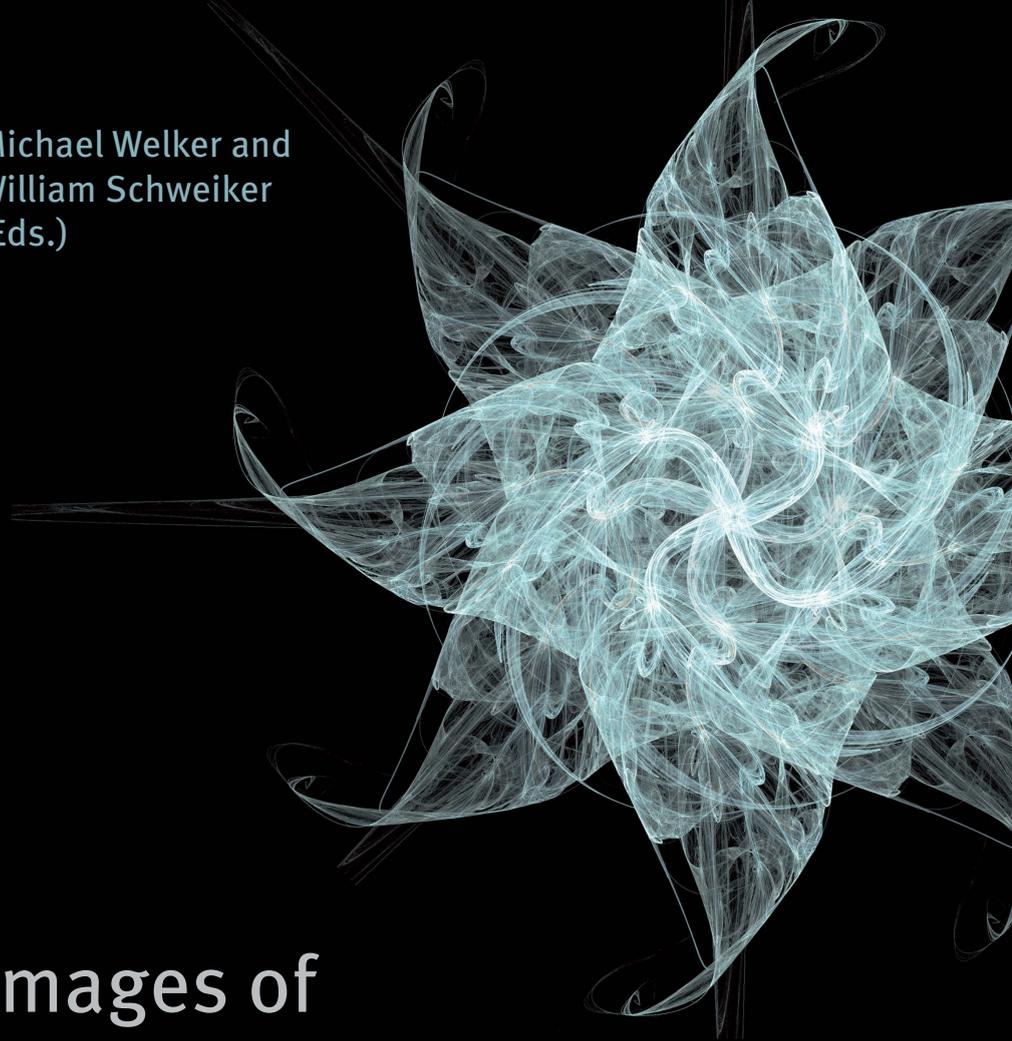


Michael Welker and
William Schweiker
(Eds.)



Images of
the Divine
and Cultural Orientations

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Voices



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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	7
William Schweiker and Michael Welker	

PART I **Divine Invisibility and Power**

INVISIBILITY AND POWER IN ISLAMIC RELIGION AND CULTURE	15
The Ambiguity of Veiling	
Baber Johansen	
IN THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE	51
Kathryn Tanner	
IS SEEING BELIEVING?	67
'Visibility' and 'Self Concealment' of God in Jewish Theology after the Holocaust	
Alfred Bodenheimer	

PART II **Spiritual Transformation and the Divine**

IMAGES OF THE DIVINE AND SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION IN JUDAISM.....	79
Michael Fishbane	
BETWEEN SENSUAL AND HEAVENLY LOVE	95
Franz Rosenzweig's Reading of the Song of Songs	
Paul Mendes-Flohr	

GOD SHARING IN THE CONDITIO HUMANA103
Reflections on the Potential of Christian Imagery from a Lutheran Perspective
Friederike Nüssel

IMAGE OF THE DIVINE AND SPIRITUAL PRESENCE..... 115
In What Ways Can Christology Provide Cultural Orientations?
Michael Welker

THE FORCES OF GOOD AND EVIL IN ‘ISLAMIC’ COMIC.....125
Susanne Enderwitz

RE-THINKING JEWISH/CHRISTIAN DIVERGENCE ON THE “IMAGE OF THE DIVINE”133
The Problem of Intra-Divine Complexity and the Origins of the Doctrine
of the Trinity
Sarah Coakley

