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God and His Names. A Shi'a Approach

ABSTRACT

This paper in an analysis of Divine attributes in the philosophy of 'Allama Muhammad
Husayn Tabataba'i (1904–1981), one of the greatest thinkers of twentieth-century Iran and
an ingenious interpreter of Mulla Sadra's transcendent philosophy. The paper is focused on
Tabataba'i's early works, *Rasa'il-i Tawhidi* (Mono-theistic Treatises), a series of treatises
written in the late 1930s. Less known than other works of the philoso-pher, they nonethe-
less contain germinal discussions found in his later writings. One such discussion is centred
around the problem of Divine names and attributes, an issue that has been subject to contro-
versies from the earliest theological schools in Islam.

KEY WORDS

Tabataba'i, Muhammad Husayn, Mulla Sadra, Divine names, Islam

'Allama Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i (1904–1982) was one of the great
Shi'a thinkers of modern day Iran. He has been recognised both for his
achievements in philosophy and in Qur'anic commentary, *tafsīr*[1]. Like some

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[1] The recognition which Tabataba'i received in Iran is still unmatched by scholarly at-
tention abroad. There are numerous sources in Persian which discuss his life and works. If
it comes to general sources, particularly exhaustive and insightful is a biography written by
one of Tabataba'i's eminent disciples: M. Ḥ. Tihrānī, *Mihr-i Tābān*, Mashhad 1425 LH/2004.
There is an Arabic translation of this work entitled *Al-Shams al-Saṭi'a* (Beirut 1417 LH
[1997]) and recently also an English translation appeared: *Shining Sun. In Memory of 'Alla-
mah Tabataba'i* (London 2011). For another good overview of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's biography and

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other modern thinkers (such as Shah Wali Allah and ʿAllama al-Mashriqi from India-Pakistan; or Muhammad ʿAbduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida from Egypt) Tabataba'i was a scholar who reinvigorated in Iran the discipline of *tafsīr*[2], after it had been underestimated for centuries. ʿAllama was also an in-genious interpreter of the philosophy of Mulla Sadra (ca.1571–1640), called in Arabic *al-ḥikma al-mutaʿaliyya* (literally, the highest wisdom), or transcend-ent philosophy, as it is often rendered in English. Mulla Sadra combined virtually all the important Islamic intellectual traditions: the illuminationist philosophy of Suhrawardi and his followers, Sufism of Ibn ʿArabi, the tradi-tional metaphysical teachings of Islamic peripatetic philosophers interpreted in a neo-Platonic fashion (for example, the doctrine of emanation), as well as Shiʿa and rational theology of *kalām*. What Mulla Sadra achieved, however, was hardly a simple combination of these traditions or a systematization of the previous teachings – he created his own innovative philosophy in which – in contrast to his philosophical antecedents – he claimed the primacy of ex-istence over essence, Ar. *iṣālat al-wujūd*. In the modern era, the transcendent philosophy of Mulla Sadra enjoyed a great wave of interest and interpretations in religious and academic circles[3], and Tabataba'i's work "The Final Goal of Philosophy" (*Nihayat al-Hikma*) is still a textbook of Sadrean philosophy used in Shiʿa religious seminaries.

A prolific writer, Tabataba'i visited most areas of traditional philosophical and religious inquiry. One interesting example is his discussion about God's names. This discussion, however, can be approached from a few perspectives:

1. A 'semantic' perspective: were names first predicated about God and only then about humans? Is name identical with the named one?

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main ideas in English see: H. Algar, *'Allāma Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī: Philos-opher, Exegete, and Gnostic*, "Journal of Islamic Studies" 2006, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 326–351. As far as the sources available in English are considered, apart from the above, there are sev-eral encyclopaedic references about the ʿAllama and some articles on various aspects of his thought, neither of them, however, includes a discussion about Divine names.

[2] In transliteration of terms and names, both in Arabic and Persian, I follow the IJMES system, cf. http://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/docs/TransChart.pdf. For additional JMES guide-lines on transliteration see: http://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/IJMES_Translation_and_Translit-eration_Guide.htm. All translations in this paper are mine, unless otherwise stated.

[3] For example, the Tehran school of neo-Sadrism was co-founded at the end of the nineteenth century by Mulla ʿAbdullah Zunuzi together with Aqa Muhammad Riza Qa-mashi'i, Mirza Abu al-Hasan Jilvih and Mirza Husayn Sabzivari. Tabataba'i was acquaint-ed with it through ʿAli Mudarris (1818–1889) with his book *Badayaʿal-Hikm*, an exposition of Sadrism and through his studies in Najaf under Sayyid Husayn Badkubi (1876–1939).

2. An ontological perspective: what is the ontological status of God's names? Are they co-eternal or created? What is their relation with God's essence? What is their role in creation?

3. An epistemological perspective: how can we know God's names? How can we explain and categorise them?[4]

All three perspectives have been entertained in the long tradition of scholarly and religious debate on Divine names. The discussion started as early as the emergence of the first theological school of Islam, the rationalist theology of *kalām*. The first of these theologians, the Muʿtazilis, argued for the oneness of Divine essence and attributes with God. For them, if attributes had a separate essence they would be like companions of God. So, the Muʿtazilis claimed that their view averted the possibility of introducing polytheism, Ar. *shirk*, into God's essence. An opposing group of theologians, the Ashʿaris, interpreted the Muʿtazili doctrine as a nullification of attributes, Ar. *taʿṭīl*, and claimed that attributes were completely separate from God's essence. This view of attributes as finite, contingent essences, having existence in something else, Ar. *wujūd bi-l-qhayr*, brought on them, in turn, the accusation of anthropomorphism, *tashbīh*, and literalism. The Shiʿa teachings on divine attributes emphasised the need for allegorical interpretation, *taʾwīl,* in order to avert both anthropomorphism and nullification. A view was adopted that there is no plurality in God's essence and the essential attributes (like knowledge, speech, life) are identical with Him whereas the names of acts are extraneous to the Divine Essence[5]. Mulla Sadra gave an interesting reinterpretation of the Shiʿa philosophical view of the issue. For him, the essential attributes were in ontological unity with God's essence and shared in God's existence.

