

Endorsements

BINYAMIN ABRAHAMOV

Professor, Department of Arabic, Bar Ilan University

Erudite, showing impressive mastery of the various sources used, very vast, comprehensive and promising academic discussions of the conclusions drawn.

MUMTAZ AHMAD

President, International Islamic University, Islamabad

This is arguably one of the most important works in recent years on the study of anthropomorphism and transcendence in the comparative perspectives of the Bible and the Qur'an. Zulfiqar Ali Shah has written a truly scholarly, and yet accessible book that opens up new avenues of research in comparative religion and invites both scholars and religious leaders to reconsider the theological formulations that lie at the center of the line that separates the idea of absolute monotheism from that of anthropomorphism. Closely argued and lucidly written, this book will surely provide a rewarding reading experience to both scholars and lay educated readers.

IHSAN BAGBY

Associate Professor, University of Kentucky

A well-researched and thought-provoking work that masterfully surveys the thinking of theologians and philosophers in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim tradition on the issue of anthropomorphism. There is much here for all people to learn and ponder.

CHARLES E. BUTTERWORTH

Professor Emeritus, Department of Government and Politics, University of Maryland

Zulfiqar Ali Shah has read widely, very widely, in seeking to understand Hebrew Scriptures and their Christian counterparts. His reading leads him at times to fault both sets of Scriptures rather than their followers – a position that is surely in tension with the teaching of the Qur'an and that will intrigue the adherents of all three revealed traditions. The boldness of the exposition as well as its vast scope will challenge many a reader and provide fruitful material for all those interested in the comparative study of religion. These features, combined with Ali Shah's clear and lucid prose and the over-all appealing manner in which the book has been prepared, make it one to be examined and pondered.

CHARLES L. COHEN

Director, Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The growing recognition that the fullest appreciation of Jewish and Christian theological discourses requires setting them in dialogue with Islam as well as with each other is an extremely important and relatively recent development. By examining classic Jewish, Christian, and

Islamic sources concerning God's unity and transcendence, Zulfiqar Ali Shah makes a major contribution to both debates about anthropomorphic depictions of God within the Abrahamic religions, and, by virtue of his comparative method, to the larger "trialogue" itself. This work presents a worthy challenge to scholars and theologians of all three traditions.

FREDERICK MATHEWSON DENNY

Emeritus Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Colorado, Boulder

Zulfiqar Ali Shah's comprehensive, penetrating and masterly study of anthropomorphism across the landscape of Abrahamic traditions is a must-read for students and professional scholars, as well as all readers dedicated to constructively balancing the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of life.

JOHN L. ESPOSITO

University Professor and Professor of Islamic Studies, Georgetown University

[This work] is a masterful, thought-provoking, and insightful study by Zulfiqar Ali Shah of anthropomorphism in the conceptions of God in the Bible and the Qur'an that will be welcomed by scholars and students and all who are interested in the Abrahamic traditions.

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! His exposition on anthropomorphism and transcendence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is not only learned, rigorous, and erudite, but also profound and inspiring. 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.

WILLIAM A. GRAHAM

Dean of The Faculty of Divinity, Harvard Divinity School, John Lord O'Brian Professor of Divinity, and Murray A. Albertson Professor of Middle Eastern Studies (Faculty of Arts And Sciences)

Zulfiqar Ali Shah's book is an extensive undertaking that is encyclopedic in its scope and ambitious in its aims. Although written with a view to demonstrating the relative superiority of the Qur'anic and Muslim understanding of the transcendent God, the book's lengthy treatments of corresponding biblical, Jewish, and Christian understandings seem largely fair, balanced and thorough. Scholars dealing with concepts of God in the three traditions will have to come to terms with this work in the future.

STEWART GUTHRIE

Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, Fordham University

The book as a whole is scholarly, engages a topic of great interest to scholars of religion, and is very well written. The opening chapter, 'Anthropomorphism: Background, Criticism, and Defining Categories', is an excellent compendium on the nature of anthropomorphism together with an excellent introduction (detailed in later chapters) to its manifestation in particular religions, primarily the Abrahamic ones. As a locus of these two related but distinct accomplishments, the chapter is one of the best I know.

YVONNE HADDAD

Professor of the History of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding

An important and timely contribution on a topic that has engaged participants in interfaith polemics as well as dialogue for centuries.

SHEIKH HAMZA YUSUF HANSON

Founder, Zaytuna College, CA

This is an extremely important topic and critical to the understanding of Western faiths and the current crisis of disbelief. Idolatry is the great sin of Judaism and Islam, and yet many of the greatest theologians have missed the idolatry of the very conception of God as mental image. The image of God that a mind holds is invariably idolatrous; hence this subject is an essential one for anyone today who takes God seriously, whether an atheist or theist. The atheist because the god he imagines he doesn't believe in probably doesn't exist, and the theist because the God he believes in through some mental image probably doesn't exist either.

JOHN HICK

Emeritus Professor, University of Birmingham, UK and the Claremont Graduate University, California

Anthropomorphism in our scriptures is a very important question for Christians as well as for Muslims and Jews, and we must all be grateful for this thoroughly researched and clearly written new treatment of the subject. I am glad to be able to recommend it.

SHERMAN A. JACKSON

King Faisal Chair of Islamic Thought and Culture, The University of Southern California

This book takes in a wide range of sources, scholars and issues, all of which stood at the very core of theological debate in pre-modern Islam and continue, albeit in attenuated form, to animate theological thinking and discussions among Muslims today. Ali Shah pulls no punches in this text, stating his positions clearly and directing his critique with unfailing candor. This, alongside the wealth of information it provides, is almost certain to gain this book a wide readership and to spawn serious, constructive and seminal debate.

JOHN KELSAY

Distinguished Research Scholar (Religion), Florida State University, Tallahassee

I am glad to see Zulfiqar Ali Shah's comparative study of anthropomorphism and transcendence in print. The topic is an important one, and readers willing to invest the time will find the analysis challenging. One need not agree with the author's conclusions regarding the relative superiority of Islam on this matter in order to appreciate his contributions. The book is a welcome addition to conversations in comparative religious thought.

