

# CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

Essays on Ontology  
and Archetype

Samuel Zinner



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## PREFACE

This monograph explores in more metaphysical depth many of the topics treated previously in my book *The Abrahamic Religious Archetype: Essays on the Transcendent and Formal Relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*.<sup>1</sup> Part I consists of comparative essays on Platonic and Neoplatonic understandings of epistemology and intellection. The first essay, “The Semiotics of Inliteration of the *Umm al-Kitab* and Sacred Time,” explores the dynamics of the descent of supra-formal revelation onto the plane of human prophetic intellection from the framework of semiotics theory, assessing to what degree semiotics might be helpful, or present an impediment to understanding sacred texts as sacred “signs.” The eternal Word pierces the veils of temporality through the mediation of a mode of the Neoscholastic concept of *aevum*, a “sacred” time participating in both the timeless and the temporal. Our essays identify parallels to Platonic philosophical concepts in Christian and Jewish scriptures, demonstrating a compatibility and “divine sanction” of the perennial aspects of Hellenistic philosophy, including the sometimes problematic concepts of the soul’s pre-existence as well as resurrection and transmigration, with special reference to the appearance of these doctrines in various schools of thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Our exploration of the Platonic doctrine of image and likeness, or archetype and form, incorporates logia from the *Gospel of Thomas* to explicate and illustrate the commonalities of the perennial philosophy in Platonism and Jewish metaphysical thought.

This study explores the theme of the celestial nature of Christ in connection with the interpenetration of the divine *Intellectus* and the created *ratio* as a way of understanding certain aspects of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, a theme

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming, London: Archetype, 2011.

amplified in the chapter entitled, “Immanent *Intellectus* and Divine Self-Contemplativity,” which is in essence an exploration of the modes of knowing God according to Sufi, Christian Neoscholastic (Aquinas) and mystical authors (such as St. John of the Cross). We are further concerned with the explication of the Neoplatonic and Thomistic synthesis of *Esse* and *Ens*, a synthesis which can be fruitfully compared to the Hindu doctrine of the mutual relationship between Brahman and Maya as well as the metaphysical distinction between Beyond-Being and Being. The predominant Neoplatonic inspirations behind Aquinas’ thought are usually overlooked in standard scholarship. Part I concludes by returning to the theme of the descent of supra-formal revelation onto the plane of temporality and contingency; the concluding essay bears the title “Some Notes on the *Ruh* and the *Amr* – Spirit and Word” and maintains a metaphysical equivalence between the Qur’anic Mother of the Book and the figure of the celestial Lady Wisdom of the Jewish scriptures, and additionally presents the case for a grammatical as well as metaphysical correspondence between the Arabic word *Amr* and its Aramaic cognate, *Memra*, which in turn is roughly equivalent with the Greek term *Logos*.

Part II concentrates on Christian metaphysics, emphasizing ‘Isa (Jesus) and the Virgin Maryam (Mary). Our essay “The Christic and Marian Dimensions of the Good Friday Singularity Paradigm” analyzes the temporal and supra-temporal aspects of the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost, and the second coming of Christ; all these realities represent formal unfoldings of a single timeless reality; in this way, some of the apparent chronological anomalies in the Gospels may be explained, and various theological tensions within Christian theology may be resolved to a certain extent, as well as tensions existing between Christian and Islamic doctrine. The essay also stresses the specifically Marian mode of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Our chapter bearing the title “On the Possibility of the Multiplicity of Logos Incarnations: Denotative Christic and Connotative Marian Reflections Based on Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, Tertia Pars, 3, Articles 5, 7, and 8” is an in-depth presentation and assessment of Aquinas’ teachings on the multiplicity of Logos manifestations and of the possibility

