

## The Equality of Religions: A Preliminary Response

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### *Abstract*

Probably, the most serious threat to the belief of modern Muslims is the false dogma of the transcendental unity of all religions and religious pluralism which claim that transcendently all religions become one and the same. According to this dogma, all religions are equal but use the various approaches to arrive at Truth. Furthermore, none of the religions has the right to condemn or degrade any other religion. Thus transcendentalism teaches that every religion is equally right. It considers the variety of world's religions as alternative ways or means along which men and women can find salvation, spiritual liberation, fulfilment and happiness provided that they practice their own respective religions wholeheartedly and sincerely. This belief was unfortunately accepted by a number of Muslim scholars who were inappropriately convinced that this is the true tolerant position of Islam towards the people of the book and other religious faiths. This article is an attempt to highlight Islamic response to this issue.

**Key Words:** Exclusive, inclusive, *rubūbiyyah*, credal matters, universalism.

### *Abstrak*

Terdapat kemungkinan bahawa antara ancaman utama terhadap kepercayaan orang-orang Islam moden ialah dogma palsu tentang persamaan cirri suci kesemua kepercayaan dan juga fahaman pluralisma agama yang mendakwa bahawa dari aspek kesuciannya semua agama adalah satu dan sama. Mereka mendakwa semua agama adalah sebenarnya sama sahaja dan bedanya adalah hanya pada cara masing-masing mencapai kebenaran. Tambahan mereka lagi, tidak ada suatu agamapun yang penanutnya berhak mengutuk atau merendahkan martabat sesuatu agama lain melainkan agama anutan mereka sendiri. Kerana itu, fahaman tentang kesucian sesuatu agama (transendentalisme) mengajarkan bahawa setiap agama itu adalah benar. Pendukung fahaman ini berpendapat bahawa kepelbagaian agama adalah hanya cara-cara alternatif yang membolehkan manusia mendapatkan penyelesaian misteri kehidupan, kebebasan rohani, kepuasan dan kebahagiaan dengan syarat semua penganut-penganut agama mengamalkan tuntutan agama mereka dengan penuh ikhlas dan sepenuh hati. Pendapat ini turut mendapat sokongan dari beberapa cendekiawan Islam yang begitu yakin bahawa ini adalah satu pendirian toleransi sebenar Islam terhadap ahli-ahli Kitab dan penganut-penganut agama lain. Kertas ini ialah satu percubaan untuk mengupas tentang jawapan Islam terhadap perkara ini.

**Kata Kunci:** Eksklusif, Inklusif, Rububiyah, perkara aqidah, universalisme

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### ***Introduction***

Some Orientlists and supporters of the concept of transcendent unity of religions have deliberately limited the term *islām* to mean only submission in its general sense and ignored all the other meanings, such as it is the name of the religion revealed to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as well as other significations. Since followers of all religions submit themselves to God or to some other deities in some way or the other, according to them, all religions are transcendentally united. This approach logically involves *shirk*, a dangerous attitude of mind which the Qur'ān vehemently rejects. Moreover, the same approach leads to the misconception that Islam understood as submission, is the umbrella for all other religions, and as such it awakens another state of mind that represents the Medieval idea of a privileged group.

### ***Definition of Religion Islam as Submission and the Name of a Particular Religion***

There are some misinterpretations in certain Islamic literature which give new meanings to certain terms, while ignore clear-cut verses of the Qur'ān and *aḥādīth* and confound the writings of ancient and modern writers.<sup>1</sup> In short they, “Displace words from their right places and meanings” as the Qur'ān (*al-Nisā'* (4): 46) describes the ancient Jewish scholars. For example, Cantwell Smith states that the word *islām* has three meanings: submission; the empirical reality of the world of *islam* as it exists sociologically; and the ideal Muslim community in a historical sense.<sup>2</sup> He strongly rejects the meaning of the word *islām* as the name of the religion revealed to Prophet Muhammad. We shall attempt to prove that Smith argues unconvincingly to show that the use of the term *islām* as the name of a particular religion is a recent development. He claims that Muslims, like Christians and the followers of other religions, have gradually changed the meanings of religious terms as they became more conscious of themselves as a separate religious group and became more devoted to in-group feeling than to the original faith. Moreover, he argues that it is only recently (19th-20th centuries) that the term *islām* has established itself as the name of a religion.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Some of them may be genuinely confused about the true meanings of the term, limiting it to the vague act of submission. By so doing they bring *Islām* under their broad umbrella of the unity of religions, thus advocating the equality of religions. See D. Z. H. Baneth, “What Did Muhammad Mean When He Called His Religion “Islam?””, *Israel Oriental Studies*, 1 (1971), 189-190. See also, Jane I. Smith, *An Historical And Semantic Study Of The Term Islam As Seen In A Sequence Of Quran Commentaries* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1975), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>Wilfred Smith, *Understanding Islam* (The Netherlands: Mouto Publishers, 1981), 174.

