

# Islamic Perspectives on God and (Other) Monotheism(s)

*Edited by*

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## Introduaction

### *Monotheisms*

Despite the famous (and much misunderstood) contention of Friedrich Nietzsche that god is dead, there is little doubt that we live in a world full of God(s); beliefs in a deity or deities that constitute the ground of existence as well as the pleroma of what is and might be persists. Devotion, ritual, and worship oriented to such entities permeate daily lives across cultures, even in supposedly ‘secularised’ spaces.<sup>1</sup> Social scientists remain concerned with the inability of humans to rid themselves of the infantility of clinging to a belief and hope in the existence of a caring supernatural being that will ultimately save us—a concern with the perpetuity of this belief is accentuated because of its implications for how we act; surely, humans will have progressed beyond this need?<sup>2</sup> But as an old piece in *The Atlantic* from 1912 by the American theologian George Hodges (1856–1919) shows, people have been assessing the history and the persistence of religion across modernity and for long before.<sup>3</sup> This prevalence of belief—in the intangible or the unseen (*al-ghayb*) as the Qur’an would put it —means that we live in a somewhat polarised world: on the one hand, the survival of belief has led to a highly creative (analytic and otherwise) philosophy of religion that retains popular interest in questions such as the reality of religious experience of the noumenal, and on the other, a tracing of atheism or the rejection of gods as an ancient, philosophical, and scientifically correct human maturity that lays out the absurdity of beliefs in gods including those of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions.<sup>4</sup> This polarisation lies between the enchanted and the disenchanted (to index Weber); still we ought to recognise that disenchantment in modernity is somewhat exaggerated and notions such as tradition and religions and their others are increasingly defined in terms of what we thought had

1 The famous quotation (with its variants) occurs a few times in the 1882 *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 167, and in the following years, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Thomas Common (New York: The Modern Library, 1917), 83.

2 This is partly predicated upon the faith in modernity and progress which is critiqued: Amy Allen, *The End of Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

3 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1912/03/the-persistence-of-religion/644691/#> accessed 15 September 2024.

4 On the former, one thinks of the many works of Graham Oppy (*Ontological Arguments and Belief in God* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995]; *Arguing about Gods* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006]; as well as the critical debate between Kenneth Pearce and Graham Oppy, *Is there a God? A Debate* [London: Routledge, 2021]) and three more popularly oriented volumes, David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), Joshua Rasmussen, *How Reason can Lead to God: A Philosopher’s Bridge to Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), and Jack Symes (ed), *Philosophers on God: Talking About Existence* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024). On the latter, we also have Graham Oppy’s *The Argument against God* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and two more historical works on the antiquity of atheism and the absurdity of belief in a deity, Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), and Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2021).

passed.<sup>5</sup> Psychological approaches do not necessarily take the metaphysical claims of monotheists seriously.<sup>6</sup> What is also striking is how the impact of ‘new atheism’ has been to revive older culturalist arguments for beliefs that are growing among the avowedly ‘secular’ non-believers.<sup>7</sup> Belief in monotheism seems to be encroaching even there, just as the death of god led to a revived theology in Protestant circles since the 1970s and then through atheology and anatheism in the continental tradition more recently.<sup>8</sup> Or at least it reflects the persistence of the need for cultural identity rooted in the manifestations of the notion of religious belief.

Monotheism itself, a term famously coined in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Cambridge Platonist Henry More (1614–1687), is nowadays associated with the notion of ‘classical theism’ and with a focus on metaphysics.<sup>9</sup> It can be defined as the belief that ‘reality’s ultimate principle is God—an omnipotent, omniscient, goodness that is the creative ground of everything other than itself. Monotheism is the view that there is only one such God.’<sup>10</sup> This contention, historically, has led to two types of critiques. The first came from the direction of the ‘pagans’, thus constructed by the new religious movements of Judaism and Christianity in late antiquity, especially in response to Christian monotheism’s insistence upon the trinity, the incarnation, and the need for a personal god who acts voluntarily. The 2<sup>nd</sup> century Greek philosopher, Celsus (d. c. 177), famously critiqued the unoriginality of monotheistic doctrine—indicating how pagan monotheisms and henotheisms were dominant in late antiquity—and its irrationality and weakness compared to ‘true Greek doctrine.’<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry (d. c. 305) in his attack on Christians maintained the weakness of Christian monotheism (based on what he saw as

5 Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) and *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

6 See, for example, Neil van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe: A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023).