PART III
The Divine and the Elevation of Life

‘GOD AS LIGHT’ IN THE CHRISTIAN MORAL IMAGINATION 153
William Schweiker

PARADISE AS A QUR’ANIC DISCOURSE 167
Late Antique Foundations and Early Qur’anic Developments
Angelika Neuwirth

“SO THAT HE COULD NOT BEAR THE SWEETNESS” 187
Imagining the Unimaginable in Medieval Ashkenaz
Johannes Heil

ISLAM AS A CULTURAL ORIENTATION FOR MODERN JUDAISM..... 197
Susannah Heschel

CHRISTOLOGY215
The Images of the Divine in USA and South African Black Theology
Dwight Hopkins

INTRODUCTION

William Schweiker and Michael Welker

This book documents results of a research project which was meant to explore fruitful commonalities and fruitful differences among the Jewish, the Christian and the Islamic traditions. Over against conventional doctrinal and comparative religious explorations, we wanted to explore the impact that the basic contents of faith and practice have on cultures and their forms of ethos. This approach was chosen to relate different traditions of research to each other—one more dominant in the European contexts (the so-called *Geistesgeschichte*) and the other in the Anglo-American world, one based on cultural and social studies. When we started the project the majority of our group voted for the title “Images of the Divine and Cultural Orientations.” An introduction to the chapters that follow can be usefully isolated through attention to the title of the volume, the problems it implies, and the challenge it puts to the study of the religions, including theology.

1. Image and Culture

In marked contrast to the contemporary globalized media and the flood of images that saturate, inform, and orient people’s imaginations around the world, the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions share in different forms and degrees the rejection of what is called “image-worship.” We read: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them ...” (Ex 20:4f; cf. Dtn 5:8 and Dtn 4:16-19).¹ Yet, ironically, we also find in the Holy Scriptures a multitude of images of the Divine and the divine glory. In the *Tanach* (Hebrew Scripture) the human being is called the “image of God” (Gen 1:26f, 5:1, 9:6) and in the New Testament of the Christian Bible they receive the promise that they will bear the image of the “second *anthropos*” (or the second Adam) from heaven (1Cor 15:49; cf. Rom 8:29), namely, Jesus Christ, “who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature” (Heb 1:3). Likewise, in the Qur’an, there is a strict prohibition of making images of the divine even as Allah has a hundred names and human beings are the “viceregents” of God on earth.²

¹ All biblical references in this chapter will be from the Revised Standard Version.

² See *Humanity Before God: Contemporary Faces of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Ethics*, eds. W. Schweiker, K. Jung, and M. Johnson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006).

Within these religious traditions, how does one relate the criticism of images with the diverse names and images of God in Holy Scripture, and with claims about God's revelation? Jews, Muslims, and Christians must think about, pray to, and worship a reality which, in any precise sense, cannot be adequately imagined or conceived, and, yet, also think, pray, and worship within the context of the religious life teeming with a multitude of names and images: God as one, God as power, God as the merciful and most high one, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a pillar of smoke leading the people out of Egypt, Christ as the Son of God, Moses the Law-giver, and Muhammed the "seal of the prophets," and on and on. In the face of this paradox of the criticism of images but their proliferation, how is one to avoid falling into a deafening silence about the divine or skepticism about God's reality and power? This challenge we can call "the iconic problem" of theology.

However, the "iconic problem" is not only a theological puzzle. It can also be raised with respect to any call for religious "cultural orientation" and brings us to the second major term in the title of this book, namely, "culture." Is culture a powerful icon or regulative ideal meant to provide orientation to human personal and social life? Kathryn Tanner, Terry Eagleton and others alerted us to the enormous complexity of the phenomenon of culture, which explains the fascination and enthusiasm with this topic in the academy and in the media.³ 'Culture' offers a realistic and a constructivist dimension. It can also be a descriptive (say, American culture) or an evaluative and even a normative term (say, high or low or pop culture). Culture includes the actual and the desirable notion of reality and—at least in a vague way—a vision or visions of perfection. Who wants to be "un-cultured?" The idea of culture is often and understandably related to claims about education and its importance in human existence. Culture is not only seen as a complex human activity, but as a complex state of actual and possible human affairs. And culture concentrates not only on natural reality, but also on spiritual and symbolic realities. Not surprisingly, in eighteenth-century Europe, 'culture' became equated with 'civilization' and correlated with all kinds of modern progress.

Since J. G. Herder in the nineteenth century, one witnesses social developments that have led to changes in ideas about culture, especially in our global age: the pluralisation of cultures, the critique of Eurocentric ideas of culture, and the emergence of a multicontextual ways of thinking about it. A nuanced approach towards different cultures across the globe and a continuous growth in the awareness of the social and cultural differentiations in complex societies is now, thankfully, the standard for all relevant investigations of the the idea of culture and also actual cultures. As Terry Eagleton noticed laconically, "The complexity of the idea of culture is nowhere more graphically demonstrated than in the fact that its most eminent theorist in post-war Britain, Raymond Williams, defines it at various times to mean the standard of perfection, a habit of mind, the arts, general intellectual development, a whole way of life, a signifying system, a structure of feeling, the

³ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997) and Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

interrelations of elements in a way of life and everything from economic production and the family to political institutions.”⁴

