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Divine Unicity (*tawḥīd*)

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Divine Unicity (*tawḥīd*)

Khalil Andani

The Arabic word *tawḥīd* is a transitive verb; it means ‘to make [something] one’ or ‘to unify’ something. In the context of Islamic belief and practice, *tawḥīd* means to profess the unity and uniqueness of God and stands as a core defining principle of Islam. Muslims attest to *tawḥīd* through a variety of theological, ritual, and communal activities. When a person embraces Islam as their religion, they recite the *shahāda* (testimony) and thereby attest that ‘there is no god except God and Muḥammad is the Messenger of God’. This confession is a verbal affirmation of *tawḥīd*. When Muslims recite their daily prayers – in which they declare that ‘God is greater’ (*Allāhū akbar*), recite Qur’anic chapters such as the Opening (*al-fātiḥa*) and the Sincerity (*al-ikhhlāṣ*), and submit to God through acts of bowing (*rukūʿ*) and prostration (*sujūd*) – they are embodying *tawḥīd*. Islamic theological texts and creeds require Muslims to intellectually assent to certain articles of faith (‘*aqāʾid al-imān*’); the most important of these credal beliefs is *tawḥīd*, which comprises a number of theological positions concerning God’s existence, attributes, and relations to His creatures. The Muslim quest to adorn the human soul with spiritual virtues by way of ethical living, a practice that believers understand as the assumption of divine character traits (*akhlāq ilāhīya*), is an attempt to spiritually reflect *tawḥīd* by integrating the human soul with the Divine Names. *Tawḥīd* is the underlying thread that both binds and permeates the entirety of Muslim belief, ritual, law, governance, and spiritual life.

Despite its centrality to Muslim religious and political life, *tawḥīd* is also the most contested Islamic doctrine. Muslims have engaged in fourteen centuries of intellectual and polemical debate over the true meaning of *tawḥīd*. Differences in truth-claims about the nature of God’s essence, attributes, actions, and relationships to His creation have divided Muslims into various theological, credal, philosophical, and mystical schools of thought. Certain theological disagreements have had downstream effects upon notions of orthopraxy well into modern times. In this entry, we survey some of the major Islamic theological positions on *tawḥīd* with a focus on God’s essence, attributes, and actions. In doing so, this entry draws liberally across the denominational diversity of Islam, including various Sunnī, Sufi and Shīʿī schools of thought, through both the classical and modern periods.

Keywords: Tawḥīd, God, Divine Essence, Divine Attributes, Muʿtazila, Asharʿīs, Māturīdīs, Ḥanbalī Atharīs, Intercessory prayer, Ismāʿīlī theology, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn ʿArabī

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1 Allāh the eternal maker: Sunnī *kalām* theology

One of the most important and longstanding intellectual traditions of Islam is known as *kalām* ('speech', 'logos'). *Kalām* is a religious science involving rational inquiry (*naẓar*), in which Muslims seek knowledge of articles of faith through rational arguments and inferences: 'The primary function of *kalām* – its end and its activity – is to rationalize the basic beliefs of the Muslims as they are given in the Koran and the Sunna and are present in the way these are read and understood by orthodox believers' (Frank 1992: 22). The *kalām* tradition focuses on proving the existence of God, establishing the reality of God's attributes, conceptualizing divine action, proving the veracity of Muḥammad's prophethood, human agency and predestination, epistemology, etc. The three major *kalām* schools in classical and post-classical Islam are the Mu'tazilīs, Ash'arīs, and Māturīdīs. The Ḥanbalīs (Atharīs), on the other hand, register as a credal school. What scholars and believers consider today as 'Sunnī Islam' was still being consolidated well into the post-classical period; for centuries, multiple legal, *kalām*, and credal schools competed with one another to claim the mantle of orthodox Sunnism. By the early modern period, the Mu'tazilīs were no longer included in the orthodox credal definition of 'Sunnī Islam', which was limited to the Ash'arīs, Māturīdīs, and Atharīs.

The Mu'tazilīs were the earliest *kalām* school in Islamic history. While they no longer exist as an independent communal group, their theological positions profoundly influenced the evolution of Islamic theology among Sunnīs and Shī'īs. Mu'tazilī theology expounds *tawḥīd* by greatly emphasizing the absolute uniqueness and absolute oneness of God, while also allowing a formative role for human reason in theological reflection. The Muslim heresiographer Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936) accurately summarizes the Mu'tazilī account of *tawḥīd* as follows:

God is one. '*Nothing is like Him and He is hearing and seeing*' (Quran 42:11). He is not a body, not an apparition, not a volume, not a form, not flesh, not blood, not a shape, not a substance, not an accident [...] He has neither length, width, nor depth. He neither conjoins nor separates. He is neither in motion nor at rest [...] He does not inhere in any place. He cannot be described by anything among the attributes of creatures that indicate their being originated. Nor can He be described as finite [...] Eyes do not see Him. Sights do not perceive him. Imagination does not encompass Him [...] He is a thing unlike other things. He is knowing, powerful and living unlike the knowers, possessors of power, and living things [in creation]. He is eternal in His singularity, not eternal through another. (al-Ash'arī 1990: 235 [vol. 1])

As seen within this extract, Mu'tazilīs negate all physical and temporal qualities from God. Everything other than God is temporal and corporeal, whereas God alone is incorporeal

and eternal. Thus, God has no similarity with creation. In general, the Mu‘tazilīs hold that ‘God is knowing, powerful, and living in Himself, not through a knowledge, a power, or a life’ that is numerically distinct from His Self (al-Ash‘arī 1990: 244 [vol. 1]). This position amounts to what modern philosophers of religion call ‘divine simplicity’, in which God does not possess any attributes that are numerically distinct from Himself; rather, most divine simplicists hold that God’s attributes are identical to Himself (Vallicella 2023). As will be seen, a significant number of Muslim thinkers adhere to the doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS).

The Mu‘tazilī theologian Abū al-Hudhayl (d. 227/841) professed that ‘God is knowing through a knowledge that is Himself; He is powerful through a power that is Himself; He is living through a life that is Himself. [It is the same case] with respect to His hearing, His seeing, His eternity, His honor, His greatness, His majesty, His exaltedness, and all the attributes of His essence’ (al-Ash‘arī 1990: 245 [vol. 1]). Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī (d. 303/915) likewise held that God is living, powerful, knowing, and existent ‘due to His Essence’ (‘Abd al-Jabbār 1965: 182). In other words, each of God’s essential attributes – His knowledge, life, power, hearing, seeing, eternity, and existence – is identical to God’s Self or God’s Essence. God is metaphysically simple without any distinctions. Accordingly, the Mu‘tazilīs interpreted many of the divine names found in scripture as allusions to God’s essential attributes (see Peters 1976: 243).

As for God’s relations with His creatures, the Mu‘tazilīs spoke of God as an agent (*fā‘il*) who performs various actions with regards to creatures. Within this context, they upheld justice (*‘adl*) as an essential attribute of all divine actions. God only does what is good and just; He cannot perform evil actions. Accordingly, many of the scriptural divine names refer to God’s performance of particular actions – including creating, originating, sustaining, giving favour, rewarding, providing, commanding, speaking, etc. (Peters 1976: 269–271). God’s actions are created – either as bodies or accidents inhering within bodies. God originated the Cosmos through an act of temporal creation (*ḥudūth*), with God’s existence preceding the Cosmos, which began to exist at the moment He created it. Mu‘tazilīs interpreted all anthropomorphic descriptions of God found in scripture as metaphors for divine attributes or actions: God’s face (*wajh*) refers to God Himself; God’s hand (*yad*) refers to God’s favour (*ni‘ma*); God’s eye (*‘ayn*) refers to His knowledge. God in His Essence transcends having a literal face, hands, or eyes (al-Ash‘arī 1990: 245, 248 [vol. 1]). Mu‘tazilī theology recognizes both direct divine causation and secondary causation in which creatures produce effects. Human beings are the creators of their own voluntary actions, which they freely choose. While the Mu‘tazilīs no longer exist as a separate community, many aspects of their theology continue in the Zaydī Shī‘ī and Twelver Shī‘ī *kalām* traditions.

The most popular *kalām* school among Sunnī Muslims is the Ash‘arī school of theology. This tradition traces its heritage back to the teachings of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936), who had reportedly been a member of the Mu‘tazilī school before renouncing it and adopting a more scripture-centric approach to theology. The Ash‘arīs uphold a view of *tawḥīd* that differs from the Mu‘tazilīs in several areas, while agreeing with them in others. In common with the Mu‘tazilīs, the Ash‘arīs affirm that God is one, eternal, incorporeal, timeless, and wholly different from His creations. However, unlike the Mu‘tazilīs, Ash‘arīs hold that God possesses real-distinct entitative attributes (*ṣifāt ma‘nawīya*). The proposition that ‘God is living, knowing, and powerful’ means ‘God possesses life, knowledge, and power’. The Ash‘arīs understand each divine attribute to be an ‘entitative reality’ (*ḥaqīqa ma‘ānī*) – a real and distinct entity that ‘subsists in [God’s] Self’ (*qā’im bi-nafsihi*; Ibn al-Fūrak 1987: 43–44). Classical Ash‘arīs held that God possesses seven entitative attributes that are eternal, uncreated, and numerically distinct from God’s Essence or Self: ‘The seven attributes, which we established, are not the Essence. Rather, they are additional to the Essence. According to us, the Maker of the world (Exalted is He) is a knower with knowledge, living with life, powerful with power, and so on with respect to all the attributes’ (al-Ghazālī 2013: 129). The Ash‘arīs affirm the formula, first coined by ‘Abd Allāh b. Kullāb (d. 241/850), that God’s attributes ‘are not identical to God and not other than Him’ (*lā hiya Allāhu wa-lā hiya ghayruhu*) and that these attributes ‘subsist in God’ (al-Ash‘arī 1990: 250 [vol. 1]). This formula, taken at face value, appears to be a logical contradiction because it violates the law of excluded middle: ‘It is not said that He is His knowledge, life and power and it is not said that He is other than these attributes’ (al-Bāqillānī 1957: 210). Al-Ghazālī also affirmed this formula and explained it by analogy to a parts-to-whole relationship:

For if we say ‘God, the Exalted,’ then we have referred to the Divine Essence together with the divine attributes, and not to the Essence alone [...]. Thus Zayd’s hand is not Zayd and is not other than Zayd; rather both expressions are absurd. Similarly, every part is not other than the whole, nor is it the same as the whole [...]. Thus it is possible that an attribute is other than the Essence in which the attribute subsists. (al-Ghazālī 2013: 129)

A common criticism of the Ash‘arī doctrine of God’s entitative uncreated attributes is the degree to which it resembles Christian Trinitarian theology. Christian Arab theologians often defined the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in terms of divine attributes such as God’s uncreated life, knowledge, and power, which are both distinct from and inseparable from God’s Essence (see Husseini 2014).

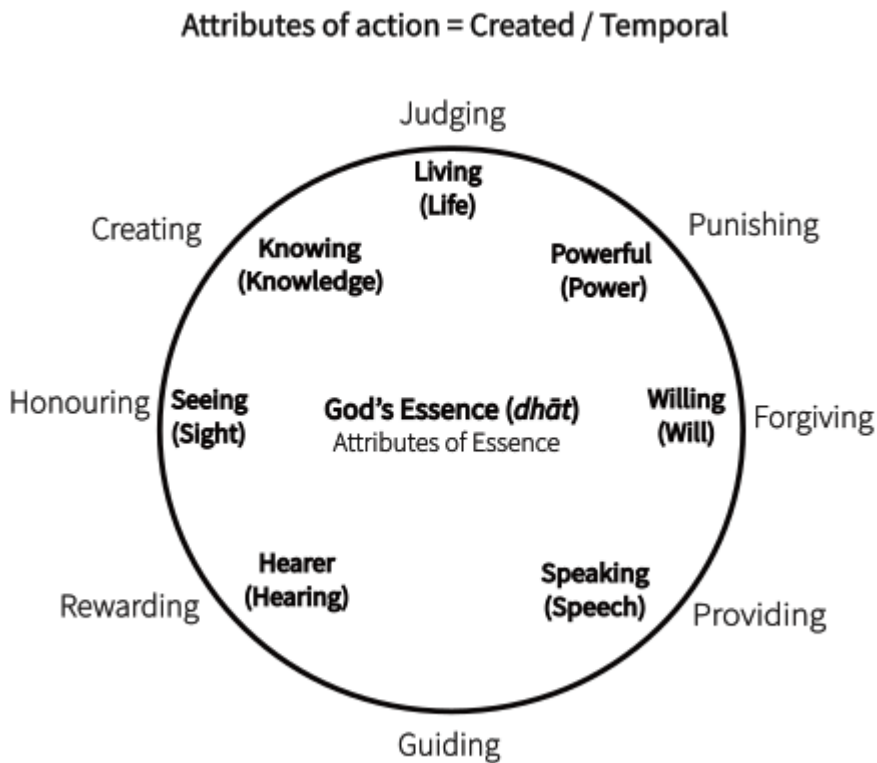


Figure 1. Ash'arī theology of God's Essence and attributes.