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

On the contrary the religion of Islam, from the very start was already mature, not needing the process of growing up to maturity. As a revealed religion, Islam is conscious of itself from the very beginning; it originated from Divine Revelation, not from the circumstances of history.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that in the case of other religions their fundamental teachings or doctrines have suffered from the process of evolution. They evolved their system of beliefs or forms of submission through the historical development of their cultural traditions. In fact, the rise of various denominations in the case of Christianity is an evidence for the developmental changes in its religious fundamentals.<sup>5</sup>

In refusing to accept the meaning of the word *islām* as the name of the religion revealed to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and practically limiting it to a vague concept of submission, Cantwell Smith and scholars like Frithjof Schoun<sup>6</sup> and Jane Smith wish to bring *Islām* under their broad umbrella of the unity of religions.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, as we have already mentioned, they go against the clear meanings of the Qur'ānic verses and *aḥādīth* and confuse obvious reality with an intellectual and pedantic smoke-screen.

As a clear example, Cantwell Smith says that “Muslims and outsiders may disagree as to what Islam really is.... Yet they may come together in discussing how specific persons at certain times and places have understood it.”<sup>8</sup> By such statement, Smith creates doubts about the clear meanings of the term and creates semantic confusion. In this legend we refer again to him, as he proposes to perform an intensive research to ‘unearth’ the evolution of the meaning of the word *islām*. He states:

The fundamentally rewarding task would be to make a study of the history of the word ‘*islām*’ to discover the evolution of its usage and the meaning over the centuries and the variety of connotations that it has evinced in the course of its historical development. We have been recently reminded that ‘the history of Muslim religion has yet to be written.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 4.

<sup>5</sup>See Gerhart B. Ladner “Reform: Innovation and Tradition in Medieval Christendom” in *Theology and Law in Islam: Second Giorgio Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference*, ed. G. E. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1971), 53.

<sup>6</sup>See, Frithjof Schoun, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (England: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), Introduction by Hutson Smith, xxii-xxiv.

<sup>7</sup>See Smith, *An Historical And Semantic Study Of The Term Islam*.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Understanding Islam*, 49.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

However, it must be obvious that such an invented confusion cannot cloud the striking clarity of the Qur'ānic verses denounce the *shirk* of Christianity, Judaism and other pagan religions; nor can this confusion cloud the Qur'ānic verses unequivocally say that “those who seek a religion other than Islam will not be accepted by Allah” (*Āl 'Imrān*, 3: 85); or that: “the true *dīn* accepted by Allah is Islam” (*Āl 'Imrān*, 3: 19). To get around these problems, scholars who uphold the belief in a transcendent unity of religions avoid speaking about certain verses and misinterpret the others.

Of interest in this respect is the way Smith changes the meaning of the Qur'ānic verse of *Āl 'Imrān*, 3: 19, so that it will enhance his position. He boldly writes:

I myself do not necessarily find a systematic institutionalized sense even in the classic verses where it is customary nowadays to see the religion as being named. *Inna al-dīna 'inda Allāh al-Islām* (3: 19) may be read as stating the essential religious truth that ‘the proper way to worship God is to obey Him.’ I will not however, repeat here my reason of supporting this and similar interpretations. One may assert, however, that there is no instance in the Qur'ān where ... the dynamic sense of the term as personal faith is patently absurd or grammatically intolerable.<sup>10</sup>

What Smith really says is that since *Islām* is nothing more than submission and since all religions profess some form of submission, then no religion can be properly called a religion without being a form of *Islām* or submission. We maintain that the word *al-dīn* in this context means ‘the religion,’ and not ‘the proper way to worship;’ and the word *al-Islām* here does not mean simply ‘to obey,’ which is merely one aspect of submission. The expression ‘the proper way to worship God’ necessarily implies improper ways of worshipping Him; and such improper ways of worshipping Him amount to disobeying Him. This means that there are other ways of worshipping God that are not proper, and that there is only one way that is proper, which is then given the name of *al-Islām* because the form of submission (*al-Islām*) is true to the command of God and approved by Him. There are two forms of submission: the willing and true kind (*taw'an*), which follows the way of the Prophets; and the unwilling and false kind (*karhan*), which follows the inventions of the various religious traditions not emulating the way of the Prophets.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Smith, *Understanding Islam*, 47.

