

Faith and Flux: Revisiting the Metaphysicity of Islam

Kidhar PT

This brief paper examines the intricate relation between metaphysics and the nature of faith in the view of Islam. It attempts to show that Islam is not an entirely metaphysical religion, since religious faith as prescribed by Islam beautifully reconciles metaphysics with flux. I do this first by giving an account of the Greek worldview in which metaphysics and the concrete world of time and change remained mutually exclusive. Then, I discuss the metaphysics of Muslim *falāsifa* which was highly influenced by Greek metaphysics. Next, I go into a brief explanation of the attack against metaphysics and concomitant celebration of flux characteristic of post-Nietzschean Western philosophy. Last, I demonstrate how faith, as prescribed by Islam, maintains equilibrium between metaphysics and flux.

The beginnings of systematic Western metaphysics are found in the works of Parmenides and Plato. Parmenides' concept of Being and Plato's theory of Forms give us a clear understanding of the general nature of metaphysics. Parmenides' Being and Plato's Forms are entities that are eternal, changeless, and never subject to the time and flux constitutive of our phenomenal world. Both philosophers regard the flux of this world as unreal. For Parmenides, the real is the changeless Being; for Plato, the real is the world of Forms, and everything in the phenomenal world is just a copy of the perfect and eternal Forms. Along with downplaying the concrete world, their metaphysics puts forth some abstract entities, like Being and Forms, as the ultimate grounds of certain qualities, or, in other words, metaphysics regards these entities as having the capacity for *representation*. Here, I do not use the word representation in its regular sense. Rather, I use it as the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard did in his *Either/Or, 1*. In *Either/Or, 1*, Kierkegaard argues that "the idea of representation was introduced into the world by Christianity" and that "Greek culture did not have this idea."¹ For Kierkegaard, representation means the state of a quality being completely present in its source. In this sense, the Greek gods lacked representation, because, in them, the quality they stand for does not manifest in fullness. For example, only once did Eros fall in love. All other times, love kept its distance from him. Still, lovers went on taking him to be the god of love, and the source of their most precious experience. This, in fact, evokes the paradox of a quality being present outside its source. It is not in Eros, the source of love, that love is seen, but rather in others. Kierkegaard argues that it was Christianity that introduced the concept of representation for the first time,

as is evident from the Christian notion of God as the source of all qualities and the locus where they appear in perfection.²

However, I think that in order to locate this idea of representation, we need not go to Christianity as Kierkegaard argues, because, as I mentioned earlier, Greek philosophy itself provides us best instances of it like Plato's theory of Forms.³ According to Plato, the Form of beauty, for instance, is the locus where perfect beauty is present, and the varieties of beautiful things in the phenomenal world are only relatively beautiful. Thus, as a source where beauty is present in full, the Form of beauty *represents* beauty. Similarly, all other Forms have the capacity to represent the qualities they stand for, as they are the sites where the qualities manifest in their perfection. This means that the concept of representation was already there among Greeks in their philosophical system. Meanwhile, in Greek literature, the concept was lacking because of a particular theology it advocated.

To make this difference clear, we can make a brief comparison between Plato's and Homer's gods to provide a better understanding of the nature of the Greek worldview. Homer's gods are not distinct from humans except that they have more powers. To attain their ends, they cheat, lie, and are often portrayed as adulterous. Ignorance and animal instincts always accompany their actions. For example, Homer's works contain stories of Zeus tricking Agamemnon by sending a false prophetic dream during the Trojan War, Aphrodite cheating on her husband Hephaistos with Ares, the god of war, and Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite bribing Paris in a beauty contest between the three (The Judgement of Paris). These gods do not have the capacity for representation in the Kierkegaardian sense because the qualities they embody do not manifest in them as perfection; rather, these gods have rivals in the qualities they are known for. For example, despite being the god of war, Ares is overpowered by Athena in a fight between the two, and Aphrodite contests with Hera and Athena in a beauty contest, though she is the goddess of beauty. If Ares were the perfect embodiment of war, none would have overpowered him. Similarly, if Aphrodite were the ultimate source of beauty, none would have dared to challenge her. Many such examples can be found in Homer's works. This indicates that the gods of Homer are not the ultimate grounds or sites of full-fledged manifestation of the qualities they stand for; hence, the capacity for representation is not found in them.