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[4] Cf. M. R. Kāshifī, *Maʿanā-shinākhtī Ṣifāt-i Ilahī az Dīdgāh-i ʿAllāmih Ṭabāṭabāʾī*, "Kalām-i Islāmī" 1382 SH/2003, No. 48 (Zimistān/Winter), pp. 110–111. In his article, Kashifi employs the third, semantic perspective. Cf. ibidem, pp. 110–129. Some other aspects of Tabataba'i's view on Divine names have also been discussed (in Persian). For comparative study of Tabataba'i's and Maturidi's approaches see: Ḥ. A. Nāṭiqī, *Barrasī-yi Taṭbīqī Mabhas-i Ṣifāt-i Ilahīaz Manẓar-i ʿAllāmih Ṭabāṭabāʾīva Abū Manṣūr Māturīdī*, "Ṭulūʿ" 1384 SH/2005, No. 16 (Zimistān/Winter), pp. 85–104. There is also a study by Abu Zarr Nawruzi about Divine names in a book which Tabataba'i co-authored with M. Mutahhari entitled *The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism*, but unfortunately I had no access to it when I was writing this article. Moreover, it should be mentioned that this short list of scholarly publications by no means exhausts the scope of interest which has been taken in Iran in the work of Tabataba'i (including his theory of Divine names). To my knowledge, several master and doctoral theses about Tabataba'i's view on this issue have been produced.

[5] Cf. M. Ḥ. Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *Al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, Beirut LH 1417/1997, Vol. 8, pp. 356–357.

In what follows, we will examine Tabataba'i's stance in this ongoing debate. We will be mostly interested in the ontological and epistemological perspectives. Firstly, we will analyse the ontic status of names to then move to the divisions and relations between names and the ten major groups Tabataba'i divides them into. We will also see that Tabataba'i, while covering most of the traditional points in the debate, is predominantly concerned with establishing harmony between philosophical positions of transcendent philosophy and the traditions of Twelver Shi'ism.

GOD, HIS ESSENCE, AND HIS NAMES

In discussing God and His names, Tabataba'i follows the customary order of exposition from the rational theology of *kalām.* He first describes God's existence and unity, Ar. *tawḥīd,* then moves to the relation of His essence to various attributes and names, and lastly discusses the expression of these attributes in creation. In a more traditional language, we might say that the order of discussion is as follows: the Divine essence, Ar. *dhāt Allah*; the essential attributes, *ṣifāt adh-dhāt*; and the attributes of Divine acts, Ar. *ṣifāt al-fiʿl.*

This traditional scheme is filled with a new philosophical content: Tabataba'i incorporates the philosophy of Mulla Sadra into it. Therefore, to understand the 'Allama's discussion we must briefly characterise the main premises of Sadrean philosophy[6].

One of these premises is the primacy of existence, Ar. *iṣālat al-wujūd*. The external reality, Tabataba'i argues in line with Mulla Sadra, is something that undoubtedly exists. We cannot prove it. Nevertheless, denying it is sheer sophistry. Man has an innate knowledge of undeniable truths such as the existence of the world[7]. This external reality is equal with existence, a principle called

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[6] A fair amount of scholarship has been devoted to the philosophy of Mulla Sadra. There are a few books devoted to the philosophical thought of Mulla Sadra in its entirety. They look at him from different perspectives. For example, Muhammad Kamal's *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy* discusses Mulla Sadra in the context of his departure from the school of illuminationism, cf. M. Kamal, *Mulla Sadra's Transcendent Philosophy*, Aldershot 2006. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's book presents Sadra's biography, main works and ideas and the sources from which Mulla Sadra drew, cf. S. H. Nasr, *Ṣadr al-Dīn Shīrāzī and His Transcendent Theosophy Background, Life and Works*, Tehran 1978. Fazlur Rahman's books is arguably the most concentrated on Sadra's transcendent philosophy, cf. F. Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*, Albany 1975.

[7] M. Ḥ. Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Tawḥīd*, [in:] idem, *Rasā'il-i Tawḥīdī*, ed. H. Khusrawshāhī, trans.

the objectivity of existence, Ar. *'ayniyyat al-wujūd*. The demonstrative proof of this claim, argues Tabataba'i, can be readily grasped: there is only existence simply because non-existence cannot exist. In consequence, any second existence is impossible. Existence is thus one and undivided[8].

We can analyse existence as such, and we can also analyse it in terms of quiddity, Ar. *māhiyya*. Quiddity, however, does not possess real existence, yet is part of our mental representations. Its relation to existence and non-existence is equal; quiddities may exist or may not exist as they are only abstracted from existence[9].

