

On the Unity of God

A follower of the Islamic religion must first accept the testimony of faith: "There is no god but God" (*la ilaha illa-Allah*). This profession of God's Unity is Islam's first pillar (*ruk'n*). All else depends upon it and derives from it.

But what does it mean to say that there is no god but God? For Islam, the manner in which the believer answers this question displays the depth to which he understands his religion. And, paraphrasing a *hadith* of the Prophet often quoted in Sufi texts, one might say that there are as many ways of understanding the meaning of this profession as there are believers.¹

Islamic intellectual history can be understood as a gradual unfolding of the manner in which successive generations of men have understood the meaning and implications of professing God's Unity. Theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, Sufism, even to some degree the natural sciences, all seek to explain at some level the principle of *tawhid*, "To profess that God is One." Some of the most productive of the intellectual schools which have attempted to explain the meaning of *tawhid* have flourished among Shi'ites.

Many historians have looked outside of Islam to find the inspiration for Islam's philosophical and metaphysical expositions of the nature of God's Unity. Such scholars tend to relegate anything more than what could derive – that is, in their view from a "simple bedouin faith" to outside influence.

Invariably they ignore the rich treasuries of wisdom contained in the vast corpus of Shi'ite *hadith* literature pertaining to Islam's first centuries, i.e., the sayings of the Imams who were the acknowledged authorities in the religious sciences not only by the Shi'ites but also by the Sunnis. Even certain sayings of the Prophet which provide inspiration for the Imams have been ignored. In particular, the great watershed of Islamic metaphysical teachings, Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law and the Shi'ites' first Imam, has been largely overlooked.

In the following selections from *Bihar al-anwar*, fifteen out of hundreds that can be found in Shi'ite sources, the reader will see the seeds for much of later Islamic metaphysical speculation. It will be noticed that the style of the *hadiths* varies little from the Prophet himself to the eighth Imam, the last from

whom large numbers of such sayings have been handed down. The most important sources for such *hadiths*, i.e., the Prophet, the first, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth Imams, are all represented.

The basic themes of the selections remain largely constant. The Prophet and the Imams all emphasize God's transcendence, or His "incomparability" (*tanzih*) with the creatures. We may speak of God – although only on the authority of His own words, i.e., the Quran—but the expressions we employ are not to be understood as they are when we use the same words to describe the creatures.

At the same time, the very fact that words can properly be employed to refer to God show that in some respect He is indeed "comparable" or "similar" (*tasbih*) to His creation, if only in the sense that His creation is somehow "similar" to Him because created by Him. Otherwise, the words employed to speak about Him would all be meaningless, or each one would be equivalent to every other. But this second dimension of God's Reality – one more emphasized in Sufism – is relatively ignored in favor of His incomparability.

Another theme of the selections is man's inability to grasp God through such things as the powers of his reason and his senses. The constant emphasis upon this point underlines God's incomparability and illustrates the particular errors to which the polytheistic and anthropomorphic thinking and imagination of the "Age of Ignorance" (*al-jahiliyyah*) before Islam was prone.

In order to clarify the meaning of the selections, I have tried to supply a sufficient number of annotations. To comment upon the sayings in detail has been the task of much of Shi'ite speculation throughout the centuries. Every word and every sentence have provided numerous scholars with ample opportunity to display their erudition. But for a Western audience, one can only hope to point out the most important references to the Quran and the prophetic *hadith* literature—references which are largely obvious for the Arabic speaking Muslim.

Then I have tried to illustrate the manner in which later commentators have elaborated upon the *hadiths* by quoting a number of explanatory passages, in Part I mostly from Majlisi, the compiler of the *Bihar al-anwar*. Some of these commentaries are necessary to understand the bearing of the text, but others may seem to obscure an apparently obvious sentence. In the latter case, this is largely because the commentators usually try to explain the text by referring to theological and philosophical concepts familiar to their readers, but not so to the average Westerner. However that may be, such notes illustrate the manner in which later speculation has expanded and developed an aphoristic mode of expression into a complex metaphysical system.

A. The Prophet

1. Profession of Faith

Abu Abdallah (the sixth Imam) has related from his fathers that the Prophet of God – God bless him and

his household² said in one of his sermons, "Praise belongs to God, who in His firstness (*awwaliyyah*) was solitary and in His beginninglessness (*azaliyyah*) was tremendously exalted through divinity and supremely great through His magnificence and power.³ He originated that which He produced and brought into being that which He created without a model (*mithal*) preceding anything that He created.

Our Lord, the eternal (*al-qadim*), unstitched (the heavens and the earth)⁴ through the subtlety (*lutf*) of His lordship and the knowledge within His omniscience, created all that He created through the laws of His power (*qudrah*), and split (the sky) through the light of dawn.⁵ ***So none changes His creation, none alters His handiwork, 'none repels His law' (13:45),⁶*** none rejects His command.

There is no place of rest away from His call (*dawah*),⁷ no cessation to His dominion and no interruption of His term. He is the truly existent (*al-kaynun*) from the first and the truly enduring (*al-daymum*) forever. He is veiled from His creatures by His light in the high horizon, in the towering might, and in the lofty dominion.

He is above all things and below all things. So He manifested Himself (*tajalla*) to His creation without being seen, and He transcends being gazed upon. He wanted to be distinguished by the profession of Unity (*tawhid*) when He withdrew behind the veil of His light, rose high in His exaltation and concealed Himself from His creation."⁸

"He sent to them messengers so they might be His conclusive argument against His creatures⁹ and so His messengers to them might be witnesses against them.¹⁰ ***He sent among them prophets bearing good tidings and warning, 'that whosoever perished might perish by a clear sign, and by a clear sign he might live who lived' (7 :42)*** and that the servants might understand of their Lord that of which they had been ignorant, recognize Him in His Lordship after they had denied (it) and profess His Unity in His divinity after they had stubbornly resisted."

2. God's Attributes

Ibn Abbas related that a Jew, called Na'thal, stood up before the Prophet of God—upon whom be blessings and peace—and said, "O Muhammad, verily I will ask thee about certain things which have been repeating themselves in my breast for some time. If thou answerest them for me I will embrace Islam at thy hand."

The Prophet said, "Ask, O Abu Ummarah"

Then he said, "O Muhammad, describe for me thy Lord."

He answered, "Surely the Creator cannot be described except by that with which He has described Himself—and how should one describe that Creator whom the senses cannot perceive, imaginations cannot attain, thoughts (*khatarat*) cannot delimit and sight cannot encompass ?

Greater is He than what the depictees describe. He is distant in His nearness and near in His distance. He fashions (*kayyaf*) 'howness' (*kayfiyyah*), so it is not said of Him, 'How?' (*kayf*); He determines (*ayyan*) the 'where' (*ayn*), so it is not said of Him, 'Where?' (*ayn*).

He sunders 'howness' (*kayfufiyyah*) and 'whereness' (*aynuniyyah*), so He is **"One . . . the Everlasting Refuge" (112:1-2)**, as He has described Himself. But depictees do not attain to His description. **'He has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one' (112:3-4)**.

Na'thal said, "Thou hast spoken the truth. O Muhammad, tell me about thy saying, 'Surely He is One, there is none like (*shabih*) Him.' Is not God one and man one? And thus His oneness (*wahdaniyyah*) resembles the oneness of man."

He answered, "God is one, but single in meaning (*ahadi al-mana*), while man is one but dual in meaning (*thanawi al-ma'na*), corporeal substance (*jism*) and accidents (*'arad*), body (*badan*) and spirit (*ruh*). Similarity (*tashbih*)¹¹ pertains only to the meanings."

Nathal said, "Thou hast spoken the truth, O Muhammad."

B. Ali (as), the First Imam

1. The Transcendent Lord

It was related by 'Ali ibn Musa Ar-Ridha' (the eighth Imam) from the earlier Imams in succession that al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (the third Imam) spoke as follows: The Commander of the Faithful—upon whom be peace—addressed the people in the mosque at Kufa and said:

"Praise belongs to God, who did not originate from anything, nor did He bring what exists into being from anything.¹² His beginninglessness is attested to by the temporality (*huduth*) of things, His power by the impotence with which He has branded them, and His everlastingness (*dawam*) by the annihilation (*fana'*) which He has forced upon them. No place is empty of Him that He might be perceived through localization (*ayniyyah*), no object (*shabah*) is like Him that He might be described by quality (*kayfiyyah*), nor is He absent from anything that He might be known through situation (*haythiyyah*)."¹³

"He is distinct (*muba'in*) in attributes from all that He has originated, inaccessible to perception because of the changing essences He has created (in things),¹⁴ and outside of all domination (*tasarruf*) by changing states (*halat*) because of grandeur and tremendousness. Forbidden is His delimitation (*tahdid*) to the penetrating acumen of sagacities, His description (*takyif*) to the piercing profundities of thought and His representation (*taswir*) to the searching probes of insight."

"Because of His tremendousness places encompass Him not, because of His majesty measures gauge Him not, and because of His grandeur standards judge Him not. Impossible is it for imaginations (*awham*) to fathom Him, understandings (*afham*) to comprehend Him or minds (*adhhan*) to imagine Him. Powers of reason (*uqul*) with lofty aspiration despair of contriving to comprehend Him, oceans of

knowledge run dry without alluding to Him in depth,[15](#) and the subtleties of disputants fall from loftiness to pettiness in describing His power."

"He is One (*wahid*), not in terms of number (*adad*); Everlasting (*da'im*), without duration (*amad*); Standing (*qa'im*), without supports (*umud*). He is not of a kind (*jins*) that (other) kinds should be on a par with Him, nor an object that objects should be similar to Him, nor like things that attributes should apply to Him. Powers of reason go astray in the waves of the current of perceiving Him, imaginations are bewildered at encompassing the mention of His beginninglessness, understandings are held back from becoming conscious of the description of His power, and minds are drowned in the depths of the heavens of His kingdom (*malakut*)."[16](#)

"He is Master over (*giving*) bounties, Inaccessible through Grandeur, and Sovereign over all things. Time (*al-dahr*) makes Him not old, nor does description encompass Him. Humbled before Him are the firmest of obduracies in the limits of their constancy, and submitted to Him are the most unshakeable of the cords in the extremity of their towering regions."[17](#)[32](#)

"Witness to His Lordship (*rububiyyah*) is the totality of kinds (*al-ajnas*, i.e. kinds of creatures), to His Power their incapacity, to His eternity (*qidmah*) their createdness (*futur*), and to His permanence (*baqa'*) their passing into extinction (*zawal*). So they possess no place of refuge from His grasp (*idrak*) of them, no exit from His encompassing (*ihatah*) them, no way of veiling themselves from His enumeration (*ihisa'*) of them and no way of avoiding His power over them.

Sufficient is the perfection of His making them[18](#) as a sign (*ayah*), His compounding of their (natural) constitutions as a proof, the temporal origin (*huduth*) of their natures as (a reason for His) eternity, and the creation's laws governing them as a lesson.[19](#) No limit is attributed to Him, no similitude struck for Him and nothing veiled from Him. High indeed is He exalted above the striking of similitudes and above created attributes!"

