

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

*Tawhīdic* Allah, the Trinity, and the Eschaton:  
A Comparative Analysis of the Qualitative Nature of the Afterlife in Islam and Christianity

A Dissertation Presented to  
the Faculty of Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by  
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Lynchburg, Virginia  
April 2019

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Approval Sheet

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To my wife. This degree is as much yours as is it mine. Your enduring patience and encouragement helped to make this goal a reality. Your unwavering sacrifice and dedication to our family gave me strength to persevere to the end. I am truly blessed to be joined to you in life. Here's to whatever may come next!

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## ABSTRACT

A theological doctrine of eternal life raises certain qualitative and existential questions. Considering the unfathomable duration, one may rightly ask, what will that experience be like and will it meet the experiential needs of human beings so that there are no intimations of boredom. Eternity, then, creates a potential existential problem for humanity. The problem is potential because eternity creates a certain need, a need which can concisely be stated in this way: *quality* must overcome *quantity*. Both Christianity and Islam teach human beings are intended to live forever so both religions must overcome this problem if eternal life within that religion is something to be desired. In this study, the problems of eternity are divided into two distinct classifications: the Qualitative Gap Problem (QGP) and the Teleological Gap Problem (TGP). The QGP is an objective problem and considers the relation of the divine to humanity as a solution to eternity. The TGP is a subjective problem and considers how the ultimate good of the afterlife aligns with human telos and consequently, human flourishing. This study argues that the Islamic afterlife does not have the theological and philosophical resources to meet both gap problems simultaneously and must compromise on one in order to meet the other. Subsequently, the study submits that the Christian view of afterlife overcomes both gaps because of the God/man relationship in Heaven focused supremely on, in, and through the God-man Jesus Christ. It is our holistic relationship to the Triune God that grants eternal joy for all of redeemed humanity.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, THESIS, RATIONALE

### Introduction

British moral philosopher Bernard Williams once stated, “nothing less will do for eternity than something that makes boredom unthinkable.”<sup>1</sup> A simple yet profound statement, Williams elucidates a fundamental assertion about eternity that follows from thorough reflection concerning said reality. This statement emphasizes the cause of existential angst some people have towards an eternal afterlife. For many people, the idea of living forever is a blessed reality met with welcome arms. It is welcomed because the opposite – death and non-existence – is a sobering and even terrifying thought. Human beings naturally seek to preserve their existence and typically do not will or wish their own non-existence. On the other hand, however, for some, the prospect of never ceasing to exist can likewise be haunting. Because that future life is not empirically accessible there is uncertainty about what it will be like. What are we going to do for an eternity? What will it be like to have an infinite amount of time ever and always before us? How will that impact the decisions we make or how we choose to spend our time? Will it have an adverse effect on the quality of life? Almost every aspect of our earthly human experiences is rooted in finitude and thus our cognitive capacity is limited in the sense that we cannot grasp the expansive nature of eternity. Furthermore, our empirical access is also limited because we cannot at once say that we have experienced eternity. There is no point on the continuum where one reaches his destination if eternity is the journey, for we will only ever be on the journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1973), 95.



### **Rationale and Need for this Study**

These thoughts on eternity highlight the impetus for this study. Thinking about eternity leads to questions about what it would be like to experience it. If the hereafter is desirable, then it must be of the kind and quality to satisfy human beings for an incomprehensible duration. Williams succinctly captures the human sentiment that an eternal existence, if it is to be good and desirable, would have to be of a certain kind and quality so as to eradicate boredom from human experience entirely. Another way to conceptualize this is the relation of the subject to the pleasure. That is, are the pleasures of afterlife, whatever they may be, of such a quality that they could fully and forever satisfy the human qua human? This is no small consideration as the eternal plane of existence is just that – eternal – and if there is eternal life after death the reality of its duration is unfathomable. In this life things satisfy us for a while, and then when we become bored, we desire something else. Will the afterlife be the same? Are our desires satisfied for a while and then we become bored, or does the qualitative nature of a particular afterlife render boredom unthinkable? What will existence be like a billion-trillion years from now when, at that future moment, there will still be the same amount of duration remaining in eternity as when it first started?

A salient feature of the three great monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – is the belief in an embodied afterlife. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all believe that at some eschatological moment, God will gather the living and resurrect the dead, exact judgment, and usher the righteous into an eternal paradise prepared by God himself. Those who are there, those who have been counted among the faithful, will enjoy a life of unending bliss in the presence of God. When we consider, however, the many different religious faiths that have a doctrine of afterlife, the comparative question naturally arises, is there one view of the afterlife that is more

desirable than the others? The idea of desirability may seem a subjective criterion upon which to judge a system. What one person deems desirable may not seem so to the other and vice-a-versa. Here, however, the level of desirability is not reducible to individual wants of individual human beings; instead, the kind of satisfaction in mind is holistic, one that encompasses not only the whole human person but all of humanity. What is it that brings pleasure, fullness, and completion to human creatures? Will the afterlife possess the necessary resources to achieve these ends?

Both Christian and Islamic doctrines have historically affirmed that part of man's intended telos is immortality, and as such, the desire to live eternally is woven into human nature. At a basic human level, a conversation about the afterlife will engage that longing and encourages people to think deeply about it. An eternal life means that human beings will spend the incomprehensible majority of their existence in a reality quite different from the one experienced now. It would seem then that our attention, reflection, and motivations should be drawn to this life to come. This life is but a mere vapor, a wisp in the wind, yet so much of humanity's thoughts and efforts are focused immanently on this present world.

Reframing one's perspective to include a present awareness of afterlife is an important feature within Islam. Among the list of fundamental doctrines, William Chittick writes that the return to Allah is "the third of the three major principles of Islamic theology, after *Tawhīd* and prophecy."<sup>2</sup> One of the things to appreciate about Islam is the emphasis on living this life in light of eternity. Classical Islam and Christianity both teach that the choices we make have eternal significance; but the significance is demonstrated even more so in Islam where the level of spiritual development in this life subsequently influences one's proximity to Allah in Paradise.

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<sup>2</sup> William Chittick, "The Ambiguity of the Qur'anic Command," in *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others*, ed. by Mohammad Hassan Khalil, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68.

The importance of Paradise and its attainment cannot be understated. Furthermore, a robust view of Heaven/Paradise provides answers to deeply felt needs.<sup>3</sup> Human purpose, human identity, the problem of evil are all issues that find answers and resolution from this doctrine. On the Christian view of Heaven Walls writes, “To recover heaven as a positive moral source is to recover our very humanity.”<sup>4</sup> This too can apply to Muslims as human telos in classical Islam is intimately linked to the afterlife. The doctrine of the afterlife – Heaven or Paradise – deserves one’s utmost attention and people should strive for thorough and sound understanding of it.

Broadly speaking, my hope is that both Christians and Muslims will benefit from this study by first challenging them to think about the doctrines of Heaven and Paradise coupled with the concept of eternal duration. More specifically, however, this study is apologetic in nature and as such I wish to equip the Christian reader with resources that help him/her to engage their Muslim neighbor in fruitful dialogue concerning the nature of the afterlife. This is done by showing the qualitative good that results from personal relationship with the Triune God consummated in the final abode contrasted to the seemingly restrictive relationality of the Muslim believer and *tawhīdic* Allah. For the Muslim reader, this study is polemical in nature but is not meant to turn the reader away. Applying the doctrine of *tawhīd* faithfully generates certain commitments which Islam’s own scholars have wrestled with for centuries and my intent is to apply that conversation towards thoughts and implications about Paradise.

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<sup>3</sup> Our desire for something to be true does not necessarily add veracity to a thing nor does it give good reason to believe it is true, but, as Walls rightly notes, “...at the same time I would insist that we should not dismiss it out of hand because it does so.” Jerry Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 200.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 200.

## Research Problem

The quantitative nature of eternity is incomprehensible, unfathomable to the human mind. What humans can project into eternity, however, is the impression that eternal existence, while initially garnishing existential appeal, could *quickly* become a hellish reality.<sup>5</sup> To provide some perspective about the sheer quantity of time, think about the adverb *quickly* relative to eternity. Take any amount of time that is comprehensible to the human mind, or, for our purposes, even an amount of time that is not, then imagine that once you reach that designated point of existence the pleasure of paradise has diminished. This sequence happens *quickly* relative to eternity for there is still an infinite amount of existence remaining for one to experience. What is left then for human beings for the rest of eternity? Would we still desire to exist, to go on in a reality of diminishing return?

Eternity, then, creates a potential existential problem for humanity. The problem is potential because eternity creates a certain need, a need which can concisely be stated in this way: *quality* must overcome *quantity*. Both Islam and Christianity teach that mankind is intended to live forever and so both religions must overcome this problem if eternal life within that religion is something to be desired. Furthermore, in both Islam and Christianity, God is revealed

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<sup>5</sup> The first intimation of trouble would likely be boredom, but as human beings experience the temporal succession of paradise, boredom could conceivably give way to a more dark and demented existence. Boredom is not the only concern that some philosophers and theologians have towards immortality. Matters of the self, the mind/body distinction, personality, the soul, etc., and their relation to immortality are all questions which give rise to concerns about a future existence. For more on this subject see: Brian Ribeiro, "The Problem of Heaven," *Ratio* 24, no. 1 (March 2011): 46-64, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2010.00482.x>; Erland Ehnmark, "The Problem of Immortality," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jan., 1951), 1-23, accessed January 25, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1508414>. Michael Martin, "Problems with Heaven," in *The Myth of an Afterlife: The Case Against Life After Death*, ed. by Michael Martin and Keith Augustine, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 427-439. A popular level source: Valerie Tarico, "10 Reasons Christian Heaven Would Actually Be Hell," *Alternet*, accessed January 25, 2018, <https://www.alternet.org/10-reasons-christian-heaven-would-actually-be-hell>. For responses to the purported problems and or positive cases for immortality see: John Martin Fischer, "Why Immortality is Not So Bad," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2 (1993): 257-270; Charles Taliaferro, "Why we need immortality," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 4 (July 1, 1990): 367-377.

as a merciful and beneficial deity who provides and sustains the well-being of his human creations. God as provider is a common motif and this trait carries into the afterlife. Since God is good, and he is an all-loving provider then we are justified in assuming that the Afterlife will be good. It would seem then that if eternity was a good thing and immortality worth possessing there must be, to quote Anselm, “something which nothing greater can be conceived,” that can overcome infinite duration. To meet the qualitative need posed by the quantitative demand nothing less will do than a maximally great being – i.e. God.

The solution to the problem of eternity rests in the Divine because He is the Ultimate Good, and possesses infinite resource, virtue, power, knowledge, etc.<sup>6</sup> I would submit even further that part of the solution (at least) rests in our capacity to have knowledge of and be able to relate to the ultimate Good. A significant feature of creaturely goodness is relationality which consists in knowing and being known by others. Knowledge of another leads to love. When directed towards Allah, knowledge of Him leads the Muslim to love Allah above all else and so love is the condition for proper belief;<sup>7</sup> and when that belief obtains, Allah, in return, will love those who love Him and do good (Q. 2:222). Similarly, we see in the gospel of John that knowing the Father and the Son is eternal life (John 17:3). Knowing the Triune God is eternal life but in Christianity, knowing is much more robust than knowledge of propositional attribute-statements about God. Here, knowledge is relationality, of knowing a person and being known in

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<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant writes, “The end of all things which go through the hands of human beings, even when their purposes are good, is folly... *Wisdom*, that is, practical reasons using means commensurate to the final end of all things – the highest good – in full accord with the corresponding rules of measure, dwells in God alone; and the only thing which could perhaps be called human wisdom is acting in a way not visibly contrary to the idea of that [divine] wisdom.” Here Kant purports that God is the grounding of the highest good. The virtue of wisdom comes from the divine wisdom and insofar as humans as wise directly corresponds not to a human end but to the divine. Immanuel Kant, “The End of All Things,” in *Religion and Rational Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 228.

<sup>7</sup> Sahih Muslim Book 1 (The Book of Faith), Hadith 67, 68 <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1>

return. This emphasis on relational knowing (and by virtue, a certain kind of love) is non-existent in Islam and this is, by necessity, due to the ontology of Allah. Allah and the Triune God share in benefaction, mercy, justice, and in these ways, they both display similar loves. However, the very ontology of God in these respective religions necessitates a very distinct foundational kind of love that differentiates Ultimate Goodness. The Islamic doctrine of *Tawhīd* teaches that Allah is unitarily undifferentiated, one, without distinction or comparison. Allah's love is fundamentally reflexive, directed back onto itself in singularity. Ultimate goodness in the context of love is thus self-love. The Trinity, however, is both unity and plurality, a singular essence (ὁμοουσία) yet three distinct asymmetrical persons. Trinitarian love is fundamentally other-centered, seeking the good of the other, in an eternal perichoretic fashion.<sup>8</sup> Here, ultimate goodness in the context of love is other-centered love.

Contrasted in this way, we have two fundamental statements about Ultimate Goodness. Thus, we have two distinct ways God relates to man and man to God in the Afterlife. I will argue that only a Trinitarian God, as described in Christianity, can provide humanity with the most robust version of eternal life, one that will better satisfy human beings for eternity. Furthermore, I submit that the Christian view of afterlife meets the demand of eternity because of the God/man relationship in Heaven focused supremely on, in, and through the God-man Jesus Christ. It is it our holistic relationship to the Triune God that grants eternal joy for all of redeemed humanity.

### **Sub-Questions**

The sub-questions laid out in this section reflect the remaining chapters in this study and are presented sequentially.

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Leithart's book on the relational considerations of the Trinity in comparison to human relationship and interaction is helpful for a greater understanding of the perichoretic relation within the Trinity. See Peter J. Leithart, *Traces of the Trinity: Signs of God in Creation and Human Experience*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015).

### 1. *What is the nature of Paradise in Islam?*

A robust understanding of Islamic Paradise is needed if Christians are to engage with Muslims in fruitful apologetic dialogue. Christians must be able to move beyond sexual caricatures of Paradise and address its most salient features. In many ways, Paradise and Heaven share similar physical characteristics although the former described in much more detail than the latter. Because of the need for greater understanding, Chapter 2 will unpack certain motifs of Islamic paradise integral to the study.

### 2. *What is the nature of the relationship between God and man in Islam?*

If one speaks of union, experience, and love of Allah, a particular set of questions arise. As mentioned before, the primary teaching of Islam is that Allah is one (*Tawḥīd*), that He is wholly other than creation. However, the Qur'an also teaches that Allah is closer to man than his jugular vein (Surah 50:16). On the one hand Allah is radically transcendent and on the other he is intimately immanent, and so Chapter 3 develops the Islamic conceptions of divine knowledge, love and relationality.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Century Medieval Muslim scholar Abū Hāmid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī (1058-1111),<sup>9</sup> a prominent and influential philosopher, theologian, jurists, and Sunni mystic, will serve as a middle ground between the majority Sunni tradition and the Christian view of Heaven.<sup>10</sup> He was a reformer of Islam in his time and suggested that central to the eternal joy of Paradise is the Vision of Allah rather than its physical pleasures. Within the highest levels of Paradise is a spiritual encounter with Allah which far surpasses the physical

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<sup>9</sup> Hereafter al-Ghazālī

<sup>10</sup> Quasem notes that Al-Ghazālī has sometimes been acclaimed in both the East and the West as the “the greatest religious authority of Islam after the prophet Muhammad,” and Muslims have given him the title of the “Proof of Islam” (*ḥujjat al-Islām*) and the “Ornament of Religion” (*ẓayn ad-dīn*). Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Jewels of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazālī's Theory: A Translation, with an Introduction and Annotation, of al-Ghazālī's Kitāb Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1977), 10.

bliss of the Garden. The highest levels of Paradise, however, are reserved for those whom in this life attain a certain level of spiritual illumination and practice.

Al- Ghazālī was influenced by the spiritual and mystical experiences of the Sufi traditions. His writings help to move the pendulum back towards a theocentric view of Heaven. Thus, it would seem that discussions about God’s love become of paramount import. Of the Islamic theologians who stressed the centrality of love in the human-divine relationship, as al-Ghazālī did, Chittick writes, “the fact that they focused on loves show that they were writing with the goal of bringing humans and God together...”.<sup>11</sup> Sufi scholars stress the human side of the divine-human relationship and seek to demonstrate how one can partake in the Beatific Vision. Al-Ghazālī moves in the right direction suggesting that the highest form of Paradise is the experience of Allah. But as his view develops two critical points (at least) arise: first, considering the doctrine of *Tawḥīd*, relation to Allah is at best mystical and impersonal; and second, how then does Allah love humanity if he only loves Himself as ultimate? One of the 99 divine names of Allah is love but what is the nature and essence of this love and to whom is the referent? Does, in fact, Allah demonstrate *agape* love towards creation as some suggest? Is it, in this way analogous to the *agape* love of the Trinity or is it merely an equivocation of terms?

### 3. *What is the nature of the relationship between God and man in Christianity?*

As was done with Islam, Chapter 4 will address Christian conceptions of divine knowledge, love, and relationality as it relates to the God/Man relationship. First John 4:7-8 is such a profound theological passage for it is one of the few passages in Scripture in Scripture where God essence is revealed. At the end of verse 8 the copulative verb applies the predicate of

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<sup>11</sup> William Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 4.



love to God. These verses go on to say that if you do not know love you do not know God.

Furthermore, in John 15:9-17, Jesus tells his followers that he loves them and that they are to abide in his love. They can abide in the love of Christ by keeping his commandments. Jesus tells these things to his disciples so that “my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” There is a connection here between love, obedience, and joy. Having fullness of joy is found in abiding in the love of God. This applies to the Afterlife as well. Eternal joy will derive from abiding and partaking in the love of God in Heaven where human beings will know and be known, love and be loved by the Triune God.

## **Limitations**

### *1. Perspectives about afterlife*

For some, death brings an existential quality to current life because every choice, every decision, every action is given a significant weightiness. Because we have only one life to live, what we chose to do with our limited time gives a heightened value to that decision. Conversely, the more the ability to choose and decide in a finite context is infringed upon or removed entirely, the more tragic the circumstance. Thus, if the possibility of non-existence is taken away and human beings are to live forever, life becomes meaningless to some degree. This perspective of immortality has been discussed in academic writings and popularized in a number of literary works as well as movies. Quite often, immortality is seen as a curse rather than a blessing and death and finitude provide a romanticized emphasis on human decisions. The negative relationship between immortality and meaning is misunderstood and I would submit that an eternal afterlife is a positive thing even something to be desired. Eternal life does not limit the existential quality of this current life for if humans are to live forever, then this ‘existential crisis of sorts’ misses the point. If, from a Christian perspective, part of mankind’s telos is immortality

then existence is woven into the very essence of humanity. Decisions in this life are important because they will have a significant impact on the life to come. The same can be said in Islamic theology. From an Islamic perspective, man's telos includes immortality, an eternal existence either enjoying the pleasures in Paradise or experiencing torment in Hell. Thus, this study will proceed under the supposition that eternal life is a good to be desired because it is part of our telos as human beings.

## 2. *Variation within the Christian Tradition*

Christian eschatology is broad and diverse. There are many camps within the broader tradition each beholden to various doctrines concerning the time of Christ's return, the nature of His coming, the role of the Church, the Tribulation period, the Millennial reign, etc. Variations in Christianity regarding the nature of heaven exist as well though commitment to them are seemingly less dogmatically held than the doctrines just mentioned. Throughout the history of Christianity there has traditionally been two ends of the spectrum concerning the foci of heavenly pleasure.<sup>12</sup> On the one end of the spectrum is a theocentric view of heaven. In its most extreme form, heaven consists of eternal contemplation of the infinite reality of God (i.e. Aquinas). Eternal joy then, as Walls writes, "consists entirely of the beatific vision, requiring no dimension of human fellowship to be complete."<sup>13</sup> On the other end of the spectrum is the anthropocentric view of heaven. Heaven, on this end, resembles life here on earth yet in a glorified sense, void of pain and suffering. We would be reunited with our loved ones and "Heaven thus construed," as Walls again writes, "would include poetry, pianos, poppies, and sex,

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<sup>12</sup> Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 177ff.; 302ff.

<sup>13</sup> Walls, *Heaven*, 7.

all at their best.”<sup>14</sup> Down through the ages, theologians, church confessions, writers and poets have fallen along the spectrum in one degree or another often like the swing of a pendulum through time.

Considering the array of belief regarding heaven, it is difficult to establish one position as orthodox. As with any spectrum, however, the poles are typically to be avoided as they tend to traverse too far in one direction. I would submit that the middle of the spectrum is where we should reside. It is the place where heaven and earth come together, where God and Man meet, where lover and beloved are united in perfect love and relationality. The middle is found where God (θεός) became Man (άνθρωπος) – Jesus Christ. That Jesus Christ is the middle ground in the spectrum provides a balanced view of Heaven. Following the resurrection, Jesus possessed a spiritual body which means that the second person in the trinity remains incarnated in space and time. Thus, if Jesus was fully human, then it suggests that human telos includes, but is not limited, to a physical spacio-temporal existence in eternity. To be human is to possess a physical body albeit one that has put on immortality.<sup>15</sup> This would further suggest that the eternal joys of afterlife are analogous in some respects to this life. Chiefly among the correspondence is the human need of and satisfaction in love and relationality. Yes, Heaven will consist of contemplation of the Divine and yes it quite likely possesses physical pleasures brought on by food, drink, nature, etc., but of central importance is the intimate relation to God, where we will love and be loved, know and be known, where all persons – Divine and Human – are not mere means to pleasure but are end in themselves where pleasure ultimately and perfectly derives.

### 3. *Variation with the Islamic Tradition*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 15:42ff.

Just as there is variation of doctrine and belief in Christianity, so too is there in Islam. There are of course fundamental dogmas in Islam where if one were to deny them, they would not be Muslim. The doctrine of *Tawhīd* and the creedal Shahada represent two such dogmas. Moving out from that foundation, however, variation and distinction begin to form in all manners of Islamic doctrine (i.e. Sharia Law, Jurisprudence, succession from the Prophet, philosophy of religion, etc.). The same can be said of Paradise, that is, there is both commonality and distinction within Islam concerning the eschaton.<sup>16</sup> Because of the broad range of eschatological views in Islam the scope will inevitably need narrowing. There are the same two traditional camps in Islam as there were in Christianity – a theocentric and anthropocentric view. The theocentric view, like Christianity, emphasizes the Beatific Vision – contemplation of the Divine – as the source of unending joy. A literal reading of the Qur'an and Hadiths support a more anthropocentric view and it is the view arguably held by a greater number of Muslims throughout the history of Islam.

The second chapter will present a basic understanding of Paradise in Islam, addressing its salient features. This survey will tend towards a Sufi (mystical) tradition of Paradise. I do not wish to trivialize or misrepresent the literalist reading of the Qur'an in relation to Paradise but nonetheless, it appears more susceptible to critical analyses than does the more mystical theocentric traditions due to the latter's emphasis on Divine encounter. As such, the overall dialogue will be directed toward the Sufi perspective.

#### 4. *The degree of speculative theology.*

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<sup>16</sup> For further study of Islamic Eschatology, one can reference these sources: Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016); *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* by Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Haddad (Oxford Scholarship Online); Jerry Walls, Ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Admittingly, our epistemic access to things concerning the eschaton delimits what can be known about every aspect of the afterlife. This study takes seriously the revelatory comments alluding to the idea that a heavenly afterlife will be beyond human imagination. Throughout any critical point of the study, a Muslim may claim that Allah or YHWH has prepared a place that is beyond our imagination (Surah 32:17) and by this resort to mystery and trust. I would certainly hope this is the case and agree that God's creative capacities are more elaborate, powerful, and complex than human capacities. The Afterlife would not be a place to long for if its design were left up to creaturely imaginations. However, even though humanity is limited in what can be known, it does not necessarily follow that nothing is known. Beyond our imagination is not the same as beyond our comprehension. We may not be able to imagine the richness of Paradise but if the reward of the afterlife is to be enjoyed forever shouldn't it be within our capacity to comprehend on some level now especially since this world is teeming with God's goodness? In both the Christian and Islamic holy texts, the revelatory disclosure includes content concerning at least some aspects of the nature of afterlife. People can at least know some things about it however limited it may be. But, if, at the conclusion of this inquiry into Islamic Paradise, someone responds with "we do not fully know what Allah has prepared for us but we trust that it will be eternally satisfactory" then it will be difficult to continue a fruitful discussion on this specific topic.<sup>17</sup> At some level the statement has merit, yes our understanding of Paradise is limited – by location, knowledge, perception, etc. – but based on what we do know through

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<sup>17</sup> This sentiment of mystery is not to be dismissed but affirmed. In Sahih Muslim there is a hadith which says "Never mind what God has told you; what He has not told you is even greater." As it has already been mentioned, mystery should be expected regarding the nature of the Afterlife. However, the argument is, given what *is* known about God and the Afterlife, an analysis and comparative judgment can be made that is not depended or does not change based on what is not yet known.

revelation, not only about Paradise but Allah's nature and thus relation to it, I believe one can form sound opinions and beliefs concerning it.

Full-disclosure and ultimate comprehension of what Paradise is like would not be expected nor could it be achieved in this life. If we faithfully apply revelations concerning its nature, then we must admit that parts of its reality are beyond our current ability to understand both in comprehension and experience. At the same time, the Qur'an and Hadiths strive to great lengths to describe the Gardens as a reality that seemingly corresponds to this one. Thus, I am asserting that it is possible within that correspondence to evaluate and make certain judgments about the nature of the blessed afterlife prepared for the faithful followers of Allah.

#### 5. *Paradise on its own merits*

In Islam, the eternal fate of mankind subsists in two contrasting realities – Jannah (the Garden or Paradise) and Hell. Paradise is for those who are faithful followers of Allah and upon whom He has desired to show mercy and reward. Hell, on the other hand, is for those who have denied the oneness of Allah, have rejected his prophet Muhammed, and have not heeded the revelation of the Qur'an. The same dichotomy exists in Christianity. Heaven is the abode of God and where those who are called His "sons and daughters" will spend an eternity in His presence. Hell is reserved for the Devil, the fallen angels, and those who have rejected the Father's Son – Jesus Christ. For this study, Paradise and Heaven will not be considered in comparison to Hell. Given the option of Paradise/Heaven or Hell, the only sane and rational choice is the former. Thus, Paradise and Heaven will be analyzed in themselves and then compared to one another and not in comparison to Hell.

## Key Terms

This section will present a number of key terms in the study. Most of the terms presented are Islamic terms and they highlight central theological aspects of Islam<sup>18</sup>:

### **islām, īmān, iḥsān**

These three words represent a threefold attitude adopted by Sufis. The Qur’ān speaks of the first two terms: *islām* and *īmān*. Obviously, *islām* is familiar as it is the name of the religion and it means “the complete and exclusive surrender of the faithful to God’s will and his perfect acceptance of the injunctions as preached in the Qur’ān.”<sup>19</sup> A Muslim who practices *sharī‘ah* has the attitude of *islām* which is the externalizing of the religious form. *īmān*, “faith,” in contrast, constitutes the internal aspect of Islam. Thus, as Schimmel notes, “a *muslim* need not be a *mu’min* “one who has faith,” but the *mu’min* is definitely *muslim*.”<sup>20</sup> The last term, *iḥsān*, was added – according to most traditions by the Prophet himself – with the meaning that you have continual contemplation of God and worship Him as if you see Him. Of course, man cannot see Allah, but the Qur’ān teaches that Allah sees everything – all the particulars of reality<sup>21</sup> – and so man, as Schimmel writes, “must never fall back into the “sleep of heedlessness,” never forget the all-embracing divine presence.”<sup>22</sup> *Iḥsān* is the completion of the internalizing of Islam and is the goal of every Sufi disciple.

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<sup>18</sup> I have chosen to focus on Sufi terminology in this section assuming that most readers will be the least familiar with their theology and terminology. More Islamic and Christian terms could have been included but the ones listed here serve the purpose of acclimating the reader to terms pertinent to Sufi theologies of divine love, salvation, and the beatific vision.

<sup>19</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> That the Divine knowledge does not encompass individual objects (the particulars of the universe) is one of the three complaints al-Ghazālī has towards the Islamic philosophers of his time. He affirmed that Allah’s knowledge consists also of the particulars.

<sup>22</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 29.

### **“Going back” *ma‘ād***

Islam teaches that human creatures were pre-existing souls prior to the creation of the world. Following the creation of the world, human beings were sent to the earth but most of them forgot about Allah because they were separated by the “veil of createdness.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, part of the Muslim journey is remembrance, remembrance of Allah and subsequently the immanence of the return. Islam views the whole of human history as moving towards the “going back” or *ma‘ād*. This concept of returning is a fundamental principle and it concern the manner in which a person returns. As Chittick notes, “The issue of salvation and its opposite, damnation, arises in discussions of this third principle [*ma‘ād*]... In the texts, the contrast between salvation and damnation is frequently expressed in terms of “felicity” and “wretchedness,” a pairing derived from a verse about the resurrection” (Q. 11:105).<sup>24</sup> Every person will return to Allah, but the manner in which they return – salvation or damnation – depends on remembrance.

### **“The Path” *ṭarīqah***

This is the term for the Sufi path to God as well as to denote a Sufi brotherhood.<sup>25</sup> *Ṭarīqah* or “path” is the doctrines and methods of “the foremost”. Regarding the method of “the path” they are practiced in addition to what the *sharī‘ah*, the sacred Law, prescribed for every

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<sup>23</sup> This time prior to creation is known as the Day of the Primordial Covenant. It was a time when man became “existentialized, endowed with individual existence by God.” Man’s existence, however, became separated by the veil of createdness so that he could not directly perceive Allah. It is not until death that the veil is lifted, and man and God are reunited. Or for the mystic of Islam, at death he is “completely and substantially annihilated in God.” The “going back” is the stage between the Primordial Covenant and the lifting of the veil. Ibid., 143.

<sup>24</sup> Chittick, “The ambiguity of the Qur’anic Command,” 68.

<sup>25</sup> Lings goes on to note that “This does not of course mean that every member of a Sufi brotherhood can be called one of ‘the foremost’. In order to have the possibility of being among these one must first of all be following the path, and today the vast majority of the members do not actually move along the *ṭarīqah* but remain stationary.” Martin Lings (Abū Bakr Sirāj ad-Dīn), *The Book of Certainty: The Sufi Doctrine of Faith, Vision and Gnosis*, (Cambridge, U.K.: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992), x. Nasr notes that *ṭarīqah* “spiritual path” is usually known as “*taṣawwuf* or Sufism” itself so that *ṭarīqah* is equivalent to Sufism. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, (Chicago, IL: ABC International Group, Inc., 2000), 115. This seems to be in agreement with Lang’s point that this term can also denote a Sufi Brotherhood.



believer. In some ways *ṭarīqah* is the internalization of *sharī‘ah* – the *essence* and the *form* respectively. The *sharī‘ah* is an outward form of an inner dimension of meaning, disposition, and spirituality. Carrying out the commands of *sharī‘ah* are necessary for all Muslims and it directs those who follow its precepts to right living. “The Path” leads Sufi adherents from right living to the way to approach God.<sup>26</sup>

### “Gnosis/Cognition” *ma‘rifa*

*Gnosis* or Cognition here refers to knowledge of the Divine. It is not to be confused with Christian Gnosticism prevalent in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century which purported to have a secret knowledge of salvation, reserved only for its adherents. In Islam, *gnosis* is related to the telos of the human soul. A properly functioning rational soul pursues its end and loves the pursuance of its activities – knowledge of God.<sup>27</sup> On the nature of the rational soul, Abrahamov writes:

The perfect state of the rational soul is to be always existent perceiving things as they really are, knowing them, and taking pleasure in this knowledge. The rational soul is delighted with knowledge because knowledge, by virtue of itself makes the rational soul perfect and brings it to its goal. Since the rational soul knows its beginning and its end, it longs for its Creator as a lover longs for his beloved.<sup>28</sup>

Seeing Allah is not a seeing of form or matter; rather, it is a spiritual seeing that is achieved through knowledge of the Divine Attributes (the 99 beautiful names). Pleasure in the afterlife will coincide with this *gnosis* as the rational soul will fulfill its telos contemplating the Divine.

### “Love” *ḥubb* and *‘ishq*

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Treiger notes the distinction between *ma‘rifa* and *‘ilm* (as used in the writings of al-Ghazālī). Treiger admits that they are often used interchangeably by al-Ghazālī the former is only used to designate the specific type of religious knowledge that will “lead to felicity in the afterlife.” Alexander Treiger, “The Science of Divine Disclosure: Ghazālī’s Higher Theology and its Philosophical Underpinnings,” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2008), 229.

<sup>28</sup> Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of Al-Ghazali and Al-Dabbagh*, (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 20.

As with most languages other than English, the concept of love is linguistically diverse with multiple terms employed to capture the robust nature of love. For the purposes of this study, we must delineate between two terms for love used by Arabic speaking Muslims – *ḥubb* and *‘ishq*. The former, *ḥubb* (or *maḥabba*) is the wording used in the Qur’ān to describe God’s love for man and vice-a-versa as seen in Surah 5:54 “He *loves* them, and they *love* Him.” In early Islam, *ḥubb* was the accepted term for talk of God’s love even though His love and man’s love were not to be understood univocally as the term referred to love as a type of longing. Over time, certain Sufis began to use *‘ishq* in reference to God’s love. This was initially controversial because of its connotation of the kind of love expressed between two passionate lovers. Used in relation to man’s love for God however, *‘ishq* need not denote a sexual connotation but can refer to the awakening of man’s soul to deeper passions and the ascension to the spiritual realm.<sup>29</sup> Al-Ghazālī referred to *‘ishq* as the last stage of love this side of Paradise and that few would attain this level of love for Allah.<sup>30</sup> A Muslim who has *‘ishq* for his Lord will experience the highest realms of pleasure in Paradise, the Beatific Vision of Allah.

### Literature Review

In the chapter entitled “A Christian Approach to Eternal Life,” Peter Vardy seeks to reframe a prominent aspect of Thomistic theology concerning the Beatific Vision in the Christian Afterlife (i.e. Heaven). This chapter is pertinent because the conclusion Vardy puts forth is much in line with the argument proposed in this comparative study. In *Summa Contra Gentiles*,

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<sup>29</sup> Abrahamov defines *‘ishq* thus, “to awaken man’s soul from the slumber of negligence and folly and make the soul ascend from the material to the rational things, from the sensual to the spiritual entities which are its source.” Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism*, 20.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph E. B. Lumbard, “From *Ḥubb* to *‘Ishq*: The Development of Love in Early Sufism,” in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 18:3 (2007), 384. (accessed May 29, 2018) doi:10.1093/jis/etm030

Aquinas writes on the Beatific Vision of God that awaits Christians in the afterlife. Throughout this portion of the *Summa*, Aquinas builds his cases chapter-by-chapter and point-by-point, towards the conclusion that the highest level of happiness for humanity is achieved in the Beatific Vision.<sup>31</sup> Aquinas contends that the highest good of human function is the contemplative life demonstrating his commitments to Aristotelian philosophy.<sup>32</sup> Not only is Aquinas committed to an Aristotelian anthropology, he also demonstrates his commitments to a Platonic view of God. Aquinas rightly identifies God as the *summum bonum* but is also overly committed to other Greek influences regarding the attributes of God: “literally timeless, utterly immutability, bodiless, spaceless and without parts.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, in relation to the Beatific Vision, man’s relation to God in the Afterlife is understood within the bounds of these essential attributes. Aquinas’s view helps the believer to see that his only end is in God “yet”, as Vardy notes, “a God identified with the supreme Platonic values.”<sup>34</sup> The subsequent development of the Beatific Vision in the *Summa* is fraught with theological and philosophical difficulties. Vardy discusses a few of the challenging implications of this Thomistic theology and proposes a new way forward that is seemingly more consistent with Scripture and avoids many of the problems of the Thomist view. His conclusions elevate the relational components of Afterlife, a heavenly society where “the wolf and the lamb shall lie down together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6). This

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<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. by Vernon J. Bourke, ed. by Joseph Kenny, III.63. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles.htm> Accessed, Sept. 14, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> In III.37 of the *Summa*, Aquinas quotes Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* 10.7 in establishing that man’s ultimate happiness is found in contemplation of the highest level of speculation (See Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. by David Ross, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 194 (10.7.11-18). It should be noted that Aristotle does not make the theological move that Aquinas will in resting the highest human good in the contemplation of God in the Afterlife.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Vardy, “A Christian Approach to Eternal Life,” in *Beyond Death: Theological and Philosophical Reflections of Life After Death*, edit. by Dan Cohn-Sherbok and Christopher Lewis, (London: MacMillan Press: 1995), 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

picture of heaven depicts a social environment that has been transformed in a spiritual sense, that is, “a spirit of individuals who have put self into second place and have devoted their lives to love of others and of God. They have become, literally, transformed by love.”<sup>35</sup>

Lastly, yet equally relevant to the study, is the analogous relationship of Aquinas’s Beatific Vision with the Islamic equivalence in the Sufi traditions.<sup>36</sup> In Ch. 51 of *SCG* Aquinas writes, “For God Himself understands His own substance through His own essence; and this is His felicity...And so, may they who enjoy the same felicity whereby God is happy to eat and drink at God’s table, seeing Him in the way that He sees Himself.”<sup>37</sup> This description of the Beatific Vision is remarkably similar to the Sufi tradition on a number of fronts. First, it places the highest good in God. This placement is obviously consistent with general theocentric view of Heaven. However, second, and more unique, both conceptions of God in the Afterlife are committed to an utterly immutable, transcendent and bodiless deity. Here is where the two views distinguish themselves from the evangelical view. Evangelical theology emphasizes the bodily resurrection of Jesus and understands this resurrection state as extending into the present. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, remains in bodily form and as such, experiences temporal succession.

Building on the first and second points, human pleasure and enjoyment in the afterlife, being found in the highest good, i.e. God, is consistently derived from the same manner God experiences delight – in Himself. Thus, for both Aquinas and al-Ghazali, humans enjoy God in the same manner that God enjoys Himself, namely, God enjoys Himself by reflecting on His

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>36</sup> Vardy himself does not make this connection in the chapter. It is not that the similarities do not exist or that they are superficial; rather, these ideas were beyond scope of the essay. I am drawing that conclusions of similarity after having read Vardy’s essay and the views of the Beatific Vision of both Aquinas and al-Ghazali.

<sup>37</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.51.5-6.

essence. God enjoys Himself and humans can enjoy God – the *summum bonum* – in the Afterlife by enjoying his attributes and contemplating His thoughts.<sup>38</sup> The problem with both of these conceptions is not that humanity finds their end in God nor that that end correlates to the manner in which God enjoys or loves Himself; rather, it is the conception of God in relation to Himself and others. Al-Ghazālī’s God is radically unitary and Aquinas’s God, while retaining an orthodox trinitarianism, is utterly immutable thus diminishing the capacity of God to truly and genuinely love humanity and vice-a-versa. It is only the Tri-unity of Persons, i.e. the Trinitarian God of Christianity, free from Platonic bonds of immutability, that can meaningfully display love. The essence of the Trinitarian God is love and not merely a self-absorbed, equivocal love, but a dynamic, other-focused love existing eternally in the Tri-unity of persons of the Godhead.

Brian Scalise’s dissertation, *Tawhīdic Allah or the Trinity In View of Inherent Human Relatedness*, adds to the corpus of theological comparison between Islam and Christianity, chiefly focusing on the nature of deity in each respective religion. Beginning with the assumption of the inherent relatedness between human beings, Scalise works out abductively seeking to “inquire into the nature of Deity in view of human relationships.”<sup>39</sup> Human relationships exist and are a definite part of human existence, which Deity best accounts for and/or has greater explanatory depth to offer the best explanation for the kinds of human relationships we have? Is it the *Tawhīdic* nature of Allah or the Trinitarian nature of the God of Christianity? Chapters 2-4 of the dissertation develop the prolegomena and theological content necessary to conclude with what is Scalise’s most significant contribution to the field, the

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<sup>38</sup> Al-Ghazali and Aquinas respectively.

<sup>39</sup> Brian T. Scalise, (2014) “*Tawhīdic Allah or the Trinity in View of Inherent Human Relatedness*.” PhD diss., Liberty University, 2014, Scholars Crossing, 922., 3.

implications of *Tawhīdic* Allah in relation to the concepts of otherness, relationality, distinction and, most importantly, love.<sup>40</sup>

The concluding chapter is both intuitive and profound as a summation and confluence of his in-depth theology study.<sup>41</sup> Before beginning his “paratactic comparison,”<sup>42</sup> Scalise first readdresses the issue of Islam’s affirmation that humans are not made in the image of Allah. This has significant impact not only on Scalise’s conclusions but the arguments of this study as well. Claiming that Allah does not have similarity to human creatures means that He is utterly dissimilar in all manner of comparison and knowledge. Regarding Scalise’s purposes, Allah’s dissimilarity would “affirm that Allah does not explain human reality and relating,” implying, at least *prima facie*, that God as Trinity has greater explanatory depth for human reality. Furthermore, the consequence of such dissimilarity reaches far beyond explanatory scope for it would *a priori* suspend any possibility of theological knowledge altogether. The Muslim would seemingly not want to hold such a commitment considering all the theological language and content purportedly revealed in the Qur’an. At risk would be the very names/attributes of Allah, the 99 beautiful pronouncements of His character. Thus, it must be assumed, if human creatures can possess any meaningful understanding of Allah’s attributes, there must be, as Scalise rightly notes, “human realities to give a basis by which to understand those names applied to Allah –

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<sup>40</sup> Chapter 5 of this dissertation is a comparative study that demonstrates the supremacy of Trinitarian theology and its capacity to best account for otherness, distinction, relationality and love over and above *Tawhīdic* Allah.

<sup>41</sup> In this conclusion, Scalise summarizes the salient points from the previous chapters and concisely analyzes *Tawhīdic* Allah and Trinity in paratactic fashion. Among the salient points are the concepts of *Oneness*, *Distinctness*, *Relatedness*, *Dissimilarity*, etc. In each case, the difficulties of *Tawhīdic* Allah in relation to creaturely realities are brought to the fore and each time the Trinity proves to be the best explanation offering better explanations for each of the salient points.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

analogically of course.”<sup>43</sup> To what extent, then, is Allah wholly other if He can meaningfully be known through human realities?

Lastly, Scalise also addresses the ethics of love in concert with *Tawhīdic* Allah and Trinity. Love for the other is one of the highest forms of love along with the love one has for God. If we are to hold this kind of love in such high regard, as such a great good, it would be problematic if we could not attribute this type of goodness to God. Once again Islam is plagued by the notion of otherness because the nature of Allah provides no ontological grounding for the concept of otherness.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Trinitarian love, there is no basis for Allah to love the other which means that Allah’s love is purely self-absorbed, ever reflexing in upon itself. This poses both ethical and relational challenges for Muslims; how do we account for such a great good apart from Allah when His own nature does not allow for it and, what are the implications for Afterlife if humans are not the recipients of Divine love? To the former, Scalise rightly argues that only God as Trinity best explains love for the other and to the latter, it is part of the goal of this study to demonstrate that *Tawhīdic* Allah does not overcome its singularity and thus has profoundly negative effects on the human experience of the Afterlife.

Miroslav Volf’s *Allah: A Christian Response* is significant in a general sense in that Volf’s expressed purpose for writing the book is to encourage fruitful dialogue and improve understanding between Muslims and Christians something this work aims to do as well.<sup>45</sup> More

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>45</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), see especially pp. 11-13. It should be noted that Volf believes that Christians and Muslims worship the same God and that this belief has been a point of much controversy in the Evangelical world over the past couple of years. The question “Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?” is a very important question to ask but one that can also be shrouded in much ambiguity. Central to the question of sameness is the further philosophical question of what it means to refer to something. Could it be the case that Muslims and Christians are referring to the same referent? Furthermore, could it be the case that Muslims and Christians are referring to the same deity although one group is doing so under a false description? Perhaps the more fruitful and pertinent question to ask is, “Do Muslims and Christians believe the same

specifically, Volf focuses on the doctrine of God throughout for his interest is, as he states, “the proper Christian stance toward the God of the Qur’an,” which will hopefully help both Christians and Muslims “live together well in a single endangered world.”<sup>46</sup> Volf’s study is partly dialogical, and in chapters 8 and 9 – “God’s Mercy” and “Eternal and Unconditional Love” – this methodology is beneficial as he focuses on the character of God as love. In both Christianity and Islam, one of the concrete theological doctrines is: God loves. But this proposition ‘God loves’ is quite ambiguous both because the word ‘love’ itself has a broad scope of meaning and it can be unclear how love stands in relation to God (i.e., as part of his nature and regarding His relationship to creation). Volf dispels many misconceptions Christians have towards Islam, most importantly are those in relation to love. He notes, with regard to God’s love, that Muslims and Christians share similar convictions: “God loves, God is Just, God’s love encompasses God’s justice and human beings should love their neighbors as themselves.”<sup>47</sup>

But this, however, does not tell the whole story for these similarities do not cover the full range and aspects of love nor does it address the more fundamental claim of Christianity that *God is love*. Volf notes that both faiths agree that God loves in a compassionate, giving manner but to say that *God is love* makes a more fundamental statement about God’s eternal being. Muslim scholars are divided on this issue and have debated ascribing love to God in any essential manner. Those who do ascribe love to God prior to creation are committing themselves to a particular set of consequences. *Tawhīdic* Allah is not internally differentiated (unlike the Trinitarian God of Christianity) and so the proposition *God is love* means there is a unitary self

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things about God and His nature?”). The answer to this question is clearly both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ as we will see in Volf’s work, this study, and elsewhere. There are clear lines of demarcation between the revealed nature and character of Yahweh and Allah.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 158-9.



who loves himself as the ultimate object of that love. This means that God's love for creatures and the creature's love for God and one another is intimately linked to this kind of self-love originating from Allah.<sup>48</sup> Thus, we have, as Volf rightly indicates, a comparison of loves – self-love and love for the other – in Islam and Christianity respectively.<sup>49</sup> Which love is ultimate? The implications of the two loves are profound and directly impact the divine-creature relationship, moreover, the profundity extends even to the very foundational fabric of reality.<sup>50</sup>

Volf's contribution to the Muslim-Christian dialogue is profoundly beneficial in this book especially as he elucidates the affinities Muslims and Christians share in their conceptions of divine love. I would agree with Volf that there is more affinity than many Christians would typically assume and that this is cause for improve relations; however, I would disagree with his claim that the differences that exist are not as "deep" as many think.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the implications of divine love and divine-creaturely love extends into the Afterlife and impacts both the metaphysical and experiential components of the life to come. If God is the highest good in Paradise (and the Christian Heaven) as Muslim theologians suggest, then how the creature stands in relation to the divine will be significant.

Jerry Wall's, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*, contributes rich theological and philosophical conceptions of Heaven and the goodness of God. One of the major themes of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 168-9.

<sup>50</sup> This point will be discussed at length in chapter 3 but here is the essential thought. Al-Ghazali suggests that creaturely love is merely an extension of the divine, and extension of Allah's love for Himself given to creatures so that in the creaturely love for God, Allah is merely loving himself. This generates a quite significant metaphysical conclusion for al-Ghazali, namely, that all reality is an extension of Allah, an emanation from the divine. *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, Book 36.

<sup>51</sup> I think Volf's overall goal may be influencing this language and, in an attempt to build unity he minimizes the profoundness of the impact the doctrine of *Tawhīd* has on the concept of love, especially if love is an essential characteristic of Allah. Volf, *Allah*, 162 (last paragraph), see also 184 (last paragraph).

*Heaven* is the centrality of heaven to Christianity and the interrelation of this doctrine to most of the core doctrines of the faith (i.e. the doctrine of the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, etc.).<sup>52</sup> The Afterlife impacts many aspects of theology and, as Walls notes, it (heaven) “is not a mere appendage on the main body of Christian doctrine.”<sup>53</sup> The doctrine of heaven also has significant philosophical implications on morality, theodicy, and overall meaning of life.

The first chapter of Walls’s book is the most significant for this study. His stated thesis was to “show that any meaningful account of God’s goodness implies some notion of heaven.”<sup>54</sup> Walls dialogues with Hume’s desire not to live forever and the impetus for such a seemingly nihilistic desire. At the end of his life, Hume stated in an interview that he did not want to live forever because he did not know what kind of life it would be and did not want to risk that life being worse than the life he had already lived. The uncertainty of the life to come, for Hume, was linked to his belief that God was an amoral being. Being neither good or bad, God would have no moral commitments to securing a certain kind of afterlife for his creation. Through his analysis of Hume’s dialogue partners in *Dialogues*, Walls argues, agreeing with Demea, that it is implausible to believe that God is amoral and more reasonable to believe in the goodness of God based on the way we have been created.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Walls, *Heaven*, see p.5 but especially pp. 32-3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>55</sup> Walls arrives at this conclusion through abduction and logical inference. Beginning with the way God has created human beings, with certain longings and commitments – humans desire a meaningful life, the promotion of human happiness, and hold moral commitments – it seems, then, either these commitments line up with God’s character and intention in some way or they do not. Either way, there is no neutral, amoral position, either God is good or evil for giving human beings these longings and commitments. *Ibid.*, see pp. 23-26.

The notion of heaven is a foundational doctrine in the Christian faith and Walls is to be praised for his rigorous theological and philosophical defense of the afterlife and prayerfully, a faithful renaissance of this doctrine is to follow. Furthermore, his work is fundamental in drawing the connection between God's goodness and what we might expect heaven to be like. Thus, analysis and conclusions about what God is like in both Islam and Christianity and God's relationship to his creation profoundly impacts what one can expect of the quality of the life to come.

Another significant text is *Heaven: A History* by Bernhard Lang and Colleen McDannell. This text is essential because it supplements the study with a very thorough history of the development of the doctrine of heaven in Church history. Beginning with the early church fathers, the authors trace how the doctrine of heaven has developed within a spectrum that has vacillated through the ages from one end to the other. The two poles of the spectrum are a theocentric and anthropocentric view of heaven. On the one end, the theocentric view places God at the center and emphasizes a heaven in which the highest good is the beatific vision – contemplation of the divine. This view tended to be more static and was not dependent on human-to-human relationships. Life in heaven was contrasted to life on earth as life in heaven will have little to do with life on earth.<sup>56</sup> Concerning the theocentric view, McDannell and Lang write, “The saints do not have to *do* anything, they merely experience the fullness of their being by existing with God.”<sup>57</sup> On the other end is the anthropocentric view of heaven. If the theocentric view of heaven stands in contradistinction to life on earth, the anthropocentric view depicts a heaven that is much like life on earth although to a magnified degree. In its extreme

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<sup>56</sup> For more on this contrasted dichotomy see McDannell and Lang, *Heaven a History*, 178-80.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

version, the goodness of heaven lies in reuniting with lost loved ones and being together again with one's spouse. The landscape of heaven is as a lush garden with houses and tents for people to live. On this view the authors write, "In the anthropocentric heaven, where all attention was directed toward the saints – and not to God – motion, variety, and endless diversity supplied the keys to eternal happiness."<sup>58</sup>

As the authors move through history and discuss the development of doctrine concerning heaven, it becomes apparent that the particular developments, the paradigm shifts, are intimately connected to the context of the time. This book reveals that the doctrine of heaven is relatively malleable and has been shaped by various cultural, theological and philosophical factors and commitments. From at least the time of Augustine and moving forward, however, there is a common motif that is prevalent throughout the doctrinal development of heaven – love. Whether love was connected to contemplation of the divine, as Aquinas suggested, or love existed in a sensual way in the paintings of the Renaissance, it is pervasive, to one degree or another, along the theocentric-anthropomorphic spectrum. That love is a central motif in the historical development of the Christian heaven supports the thesis of the study; love is a central component in thinking about the goodness of heaven.

Timothy Tennent's *Christianity at the Roundtable* provides further theological discourse on challenging topics through his dialogical project with Muslim interlocutors.<sup>59</sup> Tennent's methodological approach is encouraging because he builds conceptual relationship with other religious backgrounds by engaging in cordial theological correspondence. In his treatment of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3425709>.

Islam, Tennent discusses the theology of Allah's oneness or *tawḥīd*, that Allah is an "absolute unity, with no distinctions or associations."<sup>60</sup> To add to Allah's unicity or to associate any partner with Him is to commit *shirk* which is an unpardonable sin in Islam. He points out that from a Muslim's perspective, this is exactly what Christians do when they speak of God as Trinity and teaching of the divinity of Christ, they are committing *shirk* by adding to Allah a partner. In this section, Tennent also notes the tension and conceptual difficulty which exists for any serious student of Islam between talk of Allah's essence and His many attributes.<sup>61</sup> Navigating the relationship between Allah's essence and attributes is a delicate endeavor. Affirming both *tawḥīd* and the predication of attributes seemingly implies that there is distinction within Allah's nature. The two main schools of theology in Islam – the Mu'tazila and Ash'arite – differ in their resolution, the former purports that Allah's essence and attributes are the same, the latter that the attributes are not to be identified with His essence.<sup>62</sup> Tennent is correct to assert that any serious discussion about Allah and relationality must take seriously the relation between His essence and attributes.

Furthermore, as part of the section on Islam, Tennent defends God *qua* Trinity in a dialogue with Sunni, Shi'ite, and Sufi interlocutors. He eloquently and astutely discusses the deeper aspects of Trinitarian theology as well as both the internal relationality of God and the divine/man relationship. His correspondence with the Sunni and Shi'ite Muslim will be useful throughout this study but it was his specific discussion with the Sufi that interests us here. From the Sufi discussion two things become clear: first, Sufism is not as concerned with the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>62</sup> The Ash'arite school of theology predominates the Muslim world as it is the theological school of Sunni Muslims which makes up around 86% of the Islamic population. Ibid., 149.

ontological nature of Allah as a mere mental abstraction. In response the Şūfī writes, “*Tawhīd* refers to the experience or tasting (*dhawq*) of God’s being by becoming one with Allah in a way that supersedes all discussion or debate about him.”<sup>63</sup> Second, Sufism makes a distinction between Allah’s essence and Allah’s acts. Again, the Sufi author writes, “In our view, his acts are the extension of the eternal light of his being.”<sup>64</sup> Sufism seeks union with that light which transcends the mind and debate, leading ultimately to complete union with Allah.

