

# Understanding God

## Debate: Keith Small and Ali Ailem

### I

#### Ali Ailem: Profile

Ali Selim was born in Egypt where he lived while he pursued his education and achieved a BA in Comparative Theology from the renowned Al-Azhar University of Cairo in 1993. He is acclaimed in his skills of translation, English to Arabic and vice-versa, and has spent time working in this field. Ali moved to Ireland where he studied Ecumenics and obtained his Masters in this field from Trinity College Dublin. He is an employee at the Islamic Cultural centre of Ireland since 1999. Throughout his years in Ireland Ali has worked as a teacher in the Muslim National School, and as an official translator especially in areas of theology and religious presentations. Presently Ali is the private secretary to Imam Sheikh Halawa at the Islamic Cultural Centre and a resident theologian therein. He continues to work in the educational field, in particular he travels to schools and colleges across Ireland to educate the students on Islam and create awareness of the religion and its culture. He also facilitates workshops on Islam and Islamic etiquette at the Centre for service providers and NGO's, and also is a commanding speaker and lecturer on Islam and comparative religions. He is also a member of the three-faith forum in Ireland. Ali has throughout his life in Egypt worked as a tour guide where he utilized his command for the English language to his great benefit. He continued to use this ability as a tour guide during visits made by students of theology to the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland. Ali is married and a father of three children and he takes his duty as a father one of considerable trust, a trust awarded to him by God Almighty.

Ali Selim

[aliselim\\_2000@yahoo.com](mailto:aliselim_2000@yahoo.com)

### II

#### Ali Ailem: God or Allah

Nowadays we witness an intellectual and cultural vacuum drawing man away from believing in the existence of God. Hence many people are in a whirl and the question arises: Does God Exist? To answer this question objectively one should counter a very surging tension, as if the answer is affirmative one needs to answer a series of questions e.g. who is God? Is He masculine or feminine? etc. The most important question will be how to reach God.

Among the fundamental intellectual topics, the existence of God enjoys a paramount importance. Some confirm and others deny. Undoubtedly, one of the major factors of the emergence of a phalanx of deniers of God is the intellectual prevention and domination of some followers of certain religions.

Since the earliest eras man has been strenuously endeavouring to increase his knowledge about God. Efforts were exerted to gain knowledge about the transcendent Patron of the universe, God the Unseen, the belief of whom is, yet some disbelieve, an innate characteristic of every man. It is an inward inclination that impels man to make intellectual investigation and research to learn about God. But how to learn about God?

The essential nature of the resplendent sun, which is the most manifest of all things, remained unknown to man for many centuries and its movements and effects were subject to interpretations of all kinds. In spite of the fact that none could deny the luminosity of its rays, the minds of most men remained in total ignorance of its knowledge. God sent his prophets to educate us about Him and to make us aware of the subtle perception of our original nature and to make our Godly inclinations flow in the proper course.

Man was in dire need of prophets to gain knowledge about God, since God is Unseen and there is non-like unto Him. God cannot be coloured with the brush of materiality and does not correspond to our experience and observation. Hence, by all means, God cannot be captured by imagination.

This does not mean depriving man of his right to think. To the contrary, the prophets came to assist man's positive inclinations and instincts enabling them to grow and develop in the right direction through the proper channels. The Qura'n, the Muslim Holy Scripture, urges man to seek knowledge about Allah through His universal signs – the earth, the heavens and all that exists. This method has recently been called "*The Law of Walking and Looking.*" In the Qur'an God frequently bids man to ponder over the universe. Allah said: "Say: "Behold all that is in the heavens and on earth" (10:101) (Yusuf Ali Trans.). In another place Allah said: "Say (to them O Muhammad (peace be upon him)) "I exhort you to one (thing) only: that you stand up for Allâh's sake in pairs and singly, and reflect"(34:46) Again Allah said: "Say: "Travel in the land and see how (Allâh) originated creation, and then Allâh will bring forth the creation of the Hereafter (i.e. resurrection after death). Verily, Allâh is Able to do all things."(26:20)

The appliance of our mental faculties could be curtailed by the blind obedience granted to some human beings. Islam exhorts people to think for themselves. Allah said: "And give glad tidings to My worshippers. Those who listen to the Words and follow the best thereof. Those are (the ones) whom Allâh has guided and those are the people of understanding."(45:17-18)

