Divine Simplicity and the Flexibility of the Human Heart:

Insights from Kathryn Tanner and William Chittick

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October 2025

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Abstract

Divine Simplicity is a metaphysical doctrine about God, but it also informs our understanding of humanity's essence and human relationships. This paper will examine two thinkers who argue that the flexibility of human nature is a key aspect of humanity's image of God, and the role that *Divine Simplicity* plays in this account. I will look at Kathryn Tanner's account of the image of God in *Christ the Key*, and William Chittick's presentation of Ibn Arabi's "perfect human." For both thinkers, there is a privileged relationship between the human essence and God's simplicity that accounts for the great diversity of humanity. Although their accounts of that relationship are distinct, I suggest that comparing them highlights a shared commitment to connecting discussion of God's *Oneness* to the transformation of human life. This makes *Divine Simplicity* a ripe topic for interreligious discussion, especially (though not exclusively) between the Abrahamic faiths.

Keywords: *Divine Simplicity, Human Diversity, Christian-Muslim Dialogue, Kathryn Tanner, William Chittick*

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"And indeed We have created man, and We know what his ownself whispers to him. And We are nearer to him than his jugular vein." (Q 50:16)

"[For] you alone know every human heart." (1 Kings 8:39)

Introduction

The belief that only God knows the innermost depths of the human heart is common to the Abrahamic faiths. God knows us, but we are always in some sense a mystery to each other. Someone we trust may turn out to be a cheat,[1] someone we despise may turn their lives around and become a saint.

Even more, it is possible to be in a room full of sincere people and be bewildered by the variety of their desires, capacities, beliefs, hopes, and dreams. Perhaps there are limits on how much we can presume to know about another person because there are so few limits on what another person may become with God's help. So the question arises: *What is the relationship between the Oneness of God and the sincere diversity of humanity?*

The goal of this paper is to draw out such a connection between the *Oneness* of God and the great variety of humanity. Specifically, I will explore the claim that the flexibility of human nature has a special relationship to the *simplicity* or non-composition of the *Divine Essence*. I will pursue this argument by comparing the thoughts of William Chittick and Kathryn Tanner. To speak of "comparison" here is not to say that I will primarily focus on the similarities and differences of their positions. Such a task done well would take a whole book! Instead, comparative theology asks what might be learned when we open up a theological question to voices outside of our own tradition. My goal as a Protestant theologian is to show that Christians can learn from listening to an Islamic voice on this question.

"..., *comparative theology* asks what might be learned when we open up a *theological question* to voices outside of our own tradition."

[1] Many of the scriptures that claim only God knows the heart have human duplicity in view. We lie, we cheat, we live insincerely. In this context, God's knowledge of the heart serves as a reminder: I may fool my neighbor with a "double" life, but not God. The Truth of God's Unity will judge my duplicity. Not all the mystery of the human heart, however, can be ascribed simply to our attempts to hide ourselves.

Method: Talking about Simplicity and the Life of Faith

God is *One*. "Divine Simplicity" is a family of claims that specifies the kind of *Oneness* we mean when we make that foundational claim. While thinkers across Islam, Christianity, and Judaism have subtle differences in their conceptions of simplicity, each tradition has historically developed its concepts in conversation with the others.[2] The broadest way to talk about *Divine Simplicity* is to think of it as a denial. God is not "composite." That is, God is not a bundle of parts coming together to make a larger whole. This claim can take a variety of more specific forms, some of which some thinkers affirm and others deny: God's *Being* and *Essence* are identical, God is what God has, multiple *differentiae*, and so on, do not define God's *Essence*. The general point is this: when we think of God, do not think of multiple separable parts; God is *One*.

If we are going to make distinctions within our talk about God, for example, a distinction between the *Essence* and the *Names*, we should not understand that distinction on the model of two separate parts in a larger whole. God is *One* across our distinctions in a manner more intimate than the unity of parts within wholes.

Readers familiar with the academic literature on *Divine Simplicity* may sense something different about this discussion of the doctrine. Most articles on *Divine Simplicity* are written in the discipline of analytic philosophy. They start with a laser focus on a specific metaphysical claim (God's attributes are identical to God's *Essence*, for example) and test that claim for coherence and compatibility with other modern philosophical commitments. Such questions are profoundly important for building out a metaphysics, but they can also limit how we think about simplicity. For one, many thinkers who have confessed that God is simple thought this idea stood at the precipice of human philosophy and language. Simplicity was the door through which reason transitioned into tasting, contemplation, and devotion. Philosophical analysis alone can yield only about half of the meaning of simplicity for such thinkers.

We can put the methodological point this way: *Divine Simplicity* is never an isolated philosophical claim, but the simplicity of the God revealed to each tradition; it is a way of reflecting on the *Oneness* of the God we know through our texts and prophets, and it gains its whole meaning in the practices we use to respond to that God.