## Preface

of incarnation of the Holy Spirit, and how these issues relate to the Islamic understandings of Muhammad as Paraclete and Frithjof Schuon's esoteric understanding of the Virgin Mary as a manifestation of the celestial Holy Spirit on the earthly plane. The essay also explores works by Aquinas other than the *Summa* wherein the angelic doctor affirms the possibility of multiple Logos incarnations. In regard to this essay, as well as others, we gratefully acknowledge the insights and comments of Dr. Michael Ewbank, though the conclusions drawn are naturally our own. An essay entitled "The Christic Aspects of Ascent and Descent" explores Qur'an sura *Al-Ma'idah* ("The Table"), and presents the themes of the ascent of 'Isa to heaven and the descent of the table of celestial bread which 'Isa bestows upon the world. The chapter "The Prophetic Essence of the Virgin Maryam in Qur'anic Context" specifies the prophetic status of Maryam in Islam and describes the essence her prophethood, a prophethood further clarified in the next chapter, "Silence and Night," which emphasizes the Virgin's role not as legislator but as manifestation of the divine Matrix, not of Word, but of divine Silence and Peace. Three essays on Maryam conclude Part II, "The Virgin Maryam and the Divine Mercy"; "Sura 97, the Night of *Qadr*"; and "Sura *ar-Rahman* as Maryaman Sura." These pieces present Maryam as a manifestation of the divine Mercy, indicating a Maryaman essence within the Qur'an as a whole. Significantly, sura 97 (*al-Qadr*) contains a simultaneous dual application to the descent of the Qur'an on the Night of *Qadr* and the descent of the Logos to the world through Maryam on the night of the Nativity.

Part III is introduced with the title *Ahlul Bayt* (integrating both Shi'ite and Sunnite views on the "Household of the Prophet") and surveys and critiques a rich variety of themes encountered in Shi'ite metaphysical traditions. This section begins with a chapter bearing the title "Reflections on the Shia-Sunni Divide"; here we survey Frithjof Schuon's major thesis on this division as reflecting legitimate realities emanating from Islam's founder. We contextualize Schuon's criticisms of both Sufi voluntaristic mysticism and Shi'ite "exo-esoterism" and compare the Islamic "schism" to Christianity's Protestant-Catholic divide. Schuon's observations on the latter divide, as well as on

the distinctives and convergences of the traditional religions in general also serve to contextualize his enlightened assessment of the Shia-Sunni divide. In the end, both the Sunnite and Shi'ite schools are orthodox, yet also both stand in need of rectifying certain disequilibria in various domains of belief and praxis at the extrinsic level. The chapter "The Light Verse with Reference to Muhammad, Fatima, Jesus, and Mary" reviews Shi'ite perspectives on sacred persons as earthly manifestations of celestial light, but we include Jesus and Mary in our considerations and thus enlarge the paradigm, highlighting correspondences especially between Fatima and Mary as earthly theophanies of celestial Wisdom and Mother of the Book. Our chapter "The *Ahlul Bayt* and Qur'anic Esoteric Veils" examines to what extent allegorical and anagogical exegesis of the Qur'an might be justified, and we present various allegorical interpretations of Qur'anic *ayat* relating to the themes of light and Paradise pertaining to Fatima and 'Ali as examples of legitimate spiritual or esoteric exegesis. "The Esoteric Kingdom of Prophecy and the House of Wisdom" interprets a famous *hadith* on 'Ali as the gate of wisdom and presents aspects of 'Ali reminiscent of Maryam and 'Isa. The essay also compares the Arabic traditions on the *Afrad* with the "unitary" or "solitary ones" of the *Gospel of Thomas*. "The *Ahlul Bayt* and the Divine Names" gathers Shi'ite speculations on theosophical etymology. "Aspects of Fatima and Maryam in Sura *al-Qadr*" researches in greater detail the dual allusion to the Qur'an's descent and the Logos' descent to Maryam. The concluding essay, "Sura *Al-Kahf*: The Story of *Al-Khidr* and Moses," presents the relationship between exoteric and esoteric wisdom, emphasizing the feminine nature of esoteric wisdom with the examples of both Fatima and Maryam, metaphysically equating the Qur'anic Mother of the Book with the Lady Wisdom of the Jewish scriptures. The feminine Divine is the embodiment or theophany of the divine Mercy and Compassion, and this theme we have sought to incorporate and explicate in our work based upon legitimate traditions. We seek refuge in the All-Merciful and the All-Compassionate, and God knows best...