All the prophets, from Adam to Muhammad, preached one basic fact i.e. the Oneness of God and His Unity that can never be represented in any external object. All the divine revelations have summoned mankind to a pure declaration of God's oneness untainted by attribution of partners unto Him. The oneness of Allah is the corner stone of Islam. Had there been more than one god, each of them would have ruled the world and gave commands according to his convenience, which would definitely have dissolved the order of the universe into anarchy. Allah said: "*If there were, in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides Allah, there would have been confusion in both! But glory be to Allah,*

*the Lord of the Throne: (High is He) above what they attribute to Him!”(21:22) Yusuf Ali Trans).*

The concept of the Unity of God is asserted by the fact that God is not a body. A body is a compound of series of various elements, the union of which is essential to form the existence of the body. For compounding and division pertain to beings of beginning and end, whereas God is Eternal and Ever-lasting. A compound being is susceptible to dismantling and assembling. Glory be to God, hence it is not feasible to conceive the plurality of God.

This Muslim belief has a profound impact on Muslims’ lives. The firm belief of the Oneness of Allah is interpreted in every aspect of the Muslim life. If Allah is one then one’s lifestyle should be moulded in a way that attains His pleasure. Things that one does or refrains therefrom should be a result of Theo-centred life.

Although the Muslim commonly use the term Allah to refer to God, Muslims are not hesitant to use the term God. Nevertheless, Muslims prefer to use the term Allah since it reflects certain Muslim connotations. According to English linguistics, the plural form of the word god can be formed by adding “s”. So it will become gods. To the contrary, the Muslim word Allah is a unique word in the sense that it is a singular that neither dual nor plural form can be made thereof. It cannot refer to more than one. The term god is a masculine formula that can be changed into feminine form by adding “dess” so it will become goddess, which makes another difference between the two terms. The third major difference is that the term God is written in capital “G” when it refers to what is believed to be true God, whereas it is written in small “g” to refer what is believed to be untrue god. The term Allah can only be used to refer to the true God.

Allah, as distinct from His creations, is Self-Sufficient and utterly Independent. Self-evident are the extensive interrelatedness and interdependence of all the components of the world. It is a set of creations that if any of them dies out the whole world collapses. Man produces carbonic gas, which plants breathe. In return, plants reciprocally produce oxygen that man breathes. This is a continuous process. If it pauses or gets confused for a minute it may cause a fatal destruction. The earth receives certain amount of heat necessary for living on earth that rotates around the sun at certain distance and speed. A slight change of any of part of the system results not only in the impossibility of life on earth but also a total change of the nature on earth or its termination. In actual fact, there is a profound invisible link of all the components of this world; the break of it jeopardizes the existence of all.

Unlike Allah, the components of this world are intrinsically and extrinsically interdependent. They are subject to the rule of the cause and effect. Allah is different. Had He been dependent He would have been in need and that would have categorized Him as helpless. But Allah is not.

Allah the Creator Who cannot be circumscribed by a place, the essence of whom is limitless, is All-Knowing. His knowledge encompasses everything. None can escape the

grip of His knowledge. Contained in the sphere of His knowledge are the events that happened billions of years ago and the events that are happening now and those that will happen in the near and far future whether they occur in the most distant part of the universe or elsewhere. In the scope of His knowledge is contained the events that did not happen and how they would have happened had they happened.

Man's intelligence and skills indicate the great knowledge of his Creator. Man's accomplishments cannot be comparable to Allah's. Nonetheless, it suggests, likewise the harmonious orderly scheme of the universe, the boundless comprehensive knowledge of his Creator. Allah is aware of the course of stars in the space and the rotation of galaxies. Allah's knowledge is not restricted to time or place. Everything wherever it might be and whenever it occurs falls within the scope of Allah's knowledge.

At this point it must be marked that all the created objects in this universe ranging from the minute whirling electron to the mighty nebula represent a vivid manifestation of the Divine justice that rules the whole scheme of creation. Despite his remarkable talents, man forms a part of this universal order. He cannot be excluded from the comprehensive universal rules. Nevertheless, due to his possession of the freedom of decision he is set apart thereof. He can decide what to do and where to do and when to do. There is no deterministic power to conduct him towards lofty values or evil. Based on his possession of freedom and according to the universal principle of all creations, namely justice, man should stand one day in the court of God's justice to be judged for his deeds.

