

**How to be a Unitarian**  
presented at Prairie Group 2004  
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I believe in one God, the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד:  
*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad.*  
Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.



*Lā ilāha il-Allāh.*  
There is no god but God

Unitarian Universalists believe in one god at most.

On the face of it, it sounds like a simple enough proposition – there is only one god. The universe is not a consortium of multiple divine powers, and the world is not an object of contention among competitive deities. This fundamental claim lies at the heart of our own Unitarian Universalist movement’s long history, as well as being the unarguable foundation of the tradition we seek to examine together this week. It is an appealing notion, to suppose that the apparent barrage of multiplicity reported by our senses can be subsumed into the over-arching unity that is god. In fact, to affirm and witness that claim is the simple definition of a Muslim, and constitutes the essential gospel of Mohammed.

The western intellectual perspective, rooted in the Enlightenment and dominant for the past five or so centuries, makes a relatively uncritical assumption that monotheism is both a morally superior and a more intellectually sophisticated understanding of the world than any of the potential alternatives. Our own radical reformation identity originates in the difficulty of reconciling the trinity of the Christian creeds with an intellectually consistent monotheism that would be congruent with Biblical texts. So urgent was the impulse to assert the uniqueness and unity of a supreme being that believers would break with and defy their long time religious associations and turn to barely viable communities in quest of a sufficiently “pure” and correct understanding of god’s nature. Orthodox theologians have striven for centuries with immense subtlety to show that three really can be properly understood as one, lest the claim of Christianity’s monotheism be compromised. In Islam, the one unforgivable sin is to assert that god has any ‘associates’, or to behave as if there is anything worthy of worship or dependence that is other than the one god.

I was raised in the uncritical acceptance of this Enlightenment paradigm, celebrating Ahkenaten as “the first monotheist,” and thus by definition a spiritual hero and a thinker ahead of his time. Why a staunchly humanist family and congregation should so implicitly embrace the unity of a god in which they vociferously did not actually believe escapes me, unless by reason of a crude arithmetic which would suggest that one god is better than many because it is closer to none. Nevertheless, my own intellectual and spiritual path has led me to re-think this ingrained assumption, and to regard traditions in which the divine is ascribed more than one personal identity with as tolerant an eye as that which I turn upon the monotheists in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I was also raised to believe that both Unitarianism and humanism emerged out of an exclusively western European philosophical lineage; Islam was a ‘world religion’, something that ‘other people’ practiced, and that had no connection to my own theological heritage. Beginning in graduate school, and more intensely in the last several years, I have come to understand just how untrue that supposition is, and to realize the extent to which Unitarianism in particular owes its existence as a distinct voice to the Muslim cultures that profoundly influenced the history of Europe from the southwest, in Spain, and from the once-powerful Ottoman empire in the east. Thus I come to this assignment with some curiosity about those who insist, as we once began by insisting, that god cannot be other than one single distinct unitary entity, our cousin monotheists and in the strictly theological meaning of the term, our fellow unitarians.

This paper might have been quite short: the first pillar of Islam teaches that there is only one god, end of discussion, and don’t forget it. What part of ‘only one god’ don’t you understand? But in point of fact, unpacking the full implications of that thought has been an ongoing process for fourteen hundred years in the tradition in question, and god alone knows how much longer in other iterations of the same idea. In the absence of specific instructions from the program committee, I have undertaken to consider four themes that intrigue me, and appear to arise in the context of the attempt to arrive at a truly uncompromised and uncompromising monotheism.

To begin with, it seems important to explore some of the terminology and foundational concepts of traditional and commonly accepted Islamic theology when it deals with the unity of god. These ideas have played out in very interesting ways in the development of devotional practice, such as Sufism, and in the encounter between an emerging Muslim intellectual and cultural tradition with the texts and ideas of classical Greek philosophy. This leads to a consideration of the ways in which that Muslim culture, with its commitment to only one god, shaped medieval Europe and the emergence of Unitarianism, from points as distant as Cordoba and Istanbul. Finally, it may be worth our giving some attention to the movement within Islam today that bears our name; members of the Wahabi sect are called ‘unitarians’ – why, and what does that mean?

