

CHAPTER II

THE QUINTESSENCE OF ISLAM

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF *AL TAWHĪD*

There can be no doubt that the essence of Islamic civilization is Islam; or that the essence of Islam is *al tawhīd*, the act of affirming Allah (SWT) to be the One, the absolute, transcendent Creator, the Lord and Master of all that is.

These two fundamental premises are self-evident, not subject to doubt by those who belonged to Islamic civilization or participated in it. And only very recently have missionaries, orientalist and other enemies of Islam subjected them to doubt. However, it is for us, Muslims, self-evident. Islam, Islamic culture and Islamic civilization have a knowledge essence, namely, *al tawhīd*,¹ which is capable of analysis and description. Analysis of *al tawhīd* as essence, i.e., as the first determining principle of Islam, its culture and civilization, is the subject of this chapter.

Al tawhīd is that which gives Islamic civilization its identity, which binds all its constituents together and thus makes of them an integral, organic body which we call civilization. In binding disparate elements together, the essence of civilization in this case, *al tawhīd*—impresses them by its own mould. It recasts them so as to harmonize with and mutually support other elements. Without necessarily changing their natures, the essence transforms the elements making up a civilization, giving them their new character as constitutive of that civilization. The degree of transformation may vary from slight to radical. It is slight when it affects their form, and radical when it affects their function; for it is the latter that constitutes their relevance to the essence. That is why the Muslims developed the science of *‘ilm al tawhīd* and subsumed under it the disciplines of logic, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics.

¹ Ismā‘īl R. al Fārūqī, "Jawhar al Ḥadārah al Islāmīyah," *Al Muslim al Mu‘āṣir*, vol. 7, no. 27 (1901/1981), 1-27. This article was published along with "Critical Response" and "Response to the Response" in *Al Islām wa al Ḥadārah* (Riyadh: W.A.M.Y. Publications, 1401/1981), vol. 2, 583-668.

Allah (SWT) has said: "I have not created *jinn* and mankind except to serve Me ... And to every people We sent a prophet to convey to them that they ought to serve Allah and avoid *al ṭaghūt* ... Your Lord has decreed that you shall serve none but Him. Serve Allah and do not associate aught with Him ... Come, let me tell you what your Lord has forbidden you; namely, that you do not associate aught with him."²

These verses from the Holy Quran clearly indicate that the very purpose of man's creation is the service of God alone. Only God is worthy of worship; only He is worthy of service. His "Face," i.e., His sake, should be the end of human desire, of all human action. This is the whole essence of the message of our Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), which he could hardly express but in the words of God: "Come, let me tell you what your Lord has forbidden you; namely, that you do not associate with Him."³ That *al tawhīd* is the highest and most important commandment of God is evidenced by the fact of God's promise to forgive all sins but the violation of *al tawhīd*. "Allah will not forgive any associating of other gods with Him; but He will forgive the lesser sins to whomsoever He wills. Whoever associates aught with Allah, has perpetrated a very grave sin."⁴

Obviously, no commandment in Islam would hold without *al tawhīd*. The whole religion itself, man's obligation to serve God, to fulfill His commandments and observe His prohibitions would fall to the ground the moment *al tawhīd* is violated. For, to violate *al tawhīd* is to doubt that Allah (SWT) is the One and only God. But to do so means to assume that other beings may share His divinity. This cannot be done without

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ (الذاريات: ٥٦) وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا أَنِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ
وَأَجْنِبُوا الصُّلُوحَ ... (النحل: ٣٦) وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا يَاقَاهُ ... (الإسراء: ٢٣) وَأَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ
وَلَا تُشْرِكُوا بِهِ شَيْئًا ... (الباء: ٣٦) قُلْ تَكَلَّوْا أَنْتُمْ مَاحَرَمَ رَبِّكُمْ عَلَيْكُمْ إِلَّا تَضَرَّكُوا بِهِ
شَيْئًا ... (الأنعام: ١٥١)

² I have not created the *jinn* and humankind but to serve Me (51:56)... Unto every people We have sent a messenger to teach that service is due only to Allah, and that evil ought to be avoided (16:36)... Your Lord has prescribed that you shall serve none but Him (17:36)... Serve Allah and do not associate aught with Him (4:36)... Say [O Muhammad] to the people, "Come now, let me tell you what your Lord has prohibited; First, that you associate no god with Him" (6:151).

³ (6:151).