DANIEL C. MAGUIRE

Professor, Marquette University

Zulfiqar Ali Shah has written a masterly book that proves that true scholarship can foster dialogue, not by shying from differences, but by facing them squarely and clarifying them. He does this with a passion for fairness and objectivity that is exemplary.

DONALD W. MITCHELL

Professor of Philosophy, Purdue University. Editor CLARITAS, Journal of Dialogue and Culture

This book is an extremely important contribution to the comparative study of the attribution of anthropomorphic qualities and characteristics to God in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an as well as later thought in all three Abrahamic traditions. The encyclopedic scope of this book reflects the impressive breadth and depth of the author's scholarship. Deserving special attention is the author's comprehensive treatment of Islam's theological safeguarding of the unity and transcendence of God that is clarifying, engaging and challenging. Therefore, this comprehensive and sympathetic work adds a significant and welcome voice to both scholarship and interfaith dialogue.

EBRAHIM MOOSA

Professor of Religion and Islamic Studies, Department of Religion, Duke University, Durham, NC

This study on anthropomorphism and transcendence in the Bible and the Qur'an is a timely intervention in an ongoing theological conversation. It comes at a time when both understanding between Christians and Muslims holds promise while misunderstanding between these communities threatens global peace. This book is a tour de force and relevant to students of Islam and comparative religion. The author has painstakingly and intelligently excavated the archives of religious thought in order to render, to make available insights that show how each tradition is distinct as well as similar. A must read for the contemporary student of theology.

JACOB NEUSNER

*Distinguished Service Professor of The History and Theology of Judaism
Senior Fellow, Institute of Advanced Theology Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York*

The chapter on Judaism is well researched and solid.

IRFAN A. OMAR

Associate Professor, Department of Theology, Marquette University

This book is based on meticulous research and presents a comparative view of the three monotheistic traditions focusing on "anthropomorphism" and "transcendence" in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. It is unique in its undertaking as it attempts to address the subject matter in light of contemporary debates about God while remaining attentive to the hermeneutical as well as theological perspectives that underlie those debates. The author utilizes all the available scholarly methodologies and approaches and more; the end result is a re-examination and reframing of key issues to help the modern reader navigate through them with relative ease. It is a welcome addition to the growing library of works that seek to discover paths of convergence and divergence within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage.

ANDREW RIPPIN

Former Dean of Humanities, Professor of Islamic History, Specialist in the Qur'an and the History of Its Interpretation, University of Victoria, British Columbia

Clearly the result of many years of reading, reflection and writing, Scripture and God in the Judeo Christian and Islamic Traditions goes to the heart of theological reflections on the nature of God. By elucidating the differences and the similarities in the way God is conceived, Zulfiqar Ali Shah has produced a perceptive study from which readers will benefit greatly.

Extensively documented and lucidly written, the book provides a stimulating summary of theological articulations and controversies ranging from ancient times down to the present day.

ABDULLAH SAEED

The Sultan of Oman Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, and Director of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies and Asia Institute, University of Melbourne

A major contribution to our understanding of anthropomorphic conceptions of God in the Abrahamic traditions. The author's mastery of the material, his depth of analysis and his ability to ask hard questions and skillful addressing of them are evident throughout the work. A must read for students of Islamic thought.

OMID SAFI

Professor of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina

This is a powerful study, simultaneously an analysis and a devastating critique of anthropomorphism in Abrahamic traditions. The author, a pious and observant Muslim, moves through Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in arguing for the devastating consequence of an anthropomorphized understanding of God for the contemporary world.

CAROLINE SEYMOUR-JORN

Associate Professor, Comparative Literature Program, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

This exploration of anthropomorphism in Jewish, Christian and Muslim scriptures is well researched and clearly expounded. This study provides a useful historical synopsis of anthropological, sociological and philosophical understandings of religion, and of the various religious concepts of transcendence and immanence of God. While I differ with some of Ali Shah's overarching conclusions, I find that this text generates a fascinating comparison of the three Abrahamic scriptural traditions with regard to conceptions and descriptions of deity. Moreover, it is clearly written and accessible, and thus it will therefore be of great interest to both students and scholars of comparative religions.

MUZAMMIL H. SIDDIQI

Chairman, Fiqh Council of North America

This is an extremely important work. The author brings out very clearly what unites Islam with its other Abrahamic traditions, namely, Judaism and Christianity and what sets it apart. Monotheism (*Tawhid*) is the hallmark of Islam and in a unique way it brings home the point that God (Allah) is neither an abstract reality nor an anthropomorphic being. "There is nothing like unto Him and He is All Hearing and All Seeing" (Qur'an 42:11) We are thankful to Ali Shah for presenting his thesis with careful research and high standard of scholarship.

THE MOST REVEREND RICHARD J. SKLBA

Vicar General/Auxiliary Bishop of Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Rarely has the precise point of debate between Islam and Christianity been so carefully and extensively articulated. Ali Shah has studied the classic Christian theological sources of Scripture and the early Church Councils in order to sharpen his comprehension of the key areas for mutual understanding and radical disagreement between these two major world religious traditions. This is a profound work. His thesis is simply that Christianity's conviction regarding Jesus the Christ as incarnate Logos, divine Person and perfect Image of the Father renders

the God of Christianity as essentially corporeal. It remains a conclusion which in his judgment cannot be logically overcome, even though Catholic Christianity has long struggled with its tension between the final triumph of the Risen Christ, the sacramental system of God at work in the world and the apophatic approach of the holy mystics. Shah's work now awaits a similar study of equal erudition from the Christian perspective in order to bring the points of legitimate disagreement, especially in areas of Christology, to the table of fruitful theological interreligious dialogue.