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[2] See the works of David Burrell, especially *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), and *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

Let me give a quick example. For Anselm, a medieval Christian monk, God is not just "simple" but the "Simple Good." Something "good" in medieval Latin philosophy was something capable of eliciting *love*. Naming God the "Simple Good," then, makes the point that God is the end toward which all desires flow, the uniter of the divided and conflictual loves of mortal life.

> "Desire the Simple Good, which is the complete good, and that is enough. What do you love, O flesh? What do you long for, O my Soul? It is there."[3]

Anselm's discussions of simplicity are intimately related to a Christian (and more broadly Platonic) spiritual program to transform the heart in relationship to the God who is *Love*.[4] A metaphysical position in isolation says little when our goal is to understand the connection between a doctrine and a thinker's understanding of a life of faith. This is one situation where comparison can be helpful. By looking at claims in two different traditions, we can better see how that doctrine influences and is influenced by the larger vision of life in which it is articulated.

For any method, the proof is in the pudding. Without further delay, then, I will discuss Tanner and Chittick.

"*Naming* God the 'Simple Good,'...makes the point that God is the end toward which all desires flow, the uniter of the *divided* and *conflictual* loves of *mortal life*."

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[3] Anselm of Bec, *Proslogion* chap. 25 in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. Thomas Williams, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company), 95.

[4] Though it is sometimes said that Christianity gives a greater emphasis to *love* than Islam, William Chittick, for his part, argues to the contrary, suggesting *love* is central to Sufi traditions and that "Love alone is able to bring together all the contradictory qualities and reinstate them in God's unity….Only love, among all human experiences, has the universality and open-endedness to suggest something of the nature of the ultimate transfiguration that is the goal of human life." William Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, eds. Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (New York: NY, SUNY Press, 2012), 45. Though Christian and Islamic accounts of *love* are ultimately different, we may occasionally be unified in seeing *love* as a quality of relation uniquely close to God's *Oneness*. See also the other works of William Chittick, especially *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), xi–xxvi, and "Friendship and Love in Islamic Spirituality," in *Friendship in Islamic Ethics and World Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 80–82.

Kathryn Tanner: Humans Molded by Intimacy with God

Kathryn Tanner's book *God and Creation in Christian Theology* is unique in that she rarely commits herself to a single theological position. Instead, she traces "rules for talk about God" familiar to Christian theologians across different traditions and philosophical schools, rules such as: do not distinguish God from the world by "flat" contrasts.[5] These rules are meant to establish a certain unity to Christian thought across the divides of time, denomination, and philosophical school. In addition, they have to guard the connection between theological inquiry and the language and practice of ordinary believers.

"...[*Tanner*] traces 'rules for talk about God' familiar to Christian theologians across *different traditions* and *philosophical schools*, rules such as: do not distinguish God from the world by 'flat' contrasts."

In *God and Creation*, doctrines of *Divine Simplicity* thus appear less as specific metaphysical claims than as examples of theologians using philosophical resources to defend ordinary patterns of Christian speech. Christians talk about God as simultaneously transcendent and near. The language of our worship only makes sense if God is *transcendent* over the world in just such a way that God can be closer to every creature than any creature can be. "God's *transcendence* alone is one that may be properly exercised in the *radical immanence* by which God is said to be nearer to us than we are to ourselves."[6] According to Tanner, speaking this way was difficult in the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity was born.[7] God was either transcendent and distant, or immanent but not transcendent. Christians sought to solve this problem by radicalizing God's *transcendence*, drawing on aspects of Plotinus's philosophy that were already latent.[8] God was not only different from the world; God's mode of difference is different.

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[5] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (New York, NY: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 10–35.

[6] Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 79.

[7] Ibid., 37–48.

[8] Ibid., 42.

While differences usually distance creatures from each other, God's difference allows God to draw closer. God is uniquely exempt from the rules of opposition that organized creatures in a single taxonomy. Simplicity, denying the internal division of the *Divine Being*, appears as a way of defending God's exemption from these external divisions as well.

"While differences usually *distance* creatures from each other, *God's difference* allows God to draw *closer*.