7 Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation that Sparked an Atheist Revolution* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019). On the revival, see Justin Brierley, *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2023).

8 For example, Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952). On continental atheologies and anatheism, see Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), and Slavoj Žižek, *Christian Atheism: How to be a Real Materialist* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024).

9 Best defended in the classic work of Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (revised edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016), and on which there is much recent work. For example, Jonathan Fuqua and Robert C. Koons (eds), *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God* (London: Routledge, 2023).

10 William Wainwright, ‘Monotheism’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/monotheism/>>.

11 John Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1–22; Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 55–115, the text is extant in the Christian Origen’s *Contra Celsum*. On the prevalence of pagan monotheisms and henotheisms in late antiquity, see Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (eds), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

a false homology with monarchy) with respect to Greek tradition, arguing that for a god to be supreme he would need to be supreme over other gods just as a king would be supreme over other humans—a nod towards henotheism.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the best known of these attacks is the 4<sup>th</sup> century Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (d. 363) and his *Against the Galileans* in which he critiques the scripturalist approach and rejection of the rationality of a natural theology by Christians and prefers Plato to the exclusivism of Moses and Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

The second critique came from theists who rejected the exclusivity of monotheism usually from the perspective of dualism—the *thanawīyya* of the Arabic doxographies. This was a particular issue in early Islam as dualists—sometimes anathemised as *zanādiqa* or *malāhida*—were astonished by the insistence upon a good and omnipotent God who was responsible for evil and yet expected humans to be morally repulsed by it.<sup>14</sup> They also fundamentally disagreed on their moral cosmology. Zoroastrian critiques of Islam focused on the irrationality of the story of creation and the first humans, were perplexed by Muslim cosmology, failed to understand how a sole God would solve the problem of evil, and ridiculed the analogy that we have already seen between monarchy and monotheism, for example in the *Škand Gumānīg-Wizār*.<sup>15</sup> How could one account for evil if God is sole creator while also being essentially good? Early Muslim theologians clearly understood both the ontological and moral challenge of dualism and attempted to respond accordingly with their own metaphysical principles and sense of ridicule for the creation myths of dualists.<sup>16</sup> The problem of evil, of course, remains a salient challenge to monotheism.<sup>17</sup>

12 Porphyry, *Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (rpt. Amherst, NJ: Prometheus Books, 1994), 83–90. This text is also a reconstruction from Christian responses; see this study: Robert M. Berchman, *Porphyry Against the Christians* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

13 Julian, *Against the Galileans* (in Volume III), trans. Emily Wilmer Cave Wright (Loeb Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923).

14 For a summary of the challenge of dualism (which does tend to assume a rather austere, even Salafi, notion of monotheism as normative), see Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 453–460.

15 *The Definitive Zoroastrian Critique of Islam*. Chapters 11–12 of the *Škand Gumānīg-Wazīr* by Mardānfarrox son of Ohrmazddād, trans. Christian C. Sahner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2024), 119–147.

16 For example, the Mu‘tazilī theologian ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025), *al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-‘adl*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Khuḍayrī (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Miṣriya al-‘amma Li’l-Kitāb, 1958), V, 22–79.

17 Michael L. Peterson, *Monotheism, Suffering, and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), and for a more classic account, Eleonore Stump, ‘The problem of evil’, *Faith and Philosophy* 2.4 (1985): 392–423. For some recent Islamic responses to the problem of evil in monotheism, see Nasrin Rouzati, ‘Evil and suffering in Islamic thought—towards a mystical theology’, *Religions* 9 (2018) <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel920047>; Safaruk Chowdhury, *Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2021); and Qudratullāh Qurbānī, ‘Mas’alah-yi sharr u ufuq-hā-yi pishravī-yi khudābāvari-yi tawḥīdī’, *Faṣḥnāmah-yi andīshah-yi falsafī* 2, no. 3 (1401Sh/2022): 192–207.

