

ANTHROPOMORPHIC *Depictions of* GOD

The Concept of God in Judaic,
Christian & Islamic Traditions

Representing the Unrepresentable

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Zulfiqar Ali Shah's **Anthropomorphic Depictions of God: The Concept of God in Judaic, Christian and Islamic Traditions** is a monumental study originally published (unabridged) in 2012. It examines closely issues of anthropomorphism in the three Abrahamic Faiths, as viewed through the texts of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an.

Throughout history Christianity and Judaism have tried to make sense of God. While juxtaposing the Islamic position against this, the author addresses the Judeo-Christian worldview and how each has chosen to framework its encounter with God, to what extent this has been the result of actual scripture and to what extent the product of theological debate, or church decrees of later centuries and absorption of Hellenistic philosophy. Shah also examines Islam's heavily anti-anthropomorphic stance and Islamic theological discourse on *Tawhid* as well as the Ninety-Nine Names of God and what these have meant in relation to Muslim understanding of God and His attributes. Describing how these became the touchstone of Muslim discourse with Judaism and Christianity he critiques theological statements and perspectives that came to dilute if not counter strict monotheism. As secularism debates whether God is dead, the issue of anthropomorphism has become one of immense importance. The quest for God, especially in this day and age, is partly

one of *intellectual* longing. To Shah, anthropomorphic concepts and corporeal depictions of the Divine are perhaps among the leading factors of modern atheism. As such he ultimately draws the conclusion that the postmodern longing for God will not be quenched by pre-modern anthropomorphic and corporeal concepts of the Divine which have simply brought God down to this cosmos, with a precise historical function and a specified location, reducing the intellectual and spiritual force of what God is and represents, causing the soul to detract from a sense of the sacred and thereby belief in Him.

Dr. Shah's work forms an important background to any study or debate of this historically pivotal theological issue.

Abridged Edition by Zulfiqar Ali Shah of his Original

*ANTHROPOMORPHIC DEPICTIONS OF GOD: THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN
THE JUDAIC, CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC TRADITIONS*

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INTRODUCTION

This work is a detailed exposition of the issues of anthropomorphism and corporealism (the description of God in physical human terms, categories or forms inappropriate to His Majesty) in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as viewed through the texts of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an. It is in addition, a detailed examination of later developments in theological thought, scriptural interpretation, and exegetical criticism with regards to anthropomorphism, and how these have significantly influenced perceptions of God by followers of all three Traditions..

God created Man in His *moral image* meaning that He wished humanity to live a life marked by justice, equality, fair dealing, mutual respect, sympathy, love, compassion, and charity etc. Humanity on the other hand chose to violate even the most basic moral commandments of God and returned the favor by creating God in *Man's own image* rather crudely bringing the ineffable transcendental Other into the realms of structure and space, to serve nothing but hidden agendas and selfish desires. Indeed, the children of Abraham (by this is meant the Semitic consciousness) so personalized, nationalized and anthropomorphized the transcendental Deity that He in effect became just a larger, more powerful and lethal version of themselves. As such humanity did not hesitate to impart onto God its varied individual, communal and national agendas, practices, ideas, likes and dislikes etc., to thereby create an absolute out of finite ideas of nationhood, ethnicity, race, polity, ideology and even theology.

Elevating to the highest levels of significance limited historical phenomena such as land, race, a historical person or a particular notion

of divinity or law, what humanity ultimately managed to do was to replace the One and Only absolute with infinitely inferior erected multiple absolutes of an inherently finite nature and value beside Him. It was inevitable that this idolatrous venture, this man made idea of a national or personalized God, would lead to heated response, violent resistance and eventually degenerate into nothingness. Enlightenment “Deism” followed by scientific agnosticism and finally atheism would be the fated outcome. As science inexorably developed, and a philosophy of secular humanism and materialism replaced ideas of religion and God, becoming the new cultural ethos, bold assertions such as those of Karl Marx that religion was the opium of the people, came to hold a deeper grip on imagination. The key to human happiness now lay in maximizing ones material needs in this life and not deferring gratification to some sort of paradise after death. Forgetting of course that the *raison d’être* of religion was to solve problems of meaning, provide spiritual and ethical solutions to material problems and prepare for life after death and not to satisfy man’s ego, greed, desire for promiscuity and love for instantaneous gratification.

Meanwhile, that which could not be measured, quantified, or simply observed, was rendered obsolete. Hence, the transcendental Other Who stood against and beyond the utilitarian sphere and did not render Himself to an empirically demonstrable scientific fact was in turn rendered useless, with religion simply dismissed as the product of infantile fears and experiences. The result has been a tremendous and tragic loss of faith such that even American theologian Harvey Cox is able to declare in his bestseller, *The Secular City*, the death of God and the deification of humanity rather than a transcendent deity.

Yet statistics speak louder than statements. The brave new world of Western orthodoxy embodied in scientific rationalism and secular humanism may have succeeded to some extent in eliminating both God and religion from our immediate conscious, but it has not succeeded in eliminating human suffering, inequity and violence. Indeed some of the worst wars in human history have been fought under the banner of secular ideologies and dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini. Some would argue that the hopes of the Enlightenment died in Auschwitz, the romance of socialism and communism during the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the Chinese Revolution and the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, and the glamour of capitalism and science during the two World Wars.

Furthermore, atheistic ideas of the past few centuries have themselves created more deep rooted problems, i.e. nihilism and purposelessness, robbing man of the great strength and hope that can be derived from a religious outlook. These are more illogical and problematic than the belief in God, cosmic design and a life full of purpose.

The quest for God is intrinsic to human nature because it is the quest for meaning, for the purpose of our existence. A deified humanity is no solution to this universal longing. The true solution lies in the mysterious, ineffable and transcendent Other Who is the source of existence and the ultimate answer to humanity's craving for meaning. The true solution to humanity's suffering, anxiety and longing lies in a proper response to this transcendental source of being rather than worrying about His essence or just believing in His existence. Religion is a deeply subjective experience, and so God is known not through measurement but inner feelings and communication. This type of response requires involvement of the totality of our being, a set of spiritual exercises and a pious, dedicated, disciplined and moral lifestyle. And it is this compassionate lifestyle that will enable humanity to break free of the shackles of selfhood, greed, ego, and narrow identity to reflect the true unity of God Almighty by furthering the unity of humanity, existence and the cosmos.

In a world of violence and injustice, much of it perpetrated in the name of God, perhaps the way forward is by coming to recognize the level to which we humans have for millennia been recreating God in our image and to allow this to motivate us to work toward restoring the divine/human relationship to its proper place. This will not happen without first understanding how we got to where we are today.

In sum it is the opinion of this author that the postmodern and postsecular longing for God will not be quenched by pre modern anthropomorphic and corporeal concepts of the Divine which have simply brought God down to this cosmos, with a precise historical function and a specified location, reducing Him to a lowercase god, and causing the soul to detract from the great sense of awe and reverence that it should and has been created to feel at mention of Him.

Chapter One

The Problem of Anthropomorphism and Defining Categories

Secularism, philosophic materialism, agnosticism and blatant atheism have bewildered the 21st century's religious landscape to the extent that devoutly religious theists have become a small minority. The future of Western faith is grim as nations undergo the secularization process. This death of faith and God is one culmination of a centuries old discourse concerning the "Transcendent God" of theism in general and of Judaism and Christianity in particular.

For centuries, philosophers, intellectuals, and scientists have argued that the theistic conception of God is too anthropomorphic, primitive, confusing and complicated, and that the transcendental God and his institutions have become irrelevant to man and his surroundings. The "death of God" call was seen as necessary to liberate man from the restrictions placed upon him by religion and religion's so-called interpretations of man and the universe, imposed in the name of God upon the scientific and cultural products of men. This view regarded men as autonomous, unlimited creators of their culture and destiny. Underscoring it is the assumption that God arose in the primitive consciousness through man's fears and aspirations being projected into the cosmos fashioning a deity or deities that would protect him. Compelling because of its simplicity, this view fails however, to take into account the fact that belief in God has grown exponentially with man's own growth in knowledge and intelligence, from primitive to sophisticated cultures and civilizations, and as such religion is as much an intellectual exercise as it is purported not to be. Nevertheless science and philosophy it is widely touted have removed the need for God in human culture and activity. In other words, today the God who used to be worshipped as the Creator of the universe is no longer accepted as the creator of man and his surroundings. Instead, it is man who, we are constantly told, has created God in his own image.

Projection theories or claims concerning the human origins of notions relating to the divine are not recent. They can be traced back to the Greek philosopher-poet Xenophanes (570–470 BC), around six hundred years before Jesus Christ. It has also long been claimed that religions and gods stem from man's desires and attempts to explain and control the natural environment around him, and its disturbing

and puzzling phenomena. In the fifteenth century, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) noted that human understanding relies upon causes that relate “clearly to the nature of man rather than to the nature of the universe.” These significant observations were hallmarks of a new era: the era of science. Bacon maintained that man anthropomorphizes.¹ Science and empiricism required de-anthropomorphization of human thought processes. In the sixteenth century, French writer Bernard Fontenelle (1657–1757) proposed a universal evolutionary framework for the development of human thought and culture. He maintained that humans explained the unseen and unknown with what was seen and known. Natural forces beyond human control led people to imagine beings that were more powerful than humans and that could significantly affect human life and destiny.² The diversity of natural forces explains the multitude of primitive divinities. These gods have been anthropomorphic in nature, as the products of human thoughts and circumstances. The nature, qualities, and attributes of gods change along with human thought patterns and cultures. The primitive people ascribed rudimentary attributes to their gods such as physical bodies, corporeal attributes and crude anthropomorphic qualities. The educated and more sophisticated groups described gods in more developed forms and categories such as love, compassion, spiritual existence and transcendental categories. The conception of a god or gods in any given society reflects that society’s culture and sophistication.

David Hume (1711–1776), pioneered this line of approach in our modern times. He gave a more detailed account of the anthropomorphic nature of the divine. According to Hume, notions about the divine did not spring from reason but from the natural uncertainties of life and out of fear of the future. Viewing the idea of God in evolutionary terms, Hume rejected the theory of an original monotheism and considered the earliest form of religion to be idolatry or polytheism. To Hume, the origin of the idea of God resulted as man personified his hopes and fears into the cosmos, then worshipped gods created in his own image.³ This anthropomorphic tendency of modeling all unknown powers after our familiar human categories is the foundational source of our belief in the divine. Humes’ analysis guides and serves as a point of reference for many modern scholars of religious philosophy and sociology who share his assumptions: Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Edward Tylor, Sigmund Freud, Thomas De Quincy, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Brontë, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau Ponty, Albert Camus, A. J. Ayer, and E. D. Klemke, for example. Feuerbach for instance

argued that, “*Theology is anthropology...* the object of religion, which in Greek we call *theos* and in our language God, expresses nothing other than the deified essence of man, so that the history of religion... is nothing other than the history of man.”⁴ He insisted that man’s God is Man. Traditional religion is nothing but the opium of people and must be destroyed to wake people up from their deep slumber. Science could do so.

In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin advocated his theory of natural selection, refuting the traditional theistic view of God as the Creator and Designer, and nature as the manifestation of purpose, design, and immutability.⁵ Biblical metaphysics was based on the concept of a loving God who created man in a unique fashion. The Christian worldview revolved around the concept of fallen human nature, divine intervention through atoning sacrifice, and resultant redemption through Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Darwin’s worldview and interpretation of nature as autonomous, self-directing, and evolutionary undermined the traditional Christian world-view more than the scientific revolutions of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. Darwin’s theories challenged and effectively shook the foundations of Christian metaphysics. With Darwin’s evolutionism, every need for a God as the original source of creation and the sole maintainer of this universe ceased to exist. If creation had evolved naturally from its primitive origins and is constantly evolving through the process of natural selection without any external divine intervention, then it was naturally concluded, it does not need God for its existence, sustenance and continuity.

Despite opposition from religious establishments, evolutionary theory became the guiding principle in all leading disciplines of the nineteenth century. As a result, empirical scientists, anthropologists, philologists, psychologists, sociologists, and naturalists of the nineteenth century did not look for God in the heavens or beyond this utilitarian sphere. They searched for Him here in their own world: in nature, the human soul, the psyche, or in human society. All of them, almost unanimously, were able to locate Him in human experience: i.e., in the mental process by which man acquires ideas and is influenced by his emotions. Supposing the idea of the divine to have originated in the world of man, many scholars applied extensive research to locating the exact origin of the idea of God and religion. Although some like Father Wilhelm Schmidt used their research findings to prove that primitive religion everywhere had begun with an essentially monotheistic concept of god,

they were nevertheless in the minority. The great majority of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, and even some so-called theologians, contended that the origins of religion lay in the simple forms of primitive cultures, in animism, fetishism, and totemism, claiming that these developed in turn into higher forms of religion such as polytheism, monolatry, monotheism, and finally the ethical monotheism of modern religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam which comprise the bulk of belief today.

Despite their differences, they largely agreed on one point; God does not have an objective reality of His own. He depends upon human needs, aspirations, and fears for His existence. The word “God” they asserted was merely a reification, personification, or projection of forces found in the external, internal, and social world of man. In other words discourse about God is basically a discourse about man or, in Feuerbach’s words, and as discussed above “Theology is anthropology.” This essential understanding of the divine continued into the twentieth century. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that “religion consists in a humanization of natural laws” and an “anthropomorphization of nature.”⁶ According to Stewart Guthrie, a contemporary anthropologist, “religion is anthropomorphism.”⁷

In light of these observations, and when we examine the known faith traditions of the world, we see that anthropomorphism is embedded in the scriptures of almost all with varying degrees. Theologians of most of these traditions vainly try to eliminate anthropomorphism from their scriptures, but very often, scriptural text refuses such treatment. As it is impossible to discuss all the religious traditions within the limited scope of this work, we confine our observations to the three developed Semitic religions that claim their origin in the Abrahamic faith: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament God is shown to manifest human qualities, both mental and physical, as befits his proposal to make “man in our image and likeness.” In the New Testament He is given a completely human form, divine incarnation in Jesus. Despite the many concerted efforts of some Jewish scholars and church fathers (as explored in later chapters) to stem this, the concept of a physically humanlike God has persisted in both the traditions. The Qur’an is the only scripture which has constantly and consistently averted this tendency and safeguarded the deity from crude anthropomorphic and corporeal categories but the struggle is chronic among some Muslim sects, though not exactly as crude as in Judaism and Christianity.

On the other hand, religion as such with an anthropomorphic understanding of God has been scolded and refuted by many scholars, philosophers, and scientists of modern times. In addition to scientific developments or scientific metaphysics, and a mechanical interpretation of nature, such apathy towards religion as mentioned earlier can partly be attributed to the over-anthropomorphic nature of theistic notions of God especially in the case of Judaism and Christianity. Secular man does not need an anthropomorphic, man-looking God with limitations for anything, and wants to find his own solutions in the world. He is happy to live without such a limited God. Yet for all this, there is a strong sense of alienation, isolation, subjectivism, relativism and nihilism in modern man. And also and more ominously, in the words of Dostoyevsky, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted."⁸ Religious values do not currently bind, in general. Moral values are not ultimate but quite relative. They are disappearing, at least in the United States and Europe, with unprecedented speed, while family values are diminishing in most parts of the developed world. A March 9, 2009 CNN survey revealed that America was "becoming less Christian."⁹ Additionally being religious and moral in contemporary America or Europe is substantially different from the practice some twenty years ago. Many Christian dogmas such as the Trinity, Incarnation, and Original Sin as well as moral values such as sexual decency, protection of life, and family dignity are frequently compromised, or interpreted in such a fashion as to become a different animal. The modern idea of God is not as awe inspiring as it used to be in past centuries. Modern man has distanced himself from the transcendent God of theism. God-conscious people exist in the world, but the majority of mankind presents the exact picture of what the Qur'an says: "And be ye not like those who forgot God, and He made them forget themselves"(59:19).

What has been discussed above alludes to two distinct charges against the theistic understanding of God. The first is anthropomorphism. These charges do not mean total denial of God's existence, but that any material description of God, as the advocates of this charge against religion would contend, is conditioned by and derived from man's understanding of his own nature. Those since Xenophanes who have pressed this charge have maintained that God transcends this material world and is solely different from human beings; therefore, any description of Him in terms of human nature, no matter how greatly qualified, will distort His perfection and will be worse than no description of Him at all.

The other charge is that of ‘invention.’ The supporters of this charge contend that God is fictional with no real existence. He depends ontologically on human beings as they invent him by a cosmic projection of their nature, characteristics, and qualities. Stewart Guthrie notes that people who say religion anthropomorphizes usually mean that it attributes human characteristics to gods, or that, in claiming gods exist, it attributes human characteristics to nature. In the former meaning, religion makes gods humanlike in crediting them with the capacity for symbolic action. In the latter case, religion makes nature humanlike by seeing gods there. To understand the depth and reality of the charge we need to define key related terms such as anthropomorphism and transcendence.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism derives from the Greek *anthropos* (human being) and *morphe* (form). As a term it is relatively modern and was developed in the eighteenth century. A general definition of anthropomorphism could be: an inveterate tendency to project human qualities into natural phenomena, consciously or not, or, the description of non-material, ‘spiritual’ entities in physical, and specifically human, form. Used in its religious sense, the term denotes a universal human tendency to experience, express, and appeal to the divine in human shapes or categories. Anthropomorphism can denote the ascription to God of a human form or member.

Empirical scientists and scholars, in their efforts to restrict the compass of God and religion, and thereby the Church’s influence and interpretations of man and his surroundings, promoted the charge of excessive visual imagery or physical anthropomorphism extending it to cover all aspects of God deemed comparable to that of the human being. The charge of anthropomorphism was pressed so hard that it became a virtual witch-hunt with any divine quality or attribute, no matter how moral or spiritual, if linked to the human realm being dubbed as sheer anthropomorphism. Pushed beyond its limits the accusation lost all credible meaning stripped of its real context to become merely a term of reproach or vehicle for the expression of dislike.