In this world we can discern many criminals and oppressive rulers who encroach people's lives and their freedom, yet they enjoy opulence and luxury until the end of their lives. They shun no evil action that their polluted minds inspire them, but they never fall in the grip of justice and they never suffer the natural consequences of their evil deeds. In the end if the oppressors and the oppressed, the ones polluted with sins and the ones who strive to gain virtues draw the ultimate end by closing their eyes, then it will be oppression and transgression. Where would the infinite divine justice be the traces of which are manifested in every aspect of this life?

Throughout all the historical phases occurred revolutions. There were tension and counter tension. The term colonization is not strange in various parts of the world. But why would a country invade another? The simple answer is to loot their natural resources or to have power over their territory. Whether for this reason or another, invasion is oppression. Revolutions are organized to stop this oppression. If this is the human response to oppression, then how do you expect God's?

It is reported that prophet Muhammad asked his companions: "Who is the bankrupt?" They answered: "He is the one who does not have money." Prophet Muhammad explained to them that the bankrupt is the person who has performed a lot of prayers and a lot of fasting, but he has oppressed this person and cursed that and transgressed on that. So in the hereafter it will be taken from his virtuous deeds and given to the people he has wronged as compensation until he runs out of all his virtuous deeds.

At this point it must be marked that Allah is the most Merciful and the most Gracious and the Oft-Forgiving. It was narrated that in the days that Moses wandered with *The Children of Israel* in the desert a grizzly drought befell them. Together, they all raised their hands towards the heavens praying for the blessed rain. Then, to the astonishment of Moses and all those watching, the few clouds that scattered in the sky vanished and the drought intensified.

It was revealed to Moses that there was a sinner amongst *The Children of Israel* who had disobeyed Allah for more than 40 years of his life. "Let him separate himself from the congregation," Allah told Moses. "Only then shall I shower you all with rain."

Moses called "There is a person amongst us who has disobeyed Allah for 40 years. Let him separate himself from the congregation and only then shall we be rescued from the drought." That man, waited, looking left and right, hoping that someone else would step forward, but no one did. He knew he was the one.

If he stayed amongst the congregation all would die of thirst; yet, if he stepped forward he would be humiliated for all eternity.

He raised his hands with sincerity he had never known before, with humility he had never tasted, tears poured on both cheeks, "O Allah, have mercy on me! O Allah, hide my sins! O Allah, forgive me!"

As Moses and *The Children of Israel* awaited the sinner to step forward, the rain poured. Moses asked Allah "O Allah, you blessed us with rain even though that sinner did not come forward." And Allah replied, "O Moses, it is for the repentance of that very person that I blessed all of The Children of Israel with water."

Moses wanting to know who was this blessed man asked; "Show him to me O Allah!" Allah replied, "O Moses, I hid his sins for 40 years. Do you think that after his repentance I shall expose him? "

*"Say: O `Ibadi (My worshippers) who have transgressed against themselves (by committing evil deeds and sins)! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: verily, Allah forgives all sins. Truly, He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful". (39:53)*

Abu Dharr (May Allah be pleased with him) reported: The Prophet (PBUH) said, "Allah, the Almighty, says: `Whosoever does a good deed, will have (reward) ten times like it and I add more; and whosoever does an evil, will have the punishment like it or I will forgive (him); and whosoever approaches Me by one span, I will approach him by one cubit; and whosoever approaches Me by one cubit, I approach him by one fathom, and whosoever comes to Me walking, I go to him running; and whosoever meets Me with an earth-load of sins without associating anything with Me, I meet him with forgiveness like that".

[Muslim]

Umar Ibn al-Khattab related that some prisoners were brought before Allah's Messenger and amongst them was a woman who was frantically searching for someone in the crowd. When she found a baby amongst the prisoners, she took it in her arms, cradled it next to

her chest and suckled it. So Allah's Messenger said: "Do you think that this woman would ever throw her child into the fire?" We said: 'By Allah, Never!' So he said: "Allah is more merciful to His believing servants than that mother could ever be to her child." [Saheeh al-Bukharee (10/426) and Saheeh Muslim (18/80)]

Abu Hurayrah relates that Allah's Messenger said: "Indeed, before Allah created the creation, He decreed for Himself, 'Indeed My Mercy prevails over My Anger.'" [Saheeh al-Bukharee and Saheeh Muslim (17/68)]

