

# Avicenna's Philosophical Approach to the Qur'an in the Light of His *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*

Daniel De Smet & Meryem Sebti

CNRS, PARIS

As one of the most outstanding philosophers (*falāsifa*) in the Muslim world, Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā, d. 428/1037) showed a great interest in the Qur'an and in Islamic religion in general.<sup>1</sup> Although in most of his works he quotes ayas from the Qur'an, the way he uses and interprets them has not been studied thoroughly until now.<sup>2</sup> Modern research mainly considers Avicenna as an Arabic Aristotelian, whose thought reflects an Alexandrian, Neo-Platonic reading of Aristotle. True as this may be, the Islamic elements in Avicenna's writings are all too often bypassed as mere superficial and secondary concessions to his religious and cultural environment.

In order to clarify Avicenna's approach to the Qur'an and to establish the nature of his philosophical reading of the Qur'anic text, we are currently preparing an annotated French translation of his six small treatises on Tafsīr.<sup>3</sup> As a preliminary result of our research, the present article raises the question of the relationship between Avicenna's metaphysics and the Qur'an, based on his *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (Q. 112).

Avicenna's *Risāla al-aḍḥawiyya fī amr al-ma'ād* contains a passage about the aims of *tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, which serves as a perfect introduction to his philosophical reading of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*. He claims that the task of the philosopher when interpreting the Qur'an is to assert *tawḥīd*: the absolute unity and uniqueness of God. The numerous ayas describing God in anthropomorphic terms are to be taken in a metaphorical sense: they are only images meant for the common people, who would be confused and led astray by a theoretical exposition of *tawḥīd*, as their minds are unable to understand it. Avicenna then gives the following definition of *tawḥīd*:<sup>4</sup>

To acknowledge that the Creator is one, that He is sanctified above the *how many* and the *how*, the *where* and *when*, position and change, so

that the belief might arise that He is one essence, and cannot possibly have an associate in species, nor have an existential (*wujūdī*) part – be it a part that has a quantitative existence or that exists in the mind – and that this essence cannot be outside nor inside the world, nor be subject to a precise localisation. [However,] it is forbidden to expose this to the common people.

Next, Avicenna argues that the Torah and the Qur'an, when speaking about the essence of God, had to use anthropomorphic expressions, since they are the only ones accessible to the common people. The aim of any philosophical reading of the Qur'an is therefore to restore pure *tawhīd* by interpreting, allegorically, the figurative language of the Prophet.<sup>5</sup>

Applying this general principle as exposed in his *Adḥawiyya*, Avicenna devoted a *tafsīr* to *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, which comprises one of the longest of his Qur'anic commentaries.<sup>6</sup> This treatise is particularly important for our present purpose as Avicenna uses here his main metaphysical concepts – such as *huwiyya*, *wājib al-wujūd*, *mumkin al-wujūd*, *lawāzim*, *muqawwimāt* – in order to interpret the revealed text.<sup>7</sup> However, if the tools used by Avicenna are philosophical, his aim is theological: it is to establish the radicality of *tawhīd* by a philosophical analysis of every word of the sura. Although this sura – also known as *Sūrat al-Tawhīd* and *al-Ṣamadiyya* – is generally considered as the purest expression of God's unity and uniqueness in the Qur'an, the text still needs, according to Avicenna, a philosophical exegesis in order to prove that what is said about God in the four *ayas* of the sura is in no way contradicting His absolute simplicity. The author's main point is that in the first two *ayas*, only *huwa* refers to the Necessary Existent in Himself, whereas all the remaining words (*Allāh*, *aḥad*, *al-ṣamad*) are necessary concomitants (*lawāzim*) caused by the Necessary Existent. As we shall see, this radical interpretation, which is at variance with all previous commentaries on *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*,<sup>8</sup> although being in line with Avicenna's general conception of the divine attributes,<sup>9</sup> raises some startling questions.

Without entering into all details of the complex argumentation developed in this very condensed text, Avicenna's interpretation of Q. 112 can be summarised as follows.

### ***Qul huwa Allāhu aḥad* (Q. 112:1)**

Avicenna takes the word *huwa* as referring to the 'absolute He' (*al-huwa al-muṭlaq*), whose 'ipseity' (*huwiyya*) is not dependent on another being, as 'He is He by His own essence' (*huwa huwa li-dhātihī*). This is the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) whose quiddity (*māhiyya*) is identical with His existence (*wujūd*): His essence is that He exists. The absolute *huwiyya* cannot be expressed by any name (*ism*); it can only be explained (*sharḥ*) by the concomitants (*lawāzim*) that necessarily follow from His

being,<sup>10</sup> and not by His constituents (*muqawwimāt*), since He has no constituents at all, His essence being absolutely one.<sup>11</sup>

As the ipseity of the Necessary Existent is in itself unknowable, it can only be approached by its concomitants:<sup>12</sup>

The ipseity of the first principle (*al-mabda' al-awwal*) has a great number of concomitants, but these concomitants are disposed in a certain order (*mutarattaba*); moreover, the concomitants are caused (*ma'lūlāt*). From that which is the One, the True, the Simple, in all aspects, only one thing can proceed (*yaṣdur*), be it in a descending order, from Him onwards, vertically and horizontally (*'alā'l-tartīb al-nāzil min 'indahū ṭūlan wa-ʿarḍan*), so that the close concomitant (*al-lāzim al-qarīb*) is more able to make known (*ashaddu taʿrīfan*)<sup>13</sup> (the first principle) than the distant concomitant (*al-lāzim al-baʿīd*).