Surveying broadly the collective history of ‘the people of the book’ – Judeo-Christian-Islam – it seems to me that an intellectually tenable and spiritually vital monotheism is always precariously balanced on the edge between two extremes. On the one side, god’s oneness may mean that no qualities, characteristics, or descriptions of any kind can be ascribed to the divine, lest it be suggested by contrast that there is anything god

is not. Taken to the extreme, this becomes an ultimate *via negativa*, in which the subject 'god' can have no predicate, for to say anything whatsoever is to imply the absence of its opposite, and there can be nothing in the universe that is separate from god. On the other hand, if nothing in the universe is separate from god, then *everything* that one might say of god is true, and one tumbles not into inarticulate affirmation, but into a kind of babbling pantheism in which nothing interesting can be said about god, because all possible descriptions and affirmations are true. Islam has tried to secure a middle ground by affirming god's power to express his own names and attributes in the revealed text of the *Quran*, but hedging these revelations with prohibitions against mere mortals engaging promiscuously in the same process.

### I. The *Shadada*, *Tauhid*, and *Shirk*

One of the attractive qualities of Islam is its accessibility, and the intuitive simplicity by which one declares one's self a believer, and thereby becomes a member of the community of Muslims. The *Shahada*, the 'witness' or 'testimony', is not only a declaration of the believer's state of mind, but also a theological claim that bears some unpacking. The act of translation raises some immediate problems, for the choice of words can change the implications of the theological claim. "*Lā ilāha il-Allāh*" might legitimately be rendered "there is no god but god", which although it is grammatically tautological may be the most accurately suggestive phrasing. "There is no god but *Allah*" is strenuously resisted by many Muslims, as tending to suggest that 'god' is a category, or role, and '*Allah*' is the personal name of a sole applicant for the position, or worse, a competitor to some other potential candidate. "There is nothing ultimate but god" points in the right direction, but does not communicate a claim that would differentiate the Muslim from many other sorts of monotheists. This is where the second phrase, "*and Mohammed is his prophet*" becomes definitive. The theological significance of the *Shahada* for the Muslim believer is that it constitutes a commitment to *tauhid*, the principle of exclusive monotheism, and a renunciation of *shirk*, which is sometimes translated as polytheism, but more significantly means making the suggestion or acting as if there are partners, rivals, or alternatives of any kind to the one god.

Traditionally, *tauhid* has several aspects. *Tauhid al-Rububiyya* refers to god's role as creator and sustainer of the universe; the word derives from the same root as that for parents, teachers, religious leaders, and the concept of Lord. It is the assertion that god is the only real power in existence; not only is he the cause of everything that exists, having created the world out of nothing, and having himself no need for it or of anything from it, but also that it is only by his power that any part of creation is able to move or change. Therefore, it is clear that nothing can happen in the world except what god allows to happen by his will. As we will see presently, some of the earliest philosophical speculation in the Islamic tradition began as an attempt to reconcile this aspect of *tauhid* with the proposition that human beings exercise free will, and can be properly held accountable for their actions and choices. *Tauhid al-rububiyyah* can be contravened not only by the obvious assertions of polytheism, that more than one power or force contributed to the creation of the world, or atheism, that the universe does not originate

in the creative act of god, but also in subtler ways. To wish for the world to be other than it is suggests that one's own will is superior to god's, and to adopt superstitious practices that attempt to manipulate good or bad fortune, such as luck charms or protective amulets, is to suppose that something other than god's perfect will determines the outcome of events.

The second form of *tauhid*, *al-Asma wa as-Sifat* deals with the names and attributes of god. This involves holding the correct image of god, as he has been described in revelation and not otherwise. The 99 names that appear in the *Quran* are to be taken as absolute; god is absolute Reality, absolute Power, absolute Good and so on. Moreover, only god possesses these qualities in their absolute or pure form, in and of himself. To the extent that any of these descriptions characterize human experience, it is because god has willed it to be so, and these qualities in creation are always contingent, and mixed with their negations. Compared to god, our life is mixed with death, our goodness with evil, our power with weakness. Thus god's attributes are not like ours, but always perfect and absolute where ours are compromised and dependent functions of god's will.

The negation of *tauhid al-Asma wa as-Sifat* lies in either attributing human qualities or contingencies to god, or in suggesting that any human being shares or participates in the absolute attributes of god. Human finitude means that we can know about god only what he has chosen to reveal to us, because our limited intellect can only reason from what we know about ourselves, so that if we try to describe god in any way other than as he has revealed himself, we inevitably end up ascribing human qualities to the divine. To suppose that god needs rest, or changes his mind, as described in the Hebrew scriptures, violates *tauhid al-Asma wa as-Sifat* by assigning human motivations, or worse, needs, to god, who has no needs and is not affected by varying impulses. Neither should any human person or creation be thought of as absolute in control, or as all-knowing or everlasting, because these are qualities unique to god. Indeed, it is not permissible for human beings to use as proper names the attributes of god, unless preceded by 'abd, a prefix meaning 'slave of'; thus, 'ar-Raheem' "the merciful" must become 'abdur-Raheem' "slave of the merciful". By the same token, it violates *tauhid al-Asma wa as-Sifat* to use the prefix 'abd with any human name, including the Prophet or the Messenger, or to speak of any other person as the slave of one's self.

