Yahya Ibn Adi's conception of the one / Kamal Bualwan. — In : Parole de l'Orient : revue semestrielle des études syriaques et arabes chrétiennes : recherches orientales : revue d'études et de recherches sur les églises de langue syriaque. — vol. 28 (2003), pp. 485-495.

Cover title : Actes du IIum syposium syro-arabicum, Sayyidat al-Bir, septembre 1998, Etudes arabes chrétiennes. t. 2. — Bibliogr.

1. Yahya Ibn Adi, Abu Zakaria al-Mantiqi, ca 893-974 — Criticism, interpretation, etc.. 2. Christian philosophers.

YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ'S CONCEPTION OF «THE ONE»[*]

BY

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PRELIMINARY NOTE

In recent years considerable attention has been given to Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's philosophy as part of a broader study of the Arab Christian thought of the Arab Classical Period.

This paper sets out to present the main ideas of Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's conception of «the one» as expounded in his major work «Treatise on Unity» and in one of his philosophical essays.

The main subjects of this paper are as follows:

1. A brief account of Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's life,
2. Historical roots and meanings of the two terms: «one» and «unity»,
3. Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's «Treatise on Unity»: Its aims,
4. Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's conception of «the one»,
5. A critical review of Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's conception of «the one».

A. A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ'S LIFE

Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī was a prominent Monophysite scholar of the Arab Classical Period. He was born in 893 in the Iraqi city of Takrit, the cultural capital of the Syriac Church between 629 and 1156. He died in 974 at the age of 81.

Between 910 and 915 he lived in Baghdad where he devoted himself to the search of philosophical knowledge. His two masters in this domain were Abū Bišr Mattā ibn Yūnus († 940) and Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī († 950). At that time he must have studied the philosophical thought of al-Kindī († 873)[1], the first Arab philosopher who devoted himself to reconciling the views of Aristotle and Plato in the light of Islamic faith. It did not take ibn ʿAdī long to impose himself among his contemporaries as an outstanding philosopher, logician, commentator and theologian, and many of his ideas were quoted by Muslim and non-Muslim authors[2].

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1) Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb al-Kindī, not to be confused with the Christian scholar ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī (ca. 825) or the Muslim historian Abū ʿUmar Muḥammad al-Kindī († 961).

2) For more details about Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's life and works, see SAMIR (1980), pp. 25-27; PÉRIER, Traités (1920), Appendix 1; Augustin PÉRIER, Un Philosophe Arabe Chrétien du Xᵉ siècle, Gabalda, Paris, 1920; Gerhard ENDRESS, The Works of Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī, an analytical inventory, Ludwig Reichert, Wiesbaden, 1977; Shahban KHALIFAT, The Philosophical Treatises of Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī, A critical edition with an introduction and a study, Publications of the Universtiy of Jordan, Amman, 1988, pp. 9-22.

B. HISTORICAL ROOTS AND MEANINGS OF THE TWO CONCEPTS: «ONE» AND «UNITY»

As far as we know, the earliest philosophical speculations of 'the one' were rooted in Greco-Hellenic thought[3] as well as in the Bible and the Qur'ān. Originally and primarily they somehow denoted God's unicity, or were directed against polytheism. Monotheism, a late phenomenon in human history, came to affirm that there is only one God, and there are no other gods beside him[4]. However, pure monotheism was partially substantiated by the pre-Socratic philosophers, or Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; they all had their gods. Anyhow, from philosophy and religion arose the idea of 'the one' as the chief attribute of God and the ultimate principle of unity and being in the world.

In the Arab Classical Period the concept unity (توحيد) could mean a rational affirmation of the oneness of God as it could mean a love experience of the Creator or a gnosis (عرفان) of His mystery.

The gnostics, in general, see God's unity as the exoteric aspect of His nature. Esoterically, God as such is beyond unity and being. He is simply the unifier (الموحِّد) par excellence. As to the creatures, they are the unifiers by participation (الموحَّدون)[5].

On the other hand, the mystics (المتصوّفون) pretend to have a personal experience of God's unity through a Love-Lover-Loved relation. This is how al-Junayd († 909) arrives at a state of loving God as he is loved by Him, and as God loves Himself; or al-Ḥallāğ († 922) who in his mystical experience utters these daring words *Ego sum Deus* (أنا الحقّ) (litt.: *Ego sum Veritas*).

