

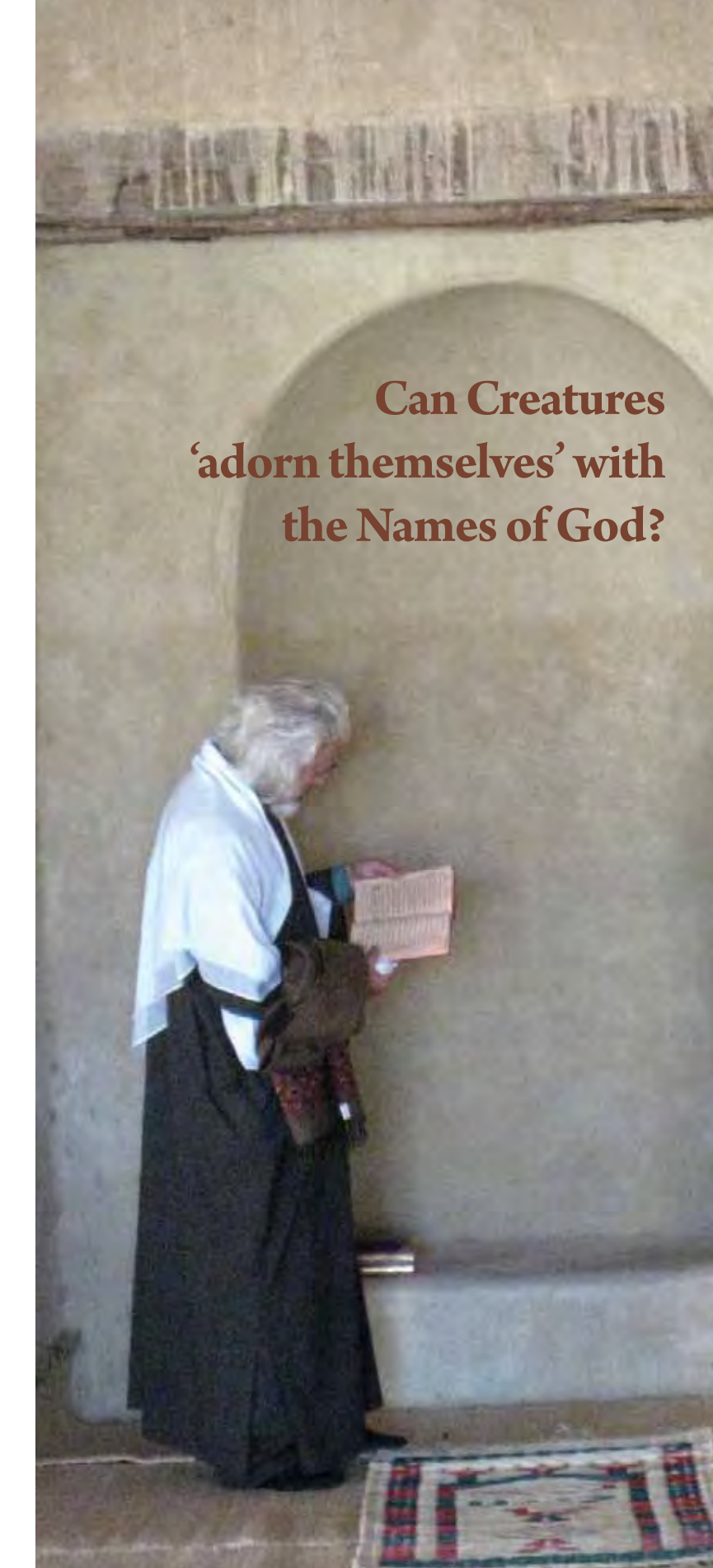
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# Religions

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## Charity and Compassion: Interreligious Perspectives





