Summary

The doctrine of divine simplicity arises out of Christian and Islamic thinkers’ reflection on the biblical and Qur’anic declaration that God/Allah is one, but is known as having many essential attributes. The question that naturally arises from such reflection is: is it possible to hold the oneness of God/Allah with the plurality of attributes without compromising the doctrine of God’s unity (Tawhīd)? This question is especially acute for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. In view of the various creedal formulations in both traditions, these doctrinal declarations have been discussed and contested among different groups of scholars, especially in the thought of the following selected thinkers: the Sunni Islamic theologian al-Ghazālī (448-505/1056-1111); the Andalusian philosophers Ibn Rushd (520-295/1126-1198); the Roman Catholic theologian/philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274); and the Reformed theologian John Calvin (1509-1564). These thinkers offered solutions that help in fostering present-day interreligious dialogue between the two faiths.

This research hence seeks to answer the central question of How do al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, Thomas, and Calvin conceptually link the oneness of God/Allah (divine simplicity/Tawhīd) with the plurality of His attributes (ṣifāt)? Additionally, how do Christian thinkers relate the oneness of God’s essence with the plurality of three divine Persons? In order to answer this question, I examined the selected texts of these four thinkers: the discussion of the divine unity (Tawhīd) in al-Ghazālī’s Tahāfut al-falāṣīfā and al-Iqtiṣād; the corresponding discussion of God’s unity found in al-Ghazālī’s Tahāfut and in Ibn Rushd’s Tahāfut al-Tahāfut, as well as Ibn Rushd’s commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics; the discussions of the simplicity and the attributes of God (and the Trinity of God) in Thomas’ Summa Contra Gentiles and Calvin’s biblical commentaries in connection to his Institutes (1536 Latin edition, 1541 French edition, and 1559).

In considering the historical order of these thinkers, I first concentrated on al-Ghazālī’s and Ibn Rushd’s views—the most comprehensive versions of the medieval theories of divine simplicity in the Muslim world. Then I turned to the theory of divine simplicity according to Thomas and Calvin – the most developed versions of the medieval and reformed theories of divine simplicity in the Christian world. Each of these chapters begins with the selected thinker’s background. A presentation of their historical and theological context is included, and attention is especially given to their contemporary interlocutors for two main reasons. First, I pointed out that each thinker’s conception of divine simplicity is in response to their interrogators (this is commonly less appreciated in contemporary discussion of their thoughts). Second, I also pointed out that this polemical or apologetical debate provides essential background for us to understand al-Ghazālī’s, Ibn Rushd’s, Thomas’, and Calvin’s ideas of divine simplicity. Finally, in the last chapter, with the results of my preceding investigations, I presented a comparative study of the Muslim-Christian theologies, and explored a more mature account of the doctrine of divine simplicity through the philosophical-theological principles of these thinkers.

In the chapter on al-Ghazālī (Chapter 2), considering that al-Ghazālī’s view represents the Ash’arite school over the Mu’tazilite version of divine unity, I identified al-Ghazālī’s usage of the Ash’arite formula. According to the Ash’arite formula, God’s essential attributes (ṣifāt dhātiyya) are neither God nor other than God. To simply put, God’s essential attributes are “not identical, but not different” from God’s essence (adḥ-Dhāt). This is a crucial distinction because on the one hand, if the essential attributes were different from God’s essence (not identical to it), the oneness of Allāh would be compromised. On the other
hand, if the essential names/attributes were co-eternal with the divine essence to maintain the divine simplicity, the many essential attributes of Allāh would be sabotaged. In my view, al-Ghazālī’s formulation of divine simplicity not only affirms the unity and attributes of God, but also counters the Mu’tazilīs’ conception of divine simplicity (including the Islamic philosophers). According to the Mu’tazilīs’ conception of divine simplicity, all positive attributes of Allāh as subsumed in the divine essence. Hence, they hold that the attributes are identical to God’s essence. Consequently, they usually emphasize God’s unity.

Furthermore, I pointed out that the terminologies of Tawḥīd constituted the backbone of Al-Ghazālī’s theory of Tawḥīd–Wahda (singularity), al-ḥaḍarīyya (individuality), al-Qayyūm (self-existence), kāmil (perfect), and al-khāṣṣiyah (uniqueness). It seems that this usage of Al-Ghazālī’s aims at stressing the oneness of God (Tawḥīd) when he considers the existence and distinctiveness of divine attributes. I argued that although al-Ghazālī borrowed these terms from his predecessors (e.g., Ibn Sīnā), he does not adopt their theories of Tawḥīd. Al-Ghazālī used these terms distinctively to demonstrate the transcendent unity of Allāh. For example, al-Ghazālī approaches the doctrine of divine unity by employing the threefold idea, namely the uniqueness, completeness, and unknowability of Allāh. In my discussion of the threefold idea, I pointed out that the following premises are required. Premise 1: Allāh is not quantification but completeness; Premise 2: Allāh is completely one as the unique being. Hence, the conclusion is: Allāh is an absolutely unique-whole-indivisible Being. This threefold idea of al-Ghazālī lies at the heart of his doctrine of divine simplicity. I concluded that by taking into account these three theological terms, al-Ghazālī is able to hold that the plurality of essential divine attributes does not make the singularity of divine essence plural.

