

Christians, Muslims and the name of God: Who owns it, and how would we know?

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The identity of individuals is problem enough in the case of Sir John Cutler's stockings, which, being originally silk have been continuously darned with wool until none of the silk remains. Are they the same socks, even though none of the original matter remains at the end of the process? Of course if you produce a pair of silk socks from behind your back, and then immediately a pair of wool socks, we can be certain that they are not just the same pair of socks, because one and the same pair of socks cannot be simultaneously all silk and all wool. But as for Sir John's socks it's different, for they have history on their side: intuitively, I guess, we are inclined to say that they are the same socks, because what links the end with the beginning is a single, unbroken, spatio-temporal process of change, or, as we might say, a single narrative of space and time co-ordinates. And if that intuition is correct, then it follows that even as of purely material individuals you do not need any actual sameness of matter as a condition of their identity. And that is just as well, given that since Heisenberg's discovery of his 'uncertainty principle' the velocities and positions of sub-atomic particles of matter have themselves been shown to be simultaneously indeterminable. For Newtonian middle-sized material objects, fortunately, all we need is Newtonian spatio-temporal continuities on a middle-sized scale.

In my opinion sameness of persons is obedient to much the same conditions, at any rate, speaking as a non-dualist. I do not suppose, as a certain kind of Cartesian might, that what makes me at the age of 66 to be the same person as a certain Denys Turner was on August 5, 1942, is the sameness of Denys Turner's soul. Or, at any rate, since his soul does come into it, it does so because his soul is individuated by his body, which is in turn individuated along the same lines, and meeting the same conditions, as are Sir John Cutler's silk stockings: there is a single unbroken narrative of the spatio-temporal co-ordinates which make a body to be just this body, and so a soul to be the soul of just this person. Otherwise, like Thomas Aquinas, I have no idea how a dualist imagines a soul just in its own terms could be an existent individual. To put it simply, "I am not my soul"— anima mea non est ego— as Thomas says in his commentary on I Corinthians. For a soul is not a self; my soul is just how a self is alive with a certain kind of life, namely human. And I can make no sense of an 'how-I-am-alive' which is not an 'how this body is alive', individuated, by the body it is the soul of.

I say these things merely so as to set the scene as far as concerns our ordinary, secular, concepts of 'sameness', and not dogmatically, for I am aware that if the issues about the sameness of individuals are horrendously complex, all the more contested is the kind of solution to them I have just so superficially paraphrased. I raise the issues here as preliminary to a brief reflection upon the following quotation from a Christian authority, who says much the same, I guess, as most of us here would want to hear said, in support of the proposition that

Christians and Muslims believe in, and worship, 'one and the same God'. Here is what that Christian authority says:

God, the Creator of all, without whom we cannot do or even think anything that is good, has inspired to your heart this act of kindness. He who enlightens all men coming into this world (John 1.9) has enlightened your mind for this purpose. Almighty God, who desires all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2.4) and none to perish is well pleased to approve in us most of all that besides loving God men love other men, and do not do to others anything they do not want to be done unto themselves (cf. Mt. 7.14). We and you must show in a special way to the other nations an example of this charity, for we believe and confess one God, although in different ways, and praise and worship Him daily as the creator of all ages and the ruler of this world. For as the apostle says: "He is our peace who has made us both one." (Eph. 2.14) Many among the Roman nobility, informed by us of this grace granted to you by God, greatly admire and praise your goodness and virtues... God knows that we love you purely for His honour and that we desire your salvation and glory, both in the present and in the future life. And we pray in our hearts and with our lips that God may lead you to the abode of happiness, to the bosom of the holy patriarch Abraham, after long years of life here on earth.¹

It might surprise you to know that the author of these words was a pope. It will almost certainly surprise you to know that they are the words of a medieval pope, Gregory VII, writing in the late eleventh century – in notably more generous terms than his current successor - to the Muslim King Anzir of Mauritania: no soft liberal eirenecist this Gregory, nor was he a respecter of persons who could require Henry II, the Holy Roman Emperor, to travel to Rome bare-footed in the snow in penance for his assertion of imperial claims against the papacy. And what does this pope say? Not only that we, Christians and Muslims, believe and confess the same

¹ Gregory VII, Letter to Anzir, King of Mauritania, in Jacques Dupuis, The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church, 7th ed., (New York: Alba House, 2001), 418-419.

God, but also that we ‘praise and worship Him daily as the creator of all ages and the ruler of this world’, albeit ‘in different ways’: for Gregory it is with the lex orandi as it is with the lex credendi. Now I wonder: how can Pope Gregory be so sure of that? What would count as believing, confessing, praising and worshipping, ‘the same God’? Much to the same point: what would count as Christians and Muslims not believing, confessing, praising and worshipping, the same God? Or just generally, how do we know that your God and my God are one and the same God? Or, yet again— but this time to ask somewhat more pointedly and less theoretically— are those Malaysian Muslims doctrinally justified, if ecumenically ungenerous, who are giving their Christian compatriots a hard time for taking to themselves the name “Allah,” on the grounds that what is in the one case the true God and in the other an idol cannot share the same name?