What these critiques do indicate is how the contention was not about (mono)theism as such but how the notion of a principle and the idea of creation itself was understood.<sup>18</sup> Monotheism is a point of convergence as well as divergence within traditions and across them. Not all theisms and indeed monotheisms were equal or understood equally. Aristotle's notion of the principle later known as the unmoved mover (*ho ou kinoúmenon kinē* or *primum movens* in Aquinas' 'first way' of the *quinque viæ*) was influential especially because of its description in book *lambda* of the *Metaphysics* as 'beautiful' (the 'Good' of the Neoplatonists which became *al-khayr al-mahd* in the Arabic reception), indivisible and simplex (hence the 'doctrine of divine simplicity' or God as *baṣiṭ al-ḥaqīqa* whose very essence and reality was to exist—*innīyatuhu mähīyatuhu* in Avicenna's terminology), and perfectly (self-)intellecting (leading to the notion of the identity thesis that was highly influential in later epistemology or what the Islamic traditions called *ittiḥād al-ʿāqil wa-l-maʿqūl*).<sup>19</sup> The Arabic Aristotle, as indicated in the famous doxography of Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), professes belief in the unmoved mover who is also singular, perfectly self-intellecting, immutable, and from him only one thing emanates (the so-called Rule of One).<sup>20</sup> The Platonists disputed the meaning of such a principle; was it a singular, efficient (and final) cause of the cosmos that manipulated the stuff of metaphysics (as held by Simplicius and Ammonius) and did not create *ex nihilo* (hence was neither the formal cause nor the material cause since it was itself immaterial) or could it be assimilated to the god of scriptures? Plato's model of creation in the *Timaeus* was also highly influential in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic conceptions later; the demiurge was just, good, and wise and it was his rational order of the cosmos and its understanding to which philosophers aspired to attain through 'godlikeness'.<sup>21</sup> This latter notion—*ta'alluh* or *al-tashabbuh bi'l-Bārī* in Arabic—was especially current in later philosophical, Sufi and more mystical contemplations of monotheism and the quest for wisdom in Islam.<sup>22</sup> The Arabic Plato posits a god who is necessary in its very essence (using the terminology of Avicenna), whose comprehensive knowledge eternally resides in the Forms of all things

18 Lloyd Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and David Sedley, *Creationism and its Critics in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

19 Enrico Berti, 'Unmoved mover(s) as efficient cause(s) in *Metaphysics* λ 6', in Michael Frede and David Charles (eds), *Aristotle's Metaphysics Lambda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 181–206.

20 Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kaylānī (rpt., Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1984), 2:119–124. On the Avicennian rule of One (*al-wāḥid lā yuṣḍiruhu illā l-wāḥid, ex uno non fit nisi unum*), see Wahid M. Amin, 'From the One, only one proceeds: The post-classical reception of a key principle of Avicenna's metaphysics', *Oriens* 48 (2020): 123–155, and Davlat Dadikhuda, 'Rule of One: Avicenna, Bahmanyār and al-Rāzī on the argument from the Mubāḥathāt', *Nazarīyyat* 6, no. 2 (2020): 69–97.

21 Gretchen J. Reydam-Schils (ed), *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2003), and Francesco Celia and Angela Ulacco (eds), *Il Timeo. Egesi greche, arabe, latine* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2015).

22 One of the best known versions that correctly maps upon the rational order ascribed to the cosmos by the demiurge that one finds in the *Timaeus* is Mullā Ṣadrā Shirāzī (d. 1636), *al-Ḥikmat al-mutaʿāliya fī l-asfār al-ʿāliya al-arbaʿa*, eds. F. Ummīd et al (rpt., Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1981), 1:20.

and who creates through the mediation of the universal intellect and the universal soul from which form and matter ensue.<sup>23</sup> The *Timaeus*' creation myth and metaphysics in rather diluted form was present in the paraphrastic translation of Galen's epitome, in some citations in the *Uthūlūjyā*, and a few rare fragments cited in later texts such as al-Birūnī's study of the philosophies and religions of India (*al-Taḥqīq mā li'l-Hind*).<sup>24</sup>