This chapter’s primary focus is not the afterlife; rather, it is a chapter on the nature of God and his relationality and knowability. However, because any notion of relationality in both Islam and Christian has its ultimate end in the Beatific Vision, Tennent’s work is beneficial to the study. His explication of the difficulties in Islamic theology concerning the nature of Allah, are the same difficulties that arise when one thinks about Paradise and its bliss, that is, assuming that Allah is the ultimate good.

Christian Lange’s *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* is a necessary source for anyone wishing to study the features of Paradise in Islam. His is a very thorough study covering the doctrinal development of Paradise in Islam as well as the points of disagreement between the various sects. Diversity within Islam led to diversity of eschatological doctrines. Various theological and metaphysical commitments about Allah and the world influenced hermeneutical approaches to the texts creating differing views of Paradise. While there is much diversity of thought, there remains, however, a strong traditionalist view that emphasizes a more literal reading and thus a tangible Paradise which emphasizes embodied sensuous reward.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>65</sup> Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 180-3.

It is important to note that it was in Lange's book where first was discovered any internal criticism of a material emphasis view of Paradise (i.e. overly sensual view). Lange notes that the Mu'tazilites were skeptical of a purely corporeal paradise (which included such phenomena as Allah's physical throne) but never went so far as to fully spiritualize it either although they tended toward a more metaphysical reading of the text. In several passages, there is some occasion of sarcasm in which they react against such sensuous views. Nonetheless, a thorough spiritualization of paradise did not occur in early Muslim theology and Lange suggests this was because the language of the Qur'ān and the Hadiths did not allow it.<sup>66</sup>

The pinnacle of the spiritualization of paradise coincided with the influence of peripatetic philosophy of whom Avicenna was the most noted adherent. It was al-Ghazālī who took issue with such non-corporeal spiritualization but in his writings, he did not fully reverse the spiritual elements. He argued, in contrast to Avicenna, that paradise is an embodied reality but at the same time affirmed that the highest dimension of paradise – and thus the highest manner of pleasure – is an embodied yet spiritualized experience with Allah. Al-Ghazālī holds a somewhat median view of paradise that incorporates both physical and spiritual dimensions. On the one hand he keeps with traditional views and preserves the embodied existence; on the other, he maintains a distinction in levels of pleasure, that is, a lower level of sensual pleasure and the higher spiritual level reserved for the prophets, saints, and all “pure Muslims.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>67</sup> On *al-Ghazālī's* view Lange writes, “Therefore, in *The Alchemy of Happiness*, al-Ghazālī can affirm that in the afterlife, prophets, saints, and all “pure Muslims” will be able to dispense of the imagination; not unlike Avicenna's philosophers, they will experience purely spiritual felicity.” Ibid., 188.

Fadlou Shehadi's book *Ghazālī's Unique Unknowable God* is an essential philosophical analysis of Ghazālī's theology concerning Allah as utterly unique and unknowable.<sup>68</sup> At once the problems discussed in Shehadi's book are revealed in the title itself, if Allah is utterly unique and truly unknowable, then how does one know anything about Allah, including the positive attribute-statements made in the Qur'ān. The problem is elaborated more fully in relation to al-Ghazālī's pursuit of knowledge and union. Shehadi notes that in Ghazālī's thought the mystical goal or union is threefold: *qurb* (likeness), subjective *tawḥīd*, and objective *tawḥīd*. *Qurb* or 'likeness' refers to the goal of enriching one's character, to reach a level of spiritual development where "nothing remains in the character of the mystic which is not God-like."<sup>69</sup> Subjective *tawḥīd* denotes a disposition where the human subject shuts off all other attention to anything that is not-God. Man's thoughts are attuned solely on God so that it is Allah alone who occupies his thought. Lastly, objective *tawḥīd*, what Ghazālī views as the highest attainment, is the realization that God is the only being that is necessarily existent and that everything else in creation derives its existence from Allah. From this realization, Shehadi writes, "the mystic attains an intuitive perspective from which he sees that there is *naught in existence except Allah*,"<sup>70</sup> that is, if mystical union is fully achieved only Allah remains because He is the only one of whom the predicate "objectively real" can be applied.

With each aspect of the mystical union, some measure of knowability of Allah is affirmed whether in likeness, knowledge, or of essence (that He is objectively real). This highlights the more fundamental issue at hand and Shehadi demonstrates how al-Ghazālī

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<sup>68</sup> Fadlou Shehadi, *Ghazālī's Unique Unknowable God: A Philosophical Critical Analysis of Some of the Problems Raised by Ghazālī's View of God as Utterly Unique and Unknowable*, (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1964). <https://www.ghazali.org/books/fad-guuG.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 33.



reconciles the seemingly logical discrepancy between Allah's uniqueness and unknowability and positive attribute-statements made of Allah. Shehadi labors to show how Ghazālī's thought does not lead to logical inconsistency by developing the nature of religious language. He points out that insofar as Allah is the objective subject of a positive attribute-statement, that statement is non-descriptive and patently false. However, this religious language, while not having a descriptive function, has a "practical directing function" in relation to man's religious life.<sup>71</sup>

This language about God is functioning in two different ways and so cannot be contradictory according to Shehadi, but while that problem may have been avoided another set of difficulties arise. If Ghazālī is correct, it implies at best a Muslim is ultimately relegated to be agnostic about God. Descriptive statements about God are meant merely for religious living but what value do those statements really possess if they do not in any way correspond to what Allah is like? They may elicit praise but what or who is the referent of that praise? Ghazālī would affirm that Allah is that referent because the creedal formulas in the Qur'ān are authoritatively given and divinely inspired. This last statement shifts the locus of the problem to be fundamentally about revelation, that is, the possibility of divine revelation from a unique and unknowable divine being.<sup>72</sup>

While Shehadi does not discuss the relation or application of Ghazālī's thought to the afterlife, the questions about Paradise naturally arise. Since Ghazālī and others affirm that humans derive the highest pleasure in Paradise from the beatific vision of the Ultimate Good (i.e. Allah), in light of the agnostic reductionism one cannot help but ask what this beatific vision

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>72</sup> Shehadi discusses Ghazālī resolution to the problem (and perhaps compromise) and although this is one of the fundamental difficulties in Islam it goes beyond the scope of this study. For more on this resolution see pp. 120ff.

may be like qualitatively or, the more extreme consequence, of its possibility. If Allah is utterly unique and unknowable, from whence comes satisfaction? Objective Goodness is unknowable and thus, it seems, must be essentially derivative of something other than God – psychological and subjective, finite and limited.

Another significant source regarding al-Ghazālī's thought is Kenneth Garden's *The First Islamic Reviver: Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī and his Revival of the Religious Sciences*.<sup>73</sup> One of Garden's primary tasks throughout the book was to properly frame Ghazālī's thought in the *Revival*. He states that reading of al-Ghazālī among Western scholars has been dominated by "an image more in keeping with modern Western notions of religion as a thing properly understood as a matter of personal conscience", furthermore, "Among the desires of his modern Western readers has been to find a Muslim intellectual with an interiorized, mystical spirituality rather than a 'scholastic' or legal one...".<sup>74</sup> The *Revival* or *Ihyā'* is a move away from the extreme exoteric form of Islam which had come to dominate the Caliphs whom Ghazālī served. Seeking to revive what he believed was the true form of Islam, Ghazālī does not go to the other end of the spectrum, the overly esoteric practice of Sufism. Ghazālī appreciated Sufism but he found balance in religious practice by incorporating other disciplines such as philosophy and guidance found in prophecy. That Ghazālī's approach is balanced is consistent with his goal in *Revival* of guiding the whole Islamic community in the science of the hereafter. Thus, as Garden notes, we should understand Ghazālī's Science of the Hereafter "not as Sufism by another name, but as a

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<sup>73</sup> Kenneth Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver: Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī and his Revival of the Religious Sciences*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), Oxford Scholarship Online, Accessed Feb 21, 2018, <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199989621.001.0001/acprof-9780199989621>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 170.

discipline of al-Ghazālī's creation, a new synthesis of Sufism and philosophy that is reducible to neither."<sup>75</sup>

More specifically, Garden discusses a number of specific Ghazālī thoughts concerning the attainment of felicity in general and its specific relation to salvation. On the latter, we see that Ghazālī clearly taught there was gradation in Paradise based on one's religious attainment in this life. While felicity was not attainable in this life, reaching felicity in the hereafter was predicated upon the actions in this life. Felicity is also different than salvation and Ghazālī taught that most will not attain felicity. This felicity is achieved through knowledge of the Divine and achieved when one attains a "monistic vision of Him"<sup>76</sup> or as Shehadi labeled it "objective *tawḥīd*." It is in the earthly process of seeking knowledge of Allah where Ghazālī combines theoretical, philosophical training with Sufism. He sees the former as necessary for proper guidance through the spiritual experiences of the latter. Without proper rational investigation, however, one can easily be lead astray in the practice of Sufism.

Love plays a central role in this study, not only because it is intimately linked to the concept of the Beatific Vision, but also because the types of love to be considered will prove a comparative tool to evaluate both the Trinitarian God of Christianity and the *Tawḥīdic* God of Islam. Binyamin Abrahamov's work entitled *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism* helps to develop an understanding of divine love in a Sufi context in general and in the theology of al-Ghazali more specifically. In the introduction, Abrahamov provides a cursory yet extremely beneficial synopsis of the categories of love as they are found in Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Using the Greek categories established in Plato's infamous *Symposium*, Abrahamov

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 176. Frank Griffel and Alexander Treiger are also part of this new paradigm in Ghazālīan studies, their works will be interacted with, along with Garden, in Chapter 3.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 92.

purports two interesting assertions about divine love in Islam. First is the category of *eros* or desire. Love as *eros* is desire for something that is lacking and in this manner, it cannot be a love displayed by Allah because He does not lack anything, He is unitary perfection. Abrahamov cites the Ash‘arite theologian al-Juwaynī who said, “God is too exalted to incline to man or to be the object of man’s inclinations.”<sup>77</sup> Man’s inclination to God or God’s inclination to man would infringe on *Tawḥīd*, on God’s radical transcendence. Second, Abrahamov asserts Allah’s love is more akin to the *agape* motif. Allah’s love for man is to be understood in terms of a two-fold benefaction towards man, of giving man the ability to come near to Allah and the removal of the “partition from man’s heart” so that he can see God (in his heart).<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps the most crucial point of Abrahamov’s work is the conclusion brought to the fore from al-Ghazālī’s work on love. The majority of Book XXXVI from the *Ihya* focuses on man’s love for God and the causes of that love. There is relatively little discussion of God’s love for man and this is consistent with the Qur’an and other Sufi theologians. Human beings cannot apply a creaturely definition of love to God because all perfections are present in him eternally.<sup>79</sup> Abrahamov writes, “Since the existence of everything except God derives from the existence of God, which means that there is *nothing but his essence and acts*, God does not look at anything except at his essence and acts. Consequently, *he loves only himself in which all creation is included*.”<sup>80</sup> This statement is made passively but has profound metaphysical and theological implications. Allah’s love is self-contained. He loves Himself and contained in that love for the

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<sup>77</sup> Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism*, 15.

<sup>78</sup> This label can easily be conflated with the *agape* motif in Christianity and should be cautioned against. The *agape* motif in Christianity is fundamentally different to the motif in Islam. At the very least, however, one could say in a minimalistic way, that both refer to some measure of benefaction on the part of the Divine. Ibid., 84

<sup>79</sup> Love being understood by Abrahamov as “the inclination of one’s soul to what befits it.” Ibid., 83.

<sup>80</sup> *Italics* added for emphasis. Ibid, 83-4.

Self is, by extension, love for the world which happens to be a reciprocal loving of an extension of Allah himself. It is evident that Abrahamov, and by extension al-Ghazali, is committing Islam to a form of panentheism in which Allah is in all and all is Allah. Any discussion of love in Islam will inevitably highlight the problem of *Tawhīd* and the other and there is seemingly only two ways to reconcile it, either God does not love us or, we have to commit, as al-Ghazali and Abrahamov do, to the illusion of otherness, a commitment few are naturally willing to make.

Continuing with the theme of love in Islam, Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, develops some of the implications of mystical love. Schimmel is widely known as an expert in Sufism and her section on love and annihilation in this text delves into the nuances of the concept of mystical love as well as discusses the development of this doctrine within the Sufi tradition. Schimmel begins this section affirming that love and gnosis are the last stations of the mystical path. The two are complimentary to one another but fluctuation exists in which is considered superior. This section however focuses on the mystical currents of which love is the highest state.

Love is a topic of divergence in Islam. Orthodox Muslims tended to understand love as obedience to Allah but for Sufis the term was too complex to be bound into one conception. To them, love was a personal and existential commitment, an experience of the divine that went beyond obedience.<sup>81</sup> Love for Allah is a process of purification wherein the self is completely submersed in the divine attributes. As one plunges the depths of the divine, s/he becomes more enraptured with Allah and experiences intimacy, proximity, longing, and desire.<sup>82</sup> It is in this

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<sup>81</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 138-9.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 132ff.

state that the self is slowly annihilated as all creaturely distinctions fade out of view and only the divine attributes remain.

Schimmel's development of love from and love of the divine in Sufi thought shows that the doctrine of Love in Islam is complex, diverse, and ultimately mystical. Furthermore, it shows that Sufi philosophical thought is highly subjective, focusing on the experience of the believer in connection to Allah. Not much is said of Allah's love for man beyond his merciful bounty and the removing of the veil and this is because there is not much that can be said. Allah is self-contained unity and as such the Sufi believer experiences Allah in some mystical, existential yet impersonal way in Paradise. In this state the Sufi attempts to always and forever achieve closer proximity to his Lord by drawing near to His divine attributes.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr's work, *The Garden of Truth*, provides further understanding Islam's mystical tradition – Sufism. Dr. Nasr is a world renown Islamic philosopher and himself a practicing Sufi. Sufism is the mystical tradition within Islam and as such, the philosophers, theologians, and poets of this tradition have written and developed far more, both in material and doctrine, on man's relation to the divine. This book is meant to serve the serious Western seeker in the ways of Sufism and as such it discusses deep universal truths and questions about existence, telos, and the path to the Truth (i.e. the Divine, Allah).<sup>83</sup> Many of the topics in this book will supplement the study overall but two particular topics are of significant import: the centrality of gnosis (knowledge) to Sufism and the role of love and beauty in the spiritual life. The book itself unfolds like a journey which is seemingly intentional because of the journey or path motif in Islam. Islamic anthropology begins with man's descent into the world (the "arc of

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<sup>83</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), xiv.

descent”), the metaphysical separation from the Source of all being (i.e. Allah). This life, as humans experience it, is part of the journey back to the Source, the “arc of ascent”. The adherents of Sufism believe that theirs is the correct path within Islam, as it is both an outward and inward journey back to the Source.<sup>84</sup>

The journey or the return to the Source is the telos of humanity and achieved both through gnosis (knowledge) and praxis (i.e. spiritual practice). Achieving the human telos first began with the Prophet who was given the power by Allah to awaken from, as Nasr notes, “our earthly daydreaming” which subsequently led to the fulfilling of ultimate human purpose, “loving and knowing God.”<sup>85</sup> One successfully completes the return when he reaches the Garden of Truth (i.e. Paradise) and it is there where love and knowledge are manifested in their fullness in the Beatific Vision. These two themes of knowledge and love are of central concern in this study because of the impact they have in the life to come. The goodness of Paradise and consequently the goodness of Allah, depend, in my estimation, on the manifestation and experience of love and knowledge as they relate to and emanate from the Divine in the Afterlife. Nasr’s work helps the seeker chart the course to Divine by thoroughly explaining and developing both themes from within the Sufi tradition.

Joseph Lumbard’s “From *Ḥubb* to *‘Ishq*: The Development of Love in Early Sufism” provides useful insight into the relationship between these two kinds of love as well as the development and implementation of the oft controversial use of *‘ishq* in early Sufism. This development is significant because the notion of *‘ishq* became the predominant use of love and a

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 23.

central theme in the Persian Sufi tradition in the 7<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> Century, most notably in Rūmī (d. 627/1273), who was both a significant Persian Sufi and contributor to the notion of love.<sup>86</sup>

Lumbard's goal in this work is to connect the later developments of *'ishq* in Sufism to the earlier traditions. He notes that the concept of *'ishq* did not take on a robust metaphysic until the work *Sawānīh* (508/1114) by Aḥmed al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid's brother. In the *Sawānīh*, Aḥmed makes the strongest metaphysical claim of love to date in Islam by linking love to the divine essence of Allah. He further suggests that all of reality is the "unfolding of love (*'ishq*) through complex interrelations of loverness and belovedness..." which will eventually culminate in the return to the origin of said love.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, Lumbard's work demonstrates the specific uses of *ḥubb* and *'ishq* in Abū Ḥāmid's Book 36 of the *Iḥyā*. There, Lumbard points out that al-Ghazālī employs *ḥubb* while discussing the five ways in which man love which correspond to the ways in which God is loved. But when al-Ghazālī discusses the highest form of love, and thus the highest level of delight, he switches to *'ishq*, a degree of passionate longing for Allah akin to infatuation, where love for everything other-than God fades away, the goal for all but one that few will attain. Another important insight from Lumbard is highlighting the connection between love and gnosis. Al-Ghazālī identifies love with gnosis, a move, according to Lumbard, first seen in the Sufi and poet al-Daylamī (d. late fourth/tenth century) but was not repeated in the extant literature (and often reject) until the publishing of the *Iḥyā*.<sup>88</sup>

### Literature Survey Summary

The survey has shown a number of things which will be summarized here. First, it has shown that both the doctrine of Heaven and Paradise in Christianity and Islam respectively is

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<sup>86</sup> Lumbard, "From *Ḥubb* to *'Ishq*," 347.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 382.



diverse and robust. Second, the sources in this survey were selected because they each add pieces that will be used to construct the argument in the remainder of the paper. Themes such as a theocentric Afterlife, God's oneness or Trinity, the love of God and love for God, all play significant parts in our understanding of the qualitative nature of eternal existence. Lastly, this survey has demonstrated support for a study of this kind – support through absence. With the increase of religious intersection there has also been a subsequent increase in religious dialogue. In the literature, there have been comparative studies done between Christianity and Islam, Allah and Trinity, etc. The most cordial of these studies and/or conversations strive for further clarification and mutual understanding while, at the same time, offering respectful critique. What is lacking, however, is a study of this kind that extends the focus of comparative research – between Christianity and Islam – into questions about the afterlife and its quality. The extant literature has laid the groundwork for asking such questions, especially with regard to the Divine nature and the God-man relationship, but it is here in this study where those comparative and qualitative questions will be brought to the fore.

### **Methodology**

There are number of direct fields of relevance in this study – philosophy of religion, theology and apologetics. The goal of the study is to ultimately make a positive case for Christianity and so the methodology is both comparative and apologetic. This section will discuss the methodologies – both apologetic and abductive – that will be applied throughout. Firstly, a discussion about the overall disposition of the apologetic endeavor is in order. Human creatures are a certain kind of being and if Paradise is to satisfy us for an eternity, it would entail pleasures that engage the whole person. The same can be said of Christian persuasion. Because

humans are complex beings, Christian persuasion should be holistic in nature. In this Late-Modern era, the effects of Modernism are still felt even in apologetic method.<sup>89</sup> Christian apologetics must caution against reductionist methodologies which make limited appeals. James K. A. Smith writes that human beings are more than thinking things reducible to mere “brains on a stick,” we are “desiring beings” beings who have longings and desires at a gut (visceral) level.<sup>90</sup> A Christian apologetic should avoid a reductionist “thinking thingism”<sup>91</sup> and instead appeal to the whole person (i.e. mind, body, soul). Therefore, a Christian apologetic, if it is to truly engage the whole person must move beyond the rigidity of intellectual arguments aimed solely at logically dismantling another’s worldview and plausibility structure. The apologetic method employed in this study appeals to both the head and the heart, both at an intellectual and visceral level. It makes an appeal to our most basic, yet consistently one of the strongest, experiences of our humanity – love and relationality.

One aspect of comparative methodology entails conclusions made through abduction.<sup>92</sup> Abductive reasoning begins with a set of facts in need of explanation. From there one or more hypotheses are considered and an inference is made to the best possible explanation, that is, the explanation that best fits and accounts for all the data. Here then are the facts in need of explanation. First, the quality of the experience must match the demand of the quantity, that is, if the afterlife is to be desired, the qualitative nature of the Afterlife must be such that it meets and

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<sup>89</sup> The term “Late-Modernism” is favored over “Post-Modern.” This usage is influenced by Chatraw and Allen in *Apologetics at the Cross: An Introduction for Christian Witness*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), esp. ch. 11.

<sup>90</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 3ff.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> For more on abductive reasoning see Douglas Walton, *Abductive Reasoning*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2014), Ch. 1

surpasses the quantitative demand of eternity.<sup>93</sup> Let us call this the Qualitative Gap Problem (QGP). In light of this problem it would seem then that the qualitative nature of the afterlife would have need to be derived from and sourced in a maximally great being (i.e. God). Only a being of that magnitude and greatness could overcome such a great expanse. That God is the Ultimate Good in the afterlife is agreed upon by both Muslims and Christians and thus this fact is not in need of thorough development insofar as the divine is understood as the source of goodness. The QGP is an objective, ontological consideration and it seems reasonable to assume that if the demand of eternity is matched and the problem overcome, it will be matched in and through the Divine.

The next three facts are both subjective and teleological in nature. They consider human experience, design and basic intuitions which form the Teleological Gap Problem (TGP) of the afterlife. The TGP is identified by these two questions: “Will the end of afterlife match the end of man?” “How well does the theology of either religion explain and account for the teleology?” Both faith traditions teach that the afterlife will be an embodied existence and human beings will retain their physicality to some extent. If we assume that the afterlife is a bodily, physical reality, then human creatures will possess the same essential properties as they do in this life pre-mortem. It is necessary, then, to consider those essential elements of human existence. Based on human experience and observation, it seems there are a number of human dimensions which constitute the human good and the conditions for human flourishing. First, human beings are physical embodied creatures who have both longings and desires. The goodness of human existence is linked to physical pleasures enjoyed in creation. Unlike prevailing Greek

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<sup>93</sup> This is an intuitive assumption made in light of those who would view immortal life as a curse rather than blessing (those articles have been referenced earlier in the chapter). If immortal life is something to be desired then it would seem that the qualitative nature of the afterlife would outweigh and/or overcome the quantitatively infinite duration.

philosophies which have traditionally viewed the physical realm as lesser-than and a shadow of the metaphysical realm, the natural world in these traditions has been created by the Divine and is thus inherently good. Both orthodox Islam and orthodox Christianity also affirm a physical, embodied afterlife, although one that is renewed and redeemed. It is plausible to suggest then that the goodness of the afterlife is connected, to some degree, to physical pleasures. Second, human beings have a mental/spiritual dimension. Unique to all other created things, human beings have individual agency, capacity for choices, creativity, introspection and deliberation. They are able to make plans for the future and reflect on and analyze the decisions of the past. For all human creatures there is a unique self which persists through time, and, we could assume eternity. Thus, the teleological goodness of the afterlife intuitively includes the retention of individual agency and function. Third, human beings have a very strong social dimension. Human beings are inherently relational creatures and live in community with one another. They form relationally intentional groups and intimately unite their individual lives into larger familial units. Individual human lives become uniquely bound to and derive meaning from these relationships.

In relation to the afterlife, the significance of the social dimension is two-fold. First, the goodness of the afterlife would seemingly need to entail some level of relationality towards or with the divine. In this life, specifically, one of the great goods of human experience is self-giving love and relationships shared between human creatures. How much more would the goodness of heaven be heightened if there was a loving, relational correspondence between God and man? Second, is the desire for our loved ones to be with us in the afterlife. As the philosopher Luc Ferry notes, “What we would like above all is to be reunited with our loved

ones, and, if possible, with their voices, their faces.”<sup>94</sup> Himself an atheist, Ferry highlights this strong human intuition and also recognizes that, in the history of thought, this is one of the great strengths of the Christian tradition of salvation.<sup>95</sup>

It would seem then, that an afterlife worth desiring, an afterlife wherein eternal joy is experienced, will provide holistic satisfaction to human creatures. A reality which meets the multi-dimensionality of human creatures. It can also be assumed that there can be some comparison of pleasures and experiences drawn between this life and the next; especially of those virtues which are so fundamental to human existence (i.e., love, peace, justice, mercy, etc.). If the Qualitative and Subjective Gap Problems are met it would seem they would be met in and through the Divine. If, then, the eternal happiness of the afterlife is found in and derives from the Divine and the human experience of the good consists of the virtues, especially of self-giving love and relationship, it would seem that eternal happiness would consist of that same experience of the good experienced in and through the divine in the afterlife. From this point, the comparative question naturally arises: which theology best meets the objective and subjective needs as expressed in the argument? As stated in the thesis earlier, the Triune God of Christian better meets these problems and it will be argued that the Christian view of Heaven better accounts for human flourishing in the afterlife.

Not only do I want to demonstrate that Christianity is true, I also want to make an apologetic appeal to Muslims regarding Christianity’s truthfulness. Therefore, interwoven into

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<sup>94</sup> Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, trans. by Theo Cuffe, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 52-3.

<sup>95</sup> He writes, “It [Christianity] promises us no less than everything we would wish for: personal immortality and the salvation of our loved ones.” Ibid., 53.

the study is an apologetic methodology called the *Inside/Out* method.<sup>96</sup> Islam, and more specifically the Sufi tradition following al-Ghazālī, is not entirely devoid of truth. Their tradition possesses elements of truth, but it is not the full truth. A proper and effective apologetic method does not strip the opposing view of every true belief; rather, it appeals to those beliefs which are true and challenges the ones that are not.<sup>97</sup> The first part of the *Inside/Out* method – the *Inside* portion – entails entering into the worldview of the opposing view and assimilating their plausibility structures. Alasdair MacIntyre suggests this approach (not specifically by name but in methodology) whenever one hopes to defeat the claims of a rival position. He writes, “A necessary first step would be for them [the Protagonist] to come to understand what it is to think in the terms prescribed by that particular rival tradition, to learn how to think as if one were a convinced adherent of that rival tradition.”<sup>98</sup> From this position two things must be assessed; first, it must be determined what can be affirmed and what needs to be challenged; and second, is to trace out their assumptions and see where they would lead if applied consistently. In this *Inside* portion, MacIntyre’s methodology is useful; he instructs the rival, from within the viewpoint of the other tradition to, “identify, from the standpoint of the adherents of that rival tradition, its crucially important unresolved issues and unsolved problems – unresolved and unsolved by the standards of that tradition – which now confront those adherents and to enquire

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<sup>96</sup> The *Inside/Out* method was named and developed by Dr.’s Chatraw and Allen in *Apologetics at the Cross*, 213-21. This methodology will be specifically applied in Ch. 5.

<sup>97</sup> If Christianity is true, it means that this world is teeming with truths, God’s truths, and humanity is bound to experience and discover truths even within other religions. This is not to suggest that there are multiple ways to God or to endorse an inclusivism soteriology. The Gospel remains the only way to God. I am merely suggesting that from Romans 1 we see that creation reveals God because it is full of His truth. This truth extends into the human experience and where those truths manifest in life and discussion, they should be built upon in Christian persuasion.

<sup>98</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edit., (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2007), xiii.

how progress might be made in moving towards their resolution and solution.”<sup>99</sup> This is what takes place in Chapters 2 and 3 of the study – the nature of Paradise and the doctrine of Love in Islam – and concludes with final analysis in Chapter 5. Through this I will highlight some problems that remain unresolved yet are crucial to the overall explanatory scope. We can naturally ask why these problems remain unresolved and it is perhaps that the tradition lacks the resources to address the issues. Because Islam does not possess the full truth, this step will, as Os Guinness notes, “press them to the logic of their assumptions and their faith will prove neither true nor adequate.”<sup>100</sup>

On the other hand, Sufi Islam possesses some truths and so, as Guinness continues, “Equally, the experience of those who listen to the real truth in what they believe, even when it runs counter or goes beyond the rest of their beliefs, will be in touch with desires and longings that point them beyond what they believe and toward the full truth.”<sup>101</sup> Taking the beliefs and doctrines which can and ought to be preserved, the transition can naturally be made to the *Outside* portion. This portion of the method asks the question “How does Christianity better address our experiences, observations, and history?”<sup>102</sup> In this way, the *Outside* portion of the method is similar to the final steps of the abductive method. Because Christianity possesses the full truth, it will naturally tell a better story about this life, or in the words of Charles Taylor, “capture the rich texture of this life and history.”<sup>103</sup> The truths of Islam which point to the fuller

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>100</sup> Os Guinness, *Fool’s Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 138.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>102</sup> Allen and Chatraw, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 218-21.

<sup>103</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 219.

truth of Christianity must be built upon and used as a mean to persuade Muslims of the Truth. Chapter 4 of the study serves the dual role of both part of building the abductive case and the *Outside* portion of the method. Through discussing the nature of love in Christianity, the nature of Trinitarian love concurrently aligns with the deep desires and longings which point beyond and towards the full truth. Finally, in Chapter 5, the comparisons will be made and the conclusions drawn – that Christian theism is the best explanation for human flourishing in the Afterlife.

### Criteria

As a comparative study, an effective set of criteria is needed upon which to judge the merits of one particular religion over the other. Given that each person approaches any research question with a set of presuppositions, it is challenging to remain as objective as possible. It is still possible nonetheless to make value judgments. Specifically, with abductive reasoning there are criteria from which to assess the competing hypotheses. Three criteria will be used here: explanatory scope, explanatory depth, and simplicity.<sup>104</sup> Explanatory scope considers the ability of the hypothesis to explain as wide a range of the data as possible. This criterion refers to the hypothesis' capacity in terms of breadth. Of all the facts in need of explanation, which competing hypothesis can account for more of the facts in itself with fewer *ad hoc* components. Explanatory depth considers the ability of the hypothesis to explain in as much detail as possible the facts in the range of consideration. Does a hypothesis explain part of the individual fact but not all? The better inference will be the hypothesis that has a more robust explanatory depth of each of the facts as they are presented. Lastly, there is the criteria of simplicity. Simplicity, or the

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<sup>104</sup> For the criterion of explanatory power see Atocha Aliseda, *Abductive Reasoning: Logical Investigations Into Discovery and Explanation*, (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 36. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, (accessed January 19, 2018). On the criterion of simplicity see Charles S. Peirce. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Ed. by Justus Buchler, (New York: Dover Publications, 2012), 156.



simpler explanation, is often misunderstood to mean the *logically* simpler hypothesis, that is, as Charles Peirce notes, “the one that adds the least to what has been observed.”<sup>105</sup> This was the assumption of Peirce, that simplicity meant the hypothesis which adds the least, but as he further notes, this assumption was misguided.<sup>106</sup> The simpler hypothesis is the one that is more “facile and natural, the one that instinct suggests.”<sup>107</sup> Here, Peirce suggests that in making an inference to the best explanation we must be able to see what is a better fit or else we have no opportunity of making evaluative judgments at all. His is a basic assumption about reality that must be true if any abductive argument is to get off the ground. Furthermore, being able to determine what is a better fit is assumed to be recognized by its aesthetic qualities. It seems that one could not make an intuitive appeal without also appealing to its aesthetic qualities for simplicity is itself an aesthetic quality. Abduction, then, is an inference to an inherently aesthetic explanation about reality. Thus, the task is to highlight the aesthetic quality of love and relationality that we humans experience in this life, focus on that good, and demonstrate the locus of that good as being found in the Triune God of Christianity.

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<sup>105</sup> Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 156.

<sup>106</sup> He writes, “It was not until long experience forced me to realize that subsequent discoveries were every time showing I had been wrong, while those who understood the maxim as Galileo had done, early unlocked the secret, that the scales fell from my eyes and my mind awoke to the broad and flaming daylight that it is the simpler Hypothesis in the sense of the more facile and natural, the one that instinct suggests, that must be preferred; for the reason that, unless man have a natural bent in accordance with nature’s, he has no chance of understanding nature at all.” *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

## **Chapter Breakdown**

### **Chapter 2 – Paradise Explored**

Following the present introductory chapter, chapter 2 is dedicated to the Islamic view of Paradise. There are a number of reasons why I have chosen to only discuss the Islamic view at length. First, in my experience there is a general agnosticism on behalf of Christians where Islamic eschatology is concerned. Popular views tend to be reductionist in scope and become caricatures of Islam's eschatological tradition. Second, from within the various Islamic traditions we see a number of key emphases and distinctions which, I would submit, have significant implications towards this study. There is, on the one hand a literalist hermeneutical tradition that reads Qur'ānic depictions of Paradise more literally and thus physical, while, on the other, certain traditions read them as metaphorical and thus through a more spiritualized lens. The hermeneutic applied to these eschatological readings is significant because it can influence whether one has an anthropocentric or theocentric view of Paradise. Lastly, the themes discussed in this chapter have an underlying relationality to them. Paradise is a place where one experiences Allah, whether through the blessing of the Garden or directly in the Beatific Vision. The sections of this chapter discuss the various pleasures of Paradise and how man relates to both the physical and the spiritual pleasures therein.

### **Chapter 3 – The Islamic Beatific Vision: God's Love for Man and Man's Love for God**

That the Beatific Vision is the highest level of Paradise is affirmed by many Muslim philosophers and mystics. As was mentioned earlier, proximity to God in the afterlife directly corresponds to the level of spiritual attainment in this life. Thus, the *ṭarīqah* or "path" is the spiritual journey one must follow in order to reach the level of *iḥsān*, the level that leads to the fullness of the beatific vision. Directly involved in the path to *iḥsān* is *gnosis* or knowledge about

Allah. Knowledge of Allah leads to a love for Him and the more one loves Allah the more one wants to know about Him. The relationship of knowledge and love is cyclical but also an upward moving spiral. Belief in Islam is measured by the love for God and His Prophet. This love is achieved through knowledge. Once a person comes to love God above all else, then, the Qur'ān states, does Allah love that person.<sup>108</sup>

As one of the greatest revivers of Islam, al-Ghazālī's efforts are of central import to this study. Reconciling the doctrine of *tawḥīd* with the positive attribution to Allah is an ongoing challenging for faithful Muslims. This chapter will focus largely on al-Ghazālī's attempt to reconcile the tension and thus provide a way forward for attaining the beatific vision. Ghazālī's works are an amalgam of Sufi and philosophical thought and provide robust insight into the attainment of eternal felicity.

#### **Chapter 4 – The Christian Beatific Vision: God's Love for Man and Man's Love for God**

There are many Christians conceptions of heaven in the theological traditions, academic and popular level circles. Space does not allow for a thorough treatment of the spectrum of beliefs concerning heaven in the Christian tradition. The central focus in this chapter is the view which is consistent to the corresponding theocentric Islamic view – the beatific vision of God. That the vision of God is the ultimate end and thus source of eternal felicity is, like Islam, an orthodox eschatological tradition within Christianity. In Christianity, the Triune God is the Good and so ultimate goodness (eternal felicity) is found in God.

Furthermore, in keeping with correspondence to the previous chapter, this chapter will discuss the conceptions of God's love for man and man's love for God as well as the relation to knowledge and love. Christianity teaches that God is love and this love is conceived in terms of

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<sup>108</sup> Q 2:222; 9:108; 2:195; 3:31; 3:76; 5:54

action and doing and is thus other-focused love – the Godhead eternally engaged in self-giving, other-centered relationship. The love of the Trinity is the foundation for the love humanity experiences, not only in terms of the God-man relationship but love between human persons. As the Scriptures teach, the ultimate revelation of God’s love is displayed on the cross when the Son willingly gave his life for the sake of all humanity. The kind of love displayed on the cross is the lens through which we try to interpret and comprehend not only God’s love for humanity but His intent to be in communion with mankind.

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusion**

This study will conclude with the task of making comparative analyses and assessments of both the Islamic and Christian views of the paradisaal afterlife. Christian apologists in previous centuries have written against an Islamic afterlife full of sensuous pleasures and indulgences. To this, I only wish to add to the criticism that an overly sensuous view is reductionistic of human creatures and is inherently limited by its relation to eternity. The main task of the study thus far has been centered on the theocentric view of the afterlife in the respective religions. Chapters 3 and 4 provided an analysis of the salient features of a theocentric position and in this chapter, we turn now to apply the specified method of abduction to our qualitative and comparative assessments of both views.

Returning to the facts in need of explanation, I present the argument that Christianity offers a more robust and satisfactory view of the afterlife because of its ability to offer more explanatory scope and depth, as well as the simpler explanation for a satisfactory afterlife. Christianity, and more importantly the Trinitarian God, better accounts for the facts and avoids the problems that arise from a *tawhīdic* Allah.

## CHAPTER 2: PARADISE EXPLORED

### Introduction

This chapter focuses specifically on Islamic Paradise and will explore the salient features of Islamic afterlife as revealed in the Qur'an, Hadiths, and various influential traditions. After the theological doctrines of *tawhīd* and prophecy, Paradise, is third in level of importance in Islam. In the Qur'ān there is an abundance of revelation concerning Paradise; so much so that Mahan notes, "It is not possible to find a single page in any conventional printing of the Qur'ān without some sort of reference to the life hereafter."<sup>109</sup> Attaining Paradise is the eschatological goal for all Muslims. The felicity of Paradise and the proximity to Allah are that which form the deepest longings of the soul for, as the Qur'ān states, "They *abide in that which their souls desired, eternally*."<sup>110</sup>

The chapter follows a certain thematic progression that begins with a brief discussion concerning Qur'ānic hermeneutical principles. Following that section, we will consider the dialectical eschatology of *al-dunyā* and *al-ākhirā*, that is, the contrastive yet correlative relationship between this life and the life to come. This, however, is not the only dialectical eschatology in the Qur'ān; Paradise is almost always contrasted with Hell and the torments of Hell give rhetorical force to Muslims being command to obey their Lord.<sup>111</sup> We can see this

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<sup>109</sup> Mahan, Mirza. "Qur'ān Exegesis and Hermeneutics." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*. Ed. by Emad Shahin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/article/opr/t342/e0391> (accessed April 4, 2018)

<sup>110</sup> Q 21:102

<sup>111</sup> In the majority of the Qur'ānic passages on Paradise, the blessed reality is contrasted to Hell. Typically, in eschatological passages of the Qur'ān, a description of Hell is given with an inclusion of who will go there follow by a vision of Paradise and a reminder that it is reserved only for believers in Allah. This dichotomy is intended as a warning to those who Allah and his Prophet are not the most beloved. Islam has a much more vivid and descriptive doctrine of Hell than does Christianity. The most extreme depictions of torture and suffering are elaborated in quite extensive detail, detail which makes Dante's *Inferno* seem tame (even for Judas who is being perpetually gnawed at in one of Satan's mouths). In just one example, the inhabitants of Hell are supernaturally preserved in their physical bodies so that their skin, which is the largest organ, can endure more torture and maximum pain. As the boiling liquid and fire burn through the body into the organs, the person is remade so as to endure this perpetual fate anew.

dialectic manifest in al-Ghazālī's book on remembrance when he writes, "occupy your heart therefore with trepidation through long meditation upon the terrors of Hellfire, and with hope through long contemplation of the abiding bliss which is promised the indwellers of the Garden."<sup>112</sup> The phraseology here and the comparative pairing in the Qur'ān suggest that the joys of Paradise are heightened in relation to terrors of Hell. I would like to suggest this is why people do not typically consider Paradise on its own merits. What rational person would not instantly choose Paradise if faced with both options immediately present before them. But this is not the focus of the study as was mentioned in the limitations section, Paradise will be considered on its own merits (and later compared to the Christian heaven). What remains to be seen is if Paradise loses any of its appeal when not in contrast to Hell for as Reinhart notes, "The bliss of the Koranic Paradise derives partly from what it follows (the Judgement) and partly from what it is

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With such a terrifying picture of the Hellfire, it is not surprising that Muslims place so much focus on attaining Paradise.

The comparative contrast between heaven and hell seems to be an intentional rhetorical literative device to motivate people to seek the former and avoid the latter. Given the option between the torment of Hell and the pleasures of Paradise, the only logical choice is Paradise. Although, this does not necessarily solve the problem of eternity. Yes, in Paradise one avoids the unfathomable torments of Hellfire which afflict both body and soul in perpetual, eternal agony. This does not mean that Paradise could not also, in and of itself, become increasingly tormenting. While it would be difficult to imagine Paradise reflecting any physical torments, we cannot negate the psychological torment of eternal existence that has been suggested by various critics of eternity.

The avoidance of Hell is not a motivation strictly reserved to Islam however. Often, Christian evangelists and preachers, craft their delivery with an emphasis on the fires of Hell that await the unrepentant sinner. Using Hell as a motivation for Heaven or Paradise can be an unhealthy way to encourage people to live committed, religious lives. It can lead to improper perspectives about the afterlife, especially in regard to the experience of the Divine presence, the Ultimate Good. Furthermore, in light of the hellfire tradition in Islam, it can spurn reflection about the overall qualitative nature of Paradise for any other reality apart from the other alternative seems infinitely better. As it pertains to this study, however, as it was mentioned earlier, Islamic paradise is not going to be compared to hell nor is Christian heaven to be compared to its own doctrine of hell either. We are asking the question about the nature of Islamic Paradise as it stands in comparison to Christian Heaven, and, more specifically, which view of Afterlife can meet the demands of eternity.

<sup>112</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, 232.

not (the Fire).”<sup>113</sup> Without the threat of Hellfire, is Paradise to be desired and does it meet the demands of eternity?

These considerations necessarily lead to sections covering the nature of Paradise and relevant paradisaic themes. These sections will not be overly exhaustive but will, nonetheless, orient the reader to Paradise’s central features. The remaining themes to be covered are: abundance of the sensual, the sexual and the sacred, Paradise as theophany, and the Beatific Vision. The way these sections are presented corresponds to the overall nature of this study. Because Allah is the ultimate good and thus the source of pleasure in Paradise – both causally and existentially – there is a correlation between the experience of Paradise and the experience of the Divine. As we will see throughout, the blessings bestowed on the inhabitants of Paradise, will subsequently lead them to turn their praise to Allah. Also, the pleasures of Paradise are perhaps the point wherein one can experience Allah. This latter distinction is referring to a deeper metaphysical connection that, for some Muslims, purportedly occurs between Allah and the inhabitants as mediated through the pleasures, blessings, and rewards. This connection is distinct from the Beatific Vision which will be discussed in the last section. The Beatific Vision occurs in Firdaws, the highest level of Paradise, and is reserved for only the most faithful of the inhabitants of Paradise. As the Qur’ān and Hadith report, few will inhabit Firdaws. It will consist of many Muslims from the beginning period of the religion (Muhammad included of course) but few from the latter times. Firdaws is the garden wherein one’s proximity to Allah is nearest and is the highest aim of the religious life.

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<sup>113</sup> Kevin Reinhart, “The Here and the Hereafter in Islamic Religious Thought,” in *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art*, ed. by Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, (Hanover, NH: Trustees of Dartmouth College, 1991), 15.

Before delving into the nature of Paradise, there are a couple of points worthy of our attention. First, the Qur'ān is the supreme source of authority in Islam for it is the eternal word of God; therefore, it is, as Muhammad Abdel Haleem notes, “the starting point of everything Islamic.”<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Haleem states that the Qur'ān is considered by Muslims to be categorically and thoroughly authentic. But within the Islam faith, the hadith collections are also authoritative guides for knowledge, instruction, and practical theology. In general, they are not considered as divine revelation and their authority is subjected to the Qur'ān, but they are nonetheless the words of the Prophet, transmitted down through his Companions.<sup>115</sup> Second, it is interesting to note, there are some who suggest that within the doctrines of the afterlife in Islam, the Qur'ān itself is not often the sole authority and does not, as Palacios states, “constitute the main source of its dogma.”<sup>116</sup> This is because Palacios sees two antithetical views of Paradise flourishing at the same time in the later Muslim traditions – one coarse and sensual and the other

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<sup>114</sup> Muhammad Abdel Haleem, “Quranic Paradise: How to Get to Paradise and What to Expect There,” in *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, ed. by Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 49.

<sup>115</sup> Not all hadith are considered authoritative and are graded on their status of transmission, that is, whether or not the words can actually be ascribed to the Prophet. For the purposes of this chapter, the hadith which were selected mainly come from hadith which are generally accepted as authoritative and genuine words of the Prophet (Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim being the two most frequented but also cited are Jami' at-Tirmidhi and 40 Hadith Nawawi).

<sup>116</sup> In the context of this quote Miguel Palacios in his famous work *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, is drawing a comparison between Dante's spiritual and celestial paradise with that of the Muslim paradisaal creeds. Palacios anticipates contention against such comparisons and notes that his assessment is based upon the creeds and not necessarily the Qur'ānic text itself. If such a comparison was made solely from the texts of the Qur'ān it would only serve to show the antagonism between the two conceptions. Palacios views the Qur'ānic descriptions of Paradise as “coarse and sensual materialism.” Palacios goes on to write, “The early traditions attributed to Mahomet, the explanations of the commentators, and the speculations of theologians and mystics, played at least as great a part as the letter of the Koran in determining the essential points of the creed of the Moslem paradise. Of outstanding interest in this connection is the tradition of the ascension of Mahomet. This legend in its various forms, and particularly in Version C of Cycle 2, showed very clearly that paradise was by no means generally conceived on the crass and sensual lines described in the Koran; on the contrary, the picture drawn there was almost exclusively one of light, color and music...” Miguel Asin Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 265, Accessed May 1, 2018, <https://rtraba.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/palacios-miguel-asin-islam-and-the-divine-comedy-1968.pdf>.



the spiritual.<sup>117</sup> In his estimation, the coarse and sensual reading comes from Qur'ānic readings primarily while the deep spiritual depiction of the afterlife flows from external sources and traditions of the mystics and philosophers. Lange would agree with Palacios's analysis concerning the paradisaal emphases in the traditionalist readings of the Qur'ān and Hadiths. He purports that the traditionalists Sunni creeds from the third/ninth century onward consistently emphasized the material pleasures and that "a thorough spiritualization of paradise and hell did not occur in early Muslim theology."<sup>118</sup> On the traditionalist, materialist understanding of the afterlife, Lange goes on to write, "the otherworld sketched out by the Qur'ān and the hadith may have been too concrete to allow for this [a spiritualization of Paradise]..."<sup>119</sup> As we will see later on in this chapter and into the next, Al-Ghazālī often serves as a middle ground between extreme philosophical/theological ends. Regarding Paradise, al-Ghazālī notes that the inhabitants of paradise enjoy "diverse pleasures" and "have all they desire" while at the same time "attending before the Throne and gazing upon the noble Countenance of God...unceasingly they move from one variety of blessing to the next, safe from ever suffering their loss."<sup>120</sup> On the one hand, al-Ghazālī affirms an embodied existence in Paradise wherein the inhabitants enjoy Allah's blessings but he also preserves a theocentric emphasis of the beatific vision establishing its centrality in the life to come.

The materialization of Paradise has often led to sharp criticisms of Islamic Paradise. J. B. Taylor responds to Palacios's analysis and while Taylor is appreciative of Palacios's fair

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>118</sup> Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*, 182.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, Book XL of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, trans. by T. J. Winter, (Cambridge, U.K.: Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 234.

treatment of the Prophet, he believes that the analysis and conclusions of the paradisaic traditions is incorrect. Taylor argues that it was precisely the Qur'ān and the life of the Prophet from whence the spiritualized readings derived. He notes that it was “the verses of the Qur'ān and the traditions concerning the Prophet upon which they meditated and which they took as the yardstick by which to judge any spontaneous or any second-hand ideas.”<sup>121</sup> The materialists traditions are often critiqued as overly anthropocentric and neglecting to realize the ultimate good of Paradise – Allah. On the other hand, overly spiritualized traditions, wishing to correct the materialists and be theocentric in focus, have perhaps neglected the fundamentally physical descriptive language found in the Qur'ān. Surah 55 is a significant passage in this context for it does not allow a materialistic reading to forget their Lord for Muslims are reminded that the rewards of Paradise are permeated with Divine mercy.<sup>122</sup> An emphatic materialism of Paradise does not faithfully follow the Qur'ān nor does a negation of such a material reality. Both the tensions and criticisms in the Islamic traditions concerning Paradise highlight certain hermeneutical and doctrinal issues. How is the Qur'ān to be interpreted? What hermeneutical principles are to be applied to the text? How was the Muslim community to understand the eschatological realities of which, according to the Qur'ān “No person knows what is kept hidden for them of joy, as a reward for what they used to do.”<sup>123</sup> It is towards this we turn to briefly in the next section.

### **Ta'wīl and Tafsīr: Hermeneutical Considerations**

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<sup>121</sup> J. B. Taylor, “Some Aspects of Islamic Eschatology,” *Religious Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Oct. 1969), 61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20000089>. (Accessed January 5, 2018)

<sup>122</sup> In Surah 55 the phrase “Which, then, of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?” is repeated after each description of reward in Paradise.

<sup>123</sup> Q 32:17

That the Qur'an is the authoritative word from Allah is not a point of dispute for the sects of Islam. What is in question, however, is the meaning of the text and how one should interpret its content. It is necessary at this point in the study to consider briefly some hermeneutical practices and distinctions in Qur'ānic exegesis or *ta'wīl*. For if one wishes to know the attributes of Heaven they must, as al-Ghazālī states, "...read the Qur'ān, for there is no discourse higher than that of God".<sup>124</sup> On the lexical meaning of *ta'wīl* Dukake notes, "[it means] to bring something back to its origin, and thus refers to the effort to ascertain the full meaning of a Qur'ānic word, phrase, or story."<sup>125</sup> The goal then of *ta'wīl* is to arrive at the original intent of the divine author – Allah. Another common interpretive term in Islam is *tafsīr*, whose basic meaning is to "quote something in detail."<sup>126</sup> Scholars note that the two terms seemed to be interchangeable in early Islam but by the 10<sup>th</sup> Century a clear distinction existed between the two. The 10<sup>th</sup> Century scholar al-Mārturīdī made the distinction in the introduction of his Qur'ānic commentary. Claude Gilliot suggests the distinction goes back even further to the first half of the second/eight century and was attested in the "earliest rudimentary attempts to classify exegesis."<sup>127</sup> Gilliot further notes that the following hermeneutical classifications of Qur'ānic exegesis were attributed to Ibn 'Abbās (d. 69/688): "The Qur'ān was [revealed] in four aspects: *tafsīr* [the literal meaning], which scholars know...; [and] *ta'wīl* [the deeper meaning] that only

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<sup>124</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 234.

<sup>125</sup> Maria Massi Dukake, "Hermeneutics and Allegorical Interpretation," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Science, and Technology in Islam*, ed. by Ibrahim Kalin. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/article/opr/t445/e77> (accessed March 29, 2018)

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Claude Gilliot, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Classical and Medieval," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007), [http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/brillquran/exegesis\\_of\\_the\\_qur%CA%BEan\\_classical\\_and\\_medieval/0?institutionId=5072](http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/brillquran/exegesis_of_the_qur%CA%BEan_classical_and_medieval/0?institutionId=5072)

God knows.”<sup>128</sup> Thus, from the earliest accounts of Qur’ānic exegesis there has been diversity in hermeneutical methodology. As Islam grew, various groups began to emerge each with differing theological commitments (i.e., Sunnis, Shī‘ites, Mu‘tazilites, Ash‘arites, the Literalists, Sūfīs, etc.). These different commitments were, as Quasem suggests, the cause of differences in Qur’ānic understanding among the various groups.<sup>129</sup>

There are various hermeneutic approaches to the Qur’an each with varying methodologies for interpretation. Some approach the text with a literal lens and will interpret the Qur’an as literal as possible seeking to understand the text at face value. The Sunni tradition in Islam looks more to the letter of the Qur’an, to its more literal meaning in contrast to the spirit of the text. This hermeneutical distinction is referred to as *ẓāhir* (the literal) in contrast to *bāṭin* (the hidden) meaning of the Qur’an. The revelatory content of the Qur’an is to be understood as literal as possible. There will obviously be instances where the Qur’an itself is not meant to be taken literally such as in the descriptions of Allah and that is because human language is inherently limited, especially when describing such metaphysical realities. Surely Allah does not have a hand for his does not have a material body. This is a case of anthropomorphism and it helps the reader to understand through analogy an attribute/action of Allah. As it relates to the afterlife, the Sunni traditions tend to emphasize a physical afterlife with all of the physical pleasures entailed. This means that the language used to describe the realities of Paradise corresponds at some level to our current reality. It might be that Paradise is qualitatively different

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<sup>128</sup> Gilliot suggests the possibility that these categories had their roots in Jewish and Patristic discussions on the four meanings of scripture: “Heb. *peshat*, “literal translation”; *remez*, “implied meaning”; *derash*, “homiletic comprehension”; *sod*, “mystical, allegorical meaning,” Gilliot, “Exegesis of the Qur’ān.” Gerhard Böwering suggests there is a connection to patristic and medieval conceptions of the four meanings in at least Tustarī’s definition of a fourfold Qur’ānic sense: literal/historical, allegorical/spiritual, tropological/moral and anagogical/eschatological. Gerhard Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur’ānic hermeneutics of the Sūfī Sahl At-Tustarī (d.283/896)*, (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 135-142.

