

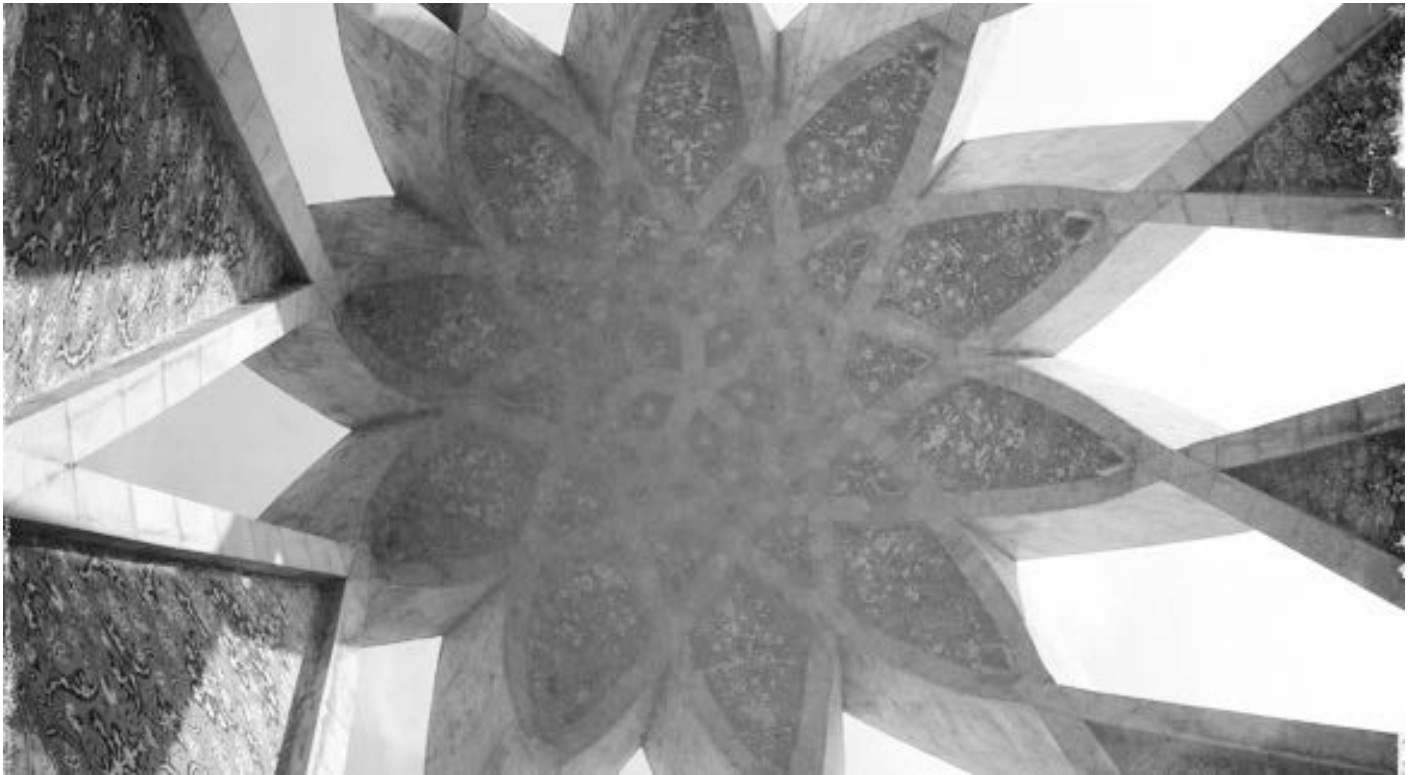


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[W]e can gain a certain understanding of the second Person's relation to the first, by considering the 'inward speech' or unspoken work which takes place in our act of thinking - the thought prior to all language, of which language is no more a sign for the purpose of communication, like the flesh assumed by the divine Word. This human 'word' is the source of all human activity, even as the divine Word is that through which all things were made.

- Augustine

"O Messenger of God, I heard [Hishām] reciting the Sūra of the Criterion differently from the way that you had recited it to me." The Messenger of God said... "Recite, Hishām." And so Hishām recited as I had heard him recite. The Messenger of God said, "It was sent down like that." He then said to me, "Recite," and I recited the Sūra. And he said, "It was sent down like that. This Qur'ān was sent down in seven ways, so recite from it whatever is easy for you."

- 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb

While both Islamic and Catholic theological traditions lay claim to Jesus as the Messiah, and as an expression of the one God, according to most visions of Catholicism, Christology is something unique and defining. Catholic theologians use Christology as the boundary between their own religious positions and the collective theologies of Islam. Specifically, the Incarnation is the criterion of Christianity; the rejection of the Incarnation marks Islamic belief.

The Hinterlands of the Qur'ān: The Edges of the Eternal and the Temporal in Early Ḥanbalite Thought, with Analogs to Catholic Theology

BY GEORGE ARCHER

However, it is not necessarily so simple. It is possible to understand even the most conservative Islamic theologies of the Qur'ān¹ as analogous to Catholic theologies of Christ. My project here places the strictest vision of classical Islamic theology into a language known to Catholics and their vision of the fully divine Christ. If Catholics wish to see the living dialogue of Islam and Catholicism continue, it is necessary for Catholics to consider the analogy between the Qur'ān and the Christ much more seriously than we have in the past.

