

## The Transcendent Unity of Religion: A Brief Exposition\*

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### Abstract:

This article attempts to explain and prove the fallacies of the philosophical idea of transcendentalism, a notion which purportedly claims that all religions are essentially and equally valid. It traces its origin and focuses on its spread among religious followers, particularly Muslims. It questions the truth and validity of the idea as propagated by certain renowned modern intellectuals, Muslims or otherwise, using rational proofs, classical and contemporary scholarly opinions and most importantly, textual evidences. It tries to show how these resources have been misappropriated, and in the process, exposes the deficiencies and irregularities of the arguments favouring the idea. It also seeks to remind Muslims

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\* This article is extended from my earlier shorter writing, "Transcendent Unity of Religion: A Preliminary Response," *Al-Hikmah* 4, no. 2 (April-Ogos 1998): 10-17. I must express my gratitude, firstly to Prof. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the Founder-Director of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC, 1987-2002), for paving my interest into this subject matter; and secondly to my colleague, Dr. Mohd Sani Badron, who, through discussions, supplied me with other relevant points as well as sources.

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to be wary of its detrimental consequences if subscribed.

**Keywords:**

Transcendent, religion, unity of religions, transcendentalism, perennial philosophy, pluralism, diversity, *waḥdat al-adyān*, *rabb*, *rubūbiyyah*, *ilāh*, *ulūhiyyah*, God, esoterism, exoterism, exclusive, inclusive, salvation, happiness, equality, validity, ethics, values.

## Introduction

The notion, the “transcendent unity of religion” (transcendentalism), represents a philosophical idea, a concept, or a theory that attempts to approach the relation of the world’s religions in universal terms acceptable to all. It is an analysis of unity and diversity in religion. It basically claims that all religions are alike in essence and differ only in forms. These religions are different because they exist within the world of forms whereas each of them is actually based upon and issued from the same formless one Essence. In other words, externally all religions are different but internally they are the same. Therefore, transcendentalism refers to the experience of unity of religions (*waḥdat al-adyān*) at this internal, formless, inward and esoteric level, or what is called the transcendent realm. This level is attainable by means of mystical teachings and practices of all religions. This means that all religions ultimately come from one single source: the same sole Absolute, the Real, the Ultimate Being. The existence of various religions only constitutes variant conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the one Ultimate Divine Reality. Since each religion comes from the same Absolute, each religion contains within itself a measure of the absolute truth, and at the same time, is a valid method and means for the attainment of that truth. Therefore, all religions are of

equal validity. As such and being true, no one in any particular religion may condemn others as religiously “less privileged” simply because they have been born into other religions. Transcendentalism teaches that no one’s religion is wrong. It affirms religious pluralism without giving any special superior position to any particular religion over the others. It follows that we must consider the variety of the world’s religions as alternative ways or means along which men and women can find salvation, liberation, fulfilment and happiness, provided they live and practice their own respective religions wholeheartedly and sincerely.<sup>1</sup>

### Definition

“To transcend” is to “go or lie beyond the limits of experience, knowledge; or to escape inclusion in a category, classification, etc.”<sup>2</sup> or to “be beyond the range or grasp of human experience, reason, belief etc.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, “transcendence” means the state of transcending the world of sense and comprehension. When used in the context of religion, it means that regardless of the various forms of religions, all of them are united at a certain level, i.e., at the level of esoterism.

1. For a detailed exposition of *wahdat al-adyān*, see Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religion*, with an introduction by Huston Smith (Wheaton: The Philosophical Publishing House, 1984; 1st pub. 1957); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (New York: Amity House, 1986), esp. pp. 14–26; and *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), vol. 12, s.v. “Religious Pluralism” (pp. 331–2).
2. William Allan Anderson, ed. in chief, *Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2d ed. unabridged with ref. history (Springfield: G & C Merriam Co. Publishers, 1957; 1st pub. 1909).
3. *The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, repr. ed. 1995).

## Origin

Transcendentalism has been propagated mainly in the West decades before the term “transcendent unity of religion” was put into writing for the first time in 1957. It was coined by Frithjof Schuon, a modern master of the discipline of comparative religion, particularly in his book, *The Transcendent Unity of Religion*. This concept has been deliberated repeatedly in his other works. However, Schuon is not the first author who introduces this idea since it was already discussed before the appearance of his writings, like in the thought and intellectual discourses of René Guénon (d. 1951)<sup>4</sup> and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (d. 1947).<sup>5</sup> Guénon is particularly considered as an initiator of the school of thought affiliated with the teaching of *sophia perennis* or *philosophia perennis* (perennial philosophy).<sup>6</sup> The main principle of this school is

4. René Guénon (Muslim name: Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahid Yahya) was a French author and intellectual who remains an influential figure in the domain of metaphysics, having written on topics ranging from metaphysics, sacred science and traditional studies to symbolism and initiation. Quoted from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9\\_Gu%C3%A9non](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Gu%C3%A9non) (accessed 17 August 2011).
5. He was a Ceylonese philosopher and metaphysician. Deeply influenced by René Guénon, and along with him, he became one of the founders of Perennialism, also called the Traditionalist School, a school of comparative religious thought. His most mature works adeptly expound the perspective of the perennial philosophy by drawing on a detailed knowledge of the arts, crafts, mythologies, cultures, folklores, symbolisms, and religions of both the East and the West. Modified from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ananda\\_Coomaraswamy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ananda_Coomaraswamy) and <http://www.worldwisdom.com/public/authors/Ananda-K-Coomaraswamy.aspx> (both accessed 12 December 2011).
6. “Perennial philosophy is the philosophical concept, which states that each of the world’s religious traditions shares a single truth. [It] asserts that there is a single divine foundation of all religious knowledge, referred to as the universal truth. Each world religion, independent of its cultural or historical context, is simply a different interpretation of this knowledge. World religions . . . are all derived from the same universal truth. Although the sacred scriptures of these world religions are undeniably diverse and often oppose each other, each world religion has been formed to fit the social, mental and spiritual needs of their



that all religions ultimately claim the same thing but in a variety of means. In order to understand this universal commonality of substance, one has to shift or come out from the external to the internal aspects of the religions. On the other hand, Coomaraswamy shows his favour in transcendentalism by defending the conception of perennial philosophy in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*.<sup>7</sup>

Some may regard Schuon as the best propagator of transcendentalism primarily due to his ability to explain the idea lucidly with considerable excellence. His writings, mainly on religions, have been claimed to have influenced many outstanding scholars of the 20th century and have attracted significant followers from almost all major religions around the globe. Intellectuals who allegedly subscribed to the idea include Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings (both of whom are Muslims), T. S. Eliot, Marco Pallis, Jean-Louis Michon, Jean Cantein, Victor Danner, Joseph E. Brown, William Stoddart, Lord Northbourne, Gai Eaton, W. N. Perry, Henri Corbin, Huston Smith, G. Durand, E. F. Schumacher, J. Needleman, William C. Chittick, John Hick and many others.<sup>8</sup> Since the “founder” as well as the majority of notable followers of transcendentalism were from the West, it is perhaps safe for us to say that this part of the world is actually the birthplace, or the place of origin, of the doctrine. It appears that transcendentalism is now gaining wider momentum among followers of world religions and the number of the transcendentalists, or perennialists, keeps increasing.

