GOD IN ISLAMIC FAITH

Azim Nanji

‘There is no god other than God’. This is the essence of the Muslim profession of faith (shahādah). Pronouncement of the Islamic creed, the Shahādah, is the supreme religious act. Its mere recitation suffices for entry into the ‘community of the believers’. In addition to this affirmation of the existence of God and his unicity, its full form contains an immediate corollary on the mission of the Prophet (and Muḥammad is the messenger of God), for the Muslim profession of faith would not be valid without reference to the preaching of the Qur’ān. Is this preaching not, first of all—essentially and historically—the rejection of polytheism, the destruction of idols, in and by the witness given to the one and unique God, the lord and creator of all that exists?

Before sketching out the traditional elaboration of this faith in the great schools of Muslim religious thought, and in order to understand their approach, it is necessary to look at what the Qur’ān itself says. This must be done with particular care since the Qur’ān does not present itself in its literary form as a doctrinal exposition on God, his nature, and his attributes. In addition, regardless of the scholarly disputes among different schools as to whether the Qur’ān itself was created or uncreated, it is considered in Muslim belief as the word of God revealed to humanity, where the “Unknowable” addresses himself to “those who believe in the Mystery” (2:3) to tell them about himself what he chooses.
All the Qur’anic affirmations relating to the existence of God, his transcendent perfections, or his ways of acting toward his creatures refer to Allāh, the word presented in Islam as the proper name of God. The wisdom and subtlety of Arab philologists has frequently been directed toward this word, which appears about twenty-seven hundred times in the text of the Qur’ân. Grammatically, Allāh is a contraction of the word al-ilāh, which appears in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry to convey a sense of the ‘divinity’ of the person being evoked.

In turn, the origin of al-ilāh is found in a root common to various ancient Semitic languages, el, from which are derived the names of divinities encountered in ancient Semitic cults. It appears likely that in the pantheon of the old Meccan religion, Allāh already designated, by figurative substitution, the supreme divinity associated with inferior ones of tribal origin. Certain tribes of the Hejaz also invoked him, as is shown at the end of surah 29. However, the same surah illustrates that Allāh, the God of Qur’anic preaching, has nothing in common with any similarly named divinity.

God in Qur’anic Teaching

It has often been remarked that, in the early Qur’anic teaching, God is usually named in terms of attributes that are related to humans: All-Powerful Creator, Supreme Lord, King of the Present and Future Life, Judge of Judges, and so forth. Orientalists have given varying interpretations to this feature. Some authors have seen it as a pedagogy designed to purify the religion of the Meccans (as in 5:3). The Meccan surahs as a whole, however, present the mission of the Prophet as a continuation of that of the earlier prophets: to confirm and perfect it and to make it universal (33:40, “Muḥammad is the Seal of the Prophets”). Others, such as P. Casanova, more attentive to the importance placed on the Day of Judgment, prefer to make Muḥammad a nabi (‘prophet’)
of the last hour, with an essentially eschatological message, an "explicit warner for those who fear the hour" (38:70; see also 79:45 and its context). Like the Creation, however, the Judgment is only a manifestation of God’s omnipotence and of his absolute and limitless lordship.

*The Uniqueness of God:* In any case, the teaching of the Qur’an, designed as it is to lead the heart ‘to the right path’ (1:6), implies the positive affirmation of the true God whose prerogatives over mortals cannot be shared, and the affirmation of an intransigent monotheism would rapidly make itself explicit. Indeed, it is the very essence of the message to be transmitted:

“Say, ‘I am only a mortal, like you. It has been revealed to me that your God is one God’” (41:6).

Nor does the Qur’anic teaching cease to denounce the complete falsity of the beliefs it is combating, despite a hostility encouraged as much by the faithfulness of the Meccans to their own divinities as by the economic and political implications of their polytheistic religion. The unshared godship belongs to the true God. No other divinities are associated with God, and no divine intermediaries lie between him and man—this is the essence of many Qur’anic verses that would form a pendant to those denouncing the vanity of idols (useless and harmful, 25:55) and the perversion of the mushrikīn, the only unpardonable sin being that of those who ‘associate’ (4:48).

*The Qur’an* denounces with particular vehemence a triad of female divinities known throughout pre-Islamic Arabia: al-Lāt (the Goddess), al-‘Uzzā (the All-Powerful), and Manāt (the one who presides over destiny and death). These divinities are assimilated to the banāt Allāh, the ‘daughters of God’, ridiculed in the Qur’an (16:57–59). How can God have daughters as men have sons (52:39)? Concerned with preserving the sanctuaries where these goddesses were venerated, the Meccans pressured the Prophet.

