CHAPTER 8

What Does Tawḥīd Mean? Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī’s Treatise on the Affirmation of the Unity of God between Philosophy and Theology

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There is no need to stress the importance of the term and the concept of tawḥīd in two closely interrelated intellectual domains of the Islamic tradition: theology and philosophy. The affirmation of the oneness and uniqueness of God—both ideas are generally subsumed under the ambiguous term ‘unity’—is at the center of Islamic theology (and not only as far as the Muʿtazilites are concerned). Tawḥīd means, in fact, that unity (oneness and uniqueness) is recognized as such in God, and this concept forms the basis of Islamic theology. Together with ʿilm al-kalām, theology itself, as exemplified in al-Ghazālī, bears the simple name of ʿilm al-tawḥīd, which indicates “the science of (divine) unity” or, literally, “the science of believing and affirming (divine) unity.”¹ One might even say that, from a theoretical point of view, Islam in itself is built on this foundation. Islam as such could be defined as the fundamental acknowledgement of a God who is absolutely one and unique, and hence the omnipotent sovereign who must be obeyed. Prayer, law, mysticism, rational efforts to conceive God, and even art find inspiration in Islam in this absolute idea of God. Analogously, and still from a theoretical perspective, the insurmountable difference between Islam and Christianity lies in the different conceptions of monotheism the two religions express: divine oneness and uniqueness have an absolute character in Islam, whereas in Christianity they give rise to an internal aporetic modulation which, in a sense, includes humanity within the limits of divinity.²

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¹ See, first of all, Gimaret, Tawḥīd; Gardet and Anawati, Introduction à la théologie musulmane, index of technical terms (index des termes techniques), s.v. tawḥīd; el-Bizri, God: Essence and attributes 121–40; Arkoun’s contribution, Unité, in Amir-Moezzi, Dictionnaire du Coran 885–8, has a theoretical focus more than a historical one. For a recent assessment of the topic of the sources of kalām arguments, see Aradi, The origins of the kalām model 135–66.

² See, most importantly, Thomas, Tahlīl. As regards Yaḥyā, see Platti, Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī, philosophe et théologien 167–84 (178–84 contain an edition and a translation of the Treatise in which the possibility of the humanization (al-taʾannus) of God is established: Traité qui établit la possibilité de l’humanisation et l’absurdité de la tenir pour impossible).
In addition to its evident religious significance, the term *tawḥīd* has an important philosophical history. The philosophical conception of the one—which for the Aristotelian tradition was in a sense equivalent to being³—was to be distinguished from being in Neoplatonism. For the Neoplatonists, partly as a consequence of Plato’s analysis in his *Parmenides*,⁴ the one was also understood to be absolute and consequently separated from being (and existent things) and was identified with the Principle and therefore located in the transcendent divine sphere, which is something that can be said of nothing but the Principle itself.⁵

The objective of this introduction is to highlight the role Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī’s *Treatise on the affirmation of [divine] unity* (*Al-Maqāla fī l-tawḥīd*) plays in the Arabic-Islamic philosophical and theological traditions.⁶ The *Treatise*—as the title, which is of paramount importance, already suggests—refers to the fundamental concept of Islamic monotheism, on the one hand, and to the philosophical effort to find a logically coherent predication of the First Principle, on the other. It is on the basis of this premise that this contribution aims to offer a general introduction to the *Treatise* and to explain its inner structure (summarized in a schematic way in the Appendix).⁷ Apart from a few contributions on some particular aspects of the work (two of these contributions are my own), no detailed study has been devoted to the *Treatise* so far.⁸ But before we get into the heart of the question—what kind of *Treatise* is the *Maqāla* and what topics are dealt with in it—a few introductory words about its author seem advisable.

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⁴ See at least Dodds, *The Parmenides* of Plato 129–42; Trouillard, Le «Parménide» de Platon 83–100; and now Turner and Corrigan, *Plato’s Parmenides*.

⁵ See, e.g., D’Ancona, *Causa prima* 519–55.

⁶ For the text, see Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī, *Maqāla fi l-tawḥīd*; and Khalifat (ed.), *Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī: The philosophical treatises*.

⁷ I am preparing a more detailed study together with an edition and translation of the text. A general description of the treatise can be found in Endress, Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī 312, 318–20.