

Gerhard Bowering (Yale University, USA)

NAMES AND IMAGES OF GOD IN THE QUR'AN

The search for God inspires the Qur'an, elicits its many statements about God's beautiful names and provokes its rare descriptions of images about God. Islamic exegesis offers a great number of commentaries on the Qur'an that illustrate and explain this search for God. Again and again, Muslims return to God in the interpretation of the Qur'an, their Holy Book. He is the origin and end of all Islamic exegesis. Throughout the centuries, God has remained deeply anchored in the interpretation of the Qur'an in the Islamic tradition. The search for God as the fulcrum of all religious desire and the focus of all personal struggle opens the field where Islam and Christianity can encounter one another in peace. A survey of the Islamic idea of God in the Qur'an and its major aspects may serve as a small contribution to this new yearbook and open it to the encounter between the two great religions of Christianity and Islam.

When one opens the Qur'an and begins to read it, one encounters the name of God many thousand times and finds a variety of expressions, titles and descriptions for God. The Qur'an is dominated by God, even intoxicated by God's praise and infatuated with God's glory, not unlike the way God is extolled in the Psalms of the Bible. God stands in the center of the Qur'anic message that can be traced back to its proclamations in rhymed form during the last twenty years of Muhammad's prophetic career in Mecca and Medina on the Arabian peninsula. These proclamations, collected after Muhammad's death (632 C. E.), were assembled in book-form and circulated in the major cities of the nascent Islamic Empire by the end of the seventh century C. E. Since that time, they have been known as the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam¹. No other theme is so central in this Holy Writ of the Muslims as is the name of God, «Allah», itself. As the predominant name for God in Islam, Allah, does not signify a proper name in Arabic but simply means "the God" without any particular explanation or addition: God short and simple. No plural can be formed of the word for this nameless God, who has none other beside Him and tolerates no partner or spouse, no mother or father, no daughter or son, no associ-

¹ The best introductions to the life of Muhammad are the concise study of R. Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran*, Stuttgart 1957, the detailed scholarly study of F. Buhl, *Das Leben Mohammeds*, Leipzig 1930, translated into German by H.H. Schaeder, and the two volume set of W.M. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford 1953, und *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford 1956. Contemporary scholarship has not achieved a new break-through to a critical and reliable presentation of Muhammad's life and career.

ate or peer. He neither co-exists with another nor shares His nature with a second nature. But He exists as the highest being, invoked and professed with the name of "Allah" by more than a billion Muslims around the globe².

The Name of God

«There is no god but Allah,» thus speaks the Muslim father the first words of the Islamic creed into the ear of his newborn son. Each day, every Muslim believer renews this uncompromising belief in the only God and enters on his daily routine and business with the pledge of obedience to the sole God. In the call to action and in the battle cry, this profession of faith is transformed into the exclamation of «*Allahu akbar*», «God is greater» than all idols and *jinn*, angels and demons, worlds and things. Muhammad's monotheistic belief overpowered the idolatry of the ancient Arabs, who associated Allah with the *jinn* (37: 158), ascribed to Him sons and daughters (6: 100) and placed other deities next to Him (53: 26—27)³. Everywhere in the daily routine of the Muslims one witnesses this profession to the one God being transformed into the invocation, «*inshallah*» («if God so will») which, like a short fervent prayer, gives expression to the awareness that everything happening now and in the future depends on God alone. In the life and faith of the Muslim community, the unyielding and absolute monotheism becomes the fulcrum of Muslim prayer and the focus of Muslim action.

The Qur'an begins «In the name of God,» and each of its 114 suras (except for the ninth sura) has the formula, «In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate» (the so-called *Basmala*), at its head⁴. With these words begins the letter of Solomon to the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'an (27: 30); and a slightly shorter and perhaps older formula has Noah exclaim in the Qur'an, «In the name

² The classical introduction to the Qur'an is T. Nöldeke, F. Schwally, G. Bergsträsser und O. Pretzl, *Geschichte des Quran*, new edition, 3 volumes, Leipzig 1909-38, translated into Arabic by G. Tamer, Beirut 2004. Reliable introductions to the Qur'an are W.M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an*, Edinburgh 1970, and R. Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, Paris 1977. Overviews about the idea of God in the Qur'an can be found in: Gardet L. Allah // Encyclopedia of Islam. Vol. 1. Leiden, 1971. P. 406—17; Macdonald D. B. «Allah» // E.J. Brill's First Encyclopedia of Islam. Vol. 1. Leiden, 1987. P. 302—11; Böwering G. God and His Attributes // Encyclopedia of the Qur'an. Vol. 2. Leiden, 2002. P. 316—31.

³ All Qur'an citations are recorded by the numbers of sura and verse, divided by a colon, and are integrated into the text in brackets, e.g., (24:35). When many Qur'anic verses are relevant for a particular reference only one of them is cited, except when parallel passages are needed to clarify the reference. In translating the Qur'anic verses, I followed A.J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, London 1955; reprinted New York 1996, or in certain cases, preferred my own translation. R. Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*, second edition, Stuttgart 1977, was consulted for explanation and commentary on particular Qur'anic verses.

⁴ I. Bismillah // Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. Vol. 2. (Reprint). Edinburgh, 1979. P. 666—68; B. Carra de Vaux, Gardet L. Basmala // Encyclopedia of Islam. Vol. 1. Leiden, 1979.

of God», when he enters the ark and sets foot on dry land (11: 41). The formula used by the ancient Meccans on top of documents of transactions, “In your name, O God” (*bismika llahumma*), is retained in the pact of Hudaibiya concluded by Muhammad and the Mecans in the year 628 C. E.⁵ The beautiful calligraphy of this tripartite introductory verse of the Qur’an (1: 1) adorns many walls and embellishes the domes of innumerable mosques from Morocco to Mindanao. This blessing is uttered when an animal is slaughtered (6: 118, 121); each important act and each meal, especially a banquet, begins in God’s name with the *Basmala*. Islamic folkbelief encases this formula in amulets and talismans, perceives in it a protection against the evil eye and finds it written on Gabriel’s wing, Adam’s thigh, Solomon’s seal or the tongue of Jesus⁶.