<sup>129</sup> Quasem, *Jewels*, 10.

than the current physical world, but this difference does not negate correspondence for Muslims are called to imagine and anticipate all that their Lord has in store for them.

Much of the philosophical literature in Islam was generated within the Sufi tradition. This is due, in part, to their creative liberties directed towards the text which led to innovations and developments in Islamic philosophy and Mysticism. In this tradition, God is known both through his self-giving revelation and mystical experience. As such, the reading of the Qur'an and subsequent hadith are interpreted through the lens of the hidden meaning (*bāṭin*).<sup>130</sup> This is seen as innovation by Sunnis and is not typically accepted based on the standard of orthodoxy. However, it would seem the Sufi traditions have elucidated a more holistic religious tradition in that one's whole person (body and soul) is meant to experience the divine. In this sense, one might say that it is more spiritual than the Sunni tradition. This 'spiritual' bent carries over into afterlife and Paradise becomes primarily a spiritual affair rather than merely sensual.

Sufi hermeneutical methodology has always sought to glean the deeper meaning that exists in the text. For them there is a double-meaning within the text of the Qur'ān. The Sufi mystic and commentator Sahl at-Tustarī, for example, seems to have been influenced by Ibn 'Abbas's fourfold distinction, which is in keeping with the larger interpretive tradition, but in practice reduces his commentary of the Qur'ān to two levels of meaning – the literal and the spiritual/hidden – favoring the latter for interpretation, a consistent hermeneutic for Sufi *tafsīr*.<sup>131</sup> Being a Sufi as well, al-Ghazālī's hermeneutical methods are similar to that of Tustarī's.

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<sup>130</sup> Mustansir Mir notes that Sūfī *tafsīr* is “notable first for the near absence in it of grammatical, rhetorical, legal, and theological discussions, and second for its attempt to go beyond the apparent meaning of the Quranic text in order to derive deeper, hidden meanings through intuitive perception.” Mir further suggests that Sufi *tafsīr* produces from the text interpretations that have a tenuous basis in the text and may even be “irrelevant in the context or incompatible with the text.” Mustansir Mir, “Tafsīr,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed. by John Esposito, *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/articl/opr/t236/e0775> (accessed April 5, 2018)

<sup>131</sup> Böwering, *The Mystical Vision*, 141.

According to Quasem, al-Ghazālī thought that the correct method of apprehending the Qur’ān was to “[penetrate] into the depth of the inner, hidden meanings of the Qur’ānic verses, without merely being content with their outward meanings.”<sup>132</sup> For Ghazālī the Qur’ān is like a vast ocean in which the Muslim must immerse himself so to find the jewels and pearls which lie in its depths. In *The Jewels of the Qur’ān (Jawāhir al-Qur’ān)* we get a glimpse of al-Ghazālī’s hermeneutic commitments in the very first chapter where he writes,

I then wish to rouse you from your sleep, O you who recite the Qur’ān to a great length, who take its study as an occupation, and who imbibe some of its outward meanings and sentences. How long will you ramble on the shore of the ocean, closing your eyes to the wonders of the meanings of the Qur’ān? Was it not your duty to sail to the midst of the fathomless ocean of these meanings in order to see their wonders, to travel to their islands in order to gather their best produce, and to dive into their depths so that you might become rich by obtaining their jewels? Do you not feel ashamed of being deprived of their pearls and jewels by your persistence in looking at their shores and outward appearances?<sup>133</sup>

Clearly, al-Ghazālī is emphasizing a hermeneutic of depth and discovery, the search for the hidden meaning that lies within the pages of the holy text. His call for those on the shore to immerse themselves in the ocean is reminiscent of the mystical goal of immersion in the Divine. Stepping out into the ocean and moving away from the shore is the beginning stages of the path (*ṭarīqah*) to Allah.

The distinctions in hermeneutical methodology are as many as the Christian traditions and it makes speaking in certain doctrinal generalities difficult. Various philosophical and theological commitments about Allah and metaphysical realities impact Qur’ānic understanding. Among these understandings gleaned from this text is the specific nature of Paradise. How are the descriptions of Paradise to be read and understood? A literal reading of the text will produce

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<sup>132</sup> Quasem, *Jewels*, 11.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1, 19.

a certain eschatological tradition as will the readings in search of the hidden meaning behind the texts. There seems to be a general correlation between methodology and emphasis in the various Islamic traditions. For instance, the literal reading of the Qur'ān tends to produce a more anthropocentric view of Paradise, whereas, a more metaphorical reading tends towards a theocentric view. As we will see in this chapter, a theocentric view of Paradise is rightly focused on the Beatific Vision as the highest good in Paradise; however, the theocentric view should not reduce the sensuous reward to the spiritual. The Qur'ān teaches that the afterlife is an embodied existence and as such the experiences of Paradise are both sensual and spiritual. Al-Ghazālī supports this balance. As we see in the final pages of his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Ghazālī unequivocally rejects the notion of a disembodied resurrection and labels those who deny a bodily resurrection as infidels.<sup>134</sup> At the same time, however, Ghazālī also writes that the Beatific Vision of Allah is the highest good of Paradise, the greatest of all delights, and “which shall cause one to be quite oblivious of the pleasures of the people of Heaven.”<sup>135</sup>

### **The Nearer and the Further Life – *al-dunyā* and *al-ākhirā***

In Islam, there is an intimate connection between this world and the next. This relationship is significant not only to the chapter but also the entire study as this dialectic bears significant influence on eternity. On the one hand, in Islam, Paradise, the further life, is thought of in contrast to this life, the nearer. Because there is such a close connection, Paradise is immanent in the minds of Muslims. The concepts of the hereafter are ever present in the daily religious life of Muslims for the religious life emphasizes the need for *remembrance*, *return*, and

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<sup>134</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. by Michael E. Marmura, (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 226.

<sup>135</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 250.

*nearness*.<sup>136</sup> On the other hand, this life and how one lives it in relation to their Lord has a profound impact on the nature of their return – their return to Allah. In the beginning, Allah gave the creative command “to be” and everything came into existence. This was not a command that could be disobeyed for all contingent creatures derive their existence from that which is non-contingent and necessary. Mankind existed previously and enjoyed their Lord, but man was created weak, forgetful, and heedless and eventually forgot God and disobeyed the religious command. As a result, mankind was confined to this life (*al-dunyā*), a life where the religious command must be regained through struggle and perseverance.

Life in this world is not disconnect from the next and is as Abdel Haleem says “an inseparable part of a continuum, a unified whole which gives our life a context and relevance.”<sup>137</sup> This unified whole creates a linear connection of life-death-life that provides context and value to this life as it relates to the whole measure of human existence – including eternity. People are called to remember their Lord and this life is made more meaningful the more one’s life is full of good actions such as the remembrance. Life in this world will lead to the afterlife but the final destination in the afterlife is contingent upon the former. In fact, this life is a proving ground of sorts and one’s remembrance of Allah guarantees greater favor from Allah Himself. There is a reason for suffering and struggle in this life. Islam teaches that Allah loves those who love him through struggle – both inward and outward.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, it is Allah who has power over all things

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<sup>136</sup> “It is Allah who created you, then he provided sustenance for you, then he will cause you to die, then he will give life back to you.” Q 30:40 “It is we who gives life and make to die and to us is the homecoming.” Q 50:43

<sup>137</sup> Haleem, “Life and Beyond,” 66.

<sup>138</sup> It is interesting to note that the Arabic word for struggle is *jihad*. Of course, this initially recalls to one’s mind the modern notion of violent *jihad* that is being waged against the West by radical Muslim extremist. But this notion of *jihad* is only part of the understanding of the word. In the Qur’ān, a person must fight an internal *jihad*, an internal struggle against one’s propensity towards weakness and forgetfulness. I will be commenting more on the Islamic concept of struggle in Ch. 3.



and as the Qur’ān states, “[it is Allah] who created death and life to test you [people] and reveal which of you does best.”<sup>139</sup> Because Allah tests man, the hardships and struggles of life need to be placed into a proper perspective. Since Allah loves those who love him first, and love for him is manifested in the perseverance through and the overcoming of the struggle, these pains are endured for the sake of demonstrating one’s disposition of love and faithfulness to Allah. But demonstrating one’s love for Allah is only part of an upward cyclical process – love, testing, and reward – of the Islamic life. It was reported that the Prophet said, “Indeed greater reward comes with greater trial. And indeed, when Allah loves a people He subjects them to trials, so whoever is content, then for him is pleasure, and whoever is discontent, the for him is wrath.”<sup>140</sup>

Part of the general weakness of mankind is the allure of pleasurable things in this life. The Qur’ān states, “The love of desirable things is made alluring for men – women, children, gold and silver treasures piled up high, horses with fine marking, livestock, farmland” (Q 3:14a). The pleasurable things of this life are a temptation and a distraction and will influence one’s ability to remember his Lord. Yes, the desirable things may bring a temporary joy in this life, but they will only ever be temporal and finite pleasures, mere shadows of the joys of the life to come. Concerning this, Al-Ghazālī writes, “By God, were there to be [in Heaven] haleness of body alone, together with safekeeping from death, hunger, thirst, and the other varieties of misfortunes, it would be worth a man’s while to renounce the world solely on its account, and to prefer it to what must necessarily be spoilt and lost.”<sup>141</sup> To the one who remembers Allah and sets his sights on the things above and not below, for him, Allah has a better place to return. In

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<sup>139</sup> Q 67:2

<sup>140</sup> Jami’ at-Tirmidhi, Chapter 56 “(What Has Been Related) About Having Patience With Afflictions,” 2396, In-book reference Book 36, Hadith 94, (Hasan). <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/36>.

<sup>141</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 233-4.

this this same passage we see the promise of a future reward, “these may be the joys of this life, but *God has the best place to return to*. [Prophet], say, ‘Would you like me to tell you of things that are better than all of these? The Lord will give those who are mindful of God Gardens graced with flowing streams, where they will stay with pure spouses and *God’s good pleasure* – God is fully aware of His servants” (Q 3:14b-15).<sup>142</sup> In order to receive Allah’s good pleasure, a Muslim must overcome human weakness through internal struggle (*jihad*), rejecting the temporal joys of this in favor of the infinite. Pursuing Allah in this life is of utmost importance. This is what the Sūfīs teach as they focus on following the path so that they can return to their Lord. Life on earth is a test and Allah loves those who love Him through struggle.

The Qur’ān, Allah’s eternal word, calls the people back to remembrance, back to their Lord. Chittick notes that there are two basic functions of prophecy in the Qur’ān: “First, prophets remind (*dhikr*) people of what they have forgotten, which is the universal and timeless truth of *tawḥīd*...the timeless reality of God Himself;” and second, “to guide people to employ their free will in trying to achieve conformity with God as the Truth, the Reality, the Right, the Appropriate – a conformity that results in nearness (*qurb*) and felicity.”<sup>143</sup> The immanence of the afterlife is manifested in both the pages of the Qur’ān and the daily liturgical prayers and rituals.<sup>144</sup> Every day, for those practicing Muslims who pray regularly, they will repeat at least 17

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<sup>142</sup> Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>143</sup> William Chittick, “The Ambiguity of the Qur’ānic Command,” in *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others*, edit. by Mohammad Hassan Khalil, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 71.

<sup>144</sup> On the relationship between this life and the next in the Qur’ān Haleem writes, “Linguistically, it is not possible in the Koran talk about one without semantic reference to the other since every term used for each this comparative with the other. Thus: *al-ūlā* and *al-ākhira* (the first and the last life); *al-dunyā* and *al-ākhira* (the nearer and the further/latter life). Neither has the name specific to itself that does not refer to the other. Consequently, the frequency of occurrence of the terms in the Qur’ān is the same, in the case of *dunyā* and *ākhira* – 115 times each...It is an article of faith which has bearing on every aspect of the present life and occurs in the discussion of the creed, the rituals, the ethics and the law of Islam. In discussing it, moreover, the Qur’ān addresses both believers and

times a day their praise of Allah, “the master of the day of judgment” (Q 1:4).<sup>145</sup> On the contrary, to be heedless of the of the life to come (Q 30:7) or to be forgetful of the coming judgment (Q 32:14) are signs of the unbeliever. Haleem further emphasizes the significance of this interdependent relationship, stating, “In fact, the principles and details of religion are meant to be seen within the framework of the interdependence of this life and the afterlife in to color the Muslims conception of life in the universe and have a bearing on their actions in this life.”<sup>146</sup> In Islam, the relationship between this life and the next cannot be overstated. Some may consider this immanence to be a source of constant angst as one is ever-reminded on their need and quest to return to Allah in a favorable manner. I would tend to agree that the nature of salvific uncertainty will definitely cause angst in this life but not the emphasis on the immanence and importance of the life to come as a whole. If this life is significant in relation to the next, we would do well to live in light of eternity every day, whether Muslim or Christian.

### **Abundance of the Sensual**

Paradise is depicted as a blessed reality wherein there is an abundance of pleasure and reward. The abundance of the sensual as I am calling it, is not overtly referencing the sexual although sexuality is essential to Paradise; rather, the sensual here refers to the whole person, the engaging of all the senses in pleasure.<sup>147</sup> An analysis of this abundance entails both the contents

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nonbelievers. The plan of two worlds in the relationship between them is, in the beginning, part of the divine scheme of things.” Haleem, “Life and Beyond, 66.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>147</sup> Bouhdiba sees Paradise as, among many things, a reconciling of man to nature; he writes, “Paradise is first of all a reconciliation of man with nature, that is to say, with matter. Hence the material profusion that characterizes Jannah. It is a feast of all the senses.” Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 83. <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/books/9781135030384> (Accessed April 16, 2018)

of the Garden as well as the renewal of the body. Paradise is typically referred to as “the Garden” or *al-Jannah* and is located in the heavens beyond the celestial spheres on a higher level.<sup>148</sup> The symbolism of a garden in the afterlife is fitting for both the theme of abundance and for the Arabian culture of the sixth century. In a dry and arid landscape where natural resources are limited, visions of a garden with flowing streams and rich with vegetation, trees and shade garnishes appeal and excites the imagination. Reinhart states that “the garden as an ideal is as much a part of Near Eastern religion as the Judgment or the Wrath of a god.”<sup>149</sup> Paradise’s connection to Near Eastern religion is found even in the name *al-Jannah* as it a Persian word in origin.

According to the Qur’ān and Hadith, Paradise and the contents within are immense. Consider some of these passages describing the vastness of the Garden. In the Qur’ān Allah states, “Race one with another for forgiveness from your Lord and for Paradise, whose width is as the width of the heavens and the earth...”<sup>150</sup> There are levels in the Garden and between each level is “(the distance of) a hundred years.”<sup>151</sup> On the trees in the Garden, the Prophet is reported to say, “Verily, in Paradise there is a tree, a rider will travel in its shade for a hundred years.”<sup>152</sup> The dwelling places of the inhabitants will be grand, “Indeed in Paradise there is a great tent of

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<sup>148</sup> Some situate it between God’s footstool, which “embraces the heavens and the earth” (2:225), and the throne, upon which “the All-merciful is seated” (20:5).” William Chittick, “Muslim Eschatology”, in *Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, edit. by Jerry Walls, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 139.

<sup>149</sup> Reinhart, “The Here and the Hereafter in Islamic Religious Thought,” 15.

<sup>150</sup> Q 57:21

<sup>151</sup> A narration of Abu Hurairah that the Messenger of Allah said from Jami’ at-Tirmidhi (Sahih), Book 38 *Chapters on the Descriptions of Paradise*, Arabic Reference, Book 38, Hadith 2719, English Reference: Vol. 4, Book 12, hadith 2528, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/38>

<sup>152</sup> Sahih Muslim, Book 53, Chapter 1: “In Paradise there is a Tree in Whose Shade a Rider Could Travel for One Hundred Years and Still Not Cross It,” Book 53, Hadith 7, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/53>. Also found in Jami’ at-Tirmidhi (Sahih), Book 38 *Chapters on the Description of Paradise*, Arabic reference: Book 38, Hadith 2714, English reference: Vol. 4, Book 12, Hadith 2523. <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/38>

hollowed pearl, its breadth is sixty miles, in every corner of it is a family, they do not see the others, and the believer goes around to them."<sup>153</sup> There is no need to worry about Paradise filling up or becoming crowded, "Paradise will remain spacious enough to accommodate more people until Allah will create some more people and let them dwell in the superfluous space of Paradise."<sup>154</sup> The immensity of Paradise is depicted on such a scale that it challenges man's imaginative capacity. But this is to be expected because the Qur'ān also states, "No person knows what is kept hidden for them of joy, as a reward for what they used to do."<sup>155</sup> Concerning this passage, Ibn Kathīr states that this means "no one knows the vastness of what Allah has concealed for them of everlasting joy in Paradise and delights such as no one has ever seen. Because they conceal their good deeds, Allah conceals the reward for them, a fitting reward which will suit their deeds."<sup>156</sup> Allah has created a Paradise that exceeds the expectations of man.

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<sup>153</sup> A narration of Abu Bakr bin 'Abdullah bin Qais from his father that the Prophet said from Jami' at-Tirmidhi (Sahih), Book 38 *Chapters on the Descriptions of Paradise*, Arabic Reference, Book 38, Hadith 2721, English Reference: Vol. 4, Book 12, hadith 2529, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/38>

<sup>154</sup> Narrated by Anas in Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 93 *Book of Oneness, Uniqueness of Allah (Tawheed)*, Ch. 7 "And He is the All-Mighty, the All-Wise," In-book reference: Book 97, Hadith 14.

<sup>155</sup> Q 32:17

<sup>156</sup> Tafsīr of Ibn Kathīr, on Q 32:17, [http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1802&Itemid=88](http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1802&Itemid=88) (Accessed March 27, 2018). Al-Tustarī in his Tafsīr also comments on this passage saying, "Their eyes delight at the outward and inward realities that they witness, which are revealed to them in the way of □ knowledge ( *ulūm* ) of unveiling (*mukāshafa*). So they behold them and hold on to them such that their eyes delight and their hearts find tranquil repose in them. Others, however are unaware of what is hidden [in reserve] for them. But God, Glorified and Exalted is He, knows best." Tafsīr al-Tustarī on Q 32:17, <http://www.alfatir.com/Books/Tustari.pdf>. Hadith Sahih Muslim adds another layer of distinction "Allah the Exalted and Glorious, said: I have prepared for My pious servants which no eye has ever seen, and no ear has ever heard, and *no human heart has ever perceived* but it is testified by the Book of Allah." (italics added) Sahih Muslim, Book 53, Chapter 2, "Chapter: Bestowal of Divine Pleasure on the People of Paradise, and Allah Will Never be Angry with them," In-book reference: Book 53, Hadith 3. <https://sunnah.com/muslim/53>. Lastly, this passage from the Qur'ān is also supported by a Hadith Qudsi. "This is a hadith qudsi "Allah said: I have prepared for My righteous servants what no eye has seen and no ear has heard, not has it occurred to human heart. Thus recite if you wish (1): And no soul knows what joy for them (the inhabitants of Paradise) has been kept hidden. (1) The words "Thus recite if you wish" are those of Abu Harayrah. It was related by al-Bukhari, Muslim, at-Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah. Hadith 37 of Hadith Qudsi. <https://www.sunnah.com/qudsi40>. Hadith Qudsi (divine hadith) differ in qualification from Hadith Nabawi (prophetic hadith). Hadith Nabawi, while having authority for the Muslim community, follow a chain of transmission back to the Prophet. Hadith Qudsi, on the other hand, do not end the chain with the Prophet but are linked directly to Allah. Hadith Qudsi are not equal to the very words of the Qur'ān but they nonetheless function as extra-Qur'ānic revelation. The classification of Qudsi is significant because it represents the belief that this has come from Allah Himself. That Allah would reveal this

Man cannot perceive some of the joys of Paradise because they are beyond his finite capacity to create and imagine. However, the paradisaal language in the Qur'ān seemingly offers correspondence at some level between the objects and pleasures in this life to the life to come.

Along with being immense in size the Garden is full of abundant rivers and food. Surah 47 gives a depiction of the Garden in which there are rivers of pure water, milk, wine, and honey. These rivers flow perpetually and there is no diminishing of their existence nor their purity.<sup>157</sup> In the same Surah we also see that there will be an abundance and diversity of food: “there they will find fruit of every kind.” Food will never not be accessible in Paradise, in fact, there is an immediacy to whatever one desires. Surah 38:15b states, “they will call for abundant fruit and drink” with the implication they will be granted what they desire. This notion is supported by al-Ghazālī when he reports a transmission of Ibn Mas‘ūd, “‘The Emissary of God said, ‘You shall only have to behold a bird in Heaven and desire it for it to fall down before you roasted.’”<sup>158</sup>

Among the many things redeemed and renewed in the afterlife, human creatures are both physically and morally transformed. The Qur'ān states in several places that at the time of the general resurrection, Allah will resurrect all of humanity and they will have physical bodies. Even though the Qur'ān taught a physical embodied resurrection, the question of what happened after death was prevalent early on in the Muslim community. It is apparent that it was initially difficult for Muslims to comprehend Allah's ability to remake the body after it had dissolved to dust in the grave. At the resurrection, every person will be remade into optimal form. Abdel

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idea to Mohammad again suggests a high level of importance. For more on Hadith Qudsi see “Hadith Qudsi” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, edit. by John L. Esposito, (originally published by Oxford University Press, 2009), Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195305135.001.0001/acref-9780195305135>. (Accessed May 10, 2018)

<sup>157</sup> Q 47:15; See also, Q 13:35

<sup>158</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 243.

Haleem suggest that this is supported by the Qur'ān where it indicates that human beings will get new bodies, and they will not have the same ones they possessed in the previous life (e.g. 56:35, 61).<sup>159</sup> Because Paradise is an abundance of the sensual and the sensual experience is intimately linked to the body, human bodies are in need of transformation and renewal in order to maximize all Paradise has to offer. The inhabitants of Paradise will eternally feast on the sustenance of the Garden, but they will not have to worry about becoming fat or any of the negative side effects that come with overindulgence in this life. Specifically, in relation to food, there will no longer be any defecation or urination as human bodies will be relieved by means of a sweat that smells like musk and after they are relieved their stomachs will return once more to their slender form.<sup>160</sup> According to Aziz al-Azmeh, man will have the “height of Adam (60 cubits), the age of Jesus (33 years), the beauty of Joseph, and he will have Muhammad’s language, for each of these descriptions is in itself consummate.”<sup>161</sup> It is said from at-Tirmidhi that “the first batch to enter Paradise will appear like the moon of a night that is full.”<sup>162</sup> Humanity will also be void of body hair and will not need to spit nor will have runny noses.<sup>163</sup>

Lastly, the inhabitants of Paradise also go through a moral transformation. The Qur'ān states, “We shall remove all ill feeling from their hearts; streams will flow at their feet,”<sup>164</sup> and

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<sup>159</sup> For more on this see Abdel Haleem, “Life and Beyond,” pp. 72-3.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>161</sup> Aziz Al-Azmeh, “Rhetoric for the Senses: A Consideration of Muslim Paradise Narratives,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 26, no. 3 (1995): 223. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4183375>. (Accessed April 16, 2018)

<sup>162</sup> Abu Hurairah narrated that the Messenger of Allah said from Jami’ at-Tirmidhi (Sahih), Book 38 *Chapters on the Descriptions of Paradise*, Arabic Reference, Book 38, Hadith 2733, English Reference: Vol. 4, Book 12, hadith 2537, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/38>

<sup>163</sup> Mu’adh bin Jabal’s narration of the Prophet from Jami’ at-Tirmidhi (Sahih), English reference: Vol. 4, Book 12, Hadith 2545; Arabic reference: Book 38, Hadith 2742, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/38> and the previous reference.

<sup>164</sup> Q 7:43

“They will hear no idle or sinful talk there, only clean and wholesome speech.”<sup>165</sup> Muhammad is also to have been reported as saying “There is no differing among them nor mutual hatred, and their hearts are like the heart of one man, and they glorify Allah morning and evening.”<sup>166</sup>

Allah will remove all malice and imperfection from the character of humanity. They will experience nothing but good will and charity toward the other companions of Paradise.

Moreover, they will feel what is the dominant sentiment of Paradise – peace.<sup>167</sup> Peace will be had amongst the inhabitants of Paradise but even more significant is the peace and bestowal of divine pleasure from Allah.<sup>168</sup>

### **Sexuality and the Sacred**

The combination of sexuality and Paradise form a rich narrative in the Islamic traditions. Beginning first with the Qur’an and then developing in the hadiths and later commentaries, sexuality is a central theme of Paradise. Development happened relatively early on within Islam and by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the paradisaic traditions were relatively stabilized –

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<sup>165</sup> Q 56:25-6

<sup>166</sup> Abu Hurairah narrated that the Messenger of Allah said from Jami’ at-Tirmidhi (Sahih), Book 38 *Chapters on the Descriptions of Paradise*, Arabic Reference, Book 38, Hadith 2733, English Reference: Vol. 4, Book 12, hadith 2537, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/38>

<sup>167</sup> Q 15:47

<sup>168</sup> After the inhabitants of Paradise have been shown the pleasures therein, they are overwhelmed with the magnificence of the Garden. They seemingly cannot imagine anything greater than what Allah has prepared for them. But, Allah grants them something even more pleasurable. This hadith describes what transpires: “O, Dwellers of Paradise, and they would say in response: At thy service and pleasure, our Lord, the good is in Thy Hand. He (the Lord) would say: Are you well pleased now? They would say: Why should we not be pleased, O Lord, when Thou hast given us what Thou hast not given to any of Thy creatures? He would, however, say: May I not give you (something) even more excellent than that? And they would say: O Lord, what thing can be more excellent than this? And He would say: I shall cause My pleasure to alight upon you and I shall never be afterwards annoyed with you.” Sahih Muslim, Book 53, Chapter 2, In-book reference: Book 53, Hadith 10. <https://sunnah.com/muslim/53> Also given on the authority of Abu Sa’id al-Khurdi, Hadith 40 of Hadith Qudsi, <https://sunnah.com/qudsi40>. Jami’ at-Tirmidhi (Sahih) also supports the narration of al-Khurdi, Book 38 *Chapters on the Descriptions of Paradise*, English Reference Vol. 4, Book 12, Hadith 2554; Arabic reference: Book 38, Hadith 2714, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/38>



although certain creative liberties had been applied.<sup>169</sup> The tradition became quite descriptive of the sexual pleasures along with the descriptions of the paradisaal spouses awaiting the faithful companions. We would do well however not to be reductionist in our analysis of this integral feature of Paradise. It seems that the sexual activity of Paradise, while part of the greater narrative of paradisaal reward, serves a dual role in providing both physical and spiritual pleasure. Physical pleasure is obvious and comes in the form of the actual act of sex as well as the sense delights of the houris – the virgins of Paradise. This second suggestion of spiritual pleasure may at first seem out of place but there is enough extant material to suggest that within Islamic tradition, there is a place for the sacred in the sexual. That in the perpetual sexual encounters of Paradise there is something sacred to be encountered as well. The extent to which one encounters the sacred in the sexual will be discussed below but first the virginal paradisaal traditions are considered.

The virgins of Paradise are perhaps the most familiar feature of the Islamic afterlife to the Western world. This is due, no doubt, to the narrative put forth that those who die as martyrs in jihad are promised 70 virgins in Paradise as a reward for their sacrifice toward the cause of Allah and Islam. It is true that the Qur'an does not mention the number of virgins specifically and that

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<sup>169</sup> Bouhdiba makes this suggestion, citing the significance of the works of the following authors without subsequent works matching the level of influence. It is important to note that Bouhdiba lists imam Abderrahman Ibn Ahmed al Qādhī and sheikh Jalal Addin al Suyūṭī and their respective documents are two exceptional documents which, in terms of content and quality, represent generally how both the elites and common people viewed the Islamic afterlife. Due to linguistic limitations, Bouhdiba will be the source for understanding and analysis of both of these scholars (especially Suyūṭī whom he seems to interact with more frequently in the chapter “The Infinite Orgasm”). Bouhdiba, *Sexuality*, 72-3. Support for the significance of Suyūṭī in the role of commentary on the houris and their description comes from Lange’s use of Suyūṭī as well. See Lange, *Paradise and Hell*, 142-43. On the dependence on the medieval traditions in Islamic eschatology J. B. Taylor writes “The survival of medieval categories to the present day in the Muslim world, and to some extent the continued dependence upon them and the reluctance to formulate fresh theological language and symbolism, meant that we shall not only indulge our historical curiosity, but may also illuminate the present situation where we try to find themes for constructive dialogue.” J. B. Taylor, “Some Aspects of Islamic Eschatology,” *Religious Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Oct. 1969): 59, accessed January 5, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20000089>.

this teaching comes from one of the hadith traditions; however, I do not think it makes it any less significant nor authoritative.<sup>170</sup> We see in the hadith composed by Jami' at-Tirmidhi in *The Book on the Virtues of Jihad*, that one of the six rewards promised to the martyr is that he is married to seventy-two wives.<sup>171</sup> Virgin spouses are promised to the martyr but it would be a mistake to assume that maidens of Paradise are promised exclusively to them. The significance, I would submit, of the promises given in this hadith are not the spouses; rather it is the forgiveness that follows from the first flow of blood and the guarantee of a place in Paradise. The virgins of Paradise are a reward to all Muslim men who enter its gates. There are multiple passages in the Qur'an suggesting that part of the reward for the devout inhabitants of Paradise are "well-matched [wives] with modest gaze,"<sup>172</sup> and, furthermore, that they are "good-natured, beautiful maidens...Dark-eyed, sheltered in pavilions...Untouched beforehand by man or jinn...They will sit on green cushions and fine carpets."<sup>173</sup> The paradisaal virgins are a promise to all who are faithful to Allah, the reward of the martyr specifically is the guarantee of Paradise.

Of the marriage companions, there exists a combination of beings – both celestial and human. Each companion is married to earthly wives – faithful female Muslims – as well as

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<sup>170</sup> Parshall makes the observation that there are "many picturesque and graphic Hadith" regarding sexuality in Paradise. Furthermore, he also notes that many of these references are not include in the most authoritative Hadith collection – Sahih Al-Bukhari. Phil Parshall, *Inside the Community: Understanding Muslims Through Their Traditions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 142. While this may be true, al-Bukhari is not the only accepted hadith tradition within the main branches of Islam and the Hadith that have been selected to discuss the existence of the houris in Paradise fall within the purview of at least the Sunni tradition of authoritative Hadith.

<sup>171</sup> Jami' at-Tirmidhi 1663 (Hasan Sahih), Book 22 *The Book on Virtues of Jihad*, Chapter 25 "Regarding the Rewards for the Martyr," In-book reference: Book 22, Hadith 46, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/22> (Accessed March 27, 2018).

<sup>172</sup> "The devout will have a good place to return to...they will have well-matched [wives] with modest gaze. 'This is what you are promised for the Day of Reckoning: Our provision for you will never end.'" Q 38:49-54

<sup>173</sup> Q 55:70-6; See also Q 38:52 and 37:48-9, "With them will be spouses – modest of gaze and beautiful of eye – like protected eggs." Abdel Haleem provides this translator's note after verse 49, "Arabs described beautiful women as being as precious as the ostrich eggs they protected from the dust with feathers," Haleem, *The Qur'an*, Oxford World Classics, 286.

celestial beings called houris – a heavenly creature created exclusively for those faithful to Allah. As we have seen so far in this chapter, one common theme in Paradise is that of excess and abundance. There is no lack in Paradise, all is given and then possessed in overwhelming fashion and this benefaction reflects the good nature of Allah. The same too can be said of one's marriage companions for they too are numerous as they are beautiful. The number of wives in Paradise is commonly thought to be seventy-two – two earthly wives and seventy houris; however, in the traditions it is as Lange points out, "characteristically, numbers [of wives] remain unstable."<sup>174</sup> Lange says this because there are a number of commentators who suggest that the number of spouses in Paradise far exceeds the seventy-two. Both Suyūṭī and al-Ghazali suggest that the number could be anywhere from 500 to somewhere in the thousands.<sup>175</sup>

Being embodied creatures, the inhabitants of Paradise are engaged in pleasure through all of the senses. Sight is an integral part of human essence. According to Bouhdiba, "everything begins with the look and everything ends with it."<sup>176</sup> Sight leads to contemplation and contemplation leads to happiness. Thus, pleasure is, to some degree, ocular.<sup>177</sup> The pleasure derived from the houris is magnified by their physical appearance. But sight is not the only sense through which we experience pleasures. One's sense of smell also contributes to the pleasure of the senses. It is for this reason perhaps that the houris are also described as composite creatures

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<sup>174</sup> Lange, *Paradise and Hell*, 142-3.

<sup>175</sup> For more on the number of spouses in Paradise see Ibid., 143 fn. 190-90; Al-Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 245. Reporting on al-Ghazali's claim see F. A. Klein, *Religion of Islam*, (Published online by Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 95. <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/books/9781136099465>. Samuel M. Zwemer, *Islam: A Challenge to Faith, Studies on the Mohammedan Religion and the Need and Opportunities of the Mohammedan World from the Standpoint of Christian Missions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (New York: Laymen's Missionary Movement, 1909), 94-5. <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=evtbigSg5YkC&rdid=book-evtbigSg5YkC&rdot=1>

<sup>176</sup> Bouhdiba, *Sexuality*, 83.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

of various smells and perfumes. Al-Azmeh again notes that the houris are said to be “made of musk between their feet and knees, of amber between their knees and breasts, and of camphor upwards of their chest.”<sup>178</sup> The combination of both sight and smell creates an even greater euphoria beyond just the pleasures of the sexual encounter itself. The gaze and the smells create a sort of “quasi-immaterial pleasure of matter itself.”<sup>179</sup>

One may wonder, however, at the extensive detail with which these houris are described in Medieval and Late Medieval traditionist literature – going far beyond more basic descriptions in the Qur’ān. Lange notes that these heavenly creatures of Paradise are imagined as “ideal courtesans” to the Muslim man and creative descriptions and interpretations developed accordingly.<sup>180</sup> The skin of the houris is white enough that the man can see his reflection but being translucent, but he can also see the marrow inside her bones like red wine in a glass.<sup>181</sup> What is the significance of translucent skin and being able to see the marrow of the bones? Al-Azmeh discusses the reasons and points out that the skin is translucent because it is extremely soft, as soft as the membrane separating the egg from its shell.<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, the skin, being of the purest white, is also simultaneously reflective to the extent that the man can see his face in the houri’s skin. Beyond the descriptions of the skin and marrow their beauty is also accounted for by their eyes which are large and dark and long flowing hair.<sup>183</sup> Lastly, the houris are also

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<sup>178</sup> Al-Azmeh, “Rhetoric,” 227.

<sup>179</sup> Bouhdiba, *Sexuality*, 83.

<sup>180</sup> Christian Lange, *Paradise and Hell*, 143.

<sup>181</sup> Al-Azmeh, “Rhetoric,” 227.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Al-Ghazālī writes, [The houris’ heads] are wreathed with crowns inlaid with pearls both great and small; flirtatious are they, and coquettish, perfumed and safe from old age or any hardship, *secluded in tents* (Q 55:72) and palaces of sapphire raised up in the center of Heaven’s gardens; modest of gaze and large-eyed.” Al-Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 232.

described by the feminine physical features which men tend to find visually attractive – the breasts, waist and posterior.<sup>184</sup> In Muslim literature, creative liberties are taken regarding the physical make-up of the houris and men imagined what was sensually attractive to them. The Muslim poet Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī in his narrational tour of the afterlife writes:

It occurs to him [the Sheikh], while he is still prostrate, that the girl, though beautiful, is rather skinny. He raises his head and instantly she has a behind that rivals the hills of ‘Alij, the dunes of al-Dahnā, and the sands of Yabrīn and the Banū Sa‘d. Awed by the omnipotence of the Kind and Knowing God, he says, “Thou who givest rays to the shining sun, Thou who fulfillest the desires of everyone, Thou whose awe-inspiring deeds make us feel impotent, and summon to wisdom the ignorant: I ask Thee to reduce the bum of this damsel to one square mile, for Thou hast surpassed my expectations with Thy measure!” An answer is heard: “You may choose: the shape of this girl will be as you wish.” And the desired reduction is affected.<sup>185</sup>

Al-Ma‘arrī’s words depict what is considered beautiful in classical Arabic poetry but we can also see the beginning stages of a connection between the sensual and the sacred. When the Sheikh in this story beholds what has been given to him by his Lord, he is overwhelmed and immediately begins to praise Allah for what has been bestowed to him. The sensual results in praise for the sacred, but furthermore, in experiencing the sensual, the believer is experiencing the wisdom of his Lord. Here, is it possible that through the sensual one can experience the sacred? This will be reflected on further in the next few paragraphs.

There is a very significant hadith that makes an integral connection between sexuality and the sacred. Not only does this saying contextualize the sexual act on earth within the sacred sphere, it illumines the significance of sex and sexual intimacy in the life to come. In this

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<sup>184</sup> The houris are described as having a certain kind of breasts, ones that are similar in size and shape to that of a young girl’s. Furthermore, the houris have large posteriors. Suyūti writes that the houris wait in their tents with “their large posteriors rising over the edges of their seats.” Lange, *Paradise and Hell*, 143.

<sup>185</sup> Abū l-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī, *The Epistle of Forgiveness or A Pardon to Enter the Garden*, trans. by Geert Jan Van Gelder and Gregor Schöler, (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 128. Gelder and Schöler note that “heavy posteriors are part of the ideal beauty in classical Arabic love poetry, whether on women or boys; the standard poetic simile is that of the sandhill or dune.” Ibid., 335 n486.

particular hadith, some companions of the Prophet are pleading their case to Muhammad in relation to the giving of alms (one of the five pillars in Islam) and the subsequent reward. They stated that they were able to fast just as the wealthy fast and pray just as they do as well but when it came to charitable giving, they were not able to match the giving of the wealthy. The Prophet responds to them in the form of a question asking, “Has not Allah made things for you to give in charity?”<sup>186</sup> Here, Muhammad is reframing their perspective of charitable giving, expanding it beyond the scope of simply material giving. He states that every *tasbīḥ*,<sup>187</sup> *takbir*,<sup>188</sup> *tahmīd*,<sup>189</sup> or *tahlīl*,<sup>190</sup> these statements of adoration and worship of Allah are a charity. Furthermore, the Messenger of Allah states that a person “commanding the good and forbidding an evil is a charity, and in the *buḍʿ* [sexual act] of each one of you there is a charity.”<sup>191</sup> Upon hearing that fulfilling their carnal desires, the companions of the Muhammad questioned him, seemingly not believing what they had just heard. The Prophet then qualifies his former statement, “Do you not see that if he were to act upon it [his desire] in an unlawful manner then he would be deserving of punishment? Likewise, if he were to act upon it in a lawful manner then he will be deserving of a reward.”<sup>192</sup>

The previous hadith – Nawawi 25 – in a way redeems sexual activity for the companions of the Prophet. The Prophet contextualizes sex and teaches that when one does it lawfully it is a good. That there is a good way to have sex and a wrong way is significant because it supports the

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<sup>186</sup> 40 Nawawi Hadith, 25. <https://sunnah.com/nawawi40/25> (Accessed April 18, 2018)

<sup>187</sup> Saying: “suhban-Allah” or “Allah is perfect” or “Glory to Allah”

<sup>188</sup> Saying: “Allahu akbar” or “Allah is greatest”

<sup>189</sup> Saying: “al-hamdu lillah” or “All praise belongs to Allah”

<sup>190</sup> Saying: “laa ilaha illAllah” or “There is none worthy of worship except Allah”

<sup>191</sup> 40 Nawawi Hadith, 25. <https://sunnah.com/nawawi40/25> (Accessed April 18, 2018)

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

notion that in the proper context it is inherently relational.<sup>193</sup> On the relationality of sex Bouhdiba notes, “This is understandable. Orgasm is certainly a pleasure. But a shared one. And it is in the pleasure derived from another at the same time as oneself that this work of piety resides, a work analogous to fasting, prayer and chastity. Eros and Agape, then, are both involved in sexuality.”<sup>194</sup> Here, Bouhdiba is correct in that sex can be a marriage of both eros and agape love. It is curious though that the agape theme should emerge in this discussion of the sexual relations in Islam. As it relates to the current discussion, the sexual realities of the afterlife are seemingly man-centered and focus solely on the husband’s satisfaction of the flesh.

Bouhdiba establishes the sexuality/sacred narrative even further by suggesting that the vision of God is constituted in the “very essence of the delights of the Muslim paradise.”<sup>195</sup> He quickly distinguishes that the extension of the Beatific Vision into the delights are not exclusively the vision as that is still separate and distinct; however, the vision is not reducible to the Beatific Vision alone. He suggests that this co-extensiveness of the sexual and the sacral is difficult for Christians to understand because from their point of view it is “unthinkable that the

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<sup>193</sup> My intent here is not to present the concept of sex (along with its prohibitions and allowances) in Islam in a purely positive light. I am keenly aware of the sexual ethic, along with its guidelines and prohibitions, in Islam. There are some aspects in their teachings which are extremely troubling. Sexuality in Islam appears to be inherently man-centered which is why the inclusion of the relationality motif is both curious and refreshing. Analyzing sexuality in Islam beyond what is done here would go beyond the scope of the paper but here is one such example of a problematic hadith. The Prophet said, “If a man invites his wife to sleep with him and she refuses to come to him, then the angels send their curses on her till morning.” Sahih al-Bukhari, 5193, In-book reference, Book 67, Hadith 127. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/67> This hadith seems to suggest that a wife does not have a right over her own body if her husband wants to have sex on a given night. It is her obligation, lest she be cursed by angels, to consent to the husband’s wishes. Not wishing to be too myopic, but in this hadith it does not seem like Agape love is being demonstrated by the husband. Agape love is non-coercive, yet the woman, regardless of her wishes or desires is pressured into the sexual act by threat of harm from the spiritual realm. If the sayings of the Prophet are good and authoritative for all Muslims, then what is prescribed here for sexual relations within marriage is a moral good. Now, there may be occasions where the wife, although herself not necessarily wanting sexual relations or feeling strong sexual desires for her husband, will, of her own volition, choose to accept the husband’s request. Here, the act of giving is voluntary and, in this sense, would be a good but it is hard to see how sex through coercion would be deemed a moral good, let alone a demonstration of agape love.

<sup>194</sup> Bouhdiba, *Sexuality*, 92.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 82.

workings of the flesh, a source of original sin, could find its place in the hereafter.”<sup>196</sup> For Islam, there is something essential in the Eros, in the fulfillment of the flesh and to some extent, Bouhdiba is correct in that this is foreign to Christianity but only to the extent that sexual relations are part of Paradise. Bouhdiba further states that to be in Islamic paradise is “the fulfillment of self” and this fulfillment can only be realized in “love conceived...as a transfiguration, a transcendence of self in others. It is no accident that hell is solitude, non-presence of others, in a word, absence of love. *Paradise, on the other hand, is total, full, infinite love. It is unity in harmony with the world, with oneself and with God.*”<sup>197</sup> Paradise conceived as the fulfillment of self in inter-relationality is strikingly similar to the Trinitarian foundation in Christianity. Bouhdiba touches upon a foundational component of our humanity in that we are inherently relational. Furthermore, emphasizing the transcendent union found in sexuality is also significant. Sex is an intimate experience that does unite persons in more than a merely physical sense. An emotional and psychological union is formed when two human beings copulate. Perhaps sexuality, and the amount of it in Islamic Paradise, is the one area that conceivably brings people closest to the sacred. What remains doubtful is that sacred union is actually achieved in this manner in Paradise.

Perhaps this symbolism – the union of the sacred and sexual – is supported by al-Suyūṭī’s statement, “On their breasts is written the name of their husband, linked with one of the beautiful names of God.”<sup>198</sup> The presence of the divine names on the exposed breasts of these paradisaical maidens coupled with the intimate sexual relations wherein the confluence of eros and agape love manifests, is purportedly a simultaneous experience with the Divine, a mystical Theo-

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Italic added. Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Bouhdiba is quoting the Muslim scholar al-Suyūṭī. Ibid., 75.



anthropic union. Bouhdiba suggestion that “the sexuality encountered in others is also a projection in God,”<sup>199</sup> is both seemingly innovative and provocative. I do not think he is suggesting a quite disrespectful imagery of divine-human sex or to say that in having sex with the houris, the inhabitants of Paradise are also having sex with Allah. He is suggesting, however, sex is a medium wherein one experiences the Divine while ultimately maintaining, I would suspect, an agnostic disposition on how that attains.

The possible union of the sensual and the sacred highlights the significant concern raised against Islamic Paradise, namely, the relationship of Man to the Divine. Allah is fundamentally transcendent and unknowable, yet, the Qur’ān and traditions continue to purport a mystical experience with the Divine in Paradise. How is this possible? This question will continue to develop possible answers in the remaining two sections.

### **Paradise as Theophany**

Paradise as theophany is a concept put forth by the influential mystical thinker and writer Frithjof Schuon. Paradise as a theophany, a manifestation of the Divine, is similar to the previous union of the sensual and the sacral in that somehow the pleasures of Paradise are a connection to Allah but is fundamentally different in terms of the metaphysical reality of Paradise. According to Schuon, Paradise as the material construction is ontologically different and metaphysically more than the natural realm in this life. In order to understand Schuon’s claim it is necessary to contextualize this conversation in relation to the presence of levels of reward in Paradise. The levels of Paradise and how man relates to them is the impetus for Schuon’s proposition.

As we have already discussed in this chapter, there is an intimate relationship between this life and next. The Qur’ān and hadith traditions state the rewards and pleasures of Paradise

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 92.

are contingent upon the choices one made in this life. It is a common perception that a Muslim is concerned simply with getting to Paradise. After death and following the general resurrection of the dead comes judgment. Allah is the supreme judge and he will weigh each person's deeds on the divine scales. If the good deeds outweigh the bad ones and then the scales tip in favor of Paradise.<sup>200</sup> But the focus of Muslims should not be to simply get there, to make it to Paradise by any means necessary. Many will make it to Paradise but barely. Once there, however, their experience is contingent upon the former life on earth. Haleem emphasizes the importance of this life and the sealing of deeds at death; he writes, "the Quran emphasizes that nobody will escape death, the resurrection or judgment, and That there is no way to salvation in the afterlife except through work in this life... it is the only chance to work for a good life in the next world (35:37). The urgency is expressed by the frequent use of 'before' death for the hour comes."<sup>201</sup> What one does in this life matters and carries eternal significance. Life on earth is a journey, a process of spiritual formation and for the Sufi specifically, this implies achieving a level of gnosis, a level of knowledge pursued and acquired which then transforms into love.

Surahs 55 and 56 are two chapters where one clearly sees the division of people into groups based upon the deeds of this life. The chapters present a trichotomy of peoples: those in the front (or the foremost) and those to the right and left. Those on the left are the ones for whom

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<sup>200</sup> But even this scene of judgment and just reward is not exactly the whole picture. If it wasn't enough to cause angst over making sure that one's good deeds outweighed the bad in this life, how much more the angst when one realizes that the decision to allow entry into Paradise is wholly contingent on Allah's arbitrary decision. Allah is merciful, one of the many divine names, and he may choose to allow some into Paradise for whom their scales weighed in the negative. This arbitration of divine mercy over divine justice is cause for admiration; however, the reverse is also possible. In the end, entry to paradise is ultimately up to Allah's capricious decision. It could be the case the one's scales weigh in the positive, but the decision is still Allah's and his divine will is uncaused not based on any external reasons or influences. One can understand why achieving Paradise is of utmost concern for Muslims as well as cause for angst.

<sup>201</sup> Haleem, "Life and Beyond," 77.

damnation awaits. They are dealt with accordingly and then sent away to their punishment.<sup>202</sup>

The two groups which remain are the faithful and the award that awaits them is Paradise. But Paradise is divided into two Gardens (at least) and the two remaining groups are designated for one or the other.<sup>203</sup> The group in the middle, the foremost, are the highest among the elect of God.<sup>204</sup> This group will consist of relatively few people as the spiritual process required to achieve this level is difficult. Sufis believe that they alone will comprise the foremost because it is only the Sufi doctrine and methods which can guide a Muslim nearer to Allah.<sup>205</sup> For this group their reward in Paradise is *al-Firdaws*, the highest level of Paradise and the level closest in proximity to Allah. The group to the right consists of believers and their reward is Paradise as well although it is not *al-Firdaws*. Nonetheless, those on the right will enjoy Paradise and all that is offered to them.

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<sup>202</sup> For more on the division of groups as well as the treatment of each group in the respective Surahs see: Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style*, (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 18.

<sup>203</sup> There are a number of Qur'ānic and Hadith passages as well as commentators which suggest multiple division of Paradise with multiple gates to enter therein. For more on the divisions of Paradise see Lange, *Paradise and Hell*, 128-135. There, he maps out the eight sections of Paradise with the corresponding gates. The difference between the two levels and the eight sections is this, the highest of the two levels is Firdaws and it is specifically reserved for the foremost. They alone enjoy that level, the remaining inhabitants of Paradise seemingly occupy the other 7 sections and the lower Garden where they too have joys reserved for them. On the division of groups in Paradise and what it will be like for them see: Q 27:21; Sahih Muslim, Book 1, *The Book of Faith*, Chapter 84 "The Status of the Lowest People in Paradise". In-book reference, Book 1, Hadith 317 and 371. <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1>; Sahih Muslim, Book 53, Hadith 11, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/53>; Perhaps there are 100 levels, "In Paradise, there are a hundred levels, what is between every two levels is like what is between the heavens and the earth. Al-Firdaus is its highest level, and from it the four rivers of Paradise are made to flow forth. So when you ask Allah, ask Him for Al-Firdaus." A narration of 'Ubadah bin As-Samit that the Messenger of Allah said from Jami' at-Tirmidhi (Sahih), Book 38 *Chapters on the Descriptions of Paradise*, Arabic Reference, Book 38, Hadith 2723, English Reference: Vol. 4, Book 12, hadith 2531, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/38>; Al-Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 236-7.

<sup>204</sup> On this Wansbrough writes, "The notion of propinquity to God as a reward for piety is clearly conveyed, expressed in 56:7-11 as a tripartite distribution of benefit, of which *muqarrabūn* (those brought near) represents the highest order." Wansbrough also notes that in two further Qur'ānic passages (Q 3:45 and 4:172), which are traditionally Christological, the reward of *muqarrabūn* is given to Jesus and certain angels as well. John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, (New York: Prometheus, 2004), 30.

<sup>205</sup> Lings, *The Book of Certainty*, x.

In relation to this study, the distinction between the two levels raises some interesting questions to consider. First, do the inhabitants of the lower level experience Allah in the same way as those in *al-Firdaws*? Second, do all Muslims in Paradise experience the unveiling of their Lord or is it merely those who are a part of the foremost? Third, is the reward of the lower level relative to the level of spiritual development in *al-dunya*, that is, if a Muslim believer does not renounce entirely the physical pleasures of earth, do they gain the physical pleasures of Paradise but miss the ultimate reward of Paradise in the process and what does that imply about their character? Fourth, how does proximity to Allah effect the quality of Paradise, will those on the right still be eternally satisfied?

The existence of levels in Paradise raises interesting questions. Here I will discuss Frithjof Schuon's attempt to correct an improper translation of a relevant hadith and what he proposes as a solution. Schuon writes that there is a hadith which states, "the majority of the dwellers in Paradise are simpleminded (*buhl*)."<sup>206</sup> Some commentators on this hadith have suggested that the simpleminded are those who are "satisfied with the Garden instead of thinking only of the Gardener – who stop short, in other words, with the created and lose sight of the Creator."<sup>206</sup> Schuon disagrees with this reading and believes this interpretation is mistaken. He suggests that while these men to whom the hadith is referencing are of holy naiveté, they are not men of little intelligence.<sup>207</sup>

Schuon believes that interpretation of this hadith – those who are satisfied with the Garden instead of the Gardener – is a forced analogy due to a confused teleological relationship between Allah and Paradise. The proper teleology is this: a gardener is there for the garden and

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<sup>206</sup> Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Perspectives on Esoteric Ecumenism*, 169

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

not the other way around, that is, the importance of the gardener is connected to and subsisted by the existence of the garden. It is foolish, Schuon suggests, to purport that the Gardener (Allah) exists for the garden (Paradise) and that He loses interest apart from it. Rather, a better analogy, he suggests, would be the absurdity of “honoring the palace instead of the king or the wedding gown while forgetting the bride.”<sup>208</sup> In either case –the palace or the gown – their existences derives from the king and bride, but the latter’s importance and interest is not contingent on the former. But for Schuon, however, these two analogies do not capture the paradisaic reality and are inadequate to convey its nature. He writes, Paradise is “above all a dimension that unites us to God;” and so instead of being the bride’s gown, Paradise is the very body of the bride, and it is “therefore what manifests outwardly the mystery of the Personality that is loved.”<sup>209</sup> Paradise, then, is not a veil that conceals the Divine but an outward manifestation reflecting the Uncreated. That the created can reveal the Uncreated is a mysterious function but if it did not have that capacity then, as Schuon notes, “it would be impossible to explain this saying of the Companion of the Prophet: ‘I never saw anything without seeing God’.”<sup>210</sup>

Returning to the idea of the Beatific Vision, this eschatological feature suggests that pleasures or joys in Paradise cannot exist apart from the divine Presence. Preferring a particular pleasure in paradise to God would, as Schuon notes, “[have] no meaning here; it is merely an illegitimate transposition of an earthly possibility into the heavenly world.”<sup>211</sup> It is true that human language is limited in its capacity to reveal eschatological truths. Concerning eschatology, Hermansen correctly points out, “By their very nature, eschatological doctrines test

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 170.

the limits of our rational and customary experience, thereby reminding us of the fragility of our attachment to conditions that strike us now as unquestionably real.”<sup>212</sup> But it seems here that Schuon’s rejection is the transference of earthly preferences to paradise as the means of joy rather than seeing the Divine as its legitimate source of joy. This does not, however, negate the existence of external and physical pleasures in the afterlife for as Schuon pointed out previously, the external reality is a reflection of the Hidden. It would seem then that Schuon emphatically seeks to influence one’s perspective regarding the divine-human relationship of Paradise. A proper disposition is one that sees the Divine as the source from which all pleasure derives.