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respective epoch and culture. Therefore, perennial philosophy maintains that each world religion has flourished from the foundation of the same universal truth, making these differences superficial and able to be cast aside to find religion's deeper spiritual meaning.” Quoted from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perennial\\_philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perennial_philosophy) (accessed 12 December 2011).

7. (New York: Dover, 1956).

8. Nasr, *Essential Writings*, 55–6. The last two names are my addition.

## Spread among Muslims

The doctrine and teachings of transcendentalism was introduced, developed and spread by intellectuals like Guénon, Schuon and some others. It is alarming to our utmost concern to see that transcendentalism is influencing a significant portion of Muslims as well, especially the educated members of the community. This spread has been receiving steady momentum since majority of them were educated in the West. For years they have been directly or indirectly exposed to and influenced by the Western style of thinking, believing and judging. Through literature and some other means, the idea of transcendentalism subtly penetrates into and resides in their minds. When they return to their people—some of them managed to occupy influential positions in the society—they become conscious and unconscious transmitters of this unnecessary confusion.

Assessing from the literary works available to us, we can say that perhaps Seyyed Hossein Nasr is one of the most outstanding Muslim figures who seems to accept transcendentalism and propagates the idea and related issues among his fellow Muslims. This inclination, for example, can be seen in Nasr's *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*. He claims that Schuon's writings have generally made an impact on other Muslim scholars and authors like the late Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, the former Rector of al-Azhar University, Uthman Yahya, A. K. Brohi, Muḥammad Ajmal, Yusuf Ibish and others.<sup>9</sup> Nasr seems to believe that the notion of *waḥdat al-adyān* is acceptable in Islam through sufism. In fact in his *Sufi Essays*, Nasr considers sufism as the qualified vehicle to understand and indulge into the unity that underlies the

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9. Ibid.

diversity of religious forms.<sup>10</sup> To this effect, he argues in favour of transcendentalism by quoting evidence from Muslim *ṣūfis* in the past like Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240/638), Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273/672), ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1428/832) and arguably Dārā Shukūh (d. 1659/1069).<sup>11</sup> Nasr’s inclination becomes more conspicuous when he reiterates the same ideas in an interview (together with John Hick in October 1994) that no religion has the exclusive right to claim the truth absolutely.<sup>12</sup>

It is arduous to establish any concrete reason(s) why certain scholars or a group of intellectuals embrace *waḥdat al-adyān* with much rigour and deliberately endeavour to disseminate its concept and understanding worldwide. Some of the advocates of this doctrine are Muslims or claim to be Muslims. According to Syed Muḥammad Naquib al-Attas, the idea of transcendentalism is set forth perhaps for motives other than the truth.<sup>13</sup> These motives could be personal or/and political. Certain writers/scholars, in their quest for fame and wider acceptance, may simply propound and offer the idea to the multiplicity of world’s religious communities hoping for their applause recognition. This kind of authors may succeed in gaining popularity nationally and internationally, but, especially for Muslims, at the expense of a genuinely true religion—Islam.

10. S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1991), 123–51.
11. For our purpose here, the discussion will be focused on Jīlī and Shukūh only, then on Nasr. Some references refer to “Shukūh” as “Shikūh.” The spelling used here follows the one adopted by the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.
12. Adnan Aslan, “Religions and the concept of the Ultimate: An Interview with John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr,” *The Islamic Quarterly* XXX, no. 4 (1996): 266–83. Cf. Turkish ed.: “Dinler ve Mutlak hakikat Kavramı: John Hick ve Sayyid Huseyin Nasr’la Bir Mulakat,” *İslam Araştırmaları Dergisi* (lit. *Journal of Islamic Research*) Sayı 1 (1997): 175–88. This interview has been summarised, commented and criticised by Muḥammad Legenhausen in “Misgivings about the Religious Pluralism of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and John Hick,” *Al-Tawhid* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 103–23.
13. *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 9.



The call for a receptive and positive attitude towards transcendentalism, apart from being disseminated through the publication of books and articles in journals and periodicals, also has been echoed through various other intellectual channels like discourses, seminars and interreligious dialogues, organised all over the world. With the current rapid advancement in information and communication technology, the misguided teachings of transcendentalism is further boosted and can be widely transmitted to a great number of people regardless of their religions. In the case of interreligious dialogues or trialogues, there were even proposals forwarded to the authorities that these interfaith dialogues be broadcasted on radio, television and other electronic media as a means, *inter alia*, to minimise the problem of moral decadence and crisis that are ravaging all races and nations. Interreligious dialogue has also been used as a pretext of creating mutual understanding and tolerance—on the basis that all religions are equally right and valid—leading to harmonious living among the followers of various religions, thus resulting in national solidarity, which will ultimately bring peace to the entire mankind of the earth. Under the aforementioned “noble” objective, many Muslims—most of whom still do not understand their religion well—will be easily influenced and may not be aware that transcendentalism is a serious threat to their belief and faith (*‘aqidah*).

The standpoint of transcendentalism may also appeal to the attention of certain politicians who would exploit and manoeuvre around the theory for their political gains. Politicians garnering support or vying for votes to obtain, maintain and strengthen their positions will waste no time propagating transcendentalism to the masses who may comprise various races, ethnic groups and religions. It is most likely that these politicians will exploit the concept as a slogan and mechanism to establish, for example, national solidarity



in their countries, and thus gaining tremendous support to secure their political interests.

