The Word of God Among Divine Attributes:
Common Ground Between Muslim and Christian Thought[1]

Muslims maintain that the Qur'an is the Word of God, but at the beginning of Islamic history a conflict broke out among scholars and theologians about whether the Qur'an was eternal like God or created. A split took place between Islamic theologians into two camps, the Mu'atazilites and the Ash'arites. The Mu'atazilites affirmed that the Qur'an was created by God, while the Ash'arites maintained that it was subsistent from eternity past in the being of God.

It is important to point out a truth affirmed by both the Noble Qur'an and the Holy Bible, namely that the Lord Christ is "the Word of God" which He "cast down to Mary" in the words of the Qur'an (Surah Al-Nisa' 4:171). Many thinkers have seen a great resemblance between the Lord Christ and the Qur'an in this truth, and this resemblance can also be seen in the dispute over the eternity of the Word of God (the Qur'an) in the Islamic religion and the eternity of the Word of God in the Christian religion (the Lord Christ). In the following pages we will focus on uncovering the parallels between the Asha'rite conception of the matter of God's Being (*dhāt*) and His attributes (*sifāt*) (including notes by scholars from several viewpoints who have noticed these parallels) and the conception of Christian doctrine on the other hand, to disclose the differences between them.

Joseph Cumming of Yale University summarizes his thoughts stating: "The issues which he [Al-Ash'arī] raises… are both bridgeable differences, in my opinion. Furthermore, apart from these differences there is a huge amount of common ground between Muslims and Christians on the fundamental issues at stake in the *sifāt* and in the Trinity-- far more common ground than is

generally supposed by either Muslims or Christians."[2]

In this context we must concern ourselves with the importance of Ash'arī's words and his studies for Sunni doctrine, since Ash'arite teachings represent the closest teachings to what could be considered Islamic orthodoxy.[3] In spite of this most Muslims are unconcerned with the most important element of the doctrine concerning the *dhāt* and the *sifāt.* "One of the central issues at stake in Al-Ash'arī's teaching…was the question of the divine *sifāt* which are derived from God's 'beautiful names' in the Qur'an, and the relation of these *sifāt* to God's essence. If God is Powerful, Knowing and Living, does this mean that God has power, knowledge and life? Has God acquired these *sifāt* in time, or has God eternally been characterized by them? And if God's power, knowledge and life are eternal, then is God synonymous with His power, knowledge, and life, or are they something other than God's essence?"[4] In this article we shall try to learn what Al-Ash'arī taught concerning the *sifāt,* and what reasons led him to these teachings.

Defining concepts

First of all, we must define the Arabic concepts connected with this topic: *dhāt* (usually translated as "essence"); *nafs* (usually translated "self/same"); *sifa* (see following discussion*)*; and *ma'nā* (reality/thing)*.* Cumming decided to leave the term *sifāt* untranslated, because none of the proposed words (attribute, reality, entity, hypostasis) adequately capture Al-Ash'arī's meaning. "The '*sifāt* of essence' are those *sifāt* which may be eternally predicated of God, without reference to the temporally created order. The

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[2] Cumming, Joseph, *Sifāt al-Dhāt in Al-Ash'arī's Doctrine of God and Possible Christian Parallels,* in Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness Among Muslims: Essays in Honor of J. Dudley Woodberry, Evelyne A. Reisacher, ed. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2012. Originally a paper presented at Yale University, 2001, p.53.

