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BECOMING THE WORD: THEOSIS IN THE EUCHARIST AND QUR'ĀN

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PRECIS

In Islam and Christianity, the Word/Logos of God entered into this world in unique forms: the Qur'ān for the former, and Jesus Christ for the latter. Bearing this in mind, each of these earthly manifestations of the Word offers believers two unique methods of theosis. In Islam, qur'ānic *dhikr* in the form of recitation is a sacramental act in which the Word of God is aurally received. In Christianity (specifically high-church Christianity), the Word of God is orally received in the sacrament of the eucharist. The aim of this essay is to compare these rituals theologically in order that one religious tradition informs the other. The essay attempts to engage in fruitful interreligious theology that remains rooted in one religious tradition while being open to transformation through another.

Introduction: Foundation of Comparison

The Word plays a pivotal role in the theological and philosophical thought of Christianity and Islam, being, in fact, the foundation upon which their revelation is based. The focus of this essay is the Word of God as it is encountered in these traditions, and, as such, it is necessary to recall—immediately and before moving forward—the sacred scripture that defines how and why the absolute

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and infinite Word of God entered into this relative and finite world:

John 1[1]
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning...In him was life, and that life was the light of men...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

Surah 96, laylat al-qadr[2]
"Behold, We sent it down on the Night of Power; And what shall teach thee what is the Night of Power? The Night of Power is better than a thousand months; in it the angels and Spirit descend, by the leave of their Lord, upon every command. Peace it is, until the breaking of the dawn."

The theological coherency in comparing the Bible with the Qur'ān is rather weak. As these two passages are read together, and within the context of their respective traditions in their entirety, we are reminded that the Word of God became flesh in Christianity, while the Word of God in Islam became the Arabic Qur'ān (most perfectly and sublimely in its recited format). In each case, the Word transcends time ("better than a thousand months") and space, yet mysteriously made a "dwelling among us." Comparing the Qur'ān to the Bible will either relegate the Qur'ān to something less than what Muslims believe it to be (the Word of God)[3] or elevate the status of the Bible to something beyond a divinely inspired text.

A revelation is consubstantial with Divinity, while an inspired text—though remaining theologically vital in any tradition, especially that of Christianity, is not the revelation and is composed by human beings under the influence of the Divine Spirit. Of course, within the Christian tradition Christ is present and can be discovered through the gospel texts, especially during such practices as *lectio divina*. St. Benedict (d. circa 547 C.E.) stipulated in his *Rule* (for monks) times for contemplating sacred scripture, and there is no doubt that his guidelines influenced (as he was influenced by previous rules) how future orders, and then laypeople, interacted with scripture on a spiritual, contemplative level. This practice (which later evolved into *lectio divina*), along with the chanting and recitation of scripture that developed in Christianity, certainly bears resemblance to qur'ānic recitation; however, there always remains the "ontological" distinction between the Christian scripture and the Qur'ān: "For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the

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[1]All biblical quotes are taken from the *The Holy Bible, New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2010 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

[2]"Night of Power": This *surah* is traditionally believed to recall the night during which the entire contents of the Qur'ān descended upon the Prophet Muhammad, i.e., the Word of God entered into this world. Even though Muhammad received revelations throughout his life, not at one moment, this night represents the powerful in-breaking of the Word that the Qur'ān in its entirety represents. All qur'ānic citations are from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran: Interpreted* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

[3]One could say "the Logos of God" in order to emphasize that the Qur'ān, for Muslims, corresponds to the theological concept of the Logos in Christianity, not simply "words" of divine inspiration.

divine Spirit,"[4] while the Word of God made flesh remains unique to Christ. Taking advantage of the English system of capitalization, one could say that the word(s) of God are present in scripture (especially during *lectio divina*—or similar practices—and the liturgy of the word that precedes the liturgy of the eucharist during the mass) while the Word (as Logos) is made flesh in Christ.[5]

At the outset, it is helpful to admit the theological perspective from which this essay will proceed. I will be addressing this comparison from the standpoint of a practicing Roman Catholic who has been academically educated in the field of Catholic theology and philosophy first, and then entered into dialogue with the Islamic tradition through further academic study thereof. My Catholic faith has been strengthened and informed through the study of Islam, and so I am approaching this comparison as a Catholic practitioner and faithful, but also as an Islamic "believer." The Qur'ān, along with the theological, philosophical, and theosophical writings of Islam, have deeply moved and inspired me in the context of my Catholic faith. Furthermore, it is the high-church understanding of the sacrament of the eucharist that is the pivot around which the ritualistic and practical aspects of this essay turn. In addition to Catholicism, other high-church denominations that possess a similar sacramental theology of the eucharist include the Orthodox (Oriental and Eastern), Anglicans, and some strands of Lutheranism and of Methodists.[6] However, the importance placed on the sermon (the preached word) in other Protestant denominations could in fact lead to a completely different comparison with Islamic thought, though this is not the subject of this essay.[7]

In any case, my approach, while remaining confessional on a personal level, is intended to bring to light certain comparisons—academic, religious, theological, subjective, and objective—that will aid in Christian-Muslim theological dialogue. The intent is theological, interreligious, and comparative all at once, and the goal is to bring certain "intersections of theology" to the attention of both Muslims and Christians. As such, two questions will be addressed in this essay: First, how can Islamic thought on encountering the Word affect eucharistic theology of theosis? Second, how can Christians who have this understanding of the eucharist come to respect and appreciate the religion of Islam better through this comparison?

Finally, much will be said about spiritual transformation, taking on the character traits of God by emulating them in one's actions in the greater community, theosis, and even the mystical goal of renouncing the self in order to

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[4]Pope Paul VI, *Dei verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation), November 18, 1986, no. 9.