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَغْفِرُ أَنْ يُشْرَكَ بِهِ وَيَغْفِرُ مَا دُونَ ذَلِكَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَمَنْ يُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدْ افْتَرَىٰ إِثْمًا عَظِيمًا (الباء: ٤٨)

⁴ Allah does not forgive any ascription of associates to Him, but He forgives all other offenses to whomsoever He wills. Whoever, therefore, ascribes partners to Allah has committed a sin most heinous indeed (4:48).

doubting the obligatoriness of Allah's commandment. For if two or more gods were possible, it is logically necessary that one should seek an individual relation with his creation or his dependents; that one should rise above the other in mutual competition.⁵ Such gods would be of no avail to men unless one were to destroy or subjugate the others, for only then could he be the "ultimate" being the definition of "God" requires. Only an "ultimate" source could stand as the final good, the final authority, the final principle. Otherwise, the authority of a subservient god, of a god with whom there may be other gods, would stand always open to question. That is why Allah (SWT) said in the Quran: "If in them (heaven and earth) there were other gods than Allah, they would have fallen into chaos."⁶ Nature cannot obey two masters; it cannot operate in orderly manner and be the cosmos it is if there are two or more sources of authority, two or more ultimate movers.

Without *al tawhīd*, therefore, there can be no Islam. Certainly, not only the *sunnah* of our Prophet (SAAS) would be subject to doubt, and its imperatives shaken; the very institution of prophecy would fall to the ground. The same doubt which pertains to the plural gods would apply to their messages. To hold on to the principle of *al tawhīd* is therefore the cornerstone of all piety, of all religiosity, and all virtue. Naturally, Allah (SWT) and His Prophet (SAAS) have raised observance of *al tawhīd* to the highest status and made it the cause of the greatest merit and reward. He said: "Those who believed and mixed not their *īmān* (belief, faith) with injustice, to them belong security. They are the rightly guided,"⁷ Likewise, it was related by 'Ubādah ibn al Ṣāmit that the Prophet of Allah (SAAS) said: "Whoever witnesses that there is no god but Allah, alone, without associate, and that Muhammad is His ser-

مَا تَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِنْ وَلَدٍ وَمَا كَانَ مَعَهُ مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِذَا أَذْهَبَ كُلَّ إِلَهٍ مِمَّا خَلَقَ وَلَمْ يَلَعْظُمُهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ سُبْحَنَ اللَّهُ عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ (المزود: ٩١)

⁵ Allah never beget or adopted a son. Never did He have an associate. Otherwise, every god would have sought exclusive dominion over his part of creation as well as dominion over the others. But Allah is beyond all their descriptions (23:91).

لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَا آلَهِ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا فَسُبْحَنَ اللَّهُ رَبِّ الْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ (الأنبياء: ٢٢)

⁶ If there were other gods beside Allah, heaven and earth would collapse in disorder and chaos. Praised therefore be Allah, Lord of the Throne, Transcendent beyond all their descriptions of Him (21:22).

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ أُولَئِكَ لَهُمُ الْأَمْنُ وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ (الأنعام: ٨٢)

⁷ The rightly guided, who believe and do not vitiate their faith by committing injustice. Theirs is safety and guidance (6:82).

vant and apostle, that 'Īsā (Jesus) is the servant of Allah and His apostle, His command unto Mary and of His spirit, that Paradise and Hell are true, Allah would on that account enter him into Paradise." This *ḥadīth* was reported in both *Ṣaḥīḥ(s)* which also recorded the report of 'Itbān that the Prophet (SAAS) said: "Allah will not permit to be consigned to Hell anyone who witnesses 'There is no god but God,' seeking thereby nothing but Allah's face." The Prophet (SAAS) is also reported by Abū Sa'īd al Khudrīy as saying: "When Mūsā (Moses) asked Allah to teach him a prayer to recite whenever he remembered or called upon Him, Allah answered: "Say, O Mūsā, there is no god but Allah," Mūsā said: "O Lord, all your servants say these words." Allah said: "O Mūsā, if the seven heavens and all they hold, and the seven earths as well, if all these were weighed against this word of 'There is no god but Allah,' the latter would outweigh the former." It is also reported by al Tirmidhī that Anas heard the Prophet (SAAS) say: "Allah said: 'O man! Were you to come to Me with all the bags of the world full of your sins, but with the witnessing that you associate naught with Me, I would come to you with those bags full of mercy and forgiveness.'"⁸

It is no wonder therefore that the Muslim is definable by his adherence to *al tawḥīd* by his profession of its *shahādah*, by his observance of the absolute unicity and transcendence of Allah (SWT) as the ultimate principle of all creation, of all being and life, of all religion.

II. DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Being the youngest world religion and stemming from the same Semitic roots out of which Judaism and Christianity had previously emerged, Islam had to relate itself to these religions. It regards them as it did itself. They and it constitute successive moments of Semitic consciousness in its long march as the carrier of a divine mission on earth and hence as the vortex of human history. While it thus identified with Judaism and Christianity, Islam found fault with them and sought to correct their historical manifestations. The error most grievous to Semitic consciousness and hence least pardonable in the eye of God (Quran 4:47, 155) Islam identified as that of misconceiving the transcendence of God.

* Quoted by Shaykh Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al Wahhāb in his *Kitāb al Tawḥīd*. See: tr, by this author under same title (Kuwait: I.I.F.S.O., 1399/1979), 9.

Judaism and Christianity, it asserted, have made themselves guilty of it; not their primeval form, in the revelations they received from God, but in their historical form, in the texts they accepted as scripture and in their expressions of their faith for the instruction of men.

A. ISLAM'S CRITICISM OF JUDAISM

Islam charged Judaism with speaking of God in the plural *Elohim* throughout the Torah; with claiming that the *Elohim* married the daughters of men (Genesis 6:2-4); that Jacob and his wife stole "the gods" of Laban because they cherished them (Genesis 31:32); that God is a ghost whom Jacob beheld "face to face" and with whom he had wrestled and nearly defeated (Genesis 33:24-30); that God was the father of Jewish kings (Psalms 2:7; 89:26; II Samuel 7:14; I Chronicles 17:13, etc.); that God was father of their nation in a real sense (Hosea 1:10; Isaiah 9:6; 63:14-16) which does not become invalid even by their "a-whoring" after other gods (Hosea 2:2-13). Islam also charged that the relation Judaism claimed to bind God to "His 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 Semitic consciousness.

B. THE OFFENSE OF CHRISTIANITY

The offense of Christianity against transcendence was even greater. Islam charged Christianity with extending the nontranscendent concept to God's "fatherhood of the Jewish kings" to Jesus and giving it, besides its moral signification of compliance with God's commandments, the de-transcendentalizing ontological connotation of unity of substance between God and Jesus.⁹ Indeed, Christian catholicity defined itself with terms of this "substantial" identity of Jesus with God, as distinct from plurality of their "personalities." characters and consciousness. Obviously, the source of this new departure from transcendence of the divine being within the Semitic stream was not the Jewish inheritance of Christianity. This had given Christianity the concepts, not their connotation. Neither

⁹ H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 61, 68-69.

was gnosticism the source of that departure, whose argument "If he suffer, he was not God; if he was God, he did not suffer" was hurled against their fellow Christians in defence of transcendence.¹⁰ The source must be the non-Semitic influence of the "mystery religions." It was from this source that Christianity derived its "suffering God" who saves by dying and returning to life and whose *mana* (grace) is imparted to the communicant thought sacrament.¹¹

This anti-transcendence influence on Christianity at its formative stage was partly responsible for its success among non-Semitic peoples unfamiliar with the notion of God as "totally-other." It is equally responsible for the misinterpretation of innocent Hebrew and Aramaic concepts current among Jesus' contemporaries. *Barnash* or *bar-Adam* meant a well-bred and hence virtuous person. But it acquired in St. Paul a mysterious metaphysical dimension. Any righteous person could claim what Jesus did, namely, "I and my father (God) are one," in the sense of total compliance with God's will. Christians, however, took this to mean that Jesus claimed divine status. Whereas *Kurie*, *D. Kurios*, *Mar Mari* and *Maran* were among Semites attributable to anyone in authority, Christians took this attribution to Jesus by his Semitic disciples as their evidence of assuming him to be God. Finally, Christian theologians, taking all these elements for granted, searched the Hebrew scripture for evidence of plural divinity. With typical intellectual clumsiness, Augustine, Tertullian and many others thought they found in the plural pronouns of Genesis, "Let *us* create man according to *our* image" (Genesis: 1:28) the evidence for three persons in the deity! This has remained a Christian "argument" to the present day held by such a notable thinker as Karl Barth. Indeed, Barth shamelessly claimed that maleness and femaleness were intrinsic to the divine nature because Genesis had reported immediately after the above-mentioned statement, "Male and female created He them" (Genesis 1:28). Since the former statement ends with the word "image," he thought, the latter statement must be an apposition to the term and hence indicating maleness and femaleness as constitutive of the divine image!¹² Christians have committed themselves to divine non-transcendence so resolutely that it had become with them an *idée fixe*, enabling Paul Tillich to declare *sub specie eternitatis* that the transcendent God is unknown and

¹⁰ Couched in this form, the argument is known as "the Arian Syllogism." See Bettenson, 56.