[3] Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi has said: "Abu al-Hasan Al-Ash'arī the theologian and author of various books and literary works replying to atheists, Mu'atazilites and other rejectors, and the Jahmites, Kharijites and all other kinds of innovators. He said: 'The Mu'atazilites raised their heads until God Almighty raised up Al-Ash'arī and so confined them to the stems of sesame seeds.' And Al-Dibaj al-Madhhab says: "Abu Hasan Al-Ash'arī was in the beginning a Mu'atazilite, then came back to this true theological school, and the Sunni school was greatly amazed by him and it was asked concerning this and they were told that he saw the Prophet (SAW) during Ramadan, and he commanded him to return to the truth and helping him, and that is what happened, praise be to Almighty God." See Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi, *History of Baghdad,* edited by Bashar Awad Ma'arouf, Al-Gharb Al-Islami Publishing House, Beirut, 1422 A.H./2002 A.D., Volume 13, p.260; Ibn Farhoun, Burhan Ad-Din Al-Ya'mari, *Al-Dibaj Al-Madhhab fi Ma'arifat A'yan 'Ulema al-Madhhab,* Edited by Muhammad Al-Ahmadi Abu An-Nur, Turath House for Printing and Distribution, Cairo, Volume 2, p.95; Ibn Katheer, *Tabaqaat Al-Shafi'een,* Edited by Anwar Al-Baz, Al-Wafa' Publishing House, Al-Mansoura, 2004, p.209.

[4] Cumming, p.2

'*sifāt* of act'[5] are those *sifāt* which may be predicated of God only in reference to His interaction with His creatures…. Al-Ash'arī often uses the unspecified term *sifāt* as shorthand for the *sifāt* of essence. When he speaks of God's *sifāt* without specifying which he means, he is virtually always referring specifically to the *sifāt* of essence. He repeatedly mentions a list of seven *sifāt* of essence: knowledge, power, life, word, will, sight and hearing."[6]

The historical context

The scholar S. Nomanul Haq writes concerning this historical dispute among Islamic theologians: "The Mu'tazilite position on this issue is that the Word of God, here specifically meaning the Qur'an, is an accident (*'arad*, in Aristotle's sense [nonessential attribute or characteristic, property or quality, of something]); like every word, it is made up of 'letters serially arranged and sounds separately articulated,' which God creates in one or another corporeal framework. And once God has created a word in a certain body, it is this body that would be the agency of speaking as a result. But then, the speaker is not 'he in whom the word resides, but he who produces the word.' The Qur'an does the 'speaking' by means of the ink that embodies its words, and the surface on which it is written; or by means of the phonetic articulations of sounds; and these are all accidents. By virtue of this reasoning, the divinity of the Qur'an is dismissed."[7]

Al-Ash'arī's words are considered to be a reaction to the Mu'atazilite sect which in the end was considered heretical.[8]

S. Nomanul Haq adds: "The opposing school of Muslim theologians, the Ash'arite, rejects the theory of the createdness of the Qur'an. But while the Ash'arites do affirm that the Word of God is coeternal with God, they nevertheless manufacture a device to save themselves from having to admit that the physical body of the Qur'an, written or verbally enunciated, is eternal—for again, this would be *shirk*. Thus they distinguish between the

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[5] Among the '*sifāt* of act' are *al-karim* (generous), *al-'adil* (just), *al-halim* (forebearing), or generosity, justice and forebearance. See Al-Ash'arī, p.178ff, and p.506ff, and p.530.

[6] Cumming, p.7. The *sifāt* of essence are also called *sifāt adh-dhāt,* see Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn,* Corrected by Helmut Reiter, Franz Schweiz Publishing House, Weisbaden, 1400 A.H./1980 A.D., p.92, 496, 506, and 527.

[7] S. Nomanul Haq, *The Human Condition in Islam: Shari'a and Obligation*, p.167ff, in the book *The Human Condition: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project*, edited by Robert Cummings Neville, State University of New York, 2001.

[8] Al-Ash'arī, *Risala Ila Ahl Thughr bi-Bab Al-Abwaab,* Edited by Abdallah Shakir Muhammad Al-Junaidi, Faculty of Academic Research at the Islamic University, Medina, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1413 A.H., pp.14, 23, 119. See also Al-Tamimi, Muhammad bin Khalifa, *Muqaddimāt fi 'Ilm Maqalāt Al-Firaq,* Gharas, Kuwait, 1423 A.H./2003 A.D., p.33

Word subsisting in the divine Essence, which is without speech, and its expression by means of letters and sounds in a corporeal body. It is the former that is eternal by virtue of being a divine attribute—a *disposition* of God, though not a separate divine s*ubstance.* The latter is created and contingent.