[5]I find it necessary to remain within the confines of this strict interpretation of the Word/words of God. It is certainly feasible—and, in fact, meritorious—to explore comparisons between qur'ānic practices of recitation and contemplation and parallel scriptural practices found within Christianity; much can be shared and learned from one another, and it is my hope that this method of comparative and interreligious theology between Christianity and Islam will be pursued, whether by myself or others.

[6]Hereafter, I will use the term "Christian" or "high-church Christian" to refer collectively to members of these denominations.

[7]In fact, the language used to describe canonical scripture in Protestant denominations is not unlike the language Muslims use to describe the Qur'ān.

reach union with God. These are all broad topics whose particulars could be comparative theological projects by themselves. That being said, this essay is limited to the actual practices and rituals of the eucharist and qur'ānic recitation and their immediate effects upon the spiritual seeker; my hope is that future comparisons will take place that consider the various unaddressed tangents of this essay.

I. The Role of the Word

A. The Role of the Word: Christianity

The role of the Word of God in Christianity is directly connected to the role of Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—both as exemplar for humans who wish to live according to the ways of the Word and as the Savior of humanity. He came to establish the truth on this earth and to be a light shining in the darkness[8] *by actually being himself* "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."[9] Christ, in effect, is the sacrament *par excellence* that gives reality to all other sacraments within the tradition. Through Christ, humanity was given access to the Divine, as Irenaeus of Lyon (and countless others after him) wrote, "God became man so that man might become God."

A practical role of the Word, that is, Christ, in Christianity is one of imitation. Through Christ, the human and the Divine became intricately connected, and in fact the goal of every Christian should be to recreate in oneself—through inner attitudes and outer actions—the reality of Christ (that is, a reality in which one attempts to move closer to union with God). The Word is the intermediary through whom individuals are able to attain such spiritual union and thus imitate Christ in all his virtue, from his compassion and selfless, disinterested love to his justice and forgiveness. The role of *imitatio Christi* has its theological counterpart in Islam, which will become apparent as we enter deeper into this comparison.

The role of Christ as Savior also plays a significant role in this comparison. Rather than shun traditional interpretations of redemption, along with the salvific significance of Calvary, as being theologically passé, the role of Christ as Savior is fundamentally connected with the role of the eucharistic sacrifice and sacrament. On the surface, it may seem strange to maintain Christ's role as Savior—namely, his passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection—when entering into dialogue with Islam, which denies the crucifixion of Jesus in its own way.[10] However, rather than forgo fundamental beliefs for amicable relations with Islam, the point of this theological comparison is to remain as true to one's faith as possible, while being open to transformation by another faith. In any comparison that is both theological and interreligious in nature, we must not hide behind a modified version of theology in order that we not contradict "the other"; instead,

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[8]Cf. Jn. 1:5.

[9]Jn. 14:6.

[10]Cf. Surah 4:150–159: "yet they did not slay him [Jesus], neither crucified him."

only when we maintain the fundamentals of theology will the transcendent light be shed on sublime "similarities-in-apparent-contradictions," thus allowing true interreligious learning to occur.

B. The Role of the Word: Islam

The role of the Word in Islam is nearly identical to that of Christianity, mutatis mutandis. The Word became the Qur'ān, which is a discernment (al-furqān) between Truth and error: "The truth has come, and falsehood has vanished away; surely falsehood is ever certain to vanish. And We send down, of the Qur'ān, that which is a healing and a mercy to the believers[.]"[11] The Qur'ān offers Muslims the Divine path to follow in order to live according to God's will, without which the multiplicity and relativity of this world would remain in confusion; with the Qur'ān, humanity can now return to unity (at-tawḥīd) and order. In a way similar to Christ's illuminating the path of righteousness for a fallen humanity, the Qur'ān illuminates the path of doing God's will. Esoterically, "the tales in the Quran are enacted almost daily in our souls . . . Mecca is our heart and . . . the tithe, the fast, the pilgrimage and the holy war are so many contemplative attitudes."[12]

The in-breaking of the Absolute Word of God into this relative world is apparent in Islam as well: "The Koran is pre-existent; the umm al-kitāb (Sūra 43:4) is preserved in the heavenly original on the lawḥ maḥfūz, the Well-preserved Tablet, and thus the Koran, once it appeared in this world, makes the Divine power present among humans."[13] In other words, the Word became the Qur'ān so that humanity, while in this world, may ever have access to the Divine; the Qur'ān is itself the sacrament par excellence as well, for it is both the symbol and the reality of the Sacred penetrating this world, just as Christ is and was.

While the Qur'ān may contain doctrinal expositions, historical and symbolic narratives, and eschatological imagery, it is above all a metaphysical document that transcends both space and time.[14] "The Quran is the world, both outside and within us, and always connected to God in the two respects of origin and end."[15] This is most likely the reason why the non-Muslim (and even Muslim) approaching the Qur'ān for the first time is left dumbfounded and confused: There seems to be no coherent order to its composition, in addition to surface-level contradictions and abstract thought that further puzzles the reader rather than bringing the discernment that the Qur'ān claims to harbor (and this is further complicated when reading a translation). However, it is the complex nature of

[11]Surah 17:83–85.

[12]Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, rev. and augmented (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1998 [orig.: *Comprendre l'Islam* (Gallimard, 1961; 1st E.T.: London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963)], p. 51.

[13]Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 155.

[14]In other words, the Qur'ān is the transcendent Word of God that has entered into this world. Its source is "other-worldly," but its audience is "this-worldly." The Qur'ān transcends this physical world, while at the same time addressing this world, and as such it can be considered metaphysical.