As far-reaching as these first two categories of *tauhid* may seem, there is a third principle of the unity of god that is equally important to maintain. *Tauhid al-ibada* concerns the worship or service devoted to god, which may not properly be directed to any other person, idea, or power. god alone deserves worship, and no intermediary or intercessor can stand in between god and the believer; therefore, to pray to prophets, saints, angels, ancestors, or any other being is to deny the unity of god. However, the concept of *ibada* includes more than merely liturgical worship or formal prayers, or even the instructed observances such as sacrifices, fasting, charity or pilgrimage. All these must be done out of obedience and devotion to god, but in addition, emotional commitments such as love, trust, and fear in their ultimate degrees belong only to god. To fear anything more than one fears god, to love anything more than one loves god, or

to trust any force to bring about a desired outcome rather than to assent to the will of god, is to violate *tauhid al-ibada*. From this principle derives the authority of *shari'a*, Islamic religious law, for if god is the ultimate law-giver, then to place one's trust in a system of secular government is to divide one's loyalty and to give to another entity the confidence and authority that ought to be given to god alone. Thus according to one of the traditional interpretations,

“The acceptance of non-Islamic rule in place of *shari'a* in Muslim lands is *shirk* [polytheism, idolatry] and an act of *kufr* [disbelief]. Those in a position to change it must do so, while those unable to do so must speak out against the rule of *kufr* and call for the implementation of *shari'a*. If even this becomes impossible, un-Islamic government must be sincerely hated and despised for the pleasure of god and the upholding of *tauhid*.”<sup>1</sup>

The word *shirk* literally means partnership or sharing, but in the context of theological discourse in Islam it refers to the denial of *tauhid* by associating any other with god, or associating god's unique absolute attributes to anything created and finite. The *Quran* describes *shirk* as the one error that god surely will not forgive, though it has many forms, and some are so subtle that the teacher Ibn Abbas once said “*shirk* is more hidden than a black ant creeping on a black stone in the middle of a moonless night.” To abide in the complete mental and moral recognition of pure monotheism is understood as a difficult spiritual attainment, the practice of a lifetime being scarcely sufficient to achieve it. I find it arresting to contemplate what might follow if in our own tradition we were to take as the opposite of our Unitarianism not so much the doctrine of the trinity, as the concept of idolatry.

*Shirk* is understood in the same categories that define *tauhid*. *Shirk al-rububiyya* consists of believing or asserting that anyone or anything other than *Allah* himself participates in the lordship of the universe as creator or sustainer, or on the other hand that such lordship does not exist. Thus alternative religious systems fall into the first aspect of this sort of *shirk*, while various human philosophies tend to fall on the other side into atheism.

In the same way, *shirk al-asma wa sifat* has two sides; one consists of ascribing human characteristics to god, and the other of applying the names or attributes of god to any human being. In this principle lies the rejection of all painted or carved pictorial representations of god, because such images inevitably give human or animal features to god, and thus serve to compromise the concept of his unique and absolute nature. On the other hand, any claim on the part of a person to incarnate or manifest god – including, by strict interpretation, the teachings of many mystics and sects within Islam, as well as other traditions, notably Christianity – also constitutes a failure of *tauhid*. This form of *shirk* can be observed as well in various scientific theories which claim to explain the origins of life or matter in terms other than the will of god, who alone is without beginning or end.

Keeping in mind that *tauhid* is not merely an intellectual proposition, but a spiritual achievement, *shirk al-ibada* is concerned chiefly with the attitude of the mind and heart

of the believer. What is called *shirk al-akbar*, or major *shirk*, is that which is most antithetical to Islam, that is the overt worship of any being or idea other than god as described through revelation by his messenger. In itself this has two aspects, the obvious one being those who are believers in some other religious system or false god; who pray to human beings, dead or alive, or to images; who intentionally invoke divine powers apart from *Allah*. In itself this is not a matter of belief as much as behavior; one may correctly believe in the one god, but if out of pragmatic considerations or convention one nevertheless participates in other forms of worship, that is nevertheless *shirk*. Yet such behavioral error is easily avoided; more problematic is the sort of *shirk* that occurs when a Muslim believer, in spite of his or her best intentions, actually loves, trusts, obeys or fears something else more than god. That love which is manifested in the full surrender of one's will to the command of god is the essence of Islam; on the one hand, it is expressed in the first moment of *shahada*, and on the other hand, it is perfected only through the practice of a lifetime.

