بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
The Problem of Divine Unity and Human Pluralism
إشكالية التوحيد الإلهى والتعددية البشرية
A paper presented by Rev. Joseph Cumming[1]
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In recent years a growing chorus of voices around the world is criticizing the idea of monotheism as being a root cause – if not the chief cause – of conflict, imperialism and intolerance in the world today. This critique is important because it not only addresses wrong *actions* of Muslims, Christians and Jews (and certainly we have been guilty of these), but it attacks the very idea of monotheism itself, arguing that the very idea of monotheism itself is incompatible with human pluralism because it inevitably promotes a hegemonic worldview and therefore imperialism, conflict and violence.

This argument, expressed in a variety of ways, goes something like this: Monotheism is the belief that one God created one human race from one ancestor, and monotheism declares war on all other gods and excludes all human identities which do not conform to correct belief. Just as there is no room for pluralism or diversity in God, so there is no room for diversity in human identity. Furthermore monotheism forms the ideological underpinning for a centralized, unitary state, and thus it contributes to the formation of empires and their violent efforts to subjugate the whole human race.

The Muslim, Christian or Jewish listener who hears these arguments will immediately think of verses in the Qur'ān or the Bible which support tolerance, pluralism, peace and love for the other. However, such proof-texts are irrelevant to responding to the critique, since the critique is addressed to the doctrine of monotheism itself. That is, these critics may readily acknowledge that beautiful verses in the Qur'ān and the Bible do support pluralism and tolerance, but they argue that those verses are contradicted by the deep structure of monotheistic belief which drives its adherents to do the opposite of what these verses advocate.

This critique of monotheism is a worldwide phenomenon, and not just a Western problem. In this paper I will cite authors from the West, from the Middle East and from South Asia to illustrate this critique, but many other examples could be cited of a growing anti-monotheist intellectual trend around the world. It is imperative that believers in the Abrahamic faiths pause for a moment from our arguments among ourselves to consider an appropriate response to this attack on the most fundamental belief which we all share. Jesus (p.) said, "If a house is divided against itself, that house will not stand," and it would be well for the House of Abraham to unite in responding to this critique of monotheism.

Regina Schwartz: *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*
Regina Schwartz's 1997 book *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*[2] is an influential example of this critique in the Western scholarly context. Schwartz begins by linking monotheism with the political identity formation of the Hebrew people. "Monotheism, then, is not simply a myth of one-ness, but a doctrine of possession, of a people by God, of a land by a people, of women by men,"[3] argues Schwartz, insisting that an identity formation which distinguishes self from other inherently leads to possession and subjection of the less powerful by the more powerful, and ultimately to violence.

Furthermore, Schwartz argues that monotheism is by nature exclusivist. "Whether as singleness (this God against the others) or totality (this is all the God there is), monotheism abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass."[4] She goes on to argue that monotheism is inherently exclusivist not only toward other gods, but also toward other peoples and other lands. She asserts, "Monotheism has been caught up with

[2] Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
[3] Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, p. 71.
[4] Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, p. 63.

particularism, with that production of collective identity as peoples set apart."[5] Schwartz concludes that the wars of God's chosen people against those around them are violent assertions of self-identity by the believers against the unbelievers.

In an interview about her book Schwartz summarized her concern as follows: "One aspect of monotheism has been complicit with violence: the demand of allegiance to one principle, or one god, is accompanied by aggression to those who have other allegiances. Unfortunately, the injunction 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me' turns into intolerance for other people who may have other gods, or principles, or beliefs…While organizing a people under one principle seems like an effective way to create a positive identity, it can also create destructiveness and division, insiders and outsiders…The issue I am focusing attention on is the price of imagining collective identity under one principle and banishing the rest."[6]

If Schwartz is correct, then monotheism is by its very nature inclined toward violence. Monotheism has no room for diverse human identities, no room for the "other" who is different from "us" but must force all people – by violence if necessary – to conform to a single organizing principle for society and a single human identity.

Aziz Al-Azmeh: *Monotheistic Kingship*

Syrian scholar Aziz Al-Azmeh (عزيز العظمة) represents a Middle Eastern voice in this discussion. Al-Azmeh makes a different argument from Schwartz which is not so much of a frontal assault on monotheism (his scholarship is descriptive, not normative), but it nonetheless leads to similar conclusions.

In his book *Muslim Kingship*,[7] and in his article "Monotheistic Monarchy,"[8] and in a lecture titled "Islam in Late Antiquity,"[9] Al-Azmeh sees monotheism as one form of sacral kingship, in which the religious beliefs of a society provide the ideological underpinning which sanctions and sacralizes the state. Monotheism, which centralizes all religious beliefs in a single divine being, and reduces all other divine beings to the status of names of the One God or idols to be combated, provides sanction for a centralized state in which all power is concentrated in the hands of a single ruler. The universalist quality of monotheism – the belief that the One God is the only God of the whole human race – means that that centralized state tends to be imperialist.