### Criticism on Nasr

The veracity of Nasr's claims is questionable from a number of angles, for example, his arguments are based on the opinion of Jilī. Citing Jilī's *al-Insān al-Kāmil*, Nasr portrays him as a *ṣūfī* who attempted to show that there are certain metaphysical similarities between Hinduism and Islam, as if the latter recognises the validity of the former.<sup>14</sup> But this is not really the case because Jilī states his actual position clearly in the very same work just a few pages away. In a categorical manner, Jilī asserts the supremacy of Islam over other religions. Quoting a Qur'ānic verse,<sup>15</sup> Jilī emphasises that Muslims are the best people that have ever been brought forth for mankind because their Prophet Muḥammad is the noblest of all other prophets and their religion is the best among all other religions. Jilī considers each of the other religions as the religion of misery (*dīn al-shaqāwah*) and its followers are miserable people precisely due to their adherence to that religion and rejection of Islam.<sup>16</sup> This is so because Allāh recognises Islam as the only true and valid religion as He decrees that "If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, he will never be accepted by Him and in the hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost."<sup>17</sup> This means that anybody who refuses to believe and accept Islam after the prophethood of Muḥammad and his *risālah*, is indeed going astray, miserable and will suffer from the torture of the Hellfire. If Allāh does not approve all other religions, then

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14. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 139–40.

15. *Āli 'Imrān* (3): 110.

16. 'Abd al-Karīm b. Ibrāhīm al-Jilī, *Al-Insān al-Kāmil fī Ma'rifat al-Awākhir wa al-Awā'il*, 4 vols. (Cairo: al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1956), 2: 126 and 128.

17. *Āli 'Imrān* (3): 85.

everything done by the followers of these religions is valueless in the eyes of God. Indeed, the unbelievers are cursed with anger by God because the way they call or reach Him is the way of misery, fury, full of suffering, pain, and discomfort. That is why they will become losers in the Hereafter. It is the detriments or disadvantages resulting from this loss that constitute their very misery, pain and torture. Therefore, their religions cannot be considered true religions in the true sense of the word. Having said this, we wonder why Nasr completely disregards or overlooks this particular standpoint of Jilī although it was expressed just a few sections away from the passages quoted by him.

Nasr also mentions that Dārā Shukūh, reportedly a *ṣūfi* practitioner of the Qādiriyyah order, was another “devout Muslim” who seemed to promulgate *waḥdat al-adyān* especially and again, in relation to Islam and Hinduism.<sup>18</sup> Shukūh is noted as the one who was responsible for the translation of the *Bhagavadgita*, the *Yoga Vasishtha* and most importantly the *Upanishads* (*Vedānta*). He is reported to have believed and said that the *Upanishads* is the “Hidden Books” meant in the Holy Qur’ān as “a book well-guarded” (*kitāb maknūn*).<sup>19</sup> It is also claimed that Shukūh’s writing, *Majma’ al-Baḥrayn*, is an undertaking to show the identity of the Muslim and Hindu

18. It is interesting to note that in the Indian Continent, the syncretic idea about unifying Hinduism (including Jainism and Zoroastrianism) and Islam was already there since the time of Kabir (d. 1518) with his “Religion of Love”; Guru Nanak (d. 1539) with his Sikhism; and Akbar Khan (d. 1605), the greatest emperor of the Mughal empire, with his *ḍīnī ilāhī*. For further remarks on these respective figures, see inter alia, Issac A Ezekiel, *Kabir the Great Mystic*, 4th ed. (Punjab: Radha Soami Satsang beas, 1979); *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 32 vols. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1985), vol. 27, s.v. “Sikhism” (pp. 294–8); Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Saviours of Islamic Spirit (Rijāl al-Fikri wa al-Da’wah fī al-Islām)*, trans. Mohiuddin Ahmad (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publication, 1983), 90ff.; and *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. “Akbar.”

19. *Al-Wāqī’ah* (56): 77–80.

doctrine of unity.<sup>20</sup> In another instance, Shukūh is regarded as to have come to the conclusion that there were no differences except purely verbal in the way in which *Vedānta* and Islam sought to comprehend the truth.<sup>21</sup>

Nasr, however, fails to note that Shukūh was considered a heretic almost unanimously by Muslim scholars.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, he is not to be cited as an authority in Islam. Though Nasr indicates that both Jīlī and Shukūh were not attempting to syncretise Hinduism and Islam, they—especially Jīlī—should not be depicted as figures with sympathetic attitude towards *waḥdat al-adyān* as it is misleading.

### Arguments favouring Transcendentalism

There are at least two areas of vivid similarities in world religions that may seem to justify the transcendentalists' position. Firstly, the recognition of the existence of one supreme god or a superhuman being. The apparent similarity among various religions in recognising the existence of one Supreme Being or entity, which is regarded as the Absolute, the Real, the Ultimate, or what may be termed as God, sounds very persuasive to followers of all religions. It creates the illusion as if all religions come from the same source. But, this is absurd since all religions hold to different views of reality, if not contradictory. Careful investigation of the teachings of major world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity would reveal that the conception, perception and explanation of that Supreme Being are very different from one another. Although the recognition of the existence of a Supreme Being is common to all religions, it does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that these religions are equally valid and/or bear the same degree of truth.

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20. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 141.

21. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. II, s.v. "Dara Shukuh" (pp. 134–5).

22. Nadwi, *Saviours*, 278–80.



Secondly, there are also other similarities in the domain of moral and ethical values, which is actually a necessary consequence that follows the first.<sup>23</sup> If one recognises God and believes in Him—no matter how simple the recognition is—we may say that one belongs to a certain religion. Each religion is supposed to have its own set of rules of conduct forming a value system as guidance to its followers. Though the exponents of transcendentalism tend to justify their position by emphasising more on the theological and metaphysical aspect of religion, the question of moral and ethical values cannot be discarded since it also constitutes another important dimension of religion. No real ethic is possible without religion since no religion teaches evil to its followers. Indeed, all religions enjoin good values to their subjects. In this regard, with willingness, we can enlist a considerable number of meeting points in ethics that are shared and common to all religions.<sup>24</sup>

The above ethical parallelism, however, should not be regarded as another premise to conclude that all religions are equally valid. The proper attitude to hold is this: the similarities found in two or more entities (*species*) do not necessarily mean that both of them are of similar status or stature though they belong to the same category (*genus*). For example, the obvious natural similarities of eating, sleeping, having sexual desires etc. between man and other animals do not necessarily make them equal in stature, regardless of the fact that both *species* belong to the same *genus* of “animal.” While one is rational, the other is not. Among men themselves, their obtrusive physical similarities do not necessarily make them equal. The knowledgeable and the ignorant, the king and his subjects,

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23. Schuon does not seem to stress this moral and ethical consideration as another justification for transcendentalism.