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In this context, the incident recorded by al-Ṭabari occurred: Satan (Iblis) made Muḥammad’s speech falter. As a result he unwittingly accorded to these three divinities the power of intercession given to the angels ‘with the consent of God’ (53:25). Tradition would speak of ‘satanic verses’, and the Qur’ān (22:52) would affirm the abrogation by God of any ‘impurity’ that Satan had surreptitiously introduced into the prophetic message. In their own way, the difficulties of interpretation presented by surah 53 illustrate again the strength of the monotheistic message brought by the Prophet.

Unity: The Qur’anic teaching does not limit itself to the affirmation of a strict monotheism. It is also clearly stated that the unique (waḥīd) God is one (aḥad) in himself, one in his nature as deity. The well-known surah 112 dates probably from the Meccan period, perhaps from Medina. The names it would receive, departing from the rule that the title of a surah is taken ad litteram from its content, show the particular attention Muslims give it. It is known as sūrat al-ikhlāṣ, that is to say the surah of ‘pure worship’ (“the action of offering a sincere worship,” in Blachère’s French translation), or sūrat al-tawḥīd, “the proclamation of divine unicity.”

Juxtaposed with the striking initial profession of faith (‘Allāhu aḥad’) is the final correlative, ‘not any one’, no one (‘Lam yakun aḥad’). This affirmation-negation is the decisive confrontation between the creator and the created. It displays, like a diamond in its setting, the unfathomable and incommunicable mystery of the deity. The second verse, ‘Allāhu ṣamad’, is awkward to translate. Al-Ṣamad is one of the ‘most beautiful names’ of God, whose root has as its primary meaning ‘without hollow’, or ‘without cleft’.

Al-Jurjānī, of the Ash’āri school (fourteenth to fifteenth century A.D.), would comment, “Without mixture of any sort,
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without any possibility of division into parts, because in God there is no ‘hollow’.” Louis Massignon would translate it as ‘dense to the absolute degree’. The word *impenetrable* in my translation is meant to evoke the density of this unity without cleft that belongs to God alone (and in turn, the meaning ‘unknowable’).

By reinforcing the unicity of the One who is ‘sufficient to himself’ (*ghanî*, as in surah 2:267), *samad* appears as the repetition of the intrinsic unicity of God in himself. The third verse reaffirms this unicity by categorically rejecting any multiplicity within the deity of God. Without doubt it was originally directed against the ‘daughters of God’ of the Meccan pantheon and all that the *mushrikûn* in their error ‘associated’ with God. Later, and in connection with the Qur’anic verses that call upon the “people of the Book” (4:171, “Do not say three . . . God is one. . . . How could he have a son?”), this verse was directed at the Christians. The thrust of this thought appears to have been intended to place the first believers on guard against the ‘associationism’ of the Christians, that is, against the mystery of the divine persons seen as a multiplicity within the deity. This interpretation is confirmed by the ongoing controversies in which Islam reacted against the mystery of the Trinity (and that of the incarnation) as a betrayal of the divine unicity under cover of which, so it was perceived, a “cleft” in God would be introduced.

*Tawhîd*: The two words used to describe the external and internal unicity of God meet in the *tawhîd*: “Allah wahîd wa-aḥad.” In its absolute transcendence, this pronouncement constitutes both the act of unification of the one God and the proclamation of his unicity. Although the word *tawhîd* is non-Qur’anic, it appears in the *hâdlîth* and is inextricably integrated with the formulations of Muslim faith. When the religious sciences developed in Islam, the particular discipline of *‘ilm al-kalâm* (the
science of the word of God, or about God) was also called 'ilm al-tawḥīd (the science of divine unicity). Regardless of the school or current of thought, it would always include a fundamental treatise on tawḥīd.

Tawḥīd is the verbal noun of the second form of the root ṭawh, which indicates the action of unifying, of conferring unity. Etymologically it designates the knowledge one has of the unity of a thing. Its application to the field of religion gave it the meaning of either the science that permits the solid establishment of beliefs, or the fact of worshiping the unique Venerable One while having faith in his unity and affirming that this unity applies to his essence, which is dissimilar to all other essences, and to his attributes and acts, although here the controversies between schools enter into the question.

This technical sense, dominant and stressed in Muslim thought, has a declarative value: it signifies the reciting of the formula affirming the divine unity-unicity, and shahādah is the concrete witnessing to this unity-unicity, actualising and creating in the heart of the believer the interior reality of tawḥīd. Hence, shahādah is the first religious duty, even taking precedence over ritual prayer (ṣalāt). This is stated in a ḥadīth reported by Abu Sa‘īd, a companion of the Prophet:

“God has given nothing better than the proclamation of divine unity and ritual prayer. If there had been anything better than tawḥīd, he would have imposed it on his angels.”