This passage obviously describes the emanation of the chain of beings, starting with the cosmic Intelligences, one by one (as from the one only one can proceed, according to a well known Neo-Platonic principle), in a descending hierarchical order. Although it is not clear what Avicenna means by '*ṭūlan wa-ʿarḍan*',<sup>14</sup> the doctrine contained in this passage is truly Avicennian. According to the Neo-Platonic inspiration of Avicenna's cosmology, based on emanation, all 'creatures'<sup>15</sup> necessarily proceed from the perfection of the Necessary Existent: so they are His *lawāzim* or necessary concomitants. Being unknowable in His ipseity, the Necessary Existent can only be known through His 'creation', i.e. through the hierarchy of beings that proceed from Him. The higher a being is situated in 'the great chain of being' (to use Arthur Lovejoy's famous expression),<sup>16</sup> the more it is able to 'make known' the Necessary Existent.<sup>17</sup>

Besides close and distant concomitants, Avicenna furthermore distinguishes in his *Tafsīr* relative and negative concomitants:<sup>18</sup>

Among the concomitants, some express a relation (*iḍāfiyya*) and others a negation (*salbiyya*). The relative concomitants are more able to make known (*ashadd taʿrīfan*) than the negative. But what makes known in the most perfect way is the concomitant that is both relative and negative.

This distinction between 'relative', 'negative' and a 'combination of both' is generally used by Avicenna in his classification of the divine attributes: besides negative attributes which express God's otherness from creation and relative or positive ones which express His relation to creation, there are attributes combining both negative and positive aspects.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, turning in his *Tafsīr* to the next word of the Qur'anic aya, *Allāh*, Avicenna states immediately after the passage translated above:<sup>20</sup>

This is why this ipseity is called *Allāh*, as the deity (*al-ilāh*) is the one with whom all the other beings are in relation, whereas he is not related at all to them. The absolute deity (*al-ilāh al-muṭlaq*) is the one who is disposed in such a way to all beings: the fact that others are related to him expresses a relation (*idāfi*), the fact that He is not related to something else, expresses a negation ... So we have shown that the name *Allāh* encompasses both [i.e. relation and negation], without any possible doubt. The aya thus continues by mentioning *Allāh*, as what reveals the meaning of the word *huwa* and explains it.

Therefore, 'the divinity' (*al-ilāhiyya*) is the first concomitant of the Necessary Existent, as it expresses at the same time a negative and a positive relation: it is a negative concomitant in so far as it denies that the quiddity of the Necessary Existent is distinct from his existence; it is also a positive concomitant, as it implies that the Necessary Existent is the first principle (*al-mabda' al-awwal*):<sup>21</sup>

The first principle has no closer concomitant than the necessity of existence (*lā yalzamuhu lāzim aqdam min wujūb al-wujūd*). Hence it is the Necessary Existent. By means of His existence, it belongs to Him that He is the principle of all that He is not (*bi-wāṣiṭat wujūdihi yalzamuhu annahu mabda' al-kull mā 'adāhu*). The addition of these two things is the divinity (*wa-majmū' hādhayn al-amrayn huwa al-ilāhiyya*).

In other words: the unknowable essence of the Necessary Existent manifests itself by its closest concomitant – 'the divinity' – expressed by the name *Allāh*. Such is the meaning of the first two words of the sura:<sup>22</sup>

As He indicates by His word *huwa* that the pure and simple ipseity is a reality that cannot be expressed otherwise than [by saying] that He is He, and given the fact that the only way to make it [i.e. this ipseity] known, is by one of its concomitants, He mentions immediately after this the concomitant which is the closest to it: the divinity, that combines two concomitants, a negative and a positive one.

From the preceding passages it appears that Avicenna applies in his *Tafsīr* the term 'concomitant' (*lāzim*) both to the beings proceeding from the Necessary Existent and to His attributes, or at least to the name *Allāh* and the property of 'divinity', which are explicitly designated as concomitants of the absolute *huwiyya*.

Next, the aya states, according to Avicenna's interpretation, that the Necessary Existent's inaccessible essence, manifested through its concomitant *Allāh*, is 'one'

(*aḥad*). This means that His essence is absolutely one in itself, having no constituents, while its multiple concomitants are all caused. As 'He is He by His own essence', there is no kind of division in Him. He can only be said 'one' in an analogical way (*bi'l-tashkīk*),<sup>23</sup> as His unity, distinct from the numerical one, transcends the different forms of unity which are peculiar to the beings caused by Him.<sup>24</sup>

After this lengthy philosophical analysis of the first aya of the sura, which takes up two thirds of the whole *Tafsīr*,<sup>25</sup> Avicenna is now able to explain the remaining three ayas.

#### ***Allāhu'l-ṣamad* (Q. 112:2)**

Relying on the current interpretation given to the problematic word *al-ṣamad* by the *mufasssīrūn*, who understand it in two quite different ways, as meaning either 'what has no hollowiness' (*lā jawf lahu*) or 'the master' (*al-sayyid*),<sup>26</sup> Avicenna takes the term in both senses. As a concomitant of the same kind as *al-ilāhiyya*, its first sense is negative – the Necessary Existent has no quiddity which is distinct from His essence – and its second sense is positive: the affirmation that He is the principle of all beings (*mabda'* *al-kull*). In this way, the word *al-ṣamad* confirms the meaning of the name *Allāh*, which expresses the same negation and affirmation.<sup>27</sup>

The first two ayas thus refer to the unknowable *huwiyya* of the Necessary Existent, which is revealed by its closest concomitants: *Allāh* and *al-ṣamad*.