<sup>11</sup>See his *Islam and Secularism*, 61.

It is the concept of the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*)<sup>12</sup> that will then determine the truthfulness and falsity of a religion, and at this point, diversity occurs between *dīn* of Islam and other religions, for the oneness of God in Islam is perceived differently from the oneness of God as perceived by other religions. The Qur'ān explicitly points to this fact:

Say: 'O unbelievers! I do not worship what you worship, nor do you worship what I worship. I shall never worship what you worship, neither will you worship what I worship. You have your own 'religion' and I have mine.' (*al-Kāfirūn*, 109 :1-6).

God has borne witness that there is no God but He, likewise the angels and the people of knowledge; He maintains justice; there is no God but He, the Al-Mighty, the Wise. Truly the *dīn* with God is Islam; and those to whom the Book has been given did not differ until after knowledge came to them, out of envy among themselves; and whoever rejects the signs of God (will find) that God is quick to reckon. And if they argue with you, say: 'I have surrendered myself to God, likewise whoever follows me.' And say to those to whom the Book has been given and to those who have no book, 'Have you surrendered?' If they do, they are in right guidance, but if they turn away you are responsible only for conveying the message to them, for God is the observer of (His) servants. (*Al 'Imrān*, 3: 18-20).

The Qur'ān makes clear that not any kind of submission can be accepted as true submission. The true submission or acceptable religion to God is the religion which emanates from the true conception of the oneness of God. True submission to God, therefore, includes the manner and the form of submission to God, as exemplified and perfected by the last Prophet (ﷺ). Thus, the affirmation or verification of *tawḥīd* lies in the manner or in the form of submission that is prescribed by the teachings of Islam.

The term *islām* has always been used to stand for the name of a particular religion revealed to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). As a general Arabic term, '*islām*' stands for submission and other related meanings, such as obedience, self-abasement and surrender. The root word for '*islām*,' *s-l-m* has other meanings like peace and its derivatives.<sup>13</sup>

Islam is not a historical religion that undergoes a historical process of evolution in line with changing circumstances. Indeed, as a revealed religion, Islam was already complete from the period of its inception. But this completeness refers to the meaning attributed to the term *islām*, which came to be the name of the religion as well. If, however, later generations of

<sup>12</sup>Abū al-Ḥasan bin Ismā'īl al-'Ash'arī, *al-Ibānah 'an Uṣūl al-Diyānah* (Haydarabad: n. p., 1948), 47; See also, *Kitāb Uṣūl al-Dīn* (Istanbul: Maṭba'at al-Dawlah, 1928), 73.

<sup>13</sup>Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad bin Mukarram bin Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1988), 6 vols.

Muslims deviate from the complete Qur'ānic understanding, this will be similar to what the adherents of other distorted religions did to their religions, and as such the distorted understanding of *Islām* cannot be taken as a development over and above the original complete meaning with which Islam was endowed by the Qur'ān.

Based on the principle of *tawhīd*, *Islām* is both a subjective personal religion of the individuals as well as the objective religion of the Community. It is belief and faith (*īmān*) as well as submission in service. It is a combination of belief and practice.<sup>14</sup> It is a harmonious relationship between both the soul and the body; it is obedience and loyalty both to God and His Prophet (ﷺ), who in fact is the first person who formulated the *kalimah tayyibah* namely *tawhīd*.<sup>15</sup>

The notion of submission (that submission or *Islām* as the name of a religion) is neither merely a general concept, nor it is a religion which lays great emphasis on laws and is restricted to ritual aspects, namely the external aspects of Islam, but it also refers to its internal dimension, which is of equal importance.

