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Lesson 11: The Incomparability of the Divine Attributes

In our efforts to describe the Creator and gain knowledge of His attributes, we ideally need concepts and expressions that are beyond our reach. Those terms we do employ are unable to help us in reaching our goal, a true description of God, for our limited understandings cannot accommodate a perception of the nature of God's infinite attributes. He is exalted above all concepts coined and fashioned by the human mind.

Man, who is created and limited in every respect, should not expect to be able to assess and describe a non-material being by means of material attributes and characteristics.

A reality that is other than contingent beings and natural beings, whose absolute power and infinite knowledge encompass all things, who in the words of the Qur'an,

"has no similarity to finite and deficient created beings," (42:11)

such a reality naturally cannot be discussed in the same breath as ordinary topics.

‘Ali, upon whom be peace, the Master of the God-fearing, said: "Whoever compares and assimilates God to something or refers to His sacred essence, has not, in reality, had Him in view. Whatever man knows to be the ground of His essence must necessarily be created. God is the Creator and Maker. Whatever depends on other than itself is caused and created. It is God alone who is only a cause (and not an effect).

"He undertakes creation without any means of instruments. He measures without having recourse to thought and reflection. He is free of all need and derives no profit from anything. Time and place do not accompany Him. Tools and instruments do not aid Him. His existence precedes all time and His pre-eternity precedes all beginning.

"He is not limited by any limit, for it is phenomena that delimit their essence by means of the limits

peculiar to them and it is bodies that indicate their likes. His sacred essence does not admit the concepts of motion and motionlessness; how is it possible that something created within phenomena should also exist in His being?

"Were there to be motion and stillness in His essence, He would be exposed to mutation and change; He would be divisible and the pre-eternity of His being would be negated.

"He is the source of all powers, and hence no being can have any effect upon Him. Finally, He is the Creator Who does not change or disappear and Who is never hidden from the people of knowledge and insight."¹

The fact that God's attributes are utterly separate from ours and cannot be examined through a comparison with our attributes is because the attributes of that fountainhead of being are different from the attributes of all other beings.

For example, we have the ability to perform certain tasks, but this is not the same as the power of God; in our case, the attribute is one thing and the entity it describes is another. When we boast of our knowledge, we are not one and identical with our knowledge.

During infancy there was no trace of learning or knowledge in our beings, but later we gradually acquired a certain amount of knowledge by learning. Knowledge and power form two distinct corners of our being; they are neither identical with our essence nor are they united with each other in our being. The attributes are accidents and our essence is a substance; each is independent of the other.

But the case of the divine attributes is fundamentally different. When we say that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, what we mean is that He is the source of knowledge and power: the attribute is not something other than the entity it describes although it is conceptually distinct.

In reality, His attributes are identical with His essence; for His essence does not constitute a substance to which accidents might adhere. He is absolute being, identical with knowledge, power, life, stability and realization; He is not subject to any mental or external limit or restriction.

Since we are nurtured in the very heart of nature and are, therefore, familiar with it at all times, and since whatever we see has particular dimensions and shape, a time and a place, and all the other properties of bodies—in short, because of the habituation of our mind to natural phenomena—we try to measure all things with the criteria of nature, even intellectual and rational concepts. The criteria of nature thus serve as the point of departure for all scientific and philosophical investigations.

To imagine a being who has none of the properties of matter and who is other than whatever our minds might conceive, and to understand attributes that are inseparable from the essence, not only requires great precision but also demands of us that we completely empty our mind of material beings.

‘Ali, peace be upon him, has spoken eloquently, profoundly and meaningfully on this matter. He

emphasizes that men cannot imprison God in a description, saying: "Pure monotheism and perfect faith lie in exempting, negating and excluding from His sacred essence all the attributes of created beings.

God forbid that He should be described by any such attribute, because when He is so described, it appears as if each attribute is separate from its possessor and alien to it. So one who says something in description of the Creator imagining Him to possess some attribute superadded to the essence has made Him the partner of something and suggested He consists of two parts. Such an attempt to describe God arises from ignorance and lack of awareness."[2](#)

Mental concepts cannot describe God by recourse to finite attributes; being limited, they are inapplicable to God's being. Each attribute, with respect to the particular meaning it conveys, is separate from all other attributes. For example, the attribute of life is quite different from the attribute of power; they are not interchangeable. It is possible that certain instances might gather all these attributes together in a single location, but each of them lexically has a different purport.

