

# Who is Allah?



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**(ca. 4600 words)**

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## Introduction



## Timeline

Islam is a religion of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It remains vital, flexible, and potent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At its core are revelations given to an itinerant Arab merchant named Muhammad. The revelations begin by invoking the name of the Sender: Allah.

### Sidebar One:

Dates for the Prophet Muhammad -- Born, 570 CE

Married, 595 CE

Called to prophesy, 610 CE

Left Mecca for Medina, 622 CE

Died, 632 CE

## Anecdote on Bismillah

It was the summer of 1985, and the King of Morocco was celebrating his birthday. Crowds of ordinary Moroccans gathered in the historic city of Marrakesh. My wife and I were leading a student summer program in Morocco

and had been invited to participate. One evening we went to a huge soccer stadium. We wanted to see and hear the legendary reggae singer of West Africa, Alpha Blondy. We arrived at 9 PM. Three hours later, at midnight, Alpha Blondy had yet to appear. All were restive, some were annoyed, some – a very few – had already left. Then a murmur began. It grew and grew as the diminutive singer strode on stage, grabbed the microphone, and whispered into the now silent stadium: “*Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim, Barukh ata Adonai*, Our Father who are in heaven.” In Arabic, Hebrew and English the names of God—Allah, Adonai, Father—tripped off his tongue and rippled across the stunned audience. Alpha Blondy repeated the words—in the name of Allah (Arabic), May thou be blessed O Lord (Hebrew), Our Father who art in heaven (English). And with each repetition there came a crescendo of applause, louder and louder until he whispered Amen, and moved on to the rest of his program. It lasted till 3 AM; no one was tired.

Alpha Blondy had elected to open his Marrakesh concert with the phrase *bismillah*, “in the name of Allah”. This was not extraordinary. He had merely done what all pious Muslims do before any action. Quietly they say *bismillah*. They invoke the name of Allah to bless a meal. They invoke His name before opening a book they are about to read. They invoke His name to anticipate an action. They invoke His name to mark a ritual slaughter. *Bismillah* is a sound, a sight, a taste, a touch, a smell. But first of all, above all, *bismillah*, in the name of Allah, is the opening phrase of what Muslims recognize to be the Noble Book: the Holy Qur’an.

That night in Marrakesh Alpha Blondy had added invocations from the two other Abrahamic religions. In so doing he had drawn popular attention to

the tight bonds connecting Muslims to Jews to Christians. In the name of Allah anchors Muslims' daily practices. It also connects Allah to Abraham, to Moses and to Jesus.

What's in a name? Why do all religions put such a focus on the name, the name of this or that deity, divinity, prophet, saint, savior? The name moves beyond the unbounded, unspecified space that surrounds and engulfs all life, whether human, animal, animate, inanimate, earthly or celestial. Naming reflects on the one named but also the one naming. By naming we identify ourselves with one whose name mirrors, but also eludes, our desire to connect to what is beyond naming. The name given to any and every Being is a human speech act; it remains human in its source yet cosmic in its aspiration.

In Islam Allah is that name beyond all names that is also the name to be invoked, remembered, and reproduced. Allah, for Muslims, is more than the Initiator of all Prophecy. Allah is also the Architect of the Universe as well as the Guiding Force of Human Destiny. Allah is there for eternity, and in each breath we take. Precisely because Allah never ceases to act throughout history, it is incumbent on individuals to invoke His name. To invoke the name of Allah is the requisite sign of individuals' constant awareness of Allah acting in their own lives.

### **From *Bismillah* to *Allahu Akbar***

If saying "in the name of Allah" connects each single Muslim to the Divine, another familiar phrase, *Allahu akbar*, Allah is Greater (than anything anyone can imagine) signals the bonds that tie the community to their Lord.

