

God and His Unity. A Christian Voice

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“Our help is in the Name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.”

Introduction

Two introductory remarks:

1. We may consider it a great grace that we have this time together to peruse the mystery of God the ONE. This time is at once marvelous and splendid, but also terrifying.
2. We are not the first Muslims and Christians who come together to try to speak about God, as. In the past our language was strongly apologetic. We had to *defend* (apology) a view *against* (*contra*) the other, even if we did not know exactly what the other was thinking. I believe it must be possible to speak in another way, leaving behind as far as possible the language of apologetics and entering into the language of dialogue, with respect for differences and trying to understand the other in the way he or she understands him or herself, without prejudices.

A monk of the sixth century, Abbot Dorotheus of Gaza, used an image that may fit what we are doing. He tells the case of a desert father who drew a large circle on the ground and said, “This is the world, and the middle, the very center of the world, is God. We all stand on the circumference. The closer we get to the center, the closer we get to one another. On the other hand, the farther way we get from the center, the farther we get from one another.”

My presentation has three parts: a general understanding of the UNITY of God, of God the ONE; some light from the Gospel and the New Testament, namely, how Jesus, Paul and his school, James, and John considered God the One. Finally, a word on Unity and Trinity.

I. The Mystery of God, the One, in a Christian Perspective.

Only God is one. God is ONE as nobody is one. There is something incomparable in the contemplation of God in his unity. We are the one and the other; we are this and not that; we are peculiar, formed by a past, by a before that is already done and a future that comes after and is not yet accomplished. In time and in space, we are this and not that, we are here and not elsewhere, or elsewhere and not here; we are completely *hic et nunc*, here and now. To be clearly ONE in oneself and with oneself is something that happens to us only from time to time. But when we consider God, it does not work that way. If God is God, he is never sometimes this and otherwise not this, or only from time to time this and not this. . . .

This unity of God is fascinating, enticing; it affects us, unifies us. In fact this Unity, in act, is a source, an invitation, a given fullness, an eternal presence, paradoxally transcending everything—and that is even true for the archangels, says the Tradition, But this Unity is also immanent, accessible in an eminent way, in everything and in everybody.

This unity reveals itself as being in part impenetrable, escaping every analysis, every human understanding, all that a person can grasp and measure. It is of the order of what is *too* beautiful,

too great, too strong. We perceive that our spirit is incapable of integrating what is given us to contemplate and reflect on.

All we can do is to be watchful, wait, and marvel at the threshold of His temple. Breathing God, living in thanksgiving, opening our conscientiousness to the Great Consciousness that encompasses us and penetrates us, illuminating us. The divine Unity bears everything, goes through everything, assumes everything. At the limit, the One and the Totality of everything come to a certain coincidence. The All is not outside the One because the One has no outside. To open one's mind to the One implies being disposed to open one's mind to All, to the totality, the universal. If one chooses to be open to the One, but refuses something of the All, will that person not pass by to the side of the One? How great is this contemplation; how great is the Mystery of the ONE. We can only adore in silence, without any representation, without idols, without statues, external or internal. The incomparable ONE shatters all idolatrous statues that keep reappearing always and everywhere. The one who remains centered on the living divine ONE never ceases to eliminate from his or her heart every idolatrous temptation.

Let us still consider two major aspects of the Unity of God.

God is ONE at the very beginning. And God is still one at the end, at the most ultimate of time and space.

God is ONE at the origin of everything, before something comes to being. What was there when there was still nothing? There was nothing and there was God, God as nothing at all. (So Meister Eckhart and some Cabbalists). God: All and Nothing; God: Nothing at all, because God is not a thing.

God is also the ONE as the end of everything. The day will come where God will be all in all, or, as it is written, all and in everyone. As we read in Colossians 3:9-11: “. . . you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! [Christ: *panta kai en pasin*];

In 1 Corinthians 15:27-28 we read, “For ‘God has put all things in subjection under his feet.’ But when it says, ‘All things are put in subjection’, it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all” (God: *panta en pasin*).

God is one in the origin of All, as the Source; God is one in the end of everything, as the goal and finality to which all tends. God is one in a presence that encompasses *and* the origin *and* the end. God is Total Presence, and so always here and now. For God, origin and end are not opposed but coincident. We are not able to think of the origin without reascending time until we reach an original starting point. So also for the ultimate: we project an absolute future as the ultimate point of history and the cosmos. But God penetrates all of this at once in what some have called “the Total Presence” (see Louis Lavelle, French philosopher, +1951).