Another Sadrean premise followed by Tabataba'i is the gradation of existence, Ar. *tashkīk al-wujūd*. Existence is one and simple but differs in terms of intensity and weakness. In Mulla Sadra's own words, these premises, i.e. the principality, objectivity and simplicity of existence, can be summarised in a single statement in which existence is described as:

> […] a single, simple, objective reality (*haqiqah 'ayniyah*). There is no difference in the essences (*dhat*) of its individuals, but only in perfection and imperfection and in intensity and weakness, or in other matters [not related to existence itself], for example, that between the whatnesses (*mahiyyah*) of the same species. The ultimate perfection for which there is nothing greater is that which does not depend on anything else, and nothing greater than it can be imagined, for all imperfect things are dependent on others, and are in need of the more complete[10].

The need of all beings "of the more complete" is a classic syllogism exercised by many Muslim philosophers, known as the possibility of the nobler, Ar. *imkān al-ashraf*. It implies that perfections cannot descend from God, the Origin of Effusion, unless they first reach the nobler creation. So, if something base exists, this in turn means that something nobler (as its cause) has to exist too[11]. This principle explains the hierarchical structure of the Divine attributes (and is manifested in all other beings and worlds as well).

The principle of the intensity of existence leads to God – the perfect Being and the First Cause. God is every perfection because non-perfection would be

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to Persian 'Alī Shirvānī, Qum 1390 SH/2011, pp. 15–16. More on this cf. M. Ḥ. Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Uṣūl-i Falsafih va Ravish-i Ri'ālism,* Vol. 4–5, Tehrān 1362 SH/1983, pp. 45–46 (text and footnote).

[8] Idem, *Tawḥīd*, op. cit., pp. 15–16.

[9] Idem, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, [in:] idem, *Rasā'il-i Tawḥīdī*, op. cit., p. 43.

[10] Translation by M. Legenhausen in: *The Proof of the Sincere*, "Journal of Islamic Philosophy" 2005, No. 1, pp. 12–13.

[11] M. Ḥ. Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Nihāyat al-Ḥikma*, Tehrān 1370 SH/1991, pp. 319–320. Also, idem, *Vasā'it*, [in:] idem, *Rasā'il-i Tawḥīdī*, op. cit., p. 164.

lacking something, and that is impossible, for God is pure Being and as such He is the very opposite of non-being, i.e., imperfection or privation. Moreover, He cannot be or not be, thus God is the Necessary Being, Ar. *wājib al-wujūd*[12]. All other beings are contingent upon Him. Naturally, because potentiality and change are endowed in matter, God is pure actuality[13].

God's indivisible, simple essence is immune from any constraint; it is un-limited. No attribute or name can fully describe God because such a particular concept is essentially different from other concepts and its direct application to God's essence would be its limitation[14]. So, because Divine essence is in-divisible and simple, this is clearly impossible[15].

Tabataba'i further argues that because God is immune from any limita-tions, verses like "And to Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth" (Q 24:4) should *not* be understood allegorically. God's kingship is a real, not a contingent one[16]. Tabataba'i introduces here the division between truths, Ar. *ḥaqā'iq*, and constructs, *i'tibārāt*. Earth and man exist regardless of whether we call them so or not. They are truths, for they are things which exist objectively in their essence, no matter whether we think about them. On the other hand, constructs are abstracted from truths and exist solely in our minds[17]. For example, God's kingship is His attribute which has real exist-ence[18], and human kingship belongs to the realm of contingent meanings – if we think about human kingship, it turns out that in reality only the king and his kingdom exist. Therefore, the contingent meanings which we use in our every day life are abstracted from truths[19].

By the same token, Tabataba'i continues, the two sentences "'Ali knows" and "God knows" are essentially different. Ali's knowledge is only through mental image. God's knowledge is the clear knowledge existing in the know-

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[12] Idem, *Tawḥīd*, op. cit., p. 16.

[13] Idem, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, op. cit., p. 43.

[14] Idem, *Tawḥīd*, op. cit., p. 16; idem, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, op. cit., pp. 39, 61.

[15] Idem, *Tawḥīd*, op. cit., p. 16.

[16] Ibidem, p. 17.

[17] This issue was first outlined in Tabataba'i's *al-I'tibarat* (Treatise on Contingents), [in:] idem, *Rasā'il Sab'a*, Qum 1362 SH/1983. It was later fully developed in: idem, *Uṣūl-i Falsafih va Ravish-i Ri'ālism*, Vol. 1–3, Qum 1356 SH/1977, ch. 6, pp. 269–354.

[18] Idem, *Tawḥīd*, op. cit., p. 17.

[19] Idem, *Insān dar Dunyā*, [in:] idem, *Insān az Āghāz ta Anjām*, ed. H. Khusrawshāhī, trans. S. Larijānī, Qum 1391 SH/2012, pp. 49–50. It worthy of notice that the Allama's understanding of *i'tbārāt* differs from that of Mulla Sadra for whom they were mental representations of quiddities.

ing one, not a mental image. Knowledge belongs to God's essence and whenever we talk about it, we abstract it from Him as His attribute[20].

No name, however, can be directly applied to God as every name is a limitation which takes away something from God's completeness[21]. A tradition from *Tawhid* by Imam Sadiq, quoted by Tabataba'i, puts it this way: "He is called by His names, so He is different from them. Names are different from Him and the described one is different from its description"[22].

