

Free Creation as a Shared Task for Jews, Christians, Muslims¹

It is certainly remarkable that it took the fledgling Christian movement four centuries to respond to its central faith question concerning Jesus: who and what is he? Moreover, the long-standing quest for clarity regarding Jesus doubtless overshadowed more explicit reflection on the first article of the creed as well: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth". As Robert Sokolowski observes: "The issue the church had to settle first, once it acquired public and official recognition under Constantine and could turn to controversies regarding its teaching, was the issue of the being and actions of Christ." Yet he goes on to insist:

[While] the Council of Chalcedon, and the councils and controversies that led up to it, were concerned with the mystery of Christ ... they also tell us about the God who became incarnate in Christ. They tell us first that God does not destroy the natural necessities of things he becomes involved with, even in the intimate union of the incarnation. What is according to nature, and what reason can disclose in nature,

Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology

retains its integrity before the Christian God [who] is not a part of the world and is not a “kind” of being at all. Therefore, the incarnation is not meaningless or impossible or destructive.²

Moreover, what Sokolowski calls

the Christian distinction between God and the world, the denial that God in his divinity is part of or dependent on the world, was brought forward with greater clarity through the discussion of the way the Word became flesh. The same distinction was also emphasized as a background for the Trinitarian doctrines and for the controversies about grace ... Thus many of the crucial dogmatic issues raised in the relationship between God and the world, and the positions judged to be erroneous would generally have obscured the Christian distinction between the divine and the mundane.³

So creation not only comes first, as it were, in our God’s transactions with the world; it is also true that the way we understand that founding relation will affect our attempts to articulate any further interaction. For were the One who reached out to believers “in Christ” not the creator of heaven and earth, the story would have to be told in a vastly different (and inescapably mythic) idiom, as indeed it has often been on the part of Christians so preoccupied with redemption that creation is simply presumed as its stage-setting.

And understandably enough, since the narrative of incarnation and redemption captures the lion’s share of the tripartite creed associated with the initiation rites of baptism, creation can appear as a mere preamble. Moreover, an adequate treatment of the unique activity which constitutes creating, as well as the quite ineffable relation between creatures and creator which it initiates, will tax one’s philosophical resources to the limit, so more timid theologians (with philosophers of religion) prefer to finesse it altogether. Yet as Sokolowski reminds us, we cannot afford to do that since the interaction among these shaping mysteries of faith is at once palpable and mutually illuminating. Nor can Christians treat Hebrew Scriptures as a mere preamble to their revelation of God in Jesus,

since the God whom Jesus can call “Abba” is introduced in those very Scriptures. Moreover, the Hebrew Scriptures reflect similar structural parallels between *creation* and *redemption*, as the engaging story of God’s affair with Israel begins at Genesis 12 with Abraham, while the initial chapters detailing God’s creation of the universe seem designed to offer a universal grounding to that story.

By the time medieval thinkers came to engage these issues, however, a third Abrahamic voice clamored for recognition, reflecting a fresh scripture. The Qur’an’s account is far more lapidary: “He says ‘be’ and it is” (6:73), yet the pattern is repeated. The heart of the drama turns on Muhammad’s God-given “recitation”; while Allah’s identifying Himself with “the Creator of the heavens and the earth” (2:117) assures us that we are not merely trafficking with an Arabian deity. So the forces conspiring to elaborate a Christian “doctrine of creation” were at once historical and conceptual, scriptural and philosophical, with parallel discussions in other faiths shaping the context.⁴ Both Jewish and Christian readings of Genesis approached the equivocal language regarding pre-existent stuff as part of the inherently narrative structure of the work, insisting that God created the universe *ex nihilo*; that is, without presupposing anything “to work on.” So the philosophical task will be to articulate how such “sheer origination” could even be possible, while the theological goal will be to show the action to be utterly gratuitous. For if creator and creation are to be what the Hebrew Scriptures presume them to be, neither stuff nor motive can be presupposed. Here is where what Sokolowski identifies as “the distinction” proves so critical: creation can only be creation if God can be God without creating. No external incentive nor internal need can induce God to create, for this creator need not create to be the One by whom all that is can originate. Yet if creating adds nothing to God, who gains nothing by creating, what could such a One be, and how might we characterize that One?