Granting the problems with ideas about culture, problems that now characterize our global age, most of the definitions and theories of culture seem to agree, explicitly or implicitly, on the fact that culture serves to secure continuities in the communication among human beings via memories and expectations. With the help of their culture(s) peoples develop amazing abilities to connect and to disconnect, to share and to differentiate, memories and expectations. People anticipate, reproduce and reconstruct in memories and imaginations what others remember, anticipate, and expect. Moving in the realms of memory and imagination, people can attune individual and communal emotions as well as thoughts and practices in powerful ways. In this way, cultures allow people to respond to the perceptions of their lives by others even as their perceptions reflectively shape those whom they engage. The reflexive dynamic of the mutual shaping of self-perception would seem to be basic to the communicative logic of culture, especially in our global media age. Among the religious, how one is seen by others shapes, for good and for ill, the self-understanding of peoples, a shaping power that is, sadly, too often resisted through violent reactions driven by fundamentalistic ideologies or, conversely, the deluting of traditions into vague patterns of thought, practice, and spirituality.

Despite all of these problems and challenges, it must still be said that the enormous individual and communal power to create worlds of memories and imaginations, to store, select, connect, and shape them, and to process and attune powerful streams of information, illumination, thoughts and emotions discloses the human spirit in and through cultural forms. And this same spirit can and does shape the consciousness of others through cultural communication even as one is being shaped by this same reflexive process. For this reason, the interpretation and assessment of culture(s), one task of this book, is a means to examine human existence itself, the structures of lived human reality in real and imagined worlds, and thus also to understand people’s capacities to create meaningful worlds.⁵

The challenge to understand the many processes of cultural memory and the many forms of imagination and their impact on the different societal systems is enormous.⁶ This challenge is heightened by the awareness that the global flux of cultural forms has to wrestle with enormous local and global distortions: massive injustice, poverty and ecological destruction in the contemporary world; the threat of relativism, cynicism, and apathy; the weakening and distortion of cultural and canonical memory by the enormous powers of the market, the media, and technology; the long term crisis and the potential restitutions of the ideologies of

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, 36.

⁵ See William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

⁶ Cf. Michael Welker, “Kommunikatives, kollektives, kulturelles und kanonisches Gedächtnis,” in *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, Bd. 22: *Die Macht der Erinnerung* (Neukirchener: Neukirchen-Vluyn 2008), 321-331.

the nation state in the context of the current crisis of the monetary system; and, the different speed of the shift from the modern to the post-modern paradigms and mentalities across the globe.

2. The Tasks of this Book

Mindful of the complexity of ideas about images within religious traditions and also culture as a human reality, the context of this book is the current global reality where images and cultures interact with increasing speed and intensity. However, our purpose in the following chapters is not only to explore the great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) through the framework of the interactions among “images,” the iconic problem, and “culture(s).” While that is indeed one of the tasks of this book, a task that, to be honest, alone would justify the scholarly labor found in the book’s pages. Yet beyond the work of interpreting the exceedingly complex ways that the monotheistic religions have provided orientation to human cultures in and through their images of the divine, two other tasks define the purpose of this book.

Another task of this book beyond exploring the religions within different historic-social contexts is decidedly “constructive.” That is to say, some of the authors represented in this book, but by no means all of them, seek to show that the monotheistic faith with their specific forms of the iconic problem in giving people cultural orientation, have, nevertheless, surprising power to speak to the global situation marked by a whirlwind of images transgressing and ingressing into cultures. This whirlwind both facilitates understanding among cultures but also blocks and distorts mutual understanding. In this situation, the constructive religious thinker must sort through distortions in his or her own tradition and its reflexive relations to other religious and non-religious global cultural forms. Additionally, the constructive thinker is audacious enough to seek to show that the resources of his or her religious tradition can provide decisive cultural orientation amid global cultural flows that are missing in other interpretation of the current situation: say, economic, political, media, non-governmental, environmental, scientific, or sociological forms of interpretation. This constructive task is the most daring purpose of this book and yet it arises organically out of the materials studied and the context in which we now live and think.

The third and final task of this book compliments its analysis of religious traditions and its forays into constructive religious thinking. This third task is modeled in the book as a whole more than finding explicit expression in any of its parts. That is to say, the book seeks to model a way for Muslims, Christians, and Jews to interpret and live out their faiths and practices in a global context that too often circulates images of the divine and religious orientations in life in their most violent, inhumane, and destructive forms. Is there a way to be religious that is deeply steeped in and committed to a religious tradition and yet avoid amid the challenges of the global age both fundamentalistic ideologies and vague spiritualities? By answering to that question, the book provide examples of being

Christian, being Muslim, and being Jewish that demonstrate the cultural orienting power of these three great religions in a time when global realities too often and too powerfully thwart human understanding and flourishing. In this way, the book is a testimony to the cultural orientation now possible for religious people who are fully mindful of the challenges of global times.

These three tasks undertaken in and through the examination of religious traditions, cultural contexts, and the “iconic problem” help to explain the structure of this volume. We begin in **Part I** with articles that explore features of the “iconic problem” itself as well as its forms and uses in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Longstanding debates about the knowableness and also invisibility of the divine are approached historically and also constructively. In our global age marked by the whirlwind of images shaping human consciousness through the medial system, it is remarkable the insights these ancient religions bring to explore the place of “images” in human thought and life.

