DO MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN THE SAME GOD?

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ABSTRACT

Muslims and Christians do indeed believe in the same God. It can be substantiated with the help of two chief sources: the revealed data of the Qur'an, and the inspired data of the mystics of both Christianity and Islam. The Qur'an–and the Sunna or Conduct of the Prophet, which is an eloquent commentary thereon–provides us with irrefutable 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 God in whom Muslims and Christians believe is one and the same; here, the stress must be placed on the Object of belief, rather than the subject thereof: if 'belief' be defined principally in terms of the divine Object rather than the human subject, then our answer to the question posed will be in the affirmative. The positions of exclusivist and universalist are open to the Muslim who acknowledges that Christians believe in the same God as do Muslims. To the extent that exclusivist theological tendencies prevail, this acknowledgment will be joined to an invitation (*da'wa*) to embrace Islam, thereby replacing an ambiguous, theologically formulated dogma of the Trinity with an unambiguous revealed doctrine of *Tawhid*. Alternatively, the universalist Muslim can affirm not only that Christians worship the same God as do Muslims. This infinite oneness will then be seen as that which encompasses all things, and as such, is far from a numerical unity; rather, it is simply, that which has no second.

To a direct question such as this, it is good to give an equally direct answer: Yes–unequivocally and unabashedly, Muslims and Christians do indeed believe in the same God. We will substantiate our position with the help of two chief sources: the revealed data of the Qur'an, and the inspired data of the mystics of both Christianity and Islam. The Qur'an–and the Sunna or Conduct of the Prophet, which is an eloquent commentary thereon–provides us with irrefutable 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. As we hope to show, 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 God believed in by Muslims and Christians. We can summarise our argument as follows: Muslims and Christians believe in the same God objectively, ontologically, and metaphysically; this is so, despite the fact that subjectively, conceptually and theologically, their conceptions of God be divergent, even contradictory. The God in whom Muslims and Christians believe is one and the same; here, the stress must be placed on the Object of belief, rather than the subject thereof: if 'belief' be defined principally in terms of the divine Object rather than the human subject, then our answer to the question posed will be in the affirmative.

We cannot of course ignore the subjective side of the question, 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 attempt 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. The mystics of the two traditions help us to arrive at this position of divine 'objectivity', this perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*, in which the unique metaphysical Object of belief takes priority over the theologically divergent, subjectively variegated, conceptions of that Object. The divine, or absolute, or ontological 'Yes' to the question

posed will then be seen to infinitely outweigh any possible human, relative or conceptual 'No'.

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'anic formulations of which explicitly rejects that which lies at the core of Christian belief, the idea that God could have a 'son'. Chapter 112 of the Qur'an, 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. What follows is an attempt to show that this incompatibility on the level of theological form does not necessarily imply incompatibility on the level of spiritual essence. Muslims and Christians can, to borrow James Cutsinger's challenging phrase, 'disagree to agree': they can disagree theologically and exoterically, in order to agree metaphysically and esoterically.[1]

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Qur'anic affirmation of the Christian 'God'

It is part of a Muslim's belief that God, as the source of life and love, wisdom and compassion, has revealed messages concerning Himself to *all* human communities, in different ways, and at different times;[2] 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'an. The Muslim in enjoined by the Qur'an 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'an, is objectively 'believed in' by Muslims, Christians and Jews who are faithful to their respective revelations.

> '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 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).[3]

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 these assertions of the unique source of revelation for all three traditions is the Qur'an'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 and your God is One, and unto Him we submit'* (29:46).

This verse gives us the most definitive answer to the question we have been asked, and it is 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 believers in the Christian and Jewish

communities–thus inducing a spirit of solidarity among all those who believe in '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–would assuredly have been destroyed' (22: 39-40).
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> 'The name of God'–of 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 many '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.[4] 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).

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*;[5] this knowledge is either nurtured and brought to fruition through revelation granted by God, or else neglected and stunted by forgetfulness and sin. 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'an 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:

> '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).
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> '*Their* Lord', *Rabbihim*, in other words, the Lord of the Jews and Christians is the same as the Lord of the Muslims. The People of the Book are not told to first ensure that their conception of God corresponds exactly to the Islamic conception, and then 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 believe, the one and only God believed in and worshipped by the Muslims, Christians and Jews alike. Similarly, in the very same verse in which the Prophet is told not to follow the 'whims' (*ahwā'*) 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, and His attributes and His acts. *That* He is 'our Lord' is not disputed–we all believe in Him; *how* 'our Lord' is conceived by us is the subject of the dispute.

