To offer a way of celebrating how far people in the West have come in appreciating Islamic and Christian traditions and their fruitful interaction, this essay will deliberately eschew a comprehensive account of each tradition by instead attending to the way a few notable figures have set the pace. For the last quarter of a century has seen remarkable scholarship in French, German and English, paving the way for those in their wake to come to a vital appreciation of the traditions long denied them. Moreover, much of the same scholarship has been intent on undoing the ravages of a colonialism which proceeded by endemic Western presumptions to result in a mode of inquiry eager to learn from others while critical of itself. We know the names of western thinkers: Louis Massignon, Roger Arnaldez, Georges Anawati, Louis Gardet, Edward Said and their contemporaries, who broke so much ground in comparative studies. Their trail-blazing led a new generation of inquirers into the rich tapestry of Islamic life and practice: Serge de Beaurecueil, Gerhard Böwering, Anne-Marie Schimmel and others whose students are still active. In a similar yet different vein, Said Hossein Nasr and Abdulaziz Sachedina have opened the reaches of Shiʿī philosophical theology, notably Mulla Sadra, whose comprehensive grasp of those before him offers a synoptic and interior taste of wrestling with philosophy. Again, their students, trained in the thought-forms and languages of Islam, are able to present their own and their mentors’ grasp of traditions hitherto considered opaque. Their legacy peers through the synoptic view that follows.

**Journeying into the unknown**

Whatever can be articulated of traditions of revelational inquiry provides a shared theological path forward from the act of creation. For there is no other access to the God who gives life in the context of a universe which that same God sustains in being. Yet that very fact defines our relation to God – a relation of God’s own making. So that relation will be unlike any other, as both traditions aver. And here comparisons are not only helpful but essential. The term that can be offered, from a study of the Hindu thinker Shankara carried out by Sara Grant, is ‘nonduality’, attempting to convey the insight that no creature can be other than the Creator or else that creature would cease to exist (Grant 2002). A Christian phenomenologist, Robert Sokolowski, employs the notion of ‘the distinction’ to express how we come forth from the Creator without a discernible difference. For the One is the one in whom we ‘live, move, and have our being’ (Sokolowski 1994).
Al-Ghazālī, the Muslim theologian (d. 1111), articulated the same *sui generis* relation with the arresting affirmation of earlier Islamic theological insights: ‘There is no agent but God’ (2000). For like our very being, our actions cannot be ‘our own’, because they (and we) come forth from the God who creates us. Discourse of this sort will inevitably jar by fracturing our ordinary language, only to show that the creation–relation is no ordinary relation. So all the relevant alterations in language may be subsumed into *nonduality* as a way of articulating what ordinary language will not permit us to do. The result is that our theological discourse is inescapably negative. And if this fact about theological language respects Islam, it respects Christianity as well, as Deirdre Carabine shows in her articulate survey of this portion of Christian tradition (2015): ‘According to the followers of the *via negativa*, knowledge is an obstacle to be overcome, because it casts a veil of clouded particularity around the One. The subsequent stripping bare or unveiling (*aperikaluptos*, as Dionysius describes it), paradoxically reveals no thing, nothing, *nada*. Using negative theology as a knife to cut away idolatry is a necessary part of theology, but cutting away the *kataphatic* (which pretends to give knowledge of God) can never reveal the ‘hidden divinity’ (Kenny 2010).

In the context of contemporary uses of negative theology, perhaps I can sum up the main contours of what can be understood as an apophatic metaphysics (relying chiefly on John Scotus Eriugena and Meister Eckhart): the no-thing-ness of God becomes some thing when, through creation, God becomes other than God. Thus, God can paradoxically be known when other than God (God’s *energeia*, in the Byzantine tradition). Creation as theophany, as the very alterity of God, enables the simultaneous knowing and unknowing of God, the simultaneous transcendence and immanence, the simultaneous procession and return. In this dialectical way of understanding the unfolding of God, the oxymorons of the mystics begin to make some kind of sense: silent music, bright darkness, unknowing knowing. The unity that is the focus of the *via negativa* is a unity that admits distinction: it is not annihilation, and neither – and this is a most important point – is it the end of the otherness of God, but rather its perpetual celebration. Creation is itself the affirmation that it is not God because it is some thing (other than God). In the eschatological moment of return to source, there is no silent repose, for, as Dionysius would put it, many candles make up its one light and many voices make up its one choir.