Minor *shirk*, or *ar-riya*, has to do again with intention, specifically motivation in worship. To perform the commandments of god – fasting, pilgrimage, alms, as well as formal prayer – in such a way as to impress other people, gain praise, or show off, is a form of *shirk*. The virtue goes out of such acts when performed with this kind of intention, because the reward is received immediately. Even deliberately to beautify one's prayers because of the awareness that others are hearing them constitutes *ar-riya*. The effort to maintain the purity of one's intentions so as not to fall into *ar-riya* requires constant vigilance; *taqwa*, the fear or awareness of god, sometimes rendered as 'piety', is the human quality that enables believers to practice their religion with such intention as will not be drawn into this kind of *shirk*.

Finally, the inconspicuous or hidden form of *shirk al-ibada* consists of being dissatisfied with the conditions of one's life, not accepting them as an expression of the will of *allah*, but complaining about one's own situation or the necessity of observing the commandments. To do this is seen as taking one's own desires as the object of worship or ultimate loyalty, and in that way violating the unity of god.

## II. *Kalam, Falsafi*, and the *Sufi* path

These far-reaching implications derived from the apparently simple affirmation of god's indivisible oneness gave rise to some of the earliest theological discussions within the tradition of Islam. Following the death of Mohammed, controversy occurred as to how his successors in leadership were to be selected from the community of believers, and to what extent that authority was to be hereditary and/or charismatic, political and/or spiritual. The *Khawarij* party, initially opponents of the fourth *caliph*, Ali, rejected the compromises he made with his opponents, and took seriously the closure of revelation, holding that no human authority after the Prophet had access to divine authority or new truth. Without centralized leadership themselves, they nevertheless defended their resistance to the usurpation of political power within the Islamic community with theological arguments, including the assertion that those who attempted illegitimately to

assume control were 'grave sinners', and thus automatically unbelievers, no longer true members of the community of Islam, and outside of its laws, rights and protections. By contrast, the *Shi'a* party affirmed the divine ordination and authority of the *imam*, while many other schools of thought sought to maintain a position of neutrality, not only to the political struggle, but also to the related issue of condemning or absolving sinners, a judgment which they argued was properly left to god in the hereafter. The *Khawarij* also defended the absoluteness of the will of god, asserting that god is the creator not only of people, but of their actions, and that nothing happens that god does not intend, which led them to embrace the idea of predestination.

As a response to these initial somewhat opportunistic adventures in theological justification for political positions, there emerged the *Mu'tazila*, a school of thinkers who, among others, engaged in a process that came to be called '*kalam*'. *Ilm a-kalam*, the science of debate, was also known as *ilm al-usul*, the science of basic principles, or more significantly, *ilm al-tauhid*, the science of god's unity. Anxious to set the theological understanding of Islam on a firm foundation, the *Mu'tazila* thinkers attempted to systematize religious doctrine into a rational schema centered on the affirmation of god's absolute unity and absolute justice. They sought to sustain the principle of human free will, as against the predestination affirmed by the *Khawarij*, because it appeared rationally unjust for god to hold human beings accountable for, and to punish them for, actions they had not had any real choice about performing. The *Mu'tazila* also challenged the anthropomorphic ideas of god derived from the *Quranic* text, as to whether god has actual hands, eyes, movement, or a throne, for instance; both these images and the idea of predestination led to intellectual paradoxes that seemed to them inimical to true faith. They hoped to establish an understanding of the basic beliefs of Islam in which all parts of the revelation and tradition would be coherent with each other and with the principles of logic. Though they began their investigations with the authority of traditional texts, their confidence in human reason led to a willingness to reinterpret received knowledge that was often resisted by more orthodox teachers.