Monotheism within Islamic contexts was further contested along two axes. On the vertical, one encounters many positions on the relative role of the transcendence of the One and its immanence in the cosmos, most aptly reflected through the many exegeses of Qur'an 42:11: 'there is nothing that is like him and he is all-hearing, all-seeing' (*laysa ka-mithlihi shay' wa-huwa l-samī'u l-baṣīr*). Is God a personal deity to whom one supplicates and prays and expects responses to petitions and intervention in the cosmos (which raises problems associated with foreknowledge and possibility)?<sup>25</sup> Is God analogous to us and how should we understand the anthropomorphisms of the Qur'an and the scriptural traditions?<sup>26</sup> On the horizontal, there was a tendency towards monism—or rather what one might more appropriately call non-duality, the postulation that only God is true being expressed in the term *waḥdat al-wujūd* that was popular in the many manifestations of the school of Ibn 'Arabī. It was precisely that tradition that was less concerned with retaining an ontological difference between God and creation on the basis of the reality of that duality and more concerned with safeguarding the aseity of the divine in one sense and the possibility and desire of God for its theophanies on the other. Both of these axes did, however, tend towards determinism of different types. As ever, the scope and sense of what we mean by *tawḥīd* in Islam, even whether we translate it as the transcendent unity of God or making God one or monotheism—and how that might apply to other traditions—remains a point of contention that was the very dynamic at the heart of Islamic theologies, past and present, as this collection of studies will show.

### *Provenance of the Volume*

This volume consists of a selection of papers delivered at the 'Islamic Perspectives on God and (other) Monotheism(s)' conference which took place at Al-Mahdi Institute, Birmingham, on 20-21 February 2023. This two-day event brought together scholars and

23 al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, 2: 88–89.

24 Rüdiger Arnzen, 'Plato's *Timaeus* in the Arabic tradition', in Celia and Ulacco (eds), *Il Timeo. Eseggi greche, arabe, latine*, 220–257.

25 On the philosophical problem, see Scott Davison, *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), and for the extension of this in a sense to the Islamic context, posed in more moral terms, Amir Saemi, *Morality and Revelation in Islam and Beyond: A New Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024) as well as Özgür Koca, *Islam, Causality, and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

26 This remains a raging debate and there is a rather vast literature on this. One recent intervention that insists that Qur'anic theology is faithful to other earlier Near Eastern theologies (as we saw with the Stavropoulou book cited above) in positing a rather material and corporeal god is Nicolai Sinai, *Key Terms of the Qur'an: A Critical Dictionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

academics specialising in various fields within Islamic Studies, allowing them to present their research on the concept of God and monotheism in Islam and in other religious traditions. The range of topics covered included theological, historical, philosophical, mystical and contemporary perspectives, each engaging with the theme of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and how it has been approached within and beyond Islamic discourse. The diverse backgrounds and scholarly expertise of the contributors enriched the discussions, resulting in a multifaceted examination of one of the core tenets of the Islamic faith.

As such, this volume is the first of three planned edited collections, each corresponding to a series of conferences that explore the central doctrines of Islamic belief; namely, divine unity (*tawḥīd*), prophecy and revelation, and belief in an afterlife. These three elements constitute the foundation of Islamic theology, and this series seeks to explore their historical development, theological implications, and contemporary relevance. By delving into the interpretations and debates surrounding these doctrines, the volumes aim to offer a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Islamic beliefs, both for scholars within the field and for those interested in interreligious dialogue.

*Tawḥīd*, the belief in the oneness of God, is the most fundamental tenet of the Islamic faith.<sup>27</sup> All Muslims, regardless of sectarian affiliation, are required to uphold the doctrine of divine unity, which forms the basis of Islamic theology and underpins the Islamic worldview. However, despite its centrality, interpretations of what *tawḥīd* entails and its implications have been the subject of extensive debate across different schools of thought throughout Islamic history. Far from being a monolithic concept, *tawḥīd* has been understood in various ways, from the early formulation of it as a requirement of belief (*i'tiqād*) in the legal and theological frameworks of the jurists (*fuqahā*) and *mutakallimūn*, to the later metaphysical expositions of the philosophers (*falāsifa*) and the mystical experiences of Sufis. The doctrine of *tawḥīd*, while envisioned as a unifying belief for Muslims, has historically been the focus of intense theological and philosophical discussions. In some instances, it has acted as a rallying point for Muslim unity, emphasising the shared belief in the oneness of God as a common ground between different Islamic traditions and other faiths.<sup>28</sup> At other times, however, it has been a source of division, as scholars and theologians have accused one another of violating the principles of *tawḥīd*.<sup>29</sup> This

27 For a brief overview of the concept of *tawḥīd* in Islam, see Asma Asfaruddin, 'Monotheism in Islam', in *Monotheism and Its Complexities: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 33–44.