Previous attempts of Catholic theology to investigate the Qur'ān have always looked a bit too aggressively for the familiar within the theology of its Islamic counterpart, and as a result the Qur'ān was often de-Islamized. For the Catholic theologian to understand the Qur'ān as a Christian, the place of the Qur'ān within Islam was ignored or suppressed. Historically, this pattern of investigation led to the medieval depiction of the Qur'ān as yet another Christian heretical text, and in the early modern period to representations of the Qur'ān as the Bible's shadow-self. More recently, the Catholic Church acknowledged the beauty of the Qur'ān and its call to monotheism, but disagreed with the Qur'ān's role as a penetrating revelation of the loving, personal divinity. For instance, in response to *Nostra Aetate*, John Paul II wrote, "Some of the most beautiful names in the human language are given to the God of the Qur'ān, but He is ultimately a God outside of the world, a God who is only Majesty, never Emmanuel, God-with-us."² Although this statement has a kind of sympathy to Islam that is historically new for Western Christianity, it is still an old criticism: Islam's God is all transcendence - as remote from this world as the God of the philosophers. In a manner notably similar to their views of the early Reformers of the sixteenth century, Catholics (like other occidentals) have habitually painted the God of Islam as detached, moving the pieces of history from afar. Simply put, the God of Islam does not make contact and communion with the world because this is not God incarnate. Besides being a theological dead end, this is simply not the full truth. There is more than just the Christian vision of a reality that 'builds bridges' (pontifex) over the chasm between God

¹ Notes on language, format, and classical references. Arabic terms have been adjusted to match the transliteration system used by the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, although for concerns of style, English plurals and other standard constructions are used (e.g., ḥadīths, or Ḥanbalism). Greek terms have been likewise transliterated according to the "Scientific" system of the Library of Congress standards for "Greek, Ancient and Medieval (before 1454)." Regarding citations of classical Islamic sources, there is unfortunately no standard that is meaningful in both Western critical and Islamic traditional literature. For this problem, I have used methods of citation that employ both. For Qur'ānic citations, I have used Ingrid Mattson's hybrid system which includes both *sūra* names and numbers (e.g., *al-Zalzala*, 99:1). Ḥadīth references include compiler's name, the *bāb* by name, and the reference number within the specific *bāb* (e.g., Muslim, *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān*, 1). All translations are attributed to their English language source unless stated otherwise.

² John Paul II. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 92.

and creation. For Muslims, God is encountered in the Qur'ān not just as a message received or as a law to be followed (although these are true as well), but as the living, perhaps breathing, presence of God-with-us on earth.

How can this be? In every recognizable form of Christianity, God-with-us can be quantified in the biological limits of a single human figure: Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. God's revelation in a particular person at least seems to draw a clean line of demarcation around Christ where God meets creation—whatever is this specific person is the expression of God; whatever is not, is not. We can problematize this if we wish. For instance, where does a person begin and end on a molecular level? Or, are parts of a certain person—say her brain—more a part of her personhood than other parts—for instance, her left kneecap? But these are not typical Christian objections. Christians have historically had no serious concern over the spatiality of the Incarnation. Their real questions about Christ and Incarnation have almost always been ontological and chronological.

On the other hand, the Islamic revelation of God in the Qur'ān is more difficult to box in. Even without metaphysical claims, it is more troublesome to determine the borders of a text in space and time. Is a text a collection of words, or meanings of words? Does the text reside where the reciter or author does, or does it move beyond him after it appears? Is the text confined in location or form, or can it be endlessly moved, copied, changed, or represented? And so to move to our theological ends, we first have to ask exactly what and where the Qur'ān is, in what respect(s) is it eternal and divine, and in what respect(s) it is temporal or material.

As the margins reveal the center, this examination requires following the early history of Islamic traditionalism, leading up to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and the Ḥanbalites. This school of thought developed specifically in response to fears of Christian Incarnationalism, which both the Ḥanbalites and their enemies saw as a threat to Islamic monotheism. Noting some 'orthodox' objections to their conclusions, I will present the Ḥanbalites as the furthest limit of belief in God's presence in the world within the Qur'ān. From here, I will turn to the most common traditional Christian formula for the limits of God's presence in the world in Christ: the Chalcedonian definition. Within this comparison, I will examine the extent to which Ḥanbalism avoided some of the theological claims of the Christians, as well as how they unwittingly embraced them, to show how that God is fully with us.

As Christianity has been an overwhelmingly creedal religion in most instances, I will not recount the developmental history of the doctrine of the Incarnation here. There is no need to, as the final creedal statements show the eventual outcomes of the Christological debates. And besides, the development of these

creeds out of the narrative materials of primal Christianity has been infinitely well documented. And again, the very nature of a Christian creed is to act as a shorthand for the whole community. In the case of Islam though, there is little to say of universal testimonies of faith beyond the double shahāda: '[I testify that] there is no god but God and Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.' With respect to the Qur'ān's nature though, there are some opinions that can each be typically considered 'orthodox' without necessarily condemning counter-opinions. If we wish to compare the revelation in the Qur'ān to a similar or equivalent revelation in Christ, some excavation is required to arrive at what we might call 'high Qur'anology:' the belief in the text and language of the revelation as eternal.

Caveat lector: Islam does not formally use detailed doctrinal creeds in the way Christianity typically does, and so there is some need to address how the beliefs of a few particular Muslim scholars can stand in for the beliefs of the Muslim masses. A typical Muslim probably could not spout out a long, technical list of their doctrines on cue the way a typical Western 'high Church' Christian can quickly rattle off the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed (even if words like 'consubstantial' don't mean much to said Christian). Moreover, as with Christianity, we should not falsely assume that because an Islamic doctrine has a history that it is an innovation. Muslims have asked what they ought to believe long before they attempted to express every iota of it systematically. This does not necessarily mean that the beliefs of the Islamic community have themselves changed with their doctrines, only the precision with which their beliefs can potentially be expressed. If a Muslim was so inclined, Cardinal Newman's 'Theory of the Development of Doctrine' could prove the worthy sister of the Islamic history of Qur'anology.