## Can Creatures 'adorn themselves' with the Names of God?

**By David B. Burrell**

To introduce us to the genre proper to his celebrated commentary on the 'Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God', al-Ghazālī opens by offering readers the goal of 'adorning themselves' with these names.<sup>1</sup> For this is not a mere speculative adventure into 'naming God', but an exercise meant to effect something in readers who will undertake the disciplines indicated with each name in the form of 'admonitions'. Now any Muslim who dares to speak of love, charity, or compassion will be reminded immediately of God's own names, for these English terms already suggest a number of them (with Qur'anic references). Besides the ubiquitous *Al-Rahman*, *al-Rahim* [the Infinitely Good, the Merciful], consider *Al-Wahhāb* [The Bestower] (3:8, 38:9, 38:35), *Ar-Razzāq* [The Ever-Providing] (51:58), *Al-Karīm* [The Bountiful, The Generous] (27:40, 82:6), *Al-Wakīl* [The Trustee, The Dependable] (3:173, 4:171, 28:28, 73:9), *Al-Afuww* [The Pardoner, The Effacer of Sins] (4:99, 4:149, 22:60), *Ar-Ra'ūf* [The Compassionate, The All Pitying] (3:30, 9:117, 57:9, 59:10),

Now inspired by the Muslim convention that whoever intends to name a child with one of these names must prefix it by 'abdul-', as in 'Abdul-Khadr', we might well ask whether we can ever 'adorn ourselves' with any of these names. And pursuing that query will open a rich vein of comparative reflection for Christians and Muslims. To take a name paradigmatic

for the exercise of love, charity, or compassion, we may ponder *'al-Ghaffar'*, where the intensive fifth form of the Arabic verb suggests a rendering like 'One who never ceases to forgive' or 'One whose forgiving continues to forgive' (Qur'an 20:82, 38:66, 39:5, 40:42, 71:10, 13:16, 14:48, 38:65, 39:4, 40:16). Christians would be reminded of Jesus' way of responding to the query of Peter: 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' As if to dispense with any such accounting, Jesus turns the number offered into a multiplier carrying us beyond calculation: 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven' (Mt 18:21)! Might this maneuver suggest how *al-Ghaffar* stands ready to forgive us? Indeed, I would propose there can be no other reading of Jesus' response. For he can hardly be suggesting that any of us would be capable of repeating the act of forgiving that many times! Indeed, were it necessary to do so, we would have to wonder whether the act could ever be efficacious? Yet that wonderment might well prove to be the thread we need.

For Christians speak readily of loving and of forgiving, yet closer scrutiny of the lives of exemplary Christians, in the light of scriptures offering them access to the One who animates their lives, suggests that truly loving or forgiving lies quite beyond their power to effect. Let us begin with the admonition attached to the *shema*, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord' (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), which Jesus cites in answer to an ostensibly academic question; 'which is the greatest commandment of the law?' 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Mt 22:36-38). But this admonition puts the grammar of 'commandment' to a severe test, for we would have no way of ascertain-

ing whether we had fulfilled it: who of us could ever be sure of loving with our whole heart, or all of our soul or strength? And might we not surmise that to be Jesus' very point: reminding the 'lawyer who asked him a question to test him', as Matthew puts it, to seek the answer in his own scripture. Following directly upon the foundational *shema*, the pride of place is given to a command which defies execution!

Moreover, the first of the letters of John explains why that must be the case. After a convoluted lead regarding a commandment at once new and old, John focuses on 'the message you have heard from the beginning, that you should love one another' (1 John 3:11). Yet to remind us that we are unable to fulfill that injunction, he goes on to exhort:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us (1 John 4:7-10).

What distinguishes this form of *knowing* is that it follows upon *doing*--'he who does not love does not know God', much as Al-Ghazālī offers an exercise to follow if we have any inkling of the import of a divine name. And for John that exercise recapitulates the way Jesus completes his answer to the lawyer: 'this is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18, Mt 22:38-39). As John elaborates it:

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has

ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us (4:11-12).

John's form of address offers the decisive clue: he is addressing those already 'beloved' by God, so can expect them to understand the import of what he is saying:

by this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. ... So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in loves abides in God, and God abides in him (4:13-16).

Moreover, the source of this knowledge is

the anointing you have received from him [which] abides in you, [so] you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true (2:26-7).

John even finds it superfluous to issue this original commandment to 'beloved' already anointed, as if to emphasize what a strange form of command it is: evoking the active presence of God to remind us that we ought not take these commands to be exhortations to fulfill, as though we could carry them out ourselves.