In short, Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's thought does not show any inclination towards gnosticism or mysticism. He is simply a philosopher of «the one» and

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3) Xenophanes of Colophon (6th Century B.C) is styled by Aristotle «the first partisan of the One». *Metaph.* I, Chap. 5, 986 b 21, p. 699.

4) «There is one God... not at all like mortals in body or mind». Xenophanes of Colophon, Kathleen FREEMAN, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Oxford, 1948), N° 23, p. 23.

«The Lord our God is one God» (Deut. 6/4).

«There is no God but one» (1 Cor. 8/4).

«God is one God» (Korān CXII).

5) If God is not primarily one but a unifier, all the more so He is neither being nor not being, but the ground of being, (faire être); not a cause (in the Aristotelian sense), but the source of all causes (مُعَلّ علة العلل). These ideas are expressed in Druzism as well as in Ismaʿīlism, the gnostics of Islam par excellence.

of God's unity, and his philosophy underlies a latent authentic zeal for his Christian faith.

C. YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ'S «TREATISE ON UNITY»: ITS AIM

It is often said that Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's main aim in writing his «Treatise on Unity» was to vindicate on rational grounds the Trinitarian doctrine before the Muslim scholars and polemists of his time, and to make it more acceptable to the Muslim side. As a matter of fact, it had been the habitual practice of certain Christian apologists before him to rely on philosophical principles either to confute heresies or to prove by reasoning the veracity of the Christian faith. Athenagoras (late 2nd century), for instance, used to quote Greek poets and philosophers in favor of Christian monotheism. In this regard, Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's «Treatise on Unity» may be viewed as part of many doctrinal and theo-philosophical issues of vital interests to the Christian communities of Byzantium, Syria, Iraq and Egypt, as from the opening centuries of the Christian era to the 10th century, which had «governed not only the people's inner life but also their social institutions and their practical activities». And more often than not, some of these issues that were related to the constitution of the Deity and Christ's nature interwove with politics and local disputes. It is good to remember in this regard the religious issues of Arianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism, and of the *Filioque* as well.

It is to be noted in passing how St Gregory of Nazianzus, the bishop of Constantinople (330-390), shows us that even the common people were also concerned in religious matters. He says: «If you went to a shop to buy a loaf, the baker instead of telling you the price, will argue that the Father is greater than the Son. The money-changer will talk about the Begotten and the Unbegotten, instead of giving you money, and if you want a bath, the bathkeeper assures you that the Son surely proceeds from nothing»[6].

The constitution of the Deity, therefore, was one of the main religious issues which concerned Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī. As a Christian believer, he was fully aware that any assertion of God's unity should not be limited to the mere saying «God is but one God, and there are no other Gods beside Him», but should also comprise the divinity of Jesus Christ who is one with the

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6) Christopher DAWSON, *The Making of Europe*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1939, pp. 110-111.

Father[7] and the unity of the Godhead through «the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit»[8]. This is to say that the essence of God is Unity in Trinity, or Trinity in Unity». In other words, he is one in substance and divinity but three through the properties (إنّه واحد في الجوهر والإلهيّة وثلاثة بالخواصّ المنعوتة)[9].

D. YAHYĀ IBN ʿADĪ'S CONCEPTION OF «THE ONE»

Yahyā ibn ʿAdī's conception of «the one» vacillates between his definition of «the one» as «a being in which there is no diversity insofar as it is one»[10], a point that will be examined shortly, and his conception of the absolute one as the fundamental character of God's nature. It seems that the analogy of «the one» is not clearly expressed in his thought, yet in this our author resumes the basic arguments of «the one» in Greco-Hellenic thought, from Xenophanes to the Eleatic school, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and the Neoplatonists.

After criticizing some current views on «the one» and showing what «the one» is not[11], ibn ʿAdī presents six ways by which to comprehend unity and six ways about the modes of its existence.

The term unity may mean: unity of genus, as animal applied to man and horse; unity of species, as man applied to Zayd and ʿAmr; unity of relation, as the relation between two and one; unity of the continuum, as one body, one surface, one place; unity in the indivisibility, as the point and the moment; unity in the definition, as in the synonymous terms man and «bašar» (بشر)[12].