### *The Nature of Submission*

Submission is the cornerstone of any religious belief. Without submission, no ideology can really be described as a religion or even quasi-religion. To religiously submit is to surrender oneself to one's object of worship. One does not submit until one believes in the holiness, Divinity or sheer power of what one surrenders himself to. Submission can be the result of fear of real or imagined authority and power, such as the submission of a pagan tribe to the 'god' of thunder or fire, or it may be the result of deep gratitude and love. Submission may be an internal subjective state of deep feelings and emotions or it may take the form of visible rites, rituals and offering which the believers engage in. Finally, submission may take different forms or grades. One may totally surrender oneself to the extent of complete abolition of mind and/or he may simply treat his object with a mild feeling of holiness and respect. Between these two extremes, there exists a gradient or hierarchy of submission. Accordingly, we can speak of different forms of submission: some of them are extreme or irrational, and others are acceptable and rationally defensible.

<sup>14</sup>Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Kalām 'lā Haqīqat al-Islām wa al-Īmān*, ed. Maḥmūd Ḥasan Nājī al-Shaybānī (Riyāḍ: Kulliyat Adāb al-Banāt, 1988), 4.

<sup>15</sup>Ali bin Abī al-'Izz al-Dimishqi, *Sharḥ al-'Aqīdah al-Ṭahāwīyyah* (Beirut: Mu'asasat al-Risālah, 1987), 150.

Submission, as an attitude, an emotion, or a cognitive experience can be compared with fear or anxiety.<sup>16</sup> Submission to God is an innate human ‘instinct’ or *fiṭrah*. We read “So turn your face to the *dīn* in sincerity (*hanīfan*), i.e. the *fiṭrah* of God, upon which He has created man” (*al-Rūm*, 30: 30). It is a Divine gift to save man’s soul.<sup>17</sup> Thus man is created in such a way that he would submit to God, if he follows his *fiṭrah*, otherwise he would find himself submitting to some other ‘gods,’ which may even be his country, his tribe, money or some other worldly ‘deity.’

Likewise, fear is created in man to save his life from real dangers, such as wild animals, fire and similar lethal things. However, man may respond with great anxiety and fear to things that are not really dangerous, such as cockroaches, high places or darkness, thus misappropriating the Divine purpose for which fear was created. This is known as a phobia. It is a sickness of the psyche, if one uses the term ‘psyche’ in its modern semantic sense. In the same way, one can perceive submission to the Almighty God as the only true and acceptable form of submission. However, corrupting the *fiṭrah* by surrendering one’s self to any other deity is a spiritual disease of the heart.<sup>18</sup> This is the severest form of injustice to his self as a spiritual living being honored by God. He would be like a matured adult who panics when he sees a tiny kitten. The best among people are those who do not suffer from any disease of the heart or the psyche. They respond with fear in the most honorable way in which the fear of God becomes their spiritual passage to submission.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Tawḥīd as the Bedrock of Islam***

True submission can only be built on the cornerstone of knowledge about the nature of God and that of man. This veritable submission is grounded on Islamic metaphysics with revelation as its ontological ground. The central pillar on which this ontology rests is a strong faith in the oneness of God or (*tawḥīd*). This then is the acid test or *furqān* by which the truthfulness and falsity of a religion is determined. *Tawḥīd* thus clearly differentiates between submission in the religion of Islam and other religions whose systems of belief developed from misguided cultural traditions and

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<sup>16</sup>Akhbar Husain, *Islamic Psychology* (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2006), 30.

<sup>17</sup>Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulum al-Dīn*, vol. 2

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

pagan convictions and not from the *millah* of Prophet Ibrāhīm as some religions claim.<sup>20</sup>

Islam is the only religion which affirms the oneness of God by full submission to Him in the way perfected by His last Messenger, Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). As the Prophet of Islam clearly shows, the true affirmation, which proves ones' belief in God is to glorify, honor and submit to Him in the manner He approves. It is only this kind of perfected submission, which can rightly be called Islam. This unique aspect is only exclusive to Islam. We read: "Do they seek for other than the religion (*dīn*) of God?, while all creatures in the heavens and on the earth have willingly or unwillingly submitted (*aslama*) to His Will, and to Him shall they all be returned" (*Al-Imrān*, 3: 85); and we read: "Today I have completed for you your religion (*dīn*) and fulfilled for you My blessings, and have chosen for you *Islām* as religion (*dīn*)" (*al-Mā'idah*, 5: 3). Thus, it is clear that God has completed His revealed guidance through Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and Islam is the final religion for all mankind. This is further elucidated by the famous *ḥadīth* narrated by both Bukhārī and Muslim:

My example and that of the earlier Prophets is like a fully built palace which had nothing wrong with it with the exception of a missing brick. People walk around, amaze at its beauty, but blame the missing part. It is me who completed the building, and it is me who sealed Prophethood after the completion of the building.<sup>21</sup>

The Qur'ān makes clear that not any kind of submission can be accepted as true submission. The true submission or acceptable religion to God is the religion which emanates from the true conception of the oneness of God. This concept of oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) will then determine the truthfulness and falsity of a religion, and at this point, diversity occurs between *dīn* of Islam and other religions, for the oneness of God in Islam is perceived differently from the oneness of God as perceived by other religions.