Negative theology is, simply put, part of the dialectical understanding of the hiddenness of the revealed God. The follower of the negative way wants to be in a ‘liberating ignorance in which faith rests on the Unknowable and is nourished by silence’ (A.H. Armstrong, quoted in Carabine 2015: vi).

Used as we are to trying to understand the divine nature from either the perspective of transcendence or the perspective of immanence, formulations such as ‘unmanifest manifest’ or ‘invisible visible’ stretch the mind in both directions simultaneously, for the one cannot be understood without the other: God is both all things and also not all things, in the sense that he is none of the perceptible things. The idea that God is manifest in creation is true, but the fact that God remains transcendentally unmanifest is also true. And yet neither is true when understood singly; the ‘problem’ is resolved by coupling both truths in a dialectical formulation which reveals the tension between and the simultaneous truth of both. The truth of the statement ‘God is all things’ is constantly undermined by the basic distinction between the divine essence and theophany, which is a forceful reminder that, as an apophatic understanding demonstrates, a comprehensive account of reality can never be attained.

**Al-Ghazālī and ‘negative theology’**

By taking a mainline Muslim figure such as Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, and notably Book 35 of his major work *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, a similar ‘negative cast’ can be traced. The book, *Kitāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-tawakkul* (‘The book of faith in divine unity and trust in divine providence’), is...
David B. Burrell

divided into two parts of unequal length, the first on *tawḥīd* (divine unity), the second on *tawakkul* (trust in God). Reading the whole yields the summation of al-Ghazālī’s unadulterated teaching. The effect, taken together with another important work of al-Ghazālī, *Al-iqtiṣād fī l-iʿtiqād* (*Moderation in believing*), is to show a Muslim theologian in the full medieval meaning of the term and not merely in the descriptive sense that includes any Muslim thinker adept at *kalām*, the dialectical apologetic designed for the defence of the faith. That is, al-Ghazālī was intent on using human reason, as he found it elaborated in the Islamic philosopher Ibn Sīnā and others, not merely to defend the faith but to lead the Muslim faithful to a deeper penetration of the mysteries of their revealed religion – the central mystery being the free creation of the universe by the one God. The works of the philosophers themselves in their native state were not always helpful to him, so he set out to purify them of their pretentious claim to offer an access to truth that was independent of divine revelation, the Qurʾān, and superior to it. Hence his need to understand the thought of the philosophers thoroughly, pursued in the work entitled *Maqāṣid al-falāsifa* (*The intentions of the philosophers*), itself conceived as an extended introduction to his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*Deconstruction of the philosophers*) (al-Ghazālī 2000). The negative tone of this latter work (together with *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, its refutation by the later philosopher Ibn Rushd) has left the impression that al-Ghazālī should never be ranked with ‘the philosophers’ but always left with ‘the theologians’ as a defender of *kalām* orthodoxy in the face of rational inquiry. It is precisely this stereotype that the reflection in this chapter challenges by calling upon al-Ghazālī’s own assistance to deconstruct the historical image that, in fact, he helped to create for himself.