Is it not God who speaks the eternal and uncreated witness that he himself bears to himself? (Verily I am God, there is no god but I, 20:14.) This witnessing joins with that of the believer to participate in it and be authenticated by it. (In the words of al-Hallāj, God alone can truly bear witness to his unicity in the heart of his disciples.) Similarly, the Qur’ān (59:23) uses the phrase Allāh al-mu‘min, an expression that has caused considerable
difficulty to many translators. *Al-Mu’min*, one of the ‘most beautiful names’ of God, signifies ‘the believer’, that is to say, “he who witnesses to his own truthfulness”, or who pronounces the witness of faith in himself in a kind of equivalent to the ‘knowledge’ he has of himself since “he alone knows perfectly the mystery” (72:26).

*The Divine Perfections:* These are revealed by the Qur’anic teaching. More precisely, God informs humans of all they can and should know about him by the ‘names’ he gives himself. To add any more would be to violate the mystery that he is; *al-Ghayb* (2:3), ‘the mystery’, is again one of the ‘most beautiful names’ of God. The term *Allāh* describes him in his inaccessible nature of a deity both unique and one (*tawḥīd*) whose essence remains unrevealed. The other Qur’anic names reveal the divine perfections (and/or God’s actions in the world, especially in relation to man) with the same distancing.

This applies particularly to the “most beautiful names [that] belong to him” (20:8), which determine the attitude the believers should take before him and which are objects of meditation and reverence for the believers’ piety. The names he chose to reveal at the same time describe and hide him, since he is “the first and the last” and “the evident and the hidden,” *al-zā hir wa-al-bāṭīn* (57:3), and “it is not given to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil” (42:51, cf. “the veil of the name,” *ḥijāb al-ism*, in Islam). This is particularly true of the names that proclaim the absolute difference between God and his creatures, and that thus magnify his mystery.

From the point of view of Islam these names are not affirmed in relation to God’s creatures either by causality or by an analogy of dissimilarity. Nor is this done by way of apophasis; rather, they are affirmed by the very flash of certitude that bears witness to God, echoing the pact dating from pre-eternity, the *mithāq*.
which the Qur’anic text revives. Once the life, the omniscience, and the omnipotence of God are affirmed, then a certain life, knowledge, and power can be attributed to man, but fleetingly and with utmost fragility. Thus, the divine perfections revealed by the ‘names’ (see in particular 59:22–24) underline and emphasise the transcendence of the Most High in relation to a world whose order and harmony are already ‘signs of God’ (āyāt Allah, as in surah 2:164), an irrefutable witness of the necessary existence of the Creator that man must acknowledge and adore.

The Qur’anic teaching does not enumerate the divine perfections in a systematic manner, as would be done in the science of kalām by the treatises on divine attributes (ṣifāt Allāh) and on the ‘acts of the Most High’ (af’āluhu ta’ālā). Muslim piety later gathered them together, completing the list of Qur’anic names with those mentioned in the hadith in order to recall and venerate them by a practice similar to that of the Christian rosary. Some authors try to give a systematic presentation of the Qur’anic teaching on the divine perfections by distinguishing the absolute divine names (for example, al-Qayyūm, the Subsistant) from the relative names (al-Ghaffar, the Absolver). However, the application of this principle is awkward because it violates both the letter and the spirit of the Qur’ān. Consequently, I shall restrict myself to citing the three perfections whose ‘names’ are the object of the highest veneration in Islam.

Al-Rahmān: Always preceded by the definite article in the Qur’ān, this term is considered a proper name of God because, as J. Jomier has expressed it, nothing is said of al-Rahmān that is not also said of Allāh. Allāh focuses thought on the unfathomable unicity, while al-Rahman focuses it on the depths of divine mercy and benevolence. This is recalled by the invocation “Bismillah al-Rahmān al-Rahīm” (In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate), which ‘opens’ almost all the surahs and sanctifies
on an everyday basis every important act of the believer, every act in his or her life that is morally qualified or qualifiable by the “good.” The invocation joins to the name strictly reserved for God the (substantive) adjective raḥim (compassionate, benevolent). Both terms have the same root (rḥm), which signifies in Semitic languages the entrails, the maternal womb, and which had already provided the name al-Raḥmān to the unique God worshipped in the centre and south of the Arabian Peninsula before Islam.

In the Qurʾān the names referring to God’s mercy are much more frequent than those describing him as a fearful master. God is called al-Qahhār (the Fearsome) four times and once (59:23) al-Jabbār, which can be translated as “the terrible, the awesome,” for this is how he would appear to the impious and the hypocrites. In these cases we are almost always dealing with an admonition against sinners that is followed by the wish “maybe he will return [unto God]” since God is both “Lord of majesty and of generosity” (55:78). For those who serve him and are faithful he is the Most Indulgent One who never ceases to pardon, the continual Giver, the Dispenser of all that is good, the Generous, the Consenter, the Answerer, the Friend and Protector, the Pitying, the Guide and Leader, and the Most Patient who is slow to punish. All these are Qurʾānic names that emphasise and clarify al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