Chapter 3 focuses on Ibn Rushd’s Tahāfut al-Tahāfut and Metaphysics. I showed that the theological discourses provided by al-Ghazālī are used by Ibn Rushd to form his Tahāfut al-Tahāfut. He argued in Tahāfut al-Tahāfut that God does not actually possess essential attributes that are multiple and super-added to His essence. Rather God’s divine attributes exist in intellection (ta’aqqul or in the mind) only. Consequently, God’s divine attributes are identical to (to express singularity) His real essence (self-existence or anniyya). Nevertheless, God’s divine attributes are also different from His real essence in the sense that His perfections are manifested only in relation to His essence as distinct realities, but not to His real essence. Ibn Rushd then makes an explicit inference to further conclude that such essential attributes are to be considered as multiple distinct attributes in God. Thus, it is appropriate only in human perception to presuppose simple essence. Through such argument, Ibn Rushd attempts to secure God’s utter simplicity. For Ibn Rushd, the principle of “God is necessarily existent” (anniyya) is particularly crucial to his doctrine of Allāh’s simplicity and attributes. For example, Ibn Rushd distinguishes the attributes of perfection (i.e., the seven essential attributes of God that are explicitly given in the Qu’rān: knowledge, life, power, will, hearing, vision, and speech) from the non-essential attributes. In such a way, he states that the non-essential attributes of perfection are a unique plurality of attributes “without implying a plurality in essence.”

With regards to Aristotle’s Metaphysics (Book XII), I argued that Ibn Rushd had proved to be an independent-minded commentator of Aristotle, at least with comparison to Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna). I pointed out that by embracing a slightly modified version of Ibn Sīnā’s works, Ibn Rushd vividly demonstrates his solution to the tension that occurs in this doctrine. I argued that in the Metaphysics, Ibn Rushd differentiated the concepts of actuality and potentiality; and constantly treated them as a unity among the attributes of being. I concluded that in his Tahāfut al-Tahāfut and his commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Ibn Rushd’s
detailed defense of the doctrine of divine simplicity is best understood when closely linked to
the premise that God is the necessary first uncaused cause of the existent (self-existence). The
oneness of the essence and the multiplicity of attributes in Allāh are clearly shown in this
premise. Since the doctrine of divine simplicity derives from this premise, I also concluded
that the self-existence of God suffices for the theory of Tawḥīd.

For the Christian doctrine of divine simplicity, I turned to the works of Thomas
(Chapter 4) and Calvin (Chapter 5). I began by examining the only completed summa among
Thomas’ works, namely, the Summa Contra Gentiles. Attention is given to surveying the
theoretical and practical objections raised against the doctrine of divine simplicity in his
contemporary debates. In light of these debates, defending “The Simplicity and the Attributes
of God” (ref. section 4.2) and “The Simplicity and the Trinity of God” (ref. section 4.3) in the
Summa Contra Gentiles were important aspects of the whole work. I studied Thomas’ view
on the relationship between the simplicity and the multiplicity of divine attributes; and further
pointed out that the following important aspects served as the key foundations for his solution
to the paradoxes in the doctrine of divine simplicity: (i) the mode of signifying; (ii) the
highest degree of unity; and (iii) the highest degree of perfection. By applying these
important aspects, Thomas proposes an initial division of his understanding on the nature of
God into the categories of cause (essentia), and created effecti (created effects of God).
Thomas discusses divine simplicity and perfection from the viewpoint of the cause; and
discusses the plurality of God’s attributes and names from the perspective of the created
effects of God. In this way, Thomas claims “that the divine perfection and the plurality of
divine names are not opposed to the divine simplicity.” According to Thomas, we conceive of
God’s attributes as the cause of created effects; whereby the perfections of created effects
pre-exist in God in a higher mode. It is the multiplicity of created effects of God which brings
with it a multiplicity of names; however, the different perfections designated by them are just
one single perfection in God. Thomas states that, for example, God possesses all His
attributes as properties in the analogical sense. The perfections that humans know from God’s
works or effects exist in an eminent way in His simple essentia (the first efficient cause). To
be sure, all attributes are real and they are not synonymous; they are plural and different to us
according to our understanding, but they are one and the same in God Himself.

