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Islam is a monotheistic religion, where belief in the divine involves belief in the existence of one God, or Allah (literally ‘the God’ in Arabic). The principal source that informs Islamic understanding of God is the Qur’an, followed by the collection of the hadith: reports of the sayings or actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. In many cases, the hadith provide further elaboration on matters stated in Qur’anic verses, including those that mention God. In addition to what one finds in these two sources, the concept of God in Islam has been thoroughly discussed and debated in the works of many Muslim theologians and philosophers. In this chapter, I will begin by outlining the concept of God as it appears (primarily) in the Qur’an and hadith. After that, I will comment on whether the concept of God that emerges from a reading of the Qur’an and hadith mirrors, or falls in close proximity to, the dominant conception of God discussed by contemporary philosophers of religion. Next, I will provide a summary account of some important discussions and debates among classical Muslim thinkers about a number of divine attributes, such as God’s power, oneness, and knowledge. In the penultimate section of this chapter, I will touch on the Islamic understanding of God’s transcendence, as discussed by both classical and contemporary Muslim thinkers; I will argue, using the divine attribute of transcendence as an example, that how we understand the concept of God will have important implications when it comes to religious practice. In this chapter’s concluding section, I will end with a few brief remarks about the direction in which Muslim philosophers must take their thinking about the concept of God, if commitment to Islamic faith is to be regarded as reasonable.

God in the Qur’an and Hadith

In this section, I will discuss some of the prominent attributes of God that are mentioned in the Qur’an and hadith. As we will see, it is not at all clear that the picture of God that emerges from reading these sources warrants putting the Islamic religion under the rubric of what William Rowe (1984: 95) calls ‘standard theism’. Standard theism, as Rowe characterizes it, is any view that holds or entails that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good being. John Bishop (1998: 74) calls such a concept of God the ‘omniGod’, referring, more specifically, to the concept of a ‘unique omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, supernatural person who is creator and sustainer of all else that exists’. The majority of the discussion and literature in contemporary philosophy of religion focuses on the coherence and plausibility of standard
(omniGod) theism.¹ It is not clear, however, whether the Islamic concept of God, as it emerges from reading the Qur’an and hadith, is best described by the label of standard theism. There are two reasons for this. First, it is questionable whether the descriptions of God’s power, knowledge, and goodness, as stated in these texts, entail that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent. Second, although these are the three main attributes that are often used by philosophers of religion in their definitions of theism, they are not among the divine attributes that the Qur’an and hadith emphasize, as I will now explain.

The most frequently recurring phrase in the Qur’an is known by the Arabic noun basmallah (or bismillah), which states: ‘In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful’. The basmallah appears at the start of each of the suras (chapters) of the Qur’an, with the sole exception of the ninth sura.² In it are found two names of God, Al-Rahman and Al-Raheem, which are part of the collection of divine names often referred to as the ‘99 Names of God’ – the names of God that are found in Qur’an and the hadith. Both Al-Rahman and Al-Raheem derive from the word rahmah, which refers to mercy, but can also be used to mean love, kindness, and compassion. The Qur’an states that God has prescribed mercy for Himself (6:12; 6:34) and that it embraces all things (7:156). A hadith of the Prophet states that God’s mercy outstrips His wrath (Sahih Muslim no. 7146, Kitab al-Tawbah). Indeed, all of the mercy that exists in the world is said to originate from the very small portion given to it by God, as stated in the following hadith:

God made mercy (into) one-hundred parts. He held back ninety-nine parts, and sent down one part to earth. It is from that part that creatures show mercy to each other, such that a mare will lift her hoof over her foal, fearing that she might harm him.

(Sahih al-Bukhari no. 6066, Kitab al-Adab)

In addition to God’s mercy, the Qur’an and hadith put a lot of emphasis on God as Ghafur – the forgiver of sins. Indeed, in about seventy different verses, the Qur’an links God’s forgiveness with His mercy (e.g. 2:173, 2:182, 2:192, 2:199, 2:218, 2:226, 2:286 in the second sura of the Qur’an alone). According to the Qur’an, God forgives all sins, except shirk – the sin of associating something with Him in worship (4:116, 85:14).³ God is always ready to forgive human transgressions, so much so that one should never despair of the mercy of God (Qur’an 39:53).

Another divine attribute that is mentioned several times in the Qur’an is God’s oneness, which is stressed in two ways; God is (indivisibly) one (ahad) and there is no deity other than God. Qur’an 2:163 puts it this way: ‘And your god is one God. There is no god but He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful’. The Qur’an is clear that, in describing God as ahad, there is no room for multiplicity within the Godhead, as found in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, that doctrine is explicitly repudiated in several verses (e.g. 4:171, 112:3). In dozens of other verses, the Qur’an also makes clear that, other than God, no other deity exists (e.g. 2:255, 3:2, 3:6, 3:18, 3:62 and many other verses).

