CAN *GOD* AND *ALLAH* PROMOTE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION?

by
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This article deals with the concept of English *God* and its Arabic equivalent *Allah*. The two concepts are analyzed based on how ordinary native English speakers and Muslim Arabs, respectively, use them in their native languages. Additionally, an explication is constructed for each concept. Comparing the explications shows that the two concepts are very similar to each other. The only differences found are as follows: (1) God appears to be perceived as being in the same place to which "good" people go after they die, while Allah is not; (2) God seems to be conceived of as an omnipresent spirit; as for Allah, no linguistic evidence was found to suggest this same idea, and (3) only God seems to have a visual representation, which is that of an old father. Being very similar to each other, these two concepts might prove to be useful in promoting intercultural communication between native English speakers and Muslim Arabs. In addition, the analysis of the two concepts can provide cultural outsiders with access to the insider perspective of each concept.

1. Introduction

In his article "The Clash of Civilizations?", Huntington (1993) claimed that future conflict in our world would not emerge due to ideological or economic reasons but because of cultural differences manifested in peoples' different histories, languages, traditions, and religions. Huntington's vision seems to have come true. Since he published that article, several violent incidents with a religious

motivation have taken place; the most distinguished one was that of September 11, 2001, while among the latest are the Peshawar church attack which took place on September 22, 2013, as well as the Islamic State attacks on churches in Iraq and Syria in the last two years.

No doubt, the events of September 11 have widened the gap between the West and the Islamic world. They have led to negative changes in attitudes towards Muslims, and they have even fuelled acts of aggression and harassment against them. More westerners have begun to suffer from Islamophobia, and more Muslims in the West have begun to suffer from discrimination (Allen and Nielsen 2002; Fetzer and Soper 2003; Abbas 2004; Sheridan and Gillett 2005; Sheridan 2006).

I would posit that lack of positive interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims contributes to Islamophobia. Needless to say, different cultures (and sub-cultures) have different norms and assumptions. The differences may lead people who conceive of themselves as being similar to avoid communicating with other people whom they perceive to be different from them. Lack of communication, coupled with lack of sufficient knowledge about the others, can, in turn, lead to stereotypes and prejudice. The stronger the stereotypes and prejudice, the colder the relationships become between different groups of people.

To dispel stereotypes and prejudice, people should be encouraged to know about other groups of people. They should also be encouraged to meet and talk with members of these groups. In any meeting that aims to promote intercultural communication, common elements should be discussed, with the hope that the similarities between these elements would promote understanding and enhance the relationship between the participants, while the differences would be respected. The advantage of discussing shared elements lies in the notion that people coming from different cultures and/or backgrounds can feel closer to each other if they find out commonalities between them.

One shared element between Anglos and Arabs is the belief in a divine entity. English *God* and its Arabic equivalent *Allah* are two terms that seem to be relevant to many people from each group. A Baylor Religion Survey has indicated that about 96% of Americans have some level of belief in the existence of God, and about 70% have no doubts at all about the existence of God (Froese and Bader 2007). The concept of *Allah* is no less relevant to Muslim Arabs than *God* is to native English speakers. Believing in Allah is the first and foremost article of faith in Islam *(Translation of Sahih Bukhari* 2013: Vol. 9, Book 93, No. 469). Owing to the significance and relevance of these two concepts, discussing the similarities and differences between them will be the focus of this study.

2. Method and Data

The two concepts will be analyzed based on how ordinary native English speakers and Muslim Arabs understand them, rather than how theologians define them. This is so because several studies have demonstrated that there are differences between folk knowledge and theological knowledge. It has been shown that people can claim theologically correct understanding of a certain religious concept. Nonetheless, when they are given a certain task in which they are asked to use this concept to process some information, their understanding of this concept can appear to be different (Barrett and Keil 1996; Barrett 1998, 2000, 2007; Pyysiäinen 2004).