As to the modes of existence of 'the one', they are: unity in act, as one line between two points; unity in potency, as water and soft drink in two receptacles which can make one mixture; unity in the subject, as the sun and Zayd; unity in the definition, as man; unity in the substance, as one body; unity in the accident, as the black in the black man and the crow. The Divine Unity, he says, should exclude all other unities except the unity of defini-

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7) John 10/30.

8) Matthew 28/19.

9) PÉRIER, Traités (1920) 51, line 5, «Among all things called one», says St Bernard († 1153) «the Unity of the Divine Trinity holds the first place». De Consider. V.8, pl. n. 182, 799.

10) SAMIR (1980), N° 148, p. 196.

11) Excluding the notion of the many; nothing similar to him; not the principle of number; not the thing which can qualify other things. SAMIR (1980), p. XXII.

12) SAMIR (1980), N° 149-176, pp. 196-203.

tion, because its terms which are applied to God are one[13]. In short, the «one» is one in the subject and multiple in the definition. As Zayd is one subject which contains the definition living, reasonable and mortal so is God one substance and three attributes.

Our author argues that God is one in a sense but more than one in another; that is, God is one by unity of essence, but three by unity of attributes. These attributes are neither genera nor species. Each one of them is endowed with one peculiarity which it shares with the other two, and at the same time it is differentiated from them. In this circumstance plurality and composition are excluded from the Godhead.

Ibn ʿAdi's limits God's main attributes to three: goodness (الجود) power (القدرة) and wisdom (الحكمة)[14]. Yet, philosophically speaking, many similar triads were diffused by Proclus and Greco-Hellenic philosophers. Let us note in passing that Pierre Abailard († 1142), who was condemned by the Church authorities for his dialectical interpretation of the Trinity, also reduced to three the attributes of God: power, wisdom and goodness. Taken separately, he asserts, they are nothing, but united they constitute the highest perfection. Anyhow, ibn ʿAdi maintains that his triad is drawn from God's creation, and its *rationes propia* are rooted in the creatures, not in God. Through his power, therefore, the world is created *ex nihilo*[15], and his voluntary act of creation manifests his goodness and wisdom which are revealed in the order and perfection of the universe.

In brief, ibn ʿAdi asserts that God, through his attributes (wisdom, power and goodness), is the cause and creator of the universe which is entirely dependent on his choice and desire. This is why he does not adhere to any Neoplatonic theory of emanation that God is constrained by natural necessity to generate, which was maintained by many Muslim philosophers of

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13) SAMIR (1980), Nᵒˢ 177-189, pp. 203-207.

14) On goodness, see SAMIR (1980), chapter 12. On power, *idem*, chapter 13. On wisdom, *idem*, chapter 14.

15) SAMIR (1980) N° 323, pp. 246-247. In his «Treatise on Unity», ibn ʿAdi does not explain the meaning of creation *ex nihilo* as does St Augustine († 430) or St Thomas Aquinas († 1274). Briefly, «all that is meant by creation *ex nihilo*» وجودها لا بعد خلائقه وجود, says St Augustine, «is that there was not anything from which He (God) might have produced it and yet he produced it, simply because he willed». *Ad Orosium*, PL 42.671. As to St Thomas, he tells us that «Creation posits something in the created thing only according to relation; for what is created is not made by motion or change... Hence creation in the creature is only a certain relation to the Creator as to the principle of its being». *Summa Theol.* Ia, Q 45, Art. 3, p. 437, lines 22-30.

the Classical Period. Nor does he indulge in imaginary speculation that there was a time in which creation took place and which, so to speak, was *un coup de foudre dans l'éternité* after a long silence of the Creator.

Let us now have a fresh start and find out Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's exact conception of «the one». In book 6 of his «Treatise on Unity», he says:

$$\text{«إنَّ الواحد موجودٌ ما، لا يوجد فيه غيريّةٌ من حيثُ هو واحد»}^{16}.$$

«The one is a being in which there is no diversity in so far as it is one».

This definition should signify that what is one is simply a being, any being in its individuality. On the other hand, it does not connote the numerical one which is a mere predication of material things, nor does it designate a univocal concept which makes of the creatures and the Creator a single unity.