God is also described in the Qur’an many times as Al-Khaliq – the Creator of all that exists (6:102), of the heavens and the earth (14:10). For God, the creation of anything is said to be simply a matter of divine fiat: ‘When He decrees a matter, He only says to it “Be”, and it is’ (3:47). Conceptually connected to the attribute of God as Creator is another divine attribute – God as the only object worthy of our worship. Consider, for instance, Qur’an 2:21: ‘O mankind, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, that you may become righteous’. God did not create this creation aimlessly (3:191). The only reason for our creation, according to the Qur’an, is to worship God (51:56). The Qur’an puts great emphasis on God’s attribute of being our Creator as contributing to His being worthy of our worship, e.g. ‘And why should I not worship He who created me and to whom you will be returned?’ (36:22). False gods and

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¹ Islamic conceptions of divinity

² "The Gracious," from Al-Rahman (The Beneficent), from Al-Rahim (The Merciful)

³ "The Merciful," from Al-Raheem (The Compassionate)

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idols all have in common the fact that they did not create any part of this creation. The Qur’an says, for example, ‘Do not prostrate to the sun or the moon, but prostrate to God, who created them’ (41:37). It narrates the story of Abraham’s argument with idol worshippers, who would devote themselves to idols that were made with their own hands, idols that did not speak, benefit, or harm anyone (21:51–67). In a similar vein, it points out the folly of the people of Moses, who worshipped a calf that they fashioned with their own hands, even though the calf could neither speak nor guide them (7:148). The shared inability among false gods and idols to create any part of God’s creation is explicitly stated in Qur’an 22:73: ‘Those you invoke besides God will never create [as much as] a fly, even if they gathered together for that purpose’.

God is also Al-Adl, The Just; the Qur’an states that He will judge every soul in a just manner: ‘And We place the scales of justice for the Day of Resurrection, so no soul will be treated unjustly at all. And if there is [even] the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it forth. And sufficient are We as accountant’ (Qur’an 21:47). The criterion for God’s judgment is the truth: ‘And God judges with truth, while those they invoke besides Him judge not with anything’ (40:20).

One more prominent divine attribute that I will mention here is the Islamic view of God as Al-Hadi, The Guide. In the most frequently repeated sura in Islamic prayer, Al-Fatiha, Muslims pray to God to ‘guide [them] to the straight path’ (Qur’an 1:6). The Qur’an frequently notes that God ‘guides whom He wills’ and ‘leads astray whom He wills’ (e.g. 2:142; 2:213; 4:88; 6:39 among several other verses). The collection of Qur’anic verses and relevant ahadith that discuss God’s guidance are not clear about how much of a role, exactly, human freedom plays in people being on the straight path.4

In sum, the core Islamic understanding of God that emerges from a reading of the Qur’an and ahadith, with a focus on the prominent divine attributes, is this: There is one God, the Creator of the universe, Gracious, Compassionate, Just, the source of guidance and the object of our worship.

The God of Islam and the God of the philosophers

In sketching out the core Islamic understanding of God in the previous section, I said nothing about the three main attributes that make up the concept of God as understood by most philosophers of religion – the ‘omniGod’ of standard theism; these attributes are omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. This is because these terms, or their respective synonyms, do not appear in the sacred texts of Islam. To be sure, these texts do mention God’s power, His knowledge, and His goodness, but whether these attributes should be given the ‘omni’ prefix is controversial.

Let’s begin by considering God’s power. The Qur’an describes God as Al-Qadeer, which is often translated as ‘The Omnipotent’. The key verse, repeated several times in the Qur’anic text, used to justify attributing omnipotence to God, states that He has ‘power over all things’ (e.g. 2:20, 2:106, 2:109; 2:148, 2:259; 2:284 in the second sura alone). It is far from clear, however, that this entails divine omnipotence, if by ‘omnipotence’ one means the power to do anything, or even anything that is logically possible.5 While God’s power may extend to all things, there is nothing in the Qur’an to suggest that His power is unlimited or devoid of any kinds of constraints.

God is also known in the Qur’an as Al-Aleem (The All Knowing). As with those verses that discuss God’s power, the Qur’an contains verses that refer to God as ‘knowing of all things’ (e.g. 2:29). Again, it is not clear whether this entails that God knows everything, especially in light of other verses that suggest a future increase in God’s knowledge. Qur’an 47:31, for example, states: ‘And surely, We will try you until we know those who strive among you, and the patient, and
We will test your affairs. Now, if God knows everything but it is also the case that there is some future knowledge that God will eventually acquire, then this results in an inconsistency, unless, of course, divine omniscience is carefully qualified.

And what of omnibenevolence? Although the Qur'an refers to God as Al-Rahman (The Gracious) and Al-Raheem (The Merciful), as mentioned above, along with other attributes like Al-Barr (The Beneficent), Al-Afiw (The Pardoner) (52:28, 4:99), there is nothing in the Qur'an stating that God is omnibenevolent. Indeed, there are certain verses that suggest God, as described in the Qur'an, is not omnibenevolent. To cite just one difficulty facing those who would insist otherwise, consider those verses stating that God does not love those who are unfaithful; more specifically, just to give a few examples, the Qur'an states that God does not love the unbelievers (2:276, 3:32, 30:45), the wrong-doers (3:57, 3:140, 42:40) or the proud and boasting (31:18, 57:23, 4:36, 16:23).

