

Allāh: Internalized Relationality: Awwaḍ Sim'ān on the Trinitarian Nature of God

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Abstract

The issue of Christ's two natures (human and divine) and the Trinitarian persons of God in the Christian conception have posed a conundrum in Christian-Muslim Relations. Islam has historically held to a formulation of absolute unity while the historic Christian faith prefers to see a plurality of union as the proper expression of divine unity. The debate raged throughout the medieval period. The contemporary Egyptian intellectual Awwaḍ Sim'ān is one outstanding voice in the current nexus of Muslim-Christian engagement. Sim'ān presents a rationally appealing formulation of the Christian doctrine, avoiding or carefully explaining some of the Christian Trinitarian terminology which Muslims regard as most egregious. He appeals to Muslim philosophers as well as historic Christian apologists to buttress his views. It is a winsome and rationally appealing formulation from an Arabic-writing theologian from within the Muslim context. This article seeks to examine the salient points of Sim'ān's formulation and ask if it could be heard in today's Muslim milieu with all its attending dissonance due to the realities of religious militancy and social displacement. The communal unity of the Trinity may yet find corners of the Muslim world where it is welcomed and embraced. If so, Awwaḍ Sim'ān's formulation will play a visible role.

Keywords

Association, Awwaḍ Sim'ān, Christology, divine attributes, divine unity, instantiation, *tawḥīd*, trinity

Introduction

The Dome of the Rock which dominates the skyline of Jerusalem was constructed only 60 years after the death of the prophet of Islam. Its majestic calligraphy which extends around its massive vault provides the earliest architectural evidence of the Qur'ān in existence. Moreover, these words predate by a century all extant collections of the sayings of Muhammad known as the *Ḥadīth* as well as his official biography (*al-sīra*). It is plausible that the Umayyad Caliph, 'Abd al-Mālik, envisioned the Dome as an alternative place of pilgrimage, diverting Muslim pilgrims from Mecca, the power base of his political rival (Brown, 2009). What is the message which the Umayyad Caliph of Damascus, 'Abd al-Malik, wished to immortalize in the third holiest site of Islam?

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The Message of the Dome of the Rock

The renowned Sura 112 is there in its poetic beauty: “Say he is Allah, One. Allah the eternal refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to him any equivalent” (Sahih International Translation).

The purpose of the Dome, or at least its theological intent, becomes clearer as the supposed pilgrim progresses around the ambulatory: “Praise to Allah who has not taken a son and has had no partner in dominion ...” (Quran 17:111):

O people of the scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was but a messenger of Allah and His word which He directed to Mary and a soul [created at a command] from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And do not say, “Three”; desist – it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but one God. Exalted is He above having a son Never would the Messiah disdain to be a servant of Allah ... (4:171-172).

At this early point in Islamic history, the Muslim Caliph was expressing the uniqueness of the Islamic conception of Divinity. Unlike Christians, whose churches and monasteries dotted the landscape of the caliphate, the Islamic God was one, without offspring, partners, or associations.

The Early Centuries of Islam

In the centuries following the construction of the Dome, Muslim polemicists continued to uphold *tawḥīd* as the intellectual standard for right *kalam*—speech about God. Among the tenets which these Muslim spokespersons attacked were the number of persons (hypostases) of the Christian Trinity (why three rather than 13?), the relationship of the essence to the hypostases (were they one and the same? If so, how could the hypostases be differentiated while the essence remained singular? If they were different, the result is multiple gods), and the irrationality of the divinity uniting with humanity in Christ (how could the transcendent God pass through the birth canal of a woman and live as a man fraught with human frailties?).

These Muslim polemicists include Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Bāqillānī the Asharite, also known as the sword of the Sunna and the mouthpiece of Muslims (Thomas, 2008). Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadḥānī was equally intransigent in his commitment to the oneness of deity, although his inclinations were Muʿtazilite (Reynolds, 2004). Perhaps the most relentless polemicist was Abū ʿĪsā Ibn Hārūn Ibn Muḥammad al-Warrāq. The sheer volume of Abū ʿĪsā’s polemic made a thorough Christian response virtually impossible (Thomas, 2002). Another layer of challenge was provided by converts to Islam from the Christian community. The most notable of these was ʿAlī Ibn Rabban al-Ṭabarī (Thomas, 1994). His insightful probing of the meaning of Christian texts provided “insider knowledge” to the Muslim polemic against the Trinity and the two natures of Christ.