Part II explores “spiritual transformation” of human life in relation to images of the divine in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. These chapters seek to understand the operative power of the divine to transform and orient human life. Importantly, the chapters show the depth and richness of these traditions to orient and empower spiritual transformations in ways radically distinct from vague, popular forms of “spirituality” or fundamentalistic ideologies.

Part III of the book examines a more specific form of human life, namely, the elevation of human life in relation to the divine. Here one can see how “images of the divine” are used by these traditions to think about the dynamics of human existence and the highest human good. This process of elevation is not a condition contrary to the meaning of being human, it is not a denial of one’s humanity, as many of the critics of religion contend. Quite the inverse is the case. The elevation of life in and through divine power is in fact an elevation into true humanity; it is to be fully and profoundly alive. Taken together, the Parts of the book provide incisive examinations of the monotheistic traditions within the framework of the problems and challenges denoted by the title of this book.

3. Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the support of many persons and institutions. We especially thank all of the contributors both for their incisive contributions to the meetings in Heidelberg, Berlin, and Chicago within which their articles originated and also for the splendid writings that bear the fruit of our common labor. The colleagues involved came from the USA, Germany, Switzerland, and Israel. They brought in inspirations from Jewish and Christian faith traditions and Islamic Studies. Their academic fields were Jewish Studies, Jewish History and Literature, Modern Jewish Thought, Islamic Studies, Islamic Religious Studies and Sociology, Arabic Philology and Cultural Studies, Systematic Christian Theology, Christian Theological Ethics, Constructive Theology, Ecumenical Theology.

We want to thank the various institutions that supported this project. Foremost, we thank the Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst, Stuttgart, in general, and Dr. Heribert Knorr in particular for its great support in the framework of the Zukunftsoffensive IV (Winning the Future IV). Next, we express our gratitude to the Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School, the Research Center for International and Interdisciplinary Theology (FITT), and the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum (IWH) of the University of Heidelberg for providing financial and logistic support to this international and interdisciplinary project.

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This book is also related to a larger research project now underway at the University of Chicago and Ruhr University Bochum. Through the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation, *The Enhancing Life Project*, directed by William Schweiker (Chicago) and Guenter Thomas (Bochum), is a three year research project dedicated to explore the religious, spiritual, scientific, and social meanings of “Enhancing Life.” In this respect, *The Enhancing Life Project* continues and yet extends the work of this book. For further information, please visit the website enhancinglife.uchicago.edu.

Chicago and Heidelberg, January 2015 *W. S. and M. W.*

PART I

Divine Invisibility and Power

INVISIBILITY AND POWER IN ISLAMIC RELIGION AND CULTURE

The Ambiguity of Veiling

Baber Johansen

I want to draw attention in this chapter to the three levels in which the symbolic expression of power through invisibility has served, in the history of Islam, to establish links between revelation, political power and gender relations.

1. The *Qur'ān* on Jesus and Moses

On the first level, that of revelation, the *Qur'ān* discusses the relation between power and invisibility in the relation between God and His prophets. Its text refers to the Law and the prophets of Judaism as well as to Jesus' teaching as part of God's revelation to mankind. It has, in particular, focused on Moses' and Jesus' relation to God as examples for particular intimacy between God and His prophets on the one hand, the necessary respect of God's transcendence and invisibility on the other.

The *Qur'ān* recognizes Jesus as God's Word (*kalimatu llāh*), having his origin in God's word of creation¹ and being strengthened by the Holy Spirit.² An interpretation of Jesus as the logos of God is, therefore, possible. The *Qur'ān* underlines, on the other hand, that Jesus is made of clay³ and that the Holy Spirit may be understood as the spirit of revelation that God sent to many prophets, Muhammad among them, but that it may be only for God to know what the Holy Spirit is.⁴ The Qur'ānic Jesus emphatically denies the assumption that he claims

¹ *Qur'ān*, Sūra 3 (*Āl 'Imrān*), 45, 48 and Sūra 4 (*al Nisā'*), 71; for a modernist interpretation of these verses see Muḥammad 'Abduh and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-ḥakīm al-shahīr bi-tafsīr al-Manār*, third edition (Cairo: 1367 h.) [henceforth *Tafsīr al-Manār*], *op. cit.* vol. III, pp. 297, 303-304, vol. VI, pp. 82-86.

² *Qur'ān*, Sūra 2 (*al-Baqara*), 87, 253 and Sūra 5 (*al-Mā'ida*), 110; see also *Tafsīr al-Manār*, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 376-377 for Sūra 2 (*al-Baqara*), 87 and vol. VII, p. 244 on Sūra 5 (*al-Mā'ida*), 110.

³ *Qur'ān*, Sūra 3 (*Āl 'Imrān*), 59.