#### ***Lam yalid wa-lam yūlad* (Q. 112:3)**

This aya, according to Avicenna, states that the Necessary Existent is the principle of all beings, but without affecting His absolute unity. All things proceed from His liberality (*jūd*) by emanation (*fayḍ*), but it is impossible that something similar to Him proceeds from Him, as nothing can participate in His quiddity nor can share the same quiddity with Him. The quiddity of the Necessary Existent is identical with His existence, whereas the possible existents proceeding from Him have a quiddity distinct from their existence. Hence, He has no 'children', as 'He has not begotten' (*lam yalid*). 'He was not begotten' (*lam yūlad*), as 'He is He by His own essence', and does not depend on anything else.<sup>28</sup>

#### ***Wa-lam yakun lahu kufu'an aḥad* (Q. 112:4)**

The last aya of the sura contains the logical conclusion of what precedes. The Necessary Existent has no equal: nothing shares the same quiddity with Him; nothing is equal to Him in the necessity of existence. He is the only Necessary Existent by Himself; hence He is absolutely one and unique.<sup>29</sup>

After summarising his interpretation of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*,<sup>30</sup> Avicenna concludes his *Tafsīr* with the following statement:<sup>31</sup>

As the ultimate aim of those who pursue the sciences in their totality is the knowledge of God's essence and attributes (*ṣifāt*) and the way His actions proceed from Him, and as this sura refers to the path which reveals and points to all that concerns the study of God's essence, it is certainly equivalent to a third of the Qur'an.

This is exactly the goal of any philosophical reading of the Qur'an, according to Avicenna, as he clearly expressed it in his *Risāla al-adḥawiyya*.

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However impressive Avicenna's reading of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* may be, his interpretation of the first two ayas raises a doctrinal problem. Throughout his *Tafsīr*, he repeats time and again that *Allāh* and 'the divinity' (*al-ilāhiyya*), along with *al-ṣamad*, are close concomitants of the Necessary Existent, that are 'making known' His ipseity which is unknowable in itself, in the same way as His ipseity is 'made known' by the hierarchy of beings emanating from it by necessity. In other words, the *Tafsīr* presents as concomitants, caused (*ma' lūl*) by the Necessary Existent, both the multiplicity of emanated beings or 'creatures' (which is common Avicennian doctrine) and of divine attributes such as *al-ṣamad*, even going as far as to qualify the name *Allāh* and 'the divinity' as caused concomitants of the Necessary Existent. Or, to put it in still other terms: Avicenna seems to introduce an ontological distinction between, on the one hand, *huwa* – which refers to the uncaused ipseity of the Necessary Existent – and, on the other, *Allāh* and *al-ṣamad*, the closest concomitants of the Necessary Existent which, as concomitants, are caused by Him.

This observation initially led us to have some doubts about the attribution of the text to Avicenna. But after closer study, these doubts have almost entirely disappeared, although a main difficulty subsists.

The manuscript tradition is unanimous in ascribing the *Tafsīr* to Avicenna. According to one of its editors, al-Khaṭīb, and also to Maḥdavi, there are no less than 39 manuscripts,<sup>32</sup> the oldest dated one being MS Chester Beatty 3045, copied in 699/1299.<sup>33</sup> There exist several commentaries on the *Tafsīr* (for instance by Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. As'ad al-Ṣādiqī, d. 918/1512); furthermore, the treatise was translated into Persian, Turkish and Urdu.<sup>34</sup> All manuscripts, translations, commentaries and editions present it under the name of Avicenna.

Even stronger than this external evidence is the internal evidence we obtained by a close study of the contents of the treatise: the terminology is undoubtedly Avicennian; moreover, we were able to trace for almost every passage of the *Tafsīr*, parallel

passages in the main works of Avicenna, such as the 'Logic' and the 'Metaphysics' of the *Shifā'*, the 'Logic of the Orientals', the *Ishārāt* and the *Ta'liqāt*. Of all this, we can only briefly present here some samples.

The main arguments of Avicenna's reading of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* are summarised at the beginning of the fourth chapter of Book 8 of the 'Metaphysics' of the *Shifā'*, but without any reference to the Qur'an. Avicenna states here that the Necessary Existent is one, that nothing is sharing with Him an equal rank and thus that nothing other than He is a necessary existence:<sup>35</sup>

He is the principle (*mabda'*) of the necessitation of the existence of everything, necessitating (each thing) either in a primary manner or through an intermediary. If the existence of everything other than Him derives from His existence, He is (the) first'; 'The Necessary Existent does not become multiple in any respect whatsoever and His essence is utterly unitary, pure truth'; 'What we mean by our statement that He is one in essence and does not become multiple is that He is as such in His essence. If, thereafter, many positive and negative relations (*iḍāfāt ijābiyya wa-salbiyya*) become attendant on Him, these are necessary concomitants of the essence that are caused by the essence (*lawāzim li'l-dhāt ma'lūla li'l-dhāt*); they exist after the existence of the essence, are not constituent of the essence (*laysa muqawwim li'l-dhāt*), and are not parts of it.'