At the time of its coming to the (multi)cultural centres of the Middle East, Islam had not developed its dogmas on the questions of paramount importance in other systems. When Christianity had several centuries of heated debates on the nature of Christ behind it, Islam was still relying on the simple references to Allah in the *Quranic* passages, and religious controversies were concentrating on the political questions. Even though large-scale conversions to Islam were achieved by socio-economic means, debates with the intellectual elite of the rival religions received plenty of attention in the cultural centres of the Caliphate, Baghdad and Basra in particular. To stand against others in the inter-religious dialogue, there was a need to find answers to the questions asked by them. What are the attributes of god, what is the position of man in relation to the Divine, how does god relate to humans, what is his role in the events occurring in the world? Answering these questions required knowledge of the rival doctrines, and understanding of the categories used in determining them.<sup>2</sup>

By this time also, Islam dominated such areas as Egypt, Syria and Persia, all places which were thoroughly immersed in Greek culture. The new rulers sought to apply the learning which existed in the empire to their own purposes. Much of this knowledge was very practical, being based on medicine, astrology, astronomy, mathematics and engineering.<sup>3</sup>

The *Mu'tazila* reached the zenith of their influence under *caliph* al-Ma'mun (813- 33), a great patron of learning and sciences. It was he who commissioned the institution for translating Greek philosophic and scientific works into Arabic, *Bait al-Hikma*, 'the House of Wisdom.' Here the ideas of Aristotle, Plato and the neo-Platonics, already in circulation among the intellectual elite, became available to the wider public, which was a stimulus for the further elaboration of philosophical ideas. Being a strong supporter of the *Mu'tazila* views, al-Ma'mun attempted to make them part of the official government policy, especially with regard to the doctrine of the creation of the *Quran*. To understand this text as an uncreated and pre-existent Word of god, as did the more traditional religious scholars, obviously gave less flexibility to temporal rulers, whether religious or political, so the *caliph* no doubt had motivation to support the view that god's word was not an eternal attribute, and that the *Quran* was created by the action of god at a specific time, which made its provisions also temporal, and subject to certain kinds of change. To ensure the compliance of his government officials, al-Ma'mun held a public examination of their ideas, and this use of force aroused considerable opposition among popular conservative leaders like Ahmad ibn Hanbal. The attempt was abandoned by 850, but it had served to discredit *Mu'tazila* teaching and give impetus to a resurgence of traditionalism that repudiated the entire enterprise of *kalam* as well as *falsafa*.

In her book Islam and Democracy, Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan scholar of Islamic history, argues that:

Islamic history reveals two traditions of dealing with the problem of despotism. One is the rational tradition based on the use of reason (*aq'l*) to challenge absolute authority, promoted by the *Mu'tazila*. Human beings, they argued, are endowed with power to think and form opinion (*ra'y*) based on reasoning. Therefore, they should have the right to choose their leaders without being coerced to obey. This tradition was violently suppressed and silenced by the latter day *caliphs* who invoked *shari'a*, stripped of its questioning dimension, to demand obedience and conformity.

The second tradition of dissent is centered around subversive rebellion, associated with the *kharjites* who first appeared on the scene of political Islam as the assassins of Ali, the fourth successor (*caliph*) to the Prophet of Islam. With the effective suppression of the rational tradition of political Islam only the *kharjite* rebel tradition has survived and flourished...

The *Mu'tazila* intellectuals, philosophers, and *sufis* fostered the democratic ideals of freedom, equality, humanism and tolerance within Islamic culture during the 9th and 10th centuries [CE] under the early Abbasid rulers of Baghdad. Reason

and private initiative triumphed during this period, making Islamic civilization synonymous with the flowering of philosophy, arts, mathematics, astronomy, engineering and medicine. But soon these *caliphs* too succumbed to the despotism characteristic of their Umayyad predecessors. *Mu'tazila* philosophers were hunted down and condemned for polluting Islam with foreign (Greek) ideas.<sup>4</sup>

Those 'polluting foreign ideas' originated in the western philosophical texts that al-Ma'mun's *Bait al-Hikma* was founded in 832 to translate into Arabic. Such translations were not uncontroversial, and many orthodox Muslim scholars questioned the necessity of studying philosophy at all. In their view, Islam already offered a complete practical and theoretical model of the nature of reality, and the premises of Greek thought often seemed to oppose the received knowledge of Islam. Muslims had guidance from the *Quran*, the *hadith*, the traditional sayings of the Prophet and his immediate successors and companions, and the *sunna*, the practices of the community. There was the system of *fiqh*, Islamic law, and the science of grammar, which explained how the Arabic language ought to be understood. The system of *kalam* dealt with explicitly theological issues and sought conceptual unity in different canonical texts. What need then for Greek forms of speculation, which originated with non-Muslims and often were initially transmitted into Arabic by non-Muslim scholars?