Some examples may help explain how this works. *Divine Simplicity* suggests that God's *Essence* (what God is) and God's *Being* (that God is) are not two separate parts of God. Perhaps the most influential Christian version of this point is Thomas Aquinas's. Building on Ibn Sīnā's (Avicenna d. 1037) argument that God's *Essence* alone necessitates its *being*, Aquinas argues that God's *Essence* just is the pure act of existence: "to be" itself (*Ipsum Esse*). This is a nuanced position I cannot explain here.[9] What is interesting for us is the effects of this way of speaking. Aquinas distinguishes God from the world in the same breath as he suggests that God is close to everything in the world. No creature is its own raw existence. In this, God is absolutely distinct. At the same time, everything that exists must have a direct relationship to the act of *Being Itself*, God's simple *being*, or it could not exist at all. A second example: Tanner makes this point by talking about a "God beyond kinds."[10] This too comes from Aquinas' treatment of simplicity, namely, the claim that God is not composed of a "genus and a species."[11] The philosophical ideas of "kinds," "genus," and "species" were meant to define creatures—let us answer "what is it?"—in part by placing a creature in a larger structure of distinctions (a taxonomy). To belong to the genus "animal" is not to belong to the genus "plant." To belong to the species "cat" was not to belong to the species "dog." To be one kind of being to be distanced from other kinds; they are contrastive and mutually exclusive. To say that God does not have a genus and species—that God is not a "kind" of being but "to be" itself—does two things at once. First, this claim places God beyond definition by genus and species. Second, it exempts God from the distance that separates different kinds of being. God transcends the defining structures of this world to be nearer to each creature than those structures allow.

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[9] See one of Tanner's presentations of this point in *God and Creation*, 60. See also Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable*, for a more extended treatment of the importance of Aquinas' position.

[10] Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2; 53.

[11] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Aquinas Institute, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Emmaus Academic, 2018), I.3.5.

"The *philosophical ideas* of 'kinds,' 'genus,' and 'species' were meant to *define* creatures...in part by placing a creature in a larger structure of distinctions..."

God's transcendent proximity has special consequences when discussing the *divine image*, because humans were made for nearness with God. Human nature, Tanner argues in *Christ the Key*, is set apart by a peculiar "plasticity." While other animals can complete most of their tasks through instinct alone, humans have a kind of "excessive openness" that allows them to adapt to their environments and learn.[12] This flexibility is a sign of the human person's intended intimacy with God. Human nature was left flexible and underdetermined so that it can grow and be shaped by the input of *Grace*, the presence of God's *Spirit*. Under the guidance of God's *Spirit*, people can be shaped in ways that are sensitive to their surroundings, becoming what they need to live well with the diversity of creatures they encounter. Without that proximity, we diminish and grow destructive. To be human is to be uniquely dependent on and open to God.

"To be *human* is to be *uniquely dependent on* and *open* to God.

This openness plays into why humans can be said to "image" God. For Tanner, there are at least two senses in which we can talk about "the image of God." In the "strongest" sense, Jesus Christ is the Image of God because Jesus is, for Christians, God's self-expressive *Word*. Humans only participate in the "strong" image of God as they are drawn to Christ.[13] All humans have some share in this union. As such, we have some part in this "strong" image, independent of the kind of life we live. God does this for us in the incarnation. However, part of the reason that our natures are left open and flexible is so that our union with Christ can shape us to reflect God's will in the world. Christ's own life and *Spirit* become the "input" that molds our plastic natures, allowing us to reflect or "image" God's character. The "strong" image of God is our nearness to Christ; the "weak" image of God is human capacities, attributes, and powers, including the initial flexibility of human nature, that grow in us under the influence of that union with Christ.

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[12] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 37–50.

[13] Tanner also employs the language of *simplicity* to explain how Jesus's imaging of God is distinct from our own. Jesus simply is the image of God—without "composition" with or reliance on anything outside himself. Other humans only have this *image* (or are "made in" it) by virtue of participation. See Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 7–9.

Let us focus on this "weak" image of God. In a sense, all creation images God. In virtue of being created, each creature has an affinity with its *divine creator*.[14] What a creature is and does shapes what kind of analogy to God it forms, with different creatures pointing to God in different ways. Interestingly, however, humans do not have just one way of life. One human life can be so distinct from another that two humans may weakly "image" God in different ways. We have a certain openness or flexibility that makes us hard to understand before our environments have shaped us. Here we can return to *Divine Simplicity*:

> Existing in perfect simplicity, God is without internal limits or boundaries dividing the *divine nature* into manageable parts or aspects for our comprehension. The absolute fullness of being and goodness, God transcends all divisions between kinds and exceeds all bounds of a particular nature or mode of being that might allow God to be set alongside others or encompassed by anything it is not. God is in that sense formless….
>
> Humans imitate God's incomprehensibility by having a nature that is also, in a sense, unlimited, unbounded by a clearly delimited nature, in virtue, in the human case, of an expansive openness and initial indefiniteness apart from some more specific formation from without that our own self-reflective capabilities help to direct….Whatever the knowable dimensions of human nature, its apophatic ones are what count here for imaging God….If humans are the image of God, they must be, as Gregory of Nyssa affirms, an incomprehensible image of the incomprehensible. (*Christ the Key*, 53–54)

Divine Simplicity helps establish God's incomprehensibility. It does so by denying all limits of "kind" internal to the *divine nature*, so that it is impossible to define. In doing so, it also helps establish that God can be uniquely near to all creatures. Humanity's flexible nature also gives us a kind of *incomprehensibility* (1), tied to the *indefiniteness* (2) of our nature. That indefinite nature, in turn, allows us to take on a variety of *uniquely formative relationships to other creatures* (3). In these three ways, our flexible natures are a "weak" image for God's exemption from composition.

