

**COMMITTEE VII**  
In Search for Understanding  
Among the Monotheistic  
Religions

DRAFT - 9/15/87  
For Conference Distribution Only

**THE GOD-CONCEPT AND THE CREED IN ISLAM**

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The Sixteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences  
Atlanta, Georgia November 26-29, 1987

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## THE GOD-CONCEPT AND THE CREED IN ISLAM

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### The God-Concept

The main elements in the Islamic concept of God <sup>1</sup> are His oneness, His being eternal, His justice, His omnipotence, and His mercy. The Deity of whom these are some of the attributes is transcendent and not immanent in the universe or in Man.<sup>2</sup> God's transcendence and His being utterly Other do not mean, however, that there is an unbridgeable gulf between Him and Man. God is "closer to Man than his jugular vein" (Q.50, 16). He is "nigh to His servants" and responds to their prayers (Q.2, 186). To the believers He is a friend and a sustainer (Q.2, 257 and 42, 31)

Neither is God a "person" in the Islamic conception, the better to ward off any inclination toward anthropomorphism. The Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān teaches that "there is nothing whatever like unto Him" (Q.42, 11). No human category should be made applicable to God. Man's intellect can conclude from pondering on creation that God

exists and that He is one. It can grasp only God's attributes but is unable to fathom God's essence.

#### I - God is One

In its simplest form, the concept is expressed in the first of the two parts of the Islamic proclamation of faith: "There is no god but God" (Lā ilāha illā 'llāh).

In al-Ash'ari's creed (circa 930 C.E.), entitled The Elucidation of the Fundamentals of Religion (al-Ibānah 'an Uṣūl ad-Diyānah), belief in God's oneness is stated thus: "We confess that God is one God - there is no god but He - unique, eternal, possessing neither consort nor child",

In a more elaborate formulation, reflecting a Mu'tazilite<sup>3</sup> influence, we read:

"God is unique, nothing compares to Him; He is neither body, nor individual, nor substance, nor accident. He is beyond time. He cannot reside either in a place or being; He is not the object of any creaturely attributes or qualifications. He is neither conditioned nor determined, neither engendering nor engendered".

In Mircea Eliade's assessment, the Islamic conception of God "represents the purest example of absolute monotheism".<sup>4</sup> God's oneness is a datum in the Islamic conception of Him and not the

outcome of an evolution in religious thought as some Biblical scholars believe was the case in historical Judaism.

## II - God is Eternal

God's existence has no beginning and no end in time, the latter being a purely human concept. He is the one and only eternal Being. The universe and all that is in it are transient. At the end of time only God's presence will remain (Q. LV. 26-27).

Two issues hotly debated among Muslims relate to the eternal nature of God:

a) Is the Qur'ān originated by God or co-eternal with Him?

The Mu'tazilah, concerned about God's oneness, maintain that the Qur'ān, like everything else in the universe, is created by God. A conservative view, in awe of the Word of God as embodied in the Qur'ān, proclaims<sup>s</sup> it uncreated but one with God, so that there would be no multiplicity of the Eternal. In this view, what is eternal and uncreated is God's Speech, as one of His attributes, and not necessarily the Qur'ān as we know it, a definite text of a certain length and arrangement, which is only an expression of the eternal Speech of God.

b) Are the divine attributes separate from the essence of God or subsumed in that essence?

Such attributes as omnipotence, omniscience, mercy, justice, etc., (there are 99 of those represented by the 99 "glorious

names" of God mentioned in the Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān) are considered by the more conservative, inclined to understand the Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān literally, as having a separate existence from the divine essence. As this may lead to a multiplicity of eternals, the Mu<sup>6</sup>tazilah deny the separate existence of the divine attributes ("He is merciful by a mercy which is He, omniscient by a knowledge which is He," etc.). A middle-of-the-road position is held in the Ash<sup>6</sup>ari creed, where the divine attributes have a separate existence but "anybody who thinks that the names of God are other than He is in error".<sup>5</sup>

### III - God is Just

Divine justice is an essential attribute of God. He rewards the faithful and the good-doers, and He punishes the infidels and the wrong-doers. Since the conservative view of Man's deeds and misdeeds as being created by God and not by their individual author may appear to be in conflict with divine justice, the issue of free will and predestination is closely related to the dogma of divine justice and has to be reconciled with it.