That this is Schuon’s goal is made clear when he adds the final and most important objection to the “fools who people Paradise” interpretation. If the correct interpretation of this hadith is that the majority of people in Paradise are satisfied with garden while overlooking the Gardener, it would suggest that the majority of people in Paradise have forgotten God. In Islam, the remembrance of God is the beginning of the return (*ma’ād*) and to forget God is to sin, even the “essence of sin,” as Schuon notes.<sup>213</sup> Paradise cannot contain sin and so Paradise cannot be a place where even one person, let alone the majority, merits the description of foolish and forgets the Creator.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, the Qur’ān is full of revelatory and descriptive language that often depicts a vivid Paradise that has some correspondence to the life humans experience now. Following Schuon’s attempt to correct one’s perspective of Paradise, it may be the case that the pendulum swing too far in the other direction. He anticipates this reaction and seeks to correct that extreme as well:

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<sup>212</sup> Hermansen, “Eschatology,” 320.

<sup>213</sup> Schuon, *Christianity/Islam*, 170.

Hasty and simplistic disparagements of Paradise obviously serve to stress the supereminence of the Creator, but the immediate objection to this is that God requires praise, which is in our interest, but not flattery, which serves no end and is an insult to Him; in fact the purpose of praise is not to please the tyrant but on the contrary to actualize our awareness of the divine Source of all goods and therefore to show forth our human function, which consists in connecting the cosmic qualities to God so as to see them in God and God in them.<sup>214</sup>

A hasty disparagement of Paradise would be to suggest that in light of the beatific vision, Paradise is of little value. Schuon states that this statement is either a “truism or ‘hypocritical angelism’.”<sup>215</sup> It is a truism if by little value one means it in the sense that the Divine is the only absolute real. It is an “angelism” if humans ought to disparage the graces which are accordant with their own nature. The latter disparagement compares the human inhabitants of paradise to angelic creatures suggesting that human creatures become non-human entities lacking a human nature and do not possess the same properties of having a will, physical bodies, etc., and thus certain physical desires relating to physical properties.<sup>216</sup> Schuon believes that the graces of Paradise consistent with our nature include those things which are physical realities and so one need not be hasty in disparaging certain imperfect views of paradise without other inherently limited, imperfect views. Allah is the source of all good and to delimit Paradise subsequently delimits proper human function because it replaces praise with flattery. The cosmic qualities of Paradise actualize our awareness of Allah as the divine source of all good which properly results in praise of the Creator. But going even further, Schuon’s thesis is that Paradise is a theophany; thus, the causal connection between Paradise and Allah is mysteriously ontological. Actualizing

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 170-71.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 171.

<sup>216</sup> According to F. A. Klein, “Angels are beings endued with subtle bodies created of light, who neither eat nor drink, in whom there is no distinction of sexes and who, therefore, do not propagate their species. Their chief characteristic is complete obedience to the will of God...” Klein, *Religion of Islam*, 64. <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/books/9781136099465>

the awareness of the divine Source is more than a causal connection as he stated earlier; it is to see the cosmic qualities in God and God in them. Paradise should not be disparaged because, as Schuon writes, “Paradise is a theophany and, in this respect, cannot be treated as the created ought to be treated when considered in its non-divinity or separativity.”<sup>217</sup>

To say that the paradisaal realities are more than the veil of the bride but the bride’s body itself puts theological tension on *Tawhīd*, between the uncreated and the created. Paradise as theophany purports that the created reveals that which is uncreated, that Allah, the utterly unique and unknowable God, is revealed through that which is knowable. Chittick’s insight is helpful as he summarizes Ibn ‘Arabī’s thoughts on existence. He writes:

Ibn ‘Arabī places it [the isthmus] at the center of his enormous project to synthesize all strands of Islamic thought on the basis of the Koran. He points out that, in actual fact, everything other than God is located in an isthmus between real being and sheer nothingness. All things are contingent upon the Real and receive their relative reality from the radiance of his light. All things are in effect images of God, or “signs,” as the Koran puts it, though nothing is identical with the signified. Everything other than the Real is God’s “dream,” shimmering in a tenuous domain that is neither the pure unity of sheer being and absolute consciousness nor the utter emphasis of pure nothingness.”<sup>218</sup>

Human existence rests on the isthmus between existence or real being and non-existence. Allah is the Ultimate Real and as such all that is not-God is contingent and exists only through Allah’s power (i.e. the radiance of his light). That all creation derives its existence from God whose existence is necessary is not problematic. A contingent entity, by definition, is not necessary so for contingent entities to exist, their existence must derive from elsewhere. A problem does seem to arise however when the ontology of the *other than the Real* is defined. When Chittick suggests that everything other than God is God’s dream, is he suggesting that all of creation is a mental

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<sup>217</sup> Schuon, *Christianity/Islam*, 171.

<sup>218</sup> Chittick, *Muslim Eschatology*, 141.



projection of God? Is creation uniquely distinct and other than the creator or, as a projection, is it God Himself? It seems that two options are available: either creation is illusory and not real or all that is other than God is merely an emanation of God himself. There is no true other.<sup>219</sup>

Problem of otherness, extension, distinction between Allah and creation are not new problems for Muslims scholars. In the case of Schuon's theophany, however, Paradise is ontologically more than a sign, and is not to be considered as normal matter is considered. Paradise as the Bride itself is a radical step that is beyond the bounds of orthodox Islam. But, at the same time, Schuon is working to reconcile the problems arising from *tawhīd* and otherness. He is trying to bridge the impassible, to overcome radical transcendence and unknowability, and thus experiencing the Divine, while also preserving the fundamental tenet of the faith.

### **The Beatific Vision**

This last section not only brings conclusion to the chapter but to the thematic conclusion of the chapter as well. All of the aspects of Paradise have been leading up to this last description of Paradise – the Beatific Vision. The Beatific Vision represents the highest level of pleasure in Paradise and an overly theocentric emphasis. Surah 10:26 states, “Those who did well will have the best reward and more besides.” Al-Ghazālī claims that the “more besides” or “even more” is “the Vision of Divine Countenance, which is the *greatest of all delights*, which shall cause one to be oblivious of the pleasures of the people of Heaven.”<sup>220</sup> That the Beatific Vision is the highest good is not debated in Islam. Where we do find disagreement however, is the exact nature of the vision. Consider these two passages, one from the Qur’ān and one from a hadith: “On that Day there will be radiant faces, looking towards their Lord,”<sup>221</sup> and from the hadith we see

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<sup>219</sup> This problem will be discussed at length in later chapters.

<sup>220</sup> Italics added. Al-Ghazālī, *Remembrance*, 250.

<sup>221</sup> Q 75:22-3

Muhammad telling his disciples on a clear night that they will “see your Lord as you see this moon, and you will have no trouble in seeing Him.”<sup>222</sup> Both passages attest to being able to see Allah but these passages become problematic when the mode of the seeing is established. On the one hand the Qur’ān and hadith claim that Allah will be seen but on the other hand Allah is amodal and therefore does not have a body. What then will the believers see on that day? Furthermore, there are other passages in the Qur’ān which state that a person cannot see Allah.<sup>223</sup> A tension thus arises between what it means to see what cannot be seen.

Historically, this was cause for debate between the Mu‘tazilite and Ash‘arite schools. The Mu‘tazilites traditionally held to the position that sight (*baṣar*) must be understood in a corporeal sense and since God did not have a body, vision of him was impossible. Ash‘arite orthodoxy affirmed the truth of the vision and proposed that Allah would be seen but held to the traditional phrase *bilā kayf* (without the how). They suggested a number of possible options in response to the Mu‘tazilites. First, it was suggested that perhaps the passage regarding Moses was given contextually to humanity in this life. Perhaps, given man’s current physical condition, he could not see God, but it could be that in the new paradisaal body vision would be granted.<sup>224</sup> Second, they also denied that there was any logical reason why *vision (baṣar)* could not perceive an entity that was neither substance nor accident.<sup>225</sup> A third way was proposed by al-Ghazālī. According to Timothy Winter, al-Ghazālī worked vigorously to defend the Beatific Vision as a true description of Paradise. Al-Ghazālī purported that the Beatific Vision was “none other than the

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<sup>222</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari 7434, Book 97, Hadith 61. (Accessed May 14, 2018) <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/97>; See also Sahih Muslim 633b, Book 5, Hadith 271. (Accessed May 14, 2018) <https://sunnah.com/muslim/5>

<sup>223</sup> In Q 7:143 Allah tells Moses “Thou shalt not behold me” and in Q 6:103 that “vision cannot attain him” or “no vision can take him in.”

<sup>224</sup> Hermansen, “Eschatology,” 320.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 320.

gnosis (*maʿrifa*) already given in an inferior and more fleeting fashion to the saints in this world.”<sup>226</sup> Al-Ghazālī is referencing here the Sufī path of gnosis, the internalizing of the religious life and the contemplation of Allah. The path of gnosis is what leads to the “tasting” or *dhawq* of Allah, a religious experience given in an inferior way not but will manifest fully in the Beatific Vision. In this way, al-Ghazālī holds orthodoxy by preserving the truthfulness of the vision while at the same time avoiding having to affirm an ocular vision of Allah.

The vision as gnosis thesis reiterates the importance of the *al-dunyā/al-ākhirā* dichotomy discussed earlier. Muslim anthropology suggests that man is inherently weak and prone to forgetfulness. In the person, there is a tension between competing forces in the body – the desiring soul and the rational soul.<sup>227</sup> The desiring soul is designed to be incline to the pleasures of this life. If one is given over to the desiring soul, he becomes more and more attached to this world, and less inclined to remember his Lord. The rational soul, on the other hand, is more inclined to pursue knowledge/gnosis (*maʿrifa*) and further contemplation of Allah. As one directs his attention more fully to his Lord, the less his desiring soul clings to this life. Thought of in another way, the path to gnosis is an emptying of the self, a shedding of earthly desires. The spiritual life is directed toward filling the mind with knowledge of Allah which in turn leads to contemplation and love. Sufi doctrine highlights this distinction in man and commends the contemplative life.

The path to gnosis is a journey that begins in *al-dunyā* and culminates in *al-ākhirā* when one attains the Beatific Vision. Perceived in this way – vision as gnosis – the vision (*ruʾya*) is a

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<sup>226</sup> See Editor’s Note A in al-Ghazālī’s, *The Remembrance*, 250.

<sup>227</sup> For more on this distinction see: Peter Adamson, “Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, *The Spiritual Medicine*” in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. by El-Rouyheb and Schmidtke, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 70-71.

spiritual delight and it is suggested that it far surpasses the physical pleasures of the Garden.<sup>228</sup> Because this vision is spiritual in nature, in Sufi literature, its description also possesses certain mystical undertones of union and assimilation. Seyyed Nasr, a contemporary Sufi, speaks of the union of ecstasy where the “Beloved is contemplated in Her infinite beauty, which consumes the beholder.”<sup>229</sup> The Beatific Vision, however, raises all sorts of theological and philosophical questions; especially if thought of in Ghazālīan/Sufi terms of gnosis, union and assimilation. First, there is the ever-immanent tension between *Tawhīd* and knowability. If God is radically transcendent and unknowable, then how can one know anything about Allah either experientially or propositionally? Second, how does reducing the Beatific Vision to gnosis impact the highest good of Paradise if *vision as gnosis* cannot reach him? Third, if the vision is attainable in Paradise what is the extent of the union and/or assimilation? Descriptions of the vision in the literature, when thought of in these terms, seemingly begins to slowly dissolve the human subject until naught but Allah remains. These questions and more will be addressed and discussed throughout the remaining chapters.

### Conclusion

This chapter has covered prevalent paradisaal themes in Islam. These salient themes were arranged and discussed in a manner that attempted to express the relationality of humanity to Paradise as well as humanity to Allah. First, the relationship between this life (*al-dunyā*) and the next (*al-ākhirā*) forms an important dialectic in Islamic eschatology. While in *al-dunyā*, Muslims must live in light of *al-ākhirā* for what is done here on earth impacts the life to come.

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<sup>228</sup> Klein, *Religion of Islam*, 96, fn. 1.

<sup>229</sup> Nasr, *The Garden of Truth*, 60. For more description see Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, 256-7.

Furthermore, the pleasures of this life stand in contrast to the coming life. They are but mere shadows of what Allah has in store for the inhabitants of Paradise.

Second, the theme of sensuality in Paradise considered the relationship of the body to nature. Paradise is described as an abundance of the sensual where the rewards are constantly and perpetually generating pleasure for the body. In connection to this theme of sensuality, the third theme – sexuality and the sacred – it was suggested that within the perpetual acts of sexuality in Paradise there is a connection to the sacred. Understood in this way, sexuality and the sacral is possibly a moment/location in which the human comes into contact with the Divine.

The fourth theme, Paradise as theophany, would support the previous proposition as we saw from Frithjof Schuon and his classification of the physical realm of Paradise of an ontological class differentiated from the physical in this life. Schuon suggests that Paradise is more than a sign/signifier relation to Allah and that Paradise is not the veil but the bride itself. Although outside the bounds of traditional Islamic orthodoxy, Schuon is attempting to reconcile the two creeds of *Tawhīd* and experience of the Divine.

Lastly, all of these themes as they were assembled led to the Beatific Vision of Allah, the highest and loftiest pleasure in Paradise. Again, the tension between *Tawhīd* and experience was addressed as the passages about seeing God were addressed. Al-Ghazālī offers a possible *via media* between two extremes – denying the truth of the vision on the one hand and affirming an ocular vision of Allah on the other. Both ends of the spectrum are problematic in relation to revelation. Ghazālī postulates another way when he limits the vision of Allah to gnosis (already given in this life but fully manifested in the next).

*Vision as Knowledge (Gnosis)* leads us into the next chapter where we will examine more closely Ghazālī's thesis. Furthermore, the next chapter will also look at the various components

which constitute the culminated vision – knowledge, love and union. The causal relation between man and the Divine first begins with the Divine. Love, it is said, derives metaphysically from Allah both in creating and in the self-giving of revelation. Gnosis, as man receives it leads to love for Allah. As one loves his Lord, in return, his Lord will return that love. Lastly, this progression of love-gnosis-love culminates in mystical union in the Beatific Vision in the afterlife.

## CHAPTER 3 – THE ISLAMIC BEATIFIC VISION: GOD’S LOVE FOR MAN AND MAN’S LOVE FOR GOD

### Introduction

The previous chapter concluded with the discussion of the Beatific Vision in Paradise. The Beatific Vision represents the highest level of both attainment and pleasure in Islamic Paradise. But, as was also mentioned in the chapter, attaining the Beatific Vision in Paradise corresponds to a Muslim’s level of spiritual development in this life. Proximity to Allah in this life correlates to the degree of nearness, and thus pleasure and satisfaction, in the life to come. Keeping the Beatific Vision in mind, this chapter will discuss the process of spiritual development in Islam needed to attain the full vision in Paradise. The process will be examined within the Sufi tradition for they submit that only along the mystical path can one achieve such illumination. More specifically, the process under examination is that of al-Ghazālī’s design, what he calls the ‘science of the afterlife.’ There are two central themes emphasized in the process or path – knowledge (or gnosis) and love. Along the path, knowledge of Allah comes first which is then followed by love for Allah. As one grows in knowledge of Allah so too does love for Him grow. As one grows in love for Allah, s/he will pursue more knowledge and thus one follows a path towards greater illumination and greater love. The reciprocating knowledge/love cycle brings one nearer and nearer to Allah until that person loves nothing save Allah alone. It is in this moment, when love for Allah (and His Prophet) is above all else, that Allah then loves his servant. In order to understand how this relation is achieved, we will discuss the content and nature of the revelatory knowledge as well as the kind and quality of Divine/human love.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Seyyed Nasr highlights the need for a qualitative distinction regarding love, stating: “Men and women experience all kinds of love and behold many beautiful objects in this life here below, but most do not reach the

The phrase “God’s love for man” may initially seem a contrary conception of Allah common to the Western reader. Seyyed Hossein Nasr believes that this idea of Allah as only a God of Justice – but not of Mercy, Compassion, and Love – has been “propagated by certain Western scholars and Christian apologists,” and that it is “totally false.”<sup>231</sup> Perhaps there is some truth in Nasr’s claim of propagation but at the same time it is not as if these assertions were made in a vacuum, absent from any Islamic doctrines and teachings. I would submit that the notion of Allah as loving is not a prevailing theme in many Sunni Muslim societies.<sup>232</sup> This does not mean however, that Nasr’s claim is to be ignored or rejected. Many Muslims thinkers and writers, especially in the classical period of Islam, emphasized Allah’s love, compassion and mercy. We turn now to one such person of this period, Al-Ghazālī, the first Islamic reformer, and his quest to revive the ever-important religious and spiritual pursuit of the afterlife.

### **Al-Ghazālī: Islam’s First Reformer**

Having a love for Allah that is above all other loves is the telos of all human creatures. Subsequently, love for Allah also leads to a love for His Prophet but the degree of love for the latter must not supersede the former. Loving the things of this world, the temporal, finite pleasures more than the Divine creates a division wherein one neglects his/her ultimate purpose in life. Furthermore, love for earthly things more than Allah will cause a person to miss out on

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Garden of Truth through such experiences. We must therefore ask ourselves what love and beauty are in the context of Sufism and why the Sufis, who emphasize so much principal and illuminative knowledge, speak so much of love and beauty, which are inextricably bound to each other.” Nasr, *The Garden of Truth*, 60.

<sup>231</sup> Nasr, *Heart of Islam*, 205.

<sup>232</sup> In the preface to a modern Sufi treatise *Irshad* by Muzaffer Ozak, Seyyed Nasr discusses the causes of the decline of Sufi prevalence and influence over the past 200 years. He notes that there are two main causes for the attacks against Sufism in the past two centuries; he writes, “Despite the ravages which the events of the past two centuries have brought upon the Islamic world and the attack made against Sufism by both the Western oriented modernists and the so-called fundamentalists and revivalists, Sufism continues to survive and in fact flourish to this day in many parts of the Islamic world...” Muzaffer Ozak, *Irshad: Wisdom of a Sufi Master*, trans. by Muhtar Holland, (New York: Amity House, 1988), ix.



the blissful life to come as s/he will not attain the Beatific Vision in Paradise wherein eternal felicity resides and may even lead to damnation in hellfire. Love for Allah is the utmost concern for the Muslim believer.

Possessing a love for Allah above all else is preceded by knowledge of Him. A person must know his Lord before one can love and so there is a need for divine revelation and disclosure prior to love. In Islam, revelation is given in a number of forms. Classical Islam teaches that all of creation is a revelation of Allah, testifying of His many wonderful attributes. The vast expanse of the cosmos, this world of ours, the human body, evoke a posture of remembrance and reflection.<sup>233</sup> These modes of revelation manifest in a general sense, but they are not sufficient in producing the type of knowledge needed to elicit a full and abounding love for Allah. It is the Qur'ān alone, the special revelation of Allah, wherein one learns the most fundamental truth of *tawhīd*. But such knowledge, however, exists in gradation in the religious subject and, as we will see, the level of spiritual development corresponds to one's ability to internalize *tawhīd*.

As was mentioned earlier in the study, Al-Ghazālī is a very influential Islamic thinker, writer, theologian, philosopher and Sufi.<sup>234</sup> The influence and gravitas with which he wrote are

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<sup>233</sup> They also serve as evidence that Allah exists. Ozak, *Irshad*, 31-33.

<sup>234</sup> The traditional paradigm of al-Ghazālī suggests that he rejected philosophy (*falsifa*) and rational theology (*kalām*) and spent the latter years working to reconcile Sufism with Muslim orthodoxy. Adherents to this paradigm cite that in the latter works of al-Ghazālī's (namely his autobiography), we receive a more final iteration of al-Ghazālī that reflects the conclusions arrived at following his long spiritual/existential journey. The current scholarship on al-Ghazālī in the West represents a paradigm shift from the traditional narratives that dominated the late 19<sup>th</sup> and then 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. In the 1990's the shift emerged in the publishing of Richard M. Frank's *Creation and the Cosmic System*. According to Kenneth Garden, Frank's work demonstrated that al-Ghazālī's thoughts on cosmology changed from the traditional Ash'arite occasionalism to a more Avicennian (Neo-Platonic) emanationism. (For more detail on this distinction and a synthesis of al-Ghazālī's view see Garden, *The First Islamic Reviver*, pp. 10ff. and Chs. 3ff.) Al-Ghazālī's cosmology is only one side of the debate in Ghazālīan studies. His work on the religious sciences calls into question his incorporation and the influence of philosophy and Sufi practices on his thinking. Currently, the works of such scholars as Frank Griffel, Alexander Treiger, and Binyamin Abrahamov, all suggest a prominent role of philosophy in al-Ghazālī's epistemology and methodology and the details of that influence, as well as the role of Sufism in his thought, will be discussed in subsequent sections.

so widely felt in the Muslim world that he is often given the moniker, “The Proof of Islam.” It is at the convergence of knowledge, love and the afterlife where his thoughts and insight are paramount for this study. Frustrated with the religious form of Islam in his day, al-Ghazālī set out to reform what he saw as a perversion of the faith from how it was originally practiced in the days of the Prophet. The Islamic society of his day, it seemed, had become engulfed in the formalities of jurisprudence and *kalām*. These sub-disciplines were having a terraforming impact on the religious sciences – both in thought and perspective. He sensed that the emphasis on the afterlife and, more importantly, the attaining of the Beatific Vision had been altogether cast to the side, yet for him, and for Islam rightly practiced, it constituted the utmost importance in religious life.

In order to grasp al-Ghazālī’s contribution to Islamic thought as well as understand his patented science of the afterlife, it is beneficial to briefly summarize and examine two of his works. First, we will look at his autobiography which tells of his intellectual and existential journey through epistemological skepticism and religious crisis. Second, the opening pages of the *Book of Knowledge* – Book 1 of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*) highlight the need for revival in Islam and thus orients the reader towards what he sought to resolve. Al-Ghazālī’s journey is chronicled in his autobiography entitled *The Deliverer from Error* (*al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*)<sup>235</sup> completed in the early months of Fall 500/1106.<sup>236</sup> The timing of the *Deliverer* is significant due to the cause for writing, a factor which cannot be overlooked. Alexander Treiger notes that al-Ghazālī’s autobiography is written in response to a

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<sup>235</sup> There are a number of variant translations to the title *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* : *Rescuer from Misguidance*, *The Deliverer from Error*, *Deliverance from Error*, etc.

<sup>236</sup> Treiger provides this date and notes that apparently this was the first work written after his return to public teaching in Nīshāpūr. *Ibid.*, 14.

significant controversy – the Nīshāpūr controversy<sup>237</sup> – that arose following the publication of the *Revival (Ihyā’)* and so the *Deliverer* should be read as an apologetic treatise.<sup>238</sup> Al-Ghazālī’s pointedness in the *Revival* did not gain him favor with the religious elite of his day, and the *Deliverer*, in part, is answering certain charges against his methodology in the *Revival*. Thus, certain passages in the *Deliverer*, especially those in relation to philosophy, must be read carefully and in light of the entire corpus of al-Ghazālī’s works.<sup>239</sup>

With that in mind, in the *Deliverer* we are privy to al-Ghazālī’s journey and how he came to resolve his bouts with epistemological skepticism and religious crisis. For al-Ghazālī, epistemological doubt was the first obstacle in need of navigation. He went through a period of skepticism while on a quest for certainty and thirsted for the ability to “grasp the real meaning of things” and not to believe something to be true merely because of religious tradition.<sup>240</sup> Al-

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<sup>237</sup> For more on the Nīshāpūr controversy see Kenneth Garden, “Al-Ghazālī’s Contested Revival: *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* and its Critics in Khorasan and the Maghrib,” (Doctor of Philosophy, Chicago University, 2005), [https://www.academia.edu/438972/Al-Ghazalis\\_Contested\\_Revival\\_IhyaUlum\\_Al-Dinand\\_Its\\_Critics\\_In\\_Khorasan\\_and\\_the\\_Maghrib\\_Morocco\\_Tunisia\\_Algeria\\_Spain\\_?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/438972/Al-Ghazalis_Contested_Revival_IhyaUlum_Al-Dinand_Its_Critics_In_Khorasan_and_the_Maghrib_Morocco_Tunisia_Algeria_Spain_?auto=download)

<sup>238</sup> Reading the autobiography in this way influences the hermeneutical framework of its study and analysis and scholars such as Treiger have suggested that we must read through some of what al-Ghazālī says in latter works and not ignore the rest of his corpus of literature – especially his inclusion of philosophical ideas elsewhere in various works (especially the *Revival*). Treiger defends the thesis (supported by Richard M. Frank) that al-Ghazālī is in debt to Avicenna (Ibn Sina) in *all* his writings (his emphasis). He further states that scholars have identified “considerable problems with al-Ghazālī’s presentation of his engagement with philosophy...” which leads him to suggest that we take al-Ghazālī’s apologetic comments against philosophy in the *Deliverer* “with a grain of salt.” Alexander Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge in Islamic Thought: Al-Ghazālī’s theory of mystical cognition and its Avicennian foundation*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3 (especially pts. 1-3).

<sup>239</sup> Kenneth Garden notes that among al-Ghazālī’s objectives in writing the *Deliverer* were to “exaggerate the totality of his break with his pre-488/1095 life and thought, downplay his extensive debt to philosophy, and proclaim his unparalleled religious authority.” Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, 170.

<sup>240</sup> On these pursuits al-Ghazālī writes: “In the bloom of my youth and the prime of my life, from the time I reached puberty before I was twenty until now, when I am over fifty, I have constantly been diving daringly into the depths of this profound sea and wading into its deep water like a bold man, not like a cautious coward. I would penetrate far into every murky mystery, pounce upon every problem, and dash into every mazy difficulty. I would scrutinize the creed of every sect and seek to lay bare the secrets of each faction’s teaching with the aim of discriminating between the proponent of truth and the advocate of error, and between the faithful follower of tradition and the heterodox innovator. I would never take leave...of a philosopher without seeking to become acquainted with the essence of his philosophy, or of a *mutakallim* without endeavoring to discover the aim of his discussion and polemic, or of a sufi without eagerly trying to obtain knowledge of the secret of his serenity, or of a

Ghazālī searched for an epistemological grounding in sense data and rational data. In a scene similar to one that would transpire a few hundred years later with Descartes, sense data and rational data are conversant interlocutors on al-Ghazālī’s skeptical shoulders. Sense data came under scrutiny first and after thorough reflection, al-Ghazālī determined epistemological grounding could not be found in sense data because his soul would not allow him to submit that he was safely from error whilst relying on it. The strongest of senses, the eyes organs, are often deceived by what is seen (i.e. the movement of shadows, the size of stars, etc.) and the knowledge provided through sense-data and judged by the “sense-judge” needs refutation from another judge – the “reason-judge.”<sup>241</sup> Reliance on sense-data for grounding was thus untenable and so he then postulated that perhaps one could rely on rational data and primary truths.<sup>242</sup> But as he did, sense-data spoke up and questioned the judgment of the rational-judge. Just as the rational judge had come along and corrected the perception of the sense-judge and exposed the lie, how does the rational judge know that the primary truths, as they are perceived, are true? Could there not be another judge beyond perception that could render the untrue verdict for the rational judge? To make the point, al-Ghazālī considers dream states and how in the waking, one realizes that what was perceived reality was merely a dream, that the dreamer did not know s/he

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devout worshiper without looking into the source and substance of his piety, or of an irreligious nihilist without attempting to find out his background and motivation in order to become aware of the reasons for his bold profession of nihilism and irreligion.” Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverer from Error (al-Munqidh min al-Dalal)*, trans. by R. J. McCarthy, (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2004), 54.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>242</sup> Al-Ghazālī has certain primary truths in mind: “‘Ten is more than three’, and ‘One and the same thing cannot be simultaneously affirmed and denied,’ and ‘One and the same thing cannot be incipient and eternal, existent and nonexistent, necessary and impossible.’” Ibid., 56.

was dreaming until awoken. It could be the case that our conscious reality is merely a dream that we could awaken from at any moment (or at death).<sup>243</sup>

This realization gripped al-Ghazālī and by his own testimony he remained extremely skeptical for two months. It is important to note that al-Ghazālī's "malady," as he calls it, did not impact his adherence to religious doctrine and his skepticism did not carry over into his religious beliefs. After a while, he testifies that Allah "cured him of that sickness" and that, "...My soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again I accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them with safety and certainty. But that was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge."<sup>244</sup> The last two sentences are of paramount import for understanding al-Ghazālī's epistemology and subsequently his methodology of the religious sciences as they introduce the phenomenology of inspiration. According to al-Ghazālī, most knowledge or the "unveiling of truth" does not depend on "precisely formulated proofs" but from the light which is cast from Allah and anyone who believes otherwise has "straightened the broad mercy of God."<sup>245</sup> It is Allah who illumines the heart with axiomatic knowledge (or first principles) and divine inspiration. But in his quest, the question remained of who were the purveyors of the full truth within Islam and how does one prepare the heart for reception? Al-Ghazālī was inclined to believe the categories of those who were seeking truth was limited to four: the *Mutakallimūn*, *Bāṭinites*, Philosophers, and the

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<sup>243</sup> Here, al-Ghazālī cites a tradition of the Prophet saying: "Men are asleep: then after they die they awake." Ibid., 57.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 57.

Sufis.<sup>246</sup> He committed to immersing himself in the first three and found both positive and negative features within each group.

The fourth category of truth seekers he investigated were the Sufis. Of the Sufis, Al-Ghazālī writes that he knew their particular Way was “consummated [realized] only by knowledge and by activity [by the union of theory and practice].”<sup>247</sup> He further elucidates that the aim of their knowledge is removed obstacles in the soul, ridding it of bad habits and qualities, so that a pure and polished heart remained, a heart that is “empty of all save God and adorned with the constant remembrance of God.”<sup>248</sup> At this point in the narrative, al-Ghazālī notes that from his journey into the sciences, through their methods and practice, on the quest for the two kinds of knowledges – revealed and rational – he had already acquired a certainty about three things: God Most High, in the prophetic mediation of revelation, and the Last Day.<sup>249</sup> The certainty in these fundamental tenets was not caused by any one specific proof but by a number of experiences and circumstances. He found, however, more was needed in order to attain the beatific vision in the afterlife. Sufism, he realized, was more than just theory and words, it demanded piety and the partaking of experiential states. In order to achieve eternal bliss, he must move beyond theory and knowledge and seek to internalize these truths of which he had become certain. A personal religious battle was emerging within al-Ghazālī for he was realizing what it would take in order to cleanse his heart of worldly attachments.<sup>250</sup> His teaching post in Baghdad,

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>250</sup> He writes, “It had already become clear to me that my only hope of attaining beatitude in the afterlife lay in piety and restraining my soul from passion. The beginning of all that, I knew, was to sever my heart’s attachment to the world by withdrawing from this abode of delusion and turning to the mansion of immortality and devoting myself with total ardor to God Most High.” Ibid., 78.

one of the most prestigious appointments one could attain, was muddying his heart and building up the earthly abode of delusion. He faced a choice, to move beyond theory and into practice, to embark on the religious experiential journey that is the Sufi Way. R. J. McCarthy suggests that this is a very significant moment in the Ghazālī story, as it represents the beginning of the religious crisis al-Ghazālī faced following his epistemological crisis.<sup>251</sup> Al-Ghazālī made the decision to apply himself to the Way and left his teaching post in Baghdad. He set out for Damascus and for the next ten years he committed to solitude, remembrance of God, and cleansing of the heart from anything but God Most High. During these ten years, al-Ghazālī became and, from that point on, was a Sufi.<sup>252</sup>

For the purposes of this study, a specific question emerges here concerning the development of al-Ghazālī's methodology for knowing during this time. It is clear that he considers the Way of the Sufis to be superior for attaining the beatific vision but is it exclusively the supreme way to know God? The answer to that question is debated and will be developed further in following sections but for now, we can consider al-Ghazālī's own conclusions following this ten-year journey. He writes:

I knew with certainty that the Sufis are those who uniquely follow the way to God Most High, their mode of life is the best of all, their way the most direct of ways, and their ethic the purest. Indeed, were one to combine the insight of the intellectuals, the wisdom of the wise, and the lore of the scholars versed in the mysteries of revelation in order to change a single item of sufi conduct and ethic and to replace it with something else better, no way to do so would be found! For all their motions and quiescences, exterior and interior, are learned from the light

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<sup>251</sup> McCarthy writes: "Al-Ghazālī always had an unshakable belief in the "three fundamentals" – even, it would seem, during his earlier crisis of skepticism, which was not properly a *religious*, but rather a *psychological* and *epistemological* crisis. This may also help to explain what follows. For here we begin the important account of the great crisis of al-Ghazālī. This is a *religious* crisis, a crisis of the spirit, not of the intellect alone: to be or not to be a true and wholly committed follower of the way logically consequent on a profound and living faith in the "three fundamentals." McCarthy is the translator of this version of the *Deliverer*. Ibid., 115 n.168 (footnote appears on pg. 78).

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., see pgs. 80ff.

of the niche of prophecy. And beyond the light of prophecy there is no light on earth from which illumination can be obtained.<sup>253</sup>

Whatever conclusions are to be made regarding al-Ghazālī's methodology, it must include, at least in part, the paradigm of Sufism.

The second part of our initial inquiry looks at the opening section of the *Book of Knowledge*, Book 1 of the *Revival*. Al-Ghazālī wrote the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*) for the expressed purpose of reorienting the Muslim community into mindful pursuit of the afterlife.<sup>254</sup> In essence, al-Ghazālī developed a new religious discipline: *the science of the afterlife*. He believed this discipline to be unknown to his contemporaries but also believed this science was not new in the sense that it had been known to the first generations of Muslims following the death of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>255</sup>

In the opening passage of Book 1 of the *Iḥyā'*: *The Book of Knowledge* (*Kitāb al-'ilm*), we are given the objective of this massive tome.<sup>256</sup> Al-Ghazālī begins the *Iḥyā'* with the conventional religious introductions and invocations although the structure of his introduction does not fully adhere to mandated conventions of religious writing. The haste with which he writes the first three steps of the introduction is a rhetorical device suggesting to the reader that his message is so important he has not time for formalities.<sup>257</sup> The fourth entry of the

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>254</sup> The science of the afterlife has two branches: the science of the unveiling (*'ilm al-mukāshafa*) and the science of practice (*'ilm al-mu'āmalā*).

<sup>255</sup> Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 4.

<sup>256</sup> The objective is the same as has just been previously stated a few paragraphs prior. Here, however, we get a glimpse of al-Ghazālī's specific thoughts regarding the religious climate of his day. Also, another note to mention regarding the form of al-Ghazālī's intro to the *Iḥyā'*, Garden states that the introduction, along with detailing the objectives, also gives insight into why al-Ghazālī's critics respond to him as they do. Garden, "Al-Ghazālī," 17.

<sup>257</sup> On the religious formalities and the cause for controversy see Garden, Ibid., 18-20. Garden notes that this break from convention is actually a rhetorical device employed by al-Ghazālī to depict a message given with haste: "By rushing through the traditional pious invocations, linking these directly to his mission statement, and writing in such a florid style, the author conveys a sense of the urgency of his task. This passage is designed to give



introduction begins the cause for writing. A brief analysis of this passage will be helpful for understanding not only the purposes of the *Iḥyāʾ*, but also, I would submit, his life's work as a whole. The fourth entry begins as follows:

I hasten to enlighten you who are self-righteous and reject belief, and who go too far in your reproach and disapproval.

I am no longer obliged to remain silent because the responsibility to speak and to warn you has been imposed on me by your persistent blindness to the true state of the divine reality, and your insistence on fostering evil, stirring up opposition against anyone who, in order to conform to the dictates of knowledge, deviates from custom and the established practice of men. In doing this he fulfils God's prescriptions to purify the self and reform the heart, and thus redeems a life that has been dissipated in despair of remedy and avoids the company of those who the Law Giver [Muhammad] described as "The person most severely chastised on the day of judgment will be the learned man whom God did not afford benefit from his knowledge."<sup>258</sup>

Al-Ghazālī begins his charge, making his distaste known for those who are self-righteous in the faith. He feels compelled to write against these people for a number of reasons: first, their religious thought and practice has become blind to the original intentions of the faith. Second, they are not only leading others astray but actively persecuting (and obstructing) those who resist these constructs and pursue the "true dictates of knowledge" thus fulfilling God's prescriptions to purify the heart. In this passage, one can begin to see the opponents al-Ghazālī is challenging – the religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) and their acquisition of knowledge (*ʿilm*), which, according the implications of the cited hadith, will be of no benefit to them in the afterlife. One of the keys to

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the impression of near recklessness, as though the author were driven by a mission so imperative that he cannot be bothered to observe convention and wait until after the formalities to launch his attack." Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>258</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Book of Knowledge (Kitāb al-ʿilm)*, Book I of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn)*, trans. by Kenneth Honerkamp, (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2015), xl. The section division of this passage is influenced by Kenneth Garden who interacts with this passage in the source listed below. Also, it is important to note that the hadith reference at the end of the passage is also cause for controversy in the *Iḥyāʾ*. Ghazālī uses many hadith throughout *The Revival* that are of low grade in terms of authenticity and transmission. Garden notes this and also points out that this hadith in particular received the grade of *ḍaʿīf* "which is to say, possibly spurious." Garden, "Al-Ghazālī," 22.

understanding al-Ghazālī's aim in the *Iḥyā'* is his conception of *'ilm* which can be translated either as "knowledge" or "science." We have already seen that the charge to all Muslims is to know himself and to seek knowledge (*'ilm*) of his Lord. The questions before us in this section of the study and for al-Ghazali in the *Iḥyā'* is "what constitutes *'ilm*?"<sup>259</sup>

In the next section, Al-Ghazālī continues his explication of the cause for the *Iḥyā'*. One can sense his belief in the imminence of the concern as well as the incensed disposition towards the religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) as leaves no uncertainty as to their identity. He writes:

By my life! There is no reason for your persistent disapproval except the malady which has become an epidemic among the multitudes. The malady [of ignorance] is not discerning the importance of the matter, the gravity of the problem, and the seriousness of the crisis. The next life is approaching, the present world is vanishing, death is imminent, the journey is far, provisions for the journey are scant, the dangers are great, and the road is blocked. The perceptive know that only knowledge and works devoted to God avail.

With neither guide nor companion, the journey on the road to the next life, with its many pitfalls, is difficult and tiring. The guides to the way are the learned who are the heirs of the prophets, but our age is void of them, and only the superficial remain, and Satan has mastery over most of them. All of them were so engrossed in their worldly fortunes that they came to see good as evil and evil as good, so that the science of religion disappeared, and the light of guidance was extinguished all over the world. They made people imagine that there is no knowledge except the formal legal rulings of a government by which judges settle disputes when foolish people quarrel; or the ability to debate, which is displayed by the vainglorious in order to confuse and refute; or the elaborate and flowery language by which the preacher seeks to lure the common people. Apart from these three [types of knowledge] they could not find other ways to profit and [acquire] the riches of the world.<sup>260</sup>

It is interesting to note that alongside al-Ghazālī's castigation of the religious leaders he also sees them as part of the sickness or "malady." They are both the cause of the epidemic and the

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<sup>259</sup> Garden states that this question is the most important and controversial theme of the entire corpus of the *Iḥyā'*, "the contestation of what constitutes *'ilm*." Ibid., 22.

<sup>260</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, xl-xli.

victims along with the remaining multitudes.<sup>261</sup> The malady is “forgetfulness” but not necessarily the forgetfulness associated with the call to remember their Lord, rather, it is the ignorance of the immanence of the life to come (i.e. not being mindful of *ma‘ād* or the “going back”). Along with the immanence of death and the return, what heightens the concern for al-Ghazālī is the challenge of the path one must take in order to return. Again, we see the significance of knowledge in this process as he notes that only the kind of knowledge he has in mind and works attributed to Allah will avail or attain felicity.

Certain guides are needed to lead people along the path that is both far and dangerous but al-Ghazālī notes that the world is void of them and with the loss of them so too did the science of religion disappear, and the light of guidance extinguish.<sup>262</sup> Of course religious guides still remained within Islam (that is who al-Ghazālī is writing to), but he believes they are all superficial and, even more extreme, that Satan has a hold on them. The identity of the corrupt guides comes into view as al-Ghazālī notes that the guides have led the people astray by their “legal rulings” (*fiqh*) and “debating...and elaborate/flowery language” (*kalām*) by leading the multitudes to believe their methodologies are, respectively, the only source for religious knowledge. The jurist and the theologians are who al-Ghazālī has in mind and in order to revive the religious sciences, “this means,” Garden writes, “wrestling *‘ilm* from the hands of those *‘ulamā’* who have blotted out its true spirit.”<sup>263</sup> One can see why Ghazālī faced controversy in his time. His clearly manifested charges against the religious leaders of his day was perhaps the

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<sup>261</sup> Garden, “Al-Ghazālī,” 24.

<sup>262</sup> The “science of religion” referenced here refers to what al-Ghazālī identifies as the “science of the hereafter.”

<sup>263</sup> Garden, “Al-Ghazālī,” 26.

most significant cause for controversy in his time for in doing so he was essentially challenging their faith, wealth, power and influence throughout the Muslim world.

In the closing section of his opening statement al-Ghazālī writes:

The knowledge of the next life according to which our predecessors walked and which God, in His book, called discernment, wisdom, knowledge, illumination, light, right guidance, and rectitude, has been quite forgotten. This is a calamity in religion and a grave crisis, [so] I considered it an important duty for me to compose this book in order to revive the religious sciences, to reveal the ways of the early imams, and to clarify the branches of knowledge the prophets and predecessors regarded as useful.<sup>264</sup>

Al-Ghazālī believes that he has been chosen to revive the all-important religious sciences for the way of reform has been shown to him. He does not want to do away with the religious methodologies of jurisprudence and kalām-oriented theology; rather, to reorient them and, as Garden writes, “subordinate them to what al-Ghazālī calls the “other-worldly science” (*ilm al-ākhirah*).”<sup>265</sup> The distinction made here by al-Ghazālī – the “other-worldly” vs “worldly” science – likely stems from the same distinction made in Surah 30:6a-7, “...but most people do not know; they only know the outer surface of this present life and are heedless of the life to come.” Awareness of the life to come is paramount, not only for al-Ghazālī but as evidenced throughout the many passages in the Qur’ān warning people to heed the coming judgment. But as al-Ghazālī rightly advocates, heeding the coming judgment is only half of the picture, it is not enough to merely make it to Paradise. A Muslim should strive for felicity in Paradise which is achieved

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<sup>264</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, xli.

<sup>265</sup> Garden, “Al-Ghazālī,” 6-7. He goes on to write, “What al-Ghazali means by the otherworldly science seems on the main to be Sufism, be he never says so directly, and in those passages in which he briefly discusses the esoteric and theoretical aspects of this science, he does so in ways that could be taken to be philosophical.” Here, we are privy to a point of debate in Ghazālīan study concerning the role of Sufism and Philosophy in his thought. The intricacies of the debate are beyond the scope of the paper but what is significant is the role of Sufism and philosophy in the quest for felicity. Current scholarship – Kenneth Garden, Alexander Treiger, Frank Griffel, Binyamin Abrahamov – suggest a more prominent role of philosophy in al-Ghazālī’s methodology than has traditionally been assumed in Western scholarship. The current theses suggest a synthesis of Sufism and Philosophy, each dependent on the other for the attaining of the knowledge leading to felicity.

through the attaining of the Beatific Vision, achieved only after one pursues knowledge of the divine in this life.

### **The Revival: Preparing the Heart for Inspiration**

The previous section served to contextualize al-Ghazālī's thought and prepare the reader for his main body of work – the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. The *Revival* is a revival of the science of the afterlife, the *locus classicus* in Islam for attaining practical religious knowledge pertaining to the perusal of felicity. For al-Ghazālī, it is imperative that all Muslims pursue knowledge of the afterlife, and more specifically knowledge of God.<sup>266</sup>

The science of the afterlife is divided into two categories: the science of proper conduct and the science of spiritual unveiling. The former is the means to achieve the latter, that is, the former constitutes the path leading to the unveiling. The *Revival* is an instruction manual, a science for how to attain knowledge through the unveiling which in turn leads to felicity in the life to come. The role of knowledge in the *Revival* cannot be understated and the pursuit of knowledge is the most excellent of quests but at the same time, it must not be disconnected from action. Knowledge and action share a dialectical bond in the *Revival*. On the one hand, right action is needed to purify the heart in order to make it receptive of inspirational knowledge (*ilham*), i.e. unveiling, but, on the other, knowledge of proper action (i.e. ethics) is needed to know how to complete the actions of proper conduct. Thus, knowledge is foundational to achieving eternal bliss and the pursuit of knowledge the most excellent of virtues.<sup>267</sup> According

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<sup>266</sup> Al-Ghazālī writes, “and you should find it [knowledge] as a means to the abode of the hereafter and its delights as well as a path to proximity with God, for there is no means of approaching Him but through it.” Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, 25.

<sup>267</sup> On the foundation of knowledge al-Ghazālī writes, “The most exalted rank with regard to humanity is eternal bliss [in the hereafter], and the most excellent of things is that which serves as a means of attaining it. One will never attain it without knowledge and action. One will only attain the incumbent actions through the knowledge of how to complete them. The foundation of bliss in this world and the next is therefore knowledge; it is thus the most excellent deed of all.” Ibid., 25.

to al-Ghazālī, unveiling is the aim of every saint and of the sincere, and it is toward this aim he wished to make accessible, but it is also that case that he does not permit the knowledge of the unveiling to be recorded in writing.<sup>268</sup> The key to understanding al-Ghazālī's role in this study lies in unlocking the science of the unveiling. Thus, the following questions will be addressed in this section: How is unveiling achieved in this life? Which methodology does he employ – Sufism or Philosophy – to achieve said phenomenon? What content is revealed in the phenomena of unveiling?

In order to answer these questions, we must examine the elements of al-Ghazālī's noetic structure. While each element deserves its own section, due to space limitations, they will be interspersed into a tandem conversation regarding the methodology of the science of the afterlife. The first and fundamental element on his noetics – the heart (*qalb*) – is the locus of the sciences and where both the noetic and methodological discussion begins. Al-Ghazālī believed that the most glorious thing about man, separating him from all other creatures, was his capacity and aptitude to know God. The heart is the element in man which prepares him for knowledge and allows him to receive it for it is the heart, as al-Ghazālī states, “that knows God, and works for God, and strives towards God.”<sup>269</sup> This conception of heart (*qalb*) does not refer to the physical heart and actually stands in contrast to the physical organ in that it is non-physical and immortal, the part of man which endures through death.<sup>270</sup> The heart of man is also the seat of desires and that which inclines him to either obedience towards God or disobedience. The outward actions of

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., xlv. The reason for the prohibition is complicated and is due to the esoteric nature of what is ultimately reveal in the *unveiling* itself. More will be said about the nature of the unveiling later on but for now if one desires to see a list of the content of the *unveiling* provided by al-Ghazālī see Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 40-41.

<sup>269</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Marvels of the Heart: Science of the Spirit*, trans. by Walter James Skellie, (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), 1.

<sup>270</sup> Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 17.

either good or evil, obedience or disobedience and the physical parts which carry them out are the either the heart's light or its darkness.<sup>271</sup> It is imperative then that a person search and know his heart for the heart is also the place wherein one knows himself, and if one knows himself then he knows his Lord.<sup>272</sup> Likewise, if one does not know his heart and thus himself, he does not know his Lord.

For al-Ghazālī, the heart, which he calls the “subtle tenuous substance,” is the real essence of man.<sup>273</sup> The heart is the part of man that perceives, knows, and experiences and in this sense, it is synonymous with the part of man the philosophical tradition calls the rational soul or intellect. Such equivalence may cause one to wonder why al-Ghazālī opts for a different element to reflect the human intellect rather than traditional philosophical noetics. Treiger suggests that it was not al-Ghazālī's intent to overturn philosophical tradition or to make a more “emotional” noetic element; instead, it was an attempt, to “defuse the concept's philosophical connotations so as to make it more palatable to the broader circles of religious scholars.”<sup>274</sup> Here, the choice to use “heart” demonstrates al-Ghazālī's sometimes covert methodology in the *Revival* and a glimpse (among many) of his philosophical commitments.

Lastly, there is, as Treiger suggests, perhaps another crucial reason al-Ghazālī employs the heart as his noetic foundation. He writes, “Because of its religious connotations, the heart,

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<sup>271</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Marvels*, 2.

<sup>272</sup> Knowing oneself and this formulation of the saying “know yourself and thus know your Lord” was a popular Muslim proverb and was written by many different authors of various stripes. Al-Ghazālī is referencing that proverb here and as Skellie (the translator of *Marvels*) notes (fn.6), al-Ghazālī sometimes spoke of it as a hadith. Ibid., 2. It is, however, unlikely that this was a genuine hadith attributable to the Prophet but this sort of occurrence is not something new for one common criticisms of his works was his hadith scholarship and the frequent use of less than credible hadith.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>274</sup> Treiger, *Inspired Knowledge*, 18. Also, it is interesting to note that al-Ghazālī's noetic structure suggests Avicennian influence (thus philosophical) and that he seems to be following Avicenna's example. Treiger demonstrates that in Avicenna's last work, *Epistle on the Rational Soul*, he calls the rational soul – among other names – “the real heart.”

more so than the intellect or the rational soul, is an appropriate meeting point of the two dimensions of spiritual life: the ascetic *praxis* and the mystical *theoria*.<sup>275</sup> As we have seen and will continue to develop further, al-Ghazālī's science of the afterlife is a combination of the sciences of proper conduct and unveiling – *praxis* and *theoria*.<sup>276</sup> These two sciences converge in the heart and this convergence is demonstrated by a powerful analogy of the heart as a mirror, an analogy crucial for understanding al-Ghazālī's science of the afterlife.

In the *Revival*, the science of proper conduct is divided into outward and inward knowledge. Outward knowledge is connected to the senses and is subdivided into acts of worship and religious custom (Books 1 and 2 of the *Revival*); whereas, inward knowledge is connected to the states of the heart and characteristics of the soul and is subdivided into blameworthy and praiseworthy states (Books 3 and 4 of the *Revival*).<sup>277</sup> The heart, being the locus of inward knowledge, is where *praxis* (i.e., ethics) is developed. However, according to al-Ghazālī, the heart is also a battleground wherein various internal armies vie for control.<sup>278</sup> Al-Ghazālī lists three internal armies that are present in the heart – the armies of anger, appetite and knowledge.<sup>279</sup> These armies have an array of purposes – both internal and external – serving the human need to live in this life as well as prepare for the life to come. The first two armies –

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>276</sup> Alexander Treiger notes that al-Ghazālī's division of the science of the afterlife into the two sub-sciences – proper conduct and unveiling – reflect the Aristotelian division of philosophy into the *theoretical* and *practical*. Ibid., 37.

<sup>277</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, xlv-xlvi

<sup>278</sup> The concept of armies is taken from Q 74:31 “*And none knows the armies of your Lord except Him*. Al-Ghazālī, *Marvels*, 13.

<sup>279</sup> There are also external armies, the parts and extremities of the body that are subject to the heart (i.e. the subtle tenuous substance) and serve it and must obey its commands without question. The external/internal army distinction compares well to the outward/inward knowledge pattern of the *Revival*. It is also interesting to note that al-Ghazālī lists three destructive elements in the human soul which must be rooted out: succumbing to avarice, following one's passions, and holding oneself in high esteem. These three elements seemingly correspond to the armies of the heart and it is up the third army to combat these destructive elements. Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, 36.



appetence and anger – belong to the class of armies that “incites and instigates” in order to, as al-Ghazālī states, “obtain that which is profitable and suitable (i.e., appetence); or to ward off that which is harmful and destructive (i.e., anger).”<sup>280</sup> The third army, called knowledge or intellect, is part of the third class which perceives and gathers information as “spies.”<sup>281</sup> Above all, it is imperative that the heart gain the assistance of this army for it is “the party of God.”<sup>282</sup> The other two armies – appetence and anger – are two armies easily given over to Satan and those forces will war against the heart if not brought under subjection. This is the plight of many people according to al-Ghazālī for their intellection has been forced to devise “stratagems to satisfy the appetence,” whereas it should be the other way around, appetence serving the intellect.<sup>283</sup>

At this point, the introduction of the third army highlights another element of al-Ghazālī’s noetic structure –intelligence/intellect (‘*aql*). According to Al-Ghazālī, the intellect (‘*aql*) is “the source of knowledge, its point of origin and its foundation; knowledge springs forth from it like fruit from a tree, light from the sun, and vision from the eye.”<sup>284</sup> In light of al-Ghazālī’s use of the term, Treiger suggests the primary interpretation of ‘*aql* be ‘intelligence’ instead of ‘intellect’ as the former denotes the primary rendering of the term as a quality of the heart rather than the heart itself. In this sense, ‘*aql*, as a quality of the heart, is as Treiger describes, a configuration “...in virtue of which the heart becomes receptive of intelligible forms.”<sup>285</sup> ‘*Aql* (‘intelligence’) as a quality or attribute is consistent with al-Ghazālī’s own explanation:

It [‘*aql*] is the attribute that differentiates human beings from all other animals and affords them the ability to apprehend the speculative sciences and to organize

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>282</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Marvels*, 17.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, 247.

