

Lesson 19: Negative Attributes (Al-ʿifāt al-Salbiyyah)

In view of the fact that God is the Necessary Being by essence, the Indivisible Existent and the Pure Perfection, He does not lack any attribute of perfection. On this basis, the Negative Attributes with respect to God does not mean negation of perfection.

In fact, the Negative Attributes of God denote negation of defect and deficiency [in Him] and since defect and deficiency have a negative connotation, negation of defect and deficiency is tantamount to the negation of negation (or double negation) which end result is positive. That is, in reality, the Negative Attributes of God express the affirmation of existential perfections [in Him].

Meanwhile, all defects and deficiencies are derived from contingency (*imkān*) and indigence (*faqr*). For this reason, it can be said that the Negative Attributes originate from a single negation and that is the negation of contingency and indigence. As Fakhr al-Sabziwārī has said, [1](#)

وَوَصَفُهُ السَّلْبِي، سَلْبُ السَّلْبِ جَا فِي سَلْبِ الْإِحْتِيَاجِ كَلَّا أَدْرَجَا

On this basis, when we negate some attributes from God, the point is their defect and deficiency, and not their perfection and excellence. For example, when we say that God is not a substance (*jawhar*), it is because to be a substance implies three things. One is that it does not depend on others [for its existence] in contrast to an ontic quality (*ʿarṣ*) and another is that it has quiddity (*māhiyyah*). The third implication is that its existence is limited (*maʿdūd*). That which can be negated from God are the last two implications, while the fact that God does not depend on others [in His existence] is in itself one of the Attributes of Perfection, and it cannot be negated.[2](#)

In books of theology, some Negative Attributes which are the point of disputes, believed by some individuals, or considered an integral part of beliefs of some sects and religions have been discussed. Among them is [the belief in] a partner, similarity and composition in the Divine Essence. These

attributes have been mentioned in the discussion concerning the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) and there is no need to deal with them again. We shall examine here other Negative Attributes:

1. Corporeality (*jasmīyyah*). God is not corporeal because in addition to being a compound (*murakkab*), a corporeal being is in need of a physical place or locus, and this quality is inconsistent with God as the Self-sufficient and Necessary Being.
2. Incarnation (*ʿuṣūl*). Incarnation necessitates that a being depends on the existence of its locus (*maḥall*) and is subject to it, and this is concomitant with the need for others. Whatever has been transmitted, therefore, from the Christians and some Sufis that God incarnated in the body of Jesus Christ (‘a) or a certain mystic is unacceptable.
3. Union (*ittiḥād*). Real union means that two things merge together and forms another thing and the earlier two things ceases to exist. There is no doubt in the incorrectness of this notion with respect to God. Yes, union is sometimes used in another sense and that is, two things have some similarities, as in the case of two persons who are the same in humanity, or two essences which are one in denotation (*miḍq*), as in the case of body and heat. This kind of union is impossible with respect to God because the Necessary Being and the contingent being are in unison in existence.

It must be borne in mind that in the sayings of mystics (*ʿurafāʾ*) expressions such as “There is nothing except God,” “Whatever exists is God,” and the like can sometimes be observed. These expressions must not be understood in their apparent meaning; rather, they imply that everything is a manifestation of the Essence and Action of God, or there is no Essential and Independent Being except God, or the said mystic person reaches a state of gnosis where he cannot see anything except the aspect of unity (*waḥdah*) and reality (*ʿaqāqah*) of existence and he pays no more attention to the aspect of multiplicity (*kathrah*), and in the words of Sa’d³,

همه هر چه هستند از آن کمترند که با هستی اش نام هستی برند

4. Direction (*jahat*). Direction refers to a point which can be physically indicated, and a being which has direction has a body or is corporeal.
5. Infusion of temporal things in God. This necessitates that God must be the locus of temporal things which is concomitant with change, receptivity and contingency of the Divine Essence which all necessitate limitation and indigence.
6. Pain and displeasure. Pain and displeasure exist in two living beings with conflicting features. One dominates the other and arbitrarily affects its structure, as in the case of viruses which are a source of pain in the body of a person or animal. Since a rival or opposite being to God does not exist, pain and displeasure in the above sense is inconceivable with respect to Him. Furthermore, what is meant by abhorrence and displeasure which are applied to God is that since He is the Absolute Goodness and

Perfection, He loves goodness and perfection and He dislikes the opposite. Liking and disliking is something distinct from the sense of displeasure and pain.