Christian theologians arose to give cogent responses, although the level of persuasiveness depended on the presuppositions with which one approached the topic. Timothy I’s responses to the Caliph al-Mahdi set the bar for Christian *kalām* in the Muslim context (Mingana, 1928). Following him was a series of capable Christian defenders of the Trinitarian faith, including ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī (Mikhail, 2013), Theodore Abū Qurra (Griffith, 1994), Abū Rāʾiṭa (Keating, 2006), Yaḥyā Ibn ʿAdī (Platti, 1994), Elias of Nisibis, and Abū al-Faraj ʿAbd Allāh Ibn al-Ṭayyib (Kuhn, 2017). These figures have been the subject of several recent studies referenced in the notes section.

The intensity of the polemic is understandable given the importance of the issue. Muslims and Christians clashed concerning the nature of the God they worshipped. Was this God Trinitarian or one with neither partners nor peers? The Christians pled for inclusion in the fold of *tawḥīd* (God’s

transcendent oneness) but not at the expense of their Trinitarian faith, nor were they eager to critique the assumptions of *tawḥīd*, likely due to their concern that they would be further excluded by their Muslim overlords. The conundrum was irresolvable, leading one scholar to conclude “that each faith has represented the other in its own terms, to a reduction of the other down to the stature of a subsidiary form of itself, and then to demonization, enmity and the sanction of bloodshed” (Thomas, 2007).

Objective and Limitations

The purpose of this article is to consider contemporary Muslim-Christian engagement in this theological nexus of *tawḥīd* and Trinity. Specifically, we will look at a unique Christian response, probing how this theologian builds on and expands the apologetic of his Christian forbears.

Though many have written outside the Muslim context, this article will study a response from within the Arab world, composed in Arabic.¹ The Egyptian Awwaḍ Simʿān expounds the Christian Trinity in response to Islamic thought. His work is reasoned and detailed and merits scholarly attention.² As his work has not been translated into European languages, one incentive of this article is to bring this important, contemporary Christian apologist to light for English readers.

Awwaḍ Simʿān

Awwaḍ Simʿān is little known outside the Arab Christian world. He is Egyptian of the indigenous Brethren Church. Though he is not the product of an academic theological formation, his contribution to the understanding of the Trinity in the Arabic-speaking Christian community is formidable. His three major works dealing with the nature of the Trinity and Christology are combined and published in one Arabic volume, titled *Allāh in Christianity*. The three works are *Allāh: Between Christianity and Philosophy*, *Allāh: His Essence and the Type of His Unity*, and *Allāh: The Means of His Self-Revelation*.

God as Substance

One of the semantic stumbling blocks for Christians engaging with Muslims in the medieval period concerned the use of the word “substance” for the essence or nature of God. The word was used in its philosophical meaning by Christians—“self-existent”—to mean that which exists independently, in itself, unlike properties (or accidents) which exist in a substance. For example, a person is self-existent in that they remain a person regardless of whether they are a plumber or a philosopher (properties or accidents). Christians used the term to speak of God, meaning that God was the original substance, the being who existed without any pre-existent cause. The Arabic term (*jawhar*) which translated the Greek for “substance” was not understood this way by Muslims, for whom the word denoted “a basic component of material objects that can be characterized by accidents” (Thomas, 2008: 145). The misunderstanding could hardly be more polarizing.

Awaḍ Simʿān accepts the moniker “substance,” providing a useful clarification taken from Thomas Aquinas. The divine substance, which is eternal, is different from other non-eternal substances in that finite substances are discovered by their accidents. The divine substance, on the contrary, is free of accidents as it is “sufficient to itself” (Simʿān, 2010: 18).

Though the distinction may appear pedantic to modern readers, it is critical in the Muslim context. Elias (Iliyyā) of Nisibis recognized the need to amend the word only after his *Sessions* with Abū al-Qāsim al-Maghribī and embraced the word “being” (*kiyān*) to clarify his meaning (Kuhn, 2017: 142).