When the Qurʾānic teaching is taken as a whole, as it should be, God’s mercy becomes inseparable from the omnipotence of which it is a special expression. These two perfections are the two poles of divine action, at the same time contrasted and complementary. Divine omnipotence is extolled by frequent reference to the unparalleled lordship of “the Lord [al-Rabb] and Creator [al-Khāliq] of all things” (6:164, 13:16). As the ‘absolute initiator’ (al-Badī’, 6:101) he creates whom he wishes, how he wishes. “When he decrees a thing, he but says to it ‘Be!’ and it
is” (2:117; the kun—‘be’—of realisation appears eight times in the Qur’ân in contexts relating to creation and resurrection). An infinite closeness is juxtaposed with this omnipotence. Since he is the ‘absolute initiator’, God knows all, sees all, and hears all (as in 6:59 and 34:50, “He is, in truth, the one who hears and who is near”).

Man is thus strongly disposed to recognise God’s unbreakable presence in every action, in every thought, and in every act of the human heart: he “created you and what you make” (37:96). Also he knows perfectly “what is in your souls” (as in 2:235 and many other instances). Is he not “closer to man than his jugular vein” (50:16)? Has he not positioned himself “between man and his heart” (8:24)? The specific context, as well as the Qur’anic teaching taken as a whole, however, show that this presence is not one of immensity bound up with transcendence in its very immanence, but rather a presence of proximity linked to the omnipotence and one that leaves intact, by its lack of similarity with all that is created, the inaccessibility of the Most High.

Allāh al-Ḥaqq: This phrase appears frequently in the Qur’ân, where it is related to the sovereign power of the Most High (as in 22:6, “That is because God is the Truth, and he brings the dead to life, and he is powerful over everything”). Like al-Raḥmān, al-Ḥaqq, which signifies both “the real” and “the truth,” is considered a synonym of Allāh, and the Sūfis, the mystics of Islam, would use al-Ḥaqq by preference when addressing God. The usual translation as “truth” conveys poorly in our European languages all the resonance of the Arabic term. The primary sense of the root conveys the idea of an indestructible law engraved in stone, hence an unchallengeable established fact. It is only by derivation that the concept of correspondence to fact arises. Only then, in the third instance, does the sense of right and legal obligation that results from it develop.
‘The real’, ‘the truth’, and ‘right’ founded on justice are all suggested together by the term al-ḥaqq. Certainly the Qurʾān uses al-ḥaqq for every reality, every truth, and every recognised right. However, the source of each lies always in God, who alone can authenticate every reality and every truth since only the divine decree (qadar) really founds truth and right, a created fact, a word, or a requisite of the created thing. God alone is total truth, since he alone is the real in its totality. Truth and reality correspond here since God alone is “subsistent in himself,” al-Qayyūm (3:1), he who exists in himself and by himself with no reason for being other than himself. It is this absolute subsistence that establishes him in reality and truth, necessary by essence and “without cleft.” He is for this reason perfectly truthful and makes truth manifest.

Used thus in figurative substitution, al-Ḥaqq is related to the Qurʾānic substantive names preferred by tradition, such as al-ʿAdl (‘justice’), al-Nūr (‘light’; God is perfectly and manifestly evident in himself: “light upon light,” 24:35), and al-Salām (‘peace’). The term al-Ḥaqq thus shows that in Islam God is not merely presented as the supreme reality, but rather as the only reality, the only one to truly deserve this name since reality without breach or hollow (ṣamad) is a concept that applies only to God.

Al-Ḥayy: The participial noun al-ḥayy (the living) is undoubtedly the ‘name’ most frequently meditated upon and brought to mind by the Şūfis. It connotes a perfection that, in a certain way, all the others make explicit. Indeed, the name al-Ḥayy reaches God’s mystery, but from the outside and on the outside, so to speak, without permitting the believer’s gaze to penetrate to it. ‘The gazes of men do not reach it’, while he “scrutinises their gaze” (6:103). God the One, who alone is real in his incorruptible reality, is the perfect Living One (3:2; cf. 20:111), the “Living One who does not die” (25:58), and thus the “omniscient,” the “omnipotent,” and, in relation to man, “the
merciful who never ceases to show mercy.” But the mystery of the divine life and the secret of his intimate life remain unrevealed and, we should add, for the Muslim faith, unrevealable. This is perhaps the most profound difference between Islam and Christianity.

The Mutashābih (Ambiguous) Verses of the Qur’ān: The names that reveal the perfections and the actions of God cannot be attributed to him except according to their revealed literal meaning. Consequently, the few anthropomorphisms present in the Qur’ānic teaching (the eyes of God, as in 11:37; his face, as in 55:27; and so forth) would be the object of exegetical and theological controversies in the schools of kalām. The same would be true, and to an even greater degree, for the diverse Qur’ānic affirmations that call into question man’s liberty under the hand of God. These passages deal with the mystery of the relations between the all-powerful creator, just judge and remunerator, who bestows his favour on whom he wishes and leads astray whom he wishes (as in 5:14 and 14:4), and his free creature, man, who is responsible to him but nevertheless subject to his decree (as in 18:29–30, 3:131–136, and elsewhere).