The Mu<sup>6</sup>tazilah maintain that, by prior divine decree, Man is free to act and create his deeds and misdeeds; he is therefore answerable for them. The divine will that such freedom be granted to Man is meant to render reward and punishment meaningful and remove any contradiction between divine justice and the eschatological consequences of Man's actions. The

Ash'ari school holds a compromise position to the effect that although Man does not create his actions, he nevertheless acquires their consequences for having acted as he did. This concept of "acquisition" (kasb) is intended to remove the apparent conflict between divine justice and predestination in that it attributes to Man a part in bringing about his actions, short of actually ~~creating~~ them. Other developments touching upon the concept of divine justice are to be found in the second paragraph of the following section.↵

#### IV - God is Omnipotent

God's power knows no limits. Not only did He create the universe and all that is in it, but the continued functioning of the universe is subject to God's continual decrees. Human actions (deeds or misdeeds) are also created by God in the conservative version of Islamic theology. Proponents of this view were motivated by their concern not to associate mere mortals with God in the act of creation, even of human actions. Only God is the creator of everything. Accordingly, Man shall not will a thing unless God is pleased that he will it (Q.LXXVI, 30). Submission to the absolute power of God is the essence of Islam. The literal translation of the word "Islam" is, in fact, submission [to the will and power of God].

The Divine will and human will are not, however, of the same order and do not operate on the same plane. God's will is

absolute and universal; Man's will is relative and particular. It is true that Man's will works under certain divinely pre-ordained limitations, but it is not true that the Divine will compels him to take a certain course. This argument, in fact, is mentioned in the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān as having been used by the polytheist Arabs against the Prophet where they contended that had God pleased they and their fathers would not have associated anything with Him. This argument is condemned in the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān as a mere conjecture and a lie (Q.VI, 14<sup>9</sup> and 14<sup>20</sup>). The conclusion of these two verses is clear in that had God willed that Man follow one particular course, the said course would have been that of guidance. God's will is to reveal the truth through His prophets and to point out the courses of good and of evil so that Man may choose among them (Q.XVIII, 29 and LXXVI, 3). Thus the words "You do not will a thing except that God wills it", in Q.LXXVI, 30, mean only that if God had not willed to reveal the truth to Man, the latter would not have been able to make his choice of good or evil. That Man has such a choice is spelled out more than once in the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān.<sup>7</sup>

#### V. God is Merciful

The qualities of love and mercy in God are emphasized in the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān perhaps more than in any other sacred book. Every one of the one-hundred-fourteen chapters of the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān, except one (IX), opens "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate".



This shows that the attributes of mercy and compassion are predominant in the Divine nature. Also, the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān goes further and lays the greatest emphasis in explicit statements on the immeasurable vastness of Divine mercy. "He has ordained mercy on Himself" (Q.VI, 12, 54). "Your Lord is the Lord of all-encompassing mercy" (Q.VI, 147). "And My mercy encompasses all things" (Q.VII, 156). "O My servants! who have acted extravagantly against their own souls, despair not of the mercy of God, for God forgives all sins." (Q.XXXIX, 53). "Our Lord, You embrace all things in mercy and knowledge" (Q.XL, 7). God's love and mercy are repeated in the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān hundreds of times, while He is referred to as the Avenger or the ~~the~~ Inflicter of retribution only fourteen times, ~~in~~ the whole Book. The fact that wrong-doers shall be punished is underlined to impress upon Man that evil is a most hateful thing which ought to be shunned. Not only does the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān lay great stress on the reward of good deeds, but it goes further and declares over and over again that misdeeds are either forgiven upon repentance or punished only according to their measure, but that good deeds are rewarded ten-fold, a hundred-fold, or even without measure.

#### The Creed

The content of the Islamic creed is stated in Q.II, 177, 285 and Q.IV, 136.

1. Belief in God:

Muslims believe in the one and only eternal God, creator and ruler of the universe, whose bounty extends to all mankind and whose justice, mitigated by his mercy, shall reward or punish one and all on the last day of judgement. Faith in the one and only God must be felt in the believer's innermost soul, be expressed by him or her verbally and be accompanied by the carrying out in practice of what is believed, i.e. compliance with the religious commandments, both positive and negative.