Instantiation

The author adopts the word “instantiation” (*taʿayyun*) as a generic equivalent for the Trinitarian persons. However, he carefully crafts his argument without mention of the “persons” of the godhead, doubtless due to the difficulty the moniker entails in the Islamic context. He reasons that some resist ascribing self-hood to God due to his transcendence, fearing this would result in God’s instantiation which is categorically ruled out by those who view God as ineffable, beyond human apprehension. Simʿān argues that instantiation does not imply God’s limitation or corporeality, but merely implies his real presence. While he agrees that God is beyond human comprehension, he refuses to prohibit God’s instantiation for the simple fact that God exists (i.e. his presence is real and not mythical). Those who deny God’s instantiation are not preserving his transcendence but denying his real presence. If there is no instantiation, there is no existence. Ibn Sina (Avicenna) is cited: “what is not instantiated does not exist” (Simʿān, 2010: 19–20). Sheikh Muhammad Abduh is also cited: “Allah must be described neither by excessive isolation (*tajrīd*) nor by delineation (*taḥdīd*).” For Simʿān, these comments from Muslim philosophers indicate the necessity of God’s instantiation while warning against an over-confident definition of God as his instantiation is also beyond our ability to comprehend. He will bring in further corroboration from Muslim philosophers as his argument progresses.

The Divine Attributes (Ṣifāt Allāh)

After significant discussion of God’s place (he is not limited by place) and his attributes, Simʿān explicates the kind of unity which is most appropriate to God. He points to two conceptualizations of God’s unity. The first strips God of any effective attributes, insisting that God is beyond or above knowledge, will, etc. The author is referring to expressions of the Greek philosophical heritage which were unwilling to assign attributes to God due to his ineffability. In Simʿān’s view, this effectively robs God of existence—one of God’s proposed attributes—as whatever is above existence must not exist (Simʿān, 2010: 60). The view effectively consigns God to the realm of unreality and disallows discourse concerning him.

The second conceptualization is absolute unity. This conceptualization sub-divides into two groups. The first is similar to the conceptualization mentioned above in that God is held to be above “will” or “desire” as this attribute would indicate the existence of some thing or someone that God willed or desired outside himself. The presence of the attribute appears to negate God’s aseity and sufficiency. Therefore, such an attribute must not be attributed to his divine transcendence.

The second group attributes to God all the attributes commonly known. In answer to the question of how these attributes were active in God before creation, this group is unable to provide an answer. Presumably, this group echoes the common Asharite posture towards the attributes of God, that we understand that God has attributes, often described in human terms (e.g. “the hand of Allāh”) but we are not given to know how he possesses them.

This exposition provides a foundational understanding for Simʿān’s subsequent argument concerning the attributes. As was common among Christian apologists in the medieval period, he will define the attributes positively and insist on their being eternally active in God. Anything less would require change in the divine being.

Divine Unity

The word chosen by the author to communicate divine unity is *waḥdāniyya*—oneness. His Christian forebears normally used the word *tawḥīd*, the commonly used word in Islamic *kalām* (theological

deductive reasoning). The Christian theologians, mentioned earlier, argued for the inclusion of their Christian faith in the fold of *tawḥīd*. The choice proved to be unwise given that Islam had provided its own definition to the term to which the Trinitarian formulation could never assent. Nevertheless the word choice was understandable given that *tawḥīd* had become the standard of correct speech concerning God. Simʿān's choice of a different word sets the discourse on a firmer foundation, allowing for a divergence in understanding. The passage of time has loosened some strictures and Simʿān as well as other Arab Christians will opt for a word which can enfold their Trinitarian conception—"oneness" (*waḥdāniyya*).

In seeking to answer what is meant by "unity," Simʿān offers the definition of his Christian Arab predecessor, Ibn al-Ṭayyib: oneness is evidenced by "a being in which other than that being is not found" (Simʿān, 2010: 44). He further delineates what is meant by divine unity by excluding it from the unity of the human being (which is composite, made of parts) and of elements (e.g. gold which can be deconstructed). For elements, their observation at the atomic level reveals a composite consisting of protons, electrons and neutrons—an internal relationality in an element presumed to be "one." A similar relationality is also seen in non-material entities. The self (*nafs*) is characterized by its properties which govern its internal relations which, in turn, form the personality. For Simʿān, these internal relations constitute the true unity of the being and are required for a being to have unity. As he builds the argument, the author establishes the fact that as these relations become more complex, the entity is understood to be more sophisticated and intelligent. This argument was known in the medieval discourse. Theodore Abū Qurra reasoned that God's greatest excellencies derived from his ability to enter into relationship with others and these virtues include "begetting, procession and headship. From this assertion, Abū Qurra would argue for his Trinitarian conception (Swanson, n.d.: 9). Accordingly, for Simʿān, the most sophisticated relations are found in rational and spiritual beings (Simʿān, 2010: 45–49).