God in Traditional Muslim Religious Thought

From a socio-phenomenological viewpoint, in every revealed religion the message written down in the book (or books) held to be sacred has a normative value for the religious thought it generates. Faith, by answering man’s religious aspirations, cannot avoid the demands for rationality inherent in the human spirit. Indeed, faith provokes and activates this demand and in so doing positions itself in relation to reason. But in this effort of reflection, the first generations of believers always hesitate, if not refuse, to free themselves from the explicit terms (notions and/or terminology) of the message accepted as revealed. Their work nevertheless retains a preferential and normative value for later
generations of believers who would periodically attempt a ‘return to the source’.

In Islam these fundamental questions, concerned as they are with the conception one holds of faith, revelation, and the like, would receive original answers governed by the characteristics proper to the Qur’anic teaching, that is to say, by inaccessibility of the divine on the one hand and the literal revelation of the Qur’an on the other.

**Historical Outline of the Problem:** The God of the Qur’an is al-‘Aţīm, the Inaccessible (e.g., 2:255, 42:4), well beyond the bounds of human understanding, which cannot limit him in any way or compare him to anything. In his knowledge and by his knowledge alone man cannot reach him “whom one does not question” (21:23; see also 21:110). Consequently, it is not surprising that all the schools devoted long preliminary discussions to what human reason can know of God on its own or on the basis of Qur’anic texts. Indeed, the response given to the question of the relationship between faith and reason, linked as it is to the attitude of the heart and the spirit toward God, determines the type of interpretation and the major lines of explanation given to the Qur’an.

The Muslim tradition, always active among the community of believers (the ummah), has never ceased to confirm, even to protect, the inaccessibility of God, sometimes to the point of jealousy. Typical of this attitude are the controversies, sometimes violent, that were provoked in Damascus under the Umayyads and later in Baghdad under the Abbasids, by the development of the science of kalām. This new science grew into a religious discipline that Western scholars like to call the “theology of Islam.” However, this translation is only approximate since the primary objective of kalām, its role in the defense of the dogma “against those who doubt and deny,” is different from that of Christian theology, defined by Augustine as “knowledge of the faith.”
any case, the doctors of *kalām (mutakallīmūn)*, or Muslim ‘theologians’, were always obliged to contend with the reticence shown by the ‘pious elders’ or their successors, the traditionists, toward any attempt to justify dogma by purely rational means, and the tension was alternately a source of inspiration and controversy.

This reticence, transmitted from one generation to the next within the *ummah*, would manifest itself with particular vigour in Ḥanball thought, developed by the great and rigid traditionist Ibn Ḥanbal (ninth century), whose profession of faith was “*The Qur’ān and the sunnah* [Muslim tradition]: that is religion.” This tendency would continue to oppose the rationalist or modernist trends that were never totally excluded from Islam any more than from Christianity. It would also categorically reject any rationalist currents of thought in which Qur’anic monotheism became mere deism, in the sense given to the term by the philosophers of the European Enlightenment.

Throughout the centuries many ‘reformers’ arose to fight once again in the name of divine inaccessibility against any interpretation or explanation that risked putting the inscrutable mystery within reach of human reason and its discourse. Such was the meaning of the reaction of Abu al-Ḥasan al-Ash’arī (d. 935/6) against the Mu’tazilah. The Mu’tazili schools of *kalām* were among the earliest constituted. Under the impact of Greek thought in the Abbasid period the Mu’tazilah gave greater credence to reason and held it able to justify by its own principles the contents of the religious law. In addition, they would maintain the double affirmation of divine transcendence and human liberty, the latter in the name of divine justice itself. Al-Ash’arī, a defector from the Mu’tazilah, attempted to place the rational dialectic at the service of traditional positions and to centre the question of the relations between God and man on the divine omnipotence of God. His doctrine, along with that of his contemporary al-Māturīdī,
would become dominant in Sunnî Islam; only in the contemporary period would a revival of Mu‘tazili thought occur.

Al-Mūridî, the ‘Master of Samarkand’, did not found a ‘school’. His teachings, however, firmly rooted in the sunnah, stood in opposition to that of the Shi‘ah and the falasifah, the Muslim disciples of the Greek philosophers. These preoccupations were also the basis of the major objections made by the great al-Ghazālî (d. 1111) against the falasifah. The influence of the falasifah—particularly Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroës)—on Muslim thought, and indeed their contribution to universal culture, must not be minimised. However, despite their sincerity toward Islam, the intellectual attitude of the falasifah was not sufficiently consistent with the traditional position toward faith for their intellectual achievements to be integrated into the Muslim religious heritage.