"And I testify that there is no god but He, having faith in His lordship and opposing whoso denies Him; and I testify that Muhammad is His servant and messenger, residing in the best lodging-place, having passed from the noblest of loins and immaculate wombs, extracted in lineage from the noblest of mines and in origin from the most excellent of plantations, and (derived) from the most inaccessible of summits and the most glorious roots, from the tree from which God fashioned His prophets and chose His trusted ones:[20](#) (a tree) of excellent wood, harmonious stature, lofty branches, flourishing limbs, ripened fruit, (and) noble interior, implanted in generosity and cultivated in a sacred precinct.

There it put forth branches and fruit, became strong and unassailable, and then made him (the prophet Muhammad) tall and eminent, until God, the Mighty and Majestic, honored him with the Faithful Spirit,[21](#) the Illuminating Light,[22](#) and the Manifest Book.[23](#) He subjected to him Buraq[24](#) and the angels greeted him.[25](#)

By means of him He terrified the devils, overthrew the idols and the gods (who were) worshipped apart

from Him. His prophet's Wont (*sunnah*) is integrity (*rushd*), his conduct (*sirah*) is justice and his decision is truth. He proclaimed that which was commanded by his Lord,²⁶ and he delivered that with which he was charged²⁷ until he made plain his mission through the profession of Unity and made manifest among the creatures that there is no god but God alone and that He has no associate; until His Oneness became pure and His lordship unmixed. God made manifest his argument through the profession of His Unity and He raised his degree with submission (*al-islam*). And God, the Mighty and Majestic, chose for His prophet what was with Him of repose, degree and means—upon him and upon his pure household be God's peace."

2. Via negativa

'Ali said, "Praise belongs to God, whose laudation is not rendered by speakers,²⁸ whose bounties are not counted by reckoners,²⁹ and whose rightfully due (*haqq*) is not discharged by those who strive. Grand aspirations perceive Him not and deep-diving perspicacities reach Him not.

His attributes (*sifah*) possess no determined limits (*hadd mahdud*), no existing description (*na't mawjud*), no fixed time (*waqt madud*) and no extended term (*ajal mamdud*). He originates the creatures by His power,³⁰ looses the winds by His mercy,³¹ and fastens the shaking of His earth with boulders."³²

"The first step in religion is knowledge (*marifah*) of Him. The perfection of knowledge of Him is to confirm Him (*tasdiq*). The perfection of confirming Him is to profess His unity (*tawhid*). The perfection of professing His Unity is sincerity (*ikhlas*) towards Him.³³ And the perfection of sincerity towards Him is to negate attributes (*nafy al-sifat*) from Him, because of the testimony of every attribute that it is not that which possesses the attribute (*al-mawsuf*) and the testimony of everything that possesses attributes that it is not the attribute."

So whoso describes God—glory be to Him—has given Him a comrade (i.e. the description). Whoso gives Him a comrade has declared Him to be two (*tathniyah*). Whoso declares Him to be two has divided Him. Whoso divides Him is ignorant of Him. (Whoso is ignorant of Him points to Him).³⁴ Whoso points to Him has delimited Him. Whoso delimits Him has numbered Him. Whoso says, 'In what is He?', has enclosed Him. Whoso says, 'On what is He?', has excluded Him (from certain things)."

"He is a being (*ka'in*) not as the result of temporal origin (*hadath*), an existent (*mawjud*) not (having come) from nonexistence (*adam*). He is with everything, not through association (*muqaranah*); and He is other than everything, not through separation (*muzayalah*). He is active (*fa'il*), not in the sense of possessing movement and instruments. He was seeing when there was none of His creatures to be observed by Him. He was 'alone' (*mutawahhid*) when there was none with whom to be intimate and at whose loss to feel lonely."

"He originated creation and gave to it its beginning without employing deliberation, profiting from experience, occasioning movement (*harakah*, i.e. in Himself), or being disrupted by the cares of the soul

(*hamamah nafs*). He delays things to their times,³⁵ mends their discrepancies, implants (in them) their natural dispositions, and makes these (dispositions) adhere to their objects. He has knowledge of them before their beginning, encompasses their limits (*hudud*) and their end (*intiha'*) and knows their relationships (*qara'in*) and aspects (*ahna'*).

3. Firm Rooting in Knowledge

It was related from Abu Abdallah that when the Commander of the Faithful was speaking from the pulpit at Kufa a man stood up and said, "O Commander of the Faithful! Describe for us thy Lord—blessed and transcendent is He—that our love (*hubb*) for Him and knowledge (*marifah*) of Him may increase."

The Commander of the Faithful became angry and cried out, "Assemble for prayer!" The people gathered together until the mosque was choked with them. Then he stood, his color changing, and he said, "Praise belongs to God, who does not gain in plenty by withholding nor become poor through giving, while every other giver than He diminishes. (He is) full of the benefits of blessings and the advantages of superabundance.

Through His generosity He ensures the provision of creatures. So He smooths the path of aspiration (*talab*) for those who make Him their Quest. Nor is He more generous with what is asked of Him than with what is not asked. Time in its march varies not for Him that (His) state should change accordingly.

If He should give to some of His servants (all of) the silver metal, ingots of pure gold and sacks of pearls that the mountains' mines breathe³⁶ and the seas' shells smile, His generosity would in nowise be affected, nor would the expanse of that which is with Him dwindle.

With Him are treasuries of bounteous bestowal which are not exhausted by objects of request and which come not to His attention in spite of their abundance, for He is the Generous who is not diminished by gifts nor made niggardly by the importunity of the importune. And ***'His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it "Be", and it is' (36 : 82).***"

"The angels, despite their proximity to the throne of His liberality, the great extent of their burning love (*walah*) for Him, (their) glorification of the majesty of His might, and their proximity to the unseen of His kingdom (*ghaybmalakutih*), are capable of knowing only what He has taught them of His affair, although they are of the Sacred Kingdom in terms of rank. It is because they possess knowledge of Him only as He created them that they say, ***'Glory be to Thee! We know not save what Thou hast taught us' (2 : 32).***"³⁷

"So what is thy opinion, O questioner, of Him who is thus ? Glory be to Him, and praise belongs to Him! He has not come into being that change or removal should be possible in Him. He is not affected in His Essence by recurrence of states, and aeons of nights and days differ not for Him. (It is He) who originated creation with no model (*mithal*) to copy or measure (*migdar*) to imitate from a deity (*mabud*) who should have existed before Him. Attributes encompass Him not, lest He be defined by limits (*hudud*)

(resulting) from their having attained Him. **He - like Him there is naught' (42 : 11)** -never ceases to transcend the attributes of creatures."

"Eyes are prevented from reaching Him, lest He be described through being plainly seen (*bi-l-iyān*) and lest He be known among His creatures in the Essence that none knows but He. Through His exaltation (*uluww*) over things He eludes that upon which falls the conjectures of imaginers (*mutawāhhimin*). The inmost center (*kunh*) of His tremendousness transcends the embrace of the impotent deliberation of those who meditate. He has no similitude that what is created should resemble Him. For those who have knowledge of Him He is forever above likenesses and opposites."

"Those who ascribe rivals to God (*al-adilun billah*) cry lies when they make Him similar to the like of their categories, adorn Him in their imaginations with the adornment of creatures, divide Him with a measure resulting from the notions of their concerns, and measure Him by the talents of their reason's powers³⁸ in terms of the creatures with their multiple faculties. For how should the deliberations of imaginations assess Him whose measure cannot be determined, when surely the notions of understanding have erred in conceiving of His inmost center ? For He is greater than that the minds of men should delimit Him through thought (*tafkir*) or angels should encompass Him through estimation, despite their proximity to the kingdom of His might."

"High be He exalted above having an equal (*kufw*) with which to be compared, for He is the Subtle: when imaginations desire to encroach upon Him in the depths of the unseen regions of His dominion, (when) thoughts (*fikar*) free from insinuating intrusions seek to grasp knowledge of His Essence, (when) hearts are thrown into mad confusion over Him in trying to embrace Him through conforming to His attributes, (when) the ways of approach of reason's powers become obscured since no attributes attain to Him by which they might gain the knowledge of His divinity, (then) they (imaginations, thoughts, hearts and ways of approach) are checked in disgrace while traversing the chasms of the dark reaches of the unseen worlds, rid (of all things) for Him—glory be to Him!

They return having been thrown back, admitting that the inmost center of His knowledge is not reached through the deviation of straying (from the path)³⁹ and that no notion of the measure of His might's majesty occurs to the mind of meditators, by reason of His distance from being (encompassed) within the faculties of limited beings. For He is counter to (*khilaf*) His creation, and there is nothing like Him among creatures. Now a thing is only compared with its like (*adil*). As for what has no like, how should it be compared with what is other than its like (*mithal*)? And He is the Beginning (*al-badi*) before whom was naught, and the Last (*al-akhir*) after whom will be naught."

"Eyes reach Him not in the splendor of His Power (*jabarut*). When He obscures them with veils, eyes do not penetrate the density of the veils' thickness, nor do they pierce the firmness pertaining to His coverings to (reach) the 'Possessor of the Throne',⁴⁰ in whose will affairs originate and before the majesty of whose tremendousness the grandeur of the arrogant cringes. Necks are bowed before Him and faces humbled in fear of Him. In the marvels (*bada'i*) which He creates appear the traces (*athar*) of

His wisdom (*hikmah*), and all that is created becomes an argument (*hujjah*) for Him and attributed to Him. Were it a silent creation His argument would be speaking through it in His directing (of its affairs, *tadbir*).⁴¹

"He determines what He creates and makes firm His determining (*taqdir*), places everything in its place through the subtlety of His directing, and turns it in a direction.⁴² Then nothing of it reaches the environs of His station.⁴³ It falls not short before carrying out His will and refrains not when ordered to execute His desire. He suffers not from weariness that might touch Him,⁴⁴ nor is He deceived by one who would transgress His command."⁴⁵

"So His creation is complete and it yields to Him in obedience. It complies with the (appointed) time at which He brings it forth, a response resisted by neither the dawdler's hesitation nor the lingerer's tardiness. He straightened the crookedness of things, delineated the way-marks of their limits, reconciled their contradictions through His power, joined the means of their conjunctions (*asbab qara'iniha*), caused their various sorts to be disparate in size, and divided them into different kinds, natural dispositions, and appearances-marvels of creation, whose fashioning He made firm. He made them according to His desire and⁴⁶ brought them into existence. His knowledge put in order the kinds of their creation and His directing achieved their fairest determination."