Simʿān leads his reader to the conclusion that if this is the nature of unity in created entities, we should expect to see that internalized relationships would characterize the unity of deity as well, though the relationality will necessarily be of a higher order. He summarizes the argument in four propositions: 1) God has a particular instantiation whose properties reveal the truth about him. In other words, God is characterized by characteristics.³ 2) Since God's attributes were not idle in eternity past (such would require change in God) and since those attributes were not active towards a being other than himself (God has no partner) and since he could not have acted on his attributes with other parts of himself (God is not composite), then these attributes were active within and among his essence, his being.⁴ 3) If we postulate that God had no internal relations before creation and then entered into relation, then he would have to change. God would evolve. Such a view is a manifest error. 4) Therefore, God's unity can be described as "communion and exclusion" or "internalized relationality."⁵ God's unity consists of the communion of his divine attributes in his internal relations. These are appropriate to his perfect being, independent of and excluding imperfections from outside himself.

It is noteworthy that Simʿān, by appealing to reason and analogy, has constructed an argument for unity that diverges from the understanding of Islamic unity (*tawḥīd*). Unity does not exclude internal relations, but assumes them. The argument is rooted in the understanding of the attributes—that they were present in God and were not idle before creation. The activity of the attributes expresses an internal relationality which must be assumed of God. While the medieval Christians understood that "one" could be defined in many diverse ways, and articulated those definitions, they were nonetheless reticent to engage in a full critique of Islamic unity.⁶ The reluctance left them at the mercy of the polemicists who attacked their conception of God's unity mercilessly as they perceived it to be contradictory and irrational. Simʿān's contention that relationality

establishes oneness is a pivot from the ancient debates, incorporating their concerns but also moving beyond them.

Philosophy

Sim'ān takes issue with Christian philosophers on various points in regard to their understanding of the attributes. His charge is that they pursue human rationality and do not carefully follow revealed truth. The author cites early Western Christian philosophers (Augustine, Aquinas, and Scotus) with whom he differs (Sim'ān, 2010: 61). Augustine asserts that God and his attributes are one. Aquinas states that God's negative attributes are more accessible to humanity than his positive attributes. Scotus felt the attributes were conceptual (theoretical) but not reality. Sim'ān finds these philosophical fine points unhelpful and misleading in his argument concerning the attributes.

The author proposes that God has attributes, that these attributes are best understood as positive attributes (as opposed to apophatic theology or the *via negativa*) and that the meanings of these attributes correspond to the infinite nature of God and should not be relativized to human terms. Furthermore, the attributes must be understood as other than the essence of God, though not invoking a separate essence. Therefore, they must be understood as active within himself, within his essence (Sim'ān, 2010: 64). This reality requires a unity of "communion and exclusion" or "internalized relationality" as described above.

The author provides another logical step in his argument which is to demonstrate that the creation of the world requires a uni-plurality within God, described as "communion and exclusion." If this were not the case, the world would either be eternal alongside God or God and the world would be one and the same (pantheism). God's internal relations allow for his creating as an expression of his will without change to his being (Sim'ān, 2010: 79).

One of Sim'ān's most successful maneuvers is to show that Muslim philosophers implicitly recognized this internal rationality within deity. Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) states that God is knowledge, knower, and known one; rationality, rational one, and object of rationality; love, lover, and beloved.⁷ This precise formula was also employed by the medieval Christians, who recognized in Avicenna an implicit recognition of the eternity of God's attributes which afforded them an opportunity to explicate the Trinitarian persons. Other citations are marshalled as evidence, which include al-Fārābī, Ibn al-Fāriḍ ("Praise to God who manifested his essence to his essence, revealing the truths of his names and his attributes"), al-Kāshānī, al-Jīlānī ("when the unique substance required instantiation, it became holy names like no other"), Sheikh al-Bījūrī ("the inclusive unity is the unity of essence, of attributes and of acts"), Sheikh al-Ghazālī ("if God's rationality is his essence, then all returns to his essence, so there is no plurality. And if this is plurality, it was present in the beginning"), Sheikh Muḥī al-dīn ("the existential reality is one in substance, and its essence is plural by its attributes and names) and Ibn al-'Arabī. The author perceives that these Muslim philosophers infer a plurality in God, not unlike the Trinitarian conception, by virtue of the Islamic tenet of God's names and his attributes.⁸

Although Muslim readers may arrive at different conclusions from a more thorough reading of these Islamic philosophers, Sim'ān has provided a unique and penetrating analysis of God's uni-plurality as seen and expressed by these intellectuals. His contention is that Muslims who have contemplated divinity deeply conclude that God's unity is a unity of internal relationality, very near to what is portrayed in the Christian scriptures. It is an implicit claim to universality of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as well as a penetrating critique of *tawḥīd* as portrayed by the medieval Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*). It represents a pivot from the medieval polemic which was subject to Islamic political, social, and religious hegemony.