<sup>285</sup> Treiger, *Inspire Knowledge*, 18.

the subtle rational disciplines. Al-Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibī intended this as his definition of ‘the intellect’. He said, ‘It is an innate inclination whereby the speculative sciences are grasped and understood. It is like a light cast into the heart that prepares it thereby to comprehend existent entities’... It is like the innate quality present in a mirror that differentiates it from other corporeal bodies and gives it the ability to reflect images and colors in a manner unique to each, namely its polish or sheen.<sup>286</sup>

Al-Ghazālī’s words call us back to the mirror analogy referenced earlier. Al-Ghazālī likens the heart to a mirror and in this analogy, if the heart is a mirror, then intelligence is likened to the mirror’s polish, or in this case its ability to reflect the knowledge revealed to it.

Furthermore, mirrors are prone and susceptible to becoming dirty, and when that does happen, it is no longer able to properly reflect the image across from it. A mirror in this condition will not functioning properly until it is cleaned and the tarnished removed. In this Ghazālīan analogy, the human heart is also susceptible to impurities, the tarnishing of the polished mirror, or the subjection of the third army to the others which vie for the heart’s focus and attention. Just as a physical mirror ceases to function properly if it is marred and unpolished, so too does the heart of man cease to function as it should if it is dark and murky. The darkened, murky heart is the heart of the wicked person because a darkened heart cannot remember his Lord and on the Day of judgment that person will be cut off from the Lord (cf. Q 83:12-17). The righteous are those whose hearts are polished and are ready to receive and reflect the true nature of things, i.e. divine inspiration (*ilham*).<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, 253-4.

<sup>287</sup> Q 7:201 “Indeed, those who fear God, when a thought touches them from Satan, they remember [God] and at once they have insight.” Concerning this passage al-Ghazālī writes: “Thus He stated that the clearness of the heart and its perspicacity are attained by the practice of remembrance (*dhikr*), and none achieve this except those who fear Him. For the fear of God is the door to remembrance of Him; remembrance is the door to mystical unveiling (*kashf*); and mystical unveiling is the door to the greatest success (*fawz*) which is the success of meeting (*liqāʾ*) God the Exalted.” Al-Ghazālī, *Marvels*, 34.

### The Way Forward: Mystical Sufism or Theoretical Philosophy?

Recognizing the reality of the negative tendencies in the heart, the *Revival* is al-Ghazālī's attempt to revive the Muslim community away from such harmful propensities. He desired for his work to be disseminated to the Muslim community at large. With such a goal in mind, he presented certain sciences one way and re-package others in another in order to appeal to the masses. One example of his rhetorical methods can be seen in the four-fold division of the *Revival*. The division of sections mirrored the four-fold division of the science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Al-Ghazālī did this because many students of his time were interested in jurisprudence which, as he observed, had become popular among those who did not fear God. Through forming the *Revival* in such a fashion similar to the books on jurisprudence, he hoped this would be a “clever way to win hearts over gradually.”<sup>288</sup> It is this sort of re-packaging – form of methodology, terminology, etc. – that makes him difficult to label. Nonetheless, as this section continues to work through al-Ghazālī's science of the hereafter, one of the questions that will be answered concerns the identification of his methodology within the larger Islamic traditions.

In order to address the identity of his methodology, it is important to first briefly establish the contexts of both of the sciences al-Ghazālī's is often identified – Sufism and Philosophy.<sup>289</sup> In his day, Sufism was a practical discipline more than a theoretical one. It was a spiritual exercise wherein one molded the self into an ideal form. Kenneth Garden notes that Sufis saw the ideal as a “Godly self,” an ideal derived from a hadith often quoted by them: “Acquire the

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<sup>288</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, xlv.

<sup>289</sup> For the sake of limited space in this study, as well as the role of these two sciences in relation to the overall thesis, other considerations are not being considered or included. These are not the only two options that encompass al-Ghazālī's thought and work. Both Alexander Treiger and Kenneth Garden note that al-Ghazālī was also a theologian (although not of the *Kalām* tradition) and that his works attempt to incorporate a larger scope of Islamic scientific schools – Sufism, Philosophy, Theology, Jurisprudence, etc. For more on this see especially Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, 7ff.

virtues of God.”<sup>290</sup> The path to the ideal formed many stations along the way. Garden further notes that the most basic of these stations amounted to “scrupulously obeying God’s commandments,” and the furthest “to the self’s obliteration in an overwhelming awareness of the Divine that breaks down the distinction between knower and known.”<sup>291</sup> This latter stage was an immersion in God, a loss of self, a type of knowledge of God (*ma‘rifa*), but it was not the concern of the Sufis to systematize or theorize these experiences.

Islamic philosophy was a robust science in al-Ghazālī’s day. Being influenced by Aristotelian, Platonic, and Neo-Platonic philosophy, it had become uniquely Islamic. For the Islamic Philosophers, philosophy was not strictly an intellectual exercise. Islamic philosophy was very much concerned with the practicality of their teaching, and like the Sufis, aimed to transform the self in order to attain salvation in the afterlife.<sup>292</sup> The most well-known and influential Islamic philosopher at that time was Ibn Sīnā (or the Latinized Avicenna). Avicenna believed that knowledge of God, the knowledge necessary for salvation, proceeds only from the middle terms of syllogisms. The capacity to gain knowledge of the intelligibles is a mental act “whereby,” as Dimitri Gutas summarizes, “the human intellect comes into contact with the active intellect and receives... ‘divine effluence.’”<sup>293</sup>

Sufism and Islamic philosophy shared commonalities in the time of al-Ghazālī. Both believed that they were the purveyors of truth and both were practical disciplines seeking to perfect the human soul with the goal of a higher knowledge of God.<sup>294</sup> However, the ends, and

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 33-4.

<sup>293</sup> Dimitri Gutas, “AVICENNA v. Mysticism,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, III/1, pp. 79-83, 1987. Accessed online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/avicenna-v> (accessed on July 23, 2018).

<sup>294</sup> Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, 37.

the methods of achieving those ends, differed. Sufis believed that knowledge of God came suddenly and was the result of spiritual exercise; whereas the philosopher believed this knowledge was achieved through rational inquiry. It is interesting to note that before al-Ghazālī, the goal of attaining felicity in Sufism was not prevalent. It existed in some Sufis writings but none that al-Ghazālī mentions having read. Felicity in the afterlife was, however, the goal of the philosophers but it would seem that their philosophical influences provided a dualistic view of the afterlife and thus knowledge and contemplation were the highest goal to attain.<sup>295</sup>

Having this context in the foreground, let us return to al-Ghazālī's analogy of the heart. Al-Ghazālī has demonstrated the need to polish the heart, to remove all of the tarnish, the temporal and finite things which hinder it from being properly configured to receive knowledge. In the previous discussion concerning al-Ghazālī's quest through intellectual and religious skepticism, it was shown that he considered philosophy and Sufism to be among the four disciplines seeking truth. Al-Ghazālī finds the Sufi path of spiritual purification containing the necessary methods of cleansing the heart from all impurity, or, as he states, "to lop off the obstacles present in the soul and to rid oneself its reprehensible habits and vicious qualities."<sup>296</sup> This pure, polished and empty heart is ready for the rush of divine wind to remove the veil and by Allah's grace, provide the subject with the light of the divine knowledge of God.<sup>297</sup> Before al-Ghazālī, Sufis were thus inclined towards the knowledge gained through immediate inspiration in contrast to that gained by instruction. They did not pursue the study of knowledge nor did they concern themselves with discussions about doctrines or proofs. The way to knowledge is through ritual and devotion.

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 43-5.

<sup>296</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverer*, 77.

<sup>297</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Marvels*, 53.

For al-Ghazālī, the Sufi practice of purifying the heart was necessary for unveiling but at the same time their practices subjected them to many difficulties and perils. First, the heart is by nature easily given over to destructive elements. Al-Ghazālī quotes the Prophet here saying that “the heart of the believer is more unsteady than a cooking pot as it boils.”<sup>298</sup> Experience alone cannot sustain the highest state of knowledge because of the confusions found in the heart. All it takes is for one impure thought to enter the heart and it will be rendered unpolished. Second, the practice of asceticism, the stripping away of all earthly appetites and desires, has a harmful effect on the physical body and weakens one’s constitution. If inspiration occurs in this state, one can easily become confused, the mind being blurred by lack of nutrition. Third, because the Sufis do not pursue learned knowledge (i.e., the sciences and the discussion of doctrine or proofs) and philosophy, when they do receive a vision they can succumb to confusions and be trapped in that vision for up to twenty years! Lastly, because of the lack of learning the mystical states of unveiling can lead the Sufi to make prophetic statements (i.e. ecstatic utterances) that are heretical pronouncements of the relation between the knower and the Known.<sup>299</sup> The two most notable of these utterances were made by al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) and al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261/874). Following their supposed inspiration and perceived union with God the former declared “I am the Truth” and the latter proclaimed “Glory be to Me!”<sup>300</sup> Both men were put to death for these sayings which were seemingly innocent proclamations of union and worship, albeit, heretical claims.

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>299</sup> For more on ecstatic utterances in Sufism see Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1985).

<sup>300</sup> Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, 33.

Continuing with this analysis of the Sufi way, al-Ghazālī believes that these problems could be avoided if the Sufis also followed a path of learning. He does not wish to correct their intentions of polishing the heart or their pursuit of mystical knowledge, both are necessary aims. Al-Ghazālī does however suggest that the path of learning (i.e. theoretical knowledge) be incorporated into their practice. On the critique of confusion mentioned earlier, he writes that “if he [the Sufi] had mastered knowledge beforehand, the point of confusion in his vision would have been opened to him at once. To busy one’s self in the path of learning is a surer and easier means of attaining the aim.”<sup>301</sup> Furthermore, al-Ghazālī expounds on this thought and describes the expectations of the Sufis in their quest for knowledge. It is worth quoting him at length as this sequence is crucial to understanding his methodology:

They [Sufis] claim that it is as though a man left off the study of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), asserting, ‘the Prophet did not study it and he became one who understood the divine law by means of prophetic and general inspiration without any repetition or application, and perhaps discipline of the soul and steadfastness will bring me finally to that goal.’ Whoever thinks this, wrongs himself and wastes his life. Nay, rather, he is like one who gives up the way of gain through farming, hoping to chance upon some treasure. The latter is indeed possible, but extremely unlikely. So too [in the matter of gaining knowledge]. They say, ‘It is first of all necessary to attain to that which the learned have achieved and to understand what they said. Then after that there is no harm in expectantly waiting for that which has not been disclosed to the other learned men, and it may be that this will be disclosed afterwards through strenuous effort.’<sup>302</sup>

Notice the two approaches to divine knowledge highlighted here. The first group supposes the model of the Prophet claiming that he received full understanding of the divine law without having to develop in the way of jurisprudence. But al-Ghazālī notes that this rarely happens, that God’s grace is not commonly bestowed in this manner. The latter option is the one al-Ghazālī supports, advocating for it in the chapter from which the quote came. Elsewhere, in the *Book of*

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<sup>301</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Marvels*, 56.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 56.

*Knowledge*, al-Ghazālī advocates the pursuit of learning through deduction, inference and study. He cites a story told by Al-Makkī of whom al-Junayd of Baghdad was his teacher: “Then when I departed I heard him saying, ‘May God make you a partisan of hadith who is a Sufi, not a Sufi who is a partisan of hadith.’ He pointed out that one who acquires hadith and knowledge then takes the Sufi path will succeed; while one who takes the Sufi path before acquiring knowledge is gambling with his soul.”<sup>303</sup> Here we again see the preferred approach of al-Ghazālī in the pursuit of divine inspiration – acquire knowledge through learning before pursuing general inspiration.

In the conclusion to this section on al-Ghazālī’s methodology for acquiring divine inspiration, I am highlighting a number of dialectical relations at play in his work: the saints/prophets and the learned men, Sufism and Philosophy, inspiration and inference, and the few and the many. The first three groups all stand in conceptual relation to one another and represent the crux of both tension and confusion in al-Ghazālī’s methodology. Perhaps the main challenge in understanding his methodology is in trying to identify it with what has come before. Some scholars purport that al-Ghazālī was a Sufi given his propensity towards their ethical practices and pursuit of mystical experiences of divine inspiration. Other scholars purport that his system was entirely philosophical and not to be confused with Sufism.<sup>304</sup> But al-Ghazālī’s methodology cannot be confined to what had come before or to any one particular system. Al-Ghazālī was creating a new way forward, a reformation of sorts, and so the best way to define his

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<sup>303</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, 55-6.

<sup>304</sup> Benjamin Abrahamov makes this argument for philosophical primacy, he writes, “Al-Ghazālī’s supreme way to know God is not Sufic, although he gives the impression that it is so. It is a philosophical system which sometimes appears in Sufic disguise.” Benjamin Abrahamov, “Al-Ghazālī’s Supreme Way to Know God,” *Studia Islamica*, No. 77 (1993), 167. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/stable/pdf/1595793.pdf>. (Accessed June 10, 2018) For more on his argument please see the article.



methods is through synthesis and new creation.<sup>305</sup> The methodology of the religious sciences is not purely Sufic or philosophical; rather, philosophy aids the Sufi goal of attaining mystical knowledge. I would submit that al-Ghazālī still maintains that higher knowledge (i.e., divine inspiration, *ilham*) is ultimately achieved through Sufi practice but that it must be supplemented by philosophical learning or what he calls theoretical knowledge. Polishing one's heart is of utmost concern and allows a more beautiful, albeit mystical, revelation to manifest.<sup>306</sup>

Al-Ghazālī's revival of the science of the afterlife forever reshaped the Islamic landscape, especially in regard to the relation between Sufism and Philosophy. Although his methodology is not purely Sufic or Philosophical, his inclusion of both led to a narrowing of the gulf in the spectrum between the two in later thought. Before the time of al-Ghazālī, Sufism was more practical discipline than theoretical; however, after his time, Sufism became increasingly theoretical as practitioners attempted to give rational explanations of their mystical experiences. Garden suggests that the rich cosmologies that were developed based upon mystical experiences from theoreticians such as al-Arabi, may have been made possible by al-Ghazālī's innovative methodology.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Concerning the assessment of al-Ghazālī's methodology Treiger writes, "In conclusion, the science of divine disclosure cannot be reduced either to philosophy (Frank's 'higher theology') or Sufism (Dallal): both influences are present, and neither is sufficient to explain the science of divine disclosure as a whole. It is the fruit of Ghazālī's own synthesis, in which both philosophical and Sufi elements can be discern. Yet this synthesis *is not a mere mixture or sum of total disparate elements, but an original creation*, which needs to be understood on its own terms." (Italics added for emphasis) Treiger, "The Science of Divine Disclosure," 98. Kenneth Garden also writes, "his [al-Ghazālī] Science of the Hereafter [is understood] not as Sufism by another name, but as a discipline of al-Ghazālī's creation, a new synthesis of Sufism and philosophy that is reducible to neither. And it supports a view of al-Ghazālī not as an inwardly focused seeker of Truth and salvation, but as an engaged scholar of the hereafter who sought to transform the religious landscape of his age, as a deliverer and as a reviver, one of the most successful in the history of Islamic thought. Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, 176.

<sup>306</sup> On the relation between the types of knowledge and how they are acquired see al-Ghazālī's analogy of the Byzantine and Chinese murals commissioned by a certain king in *Marvels* Ch. 9 (esp. pp. 62-3).

<sup>307</sup> Garden, *First Islamic Reviver*, 33.

Lastly, there is the dialectic of the few and the many as it relates to the level of human spiritual development. Every Muslim adherent finds him- or herself on a path of spiritual development in this life. Each person is called to remembrance (*dhikr*) of Allah and some achieve this calling far better than others. The end goal of this remembrance results in divine inspiration (*ilham*), the goal of the process we have been looking at in this chapter so far. For the prophet or saint of Islam, this process happens immediately. The winds of divine grace, in an instant, rush in and reveal divine knowledge to the heart. But it is important to note that inspiration is not reserved to the prophets and saints alone; rather, in al-Ghazālī's methodology, all have the potential to attain to the same spiritual level (i.e., the experience of inspiration) of the prophets. This process happens immediately for the saints and prophets but is achieved through the spiritual process of the purification of the heart, the methodology al-Ghazālī develops in the *Revival*. This does not mean that every Muslim can become a prophet but that each Muslim can reach the state of prophecy wherein the veil of the heart is removed and inspiration floods in. Lazarus-Yafeh notes that this aspect of al-Ghazālī's theory of prophecy ran counter to orthodox Islam and was perhaps one of his "most dangerous doctrines."<sup>308</sup> Al-Ghazālī believed that achieving the highest stage was the last stage of religious development on earth but that few would end up reaching it.

### **The Nature of Theological Love in Islam**

This next section turns to the topic of love in Islam looking both at the relationship between God and man as well as the kind and quality of love exhibited by both parties. We begin first with man's love God.

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<sup>308</sup> Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in Al-Ghazālī*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1975), 275.

## Man's Love for God

Knowledge and love form a reciprocal relationship which moves spirally upwards in spiritual progress.<sup>309</sup> Knowledge logically precedes love for how can a person love that which is not known?<sup>310</sup> Now that the process of divine inspiration has been discussed, the study now focuses on the other half of the religious equation, that is, love for God. Al-Ghazālī thoroughly develops the concept of man's love for God, most directly in Book 36 of the *Iḥyā'* entitled *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment*.<sup>311</sup>

As with all sections and topics of the *Revival*, Al-Ghazālī begins his discourse by first turning to proof-texts found in the Qur'ān and sacred traditions relating to the topic of love for God. Al-Ghazālī notes that within the Muslim community, love of God and His Messenger is an obligation and serves a condition of faith (*īmān*).<sup>312</sup> In the hadith of Sahih Muslim, it is stated: "No person believes, till I am dearer to him than the members of his household, his wealth and the whole of mankind."<sup>313</sup> On the existence of love for God, he first cites "He loves them and they love Him" (Q 5:54). In a succinct and relatively terse manner, al-Ghazālī declares that love for God must be possible because the Qur'ān affirms its existence. On its existence and

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<sup>309</sup> A famous *ḥadīth qudsī* states the following: "Who seeketh Me findeth Me. Who findeth Me knoweth Me. Who knoweth Me loveth Me. Who loveth Me, his I love. Whom I love, him I slay. Whom I slay, him must I require. Whom I require, Myself am his requital." This is a *ḥadīth qudsī* attributed to 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. A *ḥadīth qudsī* is distinct from a passage from the Qur'an and a traditional *ḥadīth*. It is a sacred narration, one in which Allah gives to the Prophet through inspiration or dream from which the Prophet conveys to the people. This particular passage was cited in Lings, *Book of Certainty*, 75.

<sup>310</sup> Lombard states: "For al-Ghazālī, love must necessarily follow upon knowledge and perception because only that which is known and perceived can be loved..." Joseph E. B. Lombard, *Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Remembrance, and the Metaphysics of Love*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016), 142.

<sup>311</sup> Eric Ormsby, the translator of this book, suggests that al-Ghazālī sets out to resolve the seemingly paradoxical way of thinking about the notion of reciprocal love between God and man. Al-Ghazālī, *Love, Longing, Intimacy and Contentment*. Book XXXVI of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn)*, trans. by Eric Ormsby, (Cambridge, U.K.: Islamic Texts Society, 2012), xxxi.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>313</sup> Sahih Muslim, Book 1.75, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1>

possibility al-Ghazālī has little to say beyond this affirmation. He does, however, have much to say regarding the nature of said love.

Al-Ghazālī's conception of man's love for God is described as having a longing for Him as the ultimate object worthy of such affection, the Beloved whom is the aim of all earthly pursuit. This longing stems from the reality that human creatures lack perfection and are thus in search of that which will fulfill what is lacking in their person. God, the ultimate Good, is the only being who does not lack in any way and so this sense of love cannot be applied to Him. He is, however, the object of this kind of love as love for God in this manner is the pursuit of filling what is lacking in our own humanity, and when that which is yearned for is grasped, man delights in it.<sup>314</sup> This pursuit of filling is also described as a growth of the soul and is the process of becoming fully human, achieving the telos of human existence. According to Chittick, "They [Al-Ghazālī and others] often call it 'assuming the character traits of God' (*al-takhalluq bi aklāq Allāh*)."<sup>315</sup> In this manner, love for Allah entails the putting on of God's attributes, and thus closeness to God, as al-Ghazālī states, "lies in attribute rather than in physical location."<sup>316</sup>

Longing for Allah in a way which manifests itself through a process of spiritual development is seemingly synonymous with the multi-leveled concept of *jihad* or struggle. *Jihad* is undoubtedly a loaded concept, especially in the West, but we need to make the distinction between the forms of struggle – inward and outward.<sup>317</sup> When considered inwardly, *jihad*

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<sup>314</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Love*, 104.

<sup>315</sup> William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love – The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983), 142. Chittick elaborates further, stating, "The philosophical tradition is more explicit about what this entails: human beings are called upon to actualize the 'deiformity' of their souls' the Arabic word, *ta'alluh*, derives from the same root as Allah."

<sup>316</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Love*, 103.

<sup>317</sup> Morgan also notes that *Jihad* is sometimes considered the sixth pillar of Islam. Diane Morgan, *Essential Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to Belief and Practice*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, ABC-CLIO, 2009), 87.

denotes the process and need for man to overcome his feeble-mindedness and spiritual weakness. Ozak likens this weakness to coming into this world as a blind man who is born into darkness.<sup>318</sup> The Qur'ān suggests that whoever is blind in this world will be blind in the life to come (cf. Q 17:72). Overcoming the spiritual blindness is thus of paramount importance in achieving the life to come and so *jihad* against the flesh and longing for that which is lacking in the flesh are pursued in tandem accord.<sup>319</sup>

In this sense, love, defined as longing for that which is Good, is consistent with the notion of love as *eros* in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>320</sup> At the dinner party, the main setting of the *Symposium*, Socrates recounts his conversation with Diotima, the wise sage, and how, in Socrates's estimation, she provided him with a correct understanding of love. Throughout the course of the dialogue between Socrates and Agathon, *erōs* love emerges as a spirit or *daimon* that guides the subject in the pursuit of the Good (or Beautiful). Now, on the pursuit of the Good, one does not have the capacity to immediately perceive the Beautiful. Socrates states that *erōs* typically manifests first in a desire for physical beauty. This is the first rung in the progression of

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<sup>318</sup> Ozak, *Irshad*, 359.

<sup>319</sup> The Prophet Mohammad was asked by his Companion what was the best deed in Islam. His reply to them was "belief in Allah." When asked to give the second most deed, he said, "Jihad (struggle to the utmost) in the cause of Allah." Sahih Muslim, "Clarifying that Faith in Allah Most High is the Best of Deed," in *The Book of Faith*. Sahih Muslim, 83, In-book reference: Book 1, Hadith 155, accessed May 4, 2018, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/1>. It is also important to make note of the significance of *jihad* and the debate regarding the superiority between men and angels. It is man's capacity to overcome his evil propensities that led the Ash'ariyya school to consider man as superior over the inferior angels. The Mu'tazilites considered the angels superior because they were pure beings without the propensities of weakness and forgetfulness. The Ash'arites argued, however, the God loves those who love him and who demonstrate the love in performing acts of love under great difficulties. The angels can only do what is good and therefore do not have to struggle but man has the freedom to choose the evil or the good, to love Allah or not. When man overcomes his evil propensities, the demonstration of his love is more valuable because he could have done otherwise. Love for God is achieved only after man has fought and conquered his inner self, after he chooses God over the world. F. A. Klein, *Religion of Islam*, (originally, London: Kegan Paul, 1906/online Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 65. <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/books/9781136099465>

<sup>320</sup> This is a classic definition of love going as far back as Socrates as recorded in the *Symposium*.

what has been labeled Diotima's metaphorical "Ladder of Love."<sup>321</sup> From the love of physical beauty, mankind can climb the ladder and ascend the vertical progression of desire leading ultimately to the highest rung, the love (*erōs*) of the Beautiful.<sup>322</sup> *Erōs* is thus a sort of driving force that compels the subject towards the perfection which it lacks.

If love is the perpetual desire for the good, this provides a causal explanation for human action. Irving suggests that Plato believes every action, every desire, everything which man strives for is done in pursuit of acquiring the Good or goodness. This being true, it would entail that all activity, understood as a desire for the good, is equivalent to saying that *erōs* is what drives human action.<sup>323</sup> Socrates would suggest something similar but as Sheffield suggest, he does not claim and would not go as far to say that all human desire is *erōs*; the qualification of this perspective that desire is *erōs* insofar as it is directed towards the good, but this does not include all grounding of desires.<sup>324</sup> Identifying *erōs* as the impetus for some, if not all, human actions implies that whatever human beings pursue, it is due to the perception that the object of their pursuit is good. But we know that perception is not always reality and some objects which are perceived to be good are not so. I believe this was the source of both al-Ghazālī's frustration and motivation. The majority of Muslims in his day were pursuing an end that was not aimed at the Good, not directed towards Allah.

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<sup>321</sup> Thomas L. Cooksey, *Plato's Symposium: A Reader's Guide*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 17. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.5040/9781472598394>. (Accessed September 14, 2018)

<sup>322</sup> Diotima's definition of love "'Then love,' she said, 'may be described generally as the love of the everlasting possession of the good for oneself?' 'That is most true.'" Plato, *Symposium*, trans by Robin Waterfield, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 48.

<sup>323</sup> Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther (Part I)*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 54.

<sup>324</sup> Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, *Plato's Symposium: The Ethics of Desire*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2007), 54. Doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199286775.003.0003, (Accessed September 14, 2018).

Longing for Allah is the quintessential component of Islamic religious life. In fact, al-Ghazālī purports that longing is necessary for the gnostic pursuing the afterlife. There are numerous ways in which this longing can be satisfied and satiated. Al-Ghazālī identifies two ways specifically in which longing manifests in human beings and where satisfaction is found in God the Beloved – ocular and conceptual longing. The former entails a longing to see the Beloved. This longing is not fulfilled in this life; rather, fulfillment in this manner is found in the life to come. The highest attainment of Paradise is the Beatific Vision of Allah. In this event the ocular longing for God is fulfilled.<sup>325</sup> Now, this could not be the only type of fulfillment because if one's longing was satiated in a specific encounter at a specific instance in the afterlife, satisfaction would reach a limit. Thus, while the ocular longing is fulfilled in a magnificent way in the afterlife is cannot be the extent of that which is longed after.

Along with an ocular longing for Allah, al-Ghazālī also identifies a conceptual longing for Him. This type of longing has no end, whether in this life or the next. If it did have an end, that would entail a full disclosing of Allah to man meaning that man had the ability to fully comprehend that which is fundamentally Other, radically transcendent and unknowable. In this form of longing, Allah is both being known and yet is concealed. This tension is consistent with the idea of longing as the notion of longing entails some form of concealment for if that which is longed after is manifested in a real and complete way, longing logically ceases. Elaborating on this point, al-Ghazālī writes, “it should be explained that longing is inconceivable except for something that is perceptible in one aspect while remaining imperceptible in another.”<sup>326</sup> In

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<sup>325</sup> It is not at all definitive what this vision will entail or through what means Allah reveals himself. Some Muslims scholars affirm that Allah will be visible to the eyes while others affirm that the vision entails a particular revelation in the heart.

<sup>326</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Love*, 88.

Paradise, man will eternally long to continue to contemplate the Beloved. Contemplation as pleasure and satisfaction is part of what al-Ghazālī calls the “twin graces” of Paradise, the other being divine disclosure.<sup>327</sup>

Disclosure and contemplation as the means of pleasure and satisfaction in Paradise of course presupposes that disclosure is a possibility. Al-Ghazālī was aware of this and responds by stating:

Of course, this presupposes that disclosure of that which cannot be disclosed in this world will actually be possible [in that world]. Were it not given unstintingly, bliss would reach a limit and not be augmented; as it is, that bliss continues everlastingly. God’s statement, *Their light will shine in front of them and on their right, and they will say: ‘Lord, perfect our light for us and forgive us’* [Q 66:8] ... supports this sense: bliss is the perfection of light notwithstanding any [prior] light gained in this world.<sup>328</sup>

Al-Ghazālī is correct in his analysis of the relation between bliss and that which is unstintingly given. It would seem that satiation and limitation could be reached in the afterlife if these two things are true: the afterlife is eternal and infinite in duration and the source of said satisfaction and bliss were of finite capacity and resource. Thus, it would further seem that the source of human satisfaction in Paradise need to be of unlimited capacity and resource. But that is only one part of the consideration. The other considers that which is to be known through disclosure. Unending bliss is contingent upon the source’s (or in this case Source’s) ability not only to disclose unstintingly and be infinite in nature, but to be able to disclose in the first place. Is it the case that disclosure of Allah is possible in the next world? Any measure of divine disclosure must initiate from the divine subject and subsequently directed to the other. Al-Ghazālī purports that

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<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 90. Joseph Lombard points out that for al-Ghazālī, love and gnosis are the same thing when viewed in terms of culminating bliss in the afterlife, in the instance of contemplation. Longing for Allah or having a love for Him in this manner is called *‘ishq* or “passionate love.” Lombard, “From *Ḥubb* to *‘Ishq*,” 383.

<sup>328</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Love*, 91.



this disclosure is possible and cites a passage from the Qur'an as support.<sup>329</sup> In this passage, the believing Muslim petitions Allah to perfect their light where light, in this context, refers to divine disclosure. Allah's light is given to them and provides a fundamental element of eternal bliss.

Al-Ghazālī's conception of man's love for God is consistent with the *eros* motif seen in Plato but the analysis of al-Ghazālī's conception cannot overlook the potential mystical influence of Neo-Platonic thought. In Plotinus's philosophical system, the *eros* motif is the "core," and the most important end for the human creatures is, as Abrahamov points out, "the return of the soul to God [or the One]."<sup>330</sup> The return of the soul is the third of three stages of the way of man's return to God. For Plotinus those three stages consist of "an ethical stage, then one of knowledge and love, leading to the mystical union of the soul with God."<sup>331</sup> The mention of acquiring knowledge and love leading to a mystical union echoes of al-Ghazālī's methodology in the *Revival*. Furthermore, Plotinus suggests that a newly awakened soul is too feeble to bear and perceive the Good and must be trained and shaped. He likens this development to a sculpture perfecting a statue through cutting, shaping, and of all things, smoothing (polishing?), so that one may "glow of beauty" and "see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine."<sup>332</sup> Once the soul sheds all the hinders it from joining to the One, it is at last joined to the One in an scene of ecstasy and bliss.<sup>333</sup> Al-Ghazālī's formulation of human love is consistent with the *eros*

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<sup>329</sup> "Their light will shine in front of them and on their right, and they will say: 'Lord, perfect our light for you and forgive us'." (Q 66:8)

<sup>330</sup> Abrahamov, *Divine Love*, 4.

<sup>331</sup> A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1953), 7.  
<https://archive.org/details/plotinus032932mbp> (Accessed September 14, 2018)

<sup>332</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. by Stephen MacKenna, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 54.

<sup>333</sup> Consider Plotinus' words describing this moment: "Thus we have all the vision that may be of Him and of ourselves; but it is of a self wrought to splendour, brimmed with the Intellectual light, become that very light, pure, buoyant, unburdened, raised to Godhood or, better, knowing its Godhood, all aflame then – but crushed out once more if it should take up the discarded burden." *Ibid.*, 546.

motif of Plato and the more mystical emphasis of Plotinus. Abrahamov suggests there is enough similarity to suggest the possibility that the Greek philosophical tradition “plays an important role in the formulation of Muslim mystical thought on sacred love” while also cautioning to not make too certain the causal connection.<sup>334</sup> It does seem safe to say, however, that al-Ghazālī was influenced by the Greek philosophical tradition but at the same time his version of the *eros* motif is distinct for he remains faithful to Islam by retaining and incorporating Islamic ideas of this world and the world to come.<sup>335</sup>

### God’s Love for Man

In relation to al-Ghazālī’s chapters on man’s love for God, he has relatively little to say about Allah’s love for man. This is not due to lack of significance; rather, it is simply because there is not much to say in terms of description.<sup>336</sup> As he is wont to do, al-Ghazālī continues his consistent method of appealing first to the Qur’ān and then the sacred traditions.<sup>337</sup> Al-Ghazālī calls the passages of the Qur’ān which speak of God’s love for man “proof-texts” and since they attest to God’s love for man we can know that it exists, “it is no mere metaphor.”<sup>338</sup> Even though the Qur’ān and traditions speak of God’s love for man as declarative statements with little theological content, a theology of Allah’s love for man did develop within Islam. To receive Allah’s love is the telos of every Muslim believer because it entails that one has striven and has successfully emulated the divine characteristics in his/her own person.

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<sup>334</sup> Abrahamov, *Divine Love*, 40-41

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 85-6.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>337</sup> Q 5:54; 4:61; 2:222. See also this popular statement from the traditions: “When my servant constantly draws near to me by works of supererogation, then do I love him, in once I have started to love him, I’ve become his eye by which he sees, his ear by which he hears, and his tongue by which he speaks.” Sahih al-Bukhari 6502, Book 81, Hadith 91. [www.sunnah.com/bukhari/81](http://www.sunnah.com/bukhari/81) Accessed Sept 28, 2017.

<sup>338</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Love*, 99-100.

Common to his methodology for explaining various in-depth points and distinctions relating to knowledge and love, al-Ghazālī provides a helpful analogy for understanding Allah’s love for mankind. In this analogy, he tells the story of a king and his servant. In this story there is a king who grants a servant access to his court, to be in the king’s presence. The servant has many laudable traits and because of this the king allows the servant to be present in his court at any time the servant wishes. Al-Ghazālī suggests that the reason for the king’s actions might have been so that he could consult with the servant for advice or to refresh himself by looking at him, etc. Whatever the reason was, al-Ghazālī states “It is safe to say that the king loved him; this means he inclined to him since his friend had within him some affinity corresponding to himself.”<sup>339</sup> As the story progresses, the king allows the servant to enter his presence but, in a shift of causality, al-Ghazālī then explains, it was not because the king needed the servant or sought his aid; rather, it was because the servant had developed a “pleasing manner and laudable traits” that he was allowed to draw near and not because of any need the king possessed.<sup>340</sup> When the veil was lifted and the servant allowed to approach the king, it can be said that the king loved the servant and that he (the servant) benefitted greatly by being in the king’s presence.

The analogy demonstrates two ways in which the king loved the servant. In the first way, the king was inclined towards his servant and saw in him the potential of benefitting in some way from their relationship. The king inclined towards him because there was something that the king needed, some way in which the servant could help the king. Thus, we can say that the king lacked something in his own person and assumed it could be found in the servant. In this sense, the king loved the servant where love is regarded as a desire for that which is lacking in one’s

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 103.

own person. It is also consistent with al-Ghazālī's definition of human love.<sup>341</sup> The second kind of love in this analogy is love as benefaction. By the king allowing the servant to draw near, that act denotes a love entailing benefaction on behalf of the king toward the servant. Al-Ghazālī explains that this parable of the king and servant only holds true in relation to Allah and Man if understood in the second sense, that is, the king allowing the servant to draw near but having no need of his assistance. In the loving demonstration of drawing near, one must not assume any movement on the part of Allah towards man. Allah does not incline towards man out of any need or want and there is no alteration or distinction in Him when man is allowed to draw near. Man is granted nearness to Allah contingently, upon his first drawing near to Allah and removing from his person those lower, beastly, and carnal tendencies which mark mankind's disposition. Only after a man develops his character favorably, that is, emulate the divine traits, is he allowed to draw near to Allah. Allah's love for mankind can be thought of directionally but only in the sense of man's movement towards Him and not the other way around. Furthermore, Allah's love for man lies in His lifting the veil which in doing so causes man to draw even nearer to Him and experience the divine reality on a much deeper level. In this sense, Allah's love can be thought of as benefaction similar to the kind of love that was first demonstrated in creation. Out of His mercy and grace, Allah provides man with the capacities necessary to achieve his established telos – proximity to Allah. As a point of clarity, Al-Ghazālī cogently summarizes the distinction of loves between and from both God and man in the following statement:

So then, God's love for man lies in His drawing him near, and out of himself, by warding off distractions and sins and in purifying his inmost nature from the spots of this world and in lifting the veil from his heart until he eyes Him as though he saw Him with his very heart.

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<sup>341</sup> See Ibid., 100-101.

Man's love for God lies in his inclination to seize this absent perfection which he lacks. He yearns for what he lacks; whenever he grasps some part of it, he delights therein. Love in this sense is unthinkable for God.<sup>342</sup>

In short, love in Islam between Allah and man can be simplistically described as the process of drawing near (man) and allowing man to draw near (Allah).

In this process of love given and received, a sequential pattern emerges. Love metaphysically begins with Allah. He is the causal first mover and displays benefaction towards man by bestowing upon him special physical and cognitive capacities. Also, it would seem that the self-disclosure of Allah through special revelation is a further act of benefaction. If man is to draw near to Allah through emulating the divine traits, he must be granted epistemic access to them. Next in the sequence, man has a moral responsibility to love Allah, this being done through the spiritual processes discussed throughout this chapter. Once man becomes favorable in the sight of Allah, He then grants special access to the divine through divine disclosure (*ilham*). This second phase of God's love is seemingly similar to the first in that the subject is shown benefaction from Allah in that he has the capacity to and may partake in the divine pleasure of Allah bestowed on those who first incline to Him. The difference, however, between the two instances of benefaction is that the first is given freely and without contingency whereas the second act of benefaction is conditioned up man's prior action, that is, contingently directed towards those who first love Him.

Abrahamov puts forward an interesting designation for this love as benefaction. He observes that when discussing man's love for God in Islam, one realizes that Allah is the ultimate cause of man's love for God in that Allah has given man the capacity to do so. This ability has been given because Allah is merciful and graceful in provision. Abrahamov states that

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid., 104.

this kind of love from Allah is “a notion reminiscent of the *agape* motif.”<sup>343</sup> This designation is significant for a number of reasons. First, he casually makes this suggestion at the conclusion of one of the sub-sections without developing the notion any further, leaving the reader to decide what is meant by the statement. Second, it would seem that if this is truly a reminiscent notion, it would be worthy of further explanation due to its categorical distinction from *eros* and its common designation of the love of the gods. Third, it is uncertain which context of *agape* Abrahamov has in mind here. His analysis of al-Ghazālī’s conception of *eros* was in relation to the Platonic and Neo-Platonic contexts and so perhaps he has in mind an *agape* love relative to a Greek conception. If this is so, *agape* in the Greek context is relatively shallow in meaning and there is scant material in the extant literature to provide a robust understanding of the term and to strongly distinguish it from the other usages of love – *eros* and *phileō*.<sup>344</sup> There is however, some nuance in the usage of *eros* and *agape* worth noting in this context. According to Quell and Stauffer, *agape* love must often be translated “‘to show love’; it is a giving, active love on the other’s behalf,” whereas, *eros* “seeks in others the fulfillment of its own life’s hunger.”<sup>345</sup> These two definitions are consistent with al-Ghazālī’s distinction between man’s love for God as longing and God’s love for man as benefaction; however, the use of *agape* to describe benefaction could possibly be misunderstood if the reader thinks there is any more nuance in the term than this simple definition. That the reader would have a more nuanced understanding is because the notion of *agape* love took on a more robust definition and significance when it was

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<sup>343</sup> Abrahamov, *Divine Love*, 84.

<sup>344</sup> On the Greek use and nuance of *agape*, Quell and Stauffer note, “The examples of ἀγάπη thus far adduced are few in number, and in many cases doubtful or hard to date.” G. Quell and E. Stauffer, ἀγαπάω, ἀγάπη, ἀγαπητός, G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 1, p. 37). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

adopted by New Testament authors to describe the love that the Triune God has for mankind. If Abrahamov has in mind the usage of *agape* in pre-Biblical Greek, this would be consistent a consistent usage of *agape* in relation to Allah's benefaction. However, he must not imply any more significance to *agape* than this basic definition. Anything beyond this understanding, any inclusion of New Testament nuance is unwarranted. That this is so will be demonstrated in the following section concerning the object of Allah's love.

### **The Object of God's Love**

We have seen that Allah's love for man is described as kind of benefaction, given to mankind when He allows nearness and proximity. But there is still an important component of God's love yet to be discuss, that is, the object of His love. In al-Ghazālī's analogy of the king and servant, the servant is shown a kind of love in the form of benefaction, but the analogy fails to demonstrate the true object of the king's, in this case Allah's, love. Any consideration of Allah's love must be understood in concert with the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, the most fundamental Islamic statement concerning God' ontology. *Tawḥīd*, when applied to Allah's nature, denotes unicity within Himself and dissimilarity towards the other, that is, there is no distinction within Allah's essence and He radically transcendent and wholly other-than creation.

In order to understand the significance of *tawḥīd* in relation to love, especially its object, let us approach the subject indirectly and begin from the human perspective of spiritual progression as it relates to mankind's internalization of *tawḥīd*. Al-Ghazālī likens the doctrine of *tawḥīd* or unity as a jewel that is enclosed by layers of husks. Each layer forms a gradation of *tawḥīd* and spiritual progress is measured in terms of one's ability to uncover the layers of

*tawḥīd* until the last stage, the jewel, is illuminated and internalized.<sup>346</sup> The first husk of *tawḥīd*, the outer layer, is to pronounce with your mouth the first pillar of Islam, “There is no god but God (*lā ilāha illa-Llāh*).” Proclaiming that Allah is One stands over and against any conception of a trinitarian deity; however, this pronouncement is the outer layer because, as al-Ghazālī points out, these words can be mere lip service or even be uttered by a hypocrite.<sup>347</sup> The second husk moves inward and considers the internal state of the person. Here, the pronouncement of *tawḥīd* is in direct correspondence to the belief in divine unity. In this state, al-Ghazālī writes, “there is not within the heart the least contradiction or denial of understanding this attestation; on the contrary, the exterior of the heart envelops its conviction and affirms its veracity.”<sup>348</sup> The third level is the jewel of *tawḥīd* and the heart of the matter – both in location within the heart and the nature of reality. For al-Ghazālī, the third level is reached when a person realizes that everything arises from Allah and from Him alone, that he is the only Real and Absolute.<sup>349</sup> This realization arises in the polished heart and marks the final stages of spiritual progression – a union of love and knowledge.<sup>350</sup> Moore labels this process a “transformation” wherein there is a

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<sup>346</sup> Fadlou Shehadi describes this process as a progression through three phases: *qurb* (likeness), subjective *tawḥīd*, and objective *tawḥīd*. Shehadi, *Ghazālī’s Unique Unknowable God*, 32-3.

<sup>347</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, 92.

<sup>348</sup> He also notes that this is the husk guarded by the dialectical theologians who guard it against innovation and perversion. Ibid. Shehadi calls this phase “Subjective *tawḥīd*.” In this phase the subject shuts off all other attention to anything that is not-God. Shehadi, *Ghazālī’s Unique Unknowable God*, 33.

<sup>349</sup> On the third husk, al-Ghazālī writes, “The one who attests to unity is one who perceives naught but the One (*al-wāḥid*), the Absolute Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*). He directs his face only to Him, and he exemplifies God’s words, Say, ‘God [revealed it].’ Then leave them in their [empty] discourse, amusing themselves [Q6:91]. The intended meaning here is not the utterance of the tongue; the tongue is but an interpreter, truthful at times, lying at others. The locality for the vision of God only [comes] from where the interpretation arises, and that is the heart, the repository of unity and its source.” Al-Ghazālī, *Book of Knowledge*, 93-94. This is the phase which Shehadi calls, “Objective *tawḥīd*.” In this phase, Shehadi states that the subject comes to understand objective reality, he writes, “the mystic attains an intuitive perspective from which he sees that there is naught in existence except Allah.” Shehadi, *Ghazālī’s Unique Unknowable God*, 33.

<sup>350</sup> Lumbard notes that this is the culminating stage in man’s love for God, the transition from *ḥubb* to *‘ishq*, a longing to a passionate longing, an infatuation of sorts where all else is naught except Allah. Here, the heart longs for nothing else but Allah, its allegiance is not divided in any way purged of any longings for this world. He goes on further to point out that for al-Ghazālī this kind of love and gnosis culminate in a unity, that following the



shift in focus from “individual consciousness to the greater ‘cosmic’ consciousness,” or in the case of certain Sufi practices, “to be annihilated from our effective ego-self and allow God, Who Alone exists, to be experientially realized in His singular existence.”<sup>351</sup> That a person should pursue such a level of internalization is imperative not only because it is merely the highest level of spiritual attainment, but also because it is the most fundamental truth of reality, revealing the ontological nature of the Real and the non-real.<sup>352</sup>

The jewel of *tawḥīd*, that there is none but Allah, that He alone is the truly Real, directs the object of Allah’s love. From the perspective of man, Allah alone is the Real and everything arises from Him, or, as Ormsby writes, “the more plainly he [man] sees that behind all his actions, it is God, and God alone who acts.”<sup>353</sup> From the perspective of Allah, however, this means that He has no view of anything else other than Himself. Al-Ghazālī states this point more strongly, writing, “God has no view of anything other than Himself as being other than Himself.”<sup>354</sup> It seems as if al-Ghazālī is here making the claim that Allah does not see anything other than Himself because there *is* no other being than Himself. He goes on to write,

He [Allah] only sees His own essence and His own acts exclusively since nothing exists except His essence and his acts. For this reason, the master Abū Sa’īd al-Mīḥanī said, when God’s statement ‘He loves them and they love Him’ was recited to him, ‘In truth He loves them for He loves only Himself,’ meaning that God is all and that there is nothing in existence other than God. For he who loves himself, his own actions and his own creations, does not pass beyond his own essence in his love nor the consequences issuing from his essence, inasmuch as

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attaining of this knowledge – the kernel (jewel) – love (*‘ishq*) necessarily follows. Lumbard, “From Ḥubb to ‘Ishq,” 382.

<sup>351</sup> Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore, “*Dhikr*, a Door that When Knocked, Opens: An Essay on the Remembrance of God,” in *Voices of Islam, Vol. 2 Voices of the Spirit*, ed. by Vincent J. Cornell, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 55.

<sup>352</sup> For further explanation of the relationship of the Real and creation, see Chittick, “Ambiguity,” esp. p 67.

<sup>353</sup> Ormsby in the introduction of Al-Ghazālī, *Love*, xxxi.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-2.

they stand in a nexus with his essence. It is in this way therefore that He loves only Himself.<sup>355</sup>

Statements such as this have led to the suggestion that the doctrine of *tawhīd* taken to its logical conclusion results in a form of pantheism in which all that exists is merely an extension of Allah although Skellie believes that al-Ghazālī protects against this heresy which emerges within extreme forms of Sufism.<sup>356</sup> Ontological considerations notwithstanding, Allah having nothing in view other than His self and His acts, one must consistently say that the only object of God's love is Himself alone. Furthermore, it would seem then that if everything derives from Allah – love included – then the love which human creatures have for God is really God loving Himself. Joseph Lombard suggests this, stating it accordingly, “every love, every inclination and every delight is for God and from God. The five stages of man's love for God are thus five ways in which God loves Himself through the love of His servants for Him.”<sup>357</sup> The notion of divine self-love, however, does not come from the Qur'ān directly and according to J. N. Bell is a later development within classical Islam through the influence of Neoplatonic thought.<sup>358</sup> Although not deriving specifically from the Qur'ān, the notion of self-love is entirely consistent with *tawhīdic* Allah. We know that love existed prior to creation because it is one of the 99 names of Allah (*al-Wadud*) and thus we can deduce that Allah demonstrated self-love sans creation as there was naught but Him in existence. This also follows because there is no differentiation within His divine essence and there can be no change relating to creation – love, if it existed prior to creation must have been self-love. While discussing Allah's self-love, Bell highlights the

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Walter James Skellie, Translator's introduction in Al-Ghazālī, *Marvels of the Heart*, xiv.

<sup>357</sup> Lombard, “From *Hubb* to '*Ishq*,” 384.

<sup>358</sup> J. N. Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1979), 71.  
<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=7444&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. (Accessed September 22, 2018)

words of the Sufi poet al-Daylamī (d. 11<sup>th</sup> Century) in which he makes an outright, unequivocal pronouncement on the matter:

God has never ceased to be described with love (*mahabba*), which is an attribute subsisting in him. In his pre-eternity he considered himself for himself and in himself (or "by himself": *bi-nafsihi*) and he was conscious of (*wajid*) himself for himself and in himself. Thus he loved himself for himself and in himself, and there were there *lover, beloved, and love*, one thing without division, for he is pure unity (*'ayn al-ahadiya*), and in unity two things cannot coexist.<sup>359</sup>

In this quote one cannot help but notice the three-fold distinction of lover, beloved and love and be reminded of the same Augustinian formulation regarding the Trinity. It is important to distinguish though that when applied to Allah, He is all three – lover, beloved, and love – at once. Allah is the lover, the beloved, and love all in one, demonstrating a hyper-reflexive, self-reciprocating, inward-focused love. Bell further notes that for al-Daylami, this same original love is what appears, albeit indirectly, in the world of contingency.<sup>360</sup> This view is consistent with al-Ghazālī's conception of Allah's self-love as well as how His love manifests towards creation. Bell's use of indirectly to describe Allah's love is significant and only begins to capture the non-reciprocating love of Allah for man. Allah does not desire anything other than Himself and sees none other than His essence, will and acts. In this way, the object of Allah's love is the Self; He only sees Himself and not the other. Insofar as a human creature loves those same attributes and acts, and when Allah sees enough of Himself in a human person, then he or she is allowed to draw near so that Allah can love and admire Himself as he sees His attributes and acts reflected in that person. The telos, then, of every Muslim believer is to become a mirror in which Allah

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid.

sees His reflection and is subsequently allowed to come closer so that Allah may continuously love and admire Himself in that mirror.<sup>361</sup>

Allah's love for man must first be understood within the context of the object of His love – the Divine self – and only then can one begin to understand the nature of His love for mankind. Love as benefaction is a bit misleading because one can wrongly assume that this benefaction is a primary concern for Allah. Allah's love for man is causally indirect, disinterested, radically removed, a bi-product and after thought deriving from loving the Self as ultimate. Allah's love for man may be some form of benefaction but in the same breath, it must also be said that human creatures are in no way the object of His love. In fact, it seems metaphysically consistent to say that they *cannot* be the object of His love for how could love for the other arise in such radical unicity? There can be no movement, no descent down towards the other-than God.<sup>362</sup>

Following this conclusion, that Allah's love for man is disconnected, disinterested love, one question that naturally arises is how does this impact the pleasure of Paradise? What then can be expected in terms of knowledge and love as it relates to the Divine-human relationship in

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<sup>361</sup> This is consistent with Moore's analysis. He writes, "What a mystery, but *not* a mystery! Why have we been created in a manifest universe if not by Him Who created us to become *vehicles to reflect Him back to Himself*? He says in a *hadith Qudsi*, 'I created the creation in order to be known.' We are not one with Allah, but we are not separate from Him either. 'The whole universe cannot contain Me, but the heart of the believer can contain Me.' ... What separates us from Him is His utter transcendence of this entire known and unknown cosmos." Italics added for emphasis. Moore, "*Dhikr*," 65-6. It should be noted that this *hadith qudsi*, while being cited in Sufi texts often, does not appear in any of the canonical hadith traditions. Lombard, "From *Hubb* to *Ishq*," 350 fn. 18.

<sup>362</sup> At this juncture, Nygren's descriptions of Plotinus' conception of God is interesting, he writes: "It is fundamental to Plotinus' thought of God that the Divine is self-sufficient and never issues forth from its sublime repose. Any suggestion of a spontaneous coming down is out of the question here. In harmony with this – lastly – there is the fact that the Descent, in so far as it is a reality, means *not an act of Divine condescension, but the Fall of the soul into sin and guilt*. Anyone who descends to a lower level always does so involuntarily, according to Plotinus; and that is a proof of weakness and of an inability to maintain the higher position. It is consequently unthinkable that the Divine Being should ever really descend." Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 197. In this quote Nygren does not make the connection to Islam that is being suggested but it is interesting to note the other al-Ghazālīan similarities to Neo-Platonism and wonder if perhaps he was influenced by Plotinus' conception of descent and ascent as well as the notion of love as longing.

the Beatific Vision? Ormsby's summation of the relation between love and knowledge in al-Ghazālī's thought is beneficial, he writes:

Nevertheless, the love of God, as presented here, is a love the ultimate purpose of which is an ever-deepening knowledge of the divine; and in fact, for all Ghazali's recourse to the well-established terms and figures of amatory discourse, these betoken knowledge of God as much as love of Him. When he speaks of "intimacy" with God, this denotes not "union" but something more akin to an unending exploration of the mystery of God, an infinite foray into the unknowable. The reciprocity lies in the search itself, in the divine summons to the search. If there is "jubilation and gladness" in this intimacy, that is not only because of "nearness to God", but because that intimacy involves an incessant unveiling, a progression of epiphanies, rather than some final absorption into the godhead. *If knowledge and love seem virtually indistinguishable at this ultimate stage, that is perhaps because they are mutually transfiguring. Love, in the end, is a matter of passionate cognition.*<sup>363</sup>

The Beatific Vision, as Ormsby states, is a fusion of knowledge and love, a final culmination of the quest through the science of the afterlife which was al-Ghazālī's motivation and intention.