"Interestingly, ..., humans do not have just one way of life."

[14] Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 9–11.

When our flexible nature is united to Christ and guided by the *Spirit*, we, in turn, help other creatures achieve their "weak" images of God. The flexibility of all material reality, when combined with humans guided by God's *Spirit*, is molded into an image of God as well. Diversity and change are not, then, a "flat" contrast with the *Oneness* of God. Instead, the human's ability to embrace, form, and be formed by so many different creatures becomes a distant creaturely analogy for God, a simple God who is directly working on each creature to help them reflect *Divine Gifts*.

William Chittick: The Names and Perfect Humanity

The Anglophone world owes William Chittick an outstanding debt for his dedication to Arabic and Persian. Throughout his career, he has made the thought of many overlooked and highly nuanced Islamic thinkers available to English-speaking audiences. While Chittick does not write in the analytic philosophy genre, he is interested in a detailed metaphysical and cosmological vision. Chittick weaves together quotes, concepts, and metaphors from Islamic, especially Sufi, traditions, each of which becomes a prism through which he reflects a nuanced characterization of the relationship between God and the world, one that seeks to address contemporary issues in pluralistic societies with the resources of classic Islamic thinkers.

To begin, I should note that it was more common in Islamic contexts to affirm a real distinction between God's *Essence* and attributes than it was in Christian contexts.[15] As a result, denials of composition in the Islamic world often focus not on all of divinity, but specifically the *Divine Essence*.[16]

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[15] For a helpful comparison on some of these points, see David Burell, "Ghazālī and Aquinas on the Names of God," *Literature and Theology*, 3:2 (1989), 173–183.

[16] This may be confusing to Christians who are used to thinking of simplicity as the claim that God's *Essence* and attributes are identical. Thinking of essences as definitions may help us see how an *essence* can be conceptually simple in itself. Humans are often said to be "rational animals." That is, there are two parts to the essence and "definition" of humans. Rationality is one part, animality is another. As such, our definitions are conceptually composite. God's *Essence* has no such parts—indeed, no definition at all. When asked what God is, we simply reply, God is. One can think that God's attributes and God's *Essence* are distinct and still think that God's *Essence* is simple, so long as one does not think those attributes define God. The non-composition of the *Essence* can, then, still function as a way of pointing towards the *Divine Being*'s mystery and conceptual indefinability, even if we retain the ability to talk about truly distinct attributes.

"Throughout his career, [*Chittick*] has made the thought of many *overlooked* and highly *nuanced* Islamic thinkers available to English-speaking audiences."

Take, for example, Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, whom English language sources often depict as a great opponent of *Divine Simplicity* because he argues the *divine attributes* must be distinct from the *Divine Essence*.[17] However, al-Ghazālī gives the meaning of God's name *al-Wāḥid* (the *One*) as "the one who can neither be divided nor duplicated…And God the most high is one in the sense that it is impossible for His *Essence* to be arranged into parts."[18] Even if al-Ghazālī would be an opponent of certain contemporary forms of *Divine Simplicity*, denying that the *Essence* has parts is still important to him!

When speaking about "simplicity" in Chittick's work, then, I will usually be speaking about the *indefinability* (i.e., the conceptual non-composition) of the *Divine Essence* (*dhāt*). Still, it is important to note that, in many ways, Chittick also resists seeing the *Essence* and the names as two "parts" of God. The names are relationships between God and the world, each of which "denotes the *Essence*."[19] The important task is characterizing the relationship between the non-composite *Essence* considered in itself and the manifestation of that *Essence* in the *divine names*.

Chittick often emphasizes that we must speak of God in a way that balances two considerations. We should be able to defend *tanzīh*: God's *transcendence* or incomparability with the world, and *tashbih*, God's *immanence* within and self-manifestation through the world.[20]

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[17] For example, the article by Jon McGinnis, "Simple is as Simple Does: Plantinga and Ghazālī on Divine Simplicity," *Religious Studies*, 58.S1 (Oct. 2022), S97–S109.

[18] Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God* (al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā Allā al-ḥusnā), trans. David Burrell and Nazih Daher (Islamic Texts Society, 1999).

[19] "There are not two realities, *Essence* and name, but a single reality—the *Essence*—which is called a specific name…." William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 10. See also pp. 34–36.

[20] For example, William Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 23–29. Because Chittick most often explicates the thought of other figures, I will occasionally cross-reference works to suggest that these themes remain important to Chittick himself. See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 9.