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Casablanca, Morocco



PART I



COMPARATIVE ESSAYS  
ON PLATONIC INTELLECTION

## 1. The Semiotics of Inliteration of the *Umm al-Kitab* and Sacred Time Dilation

According to Christian theology, the Word, the Logos, undergoes incarnation by being united in perfect unity with human nature. For Islam, the Word (*Kalima, Amr*),<sup>1</sup> undergoes not incarnation, but inliteration by being perfectly united not with human nature, but with human language, in this specific instance, Arabic. The divine uncreated Word descends in order to be inliterated in the created words of Arabic. Judaism also knows of such a sacred reality, namely, the inliteration of the preexistent Torah in the temporal, earthly Torah of Moses. In the Jewish scriptures, preexistent *Hokhmah*, Lady Wisdom, which coincides with the preexistent Torah, descends to the world in order to “tabernacle” within and to dwell among humanity in hypostatic and “inliterated” modes.<sup>2</sup>

The divine descent of the *Umm al-Kitab*, the Mother of the Book, took place upon the night of *al-Qadr*, which is “better than a thousand months” (sura *al-Qadr* 3). The descent of the eternal Word into time must relativize time so that one night equals

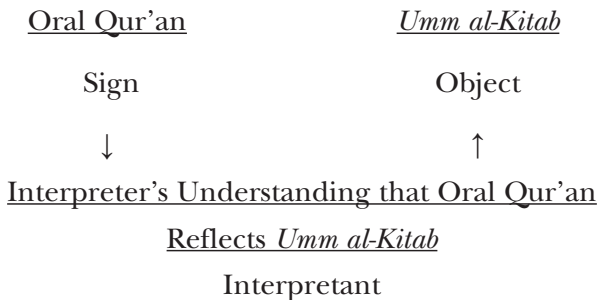
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<sup>1</sup> Arabic *Amr*, although usually translated as “command,” is the equivalent of the cognate Aramaic word *Memra*, “Word,” used in a divine “hypostatic” sense in the Jewish targumim. In Hebrew and Arabic the semantic field of the concept of ‘word’ contains the aspect of ‘command’.

<sup>2</sup> The following verses from the Jewish scriptures on Lady Wisdom treat of her descent to the world of humanity. *Wisdom* 7:27: “And being but one, she can do all things: and remaining in herself the same, she reneweth all things, and through nations conveyeth herself into holy souls, she maketh the friends of God and prophets.” *Sirach* 24:13: “And he said to me: Let thy dwelling be in Jacob, and thy inheritance in Israel, and take root in my elect.” *Baruch* 3:38: “Afterwards she was seen upon earth, and conversed with men.” These traditional Jewish concepts relating to Lady Wisdom are applied to the masculine Logos in *John* 1:14: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among [literally, ‘tabernacled in’] us, and we saw his glory, the glory as it were of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

more than a thousand months. In other words, the descent of the eternal into time involves not ordinary secular, historical time, but “sacred” time, a mode of *tempus* allowing humans who hear the word in temporality to participate in the eternal and divine realities.

Yet the concept of inliteration, valid insofar or inasmuch as it accords with the symbolism of the preexistent Book, is somewhat incomplete, given that the original manifestation of the Qur’an is oral rather than written. The latter belongs as to origin not to a written, “literate” mode, but is rather a “spoken” reality in the domain of language and speech. Since the Qur’an describes itself repeatedly as a “sign,” or *aya*, and since each verse is called an *aya*-sign, we might be able to find a helpful descriptive label for the Qur’an in the field of semiotics. More fundamental than the Qur’an as an example of inliteration is the oral Qur’an as semiosis. Of the semiotic sign classes, (isomorphic) icon, index, and symbol (the latter constituted through social convention or agreement), index is the class which in a theological manner most fittingly parallels the entry of the formless archetypal Word into manifestation as formal words. We could then refer to the oral manifestation of the Qur’an as the “indexation” of the *Umm al-Kitab*. The semiotic model of indexicality is the class that most appropriately approximates the supra-ontological and ontological continuity between the Word and words, or Idea and articulation, or yet again, between the conceptual and the sonic. The triadic-subject semiotic schema involved in this instance may be represented as follows:



The anti-closure dynamic of interpretant reflective infinity, that is, the process by which an act of interpretation gives rise to an unending series of interpretative reflections, *in potentia* at least, explains the hermeneutically inexhaustible depths of all sacred texts and authentically transcendent “literary” works. The Neoplatonic philosophers’ recognition of the Homeric poetic corpus’ sacred status is therefore justified from this perspective in light of the *Odyssey’s* and *Iliad’s* resistance to plenary or exhaustive exegesis.<sup>3</sup>