The religion of Islam does not consist of the belief in the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) only, for *Iblīs* also believes in the existence and oneness of God and knows and acknowledges Him as his Lord (*rabb*), yet he is deemed to have disbelieved. Belief in One God is insufficient in true religion, and only

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<sup>20</sup>G. H. Asi, "Muslim Understanding of Other Religions: An Analytical Study of Ibn Hazm's *Kitāb al-Faṣl fī al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal*," Unpublished Ph. D. thesis. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1982), 66.

<sup>21</sup>*Ḥadīth* narrated by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim, Cited from al-Dimashqī, *al-'Aqīdat al-Taḥāwīyyah*, 156.



such belief cannot guarantee security and salvation. *Iblis* (Satan), who believes in the One True God and knows and acknowledges Him as his Creator, Cherisher and Sustainer, i.e. his *rabb*, is nevertheless a disbeliever (*kāfir*). Although *Iblīs* submits to God, yet he submits grudgingly and insolently, and his *kufr* is due to arrogance, disobedience and rebellion.

True submission to God, therefore, includes the manner and the form of submission to God, as exemplified and perfected by the last Prophet (ﷺ). The affirmation and verification of *tawḥīd* lies in the form of submission that is prescribed by the teachings of Islam. Islamic submission as mentioned in the Qur’ān is not momentary or erratic. It is the action that continues throughout the entire ethical life of mankind. It operates within the realm of the heart and it is manifested externally through the action of the body.<sup>22</sup>

Religious experience is held in the Qur’ān as a return to *fiṭrah*, meaning original human nature.<sup>23</sup> We read: “Set your face to the *dīn* in sincerity (*ḥanīfan*) which is Allah’s *fiṭrah*, upon which He created mankind. There is no change in the creation of Allāh. That is the right *dīn* but most people know not” (*al-Rūm*, 30:30). This understanding adheres to the idea that man cannot escape from being in the state of living according to a *dīn*, since all nature submits to God’s will. However, what makes submission in Islam different from submission in other religions is that, submission as prescribed in the Qur’ān should be willingly, knowingly or consciously, and sincerely, i.e. total submission to God’s Will namely *ṭā’ah*, which is ultimately tantamount to the true *tawḥīd* of God. We read:

Verily it is We Who have revealed the Book to thee in truth: so serve Allah, offering Him sincere devotion. (*al-Zumar*, 39: 2).

Say: ‘Verily, I am commanded to serve Allah with sincere devotion. And I am commanded to be the first who submits to Allah in Islam.’ (*al-Zumar*, 39: 11, 12).

The Qur’ān, therefore, not only projects the fundamental teachings of the true religion in a precise manner conveyed by all the Prophets of God, but also mentions them in detail so as to demonstrate how the Messengers of God disseminated the true and proper submission (*Islām*) up to the last Prophet (ﷺ). We read:

To the ‘Ād people (We sent) *Hūd*, one of their own brethren. He said: ‘O my people,’ worship Allah. You have no other god but Him. You are only forgers. (*Hūd*, 11: 50).

<sup>22</sup>Asi, “Muslim Understanding of Other Religions, 52.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.,51; See also Ismail al-Faruqi, *Islam and Other Faiths* (n. c.: The Islamic Foundation: The International Inst. Of Islamic Thought, 1998), 137-138.

To the Thamud people (We sent) Salih., one of their own brethren. He said: ‘O my people, worship Allah. You have no other god but Him. It is He who hath produced you from earth and settled you therein, then ask forgiveness of Him, and turn to Him (in repentance), for my Lord is (always) near, ready to answer. (*Hūd*, 11: 61).