As for the question of non-eternity or the corporeal body of the Qur'an, the standard resolution in the mature Islamic tradition is that the Book is the appearance in history of the (final) Message of God, and though its written letters and enunciated sounds are not eternal substances, they are nevertheless an immutable and unique carrier of something eternal; for God's Message is indeed eternal, being an attribute of God."[9]

Al-Ash'arī's teaching based on his books
Cumming quotes at length from five books written by Al-Ash'arī, plus one additional source. He thus summarizes "the main points of al-Ash'arī's teaching about the *sifāt* and their relation to the divine essence" as follows:
1) God has seven *sifāt* of essence – knowledge, power, life, word, will, sight, hearing. This is not necessarily a closed list, but God does have other *sifāt* which do *not* belong on this list.[10]
2) These are not merely ways of speaking; they are realities/things. God is Knowing by virtue of His knowledge, Powerful by virtue of His power, Living by virtue of his life.[11]
3) These *sifāt* have existed eternally. They are not temporally originated or created.[12]
4) They are not His essence, nor are they other than He.[13]
5) Rather, they are realities/things eternally subsisting in His essence.
6) The Qur'ān describes God's knowledge and word as having some kind of agency in creation. That is, God creates *by* them."[14]

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Such as might (*'izza),* greatness *('azama),* glory *(jalal),* magnificence *(kibriya'),* lordship *(rububiyya),* and compulsion *(qahr).* See Al-Ash'ari, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn,* p.177 and 298.

[11] Al-Ash'arī, *Al-Ibāna 'an Usuul Ad-Diyāna,* higher criticism by Husain Mahmoud, Ansar Publishing House, Cairo, First Printing, 1397 A.H., pp.148-149, 181; *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn,* pp. 37, 70, 168, 485.

[12] Al-Ash'arī, *Risāla ila Ahl Ath-Thughr,* pp.56, 122, 124; Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn,* pp.171ff, p.547.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Cumming, p.38. Among the verses that describe the act of creating are those in the Qur'an of originating. "She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me? He said: So (it will be). Allah createth what He will. If He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is." (Surah Al Imran 3:47); "Allah hath appointed the Ka'bah, the Sacred House, a standard for mankind, and the Sacred Month and the offerings and the garlands. That is so that ye may know that Allah knoweth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, and that Allah is Knower of all things. (97) Know that Allah is

Possible resemblances with Christian doctrine

Cumming explains: "So God's power, God's knowledge and God's life are eternal realities which have always been present in God. They are not God's essence, nor are they other than He; rather they are realities/things eternally subsisting in His essence. This description of what God is like is remarkably similar to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as expounded by Patristic and Scholastic Christian writers… Some Christians have simply suggested that God's 'power' is precisely what is meant by the first hypostasis of the Trinity, and that God's 'knowledge' is what is meant by the second hypostasis of the Trinity, and that God's 'life' is what is meant by the third hypostasis of the Trinity."[15] Cummings goes on to review other additional parallels in ideas and language.

Opinions of other thinkers on this resemblance

Cumming acknowledges: "A long and diverse list of scholars, both medieval and modern, and including Muslims, Christians and Jews, have noticed these similarities and have commented on them…Some of the strongest examples of medieval texts which compare the Ash'arite doctrine of *sifāt* with the Christian Trinity come from Muslim members of anti-Ash'arite sects (no longer extant today) who rejected *both* al-Ash'arī's doctrine *and* Christianity on the grounds that both were teaching the same thing!"[16] We can cite several other scholars' views, both positive and negative, on whether the doctrine of *sifāt* holds potential for creating better dialogue and understanding concerning the Christian and Muslim doctrines of God. Shahristani has commented: "Abu Hudhayl has confirmed these *sifāt* as aspects of the *dhāt.* They are the same as the hypostases of the Christians…"[17]

We can see in the dialogue between Al-Kindi and Al-Hashimi that took place in the courts of Al-Ma'moun in the 3rd Century of the Hijra how Al-Kindi spoke about the convergence between Islamic and Christian thought in

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severe in punishment, but that Allah (also) is Forgiving, Merciful. (98) The duty of the messenger is only to convey (the message). Allah knoweth what ye proclaim and what ye hide." (Surah Al-Ma'ida 5:97-99).