Incarnation

Incarnation is a species of anthropomorphism, wherein God may be described in human categories and shapes without emerging within the representation of a human being “in our image and likeness.” But the

term “incarnation” specifically alludes to the representation of a human being as in the true image of God. Jacob Neusner defines incarnation as: “The representation of God in the flesh, as corporeal, consubstantial in emotion and virtue with human beings, and sharing in the modes and means of actions carried out by mortals.”¹⁰ The Christian doctrine of Jesus as simultaneously a complete God and a complete man represents the climax of incarnation and hence corporealism and anthropomorphism, although many Christian theologians claim otherwise. If God can fully incarnate in a historical person and experience human limitations even to the extreme point of painful death, then we have in front of us the apex of corporealism.

This notion of God suffering death has seemingly contributed to the death of God theology and underscored His irrelevance to modern culture and society. The reasoning is clear. A God that forsakes Jesus on the cross is a God that modern man does not trust anymore. What guarantee does man have that this same God will not forsake him when man needs Him most? A God that is unable to forgive the simple mistake of eating a forbidden apple and for centuries tortures billions of innocent men, women and children in the hellfire until atonement has been made through the violent bloodshed of an innocent righteous man, Jesus, is a God that modern man has serious doubts about especially with regards to His justice, mercy, loving nature, and validity. A God that is unable to eliminate or even subdue sin despite this blood atonement through the cross, is a God that becomes irrelevant to the modern culture of pragmatism, relativism and logical positivism. Such a God makes no sense and is too mysterious, paradoxical, and anthropomorphic. In a sense the death of God in the mind was already inevitable when the physical attempt by the Romans to kill Jesus took place, Jesus being viewed as God incarnate. In short, the humanization of the divine has ironically resulted in the divinization of the human. Having discarded notions of the Divine, man needs to find his own solutions via his own knowledge and institutions without looking to the transcendental realms for assistance or guidance. The old cognitive confusion of imploring God at times of need must be cast aside in favor of solutions provided by science and technology.

Transcendence

Transcendence, on the other hand, is the term most commonly used to signify God’s continuous providential guidance to and independence of this material world by emphasizing His separation from and elevation above this world. Transcendence is the most significant

attribute among all divine attributes as the other-worldliness of divinity and supernaturalism rests upon it. God is beyond this utilitarian sphere of time and space since He is the Creator of this spatio-temporal cosmos. Moreover, the term transcendence denotes that God Himself and notions about His existence, Absoluteness, Power, and Authority are not humanly created conceptions; therefore, they cannot be dispensed as meaningless and empty terms, as conceived by empiricists. In contrast, God and His revelation are the fundamental sources and ground of meaningfulness in this world.

The etymology of the word ‘transcendence’ demonstrates its origin from the Latin root *scando* which means ‘I climb’; when to this root prepositions like *as*, *de*, and *trans* are added we get words as ‘ascend’ ‘descend’ and ‘transcend.’ Thus, the word ‘transcend’ would literally mean “something has climbed out of something,” or something has “risen above” and “went beyond” something. This definition presupposes two things: a difference between the one which transcends and that which is transcended. It also presupposes a relationship or relevance between them. As a metaphor, the term transcendence has been used to convey a number of varied though related meanings, therefore, the precise significance of the term in any particular work would be determined from the context in which it is used. In this enterprise, the term will be used for God, His uniqueness and otherness, and to denote His unique mode of relationship to the world with the exclusion of corporealism. God transcends the world not in the sense that He is out of the world, but in the sense that “He stands over against all finite beings” and is “not identical with or His power not exhausted by the realm of finite being.” He is never non-being like the finite beings. God “transcends structure,” the unbreakable necessities, both spatially and temporally, and is free in relation to all of them.

Transcendence: A Philosophical Interpretation

The religious concept of ‘transcendence’ discussed above is different from the philosophers’ interpretation of it. Their notion of transcendence sharply contrasts with their concept of divine immanence. In their efforts to press Gods’ unity and oneness and to purify His being from all human attributes or characteristics, they go so far as to cut His entire relationship with, and in some cases, direct authority over, this world of perception. This extreme notion of transcendence, starting from the Pythagoreans and Platonists and permeating through Philo and Neo-Platonists to a great number of philosophers and theologians from all three traditions, identifies God

with that source of divine reality from whom all other realities emanate wittingly or unwittingly as the light emanates from the sun.

Immanence

The term ‘immanence’ denotes God’s presence in this world and is thought to directly oppose the term ‘transcendence.’ ‘Immanence’ derives from the Latin base *manere*, meaning to stay or to remain. The addition of the preposition ‘in’ gave the meaning of ‘staying in’ or ‘remaining within.’ It is worth noticing that what stays in something or remains within something is distinguishable and distinct from that which it stays in; otherwise, one will merely be a part of the other. Keeping this fact in mind, it can be argued that the term ‘immanence’ is not a polar opposite of the term ‘transcendence.’ In a sense the transcendence of God presupposes a relationship of God with the world. He transcends, while necessitating His “otherness” from it. Therefore, the transcendent God is related to this world of senses as the original and only source of its creation and existence, as the Creator and the Sustainer. He stays within the world of the material and is imminent in every aspect of its existence by means of His eternal power, knowledge, authority, protection, love, and many other infinite and absolute attributes and qualities, but ontologically is wholly ‘other’ than the world. Therefore, when contrasting transcendence, or surpassing nature, with immanence or the indwelling presence of God, we only describe in inadequate human language two aspects of one and the self-same Being which differ from each other. Therefore both transcendence and immanence are not alternatives but correlatives. Both supplement each other as each contains some elements of the other.

Such a theistic understanding of ‘transcendence’ is central to the Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). The belief in such a transcendent God sinks deep into the personalities of those who believe in Him and shapes their whole life. This belief is not something they can keep to themselves; there is a kind of compulsion and urgency behind it. All activities of true believers seem to be molded into and dictated by the particular kind of belief they possess regarding the ‘transcendent,’ because to them He is the sole source of their very existence, the One Unified, Perfect being that, though distinct from the cosmos, is the source of it, and continues to sustain and providentially guide it.

The approaches adopted by followers of these Semitic traditions

regarding anthropomorphic and corporeal depictions of this “transcendent” God are different to certain degrees. Jewish Scripture (the Hebrew Bible, Old Testament) is inundated with anthropomorphic expressions and depictions of God, though medieval Jewish theologians and philosophers like Saadia ibn Joseph (Saadia Gaon) (882–942), Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), and many modern scholars of our times have tried to eliminate or at least minimize these scriptural anthropomorphisms by various methods of interpretation. On the other hand, the pervasiveness of anthropomorphism in the Hebrew Bible makes such intellectual attempts superficial. Christianity’s dogma of the person of Christ and “Incarnation” is also anthropomorphic. In spite of ample emphasis in the Christian tradition upon the transcendence of God and His uniqueness, the presence of dogmas like “Incarnation” and the frequent usage of expressions like the Father, the Son, God in human form, God on earth, Mother of God, and the face and hands of God leave tinges of corporealism in the human mind. Islam emphasizes God’s transcendence and its scripture keenly protects the transcendent God from any shades of corporealism and physical anthropomorphisms.

The coming chapters will explore in detail the transcendental and anthropomorphic tendencies contained in the Bible (both the Old and the New Testaments) and the Qur’an.

Chapter Two

Anthropomorphism and the Hebrew Bible

The understanding of God distinctive to the Hebrew Bible and hence to Judaic tradition is an amalgamation of anthropomorphic and transcendental tendencies. God, in the text of the Hebrew bible, is presented as the transcendent reality and at the same time He is often described in concrete anthropomorphic and corporeal terms. These two polar tendencies or strands go side by side in the entire Hebrew Bible. Though visible efforts are made by the classical prophets to reduce the usage of anthropomorphic expressions and to lay more and more emphasis on the transcendental elements in the deity, there is hardly a page in the Old Testament where anthropomorphism or its vestiges cannot be found. There is a manifest progressive element in the theistic notions of the Hebrew Bible. Various kinds of concepts can be located in regard to the deity in various parts of the Old Testament (Hebrew

Bible). Animism, polytheism, henotheism, monolatry, national monotheism and universal and ethical monotheism, all these 'isms' are reported to have been practiced by Israelites during various stages and periods of their early history and overlooked in most cases if not sanctioned by the biblical writers.

Some modern scholars do not see the affirmation of God's unity, uniqueness and transcendence even in the First Commandment (*Shema*). They argue that it may prove monolatry or mono-Yahwism rather than strict monotheism. They contend that monotheism, the much stronger belief that only one God exists anywhere, was not revealed on Sinai's peaks as the *Shema* does not deny the existence of gods other than Yahweh, nor does it assert the sole existence of Yahweh. It is very difficult to find a single transcendental monotheistic statement in the whole of the Pentateuch. Historically speaking, the Jews, from antiquity to modern times, have held the First Commandment as emphasizing the unity of Yahweh. A cursory reader, on the other hand, would easily unearth the unusual tension prevailing in the Pentateuch with respect to the unity, unicity, and uniqueness of God. On the one hand, the unity and uniqueness of Yahweh is emphasized, whilst on the other it is seriously undermined, by showcasing not only the existence of other gods but also through God Almighty's recognition of their existence by appointing other nations to them while keeping Israel for Himself. Yahweh is not the universal God of mankind, but a national God of Israel; one God among many differing gods (ascribed for other nations) with the exception of His being unique among them.

Evidently most of the western anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and scientists who have interpreted religion either as a psychological illusion or a sociological need, are clearly interacting with the local, national, anthropomorphic and progressive concept of God as presented by a majority of the Old Testament writers. Indeed amongst the Scriptures of all the developed religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam it is the Hebrew Bible which depicts God in the most local, anthropomorphic and corporeal terms. Undoubtedly the Christian incarnation theology is one culmination and climax of an anthropomorphic, corporeal, and in its certain interpretations polytheistic, concept of the deity, yet the Christian New Testament does not contain many anthropomorphic expressions. In reality the anthropomorphic incarnation theology is but one interpretation of the New Testament material though it is the most popular among the

Christian believers. The Qur'anic theology is very transcendental and does not lend itself to an evolutionary scheme of progressive development from animism to polytheism to monolatry to monotheism.

It is in the Hebrew Bible that the emphasis upon the anthropomorphic deity runs deep, and to such a level that God in the ancient biblical period is presented in manifest anthropomorphic terms, with ascription of human qualities and attributes so clear, that even the Ten Commandments are said to have been written by the "finger of God." Some of the anthropomorphisms employed are crude and blatant, portraying God as embodying human physical characteristics and feelings, even acting much like a human being (details being quite graphic in certain places) leaving in their wake the theological problem of how to interpret them, their impact, and whether to regard them as objectionable or not. These and other elements are explored in this chapter.

In the Bible God appears in human form, eats, drinks, rests and is refreshed. For example, in a well known biblical encounter, God wrestles with Jacob, dislocates Jacob's thigh and is even shown to be weak, unable to physically dominate Jacob, to the point of finally asking Jacob to let Him go as the dawn breaks. As a result of this wrestling encounter God changes Jacobs' name to Israel meaning "he struggles with God."

The early Israelite traditions attribute a visible human form to God. Indeed, a majority of mortal, human, physical and mental categories appear to be present in the Hebrew God: God has a body; in the plains of Mamre, He appears to Abraham in a mythico-anthropomorphic form; Abraham bows down towards the ground, offers God water, requests Him to let him wash His feet, fetches Him a morsel of bread and God responds to Abraham's request and does eat, (Genesis 18:1-9). In this text God appears to Abraham with such anthropomorphic realism that Abraham does not recognize him until Yahweh's verbal self-revelation. In Exodus 33:11 Moses is allowed to see the back part of God and speak face to face to Him as a person speaks to a friend. The elders of Israel had also seen God (Exodus 24:9-10).

Theophany (meaning appearance of God) is thus a common occurrence in the Hebrew Bible. Many biblical theophanies are either concrete anthropomorphisms, or subcategories of physical anthropomorphism, such as envisioned anthropomorphism. And many of these theophanies

portray God's utter closeness to human beings, for the most part in terms of human form, but with varying degrees of explicitness and human embodiment. It is worth noting also that when God is portrayed as coming in thunder, lightning or behind clouds, this does not mean that He does not have a physical human form or body but rather that sinful Hebrews are not allowed to look at His radiant glory with their immoral eyes, which is only the purview of the righteous among them, who can still physically gaze at God's glorified majestic form.

So, most human organs are ascribed to God with the exception of sexuality. God has a head (Isaiah 59:17; Psalm 110:7) and the hair of His head is like pure wool (Daniel 7:9). His face is mentioned around 236 times. God's eyes are mentioned 200 times. He has a nose (Genesis 8:21) such that there issues "a smoke out of his nostrils" (Psalm 18:8), and He has a sense of smell (Exodus 25:6). God's ear is mentioned frequently (Numbers 11:1; II Samuel 22:7; Psalm 86:1). God is said to have a mouth, "With him will I speak mouth to mouth even apparently" (Numbers 12:8); He has lips, a tongue and breath. He weeps, wails, laments (Jeremiah 9:10), He commits mistakes, evil and repents of them (Exodus 32:11-14). No one can read the Hebrew Bible without coming to the conclusion that the authors supposed that God physically resembled man and that man was created in the physical likeness of the Deity.

There are times when God is depicted in transcendental anthropomorphisms where He is portrayed in human shapes and qualities yet residing in the heavens. He is enthroned on a special throne, rides cherubim, plants a garden, studies Torah, presides over a divine council and even speaks to people directly from this heavenly sphere. Some of the anthropomorphic expressions are figurative or metaphorical in nature as they render themselves to linguistically accepted metaphorical interpretations. Many however are not, being corporeal and anthropomorphic through and through. Unfortunately numerous biblical scholars muddle these concrete and literally corporeal phrases by attempting to give them figurative or representational interpretations through recourse to some very arbitrary means. So, for instance, we have scholars attempting to synthetically impose their own sophisticated and developed understandings of God and His nature onto the text of the Hebrew Bible, an approach which completely defies the original intent as well as context of the script.

The origins of Biblical anthropomorphism lie in the Book of Genesis,

the first book of the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible. In verse 1:26 God is said to proclaim “*na’aseh ‘adam beselmenu kidemutenu*,” meaning, “Let us make man in our image after our likeness.” Many orthodox exegetes try to interpret this verse spiritually, claiming that the image and likeness mentioned in the verse refer not to a physical but to a spiritual aspect. However, the original Hebrew words defy any such interpretation. The Hebrew words *selem* (image) and *demute* (likeness) mostly denote the outward form and not inward spiritual attributes.

Therefore the Hebrew God looks like man and very often acts like man. This idea of a God-man resemblance abounds in the Hebrew Bible together with anthropomorphic imagery. Thus God, like man, is “mutable,” freely “localized in space and time,” moves, changes and reacts to changes. Further, the God of the Hebrew Bible also changes His mind as well as His decisions. For instance the prophet Moses is recorded as having made God repent of certain evil decisions so causing God to change His mind. At times God appears as tribalistic with racist undertones, and at others a real estate agent more concerned with property rights than worship. He makes the covenant with Abraham, promises to give the “Promised Land” to him and his progeny forever as an inheritance to them but somehow is either unable or unwilling to fulfill that promise. He advises Moses and the Israelites to plunder the Egyptian neighbors of articles of gold, silver and clothing. Very often He represents the Hebrews’ aspirations and national agenda projecting in a sense their failures, dreams and fears into the cosmos. Thus in the Hebrew God what we have is not the absolute transcendent and perfect God of theism but rather an imperfect, corporeal and finite God, a product of His very finite creators, those who recorded the Old Testament.

Ethical monotheism was not the predominant concern of the early Hebrews. Henotheism is perhaps the best term to denote a patriarchal understanding of God. Monolatry or Mono-Yahwism replaces henotheism with the arrival of Moses who at the same time seems to be sowing the seeds of biblical monotheism although not in the strict sense of the term. His Yahweh is a jealous God though His universe is not free from the existence of other gods. Moreover, his Yahweh is not free from anthropomorphic attributes and qualities seemingly boldly presented in anthropomorphic as well as physical terms. The anthropomorphic tendency is quite visible even in the case of later prophets, who championed strict monotheism and offered vehement

opposition to idolatry and graven images. Their God is not presented in crude material terms, but is still visibly corporeal and anthropomorphic i.e., a reflection of the idea that God created man in His own image and likeness. There are many biblical statements which if taken at face value present God in transcendental terms. On the other hand, God's transcendence is not carefully protected against possible exploitation and compromise. So, the same Bible which categorically differentiates God from mortals, also on many occasions portrays Him very much like mortals with mortal qualities and attributes. There appears to be a tension between anthropomorphism and transcendence throughout the Hebrew Bible but that tension is not quite decisive in eliminating the anthropomorphic depictions of God.

Moreover, the Jewish community at large did not seem troubled by the presence of these anthropomorphic expressions in their scripture, until the onslaught of Greek philosophy especially in the first century BC. Even later Rabbinic thought embodied in the Talmud, though not without exceptions, appears to be accepting of biblical anthropomorphisms. In addition to the Written Torah, the Oral Torah or Talmud is very important to Judaic tradition and a central text. Rabbinic authorities believed that God had revealed the Oral Torah or Law to Moses just as He had revealed the Written Torah and this is what the term *Halakha LeMoshe MiSinai* exactly means. In the Talmud God is depicted as seated upon a high and exalted throne in the innermost part of the Sanctuary. He asks Rabbi Ishmael, "My son, bless Me." The Midrash depicts the Hebrews as seeing God as a warrior or as a learned scribe. The Hebrews on the Red Sea are able to point at God with their fingers, "They beheld His image as a man is able to look his friend in the face." God wears traditional Tefillin, He prays to Himself and studies Torah. He roars like a lion and says: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world. God follows a fixed day schedule and sports with Leviathan. According to the Talmud "The day consists of twelve hours; during the first three hours the Holy One, blessed be He, is occupying Himself with the Torah, during the second three He sits in judgment on the whole world, and when He sees that the world is so guilty as to deserve destruction, He transfers Himself from the seat of Justice to the seat of Mercy; during the third quarter, He is feeding the whole world, from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin; during the fourth quarter He is sporting with the leviathan..."