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–in which the sincerity of the human subject of faith is brought into harmonious confrontation with the transcendence of the divine Object of faith–is not annulled by an erroneous conception of That in which one has faith. This positing of two unequal degrees of faith, the one essential and definitive, the other formal and derivative, is not based solely on the Qur'anic verses expressing these two attitudes to the Christian 'faith', on the one hand affirmative and on the other negative; it is also derived, as we shall see below, from an act of the Prophet which serves as an implicit commentary, at once dramatic and eloquent, on these two aspects of the Qur'anic discourse.

Qur'anic critique of the Trinity

Before looking at this crucial act of the Prophet, let us consider the Qur'anic critique of the Trinity, and of the idea of divine Sonship, and to note that, although the idea of 'threeness' is censured in a general way, the only specific 'trinity' mentioned in the Qur'an 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, the specific configuration of the 'trinity' 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).

One of the most influential commentators in the specifically theological tradition of exegesis, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, for example, comments as follows on Q. 4:171:

> '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*). The proof of this is that they deem it possible for these essences to inhere (*hulūl*) in the person of Jesus and in that of Mary. Were it not so, they would not have deemed it possible for them to inhere in any other [than God], nor separate from that other again. Though they call them "attributes", 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'an in its entirety would be refuted; and the intellect would also be invalidated since we necessarily know that the concept of God being Knower (*'āliman*) is other than the concept of Him being Omnipotent (*qādiran*) or Living (*hayyan*).'[6]

Even if the 'trinity' being refuted here is conceived as consisting of the Father, Jesus and Mary,[7] and even if the Eastern Orthodox view of the Trinity is one in which the 'monarchy' of the Father implies that the other two Persons of the Trinity are not in fact 'self-subsisting' but subsist through the Father as their sole cause and source,[8] the crux of the Muslim critique is focused on the Christian idea of the one divine Essence being equally present in and thus 'shared' by three Persons or Hypostases; this, in contrast to the

Muslim conception of the one Essence manifesting Itself as so many attributes (*sifāt*, sing. *sifa*), whose sole ontological substance is the Essence. The latter idea is a concomitant of *Tawhīd*, being an 'integration'[9] of diverse divine attributes within a single ontological substance or essence. Al-Ghazali, for example, gives the classical orthodox Sunni-Ash'ari position on the divine attributes as follows: the essential attributes of God–living, knowing, powerful, willing, hearing, seeing, speaking–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 are not identical to the Essence but neither are they other than it.[10] The relationship between the attributes and the Essence is viewed in diverse ways in Islamic theology, but what the overwhelming majority of these formulations have in common is the insistence that the attributes revert to and are predicated of a unique ontological Essence which transcends them all, and by which alone they subsist.[11] By contrast, the Christian view of the Trinity is deemed to be *shirk*, 'association' or polytheism insofar as it posits three Persons who are deemed to be equally divine. Rāzī says that if the Christians confined themselves to affirming only that God had three attributes, which subsisted not through themselves, but through the Essence of God which radically transcended their Personhood, then they could not be accused of *kufr* or of *shirk*.

The kind of reconciliation of the two theologies apparently being proposed by Rāzī is one in which Christians affirm the transcendence of the unique Essence vis-á-vis the three Persons–or else affirm the transcendence of the 'Father' understood as the Essence, who then manifests Himself through two attributes; this is in contrast to a perception of the Essence being 'shared' equally by the three Persons who are rendered thereby quasi-indistinguishable from that Essence. It is clear, however, that one of the definitive features of the (orthodox formulation of the) Trinity is precisely this consubstantiality of the three Persons: to affirm a higher Substance or Essence, of which the Persons are so many attributes, aspects or modes, is to fall into what is called the Sabellian heresy of 'modalism'. Orthodoxy insists that there is no higher Substance than that which is equally shared by the Persons; even if the fount and source of the Godhead be the Father, He shares that Godhead with the other two Persons entirely. And it is this 'sharing'–among other things–which renders the gap between the theologies of Islam and Christianity unbridgeable. It might be thought the sharing in question cannot be absolute, inasmuch as the Father remains the sole cause of the Godhead, but this would be to give too much emphasis

to the Unity of God and ruin the balance between that Unity and Trinity. St Gregory of Nazianzen makes this clear in his reluctance to use the word 'origin' in relation to the Father:

> '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 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.'[12]

For the Muslim theologian the principle of unity–'one God because of the monarchy'–is 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 all three Persons of the Trinity in a quasi-absolute manner: each Person is fully God by dint of sharing the same substance of Godhead, 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. 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, 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.'[13]

