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## **Image of God and Man in Islam and Christianity<sup>1</sup>**

### Introduction

One of the subjects being discussed in "Comparative Religious Studies" is the concept of God (Diety) near different religious traditions, Abrahamic or non-Abrahamic.

According to the studies conducted by the relevant scholars, especially in the past century, the concept of God in different religions has had one of the following diverse formats:

1. A "single" being (monotheism), vs. a "multiple" being (polytheism).
2. A "personal" being, vs. an "impersonal" (abstract, conceptual) being.
3. A "metaphysical" being not prone to embodiment or incarnation, vs. a reality prone to be embodied in human beings, as well as other creatures.

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<sup>1</sup>. Paper presented by Dr. Abdolrahim Gavahi at the Sixth Round of Dialogue Between Islam and Orthodox Christianity, Moscow, July 16-17, 2008

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4. The concept of God as the absolute power of the whole universe and thus the creator and coordinator of everything, overseeing man and nature, vs. the concept of God as the initial creator of the world who has abandoned it afterwards.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, this list does not stop here and upon further contemplations many other concepts of God can be added to it, including the one perceiving God as a "natural" entity (such as the sun near Mithraism), vs. the concept of God as a totally supernatural being (such as YHWH or Allah near Judaism and Islam).

Accordingly, world living religions have also been classified into different groups which, though an interesting subject, is beyond our present discussion.

### **The Concept of God near Abrahamic Religions**

In the light of the above classifications, it is appropriate to say that the concept of God near Abrahamic religions is that God is one single, personal, metaphysical, and all-inclusive being which governs the whole universe.

Before going into any details regarding this conception of God, it is necessary to briefly address two points:

1. The fact that all three Abrahamic traditions share a single common historical root and that is their originating from the great prophet Abraham, as we read in the holy Quran: "And they say: Be Jews or Christians so that you may be rightly

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<sup>2</sup>. For details see Hume, Robert, *World Living Religions*, translated by Abdolrahim Gavahi, Nashr-e Elm, 1386, pp. 22-24.

guided, say, nay! Only the creed of Abraham, the one firm in faith, and he was not one of those who associate others with God. Say: We believe in God, and that which has been revealed to us, and that which was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was bestowed upon Moses and Jesus, and that which was bestowed upon other prophets from their Lord; We make no distinction between one and another of them, and to Him alone have we submitted ourselves."<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, one of the great problems of Judaism and Christianity is that they believe that each of them alone is the sole representative of the Abrahamic heritage,<sup>4</sup> and that only recognize the Books and Prophets which have come before themselves and deny those having come after them. This is an important issue which we will discuss later on.

Obviously, if we acknowledge that all three great religions within Abrahamic tradition originate from the same common historical background, and that they are sent through the same one God, then it follows that the basic concepts within these three religions, concepts such as God, sacred book, faith, afterlife, man, resurrection, creation, disbelief and else, should be from the same basic root too and so they should not have any major differences except in such minor issues as "being revealed in the language of their community" or "revealed in some specific geographical location destined to that community". Otherwise, they should enjoy the same theological and anthropomorphical foundations.

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<sup>3</sup>. Holy Quran 2/135-6

<sup>4</sup>. See holy Quran 3/67 and elsewhere.

But, as we all know, in Islam's and Christianity's specific expressions about "God" and "Man" there is a considerable difference that one does not notice the same between Islam and Judaism, at least not to the same extent or depth. This difference, in our opinion, arises from the very conception of Jesus near Christians that he is the "Son of God" or even, in some specific references, the Lord Himself. In other words, belief in God's embodiment or incarnation in a specific human being and, accordingly, the belief in three entities, God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit, or what is generally called "Trinity", which has been vigorously condemned in Islam.<sup>5</sup>

Although, recently, there have been considerable efforts on the side of modern Christian scholars to somehow modify and explain these two concepts, i.e. incarnation and trinity, one of the most noteworthy of them is John Hick's assessment that: "In spite of long Christian tradition, doctrines such as trinity, incarnation, and sacrifice are not revelation truths but, as demonstrated after renaissance, they are theological concepts made by human beings. Therefore, these theological views are by no means irrefutable or immutable, but deemed to reconsideration"<sup>6</sup>, and the undersigned, as a professor of foreign (non-Islamic) religions and comparative religious studies, just like professor Hick, have always been of the opinion that the concept of "trinity" has not been present in the original Christianity and the teachings of Jesus the Christ and that, even today, one can not clearly discern it from the text of New Testament, but is the product of some of the