A word is a sonic corpus; prior to the oral Qur’an is the unspoken, unarticulated Qur’an, the “thought” Qur’an, in the mind of the Prophet. This communication of the *Umm al-Kitab* to the mind of the Prophet naturally involves a central cognitive mystery and raises the question of the relations between thought and articulation in speech, which relates to the field of psycholinguistics. The many schools of interpretation within psycholinguistics demonstrate that profane science is far from solving the mysteries of thought and language production. Theologically the dynamics of the descent of the *Umm al-Kitab* are left at the level of mystery in the *al-Qadr* sura. Ultimately the descent of the Word is beyond explanation, remaining on the formal plane a sacred mystery.

In psycholinguistics, sense-based knowledge, that is, knowledge gained by experience, is called declarative knowledge. Yet as the “rationalist” school of linguistics argues, there must be a supra-sensorial base or ground of knowledge by which the human mind interprets this sensorial input. In philosophy, theology, and metaphysics this supra-sensorial foundation could be termed “transcendent.” The problematic involved here is not as crassly simplistic as suggested by the older notions of a supposed oppositional polarity between Aristotelian sense-based knowledge and Platonic preexistent archetypal knowledge. Scholarship in general has insufficiently emphasized in this context that Aristotle’s theory of connatural, pre-conceptual knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> On the sacred dimensions of the Homeric corpus, see Algis Uždavinys, “From Homer to the Glorious Qur’an: Hermeneutical Strategies in the Hellenic and Islamic Traditions” in *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*, vol. 11 (2003), 79-111.

overlaps with Plato's concept of a priori knowledge, especially when Plato's language is taken for what it is, namely, a richly variegated mixture of allegory, metaphor, and analogy. There must be a supra-sensorial mechanism by which sensorial input is processed, and as psycholinguists theorize, this processing dynamic must involve some level and some sort of autonomy and automaticity.

Certain theological models would explain the transcendent dimension of the human mind as the presence in human consciousness of the divine "Spirit." And it is fitting in this model that according to both the Qur'anic and Gospel narratives, the Word is conveyed to humanity by the "Spirit," which is to say that it is none other than God who bestows the Eternal Word upon humanity in temporality. But the Word that shares in temporality remains the Eternal Word, even though clothed in created words; and by virtue of the fact that in the process of "incarnation" or "inliteration" the continuity between the Eternal Word and temporalized words is not severed, the "time" in which the Eternal Word appears cannot be "ordinary" time, but must be sacred time, somewhat along the lines of the Scholastic notion of the *aeuum*. This sacred dimension or mode of time, this non-ordinary aspect of time, is denoted by the *al-Qadr* sura in the following line: "This Night of Majesty is better than a thousand months." "Better" must involve, in this context, both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, both the qualitative "spiritual" or sacred time, and quantitative time dilation, analogically understood.

When the eternal "encounters" the temporal something akin to time dilation must occur, and perhaps it is this dynamic which might help explain the concept of realized eschatology. *John* 5:25: "Amen, amen I say unto you, that the hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live." To reformulate this sacred saying: "The end of the world is coming and now is." This teaching on realized eschatology is even more forcefully advanced in the esoteric *Gospel of Thomas* logion 51: "His disciples said to him: 'When will the day come when the dead will rest? And on what day will the new cosmos come?' He said this to them: 'What you are looking for has already come, but you do not see it.'"

Eternity is, or at least entails, the absence of time, whereas in realized eschatology all time tenses and their absence (which is to say their simultaneous coexistence) are involved. These imply eternity per se and mediated or participated eternity. Both must apply to the contingent order, since pure unmediated eternity is applicable only to the Divine as *Ipsum Esse*. In the contingent order, eternity per se must always accompany or be manifested in the mode of a participated eternity.

“The end is coming and now is”; the “already” and “not yet” coexist, all time tenses are “simultaneously” present. This is reminiscent of time dilation wherein two temporal trajectories coexist, in separative mode at the local levels of the moving and (relatively) stationary objects respectively, yet in unitive mode when viewed against the backdrop of the cosmos as a whole, in which matrix both moving and stationary objects are entified.

