

“Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald provides a wealth of insightful yet prayerful reflections on the abundant Names of God bestowed through Qur’anic verses and followed by musings on biblical passages brought to mind as the mediation unfolds. His masterful arrangement generates a rich interplay between living sacred texts through eight developing themes. Throughout, he draws adeptly from decades of experience in Christian-Muslim studies and dialogue. *Praise the Name of the Lord* is a study guide for Christian-Muslim spiritual encounter, a scholarly contribution on two faiths in dialogue, and a prayerbook for remembering God.”

— John Borelli
Georgetown University

“This beautiful reflection is valuable for anyone who wants to understand the Muslim tradition of meditation on God’s Ninety-Nine Names more deeply. Archbishop Fitzgerald draws biblical and qur’anic passages into conversation with each other in a way that is accessible to everyone. An inspiring example of true dialogue of religious experience.”

— Sandra Toenies Keating
Associate Professor of Theology
Providence College

“In this little volume, Archbishop Fitzgerald’s meditations bear the mark of one who has studied deeply and with great integrity over a lifetime the sacred texts and languages of the Abrahamic faiths. Without compromising in the least his faithfulness to the Christian tradition, he deftly manages to present Muslim and Jewish renderings of the Names of God with the respect and objectivity reflective of his long years spent in dialogue with these communities. Importantly, while learned readers will surely benefit from his erudition, those currently laboring away at interreligious dialogue will also find themselves to be fortunate recipients of a wonderful model for *doing* intertextual studies of sacred texts.”

— Dr. Anthony Cirelli
Associate Director
Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

“Both Christians and Muslims recognize a God who creates, who draws near, who judges, and who guides. Both Muslims and Christians have also found many ways to name the aspects and attributes of the divine being. In this innovative book Archbishop Fitzgerald offers an insightful exploration of divine names drawn from both the Bible and the Qur’an, producing a volume that combines a fascinating excursus in comparative theology with a compendium of passages that can serve as material for a group retreat or for personal reflection.”

—Jane McAuliffe, PhD
Director of National and International Outreach
Library of Congress

“Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald has devoted his life to the study of Islam and dialogue with Muslims. In *Praise the Name of the Lord* he skillfully combines scholarship and spiritual insight to show how the Islamic tradition of constant remembrance (*dhikr*) of the Beautiful Names of God can be a source of inspiration for Christians. As is the case for both Muslims and Christians, remembrance—*anamnesis* is the term in the Christian Scriptures—is meant to lead to praise of God and imitation of the divine qualities. Drawing on passages of the Holy Bible that resonate with various Names of God in the Noble Qur’an, Archbishop Fitzgerald encourages readers, be they Christian or Muslim, to appreciate the spiritual riches of another religious tradition and to come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of their own.”

—William Skudlarek, OSB
Secretary General, Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

Praise the Name of the Lord

Meditations on the Names of God
in the Qur'an and the Bible

Archbishop Michael Louis Fitzgerald, MAfr

Foreword by
Mary Margaret Funk, OSB

Afterword by
Zeki Saritoprak



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Cover design by Monica Bokinskie. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. This hilye, mounted on a wooden board, is unusual in having two side panels, similar to a Christian triptych. The central panel displays a textual description of the Prophet Muhammad. The side panels list the 99 names of God.

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This publication is dedicated to all, whether men or women, of whatever religion or of none, in all parts of the world, who are endeavoring to increase mutual understanding and to strengthen cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

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I am grateful to Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, who readily agreed to write the preface to this English edition of my book.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
CBC	<i>Collegetville Bible Commentary</i>
EI ²	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2^{ème} édition.</i>
EQ	<i>The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an</i>
JB	<i>The Jerusalem Bible</i>
MIDEO	<i>Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales</i>
NRSV	<i>The New Revised Standard Version (of the Bible)</i>
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PISAI	Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica
Q	Qur'an; quotations from the Qur'an are indicated in the following way: Q 1:7, indicates <i>sûra</i> (chapter) 1, verse 7.
TOB	<i>La Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible</i>

Foreword

Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald's *Praise the Name of the Lord: Meditations on the Names of God in the Qur'an and the Bible* invites readers to encounter God through Muslim and Christian sacred texts. Some believe that the Mystery is the same fire deep inside, like a volcano, and we'll discover that all religions are really One. Brother David Steindl-Rast holds this view. Father William Skudlarek, OSB, from his experience in Buddhist/Catholic monastic dialogue observes that there's much in common in the day-to-day contemplative practices for monks and nuns but we might be heading toward different "destinations" (i.e., "karma" and "heaven" are very different).

If I reflect on my years in monastic dialogue I wonder if we are closer to a shared insight when gently grasped by "not-knowing." Perhaps we just don't know "if we are all one" or "if we differ." Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald in this book gifts us with a way of praying together without any agenda that the "other" see and do it "our" way. This book is a method for individuals and groups to see "the other" from the inside. This promotes understanding and deep appreciation.

I met Archbishop Michael in Rome when he was working at the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. He not only

received our reports and facilitated us to engage in dialogue with other Vatican officers but also joined us at gatherings in Assisi, Chicago, Louisville, and other conferences. Once I lamented to him about statements from the Vatican, such as *Dominus Iesus*, which I felt were pushing back on insights gained at Vatican II. He deflected my concerns: “I’m working on a manuscript about the ninety-nine Names of God and some parallel passages from our Christian Bible.” He then went on to share that this sustained *lectio* was inspiring his own prayer, his preparation for various homilies, lectures, writings, and participation at interfaith meetings.