Plato's concept of God is complex and exhibits clear differences from that of Homer. Plato thought that attributing human-like qualities to gods as Homer did was a distortion of their true nature. God could not be anthropomorphized because doing so would impose limitations and shortcomings upon God's nature as a being who

embodies goodness and perfection in full. These considerations drove the Greek philosopher to reject the Homeric portrayal of gods. Instead, he proposed a more abstract and transcendent conception of the divine. Plato speaks about the Demiurge, a divine Craftsman who “does not bring new things into being but rather confronts and orders what already exists in chaotic Form.”⁴ In addition, Plato tells us about traditional gods in Greek culture. It is notable that he speaks about these traditional gods with respect because he thought that portraying them as Homer did cast a negative reflection on their godliness.⁵ Actually, Plato's idea of the Form “Good” anticipates some of the essential doctrines of Christian and Islamic theologies of the medieval period. Occupying a higher position than the other Forms, the Form “Good” represents (in Kierkegaardian sense) the perfection and goodness of the other Forms; in “Good,” goodness and perfection manifest in full. This “Good” is characterized by eternity, changelessness, and oneness, those essential attributes that theologians in later centuries assumed that God must have. Thus, in contrast to Homer’s gods, Plato’s gods are the perfect embodiments of the qualities attributed to them, and as such, they have the capacity for representation.

Here, it is to be noted that this representation runs counter to the flux. Plato’s Forms, to take an example, are perfect manifestations of, or represent, the qualities they stand for. This is so because those qualities are fully present in the Forms in a way that they are never subject to time and change. In fact, to be a locus or a site having the capacity for representation, eternity and immunity to change are necessary requirements. What representation requires is the absolute presence of a quality in a certain entity. Non-eternal and changing entities cannot ensure the absolute presence of any quality in them since they are bound to be deprived of it anytime. This implies that the flux is the opposite of representation. I made clear in the foregoing that Platonic transcendent gods are very different from the immanent gods of Homer. Plato’s Forms are eternal and unchanging, and therefore qualified for representation. Meanwhile, Homer’s gods, though supernatural, are subject to the vicissitudes of concrete world and lack the capacity for representation. What governs the immanence of Homer is mad and reckless flux, whereas Plato's transcendence is marked by motionless presence. Homer’s gods and other characters float over the groundless, unstable waters of movement and time; there is not an ultimate reality like a transcendent God to bestow coherence on that movement. Participating in the flux like mortals, Homer’s gods are characterized by absence since they perform only a decentralized representation of the qualities attributed to them. The groundless movement characteristic of Homer's epics is thus the corollary of the absence of a

transcendent reality capable of being the ground of everything, and the locus where certain qualities are fully present.

In contrast, Plato's Forms are characterized by presence since they are qualities manifesting in full and, above all, are never subject to time and flux. Without being able to subsume the flux under thought, Plato denied it altogether, setting in motion thereby the history of metaphysics. Due to the absence of presence or capability of representation, Homer's immanent gods are subject to reckless, groundless flux, whereas, due to being marked by presence, Plato's metaphysics is immobile and immune to flux. This, I suggest, brings to light the crisis inherent in the Greek worldview: the Greeks were torn between the mutually exclusive opposites of movement and immobility, change and changelessness, and time and eternity without being able to realize the synthesis or symbiosis of these contradictory notions.

The problems of Greek metaphysics haunt the metaphysics of *falsafa* too. The Platonic tendency to downplay the world of matter and flux is reflected in the metaphysics of Muslim *falāsifa*, which was thoroughly influenced by Neoplatonism. To make this point clear, I give a brief discussion of the metaphysics of three major Muslim *falāsifa*: al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Sinā.

The Metaphysics of *Falsafa*

Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb al-Kindī is known as the first philosopher of Arabs. For al-Kindī, metaphysics is the science of abstract entities totally distinct from the phenomena of the concrete world. He acknowledges that the “distinction between material and immaterial entities corresponds to the broad two-fold division of philosophy into physics and metaphysics.”⁶ He then distinguishes further “between physics and metaphysics as the science of movable and immovable respectively.”⁷ One of the most important subject matters of metaphysics is the First Cause, regarded by al-Kindī as eternal, unchanging, and engaging with the world only through secondary causes. These secondary causes are heavenly bodies which, according to al-Kindī, are superior to the sublunary world of generation and corruption.