In this passage of the 'Metaphysics', Avicenna uses his doctrine of the concomitants in order to establish the absolute unity and uniqueness of the divine essence, just as he does in the *Tafsīr*. Although the notion of concomitants is central to Avicenna's logic,<sup>36</sup> as it is to his metaphysics, it is mainly in his *Ta'liqāt* that he applies it to *tawḥīd*, in a way which closely resembles the *Tafsīr*. Thus, he writes in the *Ta'liqāt*:<sup>37</sup>

The nature (*kunh*) and the essence (*ḥaqīqa*) of the First cannot be grasped by human minds. He has an essence (*ḥaqīqa*) for which we have no name. The necessity of existence is either the explanation (*sharḥ*) of the name of this essence or one of its concomitants. In fact, it is the most particular (*akḥaṣṣ*) and the first of its concomitants, as it belongs to it without the intermediary of another concomitant. As to all the other concomitants, some of them exist through the intermediary of the others. In the same way, oneness (*al-waḥda*) is the most particular of the concomitants [of this essence], as it is the real oneness that belongs to it, whereas all the other [kinds of oneness], have necessarily a quiddity [distinct from] existence. But [real oneness] belongs to the most particular of its attributes (*ṣifāt*), as nothing shares with it in existence and trueness, existence and trueness being interrelated.

This is indeed very close to what Avicenna says in his *Tafsīr*: the absolute *huwiyya* of the Necessary Existent cannot be expressed by a name (*ism*); it can only be explained (*sharḥ*) by its concomitants (*lawāzim*); 'there does not belong to Him a closer concomitant than the necessity of existence' ('*lā yalzamuhu lāzim aqdam min wujūb al-wujūd*').<sup>38</sup>

In another passage of the *Ta'liqāt*, Avicenna states that:<sup>39</sup>

The concomitants of the First proceed from Him, as they are not present in Him. For this reason, they do not introduce any multiplicity in Him, as He is their principle (*mabda'*) ... The concomitants of the First, in so far as He is their principle, proceed from Him; they are not linked to Him from something else, nor are they present in Him. His attributes (*ṣifāt*) are concomitant to His essence (*lāzima li-dhātihi*), in so far as they proceed from Him, not in so far as they are present in Him. For this reason, He is not multiplied by them, as He is the one who makes them necessary. These concomitants and these attributes are concomitant to His essence as He is He, what means that He is their cause (*sabab*), and not something else ... The concomitant of the First can only be one and simple, as from the one only one can proceed. The next concomitant is the concomitant of His [first] concomitant; the third concomitant is the concomitant of [the second] concomitant, and so on. The multiplicity of the concomitants of the First appears in this way.

This again is very close to the argument developed in the *Tafsīr*.<sup>40</sup>

Explaining further in the *Ta'liqāt* that there is no plurality in the Necessary Existent by Himself, Avicenna states that there cannot be a diversity of attributes in His essence: if this were the case, the attributes would be constitutive parts of His essence, so that His essence would be dependent on these parts and would no longer be one. In consequence, all the attributes are concomitants of his essence.<sup>41</sup>

The oneness in the First proceeds from Him (*'anhu*) and is in Him (*fī-hi*) as it is one of His concomitants.

As we have seen, Avicenna establishes in his *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, with philosophical arguments taken from his metaphysics, God's absolute unity and uniqueness, which is not hampered by the multiple concomitants proceeding from Him. At the same time, he states that God's essence, unknowable in itself, is revealed to the human mind by its concomitants. This notion of 'concomitant' is central to the treatise, whereas the term *ṣifāt* ('attributes') only occurs once, at the very end of the *Tafsīr*.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, if we read the text carefully, it is clear that Avicenna means here by 'concomitants' both God's attributes and the beings proceeding from Him.



The parallel passages from the *Ta'liqāt* confirm this: all the attributes are concomitants, but not all the concomitants are attributes.

Although this selection of passages taken from the 'Metaphysics' of the *Shifā'* and the *Ta'liqāt*, which could be easily multiplied,<sup>43</sup> sufficiently proves that the doctrine exposed in the *Tafsīr* is genuinely Avicennian, there still remains a major problem: the author states explicitly that *Allāh* and 'the divinity' (*al-ilāhiyya*) are concomitants of the Necessary Existent proceeding from Him and thus caused by Him. The unknowable *huwiyya* of the Necessary Existent reveals itself by the name *Allāh* and 'the divinity;' the latter, as a concomitant expressing at the same time negative and positive relations, seems to encompass all the divine attributes. By establishing an ontological distinction between *huwa* and *Allāh*, Avicenna's *Tafsīr* seems at variance with the previous interpretations of the aya, which all place the two terms somehow on the same level, *huwa* being considered as a pronoun introducing *Allāh*.<sup>44</sup> Avicenna's exegesis on the contrary, aims at establishing a radical *tawḥīd*, devoid of any form of *tashbīh*: even the name *Allāh* and 'the divinity' cannot be applied to the *huwiyya* of the Necessary Existent. We know of no other texts by Avicenna in which *Allāh* or 'the divinity' are qualified as concomitants or attributes of the Necessary Existent.<sup>45</sup>