"O questioner! Know that whoso compares our majestic Lord to the mutual dissimilarity of the parts of His creation and to the interconnection of their joints, hidden by the directing of His wisdom, surely he has not fixed his inmost consciousness (*ghayb damirih*) upon knowledge of Him, and his heart has not witnessed (*mushahadah*) the certainty that He has no compeer. It is as if he had not heard of the followers disclaiming the followed, saying,

'By God, we were certainly in manifest error when we made you equal to the Lord of all beings' (26 : 97-8)⁴⁷

"Whoso sets our Lord equal to something has ascribed rivals to Him, and he who ascribes rivals to Him is a disbeliever in what His clear verses⁴⁸ have revealed and in what the witnesses of His clear signs' arguments have spoken. For He is God, who does not become defined within the powers of reason that He should be qualified within the range of their thought or be limited and turned about within the craws of the reflection of aspiring souls.⁴⁹

He is the Producer of the kinds of things without having been in need of reflection, or of acting according to an innate disposition, or of experience gained through the passing of Time's events, or of an associate to help Him in bringing into existence the wonders of affairs.

When those who ascribe rivals to Him compare Him to creation, whose attributes are divided and limited and whose levels possess various zones and regions-and He, the Mighty and Majestic, is the existent through Himself, not through His instruments (*adah*) - they cannot have measured Him with His true measure.

Thus He said, declaring Himself incomparable with the association of compeers and rising above the estimate of those of His disbelieving servants who measure Him within limits,

'They measure not God with His true measure. The earth altogether shall be His handful on the Day of Resurrection, and the heavens shall be rolled up in His right hand. Glory be to Him! High be He exalted above that they associate' (39 : 67).'

"So as for that to which the Quran directs thee concerning His attributes, follow it, so that a link may be established between thee and knowledge (*ma'rifah*) of Him. Take it as an example, and seek illumination by the light of its guidance; surely it is a blessing and a wisdom given to thee, so take what has been given thee and be among the thankful.[50](#)

But as for that to which Satan directs thee, that which is not made incumbent upon thee in the Quran and no trace (*athar*) concerning which exists in the Wont of the Prophet and the Imams of guidance, leave its knowledge to God, the Mighty and Majestic. Surely that is the limit of God's claim (*haqq*) against thee."

"Know that 'those firmly rooted in knowledge'[51](#) are they whom God has freed from the need to assault the closed doors beyond which are the unseen things (*al-ghuyub*), so they cling to the acknowledgement (*iqrar*) of all of the veiled unseen of which they know not the interpretation, and they say, ***'We have faith in it; all is from our Lord.'*** (3 : 7).

So God praised their avowal of incapacity to grasp what they comprehend not in knowledge, and He called their abandonment of the desire to penetrate into that whose examination is not required of them 'firm-rootedness'. So limit thyself to that (same attitude) and measure not the Mightiness of God-Glory be to Him-according to the measure of thy reason's power, thus becoming of those who perish."

4. The Fairest of Creators

It has been related that Ali-upon whom be peace-delivered the following sermon at Kufa. He was standing on a stone that had been set up for him by Ja'dah ibn Hubayrah al-Makhzumi.[52](#) He wore an outer garment of wool. His sword belt and his shoes were made of fiber. His forehead was like the knee of a camel.[53](#) He said, "Praise belongs to God, unto whom are the homecomings of creation and the issues of the affair.[54](#)

We praise Him for His mighty goodness, His radiant proof (*burhan*) and the profusion of His bounty and gracious giving; a praise which might render Him His rightfully due, accomplish His thanks, bring (us) near to His reward and cause the fairest of His increase.[55](#) We pray to Him for succour,[56](#) the prayer of one hoping for His bounty, anticipating His benefit, having confidence in Him to avert (evil), acknowledging His blessings and submitting to Him in deed and word.

We believe in Him with the faith (*iman*) of one who hopes for Him with certainty, turns to Him as a

believer, humbles himself before Him in submission, sincerely professes His Unity (*akhlas muwahhidan*), magnifies Him in glorification and seeks refuge in Him, desiring and striving (*raghiban mujtahidan*)."

"He has not been begotten' (112 : 3) – glory be to Him that He should share in Might, and **'He has not begotten' (112 : 3)** that He should bequeath and perish. Time (*waqt*) precedes Him not, nor duration, and increase and decrease seize Him not by turns."

"Nay, He appears to the powers of reason by the marks He has shown us of (His) perfect directing and certain decree. So of the witnesses of His creation is the creation of the heavens without pillars,⁵⁷ standing without supports. He called them and they answered, obeying, submissive, without hesitation or delay.⁵⁸

Had it not been for their acknowledging (*iqrar*) Him in lordship and their willing submission (to Him), He would not have appointed them the locus of His Throne, nor the dwelling place for His angels, nor the place of ascent of good words and the righteous deed of His creation.⁵⁹

He appointed their stars waymarks by which the bewildered traveler is guided in the divergent paths of the lands. The thickness of the dark night's curtain prevents not the shining of their light, and the garments of the black night's blackness cannot push back the brilliance of the light of the moon that spreads in the heavens."

"So glory be to Him, from whom is not hidden the blackness of a gloomy dusk or still night in the hollows of lands low, nor in the peaks of neighboring mountains;⁶⁰ (nor) that with which the thunder reverberates in the horizon of heaven; (nor) that from which the lightning of the clouds vanishes;⁶¹ (nor) the leaf which falls, removed from its place of falling by the gales caused by the stars (*al-anwa'*)⁶² and the pouring down of the rain. He knows the place where the raindrop falls and where it takes its rest, the route by which the tiny ant draws and drags (on the ground), what is sufficient food for a gnat⁶³ and what the female bears within her womb."⁶⁴

"Praise belongs to God, the Existent (*al-ka'in*) before there was a Pedestal (*kursi*), or Throne (*arsh*), or heaven, or earth, or jinn, or man. He is not perceived by imagination (*wahm*) or measured by understanding (*fahm*). Petitioners busy Him not and giving diminishes Him not⁶⁵. He is not observed by eyes, nor delimited by location ("where", *ayn*), nor described by pairs.⁶⁶ He creates not through application⁶⁷ is perceived not by the senses and is compared not with man."

"He it is who spoke to Moses directly⁶⁸ and showed him one of His mighty signs⁶⁹ without members (*jawarih*), instruments (*adawat*), speech or throat.⁷⁰ Nay, if thou speakest truly, O thou who affectest to describe thy Lord, then describe Gabriel, Michael and the hosts of the angels brought nigh, bowing in the sacred chambers (*hujarat al-quds*), their intellects in adoring perplexity to delimit the 'Fairest of Creators'.⁷¹ Surely only those are perceived through attributes who possess forms and instruments and who end in annihilation when they reach the limit of their term. There is no god but He. He illumines with His Light every darkness and He darkens with His Darkness every light."

5. Oneness

It has been related that on the day of the Battle of the Camel⁷² a bedouin came before the Commander of the Faithful and said, "O Commander of the Faithful! Sayest thou that God is one?" The people attacked him and said, "O bedouin! Doest thou not see how the Commander of the Faithful's heart is divided (with cares)?"

The Commander of the Faithful said, "Leave him, for surely what the bedouin wishes (i.e., knowledge of God) is what we wish for the people." Then he said, "O bedouin! To say that God is one (*wahid*) has four (possible) meanings, two of which are not permissible concerning God, the Mighty and Majestic, and two of which are established concerning Him."

"As for the two which are not permissible concerning Him, (the first is) the saying of him who says 'one' and has in mind the category of numbers. Now this is not permissible, for that which has no second does not enter into the category of numbers. Hast thou not seen that he who says that He is 'the third of three'⁷³ is of the unbelievers? And (the second⁷⁴ is like) the saying of him who says (concerning a man), 'He is one of mankind', meaning that he is one kind within the species.⁷⁴ This is not permissible because it is a comparison, and our Lord is greater than that and high above it."

"As for the two meanings which are established concerning Him, (the first is) the saying of him who says, 'He is one, there is no likeness (*shabah*) unto Him among things.' Such is our Lord. And (the second is) the saying of him who says, 'Surely He, the Mighty and Majestic, is single in meaning (*ahadi al – mana*), intending by that that He is not divided by existence, the power of reason, or imagination.⁷⁵ Such is our Lord, the Mighty and Majestic."⁷⁶

6. Discernment

In another sermon Ali'—upon whom be peace—said, "What points to Him (*daliluh*) is His signs (*ayat*);⁷⁷ to perceive Him (*wujuduh*) is to affirm Him (*ithbatuh*);⁷⁸ to know Him is to profess His unity; and professing His Unity is to distinguish Him (*tamyiz*) from His creation.

The standard (*hukm*) for distinguishing is separation (*baynunah*) in attribute, not separation in terms of distance (*uzlah*). Surely He is a creating Lord (*rabb khaliq*), neither possessing a Lord nor created. Whatever can be conceived of is different from Him."

"Then after that he said, "Whoso is known in himself (*bi-nafsihi*) is not a god: this is the guide to that which points to Him (*al-dalil alayh*) and this it is which leads to knowledge of Him."

7. The Vision of the Heart

Abu Abdallah related as follows: the Commander of the Faithful was speaking from the pulpit at Kufa when a man called Dhi'lib stood up before him. He was sharp-tongued, eloquent and courageous. He

said, "O Commander of the Faithful! Hast thou seen thy Lord ?"

He said, "Woe unto thee, O Dhilib! I would not be worshipping a lord whom I have not seen."

He said, "O Commander of the Faithful! How didst thou see Him ?"

He answered, "O Dhilib! Eyes see Him not through sight's observation, but hearts see Him through the verities of faith (*haqaiq al-iman*). Woe to thee, O Dhilib! Verily, my Lord is subtle in subtlety (*latif al-latafah*), but He is not described by subtleness (*lutf*); tremendous in tremendousness (*azim al-azamah*), but not described by tremendousness (*izam*); grand in grandeur (*kabir al-kibriya'*), but not described by grandness (*kibr*); and majestic in majesty (*jalil al-jalalah*), but not described by greatness (*ghilaz*).

Before all things He was; it is not said that anything was before Him. After all things He will be⁷⁹; it is not said that He possesses an 'after'. He willed (all) things, not through resolution (*himmah*). He is all-perceiving (*darrak*), not through any artifice (*khadihah*).

He is in all things, but not mixed (*muta-mazij*) with them, nor separate (*ba'in*) from them. He is Outward (*zahir*), not according to the explanation of being immediate (to the senses: *mubasharah*); Manifest (*mutajallin*), not through the appearance of a vision (of Him: *istihlal ru'yah*); Separate, not through distance (*masafah*); Near (*qarib*), not through approach (*mudannah*); Subtle, not through corporealization (*tajassum*); Existent (*mawfud*), not after nonexistence (*adam*); Active (*fa'il*) not through coercion (*idtirar*); Determining (*muqaddir*), not through movement (*harakah*); Desiring (*murid*), not through resolution (*hamamah*); Hearing (*sami*), not through means (*alah*); and Seeing (*basir*), not through organs (*adah*).⁸⁰

Spaces (*amakin*) encompass Him not, times (*awqat*) accompany Him not, attributes (*sifat*) delimit Him not and slumbers (*sinat*) seize Him not.⁸¹ By His giving sense (*tashir*) to sense organs (*mashair*) it is known that He has no sense organs.⁸² By His giving substance (*tajhir*) to substances (*jawahir*) it is known that He has no substance.⁸³ By His causing opposition (*mudaddah*) among things it is known that He has no opposite (*didd*).⁸⁴

By His causing affiliation (*muqaranah*) among affairs it is known that He has no affiliate (*qarin*). He opposed darkness to light, obscurity to clarity, moisture to solidity⁸⁵, and heat to cold. He joins together those things which are hostile to one another, and separates those which are near.