This tendency to downplay the world of matter and flux was vigorously pursued by the Neoplatonists like al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā. For al-Fārābī, metaphysics is divided into three parts:

1. Ontology: The part concerned with the existence of things.

2. Theology: The part dealing with the nature of the immaterial substances, finally arriving at the inquiry about the Supreme Being, which is the ultimate reality from which everything else is derived.

3. A part concerned with the primary principles of demonstration underlying special sciences.⁸

For al-Fārābī, the process that accounts for the existence of all things is the emanation from the First Cause. This “First” is “perfect, necessary, self-sufficient, eternal, uncaused, immaterial, without associate or contrary, and is not susceptible to being defined.”⁹ Free from any kind of association with matter, the First is essentially an intellect. The First, al-Fārābī claims, generates the things in the universe through emanation which is a necessary act on his part, rather than being dependent on choice. As a Neoplatonist, al-Fārābī's contempt for matter is evident throughout his works. In the hierarchy of beings that emanated from the First, the prime matter lies at the lowest level. Occupying a significant position in the chain of beings, man nears perfection only when he attains the highest degree of immateriality by possessing Acquired Reason.¹⁰ Al-Fārābī's aversion to matter even led him to maintain heterodox views about resurrection. He denied bodily resurrection altogether, thereby reserving the afterlife only for souls. It is only the souls that managed to get rid of matter and material obsessions that can enjoy eternal bliss. Others, al-Fārābī maintained, will forever be punished with the craving to attain the pleasure of association with matter, which will never be realized. This misery awaits only those who knew the means to eternal bliss, which is based on the degree of man's partaking of the immaterial nature of Active Reason, but failed to realize it in their lives. Others, who lived in blissful ignorance will undergo total annihilation.¹¹

This same negation of matter and world of flux is characteristic of Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics as well. Ibn Sīnā defines metaphysics “as the science that deals with entities which are separable from matter, both in reality and definition.”¹² For Ibn Sīnā, God is “one of the objectives sought in metaphysics rather than its proper object.”¹³ Accordingly, he posits God as an entirely metaphysical entity whose mode of apprehension of the world “is explicitly stated to be universal, since it does not befit the Necessary Being to partake, without prejudice to its perfection, of that particular mode of cognition which belongs to finite knowers.”¹⁴ Ibn Sīnā portrays God as an entirely metaphysical entity by denying Him the knowledge of the particulars of the finite world. This metaphysical tendency itself is repeated in the ontological priority of Forms, primacy of universals, denial of bodily resurrection, etc., found in the rest of Ibn Sīnā's system.

This brief overview should suffice to show how *falāsifa*, with their rigid philosophical system influenced from top to bottom by Greek philosophy, rendered certain essential principles of Islamic faith, such as God, non-conversant with actuality and hence impotent to deal with the concrete existence. Running counter to this, some *mutakallimūn*, Ash'arīs for instance, brought forth a highly sophisticated theological system in which manifested a beautiful exposition of God that reconciled His metaphysicality with flux.¹⁵

I mentioned earlier that the Greeks were torn between the mutually exclusive opposites of movement and immobility, change and changelessness, and time and eternity without being able to synthesize these contradictory notions. It is interesting to note that this conflict in Greek worldview can be seen repeating in the Western philosophical tradition. From Plato to Hegel, the phenomenal world of flux was downplayed in the search for an ultimate reality, making the philosophy of this long period dominated by denial of movement and flux. After Nietzsche, the undue celebration of the flux shifted contemporary Western philosophy to the opposite pole, namely, to the denial of grounds and transcendent realities.

Nietzsche and Celebration of the Flux

The explicit anti-metaphysical turn in Western philosophy can be said to have started with Nietzsche. Nietzsche's thoughts, bolstered and further developed by Heidegger, cleared the path for postmodern philosophy to forge ahead. Nietzsche found that metaphysics, which had so far guided Western philosophy, was characterized by contempt and consequent distancing from matter and body—in short, anything related to the concrete life. The life-denying metaphysical truths that served as foundational truths are for Nietzsche, "nothing more than illusions created by an ancient obsession with the origin of things."¹⁶ Grounding the truth in certain foundational principles deprived it of its sensuous relation with life, necessarily leading to nihilism which is, for him, the corollary of discovering that eternal truths are a mere fantasy and that ultimately, human existence is non-foundational.¹⁷