Yet to return to Jesus' admonition to forgive 'seventy times seven' times, he confirms his point with a story of a servant whose master forgave a huge debt when he implored him to do so, only then to turn around himself to throttle a fellow servant who owed him far less (Mt 18:23-33). And Jesus endorses the master's punishment—'to deliver him to the jailer till he should pay all his [original] debt'—by insisting: 'so also my heavenly father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your

brother or sister from your heart' (18:34-35). But how can Jesus be so unequivocal if, as I have been intimating, forgiving itself is an impossible undertaking for us? For the very reason that John gives: though we cannot hope to fulfill these commandments ourselves, we are never alone, we who are 'beloved of God'. And here we find the hidden key to Jesus parable of the ungrateful servant. The force of the parable turns on the apparent contradiction: one who has been forgiven fails to forgive; yet the servant could never have acted as he did had he truly accepted forgiveness.

In fact, the contradiction is only apparent. The original servant never received forgiveness for he never acknowledged his fault; he simply breathed a sigh of relief at having been reprieved. Yet failing to acknowledge any fault kept him outside the kingdom of God, for only those able to admit sinfulness are able to ask for and receive forgiveness, and so be admitted to the kingdom. For it is only in receiving God's forgiveness that we can forgive others, yet to receive we must ask, and to ask we must acknowledge our need. Resting on our own laurels, we can never forgive, for we will always be busy 'editing and re-editing a yet more elegant version of ourselves' (Kierkegaard). Such is the dynamic of the invitation to love, charity, or compassion issued by the Christian scriptures and the Qur'an. It quickly becomes an invitation to seek the presence of the God who commands, so that we may be released from our own preoccupations enough to hear those commands and be empowered to fulfill them.

### **Parallel Muslim Testimony**

So far our focus has been on forgiving, as the acid test of love, charity, and compassion, and as a way of showing how we can only connect with the reality intimated



by the 'divine names' via that reality itself. As the first letter of John puts it: 'not that we loved God but that he loved us'. Reza Shah-Kazemi elucidates the more meta-physical aspects of divine love in Muslim tradition, stemming from the *hadīth qudsī*: 'I was a hidden treasure, and I loved to be known, so I created the creation in order to be known'.<sup>2</sup>

[this] knowledge ... is not abstract but concrete, not just posited discursively but 'realized' spiritually, that is, made 'real'; since ultimate reality is at one with love, 'realized' knowledge must be a perfect synthesis between the two principles, just as it must integrate knowledge with-in being. Without the dimension of love, knowledge remains abstract; realized knowledge is thus overflowing with love, and the consummation of love is beatific union with the Beloved, thus, *tawhīd* in its deepest spiritual significance of 'making one'. Just as, according to the *hadīth*

*qudsī*, love for being known initiates creation, so it is knowledge of God that brings about a love which consummates creation. In other words, it is consciousness of God that attracts the love of God, and this love reveals the ultimate meaning of the first testimony of Islam, 'No God but God'. It is this dimension of *tawhīd* as union that the saints or the 'friends of God' (*awliyāh Allāh*, sing. *walī Allāh*) have realized.

Such knowledge results in the 'state of the 'friend of God', the 'slave' who has 'drawn near' to God, to the point where God loves him', as another *hadīth qudsī*, expresses it: 'My slave never ceases to draw near to Me through supererogatory acts until I love him. And when I love him, I am his hearing by which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his hand by which he grasps, and his foot by which he walks'.<sup>3</sup> Here Reza Shah-Kazemi invites us beyond the obvious import of this saying, to see the way in



which al-Ghazzālī interprets this saying, one of the most oft-quoted in the works of the Sufis. Book six of volume four of his *Ihyā'* is entitled 'The Book of Love (*mahabba*) and longing and intimacy and contentment'. In his discussion on the love of God for man, he writes, in theological mode, that whereas one can legitimately apply the same word, love, both to man and to God, the meaning of the word changes depending on the agent of love. Human love is an inclination (*mayl*) of the soul towards that which is in harmony with it, beauty both outward and inward, seeking from another the consummation of love, for its perfection cannot be achieved within itself—and such love cannot be ascribed to God, in whom all perfections are infinitely and absolutely realized.