The Qur'ān in the 'Abbāsīd Court

It seems safe to say that, from the earliest period, the Muslim community of believers struggled with the physical and celestial reality of the Qur'ān. What constituted the revelation on earth and what is the ontological connection between that revelation and God? While it is true that the Qur'ān thinks of itself as an oral recitation³ with certain dimensions and borders, there is a longstanding concern for the Qur'ān as particular matter on one hand (be that sound, act, or text), and as something outside of the terrestrial order on the other. This instability arises within the words of the Qur'ān itself. There are certain indicators of a literature with an unclear ontology. Most notably, one finds references to the umm al-kitāb ("the mother of the scripture") or the lawḥ maḥfūz (the "preserved tablet"). How exactly do this heavenly writ and the material speech-act which refers to it (or them?) relate to one another, and how do

³ cf. *al-Nisā'* 4:153

they both relate to God?⁴ Did God make some heavenly text and the heavenly text is the inspiration of the earthly Qur'ān that came to be in the days of Muḥammad? Or is the heavenly text the eternal speech of God (kalām allāh), perhaps one of God's attributes, and was therefore never created? And what does this mean for the words of the Prophet in historical time? Is the Qur'ān's message also eternal? Are its specific contents? Its specific language and grammar? Its specific pronunciation? To these concerns the Qur'ān offers no simple answers.⁵

These questions were the unvoiced concerns of even the earliest Muslims, who were not yet thinking in formalized theological terms. Like the undefined encounters with the plural aspects of the one biblical God was to the early Church, the oldest umma of believers may have had experiences of the eternal uncreated Qur'ān, the direct speech of God, but were not equipped to express those experiences formally as later theologians and other scholars would. Rather, there were any number of very early debates over the rituals surrounding the recitation and the writing of the Qur'ān that suggest proto-theology. When an object or action is treated as sacred, or ritually apart from other facets of life, the boundaries of the numinous and the material must be explored and explained. In a theistic setting: where does the Deity end and creation begin? For instance, around the end of the first Islamic century the earliest dirhams were struck that contained all the text of Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ save the command word "say" (qūl).⁶ Some individuals responded that this meant that anyone ritually unclean could not handle coins, since to touch the dirham was to touch the Qur'ān. These forerunners of Islamic traditionalism argued that Muslims would have to make ablutions before making any monetary transaction. And so we have to ask what exactly were people concerned was being touched: the text, the sound of the recitation 'within' that text, the divine 'within' that frozen recited sound? If even these early quibblers thought that Qur'ān was something ritually apart from other things—closer to God than humanity—it was only a matter of time before someone would conclude that the Qur'ān shares in (or actually is) God's own attributes.

The theological discussions about the exact relationship between God and the Qur'ān appeared clearly on the scene with the arguments for the created Qur'ān by Ja'd ibn Dirham (d. 125/743), Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 128/746), and John of Damascus (d. cir. 136/754).⁷ By the early 200s/820s, the issue became a political hot

⁴ Richard C. Martin, "Createdness of the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* Vol.1, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 467.

⁵ Daniel A. Madigan, "Revelation and Inspiration," in *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* Vol. 3, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 446.

⁶ Travis Zadeh, "Touching and Ingesting: Early Debates Over the Material Qur'ān," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129, no. 3 (2009): 443-466.

⁷ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, (New York: Harvard University Press, 1976) 241.

topic with the rise of the Mu‘tazilite school and the two key figures who opposed them: Ibn Kullāb and Ibn Ḥanbal. ‘Abd Allāh ibn Kullāb (d. cir. 240/855) argued that the speech of God was one of God’s attributes and therefore God’s speech was never created. God is eternal and changeless, and thus it stands to reason that, “God is eternally ‘speaking’ (mutakallim).”⁸ Clearly God is not identical with the speech of God, but how can a monotheistic system account for an uncreated reality besides the one eternal God? Is this a second god or an incarnation similar to the Christian doctrine? Mu‘tazilite theologian ‘Abbād ibn ‘Abbād (d. cir. 230/844) accused Ibn Kullāb of crypto-Christianity on these very grounds.⁹ To maintain strict monotheism, Ibn Kullāb posited a certain gap between God’s speech, which is co-eternal with God, and the recitation of the Qur’ān in time. The Qur’ān that can be sensed and repeated, “is only an expression (‘ibāra) of God’s speech, its created phonetical form.”¹⁰ Conversely, God’s eternal speech itself is a kind of “inner speech” (kalām nafsī). This inner speech, in the later words of al-Ash‘arī (d. 324/936), “does not consist of letters and is not a sound. It is indivisible, impartible, indissectible and unalterable. It is one thing (ma‘nā) in God [...] the recitation (qirā’a) of the Qur’ān, the pronunciation (lafz) is a human act but what we understand from the words is God’s eternal speech.”¹¹ For ibn Kullāb:

God’s real speech was something where He has all his revelations together, a coherent unity (shay’ wāḥid) which was not yet divided into different languages or sentences, separate statements or texts. If God is beyond language He does not use nouns or finite verbs, neither imperatives nor questions. Grammar is something terrestrial.¹²

Under observation this does not seem substantively different from the Mu‘tazilites with whom ibn Kullāb is debating. The Qur’ān as it is sensed and lived in this world is created, but it is created by and refers to the eternal.¹³

This struggle for an argument against Mu‘tazilism would be taken a step further by Ibn Ḥanbal. Although more open to a multiplicity of religious opinions in his youth, Ibn Ḥanbal came to agree with the strict traditionalists (aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth) in his maturity. He claimed that knowledge of God’s nature and will were beyond the bounds of analogical reasoning (qiyās) or personal opinion (ra’y). Insight into

⁸ Margaretha T. Heemskerk, “Speech,” in *Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān* Vol. 5, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 110.