For Tabataba'i, the Qur'anic representation of this statement would be the following verses from the sura al-Hashr (which, by the way, is the *locus classicus* of discussions on Divine names):

> He is Allah, other than whom there is no deity, the Sovereign, the Pure, the Perfection, the Bestower of Faith, the Overseer, the Exalted in Might, the Compeller, the Superior. Exalted is Allah above whatever they associate with Him. // He is Allah, the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner; to Him belong the best names. Whatever is in the heavens and earth is exalting Him. And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise. (Q 59:23–24)

Since "Nothing is like a likeness of Him" (Q 42:11) we cannot apply human concepts, or human-like attributes to God[23]. Human words carry different notions pertaining to different objects or referents, while the indivisible, limitless nature of Divine essence means that the object of all notions, attributes is one – God. All His names are predicated homonymously. Tabataba'i gives an example to help clarify this point: when one looks at his or her characteristics one sees that he or she is, for example, a teacher, a daughter, but in the same time he or she is the same person. One sees, hears, etc. but his or her essence stays intact. So in a way none of these attributes are external with regards to one's essence[24].

Still, though, there is nothing like God and so His attributes are nothing like ours. A tradition quoted by Tabataba'i, originally found in Muhammad Kulayni's *Usul al-Kafi*, narrated by Muhammad Ibn Abu 'Abdullah from Imam Sadiq states:

> My Lord is subtle in subtleties but cannot be described by means of subtle matters. My Lord is great but cannot be described by means of greatness. His greatness surpasses all greatness but he cannot be described by means of such greatness. He is Glorious in

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[20] Idem, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, op. cit., p. 53.

[21] Ibidem, p. 40. Cf. also relevant discussion in *al-Mīzān*: idem, *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, op. cit., Vol. 8, pp. 355–356.

[22] Idem, *Tawḥīd*, op. cit., p. 25.

[23] Idem, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, op. cit., p. 55.

[24] Ibidem, p. 45.

His Glory but He cannot be described in terms of thickness. He is before everything and it cannot be said that something was before Him. He will be after all things but it cannot be said that there is something after Him. He willed the existence of things but not by means of first thinking about it. He comprehends things but not with a great deal of efforts. Things are not mixed with Him and nor is He indifferent about them. He is clearly manifest but not with contacts and changes. He shines but not in the form of being found out with sight. He is far but not in the form of distance. He is near but not in the form of nearness. He is very fine but not in the form of physical fineness. He exists but not after nothingness. He acts but not because of being forced. He measures things but not by means of movement. He wills but not by means of thinking. He hears but not with tools. He sees but not with instruments[25].

A different hadith, found in *Usul al-Kafi* and *Tawhid* of ʿAli Ibn Babawayh, reported by Ibrahim Ibn ʿUmar and attributed to Imam Sadiq, mentions that there is one word, whose purpose is to hide God from His creation:

Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, created a name with letters that had no sound. He created it with the word that would not be spoken. He created it with a personality that had no body. It had a similarity that is not described. He created it with colour that is colourless. Diameters were negated from it. Limitations were distanced away from it. The feel of all *mutawahhim* (intuitive sense) is curtained from it. It is hidden but not covered[26].

This word is called *al-ism al-aʿẓam*, the greatest name. It cannot be defined or grasped by intellect; it has no attributes, and like God – no limitations. Other traditions cited by Tabataba'i add that this inaccessible name contains seventy three letters which provoke terror in people. Some of these letters have been entrusted to the prophets—the largest number, seventy two, to the Prophet Muhammad. None of these letters, however, can be seen by men because they would perish. The hidden word is like a veil which will disappear only on the Day of Resurrection[27].

Through names, God communicates with the world, makes himself known. The remaining part of the hadith about the hidden word cited above provides a further explanation of the relation between God and His names. The one transcendent name is accompanied by three public names:

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[25] Ibidem, pp. 53–54. Translation to English by Muhammad Sarwar from Kulaynī's *Kitāb al-Kāfī*, book 3 (On Tawḥīd) [ch. 22, h. 4], [online] http://al-shia.org/html/eng/books/hadith/al-kafi/ [accessed: 02.03.2013].

[26] Ibidem, [book 3, ch. 15, h. 1].

[27] M. Ḥ. Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, op. cit., p. 28; idem, *Afʿāl-i Ilahī*, [in:] idem, *Rasā'il-i Tawḥīdī*, op. cit., pp. 74–78.

He placed it to be a perfect word consisting of four parts together. No one of them is before the other. From these He made public only three names because people desperately needed them. One of them is kept out of public sight. This is the protected and treasured name. The names that became public is Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High. He, the Most Glorious, for each of these made four subservient key elements that formed twelve key elements. Then for each key element He created thirty key elements to indicate an action ascribed to the four key elements[28].

From the three public names, the tradition continues, come all other names in the number of three hundred sixty[29]. They further hide God and make Him manifest. God's concealment is in relation to the gradual nature of existence :the weaker the existent is, the less it knows of the Divine essence[30].

The next issue Tabataba'i addresses is the seemingly unresolvable difference between God's unity and the multiplicity of things, including His own names. Multiplicity is the opposite of oneness in a sense that it is divisible[31]. God is undivided, so He cannot be the direct origin of multiplicity. Tabataba'i discusses it, i.a., in an important book called *The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism,* co-authored with his renowned disciple M. Mutahhari:

> If one wants to explain in a simple language the principle of ontological homogeneity [i.e., the initial lack of multiplicity], one should define it in the following manner: "From one cause only one effect can be emanated, and only one effect is emanated correctly from one cause". As to the exact meaning of this principle the philosophers say what follows: "the emanation of many from one, and emanation of one from many is impossible". This sentence means that a single cause is connected only with a single effect, and a single effect is connected only with a single cause. If occasionally we think about cases where a single cause is the source of multiple effects or one effect is produced by multiple causes, in reality this cause or effect really is not imposed on one but it is a sum of single units. [...] We can conclude: the emanation of beings from the First Principle, or the First Creator who – based on logical demonstration – is simple and single in all respects, is a fixed system, i.e., the emanation of beings follows an order, and most certainly the basis of the first (and by first we do not mean temporal primacy) and immediate effect is at work, and then the next effect, and so on[32].

