts that 'philosophers', i.e., Muslims and Greeks, can attain knowledge of such essential attributes as power, wisdom and goodness, attributes which are undifferentiated in the simplicity of the divine Essence, in one respect, while also pertaining, in another respect, to the Father, Son and Spirit, respectively. It is thus possible for theologians of both traditions to come together on this transcendent common ground constituted by the unicity and simplicity of the Essence, within which certain 'essential attributes' are present but undifferentiated. On the basis of this common conception of the transcendent Essence they can affirm: we as Christians and Muslims do believe in the same God, the same God conceived *essentially*. But as regards the appropriation of the essential attributes by the Persons, or the ascription to

¹¹¹ *Summa Theologica*, vol. I, p.169, I.32.1.

¹¹² *Ibid*, reply to objection 1.

each of the three Persons of all of the essential attributes, there will be theological disagreement. Nonetheless, the agreement on the plane of the Essence can prevail over disagreement on the plane of the Persons: this may be put forward as the theological premise implicit in the affirmation by Christian theologians—including the Archbishop of Canterbury, and various Popes, past and present—that they and Muslims do believe in the same God.

This argument is reinforced when we ask St Thomas about the formal status of a belief in God which is devoid of any conception of the Christian Trinity. For the answer given by him is as follows:

If we mentally exclude the personal properties there will still remain in our thought the divine Nature as subsisting and as a Person ... Even if the personal properties of the three Persons are abstracted by our mind, nevertheless there will remain in our thoughts the one Personality of God, as the Jews consider.¹¹³

So even if, like the Jews, Muslims do not believe in the Trinity, what they do believe in—the ‘divine Nature’, the unique ‘Person’ the ‘One Personality’—is identical to what Christians believe in at that same level of divinity—the transcendent unicity of the divine Essence. This one God is the God of Abraham and Moses, neither of whom made any mention whatsoever of the Trinity, and yet it is affirmed in Christian dogma that it was ‘the Trinity’ who bestowed revelation upon them both, and upon all prophets of God. In the words of the text of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): ‘This holy Trinity, which is undivided according to its common essence but distinct according to the properties of its persons, gave the teaching of salvation to the human race through Moses and the holy prophets and his other servants, according to the most appropriate disposition of the times.’¹¹⁴

¹¹³ *Summa Theologica*, vol.IV, p.2040, III.3, a.3, reply to objections 1 and 2.

¹¹⁴ We have taken this translation from the compendium of Catholic documents made available at http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1215-1215_Concilium_Lateranum_III_Documenta_Omnia_EN.pdf. See also J. Neuner & J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, op. cit., for this and many of the most important doctrinal texts of the Catholic Church.

The Trinity, being ‘undivided according to its common essence’, is thus nothing other than the One God of Abraham and Moses—and of Muhammad, one should add. However, neither Abraham nor Moses nor Muhammad would recognise that this One God is ‘distinct according to the properties of its persons’; they would not affirm any Trinity within the Unity. So we return to the point just made: Christians do believe in the same God as the Jews and the Muslims—the same God conceived *essentially*; but in addition to this essential belief, Christians also affirm belief in a triune aspect of God, an aspect vehemently denied by Jews and Muslims. One notices here a difference between implication and predication: for Christians, belief in God may well theologically *imply* belief in the Trinity, but is not essentially *predicated* upon it, failing which they could not affirm that Jews and Muslims believe in and worship the one true God. It would appear that the Christian can believe in God, therefore, without this belief being predicated on the Trinity; but the Christian cannot believe in the Trinity without believing in God. This shows that belief in one God—the basic postulate of monotheism—must have primacy over belief in the Trinity. To cite one of the key principles of Thomistic theology: what is common takes priority over what is proper: ‘What is essential is prior according to our understanding to what is notional, just as what is common to what is proper.’¹¹⁵ What is common to the Persons—the divine nature, substance or essence—precedes, or takes priority over, what is proper to the Persons—their specific, personal properties; likewise, what is essential or universal in our knowledge takes priority over what is notional or specific. This principle can be applied to the question at issue here: what is common to the two theologies of Islam and Christianity—belief in the one divine Essence—takes priority over what differentiates them—the distinctive ‘properties’ (whether attributes or Persons) ascribed to that Essence within the two theologies.

