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The Greatest Conceived Being: A Trinitarian Response to Islamic Objections

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Abstract

The Islamic golden age under the Abbasids opened up the opportunity for Christian thinkers to present several apologies for the doctrine of the Trinity in Islamic context. This study examines the status of the Arabic church in the eighth to tenth centuries, especially the trinitarian apologies of John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adi against Islamic misunderstanding of the Trinity and its probable cause, in order to come up with trinitarian apologetics that answer Islamic objections and that will be useful for the present day. While both Christians and Muslims agree that human beings will never be able to fully perceive God in their own minds, they both agree that God should be the greatest conceived being in order for people to believe in him. Basing the argument on this common ground, this study shall show that the greatest conceived being should be relational—intra-relational within himself and inter-relational with his creation—and the Trinity is the only model that shows the divine being eternally relational.

General Introduction

From humankind's earliest history, philosophers and theologians have pondered the nature of God. Is God a mystery, or can He be known? If He can be known, what are his nature, attributes, and characteristics? What is His relationship to creation, and how is He supposed to be worshipped? Several religions came up with different answers to these questions and diverging understandings of the nature of the deity.

The Christian understanding of the divine nature is trinitarian.¹ God lives forever in intra-relationship never alone because He is one God living in an eternal coinhering community of equals. Christians settled their debates about the trinitarian nature of God in the Nicene creed in AD 325 and 381 and the nature of Jesus in the council of Chalcedon in AD 451. However, when Muslims expanded beyond the Arabic peninsula and invaded the Levant (contemporary Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan), Arabophone Christian theologians and philosophers found themselves obligated to defend the Trinity against *tawhīd* (the absolute oneness of Allah)—the Islamic understanding of the divine.² Allah is alone, without a partner, rival, or equal.

Around AD 750, the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad caliphate and reigned until they were destroyed by the Mongols in AD 1258. This period is known as the Golden Age of Islamic scholarship because of the translation movements that took place. This movement began with the Arabization of the administration of the empire by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (AD 646-705) in the seventh century. This movement made the Arabic language the Muslim *lingua franca*. Up to this point, Christian communities had preserved Greek learning in

¹ John 1:1; 17; 20:28; Matthew 28:18-20; Philippians 2:6-9; Hebrews 1:1-3, Revelation 1:5-9; 22:13; Mark 14:62; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13.

² Muminoon 23: 84-89; Surah az-Zukhruf 43: 9; Surah az-Zukhruf 43: 87; Surah al-Ankaboot 29: 63; Surah az-Zumar 39: 3; Surah Yunus 10: 18; Surah al-Kafiroon 109: 2-5; Surah Sad 38: 5; Surah al-Mumtahinah 60: 24; Surah al-Fath 48: 6.

their libraries and monasteries in Alexandria, Antioch, and Edessa. Therefore, they were able to contribute to this translation movement and to the dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

This era witnessed many conversations and discussions between Muslims and Christians about the nature of the deity in each religion. This dialogue served as an instrument by which authors would intellectually verify and defend their positions while critiquing their opponent's worldview. During this period, many Christian theologians and philosophers left written documents explaining the differences of the nature of Allah (both were calling God Allah in Arabic) and defending the Trinity. This study shall focus primarily on two Christian theologians—John of Damascus (died in AD 749) and Theodore Abū Qurrah (died in AD 820)—as well as one philosopher Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī (died AD 974).³ These three Christian scholars came from different backgrounds and defended the Trinity in three dissimilar constructions. The history of Christian-Muslim relations, especially in the Abbasid era, sheds great light on the inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims. It provides contemporary Christians with many insights for interacting fruitfully and effectively with Muslims without compromising the nature of the Christian Gospel. Today's Christians might not realize that early Arab Christians faced several objections to the Trinity when Islam expanded to the Levant. This study, therefore, aims to prevent contemporary Christians from re-inventing the wheel and missing the positive contributions of early Christian-Muslim history.

Rationale and Need

This dissertation relates to the philosophy of religion, to theology, and to medieval Christian history. The study will cover the times between the end of the Umayyad and early Abbasid dynasty. The period between the eighth and the tenth centuries, known as the Golden

³ John of Damascus is also known as John Damascene. I will refer to him with John.

Age of Islam, is considered an illustrious period of Muslim-Christian interaction. As mentioned above, the early centuries of the Abbasid era were a period when Muslims became increasingly eager to validate their beliefs in light of the challenges confronting them by more educated Christians. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of these challenges, and it is inevitably discussed in terms of the *ṣifāt Allāh* (the beautiful names of God) found in the Qur'an. During that time, the Arabic church produced several theologians and philosophers eager to answer the trinitarian theological objection, and thus their works deserve to be known in the West.

The academy needs Eastern Christian Scholars; their expertise would be especially beneficial because the research is still in its infancy. Unfortunately, few academics write on John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥyā Ibn °Adī; the ones who do are mostly Arabs, and many of their studies are not translated to English. Few Western scholars have attempted to introduce and translate their works and they are still, in my opinion, underrepresented in Western scholarship. This study therefore attempts to bridge the gap between the East and the West by shedding light on the Islamic context of Arab scholars and how they were able to defend their Christian faith.

Despite the primary and secondary resources that are available on John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥyā Ibn °Adī, there are not many academic works written on their arguments for the Trinity, especially when compared to those of early, medieval, and reformed theologians, such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. A small number of monographs were written on the life and the work of each of these scholars, but few focused on their methodology in examining and explaining the Trinity in their Islamic surroundings. To my knowledge, no scholars have used or developed the arguments of these three Arab scholars to defend the Trinity.

In addition to reporting the historical data that is collected from Arabic and non-Arabic resources of John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī, this study will seek to trace the sources of the Islamic Trinity in the Qur’an, especially the idea of including Mary in the Trinity.⁴ This investigation is needed because a few studies have stated that Mohammad derived his information from cultic Christianity that was spreading in the Arabic peninsula at that time. Although this hypothesis might be true, there might be another influence on Mohammad’s belief, one related to the veneration of icons in the church. Therefore, this study shall investigate the possible influence of the *Theotokos* icons and how their presence in cathedrals came to influence Muslim understanding of the veneration of Mary and their eventual inclusion of her in the Trinity. To my knowledge, no other studies have investigated this influence.

The value of this study is to bring Eastern and Western scholarship together by shedding light on an area of history that is ambiguous and not very well known. I hope that this study becomes a great aid for scholars of history, theology, and apologetics as they seek to develop their arguments about the Trinity. Even laymen would benefit greatly from understanding the history behind the current defense of the Trinity and learn how to defend the Trinity themselves in Islamic context.

Research Problem, Sub-questions, Limitations, and Terms

The main question this study is asking is this: “Does the Trinity make sense?” Christians and Muslims agree that human beings will never fully perceive God in their minds. For both, God is an unlimited infinite divine being, and they are limited finite human beings. However, while Muslims think that God should make sense in order for human beings to believe in him, Christians believe that human beings are capable of perceiving limited aspects of God—the ones

⁴ The Trinity as it is being understood in the Qur’an.

that He has revealed to them. Founding their belief on the biblical data, the early church perceived God as a trinitarian in nature. Today, Christians still accept the Nicene and the Chalcedonian definitions of God as a Trinity and consider them logical. They believe that the Trinity makes perfect sense based on the relational aspect of God's nature. In order to address whether the Trinity makes sense, sub-questions should be asked further: How do Muslims and Christians perceive the Trinity? How do the Arabic Medieval fathers, such as John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī understand and explain the Trinity to Muslims? How do they differ and agree with the Nicene and the Chalcedonian creeds? Do their perceptions of the Trinity vary among each other? How can contemporary scholars benefit from their explanations of the Trinity?

This study does not seek to criticize the Islamic belief in *tawḥīd* as much as it attempts to further the dialogue between the two religions. This study does not intend to investigate whether Christians and Muslims believe in the same God. However, since this topic is related to the study, it will appear in the conclusion. The principal aim is to inform the readers about the historical contexts of John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī. The study will examine how they defended the Trinity in their medieval Islamic surroundings and will build on their arguments to further the conversation with contemporary Muslims. Furthermore, this study does not seek to re-define the historical understanding of Trinitarian orthodoxy or come up with a new perception. The study will adhere to the Nicene and the Chalcedonian definitions of the apostolic faith, which is based on the Bible.

Since the study does not aim to compare *tawḥīd* and the Trinity, the use of polemic language against Islamic theology and their understanding of *tawḥīd* will be minimized, except for language used by the three chosen scholars in their arguments. In the final section of the

study, the relational aspect of the nature of God will be emphasized. This emphasis might be perceived by some as a criticism of *tawhīd*.

In these discussions, the study will use Greek, Arabic, and English terms related to the topic of the Trinity: Greek terms such as *Theotokos*, *hypostasis*, *ousia*, and *perichoresis*; and Arabic terms such as *Iqnūm* (singular)/*Aqanīm* (plural) اقنوم/اقانيم and the beautiful names of Allah اسماء الله الحسنى.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, *Theotokos* means “the ‘one who gave birth to God’ ... The word was used of the Virgin by the Greek Fathers (perhaps by Origen and possibly even by Hippolytus) and increasingly became a popular term of devotion).”⁵ This word will appear in the section in which the investigation about the Islamic Trinity is made.

According to Athanasius, *Hypostasis* “is substance and means nothing else than that which exists.”⁶ For in comparing the person of the Son with the person of the Father, the writer to the Hebrews calls him “the exact representation of his being” of the subsistence of the Father (Heb 1:3).⁷

Perichōrēsis is the relational aspect of the Trinity. It is the intertwining, inexistence, and immanence of the divine persons. According to Thomas H. McCall, “The divine hypostases are genuinely distinct, and they are related to one another in the interpersonal *perichōrēsis* of holy

⁵ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1619.

⁶ NPNF2, 4:490.

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

love.”⁸ The divine persons/*Aqanīm* are three fully personal and fully divine entities who know and love one another.

Ousia or essence denotes the whatness of a thing. It designates the real being of God. According to Francis Turretin, the essence is “often met with in Scripture, not only in the concrete when God is cladded on (Ex. 3:14; Rev. 1:4), but also in the abstract when deity (theotēs, Col. 2:9), nature (*physis*, Gal. 4:8), divine nature (*theia physis*, 2 Pet. 1:4) is attributed to God.”⁹

Iqnūm/Aqanīm (singular/plural) is a word early Arab fathers used in the defense of the Trinity as a result of the usage of their fellow Syriac fathers to express the difference in meaning between the human person and the divine person. Sweetman mentions that the Syriac word ܐܩܢܘܡ *uqnūm* was accepted and widely used without causing any debate or quarrel because of its use in the Syriac translation of John 5:26.¹⁰ This is important to establish because the word *Iqnūm/Aqanīm* will be used repeatedly in this study.

Arab-Syriac apologists believe that it is hard for Muslims to understand the concept of the Trinity in a metaphysical sense as opposed to a simple numerical one. Therefore, they decided to create a new word to convey the idea of the divine person and illuminate the similarities with the concept of a human person as they understood them. According to Imad Shehadeh, a leading contemporary scholar on the subject of the Trinity in Jordan, “The only benefit from using this word [*uqnūm*] in Arabic language is to distance the word ‘person’ from

⁸ Thomas H. McCall, “Relational Trinity: Creedal Perspective,” in *Two Views on The Doctrine of the Trinity* (MI: Zondervan, 2014), 129.

⁹ James T. Dennison, Jr. Ed. *Francis Turretin Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans., George Musgrave Giger, Vol. 1, (NJ: P&R, 1992), 253.

¹⁰ James W. Sweetman, *Theology Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological ideas in the Two Religions*, vol. 2, (London, UK: Lutterworth Press, 1945), 225-226.

God and substitute it with a foreign and an unknown word that conveys its meaning.”¹¹ In other words, dedicating a special terminology to the divine person indicates a special meaning and illuminates the confusion with Muslims approached the human/physical meaning of the word *person*. Furthermore, Awad Sim’an, who is a leading Arab Christian scholar on the subject of the Trinity in Egypt, defines *uqnūm* in the following way:

The word *Aqanīm* differs totally from the word ‘persons,’ the one that is used in Arabic language and its synonyms in other languages, in two ways: a) ‘persons’ have separate essences from each other. Whereas, *Aqanīm* means one essence, which is the essence of God who does not have associates, or anyone like him. b) Even if persons participate in one nature, none of them has the same qualities, attributes, or characteristics of the others. Whereas regarding the *Aqanīm*, despite the fact that they are distinct from each other regarding the person, they are one in essence with all its qualities, attributes, and characteristics of the other because they are the essence of the one God.¹²

This definition is needed to avoid the modern concept of a person as merely an individual will and consciousness, an understanding which would inevitably leads to tritheism. The divine *Aqanīm* (persons) are three in a way that does not apply to human persons and cannot be read off from human experience apart from divine revelation.

Asmā’ Allah al-Husnā means “the beautiful names of Allah” (Surah 7:180; 17:110).

These names are understood to refer to the divine essence and act. Therefore, understanding the names of Allah is foundational to Islamic theology, especially to an inquiry into the nature and characteristics of the deity. The attributes that Muslims impute to Allah reflect who he is and

¹¹ Imad Shehadeh, *الأب والابن والروح القدس اله واحد، أمين: ضرورة التعددية في الوحدانية الإلهية*, [The father and the Son and the Holy Spirit On God Amin: the Necessity of the multiplicity in the divine oneness], (al-Matin, Lebanon: Dar al-Manhal, 2009), 31. The original Arabic renders as: “الفائدة الوحيدة في استخدام هذه الكلمة في اللغة العربية هي ابعاد كلمة “الشخص” عن الله واستبدالها بكلمة اجنبية غير معروفة في معناها.”

¹² Awad Sim’an, *الله في المسيحية*, [God in Christianity] (Cairo, Egypt: Qassir Ad-Dubara Church, 2004), 16. The original Arabic renders as: “وكلمة اقانيم تختلف كل الاختلاف عن كلمة ‘اشخاص’ المستعملة في اللغة العربية والكلمات المقابلة لها في اللغات الاخرى، من ناحيتين رئيسيتين. أ) فالمراد بالاشخاص، هم الذوات المنفصل احدهم عن الاخر. أما المراد بـ‘الاقانيم’ فذات واحد هي ذات الله الذي لا شريك له ولا نظير. ب) إن الاشخاص وإن كانوا يشتركون في الطبيعة الواحدة، إلا انه ليس لأحدهم ذات خصائص او صفات او مميزات ‘الآخر. أما الاقانيم فمع تميز احدهم عن الآخر في الاقنومية، هم واحد في الجوهر بكل خصائصه وصفاته ومميزاته، لأنهم ذات الله الواحد.”

how he acts.¹³

Literature Review

In an effort to demonstrate the unique contribution of this present work, I will survey the relevant literature in order of importance and relevance to the stated thesis. In addition to the primary resources of the written works of John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī, any secondary works on their writings would be beneficial. Despite the fact that there is not a plethora of secondary resources of these three theologians, there are plenty of studies available on the history of their contexts which will be included in this study. This is not to say that other works on the Trinity should be overlooked. On the contrary, contemporary research on the Trinity will be used as well because they form the foundation for the present inquiry.

As for secondary resources on John, Daniel Janosik has written an excellent monograph about his life and his Islamic context.¹⁴ He calls John the first apologist to the Muslims and includes several theological arguments that were circulating among other sects of Muslims, such as Ashʿarites and Muʿtazilites. Moreover, Charles C. Twombly has written a book called, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus*. This book focuses on the *Perichoretic* concept that John explains about the Trinity. Both of these books offer great insights into John's trinitarian theology.

Andrew Louth has written extensively on John in his book *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*.¹⁵ In addition to informing his readers on John's life and

¹³ As for the transliteration from Arabic to English, I am using the SBL Handbook of Style.

¹⁴ Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: The First Apologist to the Muslims*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

¹⁵ Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford Printing Press, 2002).

context, he offers a chapter on John's position in defending the veneration of icons against the iconoclasm initiated by emperor Leo III in AD 726. Furthermore, Peter Schadler has written *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations*. In this book, Schadler focuses on the idea that John considered Islam not a new religion but a heresy. In his opinion, the main reason for this classification is to establish a church's institutional and social power under the Melkites' foundation. Defining what is orthodoxy helped the faith community building a refutation of all alternatives, including Islam.¹⁶

The second theologian that this study is focusing on is Theodore Abū Qurrah, who was a Melkite.¹⁷ He left several tracts (called *Mayāmer*), one of which is on the Trinity. Sara Leila Husseini, who wrote her doctoral work on the same period, included in her sources Abū Qurrah and two other Arabic Christian theologians from the ninth century: 'Ammar al-Baṣrī and Abū Rā'ita Al-Takrītī. These men were Nestorians (the Church of the East) and Jacobite, respectively.¹⁸ Husseini focuses on their historical, social, linguistic, and religious contexts under the Islamic rule to determine how their explanation of the Trinity was affected by their Christian tradition. While she gives great attention to Abū Qurrah, only briefly mentioned John and Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī.

Wafik Nasry contributed a major work on Abū Qurrah and paid special attention to his

¹⁶ Peter Schadler, *John of Damascus and Islam: Christian Heresiology and the Intellectual Background to Earliest Christian-Muslim Relations* (Boston: BRILL, 2017).

¹⁷ Orthodox Christians who followed the Nicene creed.

¹⁸ This study will call Nestorians "The Church of the East." This appellation was attributed to the eastern Syriac-speaking region in the eighth and ninth centuries. For further information see Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 110 & Dietmar W. Winkler, "The Age of the Sassanians," in *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, ed., Wilhelm Baum, and Dietmar W. Winkler, (Taylor and Francis, 2003), 7.

book *Al-Mujādalāh*. In his book, Nasry provides arguments both for and against the authenticity of *Al-Mujādalāh* book as well as discussing whether Abū Qurrah actually wrote it or not. Since this study is not focusing on Abū Qurrah's writings in general, our concentration will be given to his argument for the Trinity, which Nasry discussed thoroughly.¹⁹ Recently, Najib Awad published a large monograph on Abū Qurrah's life and writings. In it, dedicates a whole chapter to Abū Qurrah's trinitarian theology. He even makes a comparison of Qurrah's trinitarian argument and other theologians contemporary with him, such as John and Maximus the Confessor.²⁰ Awad describes Abū Qurrah as not just a mere witness or testifier to patristic orthodoxy but also a protector and defender of it. In Awad's opinion, Abū Qurrah does more than simply preserve and protect Christian orthodoxy against the heresies: he also defends it against Islamic monotheism.

In addition to these works, Abū Qurrah has also been the subject of several scholarly papers. In one, John Lamoreaux revises Abū Qurrah's earlier biography. In a paper titled, "The Biography of Theodore Abi Qurrah Revisited," Lamoreaux defends the idea that Abū Qurrah was a member of Mar Saba's monastery in Palestine. He also mentions that Abū Qurrah is the first Syriac scholar to write in the Arabic language, acknowledging him as a significant defender in the history of the iconoclast controversy, especially in its non-Byzantine form.²¹ Moreover, Nestor Kavadas contributed a paper called "Theodore Abu Qurrah and Byzantine Orthodox Iconoclasts in the Early Abbasid Society" in which he examines the reason why Abū Qurrah

¹⁹ Wafik Nasry, *The Caliph and the Bishop: A 9th Century Muslim-Christian Debate: Al-Ma'mūn and Abū Qurrah* (Beirut, Lebanon: CEDRAC Université Saint Joseph, 2008).

²⁰ Najib George Awad, *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms: A Study of Theodore Abu Qurrah's Theology in Its Islamic Context* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 2015).

²¹ John C. Lamoreaux, "The Biography of Theodore Abi Qurrah Revisited," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 2002, Vol. 56 (2002): 25-40.

defend the veneration of the icons.²² This paper relates both to our investigation of Mary and the Trinity and to whether the veneration of the icons has anything to do with the Muslim understanding of her inclusion in it.

The third thinker that this study seeks to examine is Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī. His original writings were lost for some time but were found in Tehran Codex. This study will examine the article “The Life of Yahya Ibn ‘Adi: A Famous Christian Philosopher of Baghdad” by Mohd. Nasir Omar.²³ This article is important because it not only sheds light on Ibn ʿAdī’s life, education, and career as a philosopher, but it also takes records of the Islamic scholars and resources that mention him, for Ibn ʿAdī was a famous philosopher who had Christian and Muslim pupils. Moreover, Father Samir Khalil al-Yasu’i analyzes, commentates, and interacts thoroughly with Ibn ʿAdī’s *Essay in Monotheism* in his book *Al-Turāth al-‘Arabī al-Masiḥī* (the Arabic Christian Heritage).²⁴ Al-Yasu’i contrasts and compares Ibn ʿAdī’s answers to the Trinity and the nature of God with ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī’s apologetics against Islam. This work is written in Arabic, and it will expand the horizon of this research by shedding great light on Ibn ʿAdī’s sources. Finally, Nadine Abbas has written several articles as well as her doctoral dissertation on Ibn ʿAdī in Lebanon. Her book is published in Arabic, but it is not available in the United States. Her articles in Arabic summarize her thoughts on Ibn ʿAdī. The first article is called “Al-Falsafa wa al-Lāhūt ‘nd Yaḥyā” (The Philosophy and the Theology of Yaḥyā), in which she lists his essays

²² Nestor Kavvadas, “Icon Veneration as a Stumbling Block: Theodore Abu Qurrah and Byzantine Orthodox Iconoclasts in the Early Abbasid Society,” *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 72(1-2) (2020): 71-82.

²³ Mohd. Nasir Omar, “The Life of Yahya Ibn ‘Adi: A Famous Christian Philosopher of Baghdad,” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences MCSER*, Vol. 6 No. 2 S5 (2015): 308-314.

²⁴ Samir Khalil al-Yasu’i, “مقالة في التوحيد” in *التراث العربي المسيحي* (Jounieh, Lebanon: Al-Maktaba al-Bouliissiah, 1980).

and traces the weight of logic in defining and explaining his theology.²⁵ The second article is called “Mafhūm al-‘lūhiya ‘ind Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī fī Kītāb ‘al-Rad ‘ala al-Warrāq’ wa Maqālah fi al-Mawjūdāt” (The Concept of Divinity for Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī in the Book ‘The Reply to al-Warrāq’ and ‘A Tract in Things that are Existing’), in which she reviews the terminologies that ‘Adī used in his explanation of the meaning of the divine.²⁶

As for Muslim-Christian relations in the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth centuries, David Thomas has written and edited several books on this topic. In *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations*, the writers walk the readers through the history of Christian-Muslim relations from the beginning, through the middle ages, and to early modern and modern periods.²⁷ Thomas reports the situation of Christians in the Middle Ages under Islamic rule. He starts by explaining the Pact of ‘Umar and how it affected the liberties of Christians by opening the doors for mistreatment. During that time, many Islamic officials treated Christians as lesser citizens by asking them to dress in a certain way, to show respect to Muslims and give up their seats for them, and possibly not to teach the Qur’an to their children. Additionally, in the same volume, Sandra Toenies Keating discusses in her article “The First Arabic-Speaking Christian Theologians” the situation that forced the Christians who knew Greek and spoke Aramaic and Syriac to see a great need to shift to the Arabic language. By the late eighth century, deeper differences were introduced that necessitated creative responses to the emerging religion of Islam. The situation further escalated with the accession of the Abbasids dynasty and their

²⁵ Nadine Abbas, "الفلسفة واللاهوت والاخلاق عند يحيى ابن عدي" *Al-Tafahom Magazine* :138-168. Retrieved from: <https://tafahom.mara.gov.om/storage/al-tafahom/ar/2015/048/pdf/07.pdf>

²⁶ Nadine Abbas, "مفهوم الالهية عند يحيى بن عدي في كتاب 'الرد على الوراق' ومقالة في الموجودات" *Dar Al-Machreq Magazine*, Vol. 87, No. 1, (2013): Kindle.

²⁷ Thomas David, ed., *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslim Relations* (NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, 2018).

intentional program of Arabization and Islamization. Consequently, the early ninth century saw an intensified effort on the part of all Christians to provide theological responses to the questions of both common people and elite Muslims. Moreover, I. Mark Beaumont briefly surveys the earliest written Christian references to Islam in his article “Early Muslim Attitudes Towards the Bible.” None of the articles included in this book, however, carefully examine the early argument for the Trinity.

Daniel King provides another edited work titled *The Syriac World of the East*, which includes great information about the status of the church during the early invasion of Islam and the Abbasid period.²⁸ In this source, David Wilmshurst includes a chapter about “The Church of the East in the ‘Abbasid Era.” By this time, the church’s losses were too many. After the loss of the patriarchates of Rome and Constantinople, nine metropolitan provinces of the patriarchate of Alexandria were placed under the Arab Islamic conquest of Egypt, three metropolitan provinces in the patriarchate of Jerusalem, and twelve metropolitan provinces in the patriarchate of Antioch were placed under Islamic rulers. The time between the reigns of the Caliphs al-Mahdī AD 775–785 and al-Mutawakkil AD 847–861 was marked by a religious debate, enabling few scholars (such the ones that this study is focusing on) to introduce their defense for the Trinity and other topics.

Regarding the Divine images and Icons in the church, this study shall investigate several resources. As mentioned earlier, the three above scholars had their own teachings on the icons of the church. John and Abū Qurrah argued for the veneration of the icons, and Ibn ʿAdī was against it.

In a book published for the J. Paul Getty Museum, Alfredo Tradigo explains the different

²⁸ Daniel King, ed., *The Syriac World of the East* (NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, 2019).

types of icons that churches used throughout history.²⁹ Many of them were used in the Byzantine era, especially in the cathedrals of Constantinople. During the struggle of the iconoclasts in the seventh century, the use of The Virgin Nursing icon spread widely in Egypt, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. Pope Gregory, while writing to his adversary Emperor Leo III, mentioned that The Virgin Nursing icon should be worshiped. He also references the Three-Handed Virgin Icon that healed John's hand when the Islamic emperor amputated it. This source is necessary to learn what type of icons were circulating among cathedrals during that period.

In the book *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*, Stephen Benko proposes that there is a direct line between the goddess-cults of the ancients to the reverence paid to the Virgin Mary.³⁰ One cult he mentions is the Collyridians (Kollyridians), who worshiped Mary in Arabia. Many scholars related this cult to the misunderstanding of the Islamic Trinity. While this idea is not impossible, it is not known how or when this cult developed in Arabia. There is also no record in Islamic literature that Mohammad was in contact with such a cult. While Benko's book does not give a definite answer to our question about the Islamic Trinity, it sheds light on several Marian cults and how they affected the development of Mariology within the church.

Imad Shehadeh wrote a two-volume work titled *God with Us and Without Us: Oneness in Trinity versus Absolute Oneness* in which he makes a comparison between Trinity and *Tawḥīd*.³¹ In the first volume, he examines the historical struggle over absolute oneness between two

²⁹ Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, trans., Stephen Sartarelli, (CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004).

³⁰ Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (Leiden, NY: Brill, 1993).

³¹ Imad N. Shehadeh, *God with Us and Without Us: Oneness in Trinity versus Absolute Oneness*, vol. 1, (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2018).

Islamic schools in the eighth century. At the end of this volume, he attempts to harmonize the nature of the doctrine of the Trinity with logic by explaining that the eternal existence of God is in harmony with the eternal activity of his attributes. In order for God's attributes to be part of him, they must exist eternally with him. In other words, they need to be eternally functional and active with him in order for him to be the highest conceived divine being. In volume two, Shehadeh deals with several topics related to the Trinity, such as the difference between OT oneness and absolute oneness. One such difference is that the oneness of the OT shows God's desire to be known. This idea is clear "in God's revelation of his attributes, in his promise of knowing him, and in the use of anthropomorphism to describe him,"³² whereas within absolute oneness, the idea that God desires to be known is completely rejected. There are several covenants in the OT in which God expresses his desire to have a relationship with his people. Moreover, Christ's revelation of the special relationship between the father and Jesus revealed God's desire to be the father of all believers by extending the sonship to them. The fatherhood and sonship concepts are absent from the absolute oneness.

Another important work on the subject of the Trinity is written by Miroslav Volf and titled *Allah: a Christian Response*.³³ In it, he develops part of his argument in a dialogical manner with Sheikh al-Jifri. Volf, a prominent Trinitarian theologian, explains some of the difficulties of explicating the Trinity. For instance, he mentions the tension that the term *begets* sparks in the Muslim's minds and explains that this word does not mean a male and female relationship. Furthermore, Christians are not trying to soothe the troubled conscience of their supposed tritheism by means of a belief in Trinitarian monotheism. Volf clarifies that the acts of

³² Imad N. Shehadeh, *God with Us and Without Us: Oneness in Trinity versus Absolute Oneness*, vol. 2, (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2019), 7.

³³ Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (NY: HarperCollins, 2011).

the Christian God are divided because they belong to three different persons. Volf explains that regarding creation, God is acting “toward the outside”; his acts are undivided and inseparable. Every act of one Person of the Trinity is always caused by all three.

William Montgomery Watt’s work *Islam and Christianity today: a Contribution to Dialogue*³⁴ makes a comparison study on several topics between Islam and Christianity. On the transcendence and the immanence of God, Watt states that the Qur’an shows Allah’s immanence; he concedes that immanence is more obvious in the Christian faith than it is in Islam. On the topic of oneness and unicity, he is probably the first scholar to use the word *unicity* to explain the nature of Allah and God. He demonstrates that the problem of the attributes of Allah arises from the fact that in mainstream Islamic thought the Qur’an is not created but it is accepted as the speech of God, which makes it eternal with the eternity of God. The opponents of this view do not accept the idea of the eternity of the Qur’an because they could not admit to two Eternals. Although Watt’s book does not include a thorough discussion of the Trinity, it offers good analysis and comparisons over several topics, which in turn are helpful for this study.

Additionally, Gregory A. Boyd has written an article titled “The Self-Sufficient Sociality of God: A Trinitarian Revision of Hartshorne’s Metaphysics.”³⁵ In it, he compares classical trinitarianism on one hand, and process trinitarianism and the sociality of God on the other. The former believes that God’s essential sociality is defined within Godself. The only important metaphysical relationship that God has is within the Trinity of the divine persons. Any relationship with creation is highly contingent on God’s will or choice. The process of trinitarian

³⁴ Montgomery W. Watt, *Islam and Christianity today: A Contribution to Dialogue* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

³⁵ Gregory A. Boyd, “The Self - Sufficient Sociality of God: A Trinitarian Revision of Hartshorne's Metaphysics,” in *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God*. Ed. Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997), 73-94.

thought, in contrast, believes that God is essentially social but that his sociality is defined by his relationship with the world—a relationship that lies “beyond the accident of God’s Will.”³⁶ The notion that God could exist apart from the world is, within process thought, an unintelligible notion. Boyd’s article is important because the thought process seems similar to Islamic belief about the *tawhīdic* nature of Allah. The supposition of a self-sufficient social God who satisfies the *a priori* requirements of relationality (God-God) when he is alone before the creation is a necessary idea to provide the metaphysical foundation for a coherent understanding of the contingent relationality (God-creation).

Michael J. Chan and Brent A. Strawn have collected several essays by Old Testament theologian Terence E. Fretheim and published them in a book called *What Kind of God? Collected Essays of Terence E. Fretheim*. Fretheim’s central theology rests on a God-world relationship.³⁷ God is and remains transcendent while simultaneously immanent. God has taken initiative and freely entered both into a relationship with his creation and into a covenant with Israel. Having done so, He “has decisively and irrevocably committed himself to be in relationship with the world.”³⁸

Survey Conclusion

From the content of our literature survey, it is clear that of the several resources written on Christianity under the Abbasid dynasty, few dealt with the Arabic trinitarian apologetics under the Islamic context. However, none whatsoever reflected on John of Damascus’s, Theodore Abū Qurrah’s, and Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī’s arguments of the

³⁶ Ibid., 73.

³⁷ Terence E. Fretheim, Michael J. Chan, and Brent A. Strawn, *What Kind of God? Collected Essays of Terence E. Fretheim* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

³⁸ Ibid., 26.

Trinity/iconoclasm particularly for the purpose of creating contemporary trinitarian apologetics. Many separate studies reported these three thinkers' trinitarian arguments without reflecting on how contemporary readers can benefit from their contributions. Moreover, no literature on record has attempted an abductive/analytical method to show the trinitarian God as the greatest conceived divine being. Once this analysis is properly integrated, the path will be open for adding new insights to the apologetical argument against Islamic objections in our contemporary days.

Statement of Methodology

Because this dissertation relates to history, theology, and apologetics, it will employ a combination of methodologies. Due to its historical nature, a textual analysis will be done to establish the context in which the Arabic church in general and the three thinkers, in particular, were facing. Then, an abductive historical investigation will follow, exploring the probable cause behind the Muslim misunderstanding of the orthodox Christian Trinity. The Trinitarian arguments of the three thinkers will be textually analyzed and closely defined and compared. Lastly, a deductive analysis shall be applied to reach into an apologetical answer to Islamic objections against the Trinity.

The historical investigation will adopt abductive reasoning, which typically begins with an incomplete set of observations and proceeds to the best explanation for the set. Abductive reasoning does its best with the available information, often incomplete. It relaxes the standard and gives up the search for absolute certainty. While I cannot prove that the *Theotokos* icons are the main reason for Mohammad's misunderstanding of the Trinity, I can at least show that it is probable. My goal in using this method is to provide the best explanation for the Islamic perception of the Trinity.

The process of inquiry is one of the most widely used ways to examine a perceptual problem that cannot be addressed through immediate observation and background knowledge..³⁹ Mark Tschaepe calls this step “a guessing procedure,” in which the inquirer’s starting point is an attempt to resolve a genuine doubt about a certain issue and arrive at a stable belief. Tschaepe explains that

The more the problem is examined, the further we move from the perceptual judgment and into the procedure of guessing. Perceptual judgment simply declares the problem or question at hand. Guessing is the process that creates a Third by which to understand the problem that was determined by perceptual judgment but for which perceptual judgment could not supply an answer.⁴⁰

At the beginning of the process, the inquirer guesses by defining a new starting point in his or her examination. This new point serves as an attempt to address the surprising phenomenon that has led to doubt. Next, the inquirer draws a number of elements without ranking them or giving them any priority over each other for the purpose of reaching into the best explanation of the inquiry.

In identifying the starting point, I will review the answers that were provided for the Islamic conception of the Trinity, arguing against their adequacy. Next, I will examine Islamic historical resources that mention the relationship between Mohammad and Christians in the areas where he visited or lived. I will also evaluate the conversations that were widely spread among Christians and Muslims from the seventh century to the tenth century to verify whether they are consistent with the Islamic understanding of the Trinity.

³⁹ Sami Paavola, “Abduction through Grammar, Critic, and Methodetic,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 40 (2) (2004b): 261-262.

⁴⁰ Mark Tschaepe, “Guessing and Abduction,” *Transactions of The Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. 50, No. 1, (2014): 118.

Some previous attempts of the concept of “guessing,” which is the starting point of the inquiry, have led to the *post hoc propter hoc* fallacy: the belief that “because event B happened after event A, therefore there must be some causal connection between the two events.”⁴¹ Sometimes there is no connection, and in other cases, there might be more complicated reasons and connections than the historians have proposed. In order to avoid such fallacies, this study shall follow the criterion of “the sufficient cause” rather than “the necessary cause.” According to Carl Trueman, the necessary cause means, “if phenomenon B is present, then A must be present too; though the presence of A does not necessarily imply that B will occur”;⁴² whereas, the sufficient cause means, “A necessarily implies the presence of B, but B could be caused by C; thus the presence of B does not mean that A is necessarily present.”⁴³ The misunderstanding necessarily implies a false narration, teachings, or implications of some other beliefs, which is caused by the spread of cults, other religions, or misrepresentation of orthodox Christianity. Thus, the false narration, teachings, or implication of some other beliefs does not mean that the misunderstanding is necessarily present. The presence of the misunderstanding does not mean that the extensive reach of icons is necessarily the cause of this misunderstanding, but it is a sufficient cause, given other circumstances.

While the historical application of this study will adopt abductive reasoning, the philosophical application will require deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning starts with true premises and ends with a strongly supported conclusion. If the premises are true, then it would be impossible for the conclusion to be false. By employing the deductive method, the study shall

⁴¹ Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 102.

⁴² *Ibid.* 104.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

defend the relational character of God to refute the Islamic objection: The Trinity is a theologically contradictory concept which minimizes the perfection of the divine nature.

The argument goes this way:

P1: One aspect of divine perfection is relationality—the greatest conceived being should be a relational being in order to be perfect (the greatest).

P2: The Trinity shows God as a relational divine being (intra-relational and inter-relational)

C: The Trinity is non-contradictory.

If I am successful in defending the first and the second premises, then the conclusion should necessarily be true, and, therefore demonstrate that the Trinity is not a contradiction but instead a necessary attribute of the greatest conceived divine being.

The main question of this study is related to the Divine nature, a topic which falls under theology proper. Therefore, the idea of the Anselmian God (as presented by David Baggett and Jerry Walls) shall be both presented and assumed in this study. In their book *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, Baggett and Walls identify the Anselmian God “as a being who has no ontological deficiencies, and who is also the proper desire for human beings.”⁴⁴ I will use the notion of the Anselmian God throughout the study to refer to the highest perceived divine being, and not necessarily the Christian God. On one hand, both Islam and Christianity affirm their belief in the “greatest conceived being,” that is monotheistic in nature. They both also deny any type of atheism, agnosticism, or skepticism. Likewise, both believe that God is monotheistic, omnipotent, omniscient, glorious, and worthy; and both deny that the “greatest conceived being”

⁴⁴ David Baggett & Jerry Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 54.

is an impersonal force, chi, or an amorphous cosmic power. On the other hand, Christians and Muslims disagree about the nature of the divine. Muslims believe in *tawhīd* and Christians believe in the Trinity. The differences between the two doctrines will be briefly explained to show the general direction. The bulk of attention, however, will be given to trinitarian apologetics.

While recognizing that the interaction between theology and philosophy has been an apologetic necessity in the history of Christian thought, several distinctions should be made at this point to offer more clarity to this argument.

Throughout this dissertation, I will be using the term *apologetics*. Some people think that all apologetical methods are polemic. I admit that the latter term is related to the former, but it has a different meaning. Apologetics is a subset of theology involving the art of providing a defense for one's faith. A person can develop an apologetic that defines his or her belief in opposition to other people's beliefs and religions. Defined in this way, apologetics is related to polemics. The differences, however, have to deal with the tone, intent, and content. Polemics is a critique of other ideologies and sets of belief. Polemic is less interested in defining one's religion than it is defining and criticizing other's doctrines and beliefs. The three thinkers examined in this study used a combination of apologetics and polemic. On some occasions, they defined the orthodox Christian faith; and at other times, they explained the weaknesses of certain Islamic beliefs and pointed out its illogical and philosophical flaws.

Most Encyclopedias of Islam present a classification according to the attributes of essence, such as existence, divine eternity, and divine permanence ...etc., and the attributes of

action, such as divine power, will, and knowledge ..etc.⁴⁵ Other scholars have categorized the attributes of Allah in relationship to God's essence, to the universe, to the natural world, and to human beings. This study, however, shall follow two categorizations of essence and action.

This analysis focuses on the nature of the divine and its moral perfection, not moral goodness and rightness. The study is not related to God's commands or actions, but his divine nature and whether it is lacking any attributes that prevent him from being perfect. The study presupposes that being relational is one of the attributes that contribute to God's goodness and perfection. If God is non-relational, then his nature is missing a major attribute, and therefore is imperfect. Christians believe that God's inherent Trinitarian nature and desire for harmonious relationships with his creation demonstrate a profoundly social and relational divine nature. His trinitarian nature shows that He is eternally relational, from eternity to eternity. He is intra-relational before the foundation of the earth through the persons (*aqānīm*) of the Trinity, and He is inter-relational with his creation in the Old Testament, New Testament, and through the Holy Spirit in today's church's age.