[15]Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 51.

the Qur'ān that allows it to affect the inner dimension of the reader, for it is the "very scattered or fragmented mode of composition that allows the Qur'ān to achieve its most profound effects, as if the intensity of the prophetic message were shattering the vehicle of human language in which it was being communicated."[16]

C. The Role of the Word: Christianity Meets Islam

The dimensions of the role the Word plays in Christianity and Islam could be protracted; however, what has been said is sufficient to offer a fruitful theological comparison. The critique of incoherency that non-Muslims level on the Qur'ān can be theologically put in context with what has already been stated. How many Christians, whether lay or scholars, feel comfortable speaking of Christ in terms of "hypostatic union," "*homoousian*" (consubstantial), or *"duæ substantiæ (naturæ) in una persona"* (two natures in one person) of Leo's Tome? Further, how many of these feel completely confident that this language is truly the absolute reality of Christology? The point of this comparison is not to second-guess christological language, which is sufficient at least to explain the unexplainable in philosophical parlance,[17] but only to show that defining and understanding the Word of God as manifested in this world is no facile task. Rather, it is a complex and theologically demanding one that requires deep—and even esoteric—reflection.

The christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, which gave us the terms and phrases to define the nature of Christ, are in fact repeated in Islamic thought, once again, *mutatis mutandis.* Whether the Qur'ān was pre-eternally coexistent with God or created in time and the relationship between the physical Qur'ān in this world with the pre-existent *umm al-kitāb* (Mother of the Book) in heaven were topics discussed and argued over by various groups (Mu'tazilites, Ḥanbalites, and Ash'arites, to name some prominent ones). However, "[w]hether one took the side of the Mu'tazilites [the Ḥanbalites, or any other established group] or the orthodox, it was accepted that the Koran is the Divine word which was 'inlibrated' through the medium of Muhammad."[18]

The theological comparison does not stop here. If the Word of God is the Qur'ān, and the medium is Muhammad, then the status of Mary in Christianity can also be seen in light of Islamic thought. Muhammad had to be a pure vessel in which to receive the Word of God in lettered format, and thus he was *ummī*, or "illiterate," so as not to affect the outcome of the final revelation.[19] The same

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[16]Michael Sells, "Introduction," in Michael Sells, intro. and tr., *Approaching the Qur'ān: The Early Revelations*, 2nd ed. (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2007 [1st ed., 1999]), p. 15, with reference to Norman O. Brown, "The Apocalypse of Islam," *Social Text*, no. 8 (1983–84), pp. 155–171.

[17]One can notice the parallel between the Qur'ān as metaphysical document and the language used to describe the nature of the Word made flesh. Each is dealing with an otherworldly being that transcends the physical world's entering into this material world.

[18]Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs*, p. 155.

[19] Whether *"ummī"* means "illiterate" or "gentile" (i.e., Muhammad was sent to the gentiles) is a discussion outside the confines of this essay. The point is that, theologically, a special importance was put on Muhammad's nature, the same way that it was put on Mary's nature as a virgin, which

is said of Mary, that she was a virgin who received the Word of God made flesh in her, and thus was a pure vessel. Her Immaculate Conception and bodily assumption into heaven are even paralleled in Muhammad's *Sîrah*, traditional stories of the life of the Prophet, and *ḥadīth*, sayings of the Prophet, when his heart was opened and cleansed of all impurities before entering the seventh heaven in his *Mi'rāj* (nightly ascent into heaven). Both were bearers of the Word of God, and both became and continue to remain the primary intercessors and deliverers of mercy in traditional piety. That is, they are *bearers* of God's mercy, for only God has the power truly to act according to Divine Mercy and really *be merciful* toward humanity, God's constitutive and ultimate Mercy being that which Mary and Muhammad delivered in the form of Christ and the Qur'ān, respectively, and continue to deliver through intercessory prayer. This comparison could continue and, in fact, is worthy of an entirely different theological reflection. It is only mentioned briefly in order to bring to light certain theological realities that are directly affected by this examination of the Word of God.

For Muslims, the Word of God made the Qur'ān is still with them to this day. They have ready access to it, resting on the top of their bookshelves out of respect for its elevated and sacramental position. Muslims in fact sacramentally interact with the Qur'ān—and thus with the Word of God—through reading, reciting, and listening to it on a regular basis. The performance of *dhikr* (remembrance) with the Qur'ān is a fundamental aspect of not only Sufi practices but also of the general Muslim population. The message of the Qur'ān, being at the same time historical (available in this world) and transcendent (part of another world), is infinite, for "if the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent."[20] As such, the message will always be complex and ever understood in a new and different way. In the same way that the Christ is both pre-eternal and transtemporal, but at one point historically part of this world, the Qur'ān is a metaphysical document of the same nature. Comprehending the multilayered message of the Qur'ān is just as difficult as responding to Christ's question to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am," not to mention the difficulty in understanding the words of the Word made flesh himself as recorded in the Gospels. When the Qur'ān is read, whether by Muslims or Christians, we must realize that it is a transtemporal, metaphysical text that was revealed in history, the essence of which lies outside this world. This is why understanding it is such an arduous task, while its recitation brings sacred tranquility to the listener, a sort of spiritually soothing state.

In Christianity, however, the Word of God made flesh in Christ takes on an additional role, for he "suffered, died, and was buried, and on the third day he rose again," as the Nicene Creed states. While Christ remains ever alive, do Christians have access to the Word of God in the same way that Muslims do? The sacrament of the eucharist is in fact the very way that they encounter and receive the Word of God. High-church Christians share the same reverence for the eucharist that Muslims do for the Qur'ān. They have developed spiritual and physical rituals—established by Christ no less—in order to encounter the Word:

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has its own translation problems in the prophecy found in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Is. 7.14).

[20]Surah 18:109.

"Sacraments are through their very nature an extension of the Incarnation, a continuation of that mystery expressed in the words: 'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.' Is not the Son of God made Man, the Sacrament *par excellence*, the *magnum sacramentum*, the invisible made visible?"[21] This is where the pivotal aspect of this comparison rests: How are Christians and Muslims transformed through their respective interactions with the Word of God? In addition, how can they be transformed through this interreligious and theological comparison?