2. Belief in God's messengers:

Muhammad is the last messenger of God whose mission completes and perfects God's guidance for mankind. Recognition of Muhammad as a prophet and as God's messenger is embodied in the second half of the Islamic proclamation of faith, following the first half which bears witness to the oneness of God. Muhammad's directives on matters of religion, as reflected in the authenticated hadith (traditions of the Prophet), must be followed on an equal footing with the Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān (Q.IV, 80) which they never contradict<sup>3</sup> but merely complement<sup>3</sup>.

Muslims also believe that Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and others also mentioned in the Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān as preceding Abraham (e.g. Noah), are prophets and messengers of God. All messengers are mere mortals, chosen by God to convey His message to mankind. While being of the highest possible moral standing, they are

infallible only in matters related to the carrying out of their ministries.

With regard to Jesus in particular, the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān tells of the Virgin Mary's immaculate conception (Q.XIX, 19), of the miracles performed by Jesus (Q.III, 46, 49 and Q.V, 110) and of his being the Messiah and God's messenger to the children of Israel (Q.LXI, 6). The doctrine of the trinity is explicitly rejected (Q.IV, 171 and Q.V, 73) and so is the story of the crucifixion (Q.IV, 157). God took Jesus up to heaven and stamped his likeness on a traitor who was crucified in his stead (Q.IV, 158).

Faith in the messengers of God is mentioned alongside faith in the revealed books (Q.II, 177 and 285). In fact, there is a deeper significance underlying faith in the prophets, hence the emphasis laid upon this article of faith. The prophet is not only the bearer of the Divine message, but he also shows how that message is to be interpreted in practical life; and therefore he is the model or the exemplar to be followed. It is the prophet's example that inspires a living faith in the hearts of his followers and brings about a real transformation in their lives. This is why the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān lays special stress on the fact that prophets must be human beings. The reformation or transformation of the spiritual lives of ordinary men and women can best be accomplished through a human example who can serve as a model for his fellow Man.

### 3. Belief in God's Scriptures:

The Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān is God's revelation to Muḥammad conveyed in the Arabic language through the Archangel Gabriel (Jibrīl). It was revealed one or a few verses at a time over twenty-two years, from the beginning of Muḥammad's ministry in 610 C.E. to his death in 632 C.E.

The Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān is believed by Muslims to be the actual divine discourse, God's verbal message communicated to mankind through His messenger Muḥammad. The idea of a Muḥammadan authorship is contrary to the basic beliefs of Islam and is repugnant to Muslims. The contents of the Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān were arranged, divided into successive chapters (Suras), learned by heart and committed to writing, but not in a single volume (muṣḥaf), in the Prophet's lifetime. Thus, the full text of the Qur'<sup>3</sup>ān has been definitively established while Muḥammad was still living; its historicity is not open to question. The canonical compilation (muṣḥaf) used by Muslims for the last fourteen centuries was put together a mere twenty years after Muḥammad's death, during the reign of the third Caliph 'Uthmān (644 - 656 C.E.).

Muslims also believe in the Torah (Tawrāh) as the Book revealed to Moses and in the Gospel (Injīl) as the Book revealed to Jesus. They also believe, however, that the texts of the current Old and New Testaments do not reflect the actual divine revelation received by Moses and Jesus. This does not appear to

be necessarily in direct conflict with the prevalent Jewish and Christian views of the Scriptures, since most Biblical scholars believe that these were composed over several centuries by numerous authors and compilers in three languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. (Muslims believe that the scriptures revealed to each messenger were in his people's own language: Q.IV, 14). Belief in the revelation of the Torah on Sinai notwithstanding, the "Book of the Torah", generally considered as consisting of Deuteronomy, is encountered for the first time in Israel's history at Josiah's reform (circa 623 - 622 B.C.). The other four books of the Pentateuch were apparently canonized at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (circa 350 B.C.).<sup>e</sup> This contrasts with the definitive establishment of the Qur'ānic text in Muḥammad's lifetime and its canonization in one volume shortly after his death.