When the human mind wishes to ascribe an attribute to a certain thing, his aim is to establish in a given instance a kind of unity between the attribute and the entity it describes. But since the attribute is conceptually distinct from the entity, the mind inevitably decrees that they remain separate from each other.

The only means for the knowledge of things is to describe them through the use of mental concepts, which are conceptually separate from each other and, therefore, necessarily finite. Those concepts cannot, therefore, be used to gain knowledge of that Most Transcendent Reality. He is exalted above the possibility of being known by description, and whoever limits God with a given attribute has failed to gain any knowledge of Him.

By mentioning a few examples we can understand to some degree how the attributes are not super added to the essence. Take into consideration that the rays of heat proceeding from fire convey heat to everything, so that one of the qualities and attributes of fire is burning and the distribution of heat.

Has this quality occupied one corner of the being of the fire's being? Of course not; the entire being of fire has the attribute of burning and the distribution of heat.

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said in answer to someone who was questioning him about the nature of God: "He is something utterly other than all things; He alone is identical with the very essence of being. He is not a body and has no form. The senses cannot perceive Him and He cannot be sought out. He escapes the grasp of the five senses; fantasy and imagination are unable to perceive Him. The passage of time and the succession of ages in no wise diminish Him and He is exempt from all mutation and change."[3](#)

The Unity of God

When the question of divine unity is raised in religious discourse, it is taken to include many topics including belief in the oneness of the essence, so, too, the compounding of the attributes and the distinction between essence and attributes is totally excluded with respect to unity of the attributes. Distinctness and differentiation derive from limitation. If we posit a difference among the divine attributes, it is valid only from the point of view of our rational thought and reflection; a multiplicity of directions and of superadded attributes cannot affect the divine essence as such.

If in the world of nature we look at a body through different colored pieces of glass, that body will appear to us in a succession of different colors. Similarly, when we contemplate the unique divine essence with our reason, we sometimes ascribe knowledge to that infinite being with regard to the fact that all creatures are at all times present before Him; we then say that He is all-knowing. At other times we are aware of His ability to create all things, and we then speak of His being all-powerful.

So when we perceive through these various apertures, the different attributes which appear to resemble the properties of our limited beings, we attempt to separate them from His infinite essence. Objectively, however, all the concepts conveyed by the different attributes have a single existence and convey a single reality, a reality that is free of all defect and deficiency, that possesses all perfection's such as power, mercy, knowledge, blessedness, wisdom and splendor.

‘Ali, upon whom be peace, the Commander of the Faithful, says in the first sermon of the Nahj al-Balaghah, "The beginning of religion is the knowledge of the pure divine essence, and the perfection of such knowledge lies in faith in that sacred being. Perfect belief, in turn, lies in sincere devotion at His threshold, and perfect devotion is none other than the dissociation of that Unique Principle from all the attributes of contingent beings.

"Beware, for He cannot be described with any attribute, for then difference would appear between the name and the attribute. Whoever attempts to describe Him with an attribute is, in effect, creating a like and a partner for Him, or rather he is seeing God to be two. Whoever sees God to be two is attempting to divide His being. Such a person lacks all knowledge and insight into the nature of God's unique being and is blind and ignorant.

"The one who is thus deprived of vision will attempt to point to God (i.e., restrict Him to a given time and place), and whoever does this posits imprisoning limits for the Creator of all being and makes Him finite. Whoever limits and restricts Him in this way regards Him as a measurable quantity. Whoever asks: "Where is God?" unintentionally makes of Him a body enclosed within another body, and whoever asks, "In what is God engaged?" unintentionally states that certain places are empty of His being."

So each attribute is infinite and coextensive with the infinitude of the essence. God is free of and exempt from finite attributes that might be distinct from each other and separate from the essence.

Once we realize that God's being derives from Himself, it follows that an absolute being is infinite in all respects. If being and non-being are equally conceivable for an entity, it must acquire being from some external cause to come into being; self-origination is, after all, impossible. It is, then, only absolute being that derives from itself; all other realities are subordinate to it and knowable only by means of it.

Once an essence is identical with its own existence, it is infinite with respect to knowledge, power, non origination and ever lastingness, for all of these are forms of being, and an essence that is identical with existence must necessarily possess all these perfections to an infinite degree.