II. Remembering the Word

A. "Do This in Remembrance of Me:" Remembering the Word in Christianity

Of the seven sacraments, the eucharist is the only one for which Christ commanded an exact replication of his words and actions: "Do this in remembrance of me."[22] The passion, crucifixion, and death of Jesus are events that are collectively remembered at every mass by the Christian community. During the Last Supper, Christ ordered his community to remember the moment (precisely!) and the events to come. In other words, Christ commanded the Christian community: *Remember me, remember this meal, and remember my coming passion, death, and crucifixion. Your future life depends on it.* For, in fact, the Last Supper commemorates and re-presents the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, in addition to Christ's life and ministry.

Christians who appreciate the eucharistic liturgy will readily agree with the Vatican's statement that the eucharist is "the source and summit of the life and mission of the Church."[23] It is the remembrance of the Last Supper through the eucharistic liturgy that brings Christians closer in union with Christ and his life, as well as with each other, for a holistic understanding of the eucharist implies a subsequent commitment to social justice as well. "A Sacrament is always an external sign witnessing to that more recondite quality of the soul, the faith that justifies man by bringing him into contact with Christ."[24] The faithful, then, enter into communion with the Word, in the form of his body, blood, soul, and divinity, whenever they participate in the eucharistic liturgy. It is a form of remembering the past so that it may transform the present and prepare for the future. Of course, remembrance of the Word and his passion can only lead to sublime effects upon the human soul, but these explications must wait until after we enter into the Islamic practice of *dhikr* and how this practice can inform the Christian understanding of both Islam and the sacrament of the eucharist.

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[21]Abbot [Anscar] Vonier, *A Key to the Doctrine of the Eucharist* (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus Press, 2003 [orig., 1925]), p. 9.

[22]Lk. 22:19.

[23]Cf. "The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church," a document published by the 11th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (February, 2004).

[24]Vonier, *Key to the Doctrine*, p. 7.

B. *Dhikr*: Remembering the Word in Islam

Dhikr literally means "mentioning," but the root is also connected to "recalling," "remembering," and "reminding." Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghāzalī (d. 1111), in his *Jewels of the Qur'ān*, focused on the intellectual and practical approaches of reading the Qur'ān. He wrote of *dhikr*: "Advancement towards [God] can only be achieved by perseverance in remembrance [*dhikr*] of Him, while turning away from things other than Him is effected by opposing passion, by cleansing oneself from the troubles of this world, and by purification of the soul from them."[25] *Dhikr* is mentioned very frequently in the Qur'ān, "since humanity is often called upon in the sacred text to remember God and his commands."[26] Surah 4:103 enjoins Muslims to "remember God" while performing the prayer (perhaps entreating the faithful to be conscious of their prayers rather than succumb to automatic movement), and Surah 13:28 gives quiet and restful hearts to those who remember God. At its core, *dhikr* is the remembering of the Sacred in the quotidian life of Muslims. While being the central practice in Sufi circles, it is also part of the mainstream piety of all Muslims. One of the primary forms of *dhikr* is the recalling of the ninety-nine names of God; however, another equally important form is the listening, recitation (*tajwīd*, or "making beautiful" the divine text through recitative cantillation), and reading of the Qur'ān, as well as visual concentration on the text of the Qur'ān (usually in the form of calligraphy).

The Qur'ān plays a principal role in what can be called Divine Remembrance:

> The Sufis speak of 'seeking to be drowned' (*istighrāq*) in the verses of the Qur'ān [the Word of God] . . . It is even read continuously by some Sufis—in India and West Africa, for example—who know very little Arabic; and if it be objected that such a reading can have only a fragmentary effect upon the soul inasmuch as the minds of the readers will be excluded from participation, the answer is that their minds are penetrated by the consciousness that they are partaking of the Divine Word.[27]

How their minds are penetrated is the subject of the following sections; however, it must be said that the importance of *dhikr* through *tajwīd* lies in the Word of God as it was given to this world: namely, an Arabic Qur'ān. The act of *dhikr* in connection with the Qur'ān is then a sacramental act that allows the Word of God to pierce the mind and soul of the Muslim faithful, and this is precisely what occurs when one listens to qur'ānic recitation—whether one understands Arabic or not. However, as mentioned above, it is not only the aural version of

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[25]al-Ghāzalī, *The Jewels of the Qur'ān: al-Ghāzalī's Theory*, tr., intro., and annotation Muhammad Abul Quasem (Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1977 [orig.: *al-Ghāzalī's Kitāb Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*]), p. 26.

[26]Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston, MA, and London: Shambhala Publications, 1997), p. 92.

[27]Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?* 2nd ed. (London; Boston, MA; and Sydney: Mandala Books [Unwin Paperbacks], 1981 [orig.: London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975]), p. 25.

the Qur'ān that aids Muslims to remember the Word, but its calligraphic impact as well, for "visual concentration on the Qur'an as the word of God was the closest possible approximation on earth to seeing God face to face."[28]

Dhikr, in its general form, can be understood as the implicit pillar of Islam that subsumes all other practices, for recalling God must be the foundation upon which all rituals rest. The preeminence of qur'ānic *dhikr*, a particular form thereof, can be summed up in the *ḥadīth qudsī*[29] that states, "Someone who reads the Qur'ān is as if he were talking to Me and I were talking with him."

C. Remembering the Word: Christianity Meets Islam

Remembrance of the Word thus forms a vital aspect of both Christian and Islamic spiritual practices. Christians who understand the eucharist can fully and deeply appreciate the Islamic practice of dhikr and thus come to understand and value this sacred faith. Furthermore, dhikr can even inform the Christian remembrance of the Word as found in the consecrated bread and wine and the eucharistic liturgy.