He also has a night schedule and he listens to the song of Hayyoth. He repeatedly laments and sheds tears over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Israelites and the sound is heard from one end of the world to the other. He smites his hands together to satisfy his anguish and fury. He weeps over the destiny of Israel and the destruction of His temple in secret chambers. He daily weeps over three failures: one for the first Temple, and one for the second Temple, and one for Israel, who have become exiled from their place. The rabbis recognize the blasphemous nature of these daring statements concerning God. This is evident from their own confessions that “if Scripture did not speak thus, the tongue that says this should be cut to ribbons.”¹¹ Nevertheless they have continued to repeat the myth of divine sorrow, pain and lamentation as if this were an integral part of the scriptural portrayal of God. Finally God himself comes to appease Jerusalem and is *judged through fire*. It is difficult to find such an example of God’s punishment and purgation in any other Semitic tradition.

God is frequently depicted as crying. He requested Jeremiah to summon an embassy of Patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to console Him. The powerful sovereign of the universe is depicted as a helpless king who is unable to protect His children, defend His sanctuary, establish His services etc., lamenting openly due to His broken pride. He weeps in inner chambers and needs human patriarchal consolation in private to avoid other nations’ mockery. Moreover, the problem is not really one of minor or mild anthropomorphisms like seeing, watching, loving, caring, helping etc. for these are essential attributes for the required communication between God and man. The difficulty occurs when we come to concrete anthropomorphisms which go beyond the purpose of modality and depict God as a humanlike figure. In the *Genesis Rabbah*, ca. 400–450, it is reported that R. Hoshaiah said: “When the Holy One, blessed be he, came to create the first man, the ministering angels mistook him [for God, since man was in God’s image,] and wanted to say before him, ‘Holy,’ [holy is the Lord of hosts].”¹² In explaining Exodus 15:3 that states, “The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is his name,” the Talmud has no hesitation in portraying God as a real man. “The word ‘man’ signifies none other than the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said: The Lord is a man of war.” This, to Rabbi Jacob Nuesner, is “divinity in the form of humanity.”

In short, the rabbinic God is absolutely a corporeal deity with countless

human limitations. In no way or form does the rabbinic theological conception of God resemble the Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnipresent and Independent God of monotheistic transcendental theology. Rather, it would appear that the rabbinic concept of God is a reflection of Judaic religious and political aspirations. God's destiny is paired with Jewish destiny. He suffers with their sufferings and laments their failures. This lamenting and weeping deity can hardly be said to be the Omnipotent God of the universe.

Hellenistic thought moved a number of Jewish scholars to interpret anthropomorphic expressions figuratively. For instance, Aristobulus (150 BC) and Philo Judaeus (20 BC–40 CE) championed allegorical interpretation to eliminate anthropomorphic passages, so much so that Philo completely stripped his God of all ascription of attributes. Later in medieval times Saadia Gaon (882–942), Bahya ibn Paquda (1040), and Judah ha-Levi (1075–1141) vehemently opposed biblical anthropomorphisms. Finally we come to Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) who propounded the dogma of God's incorporeality and declared its deniers as idolaters and heretics. The medieval Jewish philosophers seem to have been really bothered by these anthropomorphic expressions, and this was mostly due to the polemic offensive of Muslim speculative theologians against them. Despite the authoritative esteem with which Maimonides was, and is, held among many Jews, his intellectualization of the Hebrew God failed to receive acceptance from among his coreligionists who rejected his incorporeal deity. They regarded his Hellenistic doctrine to be antithetical to the historically authenticated and scripturally mandated anthropomorphic tradition of Jewry at large. Consequently, the same anthropomorphic trend continued in the later generations.

A more hideous form of anthropomorphism meets us in the period of the *Gaonim*. The most monstrous book of this period was the *Shi'ur Koma*, 'Estimation of the Height,' of God. In it the Deity is described as a huge being in human shape and out of all proportion. The measurement of each member, such as the neck, the beard, the right and left eyes, the upper and lower lips, the ankles, etc. is given in parasangs (an ancient unit of distance equal to four miles or six kilometers). Only "those parasangs are not like ours, for a heavenly parasang measures a million cubits, each cubit four spans, and each span reaches from one end of the world to the other." "And," says the book of *Raziel*, "blessed is he who knows these measurements, for he has a share in the world to come."¹³

Biblical scholars and theologians, without denying the presence and crude forms of anthropomorphisms in the Bible, try to explain away some of the reasons why they feel it to be necessary. The first and the most commonly cited cause is the assumption that the human mind is unable to represent God as He is in Himself. The second reason is said to be the lack of a philosophical spirit in ancient people such that they had no choice but to perceive the Deity as a living, active, personal and individual God, the perception requiring an anthropomorphic depiction. The third reason is said to be the practical nature of the Hebrew people, their boldness and the linguistic structure of their language.

If, as traditionally believed, the Hebrew Bible is the true revelation or inspiration of God, then how is it, we may ask, that God the Creator of human nature and the Revealer of His Will, is incapable of informing people in proper terms and categories what He is and how He should be represented? Why would He resort to crude and naive anthropomorphic expressions? After all He has endowed human beings with the capacity and capability to recognize the fundamental facts and truths about Himself as the Ultimate Reality and the Truth. In point of fact, it is the very existence of such corporeal terminology that points to biblical scripture as being the outcome of human agency. The very assumption of the progressive or evolutionary revelation and crude anthropomorphic expressions as resulting from man's inability to know God or represent Him in non-anthropomorphic and appropriate terms stems from another assumption that these parts of the Bible are man's words and representations and not divine revelation. Human limitation and inability to grasp the essence of God should not be an excuse to depict God in concrete human forms and shapes; the forms and qualities which all agree are not there in Him. It is always possible to emphasize God's love, mercy and concern without making him weep or cry. The Torah's significance can be stressed in many ways other than claiming God reads its 24 books throughout the day and the Mishna during the night. One is at a loss to understand the relationship between God's daily three hourly sport schedule with the Leviathan and the excuses made that humans are unable to understand Him! Bizarrely, the situation seems to be the other way around. In this situation, it is human beings who seem to be understanding God and knowing far too many details about Him, even His very personal schedule down to the minutist details. Proper communication and also the mystery of God perhaps does not need or allow that much familiarity. The transcendent God is far above such limitations.

In addition, the non-philosophical nature of a person or a nation does not require God to be represented in terms, categories, and characteristics that are altogether inappropriate and detrimental to the very definition and concept of His transcendence and unicity. Moreover, and as discussed, this is reinforced by the fact that using the same Hebrew language, individuals from the same nation and culture have perceived and represented God in transcendental, non-corporeal, non-anthropomorphic terms. Meaning that had anthropomorphism been intrinsic to the nature of the language, or a practical requirement of the Hebrews, or even part of the boldness of the Hebrew nation, then it would have been an inclusively universal phenomenon. But it is not. So why do it? Ironically, the same scholars who maintain that the patriarchs or Moses or at least the great prophets were monotheists in the strict sense of the term, on the other hand seem to justify the use of primitive, crude expressions to visualize and understand God providing explanations to make some sense out of them. But strictly speaking we can't have it both ways. If, as these scholars maintain, the nature or boldness of an ancient figure like Moses or other prophets, does not stop them from holding a high concept of God, it should not and could not be a leading factor behind the crude anthropomorphisms of the biblical narrative. The same can be said with regards to the nature of primitive societies in terms of their concept of God.

The problem is that the Bible is considered to be the word of God verbatim, and not the work of primitive Hebrew people or the Hebrew nation. Yet, the remoteness of societies, the limitations of language structure and construction, or any other factor, could only have a bearing were human agency to be involved, for God does not and cannot misrepresent the facts or conceal the truth. Further, these causes cannot realistically be cited as the only reasons to explain biblical anthropomorphisms. Room should be left for other rational suggestions, reasons, and foundations to explain the presence and vividness of crudely realistic human anthropomorphisms as well as biblical confusions and discrepancies. In fact the major reason, and explanation for the existence of the latter would be to accept the role played by human agency in the compilation and transmission of the Hebrew Bible, and this in fact is being widely recognized in our times.

Jewry for centuries had regarded Moses as the compiler, or more correctly as the mediator, of the laws of the Pentateuch which issued from God Himself. That tradition was taken over by the Christians. The Eighth Fundamental Principle of Moses Maimonides comprised

of the following words: “that the Torah came from God. We are to believe that the whole Torah was given to us through Moses, our Teacher, entirely from God...”¹⁴ Therefore it was the inerrant Word of God. These words are crystal clear and forceful as to speak for themselves. The Jews till the beginning of our era had a strong belief in the divine origin and Mosaic authorship of the entire Torah and in its infallibility, immutability, and eternity. Though voices against such a literal view of the Torah have included Christian scholars like Clementine Homilies, St. Jerome and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. c. 428) and some Jewish scholars like Isaac ibn Yashush, Rashi, David Kimhi and Abraham ibn Ezra (d. 1167) in the twelfth century, continuing with Carlstadt, Andreas Masius (1574) in the sixteenth and Isaac de la Peyrere (1655) and Richard Simon, Thomas Hobbes and then Spinoza in the seventeenth century, it was only in the age of reason in the eighteenth century that the stage was set for the loss of biblical authority as inspired Scripture. Finally it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century that biblical scholars like Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) were able to analyze, oppose and finally shatter the idea of the divine and supernatural origin of the Torah and Mosaic authorship of it. At present, claims R. E. Friedman, “there is hardly a biblical scholar in the world actively working on the problem who would claim that the Five Books of Moses were written by Moses—or by any one person.”¹⁵

J. Wellhausen’s “Documentary Hypothesis,” had brought a revolution in the field of biblical research in general and in Pentateuch studies in particular. Since then most critics of the Pentateuch argue that it is a composite work produced at different intervals, with contradictions, inconsistencies and different literary styles, hence it cannot be the work of one individual (Moses) as had been claimed for centuries. Opposition to the critical study or examination of the Bible comes from the Church as well as the Jews, but the new scholarship has impacted on followers of both religions resulting in schism with respect to the authority of the Torah. It has also become clearly apparent that the writers, redactors and compilers of the Hebrew Bible created a biblical God in their own image and in their own likeness.

In summary, and projecting these conclusions and reasoning to our times, we may safely assert that it is the Hebrew Bible’s understanding of God and the progressive or evolutionary nature of its God-concept that could be factors attributing to modern man’s reckless and heedless attitude towards the transcendent God of traditional religion.

Furthermore, biblical data does not seem to disprove the projection theory in categorical terms, but rather underscore it, for the human element is so dominant in several parts of the Bible that it seems clear that authorship can only be ascribed to human beings, imposing their own images, qualities, and categories upon God and conceiving of Him as like themselves. We leave the last word to Robin Lane Fox who puts it rather succinctly, “In scripture this God is not revealing himself: human authors are creating him, as he is supposed to have created them, ‘after their own image.’”¹⁶

Chapter Three

Anthropomorphism and the New Testament

The distinctively Christian understanding of God is based on the claim that God is most fully revealed through what Christians claim is his self-revelation in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The final revelation of Christianity is not that Jesus is God, but that God is Jesus. If the essence of Christianity is that God has revealed himself most fully in the language and reality of a human life, it inevitably follows that the Christian understanding of God is essentially and literally corporeal and anthropomorphic. To say that the historical human person, Jesus of Nazareth, was simultaneously God and man requires as its necessary condition that divinity is able to find self-expression and self-exposure through the “form of a man” which is what the two Greek words “morphe” and “anthropos” translate to. To show that this is really implied in the claims of historic Christianity, it is necessary to emphasize two things: first, that the New Testament documents are essentially focused on the life and works of Jesus Christ as the center of the Christian religion; and second, that the historic formulations of Christian doctrine – as set out by the early Christian Fathers, and recognized as normative by subsequent generations of Christians – teach a doctrine of salvation which makes it necessary that Christ be truly God and truly man and truly one. This popular incarnational theology is corporeal through and through and in reality the pinnacle of corporeal thought in the Semitic consciousness.

Jesus historically existed among the Jews, respected their Scripture, thought himself as a fulfillment of their law, struggled with the Jewish religious hierarchy and claimed to be sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. There may have been features distinctive to Jesus’

understanding of God and His transcendence, but the concept as a whole would probably be not at odds with the Jewish understanding of the Deity. The earliest Christians would perforce have obviously inherited the themes of divine transcendence and monotheism from the developed Judaism around them, meaning that the unity, uniqueness and sublimity of the Creator God, with some anthropomorphic challenges as discussed in the previous chapter, must have been the indisputable premise of the original Church's faith tradition. One can deduce from available historical data that the Church has used the same transcendental monotheistic premise against the polytheists, Gnostic emanationists and Marcionite dualists to refute their monotheistic violations.

Like Clement of Alexandria, many of the church fathers insisted that the Hebrew Bible's anthropomorphic expressions be understood and taken metaphorically. So, for instance, Saint Basil of Caesarea (330–379) interpreted God turning “His face” as God leaving one alone in difficulties, Gregory of Nazianzus interpreted God's “face” as His oversight, Theodoret as His benevolence and restoration of freedom, and John of Damascus as His display and self-revelation through countless works.

On the other hand, the New Testament contains very few anthropomorphic expressions: the finger of God (Luke 11:20), mouth of God (Matthew 4:4), sight of God (Luke 16:15), earth being the footstool of God (Matthew 5:35) etc., and almost all of these expressions can be interpreted metaphorically. Despite this, many church fathers such as Valentinians, Melito and Tertullian held a corporeal and anthropomorphic concept of the Deity. Even Irenaeus finds the image of God in the body of man. Two centuries after Clement, St. Augustine still wrestled with the strong anthropomorphic and corporeal tendency which seemed entrenched among Christians as well as the Church itself.

This is in addition to the fact that the New Testament is not centered on God Almighty. It is Christocentric. God the Almighty/Father occupies a sum total of just 2.5% of the Gospels while the rest of the Gospels are concerned with Jesus in various capacities i.e. his person, teachings, his disciples, his recipients, his dialogue with Jewish leaders etc. (Mark gives only a 0.2% place to the verbs whose subject is God/Father in his Gospel, with Matthew 0.6%, Luke 1.1% and John 0.6%). There is, then, a tremendous concentration on one man, Jesus of Nazareth. He is described in different terms, concepts and ways. He

is addressed as the Son of man, Son of God, the Word, the Prophet, the Messiah, the Kyrios or Lord and perhaps even as God.

Had there been no concentration on Jesus' person, or had the New Testament been systematic or uniform with regard to the nature of the above descriptions, there might perhaps have been no need for critical study or discussion of anthropomorphism in the New Testament. But as it is, the New Testament writers are so obsessed with the Christ event that they seem to reflect upon every other thing, even God, through this mirror. There is a merger of divinity and humanity in the person of the historical Jesus so much so that to traditional Christians Jesus is at once a complete God and a complete human being. This incarnation, the diffusion of divinity and humanity in a feeble human being, is the climax of divine corporealism and anthropomorphic realism. Moreover, there exists such a diversity of descriptions with regard to Jesus that it is extremely difficult to render him into one uniform, universally agreed upon figure or concept. Therefore, Christology, or the significance of Jesus and his relationship with God Almighty, will form the basic area of our study of anthropomorphism in the New Testament.

There are many Christologies in the New Testament. The fundamental issue in connection with the transcendence of God and anthropomorphism is the Christology of the person i.e. the doctrine of Christ's person and divinity. Modern scholarship is more widely divided on the issue of Christ's divinity as well as interpretations of the person of Jesus, than Christians of past generations. Almost all of the old Christological issues and trends, often declared heresies by the Church teachings, could virtually be traced finding boisterous expressions in many modern Christological discussions and debates. Many of the old Christological heresies are virtually incorporated into contemporary Christian thought without much hesitation or blame.

It has been customary for Christians until the late nineteenth century to believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Church as well as the general Christian population has always contended that Jesus proclaimed himself to be the Son of God, the second person of a divine Trinity, who lived a completely mortal (yet sinless) life amongst humanity. In this God in Christ, traditional incarnational theology, we reach the apex of an anthropomorphic and corporeal conception of the Deity. If God becomes incarnate as flesh in the person of Christ, eating, drinking, sleeping, feeling grieved and eventually being

crucified, then in this physical embodiment we have the strongest case for the reality of divine corporeality in its purest sense.

The main problem with traditional Christianity throughout the centuries has been how to maintain the transcendence of God and at the same time attain salvation through the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ as God. This is an awkward paradox from which there is no escape. Reason defies it. Astonishingly, even in this day and age, there are scholars who maintain that although Jesus was divine and in fact conscious of his identity, nevertheless this incarnation somehow does not lead to the fact of polytheism or divine corporeality. This would seem to be at variance with human reason.

The fact of the matter is that the traditional Trinitarian Christian theology has been at a loss to satisfactorily solve the central problem i.e., the relationship of Jesus Christ's person with the transcendent, indivisible, impassable, unique, eternal and One God. There are many speculative works and guesses regarding this thorny issue but they are definitely not satisfactory to human logic. Whether one accepts the ultra Cappadocian movement's social Trinity or Barth's union Trinity one is still left unable to detach the Trinity from corporealism and concrete anthropomorphism. The incarnation of God in the human figure of Christ, whether in one mode of His existence or through one person of His Godhead, are crystal clear cases of corporealism. The difficulty lies in the insistence that traditional Christianity almost always places upon the person of Christ as being divine, the Second Person of the Trinity, and equal in all respects to God whilst simultaneously claiming Jesus' humanity as being equal in almost all respects (excepting sin) with mankind. This position is paradoxical, contradictory and defies logic. A fundamental tenet of Christianity, it nevertheless has little, if any, appeal to modern rational thought and as such is unintelligible to modern man who scrutinizes particulars with rigorous criteria. Many modern Christian scholars and theologians do not seem ready to deny or denounce traditional claims but are yet at a loss as to how to prove their validity or even reasonability to the contemporary mind. Forced to resort to circular argument, they make claims without logically substantiating them and in doing so repeating, in many cases, opinions either discussed in early centuries or discarded as heretical. In neither case can the charges of anthropomorphism, corporealism and, in certain cases tritheism, be denied.