It is important to highlight the contrast between the two theologies as regards the question of the divine attributes. Everything possessed by the Father–all the divine attributes such as knowledge, power, will, etc.–is equally possessed by the Son and the Spirit, who are distinguished from the Father only by virtue of their particular personal quality of, respectively, being begotten by, and proceeding from, the Father. This view diverges radically from the Islamic conception of the attributes, all of which are possessed by one sole Essence, and each of which are 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, the two attributes are equally predicated of each of the three Persons, who are distinguished from each other, not as one

(Islamically conceived) attribute is distinct from another, but solely by a personal quality defined according to the criterion of origin: 'the properties of being unbegotten, of filiation, and of procession', as St John put it, describing, respectively, the Father, Son and Spirit. The three Persons cannot therefore be seen as different attributes of God–nor can the second and third Persons of the Trinity be considered as the two attributes of the first Person; rather, each of the Persons equally possesses all of the attributes of the other two, with the sole exception of the quality determined by their 'personal' properties. Apart from this sole distinction, each Person of the Trinity is deemed to be equal to the others insofar as the divine attributes are concerned; so the Son and the Spirit is as omniscient and omnipotent as the Father, and the same applies to all the attributes. It is this 'sharing' of divine attributes that is deemed by Muslim theologians to be a violation of *Tawhīd*, constituting the cardinal sin of *shirk*.

If one adds to these considerations the Christian belief that the second Person of the Trinity was incarnated as Jesus Christ, a man who possessed simultaneously a divine nature and a human nature, while retaining an undivided Personhood, so that God Himself 'became man'–the theological incompatibility between the dogmas of the two faiths will appear all the more absolute. What is a gloriously redeeming paradox for Christianity is pure and utter contradiction for Islam. The salvific paradox of God become man is brought home in all its mystery by the founding father of the way of apophasis, St Dionysius the Areopagite:

> 'But especially is It [God as both Unity and Trinity] called loving towards mankind because It truly and completely shared our human nature, recalling and uniting to Itself, in one of Its Persons, the lowness of humanity from which, in an ineffable manner, the simplicity of Jesus became composite, and the Eternal took a temporal existence, and He who super-essentially transcends the whole order of the natural world came down into our nature, yet preserved His own essential Nature wholly unmingled and unchanged.'[14]

However, even if the Christian dogmas fall short of the requirements of *Tawhīd*, the point made earlier, based on Qur'anic 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: which aspect takes priority within the Qur'anic discourse, that of the denial of the Christian conception of the Trinity, or that of the affirmation of the Christian belief in the one God?

Both aspects, of course, have to be accepted by the Muslim, but the challenge is to determine which is to be given priority in the

process of synthesising them into one fundamental attitude to Christian belief. We would argue that the aspect of affirmation must take priority, insofar as the grounds upon which one can affirm that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God, objectively, are more fundamental than the subjective differences of conception of that God. This position will emerge in the measure that we regard the principle of spiritual intention, governed by the divine Object, as taking precedence over the rational conception, fashioned by the human subject. Seen thus, we can assert that what unites Muslims and Christians–belief in one God and not several gods–is infinitely more significant that what divides them: their respective conceptions of the nature, the attributes and the actions of that God. The Qur'anic assertion that the God of the Christians and Muslims is one and the same is an assertion relating more to objective reality and principial idealism than to subjective perception and phenomenal fact: 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 God 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 opposite position will be upheld, that of asserting that the Trinitarian dogma overshadows if not eclipses the oneness of the God thus being described.

Our position might be buttressed by arguments of a different order, symbolic and metaphysical rather than ratiocinative and theological. An appeal has to be made to spiritual intuition, to 'reasons of the heart' rather than simply the logic of the mind. 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 which surpasses the level of formal thought. It shows graphically, or 'proves' with a dazzling self-evidence, that the God worshipped and believed in by Christians is indeed the same God that is worshipped and believed in by Muslims. It also shows the importance of affirming solidarity with 'fellow-believers', and how this spiritual solidarity among believers must ultimately prevail over all theological differences between them.

In the 9th year after the Hijra (631)[15] 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. 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 place of the Muslims 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'anic 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; 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 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 esoteric or spiritual identity is implied or intended: the summit is One, and the believer 'tends towards' that oneness in sincere devotion, whatever be the form taken by that devotion: 'so strive with one another in good works. 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'anic message regarding the God of the Christians: it is the same God that is worshipped, but that God is conceived differently–erroneously, as each would say about the other. The oneness of the divine Object takes precedence–infinitely, one might add–over any diversity wrought by the human subjects; that which is spiritually intended by sincere faith takes priority over the verbal and conceptual forms assumed by the intention, the spiritual tendency, the movement of the heart and soul towards 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 are thus distinct and irreducible, while the summit of the path delineated by dogma and ritual is one and the same.