The fundamental reaction of the Muslim faith to the inaccessibility of God and the corresponding intellectual attitude is nonetheless not one of narrow-mindedness or intellectual laziness. On the contrary, it rejects a passive and meaningless acceptance of the revealed message and the facile recourse to taqlid (acquiescence to accepted opinions), even though the majority of the Ḥanābilah make taqlid the conscious imitation of the Prophet and his companions, who believed without looking for ‘proofs’. It calls instead for a personal effort of enquiry, but one that is always based on the intangible letter of the Qur‘ân and on the sunnah. The ultimate aim of this quest is always to better align the behaviour of the believer to the “correct path” that God wishes him to take (e.g., 1:6–7, 37:118). A remarkable example of this attitude is found in the person of the famous Ḥanbali Ibn Taymîyah (fourteenth century), whose successors the contemporary “orthodox reformers” claim to be.
The concept of divine inaccessibility, uncompromising and absolute as it may be, does not isolate God in an abstract heaven. It is the expression of a separate and separating transcendence in the sense that the intimate life of God remains a guarded mystery, unrevealed and, in official teaching, uncommunicated. (Islam has no concept comparable to the Christian notion of ‘theological life’, that is to say, a shared divine life.) This does not mean, however, that God is distinct from and indifferent to humans. In studying the Qur’anic preaching on God, have we not seen that every affirmation concerning his existence, his perfections, or his means of action toward his creatures was merely a repetition of the unformulated mystery of divine unity-unicity presented in ever renewed expression through the style and rhythm of Qur’anic Arabic? At the same time, each affirmation communicated to man what he needed to know to glorify God on earth and to be worthy of paradise in the hereafter.

Muslim faith, thus, creates in the souls of true believers an attitude of total and confident surrender (伊斯兰) to God, whom they know, on his word, to be a reliable, omnipotent, and benevolent guide (as in surah 93). This faith gave rise, before and then concurrently with kalām, to other ‘religious sciences’, most notably fiqh, ‘the science of the law’ in Ignác Goldziher’s translation, far preferable to the more common formula, ‘Islamic jurisprudence’. Is it not fiqh, a specifically Islamic discipline placed by history in constant conflict with the schools of kalām, that elaborates the ‘code of life’ of the community of the faithful with its major concern the devotional obligations and religious behaviour of its members toward God?

In Islam the Qur’ān is presented and received as the Word revealed by a God who reveals nothing of himself. God imparts no confidence about his mystery. He “stood in majesty on the highest horizon” when the Prophet ‘approached him to within
two bow-lengths’—woe to him who attempts to go further, to receive from on high the Qur’anic revelation in its literal form. The problems of exegesis (tafsir) would consequently take on a singular importance for two basic reasons. On the one hand there was a lack of any doctrinal authority to give the guaranteed meaning of what had been supernaturally ‘dictated’. On the other the problems of exegesis exist in their own right. How can one understand and interpret the revealed words to grasp the thought of ‘he who spoke’?

Tafsir played a crucial role when the controversy over the mutashabih verses of the Qur’an developed. However, the rationalising character taken by these scholastic debates deeply disturbed the ‘pious elders’ and served to provoke a vigorous Sunni reaction in the middle of the third century AH. This took the form of a return to the tradition exemplified and taught by Muhammad, the sunnat al-nabi. This term signifies simultaneously “the deeds and actions [of the Prophet], his words and silent approbation,” as A. J. Wensinek has expressed it.

Islam used the technical term hadith to describe the content of the sunnah. The hadith became the subject of a characteristic “religious science” born of the devotional attachment of the true believers to the “traces” of the Prophet and his companions. General opinion considers that the “sunnah of the Prophet” stands somewhat under a “revealed” light, in continuity with the Qur’an, which it is able to explain and elucidate more surely than all of human exegeses and reasonings.

The Existence of the Unique God: According to Qur’anic teaching, man has no excuse for not knowing how to affirm the existence of God. On one hand he carries from birth the mark of the mithaq like a seal affixed to his heart. This innate predisposition to Islam, traditionally called fitrah, appears as a kind of primordial natural religion that finds its fulfillment only in shahadah.
the other, “in creation . . . there are truly signs for those who have intelligence” (3:190–191). This does not mean that faith is merely the outcome of a process of metaphysical reasoning using the principle of causality and the analogousness of being to arrive at an Aristotelian ‘prime mover’.

Man must learn to recognise the ‘signs of God’ in the ‘signs of the universe’. Faith appears then as a flash of recognition, revitalising the mithq in the heart of man attracted by the beauties of creation and tempted to go no further in spite of the signs that God has given through them. Man sees the impermanence of the transient world both in and through this dazzling revelation. He also gives witness to the One who alone remains:

“Everything perishes [is perishing] except his face” (28:88; see the exceedingly beautiful text celebrating Abraham’s faith, 6:74–89).