28 For a nuanced perspective of the category 'monotheism' as a site for interfaith dialogue, see the collection of essays in Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall (eds.), *Monotheism and Its Complexities: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*.

29 In the modern context, this is most noticeable in contemporary Salafi puritanism. But perhaps the most famous historical example of intolerance and persecution within Muslim communities is the infamous '*miḥna*' initiated by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–883), in which the Mu'tazili doctrine of the Qur'an's createdness was enforced across the Islamic empire on the theological premise that it contradicted the correct understanding of *tawḥīd*. The claim was rejected by many traditionalist scholars including, most famously, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855).

is particularly evident in the polemical engagements between Sunnī and Shīʿī theologians, as well as in the debates between different sects such as the Muʿtazila, Ashʿariyya, Imāmiyya, Ismāʿīliyya and Ḥanābila, to name but a few. These intra-faith debates often centre around the interpretation of God's attributes, His relation to creation, and the nature of divine will and human agency.

Additionally, *tawḥīd* has not only been a point of internal contestation but has also featured prominently in interfaith debates since the inception of Islam as a religious movement in seventh-century Arabia. Given the shared monotheistic heritage of Muslims, Jews and Christians, discussions about divine unity have frequently engaged with the theological claims of other Abrahamic religions.<sup>30</sup> While early Muslims often positioned *tawḥīd* in opposition to what they perceived as the trinitarian doctrine of Christianity and the over-ritualised legalistic emphasis in Judaism—attitudes which, it could be argued, are expressed in the Qurʾān itself—the engagement with these traditions was not always adversarial. In fact, there were moments of intellectual exchange and ecumenical understanding, particularly in the Abbasid period (mid-8<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries) when Islamic scholars engaged with their (Arabic) Jewish and Christian counterparts in the shared pursuit of understanding the nature of God and His creation. However, the polemical tone that sometimes characterised these exchanges underscored the challenges of reconciling differing interpretations of divine unity across the Abrahamic faiths.

This volume aims to showcase both the internal and external debates surrounding *tawḥīd*, emphasising that the doctrine of divine unity has functioned both as a site for interfaith and intra-faith cohesion and as a point of contestation. Within Islam, *tawḥīd* serves as the bedrock of the faith, yet the diversity of approaches to understanding this doctrine reveals the richness of Islamic thought. Scholars of different theological persuasions, as well as philosophers and mystics, have all debated how to properly conceptualise God's unity, the extent to which God's attributes can be understood by human reason, and how divine action operates within the created world. These discussions have often led to accusations of heresy or doctrinal deviation, with certain scholars accusing others of compromising *tawḥīd* by anthropomorphising God or by adhering to philosophical interpretations that appeared to undermine the transcendence of the divine.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> As an example of this early interfaith exchange on the issue of God's unity specifically, see Sara Leila Husseini, *Early Christian-Muslim Debate on the Unity of God: Three Christian Scholars and Their Engagement with Islamic Thought (9th Century C.E.)* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> One brings to mind the famous legal edict of Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) condemning the Neoplatonising philosophers Avicenna and al-Fārābī, which he issued at the end of his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*. On this document, see Frank Griffel, *Apostasy and Tolerance in Islam: Die Entwicklung zu al-Ghazālī's Urteil gegen die Philosophie und die Reaktionen der Philosophen* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). For accusations of unbelief (*kufīr*) against philosophers and others more generally, see Camilla Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Dichronic Perspective on Takfir* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

The volume also addresses how *tawhīd* has been a focal point of dialogue between Muslims and adherents of other monotheistic faiths. Throughout history, Islamic thinkers have engaged with Jewish and Christian ideas of God, often critically assessing their doctrines in light of Islamic theology. However, such interactions have not always been hostile; there have been periods of intellectual exchange in which Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars shared insights and collaborated in their efforts to understand the divine. This volume seeks to reflect this dual nature of *tawhīd*—as both a point of inter-faith commonality and a source of theological divergence. One of the primary aims of this volume is to highlight the diverse perspectives on divine unity in Islam. By incorporating contributions from scholars specialising in different fields, the volume presents an overview of how *tawhīd* has been understood and interpreted across time and space. Theological, philosophical, and contemporary approaches to *tawhīd* are all represented, offering readers a broad and nuanced understanding of the doctrine.