A comment is in order regarding why I am exploring how Muslim Arabs, rather than native Arabic speakers in general, view the concept of *Allah*. In contrast to the Anglo world, the Arab world is much more religious, and religion appears to play a much stronger role in the life of Arabs, in general, than in the lives of native English speakers, who are mostly secular (Gellner 1992; Haynes 1998; Esposito 2000; Li 2002; Taylor 2007).

The significance of religion in the lives of Arabs provides reason to believe that Arabs belonging to different religions may have different conceptualizations of the same religious concept. It can be claimed that the same holds for native English speakers who have different religious affiliations. I would argue, however, that, owing to secularism in the West, the influence of religious affiliation on the conceptualization of a certain religious concept could be minimal. I have to admit that I do not have scientific evidence to support this claim. Yet, I do have anecdotal support. From conversing with native English speakers, whether at the University of New England or in the NSM workshops at the Australian National University, I have noticed that native English speakers seem to have almost the same conceptualization of religious terms, irrespective of their religious affiliation or of whether they are believers or not. They all seem to draw on the Christian background that they or their societies have, whether they are Christian or not, and whether they are believers or not. In the case of Arabs, on the other hand, the native Arabic speaker would rely heavily on his/her religious background and knowledge when describing the concept in question. Because the vast majority of Arabs are Muslims, my analysis of the concept of Allah will be based on how Muslim Arabs perceive it.

To uncover the folk conceptualization of *God* and *Allah*, I will use linguistic analysis. Obviously, ordinary native English speakers and Muslim Arabs use, respectively, the concepts of English *God* and Arabic *Allah* in the everyday language that each group speaks natively. I would argue, therefore, that investigating the use of these concepts in these languages can reveal what ordinary people think about the god concept that they employ in their mother tongue.

To examine the use of the two god concepts mentioned above, I will rely on corpus analysis. A corpus is a huge body of texts; these texts are taken from a variety of sources, such as books, magazines, and newspapers. In this article, I will use two corpora: (1) The Corpus of Contemporary American English (over 450 million words;

henceforth COCA), and (2) the ArabiCorpus (over 68 million words). Using the corpora helps in finding out how people use a certain word in different expressions and contexts, and this in turn provides us with information about what people know about the concept labeled by that word (Wierzbicka 1996).

To avoid so-called 'cherry-picking', i.e. choosing the contexts that suit the researcher's analysis, I have gone through many contexts in each corpus. As the reader will notice, I generally mention the number of occurrences of a certain word or phrase on which I base my analysis.

Explicating the god concepts investigated here requires a method that can ward off obscurity and ethnocentric bias. Otherwise, the explications of the two god concepts may not be clear and/or accurate. To overcome this problem, I suggest using simple, universal concepts. The simplicity of the concepts will ensure that the explications are clear, and their universality will guarantee that the explications are not ethnocentric and can be translated into any language.

Empirical cross-linguistic research within the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) theory has demonstrated that there are 65 concepts that have these two characteristics, viz. of being simple and universal (Wierzbicka 1972, 1985; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002, 2014; Peeters 2006; Goddard 2008). The 65 concepts are known as 'semantic primes,' and they are realized in English by means of the following words (see Table 1):

Table 1 Semantic primes (English exponents) (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014: 12)

I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOME-THING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	Substantives
KIND, PARTS	Relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	Determiners
ONE, TWO, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW, SOME, ALL	Quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	Evaluators
BIG, SMALL	Descriptors
THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON´T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	Actions, events, movement, contact
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOME-ONE/ SOMETHING, BE (SOMEONE)'S	Location, existence, specification, possession
LIVE, DIE	Life and death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	Time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE	Space
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	Logical concepts
VERY, MORE	Augmentor, intensifier
LIKE~AS~WAY	Similarity

- Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes)
- Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes or phrasemes
- They can be formally, i.e. morphologically, complex
- They can have combinatorial variants or allolexes (indicated with ~)
- Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

Using these semantic primes, I will construct an explication for each of the two god concepts. I will then compare and contrast the two explications and delineate the similarities and differences between them.