Thus Al-Azmeh argues: "The irreducibility of the sacred is tidied up in monotheism by the ingathering of divine functions and energies, hitherto dispersed, and their allocation to one deity, thereby rendering the irreducibility of divinity indivisible, like the indivisibility of royal power. This matter is betokened by the transfer of attributes, epithets and names of energy, majesty, protection, destruction, and kingship, from one theological universe to another."[10]

In the medieval Islamic caliphal state Al-Azmeh sees "kingship, by which is meant absolutism on analogy with the exclusive singularity of God in the cosmos and the indivisibility of His sovereignty… In this, the monarch-Caliph imposes culture, that is to say, order, upon humans, and maintains this cultural order…by the constant use of force and vigilance… Caliphs were, first of all, instances of mimesis of the divine in their constitutive and preservative capacities and figures thereof, in the indivisible nature of their sovereignty."[11]

For Al-Azmeh monotheism underlies not just the centralization of the state but also the imperialism of that state: "What was Islam, after all, but a recovery for monotheism of the last remaining reservation of ancient paganism [in the Middle East], this being the Arabian peninsula, and most particularly its western part, from whence the ruling dynasties of the Islamic empire originated? Close scrutiny of the emergence of Islam will show that it recapitulated in the new linguistic medium of Arabic, now become a language of a universal high culture, the

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[5] Schwartz, *Curse of Cain*, p. 31.
[6] Regina M. Schwartz, "An interview with Regina M. Schwartz," 1997. <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/741990.html>, accessed on May 4, 2007.
[7] Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997).
[8] Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Monotheistic Monarchy," Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies, No.10, Spring 2005.
[9] Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Islam in Late Antiquity," lecture at Yale University, March 1, 2000.
[10] Al-Azmeh, "Monotheistic Monarchy," p. 136.
[11] Al-Azmeh, "Monotheistic Monarchy," pp. 143-144.

historical processes I have been describing whereby henotheism, subordinationist theology, and polytheism gave way to a universalist monotheism correlative with empire."[12]

If Al-Azmeh is correct, then monotheism is by its very nature inclined toward the creation of centralized, imperialistic states. Intolerance of pluralism in the divine realm entails intolerance of pluralism in human society. The universal claims of monotheism in the divine realm entail universalist imperialism in the human realm. Though Al-Azmeh's scholarship is descriptive, not normative, so he does not directly attack monotheism, this is nonetheless the logical implication of his argument.

S. Gurumurthy: *Semitic Monotheism: The Root of Intolerance in India*
The Indian scholar S. Gurumurthy is an influential thinker in the Hindu nationalist BJP political party, and his 1993 article "Semitic Monotheism: The Root of Intolerance in India" is prominently featured on the website of the BJP in the section on "BJP Philosophy."[13] Despite what some readers might guess from his title, Gurumurthy's sharpest critique is directed not against Judaism but against Islam.

Gurumurthy argues that there exist two basic belief systems – 1) polytheism, as in Hinduism, which he believes promotes a decentralized "liberal pluralism," and 2) monotheism, which he believes promotes a state-centered society utterly intolerant of all pluralism. Thus he writes: "In India the society and individual form the center of gravity, the fulcrum around which the polity revolves, and the state is merely a residuary concept. On the other hand, in the Semitic [monotheistic] tradition the state wields all the power and forms the soul and the backbone of the polity...This unity of the Semitic state and the Semitic society proved to be its strength as a conquering power. But this was also its weakness."[14]

He continues: "As the monotheistic civilization rapidly evolved [into] a theocratic state, it ruled out all plurality in thought…Whenever any semblance of plurality surfaced anywhere, it was subjected to immediate annihilation. The entire social, political and religious power of the Semitic [monotheistic] society gravitated toward and became slowly and finally manifest in the unitary state. Thus single-dimensional universality, far more than plurality, is the key feature of Western society."[15]

If Gurumurthy is correct, then monotheism is by its very nature a radically anti-pluralist belief system inclined toward the creation of a society centered on an intolerant, imperialist state. Monotheism, then, forms the chief root of intolerance in the world today.

An Abrahamic Response
These critiques of monotheism require a thoughtful, reasoned response from the adherents of the Abrahamic faiths. The thinkers cited above represent just a small sampling of a growing worldwide trend of hostility toward the doctrine of monotheism. The events of September 11, 2001, and the violence of the American reaction from Afghanistan to Iraq to Guantanamo Bay, seem to these critics to prove that they are correct. Books which make these sorts of arguments now quickly become bestsellers.[16]

As noted above, the Muslim, Christian or Jewish reader of these arguments will immediately think of verses in the Qur'ān or the Bible which support tolerance, pluralism, peace and love for the other. But such verses, while important, do not address the argument which these critics make. These critics would simply respond that those verses are contradicted by the deep structure of monotheistic belief which drives its adherents to do the opposite of what those verses advocate.