Theologically, discussions of *tawhīd* have centered on the nature of God's attributes and the relationship between God and creation. Classical Islamic theology (*kalām*) grappled with the question of how God's oneness could be reconciled with the multiplicity of divine attributes, and how human beings could come to know God through these attributes. The Mu'tazila, for example, emphasised the absolute unity of God and denied the real existence of (separate) divine attributes, while the Ash'arīs argued for a more nuanced understanding of attributes as inherent in the divine essence. These theological debates continue to inform Islamic thought today. Philosophically, Islamic thinkers such as Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) and Mulla Ṣadrā developed sophisticated metaphysical systems that explored the nature of divine unity. Avicenna's conception of God as the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*) became a cornerstone of Islamic philosophy, while Mulla Ṣadrā's theory of the unity and modulated nature of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd al-tashkīkiyya*) integrated philosophical and mystical insights into a holistic vision of the divine. This volume explores how these philosophical approaches to *tawhīd* have influenced Islamic thought and continue to shape contemporary discussions of metaphysics and theology. Mystically, the doctrine of *tawhīd* has been central to the teachings of Sufi masters, who have sought to experience divine unity directly through spiritual practice. Sufism's emphasis on the immanence of God and the possibility of union with the divine has sometimes led to tensions with more orthodox theological perspectives, which stress the transcendence of God. This mystical understanding of *tawhīd*, particularly as articulated by figures such as Ibn al-'Arabī, adds another layer of complexity to the debates over the nature of divine unity. Finally, the volume addresses contemporary perspectives on *tawhīd*, examining how modern Muslim thinkers have engaged with the doctrine of God's uniqueness in light of new intellectual and social challenges. In a globalised world marked by pluralism and secularism, the concept of divine unity remains a vital part of Islamic identity, yet its meaning and relevance are continually being reinterpreted. The contributors to this

volume engage with these modern debates, offering insights into how *tawḥīd* continues to evolve in contemporary Islamic thought.

By presenting a range of scholarly perspectives, the papers collected in this volume seeks to demonstrate both the diversity of interpretations of divine unity within Islam and the ongoing significance of this doctrine in interfaith and intra-faith discussions. Whether approached through theology, philosophy, mysticism, or contemporary thought, *tawḥīd* remains the defining tenet of Islamic belief, a doctrine that has both united and divided Muslim scholars over the centuries, and one that continues to inspire debate and reflection today.

### *Contents*

The chapters that follow can be broken down into what we are calling five different perspectives: 1) Contesting Monotheisms; 2) Sunnī Theology; 3) Shīʿī Theology; 4) Philosophy; and 5) Contemporary Issues. The first section, subtitled 'A Judeo-Christian-Muslim Encounter', begins with the earliest period in Islam as the tradition emerged on the scene of world history in conversation with other religious traditions and ends in the nineteenth century with Muslim-Christian polemics in the Qajar period. Where there is conversation, it should perhaps go without saying, there is inevitably debate and contestation, and the present section seeks to showcase this. In chapter one, 'Religious Others and the Shaping of Orthodoxy in the Early Islamic Period', Aaron W. Hughes examines how the early framers of Islam struggled with religious others, both external and internal, and how this struggle was ultimately responsible for the creation of what would emerge as (Sunnī) orthodoxy.

In a similar vein, in the second chapter, 'The Influence of Christian Theology on the Development of *Tawḥīd* in Early Kalām', Romain Louge explores how Christian theological speculation on the Trinity and, particularly, on the Christ-figure in the first theological Christian writings in Arabic played an important role on the development of *kalām*, especially the concept of *tawḥīd*, and that this led slowly to negative theology and to the concept of the falsification of the Scriptures of *ahl al-kitāb*.

The third chapter, by contrast, stays with the theme of debate and contestation, but now takes us into the more modern period. In 'On Religion: Ṣadrian Metaphysics as "Islam's Argument" (*Ḥujjat al-Islām*) against Henry Martyn', Sajjad Rizvi focusses on Muslim-Christian polemics on the nature of beliefs, doctrines, and practices in the Qajar period, and especially the reactions to the work of the Anglican missionary Henry Martyn (1781–1812). After a brief contextualisation of Muslim-Christian polemics on the nature of monotheism in this period and the development of the study of Ṣadrian metaphysics, he turns to an examination of one text that deploys Ṣadrian thought and principles to provide rational responses to Martyn: *Ḥujjat al-Islām aw Burhān al-milla*, the work of the philosopher and occultist 'Alī Nūrī (d. 1831).