3. *English* God *and Arabic* Allah

In this section, I will present the folk concepts of English *God* and Arabic *Allah*. I will analyze, and construct an explication for, each concept in a separate subsection.

3.1 English *God*

As Wierzbicka (2001) argues, the biblical God is perceived as 'someone' rather than 'something;' this is because God is depicted in the scriptures as a god that, inter alia, knows, wants, and speaks, and these are characteristics of someone, not something. COCA data show that such an idea is not strange to the average native English speaker:

(1) *I am sure that **God** knows that she was once young and happy, and that she lost her happiness cruelly through no one's fault.*

(2) *This is what **God** wants from them, and from you.*

Moreover, the fact that God is normally referred to with the pronoun *He* and not *it*, lends more support to the notion that God is perceived as 'someone.' Hence, the first component of the explication is:

(1a)   someone

English speakers seem to perceive *God* as a unique being, having no equivalent. From a linguistic viewpoint, this is attested by the fact that the English word *God* is written with a capital <G> and does not have a plural form. This being so, I will add:

(1b)   there isn't any other someone of the kind of this someone

While God is the only being of his kind, he is believed by Christians to have a triune nature, i.e. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is worth considering whether native English speakers, most of whom have a culturally Christian background, associate the concept of *God* with the concept of the *Holy Trinity*. If this were so, some components conveying this concept should be added. In fact, the words *triune* and *God* occur together 118 times in COCA, and *God* co-occurs with *Trinity* 56 times in the same corpus. However, almost all of these contexts come from religious sources, and this would cast doubt on whether the average native English speaker is familiar with this concept. Consequently, I will not include any components that capture the concept of the *Holy Trinity*.

Corpus data demonstrate that God is viewed as being in heaven. The words *God* and *heaven* are found together in 307 contexts in COCA. In 138 out of the 307 contexts, God is described as being in heaven; these contexts come from a variety of sources, and not only from religious ones. Here are a couple of examples:

(3)   *They're not here, but happy with **God** in heaven. We'll all be together again. That's where we go when we die.*

(4)   *And I watched her shut the passenger door and walk around to the driver's side, and I said to myself, Why, great **God** in heaven! I seem to have married one of those station wagon mommies!*

Although a number of people might think of heaven as a 'state' rather than a place (Zaleski 2003), I would argue that the average native English speaker would tend to imagine heaven as a place where God is and to which good people, so to speak, 'go' after they depart our world (Habib 2010, 2011). This can be captured in NSM as follows:

(1c) this someone is in the place where good people live after these
      people die

I should observe that the idea that God is somewhere might sound weird, because native English speakers seem to believe that God is omnipresent, as will be discussed later on. The two ideas, that God is in heaven and that God is everywhere, can be seen as contradictory. However, it should be borne in mind that we are dealing with a very special entity, whose 'world' appears to be different from ours.

Linguistic evidence shows that God is conceived of as a good being and that his goodness is unparalleled. The word *God/god* appears with all-loving 13 times in COCA, and, on ten of these 13 occasions, God is described as all-loving. That the adjective *all-loving*, and not merely *loving*, occurs with *God* denotes that people perceive that the good nature of God is unparalleled. This argument is further corroborated by the fact that this adjective does not collocate with any other word (such as *father, wife,* etc.) in COCA. Hence, the goodness of God can be anchored along the following line:

(1d) this someone is someone good, there isn't any other someone
      good like this someone

While individual people are capable of being in only one place at a time and have limited knowledge as well as limited ability, God appears to be perceived as omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. In COCA, the words *God* and *omnipresent* are found together in 10 contexts, and the expression *all-knowing* occurs with God 14 times.

The word *omniscient* occurs with *God* 30 times, and, on 21 of these 30 occasions, God is described as being omniscient. Additionally, in the same corpus, the words *all-powerful* and *God* appear together 25 times, and the word *almighty* appears with *God* 408 times. Because of God's omniscience, God can always know what people think, feel, and do, a characteristic that no other being possesses.

