

Chapter 14: The Alphabets of Religion

Heart asked: I desire a divine insight

Teach me if you have access to it

I said: 'A', he said don't say anymore

It's enough if there is anyone at home

أول الدين معرفته

Monotheism and believing in one God is the foundation of all divine religions. Monotheism is the alphabet of religion by which all religious terms will be written and the accuracy of which will be measured. Failure to learn the alphabet of religion the student in religion may misread and misinterpret all other religious terms and doctrines the result of which may not be far from polytheism or even atheism.

If on the other hand, monotheism is understood correctly, all other religious beliefs can be understood correctly. Monotheism is not a merely subjective and theoretical principle with no effect on practicality of our lives. It is rather well mirrored on the way we live. Thus, grasping the true concept of monotheism has a direct impact on all walks of life.

For instance, A monotheist, does not put his trust save in God. He does not compromise or attempt to please humans to achieve his goals. A monotheist will never quit in his life no matter how striking the situation will be. A monotheist will never lose his hope in Almighty God, and hence, despair and hopelessness do not exist in his life dictionary. He is always enthusiastic, energetic and optimistic about the future.

A monotheist knows whom and how much he should praise and respect. He will not fall into the pitiful of

exaggerating the status of humans to believe in their deity, nor will he ignore their high status of nearness to God.

Exaggerating about the prophets and believing in their deity and divinity is due to the lack of true understanding of monotheism.

In Islam the first and the last lesson is about monotheism. Monotheism is the essence and the extract of Islam. It is the spirit of all Islamic teachings. Monotheism is the unique and the chief message of all prophets. It is the most profound and deeply rooted religious principle. All religious teachings and education should start with monotheism and to it.

If Islamic teachings are beans of pearls, monotheism is the chain, which connects them all together, makes a beautiful necklace. And if religion is a tree, monotheism is the root and the trunk of the tree.

The Head of Knowledge

One of the companions of the Prophet of Islam (saww) asked him what was the head of knowledge?

The Prophet replied:

“Knowing God as you are supposed to know Him. That to know Him with none similar to Him; that He is One God; the Creator, Omnipotent, the First and the Last, the Evident and the Hidden, none is comparable to Him or like unto Him. This is knowing God as He deserved to be known.” ¹

Teaching Monotheism during the war

During the battle of Camel (...) a man from the army of Imam Ali (a.s) asked him about the meaning of ‘Unity of God’. The army protesting him said: “You fool! Don't you see his striking situation, couldn't you ask him a better time?!”

To their surprise, Imam Ali (a.s) said to the army: “Let *him* talk! *What the man is asking is what we want from these people.*” and then he explained to him the true meaning of monotheism.²

Aspects of Monotheism

Monotheism can be understood in four aspects:

- 1) Unity of God in His Essence
- 2) Unity of God in His Divine Attributes
- 3) Unity of God in His Action
- 4) Unity of God in worshipping Him

1) Unity of God in His Essence

Unity of God in his Essence means knowing Him as One and a Unique God.

The first thing we need to know about God is the true concept of his Unity. When we say God is One, what do we really mean by that? Is it that God is One as the Sun in the solar system is one? Does it mean that He is the first as in natural number '1' in mathematics? Or the unity of God has much more profound meaning.

Numeral Unity or Unique Unity (Al-wahdatul-Adadiya or Al-wahdataul-Ahadiya)

Having lived in the world of numbers many people may image the unity of God in a numerical unity which means God is number 1.

Numerical unity means something is 'one' although it is logically possible to imagine the second for it. For instance, moon is the one and only satellite of planet Earth, however it is possible to imagine more than one satellite for it, as Mars has two satellites.

If a being is in such a way that we cannot even possibly imagine another one like unto it, this is called 'Unique Unity (Al-wahdatul-Ahadiya). As discussed in the previous chapter, God is infinite and as such there is no room even to imagine any other god in it. (Pay attention)

For instance, astronomers up until now disagree about the limits of universe whether it is infinite or finite. Some astrophysicists suggest that the universe is infinite while others propose its limitation. If we agree that the universe is infinite then we cannot even imagine another physical universe, for whatever you imagine will be within our infinite universe.

The concept of Unique Unity of God is one of the most purely Islamic contributions about the true concept of God which was never discussed among other philosophers or theologians.

The Most Perfect Description of Unity of God

Chapter 112 of the Holy Quran which is the Chapter of Purity in Monotheism describes the unity of God in the most perfect way:

“Say: He is Allah; the Unique (Ahad) .. and there is none coequal to Him ”.

Imam Ali (a.s) in introducing this Unity of God in Nahjul-Balagha says:

“He is One but not by the first in counting” 3

The Imam also in response to the man who had asked him about the concept of unity of God during the battle of Camel told him:

“O Bedouin! When we say God is One could have one of the four meanings, two of them are impossible about God and the other two are correct. The ones which are not possible are:

– To say God is One and you mean numeral unity. This is not true because when something doesn't have second, does not enter in numbers. Thus God considers those who said ‘God is one of the three’ polytheists. Similarly, if you say God is One and mean One in His kind, is incorrect, for it means you have imagined another one like unto Him.

– But to say God is One in that there is none like or coequal unto Him is correct, as it is correct to say God is Unique in His Essence in that there cannot be another one be it in our imagination, mind, or outside. Such is our Lord God”.⁴

'I' or 'WE'

If there is only One God, why God in the Quran in many instances refers to Himself utilizing the plural pronoun?