In my discussion on Thomas’ theory of divine simplicity in relation to his doctrine of
the Trinity, I pointed out that for Thomas’ theory to be valid, the existence of “oppositional
relation of the divine Persons” and “the aseity of divine Persons” is required. I also showed
that Thomas’ idea of the doctrine of divine simplicity was partly shaped by his reply to the
Cantor of Antioch: Reasons for the Faith against Muslim Objections. This reply is a response
to Muslim polemic against the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Condemnation of 1277
in Paris (particularly the Propositions 185 [1] and 186 [2]), and the treatise on the Errores
philosophorum by Giles of Rome also showed that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was at
stake. These texts revealed that at the end of the thirteenth century, the Christian doctrines of
the Trinity and the eternal generation of the Word were the subject of the debate raised by the
anti-trinitarians (i.e., Ibn Rushd and Maimonides). For these Arabian Aristotelians, the
document of the Trinity destroys the simplicity of God. At first glance, Thomas’ discussion of
the Trinity in his Summa Contra Gentiles (SCG IV [1264]) seems to be engaging in an
explicit polemic against Christian heresies (i.e., Arianism, Sabellianism), rather than fighting
against the non-Christian religious or philosophical objections (Arabian Aristotelians).
Nevertheless, Thomas’ SCG in fact shows that there are similarities between the objections of
Ibn Rushd and the objections refuted by Thomas. Thomas points out that according to the
ture Catholic faith, there is a real subsisting relation, namely one without a division, between
the divine Persons in God (i.e., the Father is entirely unbegotten, but the Son is begotten). Hence, Thomas affirms that there is one single essence in God (the essence of Father and the essence of Son are the same nature).

Moreover, I presented a survey of Thomas’ doctrine of divine simplicity and the Trinity through his discussion on these two crucial points: (a) the fullness of the deity in the three divine Persons; (b) and the aseity of God in each Person. For Thomas, the numerical oneness of God is an important aspect for maintaining the confession of the Trinity. This is explicitly shown in Thomas’ confession that each divine Person is fully God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But at the same time, Thomas affirms that the three divine Persons do not constitute three gods; they are one and the same God. The reason is that there is only one subsistence / essentia in the Godhead, not three essentiae. Through such an analysis, Thomas asserts that, while the principle of “opposed relations” and the distinct “proprietates” between the Persons leads to the plurality of the divine Persons, the common essence shared by the Persons does not lead to a plurality of gods.

In the chapter on Calvin, I investigated Calvin’s biblical account of the doctrine of divine simplicity in relation to God’s attributes and Persons. I also studied the selected biblical pericopes Calvin uses to support the doctrine of divine simplicity. My investigation shows that these selected pericopes are connected to Calvin’s Institutes (1536, 1541 French Edition, and 1559), and they also play a crucial role especially in Calvin’s affirmation of God’s simplicity and Trinity. I pointed out that the way Calvin used particular biblical texts leads us towards a clearer understanding of his idea of divine simplicity in relation to divine attributes and Persons. In the debates with his opponents (especially Pierre Caroli and Michael Servetus), Calvin explicitly indicated his disagreement with them through explaining these particular biblical texts. I have specifically identified the “standardized phrase” Calvin often used when discussing the doctrine of divine simplicity. For example, “For in each hypostasis the whole divine nature is understood, with this qualification—that to each belongs his own peculiar quality” (I.13.19; OS3: 132). I then restricted my analysis to the following biblical texts according to the historical order of Calvin’s commentaries. These texts appear to be the most representative and significant texts in Calvin’s development of his trinitarian doctrine: Rom. 8:9-11; Eph. 4:5-6; Heb. 1 and 11:3; John 1; Gen. 1; Matt. 28:19; Exod. 3:14; Dan. 7:13, and Ezek. 1:25-26. For example, Calvin uses Heb. 1:3 to define his theological term (hypostasis). He then also shows that the theological formulation of his doctrine of divine simplicity derives directly from Scripture, rather than from other sources or analogy. Additionally, the examination of Calvin’s works enables us to encounter the theological opponents of Calvin (particularly concerning the doctrine of God) who appeared in different periods of his life. These opponents include Caroli, Servetus, Giovanni Valentino Gentilis, and Giorgio Blandrata of Piedmont. I argued that the texts mentioned above do speak about the simplicity and the Trinity of God, as Calvin defines the concept (i.e., in terms of the aseity of God). I also argued that although Calvin’s formulation indicates God’s oneness, this does not prove that God’s oneness is in accordance to the understanding of Servetus (i.e., that God obtains absolute oneness).