Additionally, God seems to be viewed as the creator of mankind and of all other things; therefore, people's existence depends on God, but God's existence is not dependent on anyone or anything. Support for this view comes from the co-occurrence of the words *God* and *creator*; they appear together in 192 contexts in COCA.

Because God is the source of existence, he is immortal. This idea can be also supported by the notion that native English speakers seem to think about God as a spirit; spirits, in turn, do not have bodies and do not die. Consider the following example from COCA:

(5) *At the New York memorial, singer Roberta Flack said her late friend always will be remembered. "**God** is a spirit, music is spiritual so everytime you hear Phyllis sing, she lives."*

All of this information can be captured as follows:

(1e) someone of the kind people can be in one place at some time, this someone can be in all places at the same time

(1f) people can know some things, this someone knows all things

(1g) people can do some things, this someone can do all things

(1h) people have bodies, this someone doesn't have a body

(1i) people die, this someone doesn't die

(1j) people exist because this someone wants people to exist, things of all kinds exist because this someone wants these things to exist

Whilst God does not have a body, linguistic evidence suggests that

native English speakers can think about him as a father or an old man. It can be objected that this image depicts the first person of the Holy Trinity, viz. God the Father. The following examples, however, imply that the one who is being portrayed as a father is God, and not the first person of the Holy Trinity. This is because the word *God* is understood as referring to the first person of the Holy Trinity only when followed by the phrase *the father*. The examples come from COCA:

(6) *She often prayed at this stage of the routine, and almost as often she felt **God** whispering to her, coaxing her, helping her along as a father might help his little girl.*

(7) ***God** is really taking care of you as a father. At the very center of this issue comes a deep desire for harmony, harmony in the family and in society.*

(8) *They are about as comforting as imagining **God** as a robed elderly man with a long white beard, floating around on a cloud.*

Hence, I will add the following component:

(1k) when people think about this someone, people can think like this:
"this someone is like people's father [m],
this father [m] has lived for a long time"

This component describes how native English speakers seem to visualize God; therefore, it begins with the sentence *'when people think about this someone, people can think like this.'* This sentence is followed by a depiction of God as a father who has lived for a long time, a depiction that aims to convey the idea that God can be visualized as an old father.

Three comments are in order regarding component (1k) above. First, the word *father* is not a semantic prime but a semantic mo-

lecule, [m]. Contrary to semantic primes, semantic molecules are relatively complex, and thus, they are definable. In order for a word to be given the status of a semantic molecule, it should be shown that this word is needed in the explications of a number of words. The use of semantic molecules is called for because using only semantic primes to explicate certain terms can result in very long explications. Using semantic molecules does not influence the simplicity and universality of the explications because the former are readily decomposable into semantic primes. When a semantic molecule appears in an explication, it is followed by an 'm' in square brackets [m] to distinguish it from semantic primes (Goddard 2007, 2010).

Second, I described God as "people's father" and not "a father" because *father* in the former construction, but not in the latter one, is considered a semantic molecule. In fact, the phrase 'a father' is more complex than 'someone's father' (Goddard, p.c.).

Third, examples [6]-[8] above do not make it clear whether native English speakers have one visualization of God, i.e. as an old father, or two depictions of him, namely (1) as a father or (2) as an old man. As a consequence, it is not clear at this stage whether the second line in this component should read as:

> this someone is like people's father [m], this father [m]
> has lived for a long time

Or as:

> this someone is like people's father [m],
> this someone is like a man [m], this man [m] has lived for a long time

I prefer describing God as an old father because such a description includes the two ideas that God can be imagined as a father or as an old man.