What I have brought together here is to be found in certain ancient philosophers like Plotinus; in some mystics like the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite; and in the eleventh century Jewish master in Spain, Bahya Ibn Paquda (ca 1080), who wrote in Arabic: *An Introduction to the*

Duties of the Heart. The first of his ten Porches is dedicated to the Unity of God¹. I have also consulted the articles on *de deo uno* of Saint Thomas in his *Summa*, as well as some recent commentaries, for instance of Karl Rahner.

II. Did Jesus, Paul, his disciples, John, and James see God as One or the ONE?

All share the common biblical and Jewish faith of only One God: God is the One.

When a scribe asks Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answers:

Mark 12:29-33 “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.’ Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”; and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbour as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.”

“The Lord our God is the Lord ONE”. *Adonaij Elohenu Adonaij EHAD*.

In the common exegesis of that time, wherever you find *ehad* (“one”), the divine is there. Thus, in the beginning of chapter 10 of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus uses this way of reasoning when giving his teaching on marriage: “But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh [*basar ehad*]. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

Another passage of Mark’s Gospel shows the spontaneous reflex of Jesus with regard to the oneness of God: “As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10:17-18).

¹ About ‘*True Unity*’, taken from *The Duties of the Heart*, written by Bahya Ibn Paqûda, (ca 1080). THE word One, in common speech, denotes both accidental, transitory unity and a unity that is essential and permanent. It is this essential and permanent unity that is true unity . . . Even where the word one, in the sense of accidental unity, does not refer to obviously collective units or composite wholes, such as species, one army, etc., but is spoken of one man, even then it denotes a plurality. For it denotes a being composed of substance and form, of what is essential and what is accidental; a being to whom existence and the loss of existence come from without; a being subject to composition and dissolution, change and subdivision, to classification, or association with others of like kind. Such unity is not true unity. Lay this well to heart. Even when denoting absolute unity, the word One may be applied to a thing that is one of a number. . . . But essential, absolute, real, objective unity, that is unchangeable and cannot be multiplied, and cannot be numbered among the qualities of matter, to which being or the loss of being cannot be caused from without, that is without beginning and without end, that cannot be moved and cannot be compared to anything or have anything compared with it, or be classed with anything, because it is One and unique from every point of view and in every aspect: this alone is the true unity, the root and cause of all collective or composite things. Such is the significance of the word One, when we speak of the unity of God.

The theological meaning of the word “one” (*heis* in Greek) stands under the influence of philosophical, political and religious views on life, where the one is opposed to the many, with a negative understanding for the many.² The early writings of Christianity share this view.

Christians take over the Jewish and biblical way of speaking about God as the One: *heis ho theos*. Jesus does it explicitly, quoting the famous text of Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (literally: one (*‘ehad*)).

1. ““Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Mark 12,29.32, twice, not so in the parallels of Matthew 22:,27 and Luke 10:26). In the Gospels: see further Mark 2:7; 10:18; 12:29,32; Matthew 23:9; John 8:41). Likewise, in Paul’s writings: Romans 3:30; 1 Corinthians 8:4,6; Galatians 3:20; cf. 1 Thessalonians 1:9 ; 1 Corinthians 12:2 ; Galatians 4:8), and even in the deutero-pauline literature: Ephesians 4:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5.

The formula receives a certain development when Christological and soteriological statements will be associated with it: as God is one, so Christ as Lord is one, and we in Christ and in God are one, and all saved.

2. For Christology: see 1 Corinthians 8:6; 1 Timothy 2:5; Matthew 23:8-10. By his sacrifice Jesus Christ receives this unity when he has become “one for all,” once forever: 2 Corinthians 5:14; John 11:50; 1 Timothy 2:5f; Hebrews 2:11; 10:12,14; cf. Mark 12:6). It is interesting to note James 4:12 and Matthew 23:8-10.

1 Corinthians 8:4-7 “Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists’, and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.”

Matthew 23:6-12 “They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

1 Timothy 2:1-8 “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For

² Here follows a summary of the article of Hans Dieter Betz on *heis* (“one”) in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. Kittel). The word occurs 337 times in the New Testament. In many cases *heis* simply means “someone,” *tis*, in the Greek of that time !

there is one God;
there is also one mediator between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human,
who gave himself a ransom for all
—this was attested at the right time.