⁴ *Qur'ān*, Sūra 16 (*al-Nahl*), 2; Sūra 17 (*al-Isrā'*), 85; Sūra 40 (*al-Mu'min*), 15; Sūra 42 (*al-Shūra*), 52.

to be God's son⁵ or to participate in the divine right of being worshipped.⁶ The *Qur'ān* states that Jesus was neither crucified nor killed by his enemies but rather removed to God and thus protected from persecution.⁷ Jesus is thus recognized as God's Word, as being strengthened by the Holy Spirit and, at the same time, characterized as a human being, created by God from clay and being sent, like other prophets, with a revelation from his Lord. He is a prophet, a human being who does not participate in the divine except through the revelation and the signs that God gave to him.⁸ Among the special signs that characterize his message is the one announcing "news of an apostle who will come after me whose name is Ahmad."⁹ Proximity to, as well as distance from the Christian doctrines on Jesus are evident.

The ambition to see God, is, in the *Qur'ān*, attributed to Moses only. The Qur'ānic text takes into account the narrative of the Bible on Moses in *Exodus* and *Numbers*, but it chooses certain elements and omits others that do not seem to be acceptable in a Qur'ānic understanding of a prophet's relation to God. The chosen elements concern the spoken communication between God and Moses, the omitted elements the full or partial visibility of God. The burning bush of *Exodus* 3: 1-7 poses no problem. The *Qur'ān*, Sura 19 (*Maryam*), 51-52 tells the story as a sign for the special privilege granted to Moses, the prophet and messenger with whom God "communed in secret." *Numbers* 12: 6-8 specifies the privileged position that Moses enjoys among the Prophets in his verbal communication with God: "Hear these my words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make myself known to him in a vision, I *speak* with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I *speak* mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord." *Exodus* 33: 11 uses similar terms: "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another." The *Qur'ān* underlines this special privilege of Moses through contrasting God's general rule for His communication with His prophets to the intimacy and directness of Moses' relation to God.

God's general rule for the communication with His prophets is given in *Qur'ān*, Sura 42 (*al-Shūrā*), 51: "It is not vouchsafed to any mortal that God should speak to him except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or through a messenger sent and authorized by Him to make known His will." According to this rule, visible manifestations of God to His chosen persons do not figure among the elements through which He reveals himself.¹⁰ Many interpretations of God's relations to His

⁵ *Qur'ān*, Sūra 19 (*Maryam*), 35-36; Sūra 5 (*Al-Mā'ida*), 116.

⁶ *Qur'ān*, Sūra 5 (*al-Mā'ida*), 116.

⁷ *Qur'ān*, Sūra 4 (*Al-Nisā'*), 157-58; Sūra 3 (*Āl-'Imrān*), 51-59.

⁸ *Qur'ān*, Sūra 3 (*Āl 'Imrān*), 49, 84; Sūra 4 (*Al-Nisā'*), 163-166, 171; Sūra 33 (*Al-Aḥzāb*), 7.

⁹ *Qur'ān*, Sūra 61 (*al-Ṣaff*), 6.

¹⁰ But see *Qur'ān*, Sūra 81 (*al-Takwīr*), 13 and Sūra 53 (*al-Najm*), 11. These verses could be read as parallels to Moses's vision of God. But they are not interpreted in this way in the exegetical texts; many commentators, among them the nineteenth-century Yemeni reformer Shawkānī, define revelation rather as "inspiration" (*ilhām*) than as vision. See

prophets that we find in the exegetical literature hold that God, while speaking to Moses directly, talked to him behind a veil. This seems rather a deduction from God's general rule than an interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses that depict God's relation with Moses. *Qur'ān*, Sura 4 (*al-Nisā'*), 164 states: "Of some apostles We have already told you, but there are others of whom We have not yet spoken. God spoke to Moses directly"¹¹ and *Qur'ān*, Sura 19 (*Maryam*), 51-52 refers to the story of the burning bush (*Exodus* 3: 1-7) in saying: "In the Book, tell also of Moses, who was a chosen man, an apostle, and a prophet. We called out to him from the right side of the Mountain. And when he came near We communed with him (*qarrab-nāhu*) in secret." Both verses do not refer to any veil between God and Moses.

But when it comes to the way in which *Exodus* discusses the visibility of God, the Qur'ānic text takes its distance. *Exodus* 19: 1-24 reports that when God came down on the mountain of Sinai He announced that: "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may *hear* when I speak with you and so trust you ever after."¹² He threatened all those with death who would go up the mountain or touch the border of it "beast or man, he shall not live."¹³ But in *Exodus* 24: 9-11 it is said that "Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they *saw* the God of Israel [...]. Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God and they ate and drank." This vision of God by the Elders of Israel is not mentioned in the *Qur'ān*. Also the partial vision of God that He grants to Moses, according to *Exodus* 33: 21-23, has no place in the Qur'ānic text.

The Qur'ānic narrative of Moses vision of God rather focuses on *Exodus* 33: 17-23. On the Mountain of Sinai God promises Moses to lead the people of Israel to the Promised Land "for you have truly gained My favor and I have singled you out by name." Moses replies "Oh let me behold Your Presence!" And He answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name LORD, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But—He said—you *cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live.*" And the LORD said, "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and as My presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and *you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.*"

Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Shawkānī, *Fath al-Qadīr al-jāmi' bayna fan-nay al-riwāya wa l-dirāya min 'ilm al-tafsīr* (Dār al-Wafā' li l-ṭibā' wa l-nashr wa l-tawzī', 1415/1994) [henceforth *Shawkānī, Fath*], vol. IV, pp. 522-23.