¹¹ G. Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), 156-57.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* tr. G.W. Bromley and T.F. Torrence (London: T. & T. Clark, 1960), III, part 1, 190ff.

unknowable unless He is concretized in an object of nature and history.¹³

Since this was the state of "God's transcendence" in Christianity, the language expressing it was equally improper. Although Christians never ceased to claim that God is transcendent, they spoke of Him as a real man who walked on earth and did all things men do, including the suffering of the agonies of death. Of course, according to them, Jesus was both man and God. They never took a consistent position on Jesus' humanity or divinity with accusation of apostasy and heresy. That is why their language is always confusing, at best. When pinned down, every Christian will have to admit that his God is both transcendent and immanent. But his claim of transcendence is *ipso facto* devoid of grounds. To maintain the contrary, one has to give up the laws of logic. But Christianity was prepared to go to this length too. It raised paradox above self-evident truth and vested it with the status of an epistemological principle. But under such principle, anything can be asserted and discussion becomes idle. The Christian may not claim that the trinity is a way of talking about God; because if the trinity discloses the nature of God better than unity, a greater plurality would do the job better. At any rate, to reduce the "Holy Trinity" to a status of *in percipi* is heretical as it denies *una substantia* as metaphysical doctrine.

III. DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE IN ISLAM

A world of difference separates Islam from Judaism and Christianity on this question.

Islam declares the transcendence of God to be everybody's business. It asserts that God has created all humans capable of knowing Him in His transcendence. This is an innate endowment, a *fitrah* (*sensus communis*, the state of nature in which every man is born) which all humans share.¹⁴ Its nature is that of a faculty with which humans recognize divine ultimacy, unity and transcendence. Islam thus tolerates no discrimination *à la hindoue* between humans who may contemplate the Absolute in its transcendence and those who may perceive Him only through other

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), vol 2, 40.

¹⁴ Rudolph Otto came close to the Islamic position when he affirmed that all men are endowed with a faculty – which he names *sensus communis*, borrowing an expression of Immanuel Kant – which enables them to perceive the Holy in His mysterious of numinous existence, as well as in His might and moving appeal or fascination. See his *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), chap. 5.

gods or idols. Since recognition of divine transcendence is something innate to humanity and hence necessary, Islam attributes all departures from that norm to nature and history. Forgetfulness, mental laziness, passion and vested interest, Islam explains, are the causes of such and continue from generation to generation.

This is the first assertion of the Islamic creed that "There is no god but God," which the Muslim understands as denial of any associates to God in His rulership and judgeship of the universe, as well as a denial of the possibility for any creature to represent, personify or in any way express the divine Being. The Quran says of God that "He is the Creator of heaven and earth Who creates by commanding the creature to be and it is ... He is the One God, the ultimate ... (2:117, 163). There is no God but He, ever-living, ever-active (3:2). May He be glorified beyond any description! (6:100) ... No sense may perceive Him (6:103) ... Praised be He, the Transcendent Who greatly transcends all claims and reports about Him (17:43)." In fulfillment of this view, the Muslims have been all too careful never to associate in any manner possible, any image or thing with the presence of the divine, or with their consciousness of the divine; and in their speech and writing about the divine to use only Quranic language, terms and expressions which, according to them, God has used about Himself in the Quranic revelation.

A. TRANSCENDENCE IN ART

The association of things and sensory images with God was meticulously avoided by Muslims at all times and places. Never has any Muslim mosque contained any object associated with divinity. The mosque has always been an empty building. Its walls and ceiling would be decorated either with verses from the Quran or with abstract arabesques. The latter were designs made of stylized stalk, leaf and flower, deliberately denaturalized and symmetrically repeated to dispel any suggestion of the creaturely natural as vehicle of expression for the divine. The arabesque could also consist of geometrical figures which by their very geometrical nature bespoke the denial of nature as expressive of the divine. The arabesque was expansive by nature, to suggest an infinite field of vision to which the interlacing of its figures propelled the imagination *ad infinitum*. It generated an "idea of reason" — the infinite continuation of itself — and demanded the imagination to produce the con-

tinuation beyond the given wall, panel, facade or floor plan. The imagination failed to produce the infinite continuation every time it was asked by an arabesque to do so; and, in the process, gave the subject an aesthetic intuition of infinity, a facet of transcendence.