So the way we treat the act originating the universe will lead us inexorably to the One originating it, as whatever we can say about that One will shape our way of considering the One’s activity. So creation is not only first chronologically, as it were, but first

conceptually as well. Yet there are bound to have been alternative accounts, since the question of origination arises naturally for us, evidenced in countless stories offering to articulate the process. As the move to more methodical considerations of these issues gained momentum in Greece, however, questions about origins were eclipsed by considerations of the structure of the universe. As Plato's *Timaeus* proceeds mythologically at crucial junctures, Aristotle could deftly avoid the origins question. Yet by the time our respective religious traditions turned their attention to God as creator, a powerful philosophical figure had emerged from the Hellenic matrix: Plotinus. His relentlessly logical mind traced a multifarious universe to one principle, as the necessary condition for the order inherent in it, extending Plato's pregnant image of *participation* yet further to speak of the manner by which the ordered universe originates as *emanating* from the One. As with Plato before him, Plotinus had recourse to metaphor to signal the limits to conceptual inquiry. Yet as we have just suggested, the *manner* will offer the only clue we can have to the character of the One originating. So as we shall see, Plotinus's interpretation founders precisely on whether that "coming forth" is best described in terms of logical deduction, or whether it results from a free act of the One. At this point the deliverances of revelation and what was taken to be reason initially clashed, though further inquiry by illustrious thinkers would find them complementing one another.

Yet as circumstance would have it, creation offers the one area where we can track interaction of some kind among these three traditions.⁵ The interaction we can trace occurred as each tradition sought to clarify scriptural accounts of the origin of the universe – identical for Jews and Christians, and substantially the same for Muslims. Much work has been done to situate the Genesis story in the context of origin stories from the milieu in which the Hebrew Scriptures emanate, noting how the scriptural account reflects that milieu, and how it differs. Genesis shows traces of earlier accounts in postulating a chaotic matrix in need of ordering; but contrasts starkly in the manner of achieving that order. Earlier origin accounts graphically depict struggle, issuing in dismembering and reconstituting, while

Genesis focuses on crafting or even more refined: executing by verbal command. However, we might conceive the pre-existent matrix, which remains utterly obscure, it offers no resistance to being ordered, so the divine act of originating and of ordering remains sovereign. That could be one reason why the matrix dropped from sight, reduced to a shadowy “prime matter” in Hellenic philosophical accounts, and to *nothing* in religious accounts. Yet the official *nothing* will return to undermine religious accounts in the form of primordial resistance to the sovereign action of God, dramatized in spiritual creatures as *sin*. Jon Levenson offers a remarkable delineation of this inescapable dimension of the Jewish tradition in his aptly titled *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, contrasting it sharply with what emerged in all three traditions as creation *ex nihilo*.⁶ Yet in response to the Preface to the second (1994) edition of this work, I shall propose an understanding of creation *ex nihilo* whereby the opposition need not be so stark.

So it may well be that Plotinus’s magisterial account of emanation from the One proved less useful to a religious articulation of origins precisely because it was so magisterial, leaving too little room for any palpable resistance to an account of divine creating, relegating that feature to a *matter* residual to the outpouring of being as it transmutes into becoming. Yet once the influential Islamic philosopher, al-Farabi, introduced the model of logical deduction to provide a firm structure to Plotinus’s metaphor of overflowing, the model itself implied necessity, so settling the ambiguity remaining from Plotinus: does this emanation from the One take place necessarily, as a consequence of its nature, or as an intentional free act? In the end, however, the very feature which made the logical model attractive to philosophers made it repugnant to religious thinkers, intent on accentuating divine freedom in creating. The potential of freedom to be read as arbitrary led philosophers away from it, while religious thinkers found a necessary emanation to compromise the divine One by demanding that God could not be God without creating the universe. Yet by the same reasoning, would not the logical model also effectively adulterate Plotinus’s One, by endowing it with the necessary attribute of creator?