Thus the form of ‘submission’ that follows from this system of belief is called willing and knowing or conscious submission.<sup>24</sup> That is why Islamic ‘*aqīdah*’ stresses the importance of knowledge as opposed to the Sophists.<sup>25</sup> It is on the basis of his interpretation of the two kinds of submission, (i.e. *taw‘an* and *karhan*), that al-Attas reaches the conclusion that all other religions developed their belief system based on their own cultural traditions, which are not necessarily derived from the *millah* of the Prophet Ibrāhīm. Thus the kind of submission practiced by these religions is regarded as “unwilling submission.”<sup>26</sup>

### ***The Nature of God in Islam***

Although the recognition of the existence of some form of a Supreme Being is common to almost all religions, it does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that these religions are equally valid and/or bear the same degree of truth. Though acknowledging God as the Creator of the world is professed by many religions, this general belief is distorted by their conceptual system and worldview from which the nature of God is developed and understood. For some, God is a far away “pie in the sky,” that has no direct relationship with its creatures. For others, God is symbolized by an animal, an idol or a human being that they worship.

According to al-Bīrūnī (d. 443 / 1051), a renowned scholar of world religions, there are two categories of religions, i.e. 1. *al-ḥaqq* (the Truth) or Islam, and 2. *al-kufr* (rejection of or deviation from the Truth), or *al-inḥriāf* (alteration of the Truth). This is particularly true because of a *ḥadīth* that clarifies that the disbelievers (*kuffār*), i.e. those who are not Muslims are in one category namely *millah wāḥidah*.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup>See *Āl ‘Imrān*, 3: 85.

<sup>25</sup>Najmuddīn al-Nasafī, *Al-‘Aqāid al-Nasafīyyah*, with Taftazani’s commentary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 60-61; See also Abū al-Mun‘in Maymūn bin Muḥammad al-Nasafī, *Tabūrat al- Adillah fī Uṣūl al-Dīn*, ed. Claude Salamé (Damascus: n. p., 1990), 1:12-5.

<sup>26</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. *Islam and Secularism: The concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 61- 62.

<sup>27</sup>See Muḥammad bin ‘Isā bin Sīrah al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Madīnah: Maktabat al-Salafīyyah, 1964), 4: 135; see also K. O. Kamaruzaman, *Early Muslim Scholarship in Religionswissenschaft*, 80-81.

In fact, the diversity between Islam and other religions, therefore, is not merely a matter of form, for the differences in the form imply the differences in the conception of God, His essence, attributes, names and acts. These differences are expressed in the concept of *tawhīd*.<sup>28</sup>

The nature of God as understood in Islam is quite different from the nature of God as understood in all other religions and global worldviews. Neither the Greeks in the zenith of their philosophical edification, nor their modern cultural inheritors of the contemporary Western philosophical and scientific tradition, nor the Eastern mystical religions have any concepts of God that is the same as to that offered by Islam. It is both misguided and irrational to look for superficial similarities between different concepts of God in Islam and other religions in order to advocate a new ‘transcendental’ belief in the unity of all religions. That is so because each religion has its own conceptual system and worldview from which the nature of God is developed and understood. Hence it is not justifiable for any religious system to claim that it possesses the same concept of God’s nature as that of Islam, whether exoterically or esoterically; whether it stays on earth or it transcends itself to any spiritual level.

Furthermore, the concept of the nature of God in Islam is the completion of what has been revealed to the Prophet according to the Qur’ān. God is one in His essence; He is one in His attributes and He is one in His actions.<sup>29</sup>

Relying in this manner on the Qur’ānic idea of God as also represented in the *aḥādīth*, we believe that God is always in action, not static like the Aristotelian First Mover. He is engaged in a continuous and perpetual creative activity without changing Himself. This creation is not emanation as held by the Neoplatonists, but rather bringing forth into external existence the ideal realities that pre-exist in His Knowledge. His creation is thus “a single act repeated in an eternal process,” though what are created in this process are not themselves eternal, they are rather originated in new yet similar guises in discrete durations of existence.<sup>30</sup>

The reality of existence is the manifestation of the aspect of God. This universe comes into existence by the creative acts of God through His

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<sup>28</sup>God is one, unique, eternal, existent Being; He is not a substance, not a body, not an accident, not limited to any direction, and not in any space. See Abū al-Ḥasan bin Ismā‘īl al-‘Ash‘arī, *al-Ibānah ‘an Uṣūl al-Diyānah*, 73.

<sup>29</sup>*Kitāb Uṣūl al-Dīn*, 73; *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 12-13.

