

Lesson 12: The Attributes of God

Name (ism) and Attribute (ʿifah)

The word *ism* has different applications. In its broadest function, it means any word which implies certain meanings. In this application, *ism* is synonymous with *kalimah* (word) and it also includes *ʿarf* (particle) and *fiʿl* (verb) in the parlance of the Arabic grammarians.

The second application of *ism* is that which is used in Arabic syntax, and it is one of the types of *kalimah*, *ʿarf* and *fiʿl* being the other types.

Its third application is that which is intended in the parlance of the theologians (*mutakallimīn*) and it means any word which indicates the very quiddity (*mahiyah*) or essence (*dhāt*) of an attribute (*ʿifah*) without considering its qualification (*ittiʿāf*); examples are the words *samʿ* (heaven), *arḍ* (earth), *rajul* (man), and *jidʿr* (wall).

The word *ʿifah* has also different applications. The theosophers (*ʿukamāʾ*) call the origins of derivatives (*mushtaqqāt*) as *ʿifah* and the derivatives as *ism*. According to them, *ʿilm* (knowledge) and *qudrah* (power) are *ʿifah* while *ʿalīm* or *ʿalīm* (knowledgeable) and *qadīr* or *qadīr* (powerful) are *ism*. Meanwhile, the theologians call the derivatives as *ʿifāt* (*ʿifāhs* or attributes) and the origins of derivatives as *maʿnā* (concepts). For this matter, *ʿilm* and *qudrah* are *maʿnā* while *ʿalīm* or *ʿalīm* and *qadīr* or *qadīr* are *ʿifāt*. In other words, whenever we take into consideration the essence or quiddity in the sense that it is qualified by a specific quality (*waḥd*) or meaning, the word *ʿifah* is used.¹

الصِّفَةُ هِيَ الْإِسْمُ الدَّالُّ عَلَى بَعْضِ أَحْوَالِ الذَّاتِ، وَ ذَلِكَ نَحْوُ طَوِيلٍ وَ قَصِيرٍ وَ عَاقِلٍ وَ غَيْرِهَا.

“*ʿifah* (attribute) is an *ism* (noun) which indicates some states of the *dhāt* (essence), in the case of *ʿawḥ* (long), *qaṣīr* (short), *ʿqil* (intelligent), and the like.”²

...إِنَّ الصِّفَةَ فِي الْحَقِيقَةِ مَا أُنبِئَتْ عَنْ مَعْنَى مُسْتَفَادٍ يَخُصُّ الْمُوصُوفَ وَ مَا شَارَكَهُ

“In reality, *ʿifāh* refers to the meaning which is exclusive to the qualified (*mawḥḥ*) and what shares with it [in the said description (*waḥḥ*)].”³

It must be noted that such technicalities are not much observed in practice, and they (*ism* and *ʿifāh*) are used interchangeably.

The only word which has no descriptive meaning and is known as the exclusive Name of God is His Name of Glory (*ism jalīl*), i.e. *Allāh*, whereas other words such as *Al-ʿlīm* (the All-learned), *Al-qḍir* (the All-powerful), *Al-ʿayy* (the Ever-living), *Al-rḥīm* (the Sustainer), *Al-bāq* (the Everlasting), and the like are used both as Names and Attributes of God. For instance, in well-known traditions (*aḥādīth*), it is said that God has Ninety-nine Names. With the exception of His Name of Glory, all are derivatives and attributes.

Classifications of the Divine Attributes

The Attributes (*ḥifṭ*) of Allāh are classified in various ways:

1. The Attributes of Beauty and the Attributes of Glory

The Attributes of Beauty (*ḥifṭ al-jamīyyah*) or the Positive Attributes (*ḥifṭ al-thubṭiyyah*) are attributes which indicate the Perfect Being of God; examples are *ʿilm* (knowledge) and *Al-ʿlīm* (the All-knowing), *qudrah* (power) and *Al-qḍir* (the All-powerful), *khalq* (creation) and *Al-khḥliq* (the Creator), *rizq* (sustenance) and *Al-rḥīm* (the Sustainer), and the like. The Attributes of Glory (*ḥifṭ al-jalīyyah*) or the Negative Attributes (*ḥifṭ al-salabiyyah*) are attributes which indicate deficiency and lack of perfection and are thus negated from God. Examples are compositeness (*tarkīb*), corporeality (*jasmīyyah*), space (*makān*), direction (*jahat*), oppression (*ʿulm*), absurdity (*ʿabath*), and the like. In this regard, ʿAdr al-Mutaʿallih comments:

“These two terms (the Attributes of Beauty and Glory) are consistent with the expression *dhḥ ʾl-jalī wa ʾl-ikrām* (the Majestic and the Munificent) in the holy verse, “Blessed is the Name of your Lord, the Majestic and the Munificent!”⁴ for the Attributes of Glory (*ḥifṭ al-jalī*) are those attributes which make the Essence of God immune from similarities with others. And the Attributes of Munificence (*ḥifṭ al-akrām*) are those with which the Essence of God is adorned. Thus, God is described with the Attributes of Perfection, and immune from deficiency with the Attributes of Glory.”⁵

The Negative Attributes have another function, and that is, they are attributes which indicate God’s negation of deficiency; for example, *Al-ghan* (the Self-sufficient), *Al-wḥid* (the One), *Al-qudd* (the All-holy), *Al-ʿam* (the Praiseworthy), and the like.⁶

2. The Attributes of Essence and the Attributes of Action

In dividing the Divine Attributes into the Attributes of Essence and the Attributes of Action, there are two

terminologies and two views involved:

1. In abstracting an attribute from the Divine Essence or describing the Divine Essence with that attribute, whenever conception (*taʿawwur*) of the Essence is sufficient and there is no need for any conception of God's agency (*faiyyah*), the said attribute is an Attribute of Essence or Essential Attribute; examples are *hayy* (life) and *Al-hayy* (the Ever-living), *iradah* (will) and *murad* (the Willing), *ilm* (knowledge) and *Al-ʿlim* (the All-knowing), *qudrah* (Power) and *Al-qadir* (the All-powerful). And whenever conception of God's agency is needed [in abstracting an attribute], that attribute is called an Attribute of Action or Agency Attribute; examples are *khalq* (creation) and *Al-khaliq* (the Creator), *rizq* (sustenance) and *Al-riziq* (the Sustainer), *amatah* (death) and *Al-mumayyit* (the Life-taker), *ayy* (living) and *Al-muayy* (the Life-giver), *maghfirah* (forgiveness) and *Al-ghafir* (the Forgiver), *intiqam* (vengeance) and *Al-muntaqim* (the Avenger), and the like.

2. Whenever the opposite or reverse of an attribute can be attributed to God, it is called an Attribute of Action and whenever the opposite or reverse of an attribute cannot be attributed to God, it is called an Attribute of Essence. Therefore, power, knowledge and life are among the Attributes of the Divine Essence, because God cannot be described with the opposites of these attributes as their opposites denote existential deficiency. But will (*iradah*) is not one of the Attributes of Essence because describing God with its opposite is not possible. For instance, it can be said that God does not will any form of injustice toward His servants:

﴿وَمَا اللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلْمًا لِّلْعِبَادِ﴾

“And Allah does not desire any wrong for (His) servants.”⁷

On this basis, justice (*ʿadl*) is one of the Attributes of the Divine Essence but according to the first terminology, it is one of the Attributes of Action.

Of the two stated terminologies, the first is more popular and prevalent in the books of philosophy and theology. In his *Al-Kif*, Muʿaddith al-Kulayn has adopted the second terminology.⁸

The traditions which have regarded *iradah* (will or willpower) as one of the Attributes of the Divine Action have been interpreted on this basis. Sayyid Sharaf al-Gurgan has also adopted this terminology in his *Al-Taʿrifat*.⁹

3. The Real and the Relative Attributes

The Attributes of Essence have been divided into Real (*ʿaqqiqah*) and Relative (*iʿtifaʿ*) Attributes. A Real Essential Attribute is that which can really be ascribed to the Divine Essence; for example, knowledge and power. A Relative Essential Attribute is that which can be abstracted from the Real Attributes, but it is in itself not really one of the Attributes of Essence; for example, the attributes of *faiyyah* (the state

of being the All-knowing) and *qadiriyah* (the state of being the All-powerful) which can be abstracted by taking into account the relation of knowledge and power to the Essence, and they have no reality beyond the Essence and the attributes of knowledge and power.