So we can recognize tensions which could arise between philosophical strategies and religious sensibilities, made all the more inevitable since thinking believers could hardly dispense with the tools of human reason to articulate the path revealed to lead them to truth. Yet while each of the Abrahamic traditions sought ways to negotiate this tension, in the case of creation they received help from one another, albeit in sequential fashion. This actual interaction privileges *creation* for comparative purposes, of course, and serendipitously so, since we will see how every other topic will return to the way one attempts to articulate the ineffable relation between creatures and creator. Moreover, the period fruitful for comparing ways of treating creation – from al-Ghazali (d. 1111) to Aquinas (d. 1274) – enjoyed a relatively homogeneous philosophical culture as well, so adherents of diverse religious traditions were able to share a common discourse. Avicenna had transmitted Aristotle to each principal: Ghazali, Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides), and Thomas Aquinas; so much so that Maimonides will often identify Avicenna's views with Aristotle. None of them actually met the other, but those who came later were able to profit from earlier thinkers, in some cases actually citing them in critical conversation, often showing their esteem for the other by taking issue with them, as philosophers are wont to do. So Ghazali, who is trenchantly critical of some of Avicenna's conclusions regarding points of faith, will also acknowledge his philosophical debt by structuring his natural philosophy along Avicennian lines.⁷ But the sticking point remains whether creation constitutes the initial moment in time, or whether (as the necessary emanation scheme proposed) the universe had no beginning, so that creatures were coeternal with their creating principle. Ghazali tends to link an initial moment of the universe with creation as a free and intentional activity. As if to display his dependence on Ghazali (which most presume to be the case), Maimonides inherited this criterion, insisting that an everlasting creation coterminous with the creator itself could not be free but would inescapably reflect necessary emanation. Furthermore, nothing seemed to divide "philosophers" from "theologians" so much as the contention that the universe would have to have had a beginning if it were truly to

be created. Necessary emanation might be proffered as a theory of origination, but never as a way of explicating the statements of the Bible or Qur'an about God's free act of creating.

Yet this very contention would be challenged by Thomas Aquinas, a thinker "in conversation with" both Avicenna and to Maimonides, though far less acquainted with the work of Ghazali. (He was "in conversation" in the sense that we are always contending with writers who impress us, allowing their mode of inquiry to affect our own, to learn from them in the process. Indeed, we have to acknowledge this to be a singularly fruitful way of meeting others without ever having personal contact with them.) Aquinas adopted Avicenna's axial distinction of *essence* from *existing*, though radically recasting it, to adapt the metaphysics he gleaned from Aristotle (often through Avicenna's commentary) to accommodate a universe freely created by one God. Yet so Herculean a task, while reflective of Aquinas's singular genius, could hardly have been executed without Avicenna's quite Islamic innovation on Aristotle's treatment, later confirmed in the central role Maimonides gives to existence, as it is conveyed to creatures from a God who possesses it necessarily – Avicenna's way of establishing "the distinction" between creator and creatures.

Yet Aquinas would see that, once such a "distinction" had been secured, it mattered little whether creation was conceived with or without a beginning. He also profited from Maimonides' clear-headed observation that since neither position could be demonstrated, Torah-believers were free to accept the language of Genesis, which implied an initial moment, at face value. Yet while he averred what revelation stated to be the case, Aquinas argued that a creation coterminous with the creator need not derogate from the primary asseveration of each tradition about creating: that the act must be free and intentional. In other words, while insisting on free creation, the primary focus of revelation is not so much on an initial moment but on the way each creature depends on the sustaining power of God for its very existence at every moment. That is the radical revision of Aristotle which the Bible effects: asserting that what Aristotle took to be the lynchpin of his metaphysics – substance, existing in

itself – rather exists by the power of a creator sustaining it in existence. The verses of the Qur'an or of Genesis 1–3, of course, hardly succeed in making that point, yet a concerted inquiry carried out by Muslim, Jewish, and Christian “interlocutors” (in the sense proposed) did reach that formidable conclusion, and in doing so illustrates how revelation can so illuminate the strategies of philosophy as to transform them. For our three signal Abrahamic thinkers – Ghazali, Maimonides, and Aquinas – each adopt a dialectical approach to persuade their fellow believers how fruitfully reason and faith can interact with each other. And one of them, Aquinas, coming last as he did, was able to utilize the others to illuminate his work, with a dialectical strategy which allows faith and reason mutually to illuminate one another.