For those who are drawn near in Paradise, love from God will be demonstrated through the giving of 'incessant unveiling,' a never-ending self-revelation. But notice that the reciprocity between God and man is indirect, and one-sided. Yes, there is a divine summons to partake in this unending foray into the unknowable, but it is still indirect benefaction on Allah's part, it must be. Intimacy and love in this context, it would seem, is grounded in attaining propositional knowledge and the ever-recursive sublimity resulting from such revelation. To suggest any further degree of intimacy would infringe on the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, yet one does sense that for al-Ghazālī, there is an experiential intimacy that comes from such interaction that transcends knowledge and sublimity but it is at this point one must refrain from inquiry and default to the famous Ash'arī principle of *bi-lā kayf* "without asking how."<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Italics added for emphasis. From Ormsby's introduction in *Al-Ghazālī, Love*, xxxii.

<sup>364</sup> Lange, *paradise and Hell*, 182.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the nature of love in Islam as it pertains to God's love for man and man's love for God. Within this framework, the two main themes of knowledge and love emerge. The telos of humanity being nearness in proximity to Allah in the afterlife, knowledge of God and the subsequent love for Him are paramount for attaining such ends. Knowledge and love were discussed within the framework of al-Ghazālī's thought and more specifically within his massive tome *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. Al-Ghazālī set out to reform the Islam of his day as its leaders, both spiritual and civil, had become too focused on and concerned with this life and had neglected the life to come. In the *Revival*, we saw al-Ghazālī's development of how one can attain divine inspiration (*ilham*) the level of spiritual development in this life which leads to the Beatific Vision in the life to come. There is a current debate concerning al-Ghazālī's methodology and the systems he employs within his body of work. Al-Ghazālī can be difficult to label due to his common practice of using terminology of certain groups in his own way. The modern consensus is that al-Ghazālī's methodology was not wholly Sufi or not entirely philosophical but a combination of the two, a new synthesis of thought. Sufism serves as ethical and practical framework for polishing the heart whereas philosophy serves to prepare the heart contextually for inspiration and to guide and correct the heart when it receives, digests, and interprets said revelation.

Love is also another integral theme in this chapter. It was shown that in Islam, man's love for God is primarily that of longing for that which the human person lacks (i.e. the perfection that is Allah). Love as longing is consistent with the Platonic and Neo-Platonic conception of love as *eros*, an influence al-Ghazālī likely received following his interaction with Muslim philosophical in that time. Also consistent with Neo-Platonic thought is the notion of self-love as

it pertains to the kind of love God has. As a perfect being who lacks in nothing, love, if it exists within the divine, is directed inward to the Self, as the highest object deserving of love. This kind of love is reflexive, ever-turning in upon itself in a radical reciprocity. Within this context, Allah's love for man emerges as a type of benefaction in that man is allowed to draw near in close proximity and enjoy (benefit from) the bliss of contemplating the eternally emanating God. But Allah's love in the context of relationality remains directed inward to the Self and love for man is derivative and secondary, a bi-product of Allah's Self-love that enjoys seeing His attributes reflected in mankind.

In the next chapter the study turns to the Christian tradition and will discuss the same paradigm – the nature of God's love for man and correspondingly Man's love for God. Within this context, the same themes of knowledge and love will be interacted with as they are inevitably inter-linked. Furthermore, we will see how knowledge and love relate to the human experience of the afterlife and if there is a qualitative distinction within Christian conceptions of Heaven.

## **CHAPTER 4 – THE CHRISTIAN BEATIFIC VISION: GOD’S LOVE FOR MAN AND MAN’S LOVE FOR GOD**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, we now shift to a Christian context and consideration of the themes being examined in this study – the beatific vision, knowledge of God, God’s love for man and man’s love for God. Like Islam, Christianity affirms that God is the highest/ultimate Good and is the chief end of man. As was mentioned in the opening chapter, space does not allow for an overly thorough treatment of the nature of the Christian doctrine of heaven. Christian conceptions of heaven occupy a broad spectrum of thought – both biblical and imaginative, egocentric and theocentric, etc. In the opening section of the chapter, the discussion of heaven will focus on fundamental features of heaven particularly pertaining to the nature of this study. Nevertheless, the central focus of the chapter will be a theocentric view of heaven consistent with the corresponding theocentric Islamic view – the beatific vision of God. Following the discussion of heaven, the chapter will then examine the nature of God’s love sans creation, as it eternally existed in the triune relation of the three persons in the Godhead. Here, the question of how love is to be understood in terms of passages in Scripture which state that “God is Love” is examined.<sup>365</sup> Is love part of God’s divine essence, and, if it is, do human beings have epistemic and experiential access to that aspect of God? Furthermore, the chapter will then follow a similar format as the previous chapter in which the themes of God’s love for man, knowledge of God, and subsequently man’s love for God are considered.

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<sup>365</sup> 1 John 4:8.



### Heaven: A Theocentric View

There are many various conceptions within the Christian tradition regarding what heaven will be like. As such, the doctrine of heaven has not been, in any way, a monolithic doctrine within Christianity. A historical study of the doctrine of heaven reveals many different conceptions of the life to come, each influenced by theological and cultural trends of the day. Plato and Aristotle, early church persecution, Benedictine monasticism, Medieval Scholasticism, the Reformation, Victorian era Romanticism, the Enlightenment and Religious skepticism, as well as art, poetry, literature, agrarian and urbanized communities have all made their mark on the doctrine of heaven.<sup>366</sup> In this way, the historical study of heaven is also a history of Christian thought from the inception of the church to modern day. Out of this history emerge two prevailing themes of which all views ascribe – theocentrism or anthropocentrism. The former, a theocentric view of heaven, places God at the center of the heavenly experience. Here, the beatific vision of God, or often known as the beatific knowledge of God, is the highest form of human happiness and bliss. This view is often, but not necessarily, linked with some form of Platonic or Aristotelian philosophical presuppositions. While the philosophical influence does not need to be rejected *a priori* and is beneficial in many areas, at the same time, there seems to be theological compromises in others for the sake of the philosophical position. The thought of Thomas Aquinas is one such system which falls within this classification – of both theological and philosophical compromise – and is worth examining in the pages to follow.<sup>367</sup> The second

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<sup>366</sup> For a very detailed and thorough history of heaven see Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang's *Heaven: A History*. For a concise summation of the book's central themes, see the last chapter "Paradise Found: Themes and Variations." pp. 353-358.

<sup>367</sup> Aquinas does fall in line with the Aristotelian tradition but it should also be noted that Aquinas's influence is based largely through the Augustinian medium. Both Augustine and Aquinas incorporate Aristotelian philosophy into their theological systems with the former theologian/philosopher having a large influence on the latter. The Augustinian influence on Aquinas has been well-documented and there is no doubt that the Aristotelian influence on Aquinas is dependent upon Augustine's thought; however, the reason for focusing largely on Aquinas

part of this section will consider the felt effects of Modernist and Enlightenment thinking on the doctrine of heaven and how this influence created the need for a Christian reformation of heaven in recent years. Lastly, I will submit that recent discussions of heaven which focus on the centrality of the resurrection and the restoration of all things, is the healthiest way forward for Christians contemplating heaven.

### **The Medieval Renaissance**

In *Heaven: A History*, McDannell and Lang note there were three new cultural shifts in the Medieval period that gave shape to the concept of heaven: the city, the intellect, and love.<sup>368</sup> The increase of urbanization during this period gave rise to the emphasis of heaven as a great city, the new Jerusalem, a move that shifted away from the more agrarian conceptions of heaven. The theme of heavenly love in this period is linked to the increase in the male-female relationships of courtly love. Tales of knights in pursuit of lovely ladies inspired a more passionate conception of marriage as opposed to the more contractual nature of many courtly marriages. Furthermore, the scholastic depictions of heaven, which will be considered in a moment, were often seen as cold and devoid of passion. And while the contemplative conception of heaven might have been acceptable to the scholastics, the poets and mystics rejected it because they emphasized a more relational union with the Divine.<sup>369</sup> The intellectual shift in the

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rather than Augustine is due to the proximity of Aquinas to Al-Ghazālī. Alongside the proximity of time, there is a connection of thought between the two views. As will be seen in the pages to follow, both Aquinas and al-Ghazālī emphasize contemplation as the highest form of happiness in the life to come.

<sup>368</sup> McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 69.

<sup>369</sup> It should be noted that the love theme during the Medieval period can be separated into theocentric and anthropocentric categories. Those who emphasized courtly love could not conceive of a heaven in which there was not love between the beloved and themselves. This sort of social imaginary was seemingly significant for eternal happiness. The poets and mystics, while finding the rigidity of the scholastics to be unsatisfactory, maintained a more theocentric view of dynamic love between God and man. This view of consummate love was in no way erotic but did emphasize the longing of the soul for the divine and the anticipation of union in the life to come. For more on this see *Ibid.*, 94-107.

Medieval period was influenced by the rediscovery of the classic Greek philosophers, namely Plato and Aristotle, through interaction with Muslim philosophers and theologians (e.g. Avicenna). Chief among the Medieval Scholastics was the theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas. We now consider his views on the afterlife.

The two main theological and philosophical influences on Aquinas' thought were Aristotle and Augustine, the former being his philosophical authority and the latter his theological authority.<sup>370</sup> Aquinas was indebted to both of these thinkers and often cites them as authoritative support in his systematic treatises. Of particular importance in this study is Aristotle's specific influence on Aquinas's conceptions of heaven and what constitutes the ultimate good for humanity. Aristotle once wrote, "...every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason, the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."<sup>371</sup> Aristotle thought men and women pursue certain actions because they believe that those actions are aimed at a certain good. Now, if this is true, it is of course important to discover what the good is to which all must aim. Aristotle suggested that happiness is such a good and that the way to achieve said happiness was from the contemplative life.<sup>372</sup> This philosophical framework of things having particular ends to which they aim and that end for human beings being the pursuit of happiness was accepted by both Augustine and subsequently Aquinas.<sup>373</sup> Specifically regarding the Christian application of this framework, the contemplative life was rooted in contemplation of the divine. Consistent among the scholastic writers was belief

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>371</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1 (I.1.1-3).

<sup>372</sup> Happiness, for Aristotle, is the end which is achieved as a human pursues the good. Human good is the activity of the soul exhibiting virtue, whether it be intellectual or moral. Ibid., 12-13 (I.7-8).

<sup>373</sup> On the relation of Aquinas to both Aristotle and Augustine, McDannell and Lang write, "While philosophy, for Aquinas, mean Aristotle, his main theological authority was Augustine." McDannell and Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 88.

that contemplation of the divine was the goal of man while on earth and that it would be the eternal occupation of the beloved in heaven.<sup>374</sup> Aquinas argued that contemplation is the highest activity of intellection, and it is that mental capacity which separates man from the animals and plants.<sup>375</sup> Furthermore, everything finds an ultimate end in God and so for human beings, who possess higher-level mental capacities, their end is intimately connected to the intellect. Thus, man's ultimate telos, according to Aquinas, is the contemplative life in relation to divine knowledge. This activity is the chief end of man and also wherein eternal bliss is derived. Neither the carnal pleasure of life, nor any other external thing, can be what satisfy human creatures, because they all would detract from the last end of everything which is God.<sup>376</sup>

For Aquinas, heaven is the culmination of human perfection and happiness. The reason for this is due to the encounter the beloved will have with the Divine once in paradise – the beatific vision of God. It is in this specific culmination where his contribution to the doctrine of heaven is most significant for this study. In order to achieve ultimate happiness through contemplation, Aquinas posits that a few things must happen first. The reason that human creatures cannot achieve perfect happiness in this life is because they see through a glass dimly, that is, their perception and knowledge of God is incomplete.<sup>377</sup> Once in heaven, the soul is freed from the imperfections of the body and can thus be rightly oriented towards God.<sup>378</sup> But the soul

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>375</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III. 25, 27.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., Chs. 27-37 with special emphasis places on 37.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., Chs. 38-48.

<sup>378</sup> This point is most significant in terms of Aristotelian influence as well as a major point of departure from Aquinas in the view of heaven presented later. This point is also quite technical and might detract from the scope so it will be discussed here. The heavenly realm for Aquinas is very static and there is little emphasis given to the physical realities of heaven. Aquinas writes that the active life will cease in the future life of the blessed and will consist solely of contemplation of God. This might lead one to suggest, what role then does human bodies have in the life to come? It would seem that the resurrection doctrine, the teaching that Jesus raised bodily from the dead, would have bodily implications for Christians as well in the life to come. Aquinas does see the importance of the body but not for purposes of enjoying physical, bodily pleasures. The reason for the importance of the body has to

does not exist separate from the body, rather, the body is resurrected, glorified, and reunited with the soul in order to form the unified human substance. Second, and consistent with the Aristotelian concept of God, Aquinas was committed to the principles of perfection including aspects such as impassibility, timeless, static, etc.; God is outside time and thus does not experience change. Furthermore, because God is immaterial, he is not seen in the traditional sense of seeing. The vision of God is not vision in seeing rather it is vision as perception. The beatific vision is equivalent to having knowledge of God which, according to Aquinas, is possessing knowledge of his essence, the very substance of God.<sup>379</sup> Third, Aquinas also states that no human intellect can, by its own natural power, perceive God's essence. The moment in heaven when revelation is given, when the beloved no longer sees (perceives) through a glass dimly, is an act of God's grace. In this moment, the beloved receives a "divine ray of light."<sup>380</sup>

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do with his anthropological commitments to Aristotle and the view called hylomorphism. Hylomorphism is the anthropological view that suggests human beings are both body and soul and, more specifically, the soul is what gives form to the body. Unlike other forms of dualism which parse out body and soul in human creatures and suggest that the soul is eternal and can exist separate from the body, hylomorphism suggests a more unified human substance. To give an example, Aquinas writes, "Abraham's soul, properly speaking, is not Abraham himself, but a part of him...there needs to be life in the whole composite, i.e., the body and soul." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Cincinnati, OH: Benziger Brothers (RCL Benziger), 1947), <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/> (Accessed December 2, 2018), Supplement.Q75.Reply to Objection 2. A person is not reducible to a soul in hylomorphism but is part of a whole which must necessarily include the body, a human person is essentially both soul and body. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, vol. 10, trans. by Beth Mortensen, ed. by Peter Kwasniewski and Jeremy Holmes, (Parma 1858 Edition), IV.D44.Q1.A1, Response to Quaestiuncula 1, <https://aquinas.cc/31/32/~275> (Accessed December 3, 2018). See also, *Summa Theologica*, Supplement.Q93. A1. The implications then for heaven is this: the beloved in paradise will not be a disembodied soul because that soul would be incomplete and lacking. The soul needs the body just as the body needs the soul, the two form a sort of internal symbiotic relation. Moreover, Aquinas suggests that without the body, the soul would be imperfect because it is only part of a whole and although the soul does not need the body for contemplation, the glorified body is more conducive to the intellectual operation because, "insofar as through being united to a glorified body the soul will be more perfect in its nature, and consequently more effective in its operation." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Supplement. Q93.A1.

<sup>379</sup> It seems that Aquinas equates the divine essence to a divine intellect and it further seems that he does this not from a strong scriptural inference but philosophical commitments. His argument can be summarized according: 1. God cannot be seen in his essence in the traditional sense of seeing, however, human creatures have the natural desire to arrive at understanding of the divine substance. 2. There cannot be a natural desire which does not have a corresponding mechanism to meet said desire, 3. "We must," Aquinas writes, "conclude that it is possible for the divine substance to be seen by means of the intellect, both by separate intellectual substances and by our souls." *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.51

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., III.53.

All of God's knowledge is at once possessed by the beloved and for an eternity will contemplate God's knowledge in a state of bliss. Aquinas describes this moment as an outpouring of divine goodness and an act of grace whereby God elevates the beloved.

Aquinas's view of heaven can be appreciated for a number of reasons. First, his commitment to a hylomorphic anthropology is consistent with an embodied view of the beloved in the afterlife. Second, his view is inherently theocentric and rightly recognizes God as the *summum bonum*. Third, Aquinas seeks to preserve the doctrine of God's transcendence yet, at the same time, demonstrates that there is a degree to which God is knowable. At the same time, Aquinas's view is problematic on a number of fronts. The first problem is in relation to the last point of agreement. Aquinas's view helps the believer to see that his only end is in God "yet", as Peter Vardy has noted, "a God identified with the supreme Platonic values."<sup>381</sup> Vardy takes issue with this conception of God and suggests that the timelessness of God can be challenged. The doctrine of the incarnation and resurrection suggests that the second person of the Trinity persisted in the incarnation following the resurrection implying that Jesus is still in bodily form, located in space and, it would seem, experiencing time.<sup>382</sup> Vardy also notes that the idea of

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<sup>381</sup> Vardy, "A Christian Approach", 20.

<sup>382</sup> This is not the only way to work through the problem with Aquinas's view. Admittedly and for reasons one can applaud, Aquinas was trying to preserve the notion of perfection as it relates to God but there are ways one can synthesize both the idea of perfection and a dynamic personal interaction. Consider the words of W. Norris Clarke, a Thomist, who considers a creative way forward: "I would answer—in my project, "creative retrieval of St. Thomas"—that our metaphysics of God must certainly allow us to say that in some real and genuine way God is affected positively by what we do, that He receives love from us and experiences joy *precisely because* of our responses: in a word, that His consciousness is contingently and qualitatively *different* because of what we do. All this difference remains, however, on the level of God's *relational consciousness* and therefore does not involve change, increase or decrease, in the Infinite Plenitude of God's *intrinsic inner being* and perfection—what St. Thomas would call the "absolute" (non-relative) aspect of His perfection. God does not become a more or less perfect being because of the love we return to Him and the joy He experiences thereat (or its absence).

The mutual giving and receiving that is part of God's relational consciousness as knowing and loving what is other than Himself is merely the *appropriate expression* or living out of the intrinsic perfection proper to a perfectly loving *personal being*, the expression of the kind of being He already is. To receive love as a person, as we better understand the unique logic of interpersonal relations today, is not at all an imperfection, but precisely a dimension of the *perfection of personal being* as lovingly responsive. What remains fixed as the constant point of reference in our concept of God is *Infinite Perfection*." W. Norris Clarke, *The Philosophical Approach to God: A*

humans possessing a body and remaining timeless are seemingly a contradiction. A fundamental aspect of being human is to experience time, to change and progress. The timeless beatific vision does not do justice to the idea of individual persons surviving death. Nor does it do justice to the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the second person of the trinity. Jesus rose from the grave with a physical, albeit glorified, body. Another of Vardy's main issues is with the impersonal nature of the beloved towards one another. "Heaven," Vardy writes, "appears to be a community with an active social life focused on Christ and on continual praise of God."<sup>383</sup> To this I would add that the social life of heaven is not only focused on Christ, but it entails relationality with Christ. It is not altogether obvious, nor necessary, that contemplation of the divine is both the chief and the source of eternal bliss in Heaven. It would be agreeable to suggest that bliss partly entails contemplation and reflection but at the same time, Scripture suggests that we are known by God and the relationship between Christ and the Church is that of a marriage. In a marriage relationship, both parties know and are known by the other. Aquinas suggests however that the beloved of heaven experience felicity when they come to know God as he knows himself, but this felicity delimits the relationality between God and the beloved.<sup>384</sup>

Aquinas's conception of heaven is influenced by a philosophical understanding of God that is unnecessarily static and abstract. I do not wish to discount the focus on God for the source of eternal bliss, however, I do wish to challenge Aquinas's conception of the beatific vision. I agree with Peter Vardy when he states, "The possibility is open to us of a life lived in fellowship

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*New Thomistic Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition, New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 136-37.  
<http://fordham.universitypressscholarship.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu> (Accessed Jan. 7, 2019)

<sup>383</sup> Vardy, "A Christian Approach," 22.

<sup>384</sup> "For God Himself understands His own substance through His own essence; and this is His felicity...And so, may they who enjoy the same felicity whereby God is happy to eat and drink at God's table, seeing Him in the way that He sees Himself." Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.51.

with God in a heavenly society where the Christian idea of agape or mutual love prevails.”<sup>385</sup>

Because of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, the beatific vision should not be seen as a final “static purpose but a dynamic joy” which is imparted to the individuals who have been transformed by love because of God’s grace.<sup>386</sup>

### **Heaven Reimagined**

Vardy’s analysis segues favorably into this final section on heaven. This is due to his emphases on love, fellowship, society, and an overall dynamism characterizing the eternal activity of heaven. Before building upon Vardy’s depiction, it is important to first provide a brief context of the doctrine of heaven in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Following the emergence of Modernist and Enlightenment thinking, the doctrine of heaven, among other Christian doctrines, came under significant criticism and attack. For the past two-hundred years, a robust understanding of heaven has been waning in the many Christian traditions to the point where believe in heaven itself is in steady decline.<sup>387</sup> Even if the doctrine of heaven is strongly retained in some Christian traditions, such as Fundamentalism, McDannell and Lang argue, “eternal life has become an unknown place or a state of vague identity.”<sup>388</sup>

Jerry Walls identifies a number of significant negative influences which he suggests have influenced the doctrinal decline of heaven in Christianity. First, the internal coherency of heaven has been challenged regarding certain philosophical considerations. Eternity and living forever are ideas which challenge the human mind especially in the areas of personal identity and eternal

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<sup>385</sup> Vardy, “A Christian Approach,” 24.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 24-25

<sup>387</sup> See specifically, Ch. 10 “Heaven in Contemporary Christianity” in *Heaven: A History* by McDannell and Lang, 307-52.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 352.



joy.<sup>389</sup> Second, Walls notes that broad cultural and intellectual trends have had a significant impact on the supernatural framework altogether, heaven included. The philosopher Charles Taylor has suggested that we live in what he calls the “Secular Age.”<sup>390</sup> By “secular” Taylor does not mean that the Western Culture is thoroughly areligious – far from it. What he means by the term is that there is no longer one belief structure that is granted a higher plausibility over another, all are open to criticism and debate. Within this context, there is space for a frame that is thoroughly secularized, a “closed world system” that is characterized by what Taylor calls the “Immanent Frame,” that is, a frame which constitutes a “natural order, to be contrasted to a supernatural one, an immanent world, over against a possible transcendent one.”<sup>391</sup> An aspect of this frame which is truly unique to the post-modern era is that these closed world systems are self-contained in terms of meaning and morality. Throughout the Enlightenment era, in the midst of a very liberal theology, heaven was still a concept that provided moral reasoning and meaning. Immanuel Kant purported that heaven was a necessary concept for the postulate of practical reason, even though morality was grounded in a non-religious duty. But today, within these supposed self-contained models, heaven is not necessary for meaning and morality. Moreover, along with the emergence of these models came the notion that heaven and the notion of an eternal life was evil because it kept people focused on the life to come and not on their

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<sup>389</sup> Walls, *Heaven*, 9-10.

<sup>390</sup> Charles Taylor’s tome *The Secular Age* may not be overly accessible for some readers. James K. A. Smith’s *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* is a very nice supplement to the work, if one finds *The Secular Age* difficult to work through. Smith’s summation of Taylor’s three-fold taxonomy of the “Secular” was quite helpful. See James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 20-23.

<sup>391</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 542. ProQuest Ebook. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=3300068> (Accessed Dec. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018). For more on the Immanent Frame see ch. 15.

immediate futures. This is why Karl Marx called religion the “opium of the people.”<sup>392</sup> So, on the one hand, the doctrine of heaven is waning because of the rise in acceptance of naturalistic presuppositions, on the other, it is even deemed evil by some because it provides a false sense of hope and meaning in this life.

Christian culture in the West is not immune to the Immanent Frame and a thorough-going secularism has fostered space for a thoroughly secularized theology. Even those whom have resisted a liberal theology have still been impacted by the Immanent Frame and, consequently, a critical component of heaven is in need of restoration – a renewed emphasis on Christian hope. In *Heaven*, Walls does well to demonstrate the reasonableness of heaven and its value for addressing extremely difficult philosophical issues, especially in relation to the meaning of life.

In concert with Walls’ work, N.T. Wright, through contextual biblical exegesis and biblical theology, and has reclaimed another aspect in need of renewal – biblical imagery. One common conception of heaven in popular Christian circles is the notion of heaven being some place far away where people go when they die; a place out there, an ethereal reality of harps and clouds with the earth being jettisoned and left behind. But is that an accurate interpretation of the Scriptural depictions of heaven? N. T. Wright argues that this is not a biblical imagery of heaven as it tends to minimize two key components tied to heaven in Scripture and early Christian theology: resurrection and restoration of nature.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> He goes on to write “The abolition of religion as the *illusory* of happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.” Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Aristeus Books, 2012), 4. (Kindle Edition)

<sup>393</sup> See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

In *Surprised by Hope*, N. T. Wright has done well in reclaiming what I would submit is a sound and thoroughly biblical vision of heaven. His project focuses largely on the life of Christ and the significance of the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>394</sup> The life of Christ was a demonstration, a foretaste of the what the kingdom of God will one day be like. This preview reached its climax when God raised Jesus, the Son, from the dead and showed God's power over death and the grave. The resurrection became the focal point of Christian hope of life and the Apostle Paul teaches that without the truth of a literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus, Christianity fails, and its message preached in vain.<sup>395</sup> Central to the message of Christ's ministry and subsequent death and resurrection is the message of hope and restoration. This is what it looks like when Jesus comes into his kingdom. This coming restoration is foreshadowed in the OT in scenes of coming judgment. Wright suggests this is where some of the modern eschatological confusion emerges. The modern conception of judgment tends to be negative but for the Jews reading Psalms 96 and 98 as well as Isaiah 11 and 65-66, the coming judgment of God was a cause to celebrate.<sup>396</sup> In the OT, to have judgment was a good thing because justice will be ensured. Judgment done according to righteousness. God will sort it out. Furthermore, following the judgment of the Lord, renewal and restoration were promised to follow. The

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<sup>394</sup> N. T. Wright is not the only voice championing the life of Christ for understanding the nature of heaven. Jerry Walls highlights this significance and centrality as well. He writes, "Recall from the introduction that the resurrection is the ground of the specifically Christian hope for eternal life. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we hope to be also, in a body like his resurrected body. If the resurrection is denied, the basis of this hope is undercut. There is, then, a tight connection between the defining event of Christian doctrine and the notion of heaven."

But this is true not only of the resurrection but also of the other central Christian doctrines I have mentioned. Incarnation and atonement were part and parcel of God's saving activity, which culminated in resurrection and ascension. These events achieve human salvation, a salvation fully accomplished at the second coming of Christ, when believers anticipate a perfected relationship with God and other believers. This perfected relationship involves being taken up, in some sense, into the very life of the Trinity." Walls, *Heaven*, 32.

<sup>395</sup> 1 Cor. 15:14

<sup>396</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 137-38.

promise of cosmic renewal has no greater scene than in the culmination of the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21-22 where the writer depicts the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to be united with the earth. This passage reveals two important themes of heaven. First, in the end, heaven and earth are meant to come together and this physical reality will be the eternal dwelling place for the beloved. Second, heaven is proximity to God. Through Scripture we see glimpses of heaven wherein man enjoys a certain measure of proximity to God. In the OT the Temple was the place where God and people met. In the NT, it is in Jesus and the Holy Spirit where this happens. In the final scene of Revelation, heaven has come to earth and the temple, which was once the symbolic and literal dwelling place of God among his people, will be no more for in this new city “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”<sup>397</sup> To this we can add, where God is there too will be love for God is love and so it is true, as C. S. Lewis says, “For where agape is, there is, in some degree, heaven.”<sup>398</sup> The blessed reality of heaven will be the union of the beloved to Love itself, this will be, as John Wesley writes, what “crowns all” for “there will be a deep, and intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; and constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all creatures in him!”<sup>399</sup>

Amidst all of the various biblical interpretations, cultural trends and theological traditions, a biblical view of heaven entails what N. T. Wright calls “eschatological duality.” He

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<sup>397</sup> Rev. 21:22; for a more thorough understanding of the centrality of Christ in the eschaton see Jeffrey R. Dickson, *The Humility and Glory of the Lamb: Toward a Robust Apocalyptic Christology*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

<sup>398</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Agape” in *The Four Loves Radio Broadcast* (Audio Book), (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

<sup>399</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley: The Bicentennial Edition*, Vol. 2 (Sermons 34-70), Sermon 64.18 “The New Creation” <http://www.ministrymatters.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/library/#/000wjw-new/ae304b2a92e7fa181acfb8e96585743a/the-new-creation.html> (Accessed Dec. 4th, 2017)

writes, “What matters is eschatological duality (the present age and the age to come), not ontological dualism (an evil ‘earth’ and a good ‘heaven’).”<sup>400</sup> As Christians contemplate heaven, they ought to look to Christ for direction. His birth, life, death and resurrection all tell the story of love, redemption, new life and restoration. These components of Jesus’ life form not only a foreshadow of what is to come but establishes a hope that is relevant for believers in this present life. What Christ demonstrated to the world was the love God has for it and not only that but his active working to restore the broken relationship, a paradise lost, which will one day culminate in the final age to come.

### **The Mystery of God**

An orthodox Christian theology of God begins with two basic questions: “what is God like?” and “who is God?” These two questions, while related, are distinct as Bray suggests – the former is an inquiry into the essence or being of God and the latter concentrates on his personal nature.<sup>401</sup> An orthodox Christian theology also rests on two fundamental assumptions: first, that God has spoken to man and through man in history (special revelation); and two, that God is, at least in some capacity, knowable.<sup>402</sup> In Christianity, the revealed Scriptures are the authoritative source of knowledge about God. What the Scriptures reveal about God allows for humanity to

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<sup>400</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 95.

<sup>401</sup> These two distinctions are emphasized by Bray. Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God: Contours of Christian Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 53.

<sup>402</sup> These two assumptions have been intentionally placed in a sequential order which reflects that causal connection to human knowledge of God. A staple feature of the three monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – is that God has revealed himself specifically to men who then have either transcribed and/or been inspired to write down said holy writ. In these monotheistic traditions, knowledge begins with the divine and so revelation must be given before one could make any claim of knowability. This position stands in contrast to any rationalistic theology (i.e. Neo-Platonism) suggesting the revelatory ascent may begin through man’s initial efforts. The fact that God has revealed seems to also suggest some form of knowability – although this point is the cause of much discussion and disagreement. Nonetheless, in the causal chain of events it is God who must act first and thus the reasons for this positioning.

theologize and make inferences about what God is like and who he is. The first consideration, what God is like in his essence or being, has led to much debate throughout the centuries concerning what can actually be known about God. One challenge facing this aspect of theology is the proposition that God is utterly other and unique, incomprehensible. God's being is so other than our own, it is purported, that is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive it through creaturely language and finite minds. Feinberg points out this challenge noting that is it difficult to discuss because it is "difficult to find biblical language that talks about the 'divine essence' (perhaps the closest is Paul's claim about the 'form of God' in Phil. 2:6, though Paul's intent is not to teach the Trinity)."<sup>403</sup> Essence and nature language is inherently a philosophical category and while they are important for understanding a thing and what it is like, the Bible does not exactly speak in that categorical way. Historically, this led many theologians towards a mystical approach to God, a means of approaching God through non-rational means (i.e. an existential encounter) and speaking of God in 'negative,' apophatic terminology.<sup>404</sup> But not all theological endeavors were of the mystical tradition. The Reformers were very reluctant to say anything about God's essence but did not go so far as to endorse a 'negative' theology in its entirety. Calvin, as Bray points out, affirmed negative theology in relation to the Divine essence but not as it relates to what could be known through God's personhood and personal relationship.<sup>405</sup> The second fundamental question, *who is God?*, should be, according to Calvin, the focus of the Christian endeavor. He

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<sup>403</sup> John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 437.

<sup>404</sup> The mystical tradition in Christianity predominates the theological landscape after the time of Augustine all the way up till the Scholastic period and Thomas Aquinas. According to Bray, Aquinas did not reject the mystical endeavor but supplemented it with a measure of correspondence between the human and the divine by means of analogy. Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, 66. Aquinas highlighted the analogy of mind, a seemingly essential feature of both humans and the divine. This was not a new development and was in keeping with Augustine's work on analogy relating to the human mind in *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity). See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. by Arthur West Haddan, (Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), Book IX, 279 (Kindle Edition).

<sup>405</sup> Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, 105.

writes, “Those, therefore, who, in considering this question, propose to inquire what the essence of God is, only delude us with frigid speculations – it being much more our interest to know what kind of being God is and what things are agreeable to his nature.”<sup>406</sup> Certainly, to know what is agreeable to God is of utmost importance, but at the same time it seems that to speak of God’s nature is to say something about his essence, that is, what is essential to God’s being.

Part of the challenge in this discussion is a categorical one. It is difficult to discern what is meant when one uses terms such as essence, nature, being and attribute and whether or not they are separate or synonymous. I would submit that it is philosophically consistent to use essence and nature synonymously so that when one speaks of the nature of God, they are referring to his essence.<sup>407</sup> Furthermore, we must be careful to not dissect the nature of God into two parts, separating the being of God and his essence (ουσια) from his personhood (ὑποστασις). It is problematic to speak of God in his singular essence first and then get around to discussing the tri-unity of persons. The tri-unity of persons in the Godhead is central to our conception and consideration of the Christian God. On the centrality of trinitarian doctrine, Wolfhart Pannenberg writes,

It is not a doctrine of only secondary importance in addition to some other basic concept of the one God: If the issue is considered in terms like that, the case for trinitarian theology is lost. It can be defended only on the condition that there is no other appropriate conception of God of Christian faith than the Trinity. In that case we cannot have first a doctrine on the one God and afterwards, in terms of some additional supernatural mystery, the trinitarian doctrine...Everything that is

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<sup>406</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battle, (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), I, 2, 2.

<sup>407</sup> In the entry for *essence* in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* it states “[essence is] The basic or primary element in the being of a thing; the thing’s nature, or that without which it could not be what it is.” The entry “Essence” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (2 Rev. Ed.), ed., Simon Blackburn, Oxford University Press, 2016. (Online Edition) DOI: 10.1093/acref/9780199541430.001.0001 (Accessed Jan 4, 2019)

said in Christian theology on the one God has to be predicated, then, on the three persons of the Trinity in their communion.<sup>408</sup>

If a thing's essence is that which without it, it would cease to be that thing and since personhood is of primary importance to the concept of the Christian God, do we not then understand something of the divine essence, however minimal it may be? It would seem that God's revelation of himself has demonstrated something essential to his being. This is not to say that the nature of the tri-unity of persons in a singular substance has been comprehended fully, there is no denying that God transcends human comprehension, but it does seem we can begin to understand the essence of God, however hidden and mysterious.

When talking about God, theologians throughout Christian history have walked a fine line avoiding the extremes of agnosticism and anthropomorphism, transcendence and immanence, revelation and hiddenness, knowledge and mystery, trying to rest in the dialectical tension. Certainly, on the one hand, Christians want to maintain that God categorically transcends the creation and therefore religious language.<sup>409</sup> And yet, on the other hand, they also affirm that God has revealed himself through the Scriptures and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, knowledge is so central to the discussion about love because one cannot love that which they have no knowledge about. To provide clarification on this tension the last dialectical set – knowledge and mystery – is worth examining in a little more detail.

In Boyer and Hall's, *The Mystery of God*, the authors discuss the idea of theological mystery, a motif that is sprinkled throughout the Scriptures. In the beginning of their analysis,

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<sup>408</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Christian Vision of God: The New Discussion on the Trinitarian Doctrine," *The Asbury Theological Journal*, Vol. 46 No. 2 Fall 1991, 21.  
<https://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1509&context=asburyjournal> (Accessed January 2, 2019)

<sup>409</sup> Which would result in equivocation.



they highlight the dialectic of knowledge and mystery in terms of light, and more specifically, the sun. They employ a popular C. S. Lewis quote which states, “We believe that the sun is in the sky at midday in summer not because we can clearly see the sun (in fact, we cannot) but because we can see everything else.”<sup>410</sup> The authors here suggest that “Lewis’ point was clear: there may be certain things that are themselves too great to understand but that nevertheless enable us to understand lesser things with remarkable clarity.”<sup>411</sup> Like the sun in the midday sky, which is not visible to the naked eye yet illumines everything else, so too does God illumine reality while also not being known through normal means of knowing. The Scriptures state that God, the Creator, “lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16); this same God announces, “No one may see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). Through this construction, Boyer and Hall note that this is the God whom “philosophers, theologians, and ordinary Christians have recognized as ‘incomprehensible,’ ‘inscrutable,’ ‘hidden,’ ‘past finding out.’”<sup>412</sup> God is a mystery and yet human beings are called to seek and know him. How can this be, how can this divine invitation be meaningful if the mystery cannot be overcome? The answer lies in the meaning of theological mystery. For most, the first definition of mystery which comes to mind entails some notion of a puzzle or problem that is in need of solving. That meaning does not suffice in relation to God, he is not some puzzle that can be solved. “The mystery of God is not,” as Boyer and Hall state, “a question to which we must find an answer; it is itself the answer.”<sup>413</sup> The Apostle Paul states that the mystery revealed to him was made known through revelation (Eph. 3:3). This kind of

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<sup>410</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 400.

<sup>411</sup> Steven D. Boyer and Christopher A. Hall, *The Mystery of God: Theology for Knowing the Unknowable*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), xiii.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

mystery is one that remains so – still mysterious – even after it is revealed and unlike investigative mystery which is eliminated once enough knowledge is obtained, this “revelational mystery” is “in some sense established, not eliminated or solved, by its revelation.”<sup>414</sup> When God revealed certain things which had heretofore been unknown, they are revealed as mystery so that the knower has knowledge of the mystery but is still left in awe and wonder, the mystery still remaining.

Revelational mystery, as the authors call it, can be divided into three sub-categories: extensive, facultative and dimensional.<sup>415</sup> For the purposes of this study, I wish to discuss only the last type of revelational mystery – dimensional mystery. The authors define dimensional mystery as “characterized by an unclassifiable superabundance that transcends but does not invalidate rational exploration.”<sup>416</sup> In order to help with understanding on this type, the authors present the analogy of the Flatlanders and shapes. Imagine if you will that there are people who are called Flatlanders who only perceive reality in two-dimensions – length and width but no depth. Further imagine the consideration of a circle in this two-dimensional reality. The Flatlanders are able to rationally perceive the circle without a problem. Now, what would happen if the Flatlanders were asked to consider rectangular extension from the circle so that the shape under investigation were now a cylinder. They would not be able to understand the notion of cylinder-ness because this shape adds another dimension to the consideration, a dimension that is outside of their capacity to understand and perceive. Notice that this mystery has nothing to do with the cylinder itself, the concept of cylinder is not irrational, but it is beyond the rational capacities and reality of the Flatlanders. Transpose this analogy to the dimensional mysteries of

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>415</sup> For more on each of the categories see Ibid., 7-17.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 11.

God as reveal to finite creatures. The authors state, “The problem we will face as we address the reality of God is not that reason does not apply but that we do not know how to apply it. The things of God are not internally self-contradictory, but what we say about God *would* be self-contradictory if we were speaking of the ordinary things of this world.”<sup>417</sup> Knowing God does not dispense with reason, knowledge of God is not less rational, it is above human reason.

In light of dimension mystery, the challenge then for Christian theology is the avoidance of agnosticism. How is this to be avoided if knowledge of God is beyond human dimensions? The authors admit that it is difficult to conceive of revelation as both knowledge and mystery, to use one’s reason but at the same time realize God is beyond reason. This is not an impossible task however, and the authors suggest that resolution begins not just with the right sources of information but also “being the right kind of knower.”<sup>418</sup> Left to our own finite selves, knowledge of God would remain in another dimension, and so Christian theology begins with God and in order to know what kind of knower we humans are, we must first turn to what God is like.

Knowledge of God begins with God, with the kind of being he is and the intentions he has for creation, namely, human beings. The Scriptures reveal a God who is inherently and fundamentally personal, a God who is not merely some abstract “thing” or “it,” but a personal “Thou,” and, more specifically, a tri-unity of persons.<sup>419</sup> Being personal is not something that

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>419</sup> Donald Bloesch would agree that knowledge of God and relationship rests in what he calls “biblical personalism.” He writes, “The subject-object relationship must not be dissolved (as in idealism) nor entirely transcended (as in mysticism); instead, it must be transformed and redirected (as in biblical personalism)” (48). For more on the relationship between Rationalism and Mysticism see Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 47-50.

God has by means of a quality or relation to something external, it is what God essentially is.<sup>420</sup>

We can say that God is the premier persons and all personhood derives from him. God's personal-ness is self-contained and self-sustaining within the three persons of the trinity and from eternity past, these three have enjoyed unending communion, a rich reciprocity of giving and receiving, of loving and being loved.<sup>421</sup>

As it relates to human creatures, not only was the creation created by a personal God, but this personal God creates other individual persons external to himself, human creatures that were endowed with the *imago Dei*.<sup>422</sup> Going back to the emphasis on being a certain kind of knower, we see from Scripture that God's creation of human beings was special and unique. No other creature in creation had been given the image of God. Having knowledge of God was linked to God's intentions and the kind of creatures he not only intended to create, but whom he intended to be in relationship with. Thus, we can say that God created human beings with the capacity to

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<sup>420</sup> In John 17:24, Jesus is praying for his disciples and he asks the Father to allow his disciple to be with him where he is and to see his glory given by the Father because the Father has "loved me before the foundation of the world." Here is a clear reference to the love shared in the Godhead prior to the creation of world. It is part of God's triune nature to share in love.

<sup>421</sup> Space does not allow for a positive argument for the doctrine of the Trinity and so I am simply assuming that it is true and that the Scriptures present us with said doctrine (I think a strong case can be made for a positive affirmation of the Trinity from Scripture). What I do wish to point out here, however, is that in light of our discussion of dimensional mystery and knowledge of God, one should have pause when leveling various critiques against the Trinity, namely, that it is an irrational concept. Irrational according to whose rationality? We have just seen from the analogy of the Flatlanders how a cylinder is beyond their capacity to reason through but that does not make the cylinder irrational. Why would we expect God to be like an investigative mystery that can be solved? Would he then still be God?

One thing that needs highlighting in the discussion of the Trinity is the investigative idiom employed to understand such matters. The modern Western investigative mind is dominated by the rationalistic propositional idiom. Malcom Yarnell suggests that this is the hubris of the Western mind, the elevation of the rational proposition over any and all other idioms of knowing. Yarnell further notes that when trying to explain Trinitarian doctrine in propositional ways, the vernacular can become embarrassed but this embarrassment "may be the fault of the method more than the doctrine" (6). The problem with propositional methodology in relation to the Trinity is that the Bible does not use this methodology to reveal what God is like. Furthermore, this methodology is too limiting. There are many other ways the Scriptures explain the Trinity to use and thus relegating all manner of explanation to one form is conceptually vacuous. For more on this discussion as well as Yarnell's renewed methods for reading Scripture see Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *God the Trinity: Biblical Portraits*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016).

<sup>422</sup> Boyer and Hall provide a nice, concise list of what properties human beings possess that consist of the *imago Dei*. For that list see Boyer and Hall, *The Mystery of God*, 75-6.

meaningfully engage with the various degrees of revelational mystery. Only because of the work of the Creator can human beings engage with such mystery. Moreover, in this divine work is manifested the *agapē* love of the Creator towards his creation. A love that is rooted in doing and action and not because of any need or want external to God, “but,” as Lewis states “of plain bounty.”<sup>423</sup> But, and perhaps more importantly, human beings can only be personal because the Creator himself is personal, the premier persons, and not only that, those persons share in a unbounded, perichoretic love from all of eternity.

In the backdrop of the theme of mystery and knowledge, the next section examines the notion of God’s love for man. This section expounds of God’s love toward human beings and discusses the tremendous undertaking he undertook in order to love such finite creatures. Experiencing and sharing God’s love is a form of knowing God and so knowing what God’s love is like is beneficial for any meaningful relationship between humans and the divine.

### **God’s Love For Man**

God’s love for mankind is a central pillar in Christianity and, as Feinberg rightly suggest, “one of the grandest themes in all of Scripture.”<sup>424</sup> Perhaps the most famous verse of the Bible – John 3:16 – begins with the powerful phrase “For God loved the world in this manner, that he gave his only begotten Son.” God’s love for the world was conveyed to the world through the giving of the beloved Son, the Son who would become a ransom for many and through whom the world would be saved.<sup>425</sup> For confessing Christians, it is humbling to consider the manner in which the Triune God loves mankind – a thought that inspires wonder and mystery. When

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<sup>423</sup> Lewis, “Agape” in *The Four Loves Radio Broadcast* (Audio Book), (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

<sup>424</sup> Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 349.

<sup>425</sup> Mark 10:45, see also 1 John 4:9-10.

considering the love God has for mankind, one thought that should not be so quickly passed over concerns the lengths God went to love human beings. Few people consider the theological and philosophical difficulties inherent in a reality in which the infinite comes into contact with the finite in a loving, relational way. The qualitative difference between the Creator and the created is so vast and incommensurable, it would be quite remiss of human creatures to not take seriously the lengths the Triune God took not only to reveal himself but to achieve the particular end which manifested in the Incarnation, Death and subsequent Resurrection of Jesus. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard took this relationship between the Creator and creature seriously. He contemplated and discussed the lengths to which God, whom, according to the Kierkegaardian designation is infinitely qualitatively different than the creature, went to not only love humanity but be victorious in love, overcoming the unfathomable chasm that existed between them.

Two fundamental assumptions direct Kierkegaard's reflections of God's love for man: first, God's love is his motivation as well as his end, and two, love is genuinely expressed and experienced only among equals. The first assumption touches upon of an important theological and philosophical consideration: "what is the motivation for God's action?" In relation to creation, God is the primary cause, the Unmoved Mover as Aristotle calls him. But unlike the Aristotelian designation of God, which was merely a necessary condition for reality to obtain, the Christian God, alongside being the Creator is also loving and relational towards creatures. Neither choice nor necessity dictates a certain measure of distance for he is not far removed and detached from creation. However, God's disposition towards creation seemingly creates this tension of causality which can be summarized in this way: If God is perfect, that means he is self-contained, in need of nothing, nothing can be added to his essence or taken away; therefore,

he does not act according to some external need as if he was lacking in any way or had a desire necessitating a certain occasion. What then causes God to move? To act? To appear?

Kierkegaard recognizes this tension and asks the same question,

...nor can he [God] be so determined by any occasion that there is as much significance in the occasion as in the resolve. What then could move him to make his appearance? He must indeed move himself...But if he moves himself it follows that he is not moved by some need, as if he could not endure the strain of silence but had to break out in speech. But if he moves himself, and is not moved by need, what else can move him but love?<sup>426</sup>

Why does Kierkegaard assume that nothing but love be that which moves God to act, he answers “for love does not have the satisfaction of need outside itself but within.”<sup>427</sup> God is love and is moved by love and this motivation comes from within God himself. *Agapē* love is love grounded in action, in doing. God acts because he is love. Thus, God was not forced to love mankind, he freely loves through an act of the will. Because God is love and had such determinations towards his creation, he would, in the fullness of time, make himself known. Kierkegaard states it this way, “Out of love, therefore, the god must be eternally resolved in this way, but just as his love is the basis, so also must love be the goal, for it would be a contradiction for the god to have a basis of movement and a goal that do not correspond to this.”<sup>428</sup> The question of how God achieves such an end is revealed in the problem which underscores Kierkegaard’s other assumption.

Kierkegaard’s second assumption is fascinating when considering the love between God and man. He reminds the reader that God loves the learner and it is his aim to “win him.”<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “Philosophical Fragments” in *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus: Kierkegaard’s Writings*, Vol. 7, Ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 24.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid., 25.

Kierkegaard suggests that this kind of love, that one that win's over the individual, must be one that is shared among equals. He writes,

...for only in love is the different made equal, and only in equality or in unity is there understanding. Without perfect understanding, the teacher is not the god, unless the basic reason is to be sought in the learner, who rejected what was made possible for him.

Yet this love is basically unhappy, for they are very unequal, and what seems so easy – namely, that the god must be able to make himself understood – is not so easy if he is not to destroy that which is different.<sup>430</sup>

Here, Kierkegaard's point is that God's love for man, the kind which seeks reciprocated love, is frustrated by the inability of God and man to understand one another – the emphasis being on the side of the beloved's incapacity to understand God the lover. In order to win mankind over, the gap of difference must be overcome. So how does God avoid this frustrated love? How is the equality of lovers resolved or must God's end be frustrated for eternity? He says that, in this frustration, the grief on God's part is infinitely more profound and something only the superior being in the relationship will fully understand. There is not a creaturely analogy which can adequately grasp the extent of the misunderstanding. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard is resolved to at least try and explain this frustration knowing that human conceptions cannot capture the full-measure of qualitative difference between God and man.

Aware of the limitations, Kierkegaard asks the reader to consider the analogy of the king and the maiden. Imagine that there was a king who loved a lowly maiden. Their status was such there existed an asymmetrical relationship for he was the lordly king and she a humble maiden. Not being hindered by this, the king simply declares her his equal, raises her up, and they are wed. As time goes on, however, the king begins to have an anxious thought but one that he keeps to himself lest by speaking it to others it begins to germinate. The king thinks to himself, "what if

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<sup>430</sup> Ibid.



the maiden becomes displeased with her status,” not because she is not grateful for what the king has done; rather, because the king has made her into something she is not. She will always be the humble maiden and he the lordly king. The thought might even cross her mind, as Kierkegaard writes, “she would have been happier had she remained in her obscurity, loved by an equal, content in her humble cottage.”<sup>431</sup> In this moment, the king’s love would become frustrated, and not because he had done something wrong, that his love was not of a self-less kind; rather, it is the weakness of the beloved’s perception of the relationship that is the cause of great frustration.

Notice that the problem is not that they are not equals in a positional sense, the king has made the maiden his queen and she is. The problem lay in understanding, of the maiden’s attempt to return to a lesser love. This is the learner’s error according to Kierkegaard. God’s love for man is like the love the king had for the maiden and in the same the way the king’s love could conceivably become frustrated so too the love God has for man will experience an “unfathomable grief” out of frustrated love.<sup>432</sup> God’s grief arises out of frustration for at least two reasons. First, it is frustrated because his ends are not being realized. Second, the love of God only seeks that which is best for the other, but the learner wants to return to the lesser, to the

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>432</sup> This phrase “unfathomable grief” is Kierkegaard’s exact way of describing the frustrated love of God. At first glance one may take pause or perhaps even offense to suggest that God feels this way towards mankind, that this imaginative exercise is fundamentally an egotistical exercise rooted in an anthropocentric theology for surely God does not stand in need of the learner. Kierkegaard anticipates this objection and says that in this reaction, the suggestion that this might be a matter of indifference to God, “In this we forget—or rather, alas! we prove how far we are from understanding him; we forget that God loves the learner. And just as that kingly grief of which we have spoken can be found only in a kingly soul, and is not even named in the language of the multitude of men, so the entire human language is so selfish that it refuses even to suspect the existence of such a grief.” Ibid., 28. Kierkegaard responds, essentially, by declaring how can you be so selfish to suggest that God does not concern himself with this love for man. In fact, in your suggestion you reveal both limitation and ignorance. You have demonstrated how far we are from understanding the love of God. And perhaps Kierkegaard is correct, what a selfish assertion indeed. It would seem that the objection might be an honest one, a result of a theology intent on emphasizing and protecting the transcendence of God. And yet, it can be selfish because what one thought was their duty to protect, did not need protection all along. In fact, in the protection, their understanding of God missed what was indeed the most important aspect, the Godhead’s radical immanence in the person Jesus Christ.

squalor of his lowly position. Perhaps the grief is like that of a parent's love for a child that allows them to make their own choices knowing that they are choosing the lesser but allowing them to do so anyway. The parent knows what is best but does not force the child's hand, all the while knowing that even if the child leaves, the love for them will remain. In the same way God's love does not cease, "for the divine love," as Kierkegaard writes, "is that unfathomable love which cannot rest content with that which the object of love might foolishly consider himself blissfully happy to have."<sup>433</sup>

But would not God expect this of his creation? Yes, the Triune God, would certainly have known that this love would have become frustrated, that humanity's volition was weak and that love could easily become frustrated as the creation frivolously sought that which would only temporally satisfy. On this anticipation, the words of C. S. Lewis are helpful:

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>434</sup>

Humanity is far too easily pleased with the lesser, but God does rest content. He is not content to leave humanity in the mud and so now we must ask how God avoids the frustrated love? How is the asymmetry between the Lover and the beloved overcome and true love realized? Kierkegaard considers two options: first, the union might be brought about by the elevation of the learner/beloved or, two, by the decent of the Lover.

The first option – the elevation of the learner/beloved – is like the king's decree to make the maiden his equal. God could have elevated the humanity's status by divine fiat, a royal

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 28-9.

<sup>434</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (New York: Harper One, 2001), 26.

decree. God could, at once, overcome the weaknesses of human creatures and perfect their character but such a decree, Kierkegaard suggests, would come at a price.<sup>435</sup> In this moment of transformation, the sin and separation are overcome but so too is the will of the human individual. In this moment, God makes the decision for human creatures and in order to guarantee that love is not frustrated the will of humanity is bolstered and stands resolute but at the same time, the memory of a past life is altered and wiped clean. The person has no memory of how they arrived in the condition they are in, they do know however that they are in a place of goodness, happiness and bliss. The learner/beloved would no longer desire to return to the lesser, back to the making mud pies in the mud. But, the choice to be there was not their own. Now, this is not to say that God does not exercise his authority and will in the lives of human creatures at decisive moments in history, he does, but it does not seem to be the way he normally operates, and it definitely does not seem to be the case in relation to love. With love being the prime motivation for God's ends, it would seem consistent to submit that the free choice between the Lover and the beloved is of prime importance. Thus, the elevation of the learner in this manner is not acceptable, not because the learner objects but the Lover knows his beloved did not choose to be there on his/her own accord.

