

Disagreeing to Agree: A Christian Response to *A Common Word*

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“Theory and Application of *A Common Word Between Us and You*”
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“Conform to holy separation to realize holy union.”

Frithjof Schuon

I have long been fascinated by the traditional Islamic account of what may well have been the very first interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims, an account handed down to us by Ibn Ishāq, a biographer of the Prophet Muhammad, and by other early Muslim historians.¹ It is an important tradition, for it helps to clarify the context of the opening verses of the third Koranic *sūrah*, “The Family of ‘Imrān”—a context in which Christians were invited by Muslims to *a common word between us and you* (3:64).

Interfaith Dialogue in the Time of the Prophet

Jesus said unto them, “Who do men say that I am?”
And they answered, “One of the prophets” (Mark 8:27-28).

Imagine the scene. It is the year of our Lord 632—the tenth of the *hijrah*.² A deputation of some sixty Christians, including a bishop by the name of Abu Harithah bin ‘Alqamah, has just arrived in Medina from the Yemeni city of Najran, a dusty seven days’ ride to the south. Like many other tribal groups from throughout the Arabian peninsula, they have come seeking to establish a pact and terms of peace with the Prophet of Islam. Muhammad shows them great hospitality, generously allowing his guests—despite the objections of some of his companions—to say their prayers in his mosque. Discussions

¹ See Muhammad Saed Abdul-Rahman, *The Meaning and Explanation of the Glorious Qur’an* (London: MSA Publications Limited, 2007), 602-604. A short summary of the encounter may be found in Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1991), 326-27.

² Dates in the sources vary, some indicating that the year was 10 A.H., others 9 A.H.; the meeting may thus have occurred as early as 630 A.D. and as late as 632 A.D. For discussion of this question, see Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), Vol. 2.

afterward naturally turn to the subject of religion and to the theological differences between Christianity and Islam, notably their differing understandings of Jesus.

The Christians say they are puzzled. You Muslims agree—do you not?—that the son of Mary was no ordinary man. On the contrary, you too believe in his miracles, including his healing of the man born blind and his raising of the dead (*Sūrah* 3:49), and you describe him as *the Messiah*, as *illustrious both in this world and the next*, as *one of those brought near to God*, and indeed as God's very word (3:45-46). If—as you also claim to agree—his mother was a virgin (3:47), and if he therefore had no human father, does it not follow that he must have been the Son of God? No, the Prophet responds, this does not in fact follow, and he recites as his reason a Koranic revelation that has just been given him: *Lo! the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him: Be! and he is. This is the truth from thy Lord* (3:59-60). The prophetic logic is clear. Adam had neither father nor mother, and yet neither Christians nor Muslims believe that he was anything more than a creature of God. So why would anyone suppose that the absence of only one human parent somehow constitutes a proof of divinity?

Yes, the logic seems clear enough. But realizing that his Christian visitors might require something more than this single sign to convince them, the Prophet is told that he should propose a test to determine which of their divergent Christologies is the true one. He invites them to engage in a *mubāhalah*, an ancient rite in which the parties to a dispute attest to their confidence in their respective positions by *invoking the curse of God upon those who lie* (3:61). We are told that the Christians at first accept this challenge, but when the time arrives for the contest itself, they are daunted to find that the Prophet has returned with his daughter Fāṭimah, her husband 'Alī, and their children Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, all of whom he enfolds in his cloak, as if to say, Look! I am prepared for my whole family to be killed if we are the ones whose understanding of Jesus is wrong. According to the Islamic sources, this powerful demonstration of certitude causes the Christians to lose heart, and they decline to proceed with the imprecation.

The Prophet's response to their demurrals is especially intriguing. Once again a heavenly sign is given him, and it is precisely this additional *āya*, bestowed in precisely this interfaith context, which has provided the name for *A Common Word Between Us*

and You:³ Say, Muhammad is told, *O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God (3:64)*. According to the traditional sources, the Prophet then tells the Christians that they are free to continue practicing their religion, and in exchange for their payment of the *jizyah*, or poll tax, he pledges to protect their churches and possessions. A treaty is signed, and the deputation returns to Najran.

I find this account fascinating on many levels, not least because it raises a number of provocative questions. Who exactly were these Christians? Were they members of one of the heretical sects of the era, or were they fully Orthodox adherents of Chalcedon? If they *were* Orthodox, as some of the sources suggest in calling them “Melkites” and in describing them as followers of the “Byzantine rite”, why, unlike the many early martyrs of their faith, do they appear to have been so reluctant to stand up for their convictions regarding Christ’s divinity? Or was it reluctance? Did they change their minds and withdraw from the *mubāhalah* because they had lost their self-confidence, as the Islamic report appears to imply? Or did they draw back, though still firmly believing themselves to be right, because they were unwilling to put the Prophet and his family at risk? Which in other words was the more confident party, and whose the more generous and effective interfaith diplomacy?

The most important question for me as an Orthodox Christian, however, is whether, and if so how and to what extent, the historical background I have been sketching is germane to contemporary Christian-Muslim dialogue. Are we to read the prophetic overture of *Sūrah* 3:64 on its own and in isolation from its Koranic and commentarial context? Or should this verse be interpreted in light of the Christological controversy hinted at in the preceding *āyāt* and detailed in Islamic tradition? In issuing their own invitation to Christians today, the Muslim signatories to *A Common Word* have chosen the first approach, and they have done so in order to underscore precisely the “common ground” (36) shared by our traditions, especially our respective teachings

³ An open letter to Christians entitled *A Common Word Between Us and You* was issued on 13 October 2007 by 138 leading Muslim authorities and scholars. For the “Official Website of a Common Word”, see <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1>. The text of the *Common Word* letter has been published in *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Winter 2008-2009), 16-38; page numbers throughout this paper refer to this published version.

concerning the love of God and neighbor. Moreover, in a spirit of friendship and dialogue, they have provided a conciliatory gloss for three crucial phrases in the verse in question that might have otherwise seemed divisive. To *worship none but God*, they tell us, is to be “totally devoted to God” (17); to *ascribe no partner unto Him* means acknowledging “the Unity of God” (17); and to say that *none of us shall take others for lords beside God* implies that “none of us should obey the other in disobedience to God” (17), which is to say that “Muslims, Christians, and Jews should be free to each follow what God commanded them” (35), since *there is no compulsion in religion* (*Sūrah* 2:256).