24. See for example an article by Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, “Pandangan Seorang Muslim” (lit. *A Muslim Worldview*), Dewan Budaya (Kuala Lumpur: DBP, January 1995).

father and sons—all of them are not equal in terms of position and status though all are human beings.

Despite the striking resemblances among the various religions, namely in the general recognition of the existence of God the Absolute and in the domain of moral and ethical principles, we stress that at the same time there are also other significant fundamental differences among them which enable us to differentiate and to give them their respective identities. The distinctions lie largely on the conception and perception of the Supreme Being and other realities related to it like prophethood, the Holy Books (revelation), life after death etc., which will be discussed later below.

Naturally, the so-called Muslim proponents of transcendentalism may further argue for its validity by referring to a number of Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ānic verses. Since the Holy Book is the pivot around which the entire life of a believer turns, arguments supported by divine injunctions will be easily taken for granted. Perhaps a Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ānic injunction fits the framework of the transcendentalists well.<sup>25</sup> It states that God has prescribed a law (*shirʿah*) and a normative way of life (*minhāj*) to each community. Therefore, each is correct in its own right and context.

These transcendentalists would also cite a verse where Allāh says that for every nation there is a Prophet.<sup>26</sup> Allāh Most Exalted repeats the same message at least in three other places: that He had raised up a prophet within every community;<sup>27</sup> that He would never chastise any nation until He had sent to them a messenger;<sup>28</sup> and that He would never destroy a population without having first raised in its midst a prophet.<sup>29</sup>

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25. *Al-Māʿidah* (5): 48.

26. *Yūnus* (10): 47.

27. *Al-Nahl* (16): 36.

28. *Al-Isrāʾ* (17): 15.

29. *Al-Qaṣaṣ* (28): 59.

The aforementioned verses clearly show that every community has its own messenger. This finds greater support with a Prophetic Tradition (*ḥadīth*, pl. *aḥādīth*) reported by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923/310) in his *Ta'rikh*<sup>30</sup> and al-Taftāzānī (d. 1389/791) in *Sharḥ al-ʿAqā'id al-Nasafiyyah* which mentions that there were as many as 124,000 Prophets sent to various nations of the world.<sup>31</sup> This large number of prophets implies that each nation must have been given a divine-based religion respectively. Since these religions were "sent by God and conveyed to mankind through a certain prophet," the transcendentalists claim that their call for the Muslims to consider other religions as equally valid is justified. All religions are then, revealed religion.

Several other premises may be used as foundations or justifications for transcendentalism. One of them may be found in the words of al-Attas:

The notion of a plurality of truth of equal validity in the plurality and diversity of religions is perhaps aligned to the statements and general conclusions of modern philosophy and science arising from the discovery of a plurality and diversity of laws governing the universe having equal validity each in its own cosmological system.<sup>32</sup>

One of the means to comprehend the above is the well-known fact that our solar system is not the only system that operates in the universe. By means of scientific observations and discoveries, it has been proved that there are many other

30. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-Ṭabarī*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1988), 1: 95; see also another version of this work edited by M.J. De Goeje et al., *Annales*, 14 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1964), 1: 152; also the translation of this work by Franz Rosenthal, *The History of al-Tabari*, ed. Ehsan Yar-shater, 39 vols. (Albany: State Univ. of New York, 1989), 1: 322.

31. Sa'd al-Dīn Mas'ūd b. ʿUmar al-Taftāzānī, *Sharḥ al-ʿAqā'id al-Nasafiyyah*, 2 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba'at Kurdistan al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1911/1329), 1: 190; and its translation by Earl Edgar Elder, *A Commentary of the Creed of Islam* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1950), 132.

32. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 9.



operating extra-terrestrial systems and galaxies that are governed by their own peculiar rules and laws. Each of these systems or galaxies is valid and right in its own cosmology. Similarly, with regard to the multiplicity of world religions—being originated from the same source though with diversified systems of worship, law, ethics, etc.—each religion is right within its own context.

One may also argue in favour of transcendentalism with other logical argumentation. To eliminate hunger, it is neither blameworthy for one to take KFC's bits and pieces nor is it condemnable for others who prefer to take that of McDonald's for the same purpose. In this case, it is a matter of preference and taste, which ultimately is based upon knowledge leading to certainty, i.e. food will satisfy one's hunger. One should also never say that Paul is wrong to take Christianity as his religion nor is Ahmad mistaken in embracing Islam. Being convinced with something should not deny others the right to behave in the same manner towards other things.

As alluded, the advocates of transcendentalism—in their effort to legitimise and disseminate the ideas among mankind—camouflage themselves in the esoteric practices of all religions. They assume that the universality and transcendence nature of mysticism validates their viewpoints, which they came to realise or “discover” after being acquainted with the metaphysics of Islam.<sup>33</sup> This is not surprising since almost all main propagators of *wahdat al-adyān* like Guenon, Burckhardt, Schuon, Lings and Nasr, are all Muslims. Briefly, Islamic metaphysics unveils the concept of transcendent unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujūd*) in the sense that all existent things originate or derive their existence from the existence of God. If there is such a notion called the “transcendent unity of existence,” then there is no harm to assume that there is also the idea of the “transcendent unity of religions.”

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33. Ibid.

## Arguments against Transcendentalism

Whether or not our Muslim scholars, intellectuals or ordinary believers are really influenced by Guénon-Schuon-Nasr's school of thought of transcendentalism, Muslims all over the world must understand this misleading concept and its implications in order to ultimately reject it. If Muslims were to accept the theory, it implies that we must be content with the existence of other religions, though they are inconsistent with the teachings of Islam in the most fundamental aspects—theology. In this regard, true Muslims are not supposed to compromise with other alien faiths at the expense of their own belief.

From the viewpoint of existent qua existent, those religions must be allowed to co-exist with Islam. But this acceptance does not mean that the Muslims' duty to call the followers of other religions to Islam (*da'wah*) has come to an end. On the contrary, this duty will never cease to exist and will always be there on the shoulder of every single Muslim for it is clearly prescribed by Qur'ānic injunctions as well as Prophetic Traditions. Through its Prophet and as reflected in the Holy Qur'ān, Islam is a universal religion meant for the whole of mankind, bringing mercy to the entire universe.

Muslim reception of transcendentalism would also mean that the superiority of Islam as stated by Allāh in the Noble Qur'ān and Prophet Muḥammad in his *aḥādīth* becomes meaningless. Allāh the Almighty says that the only religion accepted by Him is Islam.<sup>34</sup> In the same *sūrah*, Allāh says that He will never accept anyone who goes in search of a religion other than Islam.<sup>35</sup> Prophet Muḥammad has reportedly said to the effect that any person of this mankind, any Jew,

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34. *Āli 'Imrān* (3): 19.