While God has uncreated eternal attributes that subsist in His Essence, He also performs various divine actions. God's acts are temporally originated (*muḥdath*): 'These attributes, such as creation, provision, justice, beatification, and favour, because they are actions of the Exalted God, are temporally originated and among the attributes of action' (al-Bāqillānī 1957: 210). Ash'arī theologians interpret and explain the meaning of various divine names by recourse to these theological principles. Some divine names refer to God's uncreated entitative attributes; other divine names are negations of imperfections from God or describe God's created actions (Ibn al-Fūrak 1987: 44ff.). As for scriptural references to God's face, eyes, hands, descent (*nuzūl*), and sitting (*istiwā'*), Ash'arī understandings have evolved over the centuries. Early scholars such as al-Bāqillānī (d. 404/1013) rejected the Mu'tazilī exegesis that understood such terms as allegorical references to God's essence, knowledge, power, and favour. Instead, al-Bāqillānī affirmed God's face, His two eyes, and His two hands as eternal attributes of God's Essence and refused to interpret these symbolically; he also read God's sitting (*istiwā'*) as a temporal divine action that cannot be interpreted allegorically and whose modality is unknown (al-Bāqillānī 1957: 259–262). However, al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), the famous 'imām of the two holy places' (*al-ḥaramayn*), employed allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*) to descriptions of God's face, hands, eyes, side, and descending. In his view, God's face simply refers to His existence; God's hands refer to His power; God's eyes refer to His protection; God's

side (*janb*) refers to His command and operation; and God's descending (*nuzūl*) refers to either the descent of His angels by His command or the descent of His blessings (al-Juwaynī 2000: 84–90).

The Ashʿarīs maintain an occasionalist worldview – that God is the libertarian agent and creator of all actions, including actions performed by human beings. Humans therefore merely acquire (*kasb*) or perform actions; God alone is the creator of all acts within creaturely substrates. Al-Qushayrī writes: 'The determination of events, both good and bad, is God's: He creates the deliberate actions of human beings and the human individual performs His acts' (Frank 2001: 211).

The second major Sunnī theological school of *kalām* is the Māturīdī tradition, which traces its intellectual heritage to the teachings of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) and the theological legacy of Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944). The consolidators of the Ḥanafī-Māturīdī theology were Abū al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī (d. c. 508/1115) and Abū Yusr al-Bazdawī (d. 493/1100), whose teachings form the basis for this section. Like the Muʿtazilīs and Ashʿarīs, the Māturīdīs profess that God is absolutely one, eternal, incorporeal, and dissimilar to all created beings. They affirm two kinds of divine attributes: attributes of God's Essence and attributes of divine action. The essential divine attributes are God's life, power, hearing, seeing, knowledge, speech, and will (or intention). The attributes of God's action include creation, provision, granting bounty, favouring, beautifying, compassion, and forgiveness. According to al-Nasafī, *all* of the divine attributes – both of God's Essence and His action – are eternal and uncreated:

God the Exalted is eternal and everlasting with all of His attributes and names. God's names and attributes are not identical to Him and not other than Him – just as in the case of the number one with regard to the number ten [...] As for the attributes of action – such as creating, providing, granting bounty, favouring, beautifying, compassion, forgiveness, and guidance – all of them are eternal and everlasting and they are not identical to Him and not other than Him [...] It is possible that God be called creator even if he has not created the creatures and be called a provider even if he has not provided to the creatures [...] These attributes subsist in God's Essence, may He be exalted, in eternity. This is because if these did not subsist in God's Essence in eternity, then His Essence would be the locus of temporal accidents and this is impossible. (al-Nasafī 1997: 91–93)

Similar to the Ashʿarīs, al-Nasafī and al-Bazdawī uphold the 'Kullabī formula', that God's attributes are not identical to Him nor other (*ghayr*) than Him. According to al-Bazdawī, the term '*ghayrīya*' (otherness) means 'separability'; thus, to deny that God's attributes are 'other than' God simply means that His attributes are inseparable from His Essence

(al-Bazdawī 2002: 46). The Māturīdī also emphasize that God’s act of creating and existentiating (*al-takwīn wa-al-ijād*) is also uncreated and eternal.

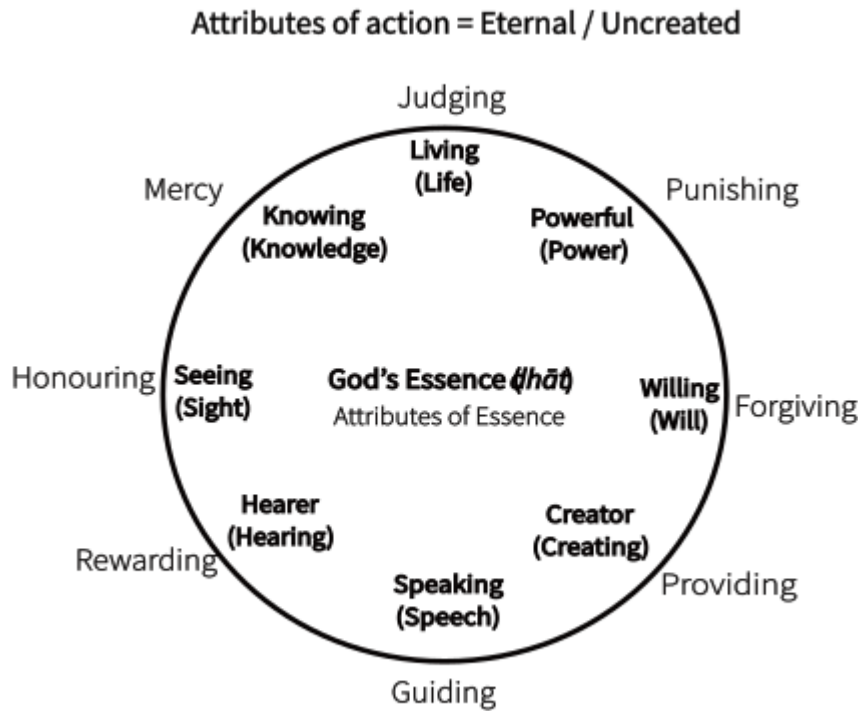


Figure 2. Māturīdī theology of God’s Essence and attributes.

As for the anthropomorphic descriptions of God found in scripture, Māturīdī thinkers interpret some expressions using *ta’wīl*, while affirming others without modality (*bi-lā kayf*). For example, al-Bazdawī interpreted divine actions such as God’s coming (*atā, jā’a*), sitting (*istiwā’*), and descending (*nuzūl*) in allegorical terms: God’s coming means the manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) of God’s traces or effects instead of the literal coming of God; God’s sitting upon His Throne signifies His eternal action of exercising mastery (*istīlā’*) and domination (*qahr*) as opposed to a literal settling (*istiqrār*); finally, God’s descending to the lowest heaven means His connection (*ittiṣāl*) to that heaven in the sense that the effects of God’s attributes reach the world (al-Bazdawī 2002: 36-38). As for God’s eye (*‘ayn*) and hand (*yad*), al-Bazdawī denies that these are physical limbs, but while still affirming that the terms *‘ayn* and *yad* each refer to a ‘specific attribute’ (*ṣifa khāṣṣa*) of God’s Essence, thereby refusing to interpret them allegorically (al-Bazdawī 2002: 39). On the matter of human agency, the Māturīdī position is that human actions are created by God and acquired by man through an act of free choice. God created in the human being the capacity to choose to acquire an action. This results in a stronger sense of human agency than in Ash‘arī theology (Haidar 2016: 76–78).

2 Allāh without modality (*bi-lā kayf*): Ḥanbalī creeds

The Ḥanbalī movement, based on the teachings and legacy of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) as transmitted by his students, styled itself early on as *ahl al-ḥadīth* (People of Prophetic Reports) and *ahl al-sunna* (People of Tradition). In its early phase, Ḥanbalī thought completely eschewed *kalām*, regarding it as an impermissible innovation. However, over the centuries some Ḥanbalīs engaged with the theological positions of the *kalām* schools and, through such interactions, articulated certain theologically distinctive positions. The professed method of the Ḥanbalīs is to simply affirm all attributes and descriptions of God found in scripture (Qur'an and Hadith) without using any allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*) to understand the meaning of those expressions. However, implementing this method in practice proved to be difficult, particularly in the face of *kalām* theology's rational account of *tawḥīd* and the numerous anthropomorphisms found in scripture. In what follows, a sample of discourses about God and His attributes from prominent Ḥanbalī authorities are surveyed and analysed.

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, as expressed in the creeds attributed to him by his students, affirmed various anthropomorphic attributes of God. Below are excerpts from one of his creeds:

The Throne of the Most Merciful (mighty and glorious is He) is above the water. God is over [*'alā*] the Throne. The Footstool is at the place of His two feet [...] He moves, speaks, [1:62] observes, looks, laughs, joys, and loves [...] He descends every night to the lowest heaven however He wills. '*There is nothing like Him; He is the Hearing and the Observing*' (Qur'an 42:11). The servants' hearts are between two of the Most-Merciful's fingers [...] The heavens and the earth on the Day of the Resurrection are in His hand. He will put His foot in the Fire, causing it to recoil. (Creed 1, Ibn Abī Ya'īlā 1999: 60–62 [vol. 1]; trans. Melchert 2017: 5–6)

Ibn Ḥanbal affirmed a host of divine descriptions found in the Qur'an and Hadith, including God's two hands, fingers, feet, anger, laughter, nightly descent, etc. For Ibn Ḥanbal, reports such as these must be understood and transmitted in their plain sense: 'According to us, *ḥadīth* is according to its apparent meaning (*ẓāhirihi*) just as what came from the Prophet. *Kalām* about it is an innovation. But we believe in it according to what came according to its apparent meaning (*ẓāhirihi*) and we do not dispute with anyone about it' (Creed 3, Ibn Abī Ya'īlā 1999: 168 [vol. 2]).

A textbook case of a hadith (*ḥadīth al-shābb*) with clear anthropomorphic implications is a highly circulated report in which the Prophet Muḥammad sees God in human form: 'I saw my Lord, glorified and exalted, as a beardless young man with long curly hair

wearing a red garment'. As reported by his personal assistant al-Marrūdhī, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal authenticated this hadith with several chains of transmission (Ibn Abī Ya'īlā 1999: 81 [vol. 3]). Ibn Ḥanbal also affirmed the chains of this report (Creed 3, Ibn Abī Ya'īlā 1999: 168 [vol. 2]). The hadith was also subsequently reported on the authority of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal and authenticated by Ḥanbalī authorities, such as 'Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/918), Abū al-Ḥasan b. Bashshār (d. 312/925), al-Dāraquṭnī (d. 385/995), and Ibn 'Aqīl (d. 513/1119). It therefore enjoyed wide circulation in Ḥanbalī circles during the classical period of Islam (Williams 2002: 445–447). Ibn Taymīya also quoted this hadith as an authentic report (Ibn Taymīya 2005: 290 [vol. 7]). Similar hadiths describe how the Prophet saw God in a beautiful form (*ṣūra*) and felt the coolness of God's hand touch him between his shoulders (al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb al-tafsīr*, hadith no. 285, 286, 287).

Ibn Ḥanbal's approach to the above hadith poses several difficulties for his concept of *tawḥīd*. According to Ḥanbalī scholars like Ibn Qudāma (d. 620/1223), the 'apparent meaning' (*al-ẓāhir*) is 'what first comes to the mind from that text, irrespective of whether it is literal or metaphorical' (Ibn Qudāma 2002: 55). Thus, when expressions like God's hand, foot, aboveness, fingers, or descent are understood in their apparent meaning, this entails that God has spatial, temporal, and bodily qualities, rendering Him similar to physical creatures. Williams (2002) therefore concluded that Ibn Ḥanbal affirmed an anthropoid form for God. At a philosophical level, Ḥanbalī affirmations of the apparent meaning of God's hands, feet, face, fingers, descent, etc., while also insisting that there is no similarity between God and His creation, entails a 'contradictory theology' (Chowdhury 2021). Al-Azmeh sees Ḥanbalī doctrine as 'a form of knowledge which is devoid of epistemic content, and whose utterance is consumed immediately by its audience [...] and belongs properly to an act of devotion more than to one of intellection' (Al-Azmeh 1988).