Linguistic evidence suggests that God is perceived as a being

who helps people. Consider, for instance, the following examples from COCA:

(9) *This generation is dealing with things I never heard of in my life: AIDS on one side and black-on-black crime is out of hand. But* **God** *wants to make a change. Each of you can reach three or four people.* **God** *can use you to minister to those people.*

(10) *We may not have all our wants, but* **God** *helps us with whatever we need.*

Linguistic evidence also suggests that God wants people to do certain things and refrain from doing other things. This is, in fact, the idea behind the concept of *God's commandments*. This concept appears 56 times in COCA and refers to the "dos" and "don'ts" that God wants people to know and abide by. It may be tempting to think that God wants people to do good things and avoid bad things, because God is viewed as good and the source of goodness. I doubt, however, whether native English speakers would agree to this idea, particularly because there are certain things which God asks people to avoid and which are not seen as evil by all native English speakers. As an example, consider homosexual relationships. The Bible teaches that God does not want people to engage in such relationships (Leviticus 18:22; 1 Corinthians 6:9); nevertheless, many native English speakers do not see such a relationship as bad or evil (Cochran 2001). These people, I assume, would not agree that God always wants people to do good things and shun bad things.

Of course, it can be argued that, since God is the source of goodness, it should be stated clearly that God wants people to do *certain good* things and refrain from doing *certain bad* things. At the same time (so the argument can proceed), it can be mentioned that God also wants people to do a number of things and avoid doing several other things, simply because that is his will. Such an argument is

not impossible to express in NSM. Nonetheless, I find it awkward, and therefore, prefer the shorter version, viz. saying that God wants people to do some things and avoid others.

Furthermore, linguistic evidence shows that native English speakers conceive of God as a being who can experience anger and can even take revenge if people disobey his commandments. If the sinner repents, however, God is always seen as merciful. In COCA, the word *wrath* appears with *God* 144 times, the word *punish* occurs with *God* 59 times, and the word *mercy* collocates with *God* 334 times. Here are some examples:

(11) *Well, I can't help but think of it as a kind of a year of the wrath of **God**. We've—we've had terrible floods, hurricanes, tidal waves, pestilence.*

(12) *It was her own fault. **God** would punish her. She knew this now. **God** would punish her for her thoughts and… for her actions.*

(13) *All the murmuring stopped when the minister stepped into the pulpit. He opened the service with prayer. Joining with the congregation, Marta said the prayer of confession, and she heard the minister's assurance of **God**'s mercy and forgiveness.*

In universal human concepts, this information can be represented as follows:

(1l)   this someone wants to do good things for all people

(1m) this someone wants people to do some things

(1n)   this someone doesn't want people to do some other things

(1o)   if people, do these other things, this someone can do something to these people, because of this, these people can feel something bad

(1p)   it can be not like this, if, after people do these other things,
        people say to this someone something like this:
        "I know that I did something bad, I know that you didn't want
        me to do it, I don't want to do something like this after this"

It should be noted that the explication does not describe what God
does to people as something bad, but rather as something that will
cause these people to feel something bad. This is because component
(1d) depicts God as being a good someone, and it would be contra-
dictory to ascribe bad actions to someone who is good.

3.2 Arabic *Allah*

The Arabic word *Allah* found its way into the English vocabulary in
1584 (Merriam-Webster 2003). *The Cambridge Advanced Learner's
Dictionary* (2005) defines it as the name of God for Muslims; so do
other dictionaries, such as the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Mer-
riam-Webster 2003) and the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary
English* (2003). Such a definition implies that *Allah* and *God* refer
to the same entity, an idea which is not acceptable by all Christians
(Cimino 2005).