Islamic reflection treated this subject in a sustained philosophical manner before the other traditions, profiting from Syriac translators rendering Hellenic philosophical texts into Arabic. But their primary source remains the Qur'an: “Originator (*Badī'*) of the heavens and earth. When He decrees a thing, He says only ‘Be!’ And it is” (Qur'an 2:117). There are eight names for God, among the canonical 99, which direct our attention to Allah as the source of all that is: *al-Badī'* (Absolute Cause), *al-Bâri'* (Producer), *al-Khâliq* (Creator), *al-Mubdī'* (Beginner), *al-Muqtadir* (All-Determiner), *al-Musawwir* (Fashioner), *al-Qâdir* (All-Powerful), *al-Qahhâr* (Dominator), each with various connotations of creating.⁸ Indeed, nothing seems simpler than identifying the one God as creator of all that is. Yet if the God of Abraham can be defined, as Thomas Aquinas does at the outset of his *Summa Theologiae*, as “the beginning and end of all things, and especially of rational creatures,” that lapidary formula has but one clear implication: God is not one of those things, an affirmation which sums up Islamic *tawhîd*.⁹ For confessing divine unity (*tawhîd*) entails removing all so-called “gods” from the world; indeed, replacing them all with One whose originating relation to the universe offers enduring testimony to the utter uniqueness of the attestation: “there is no God but God,” novel and intractable as it is in human discourse. Yet while this affirmation may prove congruent to human reason, by contrast to a mythological proliferation of gods, it will

also prove to be its stumbling block, implicitly testifying how its corollary, creation, must properly be rooted in revelation.

There will be no one Muslim account of creation; indeed there can be no fully adequate account, so the plurality of accounts is less a sign of the inadequacy of Muslim thinkers to their task than it is of their fidelity to the founding revelation of their tradition: to *tawhîd* and its corollary, creation. Irony reigns here: any pretension to have articulated the founding relation adequately will have reduced that relation to one comprehensible to us, so undermining and nullifying the distinction expressed by *tawhîd*, the heart of this tradition. The stumbling block which *tawhîd* becomes as one tries to render it conceptually may be identified by these incisive queries: everything which is not God comes forth from God yet cannot exist without God, so how are they distinct when they cannot be separated? If God is eternal and everything else temporal, how does the act of creating bridge that chasm? If God alone properly exists, and everything else exists by an existence derived from divine existence, how *real* are the things we know? And the clincher: if God makes everything else to be, including human actions, how can our actions be properly our own? That is, how can we be responsible for what God makes to be? How can God's actions, in other words, be imputed to us? And if they cannot, to what end is the Qur'an a warning and a guide? This last conundrum proved to be the crux, as we shall see later. For now, it is enough to note how what seems so simple – identifying the one God as creator of all that is – will introduce us into the set of intractable issues we call theology.

So questions elicited by the straightforward insistence that "God says 'be!' and it is" will require all the philosophical sophistication one can muster, yet two distinct schools emerge in Islamic thought: *kalâm* ("theology") and *falsafa* ("philosophy"). Notable exceptions to this apparent polarization in the Sunni world were al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111) and Fakhr al-Din al-Râzî (d. 1209), who prove to be as familiar with the thought of Islamic "philosophers" as with religious thinkers. Our treatment will attend to the points where concerns intersect, and where recognizable tendencies display complementary aspects of the relation between a creator God and