The metaphysical principle expressed by the Prophet's act is seen also embedded 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,[16] and He says: "I am your Lord", and they reply: "You are our Lord!".'[17]

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, it is Ibn al-'Arabī who provides the most satisfying commentary on the cognitive implications of this principle, and who also furnishes us with our strongest grounds, from within the mystical tradition of Islam, 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: 'After the Mercy Itself, "the god created in belief" is the first recipient of Mercy.'[18] God is said to have 'written mercy' upon His own soul, according to the Qur'an (6:12, and . 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 existentiation, 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] ...'[19]

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 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.'[20]

In other words, God mercifully and lovingly reveals Himself to His creation in theophanies which cannot but conform themselves to the subjective dimension 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 belief gives way to the spiritual realization of the content of the belief. Or else the divine is swallowed up by the human, who is blinded by the 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 is 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 form of his own 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*). The distinction between these two dimensions within the divine nature is fundamental to the metaphysics of Ibn al-'Arabī. One can only know and relate to the names and qualities of the

Lord, or the 'divinity' or the 'level; but of the Essence one remains forever ignorant:

> 'He who supposes that he has knowledge of positive attributes of the Self has supposed wrongly. For such an attribute would define Him, but His Essence has no definition.'[21]

The Essence has nothing to do with creation; the only relationship between the divine Reality and creation is perforce mediated by an intermediary principle, which is the 'divinity' or the 'level': 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, only in respect of the fact that the Essence is described by divinity.'[22]

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 literal meaning of the verse relates to the prohibition of *shirk* or associating false gods with the true divinity, but Ibn Arabi 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 ..."'[23]

The degree of divinity that can be conceived of, believed in, and worshipped cannot be the pure untrammelled unity of the Essence. 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 with the opinion My slave has of Me.'[24] The word 'with' translates *'inda*, which might also be translated as 'present within/as/to'[25]: 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...'[26]

Ibn al-'Arabī is here referring back to the principle of the divine capacity to undergo *tahawwul*, according to the prophetic saying cited above. 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 between different religions: God is truly present within all these diverse conceptions and beliefs concerning Him, without this resulting in any fundamental contradiction, given the infinitude of the theophanic forms by which God can reveal Himself, and given the indefinite possibilities of conception spread throughout the human race. 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 conceptions of Him. One of the most useful images employed by Ibn al-'Arabī to reconcile the two terms of this paradox is that of the water and the cup: 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".'[27]

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. Ibn al-'Arabī is alluding to the need to recognize that water as such cannot be perceived except through the cup of one's own belief: this recognition enables one to realize that the 'water'–or theophanies/beliefs–in receptacles 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' are fashioned by authentic Revelation, even if

they be also forged by the unavoidable relativity of the creaturely faculty of conception. We are being urged by Ibn al-'Arabī to judge all such receptacles 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.'[28]

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 relativised 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 absoluteness of God that is relativised by the specificity of one's belief, but the opposite: the relativity of the human belief is rendered absolute by virtue of the absoluteness of its content, and in the measure that this content be assimilated in depth. For then one perceives–or drinks–water as such, the substance of which is identical to that contained in all other containers. So the very absoluteness of the content of one's realized belief leads to an assimilation of the infinitude proper to that absoluteness. 'Tasting' the water within one's own cup means tasting water as such, and thus, in principle, the water in all the other cups has likewise been drunk.

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.[29] 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, as 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,
> 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.'[30]

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 within the Islamic faith. 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'an 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).'[31]

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 proportioned 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.

One is urged by the metaphysics of Ibn al-'Arabī, then, to 'see through' the cup of one's own belief, and to be receptive to the 'water' it contains, the objective content of belief. This receptivity is

predicated on a clear conception of the inescapably limited nature of all conceptions: the intrinsically inconceivable nature of ultimate Reality can however be realized 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"'.[32]

This is the consummation of the apophatic path: 'extinction within contemplation', (*al-fanā' fī mushāhada*) this being precisely the title of one of Ibn al-'Arabī's most explicit treatises on the theme of *fanā'*. 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 transcend all conceptual expressions, and the very source of those concepts, the mind itself, in order to glimpse and finally to realize the Ineffable. 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.

We cannot enter into the breadth and depth of the apophatic tradition here; suffice to draw attention to the principal features of this tradition which are pertinent to our argument, and to cite two of its greatest representatives, the 'founding father' of this tradition, St Dionysius the Areopagite, and Meister Eckhart. First let us note the

importance of the following point made by 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.'[33]

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.'[34] This means, for us at any rate, that the dogma of the Trinity is not intended to function as an 'explanation' 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 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...'[35]

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 deny that 'He is in any way above the images which they fashion after various designs'. This resonates deeply with Ibn al-'Arabī'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 utterances, plunge into the Darkness where truly dwells, as the Scriptures declare, that One Who is beyond all.'[36]

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 Moses's quest for the vision of God is also used by Dinonysius 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 through 'the inactivity of all his reasoning powers' 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.'[37]

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 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 be regarded even 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.