I would claim that God and Allah, as perceived by ordinary native
English speakers (as opposed to theologians) and by Muslim Arabs,
share many similarities and only a few differences. I would propose
the following explication of *Allah*:

(2a)   someone

(2b)   there isn't any other someone of the kind of this someone

(2c)   this someone is above the place where good people live
        after these people die

(2d)   this someone is someone good, there isn't any other someone
        good like this someone

(2e)   people can know some things, this someone knows all things

(2f) people can do some things, this someone can do all things

(2g) people die, this someone doesn't die

(2h) people exist because this someone wants people to exist, things of all kinds exist because this someone wants these things to exist

(2i) this someone wants to do good things for all people

(2j) this someone wants people to do some things

(2k) this someone doesn't want people to do some other things

(2l) if people do these other things, this someone can do something to these people, because of this, these people can feel something bad

(2m) it can be not like this if, after people do these other things, people say to this someone something like this:
"I know that I did something bad, I know that you didn't want me to do it, I don't want to do something like this after this"

Component (2a) shows that Allah is viewed as a rational being. In support of this, consider example [14] below, which indicates that Allah seems to be perceived as a being that can, among other things, think and speak:

(14) …**wallahu** yukhāṭibu muhammdan …
'…and **Allah** speaks with [the prophet] Muhammad…'

Component (2b) states that Allah is the only being of his kind. This is evidenced by the fact that the Arabic word *Allah* includes the definite article **al**- 'the' and does not have a plural form.

Component (2c) refers to the place with which Allah is associated. According to the Islamic belief, Allah's throne is above *janna* ('heaven') *(Translation of Sahih Bukhari*, 2013: Vol. 4, Book 52, No. 48); *janna*, in turn, is believed to be a place in or above the seventh heaven *(Translation of Sahih Muslim* 2013: Vol. 4, Book 54, No. 429), and to this place "good" people go after their death (Habib

2010, 2011). ArabiCorpus data suggest that Muslim Arabs may be familiar with this notion:

(15) *laqad ikhtārahā **llāhu** min fawqi sabʾi samāwāten litakūna masjidan lirrasūli lkarīmi.*
*'**Allah**, from above the seven heavens, chose it [the land of Medina in Saudi Arabia] to be a place for prayer [or Mosque] for the honorable prophet.'*

(16) *sharraʾa **llāhu** zzawaja min fawqi sabʾi samāwāten.*
*'**Allah**, from above the seven heavens, legalized marriage.'*

(17) *rubbamā lan yakūna lliqāʿu illā bissamāʿ, laqad iltaḥaqnā bilmuqāwama wanasʾalu llāha an yaktuba lanā shshahāda.*
'Perhaps we will meet each other only in heaven; we have joined the resistant movement, and we ask Allah to give us to be martyrs.'

The first two examples above clearly demonstrate the Allah is perceived as being above the seventh heaven. The third example demonstrates that people who die can go to *assamāʿ* ('heaven'). Thus, Allah can be said to be above the place to which righteous people go after they die.

As with God, Allah seems to be viewed as the source of goodness, and his goodness is unparalleled. This notion is represented in component (2d), and it is supported by the fact that the word *khayr* 'goodness/good things' collocates with *Allah* 232 times in ArabiCorpus. On 128 occasions, the collocation refers to the idea that Allah gives people good things; example [18] below is illustrative:

(18) *jazākumu **llāhu** khayran waʿamadda fī ʾumurikum.*
*'May **Allah** reward you with good things, and may he let you live for a long time.'*

Furthermore, in Islam, Allah is said to have 99 names (or attributes), two of which are *arraḥmān* 'merciful' and *arraḥīm* 'compassionate.' These two names are very well-known because of the phrase *bismi llāh irraḥmān irraḥīm* 'in the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate,' which Muslims are instructed to recite before doing certain acts, such as reading the Quran or eating. This phrase appears 504 times in ArabiCorpus. The names *arraḥmān* and *arraḥīm* demonstrate that Allah is good, as he does not reject the sinner who repents.

Components (2e)-(2h) reveal that Allah is all-knowing, all-powerful, immortal, and the source of life. In fact, among the 99 names of Allah are *alʾalīm* 'omniscient,' *aljabbār* 'almighty,' *alḥayy* 'ever living,' and *alkhāliq* 'creator.' Linguistic evidence shows that ordinary Muslim Arabs are familiar with these attributes. For instance, the expression *Allahu aʾlam* 'God knows' occurs 367 times in ArabiCorpus. This expression can be used in Arabic when making any assumption. The word *ʾalīm* 'omniscient' appears with *Allah* 65 times in the same corpus, with the meaning that Allah knows everything. The expression *khalqu llāh* 'what Allah has created' and the phrase *khalaqa llāhu X* 'Allah created X' occur 295 times in ArabiCorpus.