Originally similar to the form of an oath, sworn by the Arabs in times before Islam, the *Basmala* developed on the tongues of the Muslims into a call to God that invoked the fear of God and stressed God’s bounty. God is almighty and omniscient, transcendent and immanent; the creator of the world and final judge of humanity. He is the distant God, before whom humans stand naked and defenseless, and the totally Other — «like Him there is naught» (42: 11). But He is also the protector of humanity, the One who forgives their misdeeds and is intimately near to everyone of them — «nearer to him than the jugular vein» (50: 16). For the Muslims, the Qur’an includes the actual word of God in the Arabic language, God’s speech word-for-word, without addition by any human author. The Qur’an is composed in Arabic because God wanted to give witness to Himself before humanity in this language. He called Himself Allah — a name known to the ancient Arabs long before Islam and familiar to Muhammad because his father was called ‘Abdallah («slave and servant of God»).

Another name for God, found fifty-seven times in the Qur’an, entered Muhammad’s proclamation for a short time before the Hijra, his emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622 C. E.. This was the name of *al-Raḥmān*, “The Merciful” (17: 110)⁷, with the definite article as an essential constituent and set on equal footing with Allah in the Qur’an — «Say: ‘Call upon Allah, or call upon *al-Raḥmān*; whichever you call upon, to Him belong the Names Most Beautiful’» (17: 110). The name *al-Raḥmān*, included in the tripartite *Basmala* («In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate») and appearing together with the adjective *al-raḥīm* («the Compassionate») in four other Qur’anic verses (1: 3; 2: 163; 41: 2; 59: 22), is entirely and wholly understood as a proper name for God. Scholars agree that the adjective *al-raḥīm* cannot be understood as the proper name for a High-God, but that the matter is different in the case of *al-Raḥmān*. Originally, *al-Raḥmān*

⁵ Watt W. M. Al-Hudaibiya // Encyclopedia of Islam. Vol. 3. Leiden, 1971, 539; Goldziher I. Bismillah // Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. Vol. 2. P. 667.

⁶ Goldziher I. Bismillah // Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics. Vol. 2. P. 668.

⁷ J. Jomier. “Le nom divin ‘ar-Rahman’ dans le Coran,” in *Mélanges Louis Massignon*, volume 2, Damascus 1957, pp. 36—81.

had His home as God of the heavens in South- and Central-Arabia, as evidenced by an inscription of the year 505 C.E. that records the old South-Arabian form of *Rahmānan*, with the article placed at the end of the word testifying to Aramaic origin⁸. In the Qur'an, *al-Rahmān* eventually lost its independence, possible due to the objections of Muhammad's fellow tribesmen of the Quraysh (13: 30) and, in the *Basmala*, became subordinated to the name Allah as an adjective⁹. It is not certain whether the name, Allah, can also be retraced to Aramaic origin with reference to the use of *alāhā* for God in Syriac sources. Thus the decisive evidence is lacking to identify two groups of pre-Islamic Arabs, one in South- and Central Arabia, adoring *al-Rahmān*, and one in Northwest Arabia, worshipping *Alāhā*¹⁰. This identification, however, is confirmed by the activity of Musaylima, who a short time before Muhammad's death appeared as a prophet and Muhammad's rival, speaking in the name of *al-Rahmān*¹¹.

More than a hundred times, God is addressed in the Qur'an with the title, *Rabb*, «Lord»¹². In this name, Muhammad was urged to proclaim his message, «Recite: In the name of your Lord who created» (96: 1) because «your Lord is more generous» (96: 3) than anyone else. He is «the Lord of all Being» (1: 2), «the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them» (19: 65) and «the Lord of the heavenly throne (21: 22). The title, «Lord», is directly linked with «Allah» in the Qur'an in verses such as, «My Lord is Allah» (40: 28), «Allah is my Lord and your Lord» (3: 51) and «our Lord is Allah» (22: 40). This title, «Lord», appears frequently in the Qur'an together with a pronoun, yet never linked with the definite article, and is used in the same way as the ancient Arabs addressed their idols with, «Lord». In the Qur'an, He is called, «the Lord of this house», i.e., the Ka'ba, the central sanctuary of Mecca (106: 3). To Him praise is due as Muhammad's Lord «your Lord the Most High» (87: 1), and His rank Pharaoh claimed in blasphemy when He presented himself to his people, «I am your Lord Most High!» (79: 24).

⁸ J. Rijckmans, «Le christianisme en Arabie du sud préislamique», in *L'Oriente cristiano nella storia della civiltà: Atti del convegno internazionale*, Rome 1964, pp. 436, 440; Y. Moubarac, «Les études d'épigraphie sudsémitique et la naissance de l'Islam», *Revue des études islamiques* 25 (1957), pp. 13—68.

⁹ J. van Ess, «Der Name Gottes im Islam», in H. von Stietencron, *Der Name Gottes*, Düsseldorf 1975, pp. 156-75; Y. Moubarac, «Les noms, titres et attributs de Dieu dans le Coran», *Le Muséon* 68 (1955), pp. 93—135.

¹⁰ *Wellhausen J.* Reste arabischen Heidentums. Berlin, 1897. P. 32—3, 217; *Jeffery A.* The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an. Leiden, 2007. P. 66—7; *Blau J.* Arabic lexicographical miscellanies // *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 17 (1972). P. 173—90.

¹¹ Musaylima, active in Central Arabia among the Banu Hanifa, couched his proclamations in rhymed form (*saj'*), not unlike Muhammad. He was slain by Muslim forces in the battle of 'Aqraba in 632 C. E., a few months after Muhammad's death; *Watt W. M.* Musaylima // *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Vol. 7. Leiden, 1993. P. 664—5. *Kister M. J.* Musaylima // *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*. Vol. 3. Leiden, 2003. P. 460—3.