In one of his late philosophical essays, ibn ʿAdī adheres almost completely to the Aristotelian conception of God and abandons the Neoplatonic triad[17]. He approves what Aristotle says: «the divine thought thinks, and its thinking is a thinking on thinking»[18]. Hence, God is primarily pure intelligence, self-sufficient, self-aware, and eternally self-knowing. «He is an intellect, He is intelligent, He is intelligible, and He has one essence»[19]. Yet Ibn ʿAdī overlooks Aristotle's conviction that God's knowledge cannot have another end beyond itself, which leads to saying that God is cut off from all creative energy, yet passively moves the world as object of desire. Consequently, the God of Aristotle is primarily a pure act in the order of thought, not in the order of existence. This is how this God is not a creator and does not give existence to things[20].

In this direction, ibn ʿAdī gives a new definition of God as an eternal substance, Intellect, Intelligent, Intelligible (Aristotle's triad), wise (whose

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16) SAMIR (1980), Nº 148, p. 196
17) SAMIR (1980), p. XX. It seems that at a certain time ibn ʿAdī used to believe that the Baghdad School's translations of Plotinus' *Enneads*, Books 4 to 6, and Proclus' *Book of Causes* were properly attributed to Aristotle.
18) *Metaph* XII, Chap. 9, 1075a, p. 885, lines 14-15.
19) PÉRIER, *Traités* (1920), p. 19, lines 5-6.
20) One of the strong points in ibn ʿAdī's ontology is that he never accepted any view that might oppose the Christian doctrine of creation which is the outcome of God's will and knowledge. Ibn ʿAdī's one, for instance, is far from being a duplicate of the Neoplatonic, or the Plotinian, one. This «One» (God) lacks knowledge, that is, He does not think. «What reason might he have to think», says Plotinus. *Enneads* VI, 7, 37, in «Complete Works», (trans. by Kenneth Sylva GUTHRIE), Platonist Press, Alpine, N.J., III, p. 762.

wisdom is not limited to his self-knowledge), and the first cause (Creator) of all beings.

What Aristotle and ibn ʿAdī mean by substance is simply «that which is not predicated of a subject but of which all else is predicated»[21]. It is nothing but being proper without qualification which possesses attributes but in itself is the attribute of nothing. None of these attributes is distinct from the other attributes by virtue of some specific difference, on the ground that these attributes are simply distinct properties of the same essence.

It is clear that ibn ʿAdī's last definition of God does not go beyond Aristotle's notion of substance and that of God's self-thinking thought. It is also a fact that all the philosophical speculations of the Arab Classical Period, without exception, had never trespassed the limits of Greco-Hellenic ontology. Since such is the case, it is fitting to end this paper with some considerations and remarks on this subject in the light of St Thomas Aquinas's ontological thought.

E. A CRITICAL REVIEW OF YAḤYĀ IBN ʿADĪ'S CONCEPTION OF «THE ONE»

Any talk about Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's conception of «the one» as expounded in his «Treatise on Unity» and in other essays as well should primarily evaluate its aim and hence its ontological soundness. As to its aim it is supposed to be an introduction to an exposé on the Trinity.

It is well known that our author is above all a philosopher even when he tackles theological problems. His theological thought is always clothed in a philosophical garb which renders most of his treatises rational in their methods yet theological in their aims. As to the question of the Trinity, he adheres to the fact that there are truths in philosophy which reflect the truths of dogma, and that there are traces in nature which represent the Trinity. On this account, one is supposed to question the apologetical worth and the theological validity of ibn ʿAdī's Greco-Hellenic triads, if not all his quasi-theological ontology.

Since the days of the early Fathers of the Church it has been maintained that the Trinity of persons is a mysterium absolutum, and can in no way be grounded in natural principles. The only way a Christian may sermonize on this mystery, that might (or might not) convince the unbelievers, would be that the doctrine of the Trinity, or any teaching of the Christian faith, is not

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21) *Métaph*. VII, chap. 3, 1029a, lines 9-10, p. 785.

against reason. Otherwise, he will be doing harm to his own religion. Let us hear, in this regard, St Thomas Aquinas's view on the Trinity: «Although it (the Trinity) cannot be proved by demonstration, nevertheless it is fitting that it be declared by things which are known to us... because we can arrive at a knowledge of the essential attributes of God, basing ourselves on the creatures from which our knowledge begins. But we cannot thus reach a knowledge of the personal properties... And such a manifestation of the divine persons by the use of the essential properties is called appropriation»[22]. Nevertheless, he asserts: «Whoever tries to prove the trinity of persons by natural reason, detracts from faith. For anyone in the endeavor to prove what belongs to faith brings forward arguments which are not cogent, he falls under the ridicule of the unbelievers: since they suppose that we (Christians) base ourselves upon such arguments, and that we believe on their accounts»[23].