It is the common ground of affirmation of belief in God as such—God *qua* Essence, Substance or Nature—that, even in the absence of any reference to the Trinity, allows Christians to affirm that Muslims believe in the one true God, the God of Abraham and Moses. This appears to us logically implied in the statement of St Thomas: If the Personal

¹¹⁵ This is cited from St Thomas’s commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* (I, Sent., d.29, q.1, a.2) in Gilles Emory, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, Michigan: Sapientia Press, 2003), p.179.

properties are abstracted from our minds, ‘there will still remain in our thought the divine Nature ... the one Personality of God, as the Jews consider’. The Christian conception of God, then, is not undermined by the mental abstraction of the Trinity therefrom: it may be devoid of the plenitude rendered spiritually accessible by explicit recognition of the Trinitarian dimensions of the one God, but it remains nonetheless an adequate doctrinal expression of the one true God postulated by all monotheistic traditions. The Christian theologian might regard the relationship between this kind of unitary conception of God and the full-blooded Trinitarian conception of God as being analogous to the relationship between, on the one hand, an abstract, purely mental conception of a circle, which, being only a conception in the mind, is devoid of any objective dimensions in space; and, on the other, a concrete perception of an actual sphere existing in space. The Christian can then argue *both* that the Muslim/Jewish conception of God is identical to the Christian conception of God—both posit the same conceptual ‘circle’; *and* that the Christian goes one step further, by grasping the dimensions which are missing from that conception—the concrete manifestation of the abstract circle as an actual sphere. The shift from the one to the other might be seen as symbolizing the shift from transcendence to immanence, or simply: the act by which God becomes incarnate in Jesus—the focal point of theological incompatibility between the two traditions. The Trinity both anticipates and results from the mystery of the incarnation, and for this reason ought to remain bracketed out of any effort to establish common theological ground between the two traditions, this common ground being constituted by the affirmation of the absolute transcendence of the one and only divinity.

Aquinas—and with him, the entire scholastic tradition, it seems—regards the shift from the oneness of God to the Trinity as being a shift from general ‘metaphysics’¹¹⁶ to specific ‘theology’.¹¹⁷ The threeness of God is a greater mystery—greater in the sense of more fully

¹¹⁶ Which we would prefer to call ontology or philosophy, reserving metaphysics for such perspectives as those of Eckhart and Ibn al-‘Arabī, perspectives which reveal the limitations of theology; see footnote 2.

¹¹⁷ See for example St Bonaventure’s treatise, ‘The Soul’s Journey into God’, where the final three chapters address, in clearly ascending hierarchical order, the unity of God, the Trinity, and then the

transcendent vis-à-vis the creaturely categories of thought and being—than is the merely metaphysical or philosophical oneness of God. This oneness is something that both the Jews and the Greeks understood; the threeness of God, however, spiritually trumps this abstract conception, it more adequately reveals the intrinsic incapacity of human thought to attain knowledge of the mystery of God: ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than men’ (1 Corinthians, 1:25); it also effectively foreshadows the doctrine of salvation through the Cross, which is ‘unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness’ (1 Corinthians, 1:23).¹¹⁸ All three mysteries—Trinity, Incarnation and the Redemption wrought through the Crucifixion—are summed up in the challenging enunciation by by Vladimir Lossky, cited earlier: ‘The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought.’

