

Lesson 8: The Unity of God's Essence and Attributes

Tawḥīd or the Oneness of God is one of the most important dimensions of the propagation and teaching of the prophets of God (‘a). Whenever the Holy Qur’an gives the account of the propagation activity of such prophets as Nūḥ (Noah), Hūd, ʿĪsā and Shu‘ayb (Jethro) (‘a), it mentions that the first message they conveyed to their respective communities is this:

﴿اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ﴾

“Worship Allah! You have no other god besides Him.”¹

It also regards the call to monotheism as one of the objectives of the mission (*bi’tḥāh*) of the prophets (‘a):

﴿وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا أَنْ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ﴾

“Certainly We raised an apostle in every nation [to preach:] ‘Worship Allah, and keep away from the Rebel’.”²

The special importance of this issue has prompted the scholastic theologians (*mutakallimīn*) to occasionally deal with the subject separate from other Attributes of God. For this reason, before embarking on the discussion about the Positive and Negative Attributes of God, we shall touch on the question of *tawḥīd* after the discussion on the Essence and Existence of God. Since the Unity of the Divine Essence (*dhāt*) is so closely related to the Unity of the Divine Attributes (*ṣifāt*), we shall examine the two subjects together.

1. The Unity of the Divine Essence

The Unity of the Divine Essence (*tawḥīd-e dhātī*) means that the Essence of God is One or Unique. The Oneness or Unity of the Divine Essence has two meanings:

1. The Essence which in Itself is not in need of any cause is only God. Therefore, all essences (*dhawāt*) and existents (*mawjūdāt*) – whether they are physical or non-physical, essential (*jawharī*) or accidental (*ʿarwī*), animate or inanimate – are possible beings, needy and effects [of a prior cause]. Hence, the Essence of God is not in need of any cause [for Itself to exist] and has utter absence of necessity for any partner or similarity.
2. The Essence of God is not constituted by parts, and there is no sort of multiplicity and plurality in the Divine Essence.

Types of Compositeness

1. Rational compositeness (*tarkīb*) by parts, such as the composition of quiddity (*mḥiyyah*) by genus (*jins*) and differentia (*faʿl*), and the composition of possible being (*mawjūd-e mumkin*) by existence (*wujūd*) and quiddity (*mḥiyyah*). This type of compositeness is derived from existential limitation, and since the existence of God is infinite and limitless, such compositeness with respect to God is impossible [to happen].
2. Compositeness by physical and elemental parts, such as the natural creatures which are composed of different elements, and the elements which are composed of atoms. This type of compositeness is one of the properties (*lawṣīm*) of a physical being and since God is not physical,³ such compositeness with respect to God is impossible.
3. Compositeness by matter (*maddah*) and form (*ṣūrah*), such as the body being composed of matter⁴ and form. This compositeness is also impossible with respect to God, because compositeness is one of the characteristics of a physical being, and God is not a body [or corporeal being].

Since compositeness is impossible with respect to the Necessary Being by essence, the existence of two necessary beings is also impossible because their existence necessitates that each of them is composed of their commonalities (*mḥ bihi ʾl-istirāk*) and their particularities (*mḥ bihi ʾl-imtiyāz*) and the existence of two beings with the same essence is only possible when although they are common in essence, each of them must have its/his own peculiarity. As a result, each of them is composed of two things, viz. their commonalities and their particularities.

And compositeness (*tarkīb*), as stated above, is concomitant with limitation and neediness which are contradictory to the absolute independence of the Necessary Being by essence.

The two stated meanings have been mentioned in a tradition (*ḥadīth*) from Imām ʿAlī (ʿa). Someone

asked the Imām (‘a) concerning the Oneness of God. The Imām (‘a) replied, “Oneness has four meanings; two of them can be applied to God while the other two cannot be applied to Him. The two inapplicable meanings are as follows:

1. Numerical oneness because in numerical oneness, any notion of two, three, etc. is impossible; and
2. Oneness of genus, such as the human beings that belong to the same species; such oneness does not also hinder multiplicity and plurality.

And the two applicable meanings [of oneness] are as follows:

1. God’s uniqueness in Essence and Attributes, and
2. The indivisibility and inseparability of the Essence of God.[5](#)

Trinity or Polytheism in the Essence of God

One of the well-known doctrines in Christianity is the doctrine of the Trinity. While regarding themselves as monotheists, Trinitarian Christians believe in three Persons (or Essences) which are as follows:

1. The Person of the Essence (God the Father);
2. The Person of the Word (God the Son); and
3. The Person of Life (God the Holy Spirit).

According to them, each of these Persons completely possesses the truth of Godhood and all of these Persons are the same in the truth of Godhood. Thus, the truth of Godhood is one thing and for this reason, while God is One, He has three Persons.