The second section, ‘Sunnī Theological Perspectives on God and Monotheism’, draws our attention to the later Sunnī theological tradition. John Hoover, in chapter four, ‘The *Tawhīds* of Ibn Taymiyya’ examines how this important eighth/fourteenth thinker distinguishes between two *tawhīds*: *tawhīd al-ulūhiyya*, which demonstrates God’s exclusive divinity (*ulūhiyya*); and *tawhīd al-rubūbiyya* that confesses the exclusivity of God’s lordship (*rubūbiyya*) by acknowledging God as the sole creator of all things and as the only real source of help. Hoover does this by arguing that Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) invokes a post-classical division of Arabic sentences into two types: *khābar* and *inshā’*. The term *khābar* refers to informational statements or assertions that, as Ibn Taymiyya himself notes, may be affirmed as true or denied as false. *Inshā’* covers all other types of sentences, including imperatives, requests, wishes, exclamations, and promises.

In chapter five, Syamsuddin Arif’s ‘The Qur’anic Argument for Monotheism: Controversies between al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390) and His Contemporaries’ begins with a question: If cosmic order implies the unity of God, does the corrosion of heaven and earth imply the plurality of gods? Although many would readily give an affirmative answer to this question, the Māturīdī theologian Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī’s (d. 792/1390) explanation of the concept using Qur’an 21: 22 (‘If there were other gods [in heaven and earth] besides Allāh, they would both dissolve into chaos’) sparked considerable and often heated debate among fellow Sunnī thinkers and continued to trigger controversy in later scholarship down to Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854) and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1332/1914). Arif examines this issue of the *burhān al-tamānu’* and explores this debate and the controversies it engendered by exploring the meaning of the counterfactual conditional statement used by the Qur’an.

The third section—‘Shī‘ī Theological Perspectives on God and Monotheism’—is also comprised of two chapters. In chapter six, ‘Visions of *Tawhīd*: Reconciling a Statement in the Twenty-Eighth Supplication of *al-Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya*’, Zoheir Esmail examines Sayyid ‘Abdullāh Shubbar’s (d. 1241/1775) investigation of the statement ‘You have, my Lord, numerical oneness’, specifically his attempts to reconcile the statement’s outward commitment to a numerical conception of *tawhīd* with an agreement amongst Shī‘ī scholars that *tawhīd* is not numerical. In his *Maṣābiḥ al-anwār fī ḥall mushkilāt al-akhbār*, a book dedicated to reconciling difficult *aḥādīth*, Sayyid Shubbar summarises and evaluates different opinions produced by Shī‘ī scholars who have attempted to explain this statement. His evaluation, Esmail argues, gives us a window through which we can observe different conceptions of how numerical oneness can be reconciled with the visions of *tawhīd* held by the ‘ulamā’ beyond numerical oneness.

Chapter seven, ‘Apophatic *Tawhīd*: A Philosophical Account of Shī‘ī Ismā‘īlī Theology’, has Khalil Andani examine the famous Ismā‘īlī doctrine that advocates for an apophatic theology concerning the nature of God in which all names, descriptions and real predications to describe God are negated. This doctrine, he suggests, allows human souls

to achieve perfection by submitting to the infallible guidance of the Imām of the time, whose pure soul receives continuous emanation and light from the Universal Intellect. This process of ‘integration’, by which the human soul assimilates into its spiritual origin (*aṣl*), he argues, involves the act of *tawḥīd*, where the soul must divest and isolate every rank of God’s creation from divinity and thereby recognise the absolute unity of God.

The fourth part—‘Philosophical Perspectives on God and Monotheism’—also consists of two chapters. Chapter eight, Wahid Amin’s ‘Mullā Ṣadrā and His Commentators on Ibn Kammūna’s Argument Against Divine Unity’ explores the doctrine of divine unity and its attendant problems in Islamic philosophical texts composed between the twelfth and twentieth centuries. He explains the philosophical challenges faced by post-classical Muslim philosophers and theologians in their attempts at proving divine unity after a so-called ‘doubt’ (*shubha*) mistakenly attributed to Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284) thwarted the standard Avicennian proof of God’s unity. The severity of the challenge that the *shubhat al-tawḥīd* posed was so immense that influential Muslim figures such as Ibn Taymiyya relied on it to dismiss any proof of divine unity within the writings of the *falāsifa*. Following this, Amin demonstrates how Shī‘ī philosophers grappled with the problem of divine unity and the challenges that were raised because of *shubhat Ibn Kammūna*. This leads him to conclude that later Shī‘ī philosophy is intricately woven with philosophical speculation on the traditions of the Imams, and that rather than there being a tension between philosophy and scripture, the two in fact come together for true *ḥikma*.

