To mention some casual errors and omissions, the number of a Qur’anic verse has been printed as 22:88 instead of 22:58 (p. 110, line 17). Some names were apparently overlooked in the preparation of the Index, e.g. 'al-shuniziah', p. 107. Transliteration of names and Arabic terms seems to have been left imperfect deliberately in order, perhaps, to avoid confusing the lay reader with a complicated elaborate system. But at least some device should have been employed to differentiate the long vowel from the short one.

The printing is quite elegant, with a bold type-face 'friendly to the eye'. Printing errors are few and far between. A useful Index, along with Algar's erudite and informative Introduction, add to the value of the work. Supplying a Glossary of technical terms to such works would be of much interest and benefit to scholars as well as common readers, besides contributing to the storehouse of material for compiling comprehensive dictionaries of various disciplines.

In conclusion, let it be hoped that the next edition of this book would be a revised and complete English version of al-Qushayri's Risalah, one of the earliest and most authoritative works on tasawwuf.

S. M. Zaman


The ambitious author, a former nun, has undertaken an onerous task, researching and writing this book, subtitled: "From Abraham to the Present: the 4,000 Year Quest for God". To her credit, in spite of the heavy and vast subject, she has offered her readers a highly readable and informative volume.

What or Who is God? Does He really exist? What are the implications of His existence or non-existence for human beings? These are some of the major questions this book touches on and tries to answer. It does seem that people do not really know the answer. Even in this age, people are not sure whether God exists or not. The last of her eleven chapters is provocatively titled "Has God a Future?", when we are actually asking the opposite question: "Has Man a Future?". I suppose that is the extent of our modern predicament!

In the beginning, human beings created a God who was the First Cause of all things and Ruler of heaven and earth. He was not represented by
images and had no temple or priests in his service. He was too exalted for an inadequate human cult. Gradually he faded from the consciousness of his people. He had become so remote that they decided that they did not want him anymore. Eventually he was said to have disappeared. (p. 9)

This is how the author began her first chapter, summarizing the idea from Father Wilhelm Schmidt's *The Origin of the Idea of God* (1912). But the author says that this primitive monotheism cannot be proved or disproved.

... it seems that creating gods is something that human beings have always done. When one religious idea ceases to work for them, it is simply replaced... In our own day, many people would say that the God worshipped for centuries by Jews, Christians and Muslims has become as remote as the Sky God. Some have actually claimed that he has died. Certainly he seems to be disappearing from the lives of an increasing number of people, especially in Western Europe.... (p. 10)

However, the Qur'an tells us that, from the earliest times, since Adam and Eve, even prior to Prophet Abraham, men have believed in One God at the same time as they have disbelieved in Him and believed in many gods. After Adam and Eve were banished from the primordial paradise of non-consciousness and non-responsibility to the world of self-consciousness and personal responsibility, they were given the freedom to believe in the one Creator God or to disbelieve in Him, of course with the attendant consequences. Thus, according to the Qur'an, man is both a believer and a disbeliever (see 64:2). This is a more logical and satisfactory explanation, since the simultaneous existence of both good and evil in this world draws man in both directions.

Still, Who or What is God? There is not doubt that man cannot know God fully, since He is outside and above the categories of created being. But He is not altogether a mystery, since we can known him partially through His creation and His revelation. However, a full knowledge of Him is beyond man's intellectual capacity.

That He exists is beyond doubt, for how else can we explain this wondrous creation all around and inside us? In fact, even the disbeliever acknowledges his existence. Jean-Paul Sartre, the atheist par excellence of the twentieth century, said that even if God existed, it was necessary to reject him, implying therefore that He exists. While the French Enlightenment author and philosopher, Voltaire, said that if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him, also implying that He exists. This truth has already been stated in the Qur'an (see 29:61–63).
This stupendous creation that evokes man's wonder is described in many places in the Qur'an. One passage runs thus:

Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day, there are signs for those who possess intelligence. They remember God while standing, sitting and on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: "Our Lord, You did not create all this in vain. Be You glorified. Spare us the agony of Hell . . .". (3:190-91)

So the existence of some superhuman power called God is not really the issue. The issues are two-fold: Is that superhuman power one or many? Is that power rational, coherent and merciful, or irrational, disconnected and cruel? The line divides the believers from the disbelievers. The former believe in One God Who created the orderly Universe with a rational purpose which runs in accordance with a unified rational law. The latter believe in many gods who fight one another for dominion of a self-existing disorderly and irrational Universe.

Since knowledge of God depends on man's spiritual and intellectual development, God has been variously conceived by different groups at different times. During man's infancy and childhood in the world, God must necessarily appear like a protecting, jealous and punishing father who was to guide and protect His children in a dangerous physical environment. But once humanity achieves the stage of adulthood, then He can only appeal to reason and science to guide it towards the great destiny He has set for it.