So, when I read this manuscript in 2016, I paused. I could imagine Archbishop Michael praying over the Names of God. He had preached this retreat to some of his confreres in Algeria, before the civil conflict that was to bring about the deaths of four of them in Tizi-Ouzou and the drama of the captivity and killing of the seven Trappist monks of Notre Dame de l’Atlas, Tibhirine. Could such meditations still be presented? Would they need to be changed? The same question would arise later, when Archbishop Michael was nuncio in Cairo during the Arab Spring. While I was safe and sound in the cozy cloister of Glencairn Abbey, Ireland, writing a book on sustained *lectio*, he was doing it, and doing *lectio* as a Catholic bishop in a Muslim culture. I was writing in my “English language only” strong suit while he was drilling down deeply into these ancient texts using his knowledge of Arabic and writing both in French and in English. He could, of course, be encouraged by the example of Christian de Chergé, the prior of the Trappists of Tibhirine, who even in the face of death maintained an openness to the spiritual message of Islam.

Even though the method Archbishop Michael uses is Ignatian and not my usual way of doing monastic *lectio*, I took a week for a retreat “in place” and did what he suggested in the book. He clustered the texts in eight themes: God the Creator; The Transcendent God; God with Us; The God of Goodness and Mercy; God, Lord and King; God the Guide; The God Who Is Generous and Faithful; God, Our Peace. He provided a reflection on Moses and the Burning Bush that gave me a taste. The God who reveals Himself to us using Q 20:8-14; 1:6; 20:24 echo’s the Christian Scripture’s Exodus 3:1-7, 9-14; Isaiah 1:3-18; and Luke 1:38, which cites the Christian story of Moses, Samuel, and Mary.

I selected the name of God used in the first chapter, “God the Creator.” I meditated on the eighteen passages from the Qur’an, the sixteen passages from the Old Testament, and the five passages from the New Testament. Therefore, I simply did *lectio* on the texts provided by Archbishop Michael’s book.

When I paused and reflected on the citations from the Qur’an, I heeded the admonition that reading these texts will demand an effort; it will require that time be set aside for the purpose. It could be said that, like Moses, the reader has to make a detour. Meditating on the Names of God also demands a certain degree of purification, for one is approaching a holy place; one is coming nearer to God. One has to accept to remain in the place, even if at times it seems rather like a desert. Shoes or sandals have to be taken off, as a sign of respect, but also as a sign of the desire to remain in the presence of the Lord since, barefoot, one is not really ready to leave (p. xxx).

We can recognize that the Bible and the Qur’an are both part of the heritage of humanity as we seek to live together in peace

and mutual understanding. We are well served to discover the Qur'an from within. I had never done a personal retreat using texts from the Qur'an and continued on with my own Christian Scriptures. In fact, this was the first time I had done a retreat on the theme of "my Creator God." There was a sweet harmony. My Catholic tradition is hinged on the name of creature claiming our Creator. Moral surges of courage and purpose cleansed my rusty soul. The prayer to that Creator God rose unbidden. The daily chanting of the psalms became brand-new, once again. Audaciously, it seems that while we have so many names for God maybe any and/or all of them lifts us in Prayer of Praise. Maybe the actual litany of all the names are God speaking to God while the creature, without shoes, kneels in adoration.

This book takes the reader steep and deep. When the United States invaded Iraq in 2004, I authored a book on Islam through Lantern Press. In my years as a catechist I felt we Catholics knew so little about Muslims and the tradition of Islam. Now, some years later, I feel that we have met devout Muslims and have some feel for Islam, including [the Holy] its Prophet Muhammad, but we have much work to do to "feel" from the inside our distinctive yet revealed experience of God.

Mary Margaret Funk, OSB
Our Lady of Grace
Beech Grove, Indiana

Introduction

The Most Excellent Names belong to God: use them to call on Him. (Q 7:180)¹

The best names belong to Him.

Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him. (Q 59:24)

These verses from the Qur'an can be compared with what is said in Ps 113 [112]:

Praise the Lord!

Praise, O servants of the Lord;

praise the name of the Lord.

Blessed be the name of the Lord

from this time on and forevermore.

From the rising of the sun to its setting

the name of the Lord is to be praised. (Ps 113 [112]:1-3)²

¹Quotations from the Qur'an, unless otherwise stated, will be made following the translation of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²Quotations from the Bible, unless otherwise stated, will be made according to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

The divine Names act at the same time as a *bridge* and an *invitation*. They act as a *bridge* in so far as they establish communication between God and human beings. God expresses Himself through His Names: through them we can go to Him.

These Names also constitute an *invitation*, first of all to praise: call on Him; celebrate His praises; praise the Name of the Lord. They also invite to imitation. Islamic tradition speaks of *al-takhalluq bi-akhlâq Allâh*, to clothe oneself with the habits of God, or with the divine attributes. The invitation is to contemplate the Names of God, so that if God is Just, we also should be just; if God is Merciful, then we too should show mercy; if God is Faithful, then faithfulness is our duty also. In the Gospel we find a similar invitation, or, rather, a command: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

It seems appropriate here to quote a Muslim author, Abdenour Bidar, though without necessarily agreeing with his fundamental thesis concerning the radical autonomy of the human person in relation to God.