This would not have been such a significant issue if western philosophy had not seemed to be so often antagonistic to Islam. The philosophy that was transmitted into Arabic at this time was profoundly Neoplatonic; it tended to agree with Aristotle that the world is eternal, that there is a hierarchy of being with the intellect at the summit and the world of generation and corruption at the bottom, and to recommend a rather ascetic system of ethics. Even more crucial was the criterion of validity which the philosophers used. This was based on reason, as opposed to revelation, which naturally brought into question the significance of religious revelation. Thus philosophy came to be seen not so much as an alternative formulation of religious truths but as a rival and competing system of thought, one which required opposition by Islam. And even though *kalam* in general and the *Mu'tazila* in particular might have been expected to welcome the contribution of a system parallel in so many respects to their own, in the event the *mutakallimun*, the practitioners of *kalam*, or theologians, found themselves at odds and in competition with the *falasifa*, as the transliterated adherents of Greek thought came to be known.

A third strand of *hikma* (wisdom) can be traced in the writing of Ibn Sina (known to the European world as Avicenna). In his *al-hikmat al-mashriqiyya* (oriental philosophy) the Aristotelian universe becomes transformed; reason is linked to the intellect, the external universe becomes interiorized, facts become symbols, and philosophy itself becomes a type of "gnosis" or "sophia." The goal of philosophy then is not merely theoretical knowledge of the substances and accidents of the universe, but also to experience their presence and instantiation in such a way as to enable the soul to free itself from the confines of the universe. The universe is experienced not as something external to be understood, but rather as a succession of stages along a path on which one is traveling.

The notion of this 'oriental philosophy' played an important part in the development of future illuminationist and *Sufi* forms of philosophy, which seek not only to understand the universe rationally, but also to analyze and invite the wonder we feel when we contemplate the divine mystery of that universe.

This led to a powerful reaction from al-Ghazali, who critiqued the adoption of western Peripatetic philosophy in Islam, arguing that it was both incompatible with true religion, and also invalid on its own principles. He pointed out some of the difficulties with developments of Neoplatonism that had taken place in Islamic philosophy, and he argued that while philosophy as a discipline should be rejected, logic as a conceptual tool should be retained. At the same time, he contributed much to the intellectual credibility of the developing mystical philosophy of *Sufism*, which had its roots in the understanding of esoteric interpretations of classic texts, and the effort to achieve personal spiritual purification and experienced devotion to god. It is possible to be struck by the parallels between the formulation of *Sufism* out of the work of those teachers who challenged the arid academic treatises of *falsafa*, and the emergence of Transcendentalism from the romantic reaction to Enlightenment rationalism in the west. When monotheism becomes caught up in intellectual riddles about the logical implications of god's oneness, the lived religious practice may seek a devotional end run around these abstractions into an intuitive awareness of connection that does not see a need to justify itself philosophically.

### III. Al-Andalus and the Ottoman Empire

In 1463, thirty years before Isabella and Ferdinand would complete the dismantling of Al-Andalus by formally expelling Jews and Muslims from Spain, on the other end of Europe, the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II conquered what is now known as Bosnia-Herzegovina, and issued what has come down to us as his *ahdnama*, or proclaimed vow, which says in part:

...the ones who possess this imperial edict, the Bosnian Franciscans, are held by me in my great esteem, and I therefore order that: No one should disturb or meddle with them or their churches. They are to live in peace in my Empire. Those who have fled should feel free and secure. They should return and settle again without fear in their monasteries... They must not be disturbed either by My High Majesty, or by my viziers, employees, subjects or any other inhabitants of my Empire. No one should attack, insult or endanger either them, or their lives, or property, or their churches. Even if they bring somebody from abroad into my country, they are allowed to do so.<sup>5</sup>

Carefully preserved by the monastery community to which it applied, this *ahdnama* is an example of the religious tolerance that was generally characteristic of the Ottoman administration throughout its empire's 600 year history. Susan Ritchie quotes an edict from the following century, issued by the Pasha of Buda in 1548, which sought to quash disputes between Catholic authorities and Protestant-leaning clergy in the town of Tolna, (in present day Hungary) saying,

...preachers of the faith invented by Luther should be allowed to preach the Gospel everywhere to everybody, whoever wants to hear, freely and without fear, and that all Hungarians and Slavs (who indeed wish to do so) should be able to listen to and receive the word of god without any danger. Because – he said – this is the true Christian faith and religion.<sup>6</sup>