The source of this paradox perhaps is the New Testament. Not a single

word of the New Testament was either written or authorized by Jesus himself. The New Testament writings were the product of later generations written by different authors at various places, communities, and times. The New Testament in its present shape, number, and order, was not available to the early Christians for centuries after the departure of Jesus and his disciples. These books were written for the special needs of particular groups of people, and the idea of combining them into one authoritative volume was late and not in the mind of the authors. One of the leading factors may have been the existence of an already compiled Hebrew Bible. The compilation, collection, and identification of this particular group of writings (the canonization process) as a distinct and authoritative entity resulted from a complex development within the Christian Church. It took the Church 367 years to produce a list of writings and a canon that would contain all the present day (New Testament) canonical writings.

New Testament scholars differ widely over the process of the compilation and history of the New Testament canon – authors, places, sources and dates. The traditional or Orthodox scholars declare the New Testament to be the absolutely authentic and inspired work of the disciples attributing almost all the New Testament writings to either the disciples or the immediate apostles. Contemporary critical scholars, following form-criticism, redaction criticism, literary criticism, and a historical approach to the New Testament, disagree with the traditional view of the authenticity and divine nature of New Testament writings. They argue that the New Testament books are not the works of the immediate disciples of Jesus, but rather writings compiled long after their lifetimes by authors mostly unknown to us. They argue that the circumstances of composition (author, time, place, occasion, and any of the more specific circumstances) are not known for any of the New Testament writings other than Paul's letters. They further contend, that Jesus never asked his disciples to put anything in writing. After his resurrection the disciples were occupied with preaching about the end of the world and the arrival of the Kingdom of God and therefore, were least interested in writing the words of Jesus. Moreover, the belief that the eschatological and prophetic Spirit of God was operative among them, led the first Christians to focus more on oral transmission and preaching rather than writing the message.

Consequently, the word or the tradition was orally transmitted until the second generation when with the passage of time enthusiasm concerning Jesus' second coming cooled. When his delay caused a

number of problems, the books began to be written. During this interval new sayings came into being and were added to the old corpus. The Gospels *emerged* in a process of about fifty to sixty years. Additionally, the New Testament writers were not merely biographers reporting historical events in their original form. They were responding to a particular “living situation” (*Sitz im Leben*) meaning that they had an axe to grind. They were theologians of their time and had a message to share. Therefore, the attempt to form a picture of the life that lay forty to sixty or seventy years behind the written Gospels cannot yield a great deal in the way of fully assured results. There was a great chasm fixed between what Jesus viewed and presented himself and the way the early church interpreted him as Christ, Lord, or Son of God. It is possible then to perceive that these books are merely interpretations of the Christ event and do not give us exact and accurate information concerning what Jesus preached about himself and what he really was. The canonization process was also spread over centuries. The canon in the West was closed in the fifth century under the influence of St. Augustine and Jerome. For the Greek Church in the East the question was settled by Emperor Constantine. He ordered Eusebius to prepare 50 copies of the Scriptures to be used in the new capital. In this way the 27 New Testament books included in these copies obtained a semi-official recognition.

Now when we read the New Testament as a book what we are in fact reading is a list of books which some of the Christian bishops approved and asserted more than three hundred years after Jesus’ death and that also under imperial pressure. Three centuries are a very long time. Obviously, it would be implausible to cite the protection, guidance and comforting work of the Holy Spirit to the exclusion of human beings with all their human limitations behind the very letters of the New Testament books. The only solid conclusion one can reach is that the authors, compilers, and canonizers of the New Testament were after all simple human beings.

The central question “What think ye of Christ?” has been answered in a number of different ways by New Testament writers. He is a prophet, an angelic prince, he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the *Kyrios* meaning ‘Lord,’ and according to the Gospel of John he is *Logos* or *Theos* traditionally translated as “God.” This designation is extremely crucial for our study of anthropomorphism because if Jesus is adorned with all the majestic attributes of God (divinity, eternity, absolute cosmic Lordship), and is considered equal

with God, worshipped and finally designated with the actual title ‘God’ then it becomes impossible to say that the New Testament concept of the deity/Jesus is not anthropomorphic or corporeal.

It seems that once the Church had decided to prefer the *Logos* or *Theos* Christology over the other Christological concepts and agreed that Jesus was God, especially in light of the Easter experience, the *theos* of John, which might have been used by John just as a communicative tool, was loaded with the absolute tones of *ho theos* (The God). The transition highlights the historical fact that the high Christology and the hard divinity of Jesus was not the original idea of Jesus or his immediate disciples. It owes its origin and substance to the later Christian understandings of Jesus in light of the Easter experience. Its later absolute overtures and gambits are purely theologically motivated.

The process of Jesus’ divinization was gradual, extending over centuries, like the canonization process of the New Testament. Once the Church decided that Jesus was divine in light of the heavenly Jesus’ Easter experience then it carefully selected those Gospels and other material which were thought to support the Church’s positions. The otherwise mutually exclusive Christologies of Jesus as a prophet, angel, Messiah and Lord were metamorphosed to describe a human being with divine attributes and qualities and ultimately godhead. Hence humanity and divinity became somehow merged in the historical man, Jesus of Nazareth; a supreme illustration and climax of anthropomorphism and corporealism. The Pauline and Johannine corpus proved to be handy providing the context, terminology and conceptual framework for the later Christians to take the hazardous leap. Meaning that it was perhaps due to the influence of Pauline and Johannine Christology that the Apostolic Fathers felt no hesitation to confess Jesus’ divinity and deity. For instance Ignatius had no hesitation in calling Jesus “God.”

It seems that some of the New Testament books, especially if understood in light of the later theological developments, have probably exalted Jesus the Christ to the status of proper divinity and made him, in certain passages, equal to God. Though there are various interpretations given to these passages, the possibility of deriving the later Christological claims of absolute divinity (like that of Father in all respects) is questionable, especially in light of the monotheistic passages in the New Testament books. Further, there are several passages, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels, that emphasize the Almighty God’s absolute unity and uniqueness (Mark 12:29–32). It is

the Pauline and Johannine passages which can be treated as having led to some of the later claims concerning the proper divinity of Christ with some artificial efforts on the part of the interpreter. On the other hand, there are other passages that lead to Jesus' subordination to God the Father and his adoption at baptism (Luke 6:12, 10:22; Matthew 19:17, 11:27; John 7:29–33, Matthew 3:16–17; Luke 3:22).

It must be added here that all the aforementioned passages do not prove the hard and absolute divinity for Jesus that has been believed by a great many traditional Christians. Derivative, finite or subordination divinity is not the same as absolute divinity. Additionally whilst these passages could be interpreted as giving a divine status to Jesus, nevertheless they leave a number of important issues unresolved regarding Jesus' relationship with God and with human beings, the true nature and essence of Godhead, monotheism, tritheism, anthropomorphism, corporealism and transcendence.

The early Church had no hesitation in assigning to Jesus full-scale divinity including the designation of absolute divine titles, actions, attributes and functions. This ascription of divinity did not cause many problems as long as the faith remained confined to Christians interested solely in the salvation. It was God and God alone and nobody less than God who could have brought salvation to a humanity engulfed in sin. The problem surfaced when the Church had to face the external world and to prove to them the significance and wisdom of Christian teachings. For the one whom Christians had called God was also the one who was born, lived an ordinary natural life for thirty or so years, ate, drank, suffered and was relentlessly crucified. These were the realities which the Church itself witnessed. The Alexandrian pagan philosopher Celsus' observations pinpointed the problem accurately: "His followers then made a God of him... The idea of the coming down of God is senseless. Why did God come down for justification of all things? Does not this make God changeable?" He vehemently attacked Christianity and its incarnation theology and dubbed it as "hostile to all positive human values."

There was pressure from within too. In the first place this confusion called forth some of the earliest doctrinal controversies in the Church itself and then forced the Church to become more precise. The inner pressure demanded logical defense and intelligible explanations of the contradictory positions especially to avert the fierce attacks of the Jews and pagans. Within early Christianity, voices like "his suffering was

but a make believe” were raised by Marcion, Ptolemy and the Gnostics. Marcion, for instance, absolutely denied Jesus’ humanity. His Jesus was too lofty to be confined within the prison of the flesh. This was clear “Docetism” (a belief that states that Jesus only *seemed* to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not physically die).

The Church while trying to defend Christs’ humanity could not itself escape from the very problem it was trying to solve, the problem of ‘Docetism.’ The Church itself had been emphasizing the divinity of Jesus to such a degree that the demarcation line between his humanity and divinity were prematurely blurred. Church Father Clement of Alexandria was “near to the confines of Docetism.”¹⁷ The more the Church emphasized the hardcore divinity of Jesus using the God concept the more difficult it became to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was also the Son of God and of the same substance of God. The Church had no escape from mild Docetism which runs through the Christology of the ancient church.¹⁸

Christianity, to prove its intellectual worth and avert the cerebral attacks of paganism, Greek philosophy and Judaism, had no choice but to be a little more precise in its teachings with regards to the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Christ. It was difficult for non-Christian Jews and pagans to understand the assertions of strict monotheism on the one hand and the divinity of Jesus Christ including his suffering and crucifixion as God on the other. Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr, Theophilus, Tatian, Aristides and Athenagoras responded to this rather embarrassing situation with philosophical suppositions to vindicate the truth of Christianity. They tried to draw a rather clear line between God and Jesus using the then available philosophical concepts. Justin, the most renowned of them, for instance insisted that though Jesus had come from God he was not identical with God. Jesus was God born of God. He was divine but not in the original sense. His divinity was derivative.¹⁹ He was a pre-existent Logos, God’s agent in creation, through whom all creatures were created. Therefore, he could be called Lord and worshipped as divine but in terms of being of second rank.²⁰ Other apologists such as Tatian and Hippolytus followed Justin in his ideas of God’s transcendence, ineffability, immutability and otherness while maintaining his Logos Christology.

The Apologists clearly portrayed the Logos as required for the work

of creation in subordination to God the Father. They also manifestly limited the Logos as compared to God Himself to safeguard the indispensable idea of monotheism. There were residuals of Middle Platonism in this Logos interpretation of the Apologists. The Logos was understood in relation to the cosmos and the world to stress God's absolute transcendence, invisibility and unknowableness. Almighty God was too transcendent to directly deal with men and the world. The Logos, a product of God's creative will, was a subordinate mediator, a derivative god. Church Fathers like Tertullian (160–220) and Origen (185–254) clearly maintained the Apologists' position in regards to Christ's secondary, subordinative and derivative relationship with God. God's transcendence and *monarchia* is preserved as the Son uses the powers and the rule given to him by the Father.²¹ The Son will return this to the Father when the world comes to an end. The Father is the guarantee of the *monarchia*, the Son comes in at second place whilst the Spirit is assigned third place. Tertullian's trinity is not metaphysical but economic or dynamic in nature. Only the Father remains the eternal transcendent God while the other two entities proceed from the *unitas substantiae* because they have a task to fulfill. His concept of unity is also not mathematical. There is no subdivision within the Godhead. It is more philosophical, more organic as there is a constructive integration within the Godhead of the will and the persons. It is Tertullian who introduced the concept of 'person' in Christology.²²

Origen also emphasized the derivative, intermediary and secondary role of Jesus. He equated the procession of the Logos from the Father with the procession of the will from the mind. The act of will neither cuts anything from the mind nor causes division within it. Logos then is of secondary rank and merits secondary honor. This being the case, Origen does not permit the worship of any generate being such as Christ but only sanctions worship of God the Father to Whom even Christ prayed. The prayers offered to Christ are meant to be conveyed to the Father through the intermediary agency of Christ. God transcends both Christ and the Spirit as they transcend the realm of inferior beings.²³

Irenaeus (202) and Clement of Alexandria (150–215) were perhaps more traditionalists than philosophers. They did not look for intellectual interpretations to denote the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, preferring instead to rely on traditional terminology over philosophical concepts. On multiple

occasions they widely differed with the Apologists in regards to their understanding of the Logos Christology, and for both, the Logos who had become incarnate in Jesus Christ, was no less than God Himself. For Irenaeus to think of the Logos in derivative terms and to subordinate him to God or to think of him as another being as the Apologists did, was detrimental to his saving work and hence impossible. He identified the Logos or the Son with the Father completely. In short the Logos is God but God revealed and not God unapproachable, inaccessible and apart from the world.²⁴

We can conclude this part of the discussion by noting that until the second century CE, the Christian God Paradigm in general and the doctrine of Christ's Person were not fixed but rather flexible, fluid and confusing. The ideas of subordination, and the derivative and secondary rank of Christ were common among thoughtful Christians such as Justin and Origen. On the other hand traditionalists as well as the orthodox Church, if we can possibly use this term for purposes of convenience, inclined more towards the Unity, Equality and Eternity of Christ, and that on a par with God the Father. The latter was not without its inherent confusions and problems, and was moreover a form of possible Docetism. As such they were accused of corporealism, anthropomorphism, polytheism as well as irrationalism by even their pagan opponents such as Celsus.

The Church's vague Docetism found its ultimate expression in the Modalist Monarchians who strictly maintained the divine unity by identifying Jesus with God, the Creator Father of the universe. Any suggestion that Jesus the Word or Son was other than, or a distinct Person from, the Father seemed to the Modalists to lead inescapably to blasphemy of two Gods. It was Praxeas (c. 210) and then Noetus, both of Asia Minor, who gave this belief a regular theological touch around c. 200. They argued that the whole of God was present in Jesus. It was Sabellius (c. 215) who became the most vocal and important theologian of the movement. Their position was quite simple. There is no God but the one Creator and Sustainer of the world as stated in the Scriptures. Christ was God. Then he is that creator whom people call Father. They made use of passages of Identity such as "I and the Father are one" and stressed the absolute likeness and identity of Jesus with God. They accused orthodox Christians of tritheism.

This extreme position and preciseness with regards to Jesus' relationship with God may have been an offshoot of orthodox

teachings and underlying ambiguity. Worshipping Jesus with absolute titles like Lord and explicitly calling him God could have led anybody to eradicate the distinction between Jesus and God. We are told that phrases such as “God is born,” “the suffering God,” or “the dead God” were so widespread among Christians that even Tertullian, for all his hostility to the Modalist Monarchians, could not escape using them. The main difference between the two parties is that of precision and systematization. The Modalist Monarchians systematized the popular Christian belief in Christ in a clear and precise manner. It was a bold step towards giving a precise theological color to the rather ambiguous Christian devotional language. The Church could not accept it because of its dangerous implications. It was nothing but naive corporealism and patripassianism. Though it safeguarded Jesus’ deity as well as monotheism, the objective for which the Church had been aspiring, the Church could not approve of it in such bold terms because of its subtle implications. If the whole of God is present in the historic Jesus then the *transcendence* of God is nullified. The Pre-Nicene Church was keen to assert that somehow there was part of God which was not incarnate, and so allowed for God to transcend His total presence in Jesus. But this confusing stance was not acceptable to the salvation seeking believers.

The anthropomorphic and corporeal passages of the Old Testament had played an important role towards the triune interpretation of divinity. God was also known to be transcendent for Greek philosophy would have made mockery of an anthropomorphic or any other conception of God as rudimentary or paganistic. The secondary, derivative divine being of the Platonism scheme was initially helpful to preserve God’s absolute transcendence and to avoid accusations of being pagan. On the other hand, this kind of notion of divinity was not adequate for the purposes of salvation. Common believers preferring their own salvation over and beyond God’s transcendence sacrificed Him at the altar of their sins. This tension has remained intrinsic to the entire history of Christology. Given that God’s transcendence and ineffability was at stake, the defenders of orthodoxy except Zephyrinus, the bishop of Rome, condemned the Modalist Monarchians as heretics. Though the Monarchian anthropomorphic position has continued to surface even after its condemnation, for throughout Christian history men have been frequently condemned for denying the deity of Christ but rarely for denying the distinction between the Father and the Son. To deny the former has generally seemed unchristian; to deny the latter only unintelligent. In spite of

strong opposition, Modalism, or the crystal clear anthropomorphic concept of God, remained widespread, especially among the simple-minded and ordinary Christians. It was shared by the majority of the common people and was in harmony with the dominant piety of the age.

Meanwhile, another kind of Monarchianism became current both in the East and the West, and it took the question of Jesus' relationship with God to the other extreme. In the West, Theodotus (c. 190), taught that Jesus was a man. Jesus was born of a virgin as a result of God's special decree through the agency of the Holy Spirit. His virgin birth did not make him a god or a divine being. God tested his piety for a period of Jesus' earthly life and then let the Holy Ghost descend upon him at the time of baptism. God had a purpose for him and equipped him for that vocation. Jesus became the Christ at the time of his baptism and as a result of his vocation and not due to his heavenly nature or divinity. Additionally, Jesus excelled all humanity in virtues and became an authority over them. His adoption in no way or form diluted his humanity or made him God. He always remained an obedient servant of God. Theodotus was afterwards characterized as the founder of the God-denying revolt, adoptionism. The adoptionists made use of the biblical monotheistic passages, the Gospel passages of distinction and subordination and finally the crystal clear Gospel passages that emphasize Jesus' feeble humanity and earthly nature. They were also able to strike a balance between the transcendence of God and human salvation through Christ's redeeming death. Their solution was not adequate for the Orthodoxy though.

In the East this movement was significantly revived under the leadership of Paul of Samosata, the bishop of Antioch, the capital of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra's kingdom. He observed that Jesus did not have an essential divine nature. His nature was pure human as he was a man from beneath and not from above having divine substance. Jesus had a normal human birth and grew into knowledge and wisdom. The Logos of God inspired him from above and dwelt in him as an inner man. Jesus did neither lose his humanity nor his human nature. It always remained the dominant nature in Jesus. It was polished, civilized and guided by the Logos. The union of the Logos and Jesus was not a union of substance or merger or diffusion of natures but rather that of will and quality. Mary did neither bear nor deliver the divine Logos, but the human Jesus, just as other humans. Moreover, Jesus the man was anointed at baptism with the Spirit from above and not the Logos.

Jesus was special in the sense that he lived under the constant divine grace of a very special degree. His uniqueness lay in his union of disposition and will and not in the unity of his substance or nature with God.

Likewise we are allowed to talk of Jesus' preexistence in connection with his goodness and in the sense of the prior degree of God. It is clear that Paul did not believe in the divine nature of Jesus. On the other hand, in addition to his adoptionism, he sought to prove that the assumption that Jesus had the divine nature or was by nature the Son of God was detrimental to monotheism as it led to duality in the Godhead. Paul banished from divine service all Church psalms that expressed in any sense the essential divinity of Christ. Consequently, Paul was condemned at a Synod of Antioch held in 268, two earlier synods having failed to take action in the matter. He was declared as heretical because he denied Jesus' pre-existence and his unity of substance with God or in other words his proper divinity.