For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying),
a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.”

James 4:12 “There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So
who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?”

By his sacrifice Jesus Christ receives this unity when he has become “one for all”, once forever:

2 Corinthians 5:13-16 “For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our
right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced
that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who
live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.
From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we
once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.”

See also in the same way, where the One and the unique is connected with Jesus in his saving
role for the many: John 11:50; 1 Timothy 2:5f; Hebrews 2:11; 10:12,14; cf. Mark 12:6.

In the Gospel of John the author works out the unity between God and Christ by using the
formula of monotheism: “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30) and “Holy Father, protect
them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (17,11).

Something similar happens for soteriology: “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom
are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things
and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:6). Salvation implies becoming together one body
(*en sōma*), being the church with many members, but all united in the one body of the one
Christ (Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 6:16f.; 10:17; 12:12-14; Romans 12:4f.). The deutero-
pauline epistles work that out further: Colossians 3:14f.; and Ephesians 4:2-6! (see also
Ephesians 2:14-16: from the two he made One). The coherency in some writings is impressive:
Galatians: one God (3:20), one Christ (3:26), one apostle (1:1), one gospel (1:6f.), one Church
(3:26-28), one fruit of the Spirit (5:22). Ephesians 4:4-6 contains the longest litany, celebrating
the reality of Unity in God, through Christ and the Spirit, in the act of faith and baptism:

Ephesians 4:2-6: with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one
another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of
peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your
calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all
and through all and in all.

One last observation: Unity will become a concern **on the level of ethics**: the unity of the Torah
is recalled in one main principle: the love of one’s neighbor (Romans 13:9; James 2:9-11).
There is also unity between man and woman, unity in the community with all the differences
(social, ethnic, gender, cultural level, so in Corinth for instance), negative unity with the
prostitute (1 Corinthians 6:15-17). The contemplation of the Unity of God leads to behavior in
which we realize Unity in God.

III. Unity and Trinity

The great question in a theological exchange on the Unity of God, with you, who come from Iran as Shi'ite scholars, mollahs, is of course the way we speak about Trinity. Is that not a contradiction of the affirmation of God's Unity ?

We are aware of this difficulty, which is centuries old. I am ready to deal with that question further during this week.

Throughout the entire Christian tradition we have never accepted tri-theism (three gods). Nor have we accepted modalism (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are just aspects or modalities of the One). These have always been considered the two major errors (heretical statements). But we should also be clear: The Christian Trinity is NOT something like a Father with a Mother (the Holy Virgin) and their Son Jesus. Such a way of speaking about the Trinity is absent from the entire Christian tradition. The mystery of the Trinity does not involve human generation.

In Christian prayer life, the Trinity provides a very natural way of relating to God; it is not problematic, but dynamic. We pray to Christ our Lord, or to God the Father in Christ, always inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Arabic Christians, in dialogue with Muslims, enriched the doxology that they added to each Psalm when it was prayed. Other Christians say, "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen." They say exactly the same formula, but after "the Holy Spirit" they add "*One God*, as it was in the beginning, now and forever, Amen!" (See Rachid HADDAD, *La trinité divine chez les théologies arabes (750-1050)*, Beauchesne, Paris 1985, p.252 : "Their *Basmala* since the VIIIth Century has that formulation, with *One God*").

Conclusion

I would like to recall the word of an Anglican bishop. At the end of one of the earliest interreligious meetings, which was held in Lebanon, in 1974, he said, "We as Christians need the others, the Jews and the Muslims, to remember the strength and the richness of the vision of God as the One" (See Jean-Claude Basset, *Le dialogue interreligieux*, p. XXX).

I bring this in as a monk, living in solitude as a hermit. The oldest word for a monk (in Greek) is *monachus*. It is from the word *monos*, ("alone") and means being alone with the One, *monos* with the *Monos* and the *Heis*, the One (in Greek). In Syriac, where the terminology is even older than in the Greek, some early ascetics were called *ihidaya*, (*yahid*): those who became *unified* by the contemplation of the Unity of God. God makes his beseechers one, *yahid*, the active form of the word "one." (see A. GUILLAUMONT, *Aux origines du monachisme chrétien*, Bellefontaine 1979, p. 228-239).