Jules Janssens has rightly noticed the absence, in the *Tafsīr*, of any reference to creation: the concomitants proceed from the Necessary Existent by emanation (*fayḍ*, *ṣudūr*). Rather than being an indication in favour of the fact that the *Tafsīr* was written at a very early stage in Avicenna's life, as Janssens assumed,<sup>46</sup> we would suggest that the absence of creation could be explained in the light of Avicenna's interpretation of the sura. If he had claimed that all concomitants and attributes, including *Allāh* and 'divinity', are 'created', Avicenna would have been very close to contemporary Ismā'īlī theology. According to Ismā'īlī authors, such as Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971) and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020), the name *Allāh* and all the divine attributes do not refer to the Creator (*mubdi'*), but to the first created being (*al-mubda' al-awwal*), the Intellect.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, this is not Avicenna's opinion! Nevertheless, his *Tafsīr* implies that God, as He reveals Himself in the Qur'an, is 'caused' by an emanation proceeding from the Necessary Existent. This seems at first sight a daring statement and it is perhaps for this reason that Avicenna avoided using the term 'attributes' in his *Tafsīr*.<sup>48</sup> However, it is more likely that this assertion should not be understood too radically, as becomes clear from the post-Avicennian tradition.

Some *mufasssīrūn*, posterior to Avicenna and manifestly under his influence, introduce a 'gradation' within the three words which form the first aya of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*. This is the case in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Tafsīr*, according to which the three terms refer to three different 'stations' (*maqāmāt*) among 'those who seek (the divine knowledge)' (*al-ṭālibūn*). Hamza and Rizvi summarise al-Rāzī's text as follows: '*huwa* signifies the

undifferentiated one essence that alone requires existence through itself and through whom all other essences are brought into existence, at the level of *huwa* there is no existence except God. The next term is that of differentiation: God exists – the Lord over His creation which also exists. The third level is that of re-uniting multiplicity to the One.<sup>49</sup> In a similar way, the Ṣūfī °Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d. 736/1336), a disciple of Ibn al-°Arabī, ‘uses the terms *huwa* and *Allāh* to denote different aspects of the divine being. Thus *huwa* is “an expression for the pure unitive reality, for the essence qua essence without consideration of the attributes,” while *Allāh* signifies “the essence with the totality of the attributes”.<sup>50</sup> The same distinction is made by Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1050/1640).<sup>51</sup>

*Huwa Allāh* is one single reality and one essence. What is expressed by the two [terms] is on the one hand the necessary existence (*al-wujūd al-wājibī*) and the unique essence (*al-dhāt al-aḥadiyya*), on the other hand what encompasses the totality of the attributes of perfection and the most beautiful names. The object of the two approaches we mentioned is a unique simple reality, which is, according to the first approach, ipseity (*huwiyya*), and according to the second, divinity (*ilāhiyya*); in the same way it is, according to the first expression, existence (*wujūd*), and according to the second, name (*ism*) and attribute (*sifa*).

This is probably the key leading to a correct understanding of the ontological distinction Avicenna introduced in his interpretation of the first aya of *Sūrat al-Iklāṣ*: the unknown and unknowable *huwiyya* of the Necessary Existent reveals itself through the attributes of His divinity. Avicenna could therefore be considered as a main source of what was to become a major topic in later Ṣūfī and Twelver Shī‘ī theology: the distinction between the *Deus absconditus* and the *Deus revelatus*, to use Corbin’s terminology.<sup>52</sup>

Further investigations are needed before we will be able to fully measure the influence of Avicenna’s philosophical reading of the Qur’an on later *tafsīr*. Much further research is also necessary before we may answer the question raised at the beginning of this article: to what extent Avicenna’s metaphysics were influenced by his reading and understanding of the Qur’an? For the time being, our study of his Qur’anic commentaries clearly shows that the references to the Qur’an occurring in his philosophical works are not just superficial and secondary ‘foreign’ elements in his thought.

## NOTES

1 On the religious orientation of Avicenna’s philosophy, see the inspiring remarks of Jules Janssens, ‘Ibn Sīnā (Avicenne): un projet “religieux” de philosophie?’ in Jan R. Aertsen and

Andreas Speer (eds), *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter?*, Miscellanea Mediaevalia, 26 (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1998), pp. 863–70.

2 For a preliminary survey, see Jules Janssens, 'Avicenna and the Qur'ān: A Survey of His Qur'ānic Commentaries', *MIDEO* 25–6 (2004), pp. 177–92.

3 These treatises contain a philosophical commentary of respectively Q. 11:41, Q. 35:24 (the 'Light Verse'), Q. 87, Q. 112, Q. 113 and Q. 114. They were edited, in a not always reliable way, by Ḥasan ʿĀṣī, *al-Tafsīr al-Qur'ānī wa'l-lughā al-ṣūfiyya fī falsafat Ibn Sīnā*, (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-Jāmi'iyya li'l-Dirāsāt wa'l-Nashr wa'l-Tawzī', 1983), pp. 84–125.

4 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Risāla al-adḥawiyya fī amr al-ma'ād*, ed. and tr. Francesca Lucchetta, *Avicenna. Epistola sulla vita futura* (Padova: Antenore, 1969), pp. 42–5. A similar passage on *tawḥīd* occurs in the 'Metaphysics' of the *Shifā'* (Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Shifā': al-Ilāhiyyāt*; Michael E. Marmura (ed. and tr.), *Avicenna: The Metaphysics of The Healing* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), pp. 365–6.