If all 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 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. At this transcendent level, then, the pure Absolute 'believed in' by Christians and Muslims is revealed to be one and the same. This is expressed most explicitly, however, not through affirmation, but through radical denial. The Transcendent One is described as not being 'one or oneness … nor sonship nor fatherhood'.[38]

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 taken literally as definitions of that threshold, or, still less, the Essence of that Reality.

Eckhartian Trinity and Muslim Unity

Let us now turn to Eckhart, and look in particular at the daring manner in which the Trinity is relativised in the face 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 deny the Trinity: they believe in the Essence of that Divinity which assumes, 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 that the idea of 'monotheism' can be a veil over the One, 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 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', 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, inwardly differentiated by virtue of its own imprescriptible infinitude. To think otherwise, for the Sufis, is to fall into a 'hidden' polytheism or *shirk*. This *shirk khafī* was described by the Prophet as being 'more hidden than a black ant crawling on a dark stone in a moonless night'.[39]

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.'[40]

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 cannot relativise the divine reality by equating it with any attributes. 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.

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.[41] This is how he comments on the meaning of *ikhlās*, literally 'making pure', in theological parlance, sincere or pure worship:

> 'The perfection of purification (*ikhlās*) 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.'[42]

God of course is endowed with attributes–the 99 'names of God being the names of these attributes, precisely. 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'. This is because the attributes are identical in their essence 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 conception of the Absolute, above and beyond all mental conceptions, specific nature, and even beyond 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 god but God*.

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?[43] '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.'[44] 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 is precisely what Imam 'Alī is alluding to 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. This substance is one, but it is outwardly articulated in conformity with the differentiated planes upon which its inner infinitude unfolds. There is no plurality in the divine nature, which remains absolutely simple; but there are distinctions as regards the manner in which this unique reality relates to the world. 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.'[45]

The point here is that for Eckhart the essence of God–the Godhead or the Ground–transcends all conceivable distinctions. All that can be said of it, provisionally, is that it is absolutely one. Mental conception–and thus all dogma– 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 perceive oneness by seeing through the veil of that very perception. 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'.

> '[S]o 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.'[46]

This metaphysical perspective, clearly indicating the relativity of the ontological plane upon which the Trinity is conceivable, will help the Muslim to see that an understanding of the absolute oneness of the One is not necessarily compromised by the dogma of the Trinity; the Muslim might come to see that the Trinity is an outer deployment of the One, and is thus analogous to the divine Names which are nothing other than just such a deployment. The Persons, like the divine attributes in Islam, are identical to the Essence, which is absolute simplicity. While the Persons are distinguished from each other in terms of origin, otherwise being equal in all respects, the attributes are distinguished from each other in terms of the specific relationships they embody, relationships between the Essence and creation. In both cases, there is an outward differentiation which does not infringe upon an inward identity.

One of the clearest expressions of the universal spiritual principles embodied in the Persons of the Trinity 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.[47] 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 relativised in the face of the Absolute, it is also universalised–and thus rendered conceivable as intrinsic divine properties. It is made subordinate to pure or absolute being, on the one hand, and 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'. Here, we are taken far from all anthropomorphic reductionism: the Persons are not like human beings simply writ large, macrocosmic projections of human personalities; rather, their personhood is the extrinsic, symbolic expression of an intrinsic mystery, one which can be plumbed mystically, but not fully graspable mentally.

Eckhart reveals to Christians and Muslims alike the chasm that separates the ordinary conception of the divine attributes from their intrinsic reality, and he shows clearly the poverty of mental conceptions of divine unity in the face of the infinite richness of the

One. For even the affirmation of God's oneness smacks of *shirk* in the measure that it is a 'countable' or numerical one, one unit among other units. The affirmation of divine oneness requires a degree of spiritual intuition of the meaning of that oneness: and this spiritual intuition is founded on the negation of the apparent reality of the creature, as we have seen above in relation both to St Dionysius and Ibn al-'Arabī.

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.'[48]

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 riches and wisdom and truth are all absolutely one in God: it is not one, it is oneness.'[49]

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, apart from whom 'nothing is', as Eckhart's formulation has it. Similarly, Imam 'Ali'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 his 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.

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

every thing, but not through association; and other than every thing, 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.'[50]

God is 'with every thing, 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 every thing, 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: '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.'