All the arts of Islam developed in fulfillment of divine transcendence acting as supreme principle of esthetics. All Islamic arts developed stylization as denaturalization; all were nondevelopmental and nonfigurative; and all did their best to transubstantiate the natural forces of gravity and cohesion, the natural elements of mass, space and light, of water and color, of melody and rhythm, of physiognomy and perceptive – in short of everything natural and creaturely, into floating, air-suspended patterns suggestive of infinity. To my knowledge, transcendence in the fine art of Islam has known no exception worthy of consideration.¹⁵

B. TRANSCENDENCE IN LANGUAGE

Transcendence in language was equally well maintained by Muslims around the globe, speaking all sorts of languages and dialects and belonging to all sorts of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This was the objective of the Quranic dicta, "We (God) have revealed it an Arabic Quran" (12:2; 20:113)... We have sent it (the revelation) down an Arabic judgement (13:39); "We have revealed it in the Arabic tongue" (39:28; 41:3; 42:7; 43:3); "It is We Who shall collect it. We Who shall explain it" (75:16-19). Abiding by these dicta, Muslims treated only the Arabic original as the Quran and regarded the translations as mere aids to understanding it, not as text. Liturgical use of the Quran could be made only in Arabic. *Al ṣalāh*, the institutionalized worship, kept the form it was given it by the Prophet (SAAS) on divine instruction. Moreover, the Quran gradually molded the consciousness of the non-Arab speaking converts and furnished the categories under which religious matters could be thought out and religious feelings could be expressed. Any God-talk by Muslims became exclusively Quran-talk, one adhering scrupulously to the Arabic categories of the Quran, and to its Arabic terms, its Arabic literary forms and expressions.

How did the Quran express transcendence? It gave 99 or more names for God expressing His Lordship of the world, and His Providence in

¹⁵ Ismā'īl R. al Fārūqī. "Islam and Art," *Studia Islamica*, Fasc. xxxvii, 81-109.

it; but it emphasized that "Nothing is like unto Him" (42:11). Anything belonging to His realm or associated with it like His words, His time, His light, etc.—the Quran described as something to which empirical categories cannot apply. "If all trees were pens and all seas were ink with which to record God's speech," (31:27); it asserted, "they would be exhausted before God's speech runs out" (18:109); "A day with God is like a thousand years of man's" (22:47); "The light of God is that of heaven and earth. Its likeness is the light of a lamp whose glass is a celestial star, whose fuel is from a blessed olive tree that is neither of the East nor of the West, incandescent without fire ..." (24:35). Thus, empirical language—figures and relations from the world are used; but with the unmistakable denial that they apply to God *simpliciter*.

In time, some non-Arabic speaking Muslims fell into the error of anthropomorphism as they attempted to achieve a more intimate acquaintance with Quranic teaching. Coming from religions where anthropomorphic representation of the deity was common, it was difficult for these new Muslims to shake off their anthropomorphic habit of mind. The Mu'tazilah rose to the defence of transcendence, and argued that the divine attributes had to be taken allegorically, not literally. In their enthusiasm, the Mu'tazilah asserted that God would not be visible to the righteous even in Paradise. The Quranic passage promising the same (75:22) was to be allegorically interpreted so as to nullify the apparent lexicographic meaning of the terms. The Muslim masses feared that any legitimization of allegorical interpretation would inescapably reduce the term as such, as well as of its lexicographic meanings; that once the lexicographic anchoring of terms is lifted, nothing is left to moor the meanings down and prevent them from floating downstream indiscriminately. That is the very risk that Judaism and Christianity had taken under the pressure of Hellenization, and as a result of which both suffered radical transformations.¹⁶

The task of articulating this fear fell to al Ash'arī (died 322 A.H./935 A.C.) who began his career as a Mu'tazilah member and then rebelled against them. The divine attribute, he said, is neither God, nor not God. *Al tashbīh* (anthropomorphism) is false; and so is *al ta'zīl* (neutralization of the attributes through allegorical interpretation of them). The former is contradictory to transcendence; the latter, to the fact of the

¹⁶ See the debate of this author with Maurice Wiles, Regius Professor of Theology at Oxford University, on the subject of the expression of divine transcendence in language, in "World Faiths," *Journal of the World Congress of Faiths*, no. 107, (Spring 1979), 2-19.