5 Ibn Sīnā, *al-Risāla al-adḥawiyya*, pp. 44–53.

6 There exist no less than four different editions of Avicenna's *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (or *Tafsīr al-Ṣamadiyya*): (1) The oldest one, published in Delhi in 1893–4 under the title *Tafsīr sūratay al-Ikhlāṣ wa'l-Falaq*, was not accessible to us; (2) Next, the treatise was printed in Muḥyī'l-Dīn Ṣabrī al-Kurdī's *Jāmi' al-badā'i* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda, 1917), pp. 15–24, from an unknown manuscript; (3) Ḥasan ʿĀṣī, *al-Tafsīr al-Qur'ānī*, pp. 104–13, based his 'critical' edition on three manuscripts (Damascus, Zāhiriyya 3512; Istanbul, Nuruosmaniye 4894; Istanbul, Ahmet III 3447) and on the version printed by al-Kurdī; (4) ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Khaṭīb, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ li'l-shaykh al-ra'īs Abī ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā*, *al-Machriq* 76 (2002), pp. 123–39, ignoring ʿĀṣī's edition, used three other manuscripts (Dublin, Chester Beatty 3045; Qum, Kitābhāne Mar'aṣī 243; Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Bağdatlı Wahba Efendi 143) and the Delhi edition of 1893–4. In our forthcoming book on Avicenna's philosophical *tafsīr* we will discuss the important textual variants occurring in all these editions. All references in the present article are to ʿĀṣī's edition.

7 Although the *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* is almost completely neglected in recent Avicennian studies, Amélie-Marie Goichon has made extensive use of it to establish Avicenna's philosophical terminology; see her *Lexique de la langue philosophique d'Ibn Sīnā* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1938), p. 8, p. 18, p. 162, p. 176, pp. 181–2, p. 221, pp. 410–2, p. 417, pp. 429–30. She was well aware of its philosophical importance as a major source for Avicenna's metaphysics; see her *La distinction de l'essence et de l'existence d'après Ibn Sīnā* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1937), p. 38, pp. 147–8, p. 172 n. 1, pp. 350–2.

8 This becomes obvious at once when we look at the rich collection of commentaries on Q. 112 translated in Feras Hamza and Sajjad Rizvi (eds), *An Anthology of Qur'anic Commentaries. Volume I: On the Nature of the Divine*, Qur'anic Studies Series, 5 (Oxford and London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2008), pp. 491–575, of which the first six (pp. 495–512) are prior to Avicenna. Unfortunately, the editors of this volume did not include Avicenna's philosophical exegesis of the Qur'an in their project.

9 For a general presentation of Avicenna's doctrine of the divine attributes, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, 'Avicenna, Algazali, and Averroes on Divine Attributes' in Isadore Twersky and George H. Williams (eds), *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion, Volume 1*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 143–58; John P. Rosheger, 'A Note on Avicenna and the Divine Attributes', *The Modern Schoolman* 77 (2000), pp. 169–77. Except for a few references taken from Goichon's *Lexique* and *Distinction*, neither of these authors make use of Avicenna's *Tafsīr*.

10 Ibn Sīnā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, p. 106. In Avicenna's technical terminology, the 'concomitant' (*lāzim*, pl. *lawāzim*) is 'that quality which necessarily attaches to the

essence – by virtue of the essence – yet without being a constituent of the essence' (Shams C. Inati, *Ibn Sīnā. Remarks and Admonitions. Part One: Logic* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), p. 17). In other terms, the *lāzim* is a 'necessary attribute of a given quiddity'; cf. Tiana Koutzarova, *Das Transzendente bei Ibn Sīnā. Zur Metaphysik als Wissenschaft erster Begriffs- und Urteilsprinzipien*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies, 79 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), who translates *lāzim* as 'notwendiges Attribut der Washeiten': 'Für die Begriffsinhalte "Seiend" und "Eines" verwendet Ibn Sīnā im allgemeinen, d.h. bei der Bestimmung ihres Verhältnisses zu den Washeiten als solchen ... den Ausdruck *lawāzin*, der als "Attribute" oder "untrennbar folgenden Bestimmungen" wiedergegeben werden kann' (p. 123). In this first part of his *Tafsīr*, Avicenna thus states that the Necessary Existent cannot be named and known in Himself, but only through the concomitants that by necessity proceed from Him.

11 Ibn Sīnā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlās*, p. 107. This is common Avicennian doctrine: the Necessary Existent has no constituents as He is free from any kind of composition, such as matter and form, genus and differentia, etc.; cf. Wolfson, 'Avicenna', pp. 143–4.