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[12] Al-Azmeh, "Monotheistic Monarchy," p. 143.
[13] S. Gurumurthy, "Semitic Monotheism: The Root of Intolerance in India" (Madras: Center for Policy Studies). <http://www.bjp.org/history/htvgm-10.html>, accessed on May 4, 2007.
[14] Gurumurthy, "Semitic Monotheism."
[15] Gurumurthy, "Semitic Monotheism."
[16] E.g. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), which was on the New York Times bestseller list for 33 weeks. Though Harris's arguments focus more on what he sees as the irrationality of religious belief in general (not just of monotheism), his harshest criticism is aimed specifically at Islam and at the Christian Right.

The Muslim, Christian or Jewish reader will also want to point out that, though we have indeed been guilty of intolerance and violence, surely atheists and Hindus cannot claim to be innocent in such matters! More Christian martyrs have been killed by atheists than by all other non-Christian religionists combined, and more than 2.3 million have been killed by Hindus and Buddhists.[17] Muslims can cite similar statistics of martyrdoms at the hands of atheists and Hindus, notably including Hindus connected with the BJP. And of course the majority of Jewish martyrdoms were at the hands of the Nazi state under a secular nationalist ideology,[18] in addition to numerous martyrdoms at the hands of the atheist Soviet state.

But such arguments are no more convincing than those of the child in the schoolyard who claims, "Yes, I hit the other child, but he hit me worse!" Such arguments do not address the concern that perhaps inherent in monotheistic belief itself is an intolerance of pluralism, and therefore an inclination toward imperialism and violence.

Is this true? Do the adherents of the Abrahamic faiths believe that, as one God created one human race from one ancestor, so the unity of the human race reflects the divine unity; and if so, is this a bad thing, or is it *good* to believe in the essential unity of humankind? Does our belief in the oneness of God, which tolerates no pluralism in God, drive us to be intolerant of human pluralism, even if our Scriptures call us to tolerance, pluralism and love for the other? To answer these questions requires examining the doctrine of monotheism itself. Verses about tolerance, and statistics of misbehavior by atheists and polytheists, will not be adequate to address this concern.

It is common in conferences on interfaith dialogue to avoid discussing questions of doctrine (*'aqīda*), i.e. what we believe about God, God's essence (*dhāt*), God's attributes (*ṣifāt*) and God's actions (*af'āl*) in the world, but instead to focus on practical matters like peacemaking, human rights, fighting poverty, stewardship of the environment, etc. I believe that this is because we fear that if we enter into discussions of doctrine, it will lead only to conflict, whereas we can much more quickly find consensus on practical matters of action in the world. We have bitter experience from the past of polemical attacks among our faiths on matters of doctrine. On matters of doctrine, then, it often seems most polite simply to "agree to disagree."

Nonetheless the critiques of monotheism cited above focus on the doctrine of monotheism itself, not just on the actions of monotheists, and thus they require a response which analyzes whether the critics of monotheism have correctly understood the doctrine and its implications. Furthermore, all of us believe in our hearts that our beliefs about God – if rightly understood – will contribute to peace, not conflict. That is why we have come to this conference. If we say that we must not discuss our beliefs about God because such discussion will inevitably cause conflict among us, then we are, in effect, admitting that the critics of monotheism are correct!

Though it is certainly true that discussions of doctrine among Muslims, Christians and Jews in the past have often led to hostile polemical attacks, surely that need not necessarily be the case. Surely there exist constructive ways to discuss doctrine which contribute to mutual understanding, in which we seek common ground without denying the distinctive beliefs of our respective faiths, and in which we join together to address anti-monotheistic critiques like those I have cited above. The extensive Islamic writings on *adab al-jadal* ("etiquette for disputation") show that there is a right way and a wrong way to conduct such discussions.

I believe that it is precisely in what we believe about God that we may find our most powerful resources for promoting human pluralism and peaceful coexistence. The theme (*sha'ār*) of this conference, "Spiritual Values and World Peace" encourages me to look within our shared Abrahamic beliefs about God for resources to address issues of peaceful coexistence.

A Friendly Exchange with Two Muslim Colleagues

I was first prompted to think about this question of divine unity and human pluralism by an informal discussion I had with a Turkish Sunnī Muslim scholar at a conference on interfaith dialogue in June 2001. He presented a paper in which he proposed the concept of *Tawḥīd* (divine unity) as the fundamental criterion of truth

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[17] David Barrett, Todd Johnson, Justin Long, *The World Christian Encyclopaedia*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), accessed at <http://www.gcts.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/gd/gd16.pdf> on May 4, 2007.

[18] Though, admittedly, many Christians were implicated in supporting that state and perpetrating its crimes.

for all humankind and as a support for the pluralistic cultural richness of humanity in the face of hegemonic ideologies. He also made a connection between the unity of God and the unity of the human race which God created, with reference to the Qur'ān, *Sūrat al-Anbiyā'* (20), verse 92.