JANE I. SMITH

Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs, Harvard Divinity School

A valuable contribution to the comparative study of the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Zulfiqar Ali Shah has shed important light on the influence of text on respective believers' perception of God.

TAMARA SONN

Kenan Professor of Humanities, Department of Religious Studies, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg. Editor-in-Chief, Oxford Bibliographies Online: Islamic Studies. Co-Editor-in-Chief, Religion Compass

Zulfiqar Ali Shah's study provides profound insight into Muslim perceptions of divine transcendence. While anthropomorphism is inevitable in human efforts to describe the divine, Shah maintains that the Qur'an's explicit insistence on divine incomparability protects Muslims from excesses in this regard. His conclusion that Islam's relatively greater emphasis on divine transcendence precludes as well the alienation he observes in the secular West provides a worthy challenge for Jews and Christians.

MERLIN SWARTZ

Professor Emeritus of Religion (Islamic Studies), Boston University

Despite differences with Z. A. Shah on certain matters of detail, he has performed a remarkable service to the scholarly community by his in-depth and fair-minded examination of anthropomorphic conceptions of God in the Bible and the Qur'an. I applaud his efforts and commend his impressive work to the world of scholarship for serious study and reflection.

ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University

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. The author painstakingly examines the anthropomorphic depictions of God in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptural traditions. He correctly notes that at the textual level the Qur'an is the most consistently and severely anti-anthropomorphic, upholding a more rigorous notion of divine transcendence. Beyond the historical value of this book as an exegetical work of comparative religion, it can be read as an important theological composition. The tension between a God who is wholly other and thus resistant to any human characterization, on one hand, and the basic psychological need on the part of human beings to portray God anthropomorphically, on the other hand, continues to be at the heart of religious faith and devotion. God may be without image, but in the absence of image it is hard to imagine how to worship God. In that respect, if monotheism is to persist as a vibrant force, there must always be an idolatrous element expressed in the anthropomorphic representation of the deity. And yet precisely

because this is so, 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. Zulfiqar Ali Shah's book has contributed significantly to this conversation.

MARK E. WORKMAN

Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of North Florida

Zulfiqar Ali Shah's monumental work, reflects equally the deep erudition and profound humanity of its author. It is a work that beneficially could be read by people of all faiths, who will discover in this rich text not only what makes certain faiths distinct from one another, but just as importantly, what it is that binds people of different faiths together in their common quest for absolute meaning and purpose.

JOHN VOLL

Professor of Islamic History and Associate Director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University

In a time when inter-faith relations are of great global significance, this volume provides an important analysis of shared visions and diversities of views held by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I hope this book is widely read.

PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

ZULFIQAR ALI SHAH'S *Anthropomorphic Depictions of God: The Concept of God in Judaic, Christian and Islamic Traditions* is an extensive and meticulous exposition of the issues of anthropomorphism and corporealism (the description of God in human terms or form) in the three Abrahamic Faiths, 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.

Throughout history Christianity and Judaism have tried to make sense of God, accepting anthropomorphic images (whether verbal or physical) of the Divine, yet disagreeing as to what these mean, whilst at the same time attempting to save the transcendent God from notions of corporeality and anthropomorphism. The author addresses the worldview of both faiths, and fundamentally how each has chosen to framework its own understanding of, and encounter with, God – how each views God's personality and nature – and how much of this has been the result of scripture and how much supplemental additions of later theological debate, absorption of Hellenistic philosophy, and church decrees of later centuries.

Muslims too have historically debated the few mildly anthropomorphic expressions contained in the Qur'an, albeit strictly confining discourse to issues of metaphorical versus literal interpretation, whilst simultaneously taking an unequivocal anti-anthropomorphic stance to safeguard Islam's concept of a unique, transcendent and monotheistic God. The author examines in great detail Islamic theological discourse on the Ninety-Nine Names of God and what these have meant in relation to God's essence and attributes, situating this analysis in its

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proper historical setting. He also explains the importance and impact of *Surah al-Ikhlās* (Qur'an 112) and its maxim "there is none like unto Him [God]" as setting the benchmark for pure monotheism and *tawhid* and governing all aspects of debate.

As secularism and modern philosophy debate whether God is dead, the issue of anthropomorphism, in the author's opinion, has become of immense importance, primarily because he connects this directly to the decline of religion and belief in God in the first instance, and the general degeneration of spiritual thinking in the second. Religion to modern man, now simply reduced to the question of whether God exists or not, has become largely irrelevant, forgetting that religion's primary goal was to solve the problem of meaning in this life and answer questions relating to life after death, and not to satisfy man's immediate needs. It is the contention of this book that a crude, anthropomorphic or corporeal notion of God is partly to blame, standing resolute between modern intellectual thought and belief in God, and that at best this has weakened the authority of God and religion and at worst annihilated it in favor of a more meaningless view of existence.

Seeking God is an intellectual as much as it is a spiritual exercise, although the term intellectual would sound strange to modern ears. Past civilizations sought God, whether in the heavens, in nature, or in themselves. Whatever the case there was an acute understanding that the business of life was to prepare for death, and it is this search which at length led to varying depictions of God in anthropomorphic terms. The question of whether the attribution of qualities and characteristics elevated or degraded mankind's final perception of the Transcendent Being, depended on the nature or complexity of the anthropomorphism(s) involved. The ultimate rendering one could argue found meaning in the desire to bring God within reach of our own selves, on this earthly plane, defining the framework of man's own understanding of Him and how He was to be worshipped.

Eventually, the historical and seemingly irresistible progression of anthropomorphism was to reach a pinnacle of sorts, interestingly in Christianity, culminating in the veneration of a triune deity, a God walking alive amongst humanity and encompassing man's own field of vision.

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Islam differed markedly. The Qur'an categorically denies any ascription to God of human tendencies, bridging the gap between man and the divine whilst simultaneously maintaining God's transcendence, otherliness, and Oneness. Man could 'know' God through worship and communication, through His names and attributes, and through following His messenger, in a way that would allow an intensely close and personal relationship with the Deity without compromising transcendence. God was certainly not 'unknowable' because of His uniqueness as some critics of Islam would have it. God in other words was not perceived through outer form but spiritual realization of an infinite Reality.