Ḥanbalī scholars in succeeding centuries took somewhat different approaches to dealing with these apparent anthropomorphisms when attempting to articulate *tawḥīd*. The most frequent expression one encounters in Ḥanbalī discourse is *bi-lā kayf* (without modality), in which one affirms the reality of the divine attributes without specifying their 'howness' or 'modality' – an approach one may call 'amodal affirmationism'. Qādī Abū Ya'īlā b. al-Farrā' (d. 458/1066) adopted *kalām* terminologies to articulate the Ḥanbalī creed in this fashion. Like the Ash'arīs and Māturīdīs, Abū Ya'īlā affirmed that God has eternal 'entitative attributes' (*ṣifāt ma'nawīya*): 'He, may He be glorified, is knowing through a single knowledge, powerful through a single power, living through a single life, willing through a single will, and speaking through a single speech'; these eternal attributes are all mutually distinct and subsist in His Essence (Abū Ya'īlā 1974: 49–50). God also has attributes of action, such as providing, creating, or granting favour, which are eternal even while the actions themselves are temporal (Abū Ya'īlā 1974: 44–45). Abū Ya'īlā likewise upheld the Kullābī formula: 'The attributes of God are not the Creator and not other

than Him' (1974: 46). Abū Ya'īlā affirmed the amodal reality of God's two eyes, His face, His two hands, His shin, His foot, His leg, His sitting upon the Throne, His descent, His direction, and His form or configuration. In his view, God's two eyes are divine attributes (*ṣifatān*) super-added (*zā'ida*) to God's sight and vision, but without being organs or limbs. Likewise, God's face is an attribute super-added to God's Essence. God's two hands do not metaphorically refer to God's favour or power, rather, they are two essential divine attributes. God's shin, foot, and leg are all super-added divine attributes and do not refer to physical limbs. God's sitting is an attribute of the Divine Essence by which God eternally describes Himself; but it does not refer to bodily sitting or physical contact. God's descent every night does not involve any physical motion and should be taken as akin to His self-manifestation (*tajallī*) to Moses (Mūsā) on Mount Sinai. God may be described with a 'whereness' (*aynīya*), which is the direction above the heavens. God also has a form (*ṣūra*) which the Prophet saw in a vision, but it is a form unlike other forms (Abū Ya'īlā 1974: 51–58). Overall, Abū Ya'īlā took an affirmative amodal (*ithbāt bi-lā kayf*) approach to God's attributes, including the anthropomorphic description of Him.

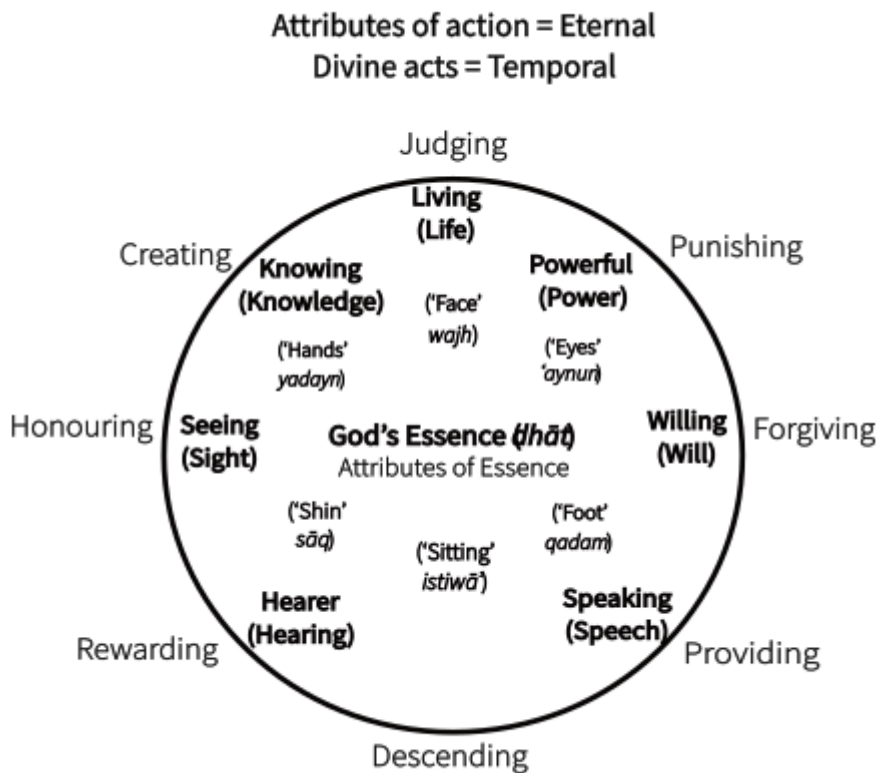


Figure 3. Ḥanbalī theology of God's Essence and attributes.

The Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn Qudāma took a somewhat different approach to God's attributes. He entirely prohibited the science of *kalām*, following instead a method that he regarded as the way of the pious ancestors (*al-salaf*):

To have faith in God's names and attributes by which He described Himself in His verses and His revelation or upon the tongue of His Messenger without adding to them, subtracting from them, without exceeding them, without explaining them, and without allegorically interpreting them with what contradicts their apparent meanings (*zāhiriḥā*). There is neither any similarity (*tashbīḥ*) of His attributes to creatures nor is there any description of temporally generated beings. (Ibn Qudāma 2002: 11–12)

Ibn Qudāma approached the scriptural descriptions of things such as God's hands, eyes, descending, etc. through a method known as *tafwīḍ al-ma'nā* (consigning the meaning to God). In this approach, one simply affirms the revealed Arabic words of God in scripture but pleads ignorance regarding their true meaning, deferring any knowledge of their intended meaning to God: 'As for our faith in the verses and prophetic reports of the [divine] attributes, it is to have faith purely in the verbal expressions for which there is no doubt in their soundness and truthfulness and He who spoke them is more knowing of their meanings. Thus, we have faith in them according to the meaning our Lord, the Exalted, has intended' (Ibn Qudāma 1990: 59). Ibn Qudāma's approach is an 'amodal apophaticism' (Kars 2019) in which the inquirer admits their ignorance about what many divine attributes truly signify, their knowledge being limited to the names and words: 'It is possible to have faith in them without knowledge of their meanings for faith with ignorance is sound' (Ibn Qudāma 1990: 52).

The Ḥanbalī tradition featured further developments to articulate and conceptualize their doctrine of *tawḥīd*. Perhaps the most famous among post-classical Ḥanbalīs was Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328) (see Hoover 2007). While a full analysis of his contributions remains outside the scope of this article, suffice it to say that his influence on the later Ḥanbalī and Salafī movements cannot be underestimated. Ibn Taymīya engaged *kalām* theology and *falsafa* (philosophy) discourses to argue for his own version of Ḥanbalī theology. On the matter of God's attributes, Ibn Taymīya rejected both *ta'wīl* and *tafwīḍ al-ma'nā* (consigning the meaning to God); instead, he upheld the amodal affirmation (*ithbāt bi-lā kayf*) of God's anthropomorphic attributes, including His two hands, eyes, face, sitting upon the Throne, and descent. Against the *kalām* tradition, Ibn Taymīya differentiated between God's essential attributes (His life, knowledge, power, and will) and God's voluntary attributes; the latter are uncreated yet temporal divine actions that God performs by His power and will, such as His acts of speaking, hearing, seeing, love, mercy, creating, anger, sitting, coming, and descending. God's voluntary attributes or actions are temporally occurring (*ḥādith*), but subsist in God's Essence after they occur, meaning God's actions are temporal, dependent upon God yet uncreated (Hoover 2010). Ibn Taymīya conceived God as a spatially extended entity that surrounds the Cosmos by literally being 'above' the world spatially; this in contrast to *kalām* conceptions of God

transcending all spatial directions (Hoover 2022). Finally, Ibn Taymīya rejected the popular Muslim practice of directing intercessory supplication (*istighātha*) to the Prophet and saints – an issue that will be discussed in a later section.

3 Allāh the necessary existence: Ibn Sīnā's philosophy (*falsafa*)

Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037), popularly known as Avicenna, was both a proponent and great transformer of the Islamic intellectual tradition known as *falsafa*. According to McGinnis and Reisman (2007: xvii), *falsafa* is 'a continuation and refinement, undertaken at least initially in the Arabic language, of the Greek philosophical and scientific tradition'. Very quickly, *falsafa* developed into an Islamic form of philosophical inquiry that ran parallel to, competed with, and cross-pollinated the aforementioned *kalām* tradition. Ibn Sīnā marked a turning point in the history of *falsafa* and Islamic intellectual history more generally, with his contributions becoming the primary reference point for most Muslim philosophical and theological projects. What concerns us here are Ibn Sīnā's distinctive positions on the concept of *tawhīd*, as embedded in his teachings concerning God as the Necessary Existence (*wājib al-wujūd*).

Ibn Sīnā's concept of *tawhīd* is grounded in his modal metaphysics of existence. In his view, whatever exists is either 'Necessary Existence in Itself' (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*) or 'possible/contingent existence in itself' (*mumkin al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*). Possible or contingent existence in itself is that which, when considered by itself, is due to a cause upon which its existence or non-existence depends. The Necessary Existence in Itself, on the other hand, is absolutely independent and uncaused; it is also the source and necessitating cause of all possible existences. When a possible or contingent existence in itself actually exists due to its cause, its existence is 'necessary through another' (*wājib al-wujūd bi-ghayrihi*; Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) 2005: 29–31). Theologically speaking, for Ibn Sīnā, the Necessary Existence is God and the possible existences, which all exist as necessary existences through another, are the creations of God: 'This is the meaning of a thing's being created – that is, attaining existence from another' (Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) 2005: 272). Based on this modal framework, Ibn Sīnā rationally demonstrated the existence of God as the Necessary Existence through a famous argument known as the 'Proof of the Truthful' (*burhān al-ṣiddiqīn*). The gist of Ibn Sīnā's argument is that whatever exists is either a necessary existence in itself or a possible existence in itself. If what exists is possible in itself, then this existent depends upon a cause for its existence, and the same inquiry applies to that cause. Even if one supposes an infinite series of possible existents in a chain of cause and effect, the aggregate of possible existences still requires a cause external to the aggregate; this external cause must be a necessary existence in itself – this

being God, the Necessary Existence (Avicenna, trans. McGinnis and Reisman 2007: 215–216).

Having proved the Necessary Existence, Ibn Sīnā goes on to affirm the doctrine of divine simplicity – that God is absolutely one without any parts or internal composition due to His ontological independence. Accordingly, God is beyond having any entitative or mutually distinct attributes, such as life, knowledge, or power, subsisting in His Essence – as classical Sunnī *kalām* scholars believed. If God's Essence contained any internal plurality, including metaphysical parts or entitative attributes, God would depend upon those attributes and no longer be the Necessary Existence in Himself. God has neither genus, species, differentia, quiddity, matter, nor form. God's absolute simplicity entails that there cannot be more than one Necessary Existent. The existence of two or more Necessary Existents requires that they each possess a differentiating attribute by which they are distinguished from one another; this entails that each Necessary Existent is internally complex and therefore dependent. God transcends matter, form, space, time, change, and definition; He is an absolute simple, immaterial, and timeless Necessary Existence. Ibn Sīnā apophatically negates from God all the qualities of created existence: 'He is only described by means of negating all similarities of Him and affirming to Him all relations. For all things are from Him, and He shares nothing in common with what [proceeds] from Him' (Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) 2005: 283).

Ibn Sīnā interprets the various divine attributes of God found in scripture in a manner that renders their meanings compatible with his metaphysics of God as the absolutely simple Necessary Existence: 'His attributes operate as negations (*salb*), as relations (*idāfa*), as a composition of negation and relation [...] Thus, their plurality does not violate His oneness or contradict necessary being' (Kars 2019: 85). Some attributes, like 'eternity' (*qidam*), 'the one' (*al-wāḥid/al-aḥad*), and 'the knowing' or 'the intellecting', are negations of imperfection and limitation from God, such as non-existence, multiplicity, and ignorance or materiality. The attribute of 'Necessary Existence' signifies the negation of any cause for God and the affirmation of God's relation to creatures as the cause of everything. Divine names like 'creator', 'producer', or 'compassionate' are attributes of action that describe God's relationships to created beings. Overall, the various attributions ascribed to the Necessary Existence do not result in multiplicity within God because God's life, knowledge, will, power, goodness, intellect, unity, firstness, etc. are absolutely identical to Himself both in essence and in meaning; every positive attribute of God is reducible to God being the Necessary Existence through Himself (Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) 2005: 295–296).