It is worth observing that, although Allah is immortal, it cannot be concluded that he does not have a body. In fact, ArabiCorpus does not present any contexts in which Allah is described as a *rūḥ* 'spirit.' At the same time, there are no contexts that suggest that Allah is perceived as having a body. It is noteworthy that this issue, i.e. whether or not Allah has a body, is controversial among Muslim theologians. Some claim that Allah has a body which is unlike any other body; they base themselves on certain religious texts that portray Allah as having a body. For example, the Prophet is believed to have said, "God met me, shook hands with me, and put his hand between my shoulders, until I felt the coldness of his fingers" (Shahrastani 1984: 90). Some other Muslim theologians claim that these depictions are but metaphorical (Brown 2009: 178). Since there is no consensus

and because there is no linguistic evidence that points out whether or not Allah has a body, I have not included any components that talk about the (in)corporeality of Allah.

The rest of the components portray the kind of relationship between Allah and people. In support of the claims made, I will present the following linguistic evidence. ArabiCorpus data suggest that Allah protects people and gives them a helpful hand. Consider, for instance, the expressions *ḥafiẓahu llāh* 'may Allah protect him' and *biʾawni llāh* 'with Allah's help'; *ḥafiẓahu llāh* appears 480 times in ArabiCorpus and is used mainly when mentioning the name of an Arab king or a prince; notice, however, that, in non-standard Arabic dialects, the expression *Allah yiḥfaẓak* 'may Allah protect you' is used to invoke Allah's protection to anyone. *Biʾawni llāh* 'with Allah's help' is found 106 times in the same corpus and is employed primarily when talking about a future plan that would be put to work; thus by saying this expression, people ask Allah to assist them in what they are going to do.

Data also suggest that Allah wants people to follow his commandments and abstain from disobeying them. Here are some excerpts from ArabiCorpus:

(19) *amma ṣiyamu…ramaḍān, faqad faraḍahu* **llāhu** *ʾalaynā.*
'As for fasting the month of Ramadan, **Allah** has decreed it for us.'

(20) *ālwālidayni…fāraḍa* **llāhu** *ʾalaynā ḥubbahuma wāḥtirāmahumā.*
'**Allah** decreed for us to love and respect our parents.'

(21) *ijtanib mā nahā llāhu ʾanhu.*
'Avoid what Allah has prohibited.'

Allah's goodness does not appear to prevent him from being angry with people or even causing them suffering if they flout his laws.

This is evidenced by the expressions *ghaḍabu llāh* 'Allah's anger,' which occurs 35 times in ArabiCorpus, and *Allahu ʾazīzun dhū intiqām* 'Allah is all-powerful and exacts revenge,' which occurs 6 times in the same corpus.

4. The explications as a whole

In this section, I present the two explications as a whole, and I underline the components that are different between them.

4.1 English God

(1a) someone

(1b) there isn't any other someone of the kind of this someone

(1c) <u>this someone is in the place where good people live after these people die</u>

(1d) this someone is someone good, there isn't any other someone good like this someone

(1e) <u>someone of the kind people can be in one place at some time, this someone can be in all places at the same time</u>

(1f) people can know some things, this someone knows all things

(1g) people can do some things, this someone can do all things

(1h) people have bodies, this someone doesn't have a body

(1i) people die, this someone doesn't die

(1j) people exist because this someone wants people to exist, things of all kinds exist because this someone wants these things to exist

(1k) <u>when people think about this someone, people can think like this: "this someone is like people's father [m], this father [m] has lived</u>

<u>for a long time"</u>

(1l)   this someone wants to do good things for all people

(1m) this someone wants people to do some things

(1n)   this someone doesn't want people to do some other things

(1o) if people do these other things, this someone can do something to these people, because of this, these people can feel something bad