Nietzsche's onslaught against metaphysics found rich development and exposition at the hands of Martin Heidegger who took it much further. For the word "God" in Nietzsche's famous "God is dead," Heidegger proposed an extensive definition: "But it is equally certain and conceivable that the names God and Christian God are used in Nietzsche's thought to depict the supra-sensory world as such. God is the name for the range of ideas and ideals."¹⁸ Thus, according to Heidegger, God in Nietzsche's famous declaration signifies what philosophers since Plato regarded as the ultimate truth; i.e.,

the metaphysical ideals lying beyond the world of time and flux. Heidegger's project of destruction of the history of metaphysics proceeds from his critique of "onto-theological" metaphysics, namely, the reduction of Being to particular beings, a tendency he thinks dominated Western philosophy since ancient times. The concept of "God" employed by onto-theology to refer to a transcendent ground that imparted meaning to everything else signifies, as Heidegger sees it, a mechanism of flight from the vicissitudes of concrete existence to the solace of ideals.¹⁹ Following Nietzsche, Heidegger recognized that metaphysics was trapped in presence or in entities with the capacity for representation, hindering it from effectively engaging with concrete existence characterized by the time and flux. To be sure, Heidegger's criticism captured the essential characteristic of Western metaphysics, although it is doubtful whether it is he who was the first to articulate it.²⁰ Marked by vigorous search for a stable changeless reality beyond the allegedly unreal world of appearances, metaphysics has shown since its inception its inability to go hand in hand with time and change, which, if introduced to a metaphysical system, cause it to founder. According to John Caputo,

Philosophy (speculation, metaphysics) opened its doors with the problem of movement. When Heraclitus affirmed the flux, Eleatics and Plato came rushing in, trying to arrest the flow. Thus, the first great philosophical theory, the opening gesture in the history of metaphysics was the doctrine of recollection, which attempted to skip out on the flux, to make one's excuses to life and take an early departure. As soon as philosophy found itself confronted with time and movement, it started looking for a back door. Thrust into existence, speculative thinking wanted to know how to reverse gears and back its ways out. If existence and life flow forward, thought tries to move in reverse.²¹

Plato used recollection to account for the varieties of knowledge that man acquires over the course of life. He did so by reducing the movement forward (acquiring knowledge) to recollecting what was already there in the soul. The propensity of metaphysics to arrest the flow and still the flux resulted in various concepts proposed by each philosopher as the ultimate reality over centuries, such as Plato's Forms, Scholastics' essence, Descartes' *cogito*, Hegel's Absolute, etc. All these concepts made it explicit that metaphysics stops functioning when it encounters actuality as Kierkegaard puts it in his *Repetition*: "Repetition is the *interest (Interesse)* of metaphysics, and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief."²² In other words, as an act whereby

the individual gains back his self, repetition requires direct confrontation with time and flux. This is both incomprehensible and intolerable to metaphysics.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida's polemic against logocentrism was largely influenced by Heidegger's critique of onto-theological metaphysics as the fallacious reduction of Being or Presence to particular experiences, or certain abstract ideas. To Derrida, logocentrism signifies “an approach at the heart of metaphysics, according to which truth, knowledge or being are present at some particular moment.”²³ In *Ousia and Grammé*, Derrida notes that the entire history of metaphysics has been marked by the “extraordinary right of the present,”²⁴ and that “from Parmenides to Husserl, the privilege of the present has never been put into question.”²⁵ This “determination of Being as presence or as beingness,” he argues, “is interrogated by the thought of *différance*.”²⁶ In other words, *différance* allows for a groundless flux of meanings that undercuts the very possibility of a selfsame identical present. In short, metaphysics prefers the presence excluding the absence as a mere illusion, which is challenged by *différance*.

As far as Derrida is concerned, even Heidegger counts as a logocentrist since, for the latter, the “difference between being and Being is the place where there is truth,” but for Derrida, “there just is no place of truth.”²⁷ This skepticism about truth and transcendent signifiers is what led Habermas, among many others, to attack Derrida for reducing philosophy to sophistry and making meaning an infinite regress leading to nowhere. It is this celebration of flux resulting from the denial of transcendent grounds that appears in various forms in Deleuze's immanence, Lyotard's incredulity towards meta-narratives, Barthes' play of signs, etc. Thus, as I mentioned earlier, the history of Western philosophy can be viewed as involving two exclusive approaches to flux, namely, flat denial and blind acceptance. This, I argue, occurred due to the lack of faith, a totally religious category that has the capacity to make possible the symbiosis of flux and changelessness, time and eternity, movement and immobility.