The intellectual strength of Islamic theology was remarkable. Fuelled by the simple idea of "there is none like unto Him [God]" and ever on guard against opening the door to *shirk* (associating partners with God), the centuries that followed witnessed theologians entering into complex and lengthy debate, not only with scholars of other faiths but also Hellenistic philosophers, countering the many convoluted questions raised with regards to the nature and even appearance of God. Despite minor expressions of anthropomorphism contained in the Qur'an (i.e. God's hand, face) and the various clashes which resulted, primarily over as to how these were to be interpreted by Muslims, Islamic exegesis and discourse remained historically and heavily anti-anthropomorphic.

This study analyzes in great detail many of these issues to ultimately chart the reasons why an almost unfettered anthropomorphism was able, even allowed, to develop in rabbinic thought and church Christologies, within essentially a transcendent conception of the Deity, to gain in due course general acceptance and authority. The author has made great efforts to treat Judaic, Christian, and Islamic literature systematically in this careful investigation and as such evidence is not only taken from many scriptural passages but also sources authored by members of each faith as well as respected critics. The issue of anthropomorphism is surveyed thoroughly and dispassionately through the lense of each tradition to give readers a clear understanding of the scriptural, theological, political, historical, and philosophical issues involved, and the significance of later developments in thought down the centuries: broadly summed up as the often heated tug-of-war between an essentially anthropomorphic versus the return to a more purely transcendent

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concept of the Divine. What we are left with is a work of remarkable value, significantly increasing our own understanding of current and historical complexities and controversies, surrounding this vital issue which after all addresses the key question of "who to worship?" and the impact of which is felt today.

Written in a clear and lucid style, the book will benefit both general and specialist readers alike, increasing their awareness of the question of anthropomorphism and corporealism as well as the God paradigm of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

This study is being published to widen discourse, invite scholars to respond, and hopefully pave the way for further research. Since it deals with some critical and difficult issues, doubtless readers may agree with some of the issues raised, and disagree with others, but it is hoped that for the most part both general and specialist readers will benefit from the perspective offered and the overall issues examined in the book.

Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the author.

The IIIT, established in 1981, has served as a major center to facilitate serious scholarly efforts based on Islamic vision, values and principles. The Institute's programs of research, seminars and conferences during the last thirty years have resulted in the publication of more than four hundred titles in English and Arabic, many of which have been translated into other major languages.

We express our thanks and gratitude to the author for his cooperation throughout the various stages of production. We would also like to thank the editorial and production team at the IIIT London Office and all those who were directly or indirectly involved in the completion of this book including, Shiraz Khan, Dr. Maryam Mahmood, Tahira Hadi, and Salma Mirza. May God reward them for all their efforts.

IIIT LONDON OFFICE
Safar 1433 AH / January 2012 CE

FOREWORD

I AM VERY GLAD TO WRITE a foreword to this quite brilliant study of Anthropomorphism and Transcendence in the Bible and Qur'an. For seven years I was privileged to work closely with Zulfiqar Ali Shah as supervisor of the doctoral thesis on which this book is based. Both I, and colleagues who shared with me in the task of supervision were deeply impressed by the thoroughness of Dr. Shah's research and the range of scholarship covered. All three examiners spoke in the highest terms of his thesis and I am delighted that it will now be available to other scholars.

The book contains a thorough overview of Jewish understandings of the authority and significance of the Torah and of the later writings which make up the Hebrew Bible. It covers both Orthodox and Reformed perspectives and ranges across the centuries.

Christian understandings of the New Testament are treated with equal care and the book contains a careful study of the development of Christian doctrine leading up to the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon as well as exploring modern attempts to reinterpret the classical doctrinal statements.

The Qur'an is equally thoroughly discussed as one would expect from a person who not only learned to recite it by heart as a child, but who has subsequently gone on to academic work in Islamic and Religious Studies in Pakistan, Britain and the USA.

The great virtue of this book is that it is fair to each of the traditions that it covers. All claims made are carefully documented both by reference to the original sources and to academic debates about them. A powerful case is made that belief in the unity and transcendence of God is better safeguarded in the Qur'anic tradition than in the earlier scriptures where an anthropomorphic understanding of God is often presented in the Hebrew Bible and in traditional understandings of Christology.

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As a Christian theologian I would wish to argue that within contemporary Christianity anthropomorphism is often criticized and that appeal can also be made to apophatic, mystical and analogical interpretations of classical doctrines which seek to avoid anthropomorphic understandings. However, I have to acknowledge that Zulfiqar Ali Shah succeeds in showing that this is not the most natural reading of the scriptures themselves nor the most natural understanding of the Christological doctrines derived from them.

This is a challenging book which Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scholars will all benefit from reading.

THE REV. DR. PAUL BADHAM

*Professor of Theology and Religious Studies
University of Wales, Lampeter*

PREFACE

IN RESPONSE TO THE CREATION STORY found in the Bible someone once quipped, “God created humans in his image and then humans turned around and returned the favor.” That there is great truth in this aphorism is well demonstrated by Dr. Zulfiqar Ali Shah’s magisterial study of the tendencies toward anthropomorphism and transcendence in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theological traditions. Encyclopedic in scope and fastidious in its documentation, Dr. Shah has produced a definitive work that thoroughly and comprehensively engages the human tendency to on the one hand conceive of a God who is transcendent, omnipotent, and wholly other than humans, but on the other to portray this God using all means of anthropomorphic attribution. From the God of the biblical Old Testament who walks, talks, and expresses a full range of human emotions to the Christian assertion that God was incarnated in human form to the theological struggles between the Mu‘tazilites and Ash‘arites, the difficulty of talking about a transcendent deity in anything other than anthropomorphic terms has been a central issue for all three Abrahamic faiths.