They prove (the existence of) their Separator (*mufarriq*) by their separation and their Joiner (*mu'allif*) by their junction. This is (the meaning of) His words—He is the Mighty and Majestic—**'And of everything created We two kinds; haply you will remember' (51: 49).**"

"So through them He separated 'before' and 'after' that it might be known that He has no before and after. They testify with their temperaments (*ghara'iz*) that He who gave them temperaments has no temperament. They announce through their subjection to time (*tawqit*) that He who has subjected them to time is not subject to it Himself."

"He veiled some of them from others so that it might be known that there is no veil between Him and His creation other than His creation. He was a Lord when there was none over whom He was Lord (*marbub*); a God when there was none for whom to be a God (*ma'luh*); a Knower (*alim*) when there was nothing to be known (*malum*); and a Hearer when there was nothing to be heard (*masmu*)."

Then Ali composed the following verses extemporaneously:

"My Lord is ever known by praise, my Lord is ever described by generosity."

"He was, when there was no light by which to seek illumination, and no darkness bent over the horizons."

"So our Lord is counter to creatures, all of them, and to all that is described in imaginations."

"Whoso desires Him portrayed through comparison returns beleaguered, shackled by his incapacity,"

"And in the Ascending Stairways the wave of His power casts a wave which blinds the eye of the spirit."⁸⁶ "So abandon the quarreler in religion lost in the depths, for in him doubt has corrupted his view."

"And become the companion of that reliable one who is the beloved of his Master and surrounded by the favors of his Protector: Smiling, he became in the earth the waymark of guidance (*dalil al-huda*) and in Heaven the adorned and acknowledged." After this Dhi'lib fell to the ground in a faint. When he recovered he said, "I have never heard such words. I will not return to any of that (which I believed before).

C. al-Baqir, the Fifth Imam

The Incomparable Lord

Abu Basir has related that a man came to Abu Ja'far (the fifth Imam) and said to him, "O Abu Ja'far, tell me about thy Lord! When was He?"

He said, "Woe unto thee! Surely it is said of a thing that was not, and then was, 'When was it?' But my Lord—blessed is He and high exalted – was ever-living without 'how' and had no 'was'. His Being (*kawn*) had no 'how', nor had it any 'where'. He was not in anything, nor was He on anything. He did not bring into existence a place (*makan*) for His Being (*kan*).

He increased not in strength after bringing things into being, nor was He weak before bringing things into being. And He was not lonely (*mustawhish*) before creating things. He resembles nothing brought into being. He was not devoid of power over the dominion before its production that He should be devoid of the dominion⁸⁷ after its passing.

He remains Living without (created) life, a powerful King before He produces anything (over which to rule) and an all-compelling King (*malik jabbar*) after He produces the universe (*al-kawn*). His Being has no 'how', nor has it any 'where', nor has it any limit. He is not known through anything resembling Him. He ages not through the duration of His subsistence. He is thunderstruck by nothing. Nothing causes

Him to fear. And all things are thunderstruck by fear of Him."⁸⁸

"He is Living without temporal life, without a being (*kawn*) described by attributes, without a state which can be defined (*kayf mahdud*), without a trace which can be followed, and without a place adjacent to anything. Nay, He is a Living One who knows, a King whoever is. His are the power and the dominion. He produces what He wills through His will (*mashiyyah*).

He is neither limited nor divided into parts, and He perishes not. He was the First, without 'how', and He will be the Last, without 'where'. And **'All things perish, except His Face' (28 : 88). 'His are the creation and the command. Blessed be God, the Lord of all beings!'" (7 : 54).**

"Woe upon thee, O questioner! As for my Lord, truly imaginations envelop Him not, uncertainties touch Him not, He is oppressed by none, none is adjacent to Him, phenomena touch Him not, He is questioned not as to anything He does,⁸⁹ He comes not upon anything,⁹⁰ **'Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep' (2 : 255). 'To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, and all that is underneath the soil'" (20 : 6).**

D. Ja'far al Sadiq, the Sixth Imam

1. Seeing God

Abu Basir has related that he said to Abu Abdallah—upon whom be peace "Tell me about God, the Mighty and Majestic Will believers see Him on the Day of Resurrection ?"

He answered, "Yes, and they have already seen Him before the Day of Resurrection."

Abu Basir asked, "When?"

The Imam answered, **"When He said to them, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said: 'Yes, verily' (7 : 172)."**⁹¹ Then he was quiet for a time. Then he said, "Truly the believers see him in this world before the Day of Resurrection. Doest thou not see Him now ?" Abu Basir then said to him, "That I might be made thy sacrifice. Shall I relate this (to others) from thee?"

He answered, "No, for if thou relatest it, a denier ignorant of the meaning of what thou sayest will deny it. Then he will suppose that it is comparison and unbelief (*kufr*). But seeing with the heart (*al-ru'yah b-il-qalb*) is not like seeing with the eyes (*al-ru'yah bi-l-ayn*). High be God exalted above what the comparers (*mushabbihun*) and heretics (*mulhidun*) describe!"

2. The name that can be named ...

It has been related that Abu Abdallah said, "The name of God is other than God, and everything that can be called by the name of a 'thing' (*shay'*)⁹² is created, except God. Therefore all that tongues express or is worked by hands ⁹³ is created. God is the goal of him who sets Him as his goal, but the determined goal (*al-mughayya*, i.e., in the mind of man) is other than the (real) goal.⁹⁴

The goal possesses attributes (*mawsuf*), and all that possesses attributes has been fashioned (*masnu*). But the Fashioner (*sani*) of things does not possess the attributes of any stated limit (*hadd musamma*). He has not come into being that His Being (*kaynunah*) should be known through fashioning (*sun*) (carried out) by other than He.⁹⁵ He does not terminate at a limit unless it be other than He.

Whoso understands this principle (*hukm*) will never fall into error. It is the unadulterated profession of Unity (*al-tawhid al-khalis*), so believe in it, confirm it, and understand it well, with God's permission the Mighty and Majestic."

"Whoso maintains that he knows God by means of a veil (*hijab*) or a form (*surah*) or a likeness (*mithal*) is an associator (*mushrik*), for the veil, the likeness and the form are other than He. He is utterly and only One. So how should he who maintains that he knows Him by means of other than Him be professing Unity? Surely He alone knows God who knows Him by means of God (*billah*). Therefore, whoso knows Him not by means of Him knows Him not. On the contrary, he only knows other than Him. There is nothing between the Creator and the created.⁹⁶111

God is the Creator of things, but not from something. He is named by His names, so He is other than His names, and His names are other than He.⁹⁷ The described (*al-mawsuf*) is other than the describer (*al-wasif*)." Then whoso maintains that he has faith in that which he does not know has gone astray from knowledge (*marifah*).⁹⁸ A created thing (*makhluk*) perceives nothing unless by means of God: the knowledge of God is perceived only by means of God. But God is empty of His creatures and His creatures are empty of Him.⁹⁹

When He desires a thing, it is as He desires, by His command (*amr*) and without speech (*nutq*). His servants have no refuge from that which He decrees (*ma qada*), and they have no argument against that which is His pleasure. They have no power to act or to deal with that which is brought about in their bodies, created (by God), except by means of their Lord. So whoso maintains that he is able to perform an act which God, the Mighty and Majestic, does not desire, has maintained that his will (*iradah*) prevails over the Will of God. **'Blessed be God' the Lord of all beings!' (7 : 54)**

E. Musa, the Seventh Imam

God's Might and Majesty

It has been related that the righteous servant, Musa ibn Ja'far, said, "Surely God – there is no god but He – was the Living without 'how' (*kayf*) or 'where' (*ayn*). He was not in anything, nor was He on anything. He did not create a place (*makan*) for His grandeur (*makan*).¹⁰⁰ He increased not in might after bringing things into being. Nothing brought into being resembles Him. He was not devoid of power over the dominion before its production, nor will He be devoid of power (over it) after its passing."¹⁰¹

"He – the Mighty and Majestic – is a Living God without temporal life, King before He produces anything,

Master after its production (*insha'*). God has no limits (*hadd*). He is not known through something resembling Him. He ages not through subsistence (*baqa'*). He is struck not by fear of anything, and by fright before Him all things are thunderstruck. [102](#)

So God is Living without temporal life, without a being described by attributes, without a state which can be defined, without a designated location or fixed place. Nay, He is Living in Himself, a Master whose power does not remove. He produced what He wills when He wills through His will and His power. He was First, without 'how', and will be Last, without 'where'. And

'All things perish, except His face' (28: 88).

'His are the creation and the command. Blessed be God, the Lord of all beings.' (7: 54)."

F. Ali Ar-Ridha', the Eighth Imam

1. Profession of Unity

It has been related that when al-Ma'mun [103](#) desired to install Ar-Ridha' (as his successor), he collected together Banu Hashim [104](#) and said to them, "Verily I desire to install Ar-Ridha' in this affair after me."

Banu Hashim envied Ar-Ridha' and said, "Thou appointest an ignorant man who possesses not the insight to direct the caliphate. Therefore send for him. He will come to us and thou wilt see how his ignorance decides thee against him. So he sent for him and he came. Banu Hashim said to him, O Abu-I-Hasan! Ascend the pulpit and display for us a sign whereby we may worship God."

So he ascended the pulpit and sat for a long time, his head bowed in silence. Then he trembled a great trembling and stood up straight, praised and lauded God, and asked His blessing for His prophet and his household. Then he said, "The first element in the worship of God is knowledge of Him, the root (*asl*) of knowledge of Him is to profess His Unity (*tawhid*), and the correct way (*nizam*) to profess the Unity of God is to negate attributes from Him for the powers of reason testify that every attribute and everything possessing an attribute (*mawsuf*) is created.

Everything possessing an attribute testifies that it has a Creator which is neither attribute nor possesses an attribute. Every attribute and everything possessing an attribute testify to connection (*iqtiran*, between the attribute and that to which it is attributed). Connection testifies to temporality (*hadath*). And temporality testifies that it accepts not the Beginningless, which accepts not the temporal."

So it is not God whose Essence is known through comparison. It is not His Unity that is professed by someone who attempts to fathom Him. It is not His reality (*haqiqah*) that is attained by someone who strikes a similitude for Him. It is not He who is confirmed (*tasdiq*) by him who professes an end for Him. It is not He to whom repairs he who points to Him. It is not He who is meant by him who compares Him (to something). It is not to Him that he who divides Him into parts humbles himself. And it is not He who

is desired by him who conceives of Him in his imagination."