<sup>30</sup>The *Metaphysics of Sabzawārī*, 479-485, as cited in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 13.

perpetual creation. The whole cosmos is in the state of perishing and is a new creation all the time. Though things seem to be the same at all times, in reality they are not; they are rather in a state of constant renewal in accordance with the creative act of God.<sup>31</sup>

The apparent similarities that may be found between their various concepts of God with the nature of God understood in Islam cannot be interpreted as evidence of identity of the One Universal God in their various concepts of the nature of God; for each and every one of them serves and belongs to a different conceptual system. God described at this level as the Creator, Sustainer, Cherisher of the world is known as '*rabb*' only, and not as '*ilah*'.<sup>32</sup>

According to the Islamic point of view, the Supreme Being mentioned or indicated in other religions refers only to the nature of God at the level of '*rububiyyah*,' not '*uluhiyyah*.' At the level of '*uluhiyyah*,' God must be regarded as an object of worship (*ma'būd*) who does not take any partner, rival or equal. It is absolutely wrong to associate or to attribute any likeness to Him.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Islām, Īmān and Ihsān***

Islam has three dimensions: *islām, īmān and ihsān*.<sup>34</sup> These three dimensions of religion coalesce into a single reality known as Islam.<sup>35</sup> We do not admit in the case of *Islām* of a horizontal dividing line separating the exoteric from the esoteric understanding of the Truth in religion. We maintain a vertical line of continuity from the exoteric to the esoteric; a vertical line of continuity which we identify as the Straight Path of *islām-īmān-ihsān* without being any inconsistency in the three stages of the spiritual ascent, so that the reality or transcendent truth that is recognized and acknowledged is in our case accessible to many.<sup>36</sup>

The Religion of Islam consists of a dimension which is outward, and another which, upon the basis of this outwardness, leads to the inward. These dimensions of the Islamic revelation are called the *Sharī'ah* (the Sacred Law), the *Tarīqah* (the Path) and the *Ḥaqīqah* (the Truth), or from another point of

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd, *Rasā'il al-Junayd*, E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series, New Series, XX11 (Luzak, London: n. p., 1976), 41.

<sup>32</sup>Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 9.

<sup>33</sup>Al-Dimishqi, *Sharḥ al-'Aqīdah al-Ṭāhāwiyyah*, 83-90.

<sup>34</sup>Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Kalām 'lā Ḥaqīqat al-Islām wa al-Īmān*, 4.

<sup>35</sup>Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: I.B. Publishers, n. d.), Introduction, xxxiv.

<sup>36</sup>Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 11.

view, they correspond to *islām*, *īmān*, and *ihsān*, or "surrender," "faith" and "virtue." The verse below indicates that the turning of face is accomplished through the worship of God and the submission to His Divinity and rule. "I submit my face to God, equals to I submit my self (*nafs*) to God," and there is not in worship any station higher than the submission of the self to God.<sup>37</sup>

Submission is an experientially crucial meaning of *islām*; besides, it is a name for the religion. This experiential meaning includes above all the obedience to Allah, and it is a matter of common sense that this obedience cannot grow in full measure unless man knows certain basic facts of life and reposes firm faith in them. Likewise, faith means firm belief arising out of knowledge and conviction. The one who knows and reposes unshakable belief in the oneness of Allah, His attributes, His laws and guidance, and in the Divine reward and punishment is called *mu'min*. This faith perpetually leads man to a life of obedience and submission to the Will of Allah. The one who lives this life of submission is known as Muslim.

This should clearly bring the fact that without faith (*īmān*) no man can be a true Muslim. It is indispensably essential-in fact, the very starting point-without which no beginning can be made. The relation of *islām* to *īmān* is the same as of a tree to its seed. As a tree cannot sprout forth without its seed, in the same way it is not possible for a man who has no belief to start with, to become a Muslim.<sup>38</sup>

It is important to note that submission in Islam is different from submission in other religions. Islamic submission is not simply a concept but more than that, it involves feeling, belief and action. The concept of submission is perhaps common to all religions, just as belief or faith is the core of all religions, but we maintain that not all religions enact real submission.

### ***Experiential Aspect of Islam and Self Purification***

The meaning of the term 'submission' can ultimately be traced back to the idea of religion rooted in the Covenant (*al-A'raf*, 7:176). We read: "Am I not your Lord?" God asked the congregated souls of all human beings and they all chorused: "Yes indeed, You are our Lord." The term *islām* in reality is the definition of religion: submission to God. The fundamental element in man's act of submission to God is his sense of indebtedness to God for His

<sup>37</sup>Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Maḥāṭib al-Ghayb al-Mushtahar bi al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Istanbul: al-Maḥba'at al-Amīnah, 1891), 11: 56.