So the Christian theologian can place Muslims in the same category as the Jews: as St Irenaeus said, insofar as the Jews believe in God, love Him and practise virtue, they ‘reveal one and the same God’.¹¹⁹ Through his detailed elaboration of the doctrine pertaining to the unique nature/Essence of God, then, Aquinas helps to render explicit what is implied in such statements by Irenaeus about the Jews, and those made by the authorities cited above about Muslims: this unique Essence is the common ground upon which all monotheists can come together and assert with unanimity that they believe in the same God. Let us also note that Aquinas’s statement that it is possible to abstract the Trinity from one’s conception of God, without ruining one’s conception of this Essence, is implied in the following declaration of the Fourth Lateran Council. After stating the position of Joachim, who rejected that of Peter Lombard, the following statement is made:

flight into ‘spiritual and mystical ecstasy’. *Bonaventure—The Soul’s Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*, tr. and ed. Ewert Cousins, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1978), pp.94-116.

¹¹⁸ St Gregory of Nyssa writes that the Christian faith is distinct both from the monotheism of the Jews and the polytheism of the Greeks, a point of view which is summed up by St John of Damascus who writes in his *De Fide Orthodoxa* (I, 7): ‘On the one hand, of the Jewish idea we have the unity of God’s nature and, on the other, of the Greek, we have the distinction of hypostases—and that only.’ Cited by Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, op.cit., p.363.

¹¹⁹ Even if he also asserts that only through the Son can the Jews be liberated from slavery to God and become friends of God. See *Five Books of S. Irenaeus Against Heresies*, op.cit., book 4, ch.13. 4.

We, however, with the approval of this sacred and universal council, believe and confess with Peter Lombard that there exists a certain supreme reality, incomprehensible and ineffable ... each of the three Persons is that reality—that is to say substance, essence or divine nature—which alone is the principle of all things, besides which no other principle can be found. This reality neither begets nor is begotten nor proceeds; the Father begets, the Son is begotten and the holy Spirit proceeds.¹²⁰

Alongside the dogmatic affirmation of the identity of each of the three Persons with the Essence, there is a reference to that Essence in terms which clearly indicate the possibility of distinguishing It from the Persons, and thus, inversely, the possibility of abstracting the Persons from the Essence without detriment to one's conception of the intrinsic nature of the Essence; this essential nature being defined in this conciliar text by the fact that it 'neither begets nor is begotten nor proceeds'. We are reminded here of Eckhart's statement, cited above: for God to see inside the One 'would cost Him all His divine names and personal properties'; only insofar as God is one and indivisible, 'neither Father, Son nor Holy Ghost', can He see or enter into the Oneness that Eckhart has discovered. As he said, when defending himself against the accusations of heresy: 'Although in God the Father essence and paternity are the same, He does not generate [the Son] insofar as he is essence, but insofar as He is Father, even though the essence is the root of the generation.'¹²¹

It is debatable whether Aquinas would have accepted the implication that Eckhart draws from the fact that the Essence is the 'root of the 'generation', namely, that the Essence transcends the Trinity, according to the same principle by which Godhead transcends God, Beyond-Being transcends Being, every cause ontologically precedes its effect, or as the root has priority over the tree. But one can argue nonetheless that for Aquinas the unity of the divine Essence is the philosophical 'infrastructure' of the dogma of the Trinity: one has to understand first what the essence or nature of God is, and on this basis proceed to

¹²⁰ From the website cited above: http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1215-1215_Concilium_Lateranum_III_Documenta_Omnia_EN.pdf.

¹²¹ Cited by Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God*, op.cit., p.154.

discussion of God qua Trinity. And this indeed is why the *Summa* starts with a treatise on the unity of God and then proceeds to the Trinity.¹²² This, together with the fact that he accepts that the unitarian conception of God remains valid on its own level, even if the Trinitarian conception be abstracted from it, means that it is entirely legitimate for Christians to invoke Aquinas's perspectives outlined here as justification for positing the unique Essence of God as that in which Christians, Muslims and Jews believe, irrespective of the fact that both Muslims and Jews disbelieve in the Trinity.