Though both types of Monarchianisms were condemned as heretical, in different ways they challenged and pushed the orthodoxy to look into the immense difficulties involved in their understanding of the transcendence and unity of God and also to attempt to clarify it in intelligible terms. The orthodox Fathers insisted upon their concept of the relative unity of God by holding on to their Logos Christology. By the end of the third century the Logos Christology became generally accepted in all parts of the Church and found its place in most of the creeds framed in that period, especially in the East.

Though the official Logos Christology, or belief in the divine nature of Jesus, disposed of the divine-human doctrine of Dynamic Monarchianism, their doctrine did not pass without leaving a trace. Lucian and Arius were inspired by the interpretations and logic of Bishop Paul. Arius brought the debate regarding Christ's nature and his relationship to God to the public and caused vehement excitement. Arius maintained that God is one both in substance and in person. He is the only eternal and unoriginated being. The Logos, the pre-existent being, is merely a creature. There was a time when he was not and then was created by the Father out of nothing. What is true of the filial relationship is true of Jesus the Son and God the Father. The Father existed before the Son. The Son Jesus was created by the Father from a substance which was non-existent prior to Jesus' creation. Arius used scriptural evidences such John 14:28 where Jesus categorically stated

that the Father is “greater than I” and John 17:20–26 where Jesus encouraged the disciples to become “one as we are one.” Arius contended that the disciples could not have been one with God or Jesus in terms of embodying the divine nature or substance, but in will. Likewise, the unity of the Son with the Father was that of will and not of divinity or substance. Additionally 1 Corinthians 8:5–6 was quoted to differentiate between God and Christ. God is perfect but the Son of God advances in wisdom and knowledge and hence is changeable. The Son can be called Logos but is to be sharply distinguished from the eternal impersonal logos or reason of God. The essence of the Son is identical neither with that of God nor with that of human beings. The Son, who became incarnate in Jesus, is the first of all creatures and hence higher in order than any other being whether angels or men. Because of what he did during his earthly life, maintaining unswerving devotion to the divine will, the Son was given glory and lordship and would even be called “God” and worshipped. But to identify him with God’s essence is to commit blasphemy.

The Church felt that Arius had at once affirmed and then nullified both the divinity and humanity of Christ. This “half-god” theology of Arius was rejected by the champions of the orthodox Logos Christology and finally defeated as heresy.

This inherent tension between the transcendental views of Godhead and redemption through the sacrificial death of God was the source of both parties’ concerns. The Arians somehow preferred the transcendence of God over their own divinization and presumed redemption. The official party could live with this tension and make sense of it by artificial bandages and irrational presuppositions. That is what was achieved by Athanasius in the Council of Nicea – arguing against Arius and his doctrine of the distinct Christ – and the Logos Christology was rendered victorious over its opponents once and for all. In 325 CE Emperor Constantine convened and presided over the Council of Nicaea in order to develop a statement of faith to unify the church. The Nicene Creed was written, declaring that “the Father and the Son are of the same substance” (*homoousios*). And when the Logos Christology obtained a complete victory, the traditional view of the Supreme Deity as one person, and, along with this, every thought of the real and complete human personality of the Redeemer was condemned as being intolerable in the Church. Even though Arius was condemned as an arch heretic and treated as such for centuries, his sincere concerns for Christianity and his genuine insights into scriptural

passages and monotheistic transcendental history could not be denied. In reality Arius had done nothing new aside from synchronizing and systematizing earlier transcendental concerns in an open and coherent form. Moreover, he had forced the orthodoxy out of their comfort zone to make them face realities they were neither pleased nor ready to encounter. The reaction of the orthodoxy was proportionately damaging. They accused Arius of violating Scripture yet failed to notice they had done the same. Further, they were forced to adopt the non-scriptural, and utterly philosophical as well as paradoxical term, *homoousios* [of the same substance] to exclude Arius' views.

Traditional Christianity has long been evading real and searching questions regarding its notions of transcendental monotheism and its understanding of the person of Christ. In the name of mysteries and paradoxes, it has long confused many rationally oriented believers. Arius brought these genuine concerns into the public sphere and in doing so echoed the anxieties of the masses. This was the real source of his popularity. He might still have many followers today, even among contemporary Christian believers, laypersons and the clergy alike. In short, Arius was one of those adventurous yet cultivated souls who had tried to locate and find a solution to the unsolved problem of Christ's relationship with Almighty God using precise exposition and clarity of thought; factors which to the Church, would destroy the 'mystery' of incarnation. This mystery was maintained by the Council of Nicea.

The Nicean formula is Docetic, contradictory and corporeal. To A. Harnack it is "absurd."²⁵ It clearly compromised Jesus' true humanity in efforts to uphold Jesus' hard divinity. Indeed the history of Christian dogma following the Nicea Council is the history of its concept of faith in a God-man. The posterity followed it in defining Christianity as a faith centered around the redemptive works of Jesus, the God-man, and both eastern and western Christianity have loyally stuck to the broader framework of Nicean Christology even though small differences have been introduced here and there. Unfortunately, it was neither the Holy Spirit nor the ecumenical synod of three hundred or so bishops who steered the Council proceedings. It was the emperor and his iron fist rule. This was the decisive factor, though lip service and occasional reverence was shown to them. It is equally unfortunate that later Christianity gave a great deal of significance and authority to the Council's decisions and terms whose religious nature seemed more inclined to political fervor and to combat Arianism than anything else.

The central phrase of this fundamental Christian confession is *homoousios* meaning of one substance with the Father. Though obviously a theological term, it was not exactly an adequate theological solution. It was a layman's solution to pin down a pure and stark divinity for Christ without much precision, explanation and rationality. It neither preserved the boundaries between the transcendent God and Christ by an emanative scheme of a hierarchal emanative Trinity, as affected by the early Platonist Fathers, nor kept the mystery of its secret locked in its box. Rather, it brought the redemptive Monarchian scheme into the public sphere and in confidently touted clear terms. Consequently it was accused of being Sabellianism along with its defenders, Athanasius and Marcellus.

Disputing it vigorously Arians argued that such an analogy and identity was absolutely inappropriate to the relationship between God and the Logos, putting forward three reasons to substantiate their position: (1) God the Father was self-existent, unoriginated, eternal while the Son was produced by the Father. Therefore the Father and the Son could not be fully equal. (2) The Father was neither begotten nor was begettable while the Son was begotten and begettable. (3) The Father had begotten the Son, the God, while the Son had not begotten another Son. How could the unoriginated Father and the originated Son be equal? Arian reasoning was logical, rational and systematic. That of the traditional Apostolic Fathers such as Athanasius on the other hand was illogical and confusing, and their answers moreover, self-contradictory. Their doctrine made the Son both unbegotten and begotten, unbegotten as part of the whole of Deity, yet begotten of the Father as a relationship within the Trinity. Harnack rightly argues that there is "in fact, no philosophy in existence possessed of formulae which could present in an intelligible shape the propositions of Athanasius."²⁶ The same can be said of subsequent Christian Trinitarian thought at large.

Christianity had entered the halls of power but the political authority was no real solution to the unresolved theological complexities. These profound theological convolutions continued haunting the Church leadership as well as the common believers. It is obvious that a clear doctrine of the "Trinity" was incorporated in the Nicene Creed even though only one indefinite statement was made with regards to the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. The deity of Christ (the central problem for our study of anthropomorphism in Christianity) was fully conserved and rendered immune to the

theological as well as philosophical criticism that had previously discredited Modalism. All avenues leading to the Godhead of Christ, the Savior, and impulses leading to his exaltation to the highest possible place and worship, that of God Himself, were given free play without his worshippers being convicted of polytheism, obscurantism or anthropomorphism. No such emphasis was laid upon the equal divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed's newly added Holy Spirit clause was left vague and ambiguous. On the other hand, as the Creed was carried in the Council under pressure of Constantine against the inclinations of a great majority of the bishops in attendance, it did not settle the theological dispute concerning the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The nature of Jesus had been decided but the Council failed to elaborate upon the role or nature of the Holy Spirit, the supposed equal and eternal member of the divine Trinity. The Council in reality provided political or diplomatic solutions to the theological problems. The Council's arbitrary decisions temporarily succeeded in pacifying the conflicting emotions and interpretations without much of long term theological impact or satisfaction. The original claims that the Council's decisions were directed by the Providence of the Holy Spirit were soon exposed and proven wrong. It needed only a change of mind in Constantine himself (in 336), especially on his death in 337, to change the so-called Holy Spirit stamped Council decisions and exposition of the divine will. It turned everything upside down. The Saints of the Council were turned into culprits by the imperial decree and the culprits were made into Saints. Arian along with his so called heretical views was honored and Athanasius exiled. Jerome's words are not wholly exaggeration when he writes, "the whole world groaned in astonishment to find itself Arian."²⁷ It was once again imperial power first in the figure of Valentinian (364) and then Theodosius (380) which came to the rescue of the Nicene Creed with some alterations and additions at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

It is worth mentioning at this point the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great (330–379), Gregory of Nazianzuz (329–389) and Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa (329–394), all known for their Trinitarian formula. Although they agreed completely with Athanasius in attributing a real and proper divinity to Jesus Christ, accepting him as being from the same substance and nature as the Father, they disagreed with him with regard to the question of persons. According to Athanasius, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the same being living in a threefold relationship. As a man can be a father, a son and a brother, the being of God can be the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit. The Cappadocians

disagreed. They contended that the Father, the Son and the Spirit were three equally alike beings, insisting on their unity, but were also independent persons.

This Cappadocian Trinitarian analogy is one of the two chief types of analogy that has been used throughout the course of Christian history to explain the notions of Trinity. The Cappadocians begin with a consideration of three persons, as we have just seen, while Augustinian analogy emphasizes a co-equal Trinity by distinguishing the persons in terms of their internal relations within a person (e.g., memory, will, and intelligence or love, the lover – *amans* – and the object loved, *quod amatur*). Both are unsatisfactory and contain several flaws. The former, for instance, could lead to vulgar tritheism while the latter could lead to Sabellianism or Unitarianism. No matter how much one protests the three persons common eternity, common activity and common will, it is difficult to call a theology based on such a definition of their common nature, monotheistic. Though the Cappadocian's Trinitarian formula of the divinity – one substance in three persons (*personae*), or three independent realities – has been called “the scientific” formula, it failed to provide any intelligible solution to the problem it was formulated to solve, i.e. the nature of the historical Jesus and his relationship to God. The words used to distinguish the persons in the eternal trinity were, as observed Paul Tillich, “empty.”²⁸ The formula may not lead to Docetism, Sabellianism, or the Modalism of Athanasius, but it could lead to something more disastrous, namely “tritheism.”

It will be apparent by now that the orthodox Fathers insisted upon the true, perfect, full divinity and Godhead of Jesus Christ. They aspired to maintain two mutually contradictory principles i.e., the transcendence and ineffability of God in the figure of God the Father, and the full incarnation of God in the human figure of Christ. All the explanations given to elucidate this, whether as modes, or persons, or any other interpretation, betray unquestionable corporealism and anthropomorphism. It is impossible to maintain that a human being who lived a true, historical and full human life was in fact the full incarnation of God and then aspire to avoid or deny charges of corporealism and anthropomorphism. This becomes even more evident when we turn to discussions concerning the will and nature of the person of Jesus Christ which were at the center of later controversies. It was and always has been the Christian desire to attain redemption that has led them to proclaim and maintain the deity of Jesus Christ. From the earlier Fathers to the Council of Constantinople a common

thread or concern has woven Christian doctrine together, and this has been the need to safeguard the proper divinity of Christ along with attempts to maintain the transcendence of God. At the same time, there has always remained the question of Christ's humanity. It was impossible to deny this humanity for according to the Gospels, Jesus had been a historical reality. Once the Church, over various gradual attempts, had finally arrived at the conclusion that Jesus was God and fully divine, they were faced with the issue of how to in some way reconcile this divine/human unity, to strike a balance between and interpret the relationship. The difficulty of regarding Christ as both divine and simultaneously human led some to Docetism and others to Adoptionism. The recognition of an absolute, pure divinity for Jesus made the problem more acute and insistent.

Just a few decades after the Council of Nicea the pendulum swung completely in the other direction. Focus now was no longer on the pre-existence of the Son or the relationship of God the Son to the Father, but rather the relation of God to man in the person of the historical Jesus. The God incarnate formula of the Council was considered too metaphysical to be an intelligible part of real human history. If Jesus was indeed God incarnate then what was his real nature, human or divine? Human history had no parallel to explain this incarnational paradigm so how to understand it in logical human terms?

It was Apollinarius (d. 390), bishop of Laodicea and a close friend of Athanasius, who proposed a somewhat rational solution to this complex problem. He took the long accepted Alexandrian Christology of the Word-flesh to its logical limits. As mentioned earlier to Athanasius and the Nicene Creed, the absolute divinity of Christ was considered essential to ensure redemption, and it was strongly held that only the true Son of God could reveal God to man. Adhering to this Word-flesh Christology, Apollinarius argued that this act of redemption could not be possible without the deification of the man Jesus Christ. Therefore, he contended that Jesus had only one theanthropic or divine-human nature. He argued that the divine Word was substituted for the normal human soul in Christ. He affirmed that Christ's flesh was "divine flesh" or "the flesh of God" and was the proper object of worship. It was virtually a clear Docetic tendency implying that Christ was not a real man but only appeared as a man. This was a culmination of the all out corporeal tendency which had all along been a part of Church thinking but often concealed. It meant that Christ in his incarnation had retained his divine soul, nature or

ousia and had not adopted a human rational soul or nature. This “Monophysitism” as it was later called, was another expression of Monarchianism.

On the other hand, the representatives of the Antiochian school challenged ‘Monophysitism’ or Apollinarianism with their scientific Christological dogma. In general, the Antiochian’s interest in Jesus was more ethical than redemptive. Jesus could have not been a perfect ethical model had he not been a complete human being with free will and a genuine human personality. Their Christology conformed to the “Word-man” scheme rather than the Alexandrian “Word-flesh” scheme. They emphasized the perfect humanity of Christ. To conform their views to that of the Logos Christology and Nicene doctrine of Christ’s proper divinity, they had no choice but to assert Christ’s two natures: one of a complete human, the other complete divine, each with a full personality and all qualities and faculties that go therewith. None of these persons or natures mixed with the other. They emphatically denied the transformation or transmutation of the Logos into flesh. They held that the divine nature did not change the human nature. Jesus, having human nature, by grace and free will could follow the divine nature. Therefore, one could say that Mary gave birth to God. This clearly was a metaphorical rather than substance designation.

The Antiochian school is another reflection of the contradictory nature of the New Testament writings. On the one hand they emphasize transcendental monotheism, and Jesus’ feeble humanity and subordination to God Almighty, whilst on other occasions they seemingly attribute a kind of divine status to Jesus especially in the Pauline and Johannine writings. The traditionalists bent on attaining salvation through the redemptive death of Jesus and their own union with divinity have inclined towards the Johannine interpretations and pushed them to their limits. The rational believers have always been worried about the danger this approach poses to transcendental monotheism and ethical piety. Christianity is the name and product of these antithetical and diametrically opposed tendencies as well as concerns. Many innocent and sincere believers have had to pay for the contradictory nature of their scriptural writings. Nestorius is a good example of this theological nightmare.

The controversy regarding the person of Christ came to a head on collision in the fifth century when Nestorius, a younger member of the Antiochian school, became bishop of Constantinople (428). He

protested against the tendency very common among the masses, especially among the monks in the neighborhood of the capital, to exalt the Virgin Mary as “Mother of God” or “*theotokos*.” He remarked that ‘God is not a baby two or three months old.’²⁹ Nestorius believed that Jesus had two natures. He maintained that before the union of the man and the Logos in Jesus, the man was a person distinct from the Logos.³⁰ To Nestorius it was a “perfect,” “exact” and “continuous” union.³¹ Unlike the Alexandrian Christological view that upheld “hypostatic or natural” union, his view of union was “voluntary.” Nestorius was anathematized by the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople (533) for his supposed heresy of the two natures and two persons.

When looked at from the perspective of our study, it becomes evident that traditional Christianity, for the sake of salvation and redemption, has always intended to crucify God and denied all efforts to make the crucifixion the suffering of a mere human being. This is crystal clear corporealism and could not have been maintained on the basis of speculative theology or any logical effort alone. It required the backing of the state, and exploitive and political power to suppress all rational and curious inquiries, made available to several traditional Logos-flesh theologians. Further, this act of blaspheming God, to use Nestorius’ term, could not have been done by the Holy Spirit as always claimed by so-called Orthodoxy but rather by the political powers of secular and at times pagan emperors.

In conclusion it is worth quoting the famous passage from Nestorius, who wrote:

It is my earnest desire that even by anathematizing me they may escape from blaspheming God [and that those who so escape may confess God, holy, almighty and immortal, and not change the image of the incorruptible God for the image of corruptible man, and mingle heathenism with Christianity... but that Christ may be confessed to be in truth and in nature God and Man, being by nature immortal and impassable as God, and mortal and passable by nature as Man – not God in both natures, nor again Man in both natures. The goal of my earnest wish is that God may be blessed on earth as in heaven]; but for Nestorius, let him be anathema; only let men speak of God as I pray for them that they may speak. For I am with those who are for God, and not with those who are against God, who with an outward show of religion reproach God and cause him to cease from being God.³²

The words of Nestorius speak for themselves. How in the world can someone who considers Mary to be the mother of God, accepts that the Logos God spent nine months in the womb of a woman, grew like a baby, harbored complete human needs, called upon God with pleas of dereliction “O, My God, O, My God, why have you forsaken me?” and died on the cross, deny accusations of heathenism? This has been and still is the true challenge and struggle of popular Christianity.

The Church tried to solve this mystery by the Chalcedonian formula of Jesus having a complete divine and a complete human nature. It was just an attempt to solve a long standing Christological problem but in no way, shape or form did it provide logical or intelligible categories to satisfactorily answer the questions of Jesus’ person or inner relational difficulties. In point of fact it was more presumed than explained that Christ was at once a complete God and a complete man. What type of man he was when he did not have the sinful nature was neither addressed nor resolved. His humanity was neither a complete humanity like that of ordinary human beings, nor his divinity like that of the Father. The whole thing was in fact a hodgepodge of presumptuous confusion rather than rational theology.