35. *Ibid.*, 85.

or Christian who has heard his call for Islam but rejects to believe in his messages will be destined to Hellfire. This *ḥadīth*, which is reported in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Muslim (d. 875/261)<sup>36</sup> as well as in *Sharḥ al-Sunnah* of al-Baghawī's (d. 1117/510 or 1122/516)<sup>37</sup> together with the above Qur'ānic injunctions, established the superiority, finality and supremacy of Islam over other religions. This incomparability was also reiterated by one of the Prophet's Companions, Ibn 'Abbās (d. 686/68), as reported in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām al-Bukhārī (d. 870/256), that Islam is the highest religion and no other religion can surpass or overtake its position.<sup>38</sup>

Imām al-Nawāwī (d. 1278/676), a Shāfi'ī scholar, notes in his *Rawḍat al-Tālibīn* that,

Someone who does not believe that whoever follows another religion besides Islam is an unbeliever, or doubts that such a person is an unbeliever, or considers their religion to be valid, is himself an unbeliever even if he manifests Islam and believes in it.<sup>39</sup>

This view is agreed upon by three other Sunnī schools.<sup>40</sup> In the Ḥanafī school, this was affirmed by Ibn 'Abidīn (d. 1306/706) in his *Radd Al-Muhtar*.<sup>41</sup> In the school of Mālikī, al-Dardir is reported to have concurred in his *Sharḥ al-Ṣaghīr*.<sup>42</sup> As for the

36. Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj b. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 5 vols. (Istanbul: al-Maktabah al-Islamiyyah, 1955).

37. Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn b. Mas'ūd al-Baghawī, *Sharḥ al-Sunnah*, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1992), 1: 104.

38. Muḥammad b. Ismā'il b. al-Mughīrah al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari*, 9 vols., trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1980), 2: 244.

39. Muhyi al-Din Yahya b. Sharif al-Nawawī, *Rawḍat al-Tālibīn wa 'Umdat al-Muftīn*, 12 vols. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1985), 10: 70.

40. I would like to thank Nūḥ Ha Mīm Keller for pointing to me this collection of sources via his internet article.

41. Muhammad Amin b. 'Umar b. 'Abidīn, *Radd al-Muhtar 'alā al-Durr al-Mukhtār*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1987), 3: 287.

42. Vol. 4: 435. This work is however not available to us for our verification.



Ḥanbalī school, it was al-Bahuti (d. 1641/1051) who expressed the same in *Kashshāf al-Qinā'*.<sup>43</sup>

Each of these works is an authoritative and a reliable *fatwā* resource of each school respectively. Therefore, Muslim scholars are unanimous about the abrogation and nullification of other religions with the coming of Islam brought by Prophet Muḥammad. In the light of the above Qur'ānic and Prophetic divine messages, reiterated by the Companions and strengthened by later scholars, all Muslims must have belief and faith that only Islam is recognised as true and valid. Should they accept other religions as equally valid, then they are clearly against this Qur'ānic and Prophetic injunctions, which would place them outside of Islam.

Our deliberation so far attempts to show that there are major differences among religions. We have said that these distinctions lie largely on the conception and perception of the Supreme God and other realities related to it, like prophethood, revelation, life after death, the nature of religion, etc., all of which form the worldview (*Weltanschauung*) of Islam. We shall now discuss some of these realities and related issues in the following pages.

First, we need to define what is meant by "religion." The word "religion" is derived from the Middle English word, "*religioun*" from old French "*religion*" and from Latin "*religio*" which vaguely refers to a "bond between man and the Gods."<sup>44</sup> Another definition goes that it is "a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings,"<sup>45</sup> or

43. Maṣṣūr b. Yūnus b. Idrīs al-Bahūtī, *Kashshaf al-Qina' 'an Matn al-Iqna'*, 6 vols. (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1983), 6: 170.

44. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (second impression, Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 49; also idem, *A Commentary on the Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānirī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, 1986), 187.

45. Jonathan Z. Smith, ed., *The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 893.

“the belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship.”<sup>46</sup> Though a unanimous definition of “religion” itself is difficult to attain, at least we have to accord or concede to a certain premise in order to proceed with the discussion. Otherwise, no discourse can take place. In the above definitions, or rather descriptions of “religion,” we must agree that God or superhuman beings are very much superior to man since they can do things that ordinary mortals cannot. To establish a bond between man and God, it is a prerequisite for one to know God and His nature first.

In Islam, the nature of God (Allāh) is derived from revelation (*wahy*). He is the consummation of what was revealed to Prophet Muḥammad as recorded in the Noble Qur’ān:

He is One God; living, self-subsistent, eternal and abiding. Existence is His very essence. He is one in essence; no division in His essence, whether in the imagination, in actuality, or in supposition is possible. He is not a locus of qualities, nor is a thing portioned and divisible into parts, nor is He a thing compounded of constituent elements. His oneness is absolute, with an absoluteness unlike the absoluteness of the natural universal, for while being thus absolute He is yet individuated in a manner of individuation that does not impair the purity of His absoluteness nor the sanctity of His oneness. He is transcendent, with a transcendence that does not make it incompatible for Him to be at once omnipresent, so that He is also immanent, yet not in the sense understood as belonging to any of the paradigms of pantheism. He possesses real and eternal attributes which are qualities and perfections which He ascribes to Himself; they are not other than His essence, and yet they are also distinct from His essence and from one another without their reality and distinctness being separate entities subsisting apart from His essence as a plurality of

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46. *Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus* (rep. 1995), 1295.

eternals; rather they coalesce with His essence as an unimaginable unity. His unity is then the unity of essence, attributes and acts, for He is living and powerful, knowing, willing, hearing and seeing, and speaking through His attributes of life and power, knowledge, will, hearing and sight, and speech; and the opposite of these are all impossible in Him.<sup>47</sup>

Rays of these divine attributes are also given to and reflected in His creations but never in its complete sense such that these creatures may be regarded as God or may act like Him.