Chapter Breakdown

Following this introductory chapter, chapter one examines the historical, linguistic, and intellectual environment of the Arabic church in the eighth to the tenth centuries. The church lived under the Abbasid dynasty in a period known as the golden age of Islam. Special attention was given to science, philosophy, and language during this brief period, and Arabic became the official language of the government after replacing Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Many Christians converted to Islam to avoid heavy taxation and to facilitate entry to government

⁴⁵ Zaki Saritopark, "Allah," in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 38-40.

services. This massive conversion prompted Christian authors of this period to compose apologetic treatises that reflect Islamic concerns and explain Christian doctrines by using the Arabic language and Islamic concepts. This shift explains the widely recorded Islamic contextual perception of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Chapter two presents the answer to the Qur’anic objections against the Trinity. The writer of the Qur’an think that Christians believe in the divinity of Mary and they include her within the Trinity as being God’s wife and the mother of Jesus. This chapter summarizes the efforts that has being done to explain the Qur’anic reference of Mary and examines the historical prevalence and the theological beliefs about the *Theotokos* icons in the history of Christianity, seeking to discover a link between these icons and the impression that they might have left on Mohammad’s understanding of the Trinity.

Chapter three investigates the trinitarian apologetics of John, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī by comparing, contrasting, and defining the essential and the fundamental components and layouts of their apologetics, noting how they used Islamic and Qur’anic concepts in their defense. It is important to discuss their arguments and understand how the Arabic church defended the Trinity against Islamic objections to learn from their apologetical style and to form a modern defense that suits the current Islamic objections in the twenty-first century.

Chapter four provides trinitarian apologetics against the claim that its doctrine is illogical (*tawḥīd* is unsurpassable) and therefore does not present God as the greatest conceived being. Since the idea of the Anselmian God is a common ground between Christians and Muslims, this chapter argues that the greatest conceived being should be relational. Otherwise, He is not the greatest being because he lacks an essential attribute—the one that makes him merciful and

compassionate. In order for God to be relational, He has to be trinitarian in nature because the Trinity is the only way that shows him as a relational divine being—he is intra-relational within himself as a Trinity and inter-relational with his creation. In this way, God is not dependent on his creation because there is no time in history when He was alone without a relationship before the creation, and there is no time when he needed the creation in order for his attributes to be functional (such as being a seer, a hearer, or loving).

Chapter five, which is the last chapter, will summarize my argument, finalize my analysis, and discusses further areas of research.

Chapter One: The Rise of the Abbasids and the Golden Age of Islam

After the death of the prophet Mohammad, Muslims expanded beyond the Arabic peninsula to the Levant and Mesopotamia. The Umayyad dynasty (AD 661-750) followed the period of the *Rashidun* caliphs (the rightly guided caliphs) and moved their capital to Damascus. After the fall of the Umayyads, the Abbasids ruled (AD 750-1258) in Bagdad through a military revolution. “It was the armies of the Muslims of Khurasan,” says Hugh Kennedy, “which defeated the forces of the Umayyads and swept the new dynasty to power in 750.”⁴⁶ The number of the Abbasids’ troops in the late eighth century was around 100,000.⁴⁷ This military power led to many uprisings within the ruling parties. Most of the Abbasid caliphs died through military coups, treason, and treachery.

Like the Umayyad, the Abbasids practiced hereditary rule to keep the caliphate within the family. They even appointed several sons as crown princes, which in many cases led the elder crown prince to isolate his younger brothers in order to deliver the regime to his own son instead of his brothers. This situation resulted in many military coups within the same family.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Abbasid dynasty included religiously mixed caliphs. Many of them were religious, prayed regularly, censored or curtailed musical practice, and did not serve wine at their tables.⁴⁹ Others were less religious; they kept concubines and paid more attention to knowledge, music, and translation than caliphs of other periods. This shift in focus led to several improvements in science, language, and art.

⁴⁶ Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam’s Greatest Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 44.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Amina Bittar, *The History of the Abbasid Dynasty* (Damascus, Syria: Damascus University Press, 1997), 322.

⁴⁹ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 13.

The translation movement from Greek to Arabic started under the Umayyad period. The initial Arab conquests in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, and the move of Arab rulers and tribesmen into Greek-speaking areas made transition from Greek to Arabic inevitable, both in government circles and in everyday life. Greek was widely used in Syria and Palestine as the official language of commerce and business and as the language of learning of Christian clerics.⁵⁰ However, most—if not all—of the translation activities during the Umayyad period are “instances of random and ad hoc accommodation to the needs of the times, generated by Arab rule over non-Arab peoples.”⁵¹ Most of the materials were administrative, political, and commercial documents. They were translated for the purpose of expanding the communication between the new rulers and the allophones.⁵²

After the Abbasid revolution and the transfer of the seat of the caliphate to Iraq, the cultural orientation of Islam changed drastically. Harūn al-Rashīd (AD 766-809) established *Bayt al-Hikma* (the House of Wisdom), which reached its pinnacle under the reign of his son al-Mam’ūn (AD 813-833) with the involvement of Aramaic speakers, Christians, Jews, and Persian scholars.⁵³ Several resources mention that *Bayt al-Hikma* started as a royal library. As an institution, it was adopted as part of the Sasanian administrative and bureaucratic state system.⁵⁴ “With the books brought from both the church schools within the state’s borders and neighboring geographies,” says Mustafa Barış, “Bayt al-Hikma grew to be the richest library of medieval

⁵⁰ Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/5th-10th C.)* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-58.

period and a science center encompassing intense scientific studies. In the foregoing science center were a director, authors and interpreters with clerks working under them, scribes copying the books and bookbinders responsible of binding.”⁵⁵ According to Ibn Al-Nadīm, who closely examined *Bayt al-Ḥikma* and utilized its library, forty-six scholars translated from Syriac to Arabic, fourteen from Persian, and three from Sanskrit.⁵⁶

The translation movement would have not flourished without the support of the caliphs, such as Harūn al-Rashīd and al-Ma’mūn, and the scholarly zeal of Syriac-speaking Christians, who were fluent in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. Christian theologians who wrote in Arabic in the early Islamic period were associated with monasteries and ecclesiastical institutions. Under the influence of the caliphs and Christian thinkers, intellectual life flourished in Baghdad and beyond. As Griffith mentions, “Some were physicians, some were philosophers, and some were logicians, mathematicians, copyists, or translators. Some were also Christian apologists and theologians ... All of them contributed something to the newly flowering culture of the classical period of Islamic civilization.”⁵⁷

The Status of the Christian Scholarship During the Early Abbasid Period

Under the Byzantine rule and the invasion of Islam into the Levant, Christians were divided into three major groups. The monasteries of Jerusalem, the Judean desert, and (to a certain extent) the ecclesiastical establishment in Edessa in Syria were filled with Greek and Syriac-speaking confessors of the Chalcedonian faith. They were known later in the ninth

⁵⁵ Mustafa Necati Barış, “First Translation Activities in Islamic Science History and their Contribution to Knowledge Production,” *Cumhuriyet İlahiyat Dergisi* 22, no. 1 (2018): 716.

⁵⁶ Muhammad ibn Ishāq ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, vol. 2, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 586-590.

⁵⁷ Sidney Harrison Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims In the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 106.

century by the name Melkites “because of their acceptance of the doctrinal decisions of the imperially sponsored, sixth ecumenical council in Byzantium, Constantinople III (681 CE), along with its five equally imperially sponsored predecessors.”⁵⁸ After the invasion of the Muslims to the Levant, the Melkites adopted the Arabic language in the ninth century. John of Damascus (AD 655-749) is the first theologian/apologist who wrote against Islam in Greek, and Theodore Abū Qurrah (AD 750-820) is the first theologian to write in Arabic. He even translated the Greek secular work of the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *De virtutibus animae* into Arabic and submitted it to Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn, the caliph al-Ma’mūn’s famous general.⁵⁹

The second Christian group who had knowledge of Greek is called Jacobites. They took their name and existence after Jacob Baradeus (AD 500-578), who was credited with organizing the Syrian Orthodox “Jacobite” Church.⁶⁰ This group is also called Monophysites because they believe in the single nature of Christ, particularly Jesus’ divinity being the principle of union of his two natures, in which his humanity is absorbed.⁶¹ They were condemned as heretics by the church in the middle of the fifth century at the council of Chalcedon.⁶² However, Baradeus continued to travel throughout Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Arabia, and many other

⁵⁸ Sidney H. Griffith, “The Melkites and the Muslims: The Qur’ān, Christology, and Arab Orthodoxy,” *Al-Qanṭara* vol. 33, no. 2, (2012): 414.

⁵⁹ Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 107.

⁶⁰ J. W. Childers, “Baradeus, Jacob (c.500-578),” ed., G. T. Kurian Wiley, 2012, *Credo Reference: The encyclopedia of Christian civilization*, accessed December 7, 2020. http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/wileyenchi/baradeus_jacob_c_500_578/0?institutionId=5072

⁶¹ W., D. W., “Monophysites,” *In Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, eds. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Robert Lamont Brown, and Oleg Grabar, Credo Reference: Harvard University Press, 1999, accessed December 7, 2020. <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/hupla/monophysites/0?institutionId=5072>

⁶² A. A. Luce, *Monophysitism Past and Present: A Study in Christology* (New York: The Macmillan Co. 1920), 1.

countries, ordaining numerous bishops and priests.⁶³ As he traveled, his preaching was all the more effective because of his fluency in Greek, Syriac, and Arabic.

It is worth noting that in the age before the printing press, copyists and booksellers were closely related professions. Yahyā Ibn ʿAdī, for instance, who received most of his education in Bagdad, was a member of the Jacobite church and quite knowledgeable in Syriac and Arabic. He devoted considerable time to copying manuscripts. Despite the fact that he was Christian, he did not restrict himself to writing only about Christianity or Christian theology. On the contrary, he boasted of being a scribe, copying Islamic manuscripts. He states, “I have transcribed with my hand two copies of the Tafsīr [Quranic Commentary] of al-Tabarī [d. 923], which I have taken to the kings of the frontiers, and I have copied innumerable works of the Muslim theologians. In fact, I have forced myself to write a hundred pages each day and night, though I felt this to be little.”⁶⁴ Ibn ʿAdī did not speak or read Greek; instead, he worked from existing translations into his native Syriac and was a major ambassador for Greek ideas into the Christian and Islamic worlds.⁶⁵

In addition to the Melkites and the Jacobites, Church of the East, made up the community of scholars inspiring the next generation of thinkers to follow their footsteps in learning, writing, and translating philosophy. The Church of the East lived in Iraq, yet they had their own Greek and Syriac learning tradition. Gutas states that the same Greek-Syriac learning atmosphere

⁶³ Philip Wood, “Christians in the Middle East, 600–1000: Conquest, Competition and Conversion,” in *Islam and Christianity in Medieval Anatolia*, eds. A. C. S. Peacock and et al., (NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 24.

⁶⁴ “Yahya ibn Adi,” in *Encyclopedia of World Biography Online*, vol. 37, (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2017), accessed December 7, 2020). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K1631010726/BIC?u=vic_liberty&sid=BIC&xid=c5dd4b6a.

⁶⁵ Omar, “The Life of Yahya Ibn ‘Adi,” 310.

existed in Monophysite and Church of the East congregations throughout the area,

if we are to judge by scholars who appeared during the early ‘Abbasid period with a solid background in Greek learning; witness Dayr Qunnā south of Baghdad on the Tigris [*EI* II, 197] the site of a large and flourishing Nestorian monastery, where Abū-Biṣr Matta ibn-Yunus (*EI* VI, 844-51), the founder of the Aristotelian school in Baghdad early in the tenth century, studied and taught.”⁶⁶

Many cities in the Levant and Mesopotamia maintained a Greek-Syriac learning tradition, which Church of the East contributed effectively to in the pre-Islamic era.

The previous analysis shows the important role that the Christians played in launching Arabic language, philosophy, and science. These scholars participated in the translation movement out of altruistic motives for the improvement of society and the promotion of their own religion. The translation movement created new developments in studying philosophy in the Arabic world, which in turn allowed some Christian and Muslim scholars to dialogue and debate. Both Christian and Muslim scholars leveraged their skills to employ philosophical, theological, and logical ideas to support the faith of their communities.

The Status of Christian Societies Under the Abbasids

Some Christians held notable positions in the government under the Umayyads, valuable in service because of their knowledge of Greek and the previous positions that they held during the Byzantine’s power. When the Arabs came to the Levant and Mesopotamia, they ruled as a minority community over established societies. Their expertise in the existing administrative systems helped them to establish their own methods and maintain order over the newly conquered lands.⁶⁷ Thus, non-Muslims were in demand as professional state administrators, and they often rose to influential and important positions, especially at the beginning of the Islamic

⁶⁶ Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 14.

⁶⁷ Mun’im Sirry, “The public role of Dhimmīs during ‘Abbāsīd times,” *Bulletin of SOAS*, 74, 2 (2011): 188.

conquest. However, several conditions changed when the Abbasids took over after the Umayyads. While many of the Christians did work for the Abbasid caliphs in translation, this does not mean that they had total freedom or that all Christian communities were treated respectfully during the extended period of the Abbasid reign. On the contrary, even with Christians in key positions of influence, they were unable to prevent Abbasid rulers from imposing new restrictions on Christians and non-Muslim communities.

One of the restrictions that Abbasids applied on local non-Muslims in the Levant and Mesopotamia is called the *dhimma*—a covenant of protection between Muslims and certain tolerated non-Muslim religious communities (Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sabaeans) living permanently within its boundaries.⁶⁸ Muslims were a minority at the beginning of the conquest; however, their number increased rapidly as many locals converted to Islam after being given the choice of conversion, paying taxes, or being killed. The people who refused to convert and opted for paying taxes are called *ahl al-dhimma*, or *dhimmis*. They did not have to pay any *zakat* (alms) on their properties, vines, crops, or livestock like Muslims did, but they had to pay *jizya*—a poll tax imposed on non-Muslims in lieu of military service. Women and senior citizens did not pay *jizya*, only men who are able to hold the sword and fight.⁶⁹

Jizya is a Qur’anic command that Mohammad himself imposed on non-Muslims during his *ghazawat* (raids). In Surah 9:29, Mohammad commands the Muslims to “fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Messenger have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book,

⁶⁸ Norman A. Stillman, “Dhimma,” in *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, ed. Joseph Meri, vol 1, (NY: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 205.

⁶⁹ Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 6.

until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection.”⁷⁰

The amount of *jizya*, however, is not defined in the Qur’an. The Ḥadīths mention briefly that Jews and Christians should pay a tenth of their profits if they are making trade outside their area of residence.⁷¹ *Muwatta Malik* includes a Ḥadīth stating that *jizya* is imposed on

The people of the Book to humble them. As long as they are in the country they have agreed to live in, they do not have to pay anything on their property except the *jizya*... This is because *jizya* is only imposed on them on conditions, which they have agreed on, namely that they will remain in their own countries, and that war will be waged for them on any enemy of theirs, and that if they then leave that land to go anywhere else to do business they will have to pay a tenth.⁷²

Non-Muslims (mostly Christians and Jews) who lived under Islamic ruling paid a certain amount of money on their properties in exchange for protection, but if they traveled from their area of residence to do business in other Islamic regions, they had to pay one-tenth of their trade, whereas Muslims did not. In another Ḥadīth, Muhammad explains that tithing is not imposed on Muslims: it is only for the Jews and the Christians.⁷³

As for the people of the Book who do not travel and remain in their area of residence in the Islamic regions, their *jizya* was not standardized, and its conditions fluctuated. The amount was left to be negotiated with individual Muslim monarchs. Al-Qurṭubī records several cases which he heard from different resources about *jizya*, detailing how Muhammad and the caliphs

⁷⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all qur’anic passages referenced are in *The Quran* M. H. Shakir, ed., (Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library).

⁷¹ Ḥadīths are the collective records of the traditions of Prophet Muhammad’s words and acts. Many of the Ḥadīths treated as authentic (which goes directly in unbroken chain to the prophet himself) and second authoritative to the Qur’an. These Ḥadīths are called *Ḥadīth Ṣaḥīḥ* (correct Ḥadīth). This study will use only *Ḥadīth Ṣaḥīḥ*.

⁷² *Muwatta Malik*, Book 17, Ḥadīth no. 46., accessed December 14, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/urn/506220>

⁷³ *Jami’ at-Tirmidhi*, Book 7, Ḥadīth no. 634, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/7>.

after him treated the non-Muslims among them.⁷⁴ He recalls al-Ṭabari saying that *jizya* should be at least one dinar with no maximum amount, while others say it should be more than one dinar or be based on whatever the Muslim potentate defines.⁷⁵

As Islamic dominance in the region increased with time, Islamic law and administrative practice evolved, and the rule of *dhimma* became more closely defined. At the beginning of the Abbasid's reign, the tribute paid by the non-Muslims varied from one province to another, depending on the conditions of the Arab commanders. Eventually, Islamic law required all adult dhimmi males to pay *jizya* “of five dinars for the wealthy, three for the middle class, and one for the working poor (although not for the total [sic] indigent), as well as a land tax (*kharaj*) for those who owned real estate.”⁷⁶ Harun al-Rashid was the first Abbasid caliph to discuss the proper administration of the *jizya* and *kharja*. During his time, *dhimmis* were required “to pay a five percent tariff on their merchandise, as opposed to the Muslims, 2.5 percent.”⁷⁷ Some historians like to argue that *dhimmis* were not oppressed, mistreated, or taxed beyond their means and that *jizya* was not as restrictive rule as we might think today, especially since Muslims themselves are required to pay *zakat* (alms). Amira Bennison, in her comment on *Muwatta' Malik's Ḥadīth*, states that “the distinction between the two was therefore not so much a matter of quantity but quality: Muslims paid taxes for the benefit of their own souls and the needy amongst them, while non-Muslims were obliged to pay their masters taxes of no particular

⁷⁴ Muhammad Iben Ahmad Al-Qortobi, *Tafsir Al-Qortobi*, (Ar-Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2003), accessed December 13, 2020, <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura9-aya29.html#qortobi>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Stillman, *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, 206.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

benefit to themselves, except to guarantee their protected status.”⁷⁸ While these are helpful observations, Bennison completely overlooks the fact that *jizya* was mandated as a way out of conversion or death. It is true that *dhimmis* were not obligated to go to war, but they also missed the booties of the war that their Muslim neighbors gained. Bennison also does not discuss the percentage that the *dhimmis* were asked to pay, which is double the amount that the Muslims paid in regular circumstances—and four times the amount paid if they were traveler merchants.

If there is any doubt left about the intention of *jizya*, note that *dhimmis* were required to pay their *jizya* publicly “in broad daylight, with hands turned palm upward, and to receive a smart smack on the forehead or the nape of the neck from the collection officer.”⁷⁹ As these actions clearly demonstrate, *jizya* was not only served as a means of protection, but it was also intended to humiliate the *dhimmis*.

In addition to their obligation to pay the *jizya*, Christians were subject to persecution and subordination. Ira M. Lapidus explains that in the eighth century, “Muslims increasingly treated Jews and Christians as subordinate minorities, forbidding non-Muslims to ride horses, bear weapons, ring church bells, stage processions, or display religious symbols in public.”⁸⁰ Bennison admits that *ahl al-dhimma* were sometimes required to wear “distinctive garments or markers of their various faiths—coloured shoulder strips, shawls and belts were all stipulated at different times—and forbidden to build ostentatious places of worship, ring bells or sound clappers, sell wine and pork in Muslim areas, carry weapons or hold positions of power over

⁷⁸ Amira K. Bennison, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the 'Abbasid Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 123.

⁷⁹ Stillman, *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, 206.

⁸⁰ Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 155.

Muslims.”⁸¹ During al-Mutawwakil reign, *dhimmi*s were not persecuted or forced to convert to Islam but rather were subject to public shaming. Kennedy mentions that in AD 850, al-Mutawwakil issued a decree which forced all *dhimmi*s “to wear yellow on their clothes. Upper-class *dhimmi*s had to wear yellow hoods and simple belts. They also were required to ride with wooden stirrups and sport two pommels on the backs of their saddles. Their slaves were to wear yellow patches on their fronts and backs, not less than four finger spans (8 centimeters) across.”⁸² These markers represent another way Muslims discriminated against the non-Muslim communities, creating a system by which they could restrict freedom of movement.

After the establishment of the Islamic government, the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakil (AD 847-862) “banned non-Muslims from holding state office. Not only did he forbid the employment of non-Muslims in government offices, he also ordered that all churches built since the commencement of Islam should be demolished and imposed several other discriminatory regulations on them.”⁸³ The hagiographical literature of Christian communities from this time period is rife with stories of Christians martyrs executed by Muslim authorities while confessing their Christian faith, opposing Islam, converting Muslims from Islam, or preaching against Islam.⁸⁴ The church hagiography tells several stories about people who lost their lives during the Abbasid dynasty. Christian C. Sahner records that “these martyrs were a varied group, including monks, soldiers, shopkeepers, village priests, craftsmen, princes, and bishops. They were women and men, young and old, peasants and nobles Although capital punishment disproportionately affected

⁸¹ Bennison, *The Great Caliphs*, 122.

⁸² Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 240.

⁸³ Sirry, “The public role of Dhimmīs during ‘Abbāsīd times,” 188.

⁸⁴ Mark N. Swanson, “Saints and Sainthood, Christian,” in *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, ed. Joseph Meri, vol 2, (Ny: Taylor And Francis, 2016), 688.

certain groups, especially the clergy, martyrs hailed from across the social spectrum of the early medieval Middle East.”⁸⁵ This is not to say that Muslims were killing people by the sword in a massive way; rather, it is to show that the historical picture is more complicated than one might assume at first glance. Capital punishment, while real and furious, was also largely bureaucratic in nature and relied on state institution. Sahner states that “the Umayyads and Abbasids were not much interested in persecuting Christians, at least systematically. In fact, the state took a rather laissez-faire attitude toward the governance of *dhimmis*... It allowed them to live as they wished provided they paid the *jizya* ... and accepted their subordination as laid down by the law.”⁸⁶ The newly established religion and law led to massive conversion to Islam, especially for people who were not firmed in their faith or did not have the means to pay *jizya*.

The Christians Thinkers in The Council of the Caliphs

The Abbasid regime founded its influence on the idea of proselytism. By definition, proselytism is “One religion, and within that religion, one version of it, is true.”⁸⁷ This idea, when it is imposed on a local community from a foreign ruler, generates opposition—both inward-facing within the religion itself and outward-facing toward the adherents of other religions who resist. The leaders of the subjugated religion do not only resist because they believe that their own religion is true but also because they are losing power and followers. Right after the Abbasid’s control was consolidated and its firm political power established, the stage was set for confrontations between the Abbasid religion—defined as Islam—and the other religions in the area. Most of the debates that transpired in the History of Islam took place

⁸⁵ Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁷ Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 64.

between the traditionalists and many other parties. Caesar Farah illustrates how the different views in early Islamic theology were formed into a standard belief system:

Qadarite, for instance, stressed the doctrine of free will, while the Jabrites denied it; the Sifatites argued for the eternal nature of the attributes of God, while the Mu'tazilites denied they were eternal; the Murji'ites stressed that human actions must not be subject to human judgment, while their opponents, the Wa'dites, insisted on the condemnation of man in this life, before the Day of Judgment; the Kharijites played down the importance of the role of secular leadership, i.e., the caliphate which they considered merely a human institution, while the Shi'ites went so far as to consider their imam as divine.⁸⁸

At the time, the three major debates among Muslims were as follows: 1) faith versus works. The Kharijites equated faith and works, insisting that "there could be no compromise, no middle ground. A Muslim was either rigorously observant, a true believer, or not a Muslim at all."⁸⁹ 2) predestination versus free will. The Qadarites argued for *khalq alaf'al* (that man determines his own fate) against Jabrya, who followed the majority of the Kharijites and believed in *jabr* (predestination). 3) Qur'an—the created Word, versus Qur'an—the uncreated word of God. Mu'tazilites and Jahmites argued against traditionalists that God's speech is as eternal as any of his attributes, and they are inseparable from his essence. Mu'tazilites viewed God speaking or revealing as an anthropomorphic act, which ultimately would destroy the unity of God because there would be two eternal entities (God and his word) rather than one that existed eternally.⁹⁰

On the Christian side, there arose a need to defend the Christian belief against Islamic objections. At the center of the debate was the Trinity: both communities believed that they do not worship the same God, although they both call him Allah in Arabic language. Due to the

⁸⁸ Caesar Farah, *Islam: Beliefs and Observance*, (Barrons Educational Series, 2000), 207.

⁸⁹ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, Fourth edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 69.

⁹⁰ Ignác Godziher, *Introduction to Islamic theology and law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 95.

widespread of heresies in the early church period, defending ecclesiastical doctrine was not a foreign practice among Christians. However, Sara Leila Hussaini suggests that the Trinity itself was not a topic of discussion among Christians before the rise of Islam because “the doctrine had been largely settled within the tradition by the end of the fourth century, and the expression of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit as ‘one ousia and three hypostases’ would have been accepted in most Christian communities.”⁹¹ However, it is important to mention that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be separated from the doctrine of Christology (the two natures of Jesus Christ as the son of God and son of man). The Melkites, Jacobites, and Church of the East were in constant contact with each other to defend their conflicting Christology, both amongst themselves and with many Muslim scholars who debated them.

During the Abbasid dynasty, the new challenge that faced Christians was the need to communicate their beliefs in Arabic. Muslims were not willing to learn the local language of the land, but they were spreading Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, in schools and public systems. Christian scholars needed to write their apologies in Arabic because Muslims do not speak, read, or write Greek or Syriac. The church faced palpable needs to move to the Arabic language in their ecclesiastical worship. It needed to reach out to Arabic-speaking/reading Christians and defend the tenets of orthodoxy from the new Islamic religion. Switching to Arabic would also be necessary in order to maintain the church’s existence and enlarge as a community.⁹² As a result, the first Abbasid century saw an unprecedented rise in Arabic Christian apologetic writings

⁹¹ Sara Leila Hussaini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God: Three Christian Scholars and Their Engagement with Islamic Thought (9th Century C.E.)* (Danvers, MA: Brill, 2014), 23.

⁹² Sidney Griffith, “Eutychius of Alexandria on the Emperor Theophilus and Iconoclasm in Byzantium: A Tenth Century moment in Christian Apologetics in Arabic,” *Byzantion*, vol. 52, (1982): 161.

directed against Islam.⁹³ The Melkites were at the forefront of the shift from Greek into Arabic, and their monasteries in the Judean desert produced the first translations of the Gospels and patristic literature.⁹⁴ John of Damascus' writings were the first books to be translated into Arabic, and Theodor Abū Qurrah was the first Christian theologian to write in Arabic.

Al-Ma'mūn received a thorough education in the most important fields of learning of his day. His father, caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, used the best teachers in the country to teach his sons the Arabic language, literature, music, and poetry.⁹⁵ Concerning the religious sciences, al-Ma'mūn was trained in *Ḥadīth* and studied *fiqh* (Islamic law) under the experts of the field. Among other things, he was known for hosting debates between Muslims and representatives of other faiths at his court.⁹⁶ Under his supervision, many debates took place between Christian and Muslim scholars. But, before we examine the debates that took place under the council of al-Ma'mūn, we need to understand the Qur'anic conception of the Trinity.

It is important to mention that in AD 833, al-Ma'mūn initiated what is called *miḥna* (inquisition) between Sunnis and Mu'tazilites. During this time, the *miḥna* was carried out to ensure that all Muslim scholars professed the doctrine of the created (as opposed to uncreated and eternal) nature of the Qur'an. The Mu'tazilites believed that the Qur'an had been created at a certain point in time by God to confess that God is the only divine and eternal being.⁹⁷ Al-Ma'mūn imprisoned or exiled those who did not comply, most famously Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (AD

⁹³ Gutas, *Greek Thought*, 64.

⁹⁴ Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 158.

⁹⁵ John Abdallah Nawas, *Al-Ma'mun, the Inquisition, and the Quest for Caliphal Authority* (GA: Lockwood Press, 2015), 21.

⁹⁶ Hussaini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God*, 31.

⁹⁷ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 250.

780–855), a respected *Ḥadīth* scholar and founder of the Ḥanbalī legal school, who actively opposed the Muʿtazilite’s doctrine.⁹⁸ Though his definitive motive is unclear, it is likely that al-Maʿmūn wanted to restrict the religious and the secular affairs and keep them under his direct control. Hussaini believes that even for a short time “the Muʿtazila enjoyed a ‘golden period’ of theological and political dominance, which had implications for the nature of Christian-Muslim debate during this period.”⁹⁹ The *miḥna* period and the ideology of the Muʿtazilites allowed the use of human reason to investigate the divine mysteries. This period in the Abbasid dynasty produced several theological writings on both the Islamic and the Christian sides.

The Widely Recorded Islamic Perception of the Trinity

Against the backdrop of Arabic-Islamic rule, it is no surprise that the doctrine of the Trinity would become the center of the debate between Muslims and Christians. Muslims believe in a strict form of monotheism called *tawḥīd* (divine unity), which is one of the cornerstones of the Islamic faith. The first pillar of Islam, the *shahada*, witnesses that “there is no God but Allah,” implying that the existence of one God. Muslims believe that God is one, without associates, separation, and division of parts. Allah is also indivisible, eternal, merciful, transcendent, and possesses ninety-nine beautiful names (*Asmāʾ Allah al-Husnā*), which reflect his essence, nature, and acts. This belief is supported in the Qur’an. Allah says, “Take not two gods, He is only one Allah; so of Me alone should you be afraid” (Surah 16:51). Any belief that is contrary to what Allah requires is considered blasphemy and *shirk* (associating someone with Allah in worship), which is the unforgettable sin. The next sections shall examine the Quranic and the Islamic medieval understanding of the Trinity and objections thereof.

⁹⁸ Hussaini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God*, 31.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

The Qur'anic Understanding of the Trinity

Mohammad was in direct contact with Christians, and they probably shared some of their beliefs with him. However, the Qur'an includes several verses that do not reflect orthodox Christian belief about the doctrine of the Trinity (the Nicene belief) but rather directly criticize it. The *locus classicus* of denying the Trinity in the Qur'an is found in Surah 4:171, where Mohammad exhorts the Christians to stop being dishonest and declare the truth that "the Messiah, Isa son of Marium is only a messenger of Allah and His Word which He communicated to Marium and a spirit from Him; believe therefore in Allah and His messengers, and say not, Three." Here Mohammad speaks directly to the people of the Book (Christians) and calls Isa (Jesus) the Messiah, but he orders them not to say "three." Some new translations render *three* as the Trinity.¹⁰⁰ The word *thalātha* (three) in Arabic shares the same root of the word Trinity, but the specific Christian phrase for the Trinity—*Uqnūm* (singular), *Aqanīm* (plural)—does not appear in the Qur'an. It seems obvious that the meaning of the phrase "say not, Three" implies the belief that Christians are not monotheists because "three" indicates the understanding of polytheism.

Mohammad also thinks that the Trinity includes three gods: Allah, Jesus, and Mary. In Surah 5:116, he recounts a conversation in which Allah asks Jesus, "did you say to men, take me and my mother for two gods besides? Allah he will say: Glory be to Thee, it did not befit me that I should say what I had no right to (say); if I had said it, Thou wouldst indeed have known it; Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I do not know what is in Thy mind, surely Thou art the great Knower of the unseen things." Most commentators project this text to the Day of Judgment. Jesus denies that he taught the crowd about his and his mother's divinity. The followers of Jesus

¹⁰⁰ Check out A. Yusuf Ali's translation of the holy Qur'an and Muhamad Asad's translation of the Qur'an.

are accused of taking Jesus and Mary *as gods* in derogation of Allah. The implied relationship—father, mother, child—is very foreign to the Christian identity. This verse contradicts the Nicene understanding of the Trinity that all Christians agree upon.

The inclusion of Mary in the Trinity occurs at different occasions in the Qur'an. Mohammad teaches the Muslims that "Certainly they disbelieve who say: Surely, Allah—He is the Messiah, son of Marium," and he teaches them to reply: "Who then could control anything as against Allah when He wished to destroy the Messiah son of Marium and his mother and all those on the earth? And Allah's is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth and what is between them; He creates what He pleases; and Allah has power over all things" (Surah 5:17). It is highly unusual for Christians to express their faith by saying "Allah—He is the Messiah." Proclaiming Christ's deity is not the same as saying "God is Christ." It is not that simple. James White explains that "we do not believe the Son exhausts all that can be said about God. The proper and balanced assertion is 'The Messiah is divine and human,' and, even more to the point, 'The Son of God is eternally divine and became man in the person of Jesus the Messiah.'"¹⁰¹ The contention of Surah 5:17 denies Mary and Jesus's divinity and attributes the power of creation and destruction to Allah only.

The writer of the Qur'an provides several other reasons not to believe that Jesus is God. First, Jesus himself states that he is not God. Mohammad quotes Jesus directly as stating, "O Children of Israel! serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Surely whoever associates (others) with Allah, then Allah has forbidden to him the garden, and his abode is the fire; and there shall be no helpers for the unjust" (Surah 5:72). Al-Ṭabarī explains that Jesus asked people not to worship

¹⁰¹ James White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Qur'an*, (Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2013), 90.

him but to direct their worship to Allah because he is his God, his king, his master, his creator, and theirs as well.¹⁰² Al-Qurtubī echoes al-Ṭabarī in his explanation and adds that the Jacobites are the ones who told Muhammad that God is Jesus, son of Mary. Al-Qurtubī repudiates the divinity of Jesus by asking a question: “if Jesus says O Lord! And O God! then how can he call himself God? and how can he ask himself? This is impossible.”¹⁰³ Ibn Kathīr agrees with al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurtubī, adding the other two sects of Christianity to the conversation (the Melkites and the Church of the East) and calling their belief *shirk* (polytheism) to emphasize that the Christian belief is considered an unforgivable sin—people will lose their eternal life in heaven if they persevere in this belief.¹⁰⁴

The second reason that the writer of the Qur’an gives against the divinity of Jesus is that Isa is a mere messenger, a normal man who eats, drinks, and sleeps. “The Messiah, son of Marium is but a messenger,” says Muhammad, “messengers before him have indeed passed away; and his mother was a truthful woman; they both used to eat food. See how We make the communications clear to them, then behold, how they are turned away” (Surah 5:75). Al-Qurtubī explains that God shows them shreds of evidence against their beliefs. He tells the Christians, “You admit that Jesus was a fetus in his mother’s womb, cannot cause harm or benefit, and if you decided that Jesus does not hear, or see, and does not know, harm, or benefit, then how did you take that to mean he is God? Allah is the one who hears, which means he is still hearing,

¹⁰² Muhammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura5-aya72.html#tabary>. Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī was one of the earliest and trusted commentators on the Qur’an with al-Qurtubī and Ibn Kathīr. He is not be confused with Ibn Raban al-Ṭabarī.

¹⁰³ Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Qurtubī, *Tafsir Al-Qortoby*, accessed December 28, 2020, <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura5-aya72.html>. “ إذا كان المسيح يقول : يا رب ويا الله فكيف يدعو نفسه أم كيف يسألها ؟ ” هذا محال

¹⁰⁴ Abi Al-Fida’ Ismaeel Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir Ibn Katheer*, accessed December 29, 2020, <http://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura5-aya72.html>.

knowing, causing harm and benefit, and who has these attributes is the real God.”¹⁰⁵ Al-Qurtubī believes that the evidence is clear: Jesus was born, acted, and lived his life like a normal man. He had human desires and needed what human’s need requires; therefore, he cannot be God. All above-mentioned Islamic scholars—al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurtubī, and Ibn Kathīr—display great ignorance of, or at the very least completely overlook, the classical Christian orthodox understanding of the Trinity—one *ousia*, three *hypostases*. Instead, they just reflect and expand on their own interpretations of the Trinity.

Finally, the Qur’an conveys a literal, materialistic, and anthropomorphic understanding of the title “Son of God.” The writer of the Qur’an states that “the Originator of the heavens and the earth! How can He have a child, when there is for Him no consort, when He created all things and is Aware of all things?” (Surah 6:101). Although Mary’s name is not mentioned directly in this passage, the verse’s allusion is clear: Allah married Mary and had a child called Isa. Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurtubī, and al-Ṭabarī agree that the meaning of *wife* is meant to be understood literally. Since Allah created the heavens and the earth, he does not need a wife and does not need to have a son who looks like him.¹⁰⁶ He can create whatever he wants and nothing in creation is like him. The writer of the Qur’an thinks of a physical relationship between God and his wife (Mary) and a literal pregnancy and birth. The same idea is repeated in Surah 112:1-4.

¹⁰⁵ Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Qurtubī, *Tafsir Al-Qortoby*, accessed December 28, 2020, <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura5-aya76.html#qortobi>. The original Arabic is: أنتم مقرون أن عيسى كان جنينا في بطن أمه ، لا يملك لأحد ضرا ولا نفعاً ، وإذ أقررتم أن عيسى كان في حال من الأحوال لا يسمع ولا يبصر ولا يعلم ولا ينفع ولا يضر ، فكيف اتخذتموه إلهاً ؟ . والله هو السميع العليم أي : لم يزل سميعاً عليماً يملك الضر والنفع ، ومن كانت هذه صفته فهو الإله على الحقيقة

¹⁰⁶ Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Qurtubī, *Tafsir Al-Qortoby*, accessed December 28, 2020, <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura6-aya101.html> ; Muhammad Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsir al-Ṭabarī*, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura6-aya101.html#tabary>; Abi Al-Fida’ Ismaeel Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir Ibn Kathīr*, accessed December 28, 2020, <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura6-aya101.html#katheer>.

Mohammad teaches his followers to say that “Allah, is One. Allah is He on Whom all depend. He begets not, nor is He begotten. And none is like Him.” The literal understanding of the Qur’an conveys a distorted picture of the orthodox Trinity that most Christians agree upon.

To conclude, the Quran neither mentions the Trinity nor comes close to accurately defining what Christians meant by it. The writer of the Qur’an considers Christians to be polytheists, understands the Trinity in a physical sense and mathematical terms (i.e., 1+1+1=3)—three beings are divine, namely Father, Mary, and Jesus. God the Father married Mary and had a baby, named Isa (Jesus). The title Father is not mentioned in the Qur’an, but it is implied in the physical relationship—Father (Allah), Mother (Mary), and Child (Jesus). The Nicene profession of the Trinity is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur’an even though it was conducted and widely agreed upon among Christians about 300 years before the Qur’an is written.

Omitting the correct theological concept of the Trinity from the Qur’an employs a historical weakness because the Qur’an was written approximately 300 years after the Nicene Creed. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the Qur’anic way of understanding the Trinity is non-historical. No early church father used the concept of the Trinity in the way that Mohammad understood it. Tertullian (AD 155-220), for example, was the first church theologian who introduced the word *Trinity* while explaining the unity of God in the third century.¹⁰⁷ He did not believe that God is three separate persons and Mary is one of the divine persons. Augustine (AD 354-430) also believed that “the Trinity is the one and only and true God...”¹⁰⁸ contradicting the Qur’an and its belief.

¹⁰⁷ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 3, accessed March 25, 2021, http://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_praxeas_eng.htm.

¹⁰⁸ Augustine, *On the Trinity* 1. 2. 4.

Other Islamic resources, such as Ḥadīths, Islamic commentators, and Islamic theologians (*Mutaklimīn*) express the same understanding of the writer of the Qur'an about the doctrine of the Trinity. In *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Mohammad tells his people about the end of times and how Allah shall conduct his judgment. He states, "Then it will be said to the Christians, 'What did you use to worship?' They will reply, 'We used to worship Messiah, the son of Allah.' It will be said, 'You are liars, for Allah has neither a wife nor a son.'"¹⁰⁹ This Ḥadīth duplicates the Qur'anic understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, venerating Mary by making her part of the Trinity and God's wife.

The Medieval Islamic Understanding of the Trinity

Under the Abbasid dynasty in the ninth century, several scholars left written apologies against the Trinity. This section shall examine three of them. The intended purpose of this section is to inform the reader of the varieties of Islamic objections to the Trinity.

Alī Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī (783-858)

The first apology was written by Alī Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī, the son of a Jewish scholar, a Christian, and a Muslim later on in his life—he converted to Islam at the age of seventy.¹¹⁰ His father was a religious leader in a Syriac-speaking community.¹¹¹ He was a senior member of the Muslim governor's administration and a trusted supporter. According to Ibn al-Nadīm, al-Ṭabarī converted to Islam at the prompting of the caliph al-Mu'taṣim (AD 833–842) and came to court

¹⁰⁹ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Ḥadīth no. 7439, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/97>.