Terminology

Sim'ān provides helpful terminology. Though the semantic fine points may be lost on English readers, the importance of clear definitions of terms and consistency in their use is critical in the Muslim-Christian interface. We have already noted his use of instantiation (*ta' ayyun*) as a neutral, philosophical moniker for plural persons of God. This moves the discussion away from the controversial "person" (*shakhs*) which indicates an essence separate from other essences. Though it is commonly used in Trinitarian discussions, it is fatally misunderstood (Sim'ān, 2010: 117). Sim'ān will wait until his argument is more fully developed to integrate the commonly used Arabic term (*aqnūm* pl. *aqānīm*) for the Trinitarian persons. The problematic terms, Father and Son of God, though dear to Christians and used prolifically, are also held in abeyance in the discussion. The author is content to labor at the concept level, providing intellectual incentive to grasp God's internal relationality while postponing the Biblical terms which Muslims have so tragically misunderstood.

In addition, the author discusses various connotations of three key words: God (Allāh), deity (*lāhūt*), and divinity (*ulūhiyya*). Sim'ān suggests that *lahūt* is the divine substance, nature, or being; Allāh is the divine instantiation; and *ulūhiyya* is God's unique characteristics or properties. Thus while Allāh can be known, *lāhūt* cannot. It is through the instantiation of the person that the person is known. The author helpfully draws on Ibn 'Arabī's use of the internality of God (*bāṭin Allāh*) which is his *lāhūt* and is beyond the comprehension of humanity. The externality of God (*dhāhir Allāh*) is the instantiation of Allāh, which humans are given to know (Sim'ān, 2010: 109–111).

The Plurality of God's Instantiations

Sim'ān's next step is to state that God is not singular in his instantiation but plural. He insists that it must not be said that each of the instantiations is a god, but rather all the instantiations are God—the one God who has no partner or equal. The author confesses that this reality stretches our minds beyond the normal range of thinking. Nevertheless, this conclusion commends itself, based on the consideration of necessary being, and from it inferring the necessity of eternally active attributes (Sim'ān, 2010: 113–114).

The author finds Old Testament indicators of the plurality of God's instantiations in the plural form given to the divinity "Elohim." He forcefully denies that ancient languages used the plural form for aggrandization or the "plural of majesty" whereas the Old Testament consistently uses the plural form of pronouns when God is speaking.⁹ Noteworthy Old Testament references to which Sim'ān refers include Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"), Genesis 3:22 ("Behold the man has become like one of us ..."), Genesis 11:7 ("Come, let us go down and there confuse their language ..."), and Isaiah 6:8 ("Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?").

The other name used of divinity in the Old Testament is Yahweh. While Elohim speaks of God's aseity and sufficiency of essence, Yahweh speaks of God's relationships with others. This is evidenced by Moses' declaration that "Yahweh [singular] our Elohim [plural] Yahweh [singular] is one" (Deut 6:4). The two are used interchangeably, though one name refers to God's internal relations (Elohim) and the other to his interactions with others (Yahweh) (Sim'ān, 2010: 144–146). The Old Testament nomenclature is now being correlated with Sim'ān's previous explication of the name Allah (as the instantiation of God) and deity (*lāhūt*) as referring to God's internal relations.

The Scriptural Names of God's Instantiations

The author finds Old Testament indicators of the names of the instantiations of God. Genesis 1:2 indicates that the Spirit of Elohim was hovering over the darkness. Psalm 33:6 states that the

heavens were formed by the word of Yahweh. Psalm 104:30 shows that creation takes place as a result of the sending of the Spirit. Proverbs 30:4 asks, “Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name and what is his son’s name? Surely you know.” Sim’ān contends that Jewish scholars, after long debate, arrived at the conclusion that the “son,” mentioned in Proverbs 30, is the Messiah. Moreover, the meaning of “son” is not literal but spiritual, as is befitting of God’s spirit nature. Finally, Isaiah 48:12-16 states that “the first and the last” was sent by agency of two—the Yahweh Elohim and his Spirit (Sim’ān, 2010: 147–148).