¹² *Chelod J.* Note sur l'emploi du mot rabb dans le Coran // *Arabica*, 5 (1958). P. 159—67; *Calderini S.* Lord // *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*. Vol. 3. Leiden, 2003. P. 229—31.

A striking characteristic of God in the Qur'an is revealed in the words with which God addresses Himself to Muhammad and the people. This divine address, principally recorded in the third person singular, occurs in the form of the imperative, «Say!» (112: 1), or is couched in the royal plural of «We». God is rarely addressed in the «Thou», and even more rarely speaks of Himself with the divine «I», in the first person singular. A powerful testimony to the divine «I» is God's theophanic address to Moses in the Qur'an, «Moses, I am your Lord; put off your shoes, you are in the holy valley of Tuwa!» (20: 11—12) and, «I am God! There is no god but I!» (20: 14) — both verses of the Qur'an proclaimed by Muhammad before the Hijra. It is important to note that the theophanic «I» occurs in the mouth of Moses, who is mentioned more frequently by name than any other prophet in the Qur'an and in whom Muhammad discovers the principal prototype and model for his own mission. The preponderance of the imperative way of divine communication with Muhammad in the Qur'an and the simultaneous infrequency of both God's theophanic «I» and the human address of God with «Thou», appear to indicate that the essence of the Qur'an rests on a mediated way of the divine communication rather than on Muhammad's direct experience of personal encounter with God. Furthermore, in the time after the Hijra, in Medina, this theophanic proclamation of the Qur'an appears in the more indirect form, «Your God is one God; there is no god but He, the Merciful, the Comapssionate» (2: 163) and becomes the embodiment of the Islamic formula of faith, «There is no god but Allah» (47: 19).

God's Names Most Beautiful

God is not only invoked by His names, Allah, *al-Raḥmān*, and *Rabb*, rather He is also revealed in the Qur'an through expressions, often imbedded in rhymed end-forms of verses, which include an astonishingly rich world of divine perfections. These are «the names most beautiful» (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*, 7: 180) — an expression, chiseled into the east gate of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem since early Islamic times — that describe Allah with a great variety of qualities. According to Islamic tradition, the number of “the names most beautiful” is ninety-nine¹³. The name of «Allah» as God's highest name is kept separate from this list of names, while *Rabb* belongs to it, but *Al-Raḥmān* does not. The names most beautiful appear in many verses of the Qur'an and are often recorded in clusters (59: 22—24) or cited as a totality (17: 110). Their number in Islamic tradition does not coincide exactly with their number in the Qur'an and also shows slight differences of language in comparison with the Qur'an. When Muslims guide the thirty-three beads of their prayer cords through the fingers, they invoke one of the names most beautiful at each bead, running through all names in three turns.

Some of the names most beautiful are similar in meaning or related in language. Some are placed at the end of verses for the sake of rhyme patterns or are

¹³ *Gimaret D.* Les noms divins en Islam. Paris, 1988; *Redhouse J. W.* The most comely names // *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 12 (1880). P. 1—69.

repeated in pairs for emphasis. Some are cited with a definite article and others without it; some are linked with the particle "and" and others not. On the whole, these names most beautiful are not fundamental concepts or propositions of a developed theological system, rather they are expressions of prayer included in the Qur'anic praise of God, as reflected in the frequently repeated, "To God be glory!" (12: 108) or, "Praise belongs to God" (1: 1) or, "Glory be to Him" (10: 18). The names most beautiful resemble signposts pointing to the prayer of the man who proclaimed the Qur'an and hallmarks giving testimony to his experience of God. They are praise of God and doxology rather than doctrine and theology. In addition, one has to consider that the Qur'an is meant to be recited, it is a recital opening the ear of the listener rather than a reading fixing the eye to the text¹⁴. It is meditation by listening to the recited word rather than contemplation by reading a written text. Nevertheless, in the names most beautiful, one can discover the origins of a rich Islamic theology that later developed in systematic form in the Middle Ages. In the Qur'an, the names most beautiful are not yet theoretical descriptions of God, but they nevertheless offer the foundation for refined theses on the divine nature and its attributes (*sifāt*) elaborated by the great systems of Islamic theology¹⁵.

Some examples from the Qur'an may illustrate God's names most beautiful. God is "the One, the Omnipotent" (39: 4), "the Living, the Everlasting" (3: 2), "the All-mighty, the All-wise" (2: 129), "the All-strong, the All-mighty" (11: 66), "the All-high, the All-great" (22: 62), "the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward" (57: 3), "the All-forgiving, the All-loving" (85: 14) and "the Giver" (3: 8). Many times the Qur'an emphasizes that "God is powerful over everything" (2: 20); He is "All-powerful" (60: 7), "All-embracing" (2: 247), "All-hearing" (2: 127) and "All-Seeing" (17: 1). God is "All-sufficient, All-clement" (2: 263), "All-laudable, All-glorious" (11: 73), "the All-subtle, the All-aware" (6: 103), "the All-provider" (51: 58), and the "Guardian over everything" (34: 21). "God ever watches over you" (4: 1), "God is witness of the things you do" (3: 98), "He is an excellent Guardian" (3: 173), "He is the Protector and Helper" (42: 9) — "God ever guides those who believe to a straight path" (22: 54).

God brings forth and maintains creation, He holds sway over it and renews it. He is "the Creator" (59: 24), "who created the heavens and the earth" (36: 21), who "gives life and makes to die" (15: 23) and gathers humanity for a Day of Judgment (3: 9). He honors and humbles the human beings, offers or holds back His gifts, hastens or delays His support, grants His help and sends misfortune. "He leads astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills" (16: 93). He opens the hearts of the believers for the faith and seals the hearts of the unbelievers with the words of their unbelief, "our hearts are uncircumcised" (2: 88; 4: 155). Innumerable are

¹⁴ Böwering G. *The Qur'an as the Voice of God // Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 147 (2003). P. 347—53.