The figure of Jesus with two heads (a human and a divine) is a strange monster figure. It is more unintelligible and exposed to more subtle questions and curiosities than even the Docetic or Monarchian positions. It is impossible to logically determine the demarcation line between God and Man while insisting upon their unity, as the traditional dogma asserts. For instance, who determines when God in Jesus is acting and when the man in Jesus is steering his actions? There is neither proper guidance nor any specific formula given by the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit has been so often suppressed or evaded by emperors and Church politicians alike that claims of his abstract providence are of no real meaning in this regard. Is the figure dying on the cross the human Jesus or Jesus as God? If God then which God other than himself was he crying out to? If the figure dying was Jesus the man, then salvation is not complete. The Chalcedonian formula was as theologically problematic as the previous Christological formulas if not more than them. The historical human Jesus, was declared to have two distinct natures, both perfect human and perfect divine, unified in one theanthropic person the Logos, the Son of God. Moreover he was unlike ordinary human beings because he was sinlessness. The contradiction is mind-boggling! Jesus is a man but not like men. If the person of Christ consists of two natures, two wills, but

in reality is identical with the divine nature and knowledge rather than the human nature, then one is fully justified in querying as Maurice Wiles does as to how genuine this humanity is and “how genuinely human is so qualified a human will?”³³

Nevertheless despite its inherent weaknesses the Chalcedonian concept of a unified being with two heads or natures (human and divine) has remained the official doctrine of Christian Orthodoxy to the present times. The world has yet to see a theologian or a philosopher who can resolve these contradictions and explain in intelligible terms the Chalcedonian doctrine of Christ’s person. If you can’t resolve the problem, simply accept it at face value. This is faith at the expense of human logic and intellectual precision.

The illogical, the impossible, the contradictory cannot be justified in the name of paradox, this is an insult to human intelligence; Faith is the exposition of Truth, and must be substantiated by facts, it cannot create them. To hide behind the smoke screens of mystery, blind faith, mysticism, spirituality and/or the Spirit’s providence etc. is to make nonsense of scripture and simply create awe for that which pays homage to a primitive, superstitious mentality. Furthermore, it is the prerogative of faith that it is made available to all and not just a select few, able to understand the intellectual contortions of mystery based doctrines. In reality, the history of the Trinitarian dogma is so saturated with political intrigue, the overriding needs of the State, exploitative elements moving through the corridors of power and so on, that actual scripture seems to have paid second fiddle to political expediency. And the monolithic impress of the doctrine has existed for so long that the whole is now taken for granted. The fact of the matter is that in the Trinity we have either the exposition of illogical truth or, what dare not be comprehended, heresy and theological scandal of the greatest magnitude. There is no in between.

Throughout their history, Christians have been trying to save the transcendent God from corporeality and anthropomorphisms, but their desire for salvation has very often resulted in the opposite. This probably was among the factors that led the Islamic version of transcendence and monotheism, observes K. Armstrong, to

spread with astonishing rapidity throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Many of its enthusiastic converts in these lands (where Hellenism was not at home ground) turned with relief from Greek

Trinitarianism, which expressed the mystery of God in an idiom that was alien to them, and adopted a more Semitic notion of the divine reality.³⁴

Chapter Four

Anthropomorphism and the Qur'an

In Islam God stands alone: transcendent and majestic. The faith is marked by a strict and uncompromising ethical monotheism, signifying the absolute Oneness, Unity, Uniqueness and Transcendence of God, in its highest and purest sense, and which formally and unequivocally eliminates all notions of polytheism, pantheism, dualism, monolatry, henotheism, tritheism, trinitarianism, and indeed any postulation or conception of the participation of persons in the divinity of God. Thus, it is a universal truth that mainstream Islam has always emphasized the absolute transcendence and unity of God, avoiding corporeal notions and anthropomorphic images of His being. However, this understanding of transcendence is not abstract in the philosophical sense of the term for many poetical expressions are used in the Qur'an to establish a kind of divine yet vague modality with regards to God, so as to make the transcendent deity immanent and live, and to allow for the provision of ample opportunities to develop a meaningful relationship with Him. This vague modality is sufficient enough to cater for human communicative needs. There are few Qur'anic expressions, which if taken absolutely literally, could lead to mildly anthropomorphic perceptions of the Deity, and these seemingly anthropomorphic expressions have been the center of debate for Muslim theologians for centuries. Hence, phrases referring to the 'hand,' 'face,' 'eyes,' of God, though very few in number, are taken as mysteries by the majority of Muslim scholars and are either often accepted as they stand with the pronouncement *bilā kayf* (literally, "without how" but figuratively as "in a manner that suits His majesty and transcendence") or interpreted metaphorically. The acceptance *bilā kayf* of these phrases is always accompanied with the absolute denial of any similarity between God and His creatures (anthropomorphism) and with repeated emphasis upon the divine otherness and transcendence of God. The total submission to the moral will of this transcendent and unique God is Islam.

Divine transcendence is the essence of the Qur'anic message. The Qur'anic worldview divides reality into two generic realms, God and

non-God. God is the Eternal Creator and nothing is like unto Him. He remains forever the transcendental Other devoid of any resemblance, similarity, partnership and association. He is that unique being who can only be called the Reality and the Being as everything other than Him derives its reality, existence and being from Him. Allah, the Arabic word for God, is semantically the highest focused word of the Qur'an. The Qur'anic worldview is theocentric to the core. Ontologically nothing can stand equal or opposed to Him. He always remains the transcendental Other who presides over the entire system of existence as its Master and Creator. Everything other than Him is His creature and stands inferior to Him in the hierarchy of being.

The second realm consists of everything other than God. It is the order of time-space, creation and of experience. Ontologically these two orders always remain disparate. The Creator neither descends to the realm of space-time and experience to be united, incarnated, diffused or confused with creatures nor can the creatures ascend to be ontologically united or diffused with the Creator. He always remains the utterly sublime transcendental Other. This is the Qur'anic concept of divine Unity. That is the thread which runs through the entire Qur'anic corpus as the core of the Qur'anic message. All Qur'anic concepts, ideas, and ideologies are woven together to pinpoint, elaborate, and describe this very doctrine of the Oneness, Unity, and Transcendence of God, and to encourage mankind to establish a meaningful and right relationship with Him. There is so much emphasis in the Qur'an upon the Oneness, Unity and Uniqueness of Almighty God that no stone seems to be left unturned to make this crystal clear even to a cursory reader. Moreover, the Qur'anic concept of "Monotheism" is neither progressive nor ambiguous. It is neither confusing nor contradictory. It is monotheistic and theocentric to the very definition of the word. It is negative, affirmative, rational, normative and self-explanatory.

The Qur'anic monotheism does not start with monolatry or with the affirmations of the existence or Oneness of the Deity. It starts by absolutely negating all concepts, kinds, ideas, understandings, and illusions of divinity or godhead other than the One and the only Divine. It starts with the Credo of Islam *Lā ilāha illa Allāh*, the *shahādah* or confession, which is derived from the Qur'an itself. The whole Qur'an is a commentary on these four words, or as an amplification of them. The first part of this declaration, *Lā ilāha*, negates the existence of each and any false god, and condemns false devotion, worship, and ideas of

dependence upon such gods. The profession of faith (*shahādah*) is a commitment to radical transcendental monotheism.

By means of the first part of the *shahādah*, the existence as well as the reality of any and every god and object of worship is absolutely negated. With an explosive “No” all allusions of multiplicity, self-sufficiency, godhead and divinity are at once shattered. The third word of the confession *illa* is the link and isthmus between what is negated and what is affirmed. All that is denied is finally restored by the fourth word Allah. It means that there is no reality, no god, none self-sufficient except Allah, the true Reality.

The second part of the *shahādah* contains an immediate corollary on the mission and prophethood of Muhammad (ṢAAS).^{*} It says, *Muḥammadun Rasūl Allāh*, “and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” The true Reality is historically revealed through the mission and prophethood of Muhammad. Prophet Muhammad is the embodiment of the divine message and not a reflection of the divine Person. In the Qur’an, the Islamic unitarian formula with its *Lā ilāha* form occurs 41 times. This is in addition to the numerous other forms (23 different formulas) that the Qur’an uses to negate godhead or divinity in any form or way. The pronouncement of this confession is the pronouncement of God’s Oneness, Uniqueness and Transcendence. Perhaps this is the reason that it has been mentioned in the Qur’an and the Prophetic traditions (Sunnah) more frequently than any other phrase.

The Qur’an categorically rejects the Christian concept of the Trinity or division of persons in the Godhead. The Qur’an claims to have come as a rectifier of Jewish and Christian excesses against God. The Christian tradition claimed to have believed in monotheism, but, to the Qur’an, the Christian dogma of the Trinity and incarnation was a clear violation of the divine unity and transcendence. It is worth noting that these Qur’anic statements roundly reject both Augustinian as well as Cappadocian interpretations of the Trinity. The Qur’an blames Christian dogma of blurring the transcendental realm with the utilitarian sphere of want and need.

The Bible as well as Judaeo/Christianity’s comprehension of God had left many problems unsolved and the Qur’anic account came to purge

^{*}(ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*. ‘May the peace and blessings of God be upon him.’ Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.

the confused, adulterated, even mystical understanding of the Divine contained in i.e. ideas such as the incarnation, corporealism and physical anthropomorphism of God, that had come to prevail. Monotheistic theology is nothing new in the history of western religious traditions. Nevertheless, the radical monotheism of Islam offers distinctive solutions to the difficult and thorny problems of the nature of God, freewill and predestination, the relationship of good to evil (theodicy), and of reason to revelation. Islamic insistence upon God's absolute transcendence and perfect unity is quite distinctive among the Semitic traditions.

In addition to insisting upon the unity, unicity, and transcendence of God, affirming this time and time again, the Qur'an aggressively attacks all forms of idolatry, monolatry and polytheism. *Shirk*, the act of associating anything or anybody with God, is according to the Qur'an, the only unforgivable sin. In addition to the appalling warnings against *Shirk*, the Qur'an has vehemently denied the existence of gods as divinities other than the Almighty. Therefore gods worshipped besides Allah are nothing but human inventions having no independent reality of their own. It needs to be emphasized that the Qur'an is not satisfied in merely attacking all kinds of polytheism but repeatedly emphasizes the point that the false gods have no existence of their own, being nothing more than a product of their worshippers' imagination. No one possesses any iota of power or ability to benefit or harm human beings except by the permission of God.

The Qur'an has categorically refuted all kinds of polytheism, henotheism and associationism, in addition to vigorously affirming the transcendental otherness and Godhead of the One God. In the Qur'an just as the concept of *tawhīd* is presented with strong and convincing arguments, likewise that of polytheism, henotheism and associationism is rejected with strong and irrefutable evidence. The Qur'an does not confine itself to mere assertions of God's Oneness, Unity, and absolute Sovereignty. It uses various arguments both logical and cosmological to substantiate such claims. The Qur'an implies a variety of methods, processes, techniques, thought processes and cognitive categories to hammer home the point of the transcendental uniqueness of God Almighty. It safeguards an already self-explaining and convincing concept with additional measures and parameters so as to allow no doubt or confusion to enter concerning it. As belief in a strict monotheism is the primordial act needed for the salvation of humanity in its entirety, the Qur'an presents such a belief in a very simple,

straightforward and logical way. The countless Qur'anic passages delineating this belief are so simple and clear that no external help is needed to elaborate the point of their emphasis. They are self-explanatory and self-sufficient in this regard. They are also coherent, systematic and methodical. Unlike the Old Testament, there exist no layers of progressive or evolutionary revelation or conflicting tendencies in the Qur'an. Qur'anic monotheism is thorough, transcendental, unique and systematic to the core. This external as well as internal unity of God is described in Islam by the word *al-tawḥīd*.

When the term *tawḥīd* is used in reference to God Almighty it means realization of the divine unity and transcendence in all of man's actions directly or indirectly related to God. It is the belief that Allah is One and Unique, without partner in His dominion and His actions (*rububiyyah*), One without similitude in His essence and attributes (*asmā' wa ṣifāt*), and One without rival in His divinity and in worship (*uluḥiyyah/ibādah*). The science of *tawḥīd* revolves around these three constituent elements so much so that omission of any of these at times overlapping categories will nullify the essence and mission of the science as well as the creed. These three categories of *tawḥīd*, are sometimes referred to as *Tawḥīd al-Dhāt* (Unity of the Being), *Tawḥīd al-Ṣifāt* (Unity of the Attributes) and *Tawḥīd al-Af'āl* (Unity of the Actions). The Unity of God, according to the Qur'an, implies that God is the Absolute One in His person (*dhāt*), Absolute One in His attributes (*ṣifāt*) and Absolute One in His works (*af'āl*). The Oneness of His person means that there is neither plurality of gods, nor plurality of persons in the Godhead; the Oneness of attributes implies that no other being possesses one or more of the Divine attributes in the absolute sense; His Oneness in works implies that none can do the works which God has done, or which God may do. It may be added here, that this tripartite division of *tawḥīd* owes its origin to the Qur'an, as its material is wholly Qur'anic, though the specific names mentioned above have resulted from later theological expositions.

In Judaism and Christianity, the conception of God is to a greater or lesser extent bound to the limitations of His creatures as seen in previous chapters. Islam emphatically proclaims that Almighty God, the Transcendent and Exalted Lord and Sustainer of all that exists, is far above possessing any of the creaturely attributes which have been ascribed to Him by man. He is not bound to any of the limitations of human beings or any other of His creatures. He has neither form nor body, nor corporeal or physical attributes, features, or characteristics.

Rather His attributes are infinite and absolute. They are far above any sort of limitations, defects, and deficiencies, such as his having a beginning or an end, begetting or being begotten, having physical dimensions, or having needs such as requiring food, rest, or procreation etc. He is the One Who gives such dimensions and characteristics to His creations, while not sharing them in the slightest degree.

This third dimension of *al-tawhīd* is specifically directed towards Jewish and Christian compromises of the divine transcendence. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam constitute successive moments of Semitic consciousness in their long march through history as carriers of a divine mission on earth. Identifying itself with the original pristine message sent by God to mankind, Islam stands as a corrective element, finding fault with the Jewish and Christian conception and portrayal of God as delineated in the historical documents accepted by the two faiths as scriptures. Islam holds these documents accountable for compromising the divine transcendence and hence committing the most grievous error against the Semitic consciousness.

Islam charges that the relation Judaism claimed to bind God to “His Chosen People” straight-jacketed Him into granting them favors despite their immorality, their hardship and stiffneckedness (Deuteronomy 9:5–6). A “bound” god, bound in any sense or degree, is not the transcendent God of Abraham and Moses. Likewise, Islam blames Christianity for gravely misconceiving the divine unity by reformulating it as a triune Godhead, using the incarnation gambit as justification to commit excesses against God and place countless limitations upon Him. In sum, a wide gulf of conceptual differences regarding the doctrine of divine transcendence exists and separates Islam from both Judaism and Christianity.

Islam emphasizes that God by very definition of His reality cannot simply be a sort of supernatural or superhuman being, directing worldly affairs from the heavens whilst simultaneously sharing in creaturely attributes, needs, and qualities. For God is nothing less than the Creator, Originator, and Fashioner of this vast universe, the One Who keeps it functioning in accordance with His infinite wisdom, knowledge and master plans. God infinitely transcends anything which the human mind can possibly perceive or comprehend, or the senses grasp, imagine, or explain. God is far, far above any similarity or comparability with any of His creatures. This special emphasis upon the Divine transcendence is what the third category of *al-tawhīd* is

designated for. God is One in His Names and Attributes. His Names, Actions and Attributes surpass human names, actions and attributes as much as His Being surpasses their beings. The Absolute Creator utterly transcends the relative actions and attributes of His creatures. This is implied in the first assertion of the Islamic creed that “There is no god but God.” In addition to being a denial of any associates to God in His worship, rule and judgship of the universe, it also contains a denial of the possibility of any creature representing, personifying, or in any way or form expressing the divine Being. The Qur’an prescribes the fundamental transcendental criterion in the following verses: “There is nothing whatever like unto Him” (42:11). “And there is none like unto Him” (112:4). While establishing the fundamental principle of divine otherness by the words “nothing is like unto Him,” the passage also institutes the basis of a possible divine modality. The One and Unique God is the most Merciful, the Compassionate. His knowledge extends to everything seen and unseen, present and future, near and far, in being and not in being; in fact these relative contrasts do not even apply to the Absolute God. He is unknowable in His being yet knowable through His Names and Attributes. These beautiful Names and Attributes are the only source and basis of a possible divine modality. This is perhaps the reason why the Qur’an and Hadith have taken upon themselves to fix the boundaries of this modality (Beautiful Names of Allah) to avoid confusion and excesses.

It is this notion of the absolute transcendence of God that has been reflected in Islamic art, language, and indeed so many other aspects of Islamic civilization and culture. Islam is, and always has been, unceasingly on guard, constantly on high alert against any corporeality, anthropomorphism or any form of comparability, injecting the divine with the non-divine. Unlike Christian art and in some rare cases Jewish art, Islamic art has always avoided sensory images, anthropomorphic depictions or corporeal portrayals of God in all times and places. No mosque has ever contained any object, depiction or statue even remotely connected with divinity. The same strict precautions have been taken with regards to the Islamic language. Islamic theological discourse (God-talk) revolves strictly around Qur’anic terminology, despite the existence of, and in fact serving as an interface between, the tremendous geographical, linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversities that span the Muslim world.

Al-tawhīd, with all its multiplex emphasis, is not meant merely to exalt God and chant His glories. It is also not meant to claim special privy

with God, enjoy special privileges in His name or assert superiority over His creatures. None of these elements are implied in the Qur'anic understanding of monotheism. It is a responsibility rather than a privilege. It is meant to create the proper response in man, the response that is essential to encourage man to work towards transforming the human society of time and space in accordance with divine moral rules. The unity of God leads to the unity of His creation. No superiority is granted based upon origin, ethnicity, color, creed or financial or social status. The basic human rights of dignity, freedom, equality and justice are universally granted to all humans because of their humanity. A right relationship with God is the sole guarantee of a just and right relationship between men. A loving connection between man and his God will assure a morally equipped caring human society.