¹¹ Quoted from the translation of N. J. Dawood, *The Koran* (London: Penguin, 1956). The brackets in which the translator puts these words have no justification. The words are plain text in the *Qur'ān*. For a nineteenth-century interpretation see *Tafsīr al-Manār, op. cit.*, vol. IX, pp. 126-127 and vol. VI, p. 67.

¹² *Exodus* 19: 9.

¹³ *Exodus* 19: 12-13, see also 19: 21-24.

The Qur'ānic narrative of this event—given in *Qur'ān*, Sura 7 (*al-A'rāf*), 142-145—leaves no space for even a partial view of God granted to Moses. It reaches its climax in 7; 143-44:

And when Moses came at the appointed time and His Lord talked to him, he said: "LORD, show me [Thyself] (*rabbī arīnī*) so that I may gaze at you" (*anzur ilayka*). He replied: "You shall not see Me. But look upon the Mountain; if it remains firm upon its base, then only shall you see Me." And when the LORD manifested (*tajallā*) Himself to the Mountain, He leveled it into dust. Moses fell down senseless and when he recovered his senses, he said: "Glory be to You. Accept my repentance. I am the first of the believers." He replied: "Moses, I have chosen you of all mankind to make known My messages and My commandments. Take therefore what I have given you, and be thankful."

2. The Exegetical Literature on the Communication between God and His Prophets

The Muslim exegetical literature on these verses faces several problems. Implicit in the wish to see God in this world is Moses' attempt to make God an object of human vision. The wish to see God is interpreted, by the Muslim commentators, as a sign of disrespect for God's transcendence, a neglect of the difference between the created world and the realm of the creator. In the created world, communication between God and human beings has to rely on the words revealed by God. It is God's word through which He becomes accessible. The spreading and the interpretation of His word is, therefore, the task of the prophets. The human effort to see God implies an effort to make God an object of the human senses (other than the hearing of His words, which depends on God's choice of the hearer and leaves the human being in a passive, even if attentive role). Hearing, in Arabic as in many other languages, is linked to obedience. Such a distinction between hearing and seeing God is closely linked to obedience, is implicit in Exodus 33: 17-23 and in the *Qur'ān*. It has probably become more obvious with the growing influence of the natural sciences of Late Antiquity on Mu'tazilī and Shī'ī theology and in particular with the growing influence of Ptolemy's *Optics* on the exegetical literature.

Ptolemy's theory of vision is based on the notion of rectilinear rays sent out from the eyes until they meet their object. It depicts vision as a flux from the eyes to the external objects. In his "Introduction" to *Ptolemy's Theory of Visual Perception*, A. Mark Smith describes this flux as follows: "Issuing forth at enormous speed, the visual flux eventually strikes external objects and, in so doing, feels them visually. Thus, while it may not be an actual species of touch, sight is like touch in its basic operation [...]"¹⁴

¹⁴ A. Mark Smith, *Ptolemy's Theory of Visual Perception. An English Translation of the Optics with Introduction and Commentary* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1996), vol. 86, part 2, p. 23. See also pp. 21, 25 and 37, and Smith's English translation of the Arabic text of Ptolemy's *Optics*, written by Amiratus Eugeney in the twelfth century,

Many Arab authors quote Ptolemy's Optics from the tenth century on.¹⁵ Smith has suggested, with good reasons, that the founder of Arab philosophy, al-Kindī (d. 873), already used it in his optical treatise *De Aspectibus*.¹⁶ Josef Van Ess, in his magistral work on *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, points out that the influence of Greek optics is already clearly traceable in the work of the eighth century Shī'ī theologian Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d. 796 in Kufa).¹⁷ The notion that the gaze is equivalent to touching its object has thus received a scholarly grounding in theology and Optics during the eighth and the ninth century. It seems to be dominant in theology and in the exegetical literature of the ninth and tenth century. From the tenth century on, the influence of Mu'tazilī theology and Ptolemy's Optics on the Sunni exegetical literature clearly diminishes. This change is due in the first line to the increasing dominance of the Ash'arī theology from the second half of the tenth century on. This theology upheld the hope for a vision of God by the elected in the hereafter and did not assign to science and optics a decisive role for its arguments.¹⁸ The fact that Ibn al-Ḥaytham (965-1040) developed a new form of optics that gave more place to an intromission aspect to the theory of vision may have supported this exegetical development.¹⁹

pp. 63-64, 74-75, 81, 99, 103. For the study of vision and optics as a key to cultural history, see Gérard Simon, *Archéologie de la Vision. L'optique, le corps, la peinture* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2003). He also underlines "la palpation du regard antique" (pp. 68-69, 72), but with a view to understanding vision as a psychological and cultural phenomenon. He underlines, in this context, the importance to the approach of Ptolemy's Optics and vision as a means of accessing the supra-lunar sphere (pp. 86-87).

¹⁵ Smith, *Ptolemy's Theory*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁷ Josef Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra vol. 1* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), p. 345; see also Josef Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra vol. V* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), pp. 69-70.