Another scenario within the first option of elevation is God could reveal himself to mankind in a display of majesty, power and glory.<sup>436</sup> Perhaps the scene would be similar to that of the return of Christ on the white horse in Revelation or the scene depicted around God's throne where the angels continuously worship.<sup>437</sup> In this manifestation, there will but one option

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<sup>435</sup> Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 29-30.

<sup>436</sup> Of course in a manner that would not, at once, melt away human existence for no man can see God in all his glory and live (Ex. 33:20).

<sup>437</sup> Rev. 19:11-16; Rev. 4:6-11

for all living creatures, to bow and confess in worship that Jesus is Lord.<sup>438</sup> At once, the learner would lose himself in adoration and he/she becomes enraptured in the glory of the divine.

Kierkegaard suggests that this could have satisfied the maiden but at the same time it would not, he writes, “satisfy the king, for he did not want his own glorification but the girl’s.”<sup>439</sup> Two things are of important note here. First, it is only a mere suggestion that this manifestation could have satisfied the maiden and in this hypothetical scenario the learner as well. Kierkegaard suggests it might have satisfied the maiden, but I suggest that it would not. It would not because of the particular telos of mankind. Being made in the image of God, human beings are persons endowed with a likeness to the premier persons of the Triune Godhead. As persons, human beings are inherently relational yet are unique individual selves and it seems that in this kind of manifestation the individual self is lost in a quasi-divine absorption. Second, and following from the first, the relation between the tri-unity of Persons and human persons is frustrated. There is no doubt that mankind would, in this instance, worship God but would this end fully align with God’s purposes? According to Kierkegaard, it would not. The first option – the elevation of the learner – may in fact please the individual but it would be shrouded in deceit, it simply will not do for, as Kierkegaard states, “In taking this path, then, love does not become happy – well, perhaps the learner’s and the maiden’s love would seem to be happy, but not the teacher’s and the king’s, whom no delusion could satisfy.”<sup>440</sup> The tension is thus revealed, how does God annihilate the unlikeness that exists between them and yet not annihilate individual persons in the

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<sup>438</sup> We see from Scripture that this is what happens when God’s power is on display. Isa. 45:23; Phil. 2:9-11; Rom. 14:11; Rev. 5:13

<sup>439</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “Philosophical Fragments,” 29.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

process? The unlikeness must be overcome because, “not to disclose itself is the death of love,” and yet how will God accomplish that for, “to disclose itself is the death of the beloved!”<sup>441</sup>

God was not satisfied with the kind of relationship which either was shrouded in deceit or abolished the individual selves whom he loved. The Scriptures are replete with relational commands – both to challenge and invite – directed to the learner to taste, see, know, respond, choose and love God. But these commands are fraught with frustration due to the kind of thing human creatures are: sinful, frail, weak, finite, contingent, etc. Given the infinite qualitative distance that exists between God and man, that would seem enough to highlight the lengths God undertook in order to achieve that particular end of love. But humanity, in the most extreme form of arrogance, added another layer of complexity to this task. Not only is there a difference qualitative difference between God and man, the Creator and creation, human creatures rejected their Creator and, in His place, set themselves as gods. The Bible says mankind professed to be wise in their rejection of God but in reality they were demonstrating their foolishness.<sup>442</sup> Thus, not only was there a divide in quality of essence, there too was divide of character and purity. Standing in the ultimate form of ignorance and self-aggrandizement, the creation had become an enemy of and to the Creator.<sup>443</sup> This added dimension only heightens the qualitative degree of God’s great love for humanity. Human beings cannot ever fully understand the degree to which God’s love has overcome but nevertheless, when we begin to try and comprehend we are filled with the words from John’s epistle, “behold what great love the Father has for us...”<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>442</sup> Rom. 1:22

<sup>443</sup> Rom. 5:8; Phil. 3:14; James 4:4.

<sup>444</sup> 1 John 3:1. Quoting from the NIV here because I think it captures the essence of John’s statement.

Because God is motivated by love, if the frustration in the Lover remains following the elevation of the learner/beloved, then perhaps it can be absolved through descent. Kierkegaard considers the notion that in order for love to be actualized and the asymmetry overcome, the lover must alter himself for the sake of the beloved, to meet the beloved wherever he or she may be. In the case of the infinite and the finite, the higher becomes the lower, taking on their humanity, becoming the lowest among them – the servant, the one who serves others. The Gospel of John states that the Word became flesh and dwelt among humanity.<sup>445</sup> This incarnation of the second person of the Triune Godhead, the putting on flesh and becoming the servant was no mere Docetist shell. The servant form was not, as Kierkegaard noted, “an outer garment, like the king’s beggar-cloak, which therefore flutters loosely about him and betrays the king...It is his true form and figure. For this is the unfathomable nature of love, that it desires equality with the beloved, not in jest merely, but in earnest and truth.”<sup>446</sup> It was in the gesture of love, the incarnation of God, that divine love was put on the center-stage of human history. But the full extent of God’s love for mankind was not fully revealed until Jesus took up his literal cross and died the death which was the beloved’s fate, an act for which there can be no greater manifestation.

The Lover went all the way to Calvary’s cross on behalf of the beloved. The human life of the Lover, Jesus the Christ, was a revelation of the Father, of what God is like in His essence. It was in this form, that of the true God becoming man, wherein the asymmetry was overcome. In light of this beautiful revelation, one could rightly ask, “did God intend it to be this way from the beginning?” The simple answer is, yes. Scripture states that the Lamb of God was slain

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<sup>445</sup> John 1:14

<sup>446</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “Philosophical Fragments,” 31-2.

before the foundations of the world.<sup>447</sup> This passage, among many others, suggests that it was part of God's plan for the Son to die as the Father's chosen Lamb. Perhaps, it could even be suggested further that this was the only way for love to be realized. Kierkegaard implies as much in his concluding thoughts:

For love, any other revelation would be a deception, because either it would first have had to accomplish a change in the learner (love, however, does not change the beloved but changes itself) and conceal from him that this was needed, or in superficiality it would have had to remain ignorant that the whole understanding between them was a delusion (this is the untruth of paganism). For the god's love, any other revelation would be a deception.<sup>448</sup>

What was or was not necessary is not the point here; rather, it is that this is what God did to demonstrate his love towards mankind and overcome the asymmetry that existed between God and man. Looking back at the cross, at God's love on full display, the beloved is left in awe, in a humble adoration of the Lover, of what has been done on his/her behalf.

The learner owes everything to the teacher, that there is no thing about the learner that earns merit or has the ability to overcome the misunderstanding.<sup>449</sup> Through the descent of the Lover, the learner and maiden are thus elevated in Christ but in this event their place and position are not lost on them. There is a scene in the book of Revelation where the crowns of glory are given to the sons and daughters of God. They are heirs according to the promise, they are raised up by the Teacher who is also the King. But love is reciprocal, it is self-giving, always focused on the other and in this Regal scene, those honored and brought high, take off their royal crowns and lay them at the feet of the true King. This is not synonymous with the humble maiden

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<sup>447</sup> Rev. 13:8. While some translations place the prepositional phrase "from the foundation of the world (*ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου*)" with those written in the book of life (ESV), the more natural reading of the Greek text seems to be that of the Lamb being slain before the foundations of the world.

<sup>448</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments," 33.

<sup>449</sup> For Kierkegaard, this transition into new life is the transition from non-being to being.

realizing her humble place and desiring to return to that lesser love. This laying down of crowns at the feet of Jesus results from the realization that the King became the Servant, that for the sake of love fulfilled, the lover lowered himself to the status of the beloved. There is understanding, a beautiful understanding and yet there is the inability to comprehend the lengths the Lover went to win the beloved; yet, the beloved know that glory, honor, and worship are due to the Lover alone.

This intention of God, to be engaged in love between equals, provides us an apologetic response to the so-called hiddenness of God problem and the common retort made by skeptics that if God exists, why does he not simply reveal himself right here and now? This retort may seem a glib jest and will likely gain some rhetorical favor for the skeptic, but at the same time it can be a simple and honest question: Why does God not acquiesce to these revelatory demands? Would it not be simple for the Godhead to be revealed in all power and glory and at once make its existence known to the skeptic and believer alike? The answer is both dialectical and paradoxical. In a dialectical sense the answer is both yes and no. Yes, it would be easy for God to make people know that He exists, but that kind of knowledge is not what God is after nor would it do humanity any good. Scripture states that even the demons know and believe that God exists and shudder at that reality.<sup>450</sup> The knowledge of God which demons possess is of no use for the human's soul, it is not a knowledge grounded in love, submission and worship. So, no, it is not simple, especially having seen the challenges between the king and the maiden – how great then between God and man. But do not be mistaken, the non-simplicity of the matter was not because God lacked the ability or the resolve; rather, it was the weakness and limitations of the persons whom God loved.

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<sup>450</sup> James 2:19



Paradoxically, the manner in which God displayed his love is both simple, and yet for some profound and offensive, to grasp. This is what Jesus means when he teaches you must become like the children in order to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>451</sup> Children realize their need for help that is external to them. In their youthful disposition, perhaps they see with clearer eyes both their need and the beauty of this story. Furthermore, it is simple to those who have responded to the invitation of love, who have tasted and seen that the Lord is Good.<sup>452</sup> For those who have yet to experience the goodness of God's love, it seems lowly, offensive, a "stone of stumbling and a rock of offense."<sup>453</sup> C. S. Lewis's distinction between looking *at* versus looking *along* something is quite helpful here.<sup>454</sup> Lewis describes a moment when he was in a very dark toolshed and a saw a single beam of light shining through a crack at the top of the door. As he looked at the light he could see the beam distinctly and it illuminated the shed faintly. But as he aligned his eye with the beam of light Lewis writes that the inside of the shed vanished and "I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw...green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun."<sup>455</sup> There is an experiential difference between looking at and looking along something. After having offered a few more examples of the differences between *at* and *along*, Lewis then asks the qualitative question of which is more valid or true than the other. Or, which of the two distinctions tells you most about the thing? This question, Lewis suggests, is taken for granted and over the past fifty years it has largely been assumed that in matters of religion, a true account must come from the outside, that

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<sup>451</sup> Matt. 18:3

<sup>452</sup> Psalm 34:8

<sup>453</sup> 1 Peter 2:8

<sup>454</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 230-34.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 230

is, those looking at – the anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists.<sup>456</sup> Lewis pushes back against this default assumption pointing out there are things we can look at but simply not know what it is like until we look along. Being outside of something can offer a clearer picture but it does not detract from the significance and validity of seeing along the beam, being on the inside. Those having looked along the beam of God's sacrificial love know through experience the depths of this great love.

Conventional wisdom scoffs at the idea of God on the cross. Friedrich Nietzsche affirms as much when he writes,

Obtuse to all Christian terminology, modern people can no longer relate to the hideous superlative found by an ancient taste in the paradoxical formula 'god on the cross.' Nowhere to date has there been such a bold inversion or anything quite as horrible, questioning, and questionable as this formula. It promised a revaluation of all the values of antiquity.<sup>457</sup>

Nietzsche's words highlight a profound truth of the crucifixion of Jesus, that it transcends human wisdom, logic and morality. No time before or no time following has such a conception entered the hearts and minds of men. But that is what God does, He takes the foolish things of the world and shames the wise.<sup>458</sup> Nietzsche's words are prophetic as they, whether intentionally or unintentionally, illuminate the "bold inversion" of Christ on the cross and the reality that this event creates a confrontation with every single human being. Nietzsche was correct, Christ on the cross calls for a revaluation of all values, it calls for one to make a choice, to either die to self and take up one's own cross or to reject this call to love and submission. So, why does God not write your name in the sky and meet your demands for knowledge and epistemic access, because

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>457</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by Judith Norman, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), #46, p. 44.

<sup>458</sup> 1 Cor. 1:27

He has already revealed himself. Where you may ask? Kierkegaard has the answer, “Look, there he stands – the god! Where? There. Can you not see him? He is the God; and yet he has no place where he can lay his head.”<sup>459</sup> Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the revelation of God and the kind of knowledge that God desires man to have is captured in the words of Jesus to his disciples when he asks “and who do you say that I am?”<sup>460</sup> Here, Jesus demonstrates that he is concerned not only that the disciples have an opinion of who he is but that they have knowledge of his identity. God was revealed in Christ so that man could have the relationship God intended to have with those creatures made in His image.

The relational purposes of God are intended for heaven as well. God’s intentional love for man extends into this current life but it also will continue on into the afterlife for an eternity. Kierkegaard’s analogy helps one to contemplate the lengths God went to achieve his purposes. The current experience of God’s love is a profound reality. The God who descended out of love to overcome finite humanity invites those very same creatures to be in personal relation with him for an eternity. If the love is God is such a good experience now, consider how much more joy there will be when humanity sees their Lord face-to-face. Heaven is the ultimate culmination of God’s love for man; where the author of love and life and light calls the redeemed his own and as the Scriptures state, “so shall we be with the Lord forever.”<sup>461</sup>

### **Man’s Love for God**

Man’s reciprocating love for God is the last section to be considered in this chapter. Integral to the possibility of love between two persons is first the possibility of knowledge of the other who is to be known. Without the potential for knowledge and its corresponding actuality,

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<sup>459</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, “Philosophical Fragments,” 32.

<sup>460</sup> Matt 16:15.

<sup>461</sup> 1 Thess. 4:17

there can be no love. In this way, knowledge and love are intertwined. As the previous section noted, the incarnation, life, death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus Christ provides both knowledge of God and a demonstration of the kind of love God has for human beings.<sup>462</sup> In Christ, not only does God cross the infinite qualitative difference in terms of knowledge about himself, he also does so in the realm of love. The incarnation is at once both a revelation of knowledge and a revelation of love in space and time, the descent of God bridging the divide which would have not been possible for man to ascent to or overcome.<sup>463</sup> With the way made available, the resulting work of Christ comes with an invitation and a command, the call to come and die to self through loving God and loving others. This command is rooted in both the kind of personal being we were created as and what we were created to do. It is not a cold-hearted command given by a disingenuous over-lord, but it is stern and unyielding. Much like Lewis's Aslan, the metaphorical Christ-figure, who is a great lion that cannot be tamed and isn't safe but is also good and the king, so too, is Jesus Christ the same person loving person who will also return to judge the earth with a sharp sword.<sup>464</sup> He is the Savior-King, the lover and the judge. Furthermore, the nature of this command is that its burden is easy and the yoke light.<sup>465</sup> It is easy

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<sup>462</sup> John 14:5-11. In this passage Jesus tells his disciples, (v.7) "If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." In this verse, Jesus is speaking in the present tense and perfect tense. The disciples are presently knowing the Father and have seen him with the emphasis on the current state of being resulting from a past event. By being around Jesus, the disciples are in the position of *having seen the Father*, a condition which they continue to be in, it is ongoing.

<sup>463</sup> The emphasis on a bodily incarnation into space and time cannot be minimized here. Orthodox Christian theology has maintained that Jesus Christ was a historical person and that the incarnation was the union, albeit mysterious, of both God and man. Thomas Torrance describes this reality well stating, "This is an utterly staggering doctrine. It does not mean, of course, that God has resolved Himself wholly into what He was not or that He has merged His eternal reality entirely with the creaturely reality of man. Nevertheless it is to be taken in all its serious intention to mean that the Son of God has become many without ceasing to be the God He ever was, and that after the Incarnation He is at work within space and time in a way that He never was before." Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1997), 52-3.

<sup>464</sup> Rev. 19:15.

<sup>465</sup> Matt. 11:28-30.

and light for a number of reasons but perhaps the most striking of them all is connected to the very life of Christ himself. Humans being are not asked to do something that God himself has not already done in the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is the archetypal human being, a perfect example of what it is to fulfill the greatest commandments – to love God and love others.<sup>466</sup> His life and death demonstrate that qualitative nature of God's *agapē* love. Not only is this the way in which God has loved us, it is also the motivation that compels us to love one another in the same manner.

The Scriptural mandate to love God and love others is of premier importance in the life of a Christian. The pair stands resolute as the two greatest commandments to follow, the latter being second in importance only due to the nature and necessity of the former. But Loving God and loving others are also mediums of knowing God, a way of understanding the dimensional mystery. In the first epistle of John, the author states, "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."<sup>467</sup> Whoever has *agapē* love for his neighbor has both been born of God and knows God. A person who loves in this sense knows God because God is love and in that act one knows what God is like. Why is this the case though, why is it that those who love others with *agapē* love have been both born of God and know God? Regarding the latter part, knowledge of God, the answer is found in the following verse when the author says, "because God is love." The phrase *God is love* (ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν) is perhaps one of the most profound statements in all of Scripture concerning God, not merely because of the directness of the copulative formula but also because it reveals to us a glimpse of the divine essence. This statement goes beyond describing what God is like in the sense that God is comparable to love; rather, from it we are to

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<sup>466</sup> John 14:31; Rom. 5:6-8; Eph. 2:4-7; 2 Thess. 2:16-17; 1 John 3:16; 4:19.

<sup>467</sup> 1 John 4:7

understand, through the copulative, that God *is* love in the equative sense. John goes on to show how the love of God was made manifest to the world through a double unfolding. He first notes that the love of God was demonstrated in the sending of his only Son (τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ τὸν μονογενῆ) into the world in order that we might have life. Secondly, John further develops the Son's commissioning noting that God's love was demonstrated not only in the purpose of bringing life but in being the propitiation for sin. In fact, it is in this act of propitiation through which we can have the kind of life which demonstrates God's love. Nestled in-between the two examples, in perhaps a chiasmic fashion, the apostle reminds us of a fundamental aspect of God's *agapē* love, it is always prior to and independent of any act of benevolence on the behalf of mankind.<sup>468</sup> God loves not because we loved God but because he first loved us, a statement John reiterates a few verses later: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

As it pertains to human creatures and the knowledge of God, it is interesting to note that in this passage knowledge of God is obtained through *agapē* love. This means that knowledge of God is gained, not through the transmission of a propositional statement about God, but rather in the act of love, in doing.<sup>469</sup> The following verse does convey such a propositional statement, perhaps one of the most important ever revealed of God, but here in verse seven the author appears to be adding another layer of knowledge that goes beyond what one thinks about God. Of course, what one thinks and believes about God is important and fundamental to right living, but here the author seems to say there is another degree of knowledge that is gained only through action, through love that is defined by doing. In the act of *agapē*, one gains knowledge of what

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<sup>468</sup> 1 John 4:10

<sup>469</sup> It is also important to mention that by love I do not mean a particular feeling one has towards another person. Lewis does well here to highlight this distinction, "Charity means 'Love, in the Christian sense'. But love, in the Christian sense, does not mean an emotion. It is a state not of the feelings but of the will; that state of the will which we have naturally about ourselves, and must learn to have about other people." C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 109.

God is like because God is *agapē*. When a Christian loves another person selfishly and unconditionally and acts rightly towards the other's good, treating them as a proper end, he/she gains a sense of what God is like. He/she gains knowledge that was not hitherto known by propositional statements. This kind of knowledge is gained only through experience and is thus a subjective truth. It is subjective truth but not in the sense of a relativistic postmodern subjectivity, that kind of purporting relegates truth to judgment of the individual. In the Christian sense, the kind of subjectivity in mind here is realized only when the human person, the subject, comes into direct contact with objective truth, with the true Real.

There are some truths that can only be experienced in this way and they tend to be the most significant truths of human experience. Consider this example of knowledge gained through experience. Imagine there are two people, a guy and a girl, who have been brought together by two families in an arranged marriage. Both of them have never seen or met one another and they are about to meet for the first time before deciding to officially marry. Up to this point the girl's family had told the prospective groom and his family about her, descriptions of what she is like, her personality, likes and dislikes, quality of character, strengths and weaknesses and even favorite foods (they were very thorough). Likewise, the guy's family relayed the same kind of information to the prospective bride, being very thorough and covering similar material and topics as they had received. Both the prospective bride and groom feel they know a lot about their future mate but in what sense do they know the other? Up to this point they only possess propositional knowledge of the other marked by statements such as "he is kind," "she enjoys jokes," "she is sentimental," "he is generally pessimistic," etc. But how well can they really be said to know one another even though they have been told so much about the other? There is still another kind of knowledge to be gained, it is called, knowledge through

acquaintance. There is an immediacy to this kind of knowledge that begins in the initial subjective encounter. Even in the moment of the first meeting, the first hello, the first smile, there is something new, a subjective knowledge gained through a direct encounter with the person, in this case the future spouse, that was not possibly acquired through propositions. In this moment there is a new degree of knowledge gained, a new level of relationality that can only come through such an interaction of which propositional truths cannot compare.

Human love for God is rooted in *agapē*, in action. But at the same time, Christian love for God has also been thought of in terms of *erōs* love, of desire for the ultimate Good. This leads us to the discussion concerning the relationship between *agapē* and *erōs* as it pertains to man's love for God. There is a rich history of theological development of *agapē* and *erōs* but there are two figures – Augustine and Luther – who are perhaps most prominent in this discussion and yet stand in stark contrast towards one another's thought.

Beginning with the ancient Greek philosophers, one question which they earnestly sought an answer entailed the movement or what A.E. Taylor calls “the first step” towards conversion of the soul from the world to God.<sup>470</sup> The answer began with contemplation and a knowledge of the self which “is also the knowledge of our own ignorance of true good.”<sup>471</sup> Human beings are lacking and in want for they do not possess the Good, the reflective life is the beginning process of discovering or in some instances returning back to the Good.<sup>472</sup> From these reflections emerged the idea of *erōs* love and the notion of the soul searching or longing for that which it lacks. Underlying the Greek idea of *erōs* is an embedded dualism in which the soul longs to

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<sup>470</sup> A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist*, (London: MacMillan and Co, 1930), 238.  
<https://archive.org/details/faithofamoralist029389mbp> (Accessed Dec. 2, 2019)

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> Plotinus states that all souls will return to the One from whence all in existence derives. See Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.7.23.1 or 492.



separate from the physical world (including the body) which is transient and temporal, to escape from Plato's cave and enter the "sunshine of the intelligible world" to that which is permanent and eternal.<sup>473</sup> Lindberg purports that this goal is more clearly expressed in the writings of Plotinus who reflects Plato and Aristotle and heavily influenced Augustine.<sup>474</sup>

Augustine was indeed influenced by Greek philosophy, especially the idea of *erōs* love. Because of this influence, perhaps the most significant feature of Augustine's theology of human love is that all love is acquisitive love or *erōs*. That all men seek the Good is a universal presupposition for human being. But more than just seeking the Good, Augustine adds to this saying that all men love.<sup>475</sup> Love is the most elementary function in man. But Augustine begins to diverge from Greek influence at precisely the moment of discerning the proper object of one's love. Concerning the starting point of introspection in Greek philosophy, A. E. Taylor rightly quips, "How do we pass from the discovery that we are in this miserable and shameful ignorance of the one thing it is incumbent on us to know to apprehension of the scale of true good? How do we get even so far beyond our initial complete ignorance as to be able to say that a good soul is immeasurably better than a good body, and a good body than abundance of possessions?"<sup>476</sup> If man's love is to be rightly ordered how does he find where to begin? Towards what Good does he aim? Augustine would affirm Taylor's point here, and this is manifested in his distinction between *Caritas* and *Cupiditas*. For Augustine, acquisitive love is neither good nor bad, to desire

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<sup>473</sup> Carter Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History Through Western Christianity*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 56.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>475</sup> See St. Augustine, *Select Sermons on the New Testament* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Vol 6, trans by R. G. MacMullen, ed. by Philip Schaff, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 365-66 (Sermon XXXIV).

<sup>476</sup> Taylor, *Faith of a Moralist*, 238.

is to be human, it is the way God has created us.<sup>477</sup> The distinction between these two forms of love, then, is not in acquisition (kind) but in the object of the acquisition. In this sequence, there are only two possibilities, either love ascends or it descends.<sup>478</sup> *Caritas* is that love which is ascends because it is rightly order on God whereas *Cupiditas* is that which descends because it is focused on this world, on the temporal. This is the fundamental problem for human creatures and the fatal flaw of all Greek philosophy. Augustine does not believe that man can ascend the ladder of righteous on his own accord. Yes, man seeks the Good so that his soul may find its proper end, but sin causes the fallen creature to always pursue the wrong end, to worship the wrong thing as god. The fallen creature's conception of what is, in actuality, the Good perpetually remains turned or curved downward towards the finite and contingent realms.<sup>479</sup> Man will always seek the Good but what is conceived of as the Good will never be that chief end for which he was created. Eros, the soul's search for that which befits it, must be supplemented from without. Augustine purports this is where the *agapē* love of God is needed. Only through an act of grace whereby the divine descends to the creature and empowers him/her through the work of the

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<sup>477</sup> Consider the infamous opening lines of Augustine's *Confessions* where he writes: "Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>478</sup> St. Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8, trans. by J.E. Tweed, ed. by Philip Schaff, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 593. For more on the Augustine and his work on the Psalms see Gerald McLarney, *St. Augustine's Interpretation of the Psalms of Ascent*, (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), esp. Ch. 4. McLarney suggests that in the Psalms of ascent, Augustine sees the reader not only as a learner or student but as being called into participation with the author.

<sup>479</sup> The reason there can be no other created thing which can fully satisfy man is due to Augustine's emphasis on God creating everything out of nothing. There is a dualistic ontology of being and non-being, non-contingent and contingent existence; God is absolute Being and non-contingent whereas all that is not God (i.e., creation) has been created out of nothing. Because creation has been created out of nothing it is their natural disposition to return to that privation. Since God is the only immutable, eternal Being and all that is other-than God derives its being from God, God is the only source of rest and satisfaction. For more on this see Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 487-97.

Spirit can one be directed towards the proper telos.<sup>480</sup> Only once the Spirit illumines the heart may man's ultimate aims be properly aimed towards God and it is this illumination which empowers the ascent.

Augustine believes that *erōs* and *agapē* are synthesized in the life of the believer. What he finds true and profitable in Neo-Platonism must be supplemented by the Christian conception of *agapē*. The issue that remains however is this, does Augustine properly synthesize *erōs* and *agapē*? Moreover, are the two types of love even synthesizable or are they, at their core, mutually exclusive; the former being fundamentally egocentric and the latter theocentric? Martin Luther vehemently rejected this synthesis and attempted to dismantle the relationship between the two. For him there were at least two glaring issues with the synthesis. The first is the implications related to merit, salvation and the will. If it is the case that the Spirit must act first, independent of the person's will, in order for man to assume the proper telos in *erōs*, what sort of causality is taking place and what are the implications of that act. When the Spirit acts and imbues supernatural ability to man does then man's will take over as he begins the ascent – to love with *agapē* toward God and neighbor – or is it the case the Spirit continues to act and direct the will in *agapē* action? The former brought a measure of pause for Luther due to the seeming implication that man had the capacity to earn merit in his own salvation and subsequently sanctification. This was inherently problematic for it suggested that man had a mechanism within his own nature which could work towards salvation. In this sense, *agapē* love was the act of properly calibrating the mechanism which, when pointed in the right direction, could follow the

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<sup>480</sup> For those familiar with Plato's *Symposium*, you may recall that Diotima describes love as a daimon or spirit that is sent to assist human being in love. What Augustine affirms here is not an equivalence of spirits. As Rist correctly points out: "Augustinian grace has come to perform the role of Platonic eros; the difference is that grace is unambiguously divine, no mere daimon, but the Holy Spirit; and the fact that love is God entails that it is omnipresent." John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient thought Baptized*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 181.

desire of the soul in proper pursuit of God. It would seem this reduces the Spirit to a divine spark needed, merely the cause, albeit a necessary one, to put the sojourner on the right course.

Second, Luther consider *erōs* to be inherently antithetical to Christian love because it was fundamentally egocentric. In the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 we see Luther's separation and rejection of the *erōs* paradigm even though he does not mention it by name; he writes, "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."<sup>481</sup> Like Augustine's *curvatus* (or curve downward), Luther also believes that man has a natural bent. While Augustine's curve emphasizes the object of one's love, Luther's is transfixed on the lover, on *erōs* itself. Luther believes that man's corruption is inherent to the very kind of *erōs* love that is symptomatic of the sinful creature. This love is turned inward and is at its core selfish and self-seeking and antithetical to *agapē*. But in eradicating the synthesis perhaps Luther goes too far to the other end of the spectrum. Wishing to remove any form of human involvement, the other option placed causality of all manifestations of *agapē*, beyond simple calibration, in the work of the Spirit. But this move also seems problematic due to the nature of love and relationality. The assumption here being that love, if it is to be called genuine *agapē* love, must be freely given and freely received. In this formula however, love is freely received by the human being but not freely given for it is the work of the Spirit and not man in the love of both God and others. Who is doing the loving and who is loving who? If love is genuine then it needs to truly involve the will of another. In this

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<sup>481</sup> Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* in *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. and trans. by James Atkinson, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1962), 278. Not only the 28<sup>th</sup> thesis, but the whole of the disputation discusses Luther's dichotomy of the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross. The former is that which he wishes to dismantle which includes the Augustinian synthesis upon which Catholic theology had its foundation. For more on this see *Ibid.*, 276-307.

formula it seems as if the human being is merely a conduit for the Spirit to act, the personal agency of the human overridden.

In light of this discussion there are a few assertions that I wish to call into question. First, are *erōs* and *agapē* inherently antithetical to one another? It doesn't seem that the answer is necessarily affirmative at least not in the sense that there is a logical contradiction. Irving Singer agrees and states, "There is no contradiction in thinking that man's love is the created effect of God's love, which both compliments and causes it, leading it to spiritual union after all other inclinations have been renounced."<sup>482</sup> One argument for the rejection of the synthesis was it made God, as the *summum bonum*, into merely a means whereby one could achieve their selfish end of happiness. But I think Augustine is aware of this and safeguards this assertion by introducing the idea of enjoyment or *frui* towards and object within the framework of *caritas*.<sup>483</sup> On the relation to objects (or persons), Augustine makes the distinction between enjoyment (*frui*) and use (*uti*). The former is the end whereas the latter is the means to achieve that end. Concerning enjoyment, he writes, "for to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake."<sup>484</sup> Augustine asserts that the Trinity alone is the true object of enjoyment and, not a means to achieve another end, but to be enjoyed for its own sake.

Second, over the course of criticism has *agapē* become too vacuous? Nygren, who is himself Lutheran, defines *agapē* as "spontaneous and unmotivated," "indifferent to value,"

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<sup>482</sup> Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther (Part 1)*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 341. Singer also points out he believes that the cause for disagreement is not in the two notions of love but more fundamental Christian attitudes between Catholics and Protestants, namely, the nature and goodness of man and whether or not there is any good in man or anything there worth love.

<sup>483</sup> St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, trans. by J. F. Shaw, ed. by Philip Schaff, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1997), 523, 527-28 (I.3-5, 22).

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, 523 (I.4).

“creative” and “the initiator of fellowship with God.”<sup>485</sup> Because of its origin from God, it is understandable why one would conceptualize *agapē* as unmotivated so as to protect the immutability of God. But when applied to God’s love for man, does it become too vacuous?

Consider Nygren’s statement on *agapē*:

Love towards God does not seek to gain anything. It most certainly does not seek to gain anything other than God. But neither does it seek to gain even God Himself or His love. The very thought of gaining God’s love, is fundamentally alien to it. It is the *free* – and in that sense spontaneous – surrender of the heart to God. When God gives His love freely and for nothing, there remains nothing for man to gain by loving God. His love for God loses the character of a deserving achievement and becomes pure and unfeigned.<sup>486</sup>

His application here is quite brazen and honestly describes a love that is seemingly less-than personal, lacking any measure of affection or desire. I propose that if you try and reduce *agapē* to pure choice of another over oneself then you are no longer talking about love but a supererogatory act that is seemingly arbitrary and vacuous. Yes, there are very few explanations that can be given for God’s initial act of creation but they are all rooted in his nature. What is also part of his nature is personhood, and as we have seen the personhood of God does not need to be thought of in a static, immutable sense but in a dynamic way, of a mutual love between persons that both gives and receives freely but also enjoys the other.<sup>487</sup>

Third, what of the *erōs* paradigm altogether? For Augustine, *erōs* was clearly a paradigm he thought compatible with Scripture, but it is interesting to note that that Greek word is not used in the Bible. I believe Augustine is correct in the opening pages of his *Confessions*, that we are

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<sup>485</sup> Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 75-81. Nygren also asks the question of whether or not Luther contributes a positive definition of *erōs* or merely use it as a platform of negative theology to critique the *caritas* synthesis. On whether or not Luther succeeded, according to Nygren, see *Ibid.*, 722-737.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>487</sup> For more on the immutability of God see W. Norris Clark, S.J., “A New Look at the Immutability of God,” in *God Knowable and Unknowable*, ed. by Robert J. Roth, S.J., (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 43-72 (especially the conclusion, 66-70).

made for God and we are restless till we find rest in Him. This notion is similar to the popular C. S. Lewis quotes which states, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>488</sup> But perhaps Augustine would have fared far better if he had simply left the *erōs* paradigm behind when conceptualizing man’s love for God. The Bible does not seem to complicate the paradigm of love. In the Scriptures we see both an invitation and command. The invitation is to come and enjoy God, just as the Psalmist states, “I sought the LORD, and he answered me... Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!”<sup>489</sup> Elsewhere the command, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.”<sup>490</sup> Here the command to love includes the whole person, the heart (affection/desire) as well as will and mind. But more importantly the love between God and man is a love between persons, a love with personal affections. The goodness God sees in us only come from Him, from the Christ-life that has transformed human persons into the persons they were meant to be. In closing these words of Lewis are fitting: “He [man] does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us; just as the roof of a greenhouse does not attract the sun because it is bright, but becomes bright because the sun shines on it.”<sup>491</sup>

### Conclusion

Much ground has been covered in this chapter but throughout each topic – heaven, knowledge of God, God’s love for man, man’s love for God – there have been underlying themes of love and relationality, knowability and mystery. In the section on heaven we saw that a

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<sup>488</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 114.

<sup>489</sup> Ps. 34:4a, 8.

<sup>490</sup> Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37; Luke 10:27.

<sup>491</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 59.

Biblical depiction of heaven is one where heaven and earth come together, where God is seated on the throne and human beings enjoy him and his creation. On the section concerning the mystery of God, a taxonomy of mystery was provided detailing that revelational mystery rests in the tension of both revealing and hiddenness. Such is the nature of God, he is both communicable yet beyond being communicated. Any knowledge that we do have of God is due to the kind of being he created us to be, namely personal creatures that share in some compacity, through the *imago Dei*, with the divine Tri-unity of persons. In the section on God's love for man, Kierkegaard's work concerning equative love was unpacked, an imaginative yet illuminative excursion into the lengths God went to realize his end of love and relationship between the infinite and the finite. It was suggested that a revelation through condescension, in the Incarnation of the Christ, was the necessary means for a love that would not ultimately be frustrated through inequality. Lastly, and in light of the lengths God went to procure such a relationship, man's love for God was considered. Augustine stands as a pivotal figure in the doctrine of Christian love. His synthesis of *erōs* and *agapē* into what he called *caritas* has been a Catholic staple ever since. It was not until the Reformation when Luther challenged this synthesis and tried to dismantle any association of *agapē* to *erōs*. But like all pendulum swings, perhaps Luther goes too far in trying to protect *agapē*. It was suggested that Augustine's notion of longing and desire in human beings for God is accurate but that distancing oneself from the Greek notion of *erōs* might be beneficial as well. In the end we returned to the concept of personhood and suggested that a robust picture of Biblical love is one that includes the whole person which would entail both will and affection. Yes, God's *agapē* love is the starting point of all things Christian, but perhaps there is more to Biblical love than mere unmotivated action. In my mind's eye, I imagine the persons of the Trinity enjoying each other from all eternity. The act



of creation, then, is the instantiation of a loving invitation to join in and partake of the divine love, enjoyment, and unity which forms the fundamental foundation of all reality.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The study began with a quote from the British philosopher Bernard Williams raising the question of the goodness of eternity. The afterlife, as Williams suggests, must be a place which renders boredom unthinkable. Eternity brings out all possibilities and by extrapolating out into eternal duration, it would seem if one could become bored in the afterlife he/she inevitably would. It would not matter when it happened either for there would still remain an eternal existence following the event. At that moment of singularity, when a specific pleasure brought on the first intimations of boredom, however minute, the quality of the afterlife would have crossed over a point of no return. These thoughts have caused theologians and philosophers to wrestle with the concept of eternal existence and question whether or not it is something to be desired. Both Islamic and Christian orthodoxy affirm that human creatures are intended to live forever in a realm of unending pleasure and bliss. Moreover, these respective versions of the afterlife – Paradise and Heaven – have been designed by the Deity to meet the needs of the finite human creatures who inhabit these realms. Thus, the comparative study ensued, seeking to discover if one theological system provides a better account of the afterlife over the other. Is it the experience of God as *Tawḥīd* or Trinity that better meets the demand of eternity?

Three essential themes emerged in the study – knowledge, love and the afterlife. The afterlife, it was assumed, had to contain some measure of proximity to the Divine if it was to meet the demands of eternity (QGP). Following that assumption, the other two themes – knowledge and love – became of paramount import. Love between persons seems to be a fundamental good within human existence and thus would be necessary for human flourishing. But before love can be had, there must first be knowledge for that which is not known cannot be

loved. This seems true also if man is to love God and God is in some way to love man. Thus, these themes became the main points of comparison between Christianity and Islam.

Within the Islamic tradition, al-Ghazālī was chosen as the specific dialogue partner for a number of key reasons. First, al-Ghazālī has been called “the Proof of Islam” and it seemed that if one were to question the truthfulness of Islam, then he/she would need to interact with such a distinguished figure. Second, al-Ghazālī was very concerned with the religious practices of his time and felt that the Islam community at large had abandoned their pursuit of the afterlife. In response, he wrote the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, a series of 40 books which had the purpose of reorienting the Muslim believer towards attaining Paradise. Third, al-Ghazālī also emphasized that Allah is the ultimate good and it is the Beatific Vision (i.e. the closest proximity to Allah in Paradise) which is the highest state of bliss. His conviction is shared as it seems that if the QGP is met in the afterlife it will be linked to human experience of and proximity to the divine for Allah represents the ultimate good.

The second chapter was dedicated to creating a particular depiction of Islamic Paradise. Due to the nature of *tawhīd*, connection to Allah is limited and any access to him in Paradise is indirect. Because of this, it has been purported that the sensual pleasures and general bliss of Paradise are instances in which Allah is experienced albeit indirectly. Some mystical Islamic thinkers have suggested that Paradise itself is a theophany of Allah which radically transforms the way Paradise is imagined. At the very least, the blessings of Paradise are said to be a direct result of Allah’s good intentions. The more one experiences this bestowal of bliss, the more one is compelled to give praise to Allah. But these same pleasures, as some have suggested, are locations wherein a deeper metaphysical experience is had. Allah’s presence being mystically mediated through these blessings and rewards. Lastly, the highest level of reward was discussed.

The Qur'ān teaches there are gradations to Paradise and the highest level of reward resides in *Firdaws* where the faithful few experience the Beatific Vision of Allah. It is this final reality which al-Ghazālī sought to attain.

The third chapter discussed the themes of knowledge and love within the context of Islam. More specifically, knowledge and love were examined within the context of al-Ghazālī's works. His intellectual story begins with a disillusionment towards his intellectual past and this led him into a personal journey through the various disciplines of Islam in order to discover what is the proper path to the afterlife. For nearly ten years al-Ghazālī lived a hermetic and ascetic life and emerged from the journey convinced he had found the true way. But this path was not wholly synonymous with what had come before. It was shown that al-Ghazālī's refined view was a new synthesis of both mystical and philosophical traditions. Al-Ghazālī saw both the strengths and weakness of each and developed from them his own system for attaining Paradise. This system begins logically with knowledge and for al-Ghazālī this was the starting point of a fundamental aspect of spiritual progress – polishing the heart. Knowledge of Allah is knowledge of his attributes. For Muslims, these attributes are the model from which one should form his/her character. Al-Ghazālī described this process as polishing one's heart so that the human will fades away and the heart reflects Allah's attributes. Knowledge of Allah also lead to a love for him. Love for Allah is manifested through the acquiring of His attributes. It is in these moments of polishing wherein love for Allah is reciprocated. According to al-Ghazālī, when Allah sees himself reflected in the mirror, he then reciprocates the love of that individual.

The fourth chapter centers on the Christian tradition and combined the three themes of afterlife, knowledge and love into one chapter. Beginning with the characteristics of Heaven, it was suggested that faithful conceptions of heaven must include a dynamic embodied state. The

Medieval Scholastics, especially Aquinas, had become too influenced by Greek conceptions of the afterlife and as a result, their teachings of heaven were quite static and disembodied.<sup>492</sup> There is a growing shift in modern evangelicalism which considers Heaven as not being something that Christians go to and leave the earth behind. Rather, the final scene of the eschaton entails heaven and earth coming together. Heaven is where God is and thus heaven will be on earth as God rules and reigns with the saints and the angels into eternity. The remaining two themes are quite important at this point. The potential for knowledge and love in Christianity are quite different than in Islam. The Triune God of Christianity is a god who reveals and communicates. But the Triune God does more than reveal and communicate in an indirect way, he does so by entering into space and time and revealing himself through the second person of the Trinity, the Word-made-flesh – Jesus Christ. It was in the life and actions of Jesus wherein the love of God was put on full display. We see the triune God loving humanity first at a time when humanity was an enemy to God. Furthermore, this love is relational. Not only did God demonstrate his love through creation, he did so in a way that invites human creatures to know and be known. One fundamental distinction here which makes this a possibility is the fact that the triune God is a plurality of persons yet singular in essence and being. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the premier persons and have shared in a dynamic, communicative, self-giving and other focused reciprocating relationship. And, when God created man, he endowed human creatures with personhood as well. The Godhead is unified yet dynamic and communicative. It is because of these distinctions that true knowledge and love of God can be obtained and shared by humanity.

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<sup>492</sup> If not ontologically disembodied, it was a practical disembodiment. There was no space for the physical nature of heaven.

This has been a brief summary of the study thus far. What follows are the comparative analysis and apologetic responses to Islam from the Christian perspective. We begin first with the application of the Inside/Out Approach.

### **The Inside/Out Approach**

The Inside/Out approach is an apologetic methodology intended to generate healthy and meaningful dialogue between two opposing views. The process begins with the Christian attempting to go inside of the Muslim's worldview, to try and understand their theological perspective. Within this space there is room for agreement and affirmation. At the same time, however, there is also room for disagreement and critique. The Inside portion of the method seeks areas in which the worldview can be affirmed but also critiques the inherent limitations of the view's logical conclusions. Once that is done, the conversation moves Outside of the worldview under examination and the Christian begins to explain how Christianity better explains/accounts for those affirmation made at the beginning. Throughout the study there have been two main themes as it relates to the divine/human relationship within the respective religions – knowledge and love. The next two sections will apply the Inside/Out method to these two fundamental themes.

### **Transcendence and Knowability**

#### **INSIDE**

The transcendence of God is one of the positive attributes both Christians and Muslims affirm. God or Allah is unlike any other being in the universe. Anselm of Canterbury's infamous pronouncement "God is that which nothing greater can be conceived" is a stalwart example of rightly capturing the transcendence that is due God in these two traditions. Nothing compares to

God's greatness and majesty and this is seen reflected in both Islamic and Christian Scriptures.<sup>493</sup> From such passages the doctrine of transcendence is rightly applied to God for he is above all else. This should be welcomed in both Islam and Christianity. At the same time, however, the respective Scriptures also name God. They describe what God is like.<sup>494</sup> These two statements – God is utterly transcendent and God is knowable – confront each religion at a crossroads. Both Christianity and Islam affirm that their respective revelations are from the Triune God or Allah and are therefore true and trustworthy. But in this case, what does it mean for the revelatory content to be true? How can God be both transcendent and known? There is a seeming contradiction in those two affirmations.<sup>495</sup> The problem though is not on the part of the divine being and what he knows about himself; rather it is the capacity of finite human creatures. Human creatures are limited by language and mental capacity to know and explain that which is above all naming. It is thus posited that any human attempt to bring God down to our level, to describe him in human language, delimits the divine and creates a god in our own image. At the

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<sup>493</sup> From the Bible: "No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might." (Jer. 10:6) "There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours." (Ps. 86:8) "There is no one holy like the LORD, Indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God." (1 Sam. 2:2) From the Qur'ān: "There is nothing like Him..." (Q 42:11) "Say, 'He is God the One, God the Eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him.'" (Q 112:1-4)

<sup>494</sup> From the Bible: "...for he is a God of justice." (Ps. 50:6) "Our God is a God who saves..." (Ps. 68:19-20) "...God is light, in him there is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5) "God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." (John 4:24) "...because God is love." (1 John 4:8) From the Qur'ān: "The Most Excellent Names belong to God: use them to call on Him" (Q 7:180) "Say [to them], 'Call on God, or on the Lord of Mercy – whatever names you call Him, the best names belong to Him.'" (Q 17:110) In Q 59:22-24, Allah is called "Lord of Mercy," "Giver of Mercy," "the Controller," "the Holy One," "Source of Peace," "Granter of Security," "Guardian over all," "the Almighty," "the Compeller," "the Truly Great," "God is above anything they consider to be His partner."

<sup>495</sup> Cragg rightly notes, "The problem of meaning in language exists for all religions and is not unique to Islam." It is true that the problem of meaning applies to all religions. As we will see, Islam has much more difficulty addressing this problem than does Christianity. Cragg's thoughts on this will be significant in the Outside portion of this section. Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1956), 55. Tennent's chapter on God and Islam (ch. 6) in *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* is a fantastic source for understanding the challenge of transcendence and knowability. Furthermore, it is a fantastic example of healthy dialogue between interlocutors who fundamentally disagree on the nature of ultimate reality.

same time, revelation in the respective holy texts are believed to be just that, a revelation of the divine being. So, do we possess knowledge about God or do we not? The philosopher David Hume, through the empirical interlocutor Cleanthes, poses an interesting perspective on knowledge of God that highlights the challenge at hand. He writes:

I can readily allow, said Cleanthes, that those who maintain the perfect simplicity of the Supreme Being, to the extent in which you have explained it, are complete *Mystics*, and chargeable with all the consequences which I have drawn from their opinion. They are, in a word, Atheists, without knowing it. For though it be allowed, that the Deity possesses attributes of which we have no comprehension; yet ought we never to ascribe to him any attributes which are absolutely incompatible with that intelligent nature.<sup>496</sup>

Hume's observation suggests that emphasizing perfect simplicity in the nature of God is synonymous with saying that god does not exist. It would not necessarily be an ontological atheism but an atheism in practicality and epistemology. One may still adhere to a belief in God's existence but practically speaking, nothing may be known about it.

The attribution of divine simplicity is one of the fundamental tenets of *tawhīd*. Along with simplicity, it is also affirmed that Allah is utterly unique and unknowable (*mukhālafah*). A warranted question thus arises from these positive attributions, can one truly know what Allah is like? Furthermore, what does it mean for a name to belong to Allah in this context? Muslims affirm that the revelation of Allah is true but true in what sense? By true does it mean that this statement is an accurate proposition of whom the referent is Allah? Or by true is it meant that this statement is profitable for religious living and thus true practically? These language questions are long outstanding questions for the Muslim community that were a source of argument and disagreement since the early inception of Islam.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>496</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part IV, 39.

<sup>497</sup> This discussion highlights the relationship between Allah's essence and his attributes. The traditional distinctions in this discussion are between two groups – the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites. Across the spectrum are two extreme poles – *tashbīh* and *ta'īl*. The first term – *tashbīh* – refers to comparison of attributes. In this reading of



It may be suggested that the mystic is in some way able to overcome the language impasse through an immediacy of direct revelation. This is perhaps the case with some Sufi orders but not so with al-Ghazālī. In fact, it was the very same Sufi premise which al-Ghazālī sought to avoid in his methodology. For al-Ghazālī, mysticism is not an independent source of revelation about Allah. Instead, it is a moment of epistemological affirmation and internalization. Recall the three levels of *tawḥīd* – professing, internalization, tasting or *naql*, *ʿaql*, *dhawq*.<sup>498</sup> The mystical experience is not one of new revelational content separate from that which is revealed in the Qurʾān. Shehadi suggests the term mystical revelation is a bit misleading and a better way to describe the experience, and a more accurate description of al-Ghazālī’s view, is “mystical disclosure.”<sup>499</sup> In this mystical experience, the truth of Islam, and more specifically the truth of *tawḥīd*, is presented immediately to believer. This apprehension of truth is non-inferential nor is

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the relevant Qurʾānic texts, the attributes of Allah are either anthropomorphized or compared to created things. Obviously, this is *shirk* and unacceptable in classical Islam. The second term – *taʿīl* – refers to the emptying of all attributes. In this reading, Allah’s attributes are subsumed into his essence and thus he is divested of all attribution. On *taʿīl*, the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* notes, “they [Allah’s attributes] cannot belong literally to his own nature or being, and simply reflect our perception of his dealings with us.” John Bowker, ed., “Tashbīh,” in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), (Accessed June 6, 2018), <http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780192800947.001.0001/acref-9780192800947-e-7248>. The Muʿtazilites affirmed *tashbīh* which made knowledge of Allah virtually impossible. Al-Ashʿarī, for whom the Ashʿarites are named, rejected *tashbīh* and instead affirmed *tanzīh*. The practice of *tanzīh* which sought to keep God pure and transcendent while at the same not divesting Islam of any meaningful language about Allah. Al-Ashʿarī rejected any anthropomorphisms relating to Allah by affirming *tanzīh* but also maintained an “agnostic acceptance of the language *bilā kayf*, without knowing how it is to be taken” (“Tashbīh”). Al-Ashʿarī purported that God’s words about God, his own revelation in the Qurʾān, “set up the directives by virtue of which reasoned judgments about the essence—attributes question are to be measured.” Nader El-Bizri, “God: Essence and Attributes,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. by Tim Winter, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 128. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521780582.007>. (Accessed June 6, 2018) In other words, the fact there is language about Allah in the Qurʾān revealed by Allah himself, there must be a way forward to speak meaningfully about Him while at the same time avoiding any form of idolatry. Al-Ashʿarī advocated for the distinction between Allah as he is in his essence versus as he is in his acts. He purported that Allah can be known through his actions. For example, the Qurʾān states that Allah will forgive those who believe. From that action it can be inferred that Allah is forgiving. While the attribute doesn’t reach Allah’s essence, from a creaturely perspective, Allah is forgiving, is a valid statement about Allah. The difficulty with this position is that it still precludes any analogous statement truly referring to Allah. There is no comparison. So, the question of whether or not this tension can be overcome will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

<sup>498</sup> Shehadi provides the Arabic terms here. Shehadi, *Unique and Unknowable*, 68.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 68.

it mediated in any way. But the content is not new, only the relation of the knower to the content has changed. This is the highest level of *tawhīd* wherein the subject knows that there is none truly Real save Allah.

The distinction here concerning mystical revelation and disclosure is significant but at the same time the knowledge/attribute problem is still present. Al-Ghazālī's mystical experience is not a bypass of revelatory content; rather, it is a direct and unmediated internalization of said content. The Qur'ān is the final authority but the problem of knowability remains. If Al-Ghazālī is correct in his description of this experience, the Muslim becomes certain that truth has been affirmed but again we may ask who or what is the supposed truth really referring to? Even if this disclosure is a direct act of Allah, the content which is affirmed does not correspond to Him. This is problematic because al-Ghazālī has stated that closeness to Allah "lies in attribute rather than in physical location."<sup>500</sup> Moreover, conceptual longing for Allah is a quintessential function of Islamic religious life, especially in Paradise. But again, we must ask, what is the thing which Muslims must long for if language does not attain Him?

If conceptual longing reaches its climactic level in Paradise, being sustained at that level by the never-ending self-disclosure of Allah, would it not then be problematic if that which is being conceived is not analogous to who Allah truly is? According to classical Ash'arite theology, human language and human conceptions about Allah are subjective conceptions that do not objectively correspond to Allah. Though he is given divine names, Mercy never reaches Him, Benevolence never reaches Him, Justice never reaches Him, Love never reaches Him.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Love*, 103.

<sup>501</sup> These attributes were capitalized for rhetorical force. They are some of the 99 names of Allah. By capitalizing the attributes it demonstrates that the very names of Allah are not names about Him directly. They do not reach him.

All such attributes are merely equivocations between human conceptions and Allah's true character. Consequently, the human perception of what is disclosed in Paradise, the Vision of Allah, which is to be the source of unending bliss, is to some degree illusory. Furthermore, it is curious that what is bringing them bliss is what has rightly been identified as virtues. Love of God really seems to be love of the virtues. These virtues are the ones Allah has revealed about himself to Muslims in the Qur'ān. But again, if Allah is unique and unknowable, the virtues themselves, however good and noble, do not reach Him. Therefore, I would submit that what Muslims actually love are abstract objects, or various conceptual virtues, which then form a purely subjective image of Allah in each individual Muslim believer. But this is extremely disconcerting for orthodox Islam because what is being set up by this religious language is an image other than Allah. Loving something other than Allah is *shirk*. It would seem that all religious language about Allah is necessarily guilty of it, that is, guilty of some form of idolatry.