I do not think these questions are idle. I do not think you can just say: “it doesn’t really matter whether we do or do not believe in, or worship, the same God, because what matters is that Christians and Muslims are amicable, do not feel divided over such issues; and if the point is not to be divided over issues of theology, the best way is to avoid entertaining theological issues in the first place. So let the matter rest as to whether we believe in the same God, on some agreed criterion of sameness. For in any case, is it not optimistic enough to suppose that we could agree as to the same God when we are faced with the even more dismal prospect that we probably will not agree even as to the appropriate criterion of sameness? So let us not divide over issues which in principle cannot be settled and attend to the more practical matter of how to live in peace, and to the areas of practical action

where we can find uncontested common ground, in work for justice and peace in our global village.”

This line of response is, I concede, good ecumenical practice in certain circumstances – I mean, often it is good practice to eschew divisive issues of theology pro tempore for the sake of practical co-operation over issues on which we can presuppose agreement, if only for the reason that the habits of practical co-operation can create circumstances more favorable to successful doctrinal dialogue than does going for the theological jugular from the outset. But neither Christians nor Muslims can ever more than provisionally detach the theological issues from the practical, justice from the knowledge of God, and soon enough both will want to re-engage the one with the other. In any case, though I do know some Christians who seem not theologically to mind if others have got God wrong and worship, as if God, something other than what they themselves worship, it matters to me. And even if I am in a minority among Christians in respect of this theological prescriptiveness, it certainly does matter to most Muslims of my acquaintance. Moreover, I share the Muslim view that others’ worship of the wrong God is a sort of offence against mine, indeed it is just about as fundamental as offences get, being a form of idolatry. Even if I believe they are wrong to think it so, I can very well see why my belief in the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity in the human nature of Christ matters to a Muslim, for this must seem simultaneously to have introduced multiplicity into the One God and an idolatrous worship of a human person. And I expect most Muslims will understand why their belief that the Word of God is incarnate in the Q’ran seems to me hard to distinguish from the idolatrous worship

of a book, even if they, no doubt, will maintain that I am wrong to do so. In short, I begin from the proposition which in my experience of Muslims I share with most of them, namely, that if it is true that we do, genuinely, disagree about God, then our doing so matters more than anything else at all on which we do happen to agree. So do we disagree about God? More particularly (it is the focus of this paper) does a Muslim's saying 'God is one' and a Christian's saying, 'God is three in one' mean that Christians and Muslims cannot be said to worship the same God - because what the one affirms about God the other denies?

Hick's "Kantian apophaticism"

There is a way, proposed by John Hick, of construing the differences between Christians and Muslims on the oneness of God which, without eliding those differences, allows the conclusion nonetheless that they do worship the same God. Now I have the greatest respect for John personally, and for his views – after all, I was for a few years his successor in the HG Wood chair of Theology in Birmingham University, and we have been the very best of friends since. But I think his position is profoundly wrong, though interestingly it can sound curiously like that of Pope Gregory. Like Gregory, Hick concedes that we believe in and worship God each in our 'different ways'; but Hick, also like Gregory, believes that it is, to use his own expression, one and the same 'ultimate reality,' unknowable in itself, in which, or in whom, we differently believe and worship.

Of course I cannot here do justice to the subtlety of Hick's argument, though I would at this point like to interject a note of generalised anxiety about the conduct of interfaith dialogue in that form in which it takes its terms from the comparative study of religion. It is obvious, I suppose, that the category of 'religion' is a taxonomical term of principally academic provenance. I mean, I know of no one at all who actually practices 'religion'. For sure I don't. I am a practicing Catholic Christian. Speaking for myself it bothers me little, one way or the other, if someone within the academic community wants to tell me that, in going to Mass on a Sunday, I am practicing 'religion'. It doesn't bother me, because it affects my going to Mass in no way at all that the academic student of religion wants so to describe what I am doing there, for there is nothing internal to that practice of mass attendance to which that academic's describing it as 'religious' makes the least difference. The category of 'religion' may be important to the academic who has other, comparativist, fish to fry. But the believer needs no such term of art in which to mediate his practice, as the case may be, of Islam, or Christianity, or Zoroastrianism, or whatever.