Visit any Muslim country and you will hear *Allahu Akbar* five times a day. The one appointed to call others to prayer, the muezzin, begins each call with *Allahu Akbar*. To say *Allahu Akbar* is to invoke Allah above, and before, and beyond all others. While *bismillah* is often a private invocation of Allah as the Supreme Source of All that is, was or ever will be, it complements another familiar phrase invoking Allah: *Allahu Akbar*. *Allahu Akbar* is a public declaration. *Allahu Akbar* makes public, and audible for all, the pervasive presence, the inescapable reach of Allah.

### **Media Accent on *Allahu Akbar***

Too often in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the public power of *Allahu Akbar* is reduced to news clips that feature would-be terrorists or freedom fighters. The recent, award winning TV series, “Homeland”, featured suicide bombers shouting *Allahu Akbar*. Turn on the evening newscasts, or troll any online news source, and you will also find the clamor of *Allahu Akbar*. Whether it was those fighting to liberate Libya from Qaddafi in 2011 or those still fighting to liberate Syria from Bashar Asad in 2013, modern day Muslim warriors punctuate most victories in skirmishes, minor or major, with the same shout: *Allahu Akbar*.

It was not so just thirty years ago. In 1983 newspapers from Cairo to Jakarta ran a front-page story about the late Neil Armstrong, who had been the first man on the moon in 1969. Armstrong was said to have had an unusual experience during his brief lunar walk: he heard an eerie noise. He had no idea where it came from or what caused it. Though he never reported it to his NASA monitors, it remained burned in his memory. Years later, while on a US sponsored trip to Cairo, Armstrong is said to have heard the same wailing noise

echoing in the streets. When he asked what it was, his Muslim host said: “*Allahu Akbar* - God, than whom none is Greater; it is the Muslim call to prayer.”

There are various reports about what happened next, and Armstrong himself later denied that either on the moon or in Cairo he had experienced “*Allahu Akbar*”. Yet the story persisted. It reverberates till today. After Armstrong died in August 2012, there was a flurry of blogs arguing whether or not he had heard *Allahu Akbar*, and whether or not he had converted to Islam. The truth of these assertions is less important than their underlying premise: *Allahu Akbar* conveys enormous symbolic power as the bridge, the window, the brand name for all that is genuinely, authentically Islamic.<sup>1</sup>

### **Beyond headlines and blogs: the barebones thesis**

Who is Allah? Many claim that they know. The real story of Allah unfolds not one but several stories. There are multiple narrators. Many subtly compete, while others openly conflict, with one another. What is required is an approach that is at once historically inclusive and culturally sensitive. One needs to survey and assess the spectrum of practices that center on Allah. Who uses the name of Allah? How do they use His name? In a sense no one knows who is Allah, yet that ignorance – the deepest level of human unknowing – does not negate the importance of Allah in practice.

When we look at Allah, we see how Muslims have used His name over time and in multiple contexts. Defining Allah is less important than locating the myriad practices that surround, and derive from, His name. Whether or not

Allah exists is finally less consequential than how His presence – at once presumed and pervasive – has been, and continues to be, addressed. That is the story – or series of stories - that unfolds in the core chapters of this book. Each appeals to the range of human sensory experience.

Chapter one will accent the tongue: how is Allah invoked, by whom and for what purpose? Chapter two will focus on the mind or intellect: how is Allah defined or redefined in numerous contexts? Chapter three will examine the heart: how is Allah remembered, and His name used to unlock the crucial, hidden dimension of human existence? Chapter four brings us to the past twenty years, attentive to the eye/ear practice of the Internet: how is Allah addressed online, through websites, twitter, Facebook and blogs? Who gets to define Allah and to claim authoritative certainty in answering the central query: Who is Allah? That will be the narrative that is traced in Chapter five. The conclusion will bring us to the global arena where non-Muslims as well as Muslims debate, and so proliferate, the practice of Allah.

### **Summary Intent**

Neither creedal nor polemical, our approach to Allah will be both critical and appreciative. It will be critical insofar as it examines many perspectives, and tries to weight their relevance in the contest for Divine sanction to human existence, whether at home or abroad, in private or public, in peace or at war. At the same time, it will be appreciative, drawing out the resonance of that Name and its symbolic power for millions of Muslims, as well as many non-Muslims, during the past fourteen hundred years.