Not unlike the defenders of Christian divine unity of the medieval period, Awwaḍ Sim’ān claims that the names of the divine persons are found in the Old Testament revelation. These three are the “son” or “word”, the Lord God and the spirit. These are neither beings other than God, nor beings alongside him, but they are his essence, his nature.

The author will give attention in due course to the New Testament revelations of God’s instantiations drawing largely from Matthew 28:18-20. It is noteworthy that he labored to demonstrate these from the scriptures of the Old Testament. Sim’ān is intent on showing that the New Testament Trinitarian references are consistent with the Old Testament understanding. In the Islamic context, building a Trinitarian understanding from the Hebrew scriptures serves as an implicit rebuttal of the ubiquitous charge of scriptural corruption (*tahrīf*). The often-heard charge that the Trinity and the divinity of Christ are Pauline accretions to the pristine monotheism of the Old Testament cannot bear the weight of scrutiny.

The Appearances of God’s Instantiations

The author takes up the invisible and visible appearances of the persons of the Trinity in a later work. God normally makes his voice heard through the symbolism of fire, pointing to the purity and holiness of his nature (Deut 4:12-16, 18:16). His visible appearances find expression in the “angel of the Lord” (Gen 16:10-13, 18:25-27, 22:11-14, 31:11-13, Ex. 14:19, Judges 13). Given that “angel” in Hebrew is the one who brings a message (a sent one), Sim’ān’s contention is that this person of Yahweh is the eternal Son or logos appearing to humanity before his incarnation. Sim’ān explicates that this is the Son who cannot be contained yet allows himself to be contained, invisible yet renders himself visible, God and also the Son of God. At times he appears as a man and at times as an angel. This being is not to be confused with other angels mentioned in Scripture, according to Sim’ān, as he is called “Yahweh,” and acts as God—granting blessing and shepherding his people (Sim’ān, 1993: 295–297).

The author’s argument takes surprising turns as he marshals Jewish writings and Hebrew scriptures as evidence. The Jewish translator of the Hebrew Torah into Aramaic, Onkelos, replaced the name of God with “word” ostensibly for fear of pronouncing the divine name in vain. Philo of Alexandria also asserted that the logos was he who appeared to the Fathers of the Old Testament. The Old Testament prophets described their prophetic inspiration through the cryptic phrase “the word of the Lord came to ...” The Old Testament wisdom literature identifies the word as one who lives in the presence of God, is seated on his throne, knows his mysteries, is the maker of all God’s works, and gladly appears to those who love the word. The awaited Messiah is identified by Malachi (3:1-3) as the angel (messenger) of the covenant and by Daniel (7:13) and Ezekiel (1:26) as the son of man. This is the angel Matthew identifies as Christ (11:10) who is the Son of Man (24:30). The angel is an apostle/messenger and the writer of Hebrews identifies Christ as the apostle of our confession (3:1).

Sim’ān’s Christo-centric hermeneutic of the “angel of the Lord” passages is reminiscent of the Fathers of the Eastern Church. Like the present author, they saw it as imminently reasonable that the Son who revealed the unseen Father would also reveal him previous to his incarnation. “... All patristic interpreters are united in seeing the primary meaning of the biblical text as Christological,

and in finding hermeneutical methods that allow them to maintain and practice this belief” (Holmes, 2012: 39).

Conclusion

We have noted that Awwaḍ Simʿān both drew from his Middle Eastern forbears in the Muslim milieu as well as extending their arguments and offering his own unique understanding of the Trinitarian persons. Still, the question that faced the Christians in their early discussions with Muslims remains: is anyone listening? Is there a will to engage in what David Thomas has called “respectful, agnostic inquisitiveness?”:

By this is meant an attitude of open inquiry into the religion of the other that puts preconditions about its truthfulness or its divine origins to one side and attempts, as far as is possible for an outsider, to discover its core beliefs and diversity of expressions with respect and attentiveness. (Thomas, 2007: 41)

Is Awwaḍ Simʿān’s apologetic heard by Muslims?

Though the answer to that question is impossible to quantify, the reproducibility of the material through a myriad of social media suggests that his apologetic is much more likely to get a broad hearing than that of his medieval Christian forebears. Is it, then, the robust nature of his formulation that will allow this Christian intellectual to be heard? Yes, but that is only part of the story. The other part owes to existential realities.