⁹ Suleiman A. Mourad, “‘Abbād b. Salmān,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*. 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill Online, 2012), accessed May 6, 2012, http://0-referenceworks.brillonline.com/library/lausys.georgetown.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/abbad-b-salman-COM_23209.

¹⁰ Josef van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration? Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology” in *The Qur’ān as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 182.

¹¹ Heemskerk, “Speech,” 111.

¹² Van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration,” 183.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 182.

divine matters can come only from the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth material, and this via the readings of the elite traditionalist scholars alone. When even those scholars cannot penetrate the meaning of the revelation, it is to be accepted as it presents itself 'without' knowing or asking 'how' (bi-lā kayf). The blank space created by this anti-intellectualism, and the insistence on the utter authority of the prophetic literature, allowed Ibn Ḥanbal to conclude that not only was God's speech co-eternal with God, but that the Qur'ān on earth is that very same speech. The Qur'ān is therefore "not produced" (lā muḥdath) but is "the speech of God, uncreated" (kalām allāh ghayr makhḷūq).

Although lacking explicit roots in the Qur'ān or the ḥadīth, this formula became, as Wilferd Madelung puts it, "a shibboleth of Sunnī orthodoxy."¹⁴ Its origins are in fact vague and disputable. The traditionalist position prior to [Ibn Ḥanbal] was apparently merely hostile to rationalistic arguments that the Qur'ān is created, without using the term "uncreated" (ghayr makhḷūq). Aḥmad's own view evolved gradually, but his conviction that the Qur'ān is God's knowledge (ʿilm), or part of it, and as such is uncreated led him to the final formula, which has since appeared in almost every traditionalist creed.¹⁵

The rise of Ibn Ḥanbal and the uncreated Qur'ān came to prominence not with detached theological hairsplitting but with the inquisition (miḥna) of the caliph al-Ma'mūn in 218/833. Five years earlier the rationalism of the Mu'tazilites had been made the official doctrine of the court. Amongst other tenets, Mu'tazilism argued for the creation of the Qur'ān (khalq al-qur'ān) both on rationalistic terms (how can something other than the one God be uncreated?) and scriptural interpretation (cf. al-Zukhuf 43:3). Indeed to argue otherwise seemed strikingly similar to another theological claim, as the caliph is said to have written in a letter: "[they are] like Christians when they claim that Jesus the son of Mary was not created because he was the Word of God."¹⁶ However, it was not pure theology that truly concerned Ma'mūn as much as the political power of that theology. Indeed, it appears as though Ma'mūn himself had no strong personal theological stances one way or another.¹⁷ A temporal Qur'ān needs to be forever reread for the present by a lawgiver, and therefore it will always need an authority who can speak for it. Such an authority would have at least as much legal force as the Qur'ān itself, if not more. Therefore,

¹⁴ Wilferd Madelung, "The Origins of the Controversy Concerning the Creation of the Koran" in *Orientalia hispanica*, ed. J. M. Barral (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 521.

¹⁵ Livnat Holtzman, "Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal," in *Encyclopaedia of the Islam*. 3rd ed. (Leiden: Brill Online, 2012), accessed May 5, 2012, http://0-referenceworks.brillonline.com/library/lausys.georgetown.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ahmad-b-hanbal-COM_23414.

¹⁶ Wolfson, *Philosophy of Kalam*, 241.

¹⁷ Nimrod Hurvitz, *The Formation of Hanbalism: Piety into Power* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 117.

a created Qur'ān means an everlasting caliphate,¹⁸ but an eternal Qur'ān means legal might dwells with the scholars. In order to squash the political threat posed by scholars who might undermine Ma'mūn's authority to command the law, a number of traditionalist scholars (Ibn Ḥanbal amongst them) were called in to testify that they agreed with the official teachings of the caliph. Of all the traditionalists brought in nearly all of them either agreed with the Mu'tazilites' conclusions already, or they surrendered their personal claims and fell in the state line. One of the two that resisted was Ibn Ḥanbal, who by pure luck avoided being brought before the caliph himself by al-Ma'mūn's sudden death. However, the new caliph, al-Mu'taṣim (d.227/842) had Ibn Ḥanbal beaten and put on public trial.

The details of this humiliation and torture, however, are a matter of opinion. Abū 'Uthmān al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), a Mu'tazilite, claims that Ibn Ḥanbal could not argue against the Qur'ānic rationalists and like the other traditionalists he surrendered his argument about the uncreated Qur'ān.¹⁹ Ibn Ḥanbal's traditionalist allies (several of whom were his own relatives) give a far different account. The inability of the man to explain how the Qur'ān must be at once uncreated and not a second divinity only outlines the mysteries of God. These are questions of faith, not enforceable dogma or demonstrable argumentation.²⁰ Thus the imām managed to argue his case and maintain his position under threat and torture, and after his release Ibn Ḥanbal was greeted as a hero by the masses.²¹ Whatever the actual events, both of these versions of the history underscore the bi-lā kayf of Ibn Ḥanbal's traditionalist stance—whether the theologian himself was silent as an obfuscation or as a realization of humility before God is another matter. The overwhelming agreement of Islamic scholarship (both traditional and Western) marks the miḥna as the epicenter of the doctrine of the eternal Qur'ān, with Ibn Ḥanbal as its champion.