Let us briefly examine the conception of God in other religions to dispose flaws in arguments supporting transcendentalism. God in Christianity is mirrored in its trinity doctrine—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>48</sup> From the Islamic point of view, there is an element of partnership (*shirk*) in Christianity. Islam has clearly rejected this Trinity conception of God in one of its earliest revelation.<sup>49</sup> The *sūrah*, revealed in Mecca, destroys the very foundation of Christianity. In Judaism, God, known as “Yahveh” or “Elohim,” is portrayed as a national God exclusively for the Jews only, not universal.<sup>50</sup> How come God is made so exclusively dedicated to just one particular group only? “Brahman” or “Ishvara” in Hinduism is regarded as the Supreme God whose manifestations are represented in three main male gods: Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. These three great figures constitute the so-called Hindu’s concept of Trinity, or Trimūrti, “the One or Whole with three forms.” They have spouse-goddesses known as Parvati, Laksmi and Sarasvati. Apart from these gods, there are a thousand other gods and deities, which are interpreted by most Hindus as being symbols of the one divine reality. Each of these many

47. Summed up by al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 12.

48. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5: 934-5; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 3, s.v. “Christianity” (p. 356).

49. *Al-Ikhlās* (112): 1-4.

50. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 6: 638-9; *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 6: 1-7.



gods, male or female, has a specific role to play in governing and maintaining the “well-being” of the world and mankind.<sup>51</sup>

It is indicative that all religions discussed above affirm the existence of one Supreme Being. But at the same time they associate Him with other beings and restrict Him with certain limitations, even attribute Him with human temporal and mortal characteristics, all of which are contrary to the conceptions of God and teachings of Islam. These religions are thus to be rejected. The real true God is not bound by the limitations of human reasonings and attributions. Therefore, it is fitting to reiterate the observation made by al-Attas in his *Prolegomena*,

The nature of God understood in Islām is not the same as the conception of God understood in the various religious traditions of the world . . . The apparent similarities that may be found between their various conceptions of God with the nature of God understood in Islām cannot be interpreted as evidence of identity of the One Universal God in their various conceptions of the nature of God; for each and every one of them serves and belongs to a different conceptual system, which necessarily renders the conception as a whole or the super system to be dissimilar to one another.<sup>52</sup>

It is hard to dispute that the notion of God has to be made something most central in the definition of religion. Taking this as an extremely fundamental defining factor, then the *religion-ness* of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and other Chinese traditions become problematic since they seem to have no clear conception of God as an object of worship. God in Taoism, for example, cannot be described in any human language. Once one starts to describe god with words, then at the very moment that God ceases to be God, or he is not

51. Ibid., 6: 52; *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5: 934–5.

52. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 7.

the real God anymore.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, that god remains unknown and mysterious.

Our exposition of God of various religions does not in whatever means indicate that the conception of god in Islam is the most absolute, in the sense that man can comprehensively perceive HIM. Nobody can grasp, conceive or understand god in His absolute sense, even the most pious Muslims. No one knows Allāh in His absolute Essence because it is beyond human comprehension. For Muslims, they can only know Allāh in the manner He explains Himself through revelation as embodied in the Noble Qurʾān and *aḥādith*. The Holy Book is the speech of God revealed in Arabic through Prophet Muḥammad. Therefore, the description of God's nature in it is the description of Allāh Himself by Himself in His own words according to that particular language.<sup>54</sup> This is precisely the perception of God in Islam. Otherwise, no knowledge of God is possible.

If the conceptions of God differ from one another, then obviously the visible manifestations of the world's religions would also take different forms. These various conceptions signify that there is no "unity" in the sense of "oneness" or "sameness." It follows that if "unity" does not mean "oneness" or "sameness," then the dissimilarity or divergence of religions takes place even at the level of transcendence. Bearing in mind that this variety exists at this esoteric level, then perhaps what the transcendentalists meant by their claim of "unity" is the "interconnectedness of parts that constitute a whole,"<sup>55</sup> i.e. *waḥdat al-adyān* is the interconnection of the multiplicity of religions as parts that constitute a whole. It is analogous to different parts of a car being assembled at a factory to produce

53. Our remarks on religions other than Islam are obtained from various articles in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, and *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, referring to entries under each and every single religion mentioned.

54. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 6.

55. *Ibid.*, 7.

one single complete car. This implies that religion only becomes complete at the level of transcendence. If we favour this assumption, then it means that at this manifest exoteric level of ordinary existence (i.e. in this worldly life), none of the religion concerned is complete in itself. In emphasis, this means that each and every single religion is incomplete in itself, and inadequate to realise its ultimate objective, that is to provide salvation to respective followers both in this world and the next one. This is contrary to the faith of every adherent that his/her religion is the true submission to the One Absolute God in certain prescribed manners. Furthermore, if salvation, fulfilment, liberation, and happiness is only possible at the transcendence level—since the transcendentalists imply that a complete religion is only available or possible at the esoteric level—then having faith to any religion in this manifest exoteric worldly level is meaningless. It follows that there is no novelty in embracing any particular religion if it is incomplete and inadequate in itself; or, if it does not promise any salvation to its subjects.

One has to note that the diversity of world religions are not to be regarded like different components of a car, an operational effective body of which becomes complete and useful only after being assembled together at its factory. Religion does not become complete only “after being assembled together in its factory” at the level of transcendence. This is simply because religions are meant for mankind in this material world, as a means of salvation ultimately in the next life to come. If it is admitted that the unity at that level does not refer to the interconnection of the plurality of religion in the sense of *parts constituting a whole*, then it means each and every religion at this manifest level of existence is supposed to be complete in itself, adequate in itself, and valid in its own limited way, each is authentic and conveying limited though equal truth.<sup>56</sup>

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56. Ibid.



The proponents of transcendentalism may still argue that God of other religions discussed earlier refers to God as reflected at the external forms of various religions mentioned. Internally and ultimately, God is still One. As we have mentioned before—according to the transcendentalists—this inward unity of God is possible and attainable through the mystical teachings and practices (esoterism) of all religions. It is precisely at this very point that the transcendentalists find their strongest proof in justifying, legitimising and propagating the idea of *wahdat al-adyān*, thus declaring all religions are equally valid. But, why should one go to the esoteric realm of his religion to attain or experience this truth of unity of God? Does it mean that there is no truth at the external and exoteric sphere of one's particular religion?