The Real Essential Attributes are divided into the Purely Real (*laqq-ye ma*) and the Relationally Essential Real (*laqq-ye dhāt al-iḥfah*). The Purely Real is that which pertains to no other than God; for example, the attribute of life. The Relationally Essential Real is that which can also be applied to other than God; for example, knowledge and power.

4. The Transmitted Attributes

Some attributes are called the Transmitted Attributes (*ḥifāt al-khabariyyah*).¹⁰ They are the attributes which have been transmitted in the Heavenly Account (the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*), and if they were not mentioned in the Heavenly Account, they could not have been established for God in a rational discourse. Meanwhile, if we subscribe to their outward meaning, it will be tantamount to [the belief in] anthropomorphism (*tashbiyyah*) and incarnation (*tajassum*).

In other words, such attributes are Attributes which are mentioned in allegorical Qur'anic verses and traditions about the Divine Attributes; for example, *wajh* (face), *yadd* (hand), *istiw'* (to settle) and *muj'* (advent) which are mentioned in the following verses:

﴿ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ هَالِكٌ إِلَّا وَجْهَهُ ﴾

“Everything is to perish except His Face.”¹¹

﴿ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ﴾

“The hand of Allah is above their hands.”¹²

﴿ الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى ﴾

“The All-beneficent settled on the Throne.”¹³

﴿ وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا ﴾

“And your Lord and the angels arrive in ranks.”¹⁴

Are the Names of Allah *Tawqif*?

The Names of Allah are said to be *tawqif* when we apply to God the Names and Attributes which are mentioned in the religious sources (the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*) and we do not apply other names and attributes. Most Sunni theologians and some of their Shi'ah counterparts subscribe to this view, but others do not believe in the Names and Attributes of God to be *tawqif*, considering it permissible to apply any name or attribute which denotes God's existential perfection and does not ascribe any deficiency or fault to God.

Even in cases, therefore, where a name or attribute is mentioned in the Qur'an or traditions, yet its application to God without any qualification or indication bespeaks defect or fault, these are not permissible. For example, God is called *zari'* (planter or grower) in this noble verse:

﴿أَأَنْتُمْ تَزْرَعُونَهُ أَمْ نَحْنُ الزَّارِعُونَ﴾

“Is it you who make it grow, or are We the grower?”¹⁵

This indicates God as the Originator of plantation and not its conventional meaning in human usage. However, since the use of this term without any qualification or indication suggests its conventional meaning which is not suitable to God, it is not permissible to apply it to Him. On the other hand, the use of such terms as ‘the Necessary Being by essence’ (*wajib al-wujud bi 'dh-dhāt*), ‘the Cause of causes’ (*'illat al-'ilal*) and the like which are terms in theosophy, is permissible as they indicate the sense of God's perfection and negate any defect or fault in Him.

Here, one may demand for elaboration, and that is, if the application of a name or attribute to God is in the context of an intellectual discussion or discourse and not in supplication or any act of worship, the contention of those who deny God's Names and Attributes as being *tawqif* is valid. In the context of supplication and any similar act of worship, it is safer to use the Names and Attributes mentioned in the Qur'an, traditions and transmitted supplications. In this regard, the late 'Allamah al-*abab* has some remarks which include the said elaboration:

الْإِحْتِيَاظُ فِي الدِّينِ يَقْتَضِي الْإِقْتِصَارَ فِي التَّسْمِيَةِ بِمَا وَرَدَ مِنْ طَرِيقِ السَّمْعِ، وَأَمَّا مُجَرَّدُ الْإِجْرَاءِ وَالْإِطْلَاقِ مِنْ دُونِ التَّسْمِيَةِ فَالْأَمْرُ فِيهِ سَهْلٌ.

“Precaution in religion necessitates restriction in calling [God] to that which is received through transmission. However, if a name is applied to God without calling Him by it, making decision in it is easy.”¹⁶

In another place, the 'Allamah has regarded naming (*tasmiyah*) and calling (*nida'*) as among the

supplements of worship (*'ibādah*): [17](#)

وَالْتَّسْمِيَةُ وَالنِّدَاءُ مِنْ لَوَاحِقِ الْعِبَادَةِ.