## Competing Definitions of Allah

An Islamic dictionary offers this definition of Allah: “Allah, or God, is the only true reality. There is nothing permanent other than Him. Allah is considered eternal and uncreated, whereas everything else in the universe is created. The Qur'an describes Him in Sura 112: *Say: He is Allah, Singular. Allah, the Absolute. He begetteth not nor was begotten. And to Him has never been one equal.* (Can any human be His offspring? No!) The Qur'an condemns and mocks the pre-Islamic Arabs for attributing daughters to Allah (Q 53:19).”<sup>2</sup>

### **Sidebar Two:**

The Qur'an consists of 114 chapters.  
All are revealed YET not all accorded equivalent importance.  
Q 1 & Q 112 are the pivotal bookends of the Noble Book,  
as it is known among Muslims.  
Citations made from the Qur'an in what follows  
will indicate chapter by the single capital letter Q,  
followed by the chapter and verse.  
Hence in this passage Q 53:19 refers to  
the nineteenth verse of the fifty-third chapter.  
Also, for visual ease, each direct citation  
from the Qur'an will be italicized.

What this definition omits is the long historical development of belief in, and controversy about belief in, Allah. One could trace the history of Allah from its primordial purity to a polluted middle period and then a prophetic restoration, as some have done,<sup>3</sup> but such a neatly teleological history omits the pivotal role of the Qur'an. The Qur'an, I argue, is not just a reference or resource for devout Muslims; it is also the authority guiding all subsequent use



of the name of Allah. It recollects Allah's history before Muhammad. "The Prophet's contemporaries", notes one scholar, "knew of a Supreme Being, but He did not dominate their minds." <sup>4</sup> Too often the contemporary Muslim history of the rise of Islam neglects to emphasize just how familiar was Allah in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia and how revolutionary was the theology of the one whom Allah declared to be the last prophet (Q 33: 40). Muhammad shaped events rather than following a predictable pattern of triumph over his adversaries. He did not merely ask for a return to worship of the One True God, as some sources suggest. Instead, Muhammad, responding to directives from the Archangel Gabriel, tried to replace the idols of God with the name of Allah.

### **Allah: A Linguistic Scrutiny of the Name**

Who is Allah? Literally, Allah means The God. The Arabic verb '*ta'allaba*' means to be worshipped. As a noun, *ilah* means one worthy of worship, a god. The *al-* prefix indicates the definite article and so *al-ilah* is "the god," lower case. During the period when the Quran was revealed, 610-632, *al-ilah* was condensed. Following normative rules of Arabic grammar, *al-ilah* became *Allah*. In philological terms, one needs to trace *ilah* or a god to its definite form, *al-ilah*, the God and then examine how *al-ilah*, the God, becomes compressed into *Allah*, the One and Only God!

### **Allah remade through Gabriel's intervention/Muhammad's mediation**

In fact, *Allah* - as announced, then expanded, during the 23 years of the Prophet Muhammad's revelation - becomes something new. That novelty is reflected, above, all, in the *shahada*, the affirmation of Allah and Muhammad.

It is the entry point for membership in the Muslim community. It has two parts. The first part – ‘no god except God’ – may have been introduced, and then neglected, for one thousand years, as some have argued. It is, for instance resonant in the Torah or Hebrew scripture: Isaiah 46:9b anticipates by a millennium what appears as part one of the Arabic/Muslim *shahada*: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is no one like me.” It is not the first part but the second part of the *shahada* that confirms the Muslim difference: “and Muhammad is Allah’s messenger.” The only God who can be, and must be, invoked, beseeched, and followed is the God of Muhammad. Not only is there no god except God, but also, in an update of demand for attention to the Absolute Other, Muhammad has become the messenger, the apostle, and the emissary for the one true God.

### **Sidebar Three:**

There are five boundary markers for Muslim self-identity.