Throughout history, God has sent countless prophet-messengers to all societies to bring His one basic message ("Believe in God and do good") to them. The series, comprising such great religious figures as Abraham, Moses and Jesus, ended with Muhammad (peace be upon them all) with whom mankind enters the Scientific-Technological Era, with God's final infallible scripture, the Grand Qur'an, as mankind's basic guide.

The two previous paragraphs summarize Armstrong's long 4,000 year quest for the real God. The real God may be unknowable, although we know Him by some of His attributes, like Eternal Life, Sovereign Power, Absolute Knowledge, Justice, Truth, Swift Punisher and All-Encompassing Mercy. Let us have a look at some of the majestic descriptions of God in the Qur'an.

God, there is no god but He, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting. Never a moment of unawareness or slumber overtakes Him. To Him belongs everything in the heavens and everything on earth. Who is there to intercede with Him, except in accordance with His will? He knows their past and their future. No one attains any part of His knowledge, except as He wills. His dominion encompasses the heavens
and the earth, and ruling them never burdens Him. He is the Most High, the Great. (2:255)

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His light is that of a concave mirror behind a lamp that is placed inside a glass container. The glass container is like a bright pearl-like star. Its fuel is supplied from a blessed oil-producing tree, that is neither eastern nor western. Its oil is almost self-radiating, needing no fire to ignite it. Light upon light. . . . (24:35)

He is God, besides Whom there is no god but He. Knower of all secrets and declarations. He is the Most Gracious, Most Merciful. He is God besides Whom there is no god but He, the King, the Most Sacred, the Peace, the Most Faithful, the Supreme, the Almighty, the Most Powerful, the Most Dignified. God be glorified, far above having partners. He is God, the Creator, the Initiator, the Designer. To Him belongs the most beautiful names. Glorifying Him is everything in the heavens and the earth. He is Almighty, Most Wise. (59:22–24)

No vision encompasses Him while He encompasses all visions. (6:103)

Proclaim, "He, God, is One. The Absolute God. Never did He beget, nor was He begotten. None is like Him." (112:1–4)

He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden. (57:3)

Everyone on earth perishes. Only the Presence of your Lord lasts. Possessor of Majesty and Honour. Which of your Lord's marvels can you two deny? Imploring Him is everyone in the heavens and the earth. Everyday He is in full control. (55:26–29)

Religion, being a way of life, therefore, falls into two categories: the religion of the believers and the religion of the disbelievers. This state of affairs has existed since the beginning of the human race. It is the operation of the famous law of opposites, of contraries or of contradictions. Thus monotheism and polytheism or paganism are the basic states of man's religion and they have existed side by side in every society. When monotheism prevails, we have a good society, because of the good influence of monotheistic teachings and practices; when paganism prevails, we have a bad society, because of the bad influence of paganistic teachings and practices.

Armstrong mentions two perennial complaints against God. Firstly, the prevalence of evil in the world and God's "inability" to remove it. (Europeans like to mention Hitler's mass-gassing of Jews at Auschwitz during World War Two.) Secondly, the misuse of religion or God's name for acts of sectarian violence and cruelty. Thus, according to atheists, it is better to do away with belief in God and its attendant cruelty.
Of the two, the problem of evil is the more difficult to explain. God, being perfect, cannot and will not originate anything but good. But, having decided, in His Infinite Wisdom, to give man the freedom of choice to believe or not to believe in Him gives rise to man’s rebellion against Him. This is the source of evil. But evil sooner or later will bring about divine punishment which will bring about good. Thus evil is good by negative example.

The First and the Second World Wars destroyed the colonial system and brought about the independence of nations and the international system. Not that there is less evil in the world today than before. With the development of science and technology man’s knowledge and ability to overcome evil has increased tremendously. But this increase in man’s knowledge is not yet accompanied by a proportionate increase in moral commitment. Morality is at a low ebb. But since God is all the time overseeing us, morality will return after the global punishment for man’s wrong-doing. In this sense, there will be a definite improvement in the human condition in the future.

It is not the really God-fearing or religious people that have misused religion or God’s name to perform acts of cruelty. They are, in fact, hypocrites, using religion or God’s name to hide their vested interests and craze for power. Such people are as far from religion and God as anything can be. The power-hungry secularists are no better.

To this reviewer, the problem that the author did not properly address is: What actually is God’s revelation to man? How far has this revelation been corrupted and how? Do we still have this revelation with us? The author has correctly stated in the concluding paragraph of her book.

Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warning. (p. 457)

Unfortunately, the author fails to deal seriously with one of the basic problems of Western civilization: the dogma of the Trinity, which, in our view, has given rise to the modern Western revolt against God. To explain this mystery, she resorts to apologetic.