Let us remember here that the God of the Qur’an has Himself precisely defined that which forms his own “flesh” through enumerating throughout the Qur’an a series of ninety-nine Names, each one more remarkable than the other. . . This is probably why the Qur’an in fact ceaselessly exhorts human beings to adopt an exclusive orientation and to meditate constantly and repeatedly on these Names, while on the contrary it repudiates anything which could turn them away from this contemplation: associating something with God, impiety, hypocrisy, unbelief, etc. The Qur’an is constantly directing the gaze of human beings towards these perfect qualities and infinite capacities because it wishes to let it be understood that human beings have been made in order

to appropriate them for themselves. The final aim of meditation on the divine Names is *to intensify their presence in ourselves*, to develop progressively, generation after generation, their activity, their strength and the fullness in ourselves.³

Christian readers may perhaps ask about the reason for the undertaking that lies at the basis of the present book, namely, to adopt as the point of departure for a series of meditations the texts of another religion. Muslim readers, likewise, may wonder how the texts of the Bible, whether of the Old Testament or of the New Testament, concern them. The idea behind this venture is to encourage dialogue with the persons among whom we are living. It is quite common now to speak of four kinds of inter-religious dialogue: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, the dialogue of formal exchanges, and the dialogue of religious experience. This last form of dialogue has been described in the following way: “[a dialogue] where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.”⁴ Here, in this book, there is obviously no direct encounter of persons belonging to different traditions, more precisely between Christians and Muslims, but only an

³ Abdennour Bidar, *L’islam sans soumission. Pour un existentialisme musulman* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008), pp. 158–59, emphasis in the original.

⁴ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991, no. 42; see Francesco Gioia, *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963–2005)* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), no. 966.

offering of texts that come from the sources of their respective spiritualities.

In this context I would like to recall something written by Father Jean-Muhammad Abd el-Jalil, a Muslim who became a Christian and subsequently a Franciscan friar: “Certainly one of the best ways of understanding a people is to meditate on the texts they use for prayer.”⁵ To pray by starting from the texts of another religion can therefore help us to acquire a better appreciation of that religion. Its riches can be discovered. It may be that what we discover is not essential for the practice of our own religion, but it is possible that we will find different echoes that can capture our attention and may nourish our prayer.

This is a venture that has been undertaken by a group of Christians living in Algeria, men and women who for the most part are members of different religious congregations. Having come to realize that constant reference to Islamic spirituality could help them to live their respective vocations in the midst of Muslims, they formed an association that they called *Ribât al-salâm* (the Bond of Peace). They would select a topic that each one was to investigate personally in the Qur’an and other Islamic sources, as well as in the Bible, and then they would come together, once or twice a year, to share their discoveries. The following are some of the topics they covered: “Do justice and walk humbly with your God”; “Living in an attitude of thanksgiving”; “Compassion—the language of the heart”; “Hospitality as a fruit of compassion.” Their example has greatly encouraged me to continue this re-

⁵Jean-Mohammed Abd El-Jalil, *Aspects intérieurs de l’Islam* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1949), p. 117.

reflection on the Beautiful Names of God according to the Islamic tradition and their meaning for Christians.

There is, nevertheless, a double pitfall to be avoided. On the one hand, care must be taken not to give a false interpretation to the meaning of the sacred books of other religions. An effort has been made here to avoid a Christian reading of the Qur'an that would try to eliminate all the differences. The texts are to be allowed to speak for themselves. At the same time, it is necessary to remain faithful to one's own tradition. That is why, in the meditations proposed here, the presentation of texts from the Qur'an is followed by texts from the Bible, both from the Old Testament, or First Testament, as it might be better termed, and from the New Testament. The hope is that the parallel presentation of these texts may touch both mind and heart.

Is it permissible to take inspiration from the texts of another religion? In answer to this question I would like to quote another text, this time taken from the charter of the Groupe de Recherche Islamo-Chrétien (GRIC), the Muslim-Christian Research Group, a body of French-speaking Christians and Muslims who have been meeting and studying together since 1977.

We do not think that the divine Word, the foundation of our faith, belongs exclusively to us, whether we be Christians or Muslims. Christian faith is based on the person of Jesus and the witness of the Apostles' faith as contained in the New Testament. But the historical phenomenon of Jesus of Nazareth, and the texts of the New Testament writings, are facts and documents available for investigation by all. Similarly Islamic faith is based on the Qur'an and the authentic tradition of the Prophet. But the Qur'anic text and the life of Muhammad b. Abdallah form part of the general history of the human race and belong to its spiritual heritage.

This is why on both sides, with regard to the historical facts that ground our faith and with regard to our scriptures, we accept “readings” other than our own.⁶

These “readings” may provide us with a different understanding of the same term, of the same divine Name, since the resonances may vary according to the creed of each one. Here we can learn from the wisdom of an Anglican bishop, Kenneth Cragg, who has written:

Words in prayer, within or beyond our faith-community, are never more than the opportunity of the soul, the voice of our intention. Truly we must care for them scrupulously. But it is we who give them their reality and they must be seen as spaces and not as prisons for our hearts. . . .

There is always the possibility that an agreement on terms, even with a difference with regard to their connotations, but with sincerity of heart, may grow and end up finally with a greater consensus.⁷

The consensus may lead to communion, a communion beyond words, in shared silence.

It is not the aim of this book to provide a complete study of the Names of God. For that the reader could consult Ghazâlî’s classical work on the subject or the book by Daniel Gimaret.⁸ It

⁶ Muslim-Christian Research Group, *The Challenge of the Scriptures: The Bible and the Qur’an* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 11–12.