Called the *arkan*, or pillars, they are first of all,

the witness to Allah’s sovereignty (*shahada*),

followed by five-time daily prayer (*salat*),

giving of alms (*zakat*),

observance of fast during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*),

performance of the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*),

and some add a sixth:

the participation in *jihad* (outer war

to protect the *umma*, or Muslim community,

but also inner struggle to improve the self).

In the early 7<sup>th</sup> century the gods of pre-Islamic Arabia were major players. They were constantly invoked in different settings but always for the betterment of their devotees. To what extent was Allah just one among many? Which gods were His closest competitors? How did the early Muslims secure Allah as the Supreme Being for their community, and for all humankind? These are crucial questions to which many have tried to provide convincing, but often conflicting, answers. Polytheism was endemic to the ancient world – and some would say, still persists in the modern world. Three of the female deities from pre-Islamic Arabia – Allat, Uzzat and Manat – are mentioned by name in the Noble Book (Q 53: 19-20)<sup>5</sup>, but other tribes also had local deities and some, such as the god ar-Rahman, clearly had trans-regional appeal. Allah prevailed as the fortunes of Islam were reversed after 622, when Muhammad, fleeing for his life, relocated in Yathrib/Medina and began to forge an independent, oppositional and eventually dominant community in Arabia. The fortunes of the Muslims, who attributed their success to Allah, also ensured His success.

### **Allah and Muhammad: Theologically Distinct yet Visually Coeval**

In the history of Islam Allah and Muhammad have become inseparable, so much so that they share contiguous space within the soul. They reflect a notion of intersecting domains, each projecting itself but always in company with the other. Consider the large, round, equal discs in this popular website on Islamic spirituality (<http://nurmuhammad.com/pbuh/?p=2095>): In the central medallion Allah and Muhammad are calligraphically interwoven, the first letter of Allah (on the far right) encompassing Muhammad, just as the final letter of his name (on the left) slices through the l-a of Allah!



In a long view of monotheistic history, there is both continuity and distinction between the God of Abraham and the Allah of Muhammad. Through the Qur'an, Muhammad as a prophet to the Arabs, and the final prophet to humankind, is linked back to Abraham. The centerpiece of Muslim ritual, the Ka'ba, black stone in Mecca, is linked to both Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, Abraham's handmaid. Yet the lineage of Abraham to Muhammad accents its Arabian branch: it is Ishmael not Isaac who is honored as Abraham's offspring, and the register of loyalty is to all the prophetic antecedents as announced, then developed in the Qur'an. And so one must conclude that from the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, and for nearly 1400 years, Allah has become the name of God for all communities where Islam has prevailed, for both Arabic and non-Arabic speaking Muslims, for both Muslims and non-Muslims in Arabic speaking countries. Till today Allah remains God's name for

many Christians in the Middle East, just as Allah is invoked by those who live in dominant Muslim cultures where Arabic is not a language of everyday speech but remains a prestigious liturgical language (e.g., in Malaysia.)

### **Diversity within Islam**

In the most recent stage of Semitic monotheism, many divide the Abrahamic community into Muslims and non-Muslims. But is that a pragmatic or viable exercise? As a South African Muslim recently observed, “there has been too much focus on Muslim-non-Muslim relations; the real problem is that Muslims themselves are actually divided. There is a dire need for better understanding of **the diversity within our own heritage.**”<sup>6</sup> In other words, one cannot jump from Muslim to Christian to Jewish notions of God as quickly as does Alpha Blondy in the song cited above. Instead, one needs to look also at the multiple ways that Muslims have inherited, embraced and adapted the notion of Allah.

In what follows, I propose to demonstrate how that diversity **within** Islam is not merely sectarian or sociological but pragmatic, depending on the variety of practices linked to the name Allah.

***Who is Allah?*** is a manifesto. It emerges out of a lifetime engaged with Islam and enjoying the company, friendship and insight of multiple Muslims. Despite the title, it is neither theology nor apologetics. It embraces a practical rather than a literary approach to religion. Islam, in common with other religions, privileges personal intention and public performance over book knowledge and analytic thought, and to understand the practice of Allah

requires listening, but also seeing, feeling, touching and even smelling the Divine presence.