I agreed with him, but I could not help thinking of the objections which Schwartz and Gurumurthy might raise, arguing that it is *tawḥīd* itself which is the most hegemonic of all ideologies, and that if the unity of the human race reflects the unity of God, then this leaves no room for human pluralism and diversity. I happened to be sitting next to him on the platform when he presented this paper, and afterward I passed him this handwritten note: "I agree with what you say, but I would like to ask whether we might take these ideas a step further. The essential unity of the human race is rooted in the unity of God, since one God created us all from one common ancestor. Classical Sunnī doctrine also teaches that a plurality of divine *ṣifāt*, or attributes (Power, Knowledge, Life, etc.), subsist eternally in the single divine essence. Could we not see these plural divine attributes as a key to understanding the plural diversity of human cultural attributes within our single, common humanity?"

He wrote me a note in reply: "Yes, but there is a major difference between divine attributes and human attributes. The divine attributes are not in conflict with one another, but rather are in perfect harmony and balance. But the attributes of human cultures and nations do often conflict with one another. This is precisely what causes many of the world's problems." Of course he might have added other differences, such as the difference between an accident (*'araḍ*) in created beings and an eternal attribute (*ṣifa azaliyya*) in God, but the point which he did make was of course correct.

I replied: "I agree with you completely. But might we suggest that the harmony of God's plural attributes, subsisting eternally in the one divine essence, encourages us to *hope* that one day in the *future* (perhaps through dialogue of the kind we are engaged in at this conference) the diverse attributes of human cultures (created by the one God) may be reconciled to one another in our common humanity?"

He replied: "Yes, I agree, but I doubt whether that hope will be fully realized before the Day of Resurrection." I could only agree with him on this.

Several months later I was meeting privately with a prominent Lebanese Shī'ī cleric, and he expressed to me the fear that if interfaith dialogue enters into questions of doctrine, this may lead to conflict. I shared with him the above story, acknowledging of course that the Shī'ī doctrine of *ṣifāt* differs in some important ways from the Sunnī doctrine. He agreed, and he was excited about the way in which this exploration of doctrine could actually contribute to harmonious, pluralistic coexistence among peoples, not conflict, because a deeper understanding of this doctrine can create a vision of humanity which is diverse in its cultural attributes but one in its essential nature. He suggested that exploring more deeply the implications of the doctrine of God in this way could help undergird a social vision which he called *al-tathāquf* (which I loosely translate into English as "mutual enculturation") and which he felt must form the basis of all interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

In the remainder of this paper, therefore, I propose to summarize the Islamic doctrine of *ṣifāt al-dhāt*, to which the above discussion referred, then briefly to consider parallel Jewish and Christian beliefs, and then to consider the implications which these doctrines have for responding to the critiques which Schwartz, Al-Azmeh, Gurumurthy and others have directed against monotheism. It will be seen that all three faiths have resources in their beliefs about God for addressing the concerns of these critics. Beliefs about God's *ṣifāt* are often studied today merely as a historical curiosity, and as a point of orthodox doctrine to which the believer assents, but they are rarely seen as having relevance to modern issues. I hope to show, however, that they do have profound importance to this very modern discussion.

Ash'arite and Māturīdī Doctrines of *Ṣifāt al-Dhāt*
In this matter of God's *ṣifāt al-dhāt* (attributes of essence), the majority of Sunnī Muslims hold to the doctrine set forth by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324 A.H. / 935 C.E.). The Māturīdī doctrine on this point is very similar to that of the Ash'arites. I will examine these first and then briefly consider Mu'tazilī, Shī'ī and Ḥanbalī doctrines on this point.

Like most Muslim thinkers, Al-Ashʿarī distinguishes between attributes of essence (ṣifāt al-dhāt), by which God has been characterized from all eternity, without reference to the created universe, and attributes of act (ṣifāt al-fiʿl) which describe God's actions toward created things. Thus, for example, Knowledge is an attribute of essence because God was characterized by Self-Knowledge from eternity, apart from any knowledge of the created world. God's attribute of Forgiveness, by contrast, is an attribute of act because to speak of God as Forgiving (ghafūr) is to speak of a sinful creature who needs to be forgiven.

In his books *al-Ibāna ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyāna*[19] and *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ fī al-Radd ʿalā Ahl al-Zaygh wa-l-Bidaʿ*[20] al-Ashʿarī lists seven attributes of essence – God's Knowledge (*ʿilm*), Power (*qudra*), Life (*ḥayāt*), Word (*kalām*), Will (*irāda*), Sight (*baṣr*) and Hearing (*samʿ*). This is not necessarily a closed list, but some of al-Ashʿarī's successors did hold that only these seven may be listed. These attributes are eternal and uncreated in God. They are not merely ways of speaking about God: they have real meaning: al-Ashʿarī calls them *maʿānī*. Al-Ashʿarī's doctrine is often summarized as follows: "The attributes of God's essence: they are not his essence, nor are they other than he; rather they are eternal, uncreated meanings subsisting in his essence."[21]