Furthermore, I pointed out that when Calvin describes the absolute simple essence of God and the Persons of the Trinity, every definition and term were used by Calvin to maintain the following doctrinal teaching: there are “three distinct Persons but not a division” in the simple essence. Calvin further develops the trinitarian terminology of aseitas, and applies it in explaining the irreducible oneness and threeness of God. This provides a strong argument for Calvin that the doctrine of divine simplicity must be defined in such a way as to
prevent obliterating the threeness of the divine Persons. Similarly, the doctrine of the Trinity cannot abolish God’s oneness. I showed how this perspective becomes the groundwork of Calvin’s biblical interpretation of the doctrine of divine simplicity, the Trinity, and his polemical arguments against the anti-trinitarians. My investigation indicated that the idea of Christ’s aseity does not only explicitly appear in his earlier works (Rom. 8: 9-11 and the 1536 Institutes), but it was being developed into a clearer doctrine in the later editions of his Institutes of (1539/1541, 1559), and his commentaries (John 1 and Gen. 1) after his debates with Caroli and Servetus. Moreover, Calvin provided an even more mature theological reflection on this doctrine in the final series of his Praelectiones (Exod. 3: 14, 34: 6-7; Ezek. 1: 25-26).

In the final chapter (Chapter 6), I applied my preceding findings of how al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, Thomas, and Calvin approached the concept of divine simplicity to present a comparative study. I also highlighted the few central elements or solutions that play an important role in their formulation of the doctrine of divine simplicity. One of these solutions focuses on the concept of God’s self-existence (the aseity of God): apart from “many attributes” and “three Persons” of the necessary being of God, God’s self-existence is also irreducible. In other words, God’s self-existence is identical to and the same as His many attributes and three Persons. The concept that God’s self-existence is indivisible enables Christianity and Islam to hold without compromise to the multiplicity of God’s attributes.

We have seen that both Ibn Rushd and Calvin emphasize the connection between God’s simplicity and His self-existence. For them, God’s aseitas (self-existence of God) implies that He is God of Himself in the fullness of His deity, and thus self-contained within Himself. Calvin further emphasizes God’s aseity in his discussion of the Trinity. Calvin points out that in His aseity, God and each of the divine Persons are truly identical with each other and the same as His essence. Yet, the divine Persons do not imply three different “gods of himself” (tritheism), but the one and only God. For al-Ghazālī, he uses the concept of God’s uniqueness to support his understanding of God’s oneness: God is an incomparable God, without any eternal partners, and transcends the composite nature of the creatures. Therefore, God is without parts in the uniqueness with which He is the one and only God. In addition, al-Ghazālī also points to God’s perfection as an important solution of this theory. He states that God Himself is in the completeness of His divinity, and in this divinity the attributes are “not identical, but not different.” Therefore, God is free from all composition of attributes. In the same vein Thomas explains that God’s highest good implies that He Himself is the supreme good (highest degree of existence). God’s plurality of attributes signifies the ultimate goodness in His own essence. The plurality of attributes is neither equivocal nor univocal with respect to His ultimate perfection. In God’s highest good each of His attributes and His essence are one and the same.

Taking into account the results and observations mentioned above, I further proposed the following framework for a possible theological appropriation of the doctrine of divine simplicity: (1) God is the one and only being with all attributes of perfection; (2) God is the one and only being without parts; (3) God is one in single essence (Dhāt); (4) God is the one and only transcendent being; (5) God is one in essence and three in divine Persons. As the results of my investigations shows, for al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, Thomas, and Calvin, the simplicity of God is associated with God’s uniqueness, perfection, highest good and aseity. In line with this, it is legitimate to conclude that in their theological discourses on God’s simplicity and the plurality of attributes, God’s uniqueness, perfection, highest good and aseity are connected. We also see in contemporary theology of the two faiths that these
themes certainly are significant when discussing the doctrine of divine simplicity. Hence, I argued that if we are to understand God’s simplicity and its relation to divine attributes (and Persons), we must turn to the texts of these thinkers as the starting point of our quest and answer. Admittedly, turning to these four thinkers for discussing the topic of divine simplicity is largely ignored in most contemporary interfaith discussion.

We also recognized from our study of al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, Thomas, and Calvin that the tension of the divine simplicity and attributes of God cannot be rationally solved by including their theological-philosophical approaches. However, analyzing and comparing their thoughts on this topic within their context would contribute immensely to our understanding of their significance for Christian-Muslim relations today. Although the ways they understand the relation between God’s oneness and His attributes are different, all four thinkers are aiming at one similar concern, namely to affirm and to worship the one and only God. Hence, it seems to me that both Muslims and Christians are justified to call their God Allāh, if both parties take serious account of what the representative authors have brought forward about God’s simplicity. It should be noted that the scope of this research did leave room for further interfaith study. It is my hope that this research will serve to expand the theological discussion of divine simplicity between the two monotheistic communities (Christians and Muslims).