7. Physical pleasure. Physical pleasure necessitates corporeality which is impossible to God, but rational pleasure with respect to God is not rationally shunned because its essence is the perception of existential perfection, and since God is the Absolute Perfection and is aware of His Essence, the assumption of rational pleasure in the above sense with respect to Him is permissible although some theologians have regarded it as impermissible to apply to God on the ground that such an attribute or name has not been mentioned in the Qur'an and traditions (*ʿadāth*). It is worth mentioning that in the jargon of the philosophers and theologians, rational pleasure is called *ibtihāj* (bliss or ecstasy).⁴

8. Attributes apart from the Essence. This has been dealt with in detail in the discussion on the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*) in Attributes, and its end result is that the assumption of attributes apart from the Essence presupposes that the Essence of God is in need of those attributes and since the assumption is that these attributes are distinct from the Essence, it follows that the Divine Essence is in need of other than Itself, and this is in contradiction with the Essential Existence and Self-sufficiency of God.

9. Visibility (*ru'yah*). The possibility or impossibility of seeing God is a source of contention and dispute among the Muslim schools of thought. The Ahl al-ʿadith, Ashʿirah and Maturdiyyah have considered it possible while the other schools of thought deemed it impossible. Of course, that which is disputed is seeing God with the eyes, but there is no dispute about the possibility of seeing God by the heart which are mentioned in the traditions of the Imams from the *Ahl al-Bayt* (ʿa) as well as about *a priori* knowledge or total disclosure which is indicated in the sayings of mystics (ʿurafāʾ). For example, when Imam ʿAlī (ʿa) was asked whether he has seen God, he replied, "How can I worship God whom I have not seen?" Then, in explaining what he meant by seeing, the Imam (ʿa) said:

لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْعُيُونُ بِمُشَاهَدَةِ الْعِيَانِ، وَلَكِنْ تُدْرِكُهُ الْقُلُوبُ بِحَقَائِقِ الْإِيمَانِ.

That is to say that He cannot be comprehended by the eyes by seeing Him but through the hearts by the truths of faith.⁵

The Proofs of Impossibility of Physically Seeing God

To support their claim, those who believe in the impossibility of physically seeing God have cited rational and textual proofs, some of which are as follows:

First proof: Seeing with the eyes is only possible under the following conditions:

1. The visible (*marʿū*) must be a corporeal being.
2. The visible being must be at a particular place in front of the seer.

3. There must be a specific spatial distance between the visible being and the seer.

4. There must be sufficient light for vision to function.

Since these conditions are impossible for God, the Exalted, who is immune from corporeality, direction and place, seeing God will also be impossible.

Second proof: That which can be seen has one of these two states. It can either totally or partially be seen, whereas whole or partial are properties of a body.

Third proof: The Holy Qur'an has also regarded seeing God as impossible, saying thus:

﴿لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْأَبْصَارُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ الْأَبْصَارَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ﴾

“The sights do not comprehend Him, yet He apprehends the sights, and He is the All-attentive, the All-aware.”⁶

The statement “He is the All-attentive, the All-aware” is in reality the reason behind the two earlier rulings; that is, since God is the All-attentive (*al-laʿāf*), the seers cannot see Him and since He is the All-aware (*al-khabīr*), He is aware of the seers.

Proof of the Proponents of Ru'yah

The proponents of *ru'yah* or physically seeing God have two claims. One is that it is possible to see God and that it will take place on the Day of Resurrection. In order to establish the possibility of *ru'yah*, they have cited two points from verse 143 of *Sūrat al-Aʿraf*:

﴿وَلَمَّا جَاءَ مُوسَىٰ لِمِيقَاتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرْنِي أَنْظُرَ إِلَيْكَ﴾

“When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said, ‘My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You.’”⁷

The mode of argument is that if it were impossible to see God, Prophet Mūsā (Moses) (‘a) would not have requested for it because requesting for something which is impossible is futile and senseless.