"Everything that can be known in itself (*bi-nafsihi*) is fashioned (*masnu*). [105](#) All that stands apart from Him is an effect (*malul*). God is inferred from what He fashions (*sun'*), the knowledge of Him is made fast by the powers of reason, and the argument (*hujjah*) for Him is established by (man's) primordial nature (*al-fitrah*)."

"God's creating of the creatures is a veil between Him and them. His separation (*mubayanah*) from them is that He is disengaged from their localization (*ayniyyah*). [106](#) That He is their origin (*ibtida'*) is proof for them that He has no origin, for none that has an origin can originate others. That He has created them possessing means (of accomplishing things) is proof that He has no means (*adah*), for means are witness to the poverty of those who use them."

"So His names are an expression (*tabir*), His acts (*afal*) are (a way) to make (Him) understood (*tafhim*), and His Essence is Reality (*haqiqah*). [107](#) His inmost center (*kunh*) separates (*tafriq*) Him from creation, and His otherness (*ghuyur*) limits (*tahdid*) what is other than He. Therefore ignorant of God is he who asks for Him to be described! Transgressing against Him is he who seeks to encompass Him! Mistaken is he who imagines to have fathomed Him!"

"Whoso says 'how?' has compared Him (to something). Whoso says 'why?' has professed for Him a cause (*talil*). Whoso says 'when?' has determined Him in time (*tawqit*). Whoso says 'in what?' has enclosed Him (*tadmin*). Whoso says 'to what?' has professed for Him a limit (*tanhiyah*). Whoso says 'until what?' has given Him an end (*taghiyah*). Whoso gives Him an end has associated an end with Him. Whoso associates an end with Him has divided Him. Whoso divides Him has described Him. Whoso describes Him has deviated from the straight path (*ilhad*) concerning Him." [108](#)

God does not change with the changes undergone by creation, just as He does not become limited by delimiting (*tahdid*) that which is limited (*al-mahdud*). He is One (*ahad*), not according to the explanation offered by number (*tawil adad*); Outward, not according to the explanation of being immediate (to the senses); [109](#) Manifest, not through the appearance of a vision (of Him); Inward (*batin*), not through separation (*muzayalah*); Apart (*muba'in*), not through distance; Near, not through approach; Subtle, not through corporealization; Existent, not after nonexistence; Active, not through coercion; Determining, not through the activity of thought (*jawl fikrah*); Directing (*mudabbir*), not through movement; Desiring, not through resolution; Willing (*sha'*), not through directing attention (*himmah*); [110](#) Grasping (*mudrik*), not through touch (*majassah*); Hearing, not through means; and Seeing, not through organs."

"Times accompany Him not, places enclose Him not, slumber seizes Him not, attributes delimit Him not, and instruments (*adawat*) are of no use to Him. His being (*kawn*) precedes times (*al-awqat*), His existence (*wujud*) non-existence and His beginninglessness (*azal*) beginning (*al-ibtida'*)."

"By His giving sense to the sense organs it is known that He has no sense organs. By His giving substance to substances it is known that He has no substance. By His causing opposition among things

it is known that He has no opposite.

By His causing affiliation among affairs it is known that He has no affiliate. He opposed darkness to light, obscurity to clarity, moisture to solidity, and heat to cold. He joins together those things which are hostile to one another and separates those which are near. They prove (the existence of) their Separator by their separation and their Joiner by their junction. That is (the meaning of) His words—He is the Mighty and Majestic—***'And of everything created We two kinds; haply you will remember!'*** "(51 : 49).

"So through them He separated 'before' and 'after' that it might be known that He has no before and after. They testify with their temperaments that He who gave them temperaments has no temperament. They prove by their disparity (*tafawut*) that He who made them disparate has no disparity. They announce through their subjection to time that He who subjected them to time is not subject to it Himself."

"He veiled some of them from others so that it might be known that there is no veil between Him and them other than them. His is the meaning of lordship (*al-rububiyyah*) when there was none over whom He was Lord, the reality of godhood (*al-ilahiyyah*) when there was nothing for whom He was God, the meaning of Knower when there was nothing to be known, the meaning of Creator (*khaliq*) when there was nothing created (*makhlūq*) and the import of hearing when there was nothing to be heard. It is not because He created that He deserves the meaning (of the term) 'Creator' and not because He brought the creatures into being that the meaning of 'making' is derived."

"How (should it not be so)? For *mudh* ('ever since') conceals Him not, *qad* ('already')¹¹¹ brings Him not near, *la'alla* ('perhaps') veils Him not, *mata* ('when ?') limits Him not in time, *hin* ('at the time of') contains Him not, and *ma* ('with') brings Him not into association.¹¹² Instruments (*adawat*) limit only themselves and means (*alah*) allude only unto their own like.¹¹³ Their activities are found only in things.¹¹⁴

Mudh withholds things from being eternal (*qidmah*), *qad* shields them from beginninglessness, and law *la* ('if only') wards off perfection (*al-takmilah*).¹¹⁵ Things become separate and prove (the existence of) their Separator. They become distinguished and prove their Distinguisher (*muba'in*). Through them their Maker manifests Himself to the powers of reason.

Through (these powers)¹¹⁶ He becomes veiled to sight, to them imaginations appeal for a decision,¹¹⁷ in them is substantiated (only) other than Him, from them is suspended the proof and through them He makes known to them the acknowledgement (*al-iqrar*)."¹¹⁸

"Confirmation (*tasdiq*) of God is made fast by the powers of reason, and faith (*iman*) in Him reaches perfection through acknowledgment. There is no religiosity (*diyana*) except after knowledge (*marifah*), no knowledge except through sincerity (*ikhlas*) and no sincerity along with comparison.¹¹⁹ There is no negation (*nafy*) of comparison if there is affirmation (*ithbat*) of attributes."¹²⁰

"So nothing in creation is found in its Creator. All that is possible in it is impossible in its Maker. Movement (*harakah*) and stillness (*sukun*) do not affect Him. How should that which He effects (in

others) have effect upon Him, or that which He has originated recur for Him? Then His Essence would be disparate, His inmost center divided, His signification (*mana*) prevented from eternity. How would the Creator have a meaning different from the created?"

"If something from behind limited Him, then something in front would limit Him. If perfection (*tamam*) were seeking Him imperfection would be upon Him. How should that which does not transcend (*imtina*) temporality be worthy of (the Name 'Beginningless'? How should that which does not transcend being produced (*insha'*) produce the things (of the world)? There they would have arisen in Him a sign of having been made (*al-masnu*) and He would become a proof (*dalil*) after having been the proven (*madlul alayh*)."[121](#)

"There is no argument in absurd opinions (such as the above) [122](#), no answer when it (absurdity) is asked about, no glorification of Him in its meaning. Nor is there any in distinguishing Him from creation, unless it be that the Eternal accepts not to be made two, nor the Beginningless to have a beginning."[123](#)

"There is no god but God, the All-high, the Tremendous. They have cried lies who ascribe equals to God! They have gone astray into far error and suffered a manifest loss! And God bless Muhammad and his household, the pure."[124](#)

2. The Veil

It was related from Muhammad ibn 'Abdallah al-Khurasani, the servant of Ar-Ridha'—upon whom be peace—that a man from among the unbelievers (*zanadiqah*)[125](#) entered the presence of the Imam, with whom was a group of people. Abu-I-Hasan (the Imam) said to him, "Dost thou see that if the correct view is your view—and it is not your view—then are we not equal? All that we have prayed, fasted, given of the alms and declared of our convictions will not harm us."

The unbeliever remained silent. Then Abu-I-Hasan said, "If the correct view is our view—and it is our view—then have not you perished and we gained salvation?"

He said, "God's mercy be upon thee. Then let me know, how is He and where is He?"

Abu-I-Hasan answered, "Woe upon thee, surely the opinion thou hast adopted is mistaken! He determined the 'where', and He was, when there was nowhere; and He fashioned the 'how', and He was, when there was no 'how'. So He is not known through 'howness' or 'whereness' or through any form of sense perception, nor can He be gauged by anything."

The man said, "So then surely He is nothing (*la shay'*) if He cannot be perceived by any of the senses."

Abu-I-Hasan said, "Woe upon thee! When thy senses fail to perceive Him, thou deniest His lordship. But when our senses fail to perceive Him, we know for certain that He is our Lord and that He is something different from other things (*shay' bi-khilaf al-asha*).[126](#)

The man said, "Then tell me, when was He?"

Abu-I-Hasan said, "Tell when He was not, and then I will tell you when He was." [127](#)

The man said, "Then what is the proof of Him ?"

Abu-I-Hasan said, "Surely when I contemplate my body and it is impossible for me to increase or decrease its breadth and height, or to keep unpleasant things away from it or draw benefits to it, then I know that this structure has a maker and I acknowledge (*iqrar*) Him—even though that which I had seen of the rotation of the celestial sphere through His power; the producing of clouds [128](#); the turning about of the winds [129](#); the procession of the sun, the moon and the stars; and others of His wondrous and perfectly created signs (*ayat*), had (already) made me know that (all) this has a Determiner (*muqaddir*) and Producer (*munshi*')."

The man said, "Then why has He veiled Himself (from men)?"

Abu-I-Hasan replied, "Surely the veil is upon creatures because of the abundance of their sins. As for Him, no secret is hidden from Him during the day or the night." [130](#)

The man said, "Then why does the sense of sight perceive Him not ?"

Abu-I-Hasan answered, "Because of the difference between Him and His creatures, who are perceived by the vision of the eyes, whether their own or others. Then He is greater than that sight should perceive Him, imagination encompass Him, or the power of reason delineate Him."

The man said, "Then define His limits (*hadd*) for me."

He answered, "He has no limits."

The man asked, "Why?"

He answered, "Because every limited thing (*makdud*) ends at a limit. If limitation (*tahdid*) is possible, then increase is possible. If increase is possible; then decrease is possible. So He is unlimited. He neither increases nor decreases. Nor is He capable of being divided or imagined."

The man said, "Then tell me about your saying that He is Subtle, Hearing, Seeing, Knowing and Wise. [131](#) Can He be the Hearing without ears, the Seeing without eyes, the Subtle without working with the hands and the Wise without workmanship (*sanah*)?" [132](#)

Abu-I-Hasan said, "Surely a person among us is subtle in accordance with (his) skill in workmanship. Hast thou not seen the man who undertakes a task and is subtle in his handling of it, so that it is said, 'How subtle is so and so!' Then how should it not be said of the Majestic Creator that He is Subtle, when He creates a subtle and majestic [133](#) creation, places in its living creatures their souls, creates every kind different in form from its own kind, and none resembles another? Each possesses in the composition of its form a subtlety from the Subtle and Aware Creator."

"Then we looked upon the trees and their bearing of delicate things, whether edible or inedible, and we said at that, 'Surely our Creator is Subtle, (but) not like the subtlety of His creatures in their workmanship.' And we said, 'Surely He is Hearing, for no hidden from Him are the sounds of His

creatures between the Throne and the earth, from a mote to what is larger than it, and in the land and the sea. And their words are not confused by Him.' At that we said, 'Surely He is Hearing, but not through ears.'"