The reference to the Neoplatonic principle *ex uno unum* is clear. Tabataba'i continues that the first name of God, the One, al-Aḥad, which is His

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[28] Idem, *Asmā-yi Ḥusni*, op. cit., pp. 27–28. Translation from *Uṣūl al-Kāfī*, [book 3, ch. 15, h. 1], [online] http://al-shia.org/html/eng/books/hadith/al-kafi/ [accessed: 02.03.2013].

[29] Idem, *Tawḥīd*, op. cit., p. 28.

[30] Ibidem, pp. 29–33.

[31] Idem, *Nihāyat-i Falsafih*, trans. to Persian T. Mahdī, Qum 1387 SH/2008, p. 258.

[32] Idem, *Uṣūl-i Falsafih va Ravish-i Ri'ālism*, Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 510, note 1.

first delimitation, is what enables the emergence of multiplicity[33]. Then, other names come in a fixed order, one after the other. According to Tabataba'i the emergence of multiplicity happens between the realm of God and the intelligible world which is spoken of in this verse: "And there is not a thing but that with Us are its depositories, and We do not send it down except according to a known measure." (Q 15:21)

Depositories, mentioned in the verse, in Tabataba'i's view are beings of the intelligible world. From this world God gives His existentiating command "Be" and creates the worlds. For Tabataba'i, the occurrence of plural "depositories" points to the fact that already the intelligible world contains multiple beings, including Divine names[34].

The multiplicity of names which occurs in the intelligible world, is the multiplicity of rank, also called vertical multiplicity. It is a kind of non-numerical multiplicity which differentiates beings in terms of the intensity of their existence. It stems from the proximity of a given being to God. This difference is the difference in rank, not an individual one, which occurs in quiddities[35].

The intelligible world is the realm in which God creates, therefore, He can be attributed with names of acts, such as, for example, creation. All names of action can be divided into two groups: those pertaining to creation (the Creator) and those pertaining to happiness and misery (the Ever Relenting or Severe in Punishment)[36]. Tabataba'i writes the following about their ontological status:

> When we compare with Him beings [God's acts] oozing from God's sacred essence, between these beings and His essential names […] relations become manifest which link these beings with essential names, not with God's essence, because in the realm of Divine essence there are no determinations or relations[37].

Tabataba'i concludes that names of acts are thus different from God's essence and essential names. Names of acts come from the realm of God's acts, below His essence. They are only attributed to God in a way that, if we take, for example, a created being, we can think who created it. From this perspect-

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[33] Idem, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, op. cit., p. 42.

[34] Idem, *Insān dar Dunyā*, op. cit., p. 24.

[35] Idem, *Nihāyat-i Falsafih*, op. cit., p. 259. The other kind of multiplicity is called horizontal multiplicity and it is a difference between quiddities of various beings, *mahiyyāt*. This multiplicity first appears in the imaginal world, nevertheless, it is fully realised in the world of matter. Cf. idem, *Āghāz-i Falsafih*, trans. M. A. Girāmī, Qum 1391 SH/2012, pp. 332–333.

[36] More on that cf. idem, *Afʿāl-i Ilahī*, op. cit., pp. 86–92.

[37] Idem, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, op. cit., p. 40.

ive, they are actualised in God's essence and are similar to essential names. The fundamental difference, however, lies in the fact that for essential names we are in no need of thinking about anything other than Divine essence whereas with the names of acts we need external reality upon which these acts are bestowed. For example, attributes like creation or mercy are only realised on external objects[38].

To further explain the difference between essential names and those of acts we must realise how existence is divided. Traditionally, philosophers divided existence into three categories:

1) independent existence (it itself), for itself and by itself (God – independent in essence and existence), or by something else (substances like intellects or souls – independent in existence but not in essence),

2) independent existence for other that itself (accidents like whiteness independent in essence, dependent in existence),

3) existence in something else (connective existence, it links two existents together, for example, whiteness with paper).

In Mulla Sadra's philosophy of existence there can be no essential division in the first group, i.e., between God as the first cause and the things caused but only a difference regarding the intensity of their existence. Clearly, the next two categories are even more problematic in the transcendent philosophy of Mulla Sadra. As a consequence, Sadra distances himself from the traditional divisions and presents existence as divided only into two:

1) independent existence in itself, by itself,

2) relative existence (equivalent to existence for other that itself and by other that itself of former philosophers). All relative beings are external, real and objective, unlike the third category from previous divisions[39].

In Mulla Sadra's system the first kind of existence which starts from God is the unconditioned, unfolding existence which goes through the levels of intensity, including the intensity of existence of His essential names. Attributes of acts belong to the second category. The relative beings are the reason for multiplicity: not the horizontal one but the vertical, realised in matter. In the discussed treatises, Tabataba'i only hints at what Mulla Sadra said *expressis verbis*. Nevertheless, from what has been said so far, it is enough to see that

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[38] Ibidem, p. 41.

[39] I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Hasan 'Azizi who let me read his unpublished dissertation entitled *Taḥlīl-i Ma'rifat-shinākhtī va Vujūd-shinākhtī Ṣifāt-i fi'l az Didgāh-i Ḥikmat-i Muta'aliyyih* (An epistemological and ontological analysis of the names of acts in transcendent philosophy). My presentation here is indebted to Dr. 'Azizi's section on this topic, pp. 78–90.

for Tabataba'i all beings are manifestations of the attributes of acts and the relative existence as Mulla Sadra defined it.