⁷ Kenneth Cragg, *Alive to God: Muslim and Christian Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 21.

⁸ al-Ghazâlî, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God (al-maḡṣad al-asnâ fî sharḥi asmâ’ Allâh al-ḡusnâ)*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1992); Daniel Gimaret, *Les noms divins en*

may nevertheless be useful to say a few words about “this characteristic feature of Islamic religion, namely the eminent place which the divine Names occupy in it.”⁹

According to tradition, there are ninety-nine Names of God. A *ḥadīth* encourages their recitation:

To God belong the 99 Names, that is one hundred minus one, for He, the Unique (*al-witr*—literally “the odd”), loves to be designated by these Names, enumerated one by one; he who knows the 99 Names will enter Paradise.¹⁰

A rosary will often be used as a support for the recitation of these Names. The Muslim rosary, the *subḥa*, is made up of three times thirty-three grains, or often simply of thirty-three. Ninety-nine is obviously 100 minus 1, the one missing being the Supreme Name, or the Hidden Name, proof that the Names given to God in human language can never entirely encompass or exhaust the mystery of God. God will always remain “Greater,” well beyond that which we can say of Him.

The ninety-nine Names that Islam gives traditionally to God are drawn from the Qur’an, either directly or, after having been

Islam (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1988). See also EQ, s.v. “God and His Attributes”; Maurice Borrmans, “Les musulmans et les Beaux Noms d’Allāh,” *La Vie Spirituelle* (May–June 1988): pp. 349–61; Christian Chessel, “Les noms divins, porche d’entrée à la théologie musulmane,” *Se comprendre* 98, no. 1 (January 1993); Angelo Scarabel, *Preghiera sui Nomi più belli. I novantanove Nomi di Dio nella tradizione islamica* (Genoa: Marietti, 1996). Further details will be found in Zeki Saritoprak’s afterword to the present volume.

⁹Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, p. 7.

¹⁰Text quoted by L. Gardet, EI², s.v. “Al-Asma’ al-Husna”; see also EI², s.v. “Witr.”

formed from Qur'anic expressions, particularly from verbs. For example, the Qur'an says that God is endowed with knowledge; therefore He is *al-'alim*, the One who Knows. It should be noted that the faithful Muslim is not authorized to invent Names for God. When a popular Egyptian writer, Mustafa Mahmûd, a medical doctor who wrote spiritual books, spoke of God as an Architect, this raised quite a hullabaloo. This restriction puts a limit to the number of possible Names for God.

In fact, however, many more than ninety-nine Names can be derived from the Qur'an. Ghazâlî includes in his study a short chapter "on explaining that the names of God most high are not limited to ninety-nine so far as divine instruction is concerned."¹¹ Moreover, since several lists of ninety-nine Names are to be found, and since not all the Names coincide, many more than ninety-nine exist in reality.¹² One scholar has calculated that there could be over 130.¹³ The list used as a basis for the reflections presented here, reproduced in the appendix, was published in Arabic and French in the review of the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, *Etudes Arabes*.¹⁴ The list in Arabic is represented in the form of a lamp (cf. Q 24:35). It would appear to be the list of Walîd b. Muslim al-Dimashqî (d. 195/810), which is held to go back to Abû Hurayra, a companion

¹¹ Cf. al-Ghazâlî, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, pp. 167–69.

¹² A Shi'ite handbook contains a list of the Ninety-Nine Names, eleven of which are not found in the list that has formed the basis of my study; cf. *Know Your Islam*, 2nd ed. (Bombay: Anjuman-e-Himayatul Islam, 1970), pp. 23–26.

¹³ Cf. Zeki Saritoprak, "God and His Most Beautiful Names as Presented by the Sufi Orders," in *Kopru*, 1995, pp. 80–92 (in Turkish).

¹⁴ "Les 'Noms' divins," in *Etudes Arabes* 20, pp. 44–45.

of Muhammad, and is to be found in the collection of *ḥadīths* compiled by al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892).¹⁵

The list ends with the following prayer:

My God, indeed I am Your servant, the son of Your servant, the son of Your handmaid. My forelock is in Your hands: Your judgment concerning me is decisive and Your decree is just. I therefore beseech You, by each one of the Names that belongs to You, which You have chosen for Yourself, or which You have revealed in Your book, or which You have taught to one of Your creatures, or the usage of which You have reserved to Yourself according to the knowledge You have of Your own Mystery, to render the glorious Qur'an true nourishment for my heart and light for my vision; may it dispel in me all sadness and remove from me every worry and affliction. Amen!

It will not be possible to reflect on all the ninety-nine Names of God within the compass of this small book. I have selected some of them, grouping them according to the following plan of meditation.

1. The Creator who upholds His creation
2. The Transcendent God, God's inner being
3. The Immanent God, God-with-us
4. The God of Love and Pardon
5. The Almighty King
6. The God who guides
7. The Generous God
8. The God of Peace

¹⁵ Cf. Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, pp. 55–56.

This choice has been made keeping in mind the general flow of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. I am fully aware that some important Names of God, such as *al-ḥaqq* (Truth, Reality) and *al-ʿadl* (the Just One), have not been considered, or have been mentioned only in passing. Each meditation begins by presenting some of the Names of God as found in the Qurʾan and then continues by looking at similar themes in the Bible, both in the OT and the NT.¹⁶ In some cases this will lead to the discovery of different emphases and even of Names that do not occur in the Qurʾan, such as “Shepherd.” At times the Names in the Qurʾan are considered in a somewhat isolated fashion, making abstraction of their context, which may contain statements that go against Christian beliefs. I hope that this will be excused. In fact, we act in a similar way with regard to the Psalms and other books of the OT when we leave out certain verses that clash with our Christian sensitivity.