The eucharistic liturgy celebrates the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, and, as mentioned before, this event is rejected in the qur'ānic story of Jesus. Can Christians truly be transformed through a better understanding of an Islamic practice? If one is willing to transpose the rituals into their proper "theological key," then this becomes not only possible but also highly rewarding. Dhikr is meant to recall the Divine Truth as encountered—through the Qur'ān—in Islam, which is God's revelation of God's will to humanity. "To recite the Koran, the Word Inlibrate, is, so to speak, a sacramental act because it is in the Word that God reveals Himself—or His will—to humanity."[30] If Islam is the religion of the Divine Truth through the message of the Qur'ān, then Christianity is the religion of the Divine Presence. For, in the eucharist, we are constantly reminded of the "real presence" in the host and wine of Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity, that is, Word—which itself is an extension of the ultimate Divine Presence here on earth in history: Jesus of first-century Nazareth.

The interiorization of the Qur'ān through dhikr must be preceded by a "forgetting of oneself"[31] in order to make space for the Word of God to penetrate the mind and spirit. Equally, that is what Christians should be doing before receiving the eucharist: engaging in a similar examination of conscience, followed by an emptying of the ego in order to make space for the eucharistic graces that enter the soul and body upon reception of the Word made flesh. Much more can be said regarding the interior disposition before, during, and after the eucharistic liturgy and dhikr; however, these effects of the Word of God will be further addressed in the following sections.

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[28]Ernst, *Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, p. 85.

[29]A *ḥadīth qudsī* is a story of the prophet in which the prophet speaks in divine voice, and thus in the first-person (the "I" or "Me" referring to God). While similar in grammatical tense, mood, and person to the Qur'ān, they are not a part thereof.

[30]Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs*, p. 165.

[31]Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 148.

Finally, what of the command, "do this in remembrance of me," which seems to ask for exact replication, unlike any other sacrament? The importance of proper execution of the Divine Liturgy—to use the apt Eastern Orthodox name of the sacrament—as found in the eucharist is paralleled even in Islam, for the "'sacramental' quality of the Koran also accounts for the rule that basically no translation of the Koran is permissible or possible."[32] Reading the Qur'ān in translation may help one understand it intellectually, but it no longer remains the Word of God, and thus its spiritual effects are reduced. Criticizing and examining the rules of the eucharistic liturgy must be executed with humility,[33] for just as the Qur'ān must be read in Arabic in order to receive the Word of God, Christ commanded Christians to "do this" (and not anything else) in order to remember his life, passion, and death. While communal celebrations and prayer services may touch the heart of the Christian faithful (in a positive way, to be sure), the eucharistic liturgy of high-church Christians is on a completely different level: "Such [being ordinarily touched by God's grace in the heart] is not the case with sacraments; through them it becomes possible to focus the distant past and future in the actual present; through them historical events of centuries ago are renewed, and we anticipate the future in a very real way."[34]

In any case, thus far this comparison has remained within the confines of fairly traditional Christian orthodoxy. I have not made sparse use of theology that takes seriously the unique nature of Jesus that is unlike any other human's in history, nor have I shied away from traditional Christian soteriology and sacramental theology. In fact, this comparison has its foundation on an unquestionably traditional understanding of Christian thought, which may surprise many who believe that in order successfully to enter into dialogue with Islam—or any other religion—forgoing certain Christian positions is necessary. In the present case, this is furthest from the truth. In the same way, I do not call on Muslims to eschew fundamental thought on the Qur'ān, asking them to put it on the level of divine inspiration (or less), thus relegating its status to something it is not. Rather, I maintain traditional teaching on both sides, believing that lowering Christology or qur'anic theology would simply be out of fear of potentially offending the other and thus a form of theological mawkishness. Rather, I believe that the higher the theology the more apparent the transcendent connection between religious traditions can be first seen, then understood, and finally examined in the form of theological reflection.

III. Effects of the Word

We have now arrived at the keystone of our theological arch at which Christian and Islamic thoughts connect: the spiritual and transformational effect of encountering the Word of God in an individual's daily life through sacramental actions. For Christians, the Word of God made flesh in history is *orally* and sac-

[32]Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs*, p. 165.
[33]This explains the Catholic Church's strict guidelines concerning its eucharistic liturgy.
[34]Vonier, *Key to the Doctrine*, p. 14.

ramentally received in the Divine Liturgy of the eucharist in the present, while for Muslims the Word of God made Qur'ān[35] is *aurally* and sacramentally received through the spiritual practice of qur'ānic *dhikr*. We begin with the Christian explanation of how the eucharist affects the communicant, continue with the Islamic understanding of the effects of *dhikr*, and then connect the two aspects together with the hope of coming to a better understanding of both the eucharist and Islam.

A. Effects of the Word: Christianity

John 17:21-23, which is part of the Last Supper Discourse, sets the stage for the understanding of the eucharistic effects on the very being of the communicant: "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, *that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me.*" Through the eucharist, the process of theosis takes place in that communicants become closer to God—transformed—through the reception of God's Word. The Eastern Church has made more use of this term, which can be translated as "divinization" or "deification," to suggest unabashedly that in the eucharist we "become Divine" through union with Christ, the Word made flesh. However, this process of theosis is not simply a self-glorification that leads to unperturbed bliss: "The effects of the Eucharistic Communion are multiple: they have the liberty and unpredictability of an entry of God into the soul. They can by turns console and distress the soul, illuminate and submerge it by eddies coming from the night of our Savior's agony . . . Nevertheless, all multiplicity of its effects tends toward one end: the consummation of the spiritual life."[36] What Christ stated at his Bread of Life Discourse finds its actualization in the eucharist: "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."[37]

However, the precise moment of consuming the eucharist cannot be understood removed from the context of the eucharist liturgy as a whole, which includes the retelling of the passion narrative, the words of institution, and, above all, a sacramental re-presentation of the sacrifice on Calvary. What takes place at the Divine Liturgy is a sort of transtemporal and transpatial event in which the *historical* sacrifice of Christ, the *present* sign at the eucharistic table, and the *future* union with God all fold up into one transcendent moment:

> The world of natural reality and the sign-world of sacramental reality are two different worlds, and yet, in the case of the Eucharistic sacrifice, they yield

[35]It is theologically tenuous to use the phrase "Word of God made Book," for in reality the Qur'ān (*al-Qur'ān*, meaning "the recitation") is the Word of God in its recited format, while the textual format of a bound copy, a *mushaf*, does not quite share the same level. In other words, the Qur'ān is the Word of God made "Recitation."