This is doubtless the most appropriate way of reading the Prophet’s concluding words to his Najrani guests if one’s primary aims are peaceful co-existence and the promotion of religious tolerance. It goes without saying, of course, that these are highly laudable goals, and like other Christians who have contributed a response to the on-line *Common Word* statement,⁴ I am very happy to support any effort that may help to reduce tension and violence between the adherents of our historic faiths. Nevertheless, as I study the opening verses of *Sūrah* 3 and the traditional Islamic account of their historical background, I confess that it is the *differences* between our traditions, and especially our Christologies, that appear by far the more prominent feature, and it seems to me we shall miss a valuable opportunity for deepened insight if we focus only on obvious and rather anodyne commonalities.⁵ Indeed, speaking as a metaphysician, I would dare to go further. I would say that it is only by first accentuating our theological differences that we can hope to attain to a truly transformative unity. For it is not on their surfaces or along their circumferences but at their centers—where outwardly they are furthest apart—that the real “common ground” between genuine religions may be realized.

What I have in mind is something of a paradox, and a visual image may be helpful.⁶ Suppose we envision the Christian and Muslim religions as geometrical figures.

⁴ See <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=responses> for “Responses from Christian Leaders”.

⁵ While stressing commonalities, *A Common Word Between Us and You* does acknowledge that “Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions” and that “there is no minimising some of their formal differences” (33).

⁶ I have adapted this paragraph and the next from the “Introduction” to my *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 10; a similar image was used in that context, though of course for a significantly different purpose.

Several configurations are possible. Exclusivists within each tradition will no doubt prefer to think of these figures as lying in parallel, and therefore never-intersecting, planes and as having different sizes and shapes representing what are perceived to be their respective degrees of perfection and comprehensiveness. One's own tradition will in this case be given the larger shape, no doubt circular in form—whereas a rather cramped and irregular polygon will be employed to symbolize the competing religion! Other Christians and Muslims, more sanguine about the prospects for interfaith concord, will imagine the figures as existing instead on the same plane, where contact is possible. Certain of these hopeful ecumenists may picture the shapes as moving ever closer to each other, while even greater optimists may see them as already touching or perhaps overlapping.

The problem with all these representations, however, is that they end up depicting the relationship between our religions, even at its best, in merely superficial and peripheral ways, as if the possibility of mutual comprehension and respect depended solely on external proximity or juxtaposition, whether between two parallel planes or between two discrete figures in the same plane. But this is to understand ecumenism in merely planimetric, dogmatic, and exoteric categories. I propose we envision a rather different, three-dimensional model, where divergence and convergence are each given their due by means of an intersection of planes. Of course, Christianity and Islam must still be represented by two distinct figures, for doctrinally they are quite dissimilar. But they should both be pictured as circular, for each expresses a unique mode of perfection. Furthermore, I suggest that we inscribe these circles inside a single sphere where, to highlight their exoteric differences, they are deployed at right angles to each other, but where, in order that attention might be directed toward their inward or esoteric commonalities, they are pictured as sharing the same diameter. For the perennialists in my audience, I could add that the sphere is the *religio perennis*, while the common diameter, stretching from the north to the soul pole of the sphere, is the *axis mundi* and thus the seeming distance between God and man.

I shall return to this diameter and to a discussion of these “inward commonalities” later on in my talk. But first I must concentrate on the divergence of planes so as to underscore for my audience the difference, indeed the radical disparity, between our

traditions' respective understandings of Jesus, and by extension our understandings of the relationship between the Divine and the human. Metaphysics comes later. For now I speak as an Orthodox Christian theologian.

Christology, *Theosis*, and *A Common Word*

“Thou, being a man, makest Thyself God!” Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, Ye are gods?’” (John 10:33-34).

The Prophet Muhammad asked the deputation from Najran, and contemporary Muslim scholars and leaders are asking my fellow Christians and me, to come to a *common word* or *agreement* with them.⁷ Central to what my co-religionists and I are being asked to accept, as the Koranic text of the invitation specifies, is the premise that God has no partners or associates and that it is therefore wrong to regard anyone other than God as divine or to take anyone other than God as one's lord. Fundamental to these claims, of course, are two key points of Islamic doctrine: on the one hand the defining *shahādah* or “testimony” *Lā ilāha illā 'Llāh*, “There is no god but God”; and on the other hand the resulting conviction that *shirk*—that is, the “association” of others than God with God, the worshipping of others as if they were God, the attribution of God's characteristics to others than God—is the gravest of sins.⁸ In deciding whether to accede to a theology thus defined, the first question a Christian must ask himself is whether Jesus Christ, whom Christians certainly do worship and to whom they certainly do attribute divine characteristics, is Himself actually God. According to the Islamic revelation, He clearly is not. Indeed, even if we had never heard of the Najrani deputation, or their meeting with the Prophet Muhammad, or the proposed but then averted test of their respective claims about Jesus, the Koranic text itself is unambiguous: however wondrous His deeds may have been and however exceptional—even prophetic—His stature, Jesus Christ is human and not divine.

⁷ The Arabic phrase *kalimatīn sawā* in *Sūrah* 3:64 is translated into English as a *word common* by Arberry and as an *agreement* by Pickthall; in Yusuf Ali it is *common terms*, in Hilali-Khan a *word that is just*, in Khalifa a *logical agreement*, in Shakir an *equitable proposition*, and in Sale a *just determination*.

⁸ *Lo! God forgiveth not that a partner should be ascribed unto Him.... Whoso ascribeth partners to God, he hath indeed invented a tremendous sin (Sūrah 4:48; cf. 4:116).*

Needless to say, the Christian perspective on Christ—whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant—is radically different. In their open letter, the authors of *A Common Word* have asserted that “Christians themselves ... have never all agreed with each other on Jesus Christ’s nature” (36), but with due respect I must say that this seems to me a most misleading claim. Disagreements can certainly be found if one includes the opinions of heretics, whether the Arians, Apollinarians, or Nestorians of the first Christian centuries, who had not yet come to terms with the full mystery of the Gospel,⁹ or else the de-mythologizers and other historicist critics of recent times, who, though they may still call themselves “Christian”, have capitulated to the reductionist pressures of modernity in their search for a purely “historical Jesus”.

Be that as it may, the vast majority of Christians, at least since the Fourth Ecumenical Council in A.D. 451, have been of one mind in believing that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God, and each time they express this consensus by repeating the words of the Nicene Creed, traditional Christianity’s most important statement of faith, they categorically reject the Koranic teaching of *Sūrah* 3:59 that *the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam*. For the Creed makes a point of stating—quite emphatically—that Jesus is “begotten” (*gennēthenta*) but *not* “created” (*poiēthenta*), being “of one essence [*homoousion*] with the Father”, and indeed that it is Jesus Himself, the eternal Word of God, “by whom all things were made”.¹⁰ Of course Christians also believe that Jesus became fully human, for *though He was in the form of God ... He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men* (Phil. 2:6-7). According to the Formula or Definition promulgated by the Fourth Council, this divine *kenosis* or self-emptying means that the Son of God is now “like us in all things with the exception of sin”. But He who thus entered the human condition, the uncreated Word, is not a human being. On the contrary, Christ’s *persona* or *hypostasis*—to use the technical theological language—remains strictly divine, though within this Person, the second of the Holy Trinity, there exist two distinct natures, one fully divine and one fully human, each with

⁹ A “mystery”, according to Saint Paul, “which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed” (Rom. 16:25). It is possible that the Najrani Christians were members of the Nestorian sect, and this might account for their apparent lack of resolve. For the Nestorians believed that Jesus was a human being joined with the divine Son or Word of God in a unity of “function” or “honor”, but that He was not the Son as such.