One final observation. These texts are proposed not as an object of study but in order to lead to meditation and prayer.¹⁷ When quoting from the Qurʾan, the Arabic is often given in transcription in a parallel column. This is so that the savor of the original language may be better appreciated. A restricted use will be made of learned considerations, based on philology or Arabic grammar, when these can help to illuminate the meaning of a particular text.

¹⁶On the Names of God in the Bible, see *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD), s.vv. “Names of God in the OT,” “God, in the OT,” and “God, in the NT.”

¹⁷The meditations that form the eight chapters of the book have already been proposed to groups of Christians in North Africa, in Jerusalem, and in Egypt. They have been reworked for this book. Some parts of this introduction and of the first two chapters have appeared in my article “The Most Beautiful Names of God: Their Meaning for a Christian,” *Islamochristiana* 35 (2009) : pp. 15–30.

Let me immediately add a remark of this kind. One finds in the Qur'an that two Names are constantly linked together: *wa-a^clamû anna Llâha ghaniyy^{um} hamîd*, "Remember that God is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise" (Q 2:267 and *passim*). The term *ghani*, which in common parlance means "rich," is here correctly translated "self-sufficient." God is not in need of anything; He does not even need our praise. This may recall for Catholics the fourth common preface for the Eucharist in which we find these words: "You have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in your grace." If we meditate on the Names of God, it is not in order to give pleasure to God, but because God has something to give us. The words of the *Fâtîḥa* come to mind:

It is You we worship;
It is You we ask for help.
(Q 1:5)

iyyâ-ka na^cbudu
wa-iyyâ-ka nasta^cîn

And now, to end this introduction, an initial meditation on the God who reveals Himself to us.

God—there is no god but Him—the most excellent names belong to Him.

Has the story of Moses come to you [Prophet]? He saw a fire and said to his people, "Stay here, I can see a fire. Maybe I can bring you a flaming brand from it or find some guidance there." When he came to the fire, he was called: "Moses! I am your Lord. Take off your shoes: you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwa."¹⁸

¹⁸ Abdel Haleem gives no explanation for this name. Another translator of the Qur'an, Yusuf Ali, notes: "This was the valley just below Mount Sinai,

I have chosen you, so listen to what is being revealed. I am God; there is no god but Me and keep up the prayer so that you remember me. (Q 20:8-14)

Some remarks on this text. First of all we see that Moses is driven by his curiosity—and curiosity, according to popular wisdom, is the beginning of knowledge. He wants to find out the nature of this fire. He accepts to be taken out of his way, to go out of himself. He thinks of his family, for whom he might be able to bring a flaming brand and so light a fire that could warm them in the desert. He may also find the right direction (*hudâ*): in the material sense, this might mean being told which way to go to find water and a good camping place, but there is also a spiritual sense, namely, to go in the right direction, along the straight path, as indicated in the *Fâtiḥa*:

Guide us to the straight path.
(Q 1:6)

| *ihdinâ l-ṣirâṭ al-mustaqîm*

Having reached the fire, Moses receives a personal invitation. He is addressed by his own name. The One who is speaking to him establishes with him a personal relationship: “I am *your* Lord.”

This meeting entails purification, for Moses finds himself in a sacred place. He also discovers that he has been chosen by God for a mission that will soon be entrusted to him (cf. Q 20:24),

where subsequently he [Moses] was to receive the Law. In the parallel mystic meaning, we are selected by trials in this humble life, whose valley is just as sacred and receives God’s glory just as the heights of the Mount (*Tur*) if we but have the insight to perceive it,” *The Holy Qur’an* (Beirut: Dar al Arabia, 1968), p. 792, n. 2544. It is possible that *Tuwa* might come from the Syriac *tur/tura*, “the mountain”; cf. EQ, s.v. “*Tuwâ*.”

but, before speaking, he must listen, and he must be careful to give worship exclusively to the one God.

Now let us consider the parallel text in the Bible.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said: "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said: "Here I am." Then he said: "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I know their sufferings. . . . So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exod 3:1-7, 9-14)

We find here, as in the Qur'anic text, the same curiosity on the part of Moses that leads him to make a detour; the invitation that is

addressed to him; the purification that is required. Yet there are differences also: the event takes place at the mountain of God; the fire is not consumed; Moses answers God, saying “Here I am,” which could remind us of the young Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 1:3-18), and also perhaps of Mary who, at the time of the Annunciation, pronounced her *fiat* to God’s messenger, Gabriel (cf. Luke 1:38). God reveals Himself as the God who intervenes in history: in the past (he is God of the ancestors), in the present (he has seen the misery of His people), and in the future (he entrusts Moses with a mission). Moses is to accomplish this mission in the strength of the Lord, the strength of His Name: “I will be what I will be.”

From these texts it is possible to draw some guidance that may help in the reading of the meditations that follow. Reading these texts will demand an effort; it will require that time be set aside for this purpose. It could be said that, like Moses, the reader has to make a detour. Meditating on the Names of God also demands a certain degree of purification, for one is approaching a holy place; one is coming nearer to God. One has to accept to remain in this place, even if at times it may seem rather like a desert. Shoes or sandals have to be taken off, as a sign of respect, but also as a sign of the desire to remain in the presence of the Lord, since, barefoot, one is not really ready to leave.