¹⁵ Allard M. *Le problème des attributs divins*. Beirut. 1965; *van Ess J. Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*. Vol. 4. Berlin, 1997. P. 425—77.

the divine names of God's forgiveness and pardon next to the repetition of "the Merciful, the Compassionate" of the *Basmala*. God is gentle (2: 143) and loving (85: 14), He answers the prayers (11: 61) and His mercy embraces all things (7: 155). He is ready to forgive (2: 173), inclined to be indulgent (38: 66) and turned to humanity with His favor and grace (2: 37).

God decides what He wills (5: 1) and His promise is true (11: 45). He is the best of judges (7: 87) and will render His verdict on the Day of Resurrection (4: 141), and no one will be able to repel His judgment (13: 41). Many times the Qur'an says of God, "You are the One who possesses knowledge and wisdom" (2: 32), but only once it is said that "God bids to justice ('*adl*)" (16: 90) and twice that He "upholds justice" (3: 18) or speaks with "justice" (6: 115). Surprisingly however, God is neither mentioned nor extolled in the Qur'an as "the Just," although He renders His verdict over humanity on the Day of the Last Judgment and apportions eternal reward or punishment for the deeds of each individual. With the absolute authority of a monarch, God passes His sentence that depends only on His good pleasure or wrath (3: 162).

Some descriptions of God in the Qur'an involve intricate difficulties for their interpretation. e.g., when God is called "the All-holy King" (59: 23; 62: 1), "the Master of the Kingdom" (3: 26) and "the Master of the Day of Doom" (1: 4). When God is called "Peace" (*al-salām*, 59: 23), He is not understood abstractly as "peace" but dynamically as the One who is peaceable and grants peace. Called, "the Truth" or "the Reality" (*al-ḥaqq*, 22: 6; 22: 62; 31: 30), the mystics of Islam preferred this name of God to any other high-name. These mystics, known as Sufis, entered Islamic history in force about two centuries after Muhammad's death, claiming to have a deeper insight into the inner meaning of the Qur'an because of their direct experience of the divine in their souls. Citing God's name under the abstract and neutral noun of *al-Ḥaqq* empowered them to speak of a mystical union with God while avoiding any identification with God understood as a person. For this reason, they emphasized God in the Qur'an as "the All-loving Lord of the Throne" (85: 14) and based their experience of mystical union with God on the moving verse in which the mutual love of God and humanity is stated short and simple: "He loves them, and they love Him" (5: 54).

God, Creator and Judge of the World

With regard to God, two themes dominate the earliest suras of the Qur'anic proclamation: God is Creator of the world and Judge of humanity. The first verse proclaimed by Muhammad according to Islamic tradition, presents God as the creator, "Recite in the name of your Lord, who created!" (96: 1). God's act of creation is an act of His divine will. He created the world through the decree of His eternal will, calling it into being with the word of His divine command, "Be!" (*kun*). He is "the crator of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a thing, He but says to it, 'Be!', and it is" (2: 117). God not only creates the world through a unique command, He also maintains it in its existence as an ongoing work of creation (79: 27—

33; 80: 17—42). God is active as creator at all times and at each moment, without ever tiring (50: 38) or sitting still (10: 3) and without resting from His work on the seventh day of creation. The Qur'an mentions the six days of the Biblical account of creation (7: 54; 10: 3; 11: 9; 25: 60; 32: 3; 41: 19—22), but does not speak of nothingness or chaos preceding creation. Rather, in the Qur'anic image, God unstitched the heavens and the earth that were a mass all sewn-up, and fashioned every living thing of water (21: 30). He set in the earth firm mountains, lest it would shake with them (21: 31) and set up the heaven as "a roof well-protected" (21: 32). He created the night and the day, and the sun and the moon, "each swimming in a sky" (21: 33)¹⁶.

Rather than as a unique act at the beginning of time setting history in motion, God's creation is experienced by humans as a process, in which they witness God's wonderful deeds in the world at each and every moment¹⁷. The vault of heaven, raised up without pillars (13: 2) has the moon set in it as a light and the sun as a lamp (71: 16). God sends water down from the sky (30: 24) and separates the sweet waters of rivers from the salt waters of oceans (25: 53). He makes the heavens and earth stand firm (30: 25) and fortifies the land with the mountains, looses the winds and has lightning strike (30: 24). He revives the earth with its growth and places in it humans with a variety of tongues and hues (30: 22). He separates day and night and provides humans with their daily rest (24: 44). God creates for them cattle, pack-horses and mounts (16: 4—8), fashions pastures for the herds and crops of all kinds of fruit (16: 11), brings forth fish and pearls from the depth of the oceans and has ships cleaving through the seas (16: 14). The rain indicates the creative power of God because it revives the dry land and makes it fertile. Just as God can make the desert sprout in the short rainy season, so He can raise the dead to new life (7: 57). "It is He who originates creation, then brings it back again" (30: 27).

God created Adam, the first human being (2: 30), with His own two hands (38: 75) and made him a successor (*khalifa*) to the angels (2: 30)¹⁸. He breathed into him of His spirit (15: 29) and summoned him to give names to the things (2: 31—32) — a task that the angels were incapable to perform. God created Adam of dust (3: 59) and water (25: 54) and shaped the human being in "its fairest stature" (95: 4), giving it proper proportions and erect posture, and shaping it in a balanced form (82: 7—8). Adam's offspring, "the children of Adam" (7: 26), were procreated through the sperm, shaped to their complete figure (18: 37) and finally made male and female — "and no female bears or brings forth, save with God's knowledge" (35: 11). Two images of the creation of the human being are linked: God created man from clay (6: 2) — "He created man of a clay like the potter's" (55: 14) — and God created man from a sperm-drop (18: 37), drop of water (25:

¹⁶ O'Shaughnessy T. Creation and the teaching of the Qur'an. Rome. 1985.

¹⁷ Nagel T. Der Koran: Einführung — Texte — Erläuterungen. München. 1983. P. 172—84.

¹⁸ Schöck C. Adam im Islam. Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte der Sunna. Berlin, 1933; Paret R. Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz. P. 16.