creation itself. Here Ian Netton's formulation of "the Qur'anic Creator Paradigm," as he puts it, can usefully guide our inquiry by forming the undeniable setting for further conceptual quandaries. It "embraces a God who (1) creates *ex nihilo*; (2) acts definitively in historical time; (3) guides His people in such time; and (4) can in some way be known indirectly by His creation."¹⁰ We must add a fifth feature as well, presumed in the first three: (5) that God's mode of acting be free. It should be clear how many philosophical conundra lurk in each of these assertions: what is it to create? How does an eternal God act in time? How can divine guidance be carried out and received? What are the ways in which created things can entice a created intellect to some knowledge of their divine source? What sense can we have of the sovereign freedom of God in creating, of creation's utter gratuity? Once having identified the usual groupings of Islamic thinkers reflecting on such matters – *kalâm*, *falsafa*, and *ishrâq* – we shall have occasion to attend to the way each group will respect the five features of the paradigm as we consider further topics germane to free creation, noting how they function as virtual corollaries to this central teaching.

It is worth reflecting why creation is so critical for Islam. For if all that is emanates from the one God, this must include the "straight path" as it comes down to the Prophet, as well as the "gospel" and the "Torah," which Muslims teach were also given to humankind by God. Moreover, beyond asserting that there is but one God who freely creates the universe, *tawhid* insists that this creator is utterly one. Yet if God is to be utterly simple, the acts of creating and of revealing cannot be separate actions; sending the Qur'an will complete the gratuitous act of creating, already elaborated in the Torah and the Gospel. So proffering the covenant to all humankind completes creation as well:

And when your Lord took the progeny of the sons of Adam from their loins, He took them to witness on their own souls, saying: "Am I not your Lord?" They answered: "Yes, indeed, we witness to it" – this, lest you should say on the Day of resurrection: "We had not known it to be so" (7:172).¹¹

So the Qur'an sees itself expressing the "religion of Abraham" (3:95) in such a way as to embrace all humankind, covenanted to God from the beginning. Indeed, this God's creating humankind will lead seamlessly to a call to respond, as the inbuilt task of a "vicegerent" of creation will be to recapitulate the originating emanation by returning it to the One from whom it comes. Many will fail to do so, of course, yet the Qur'an, in coming down, proffers all the help one needs to execute that task, so completing creation.

On the Jewish side, free creation serves to corroborate the uncontested primacy of the God who covenants the people Israel, whose destiny and vagaries constitute the dominant narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures. Placing the creation story first in their canonical redaction serves this purpose rather than pretending to offer a cosmological account. Indeed, as Moses Maimonides interprets the Scriptures in terms of the dominant philosophy of his day, he tends to presume the free founding act of origination, to focus on ways we might be able to parse the ensuing relation. He capitalizes on Avicenna's distinction of *existing* from *essence* to insist that in God "essence and existence are perfectly identical" (*Guide* 1.57), to secure the "distinction" of creator from creatures. Yet his radical agnosticism regarding any linkage between them, even when creation itself implies one, will decisively shape the way he explores creatures relating to their creator, to elaborate the salient corollaries of creation which we shall soon be considering: divine sovereignty and human freedom, providence, and the ultimate return of creation to its creator. Yet moving too quickly to Maimonides' philosophical interpretation of the Scriptures could easily elide formidable objections to an uncontested primacy for the God who covenants the people Israel, as Jon Levenson has so ably argued. Moreover, his optic will prove germane to the way all three traditions reflect on free creation, especially in their growing concurrence in creation *ex nihilo*, despite preponderant evidence to the contrary in the Genesis account.

For while the creator whom the Hebrew Scriptures and the Qur'an celebrate acts without a concomitant struggle – "God said 'be' and it is" – there remains an undertone of a resistant matrix which will emerge again and again as the narrative unfolds. Indeed,