From the Muslim point of view, the Christian conception of a transcendent Essence which 'neither begets nor is begotten'¹²³ nor proceeds' in the words of the Fourth Lateran Council, can form the basis upon which the affirmation can be made that Christians and Muslims do indeed believe in the same God; but, added to this affirmation will come a rejection of the very doctrines—the Trinity and the Incarnation—which the Christians deem to be the ultimate fulfilment of monotheism. And herein lies the core of the mutual theological irreducibility between the two traditions; however, this incompatibility can be accepted on one level, without compromising the compatibility achieved at another: each can recognise the other as a fellow-believer in the one true God. In other words, there can be agreement as regards the fact that God is one and transcends all things, and disagreement over the claim that God is also three and is uniquely immanent in Jesus Christ. But the agreement can take priority over the disagreement, for the agreement is situated on the universal ground of monotheism, and in relation to the transcendent Essence of the one God which defines the very terms of that monotheism; whereas the disagreement is situated on the particular ground of Christian theology, and in relation to the Persons of a Trinity which can be abstracted from belief in God, without this abstraction negating or undermining the essential postulate of monotheism: belief in one God.

¹²² This is the basic argument of Rudi Te Velde: 'The treatment of the Trinity presupposes therefore a prior clarification of God's activity, which in turn presupposes a clarification of the divine essence (or substance), since the activity follows upon the being of the subject of activity (*agere sequitur esse*).' *Aquinas on God—The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p.69.

¹²³ One is reminded here of the fundamental verses of the chapter of sincerity/purity (112): 'Say: God is One; God, the Eternally subsistent. He begetteth not, nor is begotten, and there is nothing comparable to Him.'

Affirming this common ground of transcendence is precisely what Frithjof Schuon calls for: he stresses the need for ‘spiritual solidarity’ between all those ‘who traditionally take cognizance of transcendence and immortality’.¹²⁴ As regards the question posed here, Muslims and Christians certainly believe in ‘transcendence’; they will agree that God is absolutely transcendent, but will disagree about how this transcendent divinity relates to and is present within, the created world; that is to say, they will disagree about the modalities of divine immanence, as has been stressed repeatedly in this essay. It is thus significant that Schuon does not talk about immanence in this context of ‘spiritual solidarity’ between believers of different traditions. For the stress on transcendence, by contrast, allows one to build a bridge of unanimity, not just between the theologies of Islam and Christianity, but also between all the great religious traditions of the world. As regards immanence, it is only on the esoteric plane that the two traditions might be seen to be in harmony, but even on this plane there are significant differences as regards spiritual accentuation.¹²⁵

But, returning to transcendence, both traditions are at one as regards all the key features of the essential nature of God, defined above by St Thomas as ‘something existing above all things, the principle of all things, and removed from all things’. We have seen that, metaphysically, this common belief is rendered irrefutably self-evident, whereas theologically it has all too often been obscured behind impenetrable veils of conflicting linguistic formulations. With the help of St Thomas, though, we can frame this common belief in terms of philosophical theology—something, that is to say, half-way between theology and metaphysics—focusing on the transcendent common ground, the unique Essence of God, and legitimately bracket out the doctrine of the Trinity for the purposes of affirming belief in that unique Essence.

¹²⁴ Schuon makes it clear that he does not believe it possible or desirable to establish ‘a generalized metaphysical or quintessential understanding’, a project which he regards as ‘self-defeating in practice’; rather, what he has in view is simply the possibility of ‘an adequate understanding’ for the sake of upholding the quintessence of the spiritual heritage of mankind, summed up in the principles of the transcendence of the Absolute, and the immortality of the soul. F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, op.cit., p.5.

¹²⁵ See our forthcoming essay, ‘Light upon Light? The Qur’ān and the Gospel of St John’.