In pointing all of this out, I am not claiming that standard theism, or the idea of an ‘omni-God’, is necessarily incompatible with any hermeneutic of the Qur'an and ahadith. Rather, my more modest claim here is simply this: It is an arguable point whether God, as described in the Qur'an and ahadith, is an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent being.

### Divine power, oneness, knowledge, creation and human freedom

One of the earliest controversies in Islamic thought involved Muslim thinkers debating the implications of God’s power, oneness, knowledge and His attribute as creator, specifically in relation to whether these attributes of God left any room for human freedom. In a creedal statement attributed to Ahmed ibn Hanbal (780–855), one of the early famous Muslim jurists and theologians, we read the following:

> Man’s destiny is from God, with its good and evil, its paucity and abundance, its outward and inward, its sweet and bitter, its liked and disliked, its good and bad, its first and last [that is, every aspect of human life]. It is a decree that He has ordained, a destiny that He has determined for men. No one ever will go beyond the will of God (may He be glorified), nor overstep His decree. Rather, all will attain the destiny for which He has created them, applying themselves to the deeds which He has determined for them in His justice (may our Lord be glorified) …

(Ibn Hanbal, Tabaqat al-Hanabilah, in Cragg and Speight 1980: 120)

Ibn Hanbal further states that Satan and others who disobey God were created for that disobedience. Similarly, God created those who are obedient to Him for that obedience.

This sort of theological determinism is arrived at by proffering a multi-faceted *reductio ad absurdum* of the alternative position of free will. Ibn Hanbal states,

> Whoever asserts that God willed good and obedience for his people who disobeyed him, but that they willed for themselves evil and disobedience, and so did according to their own will, asserts that the will of man is stronger than the will of God (may He be glorified and exalted). And what greater lie could be forged against God (may He be glorified) than this?

(Ibid.)

The idea here seems to be that humans have the capacity to frustrate the divine will if they possess free will; if God wills good only and it is humans who will evil and disobedience, then the possibility of the divine will being frustrated must exist. Such a possibility, according to Ibn
Hanbal, is incompatible with the Islamic concept of God. Another element of Ibn Hanbal’s *reductio* of the free will position is that it entails polytheism, which is inconsistent with Islamic monotheism. To illustrate this point, Ibn Hanbal gives the example of a child born out of an adulterous relation. If it was *not* God’s will that such a child be born, that it was born because of the free will exercised by those involved, then that must mean ‘there is another creator with God. This is plainly association of another with God in his deity.’

This particular criticism of Ibn Hanbal’s rests on construing human actions resulting from free will as acts of ‘creation’. If there are some human actions that God did not create, then we must have ‘created’ them. The problematic implications of this are twofold, for Ibn Hanbal: (1) there are some things (i.e., events) in God’s universe that He did not create, which does not appear to be congruent with the Islamic understanding of God having created all of that which is on earth (see, e.g., Qur’an 2:29); (2) asserting that humans ‘create’ at least some of their actions entails that there are ‘creators’ other than God, which, in turn, results in the cardinal sin of *shirk.*

Ibn Hanbal goes as far as comparing this position to the metaphysical dualism found in Zoroastrianism. Now, Ibn Hanbal’s view here does seem somewhat strange, at least initially. If human beings ‘create’ events by exercising their free will, how does that necessarily elevate them or put them in close proximity to the Divine Rank? If human beings and God both have a similar quality, namely the quality of being able to create events, this does not necessarily mean, of course, that human beings are God or god-like. While this is true, Ibn Hanbal seems to think that *certain* attributes of God are *His alone,* such as being eternal, self-sufficient, worthy of worship, etc. This particular point is accepted unanimously by Muslims and indeed most theists in other religious traditions. What Ibn Hanbal seems to think is that God’s attribute of Creator is also *solely* His; that to suggest human beings ‘created’ anything (that God did not) would compromise this attribute and consequently result in *shirk.* This cardinal sin does not just arise from a particular ontological view that postulates multiple deities. It also includes attributing divine-like qualities to things other than God.

One final aspect of Ibn Hanbal’s *reductio* involves appealing to God’s (fore-)*knowledge* and the Islamic doctrine of *qadar* (divine decree or predestination); the latter is thought to be a consequence of the former. Qur’an 22:70 asserts: ‘Do you not know that God knows what is in the heaven and earth? Indeed, that is in a Record;’ and Qur’an 57:22 explains: ‘No disaster strikes upon the earth or among yourselves except that it is in a register before We bring it into being – indeed that, for God, is easy’ (see also 9:51). Islamic tradition holds that the reference to the ‘record’ is to the Preserved Tablet *(Al-Lawhu ’l Mahfiẓ)*, in which God prescribed all that will happen in His creation. Suppose, says Ibn Hanbal, that an act of murder occurs, but not according to what God has determined for the one who is murdered. This must mean that the murdered one has died before his appointed time (i.e., contrary to what is prescribed in the Preserved Tablet), which contradicts the theological tenet of *qadar.* ‘Whoever concedes divine knowledge’, says Ibn Hanbal, ‘must also concede the divine decree and will, even in the smallest and least significant matters’ (Cragg and Speight 1980: 121).