Before his political run-ins, Ibn Ḥanbal's opinions on the status of the Qur'ān's createdness were undefined, or at least were defined only by negation. He disagreed with the Mu'tazilites but could not or did not affirm anything otherwise. "Before the miḥna the

¹⁸ William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Creeds: A Selection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 7.

¹⁹ There is also some question about the true authorship of ibn Ḥanbal's most notable defense of his beliefs, *al-Radd 'alā l-Zanādiqa wa-l-Jahmiyya*: "[ibn Ḥanbal's] best known work in the field of polemics and one quoted often by later Ḥanbalīs, treats almost every aspect of the Islamic creed, by presenting detailed arguments attributed to various heretical sects, mainly the Mu'tazila, and offering systematic refutations of them that demonstrate Aḥmad's skills in rational argumentation. The historian al-Dhahabī (d. 753/1352–3) doubted the authenticity of *al-Radd* (Siyar, 11:286–7; Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūṭ, the editor of the Siyar, has endorsed al-Dhahabī's doubt in a well reasoned footnote)" Holtzmann.

²⁰ Hurvitz, *Formation of Hanbalism*, 134.

²¹ Holtzmann, "Ahmad b. Hanbal."

formulaic use of the term ‘uncreated’ was at most rare, confined to the generation immediately preceding it [...].”²² In the period after the miḥna, the specifics of the Qur’ān’s uncreated status became increasingly fixed in the records of the early Ḥanbalites. If Ibn Ḥanbal and the traditionalists did have reservations or omissions in their opinions early on, those impurities were removed by the fire of persecution. “Although Mu‘tazilism remained the state doctrine until 851, the effort to impose it on the scholars proved counterproductive, and led to a hardening of the emerging Sunnī resistance to Mu‘tazilism as a principle.”²³ In a list of creedal statements which may have come from the pen of the later Ibn Ḥanbal himself, the matter is stated boldly and without further elaboration: “God speaks to human beings, and there is no interpreter between Him and them [...] The Qur’ān is the speech of God, uncreated. From wherever it is heard and recited, from that it begins and to that it comes back.”²⁴ This is a vast leap beyond the minor objection of Ibn Kullāb to the Mu‘tazilites. The Ḥanbalites (if not Ibn Ḥanbal himself) saw no distinction between the qirā’a and what was recited (maqrū’). There is no ‘ibāra of the Qur’ān.²⁵

The Qur’ān and the speech of God are one and the same in all ways, and the Qur’ān in all forms is thus eternal (qadīm) as God is. “Nothing of God is created, and the Qur’ān is of God (wa l-qur’ān min allāh).”²⁶ Whether the Qur’ān is written, memorized, or spoken, it is the eternal speech of God on earth. God speaks without beginning, pause, or end, in a voice (sawt), in the Arabic language, with a particular pronunciation (lafẓ) and this speech has been relayed perfectly to the Islamic community by the prophecy of Muḥammad. The community has likewise protected this speech without error as both recitation and text (and thus not only in the Arabic consonant skeletons, ḥurūf, but in the vocalizations). Although the Ḥanbalites still “admitted that when the Qur’ān is recited, the pronunciation is a human act [...] they declared that what we hear and read is God’s uncreated speech.”²⁷ The Ḥanbalites disregard even the slightest possible misalignment or ambiguity between God’s eternal thought and the human reception of that thought.

It would be amiss to not mention the long list of ‘orthodox’ figures of many stripes who rejected the Ḥanbalite claim to the eternity of the lafẓ. Al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/885), al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), al-Rūmī (d. 671/1273), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) all

²² Madelung, “Origins of the Controversy,” 518.

²³ Khalid Blankinship, “The Early Creed” in *Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49.

²⁴ Watt, *Islamic Creeds*, 32.

²⁵ Van Ess, “Verbal Inspiration,” 183.

²⁶ Madelung, “Origins of the Controversy,” 524.

²⁷ Heemskerck, “Speech,” 111.

claimed that the *lafz* was a creation.²⁸ Even the spiritual heir of Ibn Ḥanbal, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), took issue with the claim.²⁹ Generally their reasons were similar. If God has a voice identical to or indistinguishable from a human voice, anthropomorphism seems likely to follow. This also requires the avoidance of the pre-Islamic history of the Arabic language and its relationship to other languages. Furthermore, the tradition speaks of a plurality of revealed texts: previous revelations in other languages and the seven recitations of the Qurʾān. These are clearly not identical.³⁰ Even the traditional accounts of Muḥammad's reception of the Qurʾān suggests it takes multiple, distinct forms. Consider the famous ḥadīth appearing in both of the Ṣaḥīḥayn in which ʿĀ'isha asks her husband how the waḥy comes to him. The Prophet says: "Sometimes it is like the ringing of a bell, and it is hardest on me. Then it passes off of me when I grasp what it has said. And sometimes the angel is like a man to me, and he speaks to me and I grasp what he said [...]"³¹ Juwaynī (and Suyūṭī with some modifications) elaborates on this. Sometimes Gabriel "read something to [Muḥammad] from a text which was written down; this statement was verbally identical with God's speech. But then, at another time, he repeated only virtually what God had told him, according to its meaning."³²