[36]Charles Journet, *The Mass: The Presence of the Sacrifice of the Cross*, tr. Victor Szczurek (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2008 [tr. from 3rd ed. of *La messe, prâesence du sacrifice de la croix* (Bruges: Desclee de Brouwer, 1961)]), p. 196.

[37]Jn. 6:53.

> up to us the same content. The sacrifice of the Mass is the expression in sign of all that our great high priest in his once-for-all offering on the Cross underwent, did, and was. Calvary and the Mass are the self-same reality, in two utterly different modes.[38]

The eucharist is an extension of the Incarnation, and thus intricately connected with the life of Jesus in general, and with the passion, crucifixion, and death of Christ specifically. How are Christians transformed, then? By partaking in the eucharistic liturgy, in effect, Christians become active contemplatives and even extraordinary mystics. A true theosis would mean a transformation of inner character that leads to proper external actions. If the Word penetrates a Christian's very being, then he or she should attempt to emulate the actions of the Word as lived on earth: that is, recalling and acting out Christ's selfless and disinterested love, charity, forgiveness, reconciliation, mercy, justice, and, above all, "com-passion"—a "suffering with." Not only do Christians enter into Christ's passion through the eucharist, but they also enter into the passion of all humanity and, thus, are given the will and courage to end the suffering through right action, which is none other than an *imitatio Christi.*

B. Effects of the Word: Islam

Abū Ḥafṣ 'Omar as-Suhrawardī (d. 1234) wrote, "To listen to the Koran means to listen to God; hearing becomes seeing, seeing becomes hearing, knowing turns into action, action turns into knowing—that is 'fine hearing'."[39] Knowing does indeed turn into action, and this action is one of mercy and righteousness combined. Surah 21:105–107 reads, "After the remembrance, the earth shall be the inheritance of My righteous servants. Surely in this is a Message delivered unto a people who serve. We have not sent thee [Muhammad] save as a mercy unto all beings."

The Qur'ān, then, "fills the soul and then absorbs it and imperceptibly transposes it into the climate of serenity and immutability."[40] This is precisely the sacramental quality of listening to the Qur'ān through the ritual of *dhikr*, "which should permeate the entire body and soul . . . [and] remove the rust and make the heart clear so that it can receive the radiant Divine light and reflect the Divine beauty."[41] Reflecting the Divine beauty is emulation of God as "the most merciful, the compassionate," as every Surah (save one) in the Qur'ān begins. Esoterically, *dhikr* is a central practice in the spiritual path of a Muslim, that of "an offering; it is ultimately an offering of the individual self in exchange for the Supreme Self."[42] Hence, Muslim means "the one who submits or surrenders [to God]," esoterically interpreted to mean an ultimate denial of the ego in order to make room for the only true existent, which is God. The process of theosis is

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[38]Vonier, *Key to the Doctrine*, p. xiv.

[39]Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs*, p. 156, quoting Suhrawardī's *'Awārif al-ma'ārif*, tr. R. Gramlich (1978), p. 41.

[40]Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 47–48.

[41]Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs*, p. 148.

[42]Martin Lings, *What Is Sufism?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), p. 68.

thus clearly apparent in the practice of reciting the Qur'ān and in *dhikr*, and in its own way can influence the Christian understanding of the eucharist, as will be shown.

Another *ḥadīth qudsī* of the Prophet reiterates the possibility of union with God and, even though directly addressing devotional life, relates to *dhikr* when viewed as a voluntary rite in which so many Muslims partake:[43] "Nothing is more pleasing to Me, as a means of My slave to draw near unto Me, than worship which I have made binding upon him; and My slave ceaseth not to draw near unto Me with added devotions of his free will until I love him; and when I love him I am the Hearing wherewith he heareth and the sight wherewith he seeth and the Hand whereby he graspeth and the Foot whereon he walketh." By the process of *dhikr* and qur'ānic recitation, the actual historical or doctrinal subject of the text may be temporarily relegated in order to give ascent to the more fundamental aspect of the Qur'ān: the Word of God. By participating in this devotional practice, and by adding *dhikr* to any devotional rite, the Word of God permeates the body and soul to the point where one acts according to the will of God, which is just, merciful, beautiful, and compassionate.

C. Effects of the Word: Christianity Meets Islam

The Qur'ān was sent as a mercy for God's creation, and, as witnessed above, if the Word of God made Qur'ān is to pervade an individual's very being, then the only result will be a complete transformation toward emulation of the Word: mercy, compassion, and justice. As far as the Qur'ān is concerned, creation would be at a loss, confused, and disordered without the Word of God manifested in this world as a guide to do God's will. Similarly, the Word made flesh is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" that leads creation from darkness to the illuminated imitatio Christi. If Christ truly is "the Life," then Christians must acknowledge that they owe their very existence to God's mercy. Though humans are nothing without the Word of God giving us Life, they are also everything because the Word has come to sustain the very being of individuals. Christians externally—and really—re-present this reality through the eucharist, which sustains their spiritual livelihood, the same way that the Word of God maintains the existence of creation in Islamic thought, for "all that dwells upon the earth is perishing, yet still abides the Face of thy Lord, majestic, splendid."[44] The wonderful and providential news given to each faith is that there is ready access to the Word, whether it is through the eucharist or the Qur'ān, and thus theosis is a real possibility in a practitioner's life.

The transtemporal and metaphysical nature of the Qur'ān was saved for this section in order truly to appreciate its transcendent connection with the Divine Liturgy. The eucharistic sacrifice is beyond space and time: "The Eucharist, as a sacramental sign, represents temporal contexts that are not our own. It draws us

[43]Walking through the streets of nearly any Muslim majority city, one will be hard pressed not to hear qur'ānic recitation coming from the shops and streetside vendors as it permeates the environment with its beautiful and sacred sound.