The French summary of *Iḥyāʾ ulūm al-dīn* serves to remind of the forcefulness of the term *iḥyāʾ*, the verbal noun of the fourth form of the Arabic verb ḥayyā, appropriately rendered in English as ‘putting life back into’, thus conveying in the full title of the work, ‘Putting life back into the religious sciences’, al-Ghazālī’s intent as well as his assessment of the state of such learning in his time. He presents a clear understanding of matters religious, yet one which continues to give primacy to practice: faith is rooted in trust, so it must be expressed in a life of trust. The pretensions of the philosophers to understand the mysteries of ‘the heavens and the earth and all that is between them’ (Q 15:85), proceeding by conceptual argument alone, must be exposed as just that, pretension in the face of the central assertion that the universe was freely created by the one sovereign God. Yet reason, which the philosophers are so intent to elaborate, will prove to be an indispensable tool in directing human minds and hearts to understand how to think and how to live as a consequence of that signal truth. Such is al-Ghazālī’s intent, displayed in the structure of his *Iḥyāʾ* as well as in the pattern adopted for another work, *Al-maqāṣid asnā fī sharḥ asmāʿ Allāh al-husnā*, his treatise expounding the 99 canonical ‘names’ of God, where he devotes an extensive introduction to explaining the human practice of naming and how it might be understood in relation to the names which God has given Himself in the Qurʾān. It turns out that the only way to extend the limits of human knowledge of such divine things is by ‘adorning oneself’ with the meaning of the names, and so in the body of the work the commentary on each name begins with semantics and closes with counsel as to how one might oneself become more like God as he is depicted by this name. This pattern will become the master strategy of the *Iḥyāʾ* as well, where the entire gamut of Muslim life – beliefs together with practices – is laid out in a way which displays the importance of both knowledge and state of being, that is, of understanding together with practice. It is, by the way, remarkable how this master plan aligns with the later Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas’ insistence that theology is at once a speculative and a practical mode of knowing: ‘Sacred doctrine takes over both [speculative and practical] functions, in this being like the single knowledge whereby God knows himself and the things he makes’ (*Summa theologiae* 1.1.4).

It is fair to say that *Kitāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-tawakkul* plays an axial role among the other chapters of the *Iḥyāʾ*. For *tawḥīd*, ‘confession of divine unity’, sounds the distinctive note of Islam which
grounds everything Muslims declare in the *shahāda*, the confession of faith: There is no god but God. Islamic reflection on *tauhīd* is reminiscent of rabbinic commentary on divine unity as evidenced in the *shema*: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One’ (Deuteronomy 6:4). It is hardly at issue that God is one rather than many; it points instead directly to the injunction against idolatry: all Israelites know thereby that they must orient their entire lives to God through the Torah, and nowhere else. So a philosophical argument culminating in the assertion that God is one would hardly interest the rabbis, nor would it al-Ghazālī. Its conclusion may be true enough, but what is at issue is not the unity itself but the implications of the community’s faith in divine unity. Yet that cannot be a blind faith, so what is being asserted? That everything comes from God and that ‘there is no agent but God’.

In cataloguing degrees of assent to this declaration, al-Ghazālī notes:

> The third kind [of believer] professes faith in divine unity in the sense that he sees but a single agent, since truth is revealed to him as it is in itself; and he only sees in reality a single agent, since reality has revealed itself to him as it is in itself because he has set his heart on determining to comprehend the word ‘reality’ [*ḥaqīqa*], and this stage belongs to lay folk as well as theologians.

*(al-Ghazālī 2000: 11)*

He sketches out the two-part structure of the book by way of showing how *tawakkul* is grounded in an articulate *tauhīd*, as practice is anchored in faith or state [of being] in knowledge. In doing so, he is even more insistent: this first part

will consist in showing you that there is no agent but God the Most High: of all that exists in creation – sustenance given or withheld, life or death, riches or poverty, and everything else that can be named, the sole one who initiated and originated it all is God Most High. And when this has been made clear to you, you will not see anything else, so that your fear will be of Him, your hope in Him, your trust in Him, and your security with Him, for He is the sole agent without any other. Everything else is in His service, for not even the smallest atom in the worlds of heaven and earth is independent of Him for its movement. If the gates of mystical insight were opened to you, this would be clear to you with a clarity more perfect than ordinary vision.

*(15–16)*

These last words are telling, and signal al-Ghazālī’s ‘method’ in the first section, elaborating faith in divine unity. There is no attempt to show *how* everything—that-is is of God; that would be beyond the capacity of human intellect to grasp. And should we try, we would invariably end up articulating something like Ibn Sīnā’s emanation scheme, modelled on logical inference and amounting to a twin denial of divine and human freedom. Indeed, when al-Ghazālī tries to articulate what he attributes to mystical insight, it sounds uncannily like Ibn Sīnā, though he begins with a characteristic verse from the Qurān: ‘We did not create heaven and earth and what lies between them in jest; we did not create them but in truth’ (Q 44:38–9). Yet he will offer images to move us away from a literal acceptance of the Ibn Sīnā-like scheme, for in such matters human reason can at best offer models; yet the images offered by the Qurān will certainly take precedence for al-Ghazālī.