¹¹⁰ Mark Beaumont, "Muslim Readings of John's Gospel in the Abbasid Period," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 19:2, (2008): 180.

¹¹¹ Rifaat Ebied and David Thomas, eds., *The Polemical Works of 'Alī al-Ṭabarī*, (Boston: Brill, 2016), 2. Sami K. Hamarneh, et al., *Encyclopedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures* (Springer, Dordrecht, (1997): 930.

during caliph al-Mutawakkil (AD 847–861), who later on made him a table companion.¹¹² Al-Ṭabarī’s polemic objections to the Trinity are very unique because they are written from the perspective of a former Christian. It is hard to know why he converted to Islam, but he states that “the eternal One has called me to write this book of mine as a renunciation of the religion of Christianity (*li-l-tanaṣṣul min dīn al-Naṣrāniyya*).”¹¹³ He also thanks al-Mutawakkil, for his help in writing the book. It seems that he probably felt the need to prove his belief to the caliph. Thus, he wrote his polemic against the Trinity in order to return a favor or gain his trust.¹¹⁴

Al-Ṭabarī’s methodology seems to authenticate many sayings of Jesus, especially the ones that indicate his humanity. He starts his polemics against the Trinity by dissecting the nature of Jesus Christ and who He is. He lays out twelve points to refute the divinity of Jesus. For the purpose of this study, only the major objections in relation to the Trinity will be listed. For instance, al-Ṭabarī accuses the Christians of being polytheists, believing “in three or even four gods, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and an eternal human who is Jesus Christ.”¹¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī separates between the title “Son” and the person “Jesus Christ,” making them two different beings. While he does not elaborate on this point, he accuses Christians of believing in four divine beings. This section could be understood as his personal understanding or addition to the Christian belief.

Unlike the Qur’an and many other Islamic scholars, al-Ṭabarī cites several Christian

¹¹² Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, ed. M. Riḍā-Tajaddud, (Tehran, Iran: 1971), 354.

¹¹³ Ebied and Thomas, eds., *The Polemical Works of ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī*, 41.

¹¹⁴ Beaumont, “Muslim Readings of John’s Gospel in the ʿAbbasid Period,” 181.

¹¹⁵ Ebied & Thomas, eds. *The Polemical Works of ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī*, 69.

sources.¹¹⁶ He focuses in his Christology on what Jesus says according to his humanity to prove that he cannot be God. For instance, al-Ṭabarī quotes John 20:17, in which Jesus says, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God,” and concludes that Jesus is a mere human, for he is calling God his God.¹¹⁷ He also quotes Jesus declaring that his mission on earth is to do the will of God, not his own (John 6:38). Al-Ṭabarī deduces that since Jesus is fulfilling not his will but God’s will, then he is a different person from God and cannot be God.¹¹⁸

Al-Ṭabarī mentions the three major branches of Christianity that existed during the Abbasid dynasty. Because of his Christian background, it seems that he was aware of the Christological differences among these branches. To know whether Jesus is divine or not, al-Ṭabarī teaches his followers to ask all types of Christians about the eternity of the creator:

Can he [God] be changed from the condition of his eternity and substantiality, and can illnesses and death affect him or not? If they say that he is changed and dies, their belief has died, and the person who says this is like the person whom God almighty in his Book likens to animals ... The eternal Creator cannot be changed and does not die’, they are at variance with their Creed, and in their eyes the one who is at variance with it does not believe in it, for it says that Jesus Christ is Creator not created, and is true God from true God, of the substance of his Father, and that he was killed and crucified and made to suffer. Thus, their God was changed and died.¹¹⁹

Al-Ṭabarī believes that God cannot be likened to creation (human or animals) and his nature cannot be changed. When he looks at Jesus, he sees a person who gets hungry and thirsty, suffers, and is crucified. For these reasons, Jesus cannot be God.

¹¹⁶ Al- Ṭabarī does not include biblical references, but he seems to quote the biblical translation that was available to him.

¹¹⁷ Ebied & Thomas, eds. *The Polemical Works of ‘Alī al-Ṭabarī*, 73.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 73-74.

Most Islamic scholars either ignore the Nicene Creed in their polemics or deem it as a hoax, so they do not quote it to explain the Christian belief. Al-Ṭabarī, on the other hand, is one of few Islamic scholars who use the Nicene Creed in his polemics against the Trinity.¹²⁰ While he acknowledges that all Christian denominations agree on the Nicene Creed, he attributes contradictions to the first part of the creed:

The beginning of the Creed is, ‘We believe in one God, the Father, Possessor of all things, Maker of what is seen and unseen.’ And then, with this they stop referring to God and begin with a new reference, saying, ‘We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, true God from true God, of the substance of his Father.’ But this is a contradiction of the first part of what they say, and no one with any justness or understanding will think this fanciful. For they say, ‘We believe in one God’, and then immediately after this and in the same way they say, ‘We believe that Jesus Christ is the Creator of all things by his hand’. In this they affirm another Creator different from the first Creator.

This is another attempt to prove that Christians believe in two different beings, God the Father and God the Son. Al-Ṭabarī’s understanding of the creed implies literal polytheism. Since the Father is a creator and the Son is a creator, then there is no one God, but two.

Lastly, al-Ṭabarī contests the meaning of the words *Father* and *Son*. He argues that the meanings of *father* and *progenitor* can be understood both literally as referring to procreation and metaphorically “as when a child uses ‘father’ for his uncle or the person who brings him up or teaches him or educates him or does him good, and he will also call the elders of his family and his grandparents ‘fathers’: thus, Adam is called ‘the father of humanity.’ And I have heard Christian scholars say that God is really called ‘father’ because he is the Initiator and Progenitor of things.”¹²¹ Al-Ṭabarī does not cite the person who stated this information; instead, he generalizes the meaning and assumes that it is accepted by all Christians. He continues with the

¹²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī does not use the known verbatim of the Nicene creed. His resources are unknown. He could be paraphrasing what he had memorized earlier in his childhood.

¹²¹ Ibid, 155.

same reasoning, explaining that the metaphorical meaning of *Son* is “someone adopts someone, that is, he brings him up, teaches him, educates him and does him good. And people of culture are called ‘sons of culture’ and its ‘brothers.’”¹²² Al-Ṭabarī believes that the metaphorical meanings of the title *Son* contradicts the Nicene Creed and the Christian faith “because the followers of Christianity unanimously agree that there are realities to these names, and the realities are not concealed or derived but are obvious and distinct.”¹²³ In Al-Ṭabarī’s opinion, if the Son is eternal, then he is not generated, and if he was generated, then he is not eternal. He understands the meaning of the word *generated* in a temporal sense—with a beginning and an end.

Abū ʿĪsā Muḥammad al-Warrāq (AD 864)

Abū ʿĪsā Muḥammad al-Warrāq was an independent scholar who lived in the ninth century. Little is known about his life and background, but it seems that he was active in AD 864.¹²⁴ It is hard to know his religious background. While the Muʿtazilites scholars (e.g., ʿAbd al-Jabbār and al-Masʿūdī) accused him of being a Shiʿite, a *zindiq* (irreligious), and *mulḥid* (atheist), the Ashʿarī said that he was a Manichee; and Ibn al-Nadīm portrays him as an unconventional Muʿtazilite with such a deep interest in dualist beliefs.¹²⁵ David Thomas believes that al-Warrāq “remained a Muslim, probably with Shīʿī sympathies, though with his own interpretation of faith.”¹²⁶

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ David Thomas, “Abū ʿĪsā Al-Warrāq and the History of Religions,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 41 (2) (1996): 275

¹²⁵ Muḥammad ibn Hārūn Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq’s ‘Against the Trinity,’* ed. & trans. David Thomas, (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 10.

¹²⁶ Thomas, “Abū ʿĪsā Al-Warrāq and the History of Religions,” 1.

Al-Warrāq left a written work against Christianity called *Radd ʿalā al-Thalāth Firaq min al-Naṣārā*. The book itself is not available, but Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī included it in his reply by making a detailed refutation of its arguments.¹²⁷ David Thomas managed to edit and translate two volumes of al-Warrāq’s works, one about the Trinity and the other one about the incarnation. Although al-Warrāq was labeled a heretic by many Muslims, he was recognized by others as a reliable authority on non-Muslim religions. Many scholars in the tenth century, such as al-Māturīdī, al-Bāqillānī, and ʿAbdh al-Jabbār, used his works to defeat other religions; but they attacked him because of his criticism of the Qur’an and the prophet.¹²⁸

Al-Warrāq stands out because he is one of a few scholars who studied the Trinity as Christians explain it. He does not quote the Bible in his book, but he mentions that the referenced explanation about the Trinity comes from a Christian source. His intention in the *Radd* is to expose the downfalls of the Christian belief by presenting several dilemmas against the concept of God among the three types of Christian sects (Melkites, Jacobites, and Church of the East). He forms his argument in a series of questions and presents them with several dilemmas to force his audience to review their beliefs (i.e., ask this ... if they answer no, then ... and if they answer yes, then ...).

The first dilemma that al-Warrāq presents is related to the nature of substance. While the Church of the East and the Jacobites apply differentiation and number to the hypostases, they equate the substance with the hypostases. In al-Warrāq’s opinion, this belief is contradictory because they are “claiming that what is differentiated is what is not.”¹²⁹ The Melkites, on the

¹²⁷ Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, Muḥammad ibn Hārūn-861, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam: Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq’s ‘Against the Trinity,’* ed. & trans. David Thomas, (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 77.

other hand, do not believe that the substance is the hypothesis, but if they do in some respects “other than the respect in which it is different from them, then if the respect in which it is identical with them is itself, the respect in which it is different from them must be other than itself, requiring an eternal other than the substance.”¹³⁰ In other words, if the substance is different from the hypostases in a respect that is different from them and itself, then there is another eternal being other than the substance; and if another eternal is admitted, then Christianity becomes a polytheistic belief.

The second dilemma is presented when the Christians say that the substance is different from the hypostases in every respect. Al-Warrāq believes, “then it necessarily follows, since the substance is divine, that neither the father nor the Son nor the Spirit is divine; and if each of the hypostases is divine, that the substance is not divine.”¹³¹ In other words, whether the Melkites say it is the same or it is different, their belief is wrong.

The third dilemma arises when the Christians say that the substance is neither different from the hypostases nor identical to them. Al-Warrāq asks these questions: “why characterize the substance differently from the hypostases and the hypostases differently from the substance? ... will people be able to tell at all between the statement: ‘two things, one separate from the other, whose names and descriptions are distinct but they themselves are not,’?”¹³² Al-Warrāq’s understanding requires the term *other*, but “the term ‘other’ cannot be applied to it neither can

¹³⁰ Ibid., 89.

¹³¹ Ibid., 93.

¹³² Ibid., 95.

the terms ‘identical and different,’ or ‘identity’ and ‘difference.’”¹³³ Therefore, their claim that the substance is neither identical nor different from the hypostases does not stand.

Al-Warrāq raises a different objection to the divinity of the three hypostases. He is one of a few scholars who acknowledge that Christians believe that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are divine; however, they do not believe in three divinities but one. They all believe that each of the hypostases is Lord and creator, not three Lords and three creators.¹³⁴ However, al-Warrāq still thinks of this belief as a contradiction. He explains:

If the substance is other than the hypostases then its action must be other than theirs and its creation other than theirs... if action must be affirmed of the substance and not of the hypostases, then consequently it must be denied of the Father, the Son and the Spirit, which must all be debarred from it... if action and creation belong to the hypostases and not the substance which is other than them, then you have claimed that the eternal divinity, which is the general substance and its hypostases, has no action or work or control.¹³⁵

Al-Warrāq seems to consider the substance as a separate being, which is comparable to the three hypostases.

Al-Warrāq presents an objection to the nature of fatherhood and sonship of the Trinity. He asks, “Is it [substance] of the Father’s substance or not? If it is not of his substance then it must be of a substance other than his ... If it is eternal then they affirm two eternal substances ... If it is contingent, then before the appearance of this substance the Father was not Father and was not entitled to fatherhood.”¹³⁶ His confusion between the substance and the hypostases continues with his understanding of the fatherhood of the Father and the sonship of Jesus. “If fatherhood is of the substance of the father,” says al-Warrāq, “and the substance of the Son is according to

¹³³ Ibid., 97.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 111.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 127.

you, the substance of the Father then it follows that the Son must be Father and that you must affirm fatherhood of him as you do of the Father, since their substance is one.”¹³⁷ It seems that although al-Warrāq worked to understand the Trinity according to Christian belief, his grasp of the one divine being and three hypostases remained oblique.

Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Husnī, al-Rassī (AD 785-860)

Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Husnī, known as al-Rassī, was born in AD 785, grew up in al-Medina, and spent eleven years in Egypt.¹³⁸ He was contemporary to Hārūn al-Rashīd, al-Ma’mūn, and al-Mūtawakkil caliphs during the Abbasid reign. He was persecuted by the Abbasids for practicing secret *da‘wa* (call) to the Shi‘ites.¹³⁹ He gained several supporters, however, and was called the star of Mohammad.¹⁴⁰ While he was in Egypt, he learned about Christianity and debated Christians and Jews. In AD 826, he left Egypt and settled in al-Rass near al-Medina, where he died in AD 860. While he was influenced to a large extent by the Mu‘tazilites, he was one of the founders of the theological traditions of the Zaydi branch of Shi‘ite.¹⁴¹

Al-Rassī’s intent in writing *Ar-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣarā* (a reply to the Christians) is to refute the Christian revelation and their doctrine of God. He objects to the names of the hypostases—Father, Son, and Spirit—categorizing them into three different groups: natural names, which are

¹³⁷ Ibid., 129.

¹³⁸ W. Madelung, *Der Imam al-Qasim ibn Ibrdhim und die Glaubenslehre der Zaiditen* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 1966), 86-96. Binyamin Abrahamov, “Al-Ḳāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm’s Theory of the Imamate,” *Arabica*, T. 34, (1987): 80.

¹³⁹ Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Husnī al-Rassī, *الرد على النصارى*, ed. Hanafī Abduallah (Cairo, Egypt: Dar - al=Afaq al-Arabia, 2000), 15.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Abrahamov, “Al-Ḳāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm’s Theory of the Imamate,” 80.

related to the substance; hypostatical names, which are proper names; and incidental names, which are related to the situation/verb. To him, Father and Son are incidental names. “If you name the Father as father,” says al-Rassī, “because he gave birth, as you stated, he had a son and a child, so these names are not natural nor hypostatical personal names, but they are incidental, when children are born, between the parents and their children, and not natural, or proper names nor in Roma or other than Roma.”¹⁴² Al-Rassī categorizes *Father* and *Son* as incidental names and not natural or proper. These names, in his opinion, are used to describe a verb or an action. He compares them to *earth*, *heaven*, or *fire*, which denote something that is its substance.¹⁴³ Something that can be explained by its name and not by anything else.

In the second part of the book, al-Rassī calls the Christian to *al-Inṣāf* (fairness). He bases his invitation on five common points on which all Christians and Muslims agree: 1) the testimony of Allah, 2) the testimony of the angels, 3) the sayings of Jesus and his testimony, 4) the testimony of Mary the mother of Jesus, and 5) the testimony of Jesus’s disciples and their message.¹⁴⁴ He starts by quoting Matthew 1:1: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Al-Rassī uses this verse to prove to the Christians that Jesus is the son of David, not God. He explains that the meaning of fatherhood and sonship in the Gospel is not consistent in the Gospels because Jesus says to his disciples that God is their father (Matt 5:48). Al-Rassī also adds the testimony of Mary, Jesus’s mother, to that of Apostle Philip, stating that both give testimony that Jesus is the son of Joseph. However, he never cites any

¹⁴² Al-Rassī, *الرد على النصارى*, 40. “إن كنتم إنما سميتم الاب عندكم أباً، لآلانه ولد، بز عمكم، ولدأ وأبنأ، فليس هذه الاسماء باسماء “طبيعية ذاتية، ولااسماء ايضا قنومية شخصية، ولكنها حاذثة عرضية، عند حدوث اولاد، بين الوالدين والاولاد، وليس بأسماء طبيعية ولاقنوم لافي ”الروم، ولافي غير الروم.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 43-44.

reference from the Gospel.¹⁴⁵ Finally, al-Rassī includes the testimony of the angels to Mary,¹⁴⁶ telling her that she will bear a child, not that she would bear the son of God.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, while al-Rassī affirms the authenticity of a few verses, he declines the authenticity of others. For example, he declines that Simon Peter may have said that Jesus is the son of God.¹⁴⁸ It is important to note that Al-Rassī claims to quote the Bible; however, he does not quote from a known Arabic translation. He either cites the Bible from memory without paying attention to the accuracy of the verses or paraphrases the verses according to his own understanding.

Conclusion

During the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries, Christian-Muslim relations were complicated. Some of the Christians were professional state administrators under the Umayyads. They were in high demand, both because they knew how to run the government and because they knew Greek, Syriac, and Arabic. Under the early reign of the Abbasids, circumstances changed for the Christians. Some caliphs, like Harūn al-Rashīd and his son al-Ma'mūn, were not religiously strict. The former started the translation project of *Bayt al-Ḥikma*, which contributed to the development of several sciences, and the latter encouraged debates between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars under his council, which resulted in several religious writings. The translation movement would have not flourished without the support of the caliphs and the contributions of Syriac-speaking Christians.

¹⁴⁵ The editor adds two wrong citations in his footnotes (Matt 16:13-16 & Mark 8:27-29).

¹⁴⁶ Al-Rassī does not mention angel Gabriel, but he uses a plural description of angels.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

Although many Christians worked for the Abbasid caliphs in translation, several also lived under restrictions, and various were persecuted. Various social, religious, and financial restrictions were implemented on Christians and *dhimmis* under caliph al-Mutawakil, resulting in persecution to the extent of martyrdom. However, Christian scholars were able to defend and debate Muslim scholars for a short period, especially during al-Ma'mūn's reign. A need to defend the Christian belief against Islamic objections arose, and the Trinity was at the center of the debate as Christian and Muslim scholars worked to demonstrate that they did not worship the same God.

During this time and under these circumstances, many disputations were written between Muslims and Christians. From the Muslim side, the majority of them are directed against the Trinity and the Christian understanding of the nature of God. Some objections are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Christians actually teach because they are based on non-historical arguments, others are rooted in semantic confusion, and others are based on personal observation, accusing Christians of being non-rational.

The non-historical objections ignore the Gospels and the Nicene Creed's explanation of the Trinity. They ridicule the Christian belief, label it as contradictory, and add what does not belong to it. In the Qur'an, Mohammad clearly confuses the doctrine of the Trinity with the notion of divine cohabitation, deifying Mary from whom Christ was born, and making her member of the holy Trinity. He also describes the Christian faith in a polytheistic way, including God, Mary, and Jesus to the Godhead.

The semantic objections are more Christological in nature because they are related to the literal and metaphorical meanings of the titles "Father" and "Son." These objections convey a literal, materialistic, and anthropomorphic perception of the title "Son of God." Muslims argue

that the Christian belief includes God having a wife or a son in a literal sense. When the title “Father” is used literally, it must mean progenitor, which indicates procreation. When it is used metaphorically, it conveys the idea of God being the Creator of all things. “Son,” on the other hand, may be understood in an adoptionist sense if it is used metaphorically. According to the Muslims, this thinking contradicts the Nicene Creed because while Christians claim to believe in one God, they announce two creators. Moreover, some scholars went further to argue that Christian’s explanation of the terms “Father” and “Son” indicates more than three persons. Some scholars separate the “Son” and “Jesus,” making them two persons, resulting in great confusion as to what Christians actually teaches regarding the Trinity.

The “being non-rational objection” is agreed upon by most ancient, medieval, and contemporary Muslim scholars.¹⁴⁹ They accuse Christians of being non-logical in their explanation of the Trinity because they believe in three persons and call them one God. The animus with which Islamic tradition views core Christian doctrines is still very much alive today.¹⁵⁰ Most Muslims and Christians who have entered into serious conversation found the doctrines of the Trinity to be a “dead end.” I do not intend to solve this dilemma; instead, I seek to add to the conversation.

¹⁴⁹ ‘abd al-Majīd al-Sharafī, *The Islamic Thought about the reply to the christians: to the End of the Tenth Century* (Tunisia: al-Dar al-Tunisya LilNashir, 1986), 6. Al-Sharafī concludes that most of the Islamic replies to the beliefs of the Christians after the tenth century were copying the arguments of the previous centuries, especially the ninth and the tenth centuries.

¹⁵⁰ Hugh Goddard, “Muslim and Christian Beliefs,” in *Contemporary Muslim–Christian Encounters: Developments, Diversity, and Dialogues*, Ed. Paul Hedges, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 294.

Chapter Two: The Iconoclastic Effect of the Qur’anic Perception of the Trinity

In the previous chapter, I presented the Qur’anic understanding of the Trinity, which includes Mary as a divine person within the Godhead. Several scholars have been studying the Qur’anic reference of Mary for decades by using different methods and ending with different conclusions. This chapter surveys these studies briefly, examines the historical and theological beliefs about the *Theotokos* icons in the history of Christianity, and finally moves to argue the effect of the *Theotokos* icon on the Qur’anic perception of the Trinity for the purpose of studying the possible reasons why Mary is divinized in the Qur’an.

Survey of Previous Research

Previous studies suggest several reasons for the Qur’anic belief about the Trinity. For example, Abū Mūsa al-Ḥārīrī, a Christian Arab scholar, suggested that Mohammad learned about Christianity from Warāqa bin Nūfal, an Ebionite monk who followed the Gospel according to the Hebrews.¹⁵¹ Al-Ḥārīrī relied heavily on Islamic resources to learn about Warāqa. He reports that Warāqa was the only one who translated the Gospel of the Hebrews into Arabic because of his extensive knowledge of Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew languages.¹⁵² Many Islamic resources mention him copying the Gospel and translating it from Hebrew to Arabic.¹⁵³

According to al-Ḥārīrī, Warāqa was well educated and knowledgeable in Gnosticism.¹⁵⁴ This reason pushed al-Ḥārīrī to jump to the conclusion that the Gospel of the Hebrews is the only

¹⁵¹ Abū Mūsa Al-Ḥārīrī, *قس ونبي [A Monk and A Prophet]* (Diar Aqil, Lebanon: Dar Liajil al-Ma’rifa, 2005), 27.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵³ Bukharī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī*, Hadīth no. 3392, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:3392>. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadīth no. 160a, accessed March 13, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:160a>. The extent of the Gospel according to the Hebrews is no longer known. Few quotations are preserved in the writings of Clement of Alexandria (second century), Origen (third century), Eusebius (fourth century) and Cyril (fourth century).

¹⁵⁴ Al-Ḥārīrī, *قس ونبي [A Monk and A Prophet]*, 32.

Gospel that was known to Waraqa and it is the Gospel that he used to teach Mohammad. Al-Ḥarīrī states, “The Arabic Qur’an mentions one Gospel, which proves that ‘the Gospel of the Hebrews’ was the only one known, especially because we find a complete match in the information concerning doctrines, dogmas, forms of worship, and the religious calendar...”¹⁵⁵ It is true that several similarities exist between the Ebionites’ belief about Jesus and the Qur’an’s teachings about Jesus; however, their beliefs are not identical. For instance, the Ebionites denied the virgin birth and believed that Jesus was the biological son of Joseph and Mary; whereas the Qur’an approves the virgin birth of Jesus. Al-Ḥarīrī’s study seems to rely heavily on Islamic resources without taking into consideration other historical factors, such as the beliefs of the specific Arab Christians in South Arabia that Mohammad encountered. Al-Ḥarīrī even jumps abruptly to the conclusion that Waraqa was the president of the church in Makkah during Abdul Mutalib’s life (Mohammad’s uncle) and for a long period of time during Mohammad’s life.¹⁵⁶

Other scholars think that the Qur’anic view of the Trinity was influenced by Christian sects/cults that exalted Mary far above her usual Christian status.¹⁵⁷ William Montgomery Watt, Scottish Anglican Islamologist, suggests that Mohammad’s attack on the Trinity was not against an orthodox Christian formulation but rather against a heterodox community—people who believed in God and yet introduced false doctrines.¹⁵⁸ He explains that the idea that Mary was part of the Trinity “may have come from an obscure set of Collyridians, heard of in Arabia more

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 35-36. The original Arabic: فذكر القرآن العربي لانجيل واحد دون غيره يثبت ان "الانجيل العبراني" هو وحده كان معروفاً، لا سيما وإنما نجد بينه وبين القرآن توافقاً تاماً في العقيدة والفروض والعبادات واحوال المعاد..."

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 37.

¹⁵⁷ John Kalner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur’an for Bible Readers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 272.

¹⁵⁸ William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (Routledge Taylor&Francis: NY, 1991), 23.

than two centuries before Muhammad.”¹⁵⁹ Collyridians were a cultic group in Arabia, composed mainly of women who worshiped Mary the mother of Jesus.¹⁶⁰ Epiphanius of Salamis writes in his *Panarion* about a group of women who came from Thrace to Arabia who seemed to adopt a particular form of devotion to Mary, offering her loaves of bread on appointed days (called in Greek *Kollyris*).¹⁶¹ Furthermore, Jamāl al-Dīn Qāsimī, a Syrian Muslim scholar, supports Watt’s idea and argues for the possibility that Surah 5:73 refers to the Collyridians as a Christian sect. He states, “Among the Christians there was a group (firqa) called ‘Collyridians’ who said that gods are three: the Father, the Son, and Mary.”¹⁶² Despite the claim “Arabia is the mother of heresies,”¹⁶³ this view has no historical evidence in early Islamic and Christian literature. There is no evidence that Mohammad was in touch with the Collyridians, and Epiphanius’s polemic implies that they were an obscure sect of no great importance.¹⁶⁴

As for the origin of the Quranic reference to Mary as one of three gods, Watt mentions another possible explanation by referring to the goddess connotations of Mary found in the relatively early Christian Apocrypha.¹⁶⁵ There is evidence that before the fourth century scribes

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ G. Kruger, s.v. “Collyridian,” *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, accessed February 11, 2021, https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/encyc03/encyc03/Page_162.html

¹⁶¹ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73. 23.

¹⁶² Jamāl al-Dīn Al-Qāsimī, *Maḥāsīn al-ta’wīl*, vol. 6, (Cairo, Egypt: Dārihyā’ al-kutub al-‘arabiyya, 1957), 2008.

¹⁶³ Samuel M. Zwemer, *Arabia: The Cradle of Islam*. (NY: The Caxton Press, 1900), np.

¹⁶⁴ Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (JN: Princeton University Press, 1986), 44-45.

¹⁶⁵ Meyer, *Gospel of Thomas*, 101, “For my mother gave me falsehood, but my true mother gave me life,” *NHL* accessed Feb 12, 2021, <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom-meyer.html>. Isenberg, *Gospel of Philip*, “Some said, Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit. They are in error. They do not know what they are saying. When did a woman ever conceive by a woman?” *NHL*, accessed Feb 12, 2021, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html>.

in ancient Syria described the Holy Spirit not only as a female but also as a mother.¹⁶⁶ Suzan Ashbrook Harvey explains that the Syriac church emphasized the birth of Jesus, his baptism in the Jordan, and his descent to Sheol as imagery in relation to baptism; whereas, the Greco-Latin churches highlighted the “resurrection, of baptism as a dying and rising, and the baptismal water as the grave, following on the Pauline teachings of Rom 6:4-6 especially.”¹⁶⁷ Ashbrook Harvey continues, “In early Syriac tradition Baptism was above all a rebirth, following John 3:3-7, and the baptismal water was the ‘womb’ that bore true sons and daughters for the heavenly kingdom. Baptism became the ‘Mother of Christianity,’ as Mary has been the Mother of Christ.”¹⁶⁸ It seems that cults understood the baptismal imagery in this way: as Mary gave birth to Jesus through her womb, Christ gave birth to Christians through the womb of the baptismal waters. Thus, womb imagery might have been used in Gnostic and apocryphal literature to identify Jesus’s mother with the Holy Spirit, possibly due to the feminine form of the word Spirit in Syriac language.¹⁶⁹ Ashbrook Harvey indicates that the shift to the masculine form of the word Spirit which occurred during the fifth century was to bring the Syriac churches into closer conformity with those of the Greco-Latin West.¹⁷⁰

Recent critical scholarship of the Qur’an as represented by the works of Sidney Griffith and Gabriel Reynolds displays a shift from the heretical Quranic explanation to the emphasis on the rhetorical language of the Qur’an. According to these scholars, the misunderstanding of the

¹⁶⁶ Sebastian Brock, *Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition*, vol. 9, (UK: Oxford, 1979), 3-8.

¹⁶⁷ Suzan Ashbrook Harvey, “Feminine Imagery for the Divine,” *Orthodox Theological Society of America, St Vladimir’s Seminary*, (June 1990) and at *Yale University*, (March 1991): 119.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, 23.

¹⁷⁰ Ashbrook Harvey, “Feminine Imagery for the Divine,” 121.

Trinity should not be understood as referring to heretical sects but rather “as a rhetorical device developed by the Qur’an to win over an argument in such a polemical environment.”¹⁷¹ For example, when Mohammad claimed that Christians said “God is Jesus, the son of Mary” or “God is the third of three,” he was not simply repeating these narratives, but he was using polemical statements to allude, add, and even correct them. Sidney Griffith states that “the Qur’an’s seeming misstatement, rhetorically speaking, should therefore not be thought to be a mistake, but rather a polemically inspired caricature, the purpose of which is to highlight in Islamic terms the absurdity, and therefore the wrongness, of the Christian belief, from an Islamic perspective.”¹⁷² Reynolds echoes Griffith, saying that “Christians refer to Christ as the son of God, and the Qur’an explicitly rejects this appellation [sic] (Q 9:30), yet it also insists (against the Jews) that Christ had no father at all (Q 3:59), and so it cannot refer to him as ‘Son of *his father*.’ Thus, the Qur’an refers to Jesus as the son of *his mother*, and thereby encapsulates its argument against both Christians and Jews.”¹⁷³ Given their knowledge about Arabic culture and the way Arabs argue, Griffith and Reynolds’s suggestion seem very reasonable; however, taking into consideration the types of Christianity that were available to Mohammad in Arabia and the context of his conversations with them might reveal a better understanding of his statements about Christianity. In my estimation, there is no problem with any of the above-mentioned approaches. They are all prospects that scholars should pursue, but my study seeks to propose

¹⁷¹ Mun’im Sirry, “Other Religions,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur’an*, eds., Andrew Rippin and Jawid Mojaddedi (NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 329.

¹⁷² Sidney H. Griffith, “Al-Naşārā in the Qur’ān: A hermeneutical reflection,” in *New Perspectives on the Qur’ān: The Qur’ān in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds, (London, UK: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2011), 311.

¹⁷³ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur’an and the Many Aspects of Qur’anic Rhetoric,” *Al-Bayan - Journal Of Qur’ān And Hadīth Studies* 12, (2014): 48-49.

different possibilities. According to my research, a different explanation may account for the Qur'anic misunderstanding that scholars have not presented yet.

The Theotokos Icon: A Historical Background

The *Theotokos* icon was widely spread among Christians in the Levant, Egypt, and Ethiopia. The few icons that survived were dated between the fourth and seventh centuries, indicating that such icons were widely spread among Christians well before the rise of Islam. One example of these is a fourth-century image of Mary and Child seated on a throne, discovered in the city of al-Fayyum in Egypt and is now in the Staatliche Museum in Berlin.¹⁷⁴ Another is a fifth or sixth-century image of a venerated Virgin and Child appearing on a fragmentary papyrus leaf from the Alexandrian Chronicle in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.¹⁷⁵ A sixth-century ampulla from Palestine, now residing at Monza in the Treasury of the Collegiale, depicts the mother Mary and baby Jesus sitting in the same posture.¹⁷⁶ There is also a surviving seventh-century image of Mary holding her child in an apse in Saqqara in Egypt.¹⁷⁷ Besides these, excavators found a sixth-century mural painting of Mary (though her face did not survive) in Kom el-Dikka, Alexandria. She was seated on a throne and accompanied by angels, and the Child is seated in a frontal position on her left knee. According to Thomas Mathews and Norman Muller, the image is an important testimony to the veneration of Marian images in early

¹⁷⁴ Pierre du Bourguet, *L'art Copte* (Paris, France: Ministère D'Etat Affaires Culturelles, 1967), 92.

¹⁷⁵ André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (London, UK: Princeton University Press, 1980), 321.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹⁷⁷ Martyrium A. Grabar, *Recherches sur le culte des reliques chretien antique*, vol. 2, (Paris, France: Collège de France, 1946), 572.

Byzantine and Egyptian churches.¹⁷⁸ The icons and images mentioned here are few among many that survived.

In a study about the term *Theotokos*, J. A. McGuckin expresses his belief that “the word is an ancient Alexandrian theologoumenon that made its way by themed third century to an international arena because of its use by leading Logos theologians in Egypt, Palestine, and Rome.”¹⁷⁹ Building on McGuckin’s study, Mathews and Muller conclude that Marian icons started in Egypt with the goddess Isis, who had been called both the Mother of the God (because she was the mother of the divine Horus) and the Great Virgin (because she miraculously conceived her son after he had died).¹⁸⁰ The historicity of this theory is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, if Matthew and Muller’s conclusion is right, then it is reasonable to say that when the Roman empire was following pagan religions, people made images and venerated their pagan gods. In the same manner once the Roman empire moved to Christianity, people began making and venerating Christian figurative art. Without conscious thought about their pagan origins, they began forming a new theology about the holy images.

In the wider Christian world, a large number of the sixth and seventh-century churches included mosaics, an art form that displayed the brilliant work of the era. In a church in Thessaloniki, now transformed into a mosque, “the Ascension of Christ is portrayed on the vault of the cupola, while on the apse, the Virgin, seated on a gem-encrusted throne, bears the Baby Jesus in her arms.”¹⁸¹ A similar iconography occurs in a mosaic of Mary and Jesus in the chapel

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ J. McGuckin, “The Paradox of the Virgin-Theotokos: Evangelism and Imperial Politics in the 5th-Century Byzantine World,” *Maria, A Journal of Marian Theology*, vol. 2 no. 1, (2001): 12.

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Mathews and Norman Muller, “Isis and Mary in Early Icons,” in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed., Maria Vassilaki, (NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 4.

¹⁸¹ Charles Bayet, *Byzantine Art* (NY: Parkstone International, 2008), 26.

of San Zeno in Santa Prassede in Rome (AD 817-824).¹⁸² In conclusion, the *Theotokos* icons were widely spread among Christians in most churches in different styles, shapes, and sizes before the seventh century. Christians adorned, venerated, and used them in their worship.

The Theotokos Title: A Theological Background

The Theological Argument before the Sixth Century

The theological conversation about the *Theotokos* started in the fifth century during the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, when Cyril of Alexandria advocated for venerating Mary by giving her the title *Theotokos* (the one who conceived or gave birth to God). Cyril anathematized Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, who advocated for the *Christotokos* (the one who gave birth to Christ). The council ended up voting in favor of Cyril and for use of the title *Theotokos*.

Cyril taught that the Word of God was conceived in Mary's womb in order to sanctify humanity. The immortal God united himself to a mortal human flesh (even in death) to accomplish the incorruptibility and imperishability of the flesh in his own body for the whole human race.¹⁸³ By uniting himself to human death in Christ, God who is immortal overcame death and thus enabled flesh to be set beyond death and corruption.¹⁸⁴ Sarah Jane Boss describes it well when she says that Jesus "took what was ours to be his very own so that we might have all that was his."¹⁸⁵ In order to accomplish this purpose, God used Mary to bring forth corporally God made one with flesh. Cyril states,

¹⁸² G. R. D. King, "The Paintings of the Pre-Islamic Ka'ba," *Muqarnas*, Vol. 21, (2004): 222.

¹⁸³ St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Festal Letters 8*, ed. John J. O'Keefe, (Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 148-152.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Sarah Jane Boss, "The Title Theotokos," in *Mary: the Complete Resource*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52.

For this reason we also call her Mother of God, not as if the nature of the Word had the beginning of its existence from the flesh. For ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God,’ and he is the Maker of the ages, coeternal with the Father, and Creator of all; but, as we have already said, since he united to himself hypostatically human nature from her womb, also he subjected himself to birth as man, not as needing necessarily in his own nature birth in time and in these last times of the world, but in order that he might bless the beginning of our existence, and that that which sent the earthly bodies of our whole race to death, might lose its power for the future by his being born of a woman in the flesh.¹⁸⁶

Cyril of Alexandria calls Mary the Mother of God not because he thought she was divine but because Jesus is God, and she played a role in the divine plan for saving humanity. To Cyril, refusing to call Mary the Mother of God equals denying Jesus’s divinity. Cyril sent letters of condemnation to Nestorius, stating that “if anyone refuses to confess that the Emmanuel is in truth God, and therefore that the holy virgin is Mother of God (θεοτόκος), for she gave birth after a fleshly manner to the Word of God made flesh; let him be anathema.”¹⁸⁷

It was in honor of the definition by the Council of Ephesus of Mary as *Theotokos* that Pope Sixtus III built the most important shrine to Mary in the West, the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.¹⁸⁸ The theological argument and the council of Ephesus helped to spread the icon of the *Theotokos* among churches in the West and the East after the sixth century, especially after Mary officially became known as the Mother of God.

The Theological Argument after the Sixth Century

After the council of Ephesus, the veneration of Mary started developing into different

¹⁸⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, “The Epistle of Cyril to Nestorius with the XII Anathematisms,” in *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Henry R. Percival, vol. 14, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 205.

¹⁸⁷ The council of Ephesus, “Counter-statements to Cyril’s 12 Anathemas,” *New Advent*, accessed February 23, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2701.htm>.

¹⁸⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, “The Theotokos, the Mother of God,” in *Mary Through the Centuries* (UK: Yale University Press, 1996), 56.

cults. According to Hans Belting, in the seventh century, “a new and decisive phase of the Virgin’s cult began when the capital and the hard-pressed empire needed a support in the age of wars against the Avars and the Persian, and ultimately against Islam.”¹⁸⁹ By AD 626, after the great siege of the city of Constantinople by the Avars and the Persians, Mary had emerged as the special protectress. People believed that her icon saved them from their enemies,¹⁹⁰ which made her veneration even stronger.

According to Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, the earliest images to acquire cult status were the *acheiropoeta* of images (made without hands). They are of two kinds: either they are images believed not to be made by human hands or they are the mechanical impressions of the divine face or the body—miraculous impressions of the celestials.¹⁹¹ Three *acheiropoeta* manifested during the second half of the sixth century:

The so-called mandylion of Edessa, an imprint of Christ’s face on a piece of linen, was a contact relic, the sanctity of which was multiplied by the miraculous portrait that immediately appeared on it. It is first attested c. 590 by Evagrius, and at about the same time we hear of two more *acheiropoeta* of Christ: one, in Memphis (Egypt), is mentioned by the so-called Piacenza pilgrim c. 570, the other in kamoulianai (Syria), is described in a Syriac epitome of a chronicle by Zachariah of Mitylene written by an anonymous monk in 569. Like relics, *acheiropoeta* had intercessory and salvatory power: they superseded the role of Roman urban palladia—statues that housed the soul of the city—and channeled divine force to Christian community. Evagrius credited the Edessa portrait with the salvation of that city, and, in 626 an *acheiropoieton* image of Christ (perhaps the Kamoulianai portrait) famously saved Constantinople from the Avars.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35.

¹⁹⁰ Averil Cameron, “The Theotokos in Sixth-Century Constantinople: A City Finds its Symbol,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1978): 79.

¹⁹¹ Ernst Kislinger, “The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 8, (1954): 128-129.

¹⁹² Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era C. 680-850: A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 35-36.