In accordance with the above approach, Ibn Sīnā refers to God as 'perfect in existence' in the sense that God does not lack any perfections. He is also 'above perfection' because His existence is exclusive to Himself, with all other existences emanating from God and being dependent upon Him. God is the 'good' because He bestows all perfections upon

all things and is desired by all things. God is called 'pure intellect' because His Essence is disassociated from matter in all respects (Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) 2005: 283–285). Ibn Sīnā also affirms that God intellectually apprehends all existents, not by directly intellecting the things themselves but by intellecting His own Essence as the principle or cause of all things: 'The Necessary Existent apprehends all things intellectually in a universal way; yet, despite this, no individual thing escapes His knowledge' (Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) 2005: 287–288).

For Ibn Sīnā, God is the eternal originator of all possible or contingent existents, which comprise His creation. God's act of creation is a volitional act based on His will. However, since God's will is identical to His knowledge, power, and Essence, His will to originate His creation is also a necessary action as opposed to a libertarian choice. God's act of creation is necessitated by God's Essence, and He necessarily creates the best possible order which emanates from Him. Furthermore, the first of the originated beings that emanates from God directly without mediation is one entity and cannot be many things; this first created being is the First Intellect. This is because the procession of multiple entities from God logically necessitates multiple aspects within God's Essence – which is impossible:

The first of the existents [proceeding] from the First Cause is one in number, its entity and quiddity being one, [and is] not in matter [...] the first effect is a pure intellect, because it is a form not in matter. It is the first of the separated intellects that we have enumerated. (Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) 2005: 328)

Ibn Sīnā envisioned God's creation as a hierarchy of eternal immaterial intellects, immaterial spiritual souls, and spheres in a state of perpetual motion. The prophets, through the faculty of the prophetic intellect, received spiritual divine emanation or inspiration from the lowest of the intellects, known as the Active Intellect, and imaginal forms from the souls of the spheres. A prophet apprehends the intelligible contents of the Active Intellect without discursive effort and translates these into symbols and allegories that he communicates to the masses in the form of scriptural revelation. After the prophets, a human being who perfects both practical and theoretical wisdom, while also purifying his soul, can acquire prophetic virtues. Such a human being attains the rank of God's deputy on earth: '[He] wins the prophetic qualities, becomes almost a human god. Worship of him, after the worship of God, becomes almost allowed. He is indeed the earthly king and God's deputy on earth' (Azadpur 2011: 60).

4 Allāh beyond being: Shī'ī Ismā'īlī philosophy (*ḥikma*)

Ismāʿīlī Muslims are a branch of Shīʿī Islam who trace the spiritual authority of the Prophet Muḥammad through a succession of Imāms (divinely guided leaders), beginning with ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib and continuing through the lineage of Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. after 158/755). The Ismāʿīlīs consider the Imāms to be infallible authorities who interpret Islamic belief and practice for the community of believers, much like the Prophet did during his lifetime. Historically speaking, the Ismāʿīlī Imāms expounded distinctive theological doctrines through a hierarchy of authorized teachers, known as the *dāʿīs*. Today, the present living Imām of the Nizārī branch of Ismāʿīlī Shīʿism is His Highness Prince Shāh Karīm al-Ḥusaynī Aga Khan IV (b. 1936).

As explained by the Ismāʿīlī philosophers, God alone is independent and self-sufficient in His subsistence, while everything other than God, including the eternal spiritual existents, are dependent upon Him for their existence. One generation before Ibn Sīnā, al-Kirmānī (d. c. 411/1020) presented a philosophical argument that deductively inferred the logical necessity of God as the sole and absolutely independent reality from the existence of dependent realities (al-Kirmānī 1983: 129–130).

The Ismāʿīlī Imāms and *dāʿīs* taught an apophatic doctrine of *tawḥīd* in which one negates all creaturely attributes from God while affirming His absolute simplicity, independence, transcendence, and dissimilarity to His creation. In common with the *kalām* schools, the Ismāʿīlīs negated all physical and temporal attributes from God: God transcends body, space, time, matter, motion, shape, colour, etc. However, the Ismāʿīlīs went even further and negated all spiritual and intellectual attributes, such as intellection, form, spirit, substance, accident, and spiritual motion, from God (al-Sijistānī 2011: 81). Thus, God is outside the categories of body and spirit, effect and cause, intellect and soul, time and eternity.

The Ismāʿīlīs affirmed a doctrine of divine simplicity by negating all traces of multiplicity from God. In the words of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (d. c. 361/971): ‘He is the One (*al-wāḥid*) beyond each one of the numbers, natural and spiritual [...] This One whom we praise as the Creator does not contain any multiplicity and is without weakness’ (al-Sijistānī 2011: 87–88). The unity of God entails that God is beyond possessing any entitative attributes that are numerically distinct from His Essence. On this point, the Ismāʿīlīs differed from Sunnī *kalām*, being closer to Avicennian *falsafa*. Al-Kirmānī argues that if God possessed an entitative attribute – like power, life, or knowledge – then either God must depend upon that attribute for His subsistence or the attribute must depend upon God. In the former case, God becomes a creature, while in the latter case, the so-called attribute is a dependent creature and not divine. Therefore, God has no attributes whatsoever: ‘He transcends and is sanctified from the attributes that fall under His creation while He, the Exalted, is the Maker (*fāʿil*) of them and all other things’ (al-Kirmānī 1983: 153). Accordingly, the Ismāʿīlīs negate all predications, both positive and negative, from God.

Contrary predicates such as 'is knowing' and 'is ignorant' are equally inapplicable to God. This is likewise the case with every predicate pair, such as powerful/impotent, living/dead, seeing/blind, hearing/deaf, etc. As Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. c. 462/1070) argues:

It is wrong to describe God by such attributes as 'ignorance' and 'powerlessness' – not because they are unseemly but because they are attributes of creatures – as well as that it is also wrong to ascribe the opposites of such attributes, such as 'knowledge' and 'power', to Him on the grounds that these too are creaturely qualities. (Nāṣir-i Khusraw 2012: 55)

Overall, the Ismā'īlī view of *tawḥīd* exalts God above all types of attributes – spiritual and physical, entitative and essential, positive and privative. Ismā'īlī philosophers prefer to say that God is beyond both being/existence and non-being/non-existence rather than classify Him as a 'supreme being' or 'necessary existent'. As for God's names as found in scripture, such as the knowing or the powerful, Ismā'īlī thinkers interpret these as metonyms (*majāz* 'aqlī) and not real predicates. This means that God may be called 'knowing' only in the sense that God bestows knowledge upon every knower:

He is 'existent' in the sense that He *existentialises* every existence, is 'Necessary of Existence' in the sense that He *necessitates* every existent, is 'knowing' in the sense that He *causes whatever is knowing to know*, and is 'powerful' in the sense that He *empowers* whatever is powerful. (al-Shahrastānī 2001: 48, original emphasis)

According to Ismā'īlī metaphysics and theology, God is an eternal creator who originates created existence from nothing. God originates creatures through an eternal and timeless divine action known as God's command, will, or word. The Divine Word proceeds directly from God by necessity and manifests in contingent existence as the First Originated Being (*al-mubda' al-awwal*) – which Ismā'īlīs and other Islamic philosophers call either the First Intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*) or Universal Intellect (*al-'aql al-kull*). The First Intellect is an eternal, immutable, and incorporeal creation of God and possesses all created perfections: 'When the True Originator originated the first [being], He originated it perfect and without defect. He did not leave anything out of it' (al-Sijistānī and Walker 1994: 53). The Ismā'īlīs agree with the Islamic philosophers that God's direct creation must be a singular immaterial entity because God's absolute unity precludes the possibility of multiple effects issuing from God. In Ismā'īlī belief, the First Intellect is the proper object of predicative names and attributes that other theologians mistakenly apply to God. For example, the First Intellect may be described as living, knowing, powerful, majestic, luminous, intellecting, and good through its essence whereas God transcends such predications. As explained by al-Kirmānī, the First Intellect is:

entirely living, entirely powerful, entirely knowing, entirely eternal, entirely all-encompassing, entirely perfect, complete, and singular. It is the first existent, the real, and the originated being [...]. It is a singular essence to which these attributes are connected – some of which are due to its essence and some of which are due to its relationships with other things. (al-Kirmānī 1983: 189)

Thus, all the divine names, when taken as predications, properly refer to the First Intellect. This is even true for the divine name *Allāh*, insofar as *Allāh* is taken as a predicative or descriptive name (as opposed to a purely nominal name). *Allāh* therefore describes the First Intellect due to its own bewilderment (*wilāh*) before the absolute and ineffable God. The First Intellect recognizes God as transcending all attributes and worships Him in the most perfect manner by admitting its own inability to encompass God. Ismāʿīlī cosmology posits a hierarchy of created spiritual intermediaries after the First Intellect, including the Universal Soul, Prime Matter, Universal Nature, various levels of souls, and the spatio-temporal Cosmos. The Universal Intellect and Universal Soul are the two highest intermediaries and mediate all relationships between God and His creatures.

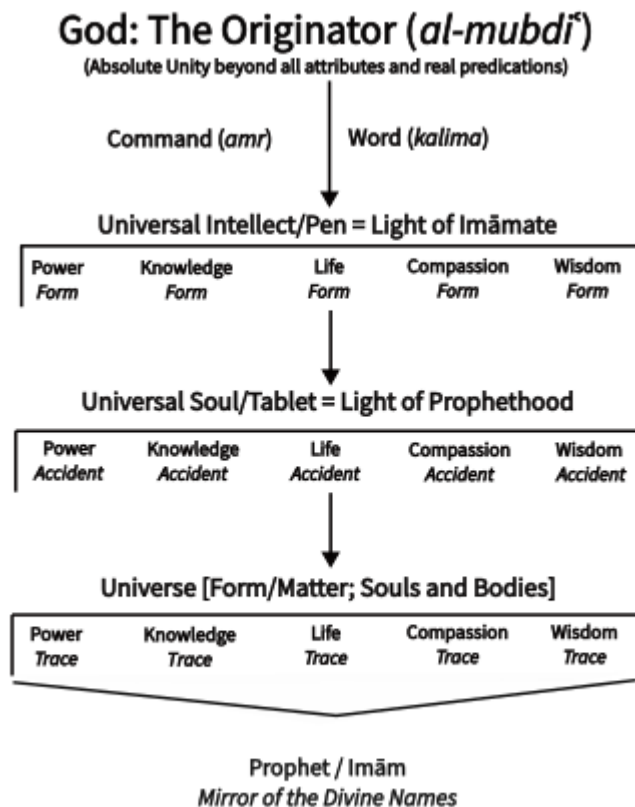


Figure 4. Ismāʿīlī theology of God's absolute transcendence and His creation of Neoplatonic intermediaries.

In the human world, there must always exist a divinely guided human being whose pure soul reflects the First Intellect in knowledge, authority, and virtue in the same manner as a mirror. This person, the locus of manifestation (*mazhar*) of the First Intellect, was the Prophet Muḥammad during his era, but has since been the Imām of every subsequent age, as the spiritual inheritor of the Prophet’s knowledge and authority. This theological framework also allows Ismā‘īlī philosophers to affirm the anthropomorphic divine attributes mentioned in scripture, like God’s face, two eyes, and two hands, as referents to specific levels of God’s creation. The ‘face of God’ (*wajh Allāh*) refers to the First Intellect due to its imperishability and because it contains all the intelligible forms by which things are distinguished. God’s ‘two eyes’ (*‘aynān*) refer to the Universal Soul, the second creation, because the Soul mediates between two worlds – the First Intellect and the world of natural things – and casts one ‘eye’ towards each of the two worlds. God’s ‘two hands’ (*yadān*) refer both to the Prophet Muḥammad and his Spiritual Legatee (*waṣī*), ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, including the Imāms after him, who elucidate the religious law and its spiritual exegesis on God’s behalf (al-Sijistānī 2011: 104–106).

In modern Ismā‘īlī vocabulary, the First Intellect is called either the ‘Light of Imāmate’ (*nūr al-imāma*) or the ‘Light of ‘Alī’ (*nūr ‘Alī*) because it is the metaphysical cosmic reality reflected in each of the Imāms. Pīr Shihāb al-Dīn Shāh (d. 1302/1884), the eldest son and deputy of the forty-seventh Ismā‘īlī Imām, explicitly restated the Ismā‘īlī apophatic theology of *tawḥīd* and the idea of the Light of ‘Alī and Muḥammad as the first and greatest creation of God (al-Ḥusaynī 1963: 2–15). The present Imām, Shāh Karīm al-Ḥusaynī Aga Khan IV, publicly defines his theological status as the ‘the bearer of the Light’ in the manner of a mirror or locus of manifestation: ‘I have been the bearer of the “*Nūr*” a word which means “The Light.” The *Nūr* has been handed down in direct descent from the Prophet’ (Andani 2019: 174). In his religious pronouncements (*firmāns*), the Ismā‘īlī Imām frequently refers to God as ‘He who is above all else’ to emphasize His absolute unity and transcendence over all things, including the Light of Imāmate. Theologically speaking, the Ismā‘īlī Imām has consistently distinguished between his human person, the metaphysical and Neoplatonic Light of Imāmate, and the absolutely transcendent God (‘He who is above all else’): ‘The Imam of the Time shows you the way thereby to bring you closer to the *Nūr* of Imamat, and through the *Nūr* of Imamat, near to He who is above all else’ (Aga Khan IV 1972). The essential role of the Imām in the Ismā‘īlī *ṭarīqa* (spiritual path) of Islam is to guide his *murīds* (spiritual aspirants) to achieve spiritual union with the Light of Imāmate, through which one attains to the complete recognition of *tawḥīd*.