Flying in the face of all these authoritative figures who cover the full spectrum of Sunnī opinions between them ought to tell us that the Ḥanbalite vision of the uncreated *lafz* was and is deeply appealing. Although the Ḥanbalites were never in the majority on the global scale, the directness of their views of the Qurʾān provides an apparent clarity and airtightness which makes them useful indicators for the whole of the Sunnī community. Historically there is no sphere of living Sunnī Islam that has not been somehow influenced by them, if not directly defined by them. Muʿtazilites, as well as those who would abstain (*wāqifa*) from the discussion of the Qurʾān's origins, remain on the margins in the Islamic histories, and are seen as heterodox, if not fully heretical. Generally, the near universal marginalization of these voices was accomplished through the appearance of the more moderate claims of the Ashʿarites a century after the miḥna. Although they did retain the use of some analogical reasoning as opposed to the Ḥanbalites, and they did not believe that the *lafz* was eternal, the Ashʿarites made Ibn Ḥanbal's

²⁸ Van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration," 185-6.

²⁹ "[...] Ibn Taymiyya undertook to deny the equation [of *lafz* to the *kalām allāh*]. He argued forcefully that the pious ancestors in affirming the uncreated nature of the Qurʾān had never meant to assert its eternity. The speech of God, he maintained, is eternal in its species (*jins*), since God has always spoken when he willed, but not in its individual manifestation (*ʿayn*)," Madelung 521. This objection bares striking similarity to Ibn Kullāb's distinction between *kalām nafsi* and *ʿibāra* (above).

³⁰ Madigan, "Revelation and Inspiration," 446.

³¹ Bukhārī, *al-Waḥy* 2; cf., Muslim, *al-Faḍāil* 87, (translation mine).

³² Van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration," 190.

declaration of the Qur'ānic uncreation their own. And through them, it became emblematic of Sunnīsm in all its later forms.³³

Christ: Catholic and Chalcedonian

In Josef van Ess' enlightening short piece on verbal inspiration in Islam, which specifically focuses on some of the traditionalist and Ḥanbalite sources I have discussed here, the author draws some excellent parallels between Islam and Christianity on the issue of God speaking with comprehensible human language. In particular, the identification of scripture to *verbum Dei* coinciding with the 'rediscovery' of the Hebrew scripture in the early Reformation and how this is "largely identical" to the views of Sunnī Islam regarding direct linguistic inspiration is a point well taken.³⁴ But this is a very limited comparison between the two traditions. Van Ess is not incorrect that the likenesses are there; they are certainly. He is perfectly right to say that Christian history has been awash (perhaps even submerged to the point of drowning) in those speaking from the belief in the verbal inspiration of some or all of the Bible. I would even go further and add many common readings of the texts of the major councils to this trend. However, a strict verbal inspiration, to the point of an eternal God speaking a particular language eternally, which is at some point relayed to a particular author who records it verbatim, is not the norm in Christian history. For instance, many or even most Christians who have ever lived may believe that the Pentateuch is dictated to Moses by God, and that specific revelation is eternally valid in some way. However, the claim that these words are pre-existent in a fixed linguistic form and are uncreated is highly unusual for Christianity. For a Muslim to believe in the uncreated *lafz* may be an extreme, but for a Christian to believe, say, in the (unfortunately named) King James Onlyist movement is extremism. Van Ess knows that this analogy ultimately falls short,³⁵ but he does not flesh out the better one—he is addressing his work to MESA, not to theologians.

Western Islamicists perpetually present the Incarnation in Christ as the better analogy to the Qur'ān than the Bible, and I do not disagree.³⁶ This method frees us from trying to foist a distinctly Christian phrase like "verbal inspiration" onto Islam. Verbal inspiration as a category will almost always fail to account for the most distinctive claim of the Ḥanbalites, the uncreated *lafz*. And

³³ Nader El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," *Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 126.

³⁴ van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration," 178-9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

³⁶ This now almost ubiquitous comparison between Christ and the Qur'ān in the literature was first proposed in the modern West by Nathan Söderblom and W.C. Smith independently of each other and about fifty years apart. For a short history of the matter, see Cantwell Smith. *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 261.

the analogy to the Christ rather than the Bible is strengthened in this case by the critiques of Ibn ‘Abbād and al-Ma’mūn (above), both of whom fear that traditionalism is a form of Incarnationalism. There is also some evidence (beyond our project here) of the direct influence of the Christian doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation upon Islam and vice versa.³⁷ Although the comparison of the Qur’ān to Christ is not perfect either (e.g., the Qur’ān cannot suffer like Christ; Christ is not a linguistic Word of God), it is a more productive analogy than the biblical one.

If the collective community of churches were asked to explain the relationship of God to humanity in Jesus, the majority would respond by affirming the Chalcedonian definition of 451. Catholics of all kinds, as well as the bulk of Orthodox and Protestants adhere to it. Although there are many churches that reject the definition, and they are too often ignored, for our ends the definition is as close to complete affirmation as any major distinctive Christian creed is after the Constantinopolitan revision of Nicaea. However, for the sake of clarity and this project, let us simply consider the definition, a Catholic document historically grounded in the “Tome” of Pope Leo I (d. 461).