The fact that churches and individual people perceived this as a miracle played a great role in increasing veneration of images and leading to the formation of several cults. This concept persisted until the last quarter of the seventh century because it was believed that the holy images and relics had miraculous or intercessory powers.¹⁹³

In most pre-iconoclastic representations, Mary is depicted as holding Jesus, the Child, and presenting him to the world. She is not only venerated because of her role in the incarnation but also as an intercessor. Among the many examples of pre-iconoclastic imagery that have been given, Mary is also “identified by an inscription as HAGIA MAPIA and is flanked by the archangels. A suggestion of her role as intercessor is made by the enthroned figure of Christ placed directly over her.”¹⁹⁴ There is an icon by the south door of the church of Hagia Sofia in Constantinople (modern Istanbul) depicting the Virgin with Constantine and Justinian on either side of her. In her lap sits the Christ child. This mosaic has stood in its place for over one thousand years. While it is not known when it was created and concealed under the whitewash and plaster, the current image dates back to the tenth or eleventh century, witnessing the important role that medieval Christians gave to Mary.¹⁹⁵

By the seventh century, churches had begun incorporating Christian symbols in their designs (such as the shape of the cross and Christ’s image) because they resemble the physical likeness and the work of God in human form. Ernst Kitzinger reports that the cult of Christian images increased and intensified from the middle of the sixth century until the imposition of

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ioli Kalavrezou, “Images of the Mother: When the Virgin Mary Became ‘Meter Theou,’” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 44 (1990): 168.

¹⁹⁵ Nicholas N. Patricios, *The Sacred Architecture of Byzantium: Art, Liturgy, and Symbolism in Early Christian Churches* (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 346-347.

iconoclasm in AD 730.¹⁹⁶ It is beyond the scope of this research to study the history of the iconoclasm; however, it is important to mention that many Christians saw the iconoclasm as a response to a strong and steady rise in the importance of sacred images from the sixth century onwards.

By contrast, Palestinian iconoclasm, according to Brubaker and Haldon, “was not consistently applied; and, in Palestine, it seems to have been a localized response rather than the realization of some anti-image edict by the ruling caliph.”¹⁹⁷ Under the Umayyads in Damascus and during the period of Leo III’s rule in the Byzantine empire, five churches attest to active construction and a skilled artisanal workforce employed by Christians. People facing day-to-day consequences of Umayyad rule were in a different situation from people living under Byzantine rule. Iconoclasm in Palestine was neither inspired by Byzantine iconoclasm nor spurred by any official Islamic policy. The Byzantine iconoclasm was not accepted by Christian churches in the East after AD 754. It was condemned in AD 760, 764, and 767 by Eastern synods and patriarchs.¹⁹⁸ The Byzantine iconoclasm did not affect the prevalence of the *Theotokos* as drastically as one might think. While the Western iconoclasts rejected the images of Christ, Mary, and the saints, the Eastern iconophiles acknowledged, defended, and even actively advanced the decoration of their churches with pictorial renderings of secular themes.¹⁹⁹

Mohammad’s Experience with the Christians During His Life

The Arabic appellation for Christians (*masīḥīyūn*) never appears in the Qur’an. The

¹⁹⁶ Kislinger, “The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm,” 128-129.

¹⁹⁷ Brubaker & Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era*, 107.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁹⁹ Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of An Idea* (NY: New York University Press, 1995), 265.

writer of the Qur'an used instead several other terms that we understand to refer to Christians. For instance, the most common appellation that Mohammad and Muslims deploy is *naṣārā*. According to Griffith, "In the early Islamic period, Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims alike regularly used the Qur'an's term *naṣārā* as the functional equivalent of the name 'Christians' (Χριστιανοί *masīḥīyyūn*) for the several ecclesial communities of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 11:26), who lived in the world of Islam."²⁰⁰ Today, Arab Christians do not use this word to refer to their religion; however, many Muslims still use it to refer to Christians. It is also important to note that the English translation of *naṣārā* always appeared as *Christians* in the Islamic scripture. *Naṣārā*, however, is not the only appellation that is used to refer to Christians. Labels such as "Scripture People" (*ahl al-kitāb*) and "Gospel People" (*ahl al-injīl*) have been used as well (Surah 5:47, 59, 65, 68, 77, 57:29).

The appellations above and the evidence of an exchange of information between Muslims and Christians suggest that Mohammad was in contact with Christians in different places and at different times throughout his life. According to Muhammad Hamidullah, Makkah was a developed city that contained people from different religions.²⁰¹ While Medina was a less-developed city, compared to Makkah, it was "a single house that encompasses people of diverse beliefs within its walls."²⁰² Islamic literature mentions several Jewish tribes such as Banī Qurāza and Banī Nuḍair who lived in Medina, and it also affirms that Mohammad was in contact with Christians. Actually, Mohammad met with Christians in several places: in the Levant, Makkah,

²⁰⁰ Griffith, "Al-Naṣārā in the Qur'an: A hermeneutical reflection," 303.

²⁰¹ Muhammad Hamidullah, "Aqdam Dustur Musajjal fi-l-'Alam," *Islamic Scholars Conference*, vol. 1 (1937): 98, accessed February 14, 2021, retrieved from <https://abulhasanalinadwi.org/book/aqdam-dastoor-musajjal-fil-aa/>

²⁰² Ibid., 99. "فكان بيت واحد يضمن بين جدرانه اناسا مختلفين في الاديان"

and Medina. Both Surah al-Nisā' and Surah al-Mā'da are Madni Surahs (written in Medina) that include speeches related to Christians (Surah 4: 171; 5:78). This evidence indicates that Mohammad was in contact with Jews and Christians, and this contact was formative to Islamic identity.

In the Levant

Mohammad's initial interaction with Christians possibly occurred early in his life when he traveled to the Levant with his uncle for trade. Most Syrian monasteries appear to have been situated near the major trade routes because these monks sought interaction with travelers. According to Islamic biographer Ibn Ishāq, Mohammad traveled to Syria with his uncle on a merchant caravan. While they were near Buṣra in Syria, they met with monk Baḥīrā "who was well versed in the knowledge of Christians. A monk had always occupied that cell. There he gained his knowledge from a book that was in the cell so they allege, handed on from generation to generation."²⁰³ Christian literature written between the sixth and the tenth centuries do not mention Baḥīrā nor the encounter between him and Mohammad. Richard Gottheil has translated Syriac and Arabic documents about the legend of Sergius Baḥīrā, who is believed to be the same monk that Mohammad met in Syria; however, he dates these documents to the late eleventh and probably early twelfth centuries.²⁰⁴ These documents seem to be written for polemic purposes, emphasizing that Baḥīrā was the original channel for Muhammad's revelations. As Guillaume mentions in his introduction to the *Life of Muhammad*, it is hard to authenticate this story.²⁰⁵ The part that describes Baḥīrā owning an ancient book that was handed down from one generation to

²⁰³ A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sirat Rasūl Allah* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79.

²⁰⁴ Richard Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira legend" *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, vol. 13 (1898): 192.

²⁰⁵ Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, xix.

another does not give enough information regarding whether this book is an apocryphal book, such as the Gospel according to the Hebrews, one of the four Gospels, the Diatessaron, or another book. Despite the lack of detail, this story does offer a glimpse of Mohammad coming into contact with Christians of some sort—however, it is hard to know whether they were orthodox or heretical.

In Arabia

It's possible that the first thorough interaction between Mohammad and Christians took place in Arabia. Most Islamic scholars agree that Khadija, the first wife of Mohammad, was a Christian, and her cousin was a monk. Khadija was a rich merchant woman in Mecca who hired Mohammad to transport and sell her goods in Syria after she heard about his admirable character. After their marriage, Khadija arranged for Mohammad to meet with her cousin, monk Waraqa ibn Naufal, who was introduced in Islamic literature as a “blind, elderly Christian sage with profound knowledge of the Bible.”²⁰⁶ Like the story of monk Baḥīrā, the narrative of the life of Waraqa is equivocal. Some Islamic sources suggest that Waraqa died shortly after recognizing Mohammad as a prophet.²⁰⁷ Others suggest that Waraqa learned from those who followed the Torah and the Gospel, wrote the Gospels to the Hebrews, and helped Mohammad launch his new religion.²⁰⁸ A study written by Brian C. Bradford suggests that the Hebrew books Waraqa read “could have included groups who possessed a *Hebrew Matthew*, the *Diatessaron*, *According to the Hebrews*, or any of the other texts that have been shown to have Qur’anic parallels.”²⁰⁹ Finally, the above-mentioned study by al-Ḥarīrī,

²⁰⁶ Recep Senturk, *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, ed. Joseph Meri (NY: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 167.

²⁰⁷ Bukharī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī*, Hadīth no. 3, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:3>.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Brian C. Bradford, “The Qur’anic Jesus: A Study of Parallels with Non-Biblical Texts” (PhD diss., Western Michigan University, 2013), 141.

affirms that Waraqa was not a Christian but an Ebionite monk who helped Mohammad to launch his new religion and that all the references to the word *naṣāra* in the Qur'an were added later by 'Uthmān.²¹⁰ Regardless of the background of Waraqa (orthodox or non-orthodox), the salient point for our discussion is that Mohammad's biography shows that he was in contact with Christians, that he probably met with them in their churches, and that Waraqa was one of them.

The second contact between Mohammad and Christians is well-documented in Islamic literature. While Christians were not numerous in Makkah, South Arabia was home to several well-organized Christian communities. Excavations in the city of Sana'a in Yemen revealed a big cathedral called Qalis church, which represents a strong Christian presence in South Arabia. Islamic sources tell the story of King Abraha al-Ashram, who built a great cathedral in Sana'a and called it Qalis.²¹¹ Ibn al-Kalbi cites Abraha explaining to the king of Ethiopia after having completed the building of the church stating, "I have built to you a church / the like of which no one has ever built. I shall not let the Arabs alone until I divert their pilgrimage away from the house to which they go and turn its course to this church."²¹² It seems that the purpose of Abraha was to create a turning point in the pilgrimage in Makkah to Sana'a by making a great cathedral that competes with *Ka'ba*, instituting a great center for Christianity in South Arabia. This story informs the reader that Christianity was well-established in the Arabic Peninsula before the birth of Mohammad.

In addition to Sana'a, a famous area in South Arabia called Najrān has surfaced in both Christian and Islamic hagiographies. Christianity was well-rooted for more than a century in this

²¹⁰ Al-Hariri, *Priest and Prophet*, 272-282.

²¹¹ Hishām Ibn-al-Kalbi, *The Book of Idols*, Trans. Nabih Amin Faris, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), 40.

²¹² Ibid.

area before the birth of Mohammad. According to Irfan Shahid, “Najrān converted to Christianity in the first half of the fifth century by Ḥayyān, one of its merchants, who brought the Christian Gospel from Ḥīra before the birth of the Monophysite movement.”²¹³ Philostorgius writes in his *Church History* about Theophilus, who was sent to the Ḥimyarite ruler Ta’ran Yuhan’im, who then converted to Christianity.²¹⁴ As a result of his conversion, three churches were constructed, one in the capital city of Zafār, one in Aden, and one near the mouth of the Persian Gulf.²¹⁵ Moreover, The Najrānite Christian community was linked with Abyssinia (Ethiopia), which had strong political relations in Yemen in AD 525, a connection that subsequently strengthened the Christian life in Najrān. According to Islamic resources, Najrān used to have its own *Ka’ba* to compete with the one in Makkah.²¹⁶

The struggle between Christianity and Judaism before the rise of Islam reached its climax in the sixth century in Najrān. A major Ethiopian military intervention “brought about the downfall of the Ḥimyaritic kingdom of South Arabia and spread the Christian faith as well as the dominion of the Negus across the Red Sea.”²¹⁷ A recently discovered Syriac manuscripts reveal several events of severe persecution that happened in the city of Najrān in AD 523 against the

²¹³ Irfan Shahid, *Byzantine and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1 (Dc, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library And Collection, 1995), 711.

²¹⁴ C. Jonn Block, “Philoponian Monophysitism in South Arabia at the Advent of Islam With Implications for the English Translation of Thalātha' In Qur’ān 4. 171 And 5. 73,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 23, No. 1 (2012): 71.

²¹⁵ Irfan Shahid, *Byzantine and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Dc, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library And Collection, 1984), 89.

²¹⁶ Hishām Ibn-al-Kalbi, *The Book of Idols*, Trans. Nabih Amin Faris, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1952), 40.

²¹⁷ Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents* (Bruxelle, Belgique: Société des Bollandistes, 1971), 7.

Christians, led by a pagan king who converted to Judaism.²¹⁸ Thus, Najrān became the Arabian martyropolis, a place of pilgrimage for the Arabic Christian tribes in the Arabian Peninsula.

Several historians believe that Christians in Najrān were Monophysites.²¹⁹ Monophysites believe in that Jesus Christ only has one nature, the divine nature, and that his humanity was either dissolved in a sea of divinity or absorbed into the divine at the moment of incarnation.²²⁰

According to Shahid, “It was in the reign of Anastasius and through the vision of Philoxenus that Najran acquired its strong Monophysite character, which determined the confessional stance of South Arabia for a century till the rise of Islam.”²²¹ If this claim is true, then it is reasonable to conclude that the Christians of Najrān—or the ones who were in contact with Mohammad, at least—were Monophysites. This piece of information should clue us in on why primary Christian terms such as Trinity, Father, and Holy Spirit were not mentioned in the Qur’an, and why Mary was understood to be included in the Trinity.

It seems that Monophysites had an opposite Christological belief from the Muslims, who denied the divine nature of Jesus and emphasized his humanity, claiming that he was just a prophet. Monophysites, on the other hand, denied the human nature of Jesus after the incarnation and emphasized the divine nature. Their major concern when they shared their belief with others was the divine nature of Christ. The emphasis on Jesus’s divinity is obvious in the Syriac

²¹⁸ There are several Syriac letters that document several stories about martyrdom and persecution happened against the Himyarite Christians in Najrān. Ignatious Ya^oqūb الشهداء الحميريون العرب في الوثائق السريانية [the Martyrs of the Arab Himyarites in Syriac Manuscript] (Damascus, Syria: Syrian Patriarchate of Antioch, 1966), 24-82.

²¹⁹ Tereza Heintaler, المسيحيين العرب قبل الإسلام [The Arab Christians before Islam], trans. Lamis Fayed, (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Nashir al-Usqufiya, 2017), 203. Ya^oqūb الشهداء الحميريون العرب في الوثائق السريانية [the Martyrs of the Arab Himyarites in Syriac Manuscript], 13-14. Shahīd, The Martyrs of Najran, 36-37.

²²⁰ A. A. Luce, *Monophysitism Past and Present: A Study in Christology*, Project Gutenberg, released December, 2009, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30219/30219-h/30219-h.htm>.

²²¹ Shahid, *Byzantine and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 711.

documents of the mass martyrdom of the Najranites. These documents include several stories recounting that many men and women who were martyred because they refused to deny the divinity of Christ. The Jewish king killed the women's husbands and gave them another chance, saying,

You have seen with your very own eyes your husbands put to death because they refused to renounce Christ and the cross, and because they blasphemously claimed that Christ is God and son of Adonay. But do you have pity on yourselves now, and on your sons and your daughters: deny Christ and the cross, and become Jewish like us; then you shall live. Otherwise you will certainly be put to death.²²²

The women were scared neither of death nor being burned alive. They replied, "Christ is God and Son of the Merciful One; we believe in him and we worship him; for his sake we will die. Far be it from us to deny him or to go on living after the deaths of our husbands. No, like them and alongside them we shall die for Christ's sake."²²³ As mentioned above, Christian terms such as Trinity, Father, and Holy Spirit are not mentioned in this story. These women acknowledged their belief in the Father by referring to him as the Merciful One and emphasized the divinity of Jesus by being willing to die for his sake. It is interesting to see the Najrānites willing to die for the sake of Jesus, not the Father or God. The prominence that they gave to Jesus's divinity in contrast to the Trinity might explain the Islamic denial of Jesus's divinity and the omission of the Trinity in the Qur'an. Mohammad's emphasis on God's unity, solitary, and singularity speaks directly against the Monophysite belief in Jesus being divine. Mohammad probably refused Monophysitism because it conveys double divinities.

The scholarship of C. Jonn Block renders this circumstance increasingly likely. He reports that a certain kind of Monophysitism was short-lived in the late sixth century, a variant of

²²² Sebastian Brock, & Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (University of California Press, 1998), 108

²²³ Ibid.

orthodox Monophysitism. He calls it “Philoponian Tritheism.”²²⁴ It was “dominant in South Arabia, in which Christians worshipped three distinct gods. No longer one nature and three persons, the Philoponians recognized doctrinally three distinct natures. The doctrine came from John Philoponus and was spread by the bishops Conon and Eugenius.”²²⁵ The theology of John Philoponus propagated three individual natures for the three persons of the Trinity and further denied any common substance between them. Philoponus states in a surviving fragment of his book *On the Trinity*,

They [divine persons] do not have equality of substance with respect to their properties, that is, in those things by which this one is Father, this one Son, and this one Holy Spirit. In accordance with these [distinctions], they are different in species and separate from one another... It is the same with “animal,” which is generally said of all animals, though they vary by species. When “rational” or “irrational” is added to “animal,” then they are differentiated in species from one another: one animal is rational, another animal irrational. Therefore, when “Father” and “Son” and “Holy Spirit” are added to “divinity,” it makes God the Father not the same as God the Son and the divine Spirit. And so, each one of them is subsequently different from the other two.²²⁶

It seems that Philoponian Tritheism acknowledges the existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three individuals, and it does not accept the credal position on the Trinity. If the people of Najrān were following this particular type of Monophysitism, then it makes sense that Mohammad understood trinitarianism as believing in three gods, as he expresses in the Qur’an (Surah 2:135; 3:67; 4:171).

Islamic resources record that the Christians of Najrān visited and communicated their belief to Mohammad on several occasions. This study will focus on two of them. The first group

²²⁴ Block, “South Arabia at the advent of Islam,” 51

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ellen Muehlberger trans., “John Philoponus, Fragments on the Trinity,” in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*, ed. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 359.

of Christian from Najrān visited the prophet when he was living in Makkah.²²⁷ They asked him questions about Islam, and at the end of the meeting, they listened to him reciting the Qur'an: "their eyes flowed with tears and they accepted God's call, believed in him, and declared his truth."²²⁸ It seems that this group returned to Najrān and reported what happened to their leaders, who in turn, sent another larger and more religiously knowledgeable group to converse with Mohammad.

The second group of Najrānites visited Mohammad after he moved to Medina. This cohort of sixty included fourteen of their best men, their prince, their bishop, and their pontiff.²²⁹ Mohammad allowed them to pray in the mosque when their time of prayer came. After a long theological discussion, the Najranites recognized Mohammad as a prophet, but they decided to hold to their religion.²³⁰ Al-Waḥidī details the conversation that they had with Mohammad when he asked them to surrender to Allah. They said, "We have surrendered to Allah before you." Mohammad replies, "You lie! Three things prevent you from surrendering to Allah: your worship of the cross, eating pork and your claim that Allah has a son." They asked him back, "Then who is the father of Jesus?" Mohammad refused to give them an answer and asked to come back the next day.²³¹ Al-Waḥidī mentions that Allah, on this occasion, revealed Surah 3:59

²²⁷ Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 179.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Abī Ḥasan ʿalī al-Waḥidī, *أسباب النزول* [Asbāb al-Nuzūl], ed., ʿiṣām al-Ḥmidān, (Dammam, Saudi Arabia: Dar al-ʾIṣlāḥ, 1992), 97. The Arabic version of al-Waḥidī even mentions some names: the prince's name is Abdul Massīḥ, the bishop's name is Al-Ayham, and the pontiff's name is Abū Ḥāritha ibn ʿalqama. The English version is published by "*The Tafsirs*," but it does not include the names of the Najranites' deputation. <https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=86&tSoraNo=3&tAyahNo=59&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2>. accessed February 17, 2021.

²³⁰ Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 179.

²³¹ Al-Waḥidī, *أسباب النزول*, 97.

as an answer to the Najrānites.²³² Allah said, “Surely the likeness of Isa is with Allah as the likeness of Adam, He created him from dust, then said to him, Be, and he was” (Surah 3:59). The reason behind revealing this Surah might seem contradictory to the Islamic explanation of the origin and the virgin birth of Jesus; however, it is not the purpose of this study to make such analysis. What the reader needs to note is that the Najrānites had a long theological conversation with Mohammad about the nature and the origin of Jesus. Mary and her divinity were not mentioned in this conversation, according to Islamic writings, which suggests another source for Mohammad’s belief that Christians held to her divinity.

Ibn Kathīr records a detailed explanation of this verse and the conversation between Mohammad and the Najrānites.²³³ While the Christians insisted on their belief in the divinity of Jesus, Mohammad could not provide evidence for his opposing belief. In order to save the situation, he invited them for *al-Mubāhaleh* (Surah 3:60-61). This term means “to curse one another and then appeal to Allah”²³⁴ for an answer. In other words, when performing *al-Mubāhaleh*, one party curses the belief and the people of the other party and asks Allah to intervene by revealing who is the winning party. The Najrānites were safe and peaceful people who had experienced mass martyrdom in their history. They feared losing and asked Mohammad to give them another option. He offered three alternatives: to convert to Islam, to pay *jizya*, or to go to war.²³⁵ The Najrānites decided to pay *jizya*. It is commonly believed that they were the first to pay *jizya* among non-Muslims, for *jizya* became a decree after opening Makkah in Surah

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Abū al-fidā Isma‘īl Ibn Kathīr, *تفسير القرآن العظيم* [The Explanation of the Great Qur’an] (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Ibn Ḥazm, 2000), 369-371.

²³⁴ الموسوعة الفقهية [theological Encyclopedia], s.v. “Mubāhaleh,” vol. 36, (Kuwait, al-Awqāf Ministry, 1996).

²³⁵ Ibid.

9:29.²³⁶

The interactions with Christians described above are not the only ones that scholars know of. Historians record more collaborations between Mohammad and Christians. Since they are of less significance, this study will only mention them briefly. The biography of Mohammad refers to him discussing Christian religion while sitting at the Marwa (a spot in Makkah), at the booth of a young Christian slave called Jabr, learning what he has to say about Christianity.²³⁷ It is also said that Mohammad learned about Christianity from his Coptic concubine, Mariyah.²³⁸ He listened to Christian sermons by the bishop of Najrān while attending a merchant festival near Mecca.²³⁹ All these interactions are documented in both Islamic and Christian sources, and they agree that Mohammad visited Christian monasteries, possibly churches, and conducted theological discussions about their Christological beliefs. None of these recorded interactions directly mention Christians teaching Mohammad about the divinity of Mary.

Mohammad's Awareness of Christian Iconography, Especially the Theotokos

It is highly likely that Mohammad saw the *Theotokos* image during his visits to Buṣra or the Levant as a boy. According to Matthew and Muller, “In Byzantine art the most important Mary and Christ icons were also door images, namely the *proskynetarion* icons of the icon screen, which are located left and right respectively of the door to the sanctuary.”²⁴⁰ If this is true, then Mohammad might have seen the image of the venerated Mary and Child for the first

²³⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *تفسير القرآن العظيم* [The Explanation of the Great Qur'an], 371.

²³⁷ Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 180.

²³⁸ ‘A’isha ‘abd al-Rahman, *نساء النبي* [the Prophet's wives] (self-published), 218-221. Guillaume, *Life of Muhammad* 653.

²³⁹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2013), 163.

²⁴⁰ Mathews and Muller, “Isis and Mary in Early Icons,” 9.

time in a Christian monastery in Syria.

Al-Balādhurī, a Muslim historian who collected documents and possessed the text of the peace treaty between Mohammad and the Christian of Najrān about *jizya*, offers an insightful note regarding Mohammad’s awareness of Christian iconography usage. The peace treaty made in exchange for the Najrānites’ safety includes a note about Christian images. After Mohammad defined the amount of *jizya*, the treaty mentions that “Najrān and their followers are entitled to the protection of Allah and the security of Muhammad the prophet, the Messenger of Allah, which security shall involve their persons, religion, lands and possessions, including those of them who are absent as well as those who are present, their camels, messengers and images.”²⁴¹ Al-Balādhurī indirectly suggests that the Christians of Najrān had images and relics most likely in their churches, and Mohammad was aware of them because he mentioned that they were to be protected with the other properties belonging to Christians.

Another Ḥadīth suggests that Mohammad saw the *Theotokos* image in al- Ka^ʿaba in Makkah. Most Islamic studies reveal that Makkah was a metropolitan center for pagan religions.²⁴² It is said that the interior of al-Ka^ʿaba was filled with pictures and relics of many gods. One of the pictures that Islamic resources mention is a sculpture of Mary and her Son Jesus. Al-Azraqī makes a detailed description of the exterior and the interior decorations of al-Ka^ʿaba, saying, “They paint on its pillars pictures of the prophets, trees, and angels; there was the picture of Abraham the friend of God (as an old man) dividing the arrows, a picture of Issā

²⁴¹ Abū al-ʿabās al-Balādhurī, *Kitāb Futhāt al-Buldān The Origins of the Islamic State*, trans. P. K. Hitti (New York and London, 1916), 100. In the footnote of the same source, the writer explains that images *tamathīl* means sculptures.

²⁴² Ibn-Al-Kalbi, *The Book of Idols*, 28.

the son of Mary and his mother, and a picture of the angels.”²⁴³ Al-Azraqī includes several other authenticated and non-authenticated Ḥadīths related to the same topic. The authenticated Ḥadīths are the ones that have an uninterrupted chain of speakers going back to the prophet or one of his close *ṣaḥāba* (followers). Al-Azraqī includes several authenticated Ḥadīths stating that the relic of Jesus and his mother was inside al- Ka^ʿaba, engraved on one of the pillars.²⁴⁴ For instance, Ḥadīth no. 180, which is classified as authenticated, states that “Abū al-Walīd told us, my grandfather said, whose own source was Da’ūd b. ‘Abd al-Rahman, whose source was ‘amrū bin Dinār, ‘Before the demolition of al-Ka^ʿaba, I have seen (the sculpture) of Issā bin Maryam and his mother.”²⁴⁵ Al-Azraqī includes also several Ḥadīths about Mohammad ordering ‘Omar his companion (who became the second caliph) to obliterate all the relics and images of al-Ka^ʿaba. Few of these Ḥadīths suggest that Mohammad asked to eliminate all relics and images except the one of Jesus and his mother.²⁴⁶ It does not concern this study whether Mohammad actually destroyed the images or not: the main concern is to know whether he saw these images. It seems that most of these Ḥadīths affirm that Mohammad saw the *Theotokos* sculpture. Ḥadīth no. 179 references Jesus seated on Mary’s lap, and they both were ornamented and embellished.²⁴⁷ The iconography of the seated Virgin with Jesus in her lap adorned is a universal piece of Christian

²⁴³ Abī al-Tawīd Al-Azraqī, *أخبار مكة وما جاء فيها من الآثار* [*the News of Makkah and its ruins*], edited and published by Abdula Dahīsh, 248. Original Arabic: “ وجعلوا في دعائمها صور الانبياء، وصور الشجر، وصور الملائكة؛ فكان منها “ صورة ابراهيم خليل الرحمن شيخ يستقسم بالأزلام، وصورة عيسى ابن مريم وأمه، وصورة الملائكة”

²⁴⁴ Ibid., Ḥadīth no. 179, page 250.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 251. أدركت في الكعبة قبل ان تهدم (تمثال) عيسى بن مريم وأمه.

²⁴⁶ It should be mentioned that the unauthenticated Ḥadīths suggest that Mohammad ordered to keep Jesus and his mother’s relics. Ibid., Ḥadīth no. 181, page 251, Ḥadīths no. 185, 187 page 253.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 250.

art. This Ḥadīth echoes the aforementioned resources and affirms that it was already widespread among Christians in the seventh century, even in Makkah.

Other Islamic sources suggests that Mohammad gained an awareness of the Christian images, relics, and statues from his wives who went to Ethiopia at the beginning of Mohammad's *da'wah* (calling). When Mohammad started calling his tribe Quraysh to Islam, he and many of his companions faced persecution. These circumstances led a large number of his followers to migrate to Ethiopia in approximately AD 615. Early Muslims *muhājirūn* (immigrants) encountered Christian paintings in the churches of Ethiopia as they sought refuge and help from Negus the king of Ethiopia. They even expressed their admiration of these images at the deathbed of Mohammad. This information is reported by authentic Islamic sources. In *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī*, "Um Habiba and Um Salama mentioned a church they had seen in Ethiopia in which there were pictures. They told the Prophet (ﷺ) about it."²⁴⁸ Imam Khatib at-Tabriz includes a similar Ḥadīth, stating that 'Aisha (the wife of the prophet) said that "when the Prophet was ill some of his wives mentioned a church called Mariya. Umm Salama and Umm Habiba who had gone to Abyssinia mentioned its beauty and the statues it contained."²⁴⁹ While these Hadiths do not prove that Mohammad saw the paintings in the Ethiopian churches, it shows that he was aware of their glory and beauty from his wives and friends.

The Islamic Belief about Images, Icons, and Figurative Arts

Islam is a monotheistic religion that believes in one God, Allah, the creator. It claims a kind of restorative bridge to Abraham, and it follows the footsteps of Moses in prohibiting the

²⁴⁸ Bukharī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī*, Ḥadīth no. 427, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:427>. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Ḥadīth no. 528a, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:528a>.

²⁴⁹ Imam Khatib at-Tabriz, *Mishkat al-Masabih*, vol. 22, Ḥadīth no. 195, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/mishkat:4508>.

use of holy religious images because of their association with idolatry and apostasy. Apart from the warning against idolatry, the Qur'an does not include an explicit prohibition of images. The Hadīths, however, contain clear and consistent statements against them. *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* mentions that “the people who will receive the severest punishment from Allah will be the picture makers.”²⁵⁰ Any kind of picture (pictures of plants, animals, or humans) that might distract the faithful person is forbidden in Sunni Hadīths. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* also includes many similar Hadīths, stating that “all the painters who make pictures would be in the fire of Hell. The soul [of the figure represented in the image] will be breathed in every picture prepared by him and it shall punish him in the Hell, and he (Ibn ʿAbbas) said: If you have to do it at all, then paint the pictures of trees and lifeless things.”²⁵¹ Even the painters of figurative art representations will face severe punishment and torment in hell because they have tried to imitate the creation of Allah.

The Islamic prohibition of images is a result of the unique view of Allah, the creator. All creation is under the influence of his creative power. Allah is the only creator responsible for imparting life in the world by breathing into his creation. The supreme meaning of the Arabic key term *rūḥ* (spirit) in Islam was thus “never first the soul or the lifebreath of man, but the spirit of God, which at most, as in the conception of Mary, can be breathed into a man.”²⁵² Any attempt to imitate Allah—the only soul maker—is considered blasphemous. Any anthropomorphic representation of the transcendental Allah is considered an attack of his innermost being/person.

²⁵⁰ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, Hadīth no. 5950, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/77>.

²⁵¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadīth no. 2109c, 2110a, 2110b, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/37>.

²⁵² I. Goldziher, “Zum Islamischen Bilderverbot,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 74 (1920): 288.

For this reason, Islam can be classified as “a phenomenon of iconophobia rather than a phenomenon of iconoclasm.”²⁵³

Vasile-Octavian Mihoc compares the decorations of the mosques to the decorations of the churches, stating,

While the walls of the churches are adorned with pictures, the mosques present the Muslim faithful with phrases from the Qur’an, as once Mohammed did, thus instrumentalizing the iconic dimension as the bearer of the divine message. As a result of the anchoring of the earthly counterpart of the Qur’an in the heavenly archetype, ‘the mother of the script’ (*umm al-kitab*, Q 43:4), this imagery was clear: the written word becomes an opening toward the transcendent, a non-figural icon of the divine.²⁵⁴

The Arab geographer Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī (AD 991) mentions that the Dome of the Rock in Palestine and the Umayyad mosque in Damascus served as a counterbalance to the abundantly decorated churches.²⁵⁵ This is to say that Muslims substituted the figurative art of the divine with Arabic calligraphy to imitate Christianity without offending the inner being of Allah.

With the Muslim conquest of the Levant, Muslims found the cross and Christian images a stumbling block and folly. Politically speaking, the cross retained imperial/military connotations, and within the new Islamic order, it was a symbol of a hostile and despised power. Muslims saw the Christian icons as visual references to the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnated God. They accused Christians of worshiping the materials rather than the reference that these images implement. The fact that Christians venerated the holy icons by kissing and prostrating themselves before them no doubt convinced many Muslims that their worship was little different

²⁵³ Vasile-Octavian Mihoc, “Aesthetics as Shared Interfaith Space between Christianity and Islam,” *Ecumenical Review*, vol. 71, no. 5, (2019): 683.

²⁵⁴ Mihoc, “Aesthetics as Shared Interfaith Space between Christianity and Islam,” 683.

²⁵⁵ Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī, *Kitab Ahsan al-taqasim fi ma’ rifat al-aqalinn*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 159.

from the idols which the pagan Arabs had worshipped before the coming of Islam.²⁵⁶ In reality, Christians believe that the relics and images are pure materials that do not possess any divine quality. Images were created as expressions of divine essences intended to help the worshiper remember the person behind the material.

°Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd, the Umayyad rulers who conquered Palestine and Syria, were aware of the differences between, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, especially in their manner of worship and decorating sacred spaces. They, however, wished to compete with and surpass monuments like the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Cathedral of Saint John in Damascus, which they turned later on into the Umayyad Mosque.²⁵⁷ The Umayyad caliphs built their shrines and decorated them in a way that aligns with their theological convictions. Just as the Christian iconography and church decoration communicated doctrinal beliefs, so Islamic decoration of certain shrines and mosques asserted emerging theological views—the interior inscriptions of the Dome of the Rock, which is a calligraphic statement used to express doctrinal statement. In the heart of the Christian East, those inscriptions declared Islamic opposition to the Trinity by making multiple references to the absolute unity of Allah and the status of Jesus as a prophet.²⁵⁸

Conclusion

Several studies attempted to discover the reason behind the misunderstanding of the

²⁵⁶ Mark N. Swanson, “the Cross of Christ in the Earliest Arabic Melkite Apologies,” in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*, ed., Samir Khalil Samir & Joren S. Nielsen, vol. 63, (NY: Brill, 1993), 116.

²⁵⁷ Nancy Khalek, “Icons John the Baptist and Sanctified Spaces in Early Islamic Syria,” In *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 96.

²⁵⁸ John of Damascus and Theodore abū Qurrah were both iconophiles-defending the veneration of icons because they saw it as a public form of worship and exercising religion. The prostration to Jesus’s icon and the cross was seen as an act of respect and worship to the person of Jesus, not to the icon itself. Muslims, however, perceived this act as being similar to idol’s polytheistic worship. Despite the fact that the iconoclasm argument is related to the icon’s investigation, which this study has presented, John and Theodore’s defenses were chronologically after Mohammad, and, consequently, they did not affect his understanding of the Trinity.

Trinity in the Qur'an. While this study acknowledges the previous efforts of several scholars and studies, it follows a different route to examine the iconographic effect on Mohammad's understanding of the Trinity. This study explores the effect of the *Theotokos* icon and the possible reason behind Mohammad's assumption of Mary's inclusion in the Trinity.

In the seventh century, Mohammad started the Islamic religion, which emphasized the absolute unity of Allah and rejected the divinity of Jesus. Mohammad had several interactions with Christians during his life. His first wife was a Christian, and one of his concubines was a Coptic Christian. The most important and thorough interaction he had with Christianity involved the Christians of Najrān. A number of Islamic resources place the Surahs that talk about the Trinity (Surah 4:171 & 5:73) within the context of the prophet's meeting with the Christians of Najrān. Many historians think that Najrānites were Monophysites, who believed in the Trinity but emphasized the divine nature of Christ and underestimated his human nature. Mohammad rejected their belief in the divinity of Jesus and called for absolute oneness because he could not reconcile Jesus's deity with the divinity of Allah.

The Najrānites challenged Mohammad by asking him who is the father of Jesus. At first, Mohammad did not know how to answer them. The next day, Allah revealed to him that the resemblance of Jesus is like the resemblance of Adam. This is to say that Jesus had no father: he is fatherless, and God is not his father. This message is also conveyed every time Jesus is called "the son of Mary" in the Qur'an, which Mohammad purposely used several times (2:87, 253; 3:45; 4:157, 171; 5:17, 46, 72, 75, 78, 110, 112; 9:31...). In comparison to other prophets, only Jesus is called by the name of his mother. The Qur'an does not call Abraham or Moses by the names of their fathers or mothers. It seems that Mohammad was trying to make a point when he

called Jesus “the son of Mary” as if he were stressing Jesus’ origin by calling him “the fatherless Jesus.”

Islamic writings include some of Mohammad’s sources about Jesus; however, there is no historical evidence that Mohammad learned about the divinity of Mary from Christians. There is no record, neither in Islamic resources nor in the early history of Christianity, of Christians believing or teaching the divinity of Mary. On the contrary, there is historical evidence that early fathers condemned such teaching and considered it heretical. The lack of resources makes it reasonable to think that Mohammad’s understanding of Mary and her role was acquired by inference rather than conversations with Christians.

In comparison to biblical data, Mohammad seems to be confused about Mary’s family. He conflates Mary the mother of Jesus with Mary the sister of Moses (Surah 19:28; 66:11). Certain aspects of the story of Mary the mother of Jesus were mentioned several times in the Qur’an, such as information about her family, her experience with Zakaria, and her pregnancy; but her divinity was alluded to only once (Surah 5:116). By contrast, the numerous times that the divinity of Jesus was mentioned surpasses the few times that Mary is mentioned. This is probably because Christians (likely Monophysites) did not mention Mary much, instead focusing on Jesus, his virgin birth, and his divinity. What Mohammad learned about Mary was mostly inferences from the *Theotokos* icons we know he saw in Ka’ba, Buṣra, and other places.

Extant icons in Egypt inform us of the early evolution of the son-and-mother pairing, beginning in pagan’s art and possibly evolving to Christian art (as Jesus and Mary’s pairing) in the Levant, Ethiopia, and South Arabia by the sixth century. However, theological conversations among Christians took place at the council of Ephesus. In AD 431, Mary was given the title *Theotokos* (bearer of God) against the title *Christotokos* (bearer of Christ). After the council of

Ephesus, the veneration of Mary started developing into different cults, especially in Byzantium, which led to the iconoclastic age. While the iconoclasm took effect in the Byzantine churches, it was rejected by the Eastern churches, and as the construction of new churches continued even in South Arabia, Holy images and relics were included in the new churches' decorations.

Islamic writings show that the relic of Jesus and his mother in al-Ka^cba was not isolated but was part of a movement that has started, spread, and continued among the Christians in many locations. While the Islamic description of the relic of Mary and her son in al-ka^cba is terse, it is similar in some ways to the description of the *Theotokos* icon. The Ḥadīth provided by Al-Azraqī states that Mary is seated, Jesus is on her lap, and both of them are ornamented. This description is very similar to the *Theotokos* icon, in which Jesus and Mary are seated on a throne, Jesus is in Mary's lap, and they both look adorned and venerated because of the halos around their heads. Christians throughout history have developed the habit of standing in front of these icons, touching, crying, praying, and asking for personal blessings and physical healing. While Muslims (including Mohammad) know Christians divinize Jesus, they see Christians performing the same worship/adoration acts in front of the image of Mary. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that a misconception can easily be acquired by someone who is not deeply rooted in Christian theology. In other words, it is easy to believe that Christians divinize Mary as well as Jesus because of the adorned guise that the paintings conveyed and the divinized worship acts that the Christians performed in front of the holy images.

The Islamic understanding of iconography is similar to the Jewish understanding. Icons and images are linked to spiritual idolatry. The Islamic prohibition of images is a result of the unique view of Allah. He is the only creator, and any attempt to imitate his creation is a direct blasphemous act against his inner being. The fact that Christians venerated the holy icons by

kissing and prostrating themselves before them no doubt convinced the Muslims that Christians worship the idols. Perhaps this is why Mohammad presumed that Christians venerated Mary. Unfortunately, extant literature about the Christians of Najrān does not provide information about their iconography belief, what it meant to them, or how important it was in their worship. The aforementioned Islamic testimonies about the Christian churches in Arabia and the surviving ancient ruins of some of these churches suggest that Christians in Arabia venerated and used images, relics, and statues. Maybe Mohammad not only saw the holy icons but also witnessed Christians venerating, kissing, and bowing in front of the holy images, leading him to conclude that Christians divinized Mary as they divinize Christ.