54) or blood-clot (96: 62), which gradually develops into a tissue, expands from the embryo to the fetus, becomes bone and flesh in the mother's womb, emerges into the world and grows to the full figure of a human being (22: 5; 23: 12—14), whom God creates as male and female and makes into races and tribes (49: 13). God assigns each human being a particular span of life (6: 2), "and then makes him to die, and buries him, then, when He wills, He raises him" (80: 21—22).

The human being, created by God, is given the true religion, the primal and natural religion of the belief in one God, the so-called *fiṭra*, which is mentioned only once in the Qur'an in a divine address to Muhammad, "Set your face to the true religion, as a man of pure faith (*ḥanīf*), God's original *fiṭra* upon which he originated humanity. There is no changing God's creation. That is the right religion" (30: 30)¹⁹. These men "of pure faith" did not represent an organised religion of the pre-Islamic Arabs, rather they were a group of men seeking a High-God because they were not content with the polytheism of the old Arab deities, whether local or tribal. Their religion, however, became the oldest name for Islam — "the only true religion with God is the *Hanīfiyya*" (3: 19), as stated in the Qur'an codex of Ibn Mas'ud (d. 653 C. E.)²⁰. This primal monotheism, the *Hanīfiyya*, documented since the early stages of the Qur'anic proclamation and followed by these men of pure faith, found its model and guide in the figure of Abraham. Just as he did, so did the *ḥanīfs* discover the one and true God through their inner wisdom and religious intuition²¹. By not associating other deities with Him, they gave witness to the original and primal belief in the one true God (6: 75—79) and bowed down in prayer before the One, "who created the heavens and the earth" (6: 79). Muhammad perceived in them the prototype to follow, professing, "as for me, my Lord has guided me to a straight path, a right religion, the creed of Abraham, a man of pure faith, he was no idolater" (6: 161).

Islam rejects the notion of *shirk*, idolatry, or more literally, "associating partners with God", categorically and sees in it the gravest offense before God²². The

¹⁹ In Islamic tradition (Hadith) the idea of *fiṭra* is further explained by a statement of Muhammad that each child is born with its nature formed according to God's plan ('*alā 'l-fiṭra*). This *fiṭra*, however, can be transformed by its parents so that it becomes a Jew, Christian or Magian according to the religion of its parents. This statement implies that each child is given a Muslim nature by birth (*anima naturaliter moslemica*), but becomes bound to a non-Muslim religion through the choice of the environment in which it grows up; cf.: *van Ess J. Zwischen Hadith und Theologie*. Berlin, 1975. P. 101—14.

²⁰ *Jeffery A. J. The Foreign Vocabulary*. P. 112—5; *Rubin U. Hanifiya and Ka'ba — an inquiry into the Arabian pre-Islamic background of Din Ibrahim // Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 13 (1990). P. 85—112; *Idem. Hanif // Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*. Vol. 2. Leiden, 2002. P. 402—4; see: *de Blois F. Nasrani and hanif: Studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and Islam // BOAS*, 65 (2002). P. 16—25.

²¹ *Nagel T. 'Der erste Muslim': Abraham in Mekka // Abraham unser Vater / Kratz R. G., Nagel T. (eds.)*. Göttingen, 2003. P. 133—49.

²² *Surdy M. I. The Qur'anic Concept of Shirk (Polytheism)*. London, 1982; *Hawting G. R. The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge, 1999.

Qur'an insists emphatically that there is only one God, the ruler of the World, "who begets no offspring, has no partner in his dominion, and has no need of a protector against humiliation" (17: 111). "He has taken to Himself neither a consort nor an offspring" (72: 3). God not having an offspring can be understood in two ways. Applied to Jesus, Mary's son, the Qur'an states, "it is not for God to take a son unto Him" (19: 35) and "they are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Messiah, Mary's son'" (5: 72). But it can also be understood as directed against the three female deities worshipped by the Meccans (53: 19—20; 16: 57—59)²³. In a broader sense, it can be understood as polemics against the Christian belief in divine sonship (2: 116) or polytheistic beliefs in general. However, one has to take into account that, in Arabic, the word offspring (*walad*) can be understood as male or female and "the taking an offspring to oneself" may refer to generation or adoption.

Rejecting the association of partners with God, the Qur'an includes a series of concise statements that insist on the oneness of God. "He is only One God" (6: 19), "Your God is One God" (18: 110), "Your God is One" (37: 4). In addition, there is the clear rejection of tritheism in the Qur'an: "they are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Third of Three.' No god is there but One God" (5: 73). A few Qur'anic verses state emphatically God's oneness, with God's self-testimony, "I am" (2: 160; 15: 49; 27: 9) or "there is no God but I, so fear you me!" (16: 2) and "I am your Lord, so serve Me!" (21: 92). The crucial statement with regard to God's oneness appears in the Qur'an in God's conversation with Moses, recalling the Biblical verse of Exodus 3: 14, "I am your Lord; put off your shoes; you are in the holy valley" (20: 11—12), and immediately thereafter, "Verily I am God; there is no god but I" (20: 14).

The Qur'an does not develop its ideas and ideals about God in a historical or interpretive vacuum. Careful study reveals that, in articulating its own normative position, the Qur'an is accepting or rejecting, in turn, views of the divine that appear in Arab tribal religion as well as in Judaism and Christianity. A good example of the amalgamation of Jewish, Christian and old-Arab themes in one short chapter of the Qur'an in sura 112²⁴. Behind, "Say, He is God, One" (*ahad*, 112: 1), stands the Hebrew *ehod* ("one") assimilated into Arabic. Then follows the emphasis on God's impenetrable nature, "God, the Impenetrable" (*al-ṣamad*, 112: 2), against the conception of the hollow idols of the ancient Arabs. Finally, there is the polemic against the Christian creed, "He has not begotten, and has not been begotten (*lam yalid wa-lam yulad*), and equal to Him is not any one" (112: 3—4).