¹⁰ “All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3).

its own set of distinguishing *idiomata* or attributes.¹¹

This traditional Christology developed in part as a way of grasping synoptically what the Bible teaches concerning Christ’s divinity. To mention only a few representative passages, Jesus is proclaimed to be *the Light of the world*, which *enlightens every man coming into the world* (John 9:5, 1:9), and it is said that *all things ... in heaven and on earth, both visible and invisible* were created *in Him and through Him and for Him* (Col. 1:16); that *He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature, upholding the universe by His word of power* (Heb. 1:3); and that *He is the Alpha and the Omega*—the Beginning and the End of all things—for He is *He who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty* (Rev. 1:8). Furthermore, contrary to what the *Common Word* initiative would appear to require of those who agree to its terms, Jesus is referred to and worshipped as “Lord” (*Kyrios* in Greek) well over 700 times in the New Testament. In fact, regarding Christ as Lord is said by Saint Paul to be the very key to eternal life: *If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved* (Rom. 10:9).

Certain Christian respondents to *A Common Word*, in an effort to move the conversation forward on this difficult point—and to exonerate their tradition of what might otherwise seem to Muslims the sin of *shirk*—have made a point of insisting that in these and other such Biblical passages, Jesus is *not* in fact being presented as a “partner” of God, or taken as a “Lord” in addition to God, or worshipped as God while nonetheless not being God. He simply *is* God as Christianity conceives of God—not something or someone else or other, but a Christian name for the one and only Divinity. This is the strategy used by Rowan Williams, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, in his June 2008 response to the *Common Word* letter. “It is important to state unequivocally,” Dr Williams writes,

that the association of any other being with God is expressly rejected by the Christian theological tradition.... “God” is the name of a kind of life, a “nature” or essence—eternal and self-sufficient life, always active, needing nothing. But that life is lived ... eternally and simultaneously as three interrelated agencies are

¹¹ Speaking in Orthodox dogmatic terms, Christ has a human *physis* or “nature”, which means that whatever can be truly predicated of us—with the exception of sin—can be truly predicated of Him; but He does not have a human *hypostasis* and is therefore not “a” human person. His humanity is “anhypostatic”, though it is “enhypositized” in the *Logos*, which means that the personal subject of all His thoughts, words, and actions is divine.

made known to us in the history of God's revelation.... In light of what our Scripture says, we speak of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit", but we do not mean one God with two beings alongside him.... There is indeed one God, the Living and Self-subsistent, associated with no other.¹²

There is certainly an important truth in this formulation, for Christians do indeed believe that there is only one God; like Muslims, we are monotheists, not polytheists. Nonetheless, as an Eastern Orthodox theologian, I am obliged to point out that this way of expressing Trinitarian doctrine comes rather too close for comfort to the modalist or Sabellian heresy, in which a single God was said to have appeared in three distinct modes or forms, whether successively or simultaneously. No doubt the Archbishop understands this distinction and is fully aware that the early Church rejected modalism; I do not mean to suggest he is consciously opting for heresy. His aim is ecumenical diplomacy, and to this end he is quick to agree with our Muslim interlocutors that nothing and no one should be associated with the only God. The result, however, is a kind of planimetric ecumenism, to refer once again to my geometrical imagery. Like many another enthusiastic proponent of exoteric religious concord, Williams has pictured Christianity and Islam as if they existed on the same theological plane, and he seems prepared to blur the sharp dogmatic outlines of his own religion so as to make it more compatible, if not congruent, with the Muslim perspective.

But the Trinity is a much greater mystery than this too simplistic equation of theologies suggests. Part of the mystery turns on exactly what, or rather whom, one means by "God". As we Orthodox see it, prayerful fidelity to the witness of Scripture, the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, and the language of liturgical worship requires that the word "God" be reserved, strictly speaking, not for some generic form of "self-sufficient life" but for God the Father alone, the first Person of the Holy Trinity, who is said to be the Fount (*pēgē*) of all divinity and the uncaused Cause (*aitia*) of the other two Persons, the Son and the Spirit. In defense of this perspective, we cite such Biblical texts as John 17:3, where Jesus prays to His Father, saying, *This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent*, or again Christ's response to the rich man, *Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone* (Luke 18:19).

¹² Rowan Williams, "A Common Word for the Common Good", *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Winter 2008-2009), 44-45.

The opening salutations and concluding blessings of several Pauline epistles further support the Orthodox Trinitarian vision, as for example the doxology in the final verse of the Letter to the Romans: *To the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ* (Rom. 16:27). What one passes “through” is evidently not the same as what one passes “to”, and it follows that Jesus is not to be equated or identified with “the only wise God”.

Now admittedly the Biblical language is not systematic, and it would be going too far to claim that Christ is never referred to as “God” in the scriptures. But even when He is thus described, the reader is not allowed to forget that there is Another who is even “more God” than He—if you will permit me this admittedly curious phrase. For as Jesus Himself insists, speaking as the divine Son and not merely as man: *The Father is greater than I* (John 14:28).¹³ The opening chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews offers a memorable illustration of this koanic complexity. Appropriating Old Testament texts from 2 Samuel and the Psalms and applying them prophetically to Christ, the author writes: *To what angel did God ever say, “Thou art my Son, today I have begotten Thee”?... But of the Son He says, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever.... Therefore God, Thy God, has anointed Thee with the oil of gladness beyond Thy comrades”* (Heb. 1:5, 8-9).

Strange as it may sound even to some Christian ears, there is a hierarchy within the divine order itself. Even though Jesus can in one sense be rightly called “God” since He has the same essence as His Father, the “God” that He is *has* a God. This astonishing claim is born out, among other places, in the risen Christ’s encounters with Thomas Didymus and Mary Magdalen, as recorded in John 20. Having touched Christ’s wounded hands and side, the erstwhile “doubting Thomas” is moved to utter the most exalted profession of faith in the entire New Testament: *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28), a profession Christ in no way rejects or rebukes him for. But when Mary attempts to embrace Him, Jesus stops her, saying, *Do not cling to me ... but go to my brethren and*

¹³ According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, these words are to be predicated of Christ’s human nature alone (*Summa Theologica*, Part 3, Question 20, Article 1). From the Orthodox point of view, however, words can be spoken and deeds performed only by a person, not a nature, and like all of Christ’s words this witness to the superiority of God the Father must therefore be attributed to the divine *persona* or *hypostasis* of the Son of God.

say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God (John 20:17).