Sacred time dilation: “With the Lord one day is as a thousand years” (see Qur’an 32:5; *Psalm* 90:4); “A day the measure of which is as fifty thousand years” (Qur’an 70:4). These divine sayings principally involve the Lord of revelation (“Being,” or Hindu *Ishvarah*), since the *Ipsum Esse* (understood as the Platonic and Eastern Orthodox “Beyond-Being,” equivalent to the Upanishadic *Nirguna-Brahman*) has no “day,” dwelling as It does in strict eternity.

It is by the divine Spirit that we transcend time and realize our presence in the Eternal Now, the “Day” of God, which is essentially timeless. The Holy Spirit is thus the Eternal Spirit, or the Spirit of Eternity, the divine power by whose means Jesus and all the Prophets spoke by inspiration:

O Jesus, son of Mary! Remember my favor unto thee and unto thy mother; how I strengthened thee with the Holy Spirit, so that thou spakest unto mankind in the cradle as in maturity; and how I taught thee the Scripture and Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel; and how thou didst shape of clay as it were the likeness of a bird by My permission, and didst blow upon it and it was a bird by My permission, and thou didst heal him who was born blind and the leper by My permission; and how thou didst raise the dead, by My permission. . . . (sura 5:110).

On the eternal Day of Doom, the Spirit and angels ascend unto God, indicating that over aeons of time the ascent to salvation is accomplished through the Spirit and the angels, who will speak by divine leave on the Day of Judgment: “On the Day when the angels and the Spirit stand arrayed, they speak not, saving him whom the Beneficent alloweth and who speaketh right” (sura 73:38). On the Day of Judgment, the Spirit and angels ascend to God: “The angels and the Spirit ascend unto Him” (sura 70:4); on the Night of Revelation, they descend to the world, in order to bring creation upwards in ascent to God: “The angels and the Spirit descend therein by leave of their Lord with the Word in all its fullness” (sura 97:4). The world is integrated into the Spirit, in whom creation will ascend to the One on the Day of Judgment. Peace and restoration reign in the Night of contingency, of suffering, and of redemption, until the dawn of the Eternal Day breaks in revelation.

Enlightenment is effected by the Spirit of God’s Word of command, the Spirit of revelation—the revelation of attaining eternal beatitude through surrender:

They will ask thee concerning the Spirit. Say: The Spirit is of the Word (*Amr*) of my Lord, the knowledge of which ye have been vouchsafed little (sura 17:85).

The Exalter of Ranks, the Lord of the Throne. He casteth the Spirit of His Word (*Amr*) upon whom He will of His slaves, that He may warn of the Day of Meeting (sura 40:15).

And thus have We inspired in thee a Spirit of Our Word (*Amr*) . Thou knewest not what the Scripture was, nor what the Faith. But We have made it a Light whereby We guide whom We will of our bondmen. And lo! thou verily dost guide unto a right path. The path of Allah, unto Whom belongeth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth. Do not all things reach Allah at last? (sura 42:52-53).

“All things reach God at last,” on the final day, the Day of Judgment, the Eternal Day, which is to say, the Eternal Now.

Eternity seems far to us, but to God it is near: “. . . the doom . . . from Allah, Lord of the Ascending Stairways [whereby] the angels and the Spirit ascend unto Him in a Day whereof the span is fifty thousand years. But be patient with a patience fair to see. Lo! they behold it afar off while we behold it nigh” (sura 70:1-4). God is the beginning and the end; the end is present in the eternal Now. Through the teaching of Prophetic truth, conveyed by the Spirit, the Eternal Day is realized in the consciousness of humanity. “Say: The Holy Spirit hath revealed it from thy Lord with Truth, that it may confirm those who believe, and as a guidance and good tidings for those who have surrendered” (sura 16:102).

Eternity is now; eternity ever is. The “reintegration” of contingent consciousness into the Divine Intellect brings to the human intellect transcendence of time. Those who discover the hidden truths will not taste death (see the *Gospel of Thomas* logion 1), because for them there is through transcendence an “escape” from time, in whose domain death holds sway, but in whose overcoming limitless Life is found.