It is possible that, in the course of these meditations, God will address a personal invitation to the reader. In this case, one should be attentive to what the Lord is asking, to the mission that he is entrusting, a mission that goes beyond the person of the individual to those to whom he or she is being sent. It is by God’s favor and grace that this mission is entrusted, and it is through the grace of God that it will be accomplished. The mystery of the burning bush includes the fire that does not consume, sym-

bolizing energy that is never spent—the love of God. If we trust in our own energy, in our own limited human strength, we shall soon be exhausted, burnt out. We are called to empty ourselves in order to leave room for divine energy, the source of all goodness and well-being.

God the Creator

We can state quite roundly that for us everything starts with creation, or rather with the Creator God. We are invited to place ourselves before this God with thanksgiving in our hearts for all that He has done, and is doing, for us. At the same time we can be aware of a possible twofold reaction. On the one hand, we become conscious of our own weakness, of the fact that we are not the masters of our own existence. We realize that we are radically dependent on God. On the other hand, we can appreciate our own dignity, which is founded on the will of God to create us and on the role that he has entrusted to us in the midst of Creation.

1. *The Teaching of the Qur'an*

Among the ninety-nine Names of God there are several that refer to the Creator. We find three of them in one single passage:

He is God: the Creator (*al-khâliq*), the Originator (*al-bâri'*), the Shaper (*al-muṣawwir*). (Q 59:24)

2 Praise the Name of the Lord

The last-mentioned Name indicates one who gives a shape, an image (*ṣûra*) to something.¹

In *al-baqara*, the second *sûra*, there is found another Name:

He is the Originator (*badî'*) of the heavens and the earth.

(Q 2:117)

The verb used would suggest the production of something that is new, a new beginning (it may be remembered that the term *bid'at* is used by Muslim jurists to refer to an innovation, something regarded as heretical).

This passage continues by giving an explanation of the way God proceeds:

And when He decrees something, He says only "Be," and it is.

(Q 2:117)

This verb is very close in form to another, *bada'a*, which means "to begin." In one text in the Qur'an this verb is used within the context of creation:

¹ See Daniel Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam*, pp. 279–311. With regard to these three Names found in Q 59:24, the great theologian al-Ghazâlî (d. 505/1111) says that they are not synonymous, but rather correspond to three stages in the process of creation: God first conceives the project of creation, He is *al-khâliq*; next He brings into being as *al-bârî'*; and finally He gives shape to the new being as *al-muṣawwir* (cf. al-Ghazâlî, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, pp. 68–72; see also Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, p. 282). Roger Arnaldez, however, remarks that it is useless to look for two different words in European languages to represent *khâliq* and *bârî'*, which are considered as synonyms. He notes that *al-khâliq*, with the article, is applied only to God; cf. EI2, s.v. "Khalk." Present in the Qur'an there is also the intensive form *al-khallâq* (Q 1:86; 36:81), which would signify that God never ceases to create. See also EQ, s.v. "God and His Attributes," pp. 326–27.

It is He who created [you] in the first place (*yabda'u*), and He will do so again, so that He may justly reward those who believe and who do good deeds. (Q 10:4)

We see from this text that the Creator God is also Judge. He has created, but He can also repeat this act of creation or, in other words, he can make creation return to Him for judgment, just as the desert, which may seem dead, can come to life once rain has fallen. In fact, in the Qur'an creation is seen as a sign of the power of God, who is able to bring human beings to life again at the end of time so that they may undergo judgment.

I would like to mention here a Name that is not found in al-Tirmidhî's list, *al-fâṭir*, "the Creator,"² but that occurs in the Qur'an, precisely in *sûrat al-fâṭir*, Q 35:

Praise be to God, Creator (*fâṭir*) of the heavens and earth. . . .
He adds to creation as He will. (Q 35:1)

It would seem that the root FṬR means "separate," thus suggesting here that creation is carried out by separating, or distinguishing, the heavens from the earth. This Name *al-fâṭir* occurs in another place, this time in connection with judgment:

Say, "God! Creator (*fâṭir*) of the heavens and earth! Knower of all that is hidden and all that is open, You will judge between your servants regarding their differences." (Q 39:46)

Just as in creation the different elements are separated one from the other, so also judgment will take the form of separation between the just and the wicked.

² Cf. Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, pp. 290–91. Al-Ghazâlî does not discuss this Name.

There are two things that become apparent from these texts: the first is that in creating God is absolutely free, and second, that creation remains a mystery. This is very different from the theory of emanation according to which all things develop from God by necessity, a theory prominent in Gnostic thought and found in the writings of some Muslim philosophers.

The question can, in fact, be asked: why has God created, He who is *al-qayyûm*, the Self-Subsistent, *al-ghanî*, the Rich, the one who has no need of anything? Does not the answer to this question belong to *al-ghayb*, that which is hidden, the Mystery? It is worth underlining this, since Islam is often presented as the rational religion par excellence, yet here we come face to face with a mystery that is at the very foundation of our existence.

This mystery brings forth a cry of astonishment and arouses an attitude of thanksgiving toward the Creator:

Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man
from a clinging form. (Q 96:1-2)³

This forms part of the initial message of Islam. These verses have been recognized both by traditional Islamic scholars and by Orientalists as belonging to the first passage of the Qur'an considered chronologically. The verses arouse grateful recognition on the part of human beings:

People, remember God's grace towards you. Is there any creator
(*khâliq*) other than God to give you sustenance from the heavens

³Yusuf Ali translates: "Proclaim! (or Read!) In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher who created—Created man out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood."

and earth? There is no God but Him. How can you be so deluded?
(Q 35:3)

To wish not to recognize the Creator, to refuse one's dependence on Him, constitutes *kuf'r*, which is the cardinal sin of ingratitude and disbelief. From the purely human point of view, the Qur'an considers such a position to be pure delusion, and indeed a great stupidity.