We find this highly paradoxical point reaffirmed in the Nicene Creed, where the grammatical apposition in the opening article shows beyond doubt that the Father alone is unequivocally “God”. The Christian recites, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” Once again it is evident that the unity of God is not to be understood as residing in some generic nature shared by three specific Persons. The oneness of God is the specificity of the Father; it is He who *is* the “one God” in whom Christians believe. As Saint Gregory the Theologian puts it, “The union is the Father, from whom and to whom the order of the Persons runs its course”.¹⁴ As for Jesus Christ, the second article of the Creed makes it clear that His divinity, while entirely real and efficacious, is in some sense derivative. For He, “the only-begotten Son of God”, is confessed to be “Light of Light” and “Very God of Very God”. In Orthodox liturgical texts, this subtle but extremely important distinction is often conveyed by using the word “God” on its own when speaking of the Father while adding the possessive pronoun “our” in phrases referring to the divinity of the Son, as in the frequently recited prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, *our God*, have mercy on us and save us”. It is as if the tradition were endeavoring to remind the Christian of the difference between Jesus’s words to Mary and Thomas’s words to Jesus. Once again it would be misleading to suggest that there is anything systematic or invariable about this usage—devotional piety is not mathematics—but it occurs frequently enough to be worthy of note.

Clearly much more could be said concerning this crucial theological distinction; indeed, to appropriate the final verse of the Fourth Gospel, *The world itself could not contain the books that would be written* (John 21:25) if our hope was in some way to exhaust in prose the mystery of Christ’s relation to His Father—let alone to the Holy Spirit. My aim here is merely to raise a question, a question not yet adequately addressed in the responses I have read to *A Common Word*. We Christians worship Jesus Christ as God’s very Son, and we take this same Christ as our Lord. And yet at least in one sense the Son of God is *not* God, or not at least God as such—not the metaphysical Absolute

¹⁴ *Theological Orations*, 42.15; quoted by Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 32. Saint Gregory can be even more direct: “There is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things” (*Orations*, 39.12).

and sovereign Source of all things, including the Son's own consubstantial divinity. So the question is this: Is it really appropriate for a faithful Christian to accept an invitation to theological dialogue the stipulations of which are that *we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God (Sūrah 3:64)?*

But this is by no means the most vexing of the questions we face, for Christology is not the only way in which the Christian and Islamic planes diverge—nor, I suspect, will it prove the most problematic form of divergence for many Muslim exoterists. Let us assume for the sake of the argument that we all agree to prescind from the historical background in which the faithful of our respective traditions first exchanged views in Medina. Let us assume further that Anglican and other Western theologians are right to prioritize the unity Christ shares with His Father and the Holy Spirit and right to use the word “God” to refer to this unity. And let us assume finally that, since Jesus Christ may thus be regarded as one expression of that unity, worshipping Him is not—or at least *need* not be—an obstacle to interfaith harmony between Christians and Muslims. Even if our discussions were to proceed as swimmingly as these assumptions suggest—and I am none too sure they would, or should—we would still find ourselves facing a tremendous dialogical dilemma. For Jesus is not merely some strange though still acceptable exception to the Islamic rule that God alone is divine. According to Christianity, He is the salvific means whereby this rule is meant to be repeatedly broken.

I said earlier that the traditional Christian understanding of Christ, as expressed by the early Councils of the Church, developed in part as a way of grasping synoptically what the scriptures teach concerning the two natures of the divine Son of God. But it would be wrong to suppose that Christological doctrine came about solely, or even primarily, as a means of collating the titles and descriptions of Christ that one finds in the Bible. On the contrary, Christian understanding of Jesus is above all a way of making soteriological sense of the Christian experience of *theosis* or deification—an experience, promised by scripture and realized in the lives of many saints, in which human beings are enabled to participate in the very powers and properties of God Himself. Granted, it is my Orthodox tradition that has especially stressed this experience as the defining element in salvation and as the ultimate goal of the whole spiritual life. But the essential teaching,

firmly based on the Bible and attested to by the entire Patristic tradition, is no more Eastern than Western. If the conviction that “there is no god but God” is foundational to Islam, the conviction that “God became man that man might become God” is foundational to Christianity.

References to *theosis* can be found throughout the New Testament. One of the most arresting passages comes in Saint Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, where he tells his correspondents that he is praying on their behalf that they *may be filled with all the fullness of God* (Eph. 3:19). What is particularly striking is that the very same phrase is also used by Paul in his Letter to the Colossians in reference to Jesus Himself, in whom *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell* (Col. 1:19).¹⁵ An equally important formulation is found in the Gospel of John, where we read that those who *receive* Christ are given the *power to become the sons of God* (John 1:12). But the most decisive of Biblical supports for this distinctively Christian teaching comes in the Second Letter of Peter:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion and become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:2-4).

Each of these lines deserves attentive study, but it is enough for our purposes here to focus on the last phrase alone. God has given us the power through Jesus Christ to become *partakers of the divine nature*—*theias koinōnoi physeōs* in the Greek. The word *koinōnoi* is particularly important for our dialogue. Translated here as *partakers*, it can also be rendered into English as “participants”, “companions”, “sharers”, “communicants”,¹⁶ and—yes—as “partners”. According to Peter, the *precious and very great promise* of God is that man, creature of God though he is, can nonetheless become

¹⁵ Read in context, the phrase follows logically from a description of Christ’s creative and salvific power, a power—the Apostle seems to suggest—which would be inexplicable were Jesus not divine: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by Him were all things created.... All things were created by Him, and for Him: and He is before all things, and by Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have preeminence. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col. 1:15-19).*

¹⁶ It is impossible not to hear the Eucharistic overtones of this word. Needless to say, the Mystical Supper, in which Christians assimilate the Real Presence of the Son of God by eating His body and drinking His blood, provides yet another reminder of the divergence between our traditions.

nothing short of God's *partner*. This for Christianity is the divinely willed culmination of human life.