Faith: Symbiosis of Metaphysics and Flux

So far, I have discussed the problem of metaphysics. Neither Western philosophy nor *falsafa* could successfully integrate flux and metaphysical presence into their systems. In contrast, faith as prescribed by Islam maintains a balanced approach that accepts metaphysical grounding even while coming to terms with the flux of concrete existence. Before getting into the analysis of Islamic faith, let us first examine how some *mutakallimūn*, precisely Ash'arīs, conceive of God who is the foundation of faith— a discussion of faith without giving a brief account of the divine nature would be

incomplete. Ash'arīs give us a sophisticated account of God which maintains balance between His transcendent and worldly aspects, a problem that is not still effectively resolved within Western theology and philosophy.²⁸ Some other *mutakallimūn* such as Matūrīdīs and Mu'tazilīs also put forth a similar conception of God which maintains equilibrium between His transcendent and worldly aspects, no doubt with certain variations, but I restrict myself to the Ash'arīs' account as the scope of this short essay does not allow me to go into details.²⁹ Before explaining the Ash'arī account, I would like to make clear what I mean by transcendent and worldly aspects of God in this context. I use transcendence to signify the way God is different from, and beyond, the finite world. When applied to the God of Islam, by worldly aspects, I mean simply the way He is closely related to the finite world.

Sharah al-'aqā'id, the renowned commentary of Sa'ad al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī on Umar al-Nasafī's *'Aqā'id al-nasafī*, is one of the most authoritative compendia that best summarizes the central tenets of *kalām* in the Ash'arī framework. Naturally, Ash'arīs also had diverse opinions and disagreements among themselves. Since a detailed discussion of Ash'arī views on God is beyond the scope of this essay, I restrict my brief discussion of the Ash'arī concept of God to the account found in the *Sharah al-'aqā'id*. Therefore, what I mean by the Ash'arī concept of God in this essay is the account seen in *Sharah*.

In *Sharah*, God is described as *al-Wāhid* (One), *al-Hayy* (Ever-Living), *al-Ā'lim* (All-Knowing), *al-Samī* (All-Hearing), *al-Basīr* (All-Seeing) and *al-Murīd* (One Who Wills). God is not substance or accident or bounded or composite. He is formless, beyond time and space, and being unique, omniscient, and omnipotent, nothing remains hidden from or inaccessible to Him; His attributes persist in Him and they are neither Him nor other than Him.³⁰ This description itself makes clear the apparent distinction between the theology of Neoplatonism and that of the Ash'arīs. Some of the attributes mentioned above, like *al-Wāhid* and *al-Hayy*, serve to show the transcendence of God. In this sense, God is a metaphysical entity, as the elements of metaphysicality such as transcendence and immunity to the flux inhere in Him. But, some other attributes mentioned here like *al-Ā'lim*, *al-Samī*, and *al-Basīr* show the intimate relation or interaction God has with the world.

Let us examine some of these to understand how they imply God's relation to the world. *Al-Ā'lim* refers to God's possession of the knowledge of both universals and particulars, in contrast to *falāsifa* like al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā who held that God cannot know the particulars without compromising His perfection. *Al-Ā'lim* implies that God is totally aware of everything that occurs in every plane of existence. Hearing and

seeing also accompany this knowledge. Unlike emanation which holds the creation to be an unconscious process of overflowing from the One, Ash'arī theology posits God as fully conscious of the finite world and enacting what he wills there. This concept of God is explicitly supported by Qur'ān. The Holy Book mentions many attributes of God that signify the latter's relation to the world such as *al-Muḥaymin* (Ever-Watchful), *al-Razzāq* (Provider), *al-Shākir* (Thankful), *al-'Afū* (Pardoner), *al-Ghaḥḥār* (Forgiver), *al-Mujīb* (All-Responsive), *al-Wadūd* (Most Loving), and *al-Waḥḥāb* (Giver of All). Like the attributes mentioned in *Sharah*, the Qur'ānic attributes such as *al-Razzāq* and *al-Waḥḥāb* refer to God's active maintenance and preservation of the world while *al-'Afū*, *al-Ghaḥḥār* and *al-Mujīb* indicate His relation to the believers. Also, it is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'ān that God regulates the natural processes, determines the fate of nations, and oversees the deeds of believers and non-believers without missing anything.³¹