12 Ibn Sīnā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlās*, p. 107, lines 16–19.

13 On the technical meaning of *ta'rif* in Avicenna's writings, see Goichon, *Lexique*, p. 221.

14 This puzzling sentence has an exact parallel in the *Kitāb al-ishārāt*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā, Dhakhā'ir al-'Arab, 22 (4 vols, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1985), vol. 3, p. 278 ('fī silsilat al-tarīb al-nāzil min 'indahū ṭūlan wa-'arḍan') where it appears in a similar context related to the emanation of a hierarchy of beings (including the cosmic Intelligences) out of the Necessary Existent. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī comments on this passage as follows (also p. 278): 'the science of the First is an act that belongs to Him by His essence and this science encompasses the totality of the existents. He apprehends intellectually what succeeds to Him in the order of being, namely the first caused existent, which, in its turn, is the cause of what succeeds to it in the order of being. Knowing a cause perfectly means to know all the concomitants that necessarily proceed from this cause. Thus, the First apprehends intellectually all the things caused by the first caused existent, because all these things belong to a chain of beings that proceed from the first caused existent and end at it. This descending chain can be either vertical (*ṭūlan*) or horizontal ('*arḍan*).' By 'vertical', al-Ṭūsī means the chain of the caused beings that are put in an order ending at the first caused existent. By 'horizontal', he means the chain of accidents (*ḥawādith*) that are put in an order not ending directly at the first caused existent, but nevertheless related to it insofar as this chain of accidents needs the first caused existent in order to exist. This need is like a transversal link that establishes a kind of equality between all the elements of the horizontal chain with respect to God. Thus, for al-Ṭūsī, the contingency of the accidents is reduced by this horizontal link between the accidents and the first caused existent. The whole passage should be taken into account when interpreting Avicenna's theory of God's knowledge of the particulars. It has to be noticed that al-Ṭūsī does not use here the term *a'rāḍ* for 'accidents', but rather *ḥawādith*, obviously in order to avoid confusion with '*arḍan*' (as have some modern scholars; cf. Janssens, 'Avicenna and the Qur'ān', p. 188). The distinction between a vertical and a horizontal emanation was later adopted by al-Suhrawardī in his doctrine about the emanation of light; see his *Kitāb ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, ed. Henry Corbin in *Suhrawardī. Œuvres métaphysiques et philosophiques*, vol. 2 (Tehran and Paris: Institut français d'Iranologie de Téhéran et Adrien Maisonneuve, 1977), pp. 138–9.

15 On the constant ambiguity between 'emanation' and 'creation' in Avicenna's thought, see Jules Janssens, 'Creation and Emanation in Ibn Sīnā', *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale* 8 (1997), pp. 455–77.

16 Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

17 See Rahim Acar, *Talking About God and Talking About Creation: Avicenna's and Thomas Aquina's Positions*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies, 58 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 26–9.

18 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, p. 106, lines 13–14.

19 On this classification, see Acar, *Talking about God*, pp. 30–3; Wolfson, 'Avicenna', pp. 151–2.

20 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, pp. 106, line 13–107, line 7.

21 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, p. 108, lines 4–8.

22 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, p. 108, lines 9–11.

23 On the technical meaning of *tashkīk*, see Goichon, *Lexique*, p. 162; Acar, *Talking About God*, pp. 36–41; Rosheger, 'Note', p. 174, n. 20. Although a central term in Avicenna's doctrine about the divine attributes, it only occurs once in his *Tafsīr* (p. 109, line 15).

24 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, pp. 109, line 13–110, line 11; cf. p. 107, lines 10–15.

25 Five pages (106–10) of the eight in 'Āṣī's edition of the *Tafsīr* are about the first aya of the sura.

26 These two interpretations of the term *al-ṣamad* are mentioned, among many others, for instance in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr aw Maḥāṭib al-ghayb* (32 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990), vol. 32, p. 166. Much has been written about the meaning of this hapax in the Qur'an: see R. Köbert, 'Das Gotteseipitheton *aṣ-ṣamad* in Sure 112,2', *Orientalia* 30 (1961), pp. 204–5; Rudi Paret, 'Der Ausdruck *ṣamad* in Sure 112,2', *Der Islam* 56 (1979), pp. 294–5; Gordon D. Newby, 'Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ: A Reconsideration' in Harry A. Hoffner Jr (ed.), *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon*, Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 22 (Neukirchner-Vluyn: Verlag Neukirchner, Butzon and Bercker Kevelaer, 1973), pp. 129–30; Uri Rubin, 'Al-Ṣamad and the High God: An Interpretation of sūra CXII', *Der Islam* 61 (1984), pp. 200–6; Arne A. Ambros, 'Die Analyse von Sure 112: Kritiken, Synthesen, neue Ansätze', *Der Islam* 63 (1986), pp. 228–44; Michel Cuypers, 'Une lecture rhétorique et intertextuelle de la sourate al-Ikhlāṣ', *MIDEO* 25–6 (2004), pp. 141–75.

27 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, pp. 110, lines 17–111, line 6.

28 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, pp. 111, lines 7–112, line 4.

29 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, p. 112, lines 5–16.

30 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, pp. 112, lines 17–113, line 19.

31 Ibn Sinā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, p. 113, lines 20–2. Avicenna's statement that Sura 112 is worth one third of the whole Qur'an alludes to a *ḥadīth* reported by Ubayy b. Ka'b and mentioned, for instance, by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 32, p. 160: 'Ubayy reports: the Messenger of God said: whoever recites the sura *qul huwa'llāhu aḥad*, it is as though he has recited a third of the Qur'an'.

32 Al-Khaṭīb, 'Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ', pp. 403–11; Yaḥyā Mahdavi, *Bibliographie d'Ibn Sina* (Teheran: Danishgah-i Teheran, 1954), pp. 64–5.

33 Arthur J. Arberry, *The Chester Beatty Library: A Handlist of Arabic Manuscripts* (8 vols, Dublin: E. Walker, 1955), vol. 1, pp. 17–9.