5 Allāh the absolute existence: Ibn ‘Arabī’s mystical thought

The mystical theology of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 637/1240), famously known as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (the Great Master), may be analysed from multiple standpoints and has been subject to various interpretations. Ibn ‘Arabī is most famous for advancing a mystical worldview known as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (the unity of existence), even though he himself did not employ that term. His ideas showcase a critical engagement with Ibn Sīnā’s thought, *kalām* theology, classical Sufi theology, and Ismā‘īlī philosophy.

Ibn ‘Arabī drew on Ibn Sīnā’s idea of God as the Necessary Existence in Himself (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihī*), developing it into a mystical theology of unitary existence. According to his teachings, God is Absolute Existence (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) and all created things are the loci of manifestation for God in the manner of empty mirrors reflecting a light that is extrinsic to them. There is nothing in existence except for God – a phrase that mystically intuits the Muslim testimony of faith (‘there is no god except God’ meaning ‘there is none in existence except God’). In this worldview, God is identical to the very existence (*wujūd*) of all created or contingent things, while created things, in and of themselves, are essentially non-existent. This theology evoked much controversy and has sometimes been characterized as ‘pantheism’. However, upon closer examination of Ibn ‘Arabī’s mystical worldview, charges of pantheism can hardly be justified.

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, God can be considered either with respect to His Essence or with respect to His Names (Chittick 1989: 49). God in Himself, without any consideration of His relationships to creatures, is called the Divine Essence (*dhāt*). God’s Essence cannot be described with any positive names or attributes because creatures have no direct access to It. Thus, Ibn ‘Arabī emphasizes the absolute incomparability (*tanzīh*) of God’s Essence and rejects *kalām* theologies that speak of God as possessing uncreated entitative attributes like knowledge, power, life, etc. Ibn ‘Arabī also affirms a doctrine of divine simplicity by stressing the absolute oneness (*aḥadīya*) of God’s Essence:

In our view there no disputing the fact that the Essence is unknown. To It are ascribed descriptions that make It incomparable with the attributes of temporal things (*al-ḥadath*). It possesses eternity (*al-qidam*), and to Its Being is ascribed beginninglessness (*al-azal*). But all these names designate negations, such as the negation of beginning and everything appropriate to temporal origination.

In respect of Itself the Essence has no name, since It is not the locus of effects, nor is It known by anyone. There is no name to denote It without relationship, nor with any assurance. For names act to make known and to distinguish, but this door is forbidden to anyone other than God, since ‘None knows God but God.’ So the names exist through us and for us. They revolve around us and become manifest within us. (Chittick 1989: 62)

The Essence of God, due to transcending all relationships and descriptions, cannot be named and is not accessible to human reason. Even the Qur'an and Hadith cannot disclose anything concerning God's Essence. 'Reflection has no governing property or domain in the Essence of the Real, neither rationally nor according to the Law' (Chittick 1989: 62). Ibn 'Arabī refers to the Essence of God as Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) and as the Necessary Being (*al-wājib al-wujūd*): 'The Real is existent through His own Essence for His own essence, unbounded in *wujūd*, not bound by other than Himself' (Chittick 1998: 17). Created beings have only a kind of 'relative existence' and 'relative non-existence', since they are nothing more than loci of manifestation (*maẓāhir*) for God in the manner of mirrors reflecting something external to themselves. However, the Essence of God, due to its infinitude and transcendence, is *not* revealed in or by anything in creation:

Were the Essence to make the loci of manifestation manifest, It would be known. Were It known, It would be encompassed (*iḥāṭa*). Were it to be encompassed, It would be limited (*ḥadd*). Were It limited, It would be confined. Were it confined, it would be owned. But the Essence of the Real is highly exalted above this. (Chittick 1989: 60)

While God's Essence remains forever unmanifest and concealed, Ibn 'Arabī also affirms that God's *self-manifestation* is revealed in, through, and as created beings. He refers to the self-manifestation of God as God's Divinity, which is described by God's Names. Ibn 'Arabī conceives of God's Names as referring to relationships (*nisab*, *iḍāfāt*) between God and creatures, as opposed to entitative attributes (*ṣifāt ma'nawīya*) that subsist in God's Essence; in this respect, Ibn 'Arabī rejects a key teaching of Sunnī *kalām* theology. Thus, each Divine Name describes a relationship between a created being and God. All of these divine-creaturely relationships taken together constitute what Ibn 'Arabī calls God's Divinity (*al-ulūhiya*) or God's Level (*al-martaba*). Ontologically speaking, God's Divinity is the primary intermediary or isthmus (*barzakh*) that mediates between God's inaccessible Essence and all created beings:

The Divinity [...] confronts the creatures through Its own essence and It confronts the Essence through Its own essence. That is why It discloses itself (*tajallī*) in many forms, transmuting (*taḥawwul*) Itself and undergoing continual change within them. It has a face toward creation through which It discloses Itself in the forms of creation; It has a face toward the Essence through which It becomes manifest to the Essence. So the created things do not know the Essence except from behind this *barzakh*, which is the Divinity. Nor does the Essence exercise properties within the created beings except through this

barzakh, which is the Divinity. We have verified It, and we have found it no different from the Most Beautiful Names by which we call upon. (Chittick 1989: 62)

The Divine Names are manifold, but they are also ranked according to degrees of excellence. Among all the divine names, the Living (*al-ḥayy*) is the greatest in degree because it is the substrate for all the other Divine Names: 'We know that the degree of the Alive (*al-ḥayy*) is the most tremendous degree among the names, since it is the precondition (*al-shart*) for the existence of the names' (Chittick 1989: 49). God's Divinity, comprising many Divine Names, is often called the 'One-Many' (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*) because the multiplicity of the Divine Names is still undergirded by the unity of God's Essence: 'The entity of Life is the entity of Alive, Knowing, Desiring, and Powerful. And so on with the rest. So the relationships are diverse, but the Entity is One' (Chittick 1989: 52). Thus, every Divine Name – when understood as a predicate or attribute – properly describes God's Divinity and not God's Essence; this is because each Divine Name describes a relationship between God and His creatures, which requires those creatures to exist. Even the all-comprehensive divine name *Allāh*, when taken as signifying all the divine attributes, describes God's Divinity as opposed to God's Essence, which remains beyond positive and negative descriptions:

That which is denoted by the name *Allāh* demands the cosmos and everything within it. So this name is like the name 'king' or 'sovereign.' Hence, it is a name of the Level, not the Essence. (Chittick 1989: 50)

In the context of cosmology and creation, Ibn 'Arabī refers to God's Divinity comprising all the Divine Names as God's 'All-Merciful Breath' (*al-naḥas al-raḥmānī*). The All-Merciful Breath is God's creative word or logos – His eternal act of uttering 'Be', which serves as the perpetual cause of the coming into being of all creatures (Chittick 1989: 126). The All-Merciful Breath is variously called 'the Cloud', 'the Real through Whom Creation takes place' (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*), 'the Supreme *Barzakh*', 'the Reality of Realities', 'the Sphere of Life', and the 'One-Many' (*al-wāḥid al-kathīr*) because the entire Cosmos comes into existence by means of this Breath (Chittick 1989: 141). From the perspective of theology, Ibn 'Arabī identifies God's Divinity, the Divine Names, and God's all-Merciful Breath with the Muḥammadan Light (*al-nūr al-Muḥammadī*) and Muḥammadan Reality (*al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiya*). As stated in his *Kitāb 'anqā' mughrib* (Book of the Fabulous Gryphon), the Muḥammadan Reality is the first self-manifestation of God. The Muḥammadan Reality 'emerged out of the Everlasting Lights (*al-anwār al-ṣamadīya*) and the Unitary Presence (*al-ḥaḍra al-aḥadīya*)' and 'arises in the [Divine] Unity (*al-qā'ima bi-al-aḥadīya*)'; the Muḥammadan Reality is 'the Veil of [God's] Self-Manifestation (*ḥijāb*

tajallī-hi) and the Fashioning of His Self-Adornment (*ṣiyāghat taḥallī-hi*)' (Elmore 1999: 372ff.).

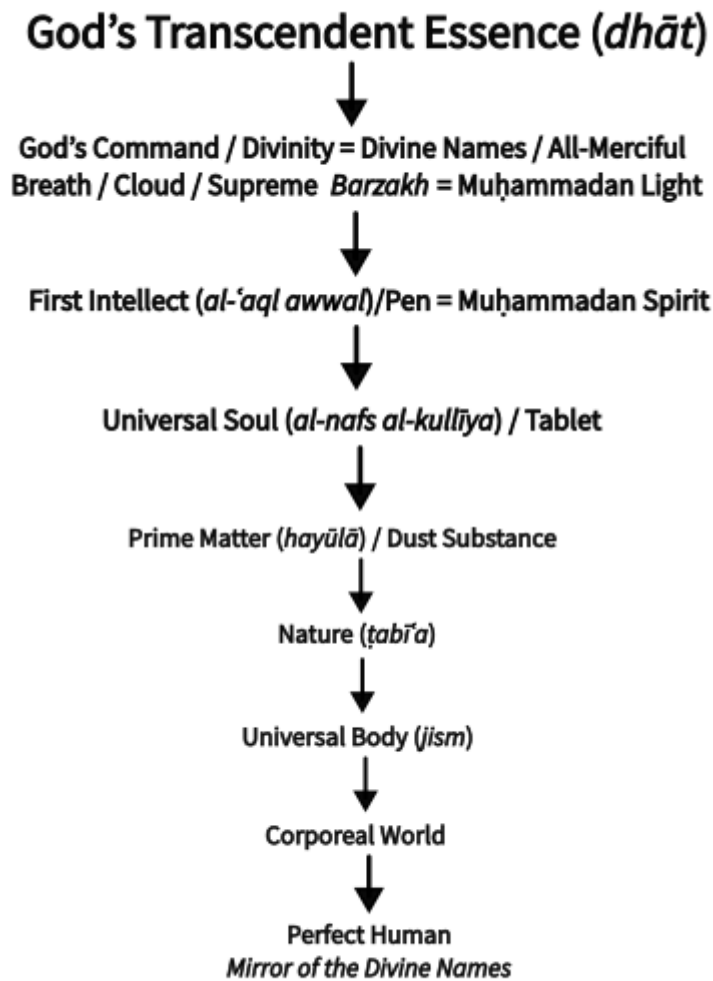


Figure 5. Ibn 'Arabī's mystical theology of God's Essence and self-manifestation.

Through the mediation of the Muḥammadan Reality, the locus of the Divine Names, God originates the Neoplatonic hierarchy of originated and composite beings. The first originated being (*al-mubdaʿ al-awwal*) is the Universal Intellect (or Pen), followed by the Universal Soul (or Guarded Tablet), Nature, Prime Matter, Universal Body, and the corporeal world with its various constituents (Murata 1992: 156–160). All created existents from the First Intellect onward are loci of manifestation that reflect one or more of God's Names and Attributes. Among them, the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) functions as the most perfect and greatest locus of Divine manifestation (*mazhar*) with respect to the Divine Names. The Perfect Human is also the microcosm of the entire created hierarchy, from the spiritual realm to the corporeal world. Perfect Humans have purified and perfected their souls into polished mirrors for all the Divine Names in the proper balance; the Prophet

Muḥammad is the foremost among them. As Ibn ‘Arabī says: ‘The manifestation of the Real within the mirror of Muḥammad is the most perfect, most balanced, and most beautiful manifestation, because of the mirror’s actuality’. Accordingly, Ibn ‘Arabī believes that a Muslim should contemplate God as He is manifest in the mirror of the Prophet’s perfect humanity, as opposed to the far weaker divine manifestations in normal humans or within oneself (Chittick 1989: 241).