(1p) it can be not like this, if, after people do these other things, people say to this someone something like this:
"I know that I did something bad, I know that you didn't want me to do it, I don't want to do something like this after this"

4.2 Arabic *Allah*

(2a) someone

(2b) there isn't any other someone of the kind of this someone

(2c) <u>this someone is above the place where good people live after these people die</u>

(2d) this someone is someone good, there isn't any other someone good like this someone

(2e) people can know some things, this someone knows all things

(2f) people can do some things, this someone can do all things

(2g) people die, this someone doesn't die

(2h) people exist because this someone wants people to exist, things of all kinds exist because this someone wants these things to exist

(2i)   this someone wants to do good things for all people

(2j)   this someone wants people to do some things

(2k) this someone doesn't want people to do some other things

(2l)   if people do these other things, this someone can do something

to these people, because of this, these people can feel something
bad

(2m) it can be not like this if, after people do these other things,
people say to this someone something like this:
"I know that I did something bad, I know that you didn't want
me to do it, I don't want to do something like this after this"

5. Discussion

As has been demonstrated, the god concepts investigated in this
study match up perfectly in most aspects. As for the similarities,
God and Allah appear to be conceived of as rational beings. They are
beneficent and do good things for people, but they punish people if
they commit sins and do not repent. They are viewed as omniscient
and omnipotent. They are also perceived as the source of life and
the creators of human beings as well as of all other things.

Regarding the differences, God seems to be viewed as being in the
same place to which good people go after they die, whereas Allah is
above such a place. Thus it seems that deceased good people can see
or come into contact with God, but not necessarily with Allah. A
second difference is related to the presence of these two entities in
the world or universe. God is believed to be omnipresent; however,
there is no linguistic evidence to support the idea that Allah can be
everywhere at the same time. From a religious point of view, one
may argue that, since Allah is all powerful, he can be in all places
at the same time; however, because this paper is based on linguistic
evidence and I have not found such evidence to support the idea
that Allah is omnipresent, I have not included any component per-
taining to this issue in the explication of Allah. A third difference
pertains to whether the god entity is a spirit or not. God appears to
be conceived of as a spirit and thus has no body. As for Allah, there
has not been found linguistic evidence that shows whether Muslim
Arabs think of him as being a spirit or not. The last difference con-

cerns the visual representation of the god entity. God is portrayed as a father; this notion is inconceivable and regarded as blasphemy in Islam, as Muslims are prohibited from picturing Allah, among other things.

Notwithstanding the differences, the two concepts, I argue, can contribute to intercultural communication, and to thinking of the **other** as a **brother**. The many similarities between these two concepts can help promote understanding between native English speakers and Muslim Arabs. As for the differences, their effect would be dependent on the interlocutors' open-mindedness and tolerance of each other's beliefs. If the interlocutors have the intention of learning about each other's perspective, discussing the two concepts can be of interest to both sides. On the other hand, if each of the interlocutors believes that s/he possesses the 'absolute truth', talking about the two concepts can bring about tension.

In addition to its contribution to intercultural communication, this study gives cultural outsiders access to the insider perspective of each concept. This access is granted owing to the translatability of the explications of the two concepts. Because the explications are constructed from universal human concepts, they can be translated into any language.

6. Conclusion

This study has dealt with the English concept of God and its Arabic corresponding concept Allah, as viewed by ordinary native English speakers and Muslim Arabs, respectively. Each concept has been examined and analyzed based on linguistic evidence, and an explication has been constructed for each concept. The explications have been compared and contrasted, and the results show that the god concepts investigated here share many similarities but are different in a few aspects. The substantial overlapping between the two concepts makes

them suitable for intercultural interaction between native English speakers and Muslim Arabs. This is because members of each group will come to appreciate the many commonalities between the two concepts, and this is hoped to promote understanding between them.

Acknowledgment

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