It is impossible not to hear the echo of these words in the familiar text of the Edict of Torda, issued two decades later by the Transylvanian Diet and affirmed by King John Sigismund. While Ritchie observes that there is no demonstrable textual connection, the fact remains that at the time when Francis David, who would later advocate for Unitarian views and for principles of toleration at Sigismund's court, was still serving as superintendent of the Magyar Lutheran churches, the Pasha's edict concerning Tolna would have been the basis on which his congregations maintained their right to exist. The Edict of Torda is not, as we are sometimes invited to believe, a sudden, spontaneous flowering of forward-thinking European Enlightenment genius; rather, it is the natural progression of a policy and a philosophy that informed the Muslim Ottoman empire as well as the Muslim Andalusian culture for several centuries in Spain. Again, according to Ritchie,

The 17th and 18th century European Socinians were not shy about praising theological Islam as a pure monotheism that had corrected many of the theological corruptions that had befallen the Christian church since its early days of honest, non-doctrinaire practice. Andrew Ramsey in 1727 spoke of Socinianism approvingly as the sublime religion which stems from "Ideal Islam". Henry Stubbe, John Toland, Arthur Bury, William Fexe and Stephen Nye were similarly all Socinian authors who strategically employed a sympathetic stance towards theological Islam as means of highlighting the deviations from primitive Christian practice that they found bothersome especially in the form of Anglican orthodoxy. ...[There was] a strong inclination for actual Unitarians to describe their attractions to Islam in highly theologized and idealized terms, and an equally understandable and politically motivated inclination on the part of the anti-Socinians to suggest that Unitarian sympathy for Islam might lead to actual alliances with Ottoman Muslims, even to the point of treason.<sup>7</sup>

While the political conflict of empires made overt religious and cultural syncretism too threatening on the eastern border, there was clearly more sympathetic curiosity in both directions than we have been wont to credit between these two traditions seeking to arrive at an authentic monotheism in the face of centuries of theological accretions.

A more thorough-going integration of Muslim, Christian and Jewish cultures took place during the centuries that western history has been pleased to call the 'dark ages'. Between the time that the Umayyad prince Abd al-Rahman established his leadership in Cordoba on the Iberian peninsula, around 760 CE, and the Spanish 'reconquista' of Isabelle and Ferdinand in the late 1400s, there flourished a politically precarious but intellectually and aesthetically fertile society referred to as Andalusia, in Arabic *al-Andalus*. The Muslim influx across from north Africa during the 8<sup>th</sup> century encountered a Christianity with strongly Arian roots among the Visigoths who had founded Toledo a

hundred years earlier. When scholars with precious manuscripts of classical Greek learning fled the fall of the Roman empire, they went two directions; to the Ottoman east, and to *al-Andalus* in the west. Here again, where Muslim administrations held power they were remarkably tolerant of religious diversity, and highly invested in scholarship. A western center for translation of texts sprang up in Toledo, from which philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, jurisprudence and science in general would filter back through the Pyrenees to energize the European renaissance.

When the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabelle reneged on their promises of toleration to the Muslim and Jewish communities under their authority, and required that all non-Christians either convert or leave the country in 1492, they created a religious underground that even the Inquisition was unable entirely to eradicate. One of the early indications of Miguel de Servet's intellectual capacity was his command of languages, including Hebrew. It should be remembered that the study of Hebrew was a harshly punishable offense in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, because those who were able to teach it were likely to be 'Marranos'; putative converts from Judaism, who would always be suspected of secretly harboring their former faith. Servetus grew up in a society that less than two decades before his birth had openly acknowledged the legitimacy of two insistently monotheistic faith traditions. During his childhood courts of the Inquisition were being established one after another where people could be tortured, strangled, and burned at the stake for religious convictions that their parents had openly practiced, and the most marked difference between the accepted and unacceptable theologies was the doctrine of the trinity. It is not too much to say that the martyr to whom we trace the origins of Unitarianism proper was a last fruit of the quintessentially Islamic culture of *al-Andalus*.

#### IV. *Muwahidun*, the rise of the *Wahhabi* sect

The protection of *tauhid* is more than just an interesting intellectual anachronism in the modern world. While ninety percent of the Muslims in the world are *Sunni*, and in the western popular imagination it is often the remaining ten percent, the *Shi'ites*, who are viewed as literalists and fundamentalists, it is important to recognize the variety of reform movements in the Islamic world today. It should also be noted that much as was the case in the Christian reformation, religious and political struggles are at work side by side, with the religious vision initially understanding itself as a return to previous, primitive, uncorrupted forms of the faith.