On the one hand, the Qur'anic declaration that "There is nothing like Him" (Q 42:11) forms the impetus for *tanzīh*. On the other hand, the *hadith qudsī* "I was a hidden treasure, so I wanted to be known" sets the stage for seeing all of creation as *divine self-manifestation*.[21] God creates the world as a field of signs pointing to God. "The principle of unity demands that all things be seen as signs and marks of God's goodness."[22] We can, then, speak of God in two respects. First, in respect to the non-manifest being (*wujūd*) of the *Divine Essence*, which is God in *Godself*. Second, we can speak in respect to the manifestation of the *divine names* shining out into creation, multiple and differentiated. It is only by balancing transcendence and immanence that we can build a subtle picture of God's relation to the universe.

"...we can speak in respect to the *manifestation* of the *divine names* shining out into creation, *multiple* and *differentiated*. It is only by balancing *transcendence* and *immanence* that we can build a subtle picture of God's relation to the *universe*."

To understand the relation between the *Essence* and names, we must discuss the critical concept of the *barzakh*—a bridge or isthmus. A *barzakh* is a reality that stands between two things we usually consider opposites.[23] Imagination is the paradigmatic example. Many philosophers organized reality into a lower material realm and a higher realm of intellect. In between these two lies the imagination. In Christian Aristotelian philosophy, the imagination is often subsumed under the intellect; its role is primarily to translate sense impressions into images that the intellect can analyze. In the thought of the school of Ibn Arabi, however, "imaginal worlds" constitute a genuine realm between the material and spiritual worlds, bridging them and combining elements of both. Such bridges are critical to the cosmology of Chittick, so that he quotes Ibn Arabi's saying, "He who does not know the status of imagination has no knowledge whatsoever."[24]

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[21] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 29.

[22] Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 61.

[23] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 14–15.

[24] Quoted in Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 12.

Human imagination, and Prophetic imagination in particular, has the power to bridge some of the most fundamental divides of this cosmos. Perfect humans are imaginal realities *par excellence* because they are bridges *par excellence*. Whenever we see a significant cosmological distinction, there is usually a *barzakh* between the two. Consider, for example, being and non-being. In one sense, only God's *Essence* alone is necessarily *Real* (*al-Ḥaqq*; *wājib al-wujūd*), and so God alone has actual being. Considered apart from any relationship with God, creatures do not exist.[25] And yet, creatures do exist to an extent.

"Considered apart from any *relationship with God*, creatures do not exist. And yet, creatures do exist *to an extent*.

The universe forms a *barzakh*, a kind of *imaginal* (not imaginary) reality, between the being of God and non-being apart from God.[26] The *divine names* are God's relationships to the cosmos, and they are a further bridge between the *Divine Essence* and the relative and received *being* of the universe.[27] The *absolute*, *non-composite*, and *non-manifest* being of the *Divine Essence* is manifested outward in the multiple *divine names*, each of which bears one aspect of *being*. Like the *Divine Essence*, the names belong to God, but they are multiple and differentiated like the universe.

We may think of the non-Manifest being of God as a white *light*, while each of the *divine names* is a stream of color pouring out of that *light* when the attributes of a creature have colored it.[28] In another metaphor, the universe is the "husk" of a grain, the *divine names* are the "kernel," and the *Essence* of God is the "kernel of the kernel."[29]

For Chittick, creatures and the universe as a whole exist to manifest God through the *divine names*. Though each creature, insofar as it exists, has some relationship to all of the *divine names*, each creature can only manifest (that is, reveal or show forth) a limited set of those names.

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[25] Ibid., 16. See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 6–8.

[26] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 20.

[27] Ibid., 21. See also Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 9.

[28] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 18; 20.

[29] Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 44.

Each creature has a "preparedness" (*isti'dād*) that limits what it can make known about God.[30] A lion, for example, might be ready to reflect the names of the *Living* and the *Powerful*, but not the *Merciful*. It is only taken as a whole that the universe reflects all the names of God.

"*Each creature* has a 'preparedness' that *limits* what it can make *known* about God.

There is, however, a partial exception to the rule that creatures can only reflect a limited set of names: humans. Other creatures have "fixed stations" that define them and suggest the names they can reflect, but Ibn al-'Arabī points out that the uniqueness of human beings lies in their inability to be pinned down. "Just as God cannot be defined, so the creatures whom he created in His own image cannot be put into a box."[31] One human may be severe, another human merciful, and still a third human may learn how to balance and reflect both of these names at once. Our "preparedness" is, at least in theory, unlimited, because "human beings are not fixed in their nature."[32] A significant part of the spiritual transformation of the human heart is to meditate upon and acquire properties associated with different *divine names*, actualizing the unlimited potential of our nature to reflect God's properties. "The goal [of Sufi practices] is conformity with the *divine qualities* that God instilled into human beings when He created them in His own image."[33] A perfect human reflects all of the *divine names* at once, even combining opposed properties in their heart, oriented totally to God. While the universe reflects all the *divine names*, the human heart can do the same. Hence, Chittick talks about humans as a microcosm and the goal of the universe.[34] The universe (the "macrocosm") exists to reflect the names of God, and in that sense, each part of the universe is a partial image of God. Humans alone among the creatures of the universe can, with their "ambiguous" nature, fulfill the goal of the universe as a whole—manifesting all the names of God in a less divided manner.[35] It is in that sense that they can be said to be created in God's image or form.[36]

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[30] Ibid., 22.