In a nutshell, clues from Islamic and Christian literature as well as history point to the idea that Mohammad learned about the divinity of Jesus from Christians—most likely Monophysites—but none of the Christians he met actually believed in the divinity of Mary. There is no historical evidence that Christians taught Mohammad that Mary was divine. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Mohammad reached this conclusion by inference—by observing Christian holy images and their adoration, especially to Mary and Jesus’s relics. The *Theotokos* icon is painted in a way that gives equal adoration to Jesus and Mary: both are enthroned and venerated with halos around their heads. When Christians bow and kneel in front of the *Theotokos*, they convey the idea that they are worshiping and praying for two divine beings, Jesus and Mary, and since Christians believe in *three*, then Mohammad, by inference, thought Mary is part of the Trinity.

Chapter Three: The Christian Explanation to the Trinity in the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Centuries

After presenting a possible answer to the Qur’anic perception of the Trinity and the divinity of Mary, the current chapter focuses on the scholarly Islamic objections to the Trinity—the ones presented in Chapter One of this study. By relying on English and Arabic resources, this chapter introduces the life, background, and the trinitarian arguments of three Arab Christian scholars (John of Damascus, Theodore Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥya Ibn ʿAdī) who defended the Trinity in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries and answered many Islamic objections to the Trinity.

John of Damascus (AD 675-754)

John’s Life and Educational Background

John was born in a great Damascene family that participated in the negotiation of the peaceful surrender of Damascus to the Muslim army. Sarjun, John’s grandfather, negotiated the terms of surrender with Khalid Ibn al-Walīd and helped the Christians keep fifteen of their churches.²⁵⁹ John grew up under Islamic rule and spent the early part of his life working as a member of the financial administration in Damascus, probably under ʿabd al-Malik (AD 685-705).²⁶⁰ Daniel Sahas suggests that John may have attained a higher position than his father, a personal secretary to the caliph, while continuing with the financial responsibilities his father left to him.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Joseph Nasrallah, *منصور بن سرجون المعروف بالقديس يوحنا الدمشقي: عصره، حياته، مؤلفاته*, trans. Antoin Wehbi, (Beirut, Lebanon: Al-Maktaba al-Boulisya, 1991), 42-46. Daniel J. Janosik, *John of Damascus: The First Apologist to the Muslims* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 25.

²⁶⁰ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 27.

²⁶¹ Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1972), 42.

While John lived under Islamic rule, his father made sure that he received a good education. Several sources report that John learned philosophy and Greek from a Sicilian monk who was captured by Muslims, brought to Syria, and later on freed by John's father.²⁶² Although most of John's writings were in Greek, it is hard to know whether this story is authentic or not. Frederic Chase, who wrote the introduction and translated three of John's writings into English states that John's understanding of classical Greek philosophy was clearly demonstrated in his books.²⁶³ He also concludes that John's writings are "sufficient to show that his traditional reputation as an eloquent, learned, and devout preacher is fully justified."²⁶⁴

Later in his life, John retreated to the monastery of Mar Sabas in southern Palestine.²⁶⁵ According to Janosik, it is likely that John remained working under the Umayyad government through the reign of Walid I (AD 706-715), entering Mar Sabas monastery to start his monastic life in AD 716.²⁶⁶ During this time, John wrote several poems and many liturgical, philosophical, and theological books, including *The Fount of Knowledge*, which is mostly Greek philosophy. He also wrote *The Orthodox Faith*, which is also called "Dialectic."²⁶⁷ It is considered the first *Summa* because it includes a summary of dogmatic faith of the early fathers and is designed to help Christians know their faith. *On Heresies* is a summarized work similar to Irenaeus and

²⁶² Kamal al-Yazaji, *يوحنا الدمشقي: أراؤه اللاهوتية ومسائل علم الكلام* (Beirut, Lebanon: Manshūrat al-Nūr, 1984), 34-36. Nasrallah, مؤلفاته، حياته، عصره، 84. منصور بن سرجون المعروف بالقدّيس يوحنا الدمشقي: عصره، حياته، مؤلفاته، 34-36.

²⁶³ Frederic H. Chase, trans., *John of Damascus: The Fathers of the Church Writings*, vol. 37, (DC: Ex Fontibus, 2012), xxviii.

²⁶⁴ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, xv.

²⁶⁵ There is no historical evidence whether John of Damascus was a monk in Mar Sabas. Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque*, 40; Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 31.

²⁶⁶ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 31.

²⁶⁷ J. B. O'Connor, "St. John Damascene," *The Catholic Encyclopedia: New Advent*, accessed April 27, 2021, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08459b.htm>.

Hippolyte's works against heresies. Finally, John wrote a short article called "The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen,"²⁶⁸ recounting a conversation between a Muslim and a Christian. His writings still prove influential today, and his teachings continue to be used throughout the Eastern Orthodox world.

History indicates that John was neither a miracle worker nor a martyr. Nevertheless, the reason behind his desire to shift to monastic life is uncertain. Some resources mention that he decided to leave his position under the Umayyad's rule after he was persecuted by the caliph. The story asserts that after John sent his iconography defense to the Byzantine emperor, the latter created a forged letter which counterfeited John's handwriting and was sent to the Muslim ruler of Damascus leaking strategic information about the status of the city and its army. When the Muslim ruler confronted John, he denied writing these letters but acknowledged that the handwriting seems similar to his. The caliph ordered John's hand amputated as a punishment. After the amputation, John prayed to Mary the mother of Jesus to intercede for him. The next morning, his hand was miraculously healed. When the Muslim prince saw his hand healed, he asked John about the doctor who helped him. John replied, "My Christ is a medical Seer. He is omnipotent. It was not difficult for him to heal me, so he was fast in his accomplishment."²⁶⁹ It is important to mention that while Joseph Nasrallah quotes the details of this story, including John's prayer to Mary, he states that the event is closer to legend than history, especially

²⁶⁸ It is also called "The Dispute." This study will be using J. P. Migne's translation: John of Damascus, "The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen," trans. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 94, (1864): 266-273. The authorship of this document is not definitely known. It was first ascribed to John of Damascus by Robert Grosseteste, who translated it in the thirteenth century. Louth and Sahas suggest that the content of "The Dispute" was used by the Arab Christian theologian Theodore Abū Qurrah in the ninth century. Therefore, it is plausible that Abū Qurrah based his writing on John's oral teaching. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: the Heresy of the Ishmaelites*, 102. Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene, 77-78*. Daniel Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 136. J.P. Migne divides John's argument and Abū Qurrah's in his translation.

²⁶⁹ Al-Yazaji, *علم الكلام، مسائل اللاهوتية ومسائل* 45. *بيوحنا الدمشقي: أراؤه اللاهوتية ومسائل* 45. Original Arabic: "ان مسيحي طبيب بصير، وهو على ما يشاء قدير. ولذلك لم يعسر عليه برئي، بل سارع في انجاز امري"

considering that it was not mentioned in any earlier historical literature, and is written by unknown authors.²⁷⁰

During John's time in the monastery, he preached in several churches. According to Frederic Chase, John "was a preacher of the first order and, although his style is at times more effusive and exalted, he may be said to rank with the great Chrysostom."²⁷¹ In the title of one of John's homilies, he is described as a presbyter (priest) of the Holy resurrection of Christ our God, which may refer to the church of Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.²⁷² This sort of evidence indicates that he was ministering in Jerusalem and other areas outside Mar Sabas monastery. Because he defended the Christian faith in the eighth century against Islamic objections, John is now considered the first apologist to the Muslims.²⁷³

The Formation of Islamic Theology

As stated in chapter one, during the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries, Islamic theology developed through conversations and debates between *ahl al-ra'y* (the people of opinion), who were mostly Mu'tazilites, and *ahl al-hādīth* (the people of *hādīth*), who were called Traditionalists. The former group based their opinions on reason, whereas the latter relied on literal reading and application of the Qur'an and *hādīth*.²⁷⁴ While these debates were conducted, a new party emerged "with its tendency to take the middle ground between the Mu'tazilites and the

²⁷⁰ Nasrallah, منصور بن سرجون المعروف بالقدیس یوحنا الدمشقی: عصره، حیاته، مؤلفاته، 100-103.

²⁷¹ Chase, trans., *Saint John of Damascus Writings* (NY: Fathers of the church, 1958), xxiii.

²⁷² Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford Printing Press, 2002), 7.

²⁷³ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 1.

²⁷⁴ Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (London, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 47.

Traditionists, Ash‘arism came to dominate the theological scene in much of the Sunni world.”²⁷⁵

Ash‘arites and Mu‘tazilites debated different topics, but the most important subject concerning this study is the nature of the Qur’an—the created word versus the uncreated word of God.

Ash‘arites argued against Mu‘tazilites that the Qur’an is uncreated—and therefore, it is eternal.²⁷⁶

There is no time in history when God existed without his word. Similar to God’s speech are

God’s attributes. Ash‘arites argued that since God’s speech is eternal, his attributes

(omnipotence, power, knowledge...etc.) are eternal as well.²⁷⁷ Allah was, is, and always will be

omnipotent, all-powerful, and perfect in knowledge. All his attributes and speech are eternal and

inseparable from his essence.

Mu‘tazilites, on the other hand, refused to believe in the eternality of the Qur’an. They

viewed God speaking or revealing as an anthropomorphic act, which—if taken literally—

ultimately would destroy the unity of God. If God’s discourse is as eternal as God’s being, then

there would be two eternal entities (God and his word) rather than one that existed eternally.

Since the Qur’an is Allah’s speech, then it must be eternal like his nature.²⁷⁸ The eternality of the

Qur’an also implies that it is uncreated because it is part of Allah’s nature (like his attributes).

Mu‘tazilites rejected this view because, in their opinion, it leads to *shirk* (polytheism) and

ultimately destroys the unity of God. If the Qur’an existed apart from God (which it did on *Al-*

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 71.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 68.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 86.

Lawh Al-Mahfūz),²⁷⁹ then there would be two eternal entities rather than one, and the unity of Allah would be compromised.²⁸⁰ The seeds of this argument were planted during John's days, but it was only officially formulated in the eleventh century.²⁸¹

John's Trinitarian Argument

As stated in the previous chapters, the Islamic invasion of the Levant carried with it several political, economical, and religious implementations. While many Christians considered the Islamic conquest as a judgment from God, others lost their faith because of persecution and the *jizya* mandate. Many thought that it is economically wiser and physically safer to ally with the stronger, winning party than with the losers. Their faith was not well-rooted in the church's teachings, and their economical situation was given a priority over their spiritual beliefs. John was quick to notice the spiritual weakness of his own people and the need to define the Christian faith. While he writes about the fundamentals of the orthodox Christian faith in his book *The Orthodox Faith*, he teaches about heresies and Islam in his book *On Heresies*. John probably lists Islam as a heresy because during the first half of the eighth century, Islam was still in its formative process. Its rules, traditions (*ḥadīth*), and even the written Qur'an was still developing at that time as the Arabs were expanding into new lands, powers, and territories. According to

²⁷⁹ Most Sunnis believe that the Qur'an is eternal, but it was descended from heaven in three stages: the first one is when the Qur'an descended to *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfūz* (the Book of Decrees/the Preserved Tablet) (Surah 57:22; 85:22). *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfūz* is a tablet that Allah had saved in the highest heaven, where all the ecumenical events that have happened and all that will happen are kept in the tablet forever. The second descension was when the Qur'an descended as a whole to *Beit Al-Iza* (the House of Glory), which is another place in heaven, where angel Jibril has access to the words of the Qur'an. Finally, the third descension took place when the verses of the Qur'an came down to the heart/mind of Mohammad. While the Qur'an descended as a whole to *Al-Lawh Al-Mahfūz* and to the dwelling place of Jibril in *Beith Al-Iza*, it partially and gradually came down to Mohammad.

²⁸⁰ Duncan Black Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence, and Constitutional Theory* (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1903), 135.

²⁸¹ George Makdisi, "Ash'arī and the Ash'arites in Islamic Religious History I," *Studia Islamica*, No. 17 (1962): 37.

Janosik, “Islam was not very distinct from Christianity in the time of John of Damascus and it is only in the latter half of the eighth century, when the earliest biographies on Muhammad were being written and the first hadiths were being penned, that the finalization of the Qur’an was also taking place.”²⁸² Many theological schools were yet to form in the later centuries, and the theological and cultural distinctions between Islam and Christians were yet to become more defined.

Writing in an Islamic context, John needed to be careful about the way he unfolded his arguments. At the same time, he needed to be explicit in order to help Christians distinguish between what they believed and what their Muslim neighbors believed. In his book *On the Orthodox Faith*, John’s prologue of his *Summa Theologica* started by mentioning the incomprehensibility of God due to the limited knowledge of human beings, which is common ground between Christians and Muslims.²⁸³ John explains that no one has seen God; therefore, no one can fully know him. Only Jesus “who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him ... the Holy Spirit knows the things of God, just as the spirit of man knows what is in man.”²⁸⁴ John gives the divine revelation a high position, advising his students against declaring things about God beyond what is being revealed to humanity.

On the nature of the Deity and the Trinity, John lists several attributes of the Godhead to emphasize the oneness of God. While some of these attributes are common between Muslims and Christians, others are exclusive to Christianity; therefore, they are misunderstood by the Muslims. For example, John stresses the idea of God being one, “one substance, one godhead,

²⁸² Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 98.

²⁸³ Frederic H. Chase, trans., “The Orthodox Faith,” in *Saint John of Damascus Writings* (NY: Fathers of the church, 1958), 165.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

one virtue, one will, one operation, one principality, one power, one domination, one kingdom; known in three perfect Persons and adored with one adoration, believed in and worshiped by every rational creature, united without confusion and distinct without separation.”²⁸⁵ His intention is to teach his students the theistic nature of their belief against the Islamic accusation of being *Mushrikūn* (polytheists).²⁸⁶ John uses the word *one* in a numerical sense, which is the same way that Muslims use it to convey the theistic nature of Christianity.

After establishing the oneness of God, John moves to write about the three persons of the Trinity. He affirms the Nicean Creed, the Chalcedonian confession of Christology, and the Eastern Orthodox understanding about the Holy Spirit (*anti-filioque*).²⁸⁷ John describes the Father as being “the cause of all things, begotten of no one, who alone is uncaused and unbegotten, the maker of all things.”²⁸⁸ Muslims would accept this description and apply it to Allah; however, they reject the term “Son of God,” (Surah 112:3). As stated earlier, Muslims understand the theological terms literally, which John took notice of and developed a special way of teaching the Christians how to understand and explain their orthodox faith. Regarding the term “the Son of God,” John elucidates that Jesus has the same essence of the Father and is eternal with the Father because he “was begotten of the Father before all the ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made; consubstantial with the Father, by whom all

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 177.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 176. It is important to note that John mentions Sabellius in this book; however, his explanation of the Trinity helps Christians to convey their orthodox belief to their Muslim neighbors as well because it clears out many misconceptions that Muslims had about the Trinity.

²⁸⁷ It is important to mention that John’s method in explaining the Trinity is biblical and creedal at the same time. He combines the biblical verses with the creedal statements and adds his own words in between to clarify its meanings, without referring to any of them.

²⁸⁸ Chase, “The Orthodox Faith,” 178.

things are made.”²⁸⁹ John continues, “We say that he is before all ages, we mean that His begetting is outside of time and without beginning, for the Son of God was not brought from nothing into being.”²⁹⁰ John affirms that the term “Son of God” has a special meaning in the Christian worldview. It is not literal, physical, nor sexual, but eternal. The Son is as eternal as the Father and from the same nature of the Father. While the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten. Begotten does not mean that Jesus had a beginning nor had different nature from the Father. The Son was not God who has converted to a human and lived among us on earth while leaving the universe unattended. On the contrary, Jesus is eternal with the Father and was even involved in creation.

The eternal state of the Father and the Son connotes immutability. The Father cannot be called a Father without a Son. The same thing goes for the Son; he cannot be called Son without having a Father. Since their relationship is mutual, simultaneous, and has no beginning or ending, it is by necessity unchanging. “The Father and the Son begotten of Him,” John states, “exist together simultaneously, because the Father could not be so-called without a Son. Now, if he was not Father when he did not have the Son, and then later became Father without having been Father before, then he was changed from not being Father to being Father, which is the worst of all blasphemies.”²⁹¹ The concept of God’s mutability is rejected in Christianity because it connotes an inferior nature of the divine. If God’s nature is subject to change, then God can improve and develop. At one point he cannot do something, and at another point he is able to do it. The changing nature of God connotes progressive development within the divine essence;

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 177-178.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 178.

therefore, it is rejected totally in Christianity.

In order to explain what Christians believe about God *begetting*, John contrasts *begetting* and *creation*. While “begetting means producing of the substance of the begetter an offspring similar in substance to the begetter,” creation “is the bringing into being, from the outside and not from the substance of the creator, of something created and made entirely dissimilar.”²⁹² This is another way to say that Jesus is not created; he is eternal with the Father because he and the Father have the same essence. Jesus is not created because there was no time in history when Jesus was not.

John’s belief about the Holy Spirit follows the Eastern Church’s tradition, which is anti-*filioque*. While the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, he abides in the Son.²⁹³ Ascribing divine attributes that are similar to the Father and the Son affirms the divinity of the third person of the Trinity; therefore, John calls the Holy Spirit “uncreated, complete, creative, almighty, all-working, all-powerful, infinite in power; who dominates all creation but is not dominated; who deifies but is not deified; who fills but is not filled; who is shared in but does not share; who sanctifies but is not sanctified...”²⁹⁴ Although the Holy Spirit is divine in nature, he “is distinctly subsistent and exists in His own Person indivisible and inseparable from the Father and the Son.”²⁹⁵ The Holy Spirit participated in creation by giving subsistence to all things. In a nutshell, the three *Aqanīm* differentiate in their manner of existing—the Father is uncaused and unbegotten, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.²⁹⁶

²⁹² Ibid., 178-179.

²⁹³ Ibid., 183.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 184.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 186.

The attributes of God is another related topic to the Trinity which John focuses on. He presents the omnibenevolence of God, attributing goodness to God and making him the source of all goodness. John states that God is “light itself and goodness and being in so far as having neither being nor anything else that is from any other; the very source of being for all things that are, of life to the living, of speech to the articulate, and the cause of all good things for all; knowing all things before they begin to be.”²⁹⁷ If God is the source of goodness, then he is not the source of evil; he does not have evil in his nature; therefore, he does not tempt people with evil. This is a point of difference between Islam and Christianity, and it is related to the morality of God.

Another divine attribute that is important to the conversation between Muslims and Christian is the transcendence of God. This doctrine is a fundamental issue and a point of difference between Islam and Christianity. John explains that God is transcendent; he is “removed far beyond all things and every substance as being supersubstantial and surpassing all, supereminently divine and good and replete; appointing all the principalities and orders, set above every principality and order, above essence and life and speech and concept.”²⁹⁸ Christians do not believe that God is only transcendent, but they also believe that he is immanent in his creation. God is above, yet he pervades “all substances without being defiled.”²⁹⁹ Traditional Muslims during John’s time, however, held a different concept of the divine. They believed that God is utterly transcendent, and nothing is like him in creation. He is not immanent in his

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

creation, and only Qur’anic attributes can be used to describe him.³⁰⁰

John’s Defense of the Trinity against Islamic Objections

In his book *On Heresies*,³⁰¹ John teaches students or Christians how to converse with Muslims against the accusation of being *Mushrikūn* (associators) in a more direct way than he did in his book *On the Orthodox Faith*.³⁰² Being *Mushrikūn* implies that Christians do not believe in one God but three because they are associating Jesus and the Holy Spirit as divine persons with God. After explaining that Christians believe in one God, John advises his students to start the conversation with their fellow Muslims by asking them what the Qur’an says about Jesus. Based on his knowledge of the Qur’an, John anticipates the answer to be that Jesus is “the word of God and his spirit” (Surah 4:171). Based on this answer, John teaches his students to explain:

The word, and the spirit, is inseparable from that in which it naturally has existence. Therefore, if the Word of God is in God, then it is obvious that he is God. If, however, he is outside of God, then, according to you, God is without a word and spirit. Consequently, by avoiding the introduction of an associate with God you have mutilated Him. It would be far better for you to say that he has an associate than to mutilate Him, as if you were dealing with a stone or a piece of wood or some other inanimate object.³⁰³

Several presuppositions can be extracted from this text: 1) God should be eternal because eternity is a concept related only to the divine nature, and it is part of God’s substance. Any

³⁰⁰ Saeed, *Islamic Thought*, 68.

³⁰¹ The authorship of chapter 101 of “On Heresies” is debatable; however, Sahas believes that it is “undoubtedly, a work of John of Damascus.” See Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites,”* 55-58.

³⁰² The root of *Mushrikūn* is *shirk* in Arabic. It is the ultimate sin in Islam to associate another entity or being with Allah, and thus derogate from the unique sovereignty of God.

³⁰³ Frederic H. Chase, trans., “On Heresies,” in *John of Damascus: The Fathers of the Church Writings*, vol. 37, (DC: Ex Fontibus, 2012), 156.

being that is not eternal is not God. 2) God should have a word, and his word should be internal to him (part of his being), which makes his word as eternal as he is. If God does not have a word, then he would be mute and cannot communicate with his creation, and if his word is external to him, then at one point, he did not have a word. 3) God should have a spirit, otherwise he is dead. His spirit is as eternal as his word. John assumes that these presuppositions are acceptable by Muslims, and if they deny it, then their concept of the divine is mutilated.

Although both Christians and Muslims use the same words to describe Jesus, their references are different. When a Muslim thinks of “the word of God,” he/she means the book/Qur’an. When John thinks about “the word of God,” he means Jesus Christ. Noting this problem, John seeks to establish a common ground between the two worldviews in order to bring out the inconsistencies of the Islamic faith. After pointing out that both religions believe that Jesus Christ is “the word of God,” John notes the first inconsistency about the eternity of the Qur’an. The Qur’an and Jesus have eternal natures, which makes something/someone co-existing with God since eternity. Muslims do not see the eternity of the Qur’an as *shirk* (the greatest sin in Islam); however, they see the eternity of Jesus as *shirk*. John rationalizes that the Islamic belief in the eternity of the Qur’an is inconsistent with the Islamic worldview because it makes Muslims associators and *shirk* is the ultimate sin in Islam. When Muslims say that the Qur’an is eternal with God, they are combining two eternal existences together, and this is not acceptable in Islam because only Allah is eternal. John introduces this as a logical dilemma of the Islamic faith, stating that if Muslims accept the view that the “word of God” is internal to him (inseparable from him) and eternal with him, then they fall into the same trap they accused the Christians of: they are associating another eternal being with God. If they say, however, “the word of God” is outside of God and separate from him, then God had no word from eternity—

this is a mutilation to the divine essence. John, therefore, concludes that it is logical to believe that the “word of God” is God.

The problem seems to be related to the way Christians and Muslims interpret the meaning of the phrase: “the word of God.” Muslims tend to be literal when they talk about “the word of God” because they understand it to be the Qur’an. However, when the Qur’an refers to Isa (Jesus) being “the word of God,” they shift to the non-literal meaning, stating that “the word of God” means the messenger of God—Jesus is the one who delivered “the word of God.” In a different conversation, John realizes this problem and addresses it. The resulting article is titled “The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen.”³⁰⁴ In this article, John teaches Christians how to converse with Muslims and ask different questions that are related to the topic of the word and the Spirit. If a Muslim, probably a Mu‘tazili,³⁰⁵ says that the Qur’an is created,³⁰⁶ then John asks, “Who created the Word of God and the Spirit? For if compelled by necessity, he [a Muslim] will reply, ‘God Himself created (the Word and the Spirit),’ then do you again say, ‘Therefore before God created the Spirit and the Word, he had neither Spirit nor Word.’”³⁰⁷ Mu‘tazilites believed in

³⁰⁴ It is also called “The Dispute.” John of Damascus, “The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen,” trans. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 94, (1864): 266-273. The authorship of this document is not definitely known. It was first ascribed to John of Damascus by Robert Grosseteste, who translated it in the thirteenth century. Louth and Sahas suggest that the content of “The Dispute” was used by the Arab Christian theologian Theodore Abū Qurrah in the ninth century. Therefore, it is plausible that Abū Qurrah based his writing on John’s oral teaching. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: the “Heresy of the Ishmaelites,”* 102. Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene*, 77-78. Daniel Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 136. J.P. Migne divides John’s argument and Abū Qurrah’s in his translation.

³⁰⁵ During the Umayyad government, the Mu‘tazilite’s belief about the uncreatedness of the Qur’an was considered a heresy because it was linked to man’s free will. The Umayyad enforced the belief in the ultimate sovereignty of Allah (Allah controls all men’s actions) in order to establish their rules and control their subjects as they wished. A number of Mu‘tazilites were executed because of their beliefs under the Umayyad, such as the leader of the Jahmite groups, Jahm B. Safwan. Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 156 & Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam*, 114-115.

³⁰⁶ Sahas argues that the Greek word for “created” must have been copied incorrectly because the word “uncreated” fit the context better. Janosik, however, disagrees with Sahas. Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 159.

³⁰⁷ John of Damascus, “The Discussion of a Christian and a Saracen,” trans. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 94, (1864): 266.

the createdness of the Qur'an in order to protect *tawhīd* (the unity of God); however, if God created his word and Spirit, then chronologically speaking, at one point in history, he was without his word and Spirit. This is why John states in *On heresies* that those who believe in the createdness of the Qur'an have mutilated God.

John foresees that some Muslims might deny the uncreatedness of the Qur'an, stating, "Behold, all the words of God are created. But they are not gods."³⁰⁸ In the same sense, if Jesus is the created word of God, then he is not God.³⁰⁹ John explains in his book *The Orthodox Faith* that "things which are changeable must definitely be created,"³¹⁰ because they increase or decrease in quality and morality. However, the creator must be unchangeable because he is perfect in his nature. This distinction might serve as a trap to the Muslims who believe in the createdness of the Qur'an, for if God created the word and the Spirit, then how could he have had his Spirit and word before they were created? If he did not have them before he created them, then his nature changed after he had them.

In response to the problem of the createdness of the Qur'an, John clarifies the fundamental rule in biblical interpretation by explaining the difference between the literal and the figurative meanings of the text. He states, "the literalness refers to the established and fixed meaning of a thing. Figurative interpretation, however, involves a secondary meaning."³¹¹ John does not refer directly to the Nicene Creed, but he quotes it, explaining that the Son is begotten,

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 267.

³⁰⁹ This issue reflects the early controversy of the Orthodox Muslims with the Jahmites and the early Mu'tazilites over the passages where God appears to be speaking in the Qur'an. The Jahmites believed that the words of the Qur'an are the words of God, but they are created in order to convey God's will and his command. Check Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1976), 266-267.

³¹⁰ Chase, trans., *John of Damascus*, 169.

³¹¹ Ibid.

not born; therefore, he is not created. He continues, “I acknowledge only one Word of God Who is uncreated. But I do not call Scripture *λόγια*, that is ‘words’ of God; but *ρήματα*, that is ‘formal words’ of God.”³¹² John introduces here two distinctions that lie behind the concept “the word of God,” which is “the uttered words of God” versus “the written words of God,” and the singular form of “the word of God” (referring to Jesus) versus its plural form “the words of God” (referring to Scripture). The Scripture (the written words of God) is created because it is the words of human beings, but the “word of God,” Jesus Christ, is not created (he is begotten), therefore, he is God.

John wanted to teach his students that the Qur’anic expression “the word of God” refers to a person, not words/Scripture.³¹³ The createdness of the Qur’an was not the common view among Muslims during John’s days because it was the persecuted view. However, John still marks it as a potential answer. Muslims might point out that Christians also believe in the creation of “the word of God,” not realizing that there is a great distinction between “the words of God” (plural form: his utterances, meaning the Scripture) and “the word of God” (singular form: referring to Jesus Christ). Muslims might claim that either the words are all God’s or that “the word of God” (the Christian profession of Jesus) is not God. In John’s view, the word (the written word of God) is neither created nor uncreated; however, Jesus (the living word of God) is the one hypostatic “word of God,” a point even the Qur’an admits.

Traditionist Muslims, according to Sahas, borrowed John’s distinction of the singular and plural form of the word/words *of God* and applied it “as a means to reaffirm the eternity and

³¹² Ibid. 267.

³¹³ Janosik, *John of Damascus*, 159-160.

uncreatedness of the Qur'an without any differentiation from its utterance."³¹⁴ The later-developed Islamic distinction of the concept of "the words of God" follows the Christian concept of the Scripture: the Qur'an was proclaimed to be uncreated, but its pronouncement by men is created. This distinction was not developed until the end of the ninth century. The later Orthodox Muslims (Ash'arites) embraced the belief that God's speech is eternal, but the written Qur'an is just a representation of the eternal Qur'an in heaven.³¹⁵

Harry Austryn Wolfson traces the createdness of the Qur'an to Labīd, who "had taught the createdness of the Torah, and Ṭalūb—insincere convert from Judaism to Islam—who was the first to write about this doctrine. So, the original belief about the pre-existent Qur'an was that it was created and that its uncreatedness was introduced later in consequence of the rise of the belief in uncreated attributes."³¹⁶ Saeed, on the other hand, proposes a different theory. He indicates that the Mu'tazilites' position on the created nature of the Qur'an "was partly a reaction to the Christian notion of the incarnation of Jesus"³¹⁷ because it threatens the unity of Allah, who is wholly transcendent and wholly other. If Saeed's theory is true, then John's argument may have played a major role in developing the later theological formation of the Islamic belief. John's argument might have led the Mu'tazilites, a century after him, to believe that the Qur'an is created so as to avoid the dilemma of acknowledging two eternal beings.³¹⁸

Theodore Abū Qurrah (AD 755-830)

³¹⁴ Sahas, John of Damascus on Islam, 117.

³¹⁵ Jerry R. Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam: The Muslim Brotherhood, Ash'arism, and Political Sunnism* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 16-17.

³¹⁶ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1976), 265.

³¹⁷ Saeed, *Islamic Thought*, 66.

³¹⁸ Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 84.

Theodore Abū Qurrah was a Melkite monk who defended the Christian Orthodox faith to Muslims, Monophysites, and others. Although historians do not know much about his life before becoming a monk or about how he received his education, they know that he was competent in Syriac, Arabic, and Greek.³¹⁹ Abū Qurrah demonstrated good knowledge in philosophy by translating some of Aristotle's books.³²⁰ He also left a wealth of written works and presented the rational and philosophical tenability of the Christian faith before Christian and Muslim officials within the context of his ecclesial and theological tradition.

As stated earlier, Abū Qurrah was the first theologian/apologist of the Eastern Orthodox Church to write in the Arabic language. His writings model John of Damascus's works, which makes scholars think that he had a close association with Mar Saba's monastery theologians.³²¹ However, Griffith points out that "none of this requires that Abu Qurrah has been in Mar Sabas in John of Damascus' lifetime, as many scholars who have written on the subject have

³¹⁹ Ignatius Deek, "ميمر في وجود الخالق والدين القويم," in *al-Turath al-Arabī al-Masīhī* (Jouniey, Lebanon: al-Maktaba al-Boulisiya, 1982), 43.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ John Lamoreaux disagrees with earlier scholars who suggested that Abū Qurrah was a monk in Mar Sabas monastery. He has exerted great labor in a historical investigation to highlight the complex relationship between Abū Qurrah and the available resources that talks about his environment. However, the work only seeks to disassociate the bishop of Harrān from Mar Sabas, while the abundant evidence of Abū Qurra's relationship with the Jerusalem patriarchate alleviate some of Lamoreaux's conclusions. John C. Lamoreaux, "The Biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah Revisited," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 56 (2002): 25-40. David Bertaina questions Lamoreaux's argument wondering why would Abū Qurrah "travel throughout Palestine and have a personal familiarity with the patriarchate of Jerusalem if he is only bishop of an insignificant see, particularly since his immediate jurisdiction was under the patriarch of Antioch? Wouldn't Theodore have had a close relationship with the monasteries of Jerusalem? In fact, Mar Sabas monastery did not only include the monastery just southeast of Jerusalem in the Judean desert, but it included a house in Jerusalem (and in Constantinople and Rome as well)." He brings to the attention of the reader the similarity of thoughts between John of Damascus and Abū Qurrah and the fact that his works have been copied and found in Mar Sabas monastery. David Bertaina, "An Arabic Account of Theodore Abu Qurra in Debate at the Court of Caliph al-Ma'mun: A Study in Early Christian and Muslim Literary Dialogues," (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2007), 214-217.

assumed.”³²² John of Damascus died before Abū Qurrah was born, but he might have read his writings, since both were Melkites and knew Greek and Syriac.

In AD 780, Abū Qurrah became the bishop of Ḥarrān in Mesopotamia, a position from which he was removed and re-appointed in AD 799.³²³ The reason for his demotion is not clear; however, Griffith speculates that “it could have been his position in favor of public veneration of the icons that put Abū Qurrah on a collision course with Patriarch Theodoret of Antioch.”³²⁴ This hypothesis makes sense, especially given that Abū Qurrah regained his seat with the ascension of Patriarch Job, who liked him, perhaps because both were iconophiles. One of Theodore’s main concerns was clearly engaging in intra-Christian polemic in order to promote the belief of Melkite doctrine. In AD 780, Abū Qurrah set off on a journey south to Alexandria and north to Armenia to defend the Chalcedonian orthodoxy.³²⁵ In AD 817 in Armenia, he engaged in a debate in the presence of a prince, debating the Syrian Orthodox deacon Nonnus of Nisibis.³²⁶ He also engaged in a debate with Muslim scholars in the presence of caliph al-Ma’mūn in Ḥarrān.³²⁷

Abū Qurrah was a well-known writer. He recognized a great need for effective religious

³²² Sidney H. Griffith, “Images, Islam and Christian Icons: A Moment in the Christian-Muslim Encounter in Early Islamic Times,” in *La Syrie de Byzance a l’Islam: VIIe-Ville siècles*, Colloque 1990, ed. Pierre Canivet and Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais (Damascus: Institut Frangais de Damas, 1992), 121-138.

³²³ Sidney H. Griffith, “Reflections on the biography of Theodore Abu Qurrah,” *Parole de l’Orient: revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes*, vol. 18 (1993):165. A. Van Roey, Nonnus de Nisibe, *Traiti Apologltique, Etude, Texte et Traduction* (Bibliothèque du Museon, vol. 21; Louvain, 1948), 18. See also Sidney H. Griffith, “The apologetic treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis,” *ARAM* 3 (1992), 115-138. Deek, “Mimar fi Wūjūd al-Khaliq wa al-Dīn al-Qawīm,” 44-45.

³²⁴ Sidney H. Griffith, “Reflections on the biography of Theodore Abu Qurrah,” *Parole de l’Orient: revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes*, vol. 18 (1993):165. 143-170

³²⁵ Sidney H. Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah: A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons* (Louvain, Belgique: Peeters, 1997), 13.

³²⁶ John Lamoreaux, trans., *Theodore Abū Qurrah* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), xv.

³²⁷ Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 13.

teaching in Arabic to support the Christian faith and to proclaim the Gospel in the new social and political contest. He left about twenty compositions in Arabic, and forty-three other Greek texts that are attributed to him, though they are arguably translations from Arabic.³²⁸ At the end of the eighth century and the beginning of the ninth century, Arabic became the *lingua sacra* of the Qur'an and the common language of the Levant. This period was also known for mass conversions to Islam, largely on the part of Greek and Syriac-speaking Christians in the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Many Chalcedonians found themselves soon subject to the rule of an aggressive and expansionist foreign religion—not adherents to an imperial faith, but merely one sect living alongside other Christian sects.³²⁹ In this context, Abū Qurrah saw a great need to teach and write about how to defend and articulate the Christian doctrines against other sects and the Islamic religion.

Unfortunately, based on the available resources, Abū Qurrah's biography is incomplete. However, several scholars—including Muslim scholars—mention Abū Qurrah's writings³³⁰ and his defense for the icon veneration.³³¹ He is also known for his famous debate about the Christian religion at the council of the caliph al-Ma'mūn in Harrān in the year AD 829.³³² This debate helped influence and shape *ʿlim al-kalām* (Islamic theology) during the early Abbasid dynasty.³³³

³²⁸ Ibid., 3.

³²⁹ Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, xviii.

³³⁰ Muḥammad ibn Ishāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm: a Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture, Vol. 1*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1970), 42.

³³¹ Miriam L. Hjälms, ed., *Senses of Scripture, Treasures of Tradition*, vol. 5, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 12-13.

³³² Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, xvii.

³³³ It should be noted that the historicity of this debate is not 100% authenticated. The manuscripts of the debate are found throughout Melkite and Jacobite monasteries; however, the scribe who copied the debate seems to be somehow affiliated to Theodore Abū Qurrah, but not a direct pupil. Abū Qurrah's debate was likely used in a monastic context for educational purposes. It would also have served as a rhetorical tool to train monks who were interested in engaging Muslims in apologetics.

Historians estimate that Abū Qurrah was about seventy-five years old when the debate took place, and they presume that he died not long afterward.³³⁴

Theodore Abū Qurrah's Trinitarian Theology/Argument

Like John of Damascus, Abū Qurrah has a great zeal for the Christian Chalcedonian faith, which led him to travel to several regions, debate Muslims, and endure persecution and demotion in his priesthood status. While he was busy in mission work, he did not neglect writing and teaching about the Trinity and many other doctrines. As an apologist, Abū Qurrah's main purpose of his written work was to answer those who do not believe in Christianity, especially those who do not believe in the Trinity.³³⁵

Christians Can Learn about God via Adam

Abū Qurrah writes little about the Trinity in his treatise *Theologus Auttodidactus* but thoroughly in *On the Trinity*. *Theologus Auttodidactus* seems to be a preparatory work to other treatises that he wrote. He uses the natural theology approach with those who are skeptical about the existence of God by recognizing that the cognitive faculties of human beings—reason, sense-perception, introspection—can be used to investigate theological matters. “While God is unseen through the likeness of our own nature's virtues,” says Abū Qurrah, “Notwithstanding that God transcends and is contrary to our nature, our minds can see both Him and the attributes according

³³⁴ Griffith, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 13. Deek, “ميمر في وجود الخالق والدين القويم,” 52.

³³⁵ Qustantīne Bashā, ميامر ثيودور أبو قررة اسقف حاران: اقدم تأليف عربي نصراني [Mayamir Theodore Abū Qurrah Usqf Ḥārān: the Oldest Arabic Christian writings] (Beirut, Lebanon: Al-Fou'ad Printing Press, 1904), 27.

to which He is to be worshipped.”³³⁶ He gives the analogy of a person looking into the mirror. While he cannot see his real face in the mirror but only its likeness, in a similar way, when he looks at his human nature, he also cannot see the nature of God and his attributes but only God’s likeness.³³⁷

Given the difference between the divine and the human natures, human beings can still learn about the divine nature by observation and reflection. Abū Qurrah uses Adam as a representative of human nature. Adam’s nature and virtues allow theologians to see God and have true knowledge of him, despite the fact that God transcends human nature. Abū Qurrah believes that “when with our minds we examine Adam’s nature and observe its virtues, we can see God from it and have true knowledge of Him, for that nature is His likeness, notwithstanding that God transcends and is contrary to it.”³³⁸

The gap between the human nature—represented by Adam—and the divine nature is wide. Adam has defects, whereas God does not. Adam exists today but tomorrow is gone. He is learned, wise, powerful, and living today, but tomorrow he is ignorant, unwise, weak, and dead. While Adam’s nature is changing and defected, God is not. He is perfect and much more transcendent than human beings. “God is not comprehended through the defects of Adam’s nature, nor does God resemble Adam in those defects,” says Abū Qurrah, “It is only with regard

³³⁶ Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 9.

³³⁷ According to the Routledge *Dictionary of world philosophy*, the term *Bilā kayfa* literally meaning “without how” that denotes the Islamic theological principle according to which one should not question revelation when one cannot understand it. This principle was invoked by Abū Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (AD 935) and others – e.g. Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (AD 855) – regarding the Quran’s anthropomorphizing expressions such as “Hand of God,” and “Face of God,” which attribute human features to God. According to these thinkers, though having a hand and having a face cannot be attributes of God, these expressions have to be taken literally without asking how.