It should also be mentioned that both essential names and the names of acts can also be divided into negative and positive. The difference between positive and negative names is that the negative ones, even though united with God's essence, are in fact negations of imperfections which exist outside the realm of God. In fact, there are negations of negation, so in a way are also positive[40]. Otherwise, it would mean that God's essence contains imperfections.

THE HIERARCHY OF DIVINE NAMES

Tabataba'i discusses several Shi'a traditions which give different lists and enumerate various names, but none of the traditions agree on the number of names[41]. To avoid dismissing the authority of the quoted narratives, Tabataba'i says that none of these lists is exclusive and the Divine names cannot be limited to any fixed number. What he stresses, though, is the hierarchy of Divine names based on the principle of intensity of existence.

Tabataba'i introduces his own list of names grouped into ten categories and totalling one hundred sixteen names[42]. The categories range from the most encompassing to the most detailed[43]. Tabataba'i claims that he extracted all of these names from the Qur'an. His selection includes only those whose grammatical form in the Qur'an is either of an adjective or a participle. This leads him to the exclusion of many names, known from the traditional lists, whose original Qur'anic usage was verbal. For example, this is why Tabataba'i does not include the name the Slayer, al-Mumīt, because in the Qur'an it only appeared in a verbal form: "And it is Allah who gives life and causes death, and Allah is Seeing of what you do" (3:156).

It is a reasonable criterion but one that Tabataba'i does not employ completely consistently. Therefore, he includes the name of al-Muḥyī, the Bestower of Life which is only formed from its verbal usage, analogically to the name the Slayer in the same verse. In a few other cases he omits names that appear in the Quran and in many lists, like the name Malik al-Mulk from "Say, «O Allah,

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[40] M. Ḥ. Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Asmā-yi Ḥusnī*, op. cit., pp. 52–53.

[41] Ibidem, pp. 49–52.

[42] In his Qur'anic commentary Tabataba'i gives a slightly different list which includes 126 names. Cf. idem, *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, op. cit., Vol. 8, pp. 361–363.

[43] Tabataba'i provides a chart that graphically shows this order. Cf. ibidem, p. 79.

Owner of Sovereignty [Malik al-Mulk], You give sovereignty to whom You will and You take sovereignty away from whom You will»" (3:26).

Disregarding these few inconsistencies, Tabataba'i stays true to his criteria and his list consists of names that had mostly adjectival forms in the Qur'an. The afore-mentioned division into ten subcategories can be extracted from Tabataba'i's explanations and chart, presented at the end of one of the treatises[44]. Both his explanations and chart were somewhat tentative therefore I took the liberty of combining the two lists into one which is more complete.

Group I
1. Al-Aḥad – The Sole One, The Indivisible
2. Al-Wāḥid – The Unique
3. Al-Ḥaqq – The Truth

The first group describes the most important attributes of God's essence, those closest to Him. They directly stem from God's name Allah which describes God's essence.

Aḥadiyya is the first delimitation, but one that eliminates all other attributes. It refers to God's pure being from which all attributes are abstracted. "Aḥad" is therefore the absolute unity. God is called the Unique due to the fact that He has no partners. It means also that even though many conceptual, abstract meanings, or names can be attributed to him, He is still their only object. And because God's essence is subsistent and immutable in all circumstances, He is called the Truth.

Group II
4. Dhū al-Jalāl wa-l-Ikrām – The Owner of Majesty and Honour

This important attribute encompasses all positive (majesty) and negative (honour) names, the names of essence and of acts, and the names of beauty and glory.

Group III
5. Al-Ḥayy – The Ever Living
6. Al-Qayyūm – The Self Subsistent
7. Al-Quddūs – The Pure

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[44] Ibidem, pp. 62–67 and 79 (chart).

This group is more specific but still encompasses various attributes. The self-subsistence and life contain all the essential attributes, like knowledge, life, power, with the exception of attributes from the first group. They first two names from this category are positive, whereas holiness is the source of all negative attributes. They are called negative because they refute any imperfection from God.

Group IV
8. Al-Aʿlam – The Most Knowing
9. Al-ʿĀlim – The Knowing
10. Al-ʿAlīm – The All Knowing
11. Al-Muḥīṭ – The All Encompassing
12. Ash-Shahīd – The Witness
13. ʿAllām al-Ghuyūb – The Knowing of Hidden Things
14. ʿĀlim al-Ghayb wa-sh-Shahāda – The Knowing of the Unseen and the Witnessed
15. Al-Baṣīr – The Seeing
16. Al-Samīʿ – The Hearing
17. Al-Ḥafīẓ – The Guardian
18. Al-Ḥasīb – The Reckoner
19. Sarīʿ al-Ḥisāb – The Swift in Reckoning
20. Al-Ḥakīm – The Wise
21. Al-Khabīr – The Totally Aware

This group consists of positive names pertaining to Divine knowledge. God knows his essence and the essence of others; therefore, He can be called *al-ʿĀlim* and *al-ʿAlīm*. Since He knows the essence of everything, He is the All Encompassing. Additionally, since He is All Encompassing He is also the Witness. He is the All Seeing as He sees everything what He knows. Since He knows the unseen, he can be called the Knowing of Hidden Things. He is the Guardian because He protect what He witnesses. He is the Reckoner because He makes an account of all information. And so on.