It is recorded in the two Saheeh, the Hadeeth of Abu Saïd from the Messenger of Allah about the man who killed ninety-nine people. Later on, he regretted it and asked a worshipper among the children of Israel whether he could repent. He told him no, so he killed him, thus completing one hundred. Then he asked one of their scholars whether he could repent. The scholar said: 'What is stopping you from repenting?' Then he asked him to go to a town where Allah was worshiped. He set out for the town, but death came to him while he was on the way. The Angels of Mercy and the Angels of Punishment disputed over him, so Allah commanded them to measure the distance between the two towns; whichever he was closer to was the one to which he belonged. They found that he was closer to the town he was heading for, so the angels of mercy took him. It was said that when he was dying, he moved himself (towards the town), and Allah commanded the good town to move closer to him and the other town to move away. [See Fath al-Baree (6: 591)]

These and other numerous Ahaadeeth and Qur'anic verses give hope to the sinful believer in the Mercy of Allah for forgiveness of his sins, for Allah is full of forgiveness, pardon and covering mistakes of people, in spite of the people's persistence upon transgression: "And never give up hope of Allah's Mercy. Certainly, no one despairs of Allah's Mercy, except the people who disbelieve." (12:87)

However, it is important to correctly understand the concept of Allah's Mercy, for some who are mistaken in this issue rely completely upon the hope that Allah will forgive their sins without even intending to refrain from evil deeds.

Await the fruits of Paradise, by planting the seeds for Hell-Fire; and to seek the abode of the obedient ones, by doing acts of disobedience; and to expect a reward, without doing any worthy action; and to hope in Allah - the Mighty and Majestic - after overstepping the bounds." "You hope for salvation but do not tread its path. **A ship never sails upon dry land**

**By Ali Selim**  
**Islamic Cultural Center of Ireland 012080000**  
[aliselim\\_2000@yahoo.com](mailto:aliselim_2000@yahoo.com)

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### III Keith Small: Introduction

Muslims and Christians, though they have different views of God, are united on appreciating the significance of tonight's topic. For us, having a correct understanding of God puts all of the rest of life in perspective. It is what provides a sure anchor in times of trouble and gives us a hope for the life to come after death. Also, many have noted that people become like the God they serve. There is an intrinsic link between the character and nature of what we worship, and the character and nature we in turn come to have. The answers to questions like, "What kind of a world do we want to live in? How do we want people to treat each other? What is right and what is wrong? All, in the end, come to be based on the view of God that we hold. This is one of the truly fundamental issues of life that each of us ought to wrestle with. It is a question that determines the shape of your life, as well as the shape of cultures we live in.

One man has wisely said,<sup>1</sup>

Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold(ed), as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.

Tonight, we have the opportunity to wrestle in our minds with the two conceptions of God offered to us by the two great historic religions, Islam and Christianity. Though many facets of their view of God are similar, in the end, they come to be views of two different beings; beings with different natures and characters, and beings that differ in how they relate to mankind. It is the responsibility of each of us to consider both views of God and consider as best as we can, which is the truth.

We must use our best abilities of critical thinking and address each view with the hardest and best questions possible. Also, we would do well to ask our questions with sympathy, respect, and sensitivity to each other's views. Christians and Muslims both have strong senses as to what constitutes blasphemy, and too easily in our zeal we can offend and inflame emotions. We must each decide to not be offended easily, to be patient and calm if we hear something offensive. Recent events have reminded us that many Muslims take great offence at criticism concerning Muhammad. Christians likewise take great offence at denials of the divinity of Christ. Let us listen to each other with patience and sympathy, and learn.

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<sup>1</sup> Packer, J. I., *Knowing God*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973.14-15.

As a Christian, I believe that

Our concern must be to enlarge our acquaintance, not simply with the doctrine of God's attributes, but with the living God whose attributes they are. ... We must seek, in studying God, to be led to God. It is for this purpose that revelation was given, and it is to this use that we must put it.<sup>2</sup>

I am here to give you a Christian view of God from the Bible, with the hope that it will bring you closer to Him.

## IV

### Keith Small: A Biblical View of God

To begin to understand the Bible's view of God, we must understand the way in which the Bible was written. It is a collection of 66 individual books, written through more than 40 authors over about 2000 years. It is assembled in a roughly chronological order, and its view of God unfolds throughout this chronology as God chose to reveal Himself in actions, words, and even visits to specific people and places in history.