This abstraction of the Trinity from the Christian conception of God, for the purposes of affirming solidarity with fellow-monotheists, by no means implies any derogation of the Trinity by Christians. On the contrary, it serves to deepen the mystery of the Trinity by denying that it can in any way be brought within the purview of 'ordinary' monotheism: the Trinity is an extraordinary instance of monotheism, one which spurns all purely natural reasoning, and calls out to be grasped by the supernatural means proper to specifically Christian faith. As we have seen above, this is what St Thomas insists upon; anything short of this—any attempt to demonstrate or prove the reality of the Trinity 'derogates from faith'. Moreover, and surprising as it may seem, this very right to grant Trinitarian dogma a divine right of exemption from the rules of logic, and all merely 'natural' modes of reason, can serve both the Christian and the Muslim theologian in their effort to embrace each other as fellow-believers.¹²⁶

For the Christian can claim that nothing essential about the Trinity is sacrificed in this embrace: in affirming with Muslims a common belief in the transcendent unity of God, one is affirming belief in one aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity—the rationally demonstrable unity of the common nature shared by the three Persons; while at the same time keeping intact the specifically Christian mystery proper to the other aspect of the Trinity—the fact that it is beyond all rational demonstration, or rather that its divine 'logic' only becomes apparent through plumbing the mysteries of contemplative faith. For his part, the Muslim theologian can likewise affirm with Christians a common belief in the transcendent unity of God, without this affirmation in any way implying acceptance of the Trinity: what for Christians is beyond all rational demonstration is for Muslims simply illogical.

¹²⁶ What Schuon says about 'true ecumenism' is pertinent here: 'either it involves an understanding between the religions which is based upon their common interests in the face of a danger that threatens them all, or it may call into play the wisdom that can discern the one sole truth under the veil of different forms.' *Logic and Transcendence*, op.cit., p.182. In this final section of the essay we have focused on the 'common interests' of all believers in the face of the dangers posed by atheism; whereas in section two of the essay, our concern was with the 'wisdom which discerns the sole truth under the veil of different forms'.

In this way, the theologians of both traditions can exercise their right—so crucial to the definition of the theologian *per se*—to bear witness to their faith, doing so in the very bosom of their brotherly embrace as fellow believers. As noted above, the Christian can quote St Paul’s declaration to the Athenians: ‘Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you.’ The Christian invitation to the Muslims might be envisaged as follows: we not only believe in the one, transcendent God as you do, but, in addition, we believe that this very God became man without sacrificing any of His transcendence; and that the miraculous nature of this incarnation, once it is accepted and empowered by faith, will allow you to see that the Trinity is in fact the least inadequate expression of the full plenitude, profound mystery, and salvific power of the divine nature.

For his part, the Muslim theologian can embrace Christians as fellow-monotheists, while inviting them to consider the crystalline consummation of the defining principle of the monotheism they share in common: *lā ilāha illa’Llāh*, ‘no divinity but God’, such as it is expressed in a myriad ways by God’s ultimate revelation to man, the Glorious Qur’ān. Once it is accepted that the Qur’ān completes the cycle of prophetic revelation, and thereby—uniquely among world scriptures—confirms the validity of *all* previous revelations of God, and *all* previous Prophets; and that it restores not just the pristine purity of the faith of Abraham, but also the primordial nature of man as such (*al-fitra*), doing so through an all-embracing ‘law and a way’ providentially adapted to meet both the particular needs of man in this last phase of the cycle of humanity and the universal needs of all human cultures until the end of this phase—when this is accepted, then it is entirely logical to take the next step: follow in the footsteps of the last Messenger who was sent by God as the ‘seal of the Prophets’, he who embodied to perfection both the outward clarity and the inner mystery of the Message with which he was charged. In other words, the invitation will be to add to the universal monotheistic principle, expressed by the first testimony, ‘no divinity but God’, the specifically Islamic appeal, not to God become man, but to ‘the Perfect Man’ (*al-Insān al-kāmil*), this being expressed by the second testimony: ‘Muhammad is the Messenger of God’.