Contemporary Witness

It may well be asked at this point: do we really need all these complex metaphysical arguments in order to affirm that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God? Is it not enough to state that the God in whom Christians believe *unconditionally* is the Father, and it is this God in whom Jews and Muslims alike believe in? If the God referred to throughout the Old Testament is the same God referred to in the Qur'an–the God of Abraham; and if this 'God' is the first Person of a Trinity whose outward manifestation in time had to wait until the incarnation of the Word as Jesus–then it follows that the Father is the unconditional, absolute and eternal 'God' in whom Muslims–and Jews–believe, even if they do not believe in the other two Persons of the Trinity. Seen thus, the 'equal' divinity of the Son and the Spirit is grasped as a derivative equality, an equality bestowed on them by the Father, thus an equal divinity which is conditional. Belief in the Trinity might then still be seen by Christians as the most perfect form of belief in 'God', but not the *only* form which belief in God can assume. This argument is in large part based on the following reflections of Jame Cutsinger, given in the seminal paper referred to earlier, 'Disagreeing to Agree':

'As we Orthodox see it, prayerful fidelity to the witness of Scripture, the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, and the language of liturgical worship requires that the word "God" be reserved, strictly speaking, not for some generic form of "self-sufficient life" but for God the Father alone, the first Person of the Holy Trinity, who is said to be the Fount (*pēgē*) of all divinity and the uncaused Cause (*aitia*) of the other two Persons, the Son and the Spirit. In defense of this perspective, we cite such Biblical texts as John 17:3, where Jesus prays to His Father, saying, *This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent*, or again His response to the rich man, *Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone* (Luke 18:19). The opening salutations and concluding blessings of several Pauline epistles further support the Orthodox Trinitarian vision, as for example the doxology in the final verse of the Letter to the Romans: *To the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ* (Rom. 16:27). What one passes *through* is evidently not the same as what one passes *to*, and it follows that Jesus is not to be equated or identified with "the only wise God".'

These points might be seen to be implied in the many contemporary Christian witnesses–witnesses of the highest degree of authority–to the principle that Muslims and Christians do believe in the same God. We conclude this essay with a brief glance at these testimonies. First, let us take note of the unconditional statement of identity made by Pope John Paul II when he addressed a group of Moroccan Muslims: '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."[51] Likewise: 'As I have often said in other meetings with Muslims, your God and ours is one and the same, and we are brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham."[52] These statements can be read as re-affirmations of the official Roman Catholic view of Islam, as enunciated in the text of the second Vatican Council, 'Nostra Aetate':

> 'The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their desserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting."[53]

This unequivocal assertion that Muslims and Christians believe in the same God is not only to be found in the post-Vatican Council era. It is also prefigured in such statements as the following. Pope Pius XI (d.1939) 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.'[54] 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.'[55]

Clearly, for these traditional-minded Popes, as well as for their modern successors, the fact that Muslims do not 'acknowledge Jesus as God', or believe in the Trinity, does not imply that Muslims and Christians believe in a different God. What is implied, rather, is belief in the Father alone, and that this belief suffices to qualify the holder thereof as a true believer, and not as a heretic or a pagan. The transcendent Essence of God–or simply, the Father–is believed in by Muslims and Christians, despite differences as regards their theological definitions, and as regards their different perceptions of the qualities and acts that are to be attributed to God.

Affirmation of belief in the 'same God', despite theological differences, can also be observed in the responses given by thousands of Christians scholars and Church leaders to the recent 'A Common Word' interfaith initiative, launched by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute in Amman, Jordan.[56] On October 13, 2007, an open letter was sent by 138 Muslim scholars, representing every major school of thought in Islam, 'to leaders of Christian churches, everywhere.' This initiative, calling for dialogue between Muslims and Christians on the basis, not just of belief in the same God–which was taken for granted–but shared belief in the principiality of love of God and love of the neighbour, as the two 'great commandments' enjoined alike by Islam and Christianity. The overwhelmingly positive Christian responses–from the leaders of all the major Churches–implied that the basic 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:

> 'That so much common ground exists–common ground in some of the fundamentals of faith–gives hope that undeniable differences and even the very real external pressures that bear down upon us can not overshadow the common ground upon which we stand together. That this common ground consists in love of God and of neighbor gives hope that deep cooperation between us can be a hallmark of the relations between our two communities … 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. God alone rightly commands our ultimate allegiance.'[57]

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 Muslim 'names' of *Allāh* to the Trinitarian God:

> '… the name "God" is not the name of a person like a human person, a limited being with a father and mother and a place that they inhabit within the world. "God" is the name of a kind of life, a "nature" or essence – eternal and self-sufficient life, always active, needing nothing. But that life is lived, so Christians have always held, eternally and simultaneously as three interrelated agencies, and are made known to us in the history of God's revelation to the Hebrew people and in the life of Jesus and what flows from it. God is at once the source of divine life, the expression of that life and the active power that communicates that 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.'[58]

In using this phrase, 'the Living and Self-subsistent', the Archbishop is clearly translating directly the Arabic names of *Allāh*, often found coupled in the Qur'an, *al-Ḥayy* (the Living) *al-Qayyūm* (the Self-subsistent). Together with nearly all the other Church leaders in their response–including Pope Benedict II–the Archbishop clearly affirms that Muslims and Christians do believe in the same God.

One might deduce from these affirmations the following Christian argument, which accepts that Muslims believe in the same God as the Christians, but also upholds the evangelical imperative to bear witness to the truth of the Trinity: when Muslims affirm belief in God, they are affirming belief in the Father, the first Person of the Trinity: they thus believe in the same 'God' as the Christians, but their belief is incomplete in the measure that it ignores or denies the other two Persons of the Trinity. The duty of Christians is therefore to say to the Muslims, as did St Paul to the Athenians: 'Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you' (Acts, 17:23).

This 'exclusivist' position has the merit of combining an acknowledgment that Muslims believe in the one true God with the accomplishment of the duty of the Christian to bear witness to the fullness or perfection of the Redemption offered through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is natural that one of the main

factors preventing Christians from readily acknowledging the fact that Muslims believe in the same God as they do is the fear of diluting the power of the evangelical call to Christ as the sole path to salvation. What St Paul said to the Athenians can thus serve as a prototype of the kind of declaration which Christian evangelists can make to Muslims: yes, we acknowledge that you believe in the Father, but you are ignorant of the transformative power or sanctifying potential inherent in this belief–a potential which can be brought to fruition solely through the redemption wrought by His Son and brought to perfection by the Holy Spirit.

Alternatively, the Christian may arrive at the following 'universalist' position: belief in the Trinity is not the *conditio sine qua non* either for authentic belief in God or for salvation in the Hereafter and sanctification in the here-below. This implies that the Trinity is one way of conceiving of the Absolute but not the only way. This universalist position–if it were to be articulated explicitly–would derive support from the apophatic tradition within Christian thought, according to which the transcendence of God strictly implies the incomprehensibility of God's Essence. '*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.[59]

The same two positions, exclusivist and universalist, are open to the Muslim who acknowledges that Christians believe in the same God as do Muslims. To the extent that exclusivist theological tendencies prevail, this acknowledgment will be joined to an invitation (*da'wa*) to embrace Islam, thereby replacing an ambiguous, theologically formulated dogma of the Trinity with an unambiguous revealed doctrine of *Tawhīd*. Alternatively, the universalist Muslim can affirm not only that Christians worship the same God as do Muslims, but also that Trinity, metaphysically interpreted by sages such as Eckhart, furnishes a subtle teaching on the deeper implications of *Tawhīd*, helping us to see that distinctions within the infinite oneness of God do not imply a plurality of 'gods': '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.' This infinite oneness will then be seen as that which encompasses all things, and as such, is far from a numerical unity; rather, it is simply, in the words of Imam 'Alī, 'that which has no second'; for, as Eckhart said, 'outside of God nothing is'.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1] See the (so far unpublished) essay by James Cutsinger, 'Disagreeing to Agree: A Christian Response to *A Common Word'* (see: www.cutsinger.net/scholarship/articles.shtml)

[2] 'For every community there is a Messenger' (10:47).

[3] See our essay, 'Light upon Light? The Qur'an and the Gospel of St John' (forthcoming) in which we address this theme directly.

[4] It should be noted in passing that Arabic translations of the Bible unfailingly translate God as *Allāh*, which constitutes a strong argument in and of itself that Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. The word *Allāh*, according to most lexicologists, is derived simply from the word *ilāh*, divinity, that which is worshipped. The definite article, *al-*, produces *al-ilāh*, which then becomes *Allāh*, the meaning thus being simply: 'the divinity', or simply 'God'.

[5] 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). One of the key dimensions of this soul is knowledge of God, embedded within the soul even before its entry into this world: 'And when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves [saying], Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify. [That was] lest ye say on the Day of Resurrection: Truly, of this we were unaware' (7:172).

[6] 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.

[7] 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.

[8] It is the Catholic addition of the *filioque* that, so the Orthodox argue, 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. 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. 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.

[9] It should be noted that the word *tawhīd* is a verbal noun, meaning: to affirm/declare/realize oneness; it does not simply mean static 'oneness', but connotes an active quality of integration.