Quran's predication of the attributes to God, which is tantamount to denying the revelation itself. The solution of the dilemma, he reasoned, was first, in accepting the revealed text as it is, i.e., as one whose meaning is anchored in the lexicography of its terms; and second, in rejecting the question, "How the commonsense meaning is predicable to the transcendent being" as illegitimate. This process, he called *bilā kayf* (without how).¹⁷

Obviously, al Ash'arī meant to say that anthropomorphism is inevitable if the question of the how of predication of the attribute is raised in the expectation of an answer similar to that analyzing the relation of the predicate to subject in the empirical world. Since the subject and predicate are transcendent, the question itself is invalid. Obviously too, al Ash'arī meant that once the lexicographic meaning of the predicate is acknowledged and understood and then denied, it acts as a springboard for the mind to create a new modality for the predication in question, other than the empirical. But no new modality is possible. Therefore, the mind perceives the impossibility of empirical predication while the understanding is still anchored to the lexicographic meaning of the term. The imagination is thus compelled to produce the needed modality once the denial of empirical predication and transcendence both are upheld. In this suspense, an intuition of transcendence is obtained, not unlike that of infinity and sensory inexpressibility engendered by the arabesque. The lexicographic meaning of the term serves as anchor while the imagination soars in search of an applicable modality of the meaning in question, a modality that is impossible to reach. Indeed, the Quran likens the word of God to "a tree whose roots are firm in the earth, and whose branches are infinite and unreachable in the skies above" (14:24).

C. THE PRESERVATION OF ARABIC

The total preservation of the Arabic language with all the categories of understanding imbedded therein and its continuous use by the millions to the present day, eliminated most of the hermeneutical problems confronting the modern reader of the fourteen-centuries-old revelation. The

¹⁷ Abū al Ḥasan al Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al Islāmīyīn* (Cairo: Maktabat al Nahḍah al Miṣriyah, 1371/1954), vol. 1, 224-229. See also the discussion of al Ash'arī's views on the divine attributes in Muḥammad 'Abd al Karīm al Shahrastānī, *Al Milāl wa al Niḥāl* (Cairo: Al Azhar Press, 1328/1910), 149 ff.

application of Quranic directives to the ever-changing affairs of life will always be new; and so would the translation of its general principles into concrete prescriptive legislation speaking to contemporary tasks and problems. This, Islamic jurisprudence always recognized. But the meaning of the terms of revelation, the categories under which those meanings are to be understood, are certainly realizable today exactly as they were for the Prophet (SAAS) and his contemporaries fourteen centuries ago. The latter, not the former, is the problem of expressing transcendence. Understanding the meanings of the Quran as the Prophet (SAAS) had understood them is the assumption of the application, or misapplication, of those meanings to contemporary problems.

The capacity of any student to understand the revelation today exactly as it was understood on the day it was revealed, is indeed a "miracle" of the history of ideas. It cannot be explained by the distinction of "disclosive" and "creative" functions of the language. The former suggests an esoteric level of meaning which is disclosed to the initiates only, and by means of exegesis; and the latter, a fabricative role whose product is not distinguishable from the constructs of pure fiction. Moreover, the "creative" function is not immune against the charges of relativism and subjectivism which render impossible any claim on behalf of Christianity and Islam as such, and treats all claims as personal and dated. The Muslim-Christian dialogue offers little reward if all it can purport itself to be is a dialogue between two persons, not two religions.

That language changes so that it is never the same is not necessary. Arabic has not changed, though its repertory of root words has expanded a little to meet new developments. The essence of the language—which is its grammatical structure, its conjugation of verbs and nouns, its categories for relating facts and ideas, and the forms of its literary beauty—has not changed at all. The Heraclitean claim that everything changes and is never the same is a fallacy, because there must be something permanent if change is to be change at all and not the skeptic's "stream of the manyfold." Far more safe and accurate in the definition of language were the Muslim linguists who recognized in language one and only one function, namely, the purely descriptive. Characteristically, they defined eloquence as "descriptive precision." The terrain of lexicography thus became for them sacrosanct—"God Himself taught Adam the names of things" (2:31); and they laboriously produced for the Arabic language of the Quran the most complete lexicographic dictionaries of any language. Creativity, they ascribed to the human mind,

where it properly belongs; and, in pursuit of more precision, they defend it as the capacity to discover and place under the full light of consciousness, aspects of reality which escape the less creative or capable, but which genius captures. The more precise the description of such apprehended reality, the more eloquent and beautiful it is, as well as more didactic and instructive. Language — in this case Arabic — thus remained an ordered and public discipline, open to inspection, capable of accurate judgement, and compelling whoever has the requisite intelligence say to the good author or critic, "Yes! That's just it!" It was natural that the Islamic revelation would do all this. For without it, considering the transformations the revelations of Moses, Zoroaster, the Buddha and Jesus had gone through as their original languages were lost, forgotten, or "changed," the transcendent God Himself would be a poor student of the history of religions!