The oneness of God is one of His foremost attributes. All the heavenly religions, in their original and undistorted teachings, have summoned mankind to a pure affirmation of God's unity, untainted by the ascription of partners to Him. Such ascription of partners, in all its forms and dimensions, is the most harmful error to which man is liable. It has occurred throughout history as a result of ignorance, unawareness, and turning away from the guidance of reason and the teaching of the Prophets.

If men believed in God according to correct thought, the proofs of reason and the guidance of the Prophets, it would be impossible for them to accept any contingent phenomenon or created thing in His place, and to imagine that any other being might be His partner or equal in commanding and controlling the destinies of the world, or even have some share in administering the order of the universe.

If numerous gods ruled over the world and each of these gods acted and gave commands in accordance with his own will, the order of the universe would dissolve into anarchy. The Qur'an says:

"If there were numerous gods other than the one true God, the order of the heavens and the earth would collapse. So exalted be the Lord of the Throne above what they say concerning Him."
(21:22)

If we say that God is one, it is because He is not a body. A body is a compound of a series of different elements, the union of which causes it to come into being. Compounding, division and generation are all attributes of contingent beings and bodies; we, therefore, negate them in the case of God and assert that whatever has come into existence, as a result of compounding and generation, neither is God nor resembles Him.

It is feasible to conceive of plurality within a given category once we speak of limitations such as quantity, quality, and time. God, however, is not limited by any of these, and it is, therefore, impossible to conceive of Him having any like or congener.

If we try to imagine the essence of water, without any limiting attribute, and repeat this exercise several times, nothing will be added to our original conception. Because in the beginning we conceived of water in an absolute sense, not limited by any condition, quantity or quality, it is impossible that in our

subsequent attempts to conceive of it, a new hypothesis should occur to us.

But when we add to the essence of water certain limiting attributes which are extrinsic to it, different forms and instances of water will appear and with them, plurality. Examples of this would be rainwater, spring water, river water, sea water, all of these observed at different times and in different places, here and there. If we eliminate all these limiting attributes and look again at the fundamental essence of water, we will see that it is exempt from all duality and is a single essence.

We must be aware that any being which can be contained in a certain place necessarily has need of that place, and any being that be contained in a certain time owes its very existence to the defining conditions of that time: its existence will be realized only within the specific temporal framework where those conditions obtain.

So, when we come to know a being that is present at all times and in all places and who possesses the highest conceivable degree of perfection, and other than whom nothing is perfect or absolute and free from defect, we must recognize that to impute duality to such a lofty reality is to make it finite and limited.

Indeed, God is not one in a numerical sense so that we might imagine Him to be the first member of a category that is followed by a second. His oneness is such that if we imagine a second to exist with Him, that second must be identical with the first.

Since the multiplicity of things derives from the limiting circumstances that differentiate them from each other, it would be totally irrational to posit a second for a being that is free of all limits and bounds. The existence of a second would mean that the first had limits and bounds, and if limits and bounds are excluded, we cannot possibly have two beings; our conception of the second will simply be a repetition of the first.

The doctrine of divine unity means that if we consider God alone, to the exclusion of all phenomenal being, His sacred essence is completely affirmed. Likewise, if we regard His being together with phenomenal being, again His existence will be completely affirmed. But if, on the contrary, we look at contingent phenomena to the exclusion of God, they cannot in any way be said to be existent, because their existence is dependent on the Creator for its origination and perpetuation.

So, whenever we ascribe some limit and condition to God, it means that God will cease to exist whenever that limit and condition cease to exist. However, God's existence is not subject to condition and plurality, and reason cannot, therefore, posit a second member of His category.

Let us give an illustration. Suppose that the world is infinite it has no bounds and in whatever direction we travel, we never come to its end. With such a concept of the world of bodies, all of its dimensions being infinite, can we imagine another world to exist in addition to it, whether finite or infinite? Certainly we cannot, because the concept of an infinite world of bodies necessarily excludes the existence of another such world. If we try to conceive of another such world, it will be either identical with the first

world or a segment of it.

So, considering that the divine essence is absolute being, to posit the existence of a second being resembling Him is exactly the same as imagining a second world of bodies to co-exist with an infinite world of bodies. In other words, it is impossible.

