

Lesson 9: How does the Qur'an Present God

When we wish to assess the scientific personality and knowledge of a scholar, we examine his works and subject them to close study. Similarly, in order to measure the talent, creativity and ability of an artist to invent original images, we undertake the study of his artistic production.

In the same way, we can also perceive the attributes and characteristics of the pure essence of the Creator from the qualities and orderliness that pervade all phenomena, together with their subtlety and precision. Thereby, within the limits set by our capacity to know and perceive, we can become acquainted with God's knowledge, wisdom, life and power.

If it be a question of complete and comprehensive knowledge of God, then, of course, we must accept that man's ability to know does not extend that far. God's characteristics cannot be placed within given limits, and whatever comparison or simile we offer for them is bound to be false, for whatever is observable to science and thought in the natural realm is the work of God and the product of His will and command, whereas His essence is not part of nature and does not belong to the category of created beings. Hence, the essence of the divine being cannot be grasped by man by way of comparison and analogy.

He is, in short, a being for the knowledge of Whose essence no measure or criterion exists and for the fixing of Whose power, authority and knowledge, we have no figures or statistics.

Is man, then, too abject and powerless to perceive anything of the essence and attributes of so elevated a reality? To concede the weakness of our powers and our inability to attain complete, profound and comprehensive knowledge of God does not imply that we are deprived of any form of knowledge, however relative.

The orderly pattern of the universe loudly proclaims His attributes to us, and we can deduce the power and unlimited creativity of the Lord from the beauty and value of nature. Phenomena are for us an indication of His unique essence.

Contemplation of the will, consciousness, knowledge and harmony inherent in the order of being and all

the various phenomena of life, makes it possible for us to perceive that all these qualities together with all the other elements that speak of aim, direction and purpose unnecessarily derive from the will of a Creator Who Himself possesses these attributes before they are reflected in the mirror of creation.

That which comes to know God and to touch His being is the remarkable power of thought – a flash which deriving from that pre-eternal source shone on matter and bestowed on it the capacity of acquiring knowledge and advancing toward truth. It is within this great divine gift that the knowledge of God is manifested.

Islam deals with the knowledge of God in a clear and novel way. The Qur'an, the fundamental source for learning the worldview of Islam, applies the method of negation and affirmation to this question.

First, it negated, by means of convincing proofs and indications, the existence of false gods, because in approaching the transcendent doctrine of unity, it is necessary first to negate all forms of pseudo-divinity and the worship of other-than-God. This is the first important step on the path to unity. The Qur'an says:

"Have the ignorant polytheists abandoned the true God and chosen, instead, the false and powerless gods? Tell them: 'Bring forth your proof!' This call of mine to unity is my saying and that of all the learned men of the community, as well as the saying of all the Prophets and learned men before me. But these polytheists have no knowledge of the truth and constantly avert themselves from it. (21:24)

"Say, O Messenger, 'You worship one other than God who has no power to help or to harm you . It is God Who is all-hearing and Who knows the state of all of creation.' (5:79)

The one who has severed his connection with divine unity forgets, too, his own true position with respect to the world and being and becomes estranged from himself. For the ultimate form of self-alienation is the severing of all links with one's essential nature as man.

Conversely, once man has become alienated from his own essence, under the influences of internal and external factors, he will also be separated from his God and become enslaved by other-than-God. Subordination to other-than-God, then, takes the place of all logical thought. This represents a reversion to the worship of phenomena, for worshipping an idol and according primacy to matter both are forms of regression that rob man of his innate capacity for growth.

Monotheism is the only force that makes it possible for man to recapture the creativity of human values. By regaining his true rank, he enters a state of harmony with his own human nature and the ultimate nature of all being, thus attaining the most perfect form of existence open to him.

Throughout history, all divine summons and movements have begun with the proclamation of divine unity and the exclusive lordship of God. No concept has ever occurred to man that is more productive of

creative insights and more relevant to the various dimensions of human existence, or a more effective brake on human perversity, than the concept of divine unity.

Using clear proofs, the Qur'an shows man the way to attaining knowledge of the divine essence as follows:

"Did man emerge from non-being through his own devices? Was he his own creator? Did mankind create the heavens and earth? Certainly they do not know God." (52:35-36)

The Qur'an leaves it to man's reason and commonsense to realize the falsity of these two hypotheses, that man came into being of himself, or that he was his own creator, by testing and analyzing them in the laboratory of his thought.

By reflecting on the signs and indications of God, he will come to recognize with clear and absolute certainty the true source of all being and to understand that no value can be posited for any model of the universe unless behind it an organizing and capable intellect is at work.

In other verses, man's attention is drawn to the manner of his creation and gradual emergence from non-being. He, thus, comes to realize that his remarkable creation, with all the wonders it contains, is a sign and indication of the infinite divine will, the penetrating rays of which touch all beings. The Qur'an says:

"We created man out of an essence of clay, then We established him in a firm place in the form of sperm. Then We made the sperm into coagulated blood, and then into a formless lump of flesh. Then we made it into bones, and then clothed the bones with flesh. Finally We brought forth a new creation. How well did God create, the best of all creators!" (23: 12-14)

When the foetus is ready to receive shape and form, all the cells of the eyes, the ear, the brain, and the other organs, start to function and begin their ceaseless activity. This is the truth to which the Qur'an is directing men's attention. It, then, poses to man the question of whether all these wondrous changes are rationally compatible with the hypothesis that there is no God.