Also, there is a progressive revelation of God's nature and character, as time passes, as He interacts with individuals and nations, and as significant events occur that bring facets of His being into sharp focus. Probably the most significant thing that can be observed about God in the Bible, is that He has a deep and constant concern, to not only reveal His will, but to also reveal Himself, and to do that in the context of relationships with people. I'd like to present an overview of how the Bible presents these things and the aspects of God's nature and character that are emphasized.

#### A. Creation

The Bible starts with the words,<sup>3</sup>

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light...”(This is the first of eight declarative statements of creation, calling things into being through His word.)

From this we can learn that God is the creator of a beautiful and useful world. He is separate from creation, above it, so to speak. He is the ruler and sovereign over creation. Yet the Bible also has some enigmatic statements. The Spirit of God is mentioned- this is not an angel in the Bible, but is spoken of as God's own personal spiritual being. In the Bible, no angel is ever called, “the Spirit of God”.

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<sup>2</sup> Packer, *Knowing God*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:1-3 NIV(All references NIV).

Also, God's word or speech is mentioned, and later in the Bible that Word is treated as a person.<sup>4</sup> In the 7<sup>th</sup> declarative statement of creation, God created mankind, with the words: Let us make man in *our* image...- One of only three times in the Bible that God speaks in the first person plural. While the God of the Bible can be distinguished as unique and separate from creation, from the outset there is an enigmatic allowance for His inner identity to somehow be plural.

## **B. The Garden and the Fall**

Genesis 1:27 states that mankind was made uniquely in the image of God. When you unpack this idea, it is saying that there is something about us that is like God in a way that no other creatures share. Intellect, aesthetics, emotion, will, morality, personality, and the ability to relate to each other and to God as individuals seem to be at the heart of this idea of our being made in God's image. We were made to know God. In the Bible, the Garden is on this earth, and the Bible's story of Adam and Eve before their fall is a picture of them as God's deputies on the earth ruling and enjoying intimacy with God. The account even describes God walking in the Garden with them and speaking directly to them. Their direct disobedience to God breaks the harmony of their relationship. They shamed God with their ingratitude and their selfishness. They earned a just punishment by disobeying Him, their Sovereign. They were punished, put out of the Garden, made subject to death and Satan's temptations and oppression, and separated from God's presence. This story sets out a basic principle that the rest of the Bible develops, that the primary effect of our sins is separation from God. One Old Testament prophet said it this way:<sup>5</sup>

“Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.  
But your sins have separated you from your God;  
your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear.”

## **C. Abraham**

Skipping forward we come to Abraham. God generously gave him children when he was childless and made him the father of nations. God gave Ishmael to him through Hagar, and miraculously gave him Isaac through his wife, Sarah, whom God enabled to conceive in her old age.

Through Abraham we learn that God makes and keeps His promises to people. Through a covenant with Abraham and especially through His descendents through Isaac, and Jacob, God revealed aspects of His trustworthy, *covenant-keeping* character through His dealings with a nation-Israel.

## **D. Moses**

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<sup>4</sup> John 1:1-3.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 59:1,2

Moving forward we come to Moses. The Law that He gave Moses has many explicit statements about what God is like.

For instance, the Shema, the creed of the Jews from the Torah says:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”<sup>6</sup>

Concerning God’s nature - Oneness here is an emphasis on identity; Oneness as uniqueness, the only Lord in contrast to others. If it has a numerical significance, it is one that can allow a unity with internal diversity, similar to the cryptic statements in Genesis, but made a bit more explicit because the Hebrew word for “one” here “*echad*” emphasizes unity of components as opposed to strict mathematical oneness. There was a perfectly good Hebrew word to express strict numerical oneness- “*yachid*” which God used in telling Abraham to sacrifice his son, “your only son.”<sup>7</sup> *Yachid* is never used of the oneness of God in the Hebrew Bible. *Echad* is used, and it is used in other places, like for man and wife that “The two shall become one flesh.”<sup>8</sup> This is a unity that allows internal distinctions.

Then, the command to “Love the Lord” speaks boldly of the importance of our relationship with God. *Love* God! In this covenant context God had made promises of love to the Israelites. They were to return that love. Though submission was implied, love is what God emphasized. He wants a loving relationship with people.

Then there is the Law of Moses itself, and at the center of the law was a sacrificial system for maintaining personal and national fellowship with God. In the center book of the Torah given to Moses- in Leviticus 17:11- it says:

“For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.”