The amalgamation of elements gathered from these three religious traditions is a characteristic of the Qur'an, not only with regard to the concept of God, but also with regard to the formation of the central institutions of Islam, such as ritual prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage. Another example of the amalgama-

²³ *Ryckmans G.* Les religions arabes préislamiques. Louvain, 1951; *Krone S.* Die altarabische Gottheit al-Lat. Frankfurt am Main, 1992.

²⁴ *Calverly E. E.* The Grammar of Suratu'l-Ikhlās // *Studia Islamica*, 8 (1957). P. 5—14.

tion of these traditions can be spotted in the formation of the prophetic figures in the Qur'an that intertwine midrashic, apocryphal and old-Arab legendary features. Furthermore, the various ideas of divine revelation combine the model of the Arab soothsayer with the prophetic seer and the divine messenger.

Images of God in the Qur'an

While God's names most beautiful appear many hundred times in the Qur'an, the images of God surface in only a few dozen verses. In particular, there are three images that are stated in part obscurely or by allusions in the Quran, but which are then further developed and embellished in the religious literature of Islamic tradition (Hadith). They are: God has face, eyes and hands; God sits on a throne; and God is the light of the heavens and the earth. These three images play a significant part in the discussion about the anthropomorphical verses that are marked in the Qur'an as obscure verses and contrasted with its clear and unequivocal verses (3: 7). They appear as examples of the allegorical exegesis in the voluminous commentary literature of the Qur'an²⁵. Although it is mentioned in the Islamic tradition that the human being is created in God's image, that statement cannot be found in the Qur'an which insists firmly that "like Him there is naught" (42: 11), thereby excluding any resemblance between God and humanity. According to the Qur'an, God shapes human beings, gives them a beautiful and balanced figure (40: 64, 64: 3; 7: 11) and forms them in the womb (3: 6). "He is God, the Creator, the Maker, the Shaper" (59: 24). The Qur'an, however, does not speak of God's figure or body. It does not mention God's ear, although He is the "All-hearing," nor does it refer to God's mouth and tongue, although God speaks, commands, promises and threatens in the Qur'an. There is also no mention of God's nose, arms, fist, foot, heart or beard; and God's sex is not mentioned expressly, although it is implicitly understood as male²⁶.

The Qur'an states clearly, however, that God has a face, eyes and hands. More than to the eyes emphasis is given to His hands in two scenarios, one at the moment of creation God and the other at the Day of Resurrection. God creates Adam, the father of humanity, with His own hands and reprimands the devil (Iblis) for his disobedience to prostrate in respect before Adam together with the angels. Iblis is cursed and driven from paradise because he boasted to be created of fire while Adam was made of clay (38: 76—77). When the world comes to an end in its final catastrophe, God will hold the whole world in His hand on the Day of Resurrection and roll up the heavens in His right hand (39: 67). This image was refined in Islamic tradition to the representation that, already before the creation of the physical world, God held the hearts of the believers between His two fingers to determine their fate when they would come into the world²⁷. The image of God's face

²⁵ Gimaret D. *Dieu à l'image de l'homme*. Paris, 1997.

²⁶ Van Ess J. *Theologie und Gesellschaft*. Bd. 4. P. 396—401.

²⁷ For example, al-Ghazzali, see: *Gramlich R. Muhammad al-Ghazzalis Lehre von den Stufen zur Gottesliebe*. Wiesbaden, 1984. P. 64.

also unites two ideas, God's ubiquitous presence and humanity's unceasing desire for God. Never turning His back to them, God always turns His face to humanity. In turn, human beings constantly seek God's countenance in their prayer²⁸. "To God belong the East and the West; withersoever you turn, there is the face of God" (2: 115). "All things perish, except His face" (28: 88). "All that dwells upon the earth is perishing, yet still abides the face of your Lord, majestic, splendid" (55: 26—27). Human beings desire God's countenance (2: 272), persevere in seeking God's face in their prayer (13: 22; 6: 52; 18: 28) and, without expecting thanks or rewards, feed the poor in whom they see the face of God (76: 9).

When taken literally, the image of God's face raises the question whether the blessed of paradise can behold God's countenance. On the one hand, the Qur'an states that human eyes cannot see God (6: 103) and God speaks to human beings from behind a veil (42: 15), on the other hand there are Qur'anic verses proclaiming that the blessed of paradise will gaze at their Lord with radiant faces (75: 22-23). On the basis of these contrasting statements of the Qur'an and some centuries after Muhammad, Islamic theology developed distinctions between the vision of God in this world and in the hereafter and between the actual vision of God and the vision of the hearts. A burning issue, however, was rooted in the two visions of God Muhammad is reported to have had in the Qur'an (53: 5—18; 81, 19—25)²⁹. According to early interpretations of Islamic exegesis, Muhammad perceives God with his own eyes and converses intimately with Him, becoming God's Beloved (*ḥabīb Allāh*) and, in Islamic tradition, ascends — during his lifetime rather than after his death — to heaven, to a rank that is nearer to God than that of Abraham or Moses. Other exegetes understand Muhammad's ascension to heaven as a dream vision, a vision of his heart³⁰, by referring to the verse, "his heart lies not of what he saw" (53: 11) and understand "the Lote-tree of the Boundary" (53: 14), at which the encounter occurs, as a curtain separating God from His prophet.

If human eyes do see God, there is no doubt about where He will appear. According to Islamic tradition, Jerusalem is the place at which God sat down after completing His work of creation and on which He will sit again on the Day of the Last Judgment. The Qur'an itself states clearly that God, sitting on His throne, rules over His creation with power and glory (7: 54). The throne rests upon the waters (11: 7) and "reaches far beyond the heavens and the earth," as said in one of the best known verses of the Qur'an, the so-called throne verse (2: 255). The angels carry the throne (39: 75; 40: 7; 69: 17), stand or walk around it, proclaiming God's praise and asking forgiveness for the sake of the believers (40: 7). Untiring from his work of creation, God sits calmly on His throne like a monarch

²⁸ *Baljon J. M. S.* To seek the face of God in Koran and Hadith // *Acta Orientalia*, 21 (1953). P. 254—66.