Is it not rather the case that phenomena such as these prove and demonstrate, with the utmost emphasis, the need for a plan, a design, a guiding hand inspired by conscious will? Is it at all possible that the cells of the body should learn their functions, pursue their aim in a precise and orderly fashion, and crystallize so miraculously in the world of being, without there being a conscious and powerful being to instruct them?

The Qur'an answers this question as follows:

"He it is Who creates and brings forth (the totality of parts), Who separates (the parts belonging to each organ), and Who gives form (to different aspects)." (59:24)

The Qur'an describes every sense phenomenon that man sees around him as something calling for reflection and the drawing of conclusions.

"Your God is but one God. There is no god other than Him, Compassionate and Merciful. In the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the alternation of night and day, in the ships that ply the seas to the benefit of man, in the water sent down from the heavens to revive the earth after its death, in the different species of animals scattered across the earth, in the rotation of the winds, in the clouds that are subordinate to God's command between heaven and earth, in all of this, there are signs for men who use their intellects." (2:163-164)

"Tell men to reflect with care and see what things the heavens and the earth contain." (10:101)

The Qur'an also mentions the study of human history and the peoples of the past with all the changes they have undergone, as a special source of knowledge. It invites man to pay heed, in order to discover the truth, to the triumphs and defeats, the glories and humiliations, the fortune and misfortune, of various ancient peoples, so that by learning the orderly and precise laws of history, he will be able to benefit himself and his society by aligning the history of his own age with those laws.

The Qur'an thus proclaims:

"Even before your time, certain laws and norms were in force, so travel and examine the historical traces left by past peoples, to see what was the fate of those who denied the truths of revelation and the promises of God." (3:137)

"How many were those powerful ones whom We destroyed in their cities on account of their oppression and wrongdoing, and We made another people to be their heirs." (21:11)

The Qur'an also recognizes man's inner world, which it expressed by the word *anfus* ("souls"), as a source for fruitful reflection and the discovery of truth. It points out its importance as follows:

"We make our signs and indications entirely manifest in the world and in the souls and inner beings of Our servants so that it should be clear that God is the True." (41:53)

"On the face of the earth there are signs for the possessors of certainty, and also in your own selves; will you not see?" (51:20-21)

In other words, there is an abundant source of knowledge in the beauty and symmetry of the human body, with all of its organs and capacities, its actions and reactions, its precise and subtle mechanisms, its varied energies and instincts, its perceptions, feelings and sensations, both animal and human, and most especially in the astounding capacity of thought and awareness with which man has been entrusted a capacity which still remains largely unknown, for man has taken only a few steps in studying this invisible power and its relationship with his material body.

The Qur'an proclaims that it is sufficient to reflect on and examine your own self in order to be guided to the eternal, infinite source that is free of all need, has unlimited knowledge, skill and power, and a feeble reflection of which is manifest in your being. You will then know that it is that infinite reality which has thus brought together in one place so fruitful a compound of elements and brought it forth onto the plain of existence.

Given the existence of such vivid indications and decisive proofs, placed at your disposal and within your own being for you to seek the knowledge of God, no excuse will be accepted from you for misguidance and denial.

The Qur'an also applies the method of negation and affirmation to the question of God's attributes. Thus, it describes the attributes that the essence of the Creator possesses as "affirmative attributes." Among the more knowledge, power will, the fact that His existence was not preceded by non-existence and that His being has no beginning, and the fact that all the motions of the world derive from His will and His power.

The Qur'an says:

"He is God, the One other than Whom there is no god, the knower of the hidden and the manifest, the Compassionate, the Merciful. He is God, the One other than Whom there is no god, the Commander, the All-powerful, Pure and Without Defect, the Bestower of Safety, the Protector, the Precious, the Mighty, the Sublime, the Most Elevated. Exempt and purified be He from the partners which they ascribe to Him. "(59:22-23)

The "negative attributes" are those from which God is free. They include the fact that God is not a body and has no place; His sacred being has no partner or like; He is not a prisoner to the limitations set up by the bounds of the senses; He neither begets nor is begotten; there is neither change nor motion within His essence, for He is absolute perfection; and He does not delegate the task of creation to anyone.

The Qur'an says:

"O Messenger, say: 'He is God, the One, the God Who is free of need for all things and of Whom all beings stand in need. No one is His offspring, and He is not the offspring of anyone, and He has no like or parallel. " (112:1- 4)

"Pure and exalted is thy Lord, God the Powerful and Unique, Who is pure of what men in their ignorance ascribe to Him. " (37:180)

Human logic, which inevitably thinks in terms of limited categories, is incapable of sitting in judgment on divinity, because we must admit that it is impossible to perceive the ultimate ground of that being for whom no observable or comprehensible analogue or parallel exists in the world of creation. The most

profound schools of thought and the greatest methods of reflection here fall prey to bewilderment.

Just as all existent beings must lead back to an essence with which existence is identical, to an independent being on which all other beings depend, so, too, they must derive from a source of life, power and knowledge, from the infinite being of which all these attributes and qualities surge forth in abundance.

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