This argument is complete if Prophet Mūsā’s (‘a) request for seeing God were serious and that he really wanted to see God. This is while a study of the totality of verses related to Prophet Mūsā’s (‘a) tryst along with a number of the prominent figures of his community and the request for seeing God on their behalf will make it clear that this request by Prophet Mūsā (‘a) was done in order for his community to understand that such a thing is impossible and that their insistence not to have faith in God unless seeing Him talking to Prophet Mūsā (‘a) was futile.⁸

The following expression by Khwājah Nāsir al-Dīn al-Ṣadīq⁹ represents the same answer:

وَسُؤَالَ مُوسَى لِقَوْمِهِ

“And the question of Moses was meant for his community.”¹⁰

﴿ قَالَ لَنْ تَرَانِي وَلَكِنْ أَنْظُرْ إِلَى الْجَبَلِ فَإِنْ اسْتَقَرَّ مَكَانَهُ فَسَوْفَ تَرَانِي ﴾

“He said, ‘You shall not see Me. But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me.’”¹¹

The mode of argument is that the mountain’s abiding in its place is something possible and since seeing God is conditional to something which is possible, it follows that seeing Him is also possible.

This argument is correct provided that what is meant by the mountain’s abiding in its place is absolute abiding. However, what can be inferred from the outward meaning of the verse is that it means the mountain’s abiding in its place at the time when Prophet Mūsā (‘a) was looking at it. Instead, what happened was that because of God’s manifestation in it, it leveled off and Prophet Mūsā (‘a) fell down swooning, as the continuation of the verse thus reveals:

﴿ فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّى رَبُّهُ لِلْجَبَلِ جَعَلَهُ دَكًّا وَخَرَّ مُوسَى صَعِقًا ﴾

“So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He leveled it, and Moses fell down swooning.”¹²

The following expression by Khwājah Nāsir al-Dīn al-Ṣadīq represents the said answer:

وَتَعْلِيْقُ الرُّؤْيَا بِاسْتِقْرَارِ الْمُتَحَرِّكِ لَا يَدُلُّ عَلَى الْإِمْكَانِ

“And attaching *ru’yah* (seeing God) to the abiding of something that moves (in that state) does not imply the possibility of *ru’yah*.”¹³

Argument on the Occurrence of Ru’yah and the Objection to It

Those who subscribe to the possibility of the faithful to see God on the Day of Judgment have cited this verse:

﴿ وَجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَاضِرَةٌ * إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَةٌ ﴾

*“Some faces will be fresh on that day, looking at their Lord.”*¹⁴

The reply to this is that since seeing God in the sense of seeing Him with the eyes is impossible, one cannot interpret the word *naẓar* (to look or see) to mean seeing with the eyes, just as the word *yadd* (hand) in the verse *“The hand of Allah is above their hands”*¹⁵ cannot be construed to mean a particular bodily limb; rather, its appropriate meaning must be sought and in the verse under discussion, it means one of these two things:

1. *Naẓar* means *intiẓār* (to wait or expect) as the use of the word *naẓar* in the sense of *intiẓār* is prevalent. For instance, when it is said that “So-and-so is looking for the hand of so-and-so” it means that he is expecting help or a reward from him.
2. A word such as *thawāb* (reward) is implied in the verse. That is, they expect for the reward and recompense from their Lord, just as the word *ahl* (people) is implied in this verse:

﴿وَأَسْأَلِ الْقَرْيَةَ﴾

*“Ask [the people of] the town.”*¹⁶

The following expression by Muḥaqqiq al-ḥaqq represents the said reply: ¹⁷

وَالنَّظَرُ لَا يَدُلُّ عَلَى الرُّؤْيَا مَعَ قَبُولِهِ التَّأْوِيلِ.