¹⁸ Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ashari* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), chapter X: Que Dieu. est visible aux regards humains, et qu'il sera vu des croyants dans l'au-delà, pp. 329-344.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Ḥaytham (965-1040), whose optics (*manāẓir*) were translated into Latin under the title *De Aspectibus*, exerted a lasting influence on European scientists until the nineteenth century. He was the first author who brought together different strands of the theories of vision and perception in late antiquity, among them those of Ptolemy, to produce a new and coherent theory on the role of light in an intromission theory of vision and perception. See A Mark Smith, *Ptolemy's Theory of Vision*, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-9. In his book on *Alhacen's Theory of Visual Perception. A Critical Edition, with English Translation and Commentary, of the First Three Books of Alhacen's De Aspectibus, the Medieval Latin Version of Ibn al-Haytham's Kitāb al-Manāẓir*. Vol. One. Introduction and Latin Text (American Philosophical Society: Philadelphia, 2001), A Mark Smith has published a theoretical analysis of its cultural sources (see Introduction, pp. XV-CXVIII and Notes, pp. CXIX-CLIV) as well as a list of its Manuscripts and Editing (CLV-CLXXVII) as well as the Latin text (pp. 3-337). He shows the different models of Optics that go into Ibn al-Ḥaytham's and Ptolemy's theories and, in particular, the role assigned to light in these theories and their sources.

Like most other exegetes, the eleventh-century Khurasani scholar Sam‘ānī (1035-1096), a Shāfi‘ī jurist, admits that it is impossible for a human being to see God in this world: the sight would destroy not only mountains but also the human being.²⁰ The older exegetical tradition linked to Qatāda (d. 735) had in fact taught that Moses died at the moment when God manifested Himself to the mountain and later was resurrected.²¹ Sam‘ānī, as before him the tenth-century exegetic authority al-Ṭabarī, holds that Moses fainted and—after having come back to his senses—repented.²² It is implicit in his text that in this world the attempt to request the vision of God confronts the human being with a power that is extremely dangerous for him.

Sam‘ānī focuses on the means of communication with the divine that are licit and less risky. He interprets *Qur‘ān*, Sura 7 (*al-A‘rāf*), 143 as a meeting between God and His prophet, shielded off against the presence of Satan and the angels. In this meeting God spoke to Moses “so that He made him hear and understand” whereas Gabriel, who according to another transmission attended this meeting, did not hear anything.²³ Sam‘ānī focuses his interpretation on the problem of language: did God speak to Moses in His own language that neither the angels nor Satan—let alone human beings—understand but through which God and Moses could communicate, thus choosing a means of communication specific to these two and not accessible to others? One wonders how Sam‘ānī’s interpretation of Sura 7 (*al-A‘rāf*), 143 is connected to the theological conflict between Mu‘tazilīs and Ash‘arīs on the question whether God’s speech is created or uncreated.

To the moral question “How did he (Moses) ask God to see Him, knowing very well that God is not to be seen by mortals?” Sam‘ānī answers by quoting a religious scholar, Íasan, who said: “His desire stimulated him and so he asked the vision. Others said: he asked the vision of his LORD because he thought that it is admissible in this base world.”²⁴ The question touches on another conflict between Ash‘arīs and Mu‘tazilīs. The Mu‘tazilīs use *Qur‘ān*, Sura 7 (*al-A‘rāf*), 143 as proof for their doctrine that human beings will not see God, neither in this nor in the next world, because he is unlike the human creatures and cannot become the object of their sense perception. Sam‘ānī holds that in the hereafter those saved in Paradise will enjoy the *visio beatifica*. He insists that God’s answer “You shall

Gerard Simon, *Archeologie de la Vision*, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-164, has analyzed the differences between the cultural, psychological, and philosophical dimensions between Ptolemy’s and Ibn al-Haytham’s systems of optics and vision.

²⁰ Abul-Muẓaffar Maṣū‘ b. Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Marwazī al-Sam‘ānī, *Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān* (ed. Abū Tamīm Yāsiribn Ibrāhīm) [Madār al-waṭan li l-nashr (maṭābi‘al-Fuṣṭāṭ) 1418/1997], vol. I (*min surat al-mā‘ida ila Hūd*), p. 212-213.

²¹ Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī al-musammā jāmi‘ al-bayān fī ta’wīl al-Qur‘ān* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1992/1414h.), vol. VI, p. 53. See also Sam‘ānī, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²² Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, *op. cit.*, vol. VI, p. 53.

²³ Sam‘ānī, *Tafsīr*, *op. cit.*, vol. I (*min sūrat al-mā‘ida ilā Hūd*), p. 212.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212. As to the Íasan quoted in the text, neither Sam‘ānī nor the editor of his work give any specification of this scholar’s identity.

not see Me” does not imply a reproach made by God to Moses, but simply means “neither at present nor in this base world,” but that it does not mean “I will not be seen by you” ever.²⁵

The twelfth-century Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī (1074-1143) who lived and worked in Khwarizm, produced an exegetical work on the *Qur’ān*²⁶ along the lines of Mu‘tazilī theology that has been widely recognized in the Muslim tradition as a philological and intellectual masterpiece of exegesis²⁷ but strongly criticized for its theological leanings. In his exegesis Zamakhsharī explicitly uses arguments derived from Greek optics in order to support Mu‘tazilī forms of reasoning. Like Sam’ānī he focuses on God’s speech, God’s invisibility and the moral justification of Moses’ request.