The Māturīdī view is very similar. It agrees that the attributes which belong to God's essence (life, power, knowledge, speech, hearing, sight and will) are real things and are eternal and uncreated, but Māturīdism is less dogmatic on the relationship of these attributes to the divine essence.[22] Louis Gardet suggests that "The Māturīdites on the whole preferred not to distinguish God's attributes from Himself, but to say: 'God is knowing and has a knowledge which is attributed to Him in the sense of eternity.'"[23]

Muʿtazilī and Shīʿī Doctrines of *Ṣifāt*

In contrast to the Ashʿarites, the Muʿtazila took the position that to speak of God's Knowledge, Power, Life, etc. as eternal uncreated realities in God is to divide the divine unity. The Muʿtazila therefore argued either that God's Knowledge, Power and Life are identical with God's essence (following Abū al-Hudhayl al-ʿAllāf) or else (following Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm al-Naẓẓām) that God is Knowing, Powerful and Living only through God's own self, and that Knowledge, Power and Life are merely ways of speaking about God and denying ignorance, powerlessness and death in God.

In this matter the Shīʿī position generally tends to be close to that of the Muʿtazila. "They hold the names and attributes of God to have no independent or hypostatic existence apart from the Being and Essence of God. Any suggestion of these names and attributes being conceived of as separate is thought to entail polytheism."[24]

The great Shīʿī theologian Jamāl al-Dīn Ḥasan ibn Yūsuf ibn ʿAlī ibn Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī (d. 726/1325), commonly known as al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī, wrote as follows: "But [God's] reality is his existence alone, not an existence which is shared between him and something other than himself. And his power and will and knowledge are nothing other than expressions of that existence in relation to the things over which he exercises power and the things which he knows and the things which he wills."[25]

Thus the Shīʿa and the Muʿtazila disagree with the Ashʿarites in that they do not believe that God's Knowledge, Power, Will, etc. have a real existence distinct from God's essence. But they do agree that the One God

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[19] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, *al-Ibāna ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyāna* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1998).

[20] Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Ashʿarī, *The Theology of Al-Ashʿarī*, Richard McCarthy ed. (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953). Though some modern Salafī commentators emphasize a difference between these two books (*al-Ibāna* and *al-Lumaʿ*), I believe that both books teach the same doctrine on the matter of God's attributes of essence, and differ only in the argumentation by which that doctrine is supported.

[21] Arabic original:

صفات ذات الله: لا هي ذاته، ولا هي غيره، بل هي معاني ازلية غير مخلوقة قائمة بذاته.

[22] "Fiqh Akbar II," article 2, quoted in A.J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1932), p. 188.

[23] Louis Gardet, "Allāh," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960- .), vol. I, p. 406.

[24] Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiʿism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 176.

[25] Jamāl al-Dīn Ḥasan ibn Yūsuf ibn ʿAlī ibn Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī, *Kashf al-Fawāʾid fī Sharḥ Qawāʿid al-ʿAqāʾid* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣafwa, 1993), p. 196. Arabic original:

بل حقيقته هو الوجود وحده، لا الوجود المشترك بينه وبين غيره. وقدرته وإرادته وعلمه ليس غير اعتبار ذلك الوجود بالنسبة إلى مقدوراته ومعلوماته ومراداته.

can be described by these several attributes, and that God acts in creation according to the diversity of God's attributes.

The Ḥanbalī Doctrine of *Ṣifāt*

The Ḥanbalīs, like the Ashʿarites, reject the Muʿtazilī position. Like the Ashʿarites they robustly affirm the reality of the divine attributes as uncreated and eternal, subsisting in God's essence. Al-Ashʿarī himself, in *al-Ibāna ʿan Uṣūl al-Diyāna*,[26] affirmed his personal loyalty to the doctrine of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855).[27] Ḥanbalīs of later centuries have differed, however, with the Ashʿarites of later centuries, arguing that some of the Ashʿarites' doctrinal conclusions are speculative sophistries and not clearly proven from the Qurʾān and Sunna.

Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya summarizes his position on God's attributes as follows: "Perfection is in the attributes which subsist in the One whom they characterize, and not in the things which are inconsistent with him. And the One thus characterized is Speaking and Knowing and Powerful only insofar as Word and Knowledge and Power subsist in him. And if that is the case, then the One who is eternally characterized by attributes of perfection is more perfect than one in whom they have come into being after he was not characterized by them."[28]

In conclusion, these different schools of Islamic thought have sharp differences among them as to whether God's attributes subsist in God's essence or are the same as God's essence, and they disagree as to the number of these attributes, and as to the attributes' createdness or uncreatedness, but all agree that the One God, who is One in being and essence, is characterized (*mawṣūf*) by a diversity of attributes in relation to the human race. Thus, if polytheist or atheist critics see Islamic monotheism as an exclusivist belief in a unidimensional singularity which cannot tolerate any pluralism or diversity in God's attributes or in God's dealings with the human race, then they have misunderstood the Islamic theological tradition. If God is one in essence while characterized by a diversity of attributes, the human beings also may be one in essence while characterized by a diversity of attributes. Though God cannot be compared (*lā yushabbah*) to human beings – there is nothing like unto Him (*laysa ka-mithlihī shayʾ*) – nonetheless human beings can imitate the qualities of the Creator (*yatakhalaqū bi-akhlāq al-Khāliq*).