But this is more than just a theological conundrum. The ability (and even the necessity) to anthropomorphize God has too often gone beyond the mere attempt to talk about God and has instead led to a disturbing tendency to enlist God in support of human agendas and prejudices, and this latter with ethically disastrous results. The very human God of the Old Testament who favors one nation over all others authorizes the wanton slaughter of the indigenous Canaanites under the leadership of Joshua in history’s first-recorded genocide simply because the Canaanites happen to be living on land God had promised to his chosen people, a paradigm that plays out again in early American history as largely Christian European colonialists begin making an appeal to the biblical conquest narrative as a

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source of divine authorization to remove the indigenous inhabitants of North America from the new “promised land” in the doctrine known as Manifest Destiny. Of course, recent history should not be ignored in this regard as God has become enlisted as the pre-eminent supporter of an aggressive U.S. foreign policy designed to extend western hegemony over many parts of the world – not the least of which are the oil-rich lands of the Middle East – via the deployment of “shock and awe” military campaigns. And in some cases those reacting to the effects of these policies (though they undoubtedly have legitimate grievances) have enlisted God in support of spectacular displays of violence. These examples could be multiplied many times over but the problem is clear. When one talks about God in human terms it is all-too-easy to enlist God in support of human concerns.

So while it may not be possible to engage in meaningful God-talk without resorting to anthropomorphic categories, we must try to resist the tendency to fully reduce God to human form and thereby invert the divine/human relationship by “recreating God in our image.” Interestingly, the Islamic tradition might do this the best with its overt rejection of Christian incarnational theology – perhaps the supreme example of anthropomorphism – and Islam’s emphasis on utter human submission to the will of an overarching divine unity. It appears to me that one of the motivating factors behind Islamic thinking is the attempt to restore the divine/human relationship to its proper structure – humans living according to the divine plan, not God supporting human agendas.

I recently heard a Methodist pastor preach a sermon on a day that was being celebrated as Trinity Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar. Preaching such a sermon was a difficult prospect for this pastor because she is an avowedly non-Trinitarian Christian. Feeling compelled, however, to address the doctrine of the Trinity, she said that she interpreted the trinitarian concept to be nothing more than an assertion of God’s greatness and magnitude, that God is more than or greater than what can be conceived in a single concept. After the service I approached her and with tongue in cheek congratulated her on having become a Muslim. Shocked at my comment, she replied, “What did I say?!” I responded that her metaphorical rather than literal understanding of the meaning of the Trinity was not very different from the Muslim assertion of *Allahu akbar* (God is greater than...). As she thought about this she seemed rather willing

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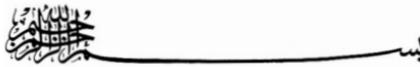
to accept a Muslim (if not Muslim) identity. More importantly, she understood the inherent problem with conceiving of God too much within human terms.

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 allow this to motivate us to work to restore the divine/human relationship to its proper place. This will not happen without first understanding how we got to where we are today. Dr. Shah has done us all a great service by providing us with the most comprehensive history ever written on the development of the tension between anthropomorphism and transcendence in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. We will be well served by knowing this rich, complex, and fascinating history as we struggle to move forward toward a brighter future.

ROBERT F. SHEDINGER

*Associate Professor of Religion
Luther College, Decorah, IA*

INTRODUCTION



THIS BOOK IS THE CULMINATION of a long and complex journey, full of the twists and turns that make up the narrative of life. I was born into a conservative Muslim family in which the words Allah (SWT),* Muhammad (SAAS)** and the Qur'an were highly revered and held deeply sacred. Pushed to memorize the Arabic text of the Qur'an at a young age, without incidentally understanding a word of it, it increasingly seemed to me by the time I reached middle school, that the words Allah, Qur'an, and Muhammad were an impediment to my fun, and gradually a clear sense of resentment began to present itself in my mind. These frustrations became compounded as I entered my teen years and the passions of youth began to assert themselves. I felt that Allah was too intrusive, Muhammad rather invasive, and that Islamic manners were a hindrance to my freedom and autonomy.

College afforded the freedom I so deeply longed for. But, just as every action has an equal and opposite reaction, so it was in my case, as this new found freedom caused the pendulum of religion to swing during these heady college years firmly in the other direction. At this time I had somehow fallen into the habit of watching western movies, which opened a whole new horizon for me, and not surprisingly levels of fascination with the Western world and its civilization and values, grew swiftly. And just as the fragmented Muslim society of Pakistan, I surmised, was the product of Islamic religion, likewise, I reasoned, Western civilization must have been the product of

* (SWT) – *Subhanahu wa Ta'ala*: May He be praised and may His transcendence be affirmed. Said when referring to God.

** (SAAS) – *Salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*. May the peace and blessings of God be upon him. Said whenever the name of Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.

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Christianity and Judaism. This new found love and sheer appreciation for Western civilization brought me exuberantly to the doors of the only Catholic Church that stood on the college premises. There I met its gentle priest who presented me with a copy of the Holy Bible and offered the ‘Jesus solution’ as the ticket to salvation and Paradise. Now, the Bible was quite different from the Qur’an both in its language, style and exhortations and to me it felt more like a storybook with real people, genealogies, dates, places and history. More importantly, there was a sense of continuity, consistency and completeness *vis-à-vis* some of the prophetic stories it presented, quite familiar to me as a Muslim. Where I had been ruffled by what I perceived to be missing links, lack of historical and geographical details and continuity in the Qur’anic accounts, the Bible seemed to have filled the vacuum very well.