In other words, the Essence of God (God the Father) has been reincarnated in the Person of the Word (Jesus Christ) through the Person of Life (God the Holy Spirit) and manifested in the image of Jesus Christ. For example, the Gospel According to St. John begins with this passage: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”[6](#)

And it is thus stated in the Epistle of Paul the Apostle which was written about ten years prior to the Gospel of John:

“God who, in numerous Persons and different channels of the prophets, had talked with our fathers in the past, now talked with us these days through His Son. He took him as the inheritor of all creatures and created the worlds through him.”[7](#)

In this regard, therefore, Trinitarian Christians believe in three things, thus:

1. Christ is the Son of God;
2. Christ is God (God the Reincarnate); and
3. There are three Divine Essences and God is the third of them.

There are doctrines which the Holy Qur'an has also mentioned and proscribed all of them as polytheistic beliefs. It states, thus:

﴿لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ﴾

“They are certainly faithless who say, ‘Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary.’”⁸

﴿لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ ثَالِثُ ثَلَاثَةٍ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ﴾

“They are certainly faithless who say, ‘Allah is the third [person] of a trinity,’ while there is no god except the One God.”⁹

﴿وَقَالَتِ النَّصَارَى الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ اللَّهِ ذَلِكَ قَوْلُهُمْ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ يُضَاهِيُونَ قَوْلَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ﴾

“And the Christians say, ‘Christ is the son of Allah.’ That is an opinion that they mouth, imitating the opinions of the faithless of former times.”¹⁰

It can be inferred from the last verse that belief in the divinity of the Messiah (‘a) and that he is the Son of God was that of the unbelievers of the past and has crept into the religion associated with him, and it is not something which the Holy Messiah (‘a) has ever taught to his followers. As Gustave Le Bon¹¹ who was himself a French Christian, has said,

“Throughout the first five centuries of its existence, by absorbing Greco–Roman and Oriental philosophical and religious ideas, Christianity gradually evolved and turned into an amalgamation of religious beliefs, and the new Trinity (Father, Son and the Holy Spirit) became the replacement of the former trinity, and the worship of God in the Trinity replaced the gods of the olden days.”

2. The Unity of the Divine Attributes

The Unity of the Divine Attributes has two meanings:

1. God has no equal in His Attributes, because:

Firstly, the Attributes of God are of Him and no one has bestowed them upon Him.

Secondly, His Attributes of Perfection are infinite and limitless, and these two characteristics are concomitant with God being the Necessary Being by essence as well as His absolute self-sufficiency and independence.

2. The Attributes of Perfection of God are identical with His Essence. That is, although they differ in terms of meaning (*mafhūm*), in terms of applicability (*mīdīq*) they are in unison. In other words, it is not the case that the Essence of God, on one hand, is All-knowing, and on the other hand, All-powerful and Sovereign; rather, His knowledge, power and will are His very Essence, because if the Attributes of God were extraneous to His Essence and distinct from each other, this implies a sort of multiplicity (*kathrah*), compositeness (*tarkīb*) and limitation (*ma'dūdiyyah*) in the Divine Essence, and all these characteristics cannot be applied to God.

Moreover, in originating the creatures and bestowing knowledge and power to them, He would be in need of His Attributes (Knowledge and Power) which are assumed to be distinct from His Essence, and neediness is contradictory to God as the Necessary Being and Self-sufficient.

We shall explain the Unity of the Divine Essence and Attributes in terms of applicability, and their multiplicity and variance in terms of meaning by citing two examples:

1. The human being is knowledgeable of himself; that is, he has knowledge by presence or intuitive knowledge (*'ilm-e ʿudūrī*). Here, we can infer three concepts, viz. the knowledge (*'ilm*), the knower (*'ilīm*) and the known (*ma'lūm*). This is while the applicability of all is something other than his person; that is, his person is the applicability of the knowledge, the knower as well as the known.

2. In comparison to God, every creature is the created (*makhluq*), the known (*ma'lūm*) as well as the possible (*maqdu'r*). So, while reality is one thing, different meanings of it can be abstracted. Of course, in abstracting different meanings from a reality, different signifiers can be considered, but these signifiers have subjective multiplicity and not objective.

The same is true with the abstraction of the different meanings and attributes of the Indivisible Essence of God. The notion of the extraneousness of the Attributes from the Essence and their distinction from the Essence as propounded by the Sunnī Ash'arīs is thus incorrect, and the doctrine of the identicalness of the Attributes with the Essence as maintained by the Imāmīyyah and Mu'tazilīs is correct and firm.

The Unity of the Divine Attributes in the Traditions

In the traditions reported from the Imāms of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (ʿa), the Unity of the Divine Attributes has been much emphasized, and the belief in the Essential Attributes of God as separate from His Essence has been considered unacceptable. Imām 'Alī (ʿa) has regarded purging the Essence of extraneous attributes as the perfection of purity in the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*), saying:

وَكَمَالُ تَوْحِيدِهِ الْإِخْلَاصُ لَهُ، وَكَمَالُ الْإِخْلَاصِ لَهُ نَفْيُ الصِّفَاتِ عَنْهُ.