There are at least a couple of philosophically interesting aspects of Ibn Hanbal’s discussion of the concept of God and human freedom. First, as a theologian, Ibn Hanbal begins his reflections on free will and theological determinism with the concept of God, as presented in the Islamic sources, and then proceeds to arrive at certain conclusions about human freedom. Given who God is (according to him), human beings do not have free will. Second, Ibn Hanbal’s approach to this one particular problem sees him elaborating on a number of divine attributes, specifically, God’s power, oneness, His attribute as the Creator (of everything) and His knowledge. In this sense, it is similar to the problem of evil: reflecting on the existence, magnitude, and scale of evil in our world often has theologians and philosophers thinking carefully about a number of divine attributes, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.
A more philosophical treatment of the Islamic concept of God and the problem of free will can be found in *The Book of The Five Fundamentals* by the Mu’tazilite thinker ‘Abd al-Jabbar (935–1025). As with Ibn Hanbal’s discussion, ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s views on the debate between the advocates of theological determinism and those who believe in free will involves discussion of a number of divine attributes, especially God’s justice. The Mu’tazilites were the first school in Islamic thought both to incorporate rationalism into their theological discussions and to engage in a systematic working out of Islamic doctrine. The core framework of Mu’tazilite theology is provided by their ‘five fundamentals’, tenets which stated that (1) God is One; (2) God is Just; (3) God’s promises and warnings are irreversible; (4) the grave sinner is neither a believer nor an unbeliever; and (5) the believer must advocate good and forbid evil. ‘Abd al-Jabbar’s views on free will and theological determinism are found under his general discussion of God’s justice. There, he provides several criticisms of the sort of theological determinism espoused by Ibn Hanbal.

First, ‘Abd al-Jabbar argues that, if human acts were created by God, it would render God’s issuing of commandments and prohibitions (which God does many times in the Qur’an) superfluous; it would be akin to God commanding or prohibiting us to have a certain color, shape, or state of health or sickness. Second, whoever commits injustice and transgression must be unjust and a transgressor. It follow, then, that if God committed injustice and transgression (by performing immoral acts), He must be unjust and a transgressor. But, says ‘Abd al-Jabbar, the Qur’an states that there is no disharmony in the creation of God, that all that God has created is good and that God disposes of all things in perfect order. Third, creating erroneous behavior in human beings and subsequently punishing them for it is a corrupt act, like commanding a slave to do something and punishing him for it. Fourth, the power to act, for a human being, must precede the act itself. If it were simultaneous with it, then the unbeliever would lack the power to have faith, which, in turn, would render God’s command to have faith unfair (‘ought implies can’). ‘Abd al-Jabbar points out that, according to the Qur’an, God does not place a burden on anyone that is greater than what he or she can bear. ‘Abd al-Jabbar turns next to the specific question of whether God wills disobedience in humans, as Ibn Hanbal believes, and argues that He does not. The argument is as follows: God wills acts of obedience and loathes acts of disobedience. It would be impossible, avers ‘Abd al-Jabbar, for a wise man to command something he loathed and to prohibit something that he wanted. Now, in commanding us to have faith, God must will that we have faith; and, in prohibiting unbelief, God must loathe it. A wise man would not will something that is ethically wrong because that willing is itself ethically wrong. Hence, if God is all-wise, then He will not will insolence. Speaking more generally, ‘[H]ow could it be said that every corruption or injustice that occurred to humankind was willed by Him?’

‘Abd al-Jabbar’s discussion of theological determinism and free will is principally guided by his understanding of, and emphasis on, Divine justice; indeed, the Mu’tazilites used to call themselves ‘The People of Unity and Justice’ (*Ahl Al-Tawhid Wal ‘Adl*). God’s justice entails human freedom, among other things.

### Understanding the divine attributes

In the Qur’an, God is described as being both similar and dissimilar to human beings. The Qur’an refers to God as a ‘thing’ (*shay*) (6:19), a being who has a face (55:26), with eyes (20:39), hands (38:75; 5:64), a leg (68:42), a spirit (15:29) and a soul (5:116). God is in the heavens (67:17) and established on His Throne (7:54). From the heavens, God will, one day, come to us in covers of cloud (2:210). God is also described as living (2:225), an attribute that is also applied to human
The twelfth-century Hanbali jurist, Ibn Qudama (1147 and is not circumscribed by and that He has a face, and that He is indivisible and that He has two hands, and that He has an …

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According to them God has a form and possesses limbs and parts which are either spiritual or physical. It is possible for him to move from place to place, to descend and ascend, to be stationary and to be firmly seated … [Some believe in] the possibility of men touching God and shaking his hand; also that sincere Muslims may embrace him in this world as well as in the next, provided they attain in their spiritual endeavors to sufficient degree purity of heart and genuine union with God.19