God is the only Creator, and He is absolutely free when He acts. He is, however, serious in His creation:

Did you think We had created you in vain, and that you would not be brought back to Us? (Q 23:115)

God has created human beings so that they will return to Him, and He has done this with care. As we have seen already, He is *al-khâliq* and *al-muṣawwir*, terms that signify that God has formed humans out of pre-existing matter.

He created mankind out of dried clay, like pottery. (Q 55:14)

Here is another quotation from Abdennour Bidar:

In the Twelfth Century of the Christian era, the theologian Fakhr Din Razi [*sic*] explains that if Allah is called the Creator (*Al-Khâliq*), it is because the Arabic word *khâliq* means both producing, bringing into being (*ijâd*) and determination (*taqdîr*). In other words God is at the same time—and through the very same act—"The One who brings something into existence" and "the One who determines the character of that thing." He is the One who creates something giving it immediately its importance and its place in the universe—for instance in creating a bird, God gives it, at one and the same time, life and its place within nature,

6 Praise the Name of the Lord

as if God were saying to it at the very moment He created it: “You will be the one within my Creation who sings, who flies, and who symbolizes the lightness of the human mind whose ideas rise to the heavens.”⁴

We find several times in the Qur’an a meditation on the wonderful creation of the human being. Here is a well-known passage:

We created man from an essence of clay, then We placed him as a drop of fluid in a safe place, then We made that drop into a clinging form, and We made that form into a lump of flesh, and We made that lump into bones, and We clothed those bones with flesh, and later We made him into other forms—glory be to God, the best of creators! *aḥsanu l-khâliqîn*. (Q 23:12-14)

Some clarifications regarding the translation of this text. The “We” refers, of course, to God, for whom the plural of majesty is used. The term for “man” is *al-insân*, which means the human person in general, and not just the male. On the phrase “other forms” Abdel Haleem gives the following note: “(Fakhr al-Din) Razi quotes Ibn Abbas (a companion of Muhammad) to explain ‘other forms’ as referring to all the various stages of infancy, childhood, and maturity—cf. 22:5; 40:67.”⁵

Muslim theologians have discussed at length whether it is possible for there to be other creators besides God, usually to

⁴ Abdennour Bidar, *L’islam sans soumission. Pour un existentialisme musulman* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008), pp. 140–41.

⁵ The words translated “other forms” are in fact in the singular, *khalq^m âkhar*. Yusuf Ali translates “another creature” and adds the following commentary: “From a mere animal, we now consider man as man . . . human life, with all its capacities and responsibilities.”

dismiss this possibility. We could say that today, with the progress in biotechnology through which human beings claim to be themselves creators, this verse takes on added meaning.

It is possible also to meditate on the creation of human beings as they are, with all their weaknesses and yet also their wonderful calling:

How can you ignore God when you were lifeless and He gave you life . . . ? [Prophet], when your Lord told the angels, "I am putting a successor (*khalīfat^{an}*) on earth," they said, "How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate your praise and proclaim your holiness?" but He said, "I know things you do not." (Q 2:28, 30)

In the midst of creation the human person is placed as the representative of God, His *khalīfa*.⁶ Human beings therefore have duties toward this creation. Yet, God does not leave everything to His representative. He Himself sustains His creation. He is the Provider, *al-razzâq* (Q 51:58). The context in which this Name is found is worth noting:

I created jinn and mankind only to worship Me: I want no provision (*rizq*) from them, nor do I want them to feed Me. (Q 5:56-57)

God expects from His creatures nothing other than their adoration. It is He who gives the *rizq*, everything that is necessary for

⁶On the creation of the human being, see EQ, s.v. "God and His Attributes," pp. 327–28. According to Gerhard Böwering, the author of this article, Adam is the representative on the earth not of God but of the angels, since he has to do what the angels cannot do, which is to name the different creatures (cf. Q 2:31-32).

life on earth.⁷ God, however, encourages human beings to look beyond this life, for the Qur'an suggests that there are other good things in store:

Do not gaze longingly at what We have given some of them to enjoy, the finery of this present life: We test them through this, but the provision (*rizq*) of your Lord is better and more lasting. (Q 20:131)

To sum up, it can be said that God is the Creator, and as Creator He gives special attention to human beings. He sustains life, both in this world and in the world to come.

2. *The OT*⁸

The Names of God according to the Islamic tradition are often formed from verbs found in the text of the Qur'an. The same procedure could be followed when reading the first account of creation given in Genesis (Gen 1:1–2:4).

“In the *beginning* when God created” (1:1)—so God can be called the Originator.

“Then God *said*, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (1:3).

This reminds us of the *kun fa-yakûn* of the Qur'anic text. God has only to say “Be,” and the thing exists. This way of creating, through the bare word, is often repeated in this passage from Genesis. The passage continues:

“And God saw that the light was good; and God *separated* the light from the darkness” (1:4). Further on we find:

⁷ Cf. EI2, s.v. “Rizk.”

⁸ On the Names for God as creator in the OT, see ABD, s.v. “Creator.”