The doctrine of the Trinity has often been misunderstood in the Western world. People tend to imagine three divine figures or else ignore the doctrine altogether and identify ‘God’ with the Father and make Jesus a divine friend — not quite on the same level. Muslims and Jews have also found the doctrine puzzling and even blasphemous. Yet we shall see that in both Judaism and Islam mystics developed remarkably similar conceptions of the divine. . . . (p. 152)
This apologetic is a pity, because she does state that

. . . the first Christians saw him as a new Moses, a new Joshua, the founder of a new Israel. . . . After his death, his followers decided that Jesus had been divine. This did not happen immediately . . . the doctrine that Jesus had been God in human form was not finalised until the fourth century. The development of Christian belief in the Incarnation was a gradual complex process. Jesus himself certainly never claimed to be God. . . . (pp. 97–8)

Continuing, moreover, she says:

Yet by making Jesus the only avatar, we have seen that Christians would adopt an exclusive notion of religious truth: Jesus was the first and the last Word of God to the human race who rendered future revelation unnecessary. Consequently, like the Jews, they were scandalised when a prophet arose in Arabia during the seventh century who claimed to have received a direct revelation from God and to have a new scripture to his people. Yet the new version of monotheism, which eventually became known as 'Islam', spread with astonishing rapidity throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Many of its enthusiastic converts in these lands (where Hellenism was not on home ground) turned with relief from Greek Trinitarianism, which expressed the mystery of God in an idiom that was alien to them, and adopted a more Semitic notion of the divine reality. (pp. 153–4)

The contradiction is not resolved. The phrase: "Greek Trinitarianism, which expressed the mystery of God in an idiom that was alien to them" — the writer should not have recourse to such easy stratagem to evade an extremely important problem. The problem is: Did Jesus teach the doctrine of the Trinity? If Abraham and Moses, who preceded him, did not teach it and if Muhammad, who succeeded him, positively criticized it, the logical answer is that Jesus also did not teach it. The doctrine was as a result of the Romanization, rather Hellenization, of Christianity to make it acceptable to the Roman Empire.

Unfortunately also, the followers of Muhammad themselves, three centuries after his death, fell into the same error of relegating God's revelation to them to the background and instead followed the teachings of their theologians. In these teachings, Muhammad (peace be upon him) is pushed to the fore to the exclusion of the teachings of the other prophet-messengers, thus falsifying themselves and alienating Islam from the rest of the world. They are now suffering the consequences of their actions as the Western Christians also are.

The lessons of 4,000-year old quest for God are there for everybody to see. The Western Sartrean revolt against God is as infantile as the present
Eastern clinging to their priesthoods. The basic message brought by all prophet-messengers is one and the same: "Believe in God and do good." It cannot be simpler or clearer. For our own good, we must reclaim this pure divine gold and remove such theological debris that for centuries has hidden it for us.

In spite of the above criticism and the fact that the writer has not told us much about the older Eastern religions of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, the 511-page book packed with information and containing a refreshing analysis is certainly a very welcome addition to literature on religion.

Kassim Ahmad


Michael Cook's biography of the Prophet of Islam entitled *Muhammad* is an extremely interesting and perplexing work. Part of the reason for this is the fact that the book is written by a non-believer who not only doubts the authenticity of Muhammad's message but that of all monotheistic religions. According to him all advanced civilizations of ancient times believed in polytheism, and the concept of monotheism arose amongst "... conceptually less sophisticated people of the Near East, the Israelites" (p. 6). He goes on to assert that had the concept of monotheism remained the exclusive preserve of the Israelites "... it would not have ranked as more than a curiosity in the history of the world at large" (p. 6). But "... a minor Jewish heresy ... Christianity" emerged, eventually became a world religion, and spread the concept of monotheism in a vast region of the world. There is an almost nostalgic tone in Cook's narrative describing the demise of polytheism in the face of expanding Christianity.

It was Muḥammad's ability to appropriate the concept of monotheism and alter it slightly to suit the local environment in Arabia, which is largely responsible for the emergence of the Arabs on the stage of history. According to Cook, Muḥammad's genius is rooted in his ability to articulate a monotheistic message, contrast it with the polytheistic surroundings, propagate the message, and have the political acumen to outwit his opponents. Hence he was able to firmly implant the concept of monotheism amongst the Arabs who are presumably even less "... conceptually ... sophisticated people" than the ones amongst whom the concept originally emerged, the Israelites.

Cook's approach to discussing the career of Muḥammad is quite original. He approaches the subject from the viewpoint of the monotheistic tradition at large. This is best illustrated by the titles of chapters 3–6: "The