In sharp contrast to such anthropomorphism was the apophatic theology of the Mu’tazilites. The famous Muslim thinker, Abu al-Hasan al-Ash’ari (874–936), the ‘father’ of the synthesis of faith and reason accepted by orthodox Sunni Islam,20 explains their concept of God as follows:

The Mu’tazilites are unanimous that God is unlike anything else and that He hears and sees and is neither body, ghost, corpse, form, flesh, blood, substance, nor accident and that He is devoid of colour, taste, smell, tactual traits, heat, cold, moistness, dryness, height, width, or depth … , and that He is indivisible … and is not circumscribed by place or subject to time … and that none of the attributes of the creature which involve contingency can be applied to Him … , and that He cannot be perceived by the senses or assimilated to mankind at all.21

For the Mu’tazilites, seemingly anthropomorphic references to God in the Qur’an need to be interpreted allegorically. It is fair to say that the predominant view among orthodox Muslims is, however, to adopt an agnostic hermeneutic when it comes to understanding the divine attributes. One of the earliest formulations of this attitude is found in a statement attributed to the famous Sunni jurist, Malik ibn Anas (711–95). When asked whether ‘God sits on the Throne’, as stated in the Qur’an, he reportedly said in reply: ‘The sitting is known, its modality is unknown; believing it is an obligation and questioning it is a heresy (bid’ah)’.22 Al-Ash’ari furthered this line of thought by construing the term bila kayfa (‘without asking how’) as a theological concept in order to apply it to the seemingly anthropomorphic verses referring to God in the Qur’an. In one of his creedal statements, for instance, he writes: ‘We [orthodox Muslims] confess that … God is seated on His throne … and that He has a face … and that He has two hands, bila kayfa … and that He has an eye, bila kayfa … ’.23 The twelfth-century Hanbali jurist, Ibn Qudama (1147–1223), argued against allegorical interpretation of the anthropomorphic Qur’anic verses referring to God on the basis that such interpretation is a novelty in religion; that is, neither the Prophet of Islam, nor the early Caliphs or Imams practiced it. When faced with apparent anthropomorphisms in the Qur’anic text, two basic principles must be applied: (1) the principle that ‘God should not be described in excess of His own description of Himself’ and (2) accept such descriptions, as Al-Ash’ari urges, bila kayfa; that is, ‘without being able to understand the how of them, nor fathom their intended sense, except in accordance with [God’s] own description of Himself’.24
Divine transcendence – a classical and contemporary problem in Islamic thought

In his controversial Regensburg lecture delivered on September 12, 2006, Benedict XVI, now Pope Emeritus of the Catholic Church, made some remarks about the Islamic understanding of God’s transcendence. In his lecture, Benedict XVI, referring to the views of the Catholic theologian, Adel Theodor Khoury, says:

[F]or Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality … Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God’s will, we would even have to practice idolatry.

By contrast, Benedict XVI maintains that, from a Christian perspective, acting unreasonably contradicts God’s nature:

[A]s far as understanding of God and thus the concrete practice of religion is concerned, we are faced with an unavoidable dilemma. Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God’s nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, the first verse of the whole Bible, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: ‘In the beginning was the λόγος’. This is the very word used by the emperor: God acts, σύν λόγῳ, with logos. Logos means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason. John thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis. In the beginning was the logos, and the logos is God, says the Evangelist … From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, Manuel II was able to say: Not to act ‘with logos’ is contrary to God’s nature.

But, the concept of God of the sort endorsed by Ibn Hazm gives us an … image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness. God’s transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind his actual decisions.

In commenting on Benedict XVI’s remarks here, let me begin with three points of agreement. First, he is correct in connecting our ‘understanding of God’ with ‘the concrete practice of religion’. There are many different ways in which this connection can be explained and justified. Here is one, with respect to Islam. For Muslims, the heart of religious commitment involves iman, which is typically translated as ‘faith’. The word ‘iman’ comes from the verb ‘amana’, which means ‘to be secure’ or ‘to put trust’ in something. Etymologically and theologically, iman (faith) in God, for a Muslim, involves trusting Him (i.e. following His commandments, avoiding His prohibitions, etc.). Now, there must be some basis on which we can at least conceptually ground such trust, even if there aren’t any evidential grounds. The distinction
between conceptual and evidential grounds can best be brought out with the following example. Mary might not think it is probable that her husband, John, will ask her for a divorce anytime in the near future, because there is insufficient evidence for thinking that this will happen (a lack of adequate evidential grounds); nevertheless, it is possible that this can happen (there are conceptual grounds; it is possible for a married man to divorce his wife). So, the need for conceptual grounds on which to base trust in God should not be conflated with the demand for adequate evidential grounds. If there aren’t even any conceptual grounds on which to base trust in God, then it seems that such trust (or faith) is arbitrary or perhaps not even ‘trust’ (or faith) at all.