Nor do we Christians regard this *koinōnia*, or “communion”, in the divine nature simply as an unrealized human potential or an as yet unfulfilled promise. According to the Fathers of the Church, it is something the greatest saints have already experienced. Saint Athanasius's dictum that “God became man in order to make us God” is one of several Patristic sources often quoted in defense of the doctrine.¹⁷ But it is important to realize that Athanasius was not speaking in a merely speculative or theoretical way; he was talking about the concrete effects of *theosis* as he had personally witnessed them in his spiritual master Saint Anthony the Great, the first and most famous of the Desert Fathers of Egypt. At the end of his biography of the saint, Athanasius tells his fellow monks that they should read what he has written not only to “the other brothers, so that they may learn what the life of monks ought to be” but to “the pagans as well, so they may understand by this means that our Lord Jesus Christ is God and Son of God”.¹⁸ For Athanasius, the quality of Anthony's life—indeed the transfigured nature of his very being—was such that it could not be described except in terms of divinity, but this divinity in turn could not be adequately accounted for without a sufficient reason that was itself divine. To repeat the critical point I made earlier: for Christians, Jesus is not some strange exception that ends up merely proving the rule that God alone is divine. He is the divine cause of the continuing effects of *theosis* among other men, and thus of the ongoing and divinely intended violation of this rule.¹⁹

¹⁷ *On the Incarnation*, 54. According to Saint Irenaeus, “We were made men at the beginning, but at the end Gods” (*Against Heresies*, 3:19); Saint Clement of Alexandria puts it this way: “God's Word became man so that you might learn how to become God” (*Protrepticus*, 1:9); Saint Gregory the Theologian writes, “I may become God to the extent that God became man” (*Theological Orations*, 3.19); the boldest formulation of all comes from Saint Basil the Great: “Man is a creature under orders to become God” (reported by Saint Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 43, “In Praise of Basil the Great”).

¹⁸ *Athanasius: The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 99.94.

¹⁹ According to Saint Maximus the Confessor, full participation in the divine nature comes about when “God suspends in created beings the operation of their natural energy by inexpressibly activating in them His divine energy” (*Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God*, First Century, 47; *The Philokalia*, Vol. 2, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware [London: Faber and Faber, 1981], 123). Like other Fathers, Maximus understands deification to be a reversal of what happened when Christ became man, for in that case an uncreated and eternal being assumed created and temporal attributes, whereas in *theosis* created and temporal beings are granted uncreated and eternal attributes. First articulated at the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431), the Christological

I should add that for Orthodox Christians the transformative experience of deification is not merely a thing of the past; on the contrary it is believed to continue right down to our own time. The Greek Orthodox bishop and spiritual writer Hierotheos Vlachos, recalling his encounter in the late 1980s with a *gerondas*, or spiritual elder, on the Holy Mountain of Athos, describes the old man as “participating in the uncreated energies of God” and as having “everything that God has, yet without having His essence”.²⁰ Even supposing that there may be a certain amount of deliberate hyperbole in this formulation, it is clear that the promise of *theosis*, the realization of which such accounts are intended to document, remains very firmly rooted in my tradition, and it points to a hugely important planimetric divergence between Christianity and Islam. As *A Common Word* makes abundantly clear, “partnership” with God is for Muslims the one thing to be avoided at all costs, but for Christians “partnership” with God—indeed partnership *in* God—is the *sine qua non* of salvation. For you it is the greatest sin, while for us it is the distinguishing mark of sanctity. The very thing you proscribe we prescribe.

So is it really possible for us to “come to a common word” with each other?

Toward a Metaphysical Dialogue

“I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfectly one” (John 17:23).

Despite the stress I have been placing on divergence and dissimilarity, I myself certainly believe that it is possible. I agree in other words that it is entirely appropriate, and indeed highly desirable, for traditional Christians and traditional Muslims to seek common ground. But as I have more than once hinted, and shall now endeavor to explain more precisely, I also believe that this search, rather than neglecting or downplaying our differences, should insist they be treated as the very key to our unity. What this means, however, is that any “common word” or agreement between us must be of a metaphysical rather than a theological order.

Simply put, metaphysics is to theology what absoluteness is to relativity. Now of course, the theologian is also concerned with what he rightly regards as absolute and

principle of *communicatio idiomatum*, that is, an “exchange of properties” between the divine and the human, also applies to the deified man.

²⁰ *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, trans. Effie Mavromichali (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1991), 31-32.

eternal Truth. But his understanding of this Truth is inevitably colored by the revealed forms in which, he believes, it has found its most definitive religious expression.²¹ This is obviously the case with Christian theology, where the doctrine of God is ineluctably tied to the saving events of Christ's life, but the general principle applies to each of the Semitic traditions, and *mutatis mutandis* to all religions. Compared to Christianity, where the revelational weight is placed on the incarnate presence of God at a particular moment of time, Islam accentuates what God has revealed to all His prophets across the ages. Nonetheless Islamic theology (*kālam*) remains bound in its own way to the conceptual categories with which it articulates the Message behind all the messengers. No less an authority than al-Ghazzali goes so far as to say that “spiritual knowledge (*maʿrifa*) cannot be attained by the science of theology”, for theology is like a “veil” (*hijāb*) and a “barrier” (*māni*).²²

By contrast, metaphysics is the science of absoluteness as such, or more precisely of the Absolute as such, and the metaphysician is the person who knows that this Absolute must by its very nature transcend every form, even the relatively absolute forms through which it has revealed itself in his religion. This is obviously not the place for a justification or defense of this science. Fellow scholars of religion who have managed to convince themselves that no one can know anything except relativities will no doubt remain unconvinced by what I say here, and so will fellow religious believers, whether Christian or Muslim, who are intent upon treating their doctrines about God as if they were God Himself. I am not addressing either of these groups at the moment. I am speaking instead to those who have already realized that, without at least some incipient knowledge of a Reality transcending all form, the very concept of form would be meaningless, and I am inviting them to look *through* the forms of their religious traditions, treating them as open windows and not opaque works of art.²³

Let us remind ourselves of the challenge we face. We have before us two great

²¹ One recalls the expression of the Sufi Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd: “The water takes on the color of its cup”; see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 341.

²² *The Revival of Religious Sciences*; see Reza Shah-Kazemi, “God as ‘The Loving’ in Islam”, *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Winter 2008-2009), 81.

²³ See the closing pages of my article “*Hesychia*: An Orthodox Opening to Esoteric Ecumenism”; published in my *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2002), it is also available here: <http://www.cutsinger.net/scholarship/articles.shtml>.

world religions whose defining doctrines are mutually exclusive, or at least so they appear. Either “God became man that man might become God”, or else “there is no god but God”; either Jesus Christ is the uncreated Son of God, or else He is a created human being; either sharing in God’s nature is the very pinnacle of holiness, or else it is the abyss of sin. As I noted near the start of this paper, if our traditions are placed within a single plane of theological reference—a plane defined, in other words, by the dogmatic formulations of Christianity alone, or alternatively those of Islam alone—then confrontation or compromise will be our only options. If the Christian is right, the Muslim is wrong; if the Muslim is right, the Christian is wrong. And in each case he who is wrong must either modify his doctrinal claims or be prepared to face condemnation—whether through a formal rite of *mubāhalah* or by some more terrestrial and less frightening means!