However, at this point al-Ghazzālī shifts into a completely different mode of discourse, and asserts that God's love is absolutely real, and that His love is not for another—such is inconceivable—but rather is for Himself: for His own Essence, qualities and acts: for 'there is nothing in being except His Essence

and His acts'. Hence, when the Qur'ān asserts that 'He loves them' (5:54), this means that 'God does indeed love them [people], but in reality He loves nothing other than Himself, in the sense that He is the totality [of being], and there is nothing in being apart from Him.' Al-Ghazzālī proceeds to show how this love of God for Himself ... most clearly manifests itself, and this he does by reference to the saying: 'God is the hearing, sight, hand and foot of the one He loves, and the one He loves is the one who draws close to Him through supererogatory prayer.'

Finally, and most significantly for our inquiry:

This capacity to attain this degree of 'nearness' is itself an expression of the eternally real love of God. According to al-Ghazzālī, this perfect and eternal love of God creates the human being in a disposition which seeks proximity to Him, and furnishes him with access to the pathways leading to the removal of the veils separating him from God, such that

he comes to 'see' God by means of God Himself. 'And all this', says al-Ghazzālī, 'is the act of God, and a grace bestowed upon him [God's creature]: and such is what is meant by God's love of him.' This enlightening grace of God towards His creatures is constitutive of His love for them, a love which in reality is nothing other than His love for Himself; and there is a clear link between this divine love of God for Himself and the highest realization of mystical *tawhīd*.

Although on the surface the saying appears to make God's love the result of contingent actions—the voluntary performance of religious acts of devotion—divine love is the eternally pre-existent reality, for God is not subject to change: all that can change is the perception of the soul, which, mysteriously, comes to see its own illusory nature and the unique reality proper to God; evidently, only God can 'see' this reality, whence the saying: God becomes the 'eye' by which the saint sees, and the saint 'sees' both his own nothingness and the sole reality of God. In other words, it is only possible to assert that God loves Himself as and through His creatures, from the point of view of one who has gained this 'proximity' to God and thus comes to a realization that it is indeed God and not himself who 'sees' through him, 'hears' through him, and so on. Such a knowledge is only granted, according to al-Ghazzālī in another treatise, to those who have seen through the illusory nature of their own existence, and this can only occur as a consequence of realizing the state of *fanā'*, extinction, annihilation, in God. It is this that the highest category of knowers of God undergo, it is this *self-dénouement* that provides them with the ultimate realization of the principle of *tawhīd*:

The love of God for Himself through His creation assumes an altogether transfor-

mative power from the point of view of *walāya*, that sanctity which is the fruit of the purest *tawhīd*, which in turn is predicated upon the complete effacement of all that is other than God—only then can one speak about God's love for Himself *through* His creatures. .... To see a saint is thus to witness something of the divine reality which he has rendered transparent by his very effacement in that reality.

### **Christian Testimony of John of the Cross**

We may readily compare this unitary view of creator and creature with John of the Cross's presentation of the inner dynamics of a life of faith.<sup>4</sup> John is disarmingly forthright in identifying the goal of that journey: 'the union and transformation of the [person] in God' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.5.3); as well as the means: 'faith alone, which is the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God' (2.9.1). He is at pains to distinguish this intentional union from the 'union between God and creatures [which] always exists [by which] God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially. ... By it He conserves their being so that if the union would end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist' (2.5.3). So John will presume the unique metaphysical relation of all creatures to their source which Meister Eckhart elaborated from Aquinas' 'distinction', and does not hesitate it to call it a *union*--indeed, an 'essential or substantial union'.<sup>5</sup> This grounding fact attends all creatures, hence it is *natural* and found in everything (though displayed differently in inanimate from inanimate, and in inanimate, differs from animals to humans, though among humans it can still be found in 'the greatest sinner in the world'), while the intentional union is *supernatural* and can only be found 'where there is a likeness of

love' [such that] God's will and the [person's] are in conformity' (2.5.3).