On this basis, the traditions which the Ahl al-Sunnah have narrated from the prophets (‘a) concerning the possibility of the faithful seeing God on the Day of Resurrection, just as the moon can be seen on the fourteenth night of the lunar month, must be interpreted in a different way because seeing with the eyes in its real sense is impossible with respect to God and in this connection, there is no difference between this world and the Hereafter.

And that sometimes it is said that not seeing God in this world is due to the weakness of the human being’s sense of sight and that their sense of sight will get stronger on the Day of Resurrection will only solve the problem on the side of the seers and not about the visible or object of sight (*mar’ū*). In any case, seeing is possible provided that the visible is located in a particular place and direction in front of the seer, and this is impossible with respect to God.

Review Questions

1. What is the meaning of the Negative Attributes of God?
2. State the incorrectness of corporeality and incarnation about God.

3. Why is the notion of union (*ittiḥād*) and direction (*jahat*) about God impossible?
4. Prove that God cannot be a locus (*maḥall*) of temporal things, pain and displeasure.
5. Why is the physical pleasure with respect to God impossible?
6. Can the Attributes of God be considered apart from His Essence? Why?
7. Write down the first reason for the impossibility of seeing God?
8. What is the second reason for the impossibility of seeing God?
9. Considering the verse ***“When Moses arrived at Our tryst and his Lord spoke to him, he said, ‘My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You,’”***¹⁸ if seeing God were impossible, then why did Prophet Mūsā (‘a) requested for it?
10. Write down the second basis of those who believe that God can be seen along with the refutation to it.
11. Write down the basis of those who believe in the possibility of seeing God on the Day of Resurrection along with the refutation to it.

¹ Fakḥm Sabziwārī, Sharḥ al-Manṭiqah, station (maqḥad) 3, singularity (farḥdah) 2, p. 103.

² Ibid.

³ Shaykh Muḥṣin al-Dīn Sa’dī (1184–1283) was one of the greatest Persian poets. Born in Shirāz, he studied Sufi mysticism at the Nizāmiyyah madrasah in Baghdad, with Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī and with Shahḥab al-Dīn Suhrawardī. He made the pilgrimage to Mecca many times and traveled to Central Asia, India, the Seljuq territories in Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Yemen, Abyssinia, and Morocco. His best known works are Bostān [Garden] and Gulistān [Rose-Garden], also known as Sa’dī-Nāmah. The former is a collection of poems on ethical subjects while the latter is a collection of moral stories in prose. He also wrote a number of odes, and collections of poems known as Pleasantries, Jests and Obscenities. His influence on Persian, Turkish and Indian literatures has been very considerable, and his works were often translated into European languages from the 17th century onward. [Trans.]

⁴ Sharḥ al-Ishārāt, vol. 3, p. 359; Anwār al-Malakūt, p. 103.

⁵ Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 179.

⁶ Sūrat al-An‘ām 6:103.

⁷ Sūrat al-A‘raf 7:143.

⁸ For further information on the abovementioned verses, see Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:55; Sūrat al-Nisā’ 4:153; Sūrat al-A‘raf 7:143.

⁹ Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn ḥasan al-ḥṣī, better known as Khwājah Nāṣir al-Dīn al-ḥṣī (597–672 AH/1200–73): a Persian polymath and prolific writer—an astronomer, biologist, chemist, mathematician, philosopher, physician, physicist, scientist, theologian, and marja’ al-taqlīd (religious authority). [Trans.]

¹⁰ Kashf al-Murād, station (maqḥad) 3, chap. 2, issue 20.

¹¹ Sūrat al-A‘raf 7:143.

¹² Sūrat al-A‘raf 7:143.

¹³ Kashf al-Murād, station (maqḥad) 3, chap. 2, issue 20.

¹⁴ Sūrat al-Qiyāmah 75:22–23.

¹⁵ Sūrat al-Fatḥ 48:10.

[16.](#) [Sīrat Yūsuf 12:82.](#)

[17.](#) [Kashf al-Murād, station \(maqāḍ\) 3, chap. 2, issue 20.](#)

[18.](#) [Sīrat al-Aʿraf 7:143.](#)

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