What begins to trouble me a bit is when that academic describes the whole system of belief and practice of Christianity as a 'religion', if that is supposed to entail that what makes that belief-system not something else, say, not a 'secular' practice, is some character it has on a comparativist's common terms with 'other' religions. For that would seem to amount to the claim that what I would find in my faith tradition which makes it 'religious' lies either in the lowest common factor of belief, symbol, ritual and practice shared by all 'religions', that is, that it consists in a

sort of minimal thread of continuity between them; or else that it lies in something other than that which is embodied in the divergent practices of a particular faith, something that, as one might say, they all in some way are said to aspire to, or would ideally converge upon, could they be got to acknowledge the particularity and cultural contingency of their avowed and explicit practice of belief.

Now what seems wrong with the LCF standard of comparison is that the minimum that is common to all 'religions' is almost certainly going to be what is least interesting in any of them; and what seems wrong with the 'convergent' account of the commonality uniting religions is that it relativises mine, down-sizing to the standing of the provisional what I think of as absolute claims, while offering nothing in epistemic return. For what my, and other 'religions' are supposed to converge upon will have to be described in terms that are neutral between them all and owned by none. And that, it seems to me, is no basis for any sort of dialogue between them. What that 'convergent' understanding of 'religion' appears to yield up is a bastard conception of dialogue which, as between any two religious traditions, amounts to a sort of tertium quid: a sui generis discourse of dialogue standing on its own and additional to the discourses proper to and natural within the faith traditions themselves. It is within this latter conception of the 'religious' that it seems right to place Hick's account of it.

As I say, in comments as necessarily brief as these, it is hard not to do an injustice to Hick's way of making the distinction between, on the one hand, the culturally specific and contingent beliefs and ritual practices of Islam and Christianity, and on the other the 'ultimate reality' which is the common object of

both. But in principle the distinction seems to rely on two different, and in my view incompatible, antecedents, one philosophical and Kantian, the other theological and Eckhartian. The distinction between what in a religious formation is, as it were, 'cultural' and contingent and the 'ultimate reality' thus diversified by its doctrines and rituals, leaves us with all the epistemological problems of Kant's Ding an sich. For, being beyond the reach of all possible description, this 'ultimate reality' is an empty category, and its evacuation of all descriptive content offers merely the appearance of providing some common ground – some sameness of God – while at the same time cutting the ground from under any possibility either of affirming or of denying that 'sameness'. For the absolute unknowableness of 'ultimate reality' eliminates all content on which any criteria of sameness and difference can get a grip. After all, if your doctrines of God can no more get a grip on this 'ultimate reality' than can mine, the sameness we can be said to share is nothing more than the common possession of a nescio quid: we might, in short, be said to share a common ignorance. But I am afraid that if you share with me my complete ignorance of mathematics, it isn't as if there is any mathematics that we can be said to share. All we share is the ignorance, describable as 'mathematical' only in the sense that that is what it is ignorance of.

Hick, in more recent writings, however, seems to think that he gains support for his neo-Kantian epistemology in some specifically Christian, and pre-Kantian, 'mystical theologies', especially in that radically 'apophatic' theology of the fourteenth century German Dominican, Meister Eckhart. For sure, Eckhart does tempt the Hick-minded comparativist. Indeed he does distinguish between what he

calls Gott and the Gottheit, between the 'God' who is known indirectly as mediated through his/her relation with creation, that is, by analogy derived from the divine effects, and the 'Godhead' which is beyond all knowing, even by analogy. Famously, Eckhart even prays to God 'that he may set me free from God', where around that second occurrence of 'God', naming the God from whom Eckhart wishes to be set free, it has become customary in English translations to insert the device, unavailable to medievals, of scare quotes. And this distinction between 'God' and 'the Godhead' can seem to be akin to Hick's, as if, on an extension of Eckhart's ground you could say: 'God' as known by us, known in this way or that within a particular faith tradition, is a sort of provisional God, whereas the hidden Godhead is beyond all knowledge and description, the same for us all.

Admittedly, Eckhart's distinction between Gott and Gottheit is misleadingly set out in that famous sermon. But the appropriation of the distinction on Hick's neo-Kantian lines is plausible only on a misinterpretation of it. Eckhart's theological epistemology is much indebted to Islamic and Jewish sources, and especially to Ibn Sina, or "Avicenna," as Eckhart knew of him. Both acknowledge the ultimate unknowability of God, though Eckhart frequently presses this 'apophaticism' to rhetorical extremes – especially, it goes without saying, in his intensely rhetorical vernacular sermons. But neither Eckhart nor Ibn Sina ever deny that true affirmative utterances are possible of the one and only God. For neither of them is the apophatic the doctrine that we are short of things to say about God for, on the contrary, both maintain that creation is an inexhaustible repertoire of names for God – they agree that there are (at least) 99 of them. The apophatic is no more than