In this way, the transcendent and this-worldly aspects of God are effectively brought into balance. Although possessing the elements of metaphysicality, God is not presented as an entirely metaphysical entity since he is in constant interaction with the world of flux and is concerned about it. God is no doubt a transcendent entity beyond the finite world; still, His existence is related to the world. This Ash'arī account is also supported by the famous *ḥadīth qudsī*³² frequently quoted by Sufīs: "I was a hidden treasure; I loved to be known. Hence, I created the world."³³ This demonstrates how deep God's relation to the world is. The world is so significant to God because it is through it that he became known. Becoming known was something God had loved; it was realized through the creation of this finite world; hence, it implies that God is not only related to the world but also that he loves it. Then, unlike metaphysics, the concept of God in Ash'arī theology affirms the importance of the finite world rather than denying it. Therefore, it is important to understand that Ash'arī theology and similar *kalām* traditions are not entirely metaphysical because they do not posit God, their focal point, as a wholly metaphysical entity, but as both transcendent and immanent, both beyond the finite world and in relation to it. It is also worth mentioning here that Ash'arī theology does not divest God of metaphysicality altogether since, as a transcendent being with no equal, He is to some extent metaphysical. Remember that all this is the case when metaphysics is understood in the way Nietzsche and his followers did.

Let us now examine how Islam conceives of faith. All sects in Islam tend to understand the faith in the following manner. The very basis of faith is the believer in that faith does not exist if there is no one to hold it. A person is called a believer only if

that identity persists in him through time. According to Islam, to be a true believer (*mu'min*), one must believe in God and perform certain rituals prescribed by this God until death; in other words, one has to confront time and continually reaffirm oneself as a believer. In one *hadith*, the Prophet says: “(The structure of) Islam is built on five (pillars): the testimony that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His slave and messenger, the observance of the prayer, the payment of *zakāt*, the pilgrimage, and the fast during Ramadan.”³⁴ Of these five pillars, three require repetition. Doing them once does not exempt the person from the obligation to do them again. This means that the believer cannot run away from time as a metaphysician does; rather, he has to confront it and maintain his identity as a believer by performing the prescribed worships on a regular basis. It is in light of this fact that we have to interpret the Qurʾān verse,

And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, (saying to them), "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we have testified." (This)—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware." (Q 7:172)

This verse clearly states that essentially every person is a Muslim since he has belief in the God of Islam as part of his *fiṭra*. However, does this mean that having this *fiṭra* exempts a person from the obligation to live as a Muslim performing the prescribed prayers and rituals and holding onto the belief in God throughout his life? Not at all. Therefore, this *fiṭra* needs to be understood more like a potentiality that man has to actualize, through religious performances of various kinds, living through the flux of time. The essence of belief, then, is repetition. If the mental and physical states required for being qualified as a believer are not repeated, a person is no longer a believer. Here, it has to be emphasized that even if a person does not perform the obligatory observances, he is still in need of having belief in God throughout his life. Thus, belief as a mental disposition also needs persistence and repetition through time. This repetition is possible only through time. As such, it follows that belief requires flux and time, which are those phenomena that metaphysics never dare look straight in the face.

However, this embrace of time and flux does not mean blind celebration. Belief as prescribed by Islam means nothing if it is not grounded in God. The believer's progress through time, holding onto faith and performing prescribed rituals and worship, is bestowed with coherence and meaning only by reference to God, since it is His authority that persuades a believer to live as he does.³⁵ The ethical life prescribed by Islam requires both flux and grounding in God. On the one hand, what makes a

person virtuous (truthful, pious, etc.) is his persistence in those virtues, which, if violated, would not qualify him for that status. On the other hand, if ethics are divested of grounding in the transcendent God, the question of why a person should then continue to live ethically, remains unanswered. Why a person should tell truth, for instance, if doing that does not bring him any benefit except adversities, is still a conundrum for secular ethics. Admitting this inadequacy of secular ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre recognizes the need for a theistic grounding for his conception of human teleology:

Explanations of what it is for someone to succeed in progressing towards or fail in progressing towards their ultimate end...are of interest only if and in so far as we have good reason to believe that they are true. But such explanations will be true only if the universe itself is teleologically ordered, and the only type of teleologically ordered universe in which we have good reason to believe is a theistic universe.³⁶