Jewish Doctrines of Divine Attributes

Major medieval Jewish thinkers such as Saʿadia Gaon al-Fayyūmī, Bahya ibn Paquda, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Yahuda Halevi, Joseph ibn Tzaddik, Abraham ibn Daud, and Moses Maimonides all dealt extensively with the question of divine attributes and their relationship to the divine essence.[29] Most interacted extensively with Islamic reflection on the attributes, and most came to a conclusion similar to that of the Muʿtazila.

Saʿadia Gaon (d. 942 C.E.) took a position similar to that of the Muʿtazilite Abū al-Hudhayl (see above). In his book *Emunōt ve-Deʿōt* (Arabic title: *Kitāb al-Amānāt wa-l-Iʿtiqādāt*), chapter II, Saʿadia divides the divine attributes in Scripture into attributes of essence and attributes of act. He lists three attributes of God's essence – Wisdom/Knowledge, Power and Life – and he argues that these are not parts of God's essence nor additions to God's essence, but rather they are God's essence itself.[30]

The view which Solomon ibn Gabirol (d. ca. 1058 C.E.) took of God's Will or "Creative Word" makes him sound at times like an Ashʿarite.[31] But David Kaufman argues[32] that Ibn Gabirol in no sense understood God's Will as having a real, independent existence which might divide God's unity.

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[26] Al-Ashʿarī, *al-Ibāna*, p. 14.

[27] I do not see any conflict between this and his position in *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ*.

[28] Shaykh al-Islām Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1997), 12/52, 64. Arabic original:

والكمال إنما بالصفات القائمة بالموصوف لا بالأمور المباينة له. ولا يكون الموصوف متكلما عالما قادرا إلا بما يقوم به الكلام والعلم والقدرة وإذا كان ذلك فمن لم يزل موصوفا بصفات الكمال أكمل ممن حدثت له بعد أن لم يكن متصفا بها.

[29] David Kaufman, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1967 – original edition 1877).

[30] Kaufman, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre*, p. 34. Kaufman's original German: "[Der] Kern der Saadjanischen Lehre: Es giebt für uns nur Ein Wesen Gottes, Weisheit, Macht und Leben sind nicht Theile, sind nicht Hinzufügungen desselben, sonder nur das Wesen selbst...Diese Lehre Abu-l Huḍails ist in den erleuchteteren Kreisen der Muʿtazila zu durchschlagender Geltung gekommen" [19th-century German spelling *sic*].

[31] Kaufman, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre*, pp. 95ff.

[32] Kaufman, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre*, pp. 110-111.

In places Moses Maimonides (*Mūsā ibn Maymūn*) (d. 1204 C.E.) could sound as though he took a similar view to Saʿadia. He writes: "God's will and his decree or his wisdom are not external to his essence – that is, they are not other than his essence."[33] But in practice, among major Jewish thinkers, Maimonides was perhaps the most reluctant to acknowledge attributes of God's essence.

Maimonides emphasized God's unknowability to finite human minds and understood God's essence primarily in terms of a "negative theology," based on negative attributes – i.e. describing what God is *not*. Thus God is One in the sense that God is not multiple. God is Living in the sense that God is not dead. But even Maimonides freely acknowledged a diversity in God's attributes of act – those attributes which describe God as God acts toward the created world: "A thing is described by its actions… This kind of attributes is separate from the essences of the thing described, and, therefore, appropriate to be employed in describing the Creator…The many attributes of different significations applied in Scripture to God, originate in the multitude of His actions."[34]

Jewish reflection on God's attributes of act – that is, attributes which describe God's action in the created world – has long been enriched by the rabbinic tradition of the Thirteen *Middōt* or attributes of God's mercy listed in Exodus 34:6ff.: "The LORD, the LORD, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and unto the fourth generation."[35] These are not attributes of God's essence, as traditionally understood, but rather attributes of act which describe God's "ways" (Hebrew: *derakhīm*) of interacting with humankind. The term "ways" is a reference to the prayer of Moses (p.) in Exodus 33:13 that God would "Show me your ways" – a prayer which was answered in Exodus 34:6ff. with the revelation of God's attributes of mercy. The rabbis of the Talmud spoke often of God's attributes of mercy and justice.

In conclusion, the Jewish tradition, like the Islamic tradition, sees a diversity of attributes in the One God, while emphasizing that attributes of essence (to the extent we speak of them) are not separate from the divine essence, so as to divide the divine unity. The Jewish tradition also emphasizes a wide diversity of attributes of act, such as the thirteen divine attributes of mercy, which are a diversity of "ways" in which the Merciful and Just God deals with the human race. Thus, if polytheist or atheist critics see Jewish monotheism as an exclusivist belief which cannot tolerate any pluralism or diversity in God's attributes or in God's dealings with the human race, then they have misunderstood the Jewish theological tradition.