the doctrine that true of God as 99 names are, they all fall short of him – and let us add that ‘him’ also falls short of God, if only to exactly the same extent as does ‘her.’ And I suppose it is all of a piece with this apophaticism to say, as Eckhart does, that if what you mean by ‘God’ is tied up too closely with what we know of God’s relationship with creation, then that knowledge ‘fails’ of God. For God would not cease to be God had she or he created nothing at all. For Eckhart, then, the ‘unknowability’ of the Godhead is not the unknowability of something else than ‘God’. The unknowable Godhead is just the other side of the divine knowability, and you cannot get to that ignorantia of God unless it is a docta ignorantia, an ignorance acquired through the patient amassing of the true names of God, on the other side of which alone the true unknowability of God is reached. That is to say, through knowing alone do you make it into the ‘cloud of unknowing.’ That is, you can’t get to where the unnameableness of God lies unless you get those true names right. As one might say in Wittgensteinian spirit, you cannot in a sort of fit of apophatic enthusiasm throw the ladder of naming away until you have climbed all 99 rungs on the way to the top of it. Or to deploy a different metaphor, the knowability and the unknowability of God are like shot silk: it is one and the same piece of dyed silk, but the colour you see varies, depending on the angle of refraction.

I very much doubt, therefore, that Hick’s appeal whether to Kant or to a misinterpreted version of Eckhart solves the problem of the divine ‘sameness’ with any adequacy of fit with the classical traditions of either Christian or Muslim forms of apophaticism. Hick’s position, moreover, would seem to leave us with the worst of both worlds from an ecumenical point of view: with an equivocal dividedness

unresolved so far as concerns anything we do say about God in our different traditions, and with nothing we can say as to the identity of any 'ultimate reality' we could unite on. In short, we need a solution which is more openly dialectical. We need the rough and tumble of argument. We appear to disagree, especially as to the 'oneness' of God. But do we? And how could you tell? Is it simply that we do not understand one another and are at cross-purposes, or is the disagreement genuine, such that, agreeing on what would count as the oneness of God, I say, God is not in that sense 'one' and you say he is? And if there is between us a genuine disagreement, is there agreement between us that that sort of disagreement can be settled on common ground and rules of argument? If we do not occupy the same territory theologically, is there any meta-theological common territory on which to settle our disagreements? Or, to put it in other terms, what are the rules for disagreement?

Christians and Muslims: how to disagree

Undoubtedly Christians and Muslims do disagree about God. But of what kind is their disagreement? Does a Muslim's saying 'God is one' and a Christian's saying, 'God is three in one' mean that Christians and Muslims cannot be said to worship the same God - because what the one affirms about God the other denies? Immediately we ask that question we notice an asymmetry: on the whole Christian theologians do not believe that the Trinitarian nature of God excludes the Muslim doctrine of the divine oneness, whereas on the whole Muslims believe that it does. We need to

know if this is just a misunderstanding on one side or the other, or both, if we are to get anywhere at all with our central question: "Do we believe in the same God?" Let us begin, then, with some clarifications which will help us narrow down the territory of this potential disagreement, for even if we are led to the conclusion that the disagreement is real, there is much in the meantime on which classical Christian and Muslim theologies would appear agree, at least on a somewhat negative semantic condition, namely that since they agree as to what their respective beliefs rule out, to boot, polytheism, to that extent at least they agree on a meaning for the oneness of God.

What, then, does it mean to say that God is 'one'? It means at least two distinguishable things on which Christians and Muslims undoubtedly agree. First, Christians and Muslims that there is one and only one God, polytheism is ruled out, there is no multiplicity of gods. Secondly, they are agreed that there is no multiplicity in God, God is utterly simple, without composition and without distinction. And in conjunction the two propositions mean that God does not enter into any sort of relations of multiplicity at all. Christians and Muslims agree on ruling out at least that much. When it comes to God there is no counting to do of any kind, and Eckhart is not departing from mainstream Christian theologies in any way when, Trinitarian theologian though he be, he says without qualification: 'there is no number in God.' How so?

You can look at one side of this 'uncountability' in God this way. Suppose, in the conduct of some quite lunatic thought-experiment, you were to imagine counting the total number of things that there are, have ever been, and will be, and

you get to the number n . Then I say: “fine, that’s the universe enumerated, but you have left out just one being, the being who made all that vast number of things that is the universe, namely God,” and, because you are not an atheist, you agree that this is so. Do you now add God to the list? Is that what I am asking you to do? Does the total number of things that there are now amount to $n+1$? Emphatically not for Eckhart; and – just in case you were to agree with Pope John XXII who in 1329 declared Eckhart’s theology to be of dubious Christian orthodoxy – emphatically not for the unquestionably orthodox Thomas Aquinas either. For Aquinas is as unambiguous as Eckhart, and says that God’s oneness is not such that God is one more in any numerable series whatever. And this is because both Eckhart and Thomas agree with the pseudo-Denys that ‘there is no kind of thing that God is.’ Hence, not being any kind of thing, not being ‘one of the things that there are,’ God cannot be counted in any list of the ‘everything that is.’ God’s oneness is not the oneness of mathematics, as it would be were I, as if equivalently, to say: ‘I’ll have one pie for lunch, not two.’