Second, it seems to me that Benedict XVI is indeed correct in pointing out that the attribute of ‘absolute transcendence’ eliminates all conceptual grounds on which to base trust in God. It is hard to see what the basis for such trust in God would be if God is beyond any of our categories, including rationality, truth, and goodness.

Third, Benedict XVI is also correct in thinking that the acceptance of absolute transcendence (or something closely similar) is found within the Islamic religion. He cites the Spanish Muslim polymath, Ibn Hazm (994–1064), as ascribing this attribute to God. Ibn Hazm is certainly not alone in maintaining such a view. The famous Muslim theologian and philosopher, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), also subscribed to a view regarding God’s transcendence that comes very close to its being absolute. In his Jerusalem Epistle, in which he summarizes his views about the concept of God, Al-Ghazali writes:

[N]othing happens in the seen and unseen universe (al-mulk wa al-malakut), not even a twinkling of an eye or an unguarded thought, except by God’s predetermined purpose (qada), His power, and His will. He is the cause (minhu) of good and evil, benefit and harm, Islam and infidelity, acknowledgement and denial [of God], success and failure, rectitude and error, obedience and rebellion, association of other gods with Him and belief [in Him alone]. There is nothing that can defeat His predetermined purpose, and none to question His dominion.

(Tibawi 1965: 111)

This sort of absolute transcendence leads to an understanding of God as simply ‘Absolute Will’. But, more disturbingly, since God is not bound by any of our categories, absolute transcendence leads to (divine) ethical voluntarism. God has no nature or essence in accordance with which He must act. Indeed, Al-Ghazali criticizes and rejects the views of the Mu’tazilites, who held that God is bound by what He has revealed to us in the Qur’an (specifically, His promises and warnings). According to Al-Ghazali, contrary to what the Mu’tazilites say, God can impose obligations on His servants that are beyond their abilities, inflict pain or torture on them for no previous offence or subsequent reward, etc., in effect, God may do with His creation as He pleases. Like Al-Ghazali, Isma’il Al-Faruqi (1921–86), a well-known contemporary Palestinian-American Muslim, endorses and defends God’s absolute transcendence as follows:

He [God] does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way. God reveals only His will. Remember one of the prophets asked God to reveal Himself and God told him, ‘No, it is not possible for Me to reveal Myself to anyone’. … This is God’s will and that is all we have, and we have it in the perfection of the Qur’an. But Islam does not equate the Qur’an with the nature or essence of God. It is the Word of God, the Commandment of God, the Will of God. But God does not reveal Himself to anyone. Christians talk about the revelation of God Himself—by God and of God—but that is the great difference between Christianity and Islam. God is transcendent, and once
you talk about self-revelation you have hierophancy and immanence, and then the transcendence of God is compromised. You may not have complete transcendence and self-revelation at the same time.\textsuperscript{28}

To be sure, understanding God’s transcendence as absolute can be given some Qur’anic justification, since the Islamic text never comments on the essence or nature of God. As Muslim philosopher Shabbir Akhtar explains,

The Koran, unlike the Gospel, never comments on the essence of Allah. ‘Allah is Wise’ or ‘Allah is loving’ may be pieces of revealed information but in contrast to Christianity, Muslims are not enticed to claims that ‘Allah is Love’ or ‘Allah is Wisdom’. Only adjectival descriptions are attributed to the divine being and these merely as they bear on the revelation of God’s will for man. The rest remains mysterious.

\textit{(Akhtar 1990: 180–81)}

Can one conclude, though, as Benedict XVI maintains, that ‘for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent’? Here, I will disagree with the former Pope’s views on the concept of God in Islam by pointing out that, as with Christianity or indeed any other religion, what counts as ‘Muslim teaching’ (or ‘Christian teaching’) is going to be controversial. Although ethical voluntarism is widely accepted among Muslims as a position describing the relationship between God and morality, it is by no means incontestable from an Islamic perspective. To begin with, ethical \textit{objectivism} seems to be the more plausible ethical theory derived from a reading of the Qur’an.

As George F. Hourani observes,

\begin{quote}
The Qur’an addresses a great many ethical sentences to pagans, especially in Mecca, who had not yet submitted to the \textit{shari’}a of Islam. It uses terms such as \textit{salih} [pious], \textit{zulm} [wrongdoing], \textit{adl} [justice], and exhorts them to be thoughtful and to reflect, to be honest in their dealings, not to be arrogant or uncharitable. The presumption is that a common ethical language is being used, understood clearly and in the same way by the speaker and the addressed parties. Such a language could not depend on their prior acceptance of the earlier revelations of Judaism and Christianity, since the Meccans had not accepted these. Many of the terms used have definite objective meanings in Arabic as far back as we can trace …
\end{quote}