Muslim thought would always affirm that human reason can and must decipher the ‘signs of the universe’. It would take Abraham’s faith as a starting point for a ‘proof’ of God’s existence. This was a proof by allusion that, under the influence of Greek thought and logic, would become demonstrative through an argument combining the concept of a beginning in time and that of the contingency of the world (proof a novitate/a contingentia mundi).

Without going into further detail on this point, it is necessary to point out the differences between the schools, since they are particularly indicative of the questions mentioned above. The Mu’tazili schools taught that, starting from creation, human intelligence can and must rise to the affirmation of God even without the help of a new explicit revelation (the Qur’anic preaching) to make this obligatory. This was to be done by inference, by a dialectic grasp of opposition—an intellectual process that parallels the gift of faith to Abraham but comes
about by means of the two-stage reasoning so characteristic of Arab-Muslim thought. The responsibility, or the honour, of giving form to this demonstration of the existence of God *a contingentia mundi* and of giving it a more easily transmitted probative value would fall to the great *falāsifah* who had adopted Aristotelian formal logic, such as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā.

The Ashʿarī school on the contrary, and al-Ghazālī after them, took the position that the (real) capacity of reason can be exercised only if revelation makes this an obligation without which man could not escape the trivialities of the world. For the followers of al-Māturīdī reason can in principle exercise this power, but in reality it also requires the authentic signs that the Qur’anic verses constitute: by divine benevolence these correspond to the “signs of the universe” (the same word, *āyāt*, designates both “signs”). We can see how such positions, each in its own way, maintain or restore the primacy of Qur’anic teaching over reason (in its approach and its arguments).

**The Divine Attributes**

The appellations and actions ascribed to God by the Qur’anic teaching incited the intelligence of believers to attribute perfections to him. The list of divine attributes was formed even before the birth of the schools of *kalām*. This list would remain effectively unchanged since the *ṣifāt* have, and can have, only one source, *the Qurʾān*. No attribute can be affirmed that is not taught in *the Qurʾān*, either directly or by way of immediate consequence (*tafwīd*).

Another consensus would emerge with the birth of the science of *kalām*. Except for certain particular points, the different currents of thought would consider the *il-āhīyāt* (“those [sciences] that have to do with God”) as rational. Reason therefore becomes responsible for what it can deduce concerning the existence of
God, once this existence is recognised. Certain elements, such as the Ash’arīyah, did not necessarily accept that reason left to its own devices would succeed in formulating all the divine attributes. However, they did not deny that this very reason can understand that they are of necessity linked to the affirmation of the unique God, absolute creator and just judge.

Scholastic disputes would begin with the efforts of the doctors of kalām to systematise to some degree the data provided by the Qur’ān. The development of the necessary explanations would come up against the lack of clarity of the Qur’ānic vocabulary and concepts, especially as it is not simple in such a sensitive field to give precise definitions. These disputes first arose in connection with problems of the inaccessibility of the Qur’ānic God and the literal revelation of the Qur’ān itself. These debates would centre principally on the meaning of the attributes of God.

At the same time they would deal with the reality of the ṣifāt and, by extension, the relationship of the latter to the divine essence and/or whether these ṣifāt were eternal or not. With time these debates would become increasingly technical and sterile (logic, philology, and so forth) and would lose their appeal even within the Islamic world; consequently I shall allude to them here only in very brief fashion. The classification of the attributes into different categories would vary. However, the schema presented below achieved a certain consensus.

Attribute of the Essence: Existence, the attribute consubstantial with the essence, was the positive term expressing the essence without adding any other significance. This was dhāt Allāh, the ‘self’ of God bearing neither comparison with nor analogy to the essence of perishable things. This was his existence (wujūd).

Essential attributes. These were subdivided into two groups. First came the negative attributes (eternity, everlastingness,
dissimilarity from the created, subsistence through himself) that underlines divine transcendence and consequently manifest that God has neither equal nor opposite of any sort. Second were the ma'ání attributes that ‘add a concept to the essence’. They are not identical to the essence but are not other than it (in a separated or separating way). Some are 'aqīyāt, ‘rational’ (power, will, knowledge, life); the others are sam‘īyāt, ‘traditional’. These latter cannot be grasped by human reason and can only be known by the Qur‘anic teaching. Among this group we can mention seeing, hearing, speech, visibility, and perception; their exact meaning has been keenly disputed by the Mu‘tazilah and Ash‘ariyah.

Attributes of ‘Qualification’: These are the divine names or the ma‘ání attributes in the verbal form (present participle), such as possessing power, willing, and so forth.