34 Al-Khaṭīb, 'Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ' p. 398; a Persian translation has been published by Ehsān Yārshāter, *Panj Resāle* (Hamadan: Dāneshgāh-e Bū 'Alī Sinā, 2004), pp. 37–50.

35 Ibn Sinā, *Kuṭāb al-Shifā': al-Ilāhiyyāt*, p. 273: Marmura's translation is here slightly modified.

36 See, for instance, Ibn Sinā, *Manṭiq al-Mashriqiyyīn*, ed. Shukrī al-Najjār (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadātha, 1982), pp. 21–3.

37 Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Ta'liqāt*, ed. °Abd al-Rahmān Badawī (Qum: Maktab al-A°lām al-Islāmī, 1404 AH), pp. 185–6; cf. p. 183: 'The necessity of existence by itself, although it has the appearance (*ṣiḡha*) of something composed, is not composed [in itself]. It is rather the explanation (*sharḥ*) of a notion (*ma'nā*) for which we have no name, i.e. that its existence is necessary. Indeed, the essence of that whose existence is necessary lies in the fact that its existence is necessary by itself, as there does not exist such a thing for which the necessity of existence is an accident.'

38 Ibn Sīnā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, respectively p. 106, lines 11–12 and p. 108, lines 6–7.

39 Ibn Sīnā, *Ta'liqāt*, p. 180.

40 Ibn Sīnā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, pp. 107–8.

41 Ibn Sīnā, *Ta'liqāt*, p. 181.

42 Ibn Sīnā, *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, p. 113, line 21.

43 See also the important parallel passage from the *Ishārāt* mentioned above, note 14.

44 The grammatical problems raised by the syntactic structure of aya 1 and the position of *huwa* in it, were solved in different ways both by the *mufasssīrūn* and by modern Arabists; on this, see Edwin E. Calverley, 'The Grammar of Sūratu'l-Ikhlāṣ', *Studia Islamica* 8 (1957), pp. 7–10; Rubin, 'Al-Ṣamad', pp. 197–200; Ambros, 'Die Analyse von Sure 112', pp. 223–7.

45 Acar, *Talking About God*, pp. 33–4, although referring to Avicenna's *Tafsīr* on this point, does not mention the problem at all.

46 Janssens, 'Avicenna and the Qur'ān', pp. 188–9.

47 See Daniel De Smet, *La Quiétude de l'Intellect. Néoplatonisme et gnose ismaélienne dans l'œuvre de Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī (Xe/XIe s.)*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 67 (Louvain: Peeters, 1995), pp. 35–6, pp. 177–80, pp. 195–6. An anonymous Ismā'īlī *ta'wīl* of *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, published by Rudolph Strothmann (*Gnosis-Texte der Ismailiten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1943), pp. 39–40) goes even further by affirming that the whole sura does not refer at all to the Creator (*mubdī'*), but only to the first created being (*al-mubda' al-awwal*), i.e. the Intellect.

48 Avicenna has devoted another of his works to 'ilm al-tawḥīd, namely the *Risāla al-'Arshiyya* (ed. Ibrāhīm Halāl (Cairo: Jāmi'at al-Azhar, n.d.)), written for 'some people' who had asked him to compose a treatise about the truthfulness of 'ilm al-tawḥīd. The doctrine he develops here about God's attributes is different from the one exposed in his *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*. In the 'Arshiyya, God's attributes are described as 'not being added to His essence' ('*ṣifātuhu lā takūna zā'ida 'alā dhārihi*', p. 21). He next states that if the attributes were added to the essence, they would be in potentiality and the essence of God would be a cause for them, thus preceding them. He concludes that all the attributes are either 'negative', or 'relative' or 'a combination of both' (p. 23). However, he does not seem to make an ontological distinction between God's ipseity and His attributes. Rather than supposing a shift in Avicenna's doctrine about the divine attributes, it seems that the discrepancy between the two works is due to a difference of perspective. In *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* the perspective is strictly ontological, as is proved by its terminology: Avicenna uses here philosophical terms such as 'ipseity' and 'concomitant', without mentioning 'creation' at all, whereas in the 'Arshiyya he uses the terms 'essence' (*dhāt*) and 'attributes' (*ṣifāt*) and refers to 'creation.' Avicenna appears here to have a more 'traditional' approach, aiming to show that there is no multiplicity in God's essence, as His attributes are all related to His knowledge of creation. In consequence, we cannot reach His essence through His attributes.

49 Hamza and Rizvi, *Anthology*, p. 493; see al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 32, pp. 164–5, and the translation in Hamza and Rizvi, *Anthology*, pp. 543–4.

50 Hamza and Rizvi, *Anthology*, p. 493; see Ibn ʿArabī (to whom the text was traditionally attributed), *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (2 vols, Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, n.d.), vol 2, pp. 869–70, and the translation in *Anthology*, pp. 550–2.

51 Mullā Ṣadrā, *Tafsīr āyat al-nūr*, ed. Muḥammad Khājawī in Christian Jambet, *Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī. Le Verset de la Lumière. Commentaire. Texte arabe édité par Muhammad Khājavī. Traduction française, introduction et notes par Christian Jambet*, Classiques en Poche, 94 (Paris: Les Belles-Lettres, 2009), p. xxii (Arabic section); cf. Jambet's translation, pp. 32–3, along with his remarks, pp. xxviii–xxix (of the French introduction).

52 Henry Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: L'Herne, 1981), in particular pp. 24–33.

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