[31] Ibid., 59–60. See also Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 32.

[32] Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 305.

[33] Ibid., 44.

[34] Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 31–35.

[35] Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 146.

[36] Ibid., 119.

"While the universe reflects all the *Divine Names*, the human heart can do the same. Hence, Chittick talks about humans as a *microcosm* and the *goal* of the universe."

Not all of the *divine names* are equal. Some names are considered more comprehensive than others, including the properties of other names within themselves. The so-called "seven leaders" are one example of this: *Living*, *Powerful*, *Knowing*, *Willing*, *Speaking*, *Hearing*, *Seeing*. Among these, *Living* is seen as *supreme*, since something cannot see or hear or know unless it lives. The name *Allāh* is the "All-Comprehensive name."[37] All the *names* of God are unified in this one. As such, this *name* serves as a bridge between the all-comprehensive, non-manifest *Divine Essence* and its manifestation through the multiple *divine names*. It is one of the *names*, but it points to their unity in the *Essence*.

Chittick explains the *divine image* in humans by saying that there is a special association between perfect human nature and this all-comprehensive *divine name*.[38] God taught humans "all the names" (Q 2:31) and formed them in the image of the all-comprehensive name. Perfect humanity is, then, also a *barzakh* between God's non-delimited *Essence* and the manifestation of that *Essence* in creation.[39] The heart's ability to take on any of the names witnesses to the ultimate unification of the names in God.

As the human heart progresses through various spiritual stations, sometimes reflecting some names, sometimes reflecting others, it can eventually come to a "station of no station" where it reflects all of the *divine names* and, in doing so, reflects the most central name of all. Of course, very few humans actually achieve the highest goal. Only the Prophet Muḥammad and those who receive his spiritual inheritance can embrace all the names.[40] Prophet Muḥammad and those in his spiritual legacy have natures that are determined by "no name, no perfection, 'no station.'"[41]

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[37] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 32.

[38] Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 144–45.

[39] Ibid., 150. Here, Chittick is presenting the thought of 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī.

[40] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 7.

[41] Ibid., 23.

"*Perfect humanity* is...also a *barzakh* between God's non-delimited *Essence* and the *manifestation* of that *Essence* in creation. The heart's ability to take on any of the names *witnesses* to the *ultimate unification* of the names in God."

Their nature, like the *Essence*, is beyond definition and manifests instead in a constant dynamism. "[Perfect humans] undergo constant transformation and transmutations by participating in God's ceaseless self-disclosure." In this way, they are related to God's "non-delimited" being.[42]

After achieving the station of no station, the human heart turns back to creation to promote the manifestation of the names among other creatures. The perfect human (and thus Prophet Muḥammad) is the lynchpin of cosmology. While other creatures reflect the names, humans witness their unity. That is to say, perfect humanity is "the primordial and original self-disclosure of the *Essence*,"[43] most closely related with the "exclusive unity" of the *Essence* prior to the multiplicity of the attributes.[44] Human non-fixity points to the simplicity prior to names. Prophetic guidance is sent to shape that non-fixity toward the ultimate station of no station, or at least toward a station that embraces "mercy, compassion, harmony, love, and unity."[45] A Muslim can, then, seek in the Prophet's conduct insight into any of the *divine names*. They can see his role as the messenger of God to be also an indication of his cosmological role as the bridge between the non-manifest and the multiplicity of all manifestations.

This vision of the universe and the human's place within it informs many aspects of Chittick's work, perhaps most importantly for our purposes, his account of religious diversity. Different religious practices and beliefs about God are themselves elements of the universe that witness to different sets of God's names.[46]

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[42] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 30.

[43] Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 143.

[44] Ibid., 146.

[45] Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 173.

[46] Ibid., 172–176.

"...*perfect humanity* is 'the primordial and original self-disclosure of the *Essence*,' most closely related with the 'exclusive unity' of the *Essence* prior to the *multiplicity* of the attributes."

Every guided community, even those that differ significantly from Islam, has some part in the manifestation of God's names. However, Islam especially reflects the unity of all the names. Perhaps the ability to live and act in unified ways across religious boundaries—an ability the Prophet Muḥammad demonstrated in abundance—can itself be a witness to the God who is *One*.