Certainly this was the idea in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab joined forces with a tribal chief, Muhammad Ibn Saud, to lead a militant reform movement in Arabia. Although known to us today as the "*Wahhabi*" sect, they called themselves *Muwahidun*: "those who advocate oneness," meaning a strict monotheism based on the Islamic doctrine of *tauhid*, which Abd al-Wahhab understood not merely as the "oneness" of god, but the exclusiveness of that one god. Influenced by the thought of medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyya, al-Wahhab advocated a form of legalism that excludes the traditional Islamic practice of *ijma* ("consensus") as an element of Islamic *sharia* law. While still members of the Sunni majority, the

*muwahidun* (literal translation renders them as 'unitarians'; the term *Wahabis* is generally used by their detractors) are concerned with correcting the corruptions of historical Islam and its politically pragmatic compromises. They insist upon the absolute humanity of Mohammed, with literal reference to the instructions of the *Quran*, and they reject with vehemence the saint and shrine worship which in their view characterizes *Sufi* mysticism. With a kind of Cromwellian iconoclastic fervor, they forbid grave markers, and have from time to time sought to destroy the tombs of religious figures which have become pilgrimage destinations.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab labeled all who disagreed with him heretics and apostates, which in his eyes justified the use of force in imposing both his beliefs and his political authority over other local Muslims. This in turn led him to declare holy war on neighboring Arab tribes, an act which would otherwise have been legally impossible under the rules of *jihad*. By 1924 their dominance had become secure, and the *Wahhabis* went on a rampage throughout the peninsula at this time, smashing the tombs of Muslim saints and imams. Saudi Arabia was officially constituted as a kingdom eight years later in 1932. More recently, *muwahidun* dissidents seized and briefly held the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979, and *Wahhabi* translations of the sayings of Ibn Taymiyya were distributed in Egypt and used by extremist members of the *jihad* organization there to justify the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981.

The al-Saud rulers base their claim to legitimacy on the success of the military conquests of the 1920s and 1930s, and on their alliance with religious authorities. They rule Saudi Arabia in an uneasy symbiosis with the *Muwahidun* clergy, a relationship which dates back to the 1744 alliance between Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud, a sort of merger of religious legitimacy and military might. The descendants of al-Wahhab still dominate the official religious institutions of the country. Today, the "alliance" between the regime and the official clergy is much contested by dissidents, who protest that the two groups no longer serve as checks on each other: the official clergy is said to be co-opted; dependent on the al-Saud for its existence. The ruling family still needs the legitimacy conferred by the clergy, but the clergy has become subservient and bureaucratized in the last 25 years.

However, theological extremism is a fickle advocate, often turning against the very regimes it once helped to empower. Two important historic moments of opposition provide striking parallels with today's Islamist opposition movement: the 1929 Ikhwan rebellion and the 1979 seizure of the great mosque in Mecca by Juhaiman al-Utaibi. In both instances, the Islamic legitimacy of the al-Saud family was seriously challenged by movements that emanated from the heartland of traditional al-Saud support, the Najd. Both of these movements were composed of *muwahidun*, protesting what they viewed as corruption in the state which their theological ancestors had helped to found.

## V. Conclusion

What does the Islamic struggle over the centuries with the concept of *tauhid* have to teach us, as their theological cousins? The first moral that I take from this story is that

it's not as easy as it looks to be a thorough-going monotheist. The claim that what is ultimate is a single entity can entail a practice of single-mindedness that is in itself a demanding discipline. Intellectual integrity and spiritual vitality may be both energized and challenged by the effort to remain constant in such an assertion. To the extent that it is filtered through a fixed historical revelation, there will always be a tension between that insight and the discoveries and shifting circumstances that inevitably follow. Monotheism can give rise to a universalizing confidence that is at ease with other religious expressions, as happened in the golden age of *al-Andalus*, or it can narrow the believers' focus to the exclusivist vision of the puritanic *muwahhidun*. Theodore Parker's famous claim that Unitarianism is concerned with the religious **of** Jesus rather than the religion **about** Jesus perhaps has application also to our historical connections with Islam. While the traditions that have grown up **about** Mohammed and his followers, like the other sealed orthodoxies of religious history, may not resonate in our free faith, yet Mohammed's foundational affirmation that god is entirely and only one weaves into our institutional roots, and echoes through the centuries of our own theological identity. As Islam comes to play a central role in the shaping of global political trends and the spiritual lives of multiple millions of people, it becomes us to have a sympathetic understanding of its many-faceted development, and of those ways in which its deepest aspirations of fidelity to the oneness of the divine may mirror and even inform our own.

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