The definition reads:

(...) Christ. The Son. The Lord. The begotten one in two natures (monogenē en duo phusesin), made known without confusion (asugchutōs), without change (atreptōs), without division (adiairetōs), without separation (achōristōs). The union does not at all remove the natures’ occurrence (diaphorá) but rather the properties of each nature are in the one person (en prosōpon) and one substance run together (hypostasin suntrechousēs), not divided or separated into two persons, but the one and the same Son and begotten one (alla ena kai ton auton gion kai monogenē), God. The Word. The Lord Jesus Christ (...) ³⁸

³⁷ “In the comparative study of religions, the dispute about the created versus the uncreated or eternal nature of the Qur’ān is a theological problem of the proportions of the ancient problem in Christian theology concerning the divine versus the human nature of Jesus Christ. In fact, as Trinitarian debates are attested within Christian circles at Baghdad contemporaneous with the Muslim discussion on the createdness of the Qur’ān, the formulation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and the Islamic debate on the createdness of the Qur’ān may have influenced one another (cf., Wolfson 240-2; for a rebuttal of Wolfson’s position, see van Ess, *Theologie Und Gesellschaft*, iv, 625-7).” Martin, “Createdness of the Qur’ān,” 472.

³⁸ This is my own jagged translation of the definition. For clarity, I have imposed a sentence structure which is foreign to the Greek; it is more densely punctuated than it ought to be. Also, I have inserted the word “without” several times (“without confusion, without change, without division, without separation”) to account for an adverbial structure which makes for odd English: unconfusedly, unchangingly, undividedly, unseparatingly.

The theme throughout the definition is the duality of natures in Christ working in simultaneous harmony. This is expressed in a sense of harmonious movement that is lost in the English. The diaphorá of the two natures, here their “occurrence,” is more like “going hither and thither together,” or a ‘shared, common occurring.’ The defiantly Greek verb suntréchō is here “run together,” instead of the usual “united,” “combined,” or “concurring,” which in translation all falsely suggest blending. A more verbose definition of this word would be: ‘to unite in movement, like the movement of two armies running into each other on the battlefield,’ or ‘to move like runners moving together in a race.’ The verb implies a dynamic relationship of two things (normally) separate, which are moving in a single way but without mixing into one thing.³⁹ This is how the Catholic faith has ever after regarded the role of the dual realities of Christ; this two-part harmony makes the human race connect directly with the Divine.

The Church thus confesses that Jesus is inseparably true God and true man. He is truly the Son of God who, without ceasing to be God and Lord, became a man and our brother.⁴⁰

This ontological overlap is the central distinction of the Catholic Christian creed from any of its orthodox Islamic counterparts, Hanbalite or otherwise. To explain, I will repurpose vocabulary used by Seyyed Hossein Nasr about classical and modern anthropologies:⁴¹ the role of the Incarnation and the Qur’ānic revelation is pontifical. To call the Qur’ān or the Incarnation in Christ pontifical is to say that they ‘bridge-build’ (pontifex) between God and the creatures, as God cannot be seen, known, or found in any conventional sense of the terms. To believe that the ultimate can be come to by cerebral cunning or physical effort alone, such as good works, ritual, or material philosophy, is like fire being stolen from Olympus, Nasr’s opposite term: prometheanism. Instead, both Christianity and Islam in most of their traditional forms posit that God is the agent. The unknowable, ineffable God makes itself known to the human race (and often by extension, everything created) by a revelation that bridges time and eternity. And so too this revelation of this eternal God must be, “indivisible, impartible, indissectible and unalterable” (al-Ash‘arī), or “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation” (Chalcedon).

This bridging can work in several different ways. In the case of traditional Catholicism, God is made available in the acts,

³⁹ See the Liddell and Scott *Greek-English Lexicon* entries for “διαφορα” and “συντρεχω,” respectively.

⁴⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition* (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 118.

⁴¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred: The Gifford Lectures, 1981*, (New York: Crossroads, 1981), 160.

teachings, and will of Christ. Christ is at once on this side of the bridge (made flesh, in this world) and on the other side of the bridge (in, with, and as the unseen God). Christ is both human and divine. Christ is two things fully and simultaneously. "The union does not at all remove the natures' occurrence but rather the properties of each nature are in the one person and one substance 'run together'." God's speech is also God's self. God is "the Word" in the gospel of John, or the "Good News" in the Synoptics, and also the one who sends that message. Christ moves on both sides of the divide, and is therefore a bridge over it (as the Savior and teacher): "I am the way, the truth, and the life. None come to the Father but through me" (John 14:6). The worlds of God and humanity meet and are bridged by an overlap where God and human refer fully to the same thing at once. Christ is pontifical in that he comes into the world and offers a way back out of it. Sacrosanctum Concilium thus dubs the Catholic pilgrimage to Christ as a meeting at the "true tabernacle," the place people come to encounter God. Athanasius' dictum comes to mind: God became human so that we might become divine.