"Then we said, 'Surely He is Seeing, but not through eyes, for He sees the trace of a black speck on a dark night on a black stone. [134](#) He sees the tracks of an ant on a pitch-black night. He sees what is harmful for it and what beneficial, and the result of its cohabitation, and its young and descendants.' And at that we said, 'Surely He is Seeing, but not like the sight of His creatures.'"

"The man did not leave until he had embraced Islam. The Imam said other things as well.

[1.](#) The Prophet said, "The number of paths to God is equal to the number of human souls."

[2.](#) Throughout these texts, as in all traditional Muslim writings, whenever the name of the Prophet or a pronoun referring to him is mentioned, phrases like "Upon whom be blessings and peace" are added. In the same way for the Imams "Upon whom be peace" is added. For the most part these phrases have been dropped in translation.

[3.](#) According to Majlisi the meaning is that God's exaltation, magnificence and divinity are not dependent upon creation, but existed before it (p. 288). i.e., although these terms logically imply duality (exalted in relation to the debased, divine in relation to creatures, etc.), they express qualities which God possessed in His eternal nature "before" any creature existed. The same can be said about His solitariness.

[4.](#) Cf. Quran (21:30): "The heavens and the earth were a mass all sewn up, and then we unstitched them."

[5.](#) Reference to Quran (6:97): "He splits the sky into dawn"

[6.](#) Chapter and verse of Quranic quotations will be indicated in the text in this manner. I have relied largely on the Arberry and Pickthall translations.

[7.](#) Cf. for example Quran (14:44): "And warn mankind of the day when the chastisement comes on them, and those who did evil shall say, 'Our Lord, defer us to a near term, and we will answer Thy call, and follow the Messengers.'"

[8.](#) Majlisi offers several explanations for this passage, and he comments as follows on the interpretation followed here: "He wished that creatures profess His Unity alone, without associating any others with Him. For if He were apparent to minds and the senses, He would be associated with possible beings in unreal unity (al-wahdat al-*i'tibariyyah*). Then the unity which pertained to Him would not belong to Him alone" (p. 289).

[9.](#) Cf. Quran (4:165): "Messengers bearing good tidings, and warning, so that mankind might have no argument against God, after the Messengers"; and (6:150): "To God belongs the argument conclusive."

[10.](#) Cf for example, Quran (22:78): "That the Messenger might be a witness against you "

[11.](#) "Similarity" or "comparison" (*tashbih*) becomes an important technical term in Islamic theology and Sufism. It indicates the belief that God's attributes can be likened to those of man and the creatures. Hence scholars have often translated the term as "anthropomorphism". It is contrasted with "incomparability" (*tanwih*), the belief that God's attributes are in no way similar to those of the creatures.

As pointed out in the introduction, the Imams emphasize the latter position throughout these texts, without failing to make use of the former to explain their points. In later theology and Sufism, attempts are often made to strike a balance between the two positions by maintaining that God is neither completely similar to His creatures nor totally incomparable, or that He is both similar and incomparable at the same time.

For example, Ibn al-'Arabi attempts to strike this balance in the third chapter of his celebrated *Fusus al Hikam*. See W. Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabi's own Summary of the *Fusus*: 'The Imprint of the Bezels of Wisdom,'" *Sophia Perennis*, vol. I, no. 2, Autumn 1975, pp. 108-110

[12.](#) As pointed out by Majlisi (pp. 223-4), this is "a rejection of the views of those who say that every temporal being (hadith) must come from a (pre-existing) matter (*maddah*)."

[13.](#) The words *ayniyyah*, *kayfiyyah* and *haythiyyah* could be translated more literally as "whereness", "howness" and

"whereasness" (cf. above, p.26, and below, p. 49). Majlisi explains the meaning as follows: "In other words, He is not localized in any one place that He should be in that place without being in another, as is the case with things qualified by localization (mutamakkinat).

So He cannot be perceived like something possessing location and place. The relation of a disengaged reality (mudarrad) to all places is equal. No place is empty of Him in respect of the fact He encompasses them in knowledge, in terms of causality, and because He preserves and sustains them

"There is no object like Him existing either externally (fi'l-kharij) or mentally (fi'l-adhhan), that He might be described as possessing any of the various qualities relating to corporeality and possibility. It is also possible that by 'quality is meant 'cognitive form' (al-surat al-ilmiyyah).

"And He is not absent from anything, that is, . . . in respect of knowledge, that one might thus conclude that He possesses aspect (hayth) and place (makan). As for things qualified by place, it is in their nature to be absent from (other) things and not to encompass them in knowledge. This sentence is as if to emphasize the former statement. It is also possible that 'aspect' here refers to time . . ." (p. 224).

[14.](#) "The changing essences of things make Him inaccessible to minds . . . either because, if the mind could perceive Him, He would be-like possible beings-a locus for changing attributes, and thus He would be in need of a maker; or because reason tells us that the Maker must be different in attribute from the made, so He cannot be perceived as are created things . . ." (Majlisi, p. 225).

[15.](#) Cf. Quran (18: 110): "Say, 'If the sea were ink for the Words of my Lord, the sea would be spent before the Words of my Lord are spent, though We brought replenishment the like of it.'"

[16.](#) It will not have passed unnoticed that the transcendence of the divine Essence is emphasized here by the fact that man is dumbfounded even by the lower reaches of God's theophanies. The powers of man's reason are stopped by the waves, they do not reach the current itself. The mere mention of God's eternity bewilders the imagination, etc.

[17.](#) According to Majlisi the reference is to the "cords" (asbab) or degrees of "Pharoah said, 'Haman, build for me a tower, that haply so I may reach the cords, the cords of the heavens, and look upon Moses' 'God' " (40: 36-7).

[18.](#) The same words, itqan al-sun', are used together once in the Quran: "God's handiwork, who has made everything perfectly" (27: 88).

[19.](#) The fact that the creation displays the signs and portents of God is of course emphasized throughout the Quran and all of Islam and is the basis of all Islamic cosmology. For the Muslim, moreover, it is the very order and regularity of the universe and nature's laws which prove God. See S. H. Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1968.

[20.](#) According to Majlisi by "tree" is meant first the Abrahamic line of prophecy, then the tribe and family of the Prophet-the Quraysh and Banu Hashim (p. 227). The descriptions following all refer to the tree of prophecy and the prophets who grew from it.

[21.](#) I.e., Gabriel, the angel of revelation. Cf. Quran (26: 192-3): "Truly it is the revelation of the Lord of all beings, brought down by the Faithful Spirit . . ."

[22.](#) I.e., revelation.

[23.](#) The Quran.

[24.](#) The "steed" which carried the Prophet to Heaven on his night journey (mir'aj).

[25.](#) I.e., during the Prophets mir'aj.

[26.](#) Cf. Quran (15: 94): "So proclaim that which thou art commanded, and withdraw from the idolators."

[27.](#) Cf. Quran (5: 67): "O Messenger, deliver what which has been sent down to thee from thy Lord . . ."

[28.](#) According to a hadith of the Prophet, "I cannot enumerate all of Thy praises: Thou art as Thou hast praised Thyself".

[29.](#) Cf. Quran (14: 34) and (14: 18).

[30.](#) Cf. Quran (17: 51): "Then they will say, 'Who will bring us back?' Say: 'He who originated you the first time!'"

[31.](#) Cf. Quran (30: 46): "And of His signs is that He looses the winds, bearing good tidings and that He may let you taste of His mercy", and other similar verses.

[32.](#) Cf Quran (16: 15): "And He cast on the earth firm mountains, lest it shake with you"; also (21: 31) and (31: 10)

[33.](#) The editor comments as follows in a footnote: "The perfection of professing His Unity is to maintain that He is not forced to act as He does and is devoid of all faults, to declare Him to be above the blemishes of incapacity and imperfection, and to profess that He is pure of what pertains to and impinges upon possible beings, such as corporeality, composition, and other negative (salh) attributes" (p. 251). Sincerity is to profess the Unity of God in a perfect manner, so that eventually at the end of the path of spiritual realization and perfection (al-tariqah), all stains of contingency are removed both from the knowledge and the being of the believer.

[34.](#) This sentence does not occur in the Bihar al-anwar, but it does occur in the same passage in the Nahj al-balaghah and seems necessary from the context.

[35.](#) I.e., to their "appointed terms" to we Quranic language (3: 145, etc.). The text of the Nahj al-balaghah reads "ahal" for "ajjal", which would change the translation to the following: "He transforms things at their (proper) times."

[36.](#) "The relation (of this image) to the saying that minerals are generated from the vapors of the earth is obvious" (Majlisi, p. 278).

[37.](#) On the Islamic teaching that the angels, though of luminous substance, are "peripheral" beings since they know only some of God's Names, while man is "central" since he knows all of His Names, see F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, London, 1953, pp.70–72.

[38.](#) "Reason's powers" is a translation of 'uqul, plural of 'aql.

A more awkward but perhaps more exact translation would be "reasons". Many scholars translate the word 'aqlas "intellect" or "intelligence". Certainly all of these translations are possible, since the various meanings are all contained in the one Arabic word—if indeed the reader will concede that there is more than one basic meaning, for in modern thought the distinction between the reason (ratio) and the intellect (intellectus) has largely been ignored.

However that may be, the Arabic word 'aql may be said to possess at least two significations according to various contexts. It may signify the Universal Intellect, which is equivalent to the Greatest Spirit and the Muhammadan Light. It is God's first creation and possesses true and detailed knowledge of all things, including God Himself. It may also signify the "reason", which is the reflection of the Universal Intellect upon the human plane. But in ordinary men the reason is cut off from the Intellect. Only the prophets and saints may be said to have actualized their "intellects" to various degrees. In other words, they have realized an inward identity with the Universal Intellect.

But in these texts, the Imams usually speak of 'aql as cut off from its luminous and spiritual source. It limits and constricts the infinite Truth in keeping with its root meaning ('aqala = to tie, to bind). Hence I translate the word as "reason" or "power of reason". When the Imams speak of the actualization of the intellect within man, they refer to the "heart" (qalb). The reason cannot understand God, but, as we shall see below, the heart may see Him.

Most Sufis follow this terminology, such as the members of Ibn al-'Arabi's school (see my forthcoming study of Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi). But all are aware of the 'aql's dual nature. Thus Rumi: "The particular intellect ('aql-i juzwi-reason) has disgraced the Intellect" (Mathnawi, V, 463).

Nevertheless, the Imams do not ignore the positive role that 'aql—and here perhaps "intelligence" would be the best translation—can and does play in religion, in keeping with Islam's fundamental emphasis upon knowledge (see F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, Leiden, 1970). The first book of the section on usul from al-Kulayni's al-Kafi is entitled the "Book of 'Aql." It contains such hadiths as the following: "The intelligence is that through which man worships the All-Merciful and gains Paradise" (Imam Ja'far).