But what if we take a step back from these dogmatically divisive formulations, not to dismiss or abandon them certainly, but to envision them in a new perspective? To revert to my earlier geometrical image, let us picture our religions as circles of equal sizes but placed in different planes. And let us position these planes in such a way that the circles intersect through their diameters and along the axis of a single sphere. Now suppose we ascend above the north pole of this sphere and then descend beneath its south pole, taking turns looking down and then up along the axis. What might we see? What might our apparent oppositions together be pointing us toward? Metaphysics, as I am using the term, is precisely this stepping back, this positioning of planes, and this looking along a shared diameter. There are three basic steps to this process.

First, we must try to understand why “God became man that man might become God” if in fact it is nonetheless true that “there is no god but God”; what deep truth within the Christian doctrine of the incarnation is revealed if, but only if, we also profess the *shahādah*?

Second, we must try to understand why “there is no god but God” if in fact it is nonetheless true that “God became man that man might become God”; what deep truth within the Islamic prohibition of *shirk* is revealed if, but only if, we also accept *kenosis*, *theosis*, and *koinōnia* as real possibilities?

And third, we must try to understand how these deepened insights into our defining

doctrines might together aid us in better knowing the Reality whom Christians and Muslims are both called to love; what deepest truths about God will we glimpse if, but only if, we transcend a merely planimetric ecumenism?

Please understand: there can be no question of somehow solving these three riddles here. What follow are merely a few scattered hints and provocations. The Muslim signatories to *A Common Word Between Us and You* have issued an invitation to Christians. All I am doing is extending in turn an invitation of my own.

Step One

Step One will require that Islamic doctrine be accorded a certain priority. Without giving up their belief that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God and the saving means whereby others may come to share in God's nature, Christians who take this step must be willing to grant that "there is no god but God"—in other words, metaphysically speaking, that *the Absolute is incomparable to anything else*. In order to do this, however, they must be prepared to rise above the north pole of my imagined sphere in order to look down its axis toward their accustomed immanence by way of transcendence.

Even the most faithful and serious of Christians should be willing to adopt this perspective, whether they are metaphysicians or not. Certainly the Eastern Orthodox, notwithstanding their emphasis on deification, yield to no one in their apophatic insistence that the true God transcends every possible category, even that of divinity itself, and that He therefore remains asymptotically forever beyond His creation. Saint Maximus the Confessor speaks about *theosis* with greater authority and confidence than perhaps any other Father of the Church, and yet he especially is quick to explain that "God is ... incomprehensible ... altogether excluding notions of when and how, inaccessible to all.... He is undetermined, unchanging, and infinite, since He is infinitely beyond all being".²⁴ This is precisely why the Christian East accentuates the primacy of the Father in relation to the other two Trinitarian Persons, for in spite of the fact that *the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, hath declared Him*, it remains the case—even "after" the incarnation—that *no man hath seen God at any time* (John 1:18).

²⁴ *Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God*, First Century, 1, 2; *The Philokalia*, Vol. 2, 114.

This is also why the doctrine of deification is almost always presented with an important disclaimer. Yes, says the Orthodox theologian, we are called to participate in the very life of God, but this participation extends only as far as His uncreated energies, and not to His essence.²⁵ The description of the Athonite *gerondas* I quoted above may seem overblown to some in my audience, but the writer was actually being very carefully and circumspectly Orthodox when he said that the old man had “everything that God has, *yet without having His essence*”.²⁶

There need be no opposition, therefore—at least in principle—between the Muslim’s conviction concerning God’s incomparability and the Christian’s conviction concerning the divinity of Christ and the deification of man. But metaphysical dialogue involves a great deal more than a half-grudging, half-apologetic acceptance of minimally compatible truths. In taking Step One, we Christians are not being asked to affirm the transcendence of the divine Absolute in spite of, or even in addition to, our continued belief in the incarnation. On the contrary, we are being invited to plumb the depths of our Christological teachings *by means of* the apparently contradictory doctrine that “there is no god but God”. And the question, as I have said, comes down to this: What deep truth may be revealed in our claim that “God became man that man might become God” if, but only if, we also profess the *shahādah*?

If nothing else, granting dialogical priority to this Islamic doctrine should help Christians to see that whatever the incarnation and deification may involve on the human side, they entail absolutely no change, and certainly no diminution, on the part of God. Christian theologians have always known this, of course; they have known—to quote again the words of Saint Maximus—that God is “unchanging” and beyond all “notions of when and how”, and they have therefore known as well—in the classic formulation of the

²⁵ “The saints do not become God by essence nor one person with God, but they participate in the energies of God, that is to say, in His life, power, grace, and glory.... The energies are truly *God Himself*—yet not God as He exists within Himself, in His inner life” (Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* [Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995], 125-26).

²⁶ My italics. The same principle is involved in Saint Gregory of Nyssa’s signature teaching concerning *epektasis*, a perpetual “stretching forward” or unending progress toward a goal one never reaches; according to Gregory, participation in God entails continual growth in virtue, but man will never understand, let alone attain, God’s transcendent perfection. The saint therefore writes, “Whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God.... Since this good has no limit, the participant’s desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless. It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection” (*Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson [New York: Paulist Press, 1978], 31 [Sections 7-8]).

Athanasian Creed—that to “believe rightly in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ” is to understand that it came about “not by the conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by the taking of the manhood into God”. But even theologians can easily forget this fact; even they sometimes talk as if something actually happened in Heaven in the year 0 A.D. The impact of the *shahādah* is such as to remind anyone, whether Muslim or Christian, that God simply *is* and that the relativities of the world and the apparent movements of time have no effect whatsoever upon Him. “There is no god but God” means that God is eternal and hence that His acts are all *now*—or rather that He does not truly “act” insofar as action entails change and becoming. But what this means in turn is not only that the world is still being created and that the Second Coming has already occurred;²⁷ it also means that God has always been man, and man always God.

Can Christians accept the “common word” of such insights? Are we willing to grant that the operative power of the incarnation “for us men and for our salvation” (Nicene Creed) depends on the metaphysical fact that *God begetteth not nor was begotten, and there is none comparable unto Him (Sūrah 112:3-4)*? Can we admit, in other words, that the south would not be fully south without north?

Step Two

In this case the tables are to be turned and Christian doctrine prioritized. Without giving up their belief that “there is no god but God”, Muslims who take this step must be willing to grant that “God became man that man might become God”—in other words, metaphysically speaking, that *the Absolute is necessarily Infinite* and that because it is Infinite *there is nothing not it*. In order to do this, however, they must be prepared to descend beneath our sphere in order to gaze upward toward their accustomed transcendence by way of immanence. The first step required Christians to position themselves in such a way as to envision their most important belief from the “northern” perspective of the Islamic *shahādah*. Now I am asking Muslims to return the favor—to

²⁷ The Koranic “Be!” (*Sūrah 3:47, 19:35*) and the Biblical fiat (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14), like all imperatives, do not have tense. In the *Anaphora* of the Divine Liturgy, the trans-temporal reality of the Second Coming is acknowledged when the priest offers thanks to the Father, “who didst bring us from non-existence into being, and when we had fallen away didst raise us up again, and didst not cease to do all things until Thou *hadst* brought us back to heaven, and *hadst* endowed us with Thy kingdom *which is to come*”.

position themselves in such a way as to envision their most important point of doctrine from the “southern” perspective afforded by Christian teaching concerning the incarnation and *theosis*.