You might object: the oneness of God must be at least minimally mathematical, for it enters into mathematical relations of negation—‘ruling out’ must come into it again. For however transcendent you may say your understanding of God’s oneness is, it must entail the denial of a plurality of gods. You must know at least this much about there being one and only one God: like my one pie for lunch the oneness of God excludes there being two of them. That, of course, is so, but not for the reason that God’s ‘oneness’ excludes plurality in the same way as does the oneness of the numeral ‘one’. What is wrong with saying that there are two, or

twenty two, gods is not that you have added up the number of gods incorrectly. A plurality of gods is ruled out by God's oneness because God's oneness entails that counting is ruled out in every way. It is the adding up itself which is mistaken. For if in counting more than one God you get polytheism, in saying that the one and only God is numerably 'one' you are neither more nor less mistaken than in saying there are many. Either way you have but idolatry, in a form of which the classical theologies of both Christianity and Islam have long had the measure. Thus far, to the extent that I understand both, Christian and Muslim theologies have no need to quarrel over the oneness of God understood as the denial of polytheism. You need to say two things here on which both traditions are agreed. First, that, as of God, our grip on ordinary senses of oneness is loosened, perhaps (as some Christians in the Middle Ages were wont to say) analogically. Second, that if positively God's oneness is beyond our ken, our grip on the divine oneness is not so slack that we cannot know what it excludes.

But does not Christian Trinitarian doctrine reverse all this as regards the divine simplicity, as regards, that is, number in God? Granted that an agreed understanding of God's oneness rules polytheism out, does not this trinitarian understanding of the divine oneness introduce multiplicity and counting into God's inner life by means of its differentiation of persons? Do not Christians say that there are three persons in one God, not two, not four? To make matters worse, do you remember Bernard Lonergan's famous theological equation with which he used to introduce every class in the Gregorian University in Rome: that $5+4+3+2+1=0$? "In the Trinity," he would say, "there are five 'notions,' plus four 'appropriations,' plus three 'persons,' plus

two 'relations,' plus one 'being,' collectively adding up to the zero of the unknowable Godhead." What now about Eckhart's 'there is no counting in God,' resolutely Trinitarian as his theology is? That Christians do not just happen to say such things, that they are impelled to say them by force of their core doctrine of the Incarnation, can only make matters worse, for that nexus between the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity, so tight as it is in Christian theology, shows to a Muslim just what is wrong with the doctrine of the Incarnation too. The Muslim responds that you cannot consistently say 'God is one' in the sense of being utterly simple, and maintain that Jesus is the incarnation of just one of the three persons. Three persons in one God is an idolatrous oxymoron. In short, Muslim oneness appears to rule out the Christian Trinity.

As I understand it, the Muslim objection to Trinitarian theology – on this point of the logic of theological language – ought not to be thought to rest on the vulgar case, easily dismissed on their own grounds as much as on Christian, that it involves a contradiction of a simple mathematical sort, since it seems to maintain that the personal God who is one and in every way undivided is at the same time divided three ways by a trinity of persons. Of course nothing's being just one in a certain respect can be three in just that same respect. There cannot be more than one Denys Turner, even if, for all I know, there are three people in the telephone directory called 'Denys Turner'. Now you might think that in speaking of the Trinity of persons in one Godhead nothing more is claimed than to say that there are three instantiations of the divine nature in the same way that three persons called 'Denys Turner' are three instantiations of the one human nature. But Christians are not

saying that. They are not saying that just as there are three human beings called 'Denys Turner', one in New Haven, one in New Canaan, one in Litchfield, three in that they are three persons, one in that all three are human beings; so, in the same way, there are three divine persons, one the Father, another the Son, and the third the Holy Spirit, albeit one in that each is an individual instance of the divine nature. For that is self-evidently tri-theism and is utterly indefensible, even for Christians, and of course for Muslims. But if Christians are saying anything other than that, then are they not perforce saying that these three persons are one person? And that amounts to a plain contradiction – no mystery there, just muddled nonsense.