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<sup>5</sup>. See holy Quran 5/116-7 and elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup>. Hick. John, Islam and Christian Monotheism, article reproduced in D.C. Sherbok, ed. , Islam in the World of Diverse Faith, St. Martin Press Inc., 1977, pp. 1-17; translated by M.H. Mohammadpour, in Haft Aseman quarterly, No. 30, pp. 77-95.

clergies present in Nicea and Constantinople Councils in 325 A.D. and 381 A.D. respectively, yet, anyhow, it can not be denied that nowadays trinity, along with the doctrine of incarnation, seem to be among the cardinal beliefs of Christianity, thus differentiating it from the purely monotheistic teachings of Islam and Judaism. Although the great share of unitarian beliefs in Christian thought should not be ignored either.<sup>7</sup>

I believe that the supernatural pregnancy of the Blessed Mary and the strange birth of Jesus the Christ from an unmarried mother should have been a very natural Justification for Jesus saying: "my father is in the sky", to whoever dared to ask him about his father. Gradually, this notion turned into "Our divine father" or "Our heavily father", which we frequently find in the Gospels. Most probably, this has also been the very basis of the famous prayer "Pater Noster" near Christians.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that, on the whole, one studying the text of the four Gospels does not readily come to the conclusion that the God of Gospels is a trinitary God; rather, the prevalent image of God in Gospels more resembles the monotheistic view of other Abrahamic traditions. Surprisingly, this is exactly the same view expressed in the Declaration of Roman Catholics Faith. As quoted in Haft Aseman quarterly of world religions, in this "Dogmatic Constitution of Catholic Faith" we read: "Apostolic Catholic Church of Rome believes and confesses that there is only one true and living God who is the creator and lord of heavens and earth. He is a God with absolute power and is eternal, invisible, uncomprehensible and unlimited in intellect, will and other

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<sup>7</sup>. Views of such renowned personalities as Irinius, Tertulian, Origen and others. For details see "Triune God in the Bible and the Dawn of Christian Orthodoxy" by Robert Wilken, translated by Elias Arifzadeh, Haft Aseman quarterly, No.14, pp. 90-116.

existential qualities. Since God is a single spiritual essence, all-pervasive and immutable, it has to be acknowledged that He is necessarily and really distinct from the whole universe, possesses perfect and eternal blessings in its very nature, and is profoundly superior to everything which exists or comes to one's mind or imagination.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of the above explanations, we would like to briefly conclude that friendship and proximity between Islam and Christianity or, on the other hand, their distance and antagonism, does not depend on their similarities or differences on this or that theological concept or item of creed. The same way that this is also true about the relation between Islam and Judaism, or Judaism and Christianity. But, what has made these two great Abrahamic traditions to stand against each other or, at times, declare war towards each other and engage in armed confrontations, is rooted in what we briefly mentioned at the beginning of this paper and that is the inappropriate and unwise habit of denying the Books and Prophets of the succeeding traditions.

Naturally, when one denies a religious tradition, especially when it is seen as a competitor and threat, he does not stop at just ignoring it but tries to stop and, if possible, destroy it by all means. That is why Annemarie Schimmel, the great contemporary Orientalist and Islamologist, says:

"Among all the religions which Christianity had to confront and deal with, Islam was"

"both misunderstood and attacked most intensely. For more than a millennium"

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<sup>8</sup>. Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Faith, chapter 1, as reproduced in John Hick's article on "Islam and Christian Monotheism", *ibid*, pp 82-3.

"Islam seemed to be a major – if not the major – threat for the people of Europe, and"

"this feeling has contributed to the fact that Islam and those who confessed it,"

"The Muslims, were regarded as arch enemies of Christianity and western civilization".<sup>9</sup>

While, on the other hand, Islam considers the Christians to be the closest People of the Book to Muslim.<sup>10</sup>

It seems the necessary prerequisite of the man's and the world's welfare and happiness is peace and tranquility, and the necessary prerequisite of peace and tranquility is mutual understanding, and the necessary prerequisite of that is mutual discussion and dialogue, and finally the necessary prerequisite of positive and useful dialogue is mutual respect of discussing parties and that they really and truly believe in each other's truthfulness and righteousness. Needless to say, in the long course of Islamo-Christian civilizations, we are still far away from this goal. Only in case of mutual acceptance and respect, we can make a mutual front of Abrahamic religions and jointly fight disbelief, cruelty, injustice, poverty, exploitation, ethical mischief's, destruction of nature and environment, and all the other vices of the present world, and make a better, more humane, and more ethical world together.

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<sup>9</sup>. Schimmel, Annemarie, Islam: an Introduction, State University of New York Press, 1992, p-1

<sup>10</sup>. Holy Quran 5/82