Group V
22. Al-Qadīr – The All Capable
23. Al-Qādir – The All Powerful

Power is the second, after knowledge, of the fundamental positive attributes is God. Because He is the Origin of all creation, He is the All Capable and All Powerful.

Group VI
24. Ar-Rahmān – The Compassionate

The attribute of power is the source of God's compassion. God is called the Compassionate because He has the power to produce beings without necessity or obligation to anybody.

Group VII
25. Al-Bāri' – The Inventor
26. Al-Khāliq – The Creator
27. Aḥsan al-Khāliqīn – The Best of Creators

Divine power gives rise to yet another group of attributes. They reveal God's power of creation. Thus, He is called the Inventor because He created the essence of creatures, and the Creator because He formed parts of beings.

Group VIII
28. Al-Awwal – The First
29. Al-Ākhar – The Last
30. Aẓ-Ẓāhir – The Manifest
31. Al-Bāṭin – The Hidden
32. Al-Qarīb – The Near
33. Al-Ghālib – The Predominant
34. Al-Qāhir – The Subjugator
35. Al-Qawī – The Powerful
36. Al-Matīn – The Firm
37. Al-'Aẓīm – The Most Great
38. Al-Kabīr – The Great
39. Dhū al-Quwwa – The Possessor of Strength
40. Al-'Alī – The Most High
41. Al-A'lā – The All High
42. Al-Muta'ālī – The Exalted
43. Rafī' ad-Darajāt – The Exalter
44. Al-Muqtadir – The Perfect in Ability
45. Dhū al-Intiqām – The Owner of Retribution
46. Al-Majīd – The Honourable
47. Al-Mutakabbir – The Superior
48. Sarī' al-'Iqāb – Swift in Punishing
49. Shadīd al-'Iqāb – Severe in Punishment

50. Shadīd al-Mahāl – Severe In Assault
51. Khayr al-Mākirīn – The Best of the Deceivers
52. Al-Qahhār – The Prevailing
53. Al-Muhaymin – The All Preserver

This group enumerates the attributes of God supremacy over His creation. They come directly from the former attribute of God, the All Encompassing. Therefore, God is the First and the Last, the Hidden and the Manifest, etc.

Group IX
54. Ar-Raḥīm – The Merciful
55. Dhū ar-Raḥma – The Possessor of Mercy
56. Arḥam ar-Rāḥimīn – The Most Merciful
57. Khayr ar-Rāḥimīn – The Best of Merciful
58. Ghāfir adh-Dhanb – The Forgiver of Sin
59. Dhū al-Faḍl – The Possessor of Bounty
60. Al-Ḥafī – The Ever Gracious
61. Al-Laṭīf – The Subtle
62. Ar-Ra'ūf – The Kind
63. Al-Wadūd – The Affectionate
64. Al-Karīm – The Generous
65. Al-Akram – The Most Generous
66. Ash-Shākir – The Appreciative
67. Ash-Shakūr – The Most Appreciative
68. Al-Ḥalīm – The Forbearing
69. Al-'Afū – The Effacer of Sins
70. Al-Ghafūr – The Forgiving
71. Ahl al-Maqhfira – The Worthy of Pardon
72. Qābil at-Tawb – The Acceptor of Repentence
73. At-Tawwāb – The Ever Relenting
74. Khayr al-Ghāfirīn – The Best of Forgivers
75. Al-Ghaffār – The Perpetual Forgiver
76. Al-Mujīb – The Answerer to Prayers

This group consists of attributes of God's mercy. They all are attributes of action because they all pertain to human happiness. As illustrated previously, happiness and misery together with creation are those Divine names which relate to His acts.

Group X

77. Rabb – Lord
78. Ahl at-Taqawwa – The Worthy of Pious Fear
79. Al-Khallāq – The Innovator
80. Al-Fāṭir – The Originator
81. Al-Badī' – The All Originator
82. Al-Jāmi' – The Gatherer
83. Fāliq al-Ḥabb wa-n-Nuwī – The Cleaver of Grains and Dates
84. Fāliq al-Aṣbāḥ – The Cleaver of Daybreak
85. Al-Mu'min – The Bestower of Faith
86. As-Salām – The All Peaceable
87. Al-Ilāh – God, deity, worthy of worship[45]
88. Al-Wahhāb – The Bestower
89. Ar-Razzāq – The Provider
90. Al-Wāsi' – The All Encompassing
91. Al-Muqīt – The Keeper
92. Al-Ḥamīd – The Praiseworthy
93. Al-Jabbār – The Compeller
94. An-Naṣīr – The Supporter
95. Al-Walī – The Patron
96. Al-Mawlā – The Protector
97. Al-Wakīl – The Disposer of Affairs
98. Al-Muḥyī – The Bestower of Life
99. Al-Muṣawwir – The Fashioner
100. Al-Barr – The Doer of Good
101. An-Nūr – The Light
102. Al-Mubayyin – The Clarifier
103. Al-Malik – The Sovereign
104. Dhū al-'Arsh – The Owner of the Throne
105. Dhū aṭ-Ṭawl – The Owner of Abundance
106. Al-'Azīz – The Exalted in Might
107. Al-Ghanī – The Free of Need
108. Aḥkam al-Ḥākimīn – The Most Just of Judges
109. Khayr al-Fāsilīn – The Best of Deciders
110. Khayr al-Hākimīn – The Best of Judges

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[45] Note that this form is different from the contracted, shorter form Allah. In his Qur'anic commentary Tabataba'i quotes a hadith from Imam Sadiq in which the two forms appear as different names. Cf. ibidem, p. 365.