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas alike saw that what gets in the way of Trinitarian orthodoxy here is the troublesome word 'person.' You can see why you need the word theologically; indeed, both Christians and Muslims want to say that God is 'personal,' for how else than in and through the vocabulary of 'person' is the language of knowledge and love to get any purchase on God, which the scriptures of both our traditions not merely warrant but require. But I think it worth pointing out that it is not only for Christian Trinitarians that on our ordinary understanding of it, the word 'person' is going to cause trouble. As I say, Augustine and Thomas knew, and do not need instruction from us, that only tri-theistic mayhem would be visited upon their Trinitarian theologies were they to try to work them through on the basis of the standard meanings of 'person' available in their own times. More especially Thomas is sensitive to the problems generated by the accepted standard definition of 'person,' inherited from Boethius, as 'an individual substance of a rational nature.' It is because he defers to the tradition of translation which renders

Nicaea's Greek hypostasis by the Latin persona that he uses the term at all in his Trinitarian theology. And it is because he is made uneasy by the term that he avoids using it whenever he can. The problem is not so much that of the overtones of the word 'rational' that could be carried over into a misrepresentation of the divine knowledge (though there is trouble enough in wait there), but because of the implications of the expression 'individual substance of any 'nature.' If there are three Boethian substances in God – individual instantiations of a common nature - then necessarily tri-theism follows.

But Muslims should not too eagerly gloat over this Christian theological predicament. If they too want to speak of God as a 'person,' they had better watch out for the consequences for their own conceptions of the oneness of God. For just as indefensible as Christian tri-theism would be a Muslim account of the oneness of the divine personhood that construed it as the one and only, even as the one and only possible, instantiation of the divine nature. For that, after all, is the condition of the last dodo. The last dodo is of course unique. And being the last one of a species which procreates sexually, it is necessarily unique: there cannot be any more. But otherwise than on a merely contingent and de facto circumstance such as that of the extinction of all but one dodo, there is no possible sense to the notion that logically there can be only one instantiation of a nature. For any nature whatsoever, it is necessarily the case that logically it can be replicated. God is not the individuated instance of any nature, even of the divine nature: that is what the pseudo-Denys meant when he said that God is not any kind of being. Hence, it is not and cannot be as just one of a kind that God is 'one;' but then, neither can it be how the persons of

the Trinity are counted as 'three.' As Eckhart said, 'there is no counting in God'—not, as we must now understand him to have meant, as thereby somehow prioritizing the oneness of God over the Trinity, but as a condition equally of non-idolatrous talk of the Trinity and of non-idolatrous talk of the divine oneness. There can be no such counting in God either way.

The trouble with talk of persons, whether deployed of the divine Trinity or of the divine oneness, is, then, that, by force of its natural meaning, in the one case it tends to generate either tri-theistic heresy or plain contradictory nonsense, depending on which way you play it; and in the other it generates an idolatrous conception of God as just a special case of an individuated nature where just one individual exhausts all that nature's possibilities. And that cannot be what Muslims teach about the divine oneness. And given the requirements of the respective scriptural authorities, in both traditions alike, to speak of the 'personal' character of God, we have to ask how much of that natural meaning of 'person' can survive its transference upon the divine being. Or, to turn the problem around the other way (it amounts to the same problem) when it comes to the personhood of God, what can be left of our secular notions of either oneness or threeness?

Given their warnings about the theological trouble caused by a naïve employment of the language of 'persons,' both Augustine and Thomas resorted to the admittedly more abstract, and certainly humanly less appealing, category of divine relations; not, be it known, to relations of or between divine persons, but to persons as being nothing but relations. That, of course, is hard talk, and the language twists and bends under the pressure of having to say not that the Father generates

the Son, but is the generating of the Son; not that the Son is what is generated by the Father, but is the being generated by the Father; and even more awkwardly, not that the Holy Spirit is what is 'breathed forth,' or 'spirated,' by the Father through the Son, but is the being spirated by the Father through the Son. There is nothing here but relatings, no somewhats doing the relating. The language strains. But bent and twisted as the language is, does it break?

Here is an analogy which, like all such analogies, does some good explanatory work so long as it is not thought to do all of it. There is one and only one highway known as the Interstate 95. But it has two directions, one south from Boston to Miami, the other north from Miami to Boston. The direction north is of course really distinct from the direction south, as anyone knows to their cost who has entered the I-95 in the wrong direction a long way from the next intersection. And yet both are really identical with the one and only I-95. In this case, we are under no temptation to say that the difference between the direction north and the direction south is just a driver's point of view, because if you are mistakenly traveling to Boston when you want to get to Miami it is the direction you need to change, not your point of view. As a Christian theologian might analogously say, 'modalism' won't meet the case, the distinction of persons is 'real,' not notional. But equally, in the case of the I-95, we are under no temptation to say that there are three I-95s, the road north, the road south, and the road that north and south are the two directions of. For the relations of north-bound and south-bound directions are really identical with one and the same I-95. As we might say, tri-theism is not, on this analogy, entailed.