This mystical theology of *tawḥīd* allows Ibn ‘Arabī to identify God with the existence of created things, but not with their contingent essences, which lack real existence:

God is identical with the existence of things, but He is not identical with the things [...]. He is identical to all things in manifestation, but He is not identical to them in their essences. On the contrary, He is He, and the things are the things. (Chittick 1989: 89–90)

This means that God is Absolute Existence and any given creature is just an empty mirror or non-existent essence that bears a limited reflection or manifestation of God. God’s Essence remains unknown and unmanifest due to its sheer infinitude, while God’s Divinity, consisting of the Divine Names as the first entification or self-disclosure of God, *is* reflected in and as creatures. Expressed by way of analogy, for Ibn ‘Arabī, God’s Essence corresponds to the sun, the sunlight that emanates from the sun corresponds to God’s Divinity comprising the numerous Divine Names, and creatures are empty mirrors in which the sunlight is reflected without the sun being affected or displaced in any manner. This rebuts the common charge that Ibn ‘Arabī’s mystical worldview is ‘pantheism’ because the latter asserts that God is identical to *the sum of created things*.

By upholding this onto-mystical worldview, Ibn ‘Arabī is also able to accommodate the anthropomorphic descriptions of God found in the Qur’an and Hadith, such as God’s hands, face, descending, sitting, etc. In his view, these various anthropomorphic attributes of God are true with respect to the manifestation of God’s Names or the All-Merciful Breath; this Breath is the substance being reflected within and as the forms of various created things:

The Breath of the All-Merciful is the substance of the engendered things. That is why God described Himself by attributes that belong to temporally originated things, attributes which are considered impossible by rational and considerative proofs. (Chittick 1989: 181)

Thus, when God describes Himself as having two hands, two eyes, descending, sitting, etc., these attributes are correct – even though they pertain to created things – because God’s various loci of manifestation, including physical things, possess these attributes.

Thus, God may be attributed with a face, two hands, and two eyes insofar as some of the loci of manifestation of God's Names, such as human beings, possess these attributes; God descends and sits insofar as certain creatures, who are God's loci of manifestation, descend and sit: 'All things attributed to the locus of manifestation are attributed to Him, whether these be what are commonly considered attributes of imperfection or attributes of perfection and completion' (Chittick 1989: 182).

Ibn 'Arabī's mystical understanding of *tawhīd* was incredibly influential, to the point that his teachings provided the impetus for an entire 'Abkarī tradition' of Sufi metaphysics. His teachings were further interpreted, systematized, and expounded by numerous intellectually gifted mystical thinkers, including Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), Sa'īd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d. 699/1300), Mu'ayyad al-Dīn al-Jandī (d. 700/1300), 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kashānī (d. 730/1330), Dā'ūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350–1351), and 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 827/1424) (see Murata 1992).

6 A return to divine simplicity: post-classical developments in theology and philosophy

The post-classical era of Islamic thought saw the considerable influence of both Ibn Sīnā's philosophy and Ibn 'Arabī's mystical thought, whether within Ottoman lands, Persia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, or East Asia. Many Muslim thinkers in the *kalām* and mystical traditions adopted Ibn Sīnā's argument for God as the Necessary Existence in Himself. This argument became widely popular and was taught in Muslim *madrasas* across Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid lands. During this period, *kalām* theology and Ibn Sīnā's philosophy became so intertwined that Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) could remark that 'the problems of theology (*kalām*) have been confused with those of philosophy (*falsafa*). This has gone so far that the one discipline is no longer distinguishable from the other' (Ibn Khaldūn 2015: 522).

One example of the synthesis between *kalām*, *falsafa*, and Akbarī mysticism is how many post-classical Muslim thinkers refined their understandings of God's attributes and embraced divine simplicity. As mentioned previously, classical Ash'arī, Maturīdī, and Ḥanbalī theologies held that God has entitative attributes (*ṣifāt ma'nawīya*), which are numerically distinct from God's Essence and one another. They argued that God's attributes are neither identical to God nor separate from Him. Meanwhile, the Mu'tazilīs, Twelver Shī'a, Ismā'īlī Shī'a, Zaydī Shī'a, Ibādīs, Philosophers (*falāsifa*), Ishrāqīs, and Akbarī Sufis all upheld divine simplicity – the view that God transcends having entitative attributes that are distinct from His Essence. In the post-classical era, some Sunnī theologians continued to profess the 'entitative attributes' position, trying to reconcile that belief with Ibn Sīnā's teaching that God is the Necessary Existence in Himself. Al-Taftazānī (d. 792/1390), for example, articulated his Ash'arī theology of divine attributes

in Avicennian terms: 'The Necessary Existence through Itself (*al-wājib al-wujūd li-dhātihi*) is God, the Exalted, *and* His attributes, meaning that they [the divine attributes] are necessary due to the Essence of the Necessary, the Exalted, but they are contingent in themselves. There is no impossibility in the eternity of contingent beings since they subsist in the Essence of the Eternal, being necessary through Him' (al-Farhārī 2012: 268–269). Thus, for al-Taftazānī, God's Essence is the Necessary Existence through Itself, while God's uncreated entitative attributes are contingent in themselves, eternally dependent upon and made necessary due to God's Essence.

On the other hand, a significant portion of post-classical Muslim theologians, philosophers, and mystics among the Sunnīs went on to deny entitative attributes for God and uphold divine simplicity. The Sunnī Akbarī followers of Ibn 'Arabī maintained an apophatic account of God's Essence as identical to His attributes. Al-Qūnawī professed that God's Essence transcends all names and attributes and that God's attributes must be considered as identical with His Essence: 'Within Him there is no manyness, composition [*tarkīb*], attribute, depiction [*naʿt*], name, impression, relation or ruling – rather, mere *Wujūd*. Rather, His name is identical with His attribute, and His attribute is identical with His Essence. His perfection is the same as His Essential *Wujūd*, fixed for Him by Himself, not by someone else. His life and His power are identical with His knowledge' (Chittick 2011: 122). 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 897/1492) reports that 'as for the Sūfīs, they took the position that God's attributes were identical to His Essence with respect to existence (*bi-ḥasab al-wujūd*) but other than It with respect to intellection (*al-taʿaqqul*)' (Jāmī 1979: 44). The Akbarīs held that God, in His absolutely unconditioned Essence, transcends names and attributes. However, the divine attributes become distinct and entified at the second level of conditioned or dependent reality, known as the Level of the Divinity or Inclusive Unity (see Figure 6). Thus, al-Qayṣarī explained that:

At the Degree of Inclusive Unity (*al-wāḥidīya*) which is the level of the names and attributes, there are attributes, possessor of attributes, names and the named; it is the Degree of Divinity (*al-ulūhīya*) [...]. In the second level [Unity], knowledge is distinct from power and power is distinct from will. In this way, attributes become multiple, and through this multiplicity, the names and their manifestations become multiple. (Al-Qayṣarī 2020: 61–63, translation slightly modified).

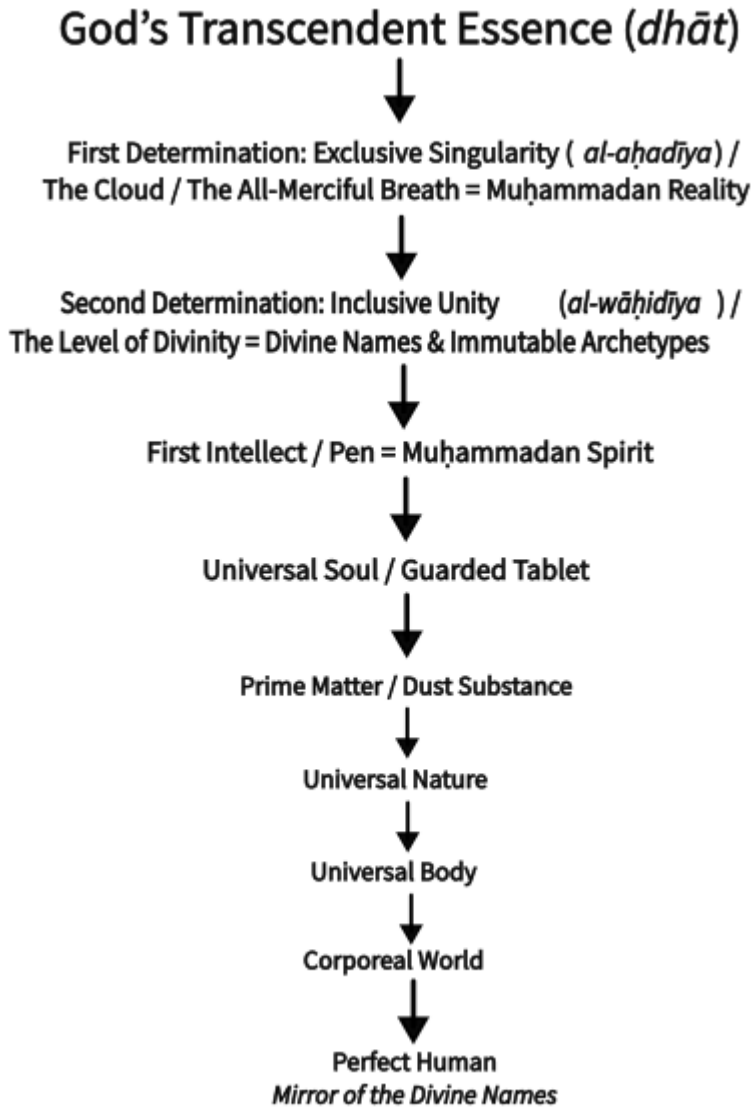


Figure 6. Al-Qayṣarī's Akbarī theology of God's transcendent Essence and His self-manifestations.

Among Sunnī philosophers and theologians, Athīr al-Dīn al-Abharī (d. 654/1265) upheld Ibn Sīnā's teachings on God's Necessary Existence, the metaphysics of divine simplicity, and the eternal creation of the Neoplatonic Intellects in his famous work, *Hidāyat al-Ḥikma* (The Guide to Philosophical Wisdom). This work has been subject to numerous commentaries, super-commentaries, and glosses, and was taught across the *madrasa* curricula; over eight hundred manuscripts of this work are extant in Turkey and elsewhere (Ahmed 2015: 18–19). 'Aḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī (d. 756/1356) in his *al-Mawāqif fī 'ilm al-kalām* (The Stations of Theological Knowledge) stated that God's attributes are only distinct in concept (*mafhūm*) but not in reality (*ḥaqīqa*), thereby upholding divine simplicity (al-Ījī 1981: 280). Al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413), in his *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif* (Commentary on the Stations), affirmed divine simplicity, stating that God's attributes are only conceptually distinct and unitary in reality: 'The Essence [of God] in this perspective is the reality

(*ḥaqīqa*) of knowledge [...] and the reality of power. According to this, the Essence and the attributes are unified in reality (*fī al-ḥaqīqa*) [and] mutually distinct in concept (*al-mafhūm*)' (al-Jurjānī 1998: 55 [vol. 8]).

The modern-era Punjabi Sunnī theologian, 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Farhārī (d. 1239/1824), attests to the popularity of divine simplicity among modern Sunnī scholars in his *al-Nibrās* (The Lantern): 'The Sufis and some of the Ash'arīs are of the view that the [divine] attributes are identical to the [divine] Essence and this [view] is immune to the difficulties that befall the followers of the earlier views' (al-Farhārī 2012: 223). According to al-Farhārī, the Sunnī verifiers (*muḥaqqiqūn*) affirm divine simplicity in accordance with the Sufi teachings of Ibn 'Arabī:

Many among the people of verification (*ahl al-taḥqīq*) are upon the belief in the identity ('*aynīya*) of the [divine] attributes [and the Essence]. The Imām 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī said in *al-Qawā'id al-Kashfiya* that 'His attributes are identical to His Essence and that no one attains to this except through spiritual wayfaring according to the *shaykh*. Spiritual wayfaring is necessary for you in order that He removes the veil from you.' Some of the Sufis narrate from 'Alī that he said: 'The perfection of His [God's] purity is that you negate from Him attributes.' This means 'super-added' [attributes]. (al-Farhārī 2012: 258)

The Ḥanafī-Māturīdī verifier and Sunnī traditionalist Muḥammad Bakhīt al-Muṭī'ī (d. 1354/1935), who served as the Grand Muftī of Egypt and Rector of al-Azhar, affirmed that the 'correct' theological position in Sunnī Islam is that God's attributes are identical with His Essence, in agreement with the divine simplicity of the Mu'tazilīs, Sufis, and the Islamic Philosophers. In his super-commentary on Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī's *Minhāj al-wuṣūl ilā 'ilm al-uṣūl* (The Way to Attaining Knowledge of the Principles) and al-Asnawī's commentary thereon, al-Muṭī'ī refuted the classical Sunnī position that God's attributes are super-added to the Divine Essence, while mildly criticizing al-Taftazānī for affirming this view: 'The verified view (*al-taḥqīq*) is that the position (*madhhab*) of *Ahl al-Sunna* is in agreement with what the Philosophers (*falāsifa*) and the Mu'tazilīs follow and this is also the position of the Sufis: the attributes of the Exalted (God) are not distinct from Him ontologically (*wujūdan*) and not identical to Him conceptually (*mafhūman*)' (al-Muṭī'ī [n.d.]: 79–80 [vol. 4]).