²⁹ *Bell R.* Muhammad's Visions // *The Moslem World*, 24 (1934). P. 145—54.

³⁰ *Böwering G.* From the word of God to the vision of God: Muhammad's heavenly journey in classical Sufi Qur'an commentary // *M.A. Amir-Moëzzi*. *Le voyage initiatique en terre de l'Islam*. Louvain; Paris, 1996. P. 205—22.

in royal composure. Neither wearing a crown nor holding a scepter, He sends the sun and moon on their course (13: 2). Two somewhat obscure scenarios are related to God sitting on the throne. One of them is “the laudable station” (*maqām maḥmūd*, 17: 79), the rank on which, according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad is invited to sit to God’s right hand at the Last Judgment. The other refers to the “Logos” (*amr*) through which God rules the world (10: 3; 13: 2; 32: 5) and whom God directs from the heaven to the earth and then has him return to Him “in one day whose measure is a thousand years in counting” (32: 4—5)³¹. The Qur’an, however, cites another word for the Logos, “whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, Mary’s son” (3: 45) and calls him God’s “word” (*kalima*) that “He committed to Mary” (4: 171). It appears that the Qur’an draws here on two sources, one understanding the Logos as *amr* and the other calling him *kalima*, and may conceal beneath it a latent trinitarian conception of God. This possibility surfaces when one compares the verses in which Jesus is called “*amr*” or “*kalima*” with those in which Jesus is seen in relation to the “spirit” (*rūḥ*, 4: 171) or “the holy spirit” (*rūḥ al-quḍus*, 2: 87; 2: 253) and in those in which the spirit is linked to the “*amr*” (17: 85; 16: 2)³².

It is possible that God’s throne, resting on the waters, was implicitly understood in the Qur’an as a reflection of divine light in the waters of the primal sea³³. This image of the divine light recalls the light verse of the Qur’an (24: 35), in which God is called “the light (*nūr*) of the heavens and the earth” rather than their “illuminator” (*munawwir*), as suggested by many Muslim commentators³⁴. In addition, the light verse includes a simile, in which the light is compared with a niche holding a lamp made of glass that sparkles like a brilliant star. This lamp burns with the oil of a blessed tree, an olive tree, that is “neither of the east nor of the west,” i. e. supernatural, burning brilliantly almost by itself without having been touched by fire. Finally, ending the verse, God is depicted as “light upon light, God guides to His light whom He wills” (24: 35). In the context with the two following verses (24: 36—37), the light verse appears to be linked to the Eastern Christian liturgy by the reference to monks worshipping God “in temples God has allowed to be raised up and His name to be commemorated therein” (24: 36). Furthermore, the framework of the simile of light in the Qur’an recalls God as “light of the world” of the fourth gospel (Joh. 8: 12; 9: 15; 12: 46) on the one hand, and the “light from light” of the Nicene creed³⁵.

³¹ *Speyer H.* Die biblischen Erzählungen im Koran. Gräfenhainichen, 1931. P. 24—7.

³² *Henninger J.* Spuren christlicher Glaubenswahrheiten im Koran. Schöneck-Beckenried 1951. P. 47—56; *Ahrens K.* Christliches im Koran. Eine Nachlese // Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 84 (1930). P. 15—68, 148—90.

³³ *van Ess J.* Theologie und Gesellschaft. Bd. 4. P. 407—11.

³⁴ *Böwering G.* The light verse: Qur’anic text and Sufi interpretation // *Oriens*, 36 (2001). P. 113—44.

³⁵ *Macdonald D. B.* Allah // E. J. Brill’s First Encyclopedia of Islam. Vol. 1. P. 318; *Clermont-Ganneau.* La lampe et l’olivier dans le Coran // *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, 81 (1920).

It is also possible that the burning bush, mentioned in the Qur'anic narrative of Moses (28: 29—30), plays a role in the image of the light verse, when it is seen linked to the Qur'anic statements about Mount Sinai (52: 1—6). Muhammad was familiar with Mount Sinai, mentioned ten times in the Qur'an as "the Mountain" (*al-Ṭūr*), invoked by oath (95: 2; 52: 1), and called Saynā' (23: 20) or, for the sake of rhyme, Sīnīn (95: 2)³⁶. On this Ṭūr Saynā' grows an olive tree, called *zaytūn* as in the light verse, that "bears oil and seasoning for all to eat" (23: 30). The Qur'an speaks of two sides of Mount Sinai. On one side of the mountain, the law and the revelation of the Torah was entrusted to Moses (28: 44). There is another side of mount Sinai in the Qur'an, however, "the right side of the Mount" (*tūr al-ayman*, 19: 52; 20: 82; 28: 29, 46) where Moses was called by God at the burning bush according to the Jewish-Christian legend. About twenty years before Muhammad's birth, emperor Justinian I (ruled 527—565 C. E.) erected a fortification for the monks of Mount Sinai, whose monastery, according to tradition, included the burning bush and was visited by pilgrims since the fourth century³⁷. Muhammad knew this place as "the frequently visited house" with its "fortified roof" to which the Qur'an refers (52: 4—5)³⁸. These textual linkages appear to relate the light verse with Mount Sinai and the monastery of the burning bush.

Politically interested exegetes of the Qur'an used the light verse to interpret the calif as God's shadow on earth. In the earliest centuries of Islam, however, Muslim mystics spotted the figure of a Logos in the symbolism of the light verse and interpreted "the likeness of His light" (24: 35) as an implicit reference to the pre-existent Adam or the primordial Muhammad³⁹. In this context, the explanation of the light verse was coupled with the interpretation of Muhammad's vision of God (53: 5—18; 81: 19—25) and the story of Muhammad's ascent to heaven. Possibly more important than the significance of the light verse for the religious imagination of Islam in post-Qur'anic times, are its implications for the historical origins of the Qur'an. For example, there is the scholarly puzzle whether the Arabic primary sources support the conjecture that Muhammad had visited Mount Sinai prior to his "call" to proclaim the Qur'an when he was about forty years old.