Unless I am mistaken, this second step will present more of a problem for most Muslims than will Step One for most Christians. While bringing the *shahādah* into direct contact with the doctrine of the incarnation is certainly a strange thing to do, and though it cannot but lead to a “de-temporalized”—and to this extent unfamiliar—understanding of what is meant when we read that *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14), there is certainly nothing intrinsically problematic from the Christian perspective in saying “there is no god but God”. The situation in this second case is very different, however, and Muslim exoterists will almost certainly be scandalized. For taking Step Two means accepting the idea that the divinity of the one and only true God is in no way threatened or compromised, but is instead most profoundly affirmed, in being *shared*.

Emphasizing the primacy of God the Father in relation to the other two Persons of the Holy Trinity is essential when it comes to Step One. But it would be a mistake for our discussions to stop there, for it is clear in the Gospel that everything the Father has—and is—has been fully given to the Son. Though Jesus Himself testifies to the primacy of the Absolute in saying that *the Father is greater than I* (John 14:28), He at the same time makes a point of insisting that *He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father* (John 14:9) and that *I and my Father are one* (John 10:30). Emphasizing the transcendent incomparability of the divine essence in relation to human beings is likewise essential to the first step of this dialogue. But again it would be a mistake to stop there, for it is also clear in the Gospel that everything the Son has received from the Father He means to give us as well, which is why He can pray—why He who *is* God can nonetheless pray *to* God—that we men be empowered to enter into Their union. John 17 records His potent words:

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word, that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us.... The glory which Thou gavest Me I have given them, that they may be one, even as We are one: I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfectly one (John 17:20-23).

For Christians, the perfect unity of God is inseparable from man’s own perfect union *in*

Him, which is why they believe *God is love* (1 John 4:16) and not just the Loving. But what this means—dare I say it?—is that a God without partners is not really God; interpenetration among the Persons of the Trinity, on the one hand, and the promise and possibility of our own participation in the eternal life of that Trinity, on the other, are essential in Christianity to God’s being God.

As I have noted already, most Muslims will be thoroughly scandalized by the seeming *shirk* of this claim, and theologically they should be scandalized. Unless I am mistaken the Sufis in our midst will be more amenable, drawing as they do on the insights of their esoteric traditions, including an understanding of the divine *tawhīd*, or oneness, that accentuates “union” and not only “unicity”.²⁸ But whether or not there are Sufic approximations to the distinctively Christian doctrines I have stressed in this paper is not the question. The question is whether the parties to our dialogue are willing to adopt, and not just concede, each other’s perspectives. In taking Step One, I did not ask my fellow Christians to give a merely provisional nod to the *shahādah*; I asked them to permit this distinctive Islamic doctrine to deepen their understanding of the incarnation. And in just the same fashion I am now inviting my Muslim interlocutors to accept the incarnation of God and the deification of man not in spite of, or even in addition to, their conviction that “there is no god but God”, but *as a means of* plumbing the depths of the divine incomparability. Muslims can—in fact they must—affirm the radiance of the divine Infinite, for *whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God* (Sūrah 2:115), and *We are nearer to [man] than his jugular vein* (Sūrah 50:16). No faithful Muslim, whether Sufi or otherwise, can object to the proposition that God is amidst us and in us. But what about the reverse formulation? Is it possible for there to be something amidst and in God—others than God within God who are “God” nonetheless, ourselves among them?

I am eager to know what the signatories to *A Common Word* think about this distinctively Christian paradox. Are they willing to grant that *no one hath ascended up to heaven but He that came down from heaven* (John 3:13) and that it is therefore possible to

²⁸ I am thinking, for example, of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s precision with regard to the divine infinitude: “Do not declare [God] nondelimited and thus delimited by being distinguished from delimitation! For if He is distinguished, then He is delimited by His nondelimitation. And if He is delimited by His nondelimitation, then He is not He” (William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 112). For Saint Gregory the Theologian and other Greek-speaking Fathers, divine unity is a function of *henōsis*, which is the “union” or “unification” among the three Persons of the Trinity, and not merely *hen*, which is the oneness of an arithmetical “unit”. The Sufi doctrine of the “unity of being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*) is clearly pertinent here.

be born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:13)? Can they admit, in other words, that the north can still be north in the south?

Step Three

This third step is going to be the most difficult by far. For here it is no longer a question of simply bringing the central teachings of our religions into contact with each other, however intimate and fructifying that contact might prove, nor of visualizing our defining doctrines from above or beneath the “poles” of each other’s perspectives. We cannot simply look toward immanence by way of transcendence or toward transcendence by way of immanence. The challenge at this point is to envision our respective teachings in complete coincidence, as if they had been reduced not just from their divergent planes to a single line but from that line to a point—as if in fact the sphere had collapsed and north and south had met in the center.

Steps One and Two entail rethinking the meaning of our most essential doctrines, and in each case our understanding of those doctrines, under pressure as it were from their theological opposites, must undergo a certain modification. Without denying the southern truth that God became man in Jesus Christ, the Christian remembers, or perhaps realizes for the first time, that God is nonetheless beyond all becoming and that the incarnation is therefore not, or not only, an event in time but an eternal state of being. And without denying the northern truth that there is nothing comparable to God, the Muslim remembers, or perhaps realizes for the first time, that there is nonetheless nothing *not* comparable to God since whatever is—to the measure it is—must be He.

Thus summarized, however, it may sound as if a metaphysical dialogue were no better able than its planimetric counterparts to avoid the dangers of compromise or capitulation. It may seem that each party to our conversation has been obliged to sacrifice at least a part of what makes his religion distinctive: the Muslim at least some of the transcendence implicit in the *shahādah* and the Christian at least some of the immanence implicit in the doctrine of *theosis*. But this is not so, or rather, though it would perhaps be an indirect and unintended result of our dialogue if we stopped short at this point, the aim of Step Three is precisely to reinstate and accentuate our exoteric and theological

differences in order to demonstrate how, precisely *as* differences, they point toward an esoteric and metaphysical unity. If we are successful in this quest, Muslims will come to see their transcendence not *through* or even *in* but *as* the deepest immanence; and Christians will come to see their immanence not *through* or even *in* but *as* the highest transcendence.