In the ninth chapter, ‘Logico-linguistic Analysis of the *Kalimat al-Tawḥīd*: al-Rāzī vs al-Kūrānī’, Yusuf Daşdemir examines *Kalimat al-tawḥīd*, namely, ‘there is no deity but God’ and the *basmala*, the first verse of the Qur’an, which functions as the commonest prayer of a Muslim’s daily life. Daşdemir examines the philosophical, logical, and linguistic treatment of the *Kalimat al-tawḥīd* by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) and Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī (d. 1101/1690), who represent two main strands of philosophy in the post-classical era, namely, philosophical *kalām* and Akbarian Sufism, respectively.

In the fifth and final section—‘Contemporary Perspectives on God and Monotheism’—we see how many of the themes and concepts explored in previous sections play out in modern and contemporary Islamic discourses. In chapter 10, ‘Divine Names for Interreligious Engagement’, Celene Ibrahim explores the significance of ‘the most beautiful names’ (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) from an interreligious and comparative perspective. She suggests that particular names, and the concept of divine names more broadly, have the potential to resonate with those who seek paradigms for conceptual enrichment, moral introspection, and spiritual development across metaphysical paradigms.

In the eleventh chapter, ‘God as a Moral Agent: An Inquiry into the Nature of Divine Agency’, Abolghasem Fanaei begins by stating that the nature of God and His attributes are two of the most fundamental questions and major points of dispute in mysticism, theology, and philosophy of religion. How we answer these questions, he suggests, have

profound practical significance for both private and public aspects of life, to say nothing of both their theoretical implications for our worldview and their practical consequences on our understanding of politics and morality. To get at some of these tensions, Fanaei reflects upon a particular conception of God, 'God as a moral agent', and elaborates on the practical implications of seeing God in this way for the life of religious people.

The twelfth chapter, 'Friendly (A)theism: A Philosophical-Theological Defence', sees S. Yaser Mirdamadi examine the root cause of intolerance among (1) theists on theological issues such as *tawhīd*; and (2) between theists and atheists, particularly on their mutual accusation of irrationality. He begins his chapter developing an epistemological model called 'friendly (a)theism', initially suggested by William Rowe (1931–2015), that enables both theists and atheists, under certain circumstances, to consider the other side of the debate as reasonable without taking a relativist approach or compromising their own (a)theistic position. He next asks if such a philosophical model is theologically viable. He concludes that it is and that the friendly theism model is also theologically defensible by defending an Islamic concept of faith. This thesis lies at the core of the Islamic concept of faith; that *īmān* and *kufr* are mainly moral categories rather than doxastic ones. Such a philosophical-theological approach to rationality, he suggests, paves the way for inter(a) faith dialogue among Muslims and non-Muslims (theist or atheist) in the contemporary multicultural context.

In the final chapter, 'Towards a Grammatical Approach to Monotheism: Unpacking Ṭabāṭabā'ī's Theological Perspective', Javad Taheri discusses how the 'principle of focal meaning' proposed by Ṭabāṭabā'ī may be rethought in light of the findings presented in David B. Burrell's Grammatical Thomism. He does this by demonstrating how Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *tanzīh fī l-tashbīh* (dissimilation-within-assimilation) strategy might be used to realise a term's focal meaning. He then suggests how a type of univocity Ṭabāṭabā'ī associated with the focal meaning must be reinterpreted in accordance with the Wittgensteinian concept of family resemblance, in a manner similar to Burrell's interpretation of the way of analogy in a discussion of the concept of God as both transcendent and related to the world. Taheri next argues that this interpretation of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's concept of focal meaning offers a novel approach to comprehending the Shī'ī doctrine of *tawhīd* that will be argued to be more accurate.

Taken together, these diverse chapters, provide a good sense and overview of the diversity of Islamic perspectives on God and monotheisms from the earliest period into the present.

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