Then things took an interesting turn. During one of his surprise visits to my lodgings, my father happened to see a copy of the Bible lying innocuously in my room and was appalled. He began to insist that I learn the Qur’an before exploring the Bible further and enlisted the help of some family friends to try and make of me a conscious rather than a traditional Muslim. These individuals were more open than my parents to questions, discourse and debate, and the gist of their discussions revolved around the fact that Islam was the only true religion, the sole gateway to salvation and Paradise, that Christianity and Judaism were considered corrupted faiths due to the historical corruptions of their scripture, and that Christianity had utterly compromised the monotheistic legacy of the prophets by introducing a Trinitarian fallacy etc. Furthermore, how could God they very logically reasoned, be said to have a “Son” when He did not beget? How could He save humanity when He was unable to save His own “Son” from Jewish and Roman persecution? How could someone remain in the womb of their mother for nine months, be given birth to, eat, drink, have normal human needs and yet still be called God Almighty? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Jesus, they pointed out, were not Jewish or Christian but in reality Muslim prophets; and Islam was the only faith which God had ever revealed since the creation of Adam.

This level of debate and these forceful questions brought me to the pragmatic question of what Islam truly entails. During the discussions it appeared that for some, Islam largely revolved around acts of worship such as the five daily prayers, fasting, alms giving, Hajj, whilst for others the focus

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was more upon regulations such as dress codes, dietary laws, social norms, customs and values. It also seemed to me that there existed no single agreed upon definition of what Islam truly was and that in its many facets it represented everything that life had to offer but, one could not quite put one's finger on, or pinpoint exactly to, what it was. Islam I surmised was different things to different people. One of the less assertive teachers described it as the divine guidance regulating human relationships. To him, Islam denoted a voluntary submission to the commandments of Allah, the Wise, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Merciful Creator and Compassionate God, for the sake of peace in this world and eternal happiness in the life to come. He focused more upon the moral values Islam sought to inculcate, such as honesty, truthfulness, trustworthiness etc. as well as social values which it sought to promote, such as caring for and about others, fair dealing, human equality, safeguarding one's sexuality etc. moving Islam away from the realm of outward observance such as performance of the daily prayers, Qur'anic recitation, dress code or dietary restrictions to something more inwardly sacred. He summed up his differences with the others by stating that the essence of the Islamic faith was essentially human interaction, how one treated the other. Put simply treat others the way you wish to be treated. This was the overarching goal with the rest of Islamic teachings subservient to it. His seemingly benign statement startled everybody. Was Pakistan an Islamic country then? Without hesitation he declared that Pakistan was a Muslim country but not an Islamic country. Islam and Muslims were two different animals. Pakistan, he observed, needed implementation of the Islamic Shari'ah to become an Islamic state. Further, he argued, the inherited man-made laws of the old colonial empire and the modern West were the real sources of Pakistan's internal fiasco. The Qur'an if we followed it would guarantee prosperity, as well as economic, social, political and legal justice. To others his interpretation of Islam carried political overtones.

The college pre-med program was exhausting. My frustrations were intensified by the complete absence of Muslim names from the course books assigned for the various scientific disciplines under study including chemistry, biology and physics. It seemed to indicate that Muslims had made little or no contributions to modern science and technology. My curiosity about this scholarly void was often met with supernatural, spiritual, moral, epistemological and, at times, absurd answers. The golden era of the Islamic

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civilization was overemphasized. Or, rather strangely, it was argued that Islam was a religion of eternity, and it was more important to focus upon eternal salvation rather than the material gains of this temporal existence, Western faiths and civilization had fallen into the trap of becoming too materialistic achieving material success at the price of the hereafter etc. This seemed like a hollow excuse to me for there was too much talk about the grave and what would happen six foot under while the most pressing issues and problems of this earthly existence were conveniently being ignored. No convincing answer was given *vis-à-vis* lack of scientific development, technology, political stability and institutionalization, in Pakistan in particular and the Muslim world in general. I was introduced to a college professor of Islamic Studies to pacify my concerns.

The professor was adamant about Islam's superiority over other faiths/religions. He informed me that Muslims had ruled two thirds of the then known world for thirteen consecutive centuries. The Islamic caliphate had continued from 632 CE to 1923, when the Ottoman Caliphate, the longest continuous dynasty in human history, was formally abolished by Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk). During its golden age and at the height of its power, the Muslim world had made incredible strides in scientific knowledge and achievement and indeed all forms of knowledge, whilst pre-Renaissance Europe remained mired in fragmented city states in what was termed the dark ages. In fact, not only had Islam as a faith come as an empire but it had also come as the great herald of knowledge; a knowledge which the world had not experienced before, and which gave new life to Greek scholarship. Other extant faiths had failed in this regard. Ironically it was only when humanistic secularism held sway in Europe and after the Islamic catalyst had swept into the continent did the West develop the knowledge and expertise for which it is the envy of the world today. Whereas, it was only when Muslims had turned away from their faith, failing to abide by the teachings of the Qur'an did their era of backwardness and decline begin to take shape. So I learned that Muslims had been connoisseurs of geo-politics, law, science, philosophy and many other fields for centuries, whilst at the same time Christian Europe had been paralyzed in the quagmire of internal strife and the anti-science stance of Church dogmatism. Today's modern scientific, political and social progress was largely the result of Renaissance thought and the Enlightenment rather than Judeo-Christian religious traditions.

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Renaissance thinkers were more liberals than traditional Christians and were in turn influenced by the medieval Muslim scientists and philosophers of the Islamic world, scholarly giants such as Ibn Sina, al-Tusi, Ibn Rushd and al-Farabi. During medieval times, I was amazed to learn, Arabic had in fact been the lingua franca of science, medicine and philosophy. Scientific Arabic manuscripts had been translated into Latin and English all the way to 17th century England. Further, the majority of the American Founding Fathers such as George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson had been against traditional Christianity. They denied Jesus' divinity, did not believe in the Trinity, refused biblical inerrancy, disapproved of Church hierarchy and also questioned traditional Christian political concepts such as submission to the authorities as a religious duty. They envisioned a non-Christian, non-religious liberal United States of America with a complete wall standing between the Church and State. Many of the Founding Fathers were influenced by Roger Bacon, John Locke, Robert Boyle and other English thinkers who in turn were influenced by Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Tufayl, al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd.