I shall not presume to try to work this out from the Muslim side. But perhaps I can give you just a hint as to what Step Three might involve for us Christians by invoking the authority of one of my tradition's greatest spiritual masters, Saint Gregory Palamas. I have in mind a short passage from his most seminal work, a three-fold collection of treatises written "In Defense of the Holy Hesychasts" of Mount Athos and often simply referred to as *The Triads*. Here is what he says:

The divine Maximus [the Confessor] taught that [*theosis*] is not only enhypostatic but also unoriginated—and not merely uncreated—as well as indescribable and supra-temporal, and that those who attain it become thereby uncreated, principal, and indescribable, even though in their own nature they come from what is not.²⁹

The words "indescribable" (*aperigrapton*) and "supra-temporal" (*hyperchronon*) speak for themselves, while the term "enhypostatic" (*enupostatton*) underscores the fact that deification involves an ontological transformation: in the language of Sufism *theosis* is a permanent "station" (*maqām*), not just a passing "state" (*ḥāl*). But the most important words in this passage—and they are nothing short of astonishing—are the adjectives "unoriginated" (*agenēton*) as applied to deification and "principal" (*anarchos*) as applied to deified human beings. They are astonishing because they appear to crack the glass ceiling which my Orthodox tradition is otherwise so careful to maintain—and which I alluded to earlier—between God's uncreated energies on the one hand, in which deified men are permitted to share, and God's essence on the other hand, which is said to remain forever beyond even them. What is perhaps most surprising is that of all the Fathers of the Church Gregory was himself one of the most indispensable in transmitting, and arguably the most assiduous in preserving, this classic distinction.

But now look what he has gone and done! In defending the methods and exalting

²⁹ *The Triads*, 3, 1, 31 (my translation); for the Greek text, see the critical edition: *Grégoire Palamas: Défense des saints hésychastes*, ed. Jean Meyendorff (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1959), Vol. 2, p. 617.

the attainments of his fellow Athonite monks, he has ended up attributing to the greatest of these brethren a level of realization—to make use of the Anselmian formula—“than which nothing greater can be conceived”.³⁰ First he goes out of his way to insist that deification is more than “merely uncreated” (*aktiston monon*), though transcending the created order would clearly be astounding enough.³¹ *Theosis*, however, is something higher: it is “unoriginated” (*agenēton*), which appears to mean that it transcends all becoming.³² And yet even this word fails to capture the incomparability of those who have arrived at this station, and in “indescribably” describing them Gregory is therefore compelled to stretch for a yet loftier term. Like deification, the deified man can be called “uncreated” (*aktistos*), but he is nonetheless more, and the more in this case takes us beyond even the level of the “unoriginated”—and thus, we may assume, beyond such transcendent realities as the divine *logoi* or “ideas”, which though eternal still depend upon God. Wonder of wonders, deified human beings exceed even these, whereas they themselves are exceeded by nothing; for according to Gregory they are now *anarchos*, which means—indeed it could mean nothing else—that they have no “principle” (*archē*), whether temporal or eternal. But if this is true, it seems we have no choice but to conclude that such men have paradoxically “become” their own Principle, having realized their identity with God as such.³³

I am not suggesting that the author of *The Triads* would himself have endorsed this startling—and some will say blasphemous—reading. As his well-known disparagement of the Platonists proves, Gregory Palamas was a theologian, not a metaphysician, and as Archbishop of Thessaloniki he would in any case have been obliged *ex officio*, whatever

³⁰ Saint Anselm defines God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” (*Proslogion*, 2).

³¹ One is reminded of the *hadīth*: “The Sufi is not created” (*al-Ṣūfī lam yukhlaq*).

³² There is, admittedly, a terminological puzzle here. Beginning with Saint Athanasius, Greek Patristic tradition observed a subtle distinction between *agenēton* (with one *n*) and *agennēton* (with two *n*’s), the former being taken to mean “uncreated” and the latter “unbegotten”; according to this usage, employed by Athanasius in his refutation of the Arians, only God the Father is *agennēton*, while the “only-begotten” (John 1:18) Son of God is *agenēton*, which is more or less the equivalent of *ou poiēthenta* (“not created”) in the Nicene Creed. For Gregory, however, *agenēton* must mean something more, something perhaps closer to *agennēton*, since he sets it in contrast to his own preferred term for “uncreated”, *aktiston*.

³³ Of course the noun *archē* can also be translated as “rule”, and the adjective *anarchos* could therefore be taken to mean only (!) that the deified are “a law to themselves”. But given the ontological trajectory suggested by other words in this passage, it seems much more logical to construe this key term in a metaphysical, rather than an ethical or political, sense—though it is difficult to know quite how to put this sense into one English word; “anarchical”, to say nothing of “unprincipled”, will clearly not do! Since what *has* no principle must in some sense *be* its own principle, possessing the divine property of aseity, “principal” seems the least inadequate solution.

his personal insights, to guard the dogmatic frontiers of the Orthodox tradition. Nonetheless, words mean what they mean, and they are worth taking seriously, especially when they are the words of so important a saint, writing in what is historically so important a treatise. And their meaning in this case, however staggering, appears indisputable. To be deified is to become identified with the very highest Reality, the one and only pure Principle, whom Christians call “Father” and Muslims *Allāh*. It is here precisely—at this supreme level of Being, or rather at a “level” Beyond-even-Being—that the greatest saints find themselves.³⁴ Were we all Hindus, we could easily cut to the chase and say, *Tat tvam asi*, “Thou art That!”³⁵ But since ours is a dialogue between Semitic traditions, I must end on a somewhat more allusive note, saying instead that this is how the deepest immanence looks when it is perceived as the highest transcendence; this is what happens, in other words, when south meets north in the center.

I invite my Muslim interlocutors to consider in turn what might happen when north meets south in the center and what the highest transcendence might look like when perceived as the deepest immanence. If they will do this—if they will disagree with me theologically in order to agree metaphysically—we may indeed “come to a common word” not only “between us and you” but *within* us as *I*.

³⁴ John Meyendorff, the Orthodox editor and translator of the critical French edition of *The Triads* cited above (note 29), as well as the editor of an English translation of the work, himself notes—though with surprising reserve—that Saint Gregory has here expressed “a bold thought: The deified saints ... are to be described by the apophatic adjectives appropriate to the *divine* transcendence” (*The Triads*, ed. John Meyendorff [Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983], 144). Elsewhere Meyendorff emphasizes, as have I in the second part of this paper, that “the Father is the ‘cause’ (*aitia*) and the ‘principle’ (*archē*) of the divine nature that is in the Son and the Spirit” (*Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* [New York: Fordham University Press, 1974], 183). Putting two and two together, we are obliged to reason, however strange it may sound, that in “becoming” *anarchos* the deified man “attains” a station that in some mysterious sense is beyond even that of the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity.

³⁵ *Chandogya Upanishad*, 6.8.7.