P. 213—59; *Buhl F.* Über Vergleichen und Gleichnisse im Qur'an // *Acta Orientalia*, 2 (1924). P. 1—11; *Speyer H.* Die biblischen Erzählungen. P. 62—66.

³⁶ *Horovitz J.* Koranische Untersuchungen. Berlin; Leipzig, 1926. P. 123—125; *Honigmann E.* al-Tur // *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Vol. 10. Leiden, 2000. P. 663—5; *Bailey C.* Sina // *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Vol. 9. Leiden, 1997. P. 625.

³⁷ *Moritz B.* Der Sinaikult in heidnischer Zeit // *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*. Berlin, 1916. P. 1—64; *Shahid I.* Sinai // *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*. Vol. 5. Leiden, 2006. P. 28—9.

³⁸ Islamic exegesis does not recognize the linkage of the "frequently visited house" with its "fortified roof" (52:4—5) to Mount Sinai, and explains it, instead, with reference to the Ka'ba, the central sanctuary of Mecca.

³⁹ *Van Ess J.* *Theologie und Gesellschaft*. Bd. 4. P. 383—7; *Böwering G.* *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*. Berlin, 1980. P. 149—53.

The Qur'anic verses 28: 44—46 are intriguing in this regard because they insist that Muhammad was not at Mount Sinai when Moses was there, “you were not upon the western side (of the Mount) when We decreed to Moses the commandments, nor were you among those witnessing” (28: 44), and “you were not upon the side of the Mount (*al-tūr*) when We called” (28: 46), i. e., when Moses was called to intimate dialogue with God at the burning bush. But was Muhammad ever at Mount Sinai during his life time? At first hand, these verses simply state that Muhammad was not an eyewitness to Moses's encounter with God. As such the Qur'anic wording does not give evidence whether this tantalizing reference conceals a visit of Muhammad to Mount Sinai. Scholarly research has established the complexities of the Qur'anic verses on this matter without reaching a consensus on the question⁴⁰.

There is some evidence, however, that Muhammad led caravans to Syria about fifteen years before his call. These caravans were an annual occurrence for the Meccans, who organized a summer caravan to Yemen, where it was cooler, and a winter caravan to Syria, where it was warmer, probably mainly for commercial purposes but also for recreation⁴¹. It is probable that these caravan routes were part of the “spice route” and could have included excursions to Mount Sinai on the way to the Palestinian region of Gaza or the Syrian town of Bosra⁴². According to the Islamic traditional biography of Muhammad, Hashim, Muhammad's great-grandfather, was the first to organize the annual caravan journeys of the Meccans and was buried at Gaza⁴³. Muhammad himself accompanied his uncle Abu Talib on a journey to Bosra in Syria⁴⁴ and, before and after his marriage to Khadija, is said to have supervised her commercial interests in the annual Meccan caravan to Syria⁴⁵.

The encounter of the three monotheistic religions

It is well known that, according to the Islamic primary sources, the history of Islam begins with the Hijra, the emigration of Muhammad and his small group of followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 C. E., the first year of the Muslim lunar calendar widely used until today. The traditional Islamic biography of Muhammad is principally concerned with his prophetic career, from the beginnings of his proclamation of the Qur'an in about 610 C. E. to his death in 632 C. E. It records little reliable information about Muhammad's life from his birth in about 570 C. E.

⁴⁰ For the complexities of the relevant Qur'anic references see: *Horowitz J.* Koranische Untersuchungen. P. 125; *Speyer H.* Die biblischen Erzählungen. P. 255; *Paret R.* Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz. P. 379—80.

⁴¹ *Rubin U.* The ilaf of Quraysh: a study of sura cvi // *Arabica*, 31 (1984). P. 165—88.

⁴² *Crone P.* Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam. Princeton, 1987. P. 205—9.

⁴³ *Guillaume A.* The Life of Muhammad: A translation of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*. Oxford, 1955. P. 58.

⁴⁴ *Guillaume A.* The Life of Muhammad. P. 79.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* P. 82.

to the beginning of his prophetic career. This is so because the Islamic biography of the Prophet had interest in legends and anecdotes about his earlier life only inasmuch as they foreshadowed his prophetic career. It abstained from presenting a record of the crucial early years of Muhammad's religious formation in which he developed his expertise in producing rhymed prose (*saj'*) and absorbed the knowledge about the religious legacy of Arabia. For this reason there is a certain vacuum concerning the historical context of the religious background that informed the Qur'anic message as it was proclaimed by Muhammad. Many circumstances of the Qur'anic verses remain obscure and open to conjecture. Nevertheless, the dependence of the Qur'an on Biblical themes and religious beliefs commonly shared by the Arab tribal structure in pre-Islamic times is obvious to anyone reading the Qur'an attentively.

This dependence, however, is not recognized by Islam, which sees the Qur'anic message as originating in God alone, rather than as the product of prophetic experiences and religious teachings based on actual historical circumstances at the eve of Muhammad's appearance as God's Messenger (*rasūl Allāh*) in the Arabian peninsula. In this perspective, Islam has defined itself from the beginnings of the Qur'an with inner certitude vis-a-vis its monotheistic siblings, Judaism and Christianity, by seeing itself as the final revelation of God superceding its forerunners and by understanding itself as the natural religion willed by God since the origins of humanity. Christianity, the middle sibling, has included Jewish Scripture as its Old Testament and has perceived in Judaism, its elder sibling, a prologue to the message of its New Testament, integrating many Jewish ideas and images about God in its own foundations of faith. Unfortunately, however, Christianity has found it a much harder task to define itself with regard to its younger sibling, Islam. Is it possible for Christianity to discover in the Qur'anic notion of God stepping stones that could guide the search for a common God? If one enters on this search, one may encounter sufficient solid ground to build a common system of thought that encompasses Judaism, Christianity and Islam and overcomes the theological polemics of the past.