<sup>38</sup>Abu A'la Maududi, *Towards Understanding of Islam* (Lahore: Idara Tarjuman-ul-Qur'an, 1990), 52.

gift of existence. A person in the state of being indebted can only pay back his debt by returning his self to the owner because the substance of debt is his very self. To return his self means to be a servant of God by performing *'ibādah*, giving himself up in service to his Lord.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of kingdom reflected in the word *dīn* portrays Islam as the epitome of Divine cosmic order; a Muslim is therefore an epitome of the cosmos, a microcosmic representative of the Macrocosm. In him is manifested the names of the Creator. As God governs the universe, so his soul governs his body. Man himself is the third entity, different from both his soul and body. There is no dualism in his self. Analogous to this fact that man is both soul and body, man's soul has a dual aspect: the higher rational soul, and the lower animal or carnal soul. Without the animal soul, man ceases to exist because it is this soul that fulfills the demands of his body for his survival in this world, but it is in its nature that the animal soul will never be satisfied. So the rational soul must be the king in this kingdom and exert its power over the animal soul. The animal soul must be rendered submissive to the rational soul. This continuous 'battle' between the rational and the animal soul is what life is all about, and he who succeeds in bridling his animal soul is he who has been freed. This is indicated in the Qur'ān:

It (*'ibādah*) protects against indecency (*faḥshā'*), and dishonor (*munkar*) and it makes one mindful of God, which is more important. (*al-'Ankabūt*, 29: 45).

By the soul, and the proportion and order given to it, and its inspiration as to its wrong and its right, truly he succeeds who purifies it. And he fails who corrupts it. (*al-Shams*, 91: 7-10).

Spiritual transformation requires internal virtues that refer to the activities of the heart, in which the ultimate goal of these activities is to attain the knowledge of Allāh (*ma'rifat Allāh*). This requires the self-inducing good intention (*niyyah*), and to be followed by action (*'amal*) with sincerity of purpose (*ikhhlās*) and truthfulness to oneself (*ṣidq*).<sup>40</sup> Thus, the rational soul must watch over the animalistic soul (*murāqabah*) to ensure that the duties assigned to oneself are carried out. It also entails self-examination (*muḥāsabah*), to observe whether he has carried out these duties in the prescribed way. All this involves deep contemplation (*tafakkur*) and brings about the gradual realization in the self of other virtues of a higher spiritual level, such as repentance (*tawbah*), patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), hope

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.,56-57.

<sup>40</sup>Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, *Al-Waṣāyā* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Imiyyah, 1986), 204; See also al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā*, vols. 1-2.

(*rajā'*), fear (*khawf*), Divine oneness (*tawhīd*), trust (*tawakkul*), and finally the highest virtue for the attainment of happiness in this life, love of Allāh (*maḥabbah*).<sup>41</sup>

The fruits of submission are not only to be reaped in the hereafter but in this world as well. This is so because true submission necessitates the realization of spiritual experiences, such as reliance on God (*tawakkul*), *ṣabr* (*patience*), gratitude (*shukr*), *maḥabbah* (love) of God. Consequently, from this experiential basis of submission the believers attain tranquillity of their souls in this life before the hereafter.

### ***Conclusion***

Different religions perceive Truth differently and concepts of that Truth may even be tangential, let alone identical. Islam is both exclusive and inclusive. As far as theological or creedal matters are concerned, Islam is exclusive. The creedal matters pertaining to question of God, His nature or attributes, Muslims should not compromise with conception or perception of other religions, except in a very general *rubūbiyyah* manner. In other word, we cannot dilute the concept of God with that of other religions. The apparent similarities that may be found between their various concepts of God with the nature of God understood in Islam cannot be interpreted as evidence of identity of the One Universal God in their various concepts of the nature of God; for each and every one of them serves and belongs to a different conceptual system. True submission can only be built on the cornerstone of knowledge about the nature of God and that of man. *Tawhīd* clearly differentiates between submission in the religion of Islam and other religions whose systems of belief developed from misguided cultural traditions and pagan convictions and not from the *millah* of Prophet Ibrāhīm as some religions claim. However, Islam acknowledges or tolerates the existence of other religions. Islam appreciates any dialogue and cooperation with other religions pertaining to matters of ethics and society. But on the theological or creedal matters like the nature of God, the nature of man, the soul, etc., Islam exerts its own authentic and firm stand.

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<sup>41</sup>Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā*, vol. 4.