For Muslims, it is the Qur'ān that has a pontifical role. Again, the transcendent God stands apart from the human race in the heights of the unknowable. God is beyond the Lote Tree of the Furthest Limits, as it were. God speaks a "Word" and this bridges the gap to appear on earth as the Qur'ān. Conversely, the Qur'ān offers a 'straight path' back over the divide. However, unlike its Christian counterpart (the "one substance 'run together'," the hypostatic union), the Qur'ān is not typically painted as two things at once. As we have seen, "it is one thing in God." There is no overlap, but rather an encounter of two borders. How the bridging of this border works in the Qur'ān can be addressed in two different ways. First, the exact meeting place of the divine and the temporal can be left consciously obscure. There is a continuum of the two worlds with the border somewhere indeterminate in the Qur'ān (e.g., in its meaning, reference, and/or beauty). This would include the will to abstain (waqf) from the discussion ('...and God knows best'), or the trend to develop intermediate theological spaces like ecstatic mysticism,⁴² the rationalists' use of qiyās, and the intercessory cults of imāms and shaykhs. All of these would be labeled by the Ḥanbalites as innovations and unbelief. And so the Ḥanbalites turn to a second schema for the Qur'ān-as-bridge: divide the Qur'ān into created and uncreated 'parts.' When pressed for more firm opinions, Muslims have turned to the discussion of which parts of the Qur'ān are divine and which are created. The miḥna of Ibn Ḥanbal is the quintessential example of this. In his case, or at least in the case of those who claim to speak for him, the division is between the lafẓ and the given individual presentation of the lafẓ. The human reciter is not divine herself, but everything that can be seen or heard of the

⁴² van Ess, "Verbal Inspiration," 186.

recitation is identical and the same as God's uncreated speech in eternity.⁴³

This exposes Ḥanbalism's dilemma. Ibn Ḥanbal was neither trying to abstain from the discussion of the Qur'ān's createdness altogether, nor posit a negotiable space of interpretation between humanity and God. In the process though, Ibn Ḥanbal drew out an opinion which ended up ironically, but not coincidentally, quite like the Christians' Incarnation. If the *lafz* is eternal, then either God is just like a person, or people were divinized by the Qur'ān. Ibn Ḥanbal himself leaned towards the former argument: anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*).⁴⁴ Wesley Williams has at length convincingly argued that Ibn Ḥanbal was certainly an anthropomorphist in practice for any number of reasons, although he would have not recognized himself as such. He unabashedly believed that God has a spatial location and form with limbs, height, and organs of speech.⁴⁵ It is following from this logic that the older Ibn Ḥanbal can claim the language and pronunciation of the Qur'ān is God's speech and is therefore eternal. The only missing factor preventing the Ḥanbalite argument of the uncreated *lafz* from blossoming into a full-fledged Islamic Incarnationalism is the total overlap of human and divine natures in Christ as stated by the definition from Chalcedon. Indeed, that Islam has no notion akin to hypostatic union is why the borders of the eternal in the Qur'ān historically pushed and the temporal aspects of the Qur'ān receded. More and more parts of the Qur'ān were declared eternal—first the meaning, then the expression of the meaning, then the language of the expression—and so less and less of the Qur'ān was created. Eventually, the borders of the eternal and the temporal came to be halted in the living recitation of breathing individuals, a step short of making the given reciter hypostatically united with God, but still addressing the need to come as close to the divine as can be possible in this life.

Does the Ḥanbalite vision of the eternal God fulfill the demand of John Paul II and the rest of the Catholic tradition for a God-with-us? We have seen that at the very dawn of historical Islam, some Muslims treated the Qur'ān as something more than just a message. Even under both the theological threat of Christian-like doctrines

⁴³ Heemskerk, "Speech," 111.

⁴⁴ Ibn Ḥanbal and most 'normative' Islam would rather bend towards anthropomorphism rather than the alternative. But one could follow the uncreated *lafz* to this other conclusion: *theopoiesis*. We can hear and understand God's speech because we are literally or mystically in the same space as God. We are subsumed by the eternal Qur'ān in history and so are made supra-historical ourselves. Of course this is not common, but neither is it unheard of for the most 'drunk' of the Sufis.

⁴⁵ Wesley Williams, "Aspects of the Creed of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse," *Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002): 441-463 and Wesley, Williams, "A Body Unlike Bodies: Transcendent Anthropomorphism in Ancient Semitic Tradition and Early Islam," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 129.1 (2009): 19-44.

that could be taken as idolatrous association (shirk) with God, and the political threat of the caliphs, the tradition still gravitated towards the less rational creed of the later Ibn Ḥanbal: the Qur'ān is eternal down to its very pronunciation. Even a full array of other Sunnī religious authorities of the highest order could not dislodge Ḥanbal's claim fully. The uncreated language of the Qur'ān, the Sunnī community seems to affirm, speaks to them in a way that disregards rationalizing counterarguments. While this is different from the way in which the Incarnation makes God present to the Christians in mechanics, it serves the same pontifical role.

The Other Side of the Bridge

"Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."⁴⁶

If the previous shortcomings in the exchanges between Catholicism and Islam have been anything, they have been failures of understanding. If the Church wishes to fully engage Muslims as *Nostra Aetate* implores, it must come to terms with the role of the Qur'ān as Muslims understand it. A specification or reevaluation of Catholicism's own economic theologies and of its theologies of the Qur'ān (and through it, Islam) is in order. If, following this self-reassessment, the Church sees fit to make itself obviously distinct from Islam then it will require a finer wedge. Both Catholics and Muslims agree that God can be encountered fully and directly in the human form for something of God is utterly available in a human act, whether this is a specific historical event or a reoccurring liturgy. The only true distinction between Islam and Catholicism on this matter is that Islam stresses the connection between the 'edges' of created and the Creator, while Catholicism makes this pontifical contact an overlapping coincidence. Therefore, the distinction is not whether God meets humanity (as both traditions claim God does, and fully), but rather how (if at all) that humanity impinges back upon God. Does the Incarnation of God in Christ create a change in God that the revelation of the uncreated Qur'ān does not? It is not an easy question, but it requires a response, for Catholics may be able to argue that the Qur'ān does not make God one amongst us, but they can no longer honestly say that it does not make God-with-us.

⁴⁶ *Nostra Aetate*, 3.

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