### **Pragmatic Observation vs. Theological Judgment of Allah**

Let me underscore how far my approach differs from theological or dialogical readings of Allah. Kenneth Cragg, an adroit Christian interlocutor on matters Islamic, once declared: “Since both Christians and Muslims believe in One supreme sovereign Creator-God, they are obviously referring when they speak of Him, under whatever terms, to the same Being. To suppose otherwise would be confusing...Those who say that Allah is not “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” are right if they mean that He is not so described by Muslims. They are wrong if they mean that He is other than the One Christians so understand.”<sup>7</sup> But does not this position privilege an inclusive spirit that Christians might welcome, yet one that Muslims would find at odds with, even subversive to, their own understanding of Allah?

For all the generosity of Cragg’s gesture, it omits, or overlooks, a crucial query: the one Christians so understand ‘when they speak of ‘God’ is the notion of God Incarnate in Jesus, and therefore embodying sacrificial love, while in Islam what Muslims mean by Allah is the notion of God ever vigilant, providing merciful guidance to humankind. Allah created Adam. Allah called Abraham. Allah revealed His Word to Muhammad. Allah provides His signs for each generation, up to and including our own. Allah evokes, and provides, Magisterial Mercy, but God as Sacrificial Love and God as Magisterial Mercy are not the same. Even though at the most profound level all notions of the Sacred, including all Names for God, merge, it is still difficult to leap to that

level of convergence from within each local memory, at once institutionally defined, historically driven and fervently embraced, that claims sanction from the One.

### **Can Allah be distinguished from God?**

That theological quest to find, yet separate Allah as God from other notions of Divinity is complicated by a further confusion. The confusion comes from the everyday register of both Allah and God in different linguistic and geographical settings. In a popular introductory textbook, *the Vision of Islam*, its authors note that: “Some Muslims insist on using the word Allah when they speak English for several reasons. First, it is the primary name of God in the Koran, so the word itself is considered to have a special blessing.” (In fact, as we will examine below, the name Allah becomes *ism-i dhat*, that is, the name, and the only name, that can be said to refer to God’s essence.

It is also the case that for many Muslims, “the word *God* as used in English refers to a false god worshipped by Jews and Christians.” In other words, there are Muslims who embrace only Allah and see all other names, approaches or appropriations of the Sacred as sacrilege.<sup>8</sup>

That theological judgment about the ontological weight of certain words/names is not peculiar to Muslims. There are also Christians who think that God is the true God, that is, that God can only be addressed as God if God is to be an effective instrument, either in this world or in the next. By extension, goes this linguistic argument, which is also an eschatological

judgment, Allah is no more than a false god worshipped by pagans, or by pagans relabeled as ‘Muslims’ who still worship ‘a moon god’.

We will return to these confusions and disagreements in the pages that follow, but here I wish to emphasize the overarching, enduring significance of Allah. I want to stress at the outset one crucial observation: the major significance of Allah as performance, public performance, repeated performance, private invocation, and deep, continuous reflection. Rather than explain away theological differences or leave competing truth claims as a fork in the road, one can look at the rhythm and resonance of Allah.

### **Using Language to get beyond Words**

One must try to appreciate the query that nearly all Muslims confront at some point in their life’s journey: where does speech end so that Allah can - and does and will - speak through silence? Can we ever hear silence, and if so, how? Concerned seekers throughout the ages have sought the nature of the Divine through words but they have also explored the Divine beyond the mask of words, that is, beyond a human calculus of precise knowing and loving, engaging and trusting, benefitting and praising the Other.

Put differently, words may exercise their greatest power when they point beyond themselves. All words, including the word Allah, have that potential. The leading scholar of apophatic discourse, Michael Sells, asks: Can one imagine “a mononomic, generic God divorced, and separated, from particular traditions and languages”?<sup>9</sup> For Jews, Christians, Muslims, for any set of believers, that is a huge challenge: can one ever truly separate the generic from



the particular, Allah (the God) from *ilab* (a god), or *aliba* (many gods), from *Allab* (the One True God) except as an insider truth claim? To imagine God on the rim of the universe, minus all human attachments, interests and explanations, is at once a perilous and a necessary enterprise. It requires deep exploration into the past, and conjecture about the future, but it must begin in the present. And for Muslims, it begins with the continuous, unfolding, consequential use of Allah in everyday life; it begins not with explaining Allah but with the practice of invoking His Name, *bismillah*.