In her study of Shankara, Sara Grant shows how the 'non-reciprocal relation of dependence' which attends all creatures of a free creator eliminates any prospect of 'heteronomy' between those two wills, but let us attend first to the internal connection between *faith* and *union* which John confidently asserts.<sup>6</sup> What makes this sound so startling is our propensity to confine such talk to 'mystics' as we tend to reduce faith to belief: holding certain propositions to be true. This long and complex debate in Christian theology cuts oddly across confessional lines, so the best we can do here is to remind ourselves that John of the Cross could well have been responding from the Iberian peninsula to sixteenth-century winds from northern Europe. He does so by elaborating key assertions of Aquinas to defuse debates polarizing intellect and will in the act of faith. For Aquinas, 'faith is a sort of knowledge [*cognitio quaedam*] in that it makes the mind assent to something. The assent is not due to what is seen by the believer but to what is seen by him who is believed'.<sup>7</sup> The one who is believed is, of course, the incarnate Word of God, Jesus, as mediated through the scriptures, so this peculiar 'sort of knowledge' is rooted in an interpersonal relation of the believer with Jesus. It is that relation at the root of faith which John of the Cross sets out to explore, quite aware that what results from it will 'fall short of the mode of knowing [*cognitio*] which is properly called "knowledge" [*scientia*], for such knowledge causes the mind to assent through what is seen and through an understanding of first principles' (*Ibid.*). More positively, Aquinas will characterize faith as 'an act of mental assent commanded by the will, [so] to believe perfectly our mind must tend unfailingly towards the perfection of

truth, in unfailing service of that ultimate goal for the sake of which our will is commanding our mind's assent'.<sup>8</sup> Unlike ordinary belief, then, faith must be an act of the whole person, involving a personal and critical quest for a truth which outreaches our proper expression. John assesses our concepts sharply: 'nothing which could possibly be imagined or comprehended in this life can be a proximate means of union with God' (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* 2.8.4), since 'nothing created or imagined can serve the intellect as a proper means for union with God; [rather], all that can be grasped by the intellect would serve as an obstacle rather than a means, if a person were to become attached to it' (2.8.1).

### ***Culminating in Al-Ghazzālī on trust in God***

The operative alternative to conceptual knowing in Islam is *trust*, the epitome of which is found in the state of *tawakkul*, elaborated by Al-Ghazzālī in the central book of his *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-dīn* as the complement to *tawhīd*, which culminates in the believer's profound conviction 'of the unalterable justice and excellence of things as they are ..., of the 'perfect rightness of the actual'.<sup>9</sup> Eric Ormsby sees this conviction as the upshot of the ten years of seclusion and prayer following Al-Ghazzālī's spiritual crisis. By 'the actual' he means what God has decreed, itself the product and reflection of divine wisdom. And in asserting the primacy of the actual over the possible, Al-Ghazzālī shows himself a true theologian. For philosophers, contingency tends to bespeak the logical fact that 'whatever exists could always be other than it is'. Yet while it may be 'logically correct and permissible to affirm that our world could be different than it is, it is not theologically correct and permissible--indeed, it is



impious--to assert that our world could be better than it is. The world in all its circumstances remains unimpeachably right and just, and it is unsurpassably excellent'.<sup>10</sup> Yet the excellence in question is not one which we can assess independently of the fact that it is the product of divine wisdom, so Al-Ghazzālī directs us to the second part where practice will allow us to traverse domains which speculative reason cannot otherwise map.

What sort of a practice is *tawakkul*: trust in divine providence? It entails accepting whatever happens as part of the inscrutable decree of a just and merciful God. Yet such an action cannot be reduced to mere *resignation*, to be caricatured as 'Islamic fatalism.' It rather entails aligning oneself with things as they really are: in Ghazali's sense, with the truth that there is no agent but God Most High. This requires surrender since we cannot formulate the relationship between this single divine agent and the other agents which we know, and also because our ordinary perspective on things is not a true one: human society lives under the sign of *jāhiliyya* or pervasive ignorance. Nor can this resignation be solely intellectual, as though I could learn 'the truth' so as to align myself with it in the way speculative reason is supposed to illuminate practical judgment. For this all-important relationship resists formulation. Nevertheless, by trying our best to act according to the conviction that the divine decree expresses the truth in events as they unfold, we will allow ourselves to be *shown* how things truly lie. So faith [*tawhīd*] and practice [*tawakkul*] are reciprocal; neither is foundational. The understanding given us is that of one journeying in faith, a *salik*, the name which Sufis characteristically appropriated for themselves.