In short, faith as Islam sees it, combines metaphysicality and flux: metaphysicality in the sense that faith requires grounding in a transcendent God, and flux in the sense that faith does not have existence unless repeated through time by means of the believer's both mental and physical actions and dispositions. It is notable that, as I mentioned earlier, this understanding of faith does not exclusively belong to any particular sect in theology; rather, there is a general agreement on it among Muslim theologians. Still, I reiterate that the Ash'arī and similar accounts of God conform better to the foregoing conception of faith because, for the belief to persist in a person, he must be conscious of a God who always watches over him, controls his life, and constantly demands his obedience. Only a God closely related to the finite world but existing transcendent and separate from it can be this way.

Conclusion

The faith as Islam sees it combines metaphysical elements and flux, making possible an impressive synthetic approach. This means that Islam is not an entirely metaphysical religion having nothing to do with the concrete world of flux. Nor does it blindly celebrate flux by abandoning metaphysical grounding altogether. Thus, Islamic faith provides us with an effective solution to a troubling dilemma that haunts Western philosophy; namely, the reconciliation of metaphysics with flux. Excess of metaphysicality necessitates denial of the flux making philosophy a lifeless system, while blind celebration of flux as in postmodernism traps us in chaotic groundlessness and indeterminacy about truth. This crisis reflects the need for philosophy to take

lessons from the Islamic faith, a category wherein metaphysics and flux co-exist. Those critiques against Islam that portray it as archaic and lifeless ignore this reality lying at its heart.

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either Or, Part 1*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 62.

² *Ibid.*, 61-62.

³ In this essay, I use the term “representation” and its variants in the aforementioned Kierkegaardian sense.

⁴ Samuel Ennoch Stumpf and James Fieser, *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill College, 2012), 65.

⁵ See Gerd Van Riel, *Plato's Gods* (London: Routledge, 2016), 53-61.

⁶ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128

¹¹ Al-Fārābī, *al-Madīnāh al-Fādhila* (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1986), 142-145.

¹² Ibn Sīnā, *al-Ilāhiyāt min kitab al-Shifā* (Iran: Makthab al-ʿIlām al-Islāmi, 1956), 12.

¹³ Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 151.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁵ *Kalām* signifies Islamic scholastic theology. It was born out of the need to safeguard the fundamental principles of the Islamic faith in the face of philosophical skepticism and certain problematic assumptions of *falsafa*. In this sense, *kalām* is generally regarded as distinct from *falsafa*. A *mutakallim* is an expert in *kalām*.

¹⁶ Lois P. Blond, *Heidegger and Nietzsche: Overcoming Metaphysics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 100.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “Aber es ist nicht weniger gewiß und im voraus zu bedenken, daß die Namen Gott und christlicher Gott im Denken Nietzsches zur Bezeichnung der iibersinnlichen Welt iiber- haupt gebraucht werden. Gott ist der Name fur den Bereich der Ideen und der Ideale.” See Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), 212. Passage translated by Stijn Latré, in “Nietzsche, Heidegger, Girard on 'The Death of God',” Latré, *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 57, 2 (2001): 301.

¹⁹ Matheson Russell, “Phenomenology and Theology: Situating Heidegger’s Philosophy of Religion,” *Sophia*, 50 (June, 2011): 644-645.

²⁰ John D. Caputo argues that Søren Kierkegaard recognized the inherent limitations of metaphysics and was already working on the destruction of the history of metaphysics long before Heidegger started the same project. He observes that despite Heidegger’s parsimonious references to Kierkegaard, the latter’s influence on Heidegger was far deeper than Heidegger himself realized. See John Caputo, “Kierkegaard, Heidegger and the Foundering of Metaphysics” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary, Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1993), 201-225.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

²² Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, Repetition, Søren Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 6, ed. trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 149.

²³ Barry Stocker, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Derrida on Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 51.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Ousia and Grammé: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 21.

²⁷ Stocker, *Derrida on Deconstruction*, 51.