³³⁸ Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 10.

to his virtues that Adam resembles God.”³³⁹ While Adam’s virtues can be attributed to God, his defects cannot because God is holy and perfect. Adam’s virtues, however, are minor to the virtues of God, who is maximally greater than any human being. Because Adam acquires such virtues, we know that God does as well. It is just that God acquires attributes and virtues in a greater and more transcendent way.³⁴⁰

Answers to Those Who Deny that the Father Begets, and Jesus Is Begotten

In a similar fashion, Abū Qurrah uses Adam’s resemblance to answer those who deny that God begets a son. He explains that since “Adam begets and is head over one who is from him, He who caused him to beget and to be head must surely Himself beget and be head over One who resembles Him. Nonetheless, this is so in a transcendent and contrary manner.”³⁴¹ Abū Qurrah believes that the ability to beget surpasses the inability to beget, and since he caused Adam to beget, then He himself should be able to beget and rule over others; otherwise, he is not the highest conceived God. Those who say that God is unable to beget are demeaning his divine nature.

Abū Qurrah does not neglect to mention that Adam’s begetting is different from God’s begetting. While Adam’s begetting of a son took place through a sexual relationship, God’s begetting of his Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit do not happen through sex and physical development but in a more transcendent way.

There are in Adam no virtues more noble or exalted than begetting and headship. After all, if Adam did not beget, he would have neither felicity of life, nor headship, nor speech, nor generosity, nor any of the other virtues attributed to him. His felicity of life would be with the pigs, asses, and other beasts—which is not felicity... it would not be

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

headship but degradation and dishonor to be called the head of ticks, pigs, scarabs, and worms.³⁴²

It is glory, honor, and exaltation when the headship is attributed to Adam over other human beings like him, not a humiliation or a deprivation of human nature. Thus, those who say that God cannot beget attribute deprivation of the divine nature because they make God rule over what is less than him and is unable to rule over what resembles him. Thus, among the many things the mind can infer from the likeness of Adam's nature is that God is three persons: One who begets, another who is begotten, and another who proceeds.³⁴³ This belief does not necessarily undermine the divine nature or disrespect God.

Can God Be One and Three?

In his treatise *On the Trinity*, Abū Qurrah discusses the topic of faith and reason, keeping in mind the variety of audiences that he met along the way of his ministry.³⁴⁴ He knew that some of them were simple in receiving faith while others were more philosophically inclined. As Najib Awad points out, Abū Qurrah “believes that reason is faith’s caretaker, which reviews faith and preserves it. Reason is what enables one to investigate what she believes in and to discover its truth or falsehood. It is what guides one to the true faith, even if the content of that belief is not according to what our feelings like and our desires seek.”³⁴⁵ By acknowledging the fact that people are on different levels with their philosophical inquiry, Abū Qurrah continues with the Scripture explaining that Christians believe in Moses’s books and all the prophets of the Old

³⁴² Ibid., 13.

³⁴³ Ibid., 13-14.

³⁴⁴ Bashā, ميامر ثيودور أبو قرّة اسقف حاران, 27.

³⁴⁵ Najib George Awad, *Orthodoxy in Arabic Terms: A Study of Theodore Abu Qurrah's Theology in Its Islamic Context* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 101.

Testament; therefore, the Trinity is not a new invention or a new belief that has being recently acquired. The Trinity is implied in the Old Testament. Several texts refer to two persons but does not call them two Lords. For instance, in Psalms 110:1, 3 the writer “called both the one who speaks ‘Lord’ and the one addressed ‘Lord,’ but did not count two lords.”³⁴⁶ Similarly, Psalms 45:6-7, “do you not see that he mentions a God whose throne is forever and ever and says that this God has another God who anointed him? As for this anointed one, there can be no doubt for the wise that this is Christ ...”³⁴⁷ Abū Qurrah believes that the Trinity is implied in the Old Testament, and many passages describe the Father as God, the Son as God, and the Holy Spirit as God; however, no writer calls them three gods.

After discussing the implication of the Trinity in the Old Testament, Abū Qurrah uses reason to explain this doctrine to those who like reasonable arguments. He realizes that one of the major philosophical errors that people commit is category errors; therefore, he explains the differences between logical and non-logical names. Logical names indicate persons, such as Peter, Paul, and John; and non-logical names indicate natures, such as man. The former may be many, while the latter is one.³⁴⁸ While Peter, Paul, and John are the names of three persons, the number three does not apply to the names; instead, it indicates their human nature. According to Abū Qurrah, it is correct to say that Peter is a man, Paul is a man, and John is a man, but it is not correct to say that Peter is mankind, Paul is mankind, or John is mankind.³⁴⁹ This concept is applied in a similar fashion when a person says, “God is one in three persons: Father, Son, and

³⁴⁶ Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 179.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Holy Spirit.” The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but God is not the Father, God is not the Son, and God is not the Holy Spirit. God is a name that indicates divine nature. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are names that indicate three divine *Aqānīm* (persons).³⁵⁰

‘Person’ is a logical name and does not belong essentially to just one of them [persons of the Trinity]. Rather, the name ‘person’ is predicated of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ... as well as of every other indivisible entity. The logical name was introduced solely that number might be applied to it, for it is not right for number to be applied to their common name, that by which their nature is named ... otherwise, it would follow that there are different natures, as we have already said.³⁵¹

Logical names are meant to describe the name of the person, not his nature; therefore, they can be used in a plural form. However, it is not right to apply numbers/plurality to a particular non-logical name; otherwise, “number will make each of the numbered entities to be all of them.”³⁵² Abū Qurrah explains that “If you say, ‘Here, Peter, James, and John are three,’ you make each one to be the three of them [Peter is also James and John]. So also, if you say, ‘in heaven, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three,’ you make each one to be the three of them.”³⁵³ The Christian trinitarian belief, however, does not believe that the Father is the Son and the Holy Spirit, but it indicates that there is unity in diversity and distinction in unification. While each of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is God, the Father is not the Son and the Holy Spirit. For this reason, it is necessary to apply logical names to persons, “and that we say that Peter, James, and John are three persons, but that the name ‘man’ remain singular, neither diffused nor

³⁵⁰ It should be noted that Abū Qurrah never explains the term ‘Uqūm or Aqānīm by using the Arabic term *shakhṣ* (pl. ‘ashkhās), which was the practice of other Christian writers and of many Muslim scholars who wrote about Christianity.

³⁵¹ Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 184.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

multiplied.”³⁵⁴

Abū Qurrah discuss another reason for why Christians do not apply plurality to the divine essence by explaining to his audience a philosophical/mathematical principle of plurality. Human beings are counted as many because they are divided in place, will, and state. However, those who are many, but agree in the will or place, are to be counted as one.³⁵⁵ The three men—Peter, James, and John—are divided in terms of place, will, and state; therefore, it is correct to count them as many. “As for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” says Abū Qurrah, “not one is in a place that the others are not in, not one has a form that the others do not have; and the same holds for will and state.”³⁵⁶ Therefore, they are one, and it is wrong to account them as many. What applies to human beings does not necessarily apply to God.

In order to illustrate this principle more thoroughly, Abū Qurrah offers several trinitarian examples. He depicts the Trinity as three lamps shining in a dark house. “The light of each is dispersed in the whole house, and the eye cannot distinguish the light of one from the light of the others or the light of all from the light of one. So also, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, even though each is fully God.”³⁵⁷ In the second example, Abū Qurrah asks his reader to imagine three men standing and reciting a poem while the reader is outside listening. “You hear only a single poem,” says Abū Qurrah, “but you do not doubt that each of them recited the complete poem, nor could you say, ‘I heard three poems.’ This is the case even if in the voices of the men there is some difference.”³⁵⁸ Finally, the last example is related to three pieces of gold.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 184.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 184-185.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 185.

Abū Qurrah states, “If three pieces of pure gold were placed before you, you would say that each of the three is fully gold and would not say that the three are three golds, but rather that they are one gold.”³⁵⁹ Abū Qurrah uses this example to emphasize that it is inappropriate for a number to predicate the name of the nature of God and to say that the three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are three gods, even though that each one of them is fully God.

Answering Objections

Abū Qurrah anticipates several objections to his explanation. Some may ask, “Was it three or one that created the world? If you say three, they consider this loathsome. If you say one, they consider the other two hypostases nullified.”³⁶⁰ Abū Qurrah believes that the answer should be “one that created the world.” In his opinion, this answer does not prevent the other hypostases/*Aqanīm* from being creators nor nullifies them. To prove his point, Abū Qurrah offers few more examples. When a person says, “Moses speaking the truth,” it is right to think that Moses spoke the truth or the tongue of Moses spoke the truth, but it is not right to think that Moses and his tongue spoke the truth because Moses spoke through his tongue.³⁶¹ The same concept is applied to the sun and its rays lightning a room, a person seeing another person with his eyes, a carpenter making a door with his hands, and a king and his son striking a person. It is not right to think both has done it (the sun and its rays lightning the room, the person and his eye seeing another person, a carpenter and his hand making a door, and the king and his son striking a person), but it is right to say that each one separately has acted.³⁶² Abū Qurrah offers these

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 185.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 186.

³⁶² Ibid.

examples to imply that the Father created the world and the Son created the world. However, it is not right to think that the Father and the Son created the world separately, for the Father created the world through his Son.³⁶³

Abū Qurrah addresses another objection to the Trinity that non-Christians believe leave Christians with a dilemma. Non-Christians might ask, “Do you deny every God other than the Father? Do you deny every God other than the Son? Do you deny every God other than the Holy Spirit?”³⁶⁴ If the Christian says, “‘I deny every God other than the Son,’ they respond, ‘The Father and the Holy Spirit, then, must not be God. If, however, the Christian says, ‘I do not deny every God other than Christ,’ they respond, ‘you have, then, multiple gods.’”³⁶⁵ Abū Qurrah points to another error non-Christians commit when they ask, “Do you deny every God other than Christ?” The questioners have a different assumption about the meaning of the word *Christ*. They are not asking about Jesus’ hypostasis but about his nature. “The name ‘God’ is not distinct to Christ to the exclusion of the Father and the Spirit. The name ‘God’ is the name of a nature, not a hypostasis.”³⁶⁶ If a Christian affirms that he or she believes in the Gospel that is presented to him/her, that does not mean other Gospels are not full Gospels, “for the gospel through which the Holy Spirit speaks is one. Similarly, you say, ‘I deny every God other than Christ,’ but your words do not entail that the Father and the Holy Spirit cease being each a full God.”³⁶⁷ Moreover,

³⁶³ It is important to emphasize the idea that Abū Qurrah never thought that his examples are perfect. He states, “we do not think that the tongue and the mind or the rays and the sun or the craftsman’s hand the craftsman or the eye and the brain are more closely united than the Father and the Son—and this, because of the refinement of the divine essence, which is unimaginable more refined than the most refined creatures” (Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 186.).

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 188.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 189.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

the same error is applied when a person is asked which image is his/her when he/she looks into a plate that has three mirrors. Abū Qurrah explains that the face is one thing, and the countenance of the person is another. Each person has one face only, and denying the procurance of another image is not denying the image in each of the mirrors.

Abū Qurrah uses a third example to clarify the false presupposition which assumes that to deny every God other than Christ is to deny that the Father and the Holy Spirit are God. A person admires another person's countenance and decides to draw it fully on three pieces of paper. Should the person whose image was drawn deny every other countenance? Abū Qurrah thinks the answer should be "yes, except for the one drawn on this piece of paper [the paper that the artist used]."³⁶⁸ This is not to deny that the painted countenance on each of the other pieces of paper is the same countenance. However, when the person points/asks about the countenance drawn on this particular piece of paper, he or she does not mean the particular drawing (the lines, curves, and dots), but the essence of the person's countenance (dark complexion, black eyes, and aquiline nose)—despite the fact the questioner was pointing with his hand to the lines of the image.³⁶⁹ The same holds to the affirmative answer to the question: "Do you deny every God other than Christ?" To answer yes does not mean to deny that the Father and the Holy Spirit are God, "for even though the questioner is hinting at Christ with his words, it is not Christ himself that he means when he names 'God,' but the nature of Christ, to which the name 'God' refers."³⁷⁰

A Trinitarian Answer to the Muslims

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 190.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

Abū Qurrah affirms the divine simplicity doctrine, which allows no composition in the divine nature to illustrate the Trinity to Muslims. Combining the Qur’anic illustration of Jesus being the word and the Spirit of God with John of Damascus’s conundrum, he asks the Muslim this question: has God ever being without his word and his Spirit? The Muslim is compelled to answer negatively, otherwise, he or she will make God mute or dead. Abū Qurrah introduces a follow-up question: is the divine word and his Spirit part of God? If the Muslim answers affirmatively, he or she then ascribes parts to the divine essence which is proscribed in Islam because it introduces composition to the divine nature. However, if the Muslim answers negatively, then the Christian belief is right. Abū Qurrah states,

God and his word and his Spirit are one God even as a person and that person’s word and spirit are one person. The Son to God as a person’s word is to that person, and the Spirit is to God as a person’s spirit is to that person, even though the Word of God is God and the Spirit of God is God—and this, because of how exalted the divine nature is above composition and the like.³⁷¹

The divine simplicity doctrine was emphasized in early Christianity, and it is consistent with the doctrine of *tawhīd*, which emphasizes the oneness of God in a numerical sense. Abū Qurrah saw similarities between the two doctrines and used them as an analogy to illustrate the Trinity.

Yaḥya Ibn Adī (AD 893-974)

Though most now know him as Yaḥya Ibn Adī, his full name is Abū Zakariyya (his son’s name) Yaḥya Ibn ‘Adī Ibn Hamid (his father’s name) Ibn Zakariyya’ (his grandfather’s name).³⁷² He was born in AD 893 to a Jacobite/Monophysite Christian family. He was born in Tikrit, which was the seat of the Jacobite bishopric from the fourth century until the middle of the

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Mentioning the full name alongside the names of his father, grandfather, and son is an Arabic habit, which indicates historic accuracy.

twentieth century, when the diocese was combined with the one in al-Mosul.³⁷³ He received his education in Baghdad under famous logicians, such as Abu Bishr Matta Ibn Yūnus (AD 940) who was a Nestorian, and Abū Nasr al-Farabī who was a Muslim (AD950).³⁷⁴ Muslim scholars such as Al-Bayhaqī and al-Masʿūdī state that Yaḥya was the most prominent disciple of al-Farabī.³⁷⁵ He earned the title of al-Mantiqī (the logician) by his Muslim peers.³⁷⁶

Most scholars during the tenth and eleventh centuries were not only philosophers, but they made a living as physicians, teachers, scribes, translators, or booksellers.³⁷⁷ Yaḥya himself was not a monk; therefore, he needed to find other sources for self-support. He earned a living as a professional copyist and a bookseller, a career that he may have inherited from his father, ʿAdi Ibn Hamid.³⁷⁸ Ibn al-Nadīm tells a story about Yaḥya spending too much time copying manuscripts. Yaḥya replies, “Wherefore now do you wonder at my patience? In my own handwriting I have transcribed two copies of the commentary of al-Ṭabarī, which I have taken to the kings of distant regions. I have transcribed so many books of the theologians that they cannot be counted. It is my agreement with myself that I should copy a hundred leaves every day and night, which I feel to be too little.”³⁷⁹ His passion as a copyist might not only be because of a

³⁷³ Omar, “The Life of Yahya Ibn ‘Adi,” 308.

³⁷⁴ Max Meyerhof, “Alī al-Bayhaqī’s *Tatimmat Siwān al-Hikma*: A Biographical Work on Learned Men of the Islam,” *The University of Chicago Press on behalf of The History of Science Society*, vol. 8 (1948): 160.

³⁷⁵ Omar, “The Life of Yahya Ibn ‘Adi,” 309.

³⁷⁶ Abū Sulaymān Al-Sijistānī, *Muntakhab Siwan al-Hikma*, ʿAbd Arahman Badawī (Teheran: Foundation Cultilrelle de l’Iran. 1974), 327. Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist*, 24.

³⁷⁷ Nicholas Rescher, *تطور المنطق العربي* [*The Development of Arabic Logic*], trans. Mohammad Mahran, (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1964), 94.

³⁷⁸ Richard Walzer, “New Light on the Arabic Translation of Aristotle,” in *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic philosophy*, (Cambridge, MS: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 77.

³⁷⁹ Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm*, 631.

financial need but also because of his hunger and curiosity to gain more knowledge.

In addition to philosophy, Yaḥya learned medicine from the famous doctor al-Razī (AD 925); however, it is not known whether he practiced it or whether he was counted as a physician.³⁸⁰ After the death of his master Matta Ibn Yūnus in AD 940, and with the absence of his master al-Fārabī (AD 950), who left Baghdad and traveled to study in Syria and Egypt, Yaḥya became the new leader of philosophical studies in Baghdad. He had accumulated several pupils and spent much time teaching and writing about religions and philosophy. In his school, Yaḥya instructed both Muslim and Christian students. Among his famous Muslim disciples were al-Sijistānī (AD 1001), ‘Isa Ibn ‘Alī Muhammad al-Badihī (AD 990), and Abū Hayyān al-Tawḥīdī (AD 1023); and among his Christian students were Ibn Zur‘a (AD 1008), al-Ḥasan Ibn Siwār (AD 1017), Ibn al-Khammar (d. 1017), Abu ‘Ali al-Samh (AD 1027), and Naẓīf Ibn Yomin—all who hailed from different backgrounds and denominations (Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians).³⁸¹ He also had a Jewish pupil, Wahab bin Thaḳīf al-Rumī, and a Sabian student, Abu Ishaq al-Sabī‘ī.³⁸²

Yaḥya left many writings related to logic, naturalism, math, metaphysics, Kalam arguments, ethics, and Christian theology. The first group of his writings was a philosophical translation of Aristotle, Plato, and their followers. He translated many books from Syriac to Arabic and focused especially on Aristotle’s *Organon* and *Physics*. He and his pupils even

³⁸⁰ Gerhard Endress, *The Works of Yahya Ibn ‘Adi: An Analytical Inventory* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1977), 124.

³⁸¹ Omar, “The Life of Yahya Ibn ‘Adi,” 310. Nadine Abbās, نظرية التوحيد والتثليث الفلسفية عند يحيى بن عدي في كتابه “الرد على الوراق” [the Philosophical Theory of Monotheism and Tri-theism at Yaḥya Ibn ‘Adī in his book ‘the reply to al-Warrāq], (Beirut, Lebanon: Centre de recherche et de publications de L’orient Chretien, 2014), 61-62.

³⁸² Omar, “The Life of Yahya Ibn ‘Adi,” 310.

compared, corrected, refined, and added their own writings and translations.³⁸³ His philosophical discourses include *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* (The Refinement of Character) and *Maqāla fī Siyasa al-Nafs* (A Discourse on the Management of the Soul). The second group of his writings includes several discourses concerning Christian philosophy. Samīr Khalīl lists nineteen treatises in his introduction to *Al-Turāth al-ʿArabī al-Massīhī* (Arabic Christian heritage), a book that belongs to Yaḥya; however, this chapter will focus on *Maqāla fī al-Tawḥīd* (Treatise in Tawḥīd).

Yaḥya Ibn ʿAdī’s Trinitarian Argument

Yaḥya was aware of the Islamic objections to the Trinity as well as his peers’ writings and teachings about this doctrine. As a philosopher, he saw a great need to explain, defend, and answer the Islamic objections to the Christian concept of the unity and oneness of God without mentioning or attacking the Islamic concept of *tawḥīd*. His philosophical defense is of a unique nature. According to Samīr Khalīl, Yaḥya might not be the first philosopher who has written about the Oneness of God, but he is the first to target and expand on this topic.³⁸⁴

Yaḥya’s makes his defense in several treatises and books. Because of the limited space and the nature of the study, this research will concentrate on “مقالة في التوحيد [Treatise in Divine Unity]” and his answer to al-Warrāq, which was compiled and presented in Nadine Abbās’s book *نظرية التوحيد والتثليث الفلسفية عند يحيى بن عدي في كتابه "الرد على الوراق"*. In his treatise, Yaḥya focuses on the term *wāḥid* (one), which both Muslims and Christians use to express their beliefs in the oneness of God. He presents a philosophical explanation of the term, when it can and cannot be used to describe the divine oneness of God. In his answer to al-Warrāq, Yaḥya focuses on the logical objection to the Trinity. He explains that it is not a logical mistake to believe that God is one

³⁸³ Ibid., 311-12.

³⁸⁴ Samīr Khalīl, (974-893) *مقالة في التوحيد للشيخ يحيى بن عدي [Treatise in Divine Unity]* (Jounieh, Lebanon, 1980), 115.

substance and three *Aqanīm* because the “one” can be one in one sense and three in a different sense.³⁸⁵ This section of the study will start with Yaḥya’s treatise "مقالة في التوحيد" to establish the philosophical meaning of the term *wāḥid*. Then it will move to Yaḥya’s answer to al-Warrāq to explain the Trinity.

Relying on Aristotelian philosophy and moving away from theology and biblical studies, Yaḥya analyzes the different meanings of the word *wāḥid*. He does not only discuss the oneness of God in terms of its logical sense—how should *wāḥid* be understood in terms of logical or linguistic analysis?—but also in terms of the correct understanding of the divine unity. Yaḥya strives to show that in one aspect, the Creator is one; but in another aspect, he is multiple. Influenced by his teacher al-Farābī,³⁸⁶ Yaḥya presents different meanings of the word *wāḥid*, which vary based on context. Something/someone can be described as *wāḥid* based on its *jins* (genus), *nawʿ* (specie), *nisba* (relation), *muttaṣil* (continuum), *ḥadd* (definition or limitation), or *ghayr munqasim* (indivisibility). Yaḥya demonstrates that *Al-Bari*’ (another name that Arab Muslims and Christians use to describe Allah/God, meaning Creator) cannot be *wāḥid* in genus, specie, relation, or continuum because they require either the existence of others or a causal connection to exist. However, God is the uncaused cause of everything. He has nothing that caused him, but he is the cause of every other existence.³⁸⁷ Thus, anything that is caused by another or has any causal connection for its existence cannot be God.³⁸⁸

Al-Bari’ cannot also be understood as a negation of divisibility (in either an existing or a

³⁸⁵ It is important to mention that Yaḥya does not use the word ‘person’ to refer to *Aqanīm* because of the human reference that this term may convey, which will lead to understand the Trinity in term of three gods.

³⁸⁶ Abū Nasr al-Farābī, *The One and the Unity* (Casablanca, Morocco: Dar Tobqal Publishing, 1990).

³⁸⁷ Khalīl, (974-893) مقالة في التوحيد للشيخ يحيى بن عدي 223.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 224.

non-existing object) or the principle of all divisible things.³⁸⁹ Regarding the negation of divisibility, *wāḥid* is like the quality of the thing under description—such as its color or its taste—not its quantity. These qualities cannot be divisible. As for the meaning of the principle of all divisible things, *wāḥid* can be understood in two ways: by its substance or by its accident. By its substance, such as the point/dot and the unit. It is one and indivisible by nature, but there can be many of them. By accident, *wāḥid* cannot be the principle of all divisible things because accidents are caused by other causes.

Since none of the previous meanings of *wāḥid* can be applied to *Al-Bari'*, Yaḥya strives to show which aspect of the *wāḥid* is applicable—the meaning that can be used to describe God. According to Yaḥya, *Al-Bari'* is *wāḥid* in action, substance, and subject.

First, *al-Bari'* is *wāḥid* in action, but not in power. Whatever exists, exists either by action or by power. “If it exists by power,” Yaḥya says, “Then every power is directed toward an action, and every power need—in egress what is in it toward an action—another cause to egress. This necessarily makes the cause caused and this is impossible.”³⁹⁰ The power needs an action to be consummated; therefore, it cannot be uncaused cause, and if the oneness of God is not in power, then it should necessarily be in action. Second, *al-Bari'* is *wāḥid* in substance. “If it is thought of *wāḥid* in multiple sense,” says Yaḥya, “Then the unity applies by necessity because *wāḥid* from each multiplicity does exist; this is to say that the existence of multiplicity and its substance is a compound union.”³⁹¹ Everything exists by its substance, whether it is one or

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 226-228.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 230. All translations from the Arabic works of Yaḥya are my own, unless otherwise indicated. "اذ كانت كل قوة، فانما هي قوتتحو فعل ما، وكل قوة مضطرة في خروج م فيها الى الفعل الى علة تخرجه إليه. فيلزم لذلك أن تكون العلة معلولة وهذا محال."

³⁹¹ Ibid., 231. "فإن وضع أنها أكثر من واحدة، فالوحدة لا محالة موجودة لها؛ إذ الواحد من كل كثرة موجود، وذلك أن وجود الكثرة وأنيته هو أحاد مجتمعة."

multiple. Lastly, *al-Bari* ' is *wāḥid* in subject as long as the subject reflects the definition of *wāḥid* and represents its substance.³⁹²

According to Yaḥya, *wāḥid* could be understood in different senses; however, a person can discuss the oneness of God only if he or she has the correct definition of *wāḥid*. When describing Allah, scholars assume different meanings of the term *wāḥid*. Some used it to negate multiplicity, others meant it as “the One who has no one like him,” and others used it to convey a strictly numerical sense—one person/one divine being. In Yaḥya’s opinion, the previous different meanings of the term *wāḥid* break several laws of logic; and therefore, they do not necessarily apply to God.

Yaḥya accuses those who define God as *al-Wāḥid* to convey the idea that “there is no one like him” with committing the equivocation fallacy—that is, using similar words to convey opposite meanings.³⁹³ Yaḥya’s logical argument goes as follows: If *wāḥid* means no one is like God, then *mawjūd* (the existing thing/creation) is also not like him. This makes God not equivalent to *mawjūd* and *mawjūd* not equivalent to God in the same respect and aspect. If *wāḥid* (God) is not equivalent to *wāḥid* (not God, but other existing things), then *wāḥid* is not equivalent to *wāḥid*. This makes the existence of *wāḥid* mean that he is not equivalent to the thing that is not equivalent. This makes the two *wāḥids* (that are equivalent and similar things) not equivalent and not similar, and this cannot be because two things that are parallel and similar to each other (*wāḥid* and *wāḥid*) cannot not be (but should be) similar or equivalent in some aspects, but not different in all aspects.³⁹⁴

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Al in Arabic language is equivalent to the definite article (the) in English. However, when it is added to an attribute describing the divine, it means God is the one who is being described.

³⁹⁴ Khalīl, *مقالة في التوحيد*, 170-171.

Whereas some people say *wāḥid* means “there is no one like God,” others might say, *wāḥid* (God) is “the opposite to all that describes human beings.” No attribute of God is similar to human attributes. Yaḥya shows that this understanding of *wāḥid* is wrong because it makes God identical to his creation, with the exception of human beings. “Some of the attributes of being a human being,” says Yaḥya, “Is that he is not a dominant, not a mare, not a plant, not eternal, is different from every accident, totally different from all that exist except another human being. So, it is necessary that none of these attributes should be applied to *wāḥid*.”³⁹⁵ Yaḥya continues,

If none of these negative attributes apply to *wāḥid*, then it is necessary to apply the positive attributes that are opposite to it... So, *wāḥid* is not not a plant, but a plant; is not not a quantity, but a quantity; is not not a modality, but a modality... in total, since God is not different from all that exists, except another human being, he is necessarily everything that exists, with the exception of not being a human being.³⁹⁶

Yaḥya’s explanation can be demonstrated in the following equations:

God is not a human being

Human being is not a plant

God is not (not a plant)

Therefore, God is a plant.

The concept of *wāḥid* (the opposite of all that describes human beings) denies that the attributes of human beings are similar to the attributes of *wāḥid* (God), and this denial makes *wāḥid*

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 172. "إذ قد وضع ان الواحد مخالف الانسان مثلاً، في كل ما يوصف به الانسان، ومن صفات الانسان انه غير ملك، وغير فرس، وغير نبات، وغير موات، وغير واحد من الاغراض، وبالجملة غير كل واحد من الموجودات، سوى الانسان. فيجب ضرورة ان لا يصدق على الواحد شيء من هذه الصفات."

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 173-174. "واذا لم يصدق على الواحد هذه السوالب، فواجب ضرورة ان يصدق عليه الموجبات المناقضات لها... ان يكون الواحد، اذ هو ليس غير فرس، فرساً، واذ هو ليس غير ملك، ملكاً، واذ هو ليس غير نبات، نباتاً، واذ هو ليس غير كمية، كمية، واذ هو ليس غير كيفية، كيفية... وبالجملة، اذ هو ليس غير كل واحد من الموجودات، سوى الانسان، فمن الضرورة ان يكون كل واحد من الموجودات، غير الانسان."

identical to his creations, but not a human being. This aspect of *wāḥid* must not apply to God because God is not a created being, and he is not part of creation.

By describing God as *wāḥid* in the sense that “there is no one like him,” Yaḥya wanted to stress the idea that *wāḥid* should be understood as “there is nothing except him that is similar and equivalent to all his attributes and epithets.”³⁹⁷ It is wrong to say that nothing is similar to God because similarity does not necessarily require parallelism/identification. There are no two similar things/persons that are identical in all their attributes. If two things/persons are similar, it is necessary that they do not match. They are similar in one aspect, but they are not identical, nor do all their attributes match up. Therefore, using the term *wāḥid* to describe God in the sense that “there is nothing like him” in an ultimate sense is wrong.

In the next section of his treatise, Yaḥya moves to explain the meanings of *wāḥid* that are applicable to God. He argues that *wāḥid* could be one in one sense and multiple in a different sense. The numerical nature of *wāḥid* is not the only sense of the oneness. While it is impossible for *wāḥid* to be multiple in genus, species, relation, continuum, and indivisibility, *wāḥid* can be multiple in action (not in power), in substance (not by accident), and in definition (not subject). In order to explain this multiplicity, Yaḥya discusses the attributes of *al-Bari*’—the attributes that may be predicated of the divine essence.³⁹⁸ *Al-Bari*’s attributes can be deduced from his creation because his essence is hidden, but his effect on the creation is evident from his activity. Since God is the creator, every existing being/thing exists because of a cause. As stated earlier, no created thing (individual or material) exists in this world without a cause. God is the cause of

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 176. "لا يوجد شيء غيرہ يماثلہ ويوافقہ في جميع صفاته ونعوتہ"

³⁹⁸ *Al-Bari*’ is another name of God the Arab Christians and Muslims use to describe the Creator.

every created thing and the only uncaused cause.³⁹⁹ Being the uncaused cause and the cause of every existent being shows his omnipotence. Furthermore, God caused other things to exist voluntarily because there is no other cause which forced God to create his creation. All that exists came into being out of nothing. All that was once non-existent came into existence because of God’s power, and he had no other cause beside himself to create this creation. Thus, it is reasonable to say, “since He was existent before these came into being, the spontaneous and voluntary act of creation reveals His bounty.”⁴⁰⁰ His omnipotence and his bounty are manifested in his power to create what exists and to choose not to create what does not exist. In a similar way, his wisdom is manifested in the order and the perfection of His work. He created everything to work together and to sustain itself in a very amazing way. These three essential attributes (*al-jūd* (bounty), *al-Qudra* (power), and *al-ḥikma* (wisdom)) can be derived from his activities in creation—especially that his essence is hidden from human beings, but his effect in creation is manifested through his activities.⁴⁰¹ Yaḥya used the three attributes of God to depict the idea that *wāḥid* can be one in one sense and multiple in a different sense. God is *wāḥid* in being and multiple in attributes.

Like Abū Qurrah, Yaḥya faced several objections from Muslims scholars. In his reply to Abū ʿIsā al-Warrāq and the dilemmas he presented against the Trinity,⁴⁰² Yaḥya uses different arguments to show that God can be one in one sense and multiple in different sense. He

³⁹⁹ Yaḥya was a ten-century scholar and mentioned the cosmological argument a century before al-Ghazālī whom the Kalam cosmological argument is attributed.

⁴⁰⁰ Gerhard Endress, “Theology as a Rational Science: Aristotelian Philosophy, the Christian Trinity and Islamic Monotheism in the Thought of Yaḥya Ibn ʿAdī,” in *Ideas in Motion in Baghdad and Beyond: Philosophical and Theological Exchanges between Christians and Muslims in the Third/Ninth and Fourth/Tenth Centuries*, vol. 124, ed., Damien Janos, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 233.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 263-264.

⁴⁰² These dilemmas are presented in Chapter One of this study.

interprets the persons of the Trinity as symbolic representations of Aristotelian ideas: the Father symbolizes *al-^caql* (the intellect), the Son symbolizes *al-^cāqil* (the intellectually cognizing subject), and the Spirit symbolizes *al-^cmaqūl* (the intellectually cognized object). According to Abbās, when Yaḥya says “the essence cognizes with its substance all that exist,”⁴⁰³ he means:

He cognizes its substance because he is one of things that exist. When He cognizes his substance, He becomes *al-^cāqil* [the intellectually cognizing subject] to his substance, and *al-^cmaqūl* [the intellectually cognized object] to his substance. Then, *al-^caql* becomes the substance of mere intellect (which is the intellect’s essence) which is available in three statures: the status of substance by itself without any other meanings—*āqil* or *maqūl*; and a status where it is *āqil* (the cognizing subject), and a status where it is *maqūl* (the cognized object).⁴⁰⁴

Yaḥya considers the essence of the intellect by itself the reason for the existence of the other two statures: the object and the subject of the intellect. The reason behind his understanding lies in the fact that each one of them cannot be depicted without the intellect’s essence (*al-^caql*). The intellect cognizing itself (*al-^caql be^cāqilan*) cannot happen without existing of himself or the existing of the cognized object (*maqūlan*). The act of God cognizing himself makes him the essence “the intellect,” the subject (because he cognized), and the object (which is himself) at the same time.

Yaḥya’s language equates essence (*jawhar*) and substance (*dhāt*). He does not use the word *essence* in a plural form because he believes in divine simplicity— God does not have three parts/essences.⁴⁰⁵ Yaḥya instead uses the term *Aqānīm* in reference to the substances or the meanings of the three persons of the Trinity. Each of the substances/*Aqānīm* has its own essence

⁴⁰³ Abbās, 159, نظرية التوحيد والتثليث الفلسفية عند يحيى بن عدي في كتابه "الرد على الوراق".

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., "هو حينما يعقل ذاته يكون عاقلاً لذاته ومعقولاً لذاته؛ فيكون عقلاً وعاقلاً ومعقولاً. وتكون حينئذ ذات العقل المجردة (التي هي جوهر العقل) موجودة بثلاثة احوال: حال الذات على انفرادها من غير ان يضاف إليها معنى عاقل او معنى معقول؛ وحال هي بها عاقلة وهي تصورها لذاتها؛ وحال هي بها معقول وهي التي تكون بها متصورة من ذاتها."

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 164.

(secondary essence/substance).

In order to understand Yahya's language, Abbās makes a distinction between essence and substance to differentiate between primary essence and secondary essence. The latter is the special substance of the Father, not the one related to the Son or the Spirit; whereas the former is the one that belong to all the *Aqānīm*.⁴⁰⁶ Yahya wanted to show from the formulation of *al-^caql*, *al-^cāqil*, *al-ma^caqūl* that the exitance of the Father necessitates the existence of the Son and the Spirit. As the existence of the intellect cognizing itself necessitates the existence of *al-^cāqil* (the intellectually cognizing subject) and *al-ma^caqūl* (the intellectually cognized object), so does the existence of the Father necessitate the existence of the Son and the Spirit.⁴⁰⁷

To summarize Yahya's standpoint, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are eternally omnipotent and wise, but the Father is not the Son and not the Spirit. The Father is the *mūlid* of (the one who begets—in the sense of cause) the Son and the source of the Spirit (by procession), especially that the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Moreover, the fatherhood of the Father is from the substance of the Father, not necessarily from the substance of the Son or the Spirit.⁴⁰⁸ According to Abbās, the Father is Father because of the Son. The similarity among them is the cause. As the intellect cognizes itself and becoming the cause of the meaning of the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object, the Father is the cause of the birth of the Son and the procession of the Spirit.⁴⁰⁹ Applying this concept to the Trinity makes God one in one sense (one in essence) and multiple in different sense (multiple

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 251.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 301.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 251.

in substances—or *Aqanīm*). The concept of unity and multiplicity in different senses is not a contradiction. It just shows God as one divine being who can have multiple substances, roles, and attributes. *Aqānīm* can be distinct from each other without having different essences.

Conclusion

The previous discussion presents great arguments that call for deeper research. The three scholars used different methods. John and Abū Qurrah's methodologies were theological, whereas Yaḥya's method was philosophical. Despite the different backgrounds of the three scholars (Chalcedonian and Jacobites), all of them agreed on the definition of the Trinity: one divine being manifested in three hypostases/*Aqanīm*. Their agreement shows that all orthodox Christians agree upon the description, the functions, and the role of the *Aqanīm*, which do not match their corresponding human description—they are not like people.

John, Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥya share several common points between Christianity and Islam in order to start their arguments or to solve a problem at hand. For instance, John and Abū Qurrah's starting point regarding the incomprehensibility of God is a shared point among Christianity and Islam. They both admit that God cannot be fully known because of the limitations of human beings. Moreover, while the topic of oneness in Christianity and Islam is mutually believed, it is also a point of tension. Muslims do not understand the trinitarian concept of God nor classify it under theism, which leads them to accuse Christians of worshipping three gods or being *Mushrikūn*. The three scholars were aware of this misunderstanding, so they prioritize the defense of God's oneness over the divine unity of the three hypostases/*Aqanīm*.

Despite the different backgrounds of John, Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥya (Chalcedonian and Monophysite), the three scholars use the word *Aqanīm* to describe the three persons of the Trinity, which is still a common practice among Arab theologians today. The three scholars

defend the Eastern model of the Trinity—the anti-*filioque* model; however, they also explain the relational aspect of the nature of God differently. While they affirm the fatherhood of the Father, the sonship of Jesus, and the procession of the Holy Spirit, they show that the intra-relationship of the *Aqanīm* is very unique to the divine nature because it cannot happen without their roles. The Father is called Father because he has a son; the son is a son because he is born of the Father; and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father showing how the three *Aqanīm* are living in an eternal relational existence with each other.

John, Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥya shared two main themes while defending the Trinity: the divine oneness and God’s attributes. The divine oneness is a crucial topic that is often misunderstood by Muslims. Many of Eastern fathers prioritized defending the divine oneness over the eternal relationship of the *Aqanīm* because of the Islamic accusation of being *Mushrikūn*. John relies mostly on the Scripture to show that Christians believe in one God—one divine being, one godhead, one virtue, one will, one operation, one principality, one power, one domination, and one kingdom. John uses the concept of the oneness of God in a numerical sense, which is similar to the Muslims’ understanding and their description of Allah as *wāḥid*-one being.

Abū Qurrah also depends on Scripture to show Muslims that the Trinity is not a newly invented doctrine. It was implied in the OT. He does not stop here, but he proceeds to explain the linguistical aspect of the doctrine by using the distinction between logical and non-logical names. The former indicates persons such as Peter, Paul, and John, and the latter implies nature. While it is correct to say that Peter is a man, Paul is a man, and John is a man, it is not correct to say that Peter is mankind, Paul is mankind, or John is mankind. In a similar manner, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but God is not the Father, God is not the Son, and

God is not the Holy Spirit. God is a name that indicates divine nature; and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are names that indicate three divine *Aqanīm*. Yaḥya does not rely directly on the Scripture; however, he uses the linguistic argument. He discusses the different meanings of the term *wāḥid* to teach that the divine being is one in one sense and multiple in a different sense, and this is not a contradiction. The logical argument for the Trinity indicates that plurality within the unity is possible in the creation and in the Godhead. The numerical sense of *wāḥid* is not the only way to understand this term. There are many other different senses of the term *wāḥid* that can be applied in creation but not to the divine nature. While *wāḥid* in the sense of genus, specie, relation, continuum, and indivisibility cannot be applied to God, *wāḥid* in the sense of action, substance, and definition is applicable. Thus, thinking of God in one sense (the numerical sense) is not rationally correct.