Zamakhsharī interprets *Qur’ān*, Sura 7 (*al-A‘rāf*), 142-45 first of all as a proof for the thesis that God created his own speech. He insists that God spoke to Moses “without intermediary, much as the king speaks.”²⁸ That he spoke to him (implies) that He created the speech through which He speaks in some bodies much as He created it as writing on the tablet (referring to *Qur’ān*, Sura 85 [*al-Buruj*], 22). According to one recital, Moses heard the speech (of God) from all directions. According to Ibn ‘Abbās, “[...God] spoke to him for forty days and forty nights and wrote the tablets for him.”²⁹ For the Mu‘tazilī exegete, Zamakhsharī, the *Qur’ānic* confirmation that God spoke to Moses is a proof that God created His own speech and thus also the *Qur’ān*, so that He could talk directly and without any intermediary with His prophet. The human sense of vision does not allow a communication between God and humans. Discussing vision as sense perception, Zamakhsharī bases his argument on *Qur’ān*, Sura 7 (*al-A‘rāf*), 143 and the difference between “make me see” and “so that I may gaze at You.” He argues that “make me see” means “manifest yourself” and is, in fact, the condition for Moses being able to gaze at God. His request is thus for a vision that leads to perception and not for a gaze that is not accompanied by perception. God has clearly answered Moses’ request in the negative. Zamakhsharī then explains why: the objects of perception have to be material bodies or accidents related to these bodies, such as color, form or smell. As God is neither a body nor an accident on a body He cannot be perceived through the human sense of vision.³⁰

²⁵ Ibid. Vol. I, p. 212.

²⁶ Abu l-Qāsim Maḥmūd ibn ‘Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an ḥaqā’iq al-tanzīl waiec-‘uyūn al-aqwāl fī wujūh al-ta’wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-‘arabī, 1947), verse 143, vol. II, pp.151-152.

²⁷ On Zamakhsharī’s status in Muslim exegesis of the *Qur’ān* see Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1952), pp. 117-177.

²⁸ *Al-Kashshāf*, op. cit., on verse 143, vol. II, p. 152.

²⁹ Companion of the Prophet, d. 686 or 688. He is considered to be the leading religious scholar of his generation and a pioneer in creating *Qur’ānic* exegesis, see Goldziher, op. cit. (note 27 above), pp. 32, 65-77.

³⁰ Zamakhsharī, *Kashshāf*, op. cit., vol. II, pp. 151-153.

Remains the question: if Moses knew all this, how could he ask for the privilege of visual perception of God, a privilege which he knew God could not and would not grant him? Moses, according to *Qurʾān*, Sura 2 (*al-Baqara*), 55, reproached the people of Israel for having asked to see God as a proof for Moses' mission. Zamakhsharī concludes from this verse that Moses—knowing well that God would never grant such a request—asked the Lord to enable him to see Him. God “spoke to Moses only and they [the elders of Israel] were listening. When they heard the speech of the Lord of Glory they wanted that He *show Moses His essence (dhātahu)* so that they could *see* it with him. *This desire was based on a wrong analogy* [between speech and seeing].”³¹ Seeing is so different from speech that the one cannot be explained in the terms of the other. To see God is unconceivable, to hear His speech is a gift given to many prophets.

According to Zamakhsharī, Moses asked God the capacity to see Him, because he thought that God would refuse his request and once the elders of Israel would hear that this request was refused to a prophet, it would be clear to them that for the same reason their request also had to be refused, “because the messenger is the leader of his community and [the commands] addressed to him [...] return to them.” The crude anthropomorphism that, according to Zamakhsharī, is contained in the demand “so that I gaze at you” shows that Moses only interprets their suggestion and quotes their utterance. As Zamakhsharī formulates, Moses was far above turning “God into a visible object facing the sense of vision,” because he was by far superior to all the theologians in the knowledge of God.³²

The negation of the future vision of God “You shall never see me” is, through its linguistic form, extended to eternity.³³ Moses, after he recuperates his consciousness, revokes his request to see God and declares himself to be the first one who believes that God is not an object of vision and not accessible to any sense perception. Through his response, God has manifested His majesty and the fact that he is not accessible to human vision and not willing to become its object. Zamakhsharī clearly assigns an important place to the argument, drawn from Greek Optics, that view presupposes direction and objects that are bodies or accidents. From this argument he draws the conclusion that human beings can never see God.

In the centuries that follow, the debates about the visibility of God remain focused on *Qurʾān*, Sura 7 (*al-Aʿrāf*), 142-145 and on the elements discussed between Zamakhshari and Samʿānī. The conclusions drawn from these elements differ. The fifteenth century Damascene Hanbali Ibn ʿĀdil draws, from Moses' request, the conclusion that God can be seen, because otherwise Moses would not have asked him for it.³⁴ He admits that the dissolution of the mountain into dust proves that “nobody can resist God's vision unless God fortifies him through His

³¹ Ibid., vol. II, p.153, on verse 143.

³² Ibid., vol. II, pp. 153-154, on verse 143.

³³ Ibid., vol. II, pp. 154-155, on verse 143.

³⁴ Ibn ʿĀdil, *Al-Lubāb f'ulūm al-kitāb* (Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyya, 1998), vol. IX, p. 300.