even the resulting philosophical formulation “*ex nihilo*” cannot succeed in reducing the primordial chaos literally to *nothing*. For it will remain present as an asystematic factor, dramatized in the trickster figure of Satan, only to emerge in Hellenic dress as *matter*. So summarizing biblical and Qur’anic free creation as “uncontested” can only intend to eliminate any hint of dualism from a creation account, as in classic Manichean pictures. For as Augustine came to see, these prove to be jejune, giving the manifest struggle between *good* and *evil* a metaphysical status. Yet the originary matrix of Genesis can hardly be neatly eliminated in favor of a translucent word, for resistance perdures in one form or another. That is the nub of Jon Levenson’s thesis, though its implications may not reach as far as his commentary suggests. His exposition highlights our incapacity to conceptualize creation, as does Paul’s recalling that “we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:22). The intractable resistance that we all experience, in the world about us where it meets our own bodies, is an inescapable part of God’s creation, challenging any purported account of creation *ex nihilo* which would import a lightsome reading of “God saw that it was good.” And those accounts Levenson is right to overturn: “the residue of the static Aristotelian conception of deity as perfect, unchanging being; the uncritical tendency to affirm the constancy of divine action; and the conversion of biblical theology into an affirmation of the goodness of whatever is.”¹² Yet as endemic as it is, resistance cannot play the role of a “worthy opponent,” for as Augustine also saw: God and goodness can have no competitors, as though *good* or *evil* could represent equal options. For as much as that gnostic picture pretends to articulate the dramatic conflict between good and evil in our world, ironically enough, treating *evil* as anything other than a *privation* neutralizes its peculiar potency: to leave an unwarranted hole in the fabric of God’s creation. (Indeed, what arrests us about evil actions, teaching us to call them *evil*, is the disruption they cause, their inherently diremptive character which fractures, as it

were, in the texture of reality, arresting us forcibly as it does so.) So while Levenson's insightful reading of the Hebrew Scriptures can duly expose "philosophical" misreadings of the text, his polemical way of dismissing alternatives can distract us from illuminating philosophical attempts to articulate this founding mystery, some of which we shall attend to, chastened by the uncanny resistance to order we feel around us and in ourselves.¹³

The thinker I find most illuminating in this regard, who learned a great deal from Maimonides, is Thomas Aquinas. Early in his life of reflection he had quite transformed Aristotle, recasting Avicenna's primal distinction between *essence* and *existing* by elevating *existing* from the oxymoronic status of an *accident* to that of *act*: *existing* will be a primary exemplar in the created order of acts as we know them, since only existing things can act. This philosophical strategy allowed him to identify a trace of God's creative activity in creatures, as each participates in the gift of existing as it comes forth from the creator, who has been identified as "existing itself" (*ipsum esse*), thereby highlighting what Avicenna and Maimonides had both seen but failed to exploit. Aquinas effectively employed this metaphysical discovery to dismiss any residue of "deity as perfect, unchanging being," with his focus on *act* transcending both stasis and change, as befits a free creator eternally in act. We may then say that the One whose very essence is to exist creates by acting consonant with its nature, though we will be unable to ascertain *how* that might happen, since we cannot properly conceive one whose essence is to exist. Now such "unknowing" must characterize our speech about God who, as creator, cannot properly be an item in the created universe. Yet the uniqueness of the creator/creature relationship will allow Aquinas to use Plotinus's term "emanation" for creating, once having established that God's creating will be freely executed.

It follows from this that it would be improper to try to conceive of the creator as "over against" the created universe, as though it were a separate being, since every creature exists only by *participating* in the inexhaustible act of existing which is the creator. That is, no creature can *be* without its inherent link to the creator, so these

“two” can never be separate from one another, as individual creatures are from each other.

Yet the very act of creation brings about creatures with a life of their own, so this ineffable “distinction” of creatures from creator emerges in the act of creating itself. All of this discourse has one goal: to clarify as best we can the protean expressions of “emanation” and “participation,” and do so in such a way that what results is a gift. So “emanation,” “participation,” and “gift” form a triptych expressing the unique act which is creation, bringing about creatures whose very existing consists in their relating to their creator. So what Aristotle had identified as “existing in itself,” individual subsistent things, are now deemed to exist in relation to a creator. Yet whatever exists does so in a certain way, for things need to be identified by their kinds; there is no coherent answer to the query: how many things are there in the room? Here we are returned to Aristotle: the puppies born as a result of the coupling of a dog and a bitch belong to that species, yet the fact of their being born elicits delight and joy. Existence marks novelty while essence expresses stability. Yet given the material substratum of sensible creatures, things can always go wrong, as the focus on individual existents, rather than essences or kinds, introduces.