I came to the conclusion that the present decline of Muslims had not been due to Islam but rather their betrayal of it and that Islam cannot play second fiddle in our lives but requires sincere devotion. One of the symptoms of this decline has been the intellectual bankruptcy of Muslims as encapsulated by a centuries long stagnation in Muslim critical thinking. For far too long now the faith's religious leadership has sought to punish thinking outside of the box, without regard for the serious socio-political consequences which have resulted. Further, analytical reasoning has been replaced by mere imitation; the Shari'ah has been used as a form of control rather than a force for justice, to coerce people into socio-political conformity; and there has been a complete disconnection between the original Islamic legacy and modern Muslim institutions. Such is the state of affairs that ironically it is Muslims who now require a Renaissance/Reformation of their own reversing the present day decline, and it is the Qur'an which miraculously transformed seventh century desert Bedouins into harbingers of empire, which has the potential to bring this about. Unlike earlier and other scriptures it has remained unchanged for the last fourteen centuries. I realized that if Muslims adhered sincerely to the teachings of the Qur'an and the Qur'anic principle of using reason, then Allah would support them just as He had done so in the past.

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Going back to my meeting with the Catholic priest it was interesting to note that he held an altogether different assessment of the situation. He regarded the success of the West as largely being due to Christian faith and values, while Muslim failure was seen to have been the result of the backward teachings of the Qur'an. It seemed to echo socio-political and economic realities. Further, I was told that the Christian God was a loving deity, loving enough to die for the sins of mankind, while Allah was a wrathful God, enough to punish people for small mistakes. The priest's message was a simple, easy and attractive one: accept the trinity and believe that Jesus as the Son of God died for your sins, and you will receive salvation and be saved for eternity. The Christian road to Paradise seemed a lot easier than the Islamic one! I was perplexed for years. For further exploration of the subject, I joined the International Islamic University in Islamabad, a newly established institution whose patron was the then (now late) President of Pakistan, General M. Ziaul Haq.

The University had a diverse international faculty with specializations ranging from Qur'anic Exegesis, Hadith Sciences, theology, philosophy, comparative religions, law, Arabic language and much more. The higher level World Religions courses, led to theological discussions and term papers which brought old memories of the Catholic priest to the surface. I now perceived that Christian theology and views on salvation were not that simple or as straightforward as I had originally imagined. For a start, the historical aspects of Christian scripture and Christian dogma were fairly complex and convoluted. The triune conception of the Deity, the Chalcedonian formula of Jesus being a perfect man and a perfect God, the two nature theories of Jesus, the simultaneously Almighty Creator and mercifully crucified Jesus, all such fundamental Christian concepts now appeared utterly confusing. In stark contrast, the history of Islamic scripture and the Islamic God paradigm seemed simple, straightforward and logical. Had the priest oversimplified Christian theology, or had the course book authors missed the mark? Were the Muslim professors showing bias concerning Christian and Jewish theological discourses? A sense of objectivity, my appreciation for Western civilization, and a respect for the gentle priest demanded that I find out for myself. I decided to take a different route i.e. through understanding Christianity from believing Christians rather than outsiders. I established contact with the leadership of an influential Church in Islamabad.

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This priest was far more educated, articulate and daring. To him, the Church came before the scriptures, selecting the very books of the Christian New Testament. One would be at a loss, he stated, to understand, comprehend or truly believe the scriptures without the help of the Church, its traditions and teachings. Further, important terms such as the “trinity”, “Divine Person or Persons” and the “Divine Substance” were not scriptural terminologies. They had been introduced to Christian thought by the Church Councils in conformity with the spirit of the scriptures. There were three co-equal, co-eternal, autonomous “Persons” in the Godhead but, God was One. Likewise, acceptance of Jesus was a precondition to understanding the Christian mysteries such as the Trinity, divine persons and nature, as well as the necessary corollaries to it.

These lengthy and contorted commentaries left me confused and impatient. How could I believe in something so incomprehensible I asked? God was unknowable, mysterious and arcane, replied the priest. Why did the Old Testament not mention Jesus’ incarnation or the triune God even once? The answer was labyrinthine. The Old Testament addressed Jesus with the title “Lord”; the Trinity was meant whenever God used the plural “us” i.e. “Let us make man” etc.; God the Father was transcendent; it was God the Son who appeared to Abraham, who ate and drank, who wrestled with Jacob, rested and was refreshed, incidents the Old Testament mentions in relation to God. The theophanous and anthropomorphic passages of the Old Testament were proofs of Jesus’ incarnation. And, the Old Testament “I AM” statements were proofs of Jesus’ divinity. His crucifixion and resurrection proved that Jesus was God Almighty. Jesus reconciled humanity with God. He paid with his blood for our sins. The theological complexities were compounding with every additional question, discussion and meeting that was held.

Islamabad was host to an annual book fair which drew people from all over. There I came across a group of missionaries, mostly physicians from the USA. They were Protestants with a visible preference for the scriptures over the Church. Their God consisted of the three independent “Persons”, each one of them equally and eternally God, the three autonomous modes of existence, consciousness and will united in the essence. It seemed as if there were three equal gods and the Godhead was an aggregate of them. One of them differed with the others and insisted that it was the same one God

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coming in different modes: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The variety of their biblical interpretations regarding the Christian God paradigm was quite obvious. The Bible was the inerrant Word of God to some, inspired not inerrant to others and divinely inspired but culturally conditioned to the few. Such an obvious difference of opinion regarding the fundamental doctrinal issues, among an otherwise congenial group of missionaries, was truly amazing. Consult the theologians and not the preachers, was their sincere advice to me. The group graciously put me in touch with a Protestant theologian.