Of course I admit that this is at best a partial analogy, one designed to allay some initial suspicions concerning the logical consistency of Trinitarian orthodoxy with a resolute defense of the oneness of God. But that the analogy at best limps is shown by the fact that whereas the two directions, north to Boston and south to Miami, are real relations, and are really distinct from one another as relations, the tarmac covered strip is a real entity, distinct from the directions north and south not as they are distinct from one another, but only as in general any entity is distinct from any relation – in the way, for example, that I am distinct from my being on the right or on the left of this table. And if you were to press my analogy on the doctrine of the Trinity, you might indeed avoid modalism and tri-theism, but you would certainly get out of it some form or other of a heterodox subordinationism— the doctrine that the Father is existentially prior to the Son and the Holy Spirit, just as an entity is existentially prior to the relations which depend on it. And for Christians, Nicaean orthodoxy plainly rules that out.

What Nicaean orthodoxy requires Christians to say is that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all three ‘relatednesses.’ And however strange such talk may seem – and it is extraordinarily strange – you say it because only on such terms could you say without gross inconsistency both that the three persons are really distinct from one another and really identical with the one, undivided, Godhead. But therein lies the point: if, under the pressure of Christian belief, to wit, in the doctrine of the Incarnation, the meanings of ‘person’ and of ‘threeness’ have migrated off the semantic map of our secular vocabularies, so has the Muslim ‘oneness.’ For, as we have seen, the oneness of the one personal God of Islam cannot be thought of in

terms of the one and only instance of the divine nature either. In either tradition, then, the meanings of 'person,' 'threeness' and 'oneness' have all migrated theologically off the same semantic map, and to the same extent. To which conclusion I would add only this rider, that it is much easier for a Muslim than it is for a Christian to forget this, as if the 'oneness' of God were easier to get into your head than the Trinity. It isn't.

Getting the "apophatic" right

At this point it is tempting on both sides to appeal to the 'apophatic' distance between God and any creatures or any creaturely analogy. This was Augustine's move – it surprises some, though it shouldn't – that in book 15 of his De trinitate, where, having for fourteen books played out his analogy between the soul's highest powers and the persons of the Trinity for all its worth, he concludes that of course it doesn't work; or, as in his more compendious way, Lonergan did, who having piled up on top of one another all fifteen of the Trinitarian enumerations concluded that they added up to a zero, cognitively speaking. Well, as we will see, we do have to make some such appeal. God is a mystery, and I think it fair to say that the best theologies in either faith tradition are designed not to eliminate, but on the contrary, to safeguard, the mystery which God is. But, as we saw with Hick, it is essential to get the mystery of God in the right place. And there are two ways of getting it in the wrong place. You have certainly misplaced it if what you say in your theology amounts to forms of contradiction detectable by the means of ordinary logic. Plain

contradictions are not apophatic: they are simple nonsense. Contradictions do not point to mysteries beyond our understanding. They simply fail to point.

On the other hand, if the appeal to the apophatic is meretricious in support of plain nonsense, neither can we allow the Hickian move which simply shifts the problem over to the other horn of the dilemma. There is no way out of the apparent conflict between Islam and Christianity on the question of the oneness and threeness of God simply by evacuating both of all such content as could entail a contradiction. That would be no more justifiable an appeal to the 'apophatic' than would Hick's, indeed it would be wrong for exactly the same reason. That is to say, just as Hick's 'ultimate reality' conflicts with nobody's theology because a fortiori there can be no knowable descriptions true of it to conflict with anything, so concepts of the divine oneness and of Trinitarian threeness which have no consequences for counting in God gain an ecumenical reduction in conflict by the device of nothing's being asserted on either side. But both Christian and Muslim doctrines of God do, as we have seen, have some exclusionary consequences for counting: for Christians there are three persons in one God, not two or four; and for both Christians and Muslims, there is one God and not two or twenty two. For both alike, the simplicity of God is preserved; for both alike, everything true of God is God.

So have we made any progress at all? Certainly some, but not very much. But then I am not sure how much progress we should expect to have made. At its most pessimistic you might say that all I have achieved so far is a sort of logical throat-clearing, nothing yet having been offered positively, but only what will not do by way of an answer to the question, "Do Christians and Muslims believe in the same

God?" On the Christian side we have apophatically to say that our way of counting persons in God is a pretty off-beat sort of counting, since it is not really persons, because not really individuals in any countable sense, that we are talking about; and yet, those Christians cannot so apophatically evacuate the divine three-ness as to disable their entitlement to say: 'three, not two, not four.' And the case matches up on the Muslim side. Muslims must place an apophatic restriction on their 'oneness' of God, for they know that it cannot be as you might count the number of Gods that you know there is only one, even if they also know better than to be so apophatically extreme about the divine oneness as to disable their right to reject polytheism. But that being so, it is on their own account of the divine oneness that Muslims should beware of concluding that Christians merely contradict themselves when they say that there are three persons in one God, or that they thereby compromise the divine oneness. Muslims might have other reasons to say that Christians are wrong about God, perhaps even that they are idolatrously wrong. But what Christians claim about the Trinity does not at least contradict what Muslims say about the divine oneness.