IV. ISLAM'S SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION TO WORLD CULTURE

The essence of religious experience in Islam is *al tawhīd*; that is, the recognition that there is no God but God (*lā ilāh illā Allāh*). What is distinctly Islamic — and hence novel — in *al tawhīd* is the negative aspect of its statement. That no being of whom godhead is predicated is God except God, strikes Jewish, Christian and pre-Islamic Arab notions of associating other beings with God. The gods of Arabia represented in stone and wood, to whom worshippers addressed praise, thanks, and whom they appeased with divination and sacrifice, relegated Allah (SWT) to the position of a *deus otiosus*. Christian trinitarianism postulated three persons in the deity each of whom is fully God, and asserted that God had become human, thus violating both the divine unity and the transcendence, or absolute otherness, of God. Judaism addressed God in the numerical plural *Elohim*, and described *Elohim* as engaging in sexual intercourse with the daughters of men, thus violating God's unicity as well as His transcendence. Moreover, by calling Ezra, the Jewish kings, and the Jews at large, "son" or "sons" of God, and by calling God the Jews' "father," to whom they are related in ways other than those of any other creature, Judaism compounded its compromise of the transcendence of the divine being *vis-à-vis* the One to Whom everything is equally a creature *ex nihilo*, not a generated progeny. Apparently, the redactors

of the Old Testament sought thereby to assert the superiority of the Hebrew race over all other races. Through *al tawhīd*, therefore, Islam sought to purge religion absolutely clean of the godhead. Thereby, it accomplished a double purpose: that of acknowledging God as sole Creator of the universe, and that of equalizing all men as creatures of God, endowed with the same essential qualities of creaturely humanity, with the same cosmic status.

By its brief statement, *lā ilāh illā Allāh*, *al tawhīd* expresses on the axiological level three novel meanings. The first is that the creation is the material in which the absolute, as divine will, is to be actualized. Every component of creation is therefore good, and creation is not only the best of all possible worlds; it is flawless and perfect.¹⁸ Indeed, creation filled with value by man through moral vision and action is itself the divine purpose of creation.¹⁹ Consequently, enjoyment of its elemental or utilitarian values is innocent;²⁰ a value-full world is a monument to God, whose preservation and enhancement are acts of praise and worship on the part of man. As an instrument for the realization of the absolute, every object in creation is invested with higher, cosmic value. *Per contra*, Christianity had deprecated the world as "flesh," mankind as *massa peccata* (fallen creature), and space-time as that in which the

الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ... (السجدة: ٧) ... مَا تَرَىٰ فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِن تَفَوتٍ فَإِذْ جَمِيعُ الْبَصَرِ هَلْ تَرَىٰ
مِن قُطُوبِهِم مَّتَاجِعَ الْبَصَرِ كَذَّبِيكَ الْبَصَرَ خَاسِتًا وَهُوَ حَسِيرٌ (المالك: ٣-٤)

¹⁸ It is Allah Who created everything and did so perfectly (32:7)... There is no flaw in Allah's creation. Look into it once, twice and more for any discrepancy or shortcoming. You will find none. Your quizzical sight will return to you humbled but convinced [of the perfection of Allah's creation] (67:3-4).

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لِّمَن يَسْلُوهُرُ أَفَنَهُم أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا (الكهف: ٧) الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ
أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا... (المالك: ٢)

¹⁹ We have created what is on earth as ornament, an enjoyment to you, that We may test who among them are best in conduct. (18:7)... He created life and death that you may prove yourselves worthy in your deeds (67:2).