“And the perfection of believing in His Oneness is to regard Him as Pure, and the perfection of His purity is to deny Him attributes.” [12](#)

The Imām (‘a) has then said that the corollary of belief in attributes which are separate from the Essence is belief in a kind of polytheism and divisibility of the Divine Essence, which is a product of ignorance of the Divine Station:

“Thus, whoever attaches attributes to Allah recognizes His like, and whoever recognizes His like regards Him as two, and whoever regards Him as two recognizes parts for Him, and whoever recognizes parts for Him mistook Him.” [13](#)

It is evident that what is meant by the negation of the Attributes of God is the negation of attributes which are separate from His Essence and not the real Attributes, because negation of the Attributes of Perfection of God is impossible. Moreover, in many of his statements, Imām ‘Alī (‘a) has described the Divine Attributes of Perfection (knowledge, power, will, etc.).

Imām ʿĀṣan al-Mujtabā (‘a) has said: “In reality, the Attributes of God are not different from each other, because if they were so, in terms of existential perfection the Essence of God would become finite and limited.” [14](#)

Imām Muḥammad al-Jawād (‘a) has said that God is One in inward reality, and diverse multiple meanings and attributes have no way to His Essence. [15](#)

It can be deduced from some traditions that belief in attributes separate from the Divine Essence was prevalent during the time of the pure Imāms (‘a) such that some Shā‘ah were also inclined to it and the Imāms of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) have explicitly declared it to be incorrect. The reasons for the incorrectness of this belief as mentioned in the traditions are as follows:

1. Belief in attributes separate from the Divine Essence is a kind of polytheism (implicit polytheism);
2. This belief necessitates anthropomorphism; and
3. It is in conflict with the Indivisibility and Oneness of the Sacred Divine Essence. [16](#)

Insufficient Formula

The forerunners of Ash‘īrah and Māturīdiyyah schools of theology who have subscribed to the Attributes as distinct from the Essence of God have adopted a formula in a bid to refute the criticisms (especially about the multiplicity of the eternals) made against their notion. It is as follows: [17](#)

لَا يُقَالُ هِيَ هُوَ وَلَا غَيْرُهُ.

That is to say that although the Essential Attributes of God are distinct from His Essence, it cannot be said that they are identical with His Essence or they are other than His Essence. That is, identicalness and distinctness are both negated.

Yet, apart from containing contradiction, this formula cannot solve the problem, because once the attributes distinct from the Divine Essence have their own reality, they are either possible beings or necessary beings. The second assumption is in conflict with the Essential Oneness of God, and in the first assumption, the reality of the attributes is an effect.

If it is an effect of something other than God, it is concomitant with God's need for other than Him, which is impossible. And if it is an effect of the Essence of God, the assumption is that the Essence lacks those attributes and that which is devoid of perfection cannot bestow perfection.

ذات نایافته از هستی بخش کی تواند که شود هستی بخش

The Essence that cannot be found from the existence–bestower,

Who can become the existence–bestower?

Review Questions

1. Write down the meaning of the Unity of the Divine Essence.
2. For what reason is God not composed of parts?
3. Write down the statement of the Commander of the Faithful (Imam 'Alī) (a) about the meaning of the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*).
4. Describe the doctrine of Trinity and prove its falsity.
5. Write down the meaning of the Unity of the Divine Attributes.
6. Explain along with examples the Unity of the Divine Essence and Attributes in terms of their applicability and their difference in terms of meaning.
7. What is the problem of the multiplicity of the eternals? State and assess the way of solving it.

[1.](#) Sūrat al-A'raf 7:59, 65, 73, 85.

[2.](#) Sūrat an-Nahḥ 16:36.

[3.](#) This is because to be physical is concomitant with dependence, change and deterioration, and these are properties of possible beings (*mumkin al-wujūd*), while God is the Necessary Being by essence.

- [4.](#) This refers to philosophical matter and not to physical or natural matter, and to prove or negate it is only possible through philosophical argument and not by means of sensory test and experiment.
- [5.](#) Shaykh al-ʿAdāq, Al-Tawḥīd, section (bāb) 3, ʿadāth 3.
- [6.](#) John 1: 1, 14. In this volume, the King James Version of the Bible is adopted for Biblical passages, unless otherwise stated. [Trans.]
- [7.](#) Epistle of Paul.
- [8.](#) Sīrat al-Mʿīdah 5: 17, 72.
- [9.](#) Sīrat al-Mʿīdah 5: 73.
- [10.](#) Sīrat al-Tawbah (or Barʿah) 9: 30.
- [11.](#) Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931): a French social psychologist, sociologist, and amateur physicist. [Trans.]
- [12.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 1.
- [13.](#) Ibid.
- [14.](#) Shaykh al-ʿAdāq, Al-Tawḥīd, section (bāb) 2, ʿadāth 5.
- [15.](#) Ibid., section (bāb) 11, ʿadāth 9.
- [16.](#) In this regard, see the book Al-Ilḥiyyāt fī Madrasat Ahl al-Bayt (ʿa) by the author.
- [17.](#) In this regard, see the book Al-Ilḥiyyāt fī Madrasat Ahl al-Bayt (ʿa) by the author.

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