Eternity (Al-Azaliyyat)

Another concept about Monotheism in His Essence that we need to be familiar with is about the true meaning of His Eternity. What do we mean by saying that God is Eternal or perpetual? When we say someone or something is eternal it normally means that it exists at all times without change; thus 'the eternal city' was an appellation of Rome. Is it the same when we say God is Eternal? Nay.

The Eternity of God does not only mean that His existence is timeless and He is perpetual. No doubt, He always existed and will always exist. But this meaning of eternity would limit God in time, whilst He is the Creator of Time and Place. In other words, eternity in the sense of being timeless, means we have already assumed the span of the time and then imagine a being living in it from the beginning of time to the end of it.

The eternity of God, therefore, is not a timely eternity. He is eternal in that His existence proceeds time as He is the Creator of time. Thus, He is the First in the same way that He is the Last, for we cannot imagine any beginning or end for Him. This is the meaning of

“ He is the First and He is the Last” ⁵

The Evident and the Hidden

Another Attribute of God in His Essence is His two Attributes of the Evident (Al-dhaher) and the Hidden (Al-baaten).

The meaning of these two seemingly contradictory attributes is that God in his Essence is so Evident and Clear to all and the same time His Essence is so hidden from our physical sensations.

Let me explain this a little bit further. Everything has two types of existence. One its existence as it is, and the other, its existence as it appears to us. The existence of other things to us depends on our system of conception and situation under which we know about them. Our system of conception is limited to understanding things which are limited, have shape, colour, and sound, can be found in a specific time or place, etc.

God as He is Eternal and Infinite, is not limited to place or time and hence is hidden from our senses. Nevertheless, He is Evident in His own existence. In other words, He is Evident due to His Perfect Existence of being Eternal and for the same reason is Hidden from our sense due to their limits.

يا من هو اختفي لفرط نوره الظاهر الباطن في ظهوره

حجاب روي تو هم روي توست در هر حال نهان ز چشم جهاني ز بس كه پيدائي

2) Unity of God in His Attributes

Unity of God in His Attributes mean as He is Unique in His Essence, He is Unique in His Attributes and with His Attributes. Unity of God in Essence meant the negation of any partner or one like unto Him for Him, and the Unity of God in His Attributes means denial of any plurality or combination or mixture in Him. In other words, His Attributes are not separate from His Essence.

For instance, when you are born you lacked knowledge, power and many other abilities that you gradually gained them later in your life, as you may gradually loose them again. Thus, the attributes of power and knowledge etc. are not essential with your being; one day you gain them and the other day you loose them.

Unity of God in His Attributes means that the Knowledge of God is the same as His Power and the same as His Existence and all other Attributes and they are the same as His Essence.

Proofs for the Unity of God in His Attributes

I can suggest two proofs for that:

1) Premise 1: Separation of Essence and Attributes requires limitation.

Premise 2: God is Unlimited.

Conclusion: There is no separation between His Essence and His Attributes.

2) Premise 1: Addition of Attributes to the Essence requires combination.

Premise 2: Combination is impossible in God.

Conclusion: God's Attributes is the same as His Essence.

Imam Ali (a.s) in explaining the above fact says in his first sermon of Nahjul-Balagha: “ *And the perfect purity is to deny Him attributes (Which are separate from His Essence), because every attribute is a proof that it is different from that to which it is attributed and everything to which something is attributed is different from the attributes. Thus whoever attaches attributes to Allah recognizes His like, and who recognizes His like regards Him two ...*”

The Meaning of Allahu-Akbar

The Attribute of Knowledge

God is Omniscient which means He is all knowledgeable. Knowledge of God is one of the most important Divine Attributes. Nothing in this existing universe is out of His Divine Knowledge. Every drop of rain, every leaf of a tree, every seed under the ground, every living organism deep inside the oceans or billions of light years in the universe, are all present before Him.

His knowledge about billions of years ago is the same as billions of years to come. As a matter of fact, there is no past, present or future for Him.

Whether you whisper a word or utter it or even hide it in your mind, it's all the same for Him and He knows about it. He even knows about your thoughts, before you are conscious about them. Your intentions are at His presence as much as your action is.

Although this fact is mentioned in many parts of the Holy Quran, perhaps one of the best examples of it is in Chapter 67:14 which says: “ *Does not the One Who Created know?!*”

Proofs of His Knowledge

- 1) The Creator knows about His creatures
- 2) Infinite God is everywhere

The Impacts of Knowledge of God in our life

- 1) Under Absolute Surveillance

– Imam Sadiq (a.s) said to Ishaq Bin Ammar: “*Fear God as if you see Him, for if you don't see Him, indeed He sees you.*” 6

– He also said: “*He who believes God sees and watches him and knows what he acts upon good or*

bad, and avoids the vicious deeds, then he is amongst those who feared the status of God and disobeyed his whim.” 7

When Zolaykha by forced took Yousif to her bedroom, being ashamed of her idol she covered the idol with a cloth. Yousif said to her: *“You are ashamed of your idol which does not hear or see, and expect me not to be ashamed of my God Who hear and sees?!”*

2) God is with me

You never feel alone in your difficulties of life. You believe no matter how striking the situation may be, God who is Omnipotent and Merciful knows about you and your difficulties and hence will not leave you alone if you seek His assistance.

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1. Behar Al-Anwar, vol.3 p. 14
 2. Ibid, p.206
 3. Nahjul balagah Sermon: 152
 4. Ibid
 5. chapter 57 of the Holy Quran Aya 3.
 6. Al-kafee 2:67
 7. Ibid, p.70

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