Every religion is supposed to offer salvation to its followers provided all fundamental teachings are observed. It does not require that every follower must strive to reach the level of a monk, priest, cleric or *ṣūfī* in order to be entitled to eternal bliss. We affirm that all religions have a dualism of esoteric and exoteric dimensions. In any religion, the esoteric is basically meant for relatively few individuals only. In the case of Islam, however, there is no strict demarcation between the two. Both affirm the Unity of God but with higher intensity at the esoteric realm. Islam does not recognise any horizontal dividing line separating the outward from the inward understanding of the Truth in religion. Islam maintains rather a vertical line of continuity from the exoteric to the esoteric; a vertical line of continuity which is identified by al-Attas as the “Straight Path of *islām-īmān-ihsān*” with no inconsistency in the three stages of the spiritual ascent.<sup>57</sup> With enough preparation and after fulfilling certain conditions, any Muslim can progress from the exoteric level to the higher esoteric stage. The

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57. Ibid., 11.

accomplishment of truth in a really true religion is possible at both domains, which happens only in the case of Islam. This is because religion as a whole, or the Truth contained in it, is not restricted for just a few selected people. Religion is meant to realise its purpose for the generality of mankind. However, for religions other than Islam, if this realisation is only possible at the esoteric level of transcendence, then it is an absurdity since mankind in its entirety can never be at the level of transcendence to discover that Truth (Unity).<sup>58</sup>

If we say that quest for the Truth, salvation and happiness is only possible to those few privileged persons who indulge into esoterism, how about others who are not? Therefore, it is not right for the transcendentalists if they refer “transcendent” to a psychological condition experienced by *ṣūfīs* or mystic practitioners who “surpass” that of the commoners among mankind. This means that the “unity” that is experienced at the transcendent realm does not belong to religions. It is religious experience and consciousness which are arrived at by a few “elites” only among people.<sup>59</sup> According to al-Attas, the transcendentalists’ claim of *waḥdat al-adyān* is something concluded “inductively by the imagination and is derived from intellectual speculation and not from actual experience.”<sup>60</sup> He doubts if they have really undergone such actual encounters, for the real experience—he observes—will not end up in confusion like the theory of transcendentalism. If they say that their claim is not based on their experience, but rather derived from the experience of others, then again “the sense of ‘unity’ is not of religions, but of varying degrees of individual religious experience.”<sup>61</sup>

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58. Ibid., 8.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., 9.

Recognising God as the Lord, the Creator, the Possessor, the Owner, the Ruler, the Governor, the Sustainer, the Cherisher, the Provider of the world, perhaps, applies to all religions. However, God described at this level—from the Islamic point of view—is known as “*rabb*” only, and not as “*ilāh*,” i.e. god of religion. Therefore, from the Islamic perspective, the Supreme Being mentioned or indicated in other religions refers only to the nature of God at the level of “*rubūbiyyah*,” not “*ulūhiyyah*.” The former refers to the belief that there is only one God for the whole universe whereas the latter points to the belief that none has the right to be worshipped but Allāh. Manifest enough that the *ulūhiyyah* position is higher than that of *rubūbiyyah*. At the level of *ulūhiyyah*, God must be regarded as an object of worship (*ma‘būd*)<sup>62</sup> who does not take any partner, rival or equal, and does not subject to any restriction. It is absolutely wrong to associate or to attribute any likeness to Him, or to restrict Him with any kind of limitations to the detriment of His divine characteristics and attributes. Faith in God demands affirmation of His Unity or unification of Him (*tawhīd*). Such are the significant distinctions which tremendously distinguish the conception and perception of God in Islam from that of other religions.

Notably, the point that recognising God as *rabb* alone is insufficient without properly acknowledging him as *ilāh* as well. Iblīs also recognised God as *rabb* but this did not save him from infidelity and eternal curse from The Almighty because Iblīs did not properly acknowledge HIM. In fact, all of the children of Ādam i.e. the entire human beings, in the form of spirits, from the first to the last, have also recognised Him as

62. Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311), *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dar Sadir, n.d.), 3: 270–9; Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 8 parts/vols. (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 1980), 5: 1934–6; J. M. Cowan, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban, 3d repr. 1980), 587.



*rabb* when they spiritually testify at the esoteric level that Allāh is their God.<sup>63</sup> But both Iblīs and man's recognition of God in the sense of *rabb* here are not true unless followed by proper acknowledgement in the sense where He is more significantly known as *ilāh*. And proper acknowledgement in the sense of *ilāh* is materialised by not associating Him with any partner or rival; and by serving him in the manner and form approved by Him, as exhibited and taught by His various prophets. There is no guarantee that once one recognises God as *rabb* then acknowledging Him in true submission necessarily follows, for rebellion, arrogance and falsehood have their origin in the very domain of transcendence as well. This is clearly evident from the case of Iblīs when he refused to obey God's order to bow to Ādam. Since other religions do not conceive God in the sense of *ilāh* as we have defined above, we may conclude that their conceptions are inadequate and fail to purify God in its purest manner.

Another important related concept is the concept of submission. In religion, it is God alone who has the full right to prescribe and determine the form, pattern or manner of belief and practices in which the bond or relationship between man and Him can be established. Only in this way can the bond, as a means of submission to God, be considered valid. In order to serve or submit to God, man alone by himself cannot build a bridge out of his own whims and fancies, conjecture or other kind of guess works. If the acquaintance between man and God commences from the former, he will never have any yardstick or means to measure the truth or accuracy of such a connection. Any kind of submission to god must be done in a manner prescribed, approved and acceptable by *the* God Himself. Therefore, if this form, pattern or manner of beliefs and practices are to be regarded as the valid constituent

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63. *Al-A'raf* (7): 172.

elements of religion, then that particular religion must come from God.

Our survey shows that Islam is the only religion whose fundamental form, pattern or manner of beliefs and practices are being prescribed, approved and acceptable by the Ultimate Real God through revelation from the very beginning without human interference whatsoever. Although religions like Christianity and Judaism are also based on revelation, they are not revealed religions in the sense that Islam is. In the case of Christianity, its doctrine of Trinity, the Incarnation and the Redemption as well as other details of dogma connected with them are all cultural creations with no divine inspirations, all of which are completely denied by the Noble Qur'ān. Even sources arising within early Christianity itself denied the divinely inspired root of these dogmas.

The Qur'ānic injunctions affirm that God sent to Prophet Mūsā (Moses) and Prophet 'Īsā (Jesus Christ) revelations in the form known as *al-Tawrah* (the Torah) and *al-Injil* (the Evangel). But, due to alterations and distortions, the Qur'ān denies the authenticity of the revelations in the form transmitted by the disciples of the said Prophets and later by the followers of some of these disciples.