It is, thus, dear that the meaning of God's being One is not that He is not two; it is that a second is inconceivable and that the exclusive possession of divinity is necessitated by His essence. He becomes distinct from other than Himself, not by means of any limit but by means of His essence itself which can clearly be distinguished from all else. All other beings, by contrast, attain their distinctiveness not from their essence but rather from God.

We see clearly that extensive interrelatedness and harmony exist among all the components of the world. Man produces a carbonic gas that enables plants to breathe, and trees and plants, reciprocally produce oxygen that enables man to breathe. As a result of this interchange between man and plants, a certain amount of oxygen is preserved at all times; were it not to be so, no trace of human life would remain on earth.

The amount of heat received by the earth from the sun corresponds to the need of living beings for heat. The speed of the earth's rotation around the sun and the distance it keeps from that source of energy and heat have been fixed at a level that makes human life on earth possible.

The distance of the earth from the sun determines a degree of heat that exactly corresponds to the needs of life upon earth. Were the speed of the earth's rotation to be a hundred miles an hour instead of a thousand miles an hour, as it now is, our nights and days would be ten times as long, and the intensity of the sun's heat would rise to the point that all plant life would be burnt and the cold nights of winter would freeze all fresh shoots in the ground.

If, on the one hand, the rays of the sun were to be reduced by half, all living beings would be frozen in place by the extreme cold. If, on the other hand, they were to be doubled, the sperm of life would never come to fruition. If the moon were farther away from the earth, the tides would become strong and fierce enough to uproot the mountains.

Seen in this light, the world appears to be a caravan in which all the travelers are joined together like links in a chain. All of its parts big or small, are striving cooperatively to advance in a single direction. Throughout this organism, everything fulfills its particular function and all things aid and complement each other. A profound and invisible link joins every single atom to all other atoms.

A world that is thus replete with unity must necessarily be connected to a single source and principle. Being derives from a single origin; if the entirety of the universe is one, its creator must also be one. The

fact that the creator has brought forth unity within the multiplicity of the created world is in itself a convincing proof of His oneness, power and wisdom.

The Qur'an says:

"Ask them, 'Show me these partners whom you worship in place of God. Have they created anything from earth or have they shared with God in the creation of the heavens ? Have we given them a book on which they rely in their ascription of partners to us?' No, the wrongdoers deceive each other with their false promises. Certainly it is God Who preserves the heavens and the earth from collapse and annihilation; were they about to collapse and be annihilated, there is none other who could preserve them. Know that God is most forbearing and forgiving." (35:40-41)

Our innate nature, which is a fundamental dimension of our existence, also confirms the oneness of God. In severe crises and times of hardship, our desires are all focused on one point; we turn in one direction and entrust our hearts to Him.

One of the pupils of Imam Ja'far Sadiq, upon whom be peace, asked him, "What proof is there for the oneness of God."

The Imam answered him: "The proof of His oneness is the interrelatedness and continuity of all creation, the integral order of being that rules over all things. God says in the Qur'an:

'Were there a creator in the heavens and earth other than the One God, their order would vanish and the world would be destroyed.(23:91)' [4](#)

So the regularity and comprehensiveness of the order that ruled over all things refutes the theory that there might be several gods, ruling the same or different spheres.

Although the Qur'an stresses the unity of God in creation and wisdom, it also mentions the role of the causes and means that implement the divine command. It says:

"God sent down water from the heavens and revived the earth thereby after its death. In that is a clear sign for men who pay heed." (16:65)

Once we reach the conclusion that God alone is engaged in creating, ordering and managing the entire universe, and that all sources of effect and causality are subordinate to His will and command, each having its particular role assigned to it by God— once we reach this conclusion, how can we imagine any other being to be on the same level as God and bow down in worship before it? The Qur'an says:

"Some men regard other beings as equivalent to God and love them as if they were God but the believers devote all of their love to God." (2:165)

"Among His signs are the night and the day and the sun and the moon. Do not bow down and prostrate yourselves before the sun and the moon. Instead, prostrate yourselves humbly before the God that created them." (41:37)

- [1.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 181 .
- [2.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, ed. Fayz al-Islam, p. 14.
- [3.](#) Usul al-Kafi, Kitab at-Tawhid, p. 150
- [4.](#) Usul al-Kafi, Kitab at-Tawhid.

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