Finally, Aḥmad Riḍā Khān (d. 1340/1921), a renowned renewer (*mujaddid*) of Sunnī Islam in modern times, presented divine simplicity as the 'pure faith' of the Sunnī verifiers, even while criticizing the Islamic Philosophers and Mu'tazilīs at the conceptual level: 'The verifiers (*al-muḥaqqiqā*) are the people of perfection among the spiritual gnostics. They believe that God, the Exalted, has attributes that are identical to the Essence through consideration of the matter according to what is upon Him that no one knows

Him except God Himself and they [the attributes] are distinct from the Essence on account of intellectual considerations – and this is the pure faith’ (Khān 2022: 112). Khān subsequently offered his own position: that God and His attributes are identical to God’s Essence in reality: ‘They [the attributes] are nothing else except identical to the Essence (‘*ayn al-dhāt*) to the absolute exclusion of being super-added (*ziyāda*) [to It]. Understand and affirm [this]’ (Khān 2022: 116).

A strong contingent of Twelver Shī‘ī philosophers, generation after generation, integrated the metaphysical ideas of Ibn Sīnā and Ibn ‘Arabī to produce several original syntheses. These philosophers included Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. 787/1385), Mīr Damād (d. 1040/1631), Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1051/1641), Hādī Sabzavārī (d. 1310/1893), and numerous twentieth-century thinkers, including Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā‘ī (d. 1401/1981), Rūḥullah Khumaynī (d. 1409/1989), Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ḥusaynī Ṭīhrānī (d. 1416/1995), Mahdī Ḥā’irī Yazdī (d. 1317/1999), ‘Allāma Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī (d. 1439/2005), and Ḥasan Ḥasanzādeh Āmulī (d. 1445/2021). These Shī‘ī philosophers upheld divine simplicity in the strongest terms, while also accepting Neoplatonic cosmological schemas resembling those of Ibn Sīnā, the Ismā‘īlīs, or the Akbarīs. For example, Mullā Ṣadrā taught that God is ‘the Necessary Existence that has neither description nor appellation except Its sheer Essence encompassing within Itself all states and the most beautiful and majestic descriptions through Its Unity and Its Singularity’. Ṣadrā demarcated three levels of modulated existence: the True Existence (*al-wujūd al-ḥaqq*), which is God; Absolute Existence, otherwise known as Extended Existence (*al-wujūd al-munbasit*), which is God’s creative action corresponding to the first divine self-manifestation in Akbarī metaphysics; and Delimited Existence (*al-wujūd al-muqayyad*), meaning contingent and conditioned existence, referring to originated beings beginning with the First Intellect (Shīrāzī 1981: 330–331 [vol. 2]).

The above examples attest that a significant contingent of post-classical Sunnī and Shī‘ī theologians, philosophers, mystics, and verifiers upheld divine simplicity and, thereby, denied that God has real-distinct or entitative attributes. Overall, Muslim scholars who affirm divine simplicity include the Mu‘tazilīs, Twelver Shī‘a, Ismā‘īlī Shī‘a, Zaydī Shī‘a, Ibādīs, Philosophers (*falāsifa*), Ishrāqīs, Akbarī Sufis, and a significant number of post-classical Māturīdīs and Ash‘arīs. Despite claims to the contrary, divine simplicity was not a marginal position in the history of Islamic thought; a plurality of Muslim scholars across sectarian lines vigorously upheld and defended the doctrine of divine simplicity.

7 Allāh as the transcendent beloved: *tawḥīd* in Indo-Muslim devotional literature

The various perspectives on *tawḥīd* explored thus far are expressions of the Arabo-Persian Muslim intellectual tradition. It is also important, however, for this survey to

account for local vernacular expressions of Islamic belief in regions like South Asia. Various Sunnī Sufi and Shīʿī Ismāʿīlī *pīrs* (preacher-saints) composed epic poetry, known as *ginān* (gnostic hymns) and *sufiānā-kalām* (mystical-devotional utterances) that facilitated the widespread popularity of Islam in South Asia among indigenous and non-elite populations. Indo-Muslim theo-poetic literature uniquely articulates Sunnī Sufi and Shīʿī understandings of *tawḥīd* using the philosophical, theological, and devotional vocabularies of Indic cultures and spiritual traditions. According to Ali Asani:

Those Muslims who interpreted their faith more esoterically or mystically, saw nothing wrong in adapting Islam to the local Indian environment, its mores and traditions, its languages and symbols [...]. As part of this process, concepts are ‘Indianized’ or ‘indigenized’ and presented in terms that would be familiar and palpable to Indian audiences. (Asani 1991: 221)

The first example of *tawḥīd* expressed in Indo-Muslim vernacular comes from the famous Bengali Muslim epic poem by Sayyid Sulṭān (d. 1057/1648), entitled *Nabīvaṃśa* (Lineage of the Prophet). In this theo-poetic discourse, Sayyid presents a theological and mytho-historical account of God’s self-manifestation in the form of the Light of Muḥammad and the gradual manifestation of that Light through various prophets, culminating in the historical Muḥammad. In doing so, Sayyid freely incorporates into his discourse Indic theological and mystical terminologies for God and His manifestations, such as *Niranjana* (the Unconditioned), *Nirākāra* (the Formless), *Sunyata* (the void), *avatara*, *amsa*, *gunah*, *Rāma*, *Krishna*, *jīvātmān*, etc. In doing so, the Sayyid merged a seemingly ‘Hindu’ vocabulary with Islamic mystical terminology to translate Ibn ʿArabī’s doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and the Muḥammadan Light into a South Asian milieu. For example, Sayyid’s poem includes the following verses:

Without Niranjana, the Immaculate One, nothing is created therein.
 Within form, the formless form ever rests.
 Even as the sun’s rays suffuse the moonlight,
 so too does Niranjana permeate all things.
 Even as butter inheres in cow’s milk,
 So too is the Lord immanent in the world.
 Having taken the form of Muhammad – his own *avatāra* –
 Niranjana manifests his own portion (*amsa*) to propagate himself.
 From time’s beginning to its end, the Creator
 shall create messengers (*paygāmbār*) to rightly guide all peoples. (Irani 2021: 1–2)
 Āhād, Āhmad, separated by the syllable *ma*:
 know that within this syllable *ma* lies the triple world (*tribhuvana*).

The light (*nūr*) from Āhmad created the syllable *ma*.
 Āhād and Āhmad are both of one body (*kalevara*).
 When Āhād beheld the sight of Āhmad,
 he looked closely at him, taking the form of a lover (*bhāvaka*).
 When he saw himself within the form of Āhmad,
 he meditated upon the form, becoming a spiritual aspirant (*sādhaka*).
 Absorbed in the juice of love (*pirīti rasa*), the formless Lord
 began to gaze upon Nūr Muhammad. (Irani 2021: 49)

The above verses from Sayyid's poetry demonstrate how he interwove various spiritual symbols from Indic traditions (Upanishads, Vedanta, Sant, Yoga, etc.) with Sufi metaphysical ideas drawn from the tradition and heirs of Ibn 'Arabī. God is termed *Niranjan* (Unconditioned) and made formless in accordance with Akbarī teachings on the unmanifest Divine Essence; yet God is also said to pervade all things like butter in cow's milk. This communicates the doctrine of God's self-manifestation in all existents through the Divine Names using Indic tropes. The poem also integrates the Upanishadic cosmogony of God creating all things through the sacred syllable 'Aum' ('Om') with the Qur'anic doctrine of God creating through His word 'Be'. Sayyid connects the divine logos, represented by 'Aum' and 'Be', to the emanation of the Light of Muḥammad (*nūr Muḥammad*) from God's Essence – respectively referred to as 'Aḥmad' and 'Aḥad'. The Light of Muḥammad proceeds from God's Essence as God's self-image (*svarūpa*) in the manner of reflection within a mirror. Sayyid further describes how God and the Light of Muḥammad gaze at each other with passionate love, which causes the Light of Muḥammad to 'sweat'. All creation then emanates from the 'sweat' of the Muḥammadan Light (Irani 2021: 34–35).

Sayyid's poem goes on to describe the details of creation and the earthly manifestation of the Muḥammadan Light through the various ancestors of the historical Muḥammad. In another example of integrating Indic religious symbolism with Arabo-Islamic motifs, Sayyid presents the seven famous *avatāras* of Lord Vishnu, recognized in Vaishnavi *bhakti* (devotion) as pre-Adamic ancestors of the Prophet Muḥammad: the Fish (*matsya*), the Turtle (*kūrma*), the Boar (*varāha*), the Man-Lion (*nṛsiṃha*), the Brahmin Dwarf, Paraśurāma, and Rāma (Irani 2021: 188). The lineage of 'Hindu' *avatāras* seamlessly connects to the 'Islamic' prophets and the famous Arab forefathers of the Prophet to form one divinely favoured genealogy (Irani 2021: 38). The culmination of this narrative is the historical advent of the Prophet Muḥammad, whom Sayyid terms the 'Muḥammad *avatāra*', the greatest manifestation of the Light of Muḥammad who calls humankind to *tawḥīd* as the fulfilment of all prior religious scriptures, *avatāras*, and prophets. Overall, Sayyid Sultan's theo-poetic discourse in the *Nabīvaṃśa* supplants our modern

dichotomous notions of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' (i.e. Arabo-Persian) with an Indo-Muslim synthesis:

This enables *hinduāni* peoples to see themselves as the original forebears of Islam, as part of an Indo-Islamic salvation history, wherein their scriptures predict the advent of the Muhammad *avatāra*, the *avatāra* of the *kali* age. (Irani 2021: 349)

A second example of an Indo-Muslim gnostic-devotional account of *tawḥīd* is found within the gnostic hymns composed by the Shī'ī Ismā'īlī *pīrs*. These *pīrs* were deputized by the Ismā'īlī Imāms in Persia from the thirteenth century onwards to preach the Ismā'īlī interpretation of Islam in various regions of India. In doing so, the *pīrs* composed didactic, devotional, and gnostic hymns called *ginān*. These *gināns*, similar to the Sunnī Indo-Muslim Bengali literature examined above, seamlessly integrated Shī'ī Muslim, Ismā'īlī Neoplatonic, and Sufi Akbarī terminologies from the Arabo-Persian vernacular with the Vaishnavite, Vedantic, Sant, *bhakti*, Shavite, and Yogic vocabularies prevalent in South Asia. Overall, the Ismā'īlī *gināns* dynamically translated the Ismā'īlī apophatic *tawḥīd* and its Neoplatonic cosmogony into an Indic spiritual milieu.

The grounding principle of the Indic Ismā'īlī mystical worldview is an apophatic theology framed using Indic *nirgunī* vocabulary. The *Rūḥānī Visāl* (Spiritual Union) of Pīr Ḥasan Kabīr al-Dīn (fl. fourteenth century) opens with the phrase: 'In the beginning there was God without attributes (*ādam ād niriñjan*), He who was without qualities (*naragun*) and without form (*āpe arūp*)' (Asani 2002: 153). Pīr Shams (fl. thirteen-fourteenth century) describes God prior to creation: 'Then, the Unique Niriñjan was totally alone; And there were no sacred words of the Vedas' (Kassam 1992: 258). These *gināns* effectively translate the Ismā'īlī Neoplatonic apophatic view of *tawḥīd* into an Indian vernacular.

The *gināns* also articulate Indo-Ismā'īlī cosmogonies by integrating 'Hindu' creation stories with Qur'anic and Shī'ī Neoplatonic cosmogonies. The *Khaṭ Niriñjan* (Highest Unseen) of Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn (fl. fourteenth century) presents a cosmogony in which the ineffable and transcendent God, the *Niriñjan* (Unconditioned), primordially originates the Divine Gnostic (*gināni*) as an expression of the Divine Gnosis (*ginān*):

Then there was neither earth nor heaven; yet Niriñjan (the Unconditioned) subsisted by Himself;

In the void, rapt in self-contemplation, through His perfect will He originated the Divine Gnosis (*brahm ginān*).

The Divine Gnostic (*gināni*) meditated on the Divine Gnosis (*ginān*), yet Niriñjan (the Unconditioned) subsisted by Himself. (Ṣadr al-Dīn 1919: Verse 2–4)

The primordial Divine Gnostic, as the first origination of the absolutely transcendent Niriñjan, is the celestial Light of Imāmate, corresponding to the Universal Intellect, which the *gināns* identify as Lord Vishnu. The same *ginān* goes on to describe how the Divine Gnostic (or Vishnu), through self-contemplation, causes the emanation of Lord Brahmā; this Brahmā goes on to create the spiritual and material Cosmos by the command and permission of Vishnu. Thus, some *ginānic* cosmologies depict a Vishnu-Brahmā creation myth in a way that closely parallels the Neoplatonic Universal Intellect and Universal Soul.