[44]Surah 55:26–27.

into those contexts and takes us out of the time and place in which we live."[45] That is, the Divine Liturgy operates on a plane of existence (the sacramental mode) that connects the past, present, and future.

> But the Eucharist activates the dimensions of time in a still deeper way. Besides displacing us into the past, it also turns us toward the end of time and to its beginning. It anticipates the final coming of the kingdom of God and it recalls the act of Creation, the first of the saving actions of God.
> . . . precisely by materializing God's action, the Eucharist brings his action into the present.
> . . . The Eucharist embodies and reenacts God's action here and now [and] . . . draws us into the new contexts of past, future, and eternity.[46]

Unenlightened readers of the Qur'ān tend to read it as a strictly historical text that, while mentioning the past as well as eschatological events of the distant future, remains confined to its temporal contexts. However, the Qur'ān is much more, and understanding its transtemporal nature will aid Christians in understanding the equally mysterious nature of the Word of God as found in the Divine Liturgy and, in turn, come to a better appreciation of the Qur'ān.

In encountering the Qur'ān in translation, one loses the malleable nature of the original Arabic. James Morris, in discussing Muḥyi'ddīn Ibn 'Arabī's (d. 1240) *Meccan Illuminations*, dedicated a portion of his essay to understanding the transtemporal nature of the Qur'ān. Many events in the Qur'ān begin with the Arabic *idh*, often translated as "when," but better translated as "Lo!" or "Behold!" However, whatever the translation,

> [T]he important thing is to imaginatively move the 'event' in question into the kind of *immediately present*, visionary imaginal 'place' [sacramental mode of the eucharistic liturgy] and direct existential connection [real participation in the passion of Christ during the Divine Liturgy] actually suggested by the Arabic. . . . Ibn 'Arabī himself sometimes calls such frequent, important and often otherwise mystifying Qur'anic passages '*mashāhid barzakhiyya*': 'places-of-immediate-witnessing in the intermediate, spiritual world'. Such typical Qur'anic passages represent precisely the kind of humanly central, often dramatically foundational inner 'immediate witnessing' and 'deep memory' ["Do this in remembrance of me."] (within a highly complex, subjective or even completely unknown time-framework).[47]

Related is the critical use of the Arabic *masdar*, or "verbal-noun," which is itself tense-less but active:

> In the original Qur'anic Arabic, the recurrent Arabic *masdar*, participial, and relatively 'concretised' adjectival forms all to some degree intrinsically and

[45]Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), p. 210.

[46]Ibid., pp. 210, 212, and 213.

[47]James Morris, "Ibn 'Arabī's Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and 'Translating' the *Meccan Illuminations*: Part II," *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society*, vol. 34 (2003), p. 132; emphasis in original; bracketed material added.

> profoundly retain their underlying *active, verbal root-sense which* are essentially observable facets of a single unifying process, of an essentially active, unitary divine 'Verbal Reality'. That is, the essentially verbal, active form of those recurrent Qur'anic expressions, inevitably lost in their reduction to static English nouns and adjectives, is in itself the ongoing mirroring of God's immediately present and active 'Speaking', not of some separate, reified 'Speech'.[48]

As such, the Qur'ān needs to be read as if it is taking place in the eternal now that has folded up the past and future into one unifying moment. Encountering the Qur'ān then takes our very being on this historical plane and transfers it to union with both the Eternal One and with those who have come before us and who will come after us.

This is precisely how the Divine Liturgy is understood, for the Sacrifice of Calvary is a singular moment in the historical past that unites with the sacramental sacrifice of the eucharist in the present (recalling the sacramental mode). In other words, the eucharist is the divinely foreordained way by which Christ chose to have Christians remember him. At the eucharist, Christians are witnesses to the reality of Calvary and thus recall a deep communal memory in which all partake, by which they transcend space and time uniting with the Word of God (and with the passion on Calvary) through theosis. Christ continues to speak to humanity at the eucharistic liturgy, enjoining individuals in the present the same way that he encouraged the twelve apostles in the past, and this is how one must enter into the Divine Liturgy. Time and space are folded into one eternal moment in which humanity becomes active participants in a singular moment in history, a "place-of-immediate-witnessing," to use Morris' translation of Ibn Arabi's phrase. In fact, the *barzakh* ("intermediate, spiritual world" about which Ibn 'Arabī had much to say) is mirrored by the "sacramental mode" found in high-church theology. Encountering the Divine Liturgy and the eucharist, as with the Qur'ān, allows an individual's being to unite with both the Eternal One and with those who have participated in the eucharist before (Church Victorious) and who will participate in it after (Church Militant), just as Christ prayed "that they may all be one" in the Last Supper Discourse previously cited.

Ibn 'Arabī, one of the most influential Sufis in Islamic history whose teachings permeate nearly every facet of Muslim piety, wrote in his *Book of the Quintessence concerning What Is Indispensable for the Spiritual Seeker* advice on how to approach the Qur'ān:

> Ask and inquire (of God), with regard to each Sura, what it is you ought to ask about regarding that. Try to figure out for every verse its special relevance and lesson for you. Meditate and put into practice, for each verse, what is its relevance and connection (to your actual situation), and what those qualities and attributes are indicating (that you should now learn or do). Reflect on those qualities and attributes you have, and on those which you are missing. Then give Him thanks for those which you have and those which you have not (yet) attained! And when you read a description of (the contrast-

[48]Ibid., p. 133; emphasis in original.