But are they the same God? What little my argument at best demonstrates is that Christians and Muslims meet a necessary condition for the sameness of the God they confess and worship, namely that both rule out the same contraries (all plurality of gods and all plurality in God) and that neither need rule out the other in so doing. But I have made no attempt to meet those sufficient conditions for sameness that would be required to establish that Christians and Muslims do worship the same God. That is simply because I do not know what those conditions are—I don't know how to describe them, though I do believe that, whatever they are

they can and will be met in what Christians call the 'beatific vision' and both call 'paradise.' This plea of ignorance is not a merely English conceit of academic modesty. I mean, really I don't know what those conditions are. But then I am not pretending to think you don't know what they are either. Really you don't. And this is because, as I have said, all our secular criteria for identity are disabled as of God, whether these are appropriate for silk or wool stockings or for the identity of persons. For if we cannot say that God is in any ordinary, secular, sense, an individual then it follows that we cannot employ our standard secular criteria to establish individual sameness. Likewise, if we cannot say that the three persons of the Trinity are in any ordinary sense three 'somewhats,' then it does not seem clear on what grounds you could say that they are not each identical with the one undivided God. So to say, the question of whether it is true that there are three persons in one God is rationally undecidable, a matter of faith, of what is or is not revealed. Of course, then, Christians do not and cannot claim to know how there could be three persons in one God. But then, the oneness of God is no less beyond our understanding too. And it is just for that reason that it seems impossible to come up with any knock-down way of establishing the identity of the Christian and Muslim Gods, as if, like the two pairs of socks, I could produce a pair from behind my back, and then do it again, and ask you to compare them for identity.

But if, short of the beatific vision in which we Christians and Muslims can hope to share, I am skeptical of any conclusive demonstration of sameness, there is something else I can do - and I hereby do it. I can offer a challenge, to both Christians and Muslims, to come up with a way of showing that when in Malaysia both call

upon “Allah” they are not calling on the same God. That is, I challenge them to provide such demonstration of their dismissals of the other’s claims on that name as, each on their own terms, does not presuppose or entail a reductively idolatrous and fundamentalist betrayal of their own best traditions. For my part, I will offer no prize for the best entry. That would be unfairly to rig the competition. For if I am right it cannot be done at all.

And that’s because, in concluding on what will seem an excessively downbeat note, I have not told the whole story.² Not by a long chalk. Not, however, because I could have told it but didn’t, but because it cannot be told at all and because there is only an idolatrous and reductive betrayal in the attempt to tell it. Indeed, all along in this paper that has been my point, namely, that short of the beatific vision the whole story does not lie within our pre-mortem power to tell. And also my point has been to argue for that impossibility, or maybe just to exhibit it, because it is essential to know that we cannot tell the whole story, and because it is essential not only that we do our theologies, but also that we live our lives, under the constraint of that impossibility. To possess the whole story is possible only within the beatific vision, indeed being able to tell it is paradise. So if it is so important to know that we cannot for the nonce tell it, it is just as important to know that it is there to be told and that one day we will find ourselves partaking in the unimaginable joy of its telling.

² An earlier version of this paper concluded at the end of the last paragraph. I wrote this revised conclusion after a conversation with Elena Lloyd-Sidle, a Muslim student at the Yale Divinity School. She made me think of Dante’s Folco. I am deeply grateful to Elena for that conversation.

As Dante knew. Folco, in Dante's Paradiso, tells us that there within the vision of God, where at last all see and all is seen and, being seen, all is thereby redeemed, 'we do not remember our fault, here we simply smile'³ at the 'art that makes beautiful the great result.'⁴ Within that 'great result,' Folco tells us, he can afford to forget that which on earth he had need to be weighed down by, the memory of his sins. And so in paradise he can afford to smile. And we, like Folco, will be able simply to smile at our sins, because then, without either excusing or trivializing their depravity, they can no longer weigh us down, can place no burden of guilt upon memory. And as it will be with our sins so will it be for our presently unresolved theological divisions. Then together we will be able to do what we cannot do now. For now we must remember them, there is no honesty in a premature attempt to forget them. Only then will we be able to smile at those divisions—with smiles far removed from the raucous laughter of those who ridicule them, as if it had been only for foolishness that those divisions had mattered to us. For they did matter. We could not have abandoned them without loss of such truth as was then possible for us. For now we must live with those divisions, sure only of a common hope that they will be overcome, that memory redeemed will be able to tell a healing narrative that we cannot now tell. But in paradise we will look one another in the eye and simply smile at the glint that we see there. Then we will smile with the joy of memory healed, with the joy that we each see in the eyes of the other at our divisions at last resolved. Then, indeed, but, for now, not yet.

³ Paradiso, 9, 103-4.

⁴ Paradiso, 9, 106-7.