Al-Ghazālī was a theologian within the tradition of al-Ash'arī and so therefore affirmed that Allah was unique and unknowable but at the same time, religious language was still meaningful in some sense. From the onset, Al-Ghazālī appears to be locked in a logical-epistemic tension with a razor thin margin much akin to the eschatological bridge (*as-sirāt*) that all people are fated to cross. That Allah is truly unique and unknowable seems to contradict any positive-attribute statement made of Allah. Either Allah is truly unknowable in any sense or He can be known and thus compromises *tawhīd*.<sup>502</sup> Al-Ghazālī appears to have anticipated this problem and purports that “disclosure of that which cannot be disclosed in this world will

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<sup>502</sup> As Scalise points out, it would seem that even saying that Allah is one, a simple affirmation of *tawhīd* is problematic because it said with creaturely language and creaturely conceptions. He writes, “[human language] infringe[s] upon *tawhīd* itself for how else would a Muslim understand a radical oneness apart from creaturely analogy.” Scalise, “*Tawhīdic* Allah,” 6.

actually be possible [in that world].”<sup>503</sup> But why think that is the case? This assertion contradicts the already established notion that Allah is unique and unknowable. Al-Ghazālī cites Surah 66:8 as a proof text for disclosure in the life to come: “Their light will shine in front of them and on their right, and they will say: ‘Lord, perfect our light for you and forgive us’.” This was the Ash‘arite position also supported by a hadith which states “a veil shall be lifted, and the believers shall gaze upon the face of God.”<sup>504</sup> For al-Ghazālī, the beatific vision was the full disclosure in the life to come, the completion of what can be experienced to a limited degree in this life.

The link between knowledge and the beatific vision highlights the importance of the revelatory content in the Qur’ān. While al-Ghazālī affirmed that revelation was authoritative and necessary for knowledge about Allah, there still is the seeming contradiction between these two statements: Allah is utterly unique and unknowable and positive-attribute statements about Allah, both of which are found in the Qur’ān.<sup>505</sup> Al-Ghazālī posits that what can be known can only come from that which is familiar. Since Allah is unfamiliar to anything experienced in this life, creaturely characterization cannot reach Him. Fadlou Shehadi sees the difficulty in these statements and works through al-Ghazālī’s thought to see if there is a true contradiction, an aporia, or if the two statements can be reconciled. In Shehadi’s analysis of al-Ghazālī’s thought, he concludes there is no inconsistency between these two statements. It is true that al-Ghazālī

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid. 91.

<sup>504</sup> Sahih Muslim 181a, Book 1, Hadith 356. Found in Marcia Hermansen, “Eschatology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. by Tim Winter, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 320. [https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/9391919C2854766CDF175CA21062454A/9781139001816c15\\_p308-324\\_CBO.pdf/eschatology.pdf](https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/9391919C2854766CDF175CA21062454A/9781139001816c15_p308-324_CBO.pdf/eschatology.pdf) (accessed March 31, 2018).

<sup>505</sup> Al-Ghazālī writes that God Most High is “completely free from characterization in terms of man’s perfection, even as He is free from characterization in terms of man’s imperfections. God Most High is free from and exalted above every attribute that one could possibly ascribe to man, and above everything resembling them.” Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Names of Allah (al-Maqṣad al-Anṣa)*, trans. by Robert Charles Stade, (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar Press, 1970), 21. [https://archive.org/details/99NamesOfAllahalMaqṣadAlAsnaByGhazali\\_201711](https://archive.org/details/99NamesOfAllahalMaqṣadAlAsnaByGhazali_201711) (Accessed Jan. 24, 2019)

affirms a knowable aspect of Allah through his acts in creation but at the same time he also affirms that this knowledge is inadequate since those attributes are understood in creaturely terms and Allah is utterly unlike that which is known to human beings.<sup>506</sup> Shehadi summarizes it this way, “Thus to know God amounts to understanding the authoritative language about God which is expressed in human terms.”<sup>507</sup> Creaturely language used to describe God is authoritatively given because it comes from the Qur’ān but insofar as said language refers to Allah as a positive-attribute statement, that statement is descriptively false. According to Shehadi, however, this does not mean that the contradiction persists.<sup>508</sup> There apparently is value in these creedal statements for they are what Allah has chosen to say about himself and their application to one’s life adds value. The religious language purportedly adds practical religious value by providing virtues for all people to emulate. But in the end, the positive attribute statement Allah is X, does not reveal Allah as He is in Himself, this point must not be forgotten.

Both al-Ghazālī’s reasoning and Shehadi’s analysis are unsatisfying responses to the problem of knowability in Islam. It is troublesome to consider that for al-Ghazālī, the unending bliss of Paradise, the highest level one can attain, consists of the full-disclosure of Allah. What is actually being disclosed for the veil itself cannot be lifted. What is it then that will satisfy human creatures for all of eternity if God cannot be disclosed? The matter becomes even more puzzling when we consider al-Ghazālī’s mirror analogy and the impetus for God’s love. Recall back to al-Ghazālī’s thoughts on the heart and how Muslims are to become like polished mirrors which reflect the attributes of God. God’s love for man it was argued is merely God’s love for himself

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<sup>506</sup> Al-Ghazālī writes, “...Or, consider, how in the world of sense, which is the highest to which your knowledge can rise,” *Mishkāt al-Anwar*, 121

<sup>507</sup> Shehadi, *Al-Ghazālī’s Unique and Unknowable God*, 75.

<sup>508</sup> On the apparent contradiction Shehadi writes, “We have seen that the first inconsistency is unreal, for what God reveals is a guide for man and not, strictly speaking, a self-description.” *Ibid.*, 121.

as he sees himself in the mirror. But if that which man emulates is descriptively false then that which is reflected in the mirror is descriptively false. What then does Allah see in the mirror and why, if it is descriptively false, does he love what he sees? There are at least two possible responses to this question. First, perhaps Allah loves the virtues he sees reflected in the mirrors. But right away this option will not do because if Allah loves that which is descriptively false, then these virtues are not part of the divine self and thus Allah would be loving something other than Himself which he does not do. Second, if he does not love what he sees in relation to the content reflected, perhaps he loves the human effort to love Him. This is possible but at the same time it seems to defeat the purpose of even becoming a mirror in the first place. Reflecting Allah, or at least the subjective conception of Allah, thus seems trivial because these attributes do not even describe him. He cannot love what is reflected in the mirror only that there were human attempts to reflect the divine Image.

The divine knowledge/human language impasse is problematic for Islam. Not only is language cut off from the Divine but so too is knowledge and subsequently any meaningful experience or relationality. No matter how creative or valiant the effort, the affirmation that God is utterly unique and unknowable means there is an incomprehensible chasm between the human creature and Allah. Instead of being able to affirm that God is like X with a humble confidence, Muslims are forced into a voluntarist corner. Islamic theologians are compelled to affirm that creedal statements concerning Allah must have religious value and religious significance but that assertion rests on a faith that is not really based in evidence but through sheer sustenance of the will.

The transcendent chasm cannot be crossed by human effort and interestingly it cannot be crossed by Allah either.<sup>509</sup> In some respects, Allah is a prisoner to his own transcendence. It is something he cannot overcome. Furthermore, the reality of this impasse, has a profoundly negative impact on Paradise. If Allah is the highest Good, and if Muslims are to enjoy unending bliss in Paradise as they are in proximity to Allah, then what is there to truly hope for? Religious language is cut off from Allah which seriously delimits its objective spiritual value. The attempt to explain a theological union has fallen short. For Muslims, there does appear to be much space for hope in terms of union with the Divine. As a result, the goodness of Paradise appears compromised.

## OUTSIDE

Christianity likewise affirms that God is transcendent and is a doctrine both Christians and Muslim can agree upon. Like Islam, there is a mystical tradition within Christianity which emphasizes the transcendence and hiddenness of God. Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and theologian, once wrote in a sermon, “let us pray to God to be free of God.”<sup>510</sup> This prayer may initially seem puzzling, but the concern in Eckhart’s petition demonstrates a healthy caution when thinking about God. It may seem that he is praying to be free from God in a relational or experiential way, he is not and does not wish to distance himself from the divine. Rather, his prayer focuses on the knower, on himself personally, and the petition aims at ridding the subject of all mental conceptions about God that are not-God. Perhaps the prayer would have more clarity if the subsequent clause was included: “...that we may gain the truth and enjoy it

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<sup>509</sup> Or, at least, *is not crossed* by Allah. If he had the capacity to cross the impasse and meaningfully reveal himself and relate to creation in a personal way but chose not to, that would say something not only about his love but the goodness of his character as well.

<sup>510</sup> Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed. by Maurice O’C. Walshe, (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2009), 422.

eternally.” Eckhart’s prayer is made clearer when re-worded this way, “let us pray to God that He will help to illuminate within us those areas in which our thinking about God is incorrect and has become idolatrous.” Eckhart highlights the challenge human creatures face when speaking of and theorizing about God. We can quickly and all too easily create in our minds a mental image of God that is not-God, an image that has become muddled by our selfish will and desires. The caution is warranted and welcomed.<sup>511</sup>

Michael Sells suggests that Eckhart’s prayer invites us to “reconsider the conventions, the logic, and the paradoxes of the distinctive mode of discourse it embodies.”<sup>512</sup> The mode of discourse Sells is referring to relates to the “dilemma of transcendence” as he calls it.<sup>513</sup> The dilemma begins with the phrase “God is beyond all names” for in doing so God has been named as that which is beyond all naming. That which is above naming receives a name and, just as it was with Islam, an *aporia* forms.<sup>514</sup> I would submit that Sells is correct to some extent. Christianity is not automatically free from the implications of transcendence and the need for theological development regarding language about God persists. However, within Christianity, is an *aporia* truly present and warranted? No, it is not.

We have seen that religious language about God has the possibility of being an equivocation of terms. In this manner, words do not reach their referent, although it is argued by

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<sup>511</sup> While Eckhart’s words are a helpful reminder here, I am not affirming his mystical methodology which is further spelled out in this homily. It is interesting to note, however, that much of what Eckhart advocates is very much in line with the mystical traditions in Islam. There appears to be a mutual consensus in the mystical traditions – both Islamic and Christian – on the need for emptying the self, especially of its will and desires. It is only when one becomes poor in spirit (i.e. emptied) that an ‘at-oneness’ with God may be achieved.

<sup>512</sup> Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Sells does not work around through the *aporia* but rather develops the ideas of mystical language that have emerged from the apparent dilemma. He states that there are traditionally three options when faced with the dilemma of naming: silence, distinguish between God-as-he-is-in-himself and God-as-he-is-in-creatures (communicable vs. incommunicable attributes), and finally, embracing the *aporia* but instead of it leading to silence a new mode of discourse is introduced – negative theology. Ibid., 2-3.



Muslim mystics they do so in in some mystical and indirect manner.<sup>515</sup> Another possibility with religious language is the suggestion that the phrase “God is love” is univocal, the human conception of the love of God capturing the essence of divine love in its entirety. This option is rightly rejected by both orthodox Christianity and orthodox Islam, and for good reason. Human beings are finite creatures and neither our mental capacities nor our language has the potential of fully grasping the divine. This is not a negative affirmation, we should not expect to be able to fully grasp the divine, nor should we want to be able to do so. If human beings could fully comprehend God, if creaturely language could capture the divine, then God would not be God and definitely not an object worthy of worship. The fact that human creatures cannot comprehend God fully was cause for thankfulness for St. Augustine, he writes, “Well, God be thanked that He said, ‘If you believe not,’ and did not say, ‘If you comprehend not.’ For who can comprehend this?”<sup>516</sup> The God of the Christian tradition does not say come and comprehend fully but he does invite humanity to come and know.

This leads to a third option for religious language – analogical predication. Although Scripture affirms human beings “see through a glass dimly,” it is implied we still can see.<sup>517</sup> I would submit that human language about God, the positive attribute statements derived from Scripture, are not an equivocation or univocation of terms. Instead, they are an analogical

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<sup>515</sup> Obviously, Muslim mystics are not the only mystical tradition within these two monotheistic faiths. There is, as was mentioned, a mystical tradition within Christianity. This tradition also affirms that language about God is fundamentally limited and is thus committed to understanding religious language through metaphor and symbolism. Like the Muslim mystics, these Christian mystics affirm that religious language is not meaningless and has spiritual significance. For more on the nature of religious symbolism (which includes metaphor) see W. T. Stace, *Time and Eternity: An Essay in the Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), esp. 62-65.

<sup>516</sup> St. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 7. Translated by John Gibb Edited by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.), 38.10. Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701038.htm> (Accessed Jan. 24, 2019)

<sup>517</sup> 1 Cor. 13:12

predication. According to Baggett and Walls, analogical predication is a long-standing Christian tradition, “according to which God’s goodness, though recognizable as such, is nonetheless infinitely greater than human goodness.”<sup>518</sup> Analogical predication avoids the pitfalls of both equivocation and univocation for it suggest that we do know something of God’s nature yet it is not fully comprehend. Consider this analogy from C. S. Lewis which helps to capture this idea: “The Divine ‘goodness’ differs from ours, but it is not sheerly different: it differs from ours not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child’s first attempt to draw a wheel. But when the child has learned to draw, it will know that the circle it then makes is what it was trying to make from the very beginning.”<sup>519</sup> This analogy demonstrates the relation between human knowledge of divine attributes as they relate to the divine itself. The knowledge is best understood not in terms of contrast (equivocation) but as correspondence.

Perhaps more significant than the language correspondence is the human capacity for knowledge and rationality. Kenneth Cragg has rightly pointed out that the problem of language is a problem for all religions but then suggested: “It can only be solved within the conviction that the Divine and the human are truly meaningful to each other: only in the confidence that the relationships God has with man are really indicative of His Nature.”<sup>520</sup> When Christians affirm that “God is love” there is a level of confidence and this affirmation is warranted for a few reasons. First, there is some *a priori* reason that God’s intentions will correspond to reality. It is reasonable to believe that if God wills our well-being (our salvation) and He is the source of that

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<sup>518</sup> David Baggett, and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 48. Kindle Edition

<sup>519</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain* in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 568.

<sup>520</sup> He further states, “We only put these convictions more shortly – and sublimely – when we say: ‘God is Love’. Islam has never felt able to say that. The pressure of these problems is the measure of its reluctance.” Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 55-6.

well-being – in both this life and the life to come – then access to God would be possible.<sup>521</sup>

Second, the Triune God of Christianity is inherently personal and relational. Furthermore, a fundamental anthropological doctrine within Christianity is that human beings have been created in the image of God and that part the image entails possessing personhood. The God of Christianity is not an abstract “it” but a personal “Thou” who reveals Himself through the Word and the Scriptures. This leads to the third reason, that is, the revelation of God Himself in the second person of the trinity, the “word made flesh,” Jesus Christ.<sup>522</sup> The second person of the Trinity, left heaven and became incarnated, taking on human flesh, becoming fully human while remaining fully God. Jesus taught that he was and is the full revelation of the Father.<sup>523</sup>

Examining the life and teachings of Jesus reveals what God is like. Through Jesus’s teaching and demonstration we see that the nature of God is loving, caring and relational. One can see that the God of Christianity deeply cares for creation to the extent that one of the persons of Trinity was willing to sacrifice His life so that all of humanity might live. Humanity is extremely valuable to God, and it is with this conviction Christians can affirm that God has made himself known.

Furthermore, Christians can rest assured that when Jesus stated eternal life was knowing God, not only are they able to truly know this good God but that He is good, personal and loving.<sup>524</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Richard Swinburne writes: “IF there is a God who wills men’s eternal well-being and chooses to allow men the choice of whether to seek it or not, there is reason to expect that he will take steps to ensure that they acquire information as to how to attain that well-being.” Furthermore, “So there is *a priori* reason to suppose that God will reveal to us those things needed for our salvation.” Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 72, 74. Walls also presents a similar conviction: “If we desire a meaningful life for ourselves and others, and if this is at the heart of our ethical convictions, then is it not reasonable to believe the God who is ultimately responsible for our consciousness and moral reflection shares these concerns? And if he shares these concerns, is it not reasonable to believe he supports them in substantive ways? Indeed, to know God himself and to be rightly related to him, can be met?” Walls, *Heaven*, 30-31.

<sup>522</sup> John 1:1 and especially John 1:14.

<sup>523</sup> John 14:9

<sup>524</sup> John 17:2-4

The beatific vision of heaven is the reality of heaven and earth, God and man coming together in a loving relational union where all persons will know and be known by their Maker.

## **Love and Relationality**

### **INSIDE**

This section considers the second of the two important stations of the path – love.<sup>525</sup> One of the Ninety-nine names of Allah is *al-Wadūd* or the “objectively loving One.”<sup>526</sup> As such, love forms an integral part of the divine attributes of Allah. Nasr has argued that non-Muslim sources have a skewed perception of Divine love in Islam. To support his argument that Allah is fundamentally loving he cites a well-known hadith which states “On the Throne of God is written, “Verily My Mercy and Compassion precede my Wrath.”<sup>527</sup> Allah has wrath, indeed, but this is preceded by his love and Nasr calls for a healthy balance when considering the attributes of Allah. Nasr emphasizes the correlation between Allah’s compassion and the act of creation. He purports that Allah’s compassion and mercy form the ethical causality of creation. Allah loved to be known and because of this the world is permeated with the divine attributes. Thus, from the observation of creation, the divine names are manifested and revealed. According to Nasr, these names reveal “the inner dimension of the Divine Reality,” and as such, they “take precedence when it comes to the inner life of the soul of the Muslim.”<sup>528</sup> As created beings, the

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<sup>525</sup> Schimmel begins this section affirming that love and gnosis are the last stations of the mystical path. The two are complimentary to one another but fluctuation exists in which is considered superior. This section however focuses on the mystical currents of which love is the highest state. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 132 ff.

<sup>526</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ninety-Nine Names*, 91.

<sup>527</sup> Nasr admits Allah has divine wrath related to his divine majesty but that this is no different than Christian or Jewish theology. Preceding Allah’s Wrath, however, is His Mercy and Compassion from which forms the ethical causality of creation. This necessary cause of creation is reflected in creation itself as it manifests and reveals Allah’s Divine Names. Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 203.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid., 203.

substance and root of human existence entails the essence of Allah's compassion, love, peace, and beauty. Love for Allah is found and understood as reflected in the love between Himself and the Prophet. The Prophet loved Allah's attributes and pursued the absolute adherence and reflection of them. Love for God is displayed then in the love of His attributes.

Islam is not monolithic concerning the expressions of love and it remains a topic of divergence. Orthodox Muslims have tended to understand love as obedience but as Schimmel points out, for Sufis the term was too complex to be bound into one conception. For Sufis, love was a personal and existential commitment, an experience of the divine that began with obedience but also transcended it.<sup>529</sup> Love is a process of purification where in the self is completely submersed in the divine attributes. Love for Allah is a process of purification wherein the self is completely submersed in the divine attributes. As one plunges the depths of the divine, s/he becomes more enraptured with Allah and experiences intimacy, proximity, longing, and desire.<sup>530</sup> It is in this state that the self is slowly annihilated as all creaturely distinctions fade out of view and only the divine attributes remain. In relation to the afterlife, love reaches its culmination in the Beatific Vision.

From a Christian perspective, attributing love to Allah is a positive attribute statement to be welcomed. It would seem that having the option to worship a deity that is either loving or not loving, one would be warranted to desire the former. And not only is it warranted; it also seems a rational proposition to believe if this deity is to be called Good. Both Christians and Muslims can agree that God or Allah being loving is good. Perhaps Nasr is correct in pointing out that non-Muslims have tended to emphasize Allah's wrath and judgment over and against his compassion

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<sup>529</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 138-9.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 132ff.

and mercy. Miroslav Volf has tried to mend the gap of understanding concerning love but from within the Christian tradition. Like Nasr, he highlights divine love within Islam and points out that both Muslims and Christians share similar convictions: “God loves, God is Just, God’s love encompasses God’s justice and human beings should love their neighbors as themselves.”<sup>531</sup> Furthermore, Volf notes that both faiths agree that God loves in a compassion, giving manner. Creation, especially of human creatures, is an instance of this mutual affirmation of compassion. But Volf also rightly notes there is theological distinction in the respective conceptions of the Divine. Christianity is fundamentally trinitarian while Islam emphasizes *tawḥīd*. Applying the propositional statement God is love within Christianity and Islam respectively, is, as we have seen, fundamentally different. Volf is correct that we have a comparison of loves – self-love within Islam and love for the other in Christianity.<sup>532</sup> Furthermore, the implications of these loves are profound as they extend even to the very foundational fabric of reality. As we will see below the implications of *tawḥīd* and love have a profound impact on otherness and distinction.

Further agreement can be found towards orthodox Islam as well. With orthodox Muslims, Christians can affirm that part of what it means to love God entails keeping his commandments. Jesus explicitly stated that if a person loves God then that person will also keep God’s commandments.<sup>533</sup> Saying that one loves either Allah or God without also demonstrating that love through obedience is a demonstration of mere lip-service. The words without corresponding action become vacuous. Common ground can also be found with the Sufis as well – and specifically al-Ghazālī. Christian conceptions of love are more than mere obedience to God’s commands. While love for God is certainly not less than obedience, there is a more robust

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<sup>531</sup> Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, 11-13.

<sup>532</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-9.

<sup>533</sup> John 14:15

understanding of the nature of love. As the robustness is explored however, the differences between the two traditions emerges and the divergence is revealed. Schimmel's analysis of love within Sufism shows that its philosophical thought is highly subjective. Focused is placed on the experience of the believer in connection to Allah. Not much is said of Allah's love for man beyond his merciful bounty and the removing of the veil. This limited amount of information is also seen in al-Ghazālī's work as well. In reality though there is not much that can be said. Allah is self-contained unity and as such the Sufi believer experiences Allah in some mystical, existential yet impersonal way in both this life and in Paradise. But without a strong foundation of mutual personhood coupled with there being no internal distinction in Allah, mystical love finds its culmination in singularity and annihilation. As the subjective self loves and pursues the Divine Singularity, less and less of that individual self remains. I champion Volf's efforts here both in his intention and content, there is much need for greater understanding by people of both religions. However, as well will continue to see, the fundamental fabrics of divine reality are entirely distinct and, unlike Volf's assertion, deeper than many people think. We will now look a little more in-depth at the culmination of love in Islam and the negative consequences of the Beatific Vision.

The *Niche of Lights* is an esoteric commentary written by al-Ghazālī about the esoteric and mystical verse of light in the Qur'ān.<sup>534</sup> In the commentary, al-Ghazālī discusses the levels of Paradise and how this verse translates to each corresponding level. For al-Ghazālī, those who attain to the highest levels of Paradise are divided into two groups. The first group of those who are brought near, their reward is eternal contemplation of the Divine.<sup>535</sup> For these faithful few, al-

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<sup>534</sup> Q 24:35

<sup>535</sup> I have set the problem of knowledge and transcendence aside for a moment and instead intend on focusing on another perceived difficulty for Islam. This does not mean that the problem of knowledge does not

Ghazālī writes, “Everything the sight of one group perceives is burned up, effaced, and annihilated.”<sup>536</sup> It seems that body and all of its wants or desires are done away with for they naturally cloud one’s perception, detracting from the perception of Allah. What remains of the person is the soul, left to contemplate, as al-Ghazālī states, “the absolute Beauty and Holiness,” as well as reflect on the beauty which is conferred on the soul by the divine presence.<sup>537</sup> All that is not-Allah is done away with save the soul, that which has the ability to perceive and reflect on the divine countenance remains.<sup>538</sup>

The second group, those who according to al-Ghazālī are the “Few of the Few,” enjoy an even a closer proximity to Allah. This is the highest level of attainment and their reward is annihilation. Al-Ghazālī writes that the “august glories of His face burn them up, and the ruling authority of majesty overcomes them. In their essences they are effaced and annihilated.”<sup>539</sup> This level of annihilation is beyond the previous group for whom contemplation still remained. Here the proximity is all-consuming, there is no more contemplation because there is nothing more to do with the individual self. Al-Ghazālī cites the passage from Surah 28:88 which states, “All

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remain, it does. But for the sake of the argument I want to look at the quality of Allah’s love assuming that that proposition attains.

<sup>536</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, trans. by David Buchman, (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 52.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid.

<sup>538</sup> It is unclear if al-Ghazālī is speaking of bodily obliteration in a literal or metaphorical sense. In the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazālī is clear that he considers it unorthodox of unbelief (*kuf*) to deny a bodily resurrection and embodied afterlife. It is one of the final three things he affirms in that treatise. Al-Ghazālī, *Incoherence*, 226. However, as Madelung suggests, this is the view of the early al-Ghazālī, much in line with the traditional Ash‘arite position and his mentor al-Juwaynī. Madelung further suggests however that his view ends up changing later in life and becomes more in-line with the disembodied perspective of the philosophers, especially Ibn Sīnā. Madelung writes, “Al-Ghazālī was thus compelled to abandon the Quranic description of the resurrection and its circumstances and seek an interpretation of them consistent with the cosmology of the philosophers.” Wilfred Madelung, “Al-Ghazālī on Resurrection and the Road to Paradise,” in *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, ed. by Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, vol. 1, (Boston, MA: Brill, 2017), 422. This latter view suggested by Madelung is consistent with the esoteric reading of the *Niche of Lights*, especially the descriptions of those who are brought near.

<sup>539</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Niche*, 52.



perishes save His Countenance,” from which he purports that all will fade away – even the soul – and be consumed by Allah. Such an event mirrors the earthly gradations of *tawhīd* in which the highest state is the direct and unmediated assurance of *tawhīd*. Here in Paradise, the human subject is once again caught up into *tawhīd* but in this instance, the beatific vision is all-consuming. The individual self is infinitely overwhelmed and eternally overcome by the Divine countenance that there is no space remaining for the self, there is only the Real, only Allah.

From the Unity, which was the reality in the beginning sans creation, the external created distinctions now return. The climax of history is the return to Unity. This level of Paradise is the highest goal one can attain and that which al-Ghazālī strove to achieve. Annemarie Schimmel provides further insight into this final station on the spiritual path. In order to understand the nuances of this final station two key terms must be explained – *fanā* and *baqā*. Schimmel notes that the true meaning of *fanā* has been a controversial topic in the study of Sufism. Annihilation of the self in Allah is a common understanding of *fanā* and this begins to capture the experience of the self in which man takes on God’s attributes.<sup>540</sup> This process culminates in the immersion in the *wujūd* or the “existence of God or, rather, the finding of God.”<sup>541</sup> But the idea of annihilation and immersion need further development for the self is not annihilated entirely nor is the immersion an absorption or union. Schimmel purports that the best interpretation of *fanā* and the following stage *baqā* comes from Toshihiko Izutsu: “the total nullification of the ego-consciousness, where there remains only the absolute Unity of Reality in its purity as an absolute Awareness prior to its bifurcation into subject and object” – the state the Sufis would call *jam* ‘,

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<sup>540</sup> Concerning *fanā* Schimmel notes, “It is the place of the alleged *ḥadīth takhallaqū bi-akhlāq Allāh*, ‘qualify yourself with the qualities of God,’ i.e., through constant mental struggle exchange your own base qualities for the praiseworthy qualities by which God has described Himself in Koranic revelation.” Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 142.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

‘unification, collectedness.’”<sup>542</sup> In the occurrence of *fanā* the self or ego-consciousness is not annihilated as in destroyed; rather its practical annihilation or, as Izutsu suggests, nullified. The creaturely will has, for all intents and purposes, been done away with and the Divine Will is all that remains. This is the stage of *baqā*. There are no longer self-determinations, for the self does not remain.

Attaining to that final stage of Paradise is what supposedly brings the utmost bliss. This is the pursuit of Muslim mystics and it was the pursuit of al-Ghazālī as well. But what of its qualitative nature for human creatures? Upon personal reflection, is practical self-annihilation something to be desired above all else? Islamic philosophers and mystics who have arrived at this conclusion are not at fault here. Their conclusions, and the conclusion of al-Ghazālī specifically, are merely the logical outworking of a faithful adherence to *tawḥīd*. William Keepin offers sound insight here; he notes, “Taking refuge in *tawḥīd* is the very realization of the supreme oneness – the one God that is the sole Reality,” therefore, he can logically conclude, “Taking refuge in this Reality entails renouncing the illusion of separate selfhood.”<sup>543</sup> The stage of *baqā* answers the question of how finite creatures are supposed to relate and find enjoyment in a being that is utterly unique and unknowable in whom there is extreme unicity and no distinction. There is no relation between Allah and the human creature as one human person relates to another human person. Furthermore, there can be no more human-to-human relationship because individual selves are nullified. Thus, eternal life is an entirely static reality for the third level of believers al-Ghazālī mentions in the *Niche of Lights*. For the lesser of this

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<sup>542</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, “The Basic Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam,” in *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*, ed. Mehdi Mohaghegh and Hermann Landolt (Tehran, 1971), p. 39f., as cited by Schimmel, *Ibid.* 143.

<sup>543</sup> William Keepin, *Belonging to God: Spirituality, Science & a Universal Path to God*, (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2016), 74.

group there is still some semblance of personhood remaining. For those closer to Allah in this group all that is not-Real is annihilated and the Real (i.e., Allah) overwhelms and obliterates the human self.

Commitment to the thesis that Allah is the ultimate Good leads to the highest stages of bliss in Paradise resulting in the annihilation of the individual. This is what the highest love for Allah achieves. As human creatures advance in proximity to Allah the more all else fades away save the divine. I would submit that the question naturally arises of whether or not this is good and worthy of an entire life's pursuit. According to al-Ghazālī every human creature should strive their entire life so that they can be eternally obliterated by the divine presence. Is bliss even possible at that point? It would seem that an individual self would need to remain in order to experience the euphoria of such proximity to Allah. The goodness of this quasi-annihilation is something entirely foreign to the human experience of goodness in this life. Human beings are inherently relational and have experiences of a certain kind of love that is a fundamental part of our existence. It is a qualitative love akin to *agapē* which goes beyond the self and seeks to elevate the other. But more than just elevating the other, it loves the other without seeking anything in return. Mothers have *agapē* love for their children. A mother's love is instinctual and is given without the need for reciprocation. It is not contingent upon the child loving her first. Contrast that kind with the love of Allah. How does the love of Allah manifest? There are numerous passages throughout the Qur'ān which state that Allah's love is contingently given. He loves those who love Him first. But as we have seen, what is called love for the other is merely love of the Self with an odd quasi-extension of supposed compassion. In reality, Allah continues to only love Himself, for he is the only true Real. The love of Allah is a radical self-love which eternally turns in upon itself in an egoistic self-reciprocating action. Human creatures do not

truly matter, there is no space for them to meaningfully matter for there is no distinction in Allah's self-love. For those who have been brought near, eternal life is an eternally static existence. Proximity to Allah entails singularity and it is here that Muslim theologians are expressing the highest levels of consistency in both their theology and eschatology.

Reciprocal love between Allah and mankind simply does not exist. But human beings crave that kind of love and flourish when they encounter it. Love such as this is powerful and transcends time, distance, separation, etc. Now, if this type of love exists, and one would be justified in affirming its existence, then it must have a source and causal explanation. We are operating under the assumption in this study that this is a theistic world. Both Islam and Christianity are monotheistic religions and as such they claim that God exists, that he is one in being, and that he is the creator of all there is. If God is the creator of all things good, and love of this kind is a good, then it must be God to whom we attribute love's existence. What then would be the implications if the existence of this love cannot be attributed to him? This love between two persons is a good that the divine does not and, assumedly, cannot possess. Nor is it a good which seemingly originates either in or from Him.

Muslims find themselves in a bit of a dilemma because Allah is ultimate unity and there is nothing lacking in his nature. Because this kind of relational love requires the existence of the other, then it could not have been manifested prior to creation nor could this love be part of the purview of love in God's essential nature. Allah's love was not lacking prior to creation. The expression of His love must then be perfect goodness. Does it become problematic for Muslims when this existential reality is present – relational love – but their God is perhaps not the source of it? In light of this consideration, Walls's words are helpful; he writes, "The question of whether we believe in God is another form of the question of whether the fleeting glimpses of

joy we experience in this life are intimations of a deeper wellspring of happiness, or whether they are tantalizing illusions, shadowy hints of a satisfaction that does not really exist.”<sup>544</sup>

Although Walls writes within the Christian tradition, his words equally apply within an Islamic context. Applying Walls’s questions to Islam, let us consider the human experiences of love and relationality, truly knowing and being known by another self. Is this experience an intimation of a deeper “wellspring of happiness” or is a “tantalizing illusion?” It seems that Muslims are caught in a dilemma. For, on the one hand, if they maintain that love is an intimation of love to come in the afterlife, a good worth retaining, then what is the source of the experience of the good in Paradise. The source is not Allah for he only loves himself. Muslims can suggest that Allah is loving but it has been shown in the tradition of al-Ghazālī that Allah’s love for man is an extension of loving himself alone. This love is a tangential, impersonal extension so that Allah can see himself reflected in human creatures and continue to love himself. That kind of love is in no way analogous to the kind in question and one can reasonably ask if Allah can be the source of the love experienced between human beings. Thus, if relational love is a good and worth retaining, then what is the source of that love in Paradise? One can suggest that human beings will continue to love each other in the manner they do now, an even more refined and robust love because their moral character will be perfected. Perhaps this is the case, but this assumption seems problematic for at least two reasons: first, it suggests that there is a finite, external mechanism designed to satisfy for an eternity. Can the love shared between finite creatures, even in an enhanced moral state, satisfy eternally? Perhaps, but it does seem interesting to assume that this problem was felt by Muslim philosopher and theologians and it led to the developing tradition of a myriad multiplication of the virgins of paradise. Love, or at least a certain

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<sup>544</sup> Walls, *Heaven*, 197.

manifestation of it, must be spread out so that it does not become exhausted on the plane of eternity. Second, and deriving from the implication of the first point, it seems then that there is a good which exists external to Allah since it does not derive from him. In this sense, Allah can be said to be a great Good but he cannot be the ultimate Good for there is something good outside of and external to his nature from which humans derive a measure happiness and satisfaction of which there is nothing analogous in the divine essence.

On the other hand, it can be suggested that love, as it is shared by human creatures in this life, is a tantalizing illusion.<sup>545</sup> This would seem to necessarily follow from the line of theologizing present in the previous point. If Allah is to be maintained as the ultimate Good, the source from which all satisfaction derives, then the experiential and conceptual goodness that human beings now possess in relational love is ultimately not real. The foundation of the family, the love between spouses, the love of parents for children, all of it is merely an illusion. This undoubtedly poses an existential problem for the love between human creatures is so palpable and fundamental to existence. What sort of qualitative Creation would this reality be, if it were all a mere illusion? What other sorts of experiences could we no longer trust? A radical skepticism would no doubt begin to set in among human beings who were told this manner of love was not real.

Existential considerations aside, the question of origination persists even if it is an illusion. How would such an idea, that relational love between individuals, arise in the first place. If one suggests that the illusion is from God, that seems problematic for a couple of

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<sup>545</sup> Nasr has asked this question, "Men and women experience all kinds of love and behold many beautiful objects in this life here below, but most do not reach the Garden of Truth through such experiences. We must therefore ask ourselves what love and beauty are in the context of Sufism".<sup>545</sup> Of course the path to the Garden of Truth is characterized by a love for Allah but within the Sufi context, the love shared and experienced by men and women are illusory goods.

reasons: first, it suggests that a fundamental aspect of human existence and experience is false which is extremely deceptive and cruel. Second, and perhaps more problematic is the logical consistency of Allah creating such an illusion. Is it even possible for Allah to conceive of loving the other as a great good? Remember, the doctrine of *tawḥīd* is vital for understanding the essential nature of Allah. The teachings of *tawḥīd* are unequivocally emphatic, Allah is an undifferentiated unity possessing no distinction within the divine essence. In light of the teachings of *tawḥīd*, can it not then be said that the idea of love for the other could not have logically derived from such a unitary mind. Perhaps one could suggest that relational love is the product of rational and emotive human beings living in relation to one another. True, relationality could have been an evolutionary biproduct-of-sorts arising out of rational creatures, but this assumption would come at a theological cost. In order to be consistent, one would have to say that not only did Allah not plan this manifestation of love, he could not have even conceived of it. This manifestation would have caught him by surprise. Furthermore, it would seem that Allah could not even be able to understand this kind of love because he certainly could not have experienced it first-hand.

## **OUTSIDE**

As the apologetic methodology moves outward, the Christian perspective is again considered. Within the Christian perspective there is robust space for the notion of divine love and relationality. The doctrine of the trinity affirms that within the God-head there is both unity and distinction. There is logical space for other-seeking, self-giving love because of the distinction of persons present from all eternity. Divine love within Islam is self-seeking and singular. The radical self-love of Allah raises serious ethical concerns regarding the fundamental elements of reality. As the eternal form of love, self-love is the highest good and this seems to go

against all creaturely moral intuitions. This ethical dilemma does not exist within the Christian conception of God's love. A. E. Taylor argues that there is indeed an ethical nature to the doctrine of the Trinity which is foundational to the notion of an *agapē*, self-giving love.

Considering the ontological nature of the trinity, he purports that a mere economic distribution of the divine life "does not make giving as fully and inwardly characteristic of the divine life as it requires to be made."<sup>546</sup> A doctrine of giving, and self-emptying may indeed be a real function of the God-head, but if understood as merely an economic function, then this action will remain "something external," as Taylor emphasizes, "an incident arising from the relation of the Creator to a creation."<sup>547</sup> The act of self-giving would thus be an accidental property, arising only in relation to creation. If this is the case, Taylor suggests that the knowledge of God humans possess would not be able to "penetrate the inmost depths of the divine life."<sup>548</sup> We simply would not know who or what God is truly like. He could at his core be a self-centered deity. A deity who, being the ultimate Good, thus withholds that goodness from creation for it is not shared. Or, consistent with the divine nature, the ultimate Good is self-centeredness, in which case that which is purported as goodness by human creatures is not the ultimate Good of reality.

Taylor further suggests this is the reason that Christian theologians would not rest until they had "declared that the 'personal' distinctions are eternal, internal, and essential to the divine being itself."<sup>549</sup> This commitment is not merely due to the conviction that the divine life must have had activity which was from the beginning, prior to creation. The commitment stems rather from the relation between God and human creatures, namely, in what can be communicated to

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<sup>546</sup> Taylor, *Faith of a Moralist*, 248.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.



finite human creatures. Taylor rightly points out that God can communicate only so much of the divine self to humanity without humanity ceasing to be the creatures they are. If God's communicable attributes are depended upon human creatures to be exercised then the "riches of the divine nature must remain as good as uncommunicated; in its foundations the divine life must be egoistic."<sup>550</sup> This would implicate the nature of divine love for in reality it would be a surface attribute of God, not indicative of the inner life of God. The fundamental revelation "God is love" would only be fundamental insofar as human creatures know and relate to God. In hindsight, what is traditionally viewed as fundamental appears to not be quite so. For God to be fundamentally love, fundamentally self-giving, there must be in the divine essence itself the capacity for such activity in which said activity is fully and not trivially realized. Taylor's concluding remarks on this thought are worth nothing:

And since such isolated selfhood is unethical, there is no room for the ethical in the inmost life of God, when it is conceived thus. To make room for the ethical we have to think of the divine, even apart from its relation to the creatures, as having a life in which there is, within the Godhead itself, an object adequate to the complete and absolute reception of an activity of giving which extends to the whole fullness of the divine nature, so that there is nothing which is not imparted and nothing which is not received. Because the mutual love in which each party bestows himself freely and completely and is freely and completely received is ethically the supreme spiritual activity, the life of God is thought of as involving an internal distinction as well as an internal unity, in order that the whole activity of the divine life may be one of perfect and unlimited self-bestowal.<sup>551</sup>

Taylor's thoughts are helpful and they direct theological inferences from the perspective of a premier ethicist. The ethical implications of the divine life point to the need for internal distinction and internal unity. The tri-unity of persons called God may challenge human logic – though not illogical itself – but from an ethical perspective, the doctrine of the trinity addresses

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<sup>550</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

the relational concerns which would arise from a divine being within whom there is utterly no distinction (i.e., *tawhīdic* Allah).

Trinitarian love is the fundamental fabric of God's nature. Instead of this love remaining an abstraction, unknowable through human perception, the triune God acted in human history manifesting the quality of divine love in full display. Contrary to Allah's contingently given love, the love of the triune is given without condition. While humanity remained enemies to God and hostile to his lordship, the Word-made-flesh descended into creation to save and redeem all things.<sup>552</sup> Through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, the quality of God's immense love was demonstrated. In that moment, humanity was given a glimpse of the quality of love that has existed within the Godhead from eternity past. It is this kind of love that Christians identify as part of the ultimate Good. And not only is that love freely given, it made a way for humanity to experience true relationship with God. To know and be known, to love and be loved. The triune God's love for man is a non-mystical reality, grounded in the very nature of the Godhead. Christians love God because, in a very real and direct expression, God first love us!<sup>553</sup> Humanity can embrace those good aspirations of love and relationality both because it is how God created human beings to be and because the God of Christianity has demonstrated it to the world in human history.

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<sup>552</sup> Rom. 5:8-10. Moreover, when the love of Christ was demonstrated on the cross, Christianity teaches that no greater manifestation of love exists (John 15:13). But this is true for human beings and while Jesus was indeed fully human his demonstration of love was of a quality beyond personal human sacrifice. His manifestation of love is qualitatively superior because he was truly innocent. This is something no human person apart from Christ could have done for no other human person was or is perfect. At the cross we see the purest manifestation of God's love for man, a love that can be understood as such but at the same time its quality extends far beyond human capacity to fathom and comprehend.

<sup>553</sup> 1 John 4:19

### **Abductive Considerations**

Alongside the apologetic nature of the study, the other stated purpose was to make a comparative judgment of the two monotheistic traditions. In order to make this final assessment, let us return to the two problems which were labeled the Qualitative Gap Problem (QGP) and the Teleological Gap Problem (TGP). The QGP stressed the importance of the quality of the afterlife and the need to meet the demands of eternal duration. The QGP was then linked to the TGP which considered the multi-dimensionality of human creatures. If the demand of the QGP is to be objectively met, then the quality of the afterlife will meet and surpass the evident ends (i.e. TGP) of the human subject thus leading to everlasting human flourishing. Both faith traditions believe their doctrines of heaven meets those demands and there are no real intimations of trouble with the afterlife so conceived. Assurance that heaven will be eternally satisfying stems from the teachings that the respective deities of Christianity and Islam have prepared Heaven and Paradise for human creatures to enjoy. But, is one tradition more desirable than the other? I would submit yes.

In making an abductive inference, the best explanation will be that which meets a number of criteria. Three criteria will be used to make the qualitative judgment: explanatory scope, explanatory depth and simplicity. Furthermore, let us reconsider the three facts of the TGP which highlighted and emphasized the multi-dimensionality of human creatures:

1. Human beings have a physical dimension.
2. Human beings have a mental/spiritual dimension.
3. Human beings have a social/relational dimension.

These are the teleological facts which are in need of explanation. If the mystic's Paradise or the revised Heaven is to be desired over the other, it will be because these subjective dimensions,

which form our fundamental longings and aspirations, are met. Let us now consider each of these dimensions in relation to the abductive criteria. First, human beings have a physical dimension. The depiction of the Christian heaven which was presented entailed an embodied existence in a physical reality. It is a scene where heaven and earth come together in a glorious harmony of the physical and the spiritual. The highest stages of Paradise according to al-Ghazālī are for all intents and purposes disembodied. His view on an embodied afterlife, while initially consistent with orthodox Islam seems to have become consistent with the cosmology of the philosophers – disembodied and static.<sup>554</sup> At the very least, there is no practical space for a physical existence as flourishing and bliss are not linked to the body.

Second, human beings have a spiritual/mental dimension. Heaven is reality wherein the human person persists and remains. Christian theology is replete with doctrine affirming that the individual will be resurrected into a renewed spiritual body. This entails that our personhood is retained as well for Christian anthropology suggests human creatures are embodied souls. Moreover, glimpses of the afterlife suggest that human creatures will be in relation with not only other humans but with the Godhead as well. This implies human agency will remain intact. For Al-Ghazālī, the highest levels of Paradise, leave no space for human agency or will. The penultimate experience in the gradation of the Beatific Vision entails a practical agency for the sole purpose of contemplating Allah. The ultimate level, the one in which unending bliss ensues, the individual self is overcome and annihilated so that none but Allah, the True Real, remains. All that is other-than Allah, fades away (including individual human agency and will).

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<sup>554</sup> Again, the article by Madelung is significant on this point. Wilfred Madelung, “Al-Ghazālī on Resurrection and the Road to Paradise,” pp. 420-27.

Third, human beings have a social/relational dimension. Again, Christianity teaches that human creatures will be in relationship in heaven. These relationships are with other human beings who are there, but it also entails being in direct relationship with God.<sup>555</sup> Moreover, this relationship is mediated in a very direct way through the person of Jesus Christ. Scripture teaches that Jesus Christ was resurrected with a spiritual body and ascended into heaven with the same body. This suggests that Jesus remains in this body even today. The incarnation was a permanent putting-on of humanity. Jesus Christ is not only the salvific bridge to God but in some very real way, he is also the relational bridge to God. The inhabitants of heaven will enjoy personal relationship with the very God who created them. Contrast this depiction with al-Ghazālī's view. Again, the highest levels of Paradise do not include human agency and so they definitely do not include a social dimension either. In fact, because Allah is the only True Real, and there is no distinction within him, it should not be expected that relationship exists the closer one gets to Ultimate Reality.

The Christian view of Heaven presented here coupled with the nature of the Triune God is a more desired reality. This assessment is based on the three abductive criteria. The Christian view has the greater explanatory scope of the three facts of the TGP. The teleology of heaven better accounts for and meets the needs of the multi-dimensionality of human beings. Each of the components of the subjective experience in this life are fundamental aspects of the life to come. The Christian view also has greater explanatory depth. Within each human dimension is vast

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<sup>555</sup> The atheist philosopher Luc Ferry writes on this component of Christian afterlife and suggests it was a very strong motivation for people to believe Christianity was true. Ferry rightly notes that as relational creatures, we do very much want to be reunited with our loved ones after death. He writes, "Stoicism tries valiantly to relieve us of the fears linked to death, but at the cost of obliterating our individual identity. What we would like above all is to be reunited with our loved ones, and, if possible, with their voices, their faces – not in the form of undifferentiated cosmic fragments, such as pebbles or vegetables. In this arena, Christianity might be said to have used its big guns. It promises us no less than everything we would wish for: personal immortality *and* the salvation of our loved ones." Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought*, 52-3.

theological richness wherein the nature of the triune God of Christianity is present as the coherent grounding for each component. Lastly, the Christian view is also the simpler hypothesis. Simplicity in abduction refers to the one that is more natural and that which instinct suggests.<sup>556</sup> Human creatures are, at their core, relational beings who love and are loved. From this foundation flows all other goodness. But these aspirations are not random and subjected to chance, they are part of God's design and thus part of his good intentions for humanity. Walls agrees and comments on this point:

The important point here is that fully meaningful life must be one that suits our aspirations, one that answers to our deepest longings and desires. I argued...that some doctrine of heaven follows from the claim that God is good, for a good God would not create us with the aspirations we have and then leave them frustrated and unfulfilled. This argument is only enhanced and enriched by the Christian vision of Trinitarian love. A God whose eternal nature is mutual and reciprocal gift and reception; could not but deeply love any creatures he made and would surely be committed to fulfilling the natures he had given them.<sup>557</sup>

Human creatures have the desires and longings that they do because within the Christian tradition, that is what they were designed for. The telos of design aligns with the telos of eternity.

Furthermore, it seems that Islam not only fails to meet these abductive criteria in the way Christianity does, but also, the QGP and TGP create an inherent dilemma in Islam. On the one hand, if the QGP (the objective problem) is to be met it will entail proximity to Allah. But as we have seen, proximity to Allah entails the annihilation of the human subject which doesn't meet the TGP (the subjective problem). On the other hand, if the TGP is to be met, it will entail a removed proximity to Allah. In the physical depictions of Paradise, the TGP, the multi-dimensionality of human creatures, is met. But, at the same time, the QGP is not met because any meaningful experience with the divine is removed.

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<sup>556</sup> Pierce, *Philosophical Writings of Pierce*, 156.

<sup>557</sup> Walls, *Heaven*, 194.

### Areas for Further Research

This study has only begun the comparative conversation concerning the afterlife traditions of both Christianity and Islam. Al-Ghazālī was chosen as a dialogue partner because he focused his attention on proximity to God in Paradise. It was assumed that the best chance either of the faith traditions had at overcoming the QGP would entail experience of the divine. There were a few areas for further research that need to be addressed in relation to al-Ghazālī's view specifically and the mystical tradition in general. One such consideration is the dichotomy between the few and the many. The esoteric nature of the mystical traditions makes the Beatific Vision not attainable by all people. Few people within Islam have both the freedom and capacity to attain to the highest levels of paradise. In fact, it would seem that the highest levels are not attainable by the masses. Haleem comments on this noting the words of the great Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd (Latinized: Averroes):

As Ibn Rushd points out, this view is more suitable for the educated since the spiritual existence is permanent in the concept of the return of the soul and a new body avoids such publications as the objection the worldly body turns into dust, is fed upon by plants, which for than eaten by other people, from whose bodies come the bodies of their descendants, etc.

The representation of existence in the afterlife as being also bodily and not merely spiritual, explains Ibn Rushd, is more suitable as it makes it more understood and more moving for the majority of people; spiritual representation might be suitable only for speculative thinkers in their argumentations, but the majority are the prime targets of religion."<sup>558</sup>

For those Muslims who do make it to Paradise, only the fewest of the few would actually attain to the level of perfect bliss. And, it seems, it would be through no fault of the masses. For their simple minds, an embodied existence is more understandable. But it is not problematic that what they believe is the best for them in the afterlife does not correspond to reality? For the many, the

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<sup>558</sup> Haleem, "Life and Beyond in the Qur'an," 72-3.

best they can hope for based on their mental capacities and the lack of time available to devote themselves to formal learning and ascetic practices is a lesser Paradise.

Another area for further study considers the Paradox of Hedonism as it stands in relation to the pursuits of Islamic Paradise. I agree with the traditions in Islam which aim towards a higher spiritual experience in Paradise rather than a purely sensual one. The Paradox of Hedonism becomes relevant when the goal of Paradise is considered. If a literal reading of the Qur'an leads to an emphasis on the physicality of Paradise, then can it be said that the highest good in Paradise is the pursuit of pleasure or pleasure fulfillment? If so, it would seem that the hedonic nature of Paradise falls prey to the Paradox of Hedonism. In *The Method of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick addresses this tension between one's aim or pursuits and the objective realities necessary for attaining said pleasures. He posits that if we seek pleasure or happiness as our chief end, what he calls Egoistic Hedonism, that this egotism might defeat itself. He writes, "There can be no doubt, I think, that the danger thus indicated, of Egoism defeating itself, is not imaginary: that the concentration of the mind upon pleasure as an object of pursuit tends to diminish the fullness and flavor of the pleasures actually experienced."<sup>559</sup> Sedgwick is suggesting that seeking pleasure as a first-order aim creates a paradox due to the mind objectifying pleasure instead of focusing on external objective realities from which pleasure typically derives. To objectify pleasure potentially diminishes the actual pleasure one may gain from external sources. Thus, the first-order pursuit of pleasure becomes frustrated and one does not actually achieve the desired end. In order to avoid this paradox, Sedgwick posits the general principle of the Paradox of Egoistic Hedonism: "that in order to attain the end we must to some extent put it out of sight and

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<sup>559</sup> Henry Sidgwick, *The Method of Ethics*, (London: McMillan and Co., 1874), 133.



not directly aim at it.”<sup>560</sup> Sedgwick’s solution to the paradox is to not make the pursuit of pleasure a first-order aim but a secondary one. Attaining pleasure should not be the aim; instead focus on some other pursuit of interest and pleasure will be achieved.<sup>561</sup>

Following his time in a concentration camp, Viktor Frankl affirmed something similar to Sedgwick although it was less egoistically motivated. Happiness, he proposed, must come from without, an indirect experience achieved when someone looks outside themselves. He writes, “success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself.”<sup>562</sup> This perspective of how one achieves genuine happiness conforms perfectly to the Christian ethic of love God and love others. I believe the same holds true in the heavenly reality. The love of God and others will lead to a lasting and eternal happiness. Those who seek their own end of happiness and pleasure will not find it. Those who, as Jesus states, “loses his life for my sake will find it.”<sup>563</sup> The teaching of Jesus confronts the paradox of hedonism and the solution is a paradox of its own. If you wish to find happiness, freedom, love, joy, you will not find it in conventional ways. No, one must lose his/her life to find it, which is equivalent to saying a person must remove himself from the throne and submit to the sovereignty of the true king. Only then will eternal joy ensue.

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>561</sup> It should be noted that Sidgwick thinks this paradox is more a paradox in the theoretical sense and that practically there is not much of a paradox at all. It is not clear though that the paradox can be so easily dismissed. Perhaps he is correct in suggesting that from a practical rational egoism, the paradox is seemingly overcome but then the question would still remain if the rational egoism itself is to be pursued. I would submit that the inward-seeking focus of individual human beings is problematic for a theory of ethics and that pleasure comes from an outward focused paradigm.

<sup>562</sup> Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, trans. by Isle Lasch, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 16-17.

<sup>563</sup> Matt. 16:25

### Closing Thoughts

If human beings retain their humanity in the Afterlife not only is love central to their current state, even more so will love be central in the eternal state. It then follows that eternal flourishing will depend on humanities' ability to love and be loved. The earlier thesis that eternal joy requires a maximally great being in order to eternally satisfy, coupled with humanity's need to love and be loved, it stands to reason that the quality of the afterlife significantly depends on God's love for humanity and the ability to of the divine to reveal not only love but aspects of itself. The mystical traditions of Islam aim to the final stages of the mystical path – knowledge and love – as that which will bring them eternal bliss. This is their solution to the problem of eternity but as it has been shown, this view is problematic. For Christianity, the solution is love but *not* in the sense that the Divine be reduced to a mere means by which to experience love; rather, the solution is Love in that God is Love. In the life to come, knowledge and love abound from God as both the telos of humanity and the means by which they will experience eternal joy.

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