Accordingly, the *gināns* present each Shī‘ī Ismā‘īlī Imām as the *avatāra* of Lord Vishnu, the first self-manifestation of God. The Indic doctrine of *avatāra* serves as the dynamic equivalent of the Ismā‘īlī concept of the Imām as a *maẓhar* (the mirror or locus of manifestation) of the Divine Names of God’s First Origination. The *gināns* further present the Prophet Muḥammad and each Ismā‘īlī *pīr* after him as the *avatāra* of Lord Brahmā, the second divine manifestation and cosmic demiurge. In the *gināns*, Vishnu and Brahmā cosmologically correspond to the Universal Intellect and Universal Soul of Ismā‘īlī Neoplatonic thought; the *gināns* identify these two metacosmic principles with the Light of Imāmate (the eternal cosmic ‘Alī) and the Light of Prophethood (the eternal cosmic Muḥammad), respectively. Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn proclaims this dynamic equivalence as follows: ‘Know that the primordial Vishnu is the Lord ‘Alī; Certainly, Gūru Brahmā is the Prophet Muḥammad’ (Ṣadr al-Dīn 1990, verse 456). Pīr Shams declares: ‘The *avatāra* of this fourth age is Nakalanka; Know that he is a Muslim [...] He has taken form (*avatāra*) as the man Islām Shāh’ (Kassam 1992: 192–193). Sayyid Abdūl-Nabī referred to the fortieth Ismā‘īlī Imām as the *avatāra* of the age: ‘The ever-living Lord (*swāmī*) and Master (*shāh*) has his seat in Kahak, manifest in the form (*avatāra*) of ‘Alī’ (Shackle and Moir 1992: 98–101). Just like Bengali Indo-Muslim literature, the *gināns* also present an uninterrupted lineage of Imāms, prophets, and *pīrs*, beginning with the first creation and encompassing the famous *avatāras* of Vishnu, including Ramā and Krishnā, before culminating in the historical Muḥammad, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, and their joint lineal descendants, the Ismā‘īlī Imāms (Khan 2005).

8 Contesting *tawḥīd*: intercessory prayer (*istighātha*) in Islam

In the present day, it is commonplace to find lay Muslims claiming that Islam rejects all intermediaries between humanity and God, especially with respect to prayer and supplication. Some Muslims, especially those following the Wāḥḥābī-Salafī school of thought, condemn anyone who evokes intermediaries when seeking God’s help as

idolators (*mushrik*) and unbelievers (*kāfir*). Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1208/1792), the founder of the Wahhābī-Salafī movement, and Ibn Bāz (d. 1439/1999), the former Salafī Grand Muftī of Saudi Arabia, have written (with the second adding to the words of the first): ‘Calling upon the dead, asking for their help, or offering them gifts or sacrifices are all forms of *shirk*. Setting up intermediaries between oneself and God, making supplication to them, or asking for their intercession with God is unbelief (*kufr*) by the consensus of the community’ (Rippin 2004: 134–135). The Salafī condemnation of intercessory prayer as *shirk* and a violation of *tawḥīd* remains a popular refrain among lay Muslims who lack formal training in the Islamic sciences. Ironically, the historical majority of Sunnī and Shī‘ī Muslims, including the scholarly elite and the laity, have considered intercessory prayer as a permissible if not recommended religious practice.

The practice of supplicating to the Prophet Muḥammad, the Imāms, or Saints (*awliyā’ Allāh*) for help in their capacity as intermediaries for God’s blessings is known as *istighātha*, which I render here as ‘intercessory prayer’. The majority of premodern Muslims, both among the scholarly elite and in popular local contexts, accepted the permissibility of intercessory prayer. The late Shahab Ahmed has aptly described the popular Muslim practice of seeking the blessings of saints through visiting their shrines: ‘The near-universal pre-modern practice of the visitation (*ziyāra*) of Sufi tomb-shrines to benefit from the blessing of the spiritual power of the deceased saint is expressive of the recognition on the part of its practitioners of an Unseen cosmos of Revealed Truth in which Sufi practitioners were active participants and of which they were active conveyors’ (Ahmed 2015: 20). At the scholarly level, there is a steady stream of Sunnī scholars, going back centuries and hailing from various legal and theological schools, who passionately defended intercessory prayer. Some of these famous Sunnī defenders of *istighātha* include: Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 750/1355), Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Qaṣṣālānī (d. 923/1517), Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ramlī (d. 957/1550), Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1566), ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1143/1731), Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Qabbānī (fl. 1100s/1700s), ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Azharī al-Ṭandatāwī (fl. 1100s/1700s), Ibn Kīrān al-Fasī (d. 1227/1812), Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (d. 1303/1886), Qāḍī Yūsuf al-Nabhānī (d. 1351/1932) (see Lav 2021; Ibn Qudāma 1990: 40; al-Ramlī [n.d.]: 362 [vol. 4]; al-Nabhānī 2007: 213; Heck 2012).

Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ramlī (d. 957/1550), the Grand Imām of al-Azhar, Grand Muftī of Egypt, and Shaykh al-Islām, explicitly permitted intercessory prayer: ‘Seeking help (*al-istighātha*) through the Prophets, Messengers, Saints, scholars, and the righteous is permissible because the Messengers, Saints, and the righteous grant help after their deaths because the miracles of the Prophets and the supernatural gifts of the Saints are not cut off with their death’ (al-Ramlī [n.d.]: 362 [vol. 4]). Intercessory prayer is a well-established practice in Twelver and Ismā‘īlī Shī‘ī communities, as evidenced by the common Shī‘ī greeting *Yā ‘Alī Madād* (O ‘Alī help) and popular petitions that Shī‘ī Muslims address to the

Imāms, such as *Nād ‘Alī* (Call ‘Alī). On the whole, intercessory prayer is a core feature of mainstream historical Islam in both its popular and scholastic manifestations.

The pro-*istighātha* position of the majority of Muslims and the anti-*istighātha* position of the Salafīs are undergirded by very different theological visions. This debate is not merely about orthopraxy, but ultimately concerns a correct understanding of *tawhīd*. For example, the anti-*istighātha* stance of the Wahhābīs and Salafīs is rooted in the theological views of Ibn Taymīya. Their doctrine of *tawhīd* comprises at least two dimensions: *tawhīd al-ulūhīya* and *tawhīd al-rubūbiya*. The latter, *tawhīd al-rubūbiya*, involves recognizing God as the absolute creator and sustainer of all creatures. For Ibn Taymīya and the Wahhābīs, the Meccan polytheists affirmed God’s *rubūbiya*. *Tawhīd al-ulūhīya*, on the other hand, means directing certain practices and rituals exclusively to God; this was the distinctive message of the prophets. In this paradigm, a supplication (*du‘ā’*) should only be directed to God. According to Salafī and Taymī theology, supplicating a created being, including a prophet or saint, amounts to a violation of *tawhīd al-ulūhīya* and registers as *shirk* (Bunzel 2023: 120–122, 128–130). Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb employed this ‘two *tawhīds*’ framework to declare that all Muslims who practise intercessory prayer are truly *mushriks* (idolators) and *kāfirs* (unbelievers) (Bunzel 2023: 130–123). However, the *tawhīd* theologies of most other Muslims greatly differ from the Wahhābīs and the Taymīs with their dichotomous *tawhīd*; this is why most Muslims have historically accepted intercessory prayer as unproblematic. The Ash‘arīs argued for the permissibility of intercessory prayer through arguments rooted in their particular theology of *tawhīd*. As mentioned previously, Ash‘arī theology holds that God is the sole agent and cause of all actions; human beings have no agency, merely ‘acquiring’ (*kasb*) actions that God creates within them. Thus, al-Subkī justified intercessory supplications directed to the Prophet as follows:

Thus Allāh is asked for aid, and the aid comes from Him in the sense of creation and existentiatio; and the Prophet is asked for aid, and the aid comes from Him [in his capacity] as a non-causal medium by acquisition (*tasabbuban wa-kasban*). (Lav 2021: 267)

Thus, within Ash‘arī theology, the Prophet has no agency or independent power to grant anything; it is God granting the help by creating it and the Prophet functions as an instrumental intermediary who ‘acquires’ the created aid and dispenses it to the supplicant: ‘The Prophet, may Allāh’s blessing and peace be upon him, is an intermediary (*wāsiṭa*) between Allāh and the one asking for aid’ (Lav 2021: 268).

Meanwhile, Avicennians, Akbarī Sufis, mystical Twelver Shī‘īs, and Shī‘ī Ismā‘īlīs ground the efficacy and legitimacy of intercessory prayer in their Neoplatonic understandings of *tawhīd*. These Neoplatonic paradigms hold that the absolutely timeless and transcendent God necessarily emanates His blessings (*baraka*) and mercy (*rahma*) upon contingent

beings without restriction; God's blessings, mercy, and favours emanate through various spiritual intermediaries, including the purified souls of the prophets, Imāms, and saints, from whom the supplicant may attain God's blessings:

The idea of the cosmic economy of *baraka* proceeds directly from the Neo-Platonic logic of emanation that underpins the Avicennan cosmos – indeed, an ordinary Muslim's *ziyāra* to obtain the *baraka* that emanates from the tomb of a Sufi in a village or mountain pass in Morocco, India or Indonesia is precisely a de facto acknowledgment of and active participation in a cosmos organized and structured and experienced in Neo-Platonic, Avicennan, and Akbarian terms. (Ahmed 2015: 92)

Avicennian, Akbarī, and Ismā'īlī understandings of *tawhīd* envision what the late Shahab Ahmed calls a 'cosmic economy of *baraka*' in which every creature receives, participates in, and distributes a share of God's blessings based on its receptivity and existential capacities. The souls of the prophets, Imāms, and saints are regarded as far more receptive to God's ever-flowing blessings than normal humans. Based on this logic, the practice of seeking help from the prophets, Imāms, or saints to alleviate one's spiritual or physical needs is as intuitive and routine as seeking the aid of doctors, friends, or even material sustenance in everyday life. God's *baraka* continuously 'flows' through all His creatures, all of which are intermediaries dependent upon God. God alone is the independent source of all help. Thus, the act of praying to a human being for assistance does not contradict *tawhīd* at all; rather, this practice affirms *tawhīd* due to the supplicant's recognition that all help and blessings comes from God, regardless of the intermediary one obtains them by.

9 Conclusion: 'The Truth without trace or name'

The theological, mystical, and practical expositions of *tawhīd* examined in this survey showcase the discursive understandings of Muslim intellectual elites. While discursive expressions of *tawhīd* are certainly valuable and meaningful, it is perhaps more appropriate to conclude this survey with a glimpse of a popular, vernacular, and gnostic-devotional expression of *tawhīd*.

One finds this in the popular Sufi poetry of the Punjabi Chishtī *pīr*, Khwāja Ghulām Farīd (d. 1322/ 1904). Khwāja Ghulām's poems are popularly recited to this day among South Asian Muslims in various devotional settings and, more recently, on Coke Studio's YouTube channel. In the below *kāfī*, entitled *Ḥusn-i Ḥaqīqī* (The Sublime Reality), Khwāja attempts to address God in a manner most befitting His greatness. In doing so, the poet rehearses the entire theological and mystical vocabulary that Muslims have employed to describe *tawhīd* over the last millennium. In the end, every theological term, mystical

doctrine, and devotional epithet uttered by Khwāja fails to describe God and melts away. Muslims have sought to conceptualize God through various articulations of *tawḥīd* but, in the end, God’s absolute unity eludes all attempts at theological conceptualization. God in His true reality is ultimately beyond *tawḥīd*.

Oh! Real-True Beauty (*ḥusn-i ḥaqīqī*), Beginning-less Light (*nūr-i azal*)!
Shall I call you ‘Necessary,’ (*vājib*) or shall I call you ‘Contingent-Possible’ (*imkān*)?
Shall I call you ‘Creator’ (*khāliq*), ‘Pre-Eternal Self- Essence’ (*zāt-i qadīm*)?
Shall I call you a ‘New Event’ (*ḥādith*)? Shall I call you a ‘Creation in this World’ (*khalq-i jahān*)?
Shall I call you ‘Absolute Pure Existence’ (*muṭlaq mahḍ vujūd*)?
[...]
Shall I call you ‘Dasrat,’ ‘Bichhman,’ or ‘Rām’?
Shall I call you ‘Sītā, my Darling One’? ...
Shall I call you ‘Mahā Dēv’? Shall I call you ‘Bhagwān’?
[...]
Repent now Farid forever!
For whatever I may say is less,
Do I call you the pure (*pāk alakḥ*) and the humane?
The Truth (*ḥaqq*) without trace or name. (Ahmed 2015: 88–90; for a musical rendition, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lbp4GXmF0ZQ>)

Attributions

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