Attributes of Action: These do not intrinsically qualify the essence, but designate what God can do or does not do (creation, command, predetermination, and so on). The schools differed in their view of the relationship of these attributes with knowledge and will; the Ash‘ariyah were usually more ‘voluntarist’, the Maturidiyah more ‘intellectualist’.

The central point in these debates is the question of the ‘reality’ of the attributes and their relationship to the essence. The ‘pious elders’ had already affirmed several attributes without providing any reasoning, just as they had affirmed the existence of God, both by punctiliously respecting the letter of the Qur‘ān and by accepting that the divine names were synonyms. However, their fundamentalist attitude with regard to the text of the Qur‘ān came into conflict with the ambiguities and anthropomorphisms of the mutashābih verses.

This led them into contradiction, even to the point of being open to the accusation of comparing God to his creatures.
Particularly aware of the purity of any affirmation concerning God, the Mu’tazilah, who saw themselves as ‘the people of justice and tawḥīd’, submitted the divine attributes to a severe critique. They rejected by the practice of tanzih ‘distancing’ all that evoked the created, supporting themselves by those passages in the Qurʾān that invite such an interpretation (e.g., 6:103, 42:9). Finally, this ‘stripping away’ of the attributes (taʿlīl) by a rigorous via remotionis tends to weaken the notion of them and to compromise their reality in God. Purified in this way, the attributes exist in God but are identical with the essence. This double affirmation rests on a distinction that can hardly be anything but nominal.

Under these conditions, the position of the Mu’tazilah toward samʿīyat attributes is not surprising. Sight, hearing, visibility, and the like are considered as mere metaphorical expressions of God’s omniscience and omnipotence. Speech, God’s manifestation in time and the expression of his will in the religious laws laid down for people, must have ‘begun’. Thus the Qurʾān is ‘created’. The tawḥīd accepts no change or even the shadow of variation. The school of Basra would even come to speak of a ‘contingent’ divine knowledge and will regarding man’s free acts.

Thus we see how and why the Mu’tazilah concept of reason, ‘criterion of the religious law’, led its followers to transform the tawḥīd, which they had intended to serve and magnify, into a concept that was negatively expressed but still accessible on the discursive level. The content of monotheistic faith thus tends to become a notion of God justified before human reason. This attitude and its inevitable consequences could not but provoke opposition and, finally, rejection. This task would be taken up by the Ashʿarīyah.

The Ashʿarīyah wished to justify their global and monolithic understanding of the mystery, which was comparable to that of the ‘pious elders’. Thus they would carefully apply tanzih to the
divine attributes, the reality of which they strongly supported. The Ash’ariyah adopted this attitude since they perceived the attributes according to their precise traditional definition (tawqif), that is to say, in the manner in which God ‘set it down’ in the Qur’an and, secondarily, in the sunnah. The sam‘iyat attributes especially are taken in their literal sense, while still remaining sufficiently mysterious to prevent anthropomorphism. They are seen as having no analogy with the created world. Their reason for existing cannot be grasped since their means of existence is ‘without how or comparison’ (bi-lā kayf wa-lā tashbih). Speech is seen as subsisting in God, whom it expresses; it is an ‘essential’ speech, just as the Qur’an is ‘uncreated’, distinct from its created expression, the Qur’anic text and recitation.

By applying to all the attributes the principle of “without how or comparison” the Ash’ariyah believed they could both remain faithful to the literal meaning of what the Qur’an affirms and avoid the ta’wil for which the Mu’tazilah were criticised. The attributes “are not God nor are they other than he.” They subsist in the divine essence in a manner completely unknown. In the eleventh century, al-Juwayni, the teacher of al-Ghazali, tried to give the attributes an intermediate existence between being and nonbeing, but this approach was not taken up by others. (More philosophically aware, the falasifah would advance the logical notion of distinction of reason.)

The Maturidiyah, for their part, would avoid any formulations that might insinuate, in whatever manner, a distinction between God and his attributes, especially those that might imply that the attributes are the ‘accidents’ of the essence. They would go to considerable lengths to remain as close as possible to the letter of the Qur’an (“God the Speaking, the Willing,” and so forth) and would say, for example, that “God is knowing and possesses a knowledge attributed to him from all eternity.”
These scholastic disputes can appear tedious, and indeed, they sometimes are. I shall conclude by quoting Louis Massignon’s remark at the end of his study on salvation in Islam: “God is not within the reach of man. Man should not be allowed to try to reach God. An abyss separates us from him. Thus emerge the strictness and intransigence of a monotheistic faith among a people to whom prophets have come to remind men that God is separate from them and inaccessible to them. Indeed faith, pure faith, is without doubt the only gift worthy of being offered to him.” This is truly what is shown by those pious believers whose submission (islām) to the commands of the Law is the basis of a total surrender to God through an act of trust that does not question.

REFERENCES

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