#### 4. Belief in God's angels:

Angels are non-material beings, manifestations and tools of their Creator's omnipotence. For example, Gabriel (Jibrīl) is the vehicle through which God communicates His revelations to His messengers. Asraīl is the "angel of death" who receives the souls of the departed. Isrāfīl is the angel who will announce the coming of the last day of judgement. Some of the angels are said in the Qur'ān to support the Prophets and make the believers firm. Angels are also the guards of Paradise and Hell. Some

angels are registrants of the deeds and misdeeds of Man, preserving the records until the last day of judgement when every individual shall be shown his/her record. The belief in Angels is part of the belief in "the unseen" (ghaib) such as the immortality of the human soul, Paradise, Hell and the like. Otherwise, angels do not occupy a central place in Islamic theology.

5. Belief in the Resurrection and the Last Judgement:

Muslims believe that at the end of time the dead shall be resurrected to face eternal reward (in Paradise) or eternal punishment (in Hell) on the last Day of Judgement.

Reward and punishment are predicated only on the individual's faith or lack of it and on his/her deeds or misdeeds. Thus the individual moral responsibility of Man and his being directly answerable to God are pivotal in Islamic eschatology (Q.VI, 94 and Q.XIX, 95).

God speaks directly to Man in the Qur<sup>ān</sup>. The solitary believer requires no mediation to comprehend the divine message, to be bound by its commands and to answer for his/her transgressions or reap the fruits of his/her compliance. Man stands in immediate relationship to God in this world and in the hereafter. A believer lacking sufficient knowledge about things religious may seek guidance from one better informed, but this does not make the latter member of a clergy in the sense given

that word in other religions. Any Muslim capable of giving such advice may do so or may lead the Friday congregational prayer. It is only a matter of practical division of labor that some mosques have full-time prayer leaders. The 'ulamā', the amorphous non-structured group of specialists in religious sciences, are the nearest thing to a "clergy" in Islam. The system of the Sharī'a (Islamic law) is decentralized and is tolerant of diversity in matters other than those pertaining to the core of the faith. These matters are defined as those "known (i.e. by the community of believers) of necessity about religion". There is no unitary, hierarchical structure of authority that can define orthodoxy in every detail for the entire community of believers - no institutional counterpart of the Church that is capable of being "established" in the European sense.<sup>7</sup> The nearest approximation to such a centralized authority is to be found among the Shī'a, comprising about 10% of present-day Muslims, who believe their successive Imams to be infallible and the only authoritative expounders and interpreters of the law. Since the twelfth Shī'i Imam went into hiding more than a thousand years ago, the Shī'i 'ulamā' or fuqahā' collectively stand in for him. Their highest echelon select one of themselves as primus inter pares (e.g., Khomeini in present-day Iran). The Shī'i scholars of religious sciences thus have

more of the characteristics of a clergy than their Sunni counterparts.

Despite a popular notion of an intercession by the Prophet on behalf of the believers on the last Day of Judgment, the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān explicitly rules out such a possibility (Q.II, 123; Q.VI, 51, 70 and Q.LXXII, 21). In an oral tradition (ḥadīth) of the Prophet, he addressed his own daughter thus: "O Fātima, ingratiate yourself with God, for I cannot intercede for you with Him." The Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān in fact teaches explicitly that on the last Day of Judgment "no progenitor shall avail his progeny and no progeny shall avail their progenitor" (Q.XXXI, 33). In so doing, Islam in fact leaves the whole burden of faith or disbelief and of good works or misdeeds with the individual human being (Q.XVI, 111; Q.XVII, 13 and Q.XIX, 95). There is no salvation beyond individual faith and individual good deeds. However, God in his omnipotence and infinite mercy may absolve the individual of any transgression short of lack of faith (Q.IV, 48).

At birth every individual faces the world with a clean slate, unencumbered by an original sin and needing no redemption from it. Adam's transgression in Paradise was forgiven by the Almighty before he and Eve were ordered out of Paradise to settle down on Earth (Q.II, 37, 38 and Q.XX, 122).



6. Balance between this-worldly and other-worldly concerns:

Although the essence of Islam is utter surrender to the will of God, and although an awesome moral responsibility is put on the individual believer, Islam is neither a religion of passivity nor a religion of complete ascetism.

The Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān repeatedly exhorts the believers to action (Q.III, 195; Q.VI, 135 and Q.IX, 105). The Prophet's ḥadīth considers work a form of worship and prefers a believer who worships and works to one who devotes all his time to worship. Man is enjoined to seek God's bounty actively anywhere on Earth (Q.XXXVII, 15). Man is, in fact, God's vicar on Earth (Q.II, 30; Q.VI, 165; and Q.XXXV, 39) entrusted with the task of striving to better human existence in this world while readying himself for the next through faith and devotion.

The good things in life, provided they are lawful, are for the believers to enjoy (Q.VII, 32). While commanded to worship God, man is also asked "not to forget his lot in this world" (Q.XXVIII, 77). A ḥadīth of the Prophet enjoins the believers to "work for this world, as if you are going to live for ever, and work for the Hereafter, as if you are going to die tomorrow." A healthy balance between human concerns in this life and salvation in the Hereafter is thus achieved.

The familiar religious/secular dichotomy is the product of a different environment and has no real application in the Islamic

context. The Christian West resolved the issue of secularism in the formula, "Render unto Ceasar that which belongs to Ceasar, and unto God that which belongs to God". Nevertheless, secularism is not perceived uniformly by all Christians and a lively tension and a degree of ambivalence appear to exist among all major Christian sects from the fundamentalists of the Moral Majority to the Roman Catholic Church. The Moral Majority's rise to prominence on the current American political scene is a reflection of that tension. The conflict within the Roman Catholic Church between the traditional hierarchy and Latin American priests practicing their "liberation theology" is perhaps the most dramatic current expression of this tension in the Christian context. Liberation theology resembles Islam, from this point of view, more than any other variety of Christianity because of the extraordinary range of its positions on a plethora of issues which cannot narrowly be defined as religious.<sup>10</sup> From the Islamic point of view, therefore, it may be said that nothing in the world is intrinsically Ceasar's and that everything belongs to God. Because of the absence of a religious/secular distinction in the Islamic conception, all human activity is potentially "religious", even where that label would be inappropriate by the standards of other religions.<sup>11</sup>

All things considered, Islam is an extremely simple religion: it has no mysteries, no sacraments, no intermediate

persons between God and man, no altars, no images or ornaments.  
God is invisible, the heart of man is His altar and every Muslim  
is his own priest.

## Notes

1. The Arabic word for God, "Allāh", has no perfect equivalent in the English language. One English translator of the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān explains his decision not to use the word "God" as follows: "I have retained the word Allah throughout, because there is no corresponding word in English. The word Allāh (the stress is on the last syllable) has neither feminine nor plural, and has never been applied to anything other than the unimaginable Supreme Being. I use the word "God" only where the corresponding word ilah is found in the Arabic" (Pickthall, The Meaning of the Glorious Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān (New York: The Muslim World League, 1977), p.1.
2. The word "Man" is used throughout in the sense of individual human being, whether male or female.
3. The Mu<sup>t</sup>azilah are rationalist theologians who flourished in the third (A.H.)/ninth (C.E.) century.
4. Eliade, A History of Religious Ideas, vol. 3 (The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.78.

5. See a partial English translation of the Ash'arī creed in McNeill and Waldman (eds.), The Islamic World, (The University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp.152-166.
6. On the topic of justice in the Islamic context see the comprehensive and insightful study by Majid Khadduri, The Islamic Conception of Justice (Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), specially Chapter 3: Theological Justice, pp.39-77, on the subject of this section III.
7. On the above see Maulana Muhammad Ali, The Religion of Islam (Cairo: National Publications and Printing House, n.d.), pp.321 ff. and note 1 on p.324 where the misunderstandings of certain orientalists regarding the Islamic position on free will and predestination are clarified.
8. Encyclopaedia Judaica, V<sup>o</sup> Pentateuch, 231 and 233 ff.
9. Ann Elizabeth Mayer, 'Law and Religion in the Muslim Middle East,' in The American Journal of Comparative Law, vol.35 (1987), pp.132-133.

10. Mitchell, The Islamic Movement: Its current Condition and Future Prospects, in Stowasser (ed.), The Islamic Impulse (London and Washington: Croom Helm and the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies of Georgetown University, 1987), pp. 78-79.

11. Mayer, supra note 9, p.151.