At any rate, a reliable proof on the Names of Allah being *tawqīf* has not been established. The main argument put forth by those who support that view is the noble verse 180 of *Sūrat al-A'raf*:

﴿وَلِلَّهِ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ فَادْعُوهُ بِهَا وَذَرُوا الَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِي أَسْمَائِهِ سَيُجْزَوْنَ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ﴾

“To Allah belong the Best Names, so supplicate Him by them, and abandon those who commit sacrilege in His names. Soon they shall be requited for what they used to do.”[18](#)

That the noble verse implies how the Names of Allah are *tawqīf* depends on two things. One is that the letter *lām* in the phrase *al-asmā' al-ḥusnā* (the Best Names) is *lām 'ahad*; these are the Names which are mentioned in the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions (*al-aḥādith*). Another is that *ilḥād* means violation of those Names and applying other names to God although those names or attributes denote perfection and do not imply any defect or fault.

Yet, none of these two points has been proved because the function of the [definite article] *al* in the first case is absorption (*istighraq*) and not *'ahad*. And its purport in the holy verse is that all the names known to be the Best Names exclusively belong to God because there is no being more perfect and superior to Him.

In every sort of perfection, therefore, its highest level belongs to God and *ilḥād* (violation) here may possibly mean that the polytheists have committed sacrilege with regards to the Names of God and through a slight change of terminology, they would apply those Names to the idols. For example, they would change the word *Al-ʿAlī* into *Al-ʿAlī* and name one of their idols with it. They would alter the word *Al-ʿAẓīz* (the Most High) into *Al-ʿuzz* and call another of their idols with it.[19](#)

Another possibility of committing sacrilege against the Names of Allah is that some ignorant individuals would call God with names which are below His Sublime Stations; for example, invocative phrases such as *Yā aba 'l-makrīm* (O father of generousities!) and *Yā abyā al-wajh* (O white-faced!).[20](#)

Review Questions

1. Write down the meanings and applications of *ism* and *ʿifah*.
2. Elucidate the Attributes of Beauty and Glory of God.
3. Write down the remarks of ʿAdr al-Muta'allih regarding the Attributes of Beauty and Glory of God.

4. Explain the two views regarding the division of the Divine Attributes into the Attributes of Essence and the Attributes of Action.
5. State the Real and Relative Attributes of God.
6. What is meant by the Declarative Attributes (*ḥifẓ al-khabariyyah*)?
7. Explain how the Divine Names are being *tawqif*.

1. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Sharḥ Asmā' Allāh al-Ḥusnā, p. 27.
2. Sayyid Sharḥ Gurgānī, Al-Ta'rifāt, p. 95.
3. Shaykh al-Mufīd, Aw'īl al-Maqālāt, p. 61.
4. Sīrat al-Raḥmān 55:78. [Trans.]
5. ʿAdr al-Muta'allihīn, Al-Asfār al-Arba'ah, vol. 6, p. 18.
6. Amīn al-Islām al-Ḥabarsī, Majma' al-Bayān, vol. 3, p. 503.
7. Sīrat Ghāfir (or al-Mu'min) 40:31.
8. Muḥaddith al-Kulaynī, Uṣūl al-Kāfī, vol. 1, section (bāb) on willpower (irādah), p. 86.
9. Sayyid Sharḥ al-Gurgānī, Al-Ta'rifāt, p. 95.
10. 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrīstānī, Al-Milāl wa 'n-Nihāl, vol. 1, p. 92.
11. Sīrat al-Qaṣa 28:88.
12. Sīrat al-Fatī 48:10.
13. Sīrat ʿĪsā H 20:5.
14. Sīrat al-Fajr 89:22.
15. Sīrat al-Waḥqī'ah 56:64.
16. Al-Maẓnī fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, vol. 8, p. 354.
17. Ibid., p. 345.
18. Sīrat al-A'raf 7:180.
19. Ḥabarsī, Majma' al-Bayān, vol. 3, p. 503.
20. Zamakhsharī, Al-Kashshaf, vol. 2, p. 180.

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