Christian Doctrine

For Christians the key text from the Bible on these questions is John 1:1-4: "In the beginning was the *Logos* [Word/Reason], and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. It was in the beginning with God; all things were made through it, and without it was nothing was made that was made. In it was life, and the life was the light of humankind."

This text puts Christians somewhere between the Muʿtazila and the Ashʿarites. With the Ashʿarites they hold that God's Word (I will translate *Logos* as "Word," but it can also be translated as "Reason," or perhaps even as "Wisdom") is uncreated, and indeed is the means by which God created the universe (*Kun fa-yakūnu*). In agreement with the Muʿtazila they hold that God's Word *is* God. But contrary to the Muʿtazila, they also hold that God's Word is *with* God, i.e. that a relationship exists between God and God's Word. Christians agree with the Ashʿarite view that God's Word is "not his essence, nor is it other than he" (see above). Furthermore this text from the Gospel affirms the eternal existence of Life in God, without specifying the relationship of God's Life to God's essence or to God's Word.

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[33] Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*), I, ch. 69, quoted in Kaufman, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre*, p. 325, n. 188. Original Arabic [Arabic spelling *sic*]:

<div dir="rtl">ليس ارادته ومشيته او حكمته اشيا خارجة عن ذاته اعني انها غير ذاته.</div>

[34] Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, I, ch. 52.
[35] Jewish Publication Society, tr. *The Tanach* (1917), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/jps/exo034.htm> accessed May 4, 2007.

These ideas, together with other passages in the Bible, form the basis for the Christian understanding of the Trinity. I hasten to add here that I am not in any way implying that this Christian belief is identical to Muslim and Jewish beliefs about the divine attributes. Significant differences here cannot be ignored. For example, Muslims are not happy with Christian use of the terms "Father" and "Son," and other differences could be cited. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to address such concerns.

Nonetheless the centrality of this belief in Christian theology means that Christians have given much thought to the relationship among God and God's Word or Reason and God's Life (in the Eastern Christian tradition) and to the relationship among God and God's Word or Intellect and God's Will or Love (in the Western Christian tradition).

An example of the Eastern Christian tradition can be found in the famous Hāshimī-Kindī dialogue (originally held at the court of the caliph al-Ma'mūn in the early 3rd/9th century, but the text was substantially redacted later), in which we see an exchange between a Muslim and a Christian who (according to the text) are personally good friends. The Christian explains the Trinity as follows:

"We know that the ṣifāt in God (blessed and exalted is his name) are of two different kinds: a natural, essential (dhātiyya) ṣifa, by which he is eternally characterized, and a ṣifa which he has acquired, and this is the ṣifa of his act (ṣifat fiʿlihī). As for the ṣifāt which he has acquired by virtue of his act, they are for example: Merciful, Forgiving, Compassionate. As for the eternal ṣifāt, which are natural and essential (dhātiyya), and by which he is eternally characterized (majestic and mighty is he), they are Life and Knowledge. For indeed God is eternally Living and Knowing. So Life and Knowledge are both eternal; there is no way around this. The correct conclusion from the foregoing is that God is One, having Word and Spirit, in three hypostases (aqānīm) subsisting in their essence."[36]

An example of the Western Christian tradition can be found in Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274 C.E.), who writes: "God's word is co-eternal with God Himself.[37] But in God understanding is not something other than His being, and consequently neither is the Word which is conceived in His intellect some accident or something foreign to His nature.[38] That divine Word is not any accident, nor any part of God, who is simple, nor is it something foreign to the divine nature; rather it is something complete subsisting in the divine nature.[39] Whatever is said about God absolutely is not something other than God's essence. For God is not Great or Powerful or Good accidentally, but by His essence.[40] The essence of the Word and Love in God is not other than the essence of God."[41]

Thus the Christian tradition, while differing from the Islamic and Jewish traditions in important ways, agrees with them in affirming unity of the divine essence and acknowledging a diversity of attributes subsisting eternally in God's one essence. If humankind in some way reflects the Creator, then Christians should see the human race as being one in essence while diverse in attributes and cultures. If polytheist or atheist critics see Christian monotheism as an exclusivist, undifferentiated belief which cannot tolerate any pluralism or diversity, then they have misunderstood the nature of Christian monotheism.

Conclusion

As noted above, Muslims, Christians and Jews who particpate in conferences on interfaith dialogue are often afraid to discuss matters of doctrine because we fear that such discussion will only cause conflict. I hope that the foregoing has demonstrated that a constructive engagement with our theological traditions – done in the right

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[36] *Risālat ʿAbdallāh ibn Ismāʿīl al-Hāshimī ilā ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn Isḥāq al-Kindī…* (London: Gilbert R. Rivington, 1880), p. 35. Arabic original:

نعلم ان الصفات في الله تبارك اسمه وتعالى صفتان مختلفتان صفة طبيعية ذاتية لم يزل متصفًا بها وصفة اكتسابًا له اكتسابًا وهي صفة فعله فاما الصفات التي اكتسبها اكتسابًا من اجل فعله فمثل رحيم وغفور ورؤوف واما الصفات المنزلة (الازلية) التي هي الطبيعية الذاتية التي لم يزل جل وعز متصفًا بها فهي الحياة والعلم فان الله لم يزل حيًا عالمًا فالحياة والعلم اذن ازليان لا محالة. فقد صحتُ نتيجة هذه المقدمات ان الله واحد ذو كلمة وروح في ثلاثة اقانيم قائمة بذاتها.