\textit{(Hourani 1985: 27)}

As an example of Qur’anic verses in which God speaks to people in a common ethical language, consider 68:35–36: ‘Shall We treat The People of Faith like The People of Sin? What is the matter with you? How judge ye?’ Moreover, as Hourani (1985: 28–37) notes, interpreting the moral language of the Qur’an in light of ethical voluntarism is simply untenable. And, explains Hourani, ‘[m]any ethical attributes are predicated of God, and these are impossible to interpret in terms of obedience to His own commands’. Part of the reason why ethical voluntarism was endorsed by Muslim thinkers (and others outside of Islam, such as William of Ockham) is because it seemed to safeguard God’s power understood as divine \textit{omnipotence}.\textsuperscript{29} For if God’s commands were issued in accordance with objective moral principles or values, such as justice, these would be a ‘constraint’ on His omnipotence.\textsuperscript{30} This problematic implication is what Al-Ghazali seems to have in mind when he writes:
The Mu’tazilah maintain that [the imposition of duties upon God’s servants] were an obligation upon Him because they are in the interest (maslahah) of His servants. But this is impossible since it is He who imposes obligations (mujib), He who commands and He who prohibits. How can He be liable to any obligation or be subject to any compulsion or command? … [O]bligation in relation to Him is inconceivable.

(Tibawi 1965: 112–14)

But the dilemma between ethical voluntarism and ethical objectivism (if ‘ethical objectivism’ is understood as a reference to the existence of objective principles or values existing eternally and independently of God) is a false one. Justice and other ethical concepts could be, to consider a third possibility, part of God’s nature, which forms the basis for His issuing commands to do good and avoid evil, for instance. Yes, the Qur’an might not explicitly identify an attribute or attributes with the nature of God as one finds in the Christian declaration that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8), but this does not mean that the Islamic conception of God, as derived from a reading of the Qur’an, necessarily lacks an essence or nature. The attribute of absolute transcendence is included (by some) in the concept of God as part of a philosophical theory used to interpret the Qur’anic text. By no means does that text explicitly state, or entail, God’s absolute transcendence. The Spanish Muslim philosopher, Ibn Rushd (1126–98), rejected ethical voluntarism as a theory that was ‘very odd from the standpoint of both reason and religion’. Referring to the Qur’anic verse that Al-Ghazali cites (‘He [God] cannot be questioned for His acts, but they will be questioned (for theirs)’ [21:32]), Ibn Rushd explains:

[T]he Almighty acts justly, not because He Himself becomes perfect through that justice, but because the perfection which is in Himself necessitates that He act justly. Thus, if this meaning is understood in that way, then it becomes clear that He is not described as just in the same sense in which the human being is so described. However, this does not imply that He should not be described as just in principle, and that all the actions that emanate from Him are neither just nor unjust, as the Mutakallimun [Ash’arite scholastic theologians] imagined. For this claim destroys what is intelligible to human beings and destroys the literal meaning of Scriptures.

(Najjar 2001: 119–20)

So, although the concept of God as an absolutely transcendent being may be based on a reading of the Qur’an and supplemented by some philosophical argumentation, it seems that both the hermeneutic and philosophical reasoning deployed to defend it are questionable. And, given this, it seems to me that it is possible to give some conceptual grounds on which to base trust (faith) in God; it can be argued, consistently with a Qur’anic hermeneutic, that it is part of God’s nature that He is Just, Gracious, Merciful, etc.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced and discussed the Islamic understanding of God as found in the Qur’an and ahadith, explaining that the concept of God that emerges from a reading of these sources is not necessarily equivalent to that of the ‘omniGod’ concept that most contemporary philosophers of religion discuss and debate. A good source of Islamic theological and philosophical discussion of God’s attributes may be found in works by Muslim thinkers who addressed the issue of theological determinism and free will, some of which I detailed in this chapter. Another major issue in Islamic thought was how we are to understand the divine attributes,
especially as they appear in the Qur’an and hadith. Of the three approaches that one finds in the classical Islamic sources, namely anthropomorphic approaches, apophatic approaches, and the ‘agnostic hermeneutic’, the latter was adopted by orthodox (Sunni) Islam. Attempts to arrive at a viable Islamic concept of God are important, as in any other theistic religion, since how we understand God will affect our (theistic) religious commitment (if we have one). I illustrated this by exploring the attribute of God’s (absolute) transcendence. If the God of Islam is indeed an absolutely transcendent deity, then there does not seem to be a rational basis for trusting in Him. Such a concept of God can, however, be reasonably resisted from both an Islamic and philosophical perspective. Nevertheless, several questions remain that need to be addressed by those who wish to present the Islamic concept of God as a ‘live option’ for people today, to use William James’ phrase. For instance, it would appear, as explained earlier, that Allah is not omnibenevolent; he does not love unbelievers, wrong-doers, etc. Does that render the Islamic concept of God inadequate? Or consider the problem of understanding the divine attributes. If these should not be interpreted or understood univocally, as maintained by Al-Ash’ari and many other Muslims, then does that render God completely mysterious? If so, is such a being worthy of our worship?33 Addressing such questions will be an important part of a contemporary Islamic philosophy of religion.