There are stages of trust in divine providence, to be sure, which Ghazzālī catalogues as (1) the heart's relying on the trustworthy One [*wakil*] alone, (2) a trust like that of a child in its mother, where the focus is less on the *trust* involved than on the person's orientation to the one in whom they trust; and (3) the notorious likeness of a corpse in the hands of its washers, where the relevant point is that such trust moves one quite beyond petition of any sort. Yet the operative factor is present already in the initial stage, which is not surpassed but only deepened by subsequent stages: trusting in the One alone. The formula for faith here is the hadith: 'There is no might and power but in God', which Ghazzālī takes to be equivalent to the Qur'anic *shahādah*: *There is no god but God*, thereby reminding us that the hadith does not enjoin us to trust in *power* or *might*, as attributes distinct from God, but in God alone. It is in this context that he selects stories of Sufi sheikhs, offering them as examples to help point us towards developing specific skills of trusting: habits of responding to different situations in such a way that one learns by acting how things are truly ordered, the truth of the decree. The principle operative throughout is that a policy of complete renunciation of reliance on customary means [*asbab*] is contrary to divine wisdom, the *Sunnah Allāh*, but those who journey in faith will learn that means are of different kinds, hidden as well as manifest.

So there is a school whereby we learn how to respond to what happens in such a way that we are shown how things are truly ordered. This school will involve learning from others who are more practiced in responding rightly; Al-Ghazzālī's judicious use of stories is intended to intimate the Sufi practice of master / disciple wherein the novice is offered way

of discerning how to act. Philosophy no longer pretends to be a higher wisdom; speculative reason is wholly subject to practical reason; the inevitable implication of replacing the emanation scheme with an intentional creator, evidenced also in Maimonides. So the challenge of understanding the relation of the free creator to the universe becomes the task of rightly responding to events as they happen, in such a way that the true ordering of things, the divine decree, can be made manifest in one's actions-as-responses. Al-Ghazzālī expresses this relationship between speculative and practical reason by noting that we need to call upon both *knowledge* and *state* [of being] in guiding our actions according to a wholehearted trust in God. What he wishes to convey by those terms in tandem is an awareness of the very structure of the book itself: the *knowledge* which faith in divine unity brings is only gained through practice, leading one to an habitual capacity to align one's otherwise errant responses to situation after situation according to the guidance that faith offers.

These reflections have shown how the faith of these diverse communities in a free creator converges to challenge us to find ways to articulate the ensuing relationship between creatures and creator, and notably free creatures, so as to give due homage and gratitude to divine wisdom in creating.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Al-Ghazālī on the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, translated by David Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992; Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> See Reza Shah-Kazemi, 'God 'the Loving', in Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington, eds., *Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* (Grand rapids MI / Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010) 88-109. These quotations, however, are taken from a portion of his contribution which was omitted from the printed version, which we are indebted to the author for supplying.

<sup>3</sup> *Sahīh al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-riqāq*, no.2117, p.992.

<sup>4</sup> John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle, The Living Flame of Love in Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> See Robert Dobie: *Logos and Revelation: Ibn 'Arabi, Meister Eckhart, and Mystical Hermeneutics* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), and Reza Shah-Kazemi: *Paths to Transcendence according to Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington IN: World Wisdom Books, 2006); French trans. *Shankara, Ibn 'Arabi et Maître Eckhart : La Voie de la Transcendance* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010)

<sup>6</sup> Sara Grant, *Towards an Alternative Theology* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 1.12.13.3.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologiae* 2-2.4.5.

<sup>9</sup> *Al-Ghazālī on Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence*, tr. David Burrell (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Bernard McGinn and David Burrell, eds., *God and Creation* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) 257.