"The sincere friend of every man is his intelligence, while his enemy is his ignorance" (Imam 'Ali Ar-Ridha'). "He who possesses intelligence possesses religion, and he who possesses religion enters the Garden" (Imam Ja'far). "In the reckoning on the Day of Resurrection God will only scrutinize His servants to the extent He has given them intelligence in the world" (Imam Musa). The first selection from Imam 'Ali Rida below (pp. 44–48) refers in several places to the positive function of the 'aql.

The two roles of the 'aql to which the Imams allude, positive and negative, derive from the principle enunciated by the

Prophet in the hadith: "Meditate upon God's bounties, but not upon His Essence." The 'aql must be able to see that the world by its very nature manifests a Reality beyond it. A healthy intelligence, one which on the human plane reflects the First Intellect directly, will naturally see the signs of God in all things. But as soon as the 'aql tries to understand the very Essence of God, it oversteps its boundaries and goes astray.

[39.](#) Majlisi interprets the "deviation of straying" to mean the "reason, whose nature is deviation and straying" (p. 281).

[40.](#) This divine Name occurs several times in the Quran, such as (40: 15).

[41.](#) As the Quran often affirms, both explicitly and implicitly, "He directs the affair" (13: 2, etc.).

[42.](#) Cf. Quran (2: 148): "Every man has his direction to which he turns." Majlisi cites the ,hadith, "All are eased to what has been created for them", which in turn recalls Quran (80: 19–21): "He created him (man), and determined him, then the way eased for him . . .".

[43.](#) Both the editor in a footnote, pointing to the printed edition of al–Tawhid, and Majlisi in his commentary, basing himself on a similar passage in the Nahj al–balaghah, suggest that the correct reading is hudud formahdud. The translation has been made accordingly.

[44.](#) Cf. Quran (50: 38): "We created the heavens and the earth, and what between them is, in six days, and no weariness touched us."

[45.](#) The commentator points out that mukabadah occurs in place of mukayadah in some manuscripts, which would change the translation of the last clause to the following: "or from hardship from one who would transgress His command" (p.280).

[46.](#) According to a footnote to the text another manuscript reads "when He" for "and".

[47.](#) These are the words of the people who were led astray by the followers of Iblis disputing with them in hell. The verse continues: "It was naught but the sinners that led us astray; so we have no intercessors, no loyal friend. O that we might return again, and be among the believers!"

[48.](#) Passages of the Quran known as "clear" (muhkam) are those about whose meaning there can be no question. They are contrasted with other passages known as "ambiguous" (mutashabih), which are open to various interpretations, even in the outward and literal meaning of the text.

[49.](#) The commentator remarks: "The subtlety of the comparison of reflection, or the mind, where reflection takes place, to a bird's crow will not be lost on the reader" (p. 284).

[50.](#) Cf. Quran (2: 23): "And remember God's blessing upon you, and the Book and the Wisdom He has sent down on you . . ."; and (2: 269): "Whoso is given the Wisdom, has been given much good."

[51.](#) A term appearing twice in the Quran (3: 7 and 4: 162). In Sufism and Shi'ism it is usually taken to refer to those who, due to their elevated spiritual station, are qualified to speak of the divine mysteries.

[52.](#) The son of 'Ali's sister, Umm Hani bint Abi Talib. For the scant bibliographical references see Bihar al–anwar, vol. 4, p.313 and the Lughat–namah of Dihkhuda (Tehran, 1325/1946 onward).

[53.](#) A reference to much prostration in prayer. Cf. Quran (48: 29): "Their mark is on their face, the trace of prostration."

[54.](#) The Quran emphasises that "To God is the homecoming" (35: 18); cf. also (2: 285); (3: 28), etc). Likewise, "Unto God belongs the issue of all affairs" is a Quranic expression (22: 41); (31: 22).

[55.](#) Cf. Quran (42: 26): "And He answers those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them increase of His bounty."

[56.](#) Reference to Quran (1: 4): "To Thee alone we pray for succour."

[57.](#) "God is He who raised up the heavens without pillars you can see. . ." (Quran 13: 2); cf. (31: 10).

[58.](#) A reference to their creation: "The only words We say to a thing, when We desire it, is that We say to it 'Be', and it is" (16: 40).

[59.](#) A reference to Quran (35: 10): "To Him good words go up, and the righteous deed–He uplifts it."

[60.](#) Literally, "the neighboring dark–reds", i.e., as explained by Muhammad 'Abduh in his commentary on the Nahj al–balaghah (vol. II, p. 126), a reference to the mountains in terms of their color from afar.

[61.](#) Majlisi remarks, "If you say, 'He–glory be to Him – knows what the lighting illumines and what it does not illumine, so why should the Imam specify what the lighting vanishes from?' I would answer, 'Because His knowledge of what is not illumined is stranger and more wonderful. Since, as for what is illumined by the lighting, it is possible that anyone of correct vision would also know it" (p. 316).

- [62.](#) A reference to ancient Arabian beliefs concerning the influence of the moon in its various mansions on the weather. See the article "Anwa' " in the Encyclopaedia of Islam (new edition), vol. I, pp. 523–4.
- [63.](#) Cf. Quran (2: 26): "God is not ashamed to strike a similitude even of a gnat".
- [64.](#) "God knows what every female bears" (Quran 13: 8).
- [65.](#) Since He already knows their needs, or since He is the "All-Hearing" in His Essence.
- [66.](#) Majlisi comments: He is not described by pairs, "i.e. by likes, or by opposites; or by the attributes of pairs; or there is no composition in Him as the result of the marriage of any two things . . ." (p. 316).
- [67.](#) 'Ilaj. If He did, it would suggest that there is something upon which He works or to which He applies Himself. Rather, "He but says to it 'Be', and it is" (Quran 2: 117; 3: 47, etc.).
- [68.](#) See Quran (4: 164).
- [69.](#) Cf. Quran (20: 23).
- [70.](#) Literally, "uvulae", lahawat.
- [71.](#) A divine Name occurring in Quran (23: 14 and 37: 125).
- [72.](#) The famous Battle of the Camel occurred in the year 36/656 between the followers of 'Ali and those of Talhah and Zubayr. See the Encyclopaedia of Islam (new edition), "Djamal", vol. II, pp. 414–16.
- [73.](#) This is a reference to the Quranic verse, "They are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Third of Three'" (V, 73). Concerning the providential Quranic "misunderstanding" of the Christian Trinity, see F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, pp. 40 ff.
- [74.](#) The first kind of "unity" that is rejected is numerical unity, or the idea that when we say "He is one God", we mean something similar to what we mean when we say, 'This is one walnut', i.e., that there may also be two Gods, three Gods, etc.

The second "unity" refers to similarity in kind or species, as when we say, "this is one cat", meaning that there are also other kinds of cats. In the words of Majlisi, "When it is said in this sense of a Byzantine that he is one of mankind, it is meant that his kind is one of the kinds of men or is a kind among other kinds" (p. 207). This is tashbih because we are comparing God to whatever we say He is one of. Since He is one of that kind, He has to be similar to others of that kind.

- [75.](#) As Majlisi points out, the first of the acceptable meanings of divine Unity is that He is one in the sense that He has no second, associate or partner. Only He truly is. And the second is that He has no parts in any sense whatsoever (p. 207).
- [76.](#) The discrepancies between the present translation of this passage and that found in Shi'ite Islam, p. 127, are due to the fact that in Shi'ite Islam the passage has been translated from 'Allamah Tabataba'i's Persian translation, which includes his commentary.
- [77.](#) God's signs are displayed through the whole of creation, as indicated in many passages of the Quran, as for example, in the verse "In the alternation of night and day, and what God has created in the heavens and the earth—surely there are signs for a godfearing people" (10: 6).
- [78.](#) The translation of this sentence follows the first interpretation offered by the commentator. According to the second, which seems less likely in the context, wujud would mean "existence" as it usually does in current usage, and the meaning would be: "His existence (being manifestly evident) necessitates affirming Him (i.e. attesting to Him)".
- [79.](#) The editor notes that in the printed edition of al-Tawhid the text reads, "So it is not said that anything is after Him."
- [80.](#) As in many similar sayings of the Imams, the purpose of this passage is to affirm both God's "similarity" to creatures and His "incomparability" with them by stating that His attributes must not be understood in the usual sense of the words. Normally if we say "outward", we mean that which is immediately perceptible to the senses, but God's "outwardness" is of a different kind. Majlisi comments in detail upon this passage.

Here we can quote his remarks on some of the less obvious clauses: "Inward, i.e. not in terms of spatial distance, in the sense that He would move from one place to another in order to become hidden, or that He would enter into creatures' inner parts in order to know them.

Rather, in His inmost center He is hidden from the powers of man's reason, and He knows his inner parts and his secrets.... His nearness is not the spatial nearness acquired by approaching things, but derives from knowledge, His causal

relationship to the creatures, His originating growth and development within them, and His mercy (which encompasses them).

He is Subtle not by being a body with a delicate constitution, small volume, strange and wondrous structure, or in that He is colorless, but by creating subtle things and knowing them; or by His incorporeality and 'disengagement (tajarrud). 'Not through coercion', that is, He is free and not forced in His activity 'Not through the activity of thought': in other words, when He determines things He does not need the flow or activity of thought' (pp. 236–7).

[81.](#) Reference to Quran (2: 255).

[82.](#) Majlisi comments: "When He creates sense organs and bestows them upon the creatures, it is known that He has no sense organs. This is either because of what has already been said about the fact that He does not possess the attributes of creatures; or because, when we see that He has bestowed sense organs, we become aware that we need them in order to perceive.

Then we conclude that He transcends them, since it is impossible for Him to be in need of anything. It may also be because the reason judges that He differs from His creatures in attributes" (pp. 237–8). Majlisi also quotes (pp. 238–g) a long philosophical and metaphysical discussion of this sentence by Ibn Maytham, one of the commentators of the Nahj al-balaghah.

[83.](#) "In other words, since their realities have become actualized and their quiddities have been brought into existence, it is known that they are possible beings. Now every possible being needs an origin. The Origin of origins will not be one of these realities (which have become externally actualized)" (Majlisi, p. 239).

[84.](#) "When we see that He created opposites and that they need a particular situation or position to manifest themselves, we realize that He is not opposite to anything, for to need something contradicts the Necessity (wujub) of Being. Or the meaning is that when we see that earth one of two opposite things prevents, repels and negates the existence of the other, we realize that He transcends that.

Or we see that opposition occurs through delimitation by certain limits which are unable to embrace other limits, as for example (in the case of) different colors or qualities, while He transcends all limits. In the same way, how should the Creator oppose His creatures, or He who causes to issue forth (al-fa'id) oppose that which is issued forth (al-mafid)? Or if we understand opposite to mean that which is equal in strength, this would necessitate another Necessary Being, the impossibility of which has already been proven" (Majlisi, p. 239).

[85.](#) In a footnote the editor mentions that some copies of 'Uyun akhbar Ar-Ridha', one of the sources of this passage, read al-jaff (dryness) for al-jasu (solidity).