On the other hand, any wrong understanding of who God is or a wrong relationship with Him will cause imbalance in man to man relationships. The Islamic transcendental monotheism if understood properly and applied in spirit can warranty an ethically balanced and caring human society. It is grounded in human responsibility, socio political and economic accountability and universal justice.

Furthermore, the Qur'anic concept of transcendental monotheism is not evolutionary. It is original and universal. The Qur'an gives this moralistic understanding of monotheism a universal dimension by claiming that this was the same message revealed to all the prophets and nations since the beginning of time. "For We assuredly sent amongst every People a Messenger, (with the Command), 'Serve Allah, and eschew Evil'" (16:36). The message is timeless, unchanged, and universal. So Noah for instance, one of the most ancient of prophets, was sent to his people with the message: "Worship Allah! Ye have no other god but Him" (7:59). All subsequent prophets and messengers of God received and communicated the same message (7:65–93). This theme occurs very frequently in the Qur'an. The Ten Commandments given to Moses were rehearsed by Jesus on the Mount and reiterated (most at least) by Muhammad in the Qur'an. The *Shalome* of the original Hebrews is the *Salām* and Islam of the Qur'an. Jesus' original message of salvation was nothing but "follow the commandments." Love your God and love your neighbor we can therefore state is the essence of this universal monotheistic consciousness.

The word "Islam" means submission and peace: submission to the moral will of the One and Transcendent God, and peace with the

Creator and His creatures. Islam claims to be in unison with the original messages of the prophets Moses and Jesus but finds fault with the historical Judaic and Christian notions of the deity. The Hebrew Bible's anthropomorphic conceptions of Yahweh (God) and Christianity's belief in a triune God are both unacceptable to Islam for they are viewed as having compromised God's transcendence and unity. The Islamic Scripture, the Qur'an, on one level, is believed to have been revealed as a corrective measure, to rectify not only the polytheistic conceptions of God but also to clarify and amend Jewish and Christian compromises with regards to God's transcendence. Islam identifies the source of this compromise in the historical adulteration of the previous revelations (both intentional and unintentional) and claims to have fixed the problem through revelation of the Qur'an, returning to original purity the message that had been undermined and corrupted. Islam also claims to have avoided the historical mistakes that led to the intermixing or interjection of human words with the word of God. Indeed, the faith deems historical authenticity, textual purity and solemn preservation of the original scripture, as key safeguards to guarantee and preserve the transcendence of God and humanity's correct perception of Him.

In spite of its strong emphasis upon the transcendence, uniqueness, and inaccessibility of God, sometimes even to the point of jealousy, the Qur'an contains only *a few* verses whose somewhat picturesque style, if taken absolutely literally, could seem to ascribe certain human attributes or acts to God. This group of verses is often termed *mutashābih* meaning "ambiguous" verses, in contrast to the verses termed *muhkam* whose meanings are firm and clearly established. This set of ambiguous verses has been the subject of much exegetical as well as theological dispute in later Islamic theological thought. Although mainstream Muslims have always denied and refuted any anthropomorphic conceptions of God, certain individuals and sects have fallen prey to a mildly anthropomorphic conception of the Deity.

It must be noted here that the anthropomorphic tendency under discussion is neither crude nor graphic; nor is the problem, in addition, one of absolute corporealism or physical anthropomorphism. What we have rather is a sort of relatively refined anthropomorphism, which crept into the thoughts of certain traditionalists such as Muqatil ibn Sulaymān and some early Shiite figures such as Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam. In spite of his literal disposition Muqatil metaphorically interpreted many Qur'anic phrases that could have lead to corporeal depictions of

God if taken literally. Therefore, even the case of Muqatil's alleged corporealism needs further examination as the polemic nature of the sources where we learn about his supposed corporeal views underlie their unreliability. His exegesis of the Qur'an which is now available presents him in a different way. According to Hishām God had a body but one unlike other bodies, meaning that no resemblance or likeness exists between the divine body and non-divine ones. Proponents of this supposed anthropomorphism rationalized their speculation with the assumption that as all things existent have bodies, proof that God exists can be done through assigning Him a body, but one of course unlike other bodies.³⁵ We are hardly in the realms of marked anthropomorphism here, for in no way or form have these theorizers compared God with His creatures or completely blurred the line between the divine and non-divine realms. The only thing they are guilty of is to have seemingly slightly muddled the strict demarcation lines dividing the two realms, and this largely due to their literalism prone disposition and a sense of needing to prove God's existence. The result of this faulty speculation was severe chastisement by mainstream Muslims who dubbed them as corporealists, defending and underscoring with great fervor the well presented, well guarded and uncompromising transcendental nature of the Qur'anic message.

It is significant and worth noting that the term "anthropomorphism" is used here as a rough equivalent for the Muslim use of the terms *tashbīh* and *tajsīm*. The two possibly interchangeable terms take material or sense perceptions as their point of reference, and can also be differentiated on a higher more refined level. The term *tashbīh* denotes the act of comparing God with non-God beings while *tajsīm* mainly focuses upon the object of the comparison. The Muslim concept of *tashbīh* and *tajsīm* is also at variance with the contemporary western use of the term "anthropomorphism." The western usage generally covers all attempts to conceive of God in human categories whether corporeal, emotional or rational. The Islamic terms focus more upon the sensual, material and corporeal aspects of the term though not completely ignoring the rational or emotional similarities. God's emotional or rational attributes are absolute while the same in humans are relative and finite. They are used regarding God for the sole purposes of existential confirmations, modality and a meaningful relationship between man and God. They are linguistic necessities, the result of human limitations, and must be taken as metaphorical expressions or figures of speech rather than reflections upon the divine nature or essence.

An example of this category of Qur'anic passages and phrases is the Qur'anic usage of the word *wajh*, literally meaning "face," with regards to God, which occurs in a total of 11 verses (5 times as "the face of Allah" 2:115; 2:272; 30:38; 30:39; 76:9; once as "the face of their Lord" 13:22; once as "the face of your Lord" 55:27; once as "the face of his Lord" 92:20; and 3 times as "His face" 6:52; 18:28; 28:88). It is interesting to note the context in which the phrase occurs in several Qur'anic verses. For instance in 2:272 it says: "Whatever of good ye give benefits your own souls, and ye shall only do so seeking the "Face" of Allah (*li wajhillāh*).” In 13:22 it says: "Those who patiently persevere (*li wajhi rabbihim*) 'for the face of their Lord'." From all these verses and others such as 30:30, 30:43 etc. it seems clear that the usage of the word "face" regarding God is more symbolic than literal, consequently leading many Muslim exegetes and scholars to interpret it as the *dhātillāh* that is, the being of Allah, or "for His sake." This interpretation is substantiated by the other Qur'anic verses where it says: "And call not, besides Allah, on another god. There is no god but He. *Everything (that exists) will perish except His face*. To Him belongs the Command, and to Him will ye (all) be brought back" (28:88). In 55:26–7 we read: "All that is on earth will perish: but *will abide (for ever) the face of thy Lord*, – full of Majesty, Bounty and Honour." It is impossible to interpret this verse literally, and it will not make sense to state that everything will perish except God's face. Qur'anic exegetes agree that the word '*wajh*' (face) mentioned here refers to God Almighty Himself and not to any organ or body whatsoever.

This demonstrates that the Qur'an contains some phrases that cannot be given ostensibly literal meanings. The scripture clearly poses a hermeneutic challenge. Therefore rational faculties, and consideration of the overall scriptural scheme, and specific context and intention behind these expressions, must be employed properly to decipher the true meanings of these poetic expressions. The seemingly anthropomorphic expressions are used merely to emphasize the reality and existence of God especially to individuals such as the Makkan polytheists who had been immersed in the worship of idols and corporeal conceptions of divinity. A bare transcendental conception of the deity would have been irrelevant and incomprehensible to them. These expressions provide a vague departure point and a divine modality with the senses soon sharply reminded of the sheer limitations of human perception and understanding by the statement "nothing is like unto Him." A literalistic approach will merely accent the corporeal aspects of these scriptural phrases, as literalism is usually prone to taking sense

experience as its frame of reference. Consequently, any face value literal interpretations of these anthropomorphic expressions only serve to reduce the Qur'anic God to the status of an idol, nullifying the Qur'anic intent of purging faith of idol worship. Phrases such as these have to be interpreted figuratively in light of the other Qur'anic verses and in accordance with the established rules of the Arabic language. Lack thereof would lead to a logical as well as theological impasse. Metaphorical delineation or *ta'wīl* is the mode of exegesis which transcends the elemental, literal and surface meaning of the text to replace it by a secondary and metaphorical sense. Human languages frequently admit of at least two levels of meaning i.e., the literal and the metaphorical. The Arabic language is heavily rich in these two levels of meanings i.e., the obvious (*ḥaqīqī*) and the metaphorical (*majāzī*). The need for a metaphorical meaning arises when a logical or theological impasse occurs such as when some few individuals decide to interpret as corporeal certain verses concerning the transcendental God. As reiterated earlier this fact was unknown to early Muslims because it was clearly obvious what was being referred to in the verses i.e. not literally the face of God but His Being and has never been an issue for the first generation of Muslims. Rather, Allah's Revelation was crystal clear with *tawḥīd* so clearly spelled out that it could not be challenged on any level. The categories arose as a result of a few tending without any evidence to adopt a literalistic perspective, despite the context of the verses and the nuances of the Arabic language categorically demanding otherwise.

The question arises as to why the Qur'an or Hadith would employ such phrases which possibly create unnecessary tension with regard to meaning. The simple and straightforward answer is that linguistic and human limitations require this. The Qur'an is a book of guidance for mankind and not a book of isolated metaphysics. To ensure human relevancy it has to employ phrases suitable to human understanding and imagery. This is perhaps a better option than a bare transcendental unity void of human imagination, relevancy and interaction. It must be kept in mind that the scripture does not always have multiple meanings. It is the context and the intention of the language that will determine, providing the clues, for a metaphorical or not interpretation. No violence to the established semantic, grammatical and philological nature of the text is permitted in the process of metaphorical interpretations, a tedious process of linguistic and textual analysis must be followed, conforming to the leads of lexicographers, grammarians, philologists, literary exegetes, poets and literary critics. Absolutely

forbidden are arbitrary allegorical interpretations which do not follow a careful and thorough analysis, which lack scholarly tools or which render the text to arbitrary fanciful interpretations, without much linguistic or textual support. The human reason and rationale should follow the revelation and not supersede, supplant or nullify it.

In conclusion, the Qur'anic Creator Paradigm does maintain a wonderful demarcation line between God and whatever is non-God by holding fast to the concept of His transcendence, uniqueness, and otherness. This concept is no bare unity or abstraction, but a vivid, alive, and demanding concept which does make God relevant to the 'here and now' by means of emphasizing His immanence through the modality it provides by the countless Qur'anic verses. The modality and the language are essentially structured in such a way so as to allow many possibilities of communication without making God resemble or disappear in the world He has created. This type of transcendental concept is pervasive throughout the Qur'an, the authentic hadith literature, and also throughout the history of Islamic civilization. All mainstream Muslim thinkers, even the philosophers and literalists to an extent, seem to have followed the same line: the sense of and a belief in the transcendental Deity who is mysterious, ineffable, and unknowable in His essence, but at the same time very close to His creatures by dint of His knowledge, power, mercy, and love. There is a rupture of language though in some of the Qur'anic terms. It is meant to admit the inadequacy and imperfection of the human language, the ineffable mystery of God, and humanity's utter dependence upon God and His revelation to achieve any authentic knowledge of His being.

The systematic Qur'anic God Paradigm is a proof of the Qur'an's authenticity. In terms of compilation, the Qur'an is very unlike the present day Bible. For one thing the Qur'an was sanctified, recorded, carefully preserved, and canonized from the very moment of its revelation, i.e. it's very inception. The Christian and Jewish concept of scriptural canonization over time is foreign to Muslims. Muslims view the Qur'an as God's last and final revelation to mankind. Muslim sources agree that the Qur'anic text was fully memorized and put into some written forms during the lifetime of the Prophet. At the end of his life, writes al-Faruqi, "Muhammad had about 30,000 contemporaries who had heard and memorized the Qur'an in whole or in part. Several of them could read and write and had committed the Qur'an to writing in part or in toto."³⁶ The fact that Prophet Muhammad was conscious of the divine nature and otherness of the Qur'an from the

very beginning of his mission, is something well attested by historical facts and recognized by western scholars. Muhammad seems to have begun quite early the practice of reciting passages from the Qur'an to his followers for as long as necessary until they knew them by heart. This practice of memorizing the text of the Qur'an has been universally followed by millions of Muslims in every generation since the time of the Prophet.

It is also recognized by the Orientalists that writing skill was common in the metropolitan town of Makkah due to its mercantile atmosphere. That Prophet Muhammad used secretaries to write down the Revelation, is also a fact widely affirmed historically and recognized by western scholarship. After he went to Madinah his employment of secretaries is well attested. From these facts and other related authentic traditions, Muslim scholars conclude that the entire text of the Qur'an was written down in some shape or form in the lifetime of the Prophet. They also unanimously hold that Prophet Muhammad himself was responsible for the arrangement of the verses into *sūrah*s. Many western scholars, like Muir, Burton and Smith agree with these conclusions. For instance Bishop K. Cragg observes that "there is no place for serious misgiving that what is here was substantially what the Prophet said or that what he said under conditions of Qur'anic inspiration is not here."³⁷ Other Orientalists, like Watt, Tritton, Gibb, hold that the Qur'an was partially written down in the lifetime of the Prophet. Watt says that "much of the Qur'an was written down in some form during Muhammad's lifetime."³⁸

It is pertinent to mention here that Abū Bakr (caliph from 632–634), who succeeded Prophet Muhammad (who died in 632), ordered the collection of the written material in one volume after ʿUmar urged him to do so. It was Zayd ibn Thābit, the secretary of the Prophet, who headed the commission and did the job for Abū Bakr. He collected the written texts of the Qur'an, verified them against his own memory (he was a *ḥafiz*), used other safeguards, and produced the single volume. ʿUthmān (caliph from 644–656), who succeeded ʿUmar, ordered the same Zayd to produce in written form a single transcript, meaning text, in accordance with the standard Makkan dialect. Therefore, within a short span of 12 years after the departure of the Prophet as al-Faruqi contends, or about 18 years as Watt argues, a standard, complete, written codice of the Qur'an was officially published and made available along with expert teachers to the metropolitan cities of the empire.

The Qur'anic text has remained intact since then. John Burton concludes his book with the following words: "only one text of the Qur'an has ever existed. This is the universally acknowledged text on the basis of which alone the prayer of the Muslim can be valid. A single text has thus already always united the Muslims. ...What we have today in our hands is the mushaf of Muhammad."³⁹ There is only one text available to all the Muslims without any exception. According to orthodox Muslims, the preservation of the Qur'anic text in such a fashion is no less than a miracle of Allah, a lasting miracle in fact. Indeed, the Qur'an itself in its very early Makkan period cites Allah's promise to protect it: "We have, without doubt, sent down the Message and We will assuredly guard it [from corruption]" (15:9). And it is due to this divine promise and the Qur'an's wondrous nature and inimitability (*'ijāz*), that nobody has been able to introduce anything into its text. Consequently, there has only ever been one text of the Qur'an in the hands of all Muslims, this universally recognized text enjoying normative authority for all.

The Qur'an is held to be revealed in seven variants of recitation or *qirā'ah*. These variants of recitation were approved and tolerated by the Prophet himself because they were congenial to the reciters' tribal or local linguistic traditions, in other words the purpose was to facilitate recitation for Muslims. These variants do not cause much change either in the meaning or the structure or format of the verses. A. S. Tritton observes:

There are seven or ten different 'readings' of the Koran; these are for the most part what the English word implies, different ways of pronouncing the text, elision or assimilation of certain letters. Many variants in vocalization are recorded but they are so slight as to be negligible, except for specialists: they make no vital difference to the sense.⁴⁰

In addition Arabic, the original language of the Qur'an and the Prophet, is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world today, actively used by millions as their first language. In fact, it is the only Semitic tongue which has remained uninterruptedly alive for thousands of years, and moreover is the only living language which has remained largely unchanged for the last fourteen centuries. P. Hitti argued that it was the Qur'an that "kept the language uniform. So that whereas today a Moroccan uses a dialect different from that used by an Arabian or an Iraqi, all write in the same style."⁴¹ In fact it was the

Qur'an which, according to Esposito, was "central to the development of Arabic linguistics and provided the basis for the development of Arabic grammar, vocabulary, and syntax."⁴²

Moreover, unlike the Bible, the followers of the Qur'an believe it to be the divine word of God, the revelation verbatim. It is authoritative and normative to the very definition of the word, and although Muslims may differ, and have differed, over the interpretations and meanings of Qur'anic words, they have never questioned the authenticity, truthfulness and authoritative nature of its text. It is interesting to note that Muslims throughout their history, and without exception, have unanimously accepted every part of the Qur'an – the entire Qur'anic text – as the verbatim word of God. They have revered it as the first determining principle of their religious beliefs, the fundamental source of their Law, and the unequivocal authority regarding matters of faith and religion in no way superseded by any other authority.

In conclusion, the simplicity, straightforwardness, consistency and constancy of the Islamic God Paradigm can easily be seen to have been derived from the historical purity, authenticity and normative nature of its scripture, the Qur'an.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to demonstrate how humanity has managed to envision God in human terms bending religion to the service of this cause, and the various strange dimensions this has led to with regards to perceptions of the Divine. The great defense has always been resort to scripture, highly questionable as I have shown, and theological debate as to whether the language used to illuminate God should be interpreted metaphorically or literally.

Whatever the case, there seems to be a direct and inverse relationship between anthropomorphism, the ascription to God of human characteristics and emotions, the visualization of God whether in verbal imagery or physical form, and strict monotheism. Meaning that notions of a transcendent and unique God together with an internalized consciousness of His Unity, become ever more diluted, to the point of nonexistence, the more corporeal aspects are introduced and legitimized.