But what about human freedom? Have we not exalted God’s sovereign freedom, as the only agent there is, to the inevitable detriment of human initiative? It certainly appears that the intent of al-Ghazālī’s images is to take us by the hand and lead us on, in hopes that we
may come to understand the emanation of things so ordained [muqaddarāt] from the eternal omnipotence, even though the omnipotent One is eternal and the things ordained [maqdūrāt]. . . . But let us leave all that, since our aim is to offer counsel regarding the way to faith in divine unity in practice: that the true agent is One, that He is the subject of our fear and our hope, and the One in whom we trust and depend. (41–2)

So the test of our understanding of divine unity will not come by way of clever philosophical schemes but through a life of trust (tawakkul), in which concerted practice will bring each of us personally to the threshold of the only understanding possible here, that of 'unveiling'. Yet through its clarifications, reason can offer some therapeutic hints to attenuate the apparent scandal.

So ‘How can there be any common ground between faith in divine unity and the šarīʿa [religious law]? For the meaning of faith in divine unity is that there is no god but God Most High, and the meaning of the law lies in establishing the actions proper to human beings [as servants of God]. And if human beings are agents, how is it that God Most High is an agent? Or if God Most High is an agent, how is a human being an agent? Is there no way of understanding ‘acting’ as between these two agents? But if ‘agent’ had two meanings, then the term comprehended could be attributed to each of them without contradiction, as when it is said that the emir killed someone, and is also said that the executioner killed him; in one sense the emir is the killer, and in another sense the executioner. Similarly, a human being is an agent in one sense, and God – Great and Glorious – is an agent in another. The sense in which God Most High is agent is that He is the originator of existing things [mukhtariʾ al-mawjūd], while the sense in which a human being is an agent is that he is the locus [māhall] in which power is created. . . . So we are called ‘agent’ in a manner which expresses that fact of our dependence, much as the executioner can be called a ‘killer’ and the emir a killer, since the killing depends on the power of both of them, yet in different respects, in that way both of them are called ‘killer’, and similarly the things ordained [maqdūrāt] depend on two powers. (43)

Indeed, the Qurʾān often attributes agency to God as well as to creatures, showing that revelation acknowledges and exploits the inherently analogous character of agency as exhibited in the multiple uses of the term ‘agent’. This small clue offers us the best way of presenting al-Ghazālī’s intent and strategy to contemporary readers. What he wanted to do was to help believers recognise that theirs is a unique perspective on the universe: each thing is related in its very existence to the one from whom it freely comes. (As Aquinas was to put it: ‘The very existence of creatures is to-be-related to their creator’, Summa theologiae 1.45.3.) Yet since we cannot articulate this founding and sustaining relationship conceptually, for to do so would trespass on divine freedom, we can only display our understanding by the way we live our life: trusting in the One who so sustains us.

This summary offers a springboard to part two of Kitāb al-tauḥīd wa-l-tawakkul, which relates one Sufi story after another, while judiciously selecting them and weaving them into a pattern that allows persons to discriminate in making subtle decisions regarding the way they lead their lives aware of God’s benevolent care, exhibiting the sorts of choices they make in typical situations. If al-Ghazālī closes part one with what looks like a backward-looking conceptual reminder, he opens the way to an entirely different mode of consideration in part two: ‘Indeed,
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all this happens according to a necessary and true order, according to what is appropriate as it is appropriate, and in the measure proper to it; nor is anything more fitting, more perfect, and more attractive within the realm of possibility’ (Burrell 2000: 45). The upshot of ṭawḥīd, then, must be the believer’s profound conviction ‘of the unalterable justice and excellence of things as they are . . ., of the “perfect rightness of the actual”’. Eric Ormsby sees this conviction as the upshot of the ten years of seclusion and prayer following al-Ghazālī’s spiritual crisis. By ‘the actual’ he means what God has decreed, itself the product and reflection of divine wisdom. And by asserting the primacy of the actual over the possible, al-Ghazālī shows himself a true theologian. ‘The world in all its circumstances remains unimpeachably right and just, and it is unsurpassably excellent’ (Ormsby 1990: 256–7). Yet the excellence in question is not one which we can assess independently of the fact that it is the product of divine wisdom, so al-Ghazālī is not asserting that ours is the ‘best of all possible worlds’, as though there were a set of such worlds ‘each of which might be ranked in terms of some intrinsic excellence’. That would miss the point of his quest: to find ways of expressing that relation of Creator to creatures which quite resists formulation. The deconstructive moment had been his rejection of the emanation scheme; the constructive task is taken up in this twin discourse in Kitāb al-ṭawḥīd wa-l-tawakkul on faith in divine unity and trust in divine providence, but especially in this second part, where practice will allow us to traverse domains which speculative reason cannot otherwise map.