Though the story is too long to be related here, it bears mentioning that there was a notable exception to the acrid exchange of the medieval times in the *Sessions* of Bishop Iliyyā of Nisibis with the Muslim Vizier (Prime Minister) Abū al-Qāsim al-Maghribī. The exchange was cordial and conveyed a sense of mutual respect and admiration between the two men. Abū al-Qāsim died shortly after the exchange so it is unlikely that the positive outcome of the *Sessions* bore lasting fruit. Nevertheless, much of Abū al-Qāsim’s receptivity might be attributed to his existential preparation to hear the Christian Bishop. It was through the good graces of a Christian monastery that Abū al-Qāsim experienced both hospitality and healing from an illness he thought would certainly take his life. Thus he was prepared to listen with “agnostic inquisitiveness.” It appears he was eager to vindicate Christians from his former impression of them as infidels and he appealed to a knowledgeable Christian—Elias (Iliyyā) of Nisibis—to provide perspective.

Then, the apologetic of Simʿān will bear fruit, not only due to its intellectual qualities (those are certainly noteworthy), but also because of the existential preparation of Muslims to hear a different, though not oppositional, account of God’s nature. Painful realities in the Muslim context, including ISIS and its ideological affiliates, a perennial lack of educational and employment opportunities for youth, the struggle for human dignity, and the Arab Spring (now morphed into an Arab Winter), impact Muslim peoples existentially and create plausibility for alternative ways of thinking (Talmazan, 2019).

Perhaps the moment is propitious for the apologetic of Simʿān along with a renewed energy for the Trinitarian traits of hospitality and mutuality to assert themselves among Muslims and Christians. Muslims and Christians alike can be glad that Awwaḍ Simʿān offers assistance in taking a fresh look at God as one whose internal relationality, through the divine attribute of love, extends to the suffering of humanity.

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Notes

1. English readers may be familiar with the *Common Word* document, penned by Muslim scholars as a plea to Christians to come to a “common word” (*A Common Word Between Us and You*, 2007). The document provoked a flurry of responses from Christian scholars, some of whom deal admirably with the question of the Trinity (Williams, 2009).
2. See Hirvonen (2013) for other responses from within the Arab world, including Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon Georges Khodr (b. 1923) and the Lebanese intellectual and Greek Catholic (Melkite) Priest Father Mushīr Bāṣil ‘Awwun.
In addition, Dr Imad Shehadeh (2018) provides an important response which is available in English.
3. Arabic: Allāh mutamayyaz bi-mumayyazātihi.
4. Sim‘ān provides two examples of God’s attributes: justice and love. God’s justice was active among his internal relations through his internal harmony and conciliation. His love demonstrates that gracious bonds existed between at least two, one being loved and the other beloved (Sim‘ān, 2010: 54).
5. waḥdāniyya jāmi’a māni’a (Sim‘ān, 2010: 55).
6. Among Christian theologians who had supplied meanings for “one” beyond singularity were Ibn al-Ṭayyib who mentioned 12 definitions of “one”, the Melkite Nazīf Ibn Yumn who spoke of seven definitions, and Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī who delineated six definitions (Kuhn, 2017: 162–163).
7. These descriptors use the standard Arabic grammatical forms of ism, ism fā’il, and ism maf’ūl (e.g. ‘ishq, ‘āshiq, ma’shūq) (Sim‘ān, 2010: 106). Moreover, they were commonly used in the medieval Muslim Christian interface by Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Adī and Ibn al-Ṭayyib, among others (Kuhn, 2017: 63).
8. Sim‘ān (2010: 105–108).
9. Sim‘ān references three bibliographic sources to buttress his point: *The Nile in the Age of the Pharaohs* by Antoine dhikrī, *Eastern Philosophy* by Dr Muhammad Ghalāb, and *Ancient Egypt* by Salīm Hassan. He also cites the Old Testament, the Pharaoh who ruled in the time of Joseph, and Nebuchadnezzar.

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Michael Kuhn holds degrees in theology and Muslim-Christian relations. He has lived 28 years in the Arab Middle East and is indebted to teachers, both Muslim and Christian, who helped him understand the complexities and drama of Muslim-Christian relations in the region. Dr Kuhn continues to teach in various locations both in the US and the Middle East. His research interest is in the area of the Trinity and Christology in dialogue with the Islamic conception of Allah.