Similarities and Differences Between Tanner and Chitttick

The key similarity between Tanner and Chittick should now become clear. Both present a highly changeable and indefinable human nature, one capable of taking on any number of ways of life. Both also see the growth of the human as a point at which changeable creation can refer back to God's transcending and grounding of this diversity in indefinable simplicity. We should, however, attend to differences. Discussing differences in light of their similarities can help us see what is truly important to a thinker. At the same time, differences provide the context in which such moments of resonance become potentially significant.

We should note, then, that Tanner associates the human image of God primarily with flexibility, while Chittick adds the theme of all-comprehensiveness.[47] Tanner does not present a perfect human as a mirror of all of God's properties. She only claims that human nature has an unlimited flexibility on account of its intended openness to God's guidance. She therefore associates humanity closely with material reality, which is also flexible and changeable, and thus a *divine image*. Chittick sees the human as all-comprehensive; its internal *divine image* is associated with the goal and image of the whole universe—material, intellectual, and especially imaginal—a microcosm of the macrocosm.

[47] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 18–19; 30. Here, Chittick, too, highlights the flexibility of the universe, and especially of the imaginal realm.

"Both [*Tanner and Chittick*] present a highly *changeable* and *indefinable* human nature, one capable of taking on any number of ways of *life*. "

This can, in part, be attributed to Tanner's two-tiered theory of the *divine image* and the Christian convictions from which it flows. Humans taking on attributes that analogically image God is only ever a "weak" version of the *divine image*. God's relation to creation is not primarily the manifestation of all of the *divine attributes*, but the presence of the Trinitarian Persons. The presence of God and union with God provided by the *Spirit* and *Son* are prior to any resemblance between God and creatures.

As such, for Tanner, the *divine attributes* and human openness to them do not serve a bridging function like the *divine names* do for Chittick. God does intend for union with Christ to "communicate" *divine properties* to humans. However, any shared names are strictly secondary to God's presence to creation in the Trinitarian missions of the *Son* and *Spirit*. For Chittick, the *divine names* and Prophet Muḥammad's primordial manifestation of them are a primary point of contact between God and creation. As such, the human ability to take on all the names is a lynchpin in Chittick's cosmology and spiritual program, whereas it is not for Tanner. Tanner's theology results in a sacramental program in which the human seeks to live in accord with the gifts given by the *Son* and the *Spirit*. Chittick's theology results in a program of transformation under the prophetic guidance, taking on all the *divine names*.

"Humans taking on attributes that *analogically image* God is only ever a "weak" version of the *divine image*."

A second reason for this difference can be traced to differing philosophical affinities—the traditions of analytic philosophy and American Pragmatism influence Tanner.[48] Little in this philosophical milieu would push Tanner to give a detailed speculative account of the cosmos or see humans as a mirror for all of it. The project of an integrated, detailed, and subtle cosmological vision, however, fills Chittick's work and the texts that he translates. Different traditions of inquiry highlight and promote different genres and questions.

[48] Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 11.

"The project of an *integrated*, *detailed*, and *subtle* cosmological vision...fills Chittick's work and the texts that he translates. Different traditions of inquiry *highlight* and *promote* different genres and questions."

Still, there is one key overlap in their methods. Both Pragmatism and Sufi traditions seek to align intellectual inquiry with practice and the transformation of real life. Tanner engages pragmatism because this tradition asks what a thinker is doing with their thought, what the practical effects of their teachings are in the time and place they confess them. While Chittick is decidedly not a pragmatist, classic discussions of tawḥīd also highlight the transformation of life. The idea of *tawḥīd* embraces both claims about God's *Oneness* and the forms of human life and consciousness which point to that Truth. Chittick claims it provides a "methodology for lovers" of God, one which helps break apart their limited understandings in the process of transforming the human soul.[49] It is no accident that a Christian theologian who foregrounds the question "what does this idea mean for the life of faith?" discusses God's simplicity in a way that resonates with certain Islamic traditions.

This similarity takes on extra significance in light of their differences. Though they have profoundly different cosmological visions, different ways of characterizing the God-world distinction, and though their traditions have different debates around the meaning of God's non-composite *Essence*, when simplicity is discussed in connection with human life, it highlights diversity shaped by and pointing to God. That this connection between human diversity and God's *Oneness* remains across such a sea of metaphysical differences suggests a specific stability to the association. This connection, I submit, should be part of our dialogue on God's *Oneness* and *non-composition*.

Conclusion: The Task of Comparative Theology

The goal of comparative theology is to open ourselves to and learn from encounters with faith that is not our own. As a Protestant theologian, then, I would conclude with what I have learned in studying Chittick.

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[49] Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart*, 60–61. There are strong parallels here, too, with the formation of love in Anselm's *Proslogion*.

"...[*the*] connection between *human diversity* and God's *Oneness* remains across such a sea of *metaphysical differences* suggests a *specific stability* to the association."