During my Master's at IIUI, I concentrated mostly upon the comparative study of Jewish, Christian and Islamic theology. The program also exposed me to some international conferences on world religions. I was lucky to meet with Professor Houston Smith and Professor Ninian Smart during one of these conferences in Rome. My theological instincts were enthusiastically encouraged and appreciated by Professor Smith. As a competent teacher, he simplified for me many complicated theological concepts in a matter of a few hours. To my surprise, he was quite uncomfortable about traditional Christian theology especially in its incarnation garb and hesitated delving deeply into it. He proved to be a Christian without conventional Christianity, and further promised to help me with admission to some leading theological programs in the US; with his recommendations, I obtained acceptance letters from Harvard Divinity School, Pennsylvania University's Religious Studies program and some other schools.

Meanwhile I had joined IIUI's Comparative Religions department as a full time lecturer. The university's study leave formalities for a new employee were quite stringent. While in the final preparations of my intended travel, I was suddenly involved in a life threatening car accident. The impact of a head on collision left me paralyzed from the neck down with multiple injuries all over my body. Unable to move any part of my body except the head I was left wondering about my destiny. The long months of complete helplessness, sheer dependence upon others and a sense of total despair brought me face to face with the ultimate questions I had hitherto shrugged off. What was this life all about? Where did I come from? What was the purpose of my existence? Who was directing my life affairs? Where was I headed to? What was true happiness?

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Mostly staring at the roof in a lonely hospital room, I was left to ponder upon these painful realities. Many worthy and unworthy thoughts crossed my mind during these long tiring months. Why would Allah, the Most Merciful and Compassionate, strike me with such a dismantling blow? How could I beseech Him to give me another chance by curing me of this disability? The doctors had already indicated that my spinal cord injury could be life threatening. Was it a result of me not searching for the true God? Could Jesus be the true God and save me at this difficult juncture of my life? Whom should I call to? God the Father whom Jesus cried to on the Cross or Jesus himself? What could the Holy Spirit do for me now? There were times when these mere thoughts bothered me a great deal. I felt that I was committing *shirk* by associating partners with the One and Only Allah, the true Master.

This was also a time of deep reflection upon the realities of life. What about my degrees, accounts, articles and everything else that I had cared so much about? Were they of any use to me now? All the modern theories of the origins of religion and God, discussions on atheism, agnosticism, relativism, pragmatism and skepticism etc. at once became utterly irrelevant. Suddenly the issue of life after death became of great interest. I sincerely promised to myself and God that I would truly search for the meanings if given the chance.

After almost two years of a slow but miraculous recovery I was finally able to stand up and walk. In spite of some health challenges, my life started getting back to normal. By now the TOEFL and GRE scores, university admissions and visa papers were outmoded. I applied to Saint David's University College, University of Wales, mostly because of its strong theology program and teaching opportunities. The academic environment at the University of Wales was quite different to that of the academic institutes in Pakistan, with a different teaching methodology, research tools, approaches and processes. There was openness, boldness, fairness and objectivity. Further, faith as such was in a more dramatic climate of suspicion, attacks and bewilderment than initially envisaged. It was clear that organized Christianity had become visibly weakened while the traditional notions of God were fast disappearing. The God Who was very much with me, was radically absent from the society at large, at least so it seemed to me. The gulf between the sacred and the profane was quite wide. The dichotomous bifurcation of faith and reality and a personal sense of loss and alienation were

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quite apparent. After the initial cultural shock and a few months' work with an advisor, I transferred my work to a Professor Paul Badham, an accomplished author and a renowned Christian theologian. This scholarly soul made it clear to me from the outset that objectivity (not subjectivity) would be the ruling standard. No claims were to be made without proper documentation and substantiation. Scholarly Jewish and Christian sources were to be depended upon while addressing issues connected with these traditions, and respectable Western sources were to be explored while discussing matters related to the Qur'an and its God paradigm. This methodology was essential to shun any possibility of suspicions of bias, prejudice and bigotry. This was what the sensitive nature of the subject demanded. Professor John Kelsay of Florida State University, a profuse author and an expert on Islam, was requested to co-supervise the thesis which he readily accepted. I was extremely pleased that Professor Ian Richard Netton, Head of the Department of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Leeds, chaired the viva committee as the external examiner. Professor Netton, originally of Jewish origins, was a prolific writer on a variety of Islamic subjects such as philosophy, theology, Sufism, Arabic and Islamic bibliography, comparative textuality and semiotics. It added a great deal to the validity and significance of my work.

This book is the result of seven long years of research, discussions, debates and friendly fire engagements. In the first chapter I discuss the problems of atheism, skepticism and anthropomorphism, give an account of the historical background and define the relevant categories. The second chapter traces issues related to the authenticity, authority, textual purity and validity of the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian Old Testament. It continues by exploring the transcendental and anthropomorphic tendencies contained within the text of the Hebrew Bible with some significant discussions of the same in Rabbinic theology. The third chapter explores some of the crucial points related to the origins, compilation, canonization, authority, authenticity, reliability and textual purity of the New Testament. The crux of the chapter deals with the multiple Christologies which exist, i.e., the New Testament theologies and their historical development. It culminates in some contemporary traditional as well as liberal interpretations of Christology. The fourth chapter delves into several significant and controversial matters connected with the historical authenticity, authority and purity of

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the Qur'anic text. It culminates in an excursion into the transcendental and anthropomorphic tendencies in the Qur'an. It also explores some of the main Islamic sects in relation to their anthropomorphic, literal or metaphorical dispositions. The book ends with a conclusion and bibliography.

It is my fervent wish that this study generates positive scholastic and general debate and dialogue between followers of the three Semitic traditions. These traditions enjoy many commonalities with some fundamental distinctions. These distinctions represent the variety of perspectives, historical contexts, cultural settings and realities which they have faced over the centuries. These distinctions must not be ignored but discussed with a sense of understanding and composure to enhance mutual respect, appreciation, coexistence and tolerance. Such dialogue and debate could spell the return of the Abrahamic God to the consciousness of modern alienated man, who is sorely in need of God's moral commandments and spiritual guidance.

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