“And God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it *separate* the waters from the waters’” (1:6). So, in creating, God operates through separation; He is the Separator (*al-fâṭir*).

“God *called* the dome Sky” (1:8)—He gives names to things, thus fixing their nature, and at the same time manifesting His own control over things. Yet He shares this prerogative with the human being He has created (cf. 2:19-20).

“God *set* (the lights) in the dome of the sky” (1:17; see also Ps 8:3: “the moon and the stars that you have *established*”).

“God *blessed* (the living creatures)” (1:22)—which means that He gave them life.

At the end of this account special attention is given to the creation of humankind. There is first of all a kind of deliberation:

God said: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” (1:26)

Then God decides that this special creature will have domination over all the others. And finally:

So God *created* humankind in his image. (1:27)

The special care that God took in creating humankind is underlined in the second account of creation:

Then the Lord God *formed* man from the dust of the ground,⁹ and *breathed* into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (2:7)

⁹The *Cambridge Annotated Study Bible* provides a note here giving an alternative translation that brings out the play on words in Hebrew: “formed a man (Heb. *adam*) of dust from the ground (Heb. *adamah*).”

This special interest that God takes in the human being arouses admiration and praise, which are often expressed in the Psalms. Here is just one example, Psalm 8, which begins and ends with the following refrain:

O Lord, our Sovereign,
How majestic is your name in all the earth!

The psalmist also exclaims:

What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them? (Ps 8:1, 4)

The Psalms, in fact, contain numerous references to God as Creator, and through all the verbs of action that are used it is possible to gain an idea of the commitment of God in Creating. Here is an example:

Bless the Lord, O my soul . . .
You *stretch out* the heavens like a tent.
You *set* the beams of your chambers on the waters . . .
You *set* the earth on its foundations . . .
You *cover* it with the deep as with a garment. (Ps 104 [103]:1-6)

The same psalm praises God who sustains His creation:

These all look to you to give them their food in due season;
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
When you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
(Ps 104 [103]:27-28)

In chapter 16 of the book of Exodus we find a portrait of the God who nourishes His people. Responding to the prayer of Moses, God gives the manna. We could note here:

- that each one must gather according to the need felt; there is no absolute uniformity in the amount allowed (it would seem to me that this is often the case when God distributes His gifts);
- that one needs to have confidence in the Lord, so one should not try to accumulate for future needs.

The reflection of a parish priest, quoted by Cardinal Etchegaray, seems apposite here: “In the past, when the people killed a pig, they used always to bring me some pieces of meat. Now that they have the freezer, they keep the lot for themselves.”¹⁰

The OT insists on the fact that God is sole Creator. So the prophet Isaiah declares:

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer,
who formed you in the womb:
I am the Lord, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who by myself spread out the earth. (Isa 44:24; cf. 45:18)

The prophet Jeremiah, for his part, underlines the freedom of God. From the house of the potter he proclaims:

Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as the potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. (Jer 18:6; cf. Isa 64:7)

This recalls the text of the Qur’an referred to above:

He created mankind out of dried clay. (Q 55:14)

¹⁰ Roger Etchegaray, *Javance comme un âne: petits clins d’oeil au Ciel et à la terre* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

Such texts suggest a new Name for God, the Potter.¹¹ Islamic tradition has not adopted this Name, but it is an image that Paul takes up in his letter to the Romans (cf. Rom 9:20-21).

3. *The NT*¹²

We have thus arrived at the NT, where, as a matter of fact, we find little about creation. This is perhaps because this belief went unchallenged. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans:

Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (Rom 1:20)

In his teaching, Jesus puts the accent more on divine providence:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the fields, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? (Matt 6:26-30)

We have seen how God, in his providence, nourished his people by giving them the manna. Following on the passage concerning the manna in Exodus, one could read the discourse of Jesus on the Bread of Life in the Gospel of John, chapter 6. This can be left to the personal initiative of the reader. Here I would like to consider

¹¹ Peter F. Ellis gives a brief explanation of this Name in his commentary on Jeremiah 18:1-12, in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (CBC) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989), p. 464.

¹² On the Names of God as Creator in the NT, see ABD, s.v. "Creator."

what is said about creation at the beginning of the Gospel of John. According to Christian understanding, creation is attributed to the Word of God, as the prologue to this gospel attests:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1:1, 3)

The Word is “at the beginning” not only because of being eternal,¹³ existing prior to creation, but also on account of being responsible for the existence of creation. Now since the Word has become flesh, Christian meditation places Jesus at the center of creation, as being at one and the same time its Creator and its final goal. God does not create haphazardly, but according to a definite plan. Here, therefore, by way of conclusion to this meditation, is a text about Jesus from Paul’s letter to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col 1:15-20)

It is through Christ and in Christ that creation enjoys coherence.

¹³ The Word is *azali*, (pre)-eternal. The Arabic language makes, in fact, a distinction between *azal*, eternity without any beginning, and *abad*, eternity without end. One of the Names of God given in the Shi’ite handbook mentioned in the Introduction is *al-azali*; cf. *Know Your Islam*, 2nd ed. (Bombay: Anjuman-e-Himayatul Islam, 1970), pp. 24.

What conclusion can be drawn from these texts? We should let ourselves be filled with gratitude, for the gift of life, for our own existence, for the whole of creation that surrounds us and of which we form part. If our sensitivity to the unity of creation grows, then we shall be more inclined to a feeling of confidence and to a desire to give thanks to God in whose hands we are.