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

[11] See the article by C. Gilliot, 'Attributes of God', in *Encylopaedia of Islam* 3rd edition (http://www.brillonline), which gives a good overview of various perspectives on this theme.
[12] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, op. cit., p.63.
[13] Cited in ibid., p.54.
[14] Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names* (Fintry, Surrey: The Shrine of Wisdom, 1980 [reprint of 1957 ed]), p.12.
[15] There is some discrepancy in the sources about the precise date of this event.
[16] The wording here is extremely important: *wa-qad tahawwala fi sūratihi allatī ra'ūhu fihā awwal marra.*
[17] This version of the saying comes in the *Sahīh Muslim* (Cairo: Īsā al-Bābī al-Halabī, n.d), chapter entitled *Ma'rifa tarīq al-ru'yā* ('knowledge of the way of vision'), vol. 1, p.94.
[18] *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.
[19] Cited by William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989), p.388.
[20] Cited by Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p.254 (translation modified).
[21] *Sufi Path*, op. cit., p.58.
[22] Ibid., p.59.
[23] Ibid., p.244
[24] 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.
[25] The translators of the above-mentioned work render the saying as follows: 'I am as My servant thinks I am.'
[26] *Sufi Path*, p.337.
[27] Ibid., pp. 341-342.
[28] Ibid., pp. 339-340.
[29] See M. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau des Saints* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), p.73.
[30] Tarjuman, 52
[31] *Tarjumān*, p.70. Cf. Hatif Isfahani, p.30.
[32] Cited by James W. Morris, 'The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn Arabi and the *Mi'raj*,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 108, 1988, p.375.
[33] *Mystical Theology*, op.cit., p.39.
[34] Ibid., p.66.
[35] Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies* (Fintry: The Shrine of Wisdom Press, 1965), p.19.
[36] Ibid., p.21
[37] Ibid., pp.21-22.
[38] Ibid., p.29.
[39]The saying is found in slightly differing versions in Ibn Hanbal, *al-Musnad,* ed. A.M. Shākir (Cairo, 1949), vol.4 p.403; Nīsabūrī, *al-Mustadrak,* vol.1, p.113; and the Qur'ānic commentator al-Tabarsī in his comment on verse 6:108. [These references are given by Muhsin al-Mūsawī al-Tabrīzī, editor of the Qur'anic

commentary by Sayyid Haydar Āmulī, *al-Muhīt al-a'zam* (Qom, 2001), vol.1, p.284, n.54.]

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

[41] 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 'Ali* (London: IB Tauris, 2005) for discussion of the spiritual perspectives of this seminal figure in the Islamic tradition.

[42] Cited in ibid., p. 208.

[43] *Meister Eckhart*, op.cit., vol. 2, pp. 150-151

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., vol.1, p. 217.

[46] Ibid., vol.1, p. 76.

[47] Ibid., vol.2, pp. 174-175. In terms of strict Trinitarian dogma this interpretation would be regarded as depriving the Persons of their full divinity, by ascribing to them only one particular 'work' or divine quality. All three Persons 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.

[48] *Justice and Remembrance*, op.cit., p.

[49] *Meister Eckhart*, op.cit., vol. 2, pp.339 & 341.

[50] Cited in *Justice and Remembrance,* op.cit., pp.208-209.

[51] Address to Young Muslims, Morocco, August 19, 1985. Cited by Aref Ali Nayed in his paper, 'Our God and Your God is One' (forthcoming).

[52] Address to the Colloquium on 'Holiness in Christianity and Islam', May 9, 1985. Cited in ibid.

[53] Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions: "Nostra Aetate". Proclaimed by Paul VI, October 28, 1965. Cited in ibid.

[54] *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

[55] Cited in ibid., p.12. A wealth of additional material of a similar nature can be found in this valuable compilation of William Stoddart.

[56] See www.acommonword.com for the text itself, and the responses thereto.

[57] This was signed, in the first instance by Harold W. Attridge, Dean and Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament, Joseph Cumming, Director of the Reconciliation Program,
Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Emilie M. Townes, Andrew Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology, Miroslav Volf, Founder and Director of the Yale Center for
Faith and Culture, Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology. It was then endorsed by almost
300 other Christian theologians and leaders. See, for the full text, 'A Christian Response to A Common Word Between Us and You', *New York Times*, Nov.18, 2007.

[58] See the full text of the Archbishop's response on www.acommonword.com.

[59] *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1:4; cited by Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, op.cit., p.217. Cf the statement by al-Ghazali: '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".' (citing Ibn al-Mu'tazz) *Deliverance from Error* (tr. Montgomery Watt), p. 61.