يَبْنَیْءَ آدَمَ خُذُوا زِينَتَكُمْ عِندَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا وَلَا تُسْرِفُوا إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفِينَ قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي
أَخْرَجَ لِيَابَادِهِمُ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ قُلْ هِيَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا خَالِصَةً يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ... (الأعراف: ٣١-٣٢)

²⁰ O Sons of Adam! Put on your best ornaments when you go out to the mosque [for a communal prayer or function]. Eat and drink [of Allah's bounty], but do not go to excess. Allah does not love those who do so. Say: [O Muhammad], who prohibited the ornaments [the delicacies, beautiful things] which Allah provided for His servants? Say, Such belong in this very world to those who believe. And they will enjoy it once more in purity in the other world (7:31-32).

realization of the absolute is forever impossible.²¹

The second is that man stands in no predicament out of which he cannot pull himself. That man's road is full of obstacles, that he is inclined to lose himself in egocentrism, or to take the easier path of lazy hedonism and euphoria, are facts. But they are no more factual than their opposites. Man therefore needs no savior, no Messiah and no salvation; but, rather, to apply himself to his cosmic duty and to measure his worth in direct proportion to his achievement. Against Christianity, Islam therefore taught that spirituality—i.e., pursuit of the divine will without disturbance of the ontological poise of creation, without deflection of the causal threads of nature on all levels of space-time, in short, without politics and economics—is false and futile pretension. It called men to felicity rather than salvation, and promised them rewards in this world and the hereafter directly proportionate to their deeds.

The third novel meaning *al tawhīd* expresses on the axiological level is that since the good to be realized is the divine will, and since the divine will, because of its creatorliness is the same for all creatures as all of them must fall under its ought-to-be, there can be no discrimination between places or men as objects of moral action. This meaning was adequately assured by Jesus and the apostolic fathers; but it was hardly observed by their Christian followers, thus necessitating a fresh restatement for their benefit. Judaism, on the other hand, has persistently denied it on principle and has always taught the opposite. That there can be no discrimination between points of space-time as foci of centrifugal political action, thus none between men as subjects of moral action, thus making the moral life necessarily universalistic and societistic at the same time, was a novel discovery unknown and unpracticed when the Islamic movement was born.

All this seems to fall within the perspective of the Semitic religious tradition. From a wider, world-perspective, Islam constituted a genuine breakthrough from the fixation into which the world had fallen, divided as it was between Indian religiosity and Hellenic religiosity. Indian religiosity maintained that the universe was itself the absolute (Brahman), not in its ideal form, but in an objectified, individuated and particularized form which it condemned. Objectification and materialization of the absolute spirit, Brahman, is an undesirable event. Hence, salvation was conceived of as escape from the religious/moral imperative. The realm of objectification (creation) was regarded as evil, while the realm of the

²¹ St. Augustine, "De Diversi Quaestionibus," *Ad Simplicianum*, i.g., 1:4 and 10.

absolute (Brahman, Nirvana), was praised as bliss and *sumмум bonum* (the plenum of values, the sublime). Under this view cultivation of the world, i.e., procreation, mobilization for food production, education, rendering the world into a garden and making history, are definitely evil because they spread, intensify or prolong the state of objectification. Evidently the only morality which harmonizes with this view is individualistic and world-denying. Judaism and Theravada Buddhism remained true to this essential vision of the Upanishads. Hinduism accepted the vision for the endowed elite. It propounded a popular religiosity in which the castes look forward to release from their travails only in the after-life, while continuing to labor in their appointed stations in this life with no little amount of joy and complacent satisfaction that they are fulfilling the purpose of their existence. Likewise Mahayana Buddhism kept this vision as a background and constructed its religiosity out of native Chinese worldly morality; and appointed Bodhisattvas (human ancestors apotheosized into saviors) to redeem men from the afflictions of existence.

Combining elements of Egyptian and Greek religions, of Mithraism and Near Eastern mystery cults, Hellenism engulfed the Semitic movement of Jesus which sought to reform the legalism and ethnocentrism of Judaism. Hence, the Greco-Egyptian element which identified God with the world was retained but modified and diluted in the doctrine of the incarnation which made God become man and enabled man to associate himself with divinity. Hence too, the resentment of the downtrodden of the empire, Gnostic aversion to matter and the world, and the redemptionist hope of Mithraism and Judaism, all combined to give historical Christianity its judgement of creation as fallen, of the world as temporary evil, of state and society as the devil's handiwork, and of the moral life as individualist and world-denying.

It was a refreshing clarification that Islam achieved. It put aside both claims of India and Egypt which identified the absolute with the world, the Creator with the creature, whether to the advantage of the creature as in Egypt and ancient Greece, or to that of the "creator" as in India. It reaffirmed the ancient Mesopotamian vision of the utter desperateness of Creator and creature, and of man as servant in the manor of God. Benefitting from history, Islam's reaffirmation was to be a crystallization of this ancient Mesopotamian wisdom as well.²²

²² Ismā'īl R. al Fārūqī, *Historical Atlas of the Religions of the World* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1974), "The Ancient Near East," chaps. 1, 2 and 3.