I began studying Islam largely because I felt something was limited in the way my peers discussed *Divine Simplicity*, and that a similar shortcoming did not seem present in my exposure to Islamic texts. Knowing Muslims and Christians had often influenced each other on *Divine Simplicity*, I wondered whether dialogue with Islam would help me reclaim an obscured importance to this idea. What I found was a lush world of thought and practice. So much of what I read in my Christian philosophical sources saw the *Oneness* of God as an abstract fact securing God's absoluteness, but here was that *Oneness* as a near and present guide. Though I will draw different conclusions in light of my Trinitarian convictions, I was impressed by the diversity of Islamic strategies for underscoring the urgency of "God is *One*." There was a liveliness, a wisdom, and attention to detail here that I have encountered only in a handful of Christian theologies and spiritual manuals.

I think Christians are right to foreground God's freely given Trinitarian "missions," but there is an old danger to this Christian particularity. A priority given to the work of the *Son* and *Spirit*, independent of our actions and properties, can inadvertently make us forget to discuss the importance of God's names, attributes, and energies in the life of faith. We can forget that the *divine attributes* are not just words we use when we want to worship and adore, but also invitations to be shaped by a relationship with God. This danger, I believe, can be staved off by a practice of dialogue with Muslims about the *divine names* and their significance for spiritual transformation. Muslim thought and scripture foreground this aspect of the *divine invitation* to humans more than do Christian texts, and they treat it with extreme care and rigor.

"A priority given to the work of the *Son* and *Spirit*, independent of our actions and properties, can inadvertently make us forget to discuss the importance of God's *names*, *attributes*, and *energies* in the life of *faith*."

As a first learning, then, I wish to propose a "rule" of my own. When discussing *non-composition*, do so with an eye toward the *flexibility*, *diversity*, and *transformation* of the human life. Such rules are meant to support ongoing practices among communities. In this case, the proposed rule ought to help Christians reclaim their own emic practices of meditation on God's *Oneness*. At the same time, however, this "rule" may also inform the practice of interreligious dialogue and comparative theology between Christianity and Islam—or at least between those streams in these traditions that discuss the *divine names* and God's *non-composition*.

This is, in fact, my second learning. Tanner usually focuses her "rules" for theological speech on the governance of practices within a single tradition, but each religious tradition also has practices for engaging others. Chittick's framing of the connection among God's *manifestation*, *human diversity*, and *religious pluralism* prompts me to reflect on the principles that make interreligious dialogue productive and coherent. Muslim and Christian dialogues on *divine attributes*, especially those that elaborate God's *Oneness*, do need to take place on the metaphysical level. However, metaphysical dialogue should not be divorced from questions of practice. In the same breath, then, dialogue on the *divine attributes* ought to address the practices that witness to these attributes. Even more, we should discuss how our communities can support one another in the manifestation of God's gifts/names in the joint life of humanity.

The most consequential dialogue and joint action between religious communities often happens "on the ground," independent of academic conversations. Academic theological dialogue needs bridges that allow it to learn from, inform, and promote such organic cooperation. The Islamic tradition of speaking about God's names and their manifestation in human life provides one such bridge between metaphysical claims and practical accounts of human action and responsibility. How might we act together in witness to God's *names*? God's *justice*? God's *mercy*? Toward what names might God's *guidance* be shaping our hearts to meet the challenges of the times? Does joint action across *theological diversity* itself witness to the simplicity of God, as does the human heart's ability to embrace multiple attributes? An affirmative answer seems implicit in Chittick's discussion of *religious pluralism*, where different prophetic communities exist and develop to manifest specific names.

"Tanner usually focuses her 'rules' for *theological speech* on the governance of practices within a single tradition, but each *religious tradition* also has practices for engaging others."

I wish to suggest, then, that God's *non-composition* can be best imaged not just by the fact of *human diversity*, but by the *quality* of our relations across that difference. Both Tanner and Chittick give humans a limited exemption from the usual rules that divide the universe into parts. Human hearts can establish relations that the ordinary rules of *contrast*, *division*, and *composition* among creatures would press against. Sincerity across human diversity is a significant example of this, that unexpected nearness that can come when we show another person, or another community, our true faces; the hospitality that lets us see another's face without reducing them to merely a part of our worldview.

"Does joint action across *theological diversity* itself witness to the *simplicity of God*, as does the *human heart*'s ability to embrace multiple attributes? An affirmative answer seems implicit in Chittick's discussion of *religious pluralism*..."

The ambiguity of the human heart, the seemingly infinite ways its desires and capacities can refract and be rearranged, does shroud the heart in mystery. There are things about every human which I will never know, much more whole traditions! Still, where there is a shroud, there is also a potential for unveiling. Only God knows the heart because our hearts belong with God. May they grow with God's presence.

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