What sort of a practice is tawakkul? It entails accepting whatever happens as part of the inscrutable decree of a just and merciful God. Yet such an action cannot be reduced to mere resignation and so caricatured as ‘Islamic fatalism’. It rather entails aligning oneself with things as they really are: in al-Ghazālī’s sense, with the truth that there is no agent but God Most High. This requires effort since we cannot formulate the relationship between this single divine Agent and the other agents which we know, and also because our ordinary perspective on things is not a true one: human society lives under the sign of jahiliyya or pervasive ignorance. But by trying our best to act according to the conviction that the divine decree expresses the truth in events as they unfold, we can allow ourselves to be shown how things truly lie. So faith (ṭawḥīd) and practice (tawakkul) are reciprocal; neither is foundational. The understanding we can have is that of one journeying in faith, a sālik, the name which Sufis characteristically appropriated for themselves. The formula for faith here is the Ḥadīth: ‘There is no might and power but in God’, which al-Ghazālī shows to be equivalent to the qurʿānic shahāda: ‘There is no god but God’, thereby reminding us that the Ḥadīth does not enjoin us to trust in power or might, as attributes distinct from God, but in God alone. It is in this context that he selects stories of Sufi shaykhs, offering them as examples to help point us towards developing specific skills of trusting: habits of responding to different situations in such a way that one learns by acting how things are truly ordered, the truth of the decree. The principle operative throughout is that a policy of complete renunciation of means (asbāb) is contrary to divine wisdom, the sunnat Allāh, although those who journey in faith will be cognizant that there are different kinds of means as they become aware of hidden as well as manifest ones.

The bevy of stories which al-Ghazālī mines offer living examples of the attitude proper to one who firmly believes in divine unity, namely, a total trust in God’s providential care. He uses them to offer one object lesson after another of a way to take esoteric Sufi lore and allow it to inspire one’s practice. So there is a school whereby we learn how to respond to what happens in such a way that we are shown how things are truly ordered. This school will involve learning from others who are more practised in responding rightly; al-Ghazālī’s judicious use of stories is intended to intimate the Sufi practice of master/disciple, wherein the novice is helped to discern how to act. Philosophy is no longer identified as a higher wisdom; speculative reason is wholly subject to practical reason. But that is simply the inevitable implication of replacing the emanation scheme with an intentional creator, evidenced also in the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (Burrell 1993).
So the challenge of understanding the relation of the free Creator to the universe becomes the task of rightly responding to events as they happen, in such a way that the true ordering of things, the divine decree, can be made manifest in one’s actions-as-responses.

This is also evident in Al-maqṣad al-asnā, al-Ghazālī’s treatise on the names of God, for it is the 99 names culled from the Qur’ān, names by which God reveals the many ‘faces’ of the divine, which offer a composite picture for human perfection. If we take names to identify attributes, then that book can be read in two distinct, yet related, ways: as a condensed summary of Islamic theology, and as offering a revealed counterpart to Aristotle’s Ethics. Perhaps enough has been said so far to begin to make my case for al-Ghazālī as an Islamic theologian, in the normative and not merely descriptive sense of that term. If he tends to resolve to mystical insight in places where philosophers would prefer conceptual schemes, one ought to acknowledge that he is thereby suggesting that certain domains quite outstrip human conceptualising. Yet more significant, however, is that everything he says about practice can be carried out quite independently of such ‘mystical insight’, as indeed it must be for the vast majority of faithful.

So al-Ghazālī’s practice brings Islamic philosophy and theology into perspicuous alignment with Islamic teaching on God’s free creation of the universe. It shows how the two traditions of Christianity and Islam can both be faithful to their scriptures and also leave a rich philosophical legacy to be mined by their followers.

**References**


**Further reading**