> ing negative attributes of) the hypocrites and those who ungratefully reject (God), then reflect as to whether there is not also something of those same attributes in you.[49]

This would also be helpful advice as Christians self-reflect and mediate before and during the eucharistic liturgy. In preparation for theosis, whether through the Qur'ān or the eucharist, there can be an active examination of how lives can be conformed to the Word of God. This meditation on the Word of God can also be transposed to the high-church Christian (and specifically Catholic) meditative practice of eucharistic adoration (explicitly, compare meditation on the Qur'ān in calligraphic art). How can individuals put into practice the actions of the Word made flesh? What is it that needs to be done in order truly to conform to Christ's life? Individuals can be grateful for any humble emulation they have succeeded in doing and then follow that with a reflection on what negative aspects they have that contradict the Word. If Christians truly understood the earth-shattering effects of the eucharist on their very beings, the courage and willingness to transform into the Word of God in an individual's fallen way would be multiplied. Through the eucharist, one can truly say that "Christ reenacts in the outward historical world what is being enacted at all times in the inner world of the soul,"[50] and this reenactment is made explicit during the eucharistic liturgy.

In the same short treatise (which was probably Ibn 'Arabī's most widely read work), he encouraged believers to practice general *dhikr* at all times; however, should one tire of *dhikr,* one should turn to the recitation of the Qur'ān:

> You must practice *dhikr* (remembering God) and asking His Forgiveness. For (asking His forgiveness) after you've sinned effaces and removes the sin, while doing so after you've been willingly obedient and have done good (*ihsān*) brings '*light upon light*' and joy upon joy. As for *dhikr*, that unifies the (scattered) heart and purifies your inner thoughts and intentions. But if you should tire (of performing *dhikr*), then turn to reciting the book of God, reciting it deliberately and reflectively, glorifying and exalting God. (Recite the Qur'ān) while asking and imploring (God), if it is a verse of imploring; or with awe and humility, if it is a verse (suggesting) fear and a threat and a warning and lesson. As for the Qur'ān, the one who recites it never tires of it, because of the (constantly changing) diversity of meanings within it.[51]

Ibn 'Arabī claimed that one could never tire of reciting the Qur'ān even if one may tire of general *dhikr*; if anything, this points to the sublime nature of the Qur'ān and its importance in the ritual and prayer life of the spiritual seeker. His advice was that one should become the action and emotion that the specific verse embodies, in the same way that one should seek transformation in the di-

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[49]Ibid., p. 124, n. 97, quoting from a then-planned volume, "Spiritual Practice and the Spiritual Path: Ibn 'Arabī's Advice for the Murīd."

[50]Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 139.

[51]Ibn al-'Arabī, *K. al-Kunh ma la yanbaghi li-l-murid* (*Book of the Quintessence concerning What Is Indispensable for the Spiritual Seeker*), tr. James W. Morris (unpublished; used with permission).

vine attributes that a specific verse encourages (the previous quote). Entering into the affective mode of the Word of God is essential to those seeking a spiritual transformation. In the same way, Christians can enter not only into the suffering of Christ at Calvary but also into sympathy and compassion with the greater community.

Yet, this transformation is for naught unless, as briefly mentioned above, it affects our interactions with each other. It is evident that the qur'ānic practice of *dhikr* imprints within the Muslim the strength to emulate the attributes of God; the transformation is made real in our actions within the greater community. The same holds true for the Christian community known as "The Mystical Body of Christ." Qur'ānic recitation tends to be a communal event, and the eucharistic liturgy is surely communal as well. By "becoming the Word" we are expected to imitate the Word in our interactions with others. The Mystical Body of Christ embraces Christians of the past, present, and future, just as the Islamic *ummah* (community of Muslims) finds its origin in the primordial covenant mentioned in the Qur'ān, when all the descendents of Adam are asked, "Am I not your Lord?" and they said, "Yes, we testify."[52]

Conclusion

This essay only scratches the surface of such a sublime and sacred subject, and much more could be written. It is evident that theosis in the eucharist and qur'ānic *dhikr* can inform each other, both as has been done and in many other fruitful ways. The theology of the Word offers Christians and Muslims a unique path for theological, philosophical, theosophical, and mystical dialogue that must not and cannot be ignored. Be that as it may, it is obvious that many Christians and Muslims may find this sort of comparison appalling. My hope is that this brief foray into the comparison will shed some appreciative and respectful light on the "religious other." Each tradition has been divinely given a sacred and unique method for reaching the Word of God and for understanding the sustaining presence thereof. To those who still have trouble accepting this comparison, I can offer a brief interreligious consolation. Even Muslims speak of Christ as the Word of God and His Spirit.[53] Furthermore, the way the Qur'ān experiences the Word of God also gives new meaning to the power of Jesus' actual spoken word in the miracles he performed (which the Qur'ān does not deny). In addition, the high point of the eucharistic liturgy is, in fact, the words of institution, when the priest repeats, *in persona Christi*, the words of Christ as he did at the Last Supper.[54] The power of the Word in Christianity, it seems, is not reserved to Christ's nature, but also to real words as it does in Islam and qur'ānic recitation.

This theological comparison, furthermore, shows a sublime and transcen-

[52]Qur'ān 7:172.

[53]"The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him" (Surah 4:168).

[54]"This is my body . . . this is my blood" (Lk. 22:19–21).

dent connection between these two sacred faiths. While in this world, these faiths appear to contradict each other exoterically, which is only natural. The manifestations of the Divine Light in this world (the Absolute entering the relative) refract as a prism refracts light in every direction, creating a majestic, polychromatic matrix of the world's faiths, unique and distinct in and of themselves, and in contradistinction to each other. Yet, there is a thread that weaves in and out of these faiths, connecting them on certain levels, that providentially allows those searching for transcendent connections to encounter and learn from them. This is just one of those threads among a meshwork of possibilities. While I remained within the confines of high-church Christian-Muslim dialogue and theological comparison, there is much more to be discussed in the broader area of Christian-Muslim dialogue and theological comparison. I hope that this has been one template among many of how real theological dialogue and comparison can take place, without sacrificing fundamental beliefs.