There were laws to maintain ritual purity and national identity. There was also a moral component to the law summarized in the 10 Commandments<sup>9</sup> - a strict moral standard that reflected the purity of God’s own moral character. The Law provided a basis on which the morally perfect and exalted God could dwell with a sinful people. Through the sacrificial system, the death of a substitute met the demand for God’s judgment.<sup>10</sup>

## **E. Visits by God**

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 6 :4,5

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 22:2

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 2:24

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 20 :1-17 ; Deuteronomy 5 :1-21.

<sup>10</sup> This is one of the Bible’s great differences to the Qur’an. The Qur’an omits all mention of this enormous and foundational part of the Law of Moses. Yet it is the foundation for a person having a relationship with God, according to the Bible.

There were personal visits to Adam and Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Hagar, Moses, to name a few. Then after the law was given to Moses, and the priesthood and sacrifices were in use, God's presence manifested itself in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple built by Solomon. These were personal manifestations of God in this world.

These demonstrate a facet of the God of the Bible that is different from the Greek and Roman conceptions of gods, as well as many of the other ancient near eastern religions. God was a living God who was not far off and distant. God has the ability to enter time and space personally and interact with people directly in various ways.

## **F. The Messiah**

Most of the Old Testament prophets predicted facets of a mysterious person who would come and bring God's plans to their ultimate completion. Their predictions centered around three roles- the ultimate prophet, the universal King, and the one high priest over the entire human race. They came to be summed up under the single title, Messiah.

Somehow, this Messiah would also be a divine figure. The Prophet Daniel was given this revelation:<sup>11</sup>

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

## **G. Jesus Christ**

The Gospels and the rest of the New Testament assert that Jesus was this Messiah of the Old Testament predictions. Jesus claimed to be this figure numerous times, both explicitly and implicitly. The Jews understood completely that His miracles and teaching were claims to of His being the promised Messiah. But, they tended to fix on just one facet of His role- that of the King over all- and they wanted Him to rule and throw the Romans out of their land. Jesus, though, deferred taking up the role of King, and focused on the roles of Prophet and Priest.

As sacrifices to cover the sins of the people were necessary in the Jewish religion to keep the people clean before God, so Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice, at the cross taking on Himself the sins of all of mankind, acting as the sacrifice and then, after the resurrection, as the High Priest over mankind.

Also, he claimed to be God in Human flesh as the divine Messiah. This is the significance of the title He constantly used of Himself “Son of Man”, taken from that passage in

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel 7:13-14

Daniel I read earlier.<sup>12</sup> He also claimed deity by claiming for Himself the most holy personal name of God- *Yahweh*, the very name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush.<sup>13</sup> Jesus did this when he said to the Jewish leaders, “Before Abraham was, *I Am*” in Hebrew, *Yahweh*.<sup>14</sup> The leaders knew exactly what He was claiming and in their unbelief they picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

Jesus Himself said “Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.”<sup>15</sup>

Concerning God the Father, Jesus Christ revealed the conception of God as a loving Father. Jesus said,<sup>16</sup>

“If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

Jesus was asserting God can be known personally. And this is the hope given to every Christian- that in this life they can know God through Jesus, and after death, they will live in God’s presence forever. Listen to words given to a prophet recorded in the last book of the Bible- Revelation:<sup>17</sup>

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away...I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple...Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.’”

## **H. The Lamb**

That title, “Lamb”, brings us to our closing thoughts. One thread through the entire Bible is that it takes the shedding of the blood of a substitute for a person’s sin to be forgiven. Jesus, taking the title Lamb, is asserting that He is the sacrificed Lamb whose blood atones for sin. The first time the title was ascribed to him was by John the Baptist. When Jesus came to John to be baptized, John said as Jesus was walking toward him, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel 7:13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 3:14.

<sup>14</sup> John 8:58-59.

<sup>15</sup> John 14:9.

<sup>16</sup> John 14:23.

<sup>17</sup> Revelation 21:1-4, 21-27.

<sup>18</sup> John 1:29.

In this picture of Jesus being the ultimate sacrificial lamb for the world's sin, we have the Bible's greatest picture of the character of God. He is a god whose moral standards cannot be compromised. He is pure, and He demands that anyone who has a relationship with Him is just as pure. God does not play favourites. He does not wink at sin, or look the other way. Our sin is a personal offence to Him- even just a wicked thought or look of lust.

Each of us, in all honesty, must recognize that we don't measure up to this standard. All of us fail. One Old Testament prophet was given these words:<sup>19</sup>

“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.”