[15] Cumming, ibid.

[16] Cumming, pp. 40, 42. See Ibn Hazm, *Kitab al-Fasl fi Al-Milal wa al-ahwa' wa al-nahl,* Muthanna Bookshop, Baghdad, 1964, Volume 1, Section 1, pp.50, 55.

[17] Al-Shahrastānī, Abu Al-Fath Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm, *Al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal,* Halabi Foundation, n.d., Part 1, p.50; see the English edition: Al-Shahrastānī, Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal,* Edited by William Cureton, London, Society for the Publication of Oriental Texts, 1842-1846, Volume 1, p.34.

this matter,[18] just as we can see some centuries after this how Al-Razi commented on the possibility of compatible concepts between the two creeds: "I know that the sect of the Christians is not well known, and the outcome is that they have established an essence with three *sifāt.* However, they have called them *sifāt,* but in reality they are self-existence essences. For because of this He said: "Do not say, three. Enough." But if we grant that the three are their belief in three *sifāt,* then we cannot deny this. And how can we not say this, when we say: He is God the King, the Holy One, the Peace, the Knowing One, the Living, the Almighty, the One Who Wills. We understand from each of these expressions something different from the others. The multiplicity of *sifāt* can only mean this. If it is unbelief to say that there is a plurality of *sifāt,* we must reject the entirety of the Qur'an, and reject logic, since we know that necessarily if God Almighty is Knowing, that this not the same as His being the Living One."[19]

Possible differences between the two doctrines
Cumming discusses four differences between the two doctrines but states that they appear to deal more with Christian theological issues (such as the incarnation) rather than the doctrine of the Trinity. Cumming concludes this section with a strong statement regarding terminology. "If one rejects all metaphorical language in reference to God, then the only way to understand the word 'Son' is as implying that God literally took a wife and carnally begot a son. Such a suggestion is seen by both Muslims and Christians alike as blasphemous and offensive. Christians would agree with al-Ash'arī in reacting to such a suggestion by saying, 'Mighty and glorious is God and exalted highly above that!'" (Al-Isra' 17:43).[20]

Conclusion
Here is Cumming's conclusion: "The average Christian today has a very superficial understanding of the Trinity, just as the average Muslim knows very little about al-Ash'arī's doctrine of *sifāt.* But what both would probably agree on is that they *disagree* about their doctrine of God in this area, and that the differences are too profound and too wide to be bridged. I think, though, that a deeper analysis of both doctrines shows that they are much closer to one another than is commonly supposed. The differences which al-

[18] *Risalat Abdallah bin Isma'il Al-Hashimi ila Abdel Massih ibn Ishaq al-Kindi,* London, Gilbert R. Refington, 1880, pp.32-35.
[19] Al-Razi, *Mafateeh al-Ghayb,* M. Khalil Muhiyyeddin Al-Mais, Beirut, Fikr Publishing House, 1990, Volume 6, p.118.
[20] Cumming, p.52.

Ash'arī has noted about *hulūl*/incarnation and about use of the word "Son" are important, but they are, properly speaking, related to christological doctrine, not to the Trinity as such. The issues which he raises which relate specifically to the Trinity itself (namely: 1) equating of "word" and "knowledge" and insisting on only three hypostases, and 2) al-Ash'arī's apparent insistence that God's life cannot be called Spirit)[21] are both bridgeable differences, in my opinion. Furthermore, apart from these differences there is a huge amount of common ground between Muslims and Christians on the fundamental issues at stake in the *sifāt* and in the Trinity – far more common ground than is generally supposed by either Muslims or Christians."[22]

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[21] Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn,* Volume 1, p.337.
[22] Cumming, pp.52-53.