The attributes of God is an important topic shared by Christianity and Islam. Scholars cannot study the nature of God without discussing God's attributes. While Muslims affirm that Allah has ninety-nine beautiful names/attributes, they disagree on the list of these names and many of their meanings. Muslims who follow the doctrine of *Bilā kayfa* are unable to answer many questions related to the morality of Allah because they confirm that Allah's attributes are not like humans' attributes, and Allah cannot be described in a non-Qur'anic way. However, by discussing God's attributes, John, Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥya were able to show that he is maximally good through the doctrine of the Trinity.

John, Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥya discuss the topic in three different ways. While John infers the attributes of God from Scripture and tradition, Abū Qurrah and Yaḥya believe that God's attributes can be deduced from creation. The first attribute discussed is the omnibenevolence of God. The maximally good God in Christianity is shown in different ways. John mentions several

attributes. He believes that God is uncreated, eternal, uncircumscribed, unchanging, source of goodness and justice, and so on. These divine attributes are shared with Muslims; however, some of them are related to the triune nature of God more than others. John, for instance, comments on God's omnibenevolence by attributing goodness to God's essence (not his will, as Muslims do). This distinction makes God maximally good and the source of all goodness. He is the very source of being for all things that exist and the cause of all good things. Being maximally good (omnibenevolence) is reflected in the way God treats his creation and the way he relates to evil in this world. When the goodness of God is ascribed to his essence, his will and power shown in creation will follow.

Abū Qurrah believes that people can learn about God's attributes by observing Adam's virtues. While Adam's defects cannot teach about God, his virtues can by affirming the gap between human nature and divine nature. Whatever virtues Adam possesses (bounty, goodness, wisdom ...etc.), God possesses in a greater, multiple, and more transcendental manner. Through the virtues of Adam, people can imagine God being maximally good and greater than all human beings. Yahya believes that God's essence is hidden, but his effect on creation is evident from his activity. The three essential attributes of God are his bounty, his power, and his wisdom. The three attributes are extrapolated from his creation and show his goodness. His omnipotence and his bounty are manifested in his power to create what exists and of his choice not to create what does not exist. Similarly, his wisdom is manifested in the order and the perfection of his work. Whether the omnibenevolence of God is extracted from the Scripture or from creation, it is related to the essence of God. If God is maximally good, then his nature (whether triune or oneness) should reflect his goodness.

The omnipotence of God is another attribute that is shared between Christianity and

Islam. Abū Qurrah emphasizes the omnipotence of God by focusing on the Trinity. He states that begetting surpasses the inability to beget. Any denial of the Father being able to beget undermines the omnipotence of God. Yaḥya, on the other hand, does not link his formula of *al-^caql*, *al-^cāqil*, *al-ma^caqūl* to God's omnipotence because he talks about God's power separately. However, being the only being who can apply this formula shows his great power. Yaḥya's formulation moves beyond the roles of the *Aqanīm* to the reason behind the existence of each *Iqnūm*. The existence of the intellect cognizing itself necessitates the existence of *al-^cāqil* (the intellectually cognizing subject) and *al-ma^caqūl* (the intellectually cognized object). The existence of the Father necessitates the existence of the Son and the Spirit. No other being can accomplish this formula because all other beings need external beings to serve as the subject and the object. The Trinity is the only model that shows God not needing otherness outside his being in order to be able to conceive. As the intellect cognizes itself and becomes the cause of the meaning of the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object, the Father is the cause of begetting the Son and the procession of the Spirit. He does not need any other being to be able to achieve this formula.

The last attribute that is related to the doctrine of the Trinity is the immutability of God. This attribute means that God does not change in his character or nature, unlike his creation. Unlike God, a human father was not a father before having his son. In fact, he became a father when he had a son. The heavenly Father has always being a Father because there was no time in history where the Father was not a Father and the Son did not exist. The relationship between the Father and the Son is mutual, simultaneous, and has no beginning or end; therefore, it is unchanging. Furthermore, John brings to the attention of his readers that the Son of God is God's word. God is not wordless, and he has never been without his word at any point of history. Thus,

it is correct to think of God being the communicator. His word was always with him and in him; and later on, it was revealed to humanity. What makes his word different from our language, is that our words are perishable and changeable, whereas he is unchanging and eternal. The Trinity works as a great model to potentially present the unchanging nature of God. If God's nature is subject to change, then God can improve and develop. At one point, he cannot do something and at another point, he can do it. The changing nature of God connotes progressive development within the divine essence; therefore, it is rejected totally in Christianity.

Chapter Four: A Contemporary Christian Answer to Islamic Objections Against the Trinity

Now that the study has offered background on the Medieval period in the Middle East, three major Arab theologians, and their defenses of the Trinity, it will move to present a modern defense of the doctrine of Trinity against Islamic objections, especially the doctrine of *tawḥīd*. During the Medieval period, Arab Christian scholars were preoccupied with proving the oneness of God over discussing the importance of God being manifested in three persons. They moved from the three *Aqānīm* to the one divine being. Western scholars, on the other hand, were influenced by Neoplatonism, in which “the presentation of Christian theology began from the one God and then went on to the God triune.”⁴¹⁰ Therefore, they were preoccupied with the relational aspect of the three persons of the Trinity over proving the oneness of God.

To defend the Trinity, Christian Middle Eastern scholars discussed God's attributes. John of Damascus, for instance, listed them to explain what kind of God Christian believes in; whereas Theodore Abū Qurrah and Yaḥya ibn ʿAdī expanded the explanation and used them in

⁴¹⁰ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Trinity and Revelation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 71.

their illustrations to define the Trinity and prove God's oneness. Western scholars, on the other hand, did not neglect the discussion of divine attributes, but they included significant reorientations and revisions. Therefore, the current chapter serves as a bridge between the East and West to present a comprehensive, but not an exhaustive, trinitarian model showing God as the greatest conceived being.

The Greatest Conceived Being: A Summary

Christian scholars always pursue ways to understand God. Throughout church history, they formed several creeds in order to fight heresies and defend orthodoxy. In similar fashion, Muslim scholars have always sought ways to talk about Allah. They call theology the science of *kalām*,⁴¹¹ which is used, not for the purpose of understanding Allah—Allah is supremely transcendent, and no one can understand him—but for the purpose of speaking about Allah as the Qur'an reveals him.

In both religious disciplines, Christian and Muslim scholars proceed with caution, especially in using terms that describe the essence of God. They believe that using absent terms—terms that have no fixed meanings—lead to people speaking about abstract concepts because no one knows what the author meant by it. Christian theologians such as John and Abū Qurrah realized this fact and encouraged their audience to seek comparisons between the attributes of God and the nature of man to discover the differences. Abū Qurrah argues that people can learn about God's attributes by observing Adam's virtues, acknowledging his defects,

⁴¹¹ According to Tim Winter, "For most of this 'classical' period [10th to 13th centuries] the *kalām*, literally 'discourse', that is to say, the formal academic discipline which one scholar aptly calls 'Islamic doctrinal theology.'" Tim Winter, ed., "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

and affirming the gap between the human and the divine natures.⁴¹² If some ideas or experiences do not match or map onto the divine essence, then people know nothing about God and his perfection. As Medieval Christian scholar, John Dun Scotus puts it, “If things were really this bad, we would have no better reason to call God wise than a rock.”⁴¹³ He adds,

Every metaphysical inquiry about God proceeds in this fashion: the formal notion of something is considered; the imperfection associated with this notion in creatures is removed, and then, retaining the same formal notion, we ascribe to it the ultimate degree of perfection and then attribute it to God . . . Consequently, every inquiry regarding God is based upon the supposition that the intellect has the same univocal concept which it obtained from creatures.⁴¹⁴

When Christian scholars say God is the seer, the hearer, and the communicator, they know what vision, hearing, and communication is; however, they ascribe the ultimate and the perfect ability to see, hear, and speak with all creation to God who is omnipotent.

While this method of inquiry followed Christian theologians throughout church history, Muslim theologians resisted such comparison, acknowledging a wide chasm between Allah and humanity. As Islamic theology evolved, many Muslim traditionalists in the early years of *kalām* followed the principle of “*man ṭalaba al-dīn bi’l kalām tazandaqa* (whoever seeks religion through *kalām* becomes a heretic).”⁴¹⁵ This slogan did not refer to the whole project of theology as represented by *Usūl al-Dīn* (the origin of religion), but to the investigation of the basic features of the nature of Allah, especially his attributes, which some early Muslim thinkers engaged in. Later generations of Muslim scholars accused other theologians of assuming too

⁴¹² Qusṭanṭīne Bashā, ميامير ثيودور أبو قرّة اسقف حاران: اقدم تأليف عربي نصراني [Mayamir Theodore Abū Qurrah Usqf Ḥārān: the Oldest Arabic Christian writings] (Beirut, Lebanon: Al-Fou’ad Printing Press, 1904), 27.

⁴¹³ Alexander Hall, “Scotus: Knowledge of God,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed January 22, 2022. <https://iep.utm.edu/scotusk/>

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Oliver Leaman, “The Developed Kalām Tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed., Tim Winter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 81.

much about the knowability of the divine nature, so they created the doctrine of *bila kayfa* (without asking how). It means believing in certain attributes (Allah's ninety-nine beautiful names) without attempting to understand them beyond their description in the Qur'an and traditions. The discussion of Allah's attributes continued afterwards in a very limited way.

Both Christian and Muslim theologians confess the perfect-divine theology. Divine perfection relates to a state of completeness or absolute wholeness. As stated in chapter one, the greatest conceived being has no ontological deficiencies, has no flaws, or depends on anything else. There is no greater being that can be thought of which deserves human worship except the greatest conceived being. This concept can be demonstrated with the following equation: Maximally good + Maximally perfect = Maximally great. This is the definition of the greatest conceived being. In other words, God is maximally good and maximally perfect; therefore, he is the greatest conceived being.

Maximal divine goodness means God cannot be morally better; there is no room for him to obtain more moral skills. His goodness is maximal and full. If there is anything in the world that can contribute to or increase his goodness, then he is a minor God. In like manner, maximal divine perfection means he lacks no thing (e.g. skill, ability, attributes ...etc.). There is nothing in creation that can add or subtract from him. God did not create the world because he must or ought to, nor because he needs to. God is self-sufficient; he does not need the world to be unsurpassably great. He is perfect with or without the world. Divine maximal goodness and aseity (self-sufficiency) make theists (both Christian and Muslim) believe that God/Allah is the greatest conceived being, and therefore, he deserves human worship.

Theists, however, follow two different models for divine perfection—Trinity and *tawhīd*. The study advocates for the divine trinitarian model because it demonstrates divine perfection in

an unsurpassable way. As Kallistos Ware states, “The doctrine of the Trinity is not just one possible way of thinking about God. It is the only way. The one God of the Christian church cannot be conceived except as Trinity.”⁴¹⁶ Other non-trinitarian models of theism (especially *tawḥīd*) do not reveal God as unsurpassably perfect. Their presentation of the divine essence portrays God as contingently relational, especially before creation. Allah was alone with no other person to communicate with. All his divine communicative attributes were dysfunctional before the existence of creation because there was no one to practice these attributes with—e.g. Al-Baṣīr (the Seer), As-Samīʿ (the Hearer), Ar-Razzāq (the Sustainer), Ash-Sahkūr (the Thankful), al-Ḥāfīz (the Preserver), al-Muqīt (the Nourisher), Ar-Raqīb (the Watcher), al-Karīm (the Generous), al-Mujīb (the One who Responds to Those Who Ask) ...etc.⁴¹⁷ Consequently, the Islamic presentation of *tawḥīd* shows that Allah is contingent upon his creation in order to communicate. This shortcoming in the divine nature affects the greatness of the divine and runs the risk of misperceiving the greatest conceived being.

The argument goes this way:

P1: One aspect of divine perfection is relationality—the greatest conceived being should be a relational being in order to be perfect and good (the greatest).

P2: The trinitarian model shows God as an eternally relational divine being (intra-relational and inter-relational).

C: God as a Trinity is the greatest conceived being.

⁴¹⁶ Kallistos Ware, “The Holy Trinity: Model for Personhood-in-Relation,” in *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*, ed., Polkinghorne, J. C., (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2010), 107.

⁴¹⁷ This list of Allah’s attributes is taken from Al-Gazālī, *Ninety-Nine Names of God in Islam: A translation of the Major Portion of Al- Gazālī’s al-Maqṣad and al-Asnā*, trans. Robert Stade, (Ibadan, Nigeria: Daystar Press, 1970).

The Greatest Conceived Being Is Relational in Nature

Many theologians appeal to the concept of divine attributes in an attempt to discover the mystery of the divine essence. One of the ways to understand the greatest conceived being is by studying his attributes to ensure that none of them is in conflict with other attributes. The attribute that this study will focus on is the relational nature of God—God in relationship. It is rare to see the relationality of God discussed in theology proper as an attribute; however, the relationality of God in the sense of interconnectedness is undeniable in any theistic worldview. God communicates and connects with his creation. He hears his people’s prayers, answers their inquiries, and reveals his will. If God does not possess the ability to relate, then he is a lesser God. If he is non-relational, then he cannot communicate with his creation. He cannot hear the prayers of believers and cannot communicate his divine revelation and will. In the theistic worldview, the greatest conceived being does not miss any attributes that might make him imperfect. Therefore, within theism, God must be relational.

Relationality: An Essential Trait of Divine Personality

Relationality Is Essential in the Theistic Worldview

All theistic worldviews (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) believe that God connects with his creation in one way or another. God gave his revelation (the Bible and the Qur’an). He spoke directly with his prophets (Ex 31:18; Dan 5:25) and he communicated his message to human beings through angels and apostles. Today, the written revelation is completed, but God still communicates with his people. He listens to their prayers and answers their needs (Ps 4:3; John 9:31; 1 John 5:14) (Surah 21:48, 76; 35:22). In other words, within a theistic worldview, God is still involved in his creation by communicating with his followers. He did not leave the world alone to wrestle with its challenges, as in a deistic worldview.

Relationality Is Essential to Personhood

Relationality requires personal agency—an agent who can hear/listen and speak/talk. The form of communication is not important at this point, and it will not be addressed. The significant point, however, that this study conveys is that no relationship of any sort (father-son or master-slave) can be done without the ability to connect. The minimum requirement for starting a relationship is the ability to see, hear, and communicate. Objects, such as newspapers, televisions, and computers are all transmitters rather than ends in themselves. They do not represent or reflect themselves, but they point to a variety of things, such as the flux, flow, and changing circumstances around the world.⁴¹⁸ They are unable to create or maintain a relationship, unless there is a personal agency behind them.

Relationality rules out indifference. Usually, objects are indifferent to what is around them. Scotus states, “Something with passive power is indifferent to contrary states of affairs, like how logs are indifferent to being hot or not being hot. After all, a log does not care, so to speak, whether it is one or the other, for there is nothing about a log that requires that it be hot, or that it not be hot.”⁴¹⁹ On the contrary, an agency of a person who cares about the status of the log can interact with it by heating it up and causing it to receive heat. In the same sense, an active power, such as the sun, is indifferent to the many effects it can bring about to creation; however, an agency of a person (who has control over the sun) is not indifferent to its affect. A personal agency is intentional about its effects on the creation because it seeks to emphasize virtue and minimize harm.

⁴¹⁸ Robert Cooper, “Peripheral Vision: Relationality,” *Organization Studies* 26, no. 11 (November 2005): 1691.

⁴¹⁹ J. T. Paasch, *Divine Production in Late Medieval Trinitarian Theology: Henry of Ghent, Duns Scotus, and William Ockham*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 139.

Relationality requires otherness—another agency to connect with. The communicative ability of a personal agency cannot be completed without another personal agency to receive, convey, and impart the information that is being transmitted. Relationships require at least two agents for meaningful interaction. It is pointless for someone to make a relationship with himself, or to be satisfied seeing the dirt or listening to the wind. Pure individualism or selfishness is not perceived as a virtue. Even psychologists, while they emphasize the traits of self-awareness for the sake of furthering and improving interpersonal relationships, they do not recommend it for the sake of furthering individualism.⁴²⁰

Relationality Is Essential for Human Flourishing

Relationality is fundamental for human flourishing. God does not only ask people to worship him, but he also promises to bless them if they believe and obey him. Those who are not believers will not receive his blessings, and those who believe will receive their deserved awards. In other words, the results of the divine relationality should lead to human flourishing (at least for those who are obeying the divine communication/revelation). Those who do not want to have a relationship with God might not enjoy human flourishing, but those who want to establish a relationship with God are promised a thriving life. If this is true, then God ought to communicate to establish a relationship with his creation. If he is unable to convey his message or listen to prayers, then his greatness is disputable.

Humanly speaking, some people are better than others in their relatedness and communication with other people. Some can make friends so easily—it comes naturally to them—whereas others struggle with making friends and relating to people. No matter how hard

⁴²⁰ Chen, S., Boucher, H. C., & Tapias, M. P. “The Relational Self Revealed: Integrative Conceptualization and Implications for Interpersonal Life,” *Psychological Bulletin*, (2006): 151-179. E. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. New York, (NY: Norton, 1968).

connecting with others is, the ability to communicate and relate is essential to any person, otherwise the individuals would be stripped of their humanity. Needless to say, human relationships are different from God's relationship to the world. God is transcendent and does not need humanity to flourish (Eccles 5:2; Isa 6:1) (Surah 87:1; 2:255; 42:12). While this is true, there is a need to note that God is omnipotent (able to do all possible things) (Rom 4:21; 2Cor 9:8; 2Tim 1:12) (Surah 17:99; 23:17; 36:81; 46:33); therefore, perceiving him as unable to establish a relationship with his creation (especially human beings) is not a virtue, but a defect.

In a nutshell, relationality is a fundamental attribute to divine agency. Most theistic religions believe that God created human beings to worship him. Relationship with the divine started through the divine agency (God) who communicated to human beings their need and duty to worship him. Intuitively speaking, if the divine agency is unable to communicate this requirement, then he is to blame, not the human. In other words, the first step in relationality starts with the divine, who is communicated to be the supreme, the creator, and the omnipotent; subsequently, he deserves to be worshiped. God's inability to communicate with his creation at any point in history would be considered a flaw, not a perfection.

The Fundamental Factor of Relationality

Relationality: Intra-Relational Nature of the Divine

Intra-relationality is essential to the divine agency because it shows God not only as relational but also as eternally relational. Christians and Muslims perceive God as an eternal divine being, which implies that God has no beginning and no end. He was not born, does not have a starting point, and will not die (Rom 1:20, 16:26; 1Tim 1:17) (Surah 28:88; 55:27). As

Stanley Grenz states, “To refer to God as spirit means to understand God as the Living One.”⁴²¹ Living in this case implies the idea of always/eternally living.

Since creation has a starting point (at one time in history there was no creation), then scholars can think of divine relationality in two ways: the relationality of God before the creation and after it. The divine intra-relationality is related to God’s unity, and it refers to his sociality within the Godhead—God as a community and the way he perceives himself. This criterion helps thinkers understand God’s nature inwardly—whether he is alone (as one agent) or a communion of persons—and whether his relational nature is consistent with his eternity.

Relationality: Inter-Relational Nature of the Divine

Inter-relationality is another type of divine relationality related to the communication between God and his creation. God is integrally involved with his creation. He is not static, but active and affected by the events of the world. Any relationship requires at least two agents: one speaks while the other listens, one loves while another receives the love, and so on. This criterion is important because it provides answers about the nature of the relationship of God with his creation. How does God relate/act with his creation and what does he require/expect from his creatures? After the fall, what did he do to save humanity? This criterion helps thinkers understand God’s nature outwardly through his actions.

Allah and Relationality

The Main Islamic Theological Schools: A Historical Overview

As stated in chapter three, during the Islamic formation of theology (*kalām*), theological and philosophical conflicts arose between two major Arabic schools of thought: the traditional

⁴²¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 83.

and the rational. The traditional school, led by the Ashʿarites, stressed the idea that revelation should precede reason. They viewed inspired writings as superior to human reasoning and believed that faith and surrender were therefore required. Consequently, “interpretation of the text was to be either limited or forbidden, and ignorance must be admitted.”⁴²² On the other hand, the rational school, represented by the Muʿtazilites, recognized the necessity of reason. They placed reason above revelation. Faith was not complete without understanding. When a discrepancy between the mind and revelation occurs, interpretation is required. In the eleventh century, after a long dispute, the Muʿtazilites were accursed and the Ashʿarites were recognized as the orthodox party.⁴²³ Based on this distinction, both Ashʿarites and Muʿtazilites presented different perceptions of the divine attributes. While they both were intent on saving God’s unity, they became preoccupied with God’s power over God’s relationality.

Islamic Overview of Divine Attributes

The two Sunni groups disputed the topic of Allah’s names/attributes. In the Qur’an, Muhammad states that “to Allah alone belong all perfect attributes. So call on Him by these” (Surah 7:180 Islam International Publications, 2015; 17:110; 20:8; 59:24).⁴²⁴ Following Muhammad’s commands, Muslims believe that they should not look to nature or the virtues that human beings enjoy in order to extract God’s attributes. Instead, they should only use the names

⁴²² Kamal Al-Yaziji, *معالم الفكر العربي في العصر الوسيط* [Highlights of the Arab Thought in the Middle Ages], (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al-ʿIlm Lilmalayīn, 1979), 151-157. Imad N. Shehadeh, *God with Us and without Us*, Volumes One and Two: The Beauty and Power of Oneness in Trinity versus Absolute Oneness (Carlisle: Langham Creative Projects, 2020), 109.

⁴²³ William Thomson, “Al-Ashʿari and His Al-Ibanah,” *The Muslim world: A Quarterly Review of History, Culture, Religions & The Christian Mission in Islamdom*, vol. 32, no. 3, (1942): 253.

⁴²⁴ Bukharī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukharī*, Hadīth no. 6410, 2736, and 7392, accessed January 8, 2022. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6410>. Sunan ibn Majah, Hadīth no. 3861, accessed January 8, 2022. <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:3861>. Jamiʿ At-Tirmidhī, Hadīth 3507, accessed January 8, 2022. <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/48>.

that Allah and Mohammad used in the Qur'an. The dispute was over what names to include and what are the meanings of these names.

Using different methods of interpretation, the Ash'arites' understanding of Allah's attributes resulted in different interpretations from the Mu'tazilites. The most famous scholar that the Ash'arites followed was Ahmad ibn Hanbal (AD 855), who rejected the Mu'tazilites' rationalism and gave precedence to divine revelation. Ibn Hanbal believed that the attributes of God, according to the teachings of the Qur'an, are not subject to human reasoning, and thus must be accepted without qualification.⁴²⁵ Asking whether God's attributes are part of his essence (in him) or part of his will (without him) was an unacceptable religious innovation.⁴²⁶

The ongoing issues between the Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites culminated in the question of anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*). The Qur'an speaks of God's hands (Surah 38:75), eyes (Surah 54:14), and face (Surah 55:27). It also describes him as hearing (Surah 2:127; 17:1; 22:61), seeing (Surah 4:58, 134; 5:71; 17:30), and seating himself on his throne (Surah 20:5), apparently implying that he has a body. Many Ash'arite scholars, such as al-Baqillanī, al-Juwaynī, and al-Ghazalī, argue that these verses must be understood metaphorically. As al-Juwaynī states, "What is correct, in our view, is that the hands [of God] should be construed as power, the eyes as vision, and the face as existence."⁴²⁷ Ash'arites were eager to avoid anything that might be construed as anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*).⁴²⁸

⁴²⁵ H. Laoust, "Ahmad b. Hanbal," in P. J. Bearman et al. (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam Online*, 12 vols, Leiden: Brill, 2004 <http://www.encyislam.brill.nl>. This idea is related to the doctrine of *bila kayfa* ("without asking how").

⁴²⁶ Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 65.

⁴²⁷ Al-Juwaynī, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief: Al-Irshad*, trans. Paul e. Walker, (Garnet Publishing, 2001), 86.

⁴²⁸ J. Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam: The Muslim Brotherhood, Ash'arism, and Political Sunnism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010), 19.

Dar al-Ifta al-Missriyyah, which is the highest religious authority in Egypt, issued a mandate on their website, commending Sunnis to

Believe in them [Allah’s attributes] and to receive them with acceptance and resignation. And to not engage in its interpretation, its refutation, likening the attribute to something tangible, and other problematic methodologies. It is incumbent to establish the attribute as it came and to leave interpreting its meaning and to resign its meaning to the One who spoke of it in accordance with the way of those who are firmly established in the faith... He [Allah] has castigated those who innovate in interpretation ‘But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except God.’⁴²⁹

Dar al-Ifta al-Missriyyah also quotes Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, who, regarding Allah descending to the sky of this earth and the scene on the day of resurrection, has stated that “we believe in these texts and we verify their truth without asking how, or without seeking a meaning and we desire nothing of this. We believe that what the Messenger of God brought is truth and we do not respond to him nor do we describe God with more than what He has described of Himself ‘there is none like unto Him and He is the all seeing, all hearing.’”⁴³⁰ This statement affirms the attributes of Allah, and if any of them are ambiguous or equivocal, then Sunnis should accept them as is without further question.

What is important to our study is that the Ash‘arites affirmed Allah’s Attributes (*sifat*), divided them into two groups, and emphasized seven essential ones. The first group is the essential *sifat*. They are called *Al-sifat al-dhatīya* (attributes in essence): namely power, knowledge, life, will, speech, hearing, and sight, which eternally subsist in God’s essence. From eternity, Allah is omnipotent, omniscient, living, willing, speaking, all-hearing, and all-seeing. The second group is called *Al-sifat al-fī‘lyā* (attributes in actions), such as mercy, love, wrath ...

⁴²⁹ Dar Al-Ifta Al-Missriyyah, “Who are the Ash’arites?” accessed January 8, 2022, <http://www.dar-alifta.org/Foreign/ViewFatwa.aspx?ID=8001>.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

etc. These attributes exist only as Allah acts with his creation. The Ash'arites' semantics regarding the attributes of actions is ambiguous. Some scholars say, "These attributes [attributes in actions] are therefore not eternal and do not subsist in His [Allah]Essence."⁴³¹ Other scholars say that these attributes are eternal, but they are not related to the essence of God but to his will.⁴³²

Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, contributed to the attribute debate by presenting different views from the Ash'arites. According to John Renard, the Mu'tazilites' views "flow from the first principle: since God is simply and irreducibly one, his 'essential' attributes (power, knowledge, existence) are identical with God's being. But since God also acts in time, his speaking, hearing, seeing, and willing are separate from God's essence and subject to change."⁴³³ Mu'tazilites attempted to save a strict concept of monotheism, which, in their opinion, requires an uncompromised observance of the transcendence and the absolute unity of God. In their view, Allah should be pure in essence and has no attributes because assigning attributes implies multiplicity.⁴³⁴ If the attributes are identical with God, then they would have to be identical among themselves. God's knowledge would thus be the same as God's omnipotence.

The Mu'tazilites maintained the attributes of essence; however, they insisted that it would be blasphemous to acknowledge the attributes of action as defining what God is like.⁴³⁵

According to Shehadeh, "Mu'tazilites maintained that the attributes of action are not eternal, but

⁴³¹ Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam*, 21. The issue of the attributes of acts is complicated

⁴³² Imad N. Shehadeh, *God with Us and without Us*, 112.

⁴³³ John Renard, *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 105.

⁴³⁴ Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction*. (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 65.

⁴³⁵ Al-Yaziji, *معالم الفكر العربي في العصر الوسيط*, 17.

created, and therefore, contingent, unnecessary and changing.”⁴³⁶ Allah’s attributes in actions are the abstract meanings, human semantics, and knowledge that were created to know Allah. Thus, it is easy to imagine a time when Allah did not have these attributes because they only came into being when he acted with his creation. As a result of this claim, Mu^ctazilites made Allah mutable and subject to change.⁴³⁷

The Intra-Relationality of Allah

Neither the Ash^carite nor the Mu^ctazilite understanding of Allah’s attributes show him as relational before creation. Mu^ctazilites do not believe that Allah’s attributes, such as seeing, hearing, and speaking, are eternal. Most of the Islamic dispute happened over God’s speech, in which Mu^ctazilites view Allah’s speaking as an attribute of action; therefore, it is not eternal. Moreover, Mu^ctazilites have different interpretations for Allah being the seer and the hearer. Al-Shahrastānī mentions several Mu^ctazilite views on this topic. Al-Ka^cbī, for instance, believes that Allah being the seer and the hearer means “he is aware of what is being said and seen.”⁴³⁸ Other scholars, like Al-Jibā’ī, understood Allah (the seer and the hearer) as *al-Ḥay* (the living, who is not dead, full of life, and the existent).⁴³⁹ In other words, Mu^ctazilites do not affirm the attributes of Allah as part of his essence; subsequently, they are not eternal. They interpret Allah being the seer and the hearer by alluding either to his life or his knowledge of the objects of seeing and hearing. To protect Allah’s unity, Mu^ctazilites end up presenting a mutilated concept of the divine by making him unable to see or hear from eternity.

⁴³⁶ Imad N. Shehadeh, *God with Us and without Us*, 111.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 112.

⁴³⁸ Al-Shahrastānī, *نهاية الاقدام في علم الكلام Nihāyat Al-Iqdām fī cīm al-Kalām* (Bagdad, Iraq: Muthana), 341.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

The Ash‘arites, on the other hand, acknowledge that Allah sees and hears because it is written in the Qur’an that “He is the Hearing, the Seeing” (Surah 42:11, Shakir). The problem with this view lies in the idea that Allah could hear and see eternally before creating the world because these attributes are part of his essence. But here’s the question that Ash‘arites never asked: Whom did Allah see or hear before the creation of the world? If he did not see or hear anyone, he only started seeing and hearing after the creation; consequently, his nature changed. Perhaps he had the potential ability to see and hear, but his attributes were dysfunctional until he created the world.

The eternal divine communication problem in Islam, which is mentioned in chapter three, extends to Allah’s speech. Remember, the Ash‘arites’ view about Allah’s speech is understood by his perpetual state of being, as a substance (*ma‘na*), not in the sense of a set of temporal ideas or representations, but as an eternal divine attribute. This understanding raises the same problem of seeing and hearing: Allah had no one to communicate with before the creation of the world. His ability to communicate was contingent on his creation.

The conflict between the Mu‘tazilites and the Ash‘arites regarding the relationality of Allah exposes the weakness of absolute oneness. Muslims encounter a dilemma with their concepts of *tawhīd* based on their descriptions of Allah’s attributes. Those who affirm the eternality of the attributes—especially speaking, seeing, and hearing—mutilate their concept of the divine because Allah needs another agent to speak, see, and hear. Otherwise, Allah would be speaking, seeing, and hearing with himself, and that seems meaningless. Those who do not affirm the eternality of the attributes, on the other hand, end up presenting a minor image of the divine who could not communicate—speak, hear, or see—until after the creation came into existence because there was no subject of communication to fulfill his attributes with.

To answer this dilemma, later Muslim scholars suggested that Allah did not form creation *ex-nihilo* (out of nothing), but instead by emanation. The concept of emanation means that all created things are derived from something else in the sense that secondary things proceed or flow from the primary.⁴⁴⁰ Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (AD 1001) believes in eternal creation. Time does not have beginning or end. According to Joel Kraemer, al-Sijistānī maintains that God’s power is “spread throughout the world permanently” and saw creation as “a non-temporal, eternal process.”⁴⁴¹ This means God did not create out of nothing nor in six literal days as the Qur’an states. Instead, creation is perpetually existent with God. Ibn Taymīyya (AD 1328), who was regarded as a *kalām* theologian and not a philosopher, argues for the idea of continuous creation from eternity. Commenting on a *ḥadīth* in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and a Quranic verse, he argues that Allah created this world while his throne was already in existence.⁴⁴² It is written in the Qur’an that Allah “is Who created the heavens and the earth in six Days - and His Throne was upon the water” (Surah 11:7 Pickthall). This verse connotes the idea that water and Allah’s throne were already in existence when Allah created the world in six days. Hoover notes,

God’s creative activity had a beginning. They correctly see that reason dictates that God could have become an agent after not having been one unless a prior cause originated to necessitate the change. That is, it is impossible that God arbitrarily started creating at some point in the past after never having created before. Here Ibn Taymiyya endorses the philosophers’ axiom of efficient causality—every event requires a cause—and he rejects the *Kalām* view that it is in the nature of God’s will to decide without prior cause.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴⁰ *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Emanation,” accessed January 15, 2022. <https://iep.utm.edu/emanatio/>.

⁴⁴¹ Joel Kraemer, *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam: Abu Sulaymān Al-Sijistānī and His Circle* (Studies in Islamic Culture and History), vol. 8, (Brill Academic, 1987), 197, 219-22, 224.

⁴⁴² The exact wording of this *ḥadīth* as Ibn Taymiyya relates it does not appear in the standard collections of *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, but his text is close to that found 3190 & 3191.

⁴⁴³ Jon Hoover, “Perpetual Creativity in the Perfection of God: Ibn Taymiyya’s Hadith Commentary on God’s Creation of This World,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol.15, no.3 (2004): 294.

Despite ibn Taymīyya’s suggestion about the eternality of the world, the dilemma of the relationality of Allah remains unanswered. For even if water and Allah’s throne (or just basic atoms) is all that existed at the beginning (from eternity), Allah’s attributes as the hearer and communicator were not perfected until the creation of human beings. Allah was still unable to communicate in a relational way or demonstrate his relational nature until the creation of human beings. Allah’s inability to see, hear, and speak limits his power and perfection. Additionally, the idea of the eternal nature of water and God’s throne is problematic. For only Allah is eternal, and all that is eternal is Allah.⁴⁴⁴ If water or Allah’s throne was eternal, as ibn Taymiyyah claims, then other things were Allah or associating with Allah from eternity. This idea is completely rejected in Islam because it is inconsistent with the doctrine of *tawhīd*—only the divine is eternal. In other words, the eternality of the universe limits the divinity of Allah because it presents something else as eternal, and this idea refutes the concept of *tawhīd*.

The Inter-Relationality of Allah

Allah’s attributes describe him communicating with his creation, which raises the question of the inter-relationality of Allah. The Qur’an describes Allah speaking to angels, teaching them mysteries about the future, and ordering them to bow to Adam (Surah 2:30-34). The Qur’an also depicts Allah hearing the pleading of woman regarding her husband (Surah 58:1), seeing everything (Surah 17:1; 26:218; 96:14), and hearing everything (Surah 5:76; 6:13; 21:4). Perhaps most importantly, the Qur’an itself is the speech of Allah to his servant via the angel Jibrīl Muhammad (Surah 6: 19).

⁴⁴⁴ According to the Sunni Creed, *Al-Aqīdah al-Tahāwīyyah*, Allah is “the eternal without a beginning and enduring without end . . . He has existed with His timeless attributes before His creation, which added nothing to His essence that was not already among His attributes. As His attributes were before creation, so will they continue forever.” Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭahāwī, *Al-Aqīdah al-Tahāwīyyah*, trans., Abū Amīna Elias, (Dar Al-Thaqafah, 2018), 2-3.

Most theistic scholars believe that God is a person/agent.⁴⁴⁵ He is not a person as human beings are, but he is a person in a unique, divine way. The divine person, for instance, is eternal, having no beginning or end. He is not born, and he cannot die.⁴⁴⁶ The divine person is not a secondary but a primary and absolute notion in existence. As John Zizioulas states, “Nothing is more sacred than the person since it constitutes the ‘way of being’ of God himself.”⁴⁴⁷ Christians and Muslims, however, differ on the idea of whether God (as a person) exists in communion or alone. Christians believe that if God is a person, then he cannot exist in isolation or alone; whereas, Muslims have no problem with God being alone and lonely. They believe that there is no plurality in him because his essential characteristic is that of unity. Nevertheless, his lack of plurality means he is not in relationship throughout eternity, for there is no other with whom he might relate.

The reason behind this difference is that Christians relate the idea of personhood to the idea of identity. For a being to be a person is unique and unrepeatable. Even if a person dies, he or she will still be remembered for who he or she was. Their skills, traits, characteristics (good and bad) will always be remembered. However, animals, who are not persons, are replaceable, and their traits and characteristics are repeatable. “They can be similar; they can be composed and decomposed; they can be combined with others in order to produce results or even new

⁴⁴⁵ Islamic scholars use different ways/words to call Allah, such as Creator, Aḥad, Wāḥid ...etc. However, they rarely use the word person. Therefore, they do not agree whether ‘person’ should be used to describe God. Those who call Allah a person, they quote Sahih Muslim Hadith no.1499a, “No person is more jealous of his honour than Allah, and no persons, is more fond of accepting an excuse than Allah, ... and no one is more fond of praise than Allah...” <https://sunnah.com/muslim:1499a>.

⁴⁴⁶ Chase, “The Orthodox Faith,” 178, 183. Al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Al-Aqīdah al-Tahāwiyyah*, 2-3.

⁴⁴⁷ John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 166-167.

species; they can be used to serve purposes—sacred or not, this does not matter.”⁴⁴⁸ On the contrary, persons cannot be replaced, reproduced, combined, or used the same way the animals are used—even the most sacred ones. Whosoever treats persons in such a way automatically turns them into a thing. When people die, they perish physically, but they bring into existence their personal particularity. As Zizioulas explains,

Death dissolves us all into one indistinguishable nature, turning us into ‘substance,’ or things. What gives us an identity that does not die is not our nature but our personal relationship with God’s undying personal identity. Only when nature is hypostatic or personal, as is the case with God, does it exist truly and eternally. For it is only then that it acquires uniqueness and becomes an unrepeatable and irreplaceable particularity in the ‘mode of being’ which we find in the Trinity.⁴⁴⁹

Some Muslims might partially agree with this explanation; however, those who reject the idea that God is a person are trying to avoid the term because of its anthropomorphic connotation. Such Muslims prefer to use other titles and names of Allah, such as *rabb* (lord) (Surah 40:28; 43:64), a word used to refer to the God of Mohammad or the God of al-Ka’ba. *Ilāh* (a god – pl. *āliha*), a word of considerably lower incidence in the Qur’anic text, is used often to refer generically to the false gods of others, including Jesus and Mary (Surah 5:116, 16:51; 20:88).⁴⁵⁰

Whether Allah is defined as a person or a divine agent, his relationality to the world is essential. The Islamic presentation of divine attributes can be opaque because absolute oneness focuses on the power of Allah and the freedom of his will. A revealed action of God “deals with the will of Allah and not Allah himself.”⁴⁵¹ Shehadeh thinks that “the emphasis was placed upon

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 285.

⁴⁵¹ Arne Rudvin, “Islam: An Absolutely Different Ethos?” *International Review of Mission* 71, (1982): 59.

the phenomenon that there is never a promise given by God in the Qur'an that is not accompanied by a statement stressing his freedom and power to act according to how he chooses."⁴⁵² This is mainly because in Islam, human beings are created primarily to worship Allah rather than to have a relationship with him. Ida Glaser states, "The ultimate in relationship is willing submission rather than interaction."⁴⁵³ Glaser adds, "God's love may cause him to have mercy on his creatures, even to the extent of communicating with them; but it is a love that condescends in beneficence rather than a love that shares in relationship."⁴⁵⁴ Relational love includes both benefits and relationship.

If the previous analysis is true, then God's absolute power and authority over the whole universe constitute a master-slave relationship instead of a father-child relationship. It is his right alone to enforce the affairs of men as he wills, and it is the duty of the slave to obey and worship his master without questioning. Al-Shahristānī openly affirms this kind of relationship between Allah and everything in his creation (including human beings) by indicating that "Ar-Raḥmān [another name of Allah's names] should not have a son because he is exalted. He did not become, nor was caused to exist; he did not beget, nor was begotten; but everything to him is as slavery to masterdom. All who existed in heavens and on earth become slaves to Ar-Raḥmān, and he is the master of everything and its [the world] creator, and the God of all that exists ..."⁴⁵⁵

The super-transcendence of Allah in Islamic theology presents him as above his creation because there are no signs of personal interaction with human beings. When Allah wanted to

⁴⁵² For more elaboration on this idea please see, Shehadeh, *God with us and without us*, 114-116.