As to Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's pure conception of «the one», it is confined, as are all the Arab philosophies of the Classical Period, within the limits of Greco-Hellenic thought. His starting principle is the concept of «the one», not the concept of being. Hence, it is more correct to say that being is one and God is one, than to say «the one» is a being (as does ibn ʿAdī)[24], or above being as many platonists have maintained. In short, one should ask: Is «the one» an attribute of being, or is being an attribute of «the one»? Western scholasticism which culminated in the philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas could develop the scanty ideas in the Metaphysics of Aristotle on this matter and put the conceptions of «the one» and of God's Unity on firm grounds.

St Thomas's philosophy affirms that any conception of 'the one' has to be preceded by a fundamental conception of being. It also reveals that the concept one is simply a privative term which cannot be understood unless we understand the concept being, for what the intellect comes to know first is being, not one.

As a privative term, the concept one should mean not many, as immaterial, not material or infinite, not finite. «Although in God there is no privation», says St Thomas, «still, according to the mode of our apprehension,

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22) *Summa Theol.* 1a, Q 39, Art. 7, p. 375, lines (from below) 7-10.
23) *Summa Theol.* 1a, Q 32, Art. 1, pp. 316-17.
24) A poor definition indeed. It seems that the philosophy of being is alien to Ibn ʿAdī's thought as well as to many Arab philosophers of the Classical period.

He is known to us by way only of privation and remotion. Thus there is no reason why certain privative terms should not be predicated of God, for instance, that he is incorporeal, and infinite; and in the same way it is said that He is one»[25].

According to St Thomas, being (ens) is an analogical concept which has properties or attributes. They are called transcendentals, because they transcend all the categories, and are known as truth and good and one. «Everything that is, insofar as it has being, is true and good and one». These do not add any reality to being but are convertible with it. They are also called modes which means being regarded in a certain way. Truth (verum) is being as thought of, good (bonum) is being as desired, whereas one (unum) is the negation of division. Thus «one does not add any reality to being, but is only the negation of division; for one means undivided being. This is the very reason why one is convertible with being»[26]. But one which is the principle of number does add a reality to being, belonging to genus quantity[27]. Moreover, being is one and multiple, and there are degrees of unity as there are degrees of being.

The term God, says St Thomas, is an appelative name, not a proper name. The most proper name that can be given to him is the God of Exodus, «He who is»[28], Qui est, which signifies to be: ipsum esse. «It is the very act whereby an essence is»[29]. This is a truth, among other truths, which was not intended to be philosophical when it was revealed, but thanks to the metaphysical insight of the scholastic philosophers, it became philosophical after its revelation.

It follows that Qui est, not the oneness of God, is the first transcendent principle and supreme cause of all things. In this direction, St Thomas differentiates between being as a noun, ens, which designates some substance (here we must recall that ibn ᶜAdī does not go beyond the notion of substance) and being as a verb, which designates esse, to be. The latter designates an act in the order of existence, not in the order of thought. Hence,

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25) *Sum. Theol.* 1a, Q 11, Art. 3, Rep. 2, pp. 89-90.
26) *Sum. Theol.* 1a, Q 11, Art. 1, p. 85, lines 20-22. Many Thomists add to the transcendentals list: 1. distinction and identity (*aliquid*); 2. thing (*res*); 3. beauty (*pulchrum*), the quality of objects which pleases and gratifies.
27) *Sum. Theol.* 1a, Q 11, Art 3, Rep. 2.
28) «Moses simply asked God about His name... God said to Moses: I AM WHO AM. He said: Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: HE WHO IS, hath sent me to you» (Exodus 3, 13-14).
29) *De Potentia*, Q. VII, art. 2, ad. 9.

esse becomes the fundamental act that causes a thing to be, to be what it is, and to be one. It is known to us neither intuitively nor as an object of concept but only as an object of judgment[30].

These are in brief some remarks and considerations that one may give on Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī's conception of «the one» who, being unable to trespass the limits of Greco-Hellenic ontology which did not «reach beyond the level of essence, the deepest level of existence», could not fully realize that God is all knowing, all willing and one because He Is, because He Exists.

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30) See Étienne GILSON, *God and Philosophy*, Yale University Press, Yale, pp. 39-73.