And the more the attempt to “reveal” God is made, the more elusive “hidden” He becomes, accounting for the endless theological studies, and oftentimes heated debates, that have historically proliferated as to His nature, essence, and outward form. This inverse relationship is significant by its existence and should be noted.

Because ambiguity begets ambiguity, and dangers of a diffused understanding of God’s unity and transcendence become amplified once ideas of anthropomorphism are introduced, the Qur’an adopted a clear, highly contained approach. So explicit are the Qur’anic verses that one of Islam’s deepest fears has been to violate in any way, shape, or form the principles of *tawhīd* as enshrined in the Qur’an and Hadith. Thus in Islam God stands alone, Unique and Majestic, and Muslims remain ever vigilant against *shirk*, associating partners with Him and weakening or adulterating their understanding of His Oneness and His transcendence. On the other hand, the biblical concept of God is anthropomorphic, corporeal and at times a challenge to human intellect and logic.

The primary assertions, findings and conclusions of this study are summarized below:

(1) The God Paradigm presented by the data of the Hebrew Bible is not consistent. Polar tendencies are quite visible. The transcendental monotheism is there but it is not systematically presented, clearly elaborated and completely safeguarded against possible misconceptions, exploitations and violence. It is very much scattered throughout the books of the Hebrew Bible. One has to sift through a great many contradictory statements and assertions, plough through an inordinate amount of information, and face certain thorny problems in order to derive a concept of the absolute otherness and transcendence of God from the text of the Hebrew Bible itself. And this cannot be done satisfactorily without external help.

In contrast an anthropomorphic conception of the Deity is strikingly evident. Crude and overt anthropomorphic descriptions, attributes, qualities, and portrayals abound and are so pervasive throughout the text that even a cursory read will leave the impression of the God of the Hebrew Bible as being undoubtedly anthropomorphic. Many of the biblical anthropomorphisms are naive, at times concrete and corporeal. Such graphic depictions are not essentially needed for the sort of modality intrinsic to proper religious communication except for the

type of religious understanding which holds God as absolutely corporeal. God is presented as a body, walking, talking, searching after somebody, weeping and crying, resting, wrestling, repenting, lamenting etc. In certain incidents He is further shown lacking power, knowledge, mercy, justice, impartiality, universality and so on, the basic traits in other words of a transcendent God. On the other hand, many human limitations, qualities and categories are ascribed to him such that He often appears like a human being but of a higher rank or gigantic proportion. Many of these passages can be interpreted metaphorically but a great majority of them would not render to such an interpretation without violence to the text. At times it would ironically appear that what we have in front of us is man creating God in his own image, likeness and form rather than the other way around. Consequently, that image quite often suffers the finitude of its creator.

In sum the God of the Hebrew Bible as painted by the scripture is not a Being one would deem to be the “Transcendent Perfect” Deity but rather one Who is weak, suffering the many imperfections of human beings and really a supernatural mirror of themselves.

(2) The Hebrew Bible’s God Paradigm seems to be progressive and evolutionary. The conception of God of the later prophets, especially those after 8th century BC, is more elaborate, systematic and unified than the earlier writings though not necessarily non-corporeal or non-anthropomorphic. This prophetic conception, as outlined in the scripture at least, is as much anthropomorphic as the earlier writings but in a different way. The anthropomorphic expressions utilized are, to certain degrees, refined and at times convey a sense of mystical experience or spiritual reflection. Many of them render to metaphorical interpretation more easily than their counterparts in the so-called books of Moses and other earlier writings. Nevertheless, they still ultimately convey nothing less than the concept and imagery of an anthropomorphic and imperfect deity.

(3) The traditional Rabbinic mind is very close to the God Paradigm of the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, there are times when the Rabbinic God seems more anthropomorphic, corporeal, familiar and bound than the God of the Hebrew Bible.

(4) Philosophical and transcendental thinking, in the sense of non-corporealism or non-anthropomorphism, had been looked upon (by

religious Jewry at large) as non-biblical. Such an understanding of God had not been very popular in Judaic tradition over the centuries following the Rabbinic period. The few rational souls such as Philo and Maimonides, who attempted to incorporate philosophical transcendence into the Hebrew conception of the divine (mostly under foreign influence) failed unfortunately to convince the orthodoxy of their transcendental ideas. Their views were regarded as not in conformity with the written texts and the Hebrew legacy.

(5) It is not very hard to figure out human nature and the origin of the anthropomorphic Biblical passages. Human creativity seems to have played a vital role in the creation of these anthropomorphically oriented, corporeally constructed, and at times immorally tuned, passages of the Hebrew Bible. This human element, origin and nature of the Hebrew Bible, ignored over the centuries, has been highlighted by many biblical scholars since the 19th century. It has almost become a standard explanation, particularly in academic circles, of the many theological, moral and religious difficulties presented by the text of the Hebrew Bible.

(6) It has become impossible to logically prove or rationally substantiate the traditional claims of the Hebrew Bible being the inerrant Word of God verbatim. Modern critical scholarship looks upon it as the word of man or at best an indirect inspiration with the word of God mixed up with the words of man. The presence of a labyrinthine maze of centuries old allegorical interpretations and polar and contradictory tendencies with regards to the Deity are not proofs of the depths and infinite mysteries of these problematic passages but rather the other way around, evidence of the sheer limitations and imperfections of their human writers and a descendency in thinking. The existence of all these problems, wittingly or unwittingly confessed by almost all biblical scholars, prove the point that the Hebrew Bible in its present shape and form cannot be taken as the inerrant word of God.

(7) The New Testament seems to be far removed from the Hebraic universe of discourse and very close to Hellenistic thought patterns and world view. Furthermore, it is not theocentric but Christocentric. A greater variety of theologies (Christologies) is presented in the New Testament than the variety one notices in the Old Testament and not all of them are mutually congruent. These theological models are more problematic, divergent and mutually dissonant.

(8) The New Testament is not what Jesus said and wrote about himself, and probably not even what he understood about himself. It is what the Church and later Christians understood and interpreted that he was or should have been.

(9) Traditional Christian Incarnation theology is a result of centuries of later reflections, controversies and developments. It is neither a necessary reflection of what the text of the New Testament presents nor a sole product of pure theological curiosity. In fact cultural realities, political motivations and personal agendas and vendettas have played a significant role in formulating its shape and content. Neither is incarnational theology clearly charted out in the New Testament in its developed, traditional, and literal sense. No one can prove it to be the essence of New Testament writings as a whole without external intrusions and arbitrary interpretations. It could possibly be construed from some New Testament writings but not without superficial efforts and violence to the text on the part of the one who intends to do so.

(10) Christian Incarnation theology, especially in its literal sense, is absolutely corporeal and anthropomorphic and involves the fevered veneration of a triune Godhead. In point of fact it forms the epitome of corporeal thought in the religious consciousness of some Semites. In Incarnation, the practical separation between the divine and human becomes impossible. In reality it is the divine, the Logos, which is dominant, visible and worshipped, whilst the human Jesus is conceded and concealed somewhere in the shadows. Yet, God is often claimed but seldom given a true and natural existence of His own. In reality, God the Father, the supposed first person of the holy Trinity and the original source of all, seems to play second fiddle to Lord Jesus Christ, the supposed second person of the Trinity, who often is shown to be taking over in such a fashion that God the Father often becomes invisible. Christianity, in its traditional popular sense, is really what the word "Christianity" literally means. It is a faith about Jesus Christ, and a deification of his person. Exalting this historical human figure to the status of full divinity represents a degeneration in Christian development. Incarnation is truly anthropomorphic and thoroughly corporeal and what Christianity has ultimately done is to bring down the "Sacred Transcendent Perfect", the holy Other, God of the universe to the realms of imperfection and profanity. It has bound Him to the chains of imperfection and in effect crucified Him twice, once physically and once conceptually, devaluing Jesus' message and fashioning it anew. This is the utmost violence against God and against Semitic monotheistic consciousness that has ever been conceived.

(11) Incarnation theology is not paradoxical. It is thoroughly and utterly contradictory. Centuries of theological debate, difficulties, developments, controversies and political interferences attempting to pin down the true nature of Christ and his relationship to God are manifest indicators and clear proofs of the contradictory nature of this Christian doctrine, all inevitable and unavoidable given that Incarnational theology poses serious challenges to the human intellect and rational thinking. One has to violate all logical categories and rational axioms to accommodate Incarnational claims and to present them in intelligible forms and categories. These logical impasses can only be averted if one accepts the dictum that the Gospel of Jesus has more to do with God the Father and our relation to our neighbors than to the person of Jesus himself. The Gospel dictum of love your God and love your neighbor is the only way out of these theological nightmares. Without such frank and honest confession even the metaphorical interpretations of the Incarnation in its traditional garb would be misleading and incomprehensible.

(12) The compilation and canonization process of the New Testament was a long and convoluted affair. Spread out over centuries, covering many regions, persons and intentions etc., it naturally left a great many questions and impossibilities unresolved, calling into question the New Testament text being the inerrant word of God. Perjuries, insertions, textual violence and many other factors (as outlined in this study) raise serious questions as to the textual purity and historical authenticity of the New Testament. All these difficulties are currently well recognized by a majority of New Testament scholars. Given this as well as the lengthy canonization process (in itself a major proof of human intervention, manipulation and exploitation of the New Testament text) it is time to accept and highlight the human origins and nature of the New Testament writings.

(13) Unlike the Bible, the Qur'an was canonized from its inception. Its compilation process was not spread out over centuries but the small span of a few years and within the lifetime of its original recipients. The authenticity, purity and universality of its text is a historical fact admitted by both Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars and sources. Many questions and objections concerning various aspects of the Qur'an have been raised by many non-Muslim scholars over the centuries. Currently, there seems to be a sort of consensus among those who are actively involved in the field of Qur'anic studies that the unity, universality and purity of the Qur'anic text is indisputable – a historical

fact beyond doubt. Moreover, the Qur'anic challenge of producing a rival verse like that of the Qur'an still stands unmet after fourteen centuries, though efforts have been made. On the other hand, its claim of divine protection, preservation and purity of text, also made fourteen centuries ago, has not been violated. The textual purity, unity, integrity and universality of its text over these long centuries is witness to the fact of its divine status as the word of God.

(14) The Qur'anic God Paradigm is transcendental. Its monotheism is pure, strict and absolute. The Qur'an has a systematically well explained conception of God's transcendence, otherness, uniqueness and perfection. It is supported by countless Qur'anic verses and substantiated by a variety of methods and arguments. Unlike the Bible, it is safeguarded against possible violations (like the existence of other gods as true gods, their ability to harm or benefit without the leave of God, division of power, knowledge, or person or any other division within the Godhead etc.). Moreover, it is not a bare and abstract notion of transcendence but a balanced, vivid and live concept of God. The transcendent God is imminent by dint of His infinite knowledge, power, love, mercy and other positive attributes spelled out in the text of the Qur'an. Unlike the Bible, the Qur'anic Paradigm is consistent. There is only One Transcendent God who is absolutely perfect in His Names and Attributes. Though unknown in His essence, He is known through His signs, attributes, qualities and actions. The idea of such a transcendent God is consistently conveyed throughout the text of the Qur'an. Its strong ethical nature and egalitarian tone is also evident from the Qur'anic text itself. The Qur'an's ethical transcendental monotheism is systematic and self sufficient. The Qur'an does not need external help or arbitrary explanations to present, explain and safeguard its God Paradigm from possible violations.

(15) The Qur'anic God Paradigm is neither corporeal nor anthropomorphic. The few seemingly anthropomorphic expressions of the Qur'an readily render themselves to metaphorical interpretations, without invention of facts or metaphors not existent in the text itself. Such non-anthropomorphic explanations can be derived either from the context (or from within the Qur'anic text) or through metaphors commonly used in the language. This fact has been established by a great many Muslim scholars and theologians over the centuries. Additionally, these seemingly anthropomorphic phrases, if kept within Qur'anic parameters, help create a needed modality in the communication process between God and man. The Qur'anic Paradigm is able

to create this modality without recourse to graphic anthropomorphism or corporealism. Consequently Islam has been known for its strong anti-anthropomorphic stance, and except for the absolute literalists, mainstream Islamic thought has always shunned and rebuked corporeal and anthropomorphic depictions of God. This delicate balance is maintained by the well preserved text of the Qur'an itself.

It is my contention that in an age of intellect and scientific inquiry, an anthropomorphized God spells in fact the death of God. Although couched in dramatic terms the statement is rather a matter of fact one, and fortunately not entirely true. For it is the anthropomorphized God who has died but certainly not the monotheistic one. In my opinion the success of the secularist worldview largely resides in its apparent intellectual appeal when juxtaposed against a non-intellectual version of God, a God controlled by our five senses and one who constantly in the words of Nietzsche deserves our "pity." For any solution to the problem we have to admit that secularism is not the triumph of intellect over superstition but rather an indication of humanity's global alienation, its loss of the purpose and meaning of life, and its need for a transcendent God, something greater than man and the cosmos he lives in.

At the end of the Middle Ages, the Old World contained four major civilizations. Of these, three are now, in one measure or another, secularized. But in one of the four civilizations, the Islamic, the situation is altogether different. In the words of E. Gellner, "To say that secularization prevails in Islam is not contentious. It is simply false. Islam is as strong now as it was a century ago. In some ways, it is probably much stronger."⁴³ He attributes this stability and resisting power to its "emphatic and severe monotheism." Therefore, it can easily be contended that the Qur'anic God Paradigm has the potential to stand the ground against modern atheistic challenges and avert the dangers that have shaken other civilizations to the very core of their essence. The Qur'anic God Paradigm is systematic, moral and transcendental. It is logical as well as simple to the core. It focuses more upon human salvation, piety, and socio, political and economic reformation than on the person of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam or even God Himself. It is homocentric rather than being theo-centric. It is also truly universal in its nature and moral implications and does away with all possibilities of racial bias, notions of chosen race, promised lands and other possible narrow identities. Its intrinsic Divine unity guarantees a universal human unity.

Such a notion of God has been aspired to by all three Semitic traditions though the text of the Bible is not consistent concerning it. By emphasizing the non-corporeal and non-anthropomorphic elements in the Deity one would not do terrible injustice to these traditions. Quite the reverse, one would very much be within the aspired goals of these faith traditions. With the help of this simple yet magnificent conception of the Deity, the wide gulf between alienated man and God can be narrowed and science and faith can be brought closer if not together. This is not fanciful for modern science and philosophy seem to be opening up to belief in God. For instance Paul Charles William Davies (b. 1946), a physicist, cosmologist and astrobiologist working at Arizona State University, strongly argues against notions of the purposelessness and meaninglessness of the universe. Davies further observes that, "Although many metaphysical and theistic theories seem contrived and childish, they are not obviously more absurd than the belief that the universe exists, and exists in the form it does, reasonlessly... We are truly meant to be here."⁴⁴ Davies emphasizes the need to think of God in less anthropomorphic ways and not to have a naive image of God but perhaps think of God as transcendent "universal mind," "supreme holistic concept" "Being itself" or a "Creative Force" or as a "mathematician." He argues that only a God that transcends space-time and is above human manipulations can have any real meaning and relevance for the natural activity taking place all around us.

I am not saying that religion should follow a scientist's concept of God or that revelation be subordinate to science. Rather, what I want to emphasize is that a crude, anthropomorphic or corporeal notion of God is a great hurdle, standing resolute between modern intellectual thought and belief in God. It has at best weakened the authority of religion and God and at worst annihilated it. Human intellect is truly at a loss to digest or reconcile the idea of a man-God or a human looking God for what we worship cannot be within our purview but greater than the universe itself. Anthropomorphically corporeal concepts of the Divine are perhaps among the leading factors of modern atheism. This gulf between religious consciousness and intellectual thinking can be narrowed considerably by emphasizing and insisting upon the moral transcendent God.

The difficulty in believing today is not due to belief as such but rather a concept of God that is anthropomorphic and corporeal, which does not appeal to the intellect and which appears at once weak, without

strength, vigour or transcendence. Yet there is a solution. And that is the God of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an provides the authority, God, that people are looking for and can accept, couched in a language and underscored by a logic that allows for an immediate, complete and intelligent understanding of the Divine. As such it is the Qur'an which can contribute more than the Bible to a revival of global belief in a transcendent Deity and religion itself. Its focused stress on the absolute Oneness, Unity, Uniqueness and Transcendence of God, in its highest and purest sense, and its unequivocal rejection of anthropomorphic imagery and depictions of God averting the dangers of corporeal notions, is unparalleled, and speaks to the highest intellect as well as the most average mentality. It is also testament to the vigour of the Islamic faith which has indisputably withstood the twin onslaught of complex atheistic philosophy and widespread disbelief in the fundamentals of religion.

Nothing less will do than the reinstatement of God as Majestic, Unique, Alone, and One, the Creator and Ruler of the cosmos and all that it contains.

The Author

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Notes

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As secularism debates whether God is dead, the issue of anthropomorphism has become of immense importance. Shah addresses the Judeo-Christian worldview and how each has chosen to framework its encounter with God, to what extent this has been the result of actual scripture, the product of theological debate, church decrees of later centuries and absorption of Greek philosophy. He also examines *tawhid* and Islam's strictly anti-anthropomorphic stance. To Shah, anthropomorphic concepts and corporeal depictions of the Divine are perhaps among the leading factors of modern atheism. As such he ultimately draws the conclusion that the postmodern longing for God will not be quenched by pre-modern anthropomorphic concepts of the Divine which have simply brought God down to this cosmos, with a precise historical function and a specified location.

Khaled Abou El Fadl, Omar and Azmeralda Alfi Professor of Law, Chair of Islamic Studies Program, UCLA School of Law

I am in awe of Zulfiqar Shah's work! Every student of comparative religion, and every person of faith ought to read and reflect upon this book. I for one after completing this book, feel compelled to read it again. And this time with greater relish.

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Zulfiqar Ali Shah's study is an honest assessment of one of the most perplexing shadows of monotheism as it has expressed itself in the history of the three Abrahamic faiths. We must always refine our beliefs so that we are not ensnared in representing the unrepresentable and imaging the imageless by the fabrication of images that, literally speaking, are false. Rather than expanding the analogical imagination in envisioning transcendence, the spiritual demand of the hour, the epochal duty, is the need to overcome it.



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