In the Qur'ān, Mūsā and 'Īsā were sent as messengers to the people of Israel with two main missions: (i) putting them back to the right path after being deviated from and being unmindful of their covenant of obedience with God; and (ii) conveying message of the forthcoming arrival of the complete and perfect universal religion called Islam, which would be established by the Seal of the Prophets whose name was mentioned as Aḥmad or Muḥammad in both the original *Tawrah* and *Injil*. Both Prophets were asked to communicate the message to their people to prepare themselves for the reception of the new, complete and ultimate form of Islam which would consequently abrogate and nullify all previous

“incomplete” religions. When the right time came, these people were supposed to abandon their old religion and embrace the new one as described in the new revelation. This, nevertheless, by no means indicates that the earlier versions of religion were wrong.

All revealed religions are actually one because the essential message of the revelation was always the same: *tawhīd*, that is to recognise, acknowledge and worship the One True, Unique and Real God (*ilāh*) alone, without associating Him with any partner, rival or equal, nor attributing a likeness to Him; and to confirm the truth preached by the earlier Prophets as well as to confirm the final truth brought by the last prophet. Thus, the followers of Mūsā and ʿĪsā were also Muslims as long as they accepted and followed the original and fundamental message of the revelation. However, most of them chose to deliberately renounce the guidance, and therefore, ceased to become Muslims in the last form of the religion brought by the Prophet Muḥammad.

From the above discussions, we know that God neither instructed Mūsā nor ʿĪsā with the founding of new religions called Judaism or Christianity respectively. In the latter, it was some of the disciples and followers of ʿĪsā, mainly Paul, who departed from the original revelation and true teachings based on it. He began to preach a new religion and set out foundations for it which later became known as Christianity. In its early days, even the name “Christian” is not known to it. As history went on, this religion developed itself until its particular traits, characteristics and attributes took shape and became fixed after a number of clarification and refinement which finally recognised as the religion of a culture and civilisation called Christianity. Not less interesting is the fact that Christianity had no revealed law (*sharīʿah*) expressed in the teachings, sayings and actions of Jesus. This point is very significant as it indicates that Christianity began as a



new religion not intended as such by its presumed founder, nor authorised as such by God who sent him as well as other Prophets. Therefore, Christianity, in the words of al-Attas, is a man-made religion, that:

. . . gradually developed its system of rituals by assimilation from other cultures and traditions as well as originating its own fabrications; and through successive stages clarified its creeds such as those at Nicea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. Since it had no Revealed Law it had to assimilate Roman laws; and since it had no coherent worldview projected by revelation, it had to borrow from Graeco-Roman thought and later to construct out of it an elaborate theology and metaphysics . . .

From its earliest history, Western Christianity . . . came under the sway of Roman influences with the concomitant latinization of its intellectual and theological symbols and concepts which were infused with Aristotelian philosophy and worldview and other Western elements that gradually 'disenchanted' nature and deprived it of spiritual significance.<sup>64</sup>

There is only one genuine revealed religion, namely Islam. A true revealed religion must be complete and perfect for mankind from its very inception. In the case of Islam, the Holy Qur'ān states that Allāh has already perfected Islam as a religion for mankind.<sup>65</sup> This fact is substantiated from its very beginning by history. The religion received its name "Islam" from its very earliest day and the name Muslim was given to its followers from the very start, both from Allāh Himself. The revelation itself was completed during the lifetime of the Prophet. As far as the fundamentals of Islam are concerned, all of them were firmly established during the lifetime of the Prophet under the primary guidance of the revelation. The

64. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 28-29.

65. *Al-Mā'idah* (5): 3.

prophetic *sunnah* helps tremendously in the accomplishment of the completion of the basic principles, doctrine, tenet, pillars and practices of the religion.

It may appear that this discussion portrays Islam as a dismissive or an exclusive religion, intolerable. This is not the case because Islam is both exclusive and inclusive. As far as theological or metaphysical matters are concerned, Islam is exclusive. But in matters other than the above, Islam is extremely inclusive. When it comes to the question of God, His nature or attributes, Muslims should not compromise with the conceptions and perceptions of other religions, except in a very general *rubūbiyyah* manner. But when it comes to moral and ethical values, the door is wide open for polite conversation, dialogue and cooperation. In fact, in a multiracial country like Malaysia, peace and harmony can be further strengthened by emphasising on these moral and ethical aspects of each religion of its citizens. The theological or metaphysical dimension of these religions, especially Islam, cannot and must not be considered the best plane for the creation of the sentiment of solidarity of any nation.

We may agree with Hans Küng that “No world peace without peace among religions, no peace among religions without dialogue between the religions, and no dialogue between the religions without accurate knowledge of one another.”<sup>66</sup> But, we would like to stress that those who are deeply involved in comparative religious study (*Religionswissenschaft*) will agree with us that no harmony, compromise, or tolerance is possible on theological and metaphysical matters.

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66. Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (Michigan: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1991); idem, “Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam,” *Muslim in Dialogues* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

Islam classifies world religions into three categories: the wholly true; the partially true; and the wholly false.<sup>67</sup> We basically agree with the above classification with addition that the second category may be further subdivided into two, namely (a) People of the Book; and (b) Quasi-People of the Book. For the first category, only Islam deserves the exclusive right to be called so. Islam must stand on its own superior standard over other religions for reasons explained earlier. Throughout Islamic history, Muslim scholars had never placed Islam in any group with other religions. This is evident from the works of Abū Rayḥān al-Birūnī's (d. 1048/440) *Kitāb 'Ajā'ib al-Hind*, and Abū al-Faḥ Muḥammad al-Shahrastānī's (d. 1153/348) *al-Milal wal-Niḥal*.<sup>68</sup> Thus, it is wrong, for example, to put Islam under the category of Semitic or even Abrahamic religions together with Judaism and Christianity.

For the second category, i.e. the partially true religions, under the subdivision (a), we may put Judaism and Christianity since these religions claim to have revealed Holy Books; while for the other subdivision (b), we may include Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Sikhism and Shintoism. All religions in this second subdivision claim possession of Holy Books but there is no clear proof that they were also revealed. As for the last category, namely the wholly false religion, we may ascribe this form of religion, or rather traditions, to the beliefs and practices of those who do not believe in the Real God and instead, regard mundane things as God. The best example for this is the religion of the Meccan people before the advent of Islam. As for our time, this may refer to the religion of the aborigines or many pagan tribes in many remote areas of the world.

67. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 26: 563.

68. Translated by A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn, *Muslim Sects and Division* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1984).



## **Conclusion**

Transcendentalism has become an ideology with its own particular doctrines and teachings that will continue to develop and spread among religious adherents. It may be regarded as synonymous with perennial philosophy. Despite its seeming appeal, this philosophical notion is alien and incompatible with Islam. Muslims must be wary of this ideology as its implications may ruin their foundations of faith.