[37] Thomas Aquinas, "De Rationibus Fidei ad Cantorem Antiochenum," in Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1969), chapter 3, lines 105-106. Here and below the translation from Thomas's Latin is my own.

[38] Aquinas, "De Rationibus Fidei," ch. 3, lines 55ff.

[39] Aquinas, "De Rationibus Fidei," ch. 3, lines 62ff.

[40] Aquinas, "De Rationibus Fidei," ch. 4, lines 74ff.

[41] Aquinas, "De Rationibus Fidei," ch. 4, lines 109-111.

way, without polemics, and without denying the differing beliefs of each faith tradition – can actually bring to light important resources which promote pluralism, tolerance and peaceful coexistence, while addressing modern attacks on our common faith in the God of Abraham.

The monotheistic faith of Muslims, Christians and Jews – when rightly understood – is not an exclusivist faith, intolerant of pluralism and inclined toward a hegemony and violence. On the contrary, when rightly understood, faith in the God of Abraham envisions a human race which is diverse and pluralistic, while still being one in its essential nature. If Muslims, Christians and Jews have failed to live in accordance with that vision (as surely we have done), it is because we have failed to understand our own faith rightly, not because of a flaw in the monotheistic faith of Abraham itself.

Furthermore, belief in the common human nature of all people is, I believe, a *good* thing for world peace. To understand this, it will help to place this common humanity into the creation narrative, which asserts human dignity and uniqueness as the culmination of monogenesis by the agency of God. Muslim scholar Mona Siddiqui synthesizes the Muslim and Judeo-Christian conceptions of this, saying: "God distinguishes man from other beings by breathing into him of His own spirit. Exactly what is meant by *khalifa* in this context is open to interpretation in similar ways to *imago Dei*, except that *khalifa* does imply some kind of successor or deputy who will settle on earth. Early Muslim commentary also suggested that Adam may be God's representative in 'exercising judgement with justice' (Q38:26).The Qur'an advises Adam and the sons of Adam that the status of *khilafat* means that they are being entrusted to look after the earth – the earth is in man's care (*amana*) and man can make use of the earth's riches...The Qur'an continues to explain how Adam's superior knowledge of all things distinguishes him from other creatures. It is a combination of these themes which reflect the honour which has been bestowed on man: We have bestowed dignity on the sons of Adam and blessed them with favours above a great part of our creation (Q17:70)."[42]

Thus, in valuing the dignity of all of humanity, monotheism proves in fact to be not exclusive, but universalist in the best sense of the term. God is accessible to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, language, etc.

Atheism and polytheism, by contrast, would seem to have no metaphysical basis for finding a common humanity in all people, and it is difficult to see, then, how they may construct a peaceful world for all people. As Christian theologian Miroslav Volf points out in response to Regina Schwartz, "Should not a person who sees the oneness of God as a source of antithetically constructed identities and the consequent exclusion of the other deal with the fact that God's oneness correlates with the stress on the common humanity of all people? Schwartz never does. Inversely, should not a person who argues that the belief in many gods will eliminate the polarity between 'us' and 'them' explain why this belief will not simply multiply that same polarity at a different level? With many gods, why would there be peace instead of struggle of all against all, unconstrained by anything but the law of the jungle in which the strong swallow the weak?...The oneness of God is not inimical to the peaceful coexistence of people but is rather an important precondition for it."[43]

Elsewhere Volf adds: "In a polytheistic context violence may reassert itself with even more force, because it will necessarily be justified by locally legitimized or arbitrary preferences, against which, in the absence of a divinity which overarches the parties, there now can be no higher court of appeal."[44]

A deep and nuanced understanding of God's oneness requires us to include and accept others because we share a common God-given human nature in which a diversity of cultural attributes can subsist in harmony and peace. By engaging our theological beliefs – including our differences – we can find resources to build a better world, rather than fearing and avoiding conflict.

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[42] Mona Siddiqui, "Divine Love and Divine Law: Competing Claims on Human Dignity," lecture given at Yale Divinity School, March 10, 2007.

[43] Miroslav Volf, "Jehovah on Trial," *Christianity Today*, April 27, 1998 pp. 32-35. Though I have not quoted Volf in the section of this paper on Christian doctrine, I am indebted to Volf for pointing out the importance of the Trinity to any thoughtful Christian response to Schwartz's critique.

[44] Miroslav Volf, "Christianity and Violence," <http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/x_volf_violence.pdf> accessed May 4, 2007.