Notes
1 See Swinburne (1977/1993; 1979/1991) for a defense of standard theism. For an atheist perspective that accepts standard theism as an understanding of God but concurrently rejects God’s existence, see Mackie (1982).
2 Muslim scholars disagree as to the precise reason why the basmallah is absent at the beginning of the ninth sura. According to some, it simply was not part of the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad. Other scholars think that the sura is actually a continuation of the one before it (which does contain the basmallah). And yet other scholars are of the opinion that content of the sura, particularly its beginning (which has to do with declaring that God and His Messenger have dissociated themselves from the disbelievers), did not warrant the inclusion of the basmallah at the start.
3 Compare with Mark 3:29 in the New Testament: ‘But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin’.
4 Some verses in the Qur’an suggest that humans are the source of their choices (e.g. 18:29, 58:38–39, 41:46), while others suggest that God is the source of our choices (e.g. 6:25, 6:39, 6:111, 37:96). The fact that this sort of ambiguity exists in the Qur’an is acknowledged by the text itself (3:7).
5 One might, however, attribute a carefully qualified understanding of ‘omnipotence’ to God, based on interpreting that concept in a certain way. See Hoffman (2012) for further discussion.
6 For more on divine omniscience, see Wierenga (2010).
8 Henceforth, I will be using the definition of free will provided by van Inwagen (1975: 185–89). According to van Inwagen, free will refers to ‘the power or ability of agents to act otherwise than they in fact do. To deny that men have free will is to assert that what a man does do and what he can do coincide. And almost all philosophers agree that a necessary condition for holding an agent responsible for an act is believing that that agent could have refrained from performing that act’.
10 Cragg and Speight 1980.
11 See above.
12 Cragg and Speight 1980, p. 121.
13 This specific form of the sin of shirk is often referenced by Muslim theologians as the sin of giving God’s Names and Attributes (Arabic: Al-Asma was-Sifat) to created beings. Thus, most Muslim theologians agree that human beings can never be given the names of God, such as Ar-Rahman (‘The Most Merciful’).
14 There are numerous hadith that discuss the doctrine of divine decree. Consider, for instance, the following: ‘The first thing which Allah created was the pen. Then, He said to it: Write. It asked: My Lord, what should I write? He said: Write the proportions of all things up until the Hour’.
15 This specific form of the sin of shirk is often referenced by Muslim theologians as the sin of giving God’s Names and Attributes (Arabic: Al-Asma was-Sifat) to created beings. Thus, most Muslim theologians agree that human beings can never be given the names of God, such as Ar-Rahman (‘The Most Merciful’).
15 As with Ibn Hanbal’s reflections on God’s power, there are some basic ruminations here on the problem of reconciling God’s foreknowledge with human freedom. See Zagzebski (2004) for a more extended discussion. For a book length treatment of the problem as it arose in early Islamic thought, see Watt (1948).
16 See, for example, Keller (1989).
17 For a translation of, and commentary on, this work, see Martin et al. (1997).
18 Compare with van Inwagen’s description of the rejection of free will: ‘To deny that men have free will is to assert that what a man does do and what he can do coincide’ (see above).
20 As Fakhry (1999: 280) writes, ‘The teachings of the new theological movement that al-Ashari launched was eventually identified with orthodox Sunni Islam’.
21 Al-Ash’ari, as quoted in Fakhry (2004: 58).
22 As quoted in Fakhry (1997).
23 Translation in Klein (1940: 50).
26 There is another Islamic concept that is similar to iman: tawakkul (reliance), which can be found in the Qur’an. 3:159, for instance, says: ‘Rely upon God. Indeed, God loves those who rely [upon Him]’.
27 Ibid., pp. 113-115. For a more detailed discussion of this by Al-Ghazali, see his Moderation in Belief, translated by Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), Third Treatise. In that section of this work, Al-Ghazali makes it very clear that, in his view, God can essentially do whatever He likes, provided that what He wants to do is logically possible. This is the only constraint of God’s Will and there is no other. As Yaqub explains, ‘Al-Ghazali, like almost all theologians and philosophers, holds that divine will is constrained by the limits of logical possibility … Al-Ghazali places no other constraints on the divine will’ (p. 269).
29 As stated above, it is controversial whether the Qur’anic descriptions of God’s power should be interpreted as referring to omnipotence.
30 Again, as stated above, God having ‘maximal power’, a qualified sense of omnipotence, is not incompatible with Qur’anic verses that refer to divine power.
31 This is debatable. Consider, for instance, the famous ‘Verse of Light’ in the Qur’an that states: ‘Allah is the Light of The Heavens and The Earth’ (24:35). This verse has attracted a lot of commentary from Muslim thinkers (mostly mystical or esoteric) attempting to understand what it means.
33 As John Stuart Mill writes, ‘If in ascribing goodness to God I do not mean what I mean by goodness; if I do not mean the goodness of which I have some knowledge, but an incomprehensible attribute of an incomprehensible substance, which for aught I know may be a totally different quality from that which I love and venerate, … what do I mean by calling it goodness? And what reason have I for venerating it? … To say that God’s goodness may be different in kind from man’s goodness, what is it but saying with a slight change of phraseology that God may possibly not be good?’ As quoted in Hospers (1996: 226).