That fact represents an initial recognition of the “resistance” Levenson finds expressed in the pre-existent stuff of the Genesis story, reminding us how what the creator deems good can fail. Yet intentional creatures can fail the creator even more directly, by operatively rejecting the relation which links them with existing itself. We call that failure “malice,” and the refusal it embodies “sin.” An intentional rejection becomes the source of malice precisely because intentional creatures have the role of “vicegerent” of creation, capable of initiating a return of emanating things to the One from which they emanate simply by understanding that these things are not free-standing but, as created, participate in the being of the creator. So to reject or ignore the very relatedness they are meant to affirm, inviting them to return to their source, can only distort the very ethos of created existence. So creation is inevitably bedeviled by failures endemic to material stuff, or yet more pointedly, by those who turn

aside from the “good” they are able to recognize as their goal. Yet as actively participating in the gift received, it is the very dynamism of existing which allows for failure and even for malice. Rather than eliminating this shadow accompanying creation itself, a robust sense of existing by participation in the creator leaves room for it, even while the shadowy nature resists explanation. Yet while that acknowledgement concedes that the creator is not “all-powerful,” an ambiguous talent at best; it hardly implies a “worthy opponent,” nor introduces a dualism at the origin of things. At the same time, however, it will recognize that affirming the “goodness” of creation cannot imply transparent luminosity all the way down. Yet that is the argument which Jon Levenson has with his Jewish interlocutor (as well as a plethora of others), an argument which can be accommodated short of outright Manichean or gnostic assertions.

Finally, we find an unexpected crossover in the sixteenth-century Shi’ite philosophical theologian, Mulla Sadra, as he seconds Aquinas’s unabashed affirmation of the primacy of *existing* over *essence*, which had certainly been the case with Aristotle, with his Islamic epigone, Avicenna, and with his dedicated commentator, Averroës. To do so, he had to contradict his predecessor and mentor in the Isfahan school, Mir Damad; as well as Suhrawardi, whose philosophical genius fairly initiated *ishrâq* philosophy in Iraq after Averroës. We shall hear more of him in the final chapter on eschatology, for he developed in a lucid manner the intrinsic connection between emanation and the return, a pattern which has been touted as the very structure of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*. For now, we need to pursue the different ways in which the unique relation of creatures to the one creator can elicit a founding attitude of trust on the part of intentional creatures.

Notes

- 1 Portions of this chapter have been adapted from my “Act of Creation and its Theological Consequences,” in Thomas Weinandy OFM Cap, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum (eds), *Aquinas on Doctrine* (London: T & T Clarke, 2004), pp. 27–44, with gratitude to the publishers.

Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology

- 2 Robert Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), pp. 34–36. For a dramatic account of the sinuous journey to Chalcedon, see Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Change?* (Still River, MA: St Bede's, 1985).
- 3 Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, p. 37.
- 4 For an explicitly interfaith appraisal, see David Burrell and Bernard McGinn (eds), *God and Creation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), with the more recent Castel Gandolpho colloquy: David Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet M. Soskice, and William R. Stoeger (eds), *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 5 For a narrative sketch of the interaction among key medieval protagonists, see my *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), as well as *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).
- 6 Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
- 7 Richard M. Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazâlî and Avicenna* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1992).
- 8 *Al-Ghazali: The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God* (trans. David Burrell and Nazih Daher; Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1992).
- 9 *Summa Theologiae* 1.1. Prol.
- 10 Ian Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 22. For a critical appreciation of this erudite treatise which calls attention to its pointedness, see Richard Taylor's review in *Middle East Journal* 44 (1990), 521–522.
- 11 See the reading of Thomas Michel, "God's Covenant with Mankind according to the Qur'an," *Bulletin of the Secretariat for Non-Christians* 52 (1983); reprinted in *Encounter* (Rome) 101 (1983); in *The Catholic Witness* (Ibadan, Nigeria) IV/10 (1983).
- 12 Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. xxv.
- 13 For a less polemical account which retains the punch of Levenson, see Paul Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009): "it clearly belongs to the grammar of Christian thought to say that there is almost omnipresent damage, best construed as lack, the absence of particular goods they should have. ..." (p. 90).