### **Allah: The Ongoing Quest**

We will explore the many voices expressing their relation to Allah and their quest to understand who is Allah. The initial voice is Muhammad's – or more accurately, in the Muslim tradition, Gabriel's mediated by Muhammad. Not Muhammad, but others who heard his oral utterances, later wrote them down. They have been compiled into what Muslims take to be the Noble Book, the Holy Qur'an. There are also Muhammad's own words. Often called *hadiths* or traditions, they reflect his mission as a divine demand yet with his own agency not God's Word highlighted.

#### **Sidebar Four:**

Hadiths enjoy a complex, crucial trajectory as the second scriptural authority in Islam, after the revelations compiled as the Qur'an.

There are two that are said to be primary, the Sound Traditions of Bukhari and Muslim, but many others that are authoritative,

and the study, then use of hadith has itself become  
a noted, closely monitored Islamic science.

And then there come a host of Muslims – scholars, jurists, philosophers, theologians and mystics. Too many to list here, they will be identified at several points in the chapters that focus on Allah, whether as invoked, defined, remembered, traced in cyberspace, or debated in many places. There will be skeptics, such as Christopher Hitchens, and mockers, such as Jack Chick. They will mingle with sympathetic non-Muslims, like Bishop Cragg, or scholars of Islam, like Denis Gril. One can even dare to hope that the ordinary believer will find her voice in the din of these many missives of mercy and beacons of light reflecting Allah.

### **A Final Disclaimer**

Yet the immensity of the quest for Allah underscores the humility essential to this effort. What follows is emblematic, not exhaustive, of human efforts to engage Allah. The issues addressed, the authorities culled, and the approaches suggested are but a drop in the ocean, a shadow of the sun, or a leaf from the tree of life. If you substitute computer for ocean, you can read the following Qur’anic verse as my own disclaimer about the analyses to come:

*Say, even if the ocean were ink  
For (writing) the words of my Lord,  
The ocean would be exhausted  
Before the words of my Lord were exhausted,  
Even if We were to add another ocean to it.*

(Q 18:109)

There will always be a surfeit of meaning beyond the thought and words dedicated to probing the practices of Allah. This book is no exception to that timeless rule. *Bismillah* beckons the reader to listen, to reflect and to explore the pervasive tones of a god so close yet so far from human reckoning.

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<sup>1</sup> On the disparate uses of *Allahu Akbar* attributed to Neil Armstrong, see [http://muktomona.net/Articles/skm/neil\\_armstrong.htm](http://muktomona.net/Articles/skm/neil_armstrong.htm), and for its polemical citation, see the following obituary on Neil Armstrong: <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2012/08/neil-armstrong-first-man-on-the-moon-dies-at-age-82.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.islamic-dictionary.com>, accessed on 8 Feb 2012)

<sup>3</sup> G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam – From Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) dedicates an entire chapter (20-42) exploring what he calls the distinction “between a straightforward evolutionary approach and one associated with the notion of primaeval monotheism”(25). In other words, how do you choose between an idea of making the One God appear from the many or seeing the One God appear, disappear and then reappear (in this case, with Muhammad). The outcome of that debate is important for academics but not for most practicing Muslims.

<sup>4</sup> Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*: 37

<sup>5</sup> See Hawting, *op.cit.*, “The Daughters of God” (130-149) for the academic debate about these three female deities of pre-Islamic Arabia.

<sup>6</sup> Yasein Muhammad, University of Western Cape, email (accessed on 6 Feb 2012)

<sup>7</sup> Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*: 36

<sup>8</sup> Murata, Sachiko and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994):46-47

<sup>9</sup> Sells, Michael *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994):11