⁴⁵³ Glaser, "Concept of Relationship as a Key," 59.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁵⁵ Ash-Shahristānī, *Nihāyat al-Iqdā fī cilm al-Kalām* (Bagdad, Iraq: Muthanah), 179. "وما ينبغي للرحمن ان يتخذ ولداً فهو تعالى لم يوجب ولم يوجب ولم يلد ولم يولد وانما نسبة الكل اليه نسبة العبودية الى الربوبية، ان كل من في السموات والارض إلا آتى الرحمن عبداً وهو رب كل شيء..."

interact with his created beings, he sent them several prophets, such as Abraham, Moses, Jonah, and many others. When the age of maturity, or the age of reason approached, Allah sent prophet Mohammad to his people as the Seal of the prophets (Surah 33:40).⁴⁵⁶ He did not simply reveal the continuation of the Judeo-Christian faith, but he claimed to be the culmination of all previous revelations.⁴⁵⁷ Up to this point, Allah did not leave himself without a witness. He was still communicating with his people. He saw the conditions of humanity, heard their agony, and taught them what they need to know about his majesty. He corresponded with them by speaking, and he spoke by revealing. He communicated by sending a messenger, whom he gave supreme authority to reveal his will (Qur'an 42:51). After this point, Allah stopped communicating with human beings. He stopped sending prophets and revealing more messages. It seems that Allah gave humanity the moral law and taught them the ethical codes that they should apply, but he then left them on their own to struggle and fight. This part of Allah's relationality is also missing from Islamic theology. Allah seems to distance himself from the creation.

The original equation of God's perfection + God's moral goodness does not seem compatible with the Islamic presentation of the divine. For Allah to be the greatest, he must be maximally good and maximally perfect. Maximally good means God cannot morally improve. He cannot be non-relational at one point of history, then become relational, and later stop being relational again. Being non-relational at any point in history makes him a minor god. Similarly, God being maximally perfect means he lacks nothing. If he does not exhibit the feature of relationality necessarily, then he is a contingent being. He needs his creation in order to be relational. Before the creation of human beings, there was no one to hear, see, or speak to. The

⁴⁵⁶ It was interpreted as the last of the prophets.

⁴⁵⁷ David Waines, *An Introduction Islam*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 27.

doctrine of *tawhīd* rejects the idea of relationship within the divine community and emphasizes the idea of oneness—Allah is *Wāhid*, *Aḥd*, and *Samad*. He is not a community of external persons who need no creation to communicate with, but he is contingently reliant on his creation to be relational.

Despite all the attempts to protect God’s transcendentalism and perfectionism, being morally contingent does not make the Islamic divine being necessarily perfect. Allah is either essentially morally perfect or essentially morally defective. For the greatness of Allah to occur, his goodness and perfection should match. Just as we do not take God’s omnipotence to be threatened by God not being able to make water H₂O, we need not take God’s greatness to be threatened by the fact that he cannot exhibit the attribute of relationality necessarily. The concept of God existing eternally independent of the world must here be judged as being strictly incoherent. By logical necessity, the concept of Allah’s self-sufficient sociality must be rejected.

The Trinitarian God and Relationality

As it is commonly known, Christians believe in the Trinity. The Trinity to them is not just a doctrine or a concept. It is more than that. It is God himself. God is completely unique, and he is totally unlike anything else. So, to define the Trinity is to define God. Is it possible to define the undefinable? Human language fails theologians in two ways: first, it is based upon time. While God is not limited to time, human beings speak of the past, the present, and the future. Thus, when they speak about God, they are forced to place misleading limitations upon his being. Second, words often carry with them “baggage,” which is to say that specific words might conjure up a particular mental image.⁴⁵⁸ The most obvious example is using the word *person* when we are describing the deity—the persons of the Trinity. Like Muslims, Christian

⁴⁵⁸ James White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 14.

theologians are aware that human beings (as persons) are unlike God. To avoid any confusion, Arab and Syriac theologians invented a special theological term and called it *Aqānīm* (sg. *Uqnūm*) to refer to the persons of the Trinity. The three Arab Christian scholars that were discussed in the previous chapter followed this pattern, and this study will follow the same pattern. This is to say that Arab Christians who were conversing with their Muslim peers knew about the problem of anthropomorphism and its Islamic rejection. They saw a necessity in inventing a theological terminology that helps clarify the meaning of the divine persons while honoring the distinction.

It has been argued in the previous chapter that most Chalcedonian Christians follow the definition of the apostles' creed of the Trinity. God is one divine being manifested in three *Aqānīm*. Like Muslims theologians, Arab Christian theologians explained the doctrine of God by discussing his attributes. However, they did not classify the attributes into two categories (the attributes of essence and the attributes of actions); instead, they emphasized that the knowledge of God is possible through studying God's actions and through observing human's virtues while keeping the distinction between the divine and human virtues clear.

Most theologians did not include the relationality of God in their discussions. This attribute has a close relation to the omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and the immutability of God. If God is not eternally relational, then he is a minor God who is an abstract concept, and not a being that deserves worship. If God is not relational in essence, then he is not maximally good because relationality is superior to non-relationality, and lacking relationality indicates lacking ability, which makes God non-omnipotent. Finally, if God was not relational, but he became relational after he created human beings, then his nature is changing. He was not perfect at one

point in history because he was not able to practice all his virtues, but at another point in history, he became able to. This change in God's nature indicates inferiority.

The next sections discuss in further detail how the relationality of God is important to show the perfection of his nature. In Christianity, God is eternally relational because the three persons of the Trinity are eternal in nature. The trinitarian model is the only way to show God as intra-relational within himself and inter-relational with his creation, without compromising his omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and immutability—all of which reflects his perfection. For to construe God's sociality as being world-dependent rather than self-sufficient presents weakness in the divine essence.

The Trinitarian God is Intra-Relational

Christian theologians emphasize God in his revelation. God's own eternal being and the salvific actions of the three divine *Aqanīm* in history reflect the intra-trinitarian relations in the eternal Godhead. For all the attributes of the Father are beheld in the Son, and all the attributes of the Son belong to the Father, insomuch as the Son abides wholly in the Father and in turn has the Father wholly in Himself. Thus, the *Uqnūm* (Person or hypostasis) of the Son becomes, as it were, the form and countenance by which the Father is made known, and the *Uqnūm* of the Father is made known in the form of the Son.⁴⁵⁹ Basil of Caesarea points out that the Son beholds the attributes of the Father, and the Son's attributes belong to the Father, "in so much as the Son abides wholly in the Father and in turn has the Father wholly in Himself."⁴⁶⁰ The Father and the Son inter-dwell with one another in an intimate relationship in which each fully knows and beholds the other.

⁴⁵⁹ St. Basil of Caesarea, *Letters* 38. 8, accessed January 21, 2022
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3202038.htm>.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

John of Damascus was one of the prominent theologians who spoke about the intra-relationality of God. He developed what was later called the doctrine of perichoresis—the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit within the blessed Trinity.⁴⁶¹ This doctrine grasps the circulatory character of the triune God in which “the Persons exist in one another.” Perichoresis is seen in the mutual cleaving of the *Aqanīm*, in which

the abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling is without confusion. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and the Father is in the Son and the Spirit, and there is no merging or blending or confusion.⁴⁶²

Each *Uqnūm* of the Trinity is vitally existing in the other two without losing his own identity.

Miroslav Volf calls such a construct reciprocal interiority.⁴⁶³ We find this type of thinking predominantly in the Johannine writings in the New Testament. John sees the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father (John 14:11). Divine unity is an act of interiority; is an expression of divine intra-relationality.

The doctrine of perichoresis provides a proper ground for claiming that God is not contingently relational, but that God is eternally relational because he is relational within himself. God is fundamentally a community of divine *Aqānīm* who displays love and functions in harmony within himself. Since God is triune in nature, perichoresis promotes the idea that God is never “alone.” According to Bruce Ware, God “never experiences, whether with or without the world he has made, a sense of individual isolation and ‘loneliness.’ He never has

⁴⁶¹ It is called in the twelve century Perichoresis (Greek) and *circumincession* (Latin).

⁴⁶² Frederic H. Chase, trans. “On the Orthodox Faith,” in *Writings (The Fathers of the Church)*, vol. 37. DC: Ex Fontibus, 2012, 202.

⁴⁶³ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (United Kingdom: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 209.

been lonely or alone, in this sense, nor could he ever be, even in principle. The one God is three! He is by very nature both a unity of Being while also existing eternally as a society of Persons.”⁴⁶⁴ God is a relational being. He is social within himself and in relationship with his creation. Ware adds,

In this tri-Personal relationship the three Persons love one another, support one another, assist one another, team with one another, honor one another, communicate with one another, and in everything respect and enjoy one another. They are in need of nothing but each other throughout all eternity. Such is the richness and the fullness and the completion of the social relationship that exists in the Trinity.⁴⁶⁵

Perichoresis reveals that God is not a distant, alone, or lonely deity who foregoes intimate interaction with persons; rather, God is intrinsically personal and therefore reaches out in love and offers humans what they most desperately need—a personal relationship with him.

Against the Islamic understanding (especially al-Warrāq’s claim), the Trinity is not a contradiction but a paradox. According to *Bloomsbury Guide to Human Thought*, a paradox is a Greek word, which means, “Against expectation, in mathematics, is a pair of mutually contradictory statements, or apparently contradictory statements, which are both deductions from statements which are accepted as true.”⁴⁶⁶ The Trinity is an apparent contradiction to those who do not understand the progression of divine revelation. Christians believe that the Trinity is not a contradiction because if it is, then God is one and not one in the same time, sense, and relationship. However, the Trinity is one divine being in one sense and three *Aqanīm* in another sense. In God, we find the eternal and singular being existing and expressing himself in the three

⁴⁶⁴ Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationship, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 16.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ *Bloomsbury Guide to Human Thought*, s.v. “Paradoxes”, ed. Kenneth McLeish, (Bloomsbury, 1993), accessed, January 19, 2022, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/bght/paradoxes/0?institutionId=5072>.

Aqanīm of the Father, (who is not the Son or the Spirit), the Son (who is not the Father or the Spirit), and the Spirit (who is not the Father or the Son). The three members of the Godhead work together in harmony and complementary roles. They are not three and one in the same sense—otherwise the Trinity would be a logical contradiction (A and not A at the same sense).

Many Christian scholars like to offer illustrations from life and creation to explain the Trinity, as Abū Qurrah and ibn ʿAdī did in the previous chapter. I personally do not like to use this method because as stated earlier, the Trinity is not a mere concept: it is the being of God, and nothing in creation can be similar or equivalent to God. However, Ware’s musical illustration might be useful to explain the concept of perichoresis, which is a philosophical concept about the relationship between the three *Aqanīm*, and does not define the divine being.⁴⁶⁷ The perichoretic relationship between the *Aqanīm* might be illustrated as a musical band. There are different voices singing in different pitches. One carries the melody and others carry the strains of harmony to fill out and complement the melody. The one who carry the melody is important, but not alone, for all voices are important to achieve harmony. In order for this to happen, each part must be an expression of the same score and the same composition, expressing the mind of the composer.⁴⁶⁸ The concept of perichoresis is similar: “God’s unified nature expressed richly and beautifully in the three equal and full possessions and manifestations of that one nature, with each ‘voice’ contributing variously, yet with complete unity and identity of

⁴⁶⁷ Millard Erickson explains, “In Latin, the term came to be translated by two words, which represent two different understandings of the nature of persons, and which together capture the full meaning of the Greek. The word, *circumincessio*, means literally ‘to be seated in.’ It conveys the more static conception of being located within one another. The word, *circumincessio*, is a more dynamic concept. It comes from a word meaning to permeate or interpenetrate. Together, these ideas as found in perichoresis, mean both permanence of location with respect to another and ongoing interchange or sharing.” Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 230.

⁴⁶⁸ Ware, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, 31.

nature or essence.”⁴⁶⁹ As stated earlier, the three divine *Aqanīm* are not identical divine Persons, but they are harmonious and complementarian in their roles of accomplishing God’s one purpose, goal, and salvific work, since they each possess fully the one, undivided divine essence.

The Trinitarian God Is Inter-Relational

In Christianity, God is not only intra-relational but also inter-relational. The relational structure of the concept of divine relationality also includes God’s relations with the world. Being relational means living in relationship with others and recognizing the interconnectedness with them. In a human sense, relationship with others means being engaged, centered, grounded, clear, generous, humble, and kind. A positive relationship to another person is always valued and hoped for. In Christianity, the triune God desires to have a personal encountering relationship with his people and enter into a relationship with his creation. He is even willing to do more than that: he is willing to enter his creation to facilitate that relationship.

From beginning to end, and in virtually every chapter in between, the relational presence of God unifies and advances the biblical story. The Bible begins with God’s presence relating to his people in Genesis and ends with God’s presence relating to his people in Revelation. In the Old Testament, God enters into a covenantal relationship with Abraham and promises to bless him and his descendants. God’s powerful presence appears to Moses in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai and is seen in the tabernacle and later in the temple. God’s deliverance of his people from Egypt, protection through their journey in the wilderness, and direction into the promised land all point to God’s presence and his desired relationship with his people. Throughout much of the Old Testament, God’s covenantal relationship with Israel is revealed by an often repeated, three-part statement: “I will be your God” (Ex 6:7; Jer 11:4), “you will be my people” (Jer 7:23),

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

and “I will dwell in your midst” (Eze 43:7, 9 Zech 2:11). This indicates that the concept of God dwelling among his people is foundational to his covenant with Israel; yet as a result of their continuous sin and disobedience, Israel was expelled from God’s presence and sent into exile.

The restoration of God’s presence promised throughout the Old Testament (Zech 2:10-13) is fulfilled in the New Testament when Jesus, Immanuel (God with us), appears. As Duvall and Hays state, “The incarnation brings to a climax the relational presence of God, the theme that drove the entire OT story.”⁴⁷⁰ The Apostle John presents Christ as the Logos in two senses. The first refers to ordinary speech among people: “my word” (John 8:37) and “the word of the woman” (John 4:39). The second refers to a theological title of a historical person: the Word (John 1:1-2, 14), the Word of life (1 John 1:1), and the Word of God (Rev 19:13). John introduces the Word as being always in a relationship with the Father, who came to the world (through incarnation) to disclose God and his nature to us. He came to reveal that the transcendent God, who is above humanity, draws near to be in relationship with human beings. The doctrine of the incarnation reveals that the Son became a human person at a specific point in time, being born as a baby and living life on earth as the God-man. Jesus, as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,” further reveals the deeply personal nature of the Triune God (Heb 1:3).

As Shehadeh declares, God, upon his presence in the incarnation, “did not stop at giving humanity revelations to understand with their minds; he himself came to guide each individual personally. He did not stop at giving humanity laws to try to obey in their own efforts; he himself came to grant power to each individual personally.”⁴⁷¹ While revelation stresses Jesus’ exalted

⁴⁷⁰ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God’s Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 22.

⁴⁷¹ Shehadeh, *God with us and Without Us*, 465-466.

and glorified status, it also affirms his incarnation as a significant aspect of God's relational presence.

God's relationality culminates in the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. While God longs for a relationship with humanity, their sins prevent that relationship. God is holy, and human beings are sinful. The only solution was for God to take upon himself the initiative to draw humanity closer through the death and the resurrection of Jesus. The end goal is to establish God's kingdom, where he will dwell among his people forever.

The relational story of God and humanity does not end with Jesus' death or resurrection; the last revelation of God does not end with Jesus nor with an eschatological hope for the future. In the book of Acts, after Jesus' ascension, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within each believer. Just as the holy presence of God in the Old Testament dwelt in the temple, the promised Spirit comes on the day of Pentecost in fulfillment of God's promise to live within and among God's people (e.g., Acts 2 fulfilling the promise of Joel 2:28). Jesus refers to the Spirit as another (of the same kind) "helper" (John 14:16), who testifies about Jesus, reminds the disciples of his teachings, guides them into all truth, and discloses what is to come (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). One of the primary roles of the Holy Spirit is to assure believers of God's presence in their lives (1 John 3:24).⁴⁷² God's relational presence drives the story line from beginning to end, consistently unifying the biblical metanarrative and moving the divine plot toward the ultimate goal of God living with his people in the new creation.

Conclusion

The Qur'an Reveals Allah as Contingently Relational

⁴⁷² Duvall and Hays, *God's Relational Presence*, 254.

Because of the doctrine of *tawhīd*, the extent to which Allah is a relational deity is debatable. Islamic scholars view Allah as the “One and Indivisible” (Surah 112:1) agent who created this world; therefore, he is highly transcendent above it. Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr affirms that “the Quran continuously emphasizes the Unity and the Oneness of God, and it can be said that the very *raison d’être* of Islam is to assert in a final and categorical manner the Oneness of God and the nothingness of all before the Majesty of that One.”⁴⁷³ This view, consequently, makes Allah alone before the creation of the universe. At that time, there was no one to see, hear, or speak to—especially before the creation of human beings. Arguably, without the concept of the Trinity, one cannot hold an eternally relational conception of God because many attributes of personality are expressed within the context of a relationship—in addition to things like seeing, hearing, and speaking there are things like love, communication, empathy, and self-giving. The functionality of such attributes before the world came into being is open to challenge, making it impossible to see Allah intrinsically and eternally relational. If Allah is truly the seer, the hearer, and the communicator, one must presume that these attributes were dysfunctional until Allah created the world. In that case, Allah would be dependent on creation, which appears to be at odds with what Surah 112:2 says: “Allah—the Sustainer needed by all.” A dependent deity would be merely a minor deity because he needs his creation to be able to speak, see, and hear.

The Bible Reveals God as Eternally Relational

The Christian view of the divine (one God who exists in three *Aqanīm*) seems to present God as eternally relational and independent of his creation. The three *Aqanīm* within the

⁴⁷³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2002), 3, 6.

Godhead, (distinct, yet not separate) who exist in a relationship with one another, present the personal and loving nature of God. Their interpenetrating relationship, which occurs within the Godhead, exists at the center of the universe. Because of this special relationship within the Godhead (via the three divine *Aqanīm*), God does not need the creation to see, hear, communicate, or be compassionate. All his acts/attributes were functional before the creation of the world within the Godhead. All of God's actions in history are expressions of this intimate, personal relationship that exists at the very heart of ultimate reality.

Understanding the reciprocal and mutually dependent relationship between the three *Aqanīm* demonstrates the nature of God's relationship with the world, which is the key to knowing God as well. The way God relates to himself and to creation helps human beings realize that the world arose not as a self-unfolding divine subject, but through the will of God, who as a free being, brought forth a world out of an overflow of love. The world is the product of the mutual activity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, not just a product of his power. God is relational—with the world or without it. He does not need the world to be social. He has accomplished his relationality within himself through the *Aqanīm*. Thus, God is not dependent on other agents to activate his attributes as the seer, the hearer, and the communicator.

The assumption is that Christians and Muslims agree when it comes to the perfect being theology because God already has specified his perfection in the Bible and the Qur'an. No improvement in respect to power, morals, duration, presence, or anything of the kind is possible for him. If whatever is divine is perfect, then it would be better to be necessarily perfect than to be contingently perfect. Therefore, being necessary relational is better than being contingently relational.

Being perfect does not allow an attribute that is incompatible with perfection. If being relational in all respects is a perfection, then it is better to have it necessarily than contingently. If whatever is divine is perfect, then it is necessary that whatever is securely and permanently divine is securely and permanently perfect.⁴⁷⁴ “If it is possible to be securely and permanently divine, it is possible to be securely and permanently perfect.”⁴⁷⁵ Therefore, an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly relational being can maintain his relationality, and so his perfection, if he chooses. In the same manner, an omnipotent God is able to assure things, break down, or paralyze his choice (e.g., seeing, hearing, and having a relationship). So, his relationality renders his choice permanent.⁴⁷⁶ The maximum of security and permanence in perfection would be having relationality of God necessarily. If an eternally relational divine being is better than a contingently divine being and his relationality is compatible with the rest of his attributes, then perfect-being theology lies within the court of Christianity, and the doctrine of the Trinity is the only model that shows God eternally relational, not the doctrine of *tawhīd*.

⁴⁷⁴ Brian Loft, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 195-197.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid. Loft explains that it is possible to be more or less permanently perfect—if both A and B are perfect at all points in their lives, but A has a longer life, A is more permanently perfect than B. It is also possible to be more or less securely so. And by the same token, plausibly it is better to be more rather than less securely and permanently perfect. So perfection must be had with the maximum security and permanence it can be had with.

⁴⁷⁶ Loft, *God and Necessity*, 197.

Final Conclusion and Prospective Areas of Study

Christian-Muslim relations in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries resulted in the rise of Islamic theology (*kalām*). The House of Wisdom established by Harūn al-Rashīd, the translation work that was carried over by the Syriac scholars, and the debates between Muslims and Christians in the presence of the caliphs paved the way for the development of Islamic theology. Christians (Chalcedonians, Jacobites, and the Church of the East) were already known to being multilingual, profoundly rooted in Greek philosophy, and spent centuries developing their theology against various heresies—especially in relation to the Trinity and Christology. During this time, many learned, wrote, and preached in the Arabic language because Muslims were not willing to learn the local languages, but they spread Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, in schools and public systems. As a result, the first part of the Abbasid century saw an unprecedented rise in Arabic Christian apologetic writings directed against Islam.

Various Islamic schools of thought started emerging during this time of history, forming many standard belief systems (e.g. Qadarites, Jabrites, Ash‘arites, Mu‘tazilites, Murji‘ites, Kharijites, and Shi‘ites). Mu‘tazilites enjoyed a golden period of theological and political dominance during al-Ma’mūn’s reign, which left implications on the nature of the Christian-Muslim debates during this period. The discussion about Allah’s speech, the nature of the Qur’an, and Allah’s attributes started in this period and carried on until the Ash‘arites became the majority view in the eleventh century, in addition to many Christian apologies that were devised to defend Christian beliefs against Islamic objections.

During this time, the doctrine of the Trinity was widely accepted in most Christian communities. By the end of the fourth century, the expression “one ousia and three hypostases” was settled within the Christian tradition. However, the historical discussion of the doctrine of

the Trinity is completely ignored in the Qur'an. The Qur'anic understating of the Trinity includes Mary as a divine person within the Godhead. This perspective was never part of orthodox Christianity throughout its history; however, it seems that Mohammad perhaps inferred the divinity of Mary from another source. Many studies written on this topic suggest that Mohammad learned about the non-conventional Trinity (God the Father, God the Mother, and God the Son) from cultic Christians or non-orthodox communities who lived in the Arabic Peninsula during the seventh century. This research shows that while the previous studies are possible, there is no sufficient Islamic historical information which suggests that Mohammad was in contact with such communities. The Christian information about cultic Christianity in Arabia is scarce, and the historical Islamic records suggest that Mohammad was in contact with Christians who had decorated churches. During that time of history, the iconoclasts were rejected by the Western church, but they were flourishing in the East. The *Theotokos* icon and many other icons were widely spreading and decorating the Eastern churches. Mohammad probably developed a non-orthodox understanding of the Trinity by observing Christian icons, especially the *Theotokos* icons.

The first objection this study addresses is classified as non-historical because the Qur'an ignores the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, especially the Nicene Creed. While Mohammad was in contact with Christians in the Levant, Arabia (Makkah and Medina), and Africa (through his wives), he heard and most likely saw the Christians icons—the most famous of which is the *Theotokos* icon. His contact with this icon probably happened in the Levant when he was a young man, in Makkah inside al-Ka'aba, or from his wife who went to Ethiopia at the beginning of his calling and came back reporting about a magnificent icon of Mary she has seen in Africa. Since there is no historical evidence—from Islamic or Christian

resources—which suggest that Mohammad learned about the divinity of Mary from orthodox or cultic Christians, it is reasonable to think that his understanding of Mary and her divine role was acquired by inference rather than by cultic teachings. In other words, knowing that Christians believe in the Trinity and seeing them venerating the icons—especially the *Theotokos* icon—might have played a major role in Mohammad’s misunderstanding of the Trinity, which he then conveyed in the Qur’an.

The second group of objections are semantic in nature and related to the three *Aqanīm*. The titles “Father” and “Son” are understood in both literal and anthropomorphic senses. The Father had a wife who bore him a son, and they called him Issa. The Father, Son, and Spirit are three deities that resemble the polytheistic nature of the Christian worldview. Theodore Abū Qurrah, who was attentive to this objection, argues that every perfection apparent in creation must also be a prediction of the creator. He based his argument on Surah 3:59: “Surely the likeness of Isa is with Allah as the likeness of Adam.” If Adam did not beget a son, then he would be the head and the representative of animals, such as pigs, asses, and worms, who have a paltry nature compared to humans. In this way, Adam would be just a representative of what is below him in nature. Begetting a son makes Adam the head and the representative of all humanity. In the same sense, those who say God does not beget attribute deprivation to his divinity by making him ruler over what is less than him and unable to rule over what resembles him.

In relation to this objection, Abū Qurrah distinguishes between logical and non-logical names. He explains that logical names indicate persons, such as Peter, Paul, and John, and non-logical names indicate natures, such as man. While logical names can be many, non-logical names are collective in nature and singular in form. The number three does not apply to the

names because it indicates human nature. While it is correct to say Peter, Paul, and John are three men, it is not correct to say Peter is mankind. In the same sense, God is a name which indicates divine nature; whereas Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are names that indicate three divine *Aqanīm*. The essence of God cannot be plural, and the titles Father, Son, and Holy Spirit attribute plurality to the Godhead, not to his essence.

The third group of objections is called the non-rational objections, which is agreed upon by most ancient, medieval, and contemporary Muslim scholars who accuse Christians of being non-logical in their explanation of the Trinity. The idea of believing in three persons and calling them one God is illogical to the Muslim mind. Yaḥya Ibn Adī takes the rational route and provides answers that might be applied to the semantic and the non-logical objections. Using philosophy, he discusses the concept of *al-wāḥid*. Muslims call Allah *al-wāḥid* to convey that he is one (divine being) in a numerical sense. Yaḥya, who was attentive to his objection, was the first Arab Christian philosopher to argue that the creator is one in one sense and multiple in another sense. Being one is one aspect of the meaning, not the full meaning because *wāḥid* can be understood in many different senses. God is one as a divine person, but he cannot be one in genus, specie, relation, or continuum because all these types of essences require either the existence of others or a causal connection to exist. However, God is the uncaused cause of everything. While he causes other things to exist, he cannot be caused by anything/anyone else. Moreover, it is semantically and philosophically wrong to understand *wāḥid* in one sense, which is the numerical, because *wāḥid* does not refer only to quantity but also to quality, such as qualitative names referring to color and taste. Restricting the meaning of *wāḥid* to the numerical sense is a mistake because the word has several meanings and can be understood in different senses. Some of them can be applied to God, while others cannot.

While Muslims follow the doctrine of *bila kayfa* in regards to Allah's attributes, they refuse to compare Allah to any of his creation. They believe that Allah is extremely transcendent and that it is demeaning to the divine nature to be compared with human nature, for there are no similarities that can be discovered. John of Damascus, Abū Qurrah, and Yaḥya, on the other hand, base the doctrine of God's attributes on the concept that every perfection apparent in creation must also be precedence in the creator. Realizing that the attributes of perfection in God are unrestricted and eternal in contrast to those in man, Yaḥya explains that it is wrong to say that nothing is similar to God because similarity does not require 100% matching identification. There are no two similar persons/things that are identical in all their attributes. If two persons/things are similar, it is necessary that they do not match. They are similar in one aspect, but they are different in many. They are not identical, and not all their attributes align. Yaḥya's explanation answers the problem of anthropomorphism and logically explains that Christians are not wrong when they look at the virtues of human beings to extract the attributes of God.

The danger of separating God's actions from his nature is that it impairs a person's knowledge of what is real and objective about God as he is in himself. Separating the attributes of action from the attributes of essence deprives the essence of its content and meaning, for God is not a mere substance essentially separated from his attributes. Such a notion would reduce the divine essence to a barren concept, a hypothesis devoid of content and meaning. "God's being is not the bearer of the divine attributes; rather, God's essence and attributes are identical."⁴⁷⁷ Thus, preventing reflection on the essence of God amounts to preventing God from revealing wonders about himself, and this robs humankind of understanding God's relationship with his creation

⁴⁷⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: God Who Stands and Stays*, vol. 5 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 130.

and his purposes for it. This is a narrow but revealing point that can be identified at the end of the eighth and early ninth centuries as Muslims came to a greater awareness of Christian thoughts about the divine attributes, the *sifāt* Allah. This encounter helped bring Islam to a greater theological and philosophical maturity, while Christians confronted the challenge of translating traditional doctrines into a new idiom.

Building on the early Christian Arab apologies on the Trinity, the topic of the relationality of God emerges as the most important aspect of this study. Relationality of God is an essential divine attribute that was not given much attention in Islamic and Christian Arab theologies. The trinitarian model of divinity demonstrates that God is eternally relational because he is intra-relational and inter-relational. He is intra-relational within himself in the Godhead, as the three *Aqānīm* live in eternal harmonious relationship of love, honor, and respect. God is fundamentally a community of divine *Aqānīm*, who never experienced loneliness and isolation, whether with or without the world. God is in need of nothing to practice his relationality. He is not dependent on his creation to be able to see, hear, communicate, and love. He is the seer, the hearer, the communicator from eternity to eternity. Such is the richness and the fullness and the completion of the social relationship that exists in the Trinity.

Although Muslims believe that Allah interacted and communicated with humanity, the nature of the inter-relationality of God with creation is shown differently within Islam and Christianity. In Christianity, the triune God moves closer to human beings throughout history, further revealing the personal nature of the Godhead. In the Old Testament, God pursues human beings in the Garden. When the Fall occurs, he offers help and guidance on how to live a holy life. In the New Testament, the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus, takes on human flesh in order to dwell among human beings, ultimately repairing their personal relationship with God (Phil

2:6-11). Additionally, the third Person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit—following Jesus’s ascension to heaven, is sent to dwell and live within believers. God pursues his creation through the incarnation of the Son and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The divine Islamic concept of relationality, on the other hand, is not eternal. Because of absolute oneness, Allah is contingent in his relationship with creation. When there is no concept of plurality in the Godhead, his relational attributes seem to be dysfunctional, and therefore, God’s essence is dependent on his creation. In Islamic theology, Allah is attributed as the seer (the one who sees everything) and the hearer (the one who hears everything); however, based on the absolute oneness model, he was not able to see or hear anything because there was nothing to see or hear. This presentation of the divine makes some aspects of the deity contingent on creation.

The Islamic view differs from the Christian view in two aspects: 1) the creation of human beings is not Allah’s priority. 2) The most important goal from creating the world is to show Allah’s power and magnificence. The Islamic understanding of creation implies that the created world has more value than human beings. Mohammad states, “Certainly the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of the men, but most people do not know” (Surah 40:57). Man is not the greatest creative act of Allah, and the universe is far more complex and magnificent than man. The ultimate purpose, however, for creating human beings is to worship Allah (Surah 51:56). In other words, Allah created human beings to show his glory and majesty, not to start a relationship with them. Ibn Kathīr explains in his commentary that “worship Allah” means “I [Allah] created them to command them to worship me, not because I need them.”⁴⁷⁸ Despite the fact that God’s relationality does not necessarily mean that he needs

⁴⁷⁸ Ibn Kathīr, *تفسير القرآن العظيم Tafsīr al-Qur’an al-‘aẓīm* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Ibn Ḥazm, 2000), 1768.

his creation, in the Islamic view, creation is the natural consequence of the creator who cares about showing his power and dominion more than expressing his love toward his creatures. The concept of the ultimate power of the divine is the most important aspect in Islamic belief; however, it ignores the relationality of the divine.

If Allah is the greatest, how can human being know, acknowledge, and worship his greatness without having a relationship with him? Relationality is what teaches humanity about the divine. It implies that the value the world has for God is in expressing, not in constituting. Moreover, the eternal relationality of God increases the value of the world before God—precisely because God does not need it to be God. The world, therefore, takes on the beauty of grace and free love that is greater than the necessity of power and domination. God saves because he loves and has mercy, not only because he is free. His love is based on a decision he made long before the world was created.

Worshipping the divine for his absolute power and magnificence without having a relationship with him makes human beings slaves. Their relationship with the divine is to acknowledge his grandeur and majesty without being able to closely open up to him. He is like a master receiving honor rather than a father who cares about the wellbeing of his sons and daughters. While the slave-master relationship is based on command and obedience, the father-son relationship is about respect, nourishment, and protection. Slaves seek to please their masters because they fear punishment; whereas, sons and daughters seek to please and honor their father because they love him and he loves them. Love, respect, and sustenance are the foundational elements of this relationship, not fear and trembling.

Unfortunately, when twenty-first century Christians think about the word *God*, they do not think about the Trinity. Like in the Islamic view, people think of God as the most powerful,

eternal spiritual being who is the creator of the universe. In most people's understanding, God is also a moral judge who will ultimately decide who gets to spend eternity in heaven or in hell. The hope of this study is to encourage Christians to think of God as the Trinity first before contemplating his majesty, expectation, and commands. The eternal existence of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was the central affirmation of the ancient church and the fundamental truth from which all other theological understanding flowed, and I hope this notion continues and not fade into obscurity.

Finally, it is significant for the purposes of Christian-Islamic discussion that the parties involved in such debates and apologetical writings understand themselves to be seeking a common end—a clearer expression of true statements about God and all of creation. The purpose of this study is directed toward this goal. It is not the writer's intention to offend the Islamic presentation of the divine but to push it toward into a more reformed view that honors God. A successful participation in such dialogue means not simply that one has convinced one's opponent, but hopefully that the discussion is furthered toward a better end.

Final Thoughts and Future Studies

The status of Christianity in Arabia is a very tempting topic, which deserves more attention and research. Few scholars have attempted to write on this topic because of political reasons. For more than fifty years, Saudi Arabia was a closed country ruled by Shari'a law. However, recent changes have introduced more liberties in the kingdom that might usher in educational opportunities that need to be taken advantage of. Excavation was banned in Saudi Arabia; therefore, most of the historical arguments about cultic Christianity were either arguments from silence or based on the limited testimonies of early church fathers. Mohammad's connection with these cults cannot be historically confirmed, such as the case with the

Collyridians/Marian cults. Hopefully, such research will be allowed soon in the Arabic peninsula, which might reveal more information regarding Christianity in that community, the Syriac community in the Arabian gulf, and the Christians community in Najran.

The project of commending Christian doctrine in an Islamic environment is an area that should be further explored for three distinct reasons. First, learning the source of Mohammad's understanding of the Trinity would help with further discoveries about other topics, such as Jesus' nature and his miracles in the Qur'an. Further findings about Christian doctrine in an Islamic environment will help apologists immensely today. Second, learning about the history of Christianity in the Arabic Peninsula would help with the study of historical Mohammad. Many European scholars are advocating for the non-historical view of the Islamic prophet, pushing the origination of Islam to the Levant under the Umayyad dynasty. Excavation works in the Arabic peninsula will help reveal whether their arguments are factual or false. Third, excavations in general have an unpredictable nature about what scholars might find. Sometimes excavations affirm their predictions, and sometimes they surprise them completely with new discoveries. Scholars might be able to find additional biblical manuscripts, apocryphal literature, and hymnals that early Arab Christians used to use in their masses and prayer times.

There are several Arab Christian theologians and philosophers that are not known in the West. This study sheds some light on Theodore Abū Qurrah's theology and Yaḥya Ibn ʿAdī's philosophy, especially related to their defense of the Trinity. Grasping their works and presenting their ideas to the public arena of western thought is one of the unfinished projects of this study. Abū Qurrah left a great inventory of literature in Greek and Arabic languages that has not yet been translated into English. There are potential studies to be written about Abū Qurrah's

theological and apologetical methodology, his defense against the iconoclasm, and his theory of human free will, among other things.

Like Abū Qurrah, Yaḥya's Christian philosophical works are not translated into English and deserve considerable attention. In fact, what makes his apologetics unique is his Aristotelian philosophical background. He was one of those who translated the works of Aristotle into Arabic. He also was a student of the famous Islamic philosopher al-Fārābī. His discussion of *al-wahid* is unique because he took most of his ideas from his Muslim professor and applied it to his understanding of the divine. The most important book he left is about morality, called *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* [Refining Ethics]. According to Nadīne ^cAbbās, it is one of the most important books about the philosophy of ethics in the Arabic world.⁴⁷⁹ Translating this book into English will contribute profoundly to the fields of ethics and theology.

Among the points most relevant and most worthy of further consideration is the doctrine of creation in Islam in relation to the doctrine of *tawḥīd*. The multiple views of the doctrine of creation and the schism between traditionalists and philosophers would lead to multiple understandings of *tawḥīd* and potentially to a misunderstanding of the doctrine of Allah. Traditionalists deny the philosophers' suggestions regarding the creation of the world. As briefly presented in this study, some medieval philosophers believed in the eternity of time, and others believed in creation by emanation. Their beliefs threaten the doctrine of *tawḥīd* because they assume an eternal nature of the universe is necessary. However, creating another eternal reality alongside Allah is inconsistent with the nature of absolute oneness because it makes Muslims binitarian monotheists, not unitarians as they claim.

⁴⁷⁹ Nadine Abbas, "الفلسفة واللاهوت والاخلاق عند يحيى بن عدي" [The Philosophy, Theology, and Ethics of Yaḥya ibn ^cAdī], *Tafahom Magazine*, 2015, 137. Retrieved from: <https://tafahom.mara.gov.om/storage/al-tafahom/ar/2015/048/pdf/07.pdf>.

The same problem might be applied to the Qur'an, when scholars assume its eternal nature. The eternal nature of the Qur'an makes Muslims binitarian as well, requiring them to clarify how the Qur'an relates to Allah's absolute oneness. The Qur'an's purpose is to deliver a divine message that has a dialogic character. If this is true, how can the Qur'an (the eternal) communicate with human beings (the non-eternal)—especially since the Qur'an is written for people, not for angels? To speak of the Qur'an as a distinct eternal reality to Allah is similar to speaking of the *Logos* as a distinct eternal reality to the Father. Muslims reject such belief and consider it a *shirk* (association). Therefore, further illumination is required as to the double standard of allowing the Qur'an and the creation to have distinct eternal realities from Allah, but not granting this liberty to the *Logos*. Why otherness is allowed to be predicated in Allah by Muslims and not considered *shirk*, whereas Christians are not allowed such concept in their theology.

Moving from Islam's foundational era to more modern theological developments, the topic of the relationality of God has an apologetical potential against process theology. To classify the relationality of God as an attribute of essence is to make God a personal being. Process theologians, such as Paul Tillich, advocate for the concept of "God as Being." In Tillich's view, God is not a Being, because that would describe God as one "being" among other beings. Rather, "God is being itself"—or "the ground of being."⁴⁸⁰ If God as the ground of being infinitely transcends everything, then whatever one knows about a finite thing one knows about God, because it is rooted in him as its ground. At the same time, anything one knows about a

⁴⁸⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol.1 (IL: University of Chicago, 1967), 84.

finite thing cannot be applied to God, because he is, as Tillich says, “ecstatically experienced and symbolically expressed.”⁴⁸¹

Another topic Tillich talks about is the distinction between a “sign” and a “symbol.” “Signs” (like letters and written words) have no essential connection to what they represent but are merely used to point to their referent. “Symbols,” on the other hand, have a stronger similarity or “participation” with the thing to which they refer. Religious symbols negate themselves in their literal meanings but still have something to say about God, including his qualities, actions, and manifestations. They have a symbolic character, but the meaning of “God” is completely missed if one takes the symbolic language literally. God’s “fatherhood” for instance is a symbol because of the fatherly qualities that God and other fathers share. The letters *G-O-D* share nothing essential with God and are therefore only a “sign” for God. Process theology turns God from a personal being into an idea; therefore, by focusing on the relational aspect of God, conservative theologians have an argument to turn God into a Being in a personal way, not just as a symbol. While someone might suggest that all “Godtalk” is symbolic and does not exhaust the mystery of God’s being, the analogy of personal encounter and the use of person as a theological model have distinct advantages over impersonal approaches to the problem.

To Christians, the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be denied. To them, the Trinity is not a problem to be solved but rather a beauty to be discover, a mystery to be clarified, and a Being to have a relationship with. Their readiness to receive God’s revelation of himself, like a beauty and a mystery, provides growing knowledge with no end. The Trinity is not a contradiction or a barrier to belief; rather, it is the Being of God, whose discovery is an unending worship.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 148-149.

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