But God, in love and grace, wants a relationship with His creatures. How can the chasm be bridged? The Bible says it was bridged by the cross- the atoning sacrifice of God's Messiah Jesus. Jesus, as a perfect, sinless man, could bear our sins, because he had none of his own to bear. Since He was also God, he could bear the sins of the entire human race. He alone could do it. No other prophet or human in history could bear the world's sin and shame and so effectively intercede for us. Jesus Himself said:<sup>20</sup>

“For God so loved the world, He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Also, it was said at the beginning that just to know about God is not really the goal. The goal according to the Bible is to be restored to a relationship with him; in other words, to know Him personally. That is what is offered to each of us by Jesus in His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Your sins can be forgiven. Any shame you bear before God can be removed. Any dirtiness in your heart or life can be cleansed- all through Jesus. By dying on the cross and rising from the dead, He conquered sin, shame, death, and Satan himself. He offers that victory to you if you will only believe in Him as your Messiah, Savior and Lord. I ask you to consider doing that tonight. If you do, the promise from the Bible is that you will enter a loving and pure relationship with God where your knowledge of Him will not only be academic, but personal and real.

Thank you very much for listening so carefully. May God bless you as you seek to better understand Him.

## V

### Keith Small: A note about the Trinity

*The following thoughts were prepared for the evening, but time and questions did not permit these thoughts to be shared in detail. They are offered here for your consideration.*

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<sup>19</sup> Habakkuk 1:13.

<sup>20</sup> John 3:16.

In the centuries immediately following the first generation of Christians, Jesus' claims to deity, and the Bible's assertions of God's aspects of plurality and unity became the focus of much theological thinking. This especially happened as Christians had more contact with Greek and Roman thoughts of deity, when they realized they had to protect the Jewish and Biblical conception of God's uniqueness and ability to enter time and space against pagan Greek categories of a distant deity who works through semi-divine intermediaries.<sup>21</sup>

For instance, the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit in the Bible never refers to an angel acting as an intermediary of a distant, wholly separate God. The Holy Spirit is always treated as an eternal person with the same attributes, powers, and eternity of being as God. This, to my mind is one of the key differences between the view of God given in the Bible and the one given in the Qur'an. The Qur'an's view seems to me to more like an Aristotelian view, or a neo-Platonist Gnostic view with a distant god working only through semi-divine intermediaries,<sup>22</sup> rather than a view in line with the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

Jesus is the eternal Son who has always existed as the personified Word and Wisdom of God, and who takes on; adds to His eternal spiritual existence, a human body, which died on the cross, was raised from the dead, and in which He will live forever.

Working from the foundation of words, ideas, and revelations laid in the Old Testament, Jesus and His disciples presented with more clarity and explanation the nature of God's existence as three eternal spiritual persons sharing one eternal spiritual essence in complete harmony and unity. When one tries to understand *how* this works, physical categories break down, and human analogies break down. It is however, logically consistent because the three persons share one essence, person and essence being two different though related categories of existence. If Christians were saying 3 essences = 1 essence, that would be illogical. Or, if they were saying 3 Persons = 1 Person, that too would be illogical. But the formal definition, and what is described in the Bible is 3 Persons sharing 1 essence. This is logically consistent, though we can't conceive exactly of *how* it works. And it is also reasonable that God's unique existence would be above our comprehension. Any model that makes it completely understandable limits God, and is an inadequate description.

The doctrine of the Trinity was the result of devout Christians seeking to understand and stay true to the Bible's testimony in the face of the religious ideas of the ancient world. Gnostic views imbibed too heavily of the Greek thought and could not accept God entering time and a flesh and blood existence. Also, these Gnostic views came well after the time of Jesus and are foreign to the Old Testament conception of God. These are basic facts which the DaVinci Code and similar books fail to take into account.

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, *Challenge*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> I mean here the views of angels giving revelation to perfected, 'sinless' prophets who stand between mankind and God.

Though above comprehension, the Trinity does not violate logic. It faithfully accounts for the entire Biblical view of God, and faithfully takes Jesus at His word and gives His actions their full weight. Also, it fully agrees with the testimony of those who received Jesus' teaching firsthand- His disciples.<sup>23</sup> The word Trinity is not in the Bible, but the concept can be legitimately found in both the New and Old Testaments.

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<sup>23</sup> Wright, *Challenge*, 79.