111. Al-Fattāḥ – The Opener
112. Khayr al-Fātiḥīn – The Best of Conquerors
113. Aṣ-Ṣamad – The Eternal
114. Al-Ilāh – God[46]
115. Khayr ar-Rāziqīn – The Best of Providers
116. Al-Musta'ān – The One Sought for Help

The last group consists of attributes of God's creation and kingship.

All the above attributes by no means exhaust the different ways God can be referred to. Tabataba'i provides examples of other descriptive names which can be extracted from the Qur'an, for instance, the names the Doer, the Protector or the Intercessor from "Indeed, We will do it." (Q 21:104) and "Besides Him will be no protector and no intercessor" (Q 6:51).

Moreover, Tabataba'i adds the personal pronouns you, I, and He. "You" is for addressing God by His creatures, "I" shows His speaking to mankind, and "He" refers to the absence of both, the lack of communication[47].

Also, nowhere so far has Divine speech been mentioned, which is one of the central attributes discussed thoroughly by many scholars. Even though nowhere enlisted, Tabataba'i includes it among Divine acts, such as giving life and death, sustaining, guiding, forgiving, etc. In *al-Mīzān* Tabataba'i explains that Divine speech is different from human speech because of God's unlikeness to any creature:

> What is the reality of speech from our point of view? Man needs society and civilization, and, as a result, needs all the essential ingredients of co-operative civilization – and "speaking" is one of them. Nature has guided man to express his thoughts through the medium of the voice which is produced from his mouth. He has made various combinations of his voice as signs to describe various ideas which are produced in his mind. Needless to say that the only way to convey hidden ideas and thoughts to others is to appoint, and agree upon, some signs for them. Man needs speech because there is no method to understand, and make others understand, other than words, the variously mixed and combined sounds which have been agreed upon as signs, and made as tokens for objects and ideas. That is why a language is closely related to the developmental stage of the society which it serves[48].

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[46] Note that this name was already listed by Tabatabai'i (name 87). Listing it for the second time is most likely a mistake.

[47] Ibidem, p. 70.

[48] Idem, *Al-Mīzan. An Exegesis of the Qur'an*, Vol. 4, trans. S. S. A. Rizvi, Tehran 1982, p. 124.

'Allama Tabataba'i distinguished various instances of the speech of God. Generally he spoke about two, interconnected functions: revelatory and creative. First, he argues, various verses of the Qur'an define speaking in terms of revelation. God is said to speak to the prophets. The verse "While he [Muhammad] was in the higher [part of the] horizon. // Then he approached and descended//And was at a distance of two bow lengths or nearer. // And He revealed to His Servant what He revealed" (Q 53:7–10) shows the immediate, almost intimate conversation that took place between God and Muhammad.

The speech of God, after having been received by the Prophets, is then communicated to the humankind. For example: "Say, [O Muhammad], «If the home of the Hereafter with Allah is for you alone and not the [other] people, then wish for death, if you should be truthful»" (Q 2:94). But defining the speech of Allah in terms of revelation is not the only way this term was employed in the Qur'an. For example: "And it is He who created the heavens and earth in truth. And the day He says, 'Be', and it is, His word is the truth" (Q 6:73). In this verse we clearly see that creation has something to do with God's word: speaking here is understood as giving the command "Be". Only after this command, which is God's intention to create, does the actual act of bringing something into existence take place. It seems that Tabataba'i gave primacy to the creative aspect of Divine speech as he defined revelation in the following manner: "In matters other than creation – for example, when He says something to a man – it means that He creates something which gives that man an inner knowledge of the intended message"[49].

CONCLUSIONS

Several points about Tabataba'i's approach to the problem of Divine names should be summarised here. We have already seen that he takes up themes known for the traditional accounts about God's names and attributes. This is evident in the very arrangement of his argument – from God's essence and His uniqueness to His relationship with the world of creation. He discusses at length the traditional attributes, such as knowledge, kingship or speech, to name only the most important. Nonetheless, Tabataba'i's approach is characterised by a considerable dose of originality. First of all, he identifies God's names with beings emanated from God's essence and varying in the intensity of existence. Such an approach is a necessary corollary of his adoption of the premises of Sadra's metaphysics of existence.

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[49] Ibidem, p. 126.

Worth mentioning is Tabataba'i's non-literal approach to Divine names, which – as indicated previously – is characteristic for the whole Shiʿa exegesis. Tabataba'i does not limit the number of names to 99, as is very often the case (the most canonical list of 99 beautiful names is that of al-Walid ibn Muslim), probably seeing in this number a metaphor that merely represents the plurality of names.

Other features of the ʿAllama's account should be stressed too. One can detect a considerable attention to reconcile philosophical assumptions with the content of revelation. That it was a valid and pressing concern can be testified, *interalia*, by Tabataba'i's treatise "Ali and Metaphysics" in which the first imam Ali is said to have expressed the most important imperative of the Qur'an which is the search for knowledge and truth, especially in the realm of metaphysics, a task to be achieved through reasoning and demonstration. Tabataba'i, first and foremost a philosopher, turns in his analysis of God's names to the Qur'an and the hadith to find a textual basis for his views. Tabataba'i's concern to always quote the traditions of the imams shows his deep respect for Shiʿa sources and his veneration for the imams as the exegetes of the Word of God but also, so to speak, the first ones to employ the scholastic method in their theology. Here I would like to conclude with one methodological note – even though mostly philosophical, the treatises analysed in this paper are also very much indebted to the genre of Qur'anic exegesis in the afore-mentioned efforts to bridge the gap between reason and revelation.

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