²⁸ More generally, this problem can be referred to as the imbalance between the transcendent and immanent aspects of religion. The German philosopher Gadamer has observed that “the whole history of Western thought is marked by the tension between human experience which unfolds itself historically and is simultaneously directed towards the future, and the formation of concepts which had been drawn from the cosmos.” See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Philosophy and Literature”, trans. Anthony J. Steinbock, *Man and World*, 18, 3 (September 1985): 244. Plato’s “Good” and Aristotle’s “Prime Mover” are, for instance, too transcendent to interact with concrete existence. Medieval theology could not address the complexities of existence because it gave primacy to the rational exposition of religion. This binary of immanence and transcendence became further solidified in modern philosophy as is evident from the incapability of Kantian *Moralität* and Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* to make sense of Akedah (Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac). The Akedah marks the moment when God’s command closely interacted with human existence; this was beyond the reach of both Kant’s and Hegel’s abstract ethics. The phenomenological approach to religion advanced by Husserl and Heidegger was too immanent in that it could not incorporate the transcendent God effectively into its system. Arguably, it was Søren Kierkegaard who managed to reconcile these two aspects of religion almost successfully. The knight of faith, portrayed by Kierkegaard as representing the peak of the life of faith, is a person who lives like any ordinary man without exhibiting anything unnatural but with a solid footing in the infinite. Still, Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the rarity and apparently superhuman dispositions distinguishing the knight renders the latter more like an unattainable ideal, obstructing the successful reconciliation of the aforesaid dimensions of religion.

²⁹ Matūrīdīs are much closer to Ash’arīs in this regard than Mu’tazilīs, who had a long history of heated disputes with Ash’arīs.

³⁰ Sa’duddīn Thafthāzānī, *Sharah-al-‘aqai’d* (Dār Ihyā’ al-Thurāth al-‘Arabī), 48-60.

³¹ See Qur’ānic verses such as, 22: 65, 7: 57, 6: 103, 6: 59, 2: 26, etc.

³² A *hadīth qudsī* is the saying of the Prophet Muhammad as revealed to him by God. It is named so because, unlike the majority of Prophetic *hadīths*, its authority (*isnād*) is traced back not to the Prophet but to God.

³³ The text runs: كنت كنزا مخفيا فأحببت أن أعرف فخلقت الخلاق. Many scholars maintain that *isnād* of this *hadīth* is not known. It is quoted by Ibn ‘Arabī in *Futūhāt al-makkiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Sādir, n.d.), 2:299, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Razī in *Mafāthih al-ghaib* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ al-Thurāth al-‘Arabī), 27: 34 and others.

³⁴ This *hadīth* is narrated by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim. The text runs as follows: بني الإسلام على خمس شهادة: أن لا إله إلا الله وأن محمدا عبده ورسوله وإقام الصلاة وإيتاء الزكاة وحج البيت وصوم رمضان. See Abū Zakariyyā Yahyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Riyādh al-swālihīn*, ed. Māher Yasīn al-Fahl (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2007), 338.

³⁵ The problem of our era is that many people do not admit that God is the ground of their selves. They love their selves to the extent that they see themselves as the ultimate grounds of their selves. This type of narcissism characterized by excessive reliance upon one’s self plagues our era, masking it from the truth of God. Ramses II, the Pharaoh of Moses’ times, was such a narcissist who loved himself to the extent that he saw himself as the ground that gave existence and meaning to everything else. He declared, according to Qur’ān, “I am your Lord” (79:24), even though it was proven to him that he was dependent and imperfect. But he chose to suppress the truth. He built a skyscraper to reach to the God of Moses, sent an arrow only to be sent back smeared with blood, and claimed that he had killed Moses’s God. While Pharaoh pretended to be the perfect ground of all creatures, modern man does not claim that he is perfect or an ultimate ground of all other creatures, but he loves his self and sees it as the ultimate ground of himself. That human beings are fragile creatures with no ability to exert full control over the course of their lives evades his considerations; instead, he is deceived by the myth that he is sovereign over himself.

In contrast, true faith (*īmān*) is to submit the self before God unconditionally, vanquishing the love of self and the desire to pretend to be the ground of oneself. This submission is never complete unless intellect and passion attain total contentment in the ultimate reality of God. Both intellect and passion will become fully gratified only when they find a proper object to satisfy them. This they will find in the

moment of being blessed with the vision of God in afterlife, when the divine name "al-Jamīl (The beautiful)" reveals itself before the eyes of the believers.

One of the best approaches that does justice to the human existence is *īmān* (true faith) prescribed by Islam because it gives man God, the most solid, reliable ground and helps the intellect and passions realize that their contentment lies not in separate things but in one entity (God) and, along with that, paves way to the realization of that contentment.

³⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues and Goods," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 152.