[86.](#) The Ascending Stairways (al-ma'arij) are mentioned in the Quran, (70: 3). The meaning would seem to be that at death, if the spirit of one who has compared things to his Lord tries to ascend towards Him, it is blinded by His power. Compare Rumi: "Make it thy habit to behold the Light without the glass, in order that when the glass is shattered there may not be blindness (in thee)" (Mathnawi, V, 991).

[87.](#) The text reads "it" for "dominion", but in order to avoid ambiguity the noun has been repeated. In Arabic the masculine pronoun cannot refer to the feminine "power", although if one were to follow the similar sentence in the hadith related from the Seventh Imam below, "power" would be the logical choice as antecedent. The meaning is that before the production of the world God had power over it, and after its end He will still possess it. Whether or not it exists in external form is irrelevant.

[88.](#) Cf. Quran (52: 45): "Then leave them, till they encounter their day wherein they shall be thunderstruck . . .".

[89.](#) Cf. Quran (21: 23): "He shall not be questioned as to what He does, but they shall be questioned."

[90.](#) La yaqa' 'ala shay'. The meaning is not completely clear. The editor points out in a footnote (p. 300) that in the Usul min al-kafi the text of this hadith reads yandam for yaqa' i.e., "He becomes remorseful at nothing."

[91.](#) This verse is in reference to the covenant made between God and man before the creation of the world. See S. H. Nasr, Ideals and Realities of Islam, London, 1966, pp. 25–7.

[92.](#) God is often referred to as a "thing" (shay') in the hadith literature, as well as in theology and philosophy, since the meaning of the word "thing" in Arabic is not limited to external, concrete existents. Rather, it signifies reality, entity or quiddity, at whatever level of existence, from the most sublime to the most concrete.

[93.](#) Majlisi interprets this to mean the "script written by hands" (p. 162). I.e., neither the spoken nor the written name is the Named.

[94.](#) The meaning of this sentence is obscure in the Arabic and Majlisi offers at least eight possible readings (pp. 162–3), some of which are very close to one another, and the most likely of which has been followed here. The present interpretation is also that offered by the editor of al-Tawhid, p. 58.

[95.](#) Majlisi comments that this sentence has been interpreted to mean that "God has not come into being. If He had, He would have been originated by another, and His Being as well as the attributes of His origination would be known by means of the fashioning of His maker, just as effects are known by their causes."

But, he adds, "In my view perhaps the meaning is that He has not been fashioned and that therefore He cannot be known by comparing Him to something else which has been fashioned" (p. 163). According to this interpretation, the sentence should be translated as follows: "He has not come into being that His Being should be known through something else which has been fashioned."

[96.](#) Majlisi comments: "Between the Creator and His creatures there is no common matter (maddah) or reality (haqiqah) which might allow them to attain to knowledge of Him; rather, He produced them from nothing that was" (p. 165). This passage may also be interpreted to mean, in accordance with the beginning of the paragraph, "There is nothing to act as a veil between the Creator and His creatures."

[97.](#) This passage is related up to this point in the Usul min al-kafi. The Tehran edition of 1388/1968–9, published with a Persian translation and notes by one of the well-known contemporary 'ulama', Ayatallah Muhammad Baqir Kamara'i, contains the following commentary (vol. I, pp. 207–8): "The Names of God are His theophanies (jilwah-ha) which cast a ray of light upon man's reason (khirad). Because they become connected to human reason, limit, end and definition (ghayah, nihayah, hadd) apply to them.

The limit of each being lies where it is connected to another being. The theophanies of God's act (fi'l) and fashioning (san'ah) which are His creation, become limited in the framework of possible beings (mumkinat) There the ray of light which brings about creation comes to its limit. Thus it is said, 'the existence of a man', or 'of a tree', 'of an angel', 'of the earth', 'of heaven', etc.

"The theophanies of God's attributes (sifat), which are the principle (mabda') of the theophanies of (His) act, are given limits by the functioning of the reason, and thus it is said, God's 'knowledge', 'power', and 'life'. In this way the Names become distinct from the divine Essence, and even the all-inclusive (jami') Name of God, which is 'Allah', is separated from the Essence. The reality of God is other than all of these."

[98.](#) Ma'rifah within the essentially gnostic perspective of Islam is the goal of religious endeavour. See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London, 1962, chapter I. As explained in the following footnote, the meaning of this sentence is that man has faith not in something which he himself does not know, but in that upon which all of his knowledge is based and which is in fact the object of all knowledge. To the extent he has knowledge, he has knowledge of God, albeit imperfectly, since there is no other knowledge.

[99.](#) In an unpublished work entitled *Risalat al-walayah* (Treatise on sanctity), 'Allamah Tabataba'i comments on the section of this passage beginning with the words "Whoso maintains that he knows God by means of a veil": "Allusion is made here to the fact that it is logically impossible for the knowledge of something other than God to make necessary the knowledge of God Himself. Because of God's transcendence, it cannot be said that knowledge (of Him) is the very same as the thing known, as has already been explained (earlier in the treatise).

"It is impossible that knowledge of one thing should be knowledge of another thing different from it: otherwise the two different things would be the same, which contradicts the premise. So the fact that knowledge of one thing renders the

knowledge of another thing necessary requires some sort of unification (ittihad) between the two things.

But since they have been postulated as two things, there must be in addition to an aspect of unification, an aspect of disparity. Thus each of them is compounded of two aspects. Whereas God—glory be to Him—is one and simple in essence: He is not compounded of anything in a manner which would allow Him to be known by other than Him. This point is indicated by the Imam's saying, 'There is nothing between the Creator and the created,' etc., as well as by his words, 'Then he who maintains that he has faith in that which he does not know has gone astray from knowledge', etc., which is derived from his previous saying, i.e., 'Surely he alone knows God who knows Him by means of God,' etc.

His words, 'A created thing perceives nothing unless it be by means of God', serve as its proof, for everything is known by means of God, who is 'the Light of the heavens and the earth' (Quran 24: 35), so how should things be known by means of other than Him?

For He supports every individual being (dhat), and He is without supports in His very Essence (dhat). At the same time, knowledge of that which in its very essence is dependent ensues from knowledge of the Independent Being which supports it, for the fact that knowledge takes form necessarily requires independence in the case of that which is known. Thus knowledge of what is dependent is a consequence of (knowledge of) the Independent which accompanies it. Such is the reality.

And since it might be imagined that this doctrine is incarnation (hulul) or unification (ittihad)—high be God exalted above these—the Imam follows his words by saying, 'God is empty of His creatures and His creatures are empty of Him', etc.

Saying that the created being's perception of something is by means of God does not negate the beginning of the passage ('Whoso asserts. . .'), which denies that the knowledge of God should require knowledge of other than Him, for the knowledge which is spoken of at the beginning is acquired (husuli) i.e., rational), and that at the end is 'presential' (huduri) i.e., direct and divinely dispensed knowledge or gnosis)."

Folio 26 obverse–reverse (Photocopies of this work are in the possession of a number of 'Allamah Tabataba'i's disciples and students, and it is hoped that someday it will be published).

[100.](#) In al-Tawhid the editor explains that here the second *makan* is equivalent to *makanah* or *azamah*. He comments, "He did not create a place for His station and grandeur because places encompass Him not" (p. 141). Majlisi prefers the reading *kan* for *makan* as found in some manuscripts and also in the *hadith* from the fifth Imam translated above. The meaning would then be as translated there, i.e., "He did not bring into existence a place for His Being."

[101.](#) "Master of the dominion" (*malik al-mulk*) is a divine name, occurring in Quran (3: 26). Cf. Quran (3: 189): "To God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: and God is powerful over everything" and many similar verses.

[102.](#) Cf. Quran, (52: 45).

[103.](#) The famous Abbasid caliph, son of Harun al-Rashid. On his decision to appoint Imam Ar-Ridha' as his successor, see Shi'ite Islam.

[104.](#) In general Banu Hashim ("The sons of Hashim") have been understood to be the descendents of Hashim ibn 'Abd Manaf, the great grandfather of the Prophet and also the ancestor of 'Ali and al-'Abbas, half-brother of the Prophet's father, from whom is taken the name of the Abbasid caliphate. During the Abbasid period the term refers to the family of the Prophet, but more specifically, as here, to the Abbasid family itself. See B. Lewis, "Hashimiyah", The Encyclopedia of Islam (new edition), vol. III, p. 265.

[105.](#) Majlisi offers four possible explanations for this sentence, the simplest of which is as follows: "Everything whose existence can be known immediately through the senses without inference from its effects is fashioned (since it is a part of the created world)" (p. 233).

[106.](#) Men are not separated from God because they are in one place and He in another, but because He is free of place and localization, whereas they are entrapped within it (Majlisi, p. 233).

[107.](#) Majlisi comments: "His names are an expression', or they are not His very Essence and Attributes, rather they are means of expressing and speaking of them. 'And His acts are to make understood', so that men will come to know Him

through them and they will infer His existence, knowledge, power, wisdom and mercy. 'And His Essence is Reality', or a hidden, transcendent reality not reached by the powers of the creatures' reason" (p. 234).

[108.](#) Majlisi offers several interpretations for this passage. According to the one which is largely followed here, "To associate an end with Him . . . means to come to the conclusion that He undergoes annihilation along with the creatures, so that it would be correct to say, 'His end is before, or after, the end of so and so.'

This is the same as to say that He participates wholly in the nature of creatures and therefore has parts. Whoso says this has described Him as possessing possibility, incapacity and the other defects of possible beings. And whoso judges such has deviated concerning the divine Essence" (p. 2,5).

[109.](#) From this sentence begins a long section which corresponds almost exactly with the hadith quoted from Imam 'Ali above (pp. 38 ff). For this reason the original Arabic terms have not been repeated. It might be tempting to take this correspondence as proof that the attribution of these words to 'Ali Ar-Ridha' or to 'Ali is incorrect.

But one must remember that it is quite common for the Imams to quote their father and grandfather, all the way back to the Prophet. We have seen examples of this already in the chain of authority of a number of hadiths translated above. Moreover, in the middle of a discourse there is no particular reason for the Imam to stop and point out exactly whom he is quoting, just as is the case with quotations from the Quran, especially since most of his followers would know perfectly well.

The traditional explanation for the repetition is summed up by Shaykh al-Saduq (al-Tawhid, p. 309; see also Majlisi, p. 306): "In the hadith of 'Ali there are certain words which Imam Rida mentioned in his sermon. This is a confirmation of what we have always said concerning the Imams, upon whom be peace: the knowledge of each of them is derived from his father right back to the Prophet."

[110.](#) This and the previous phrase are essentially the same in meaning. Normally, when man wills or desires to do something, he has a particular idea or goal and then exerts himself to achieve it, employing resolution and diligence. But as for God, "His command, when He desires a thing, is to say to it 'Be', and it is" (Quran 36: 82).

[111.](#) Qad often cannot be translated by a separate word in English. It indicates the termination of action at the moment of speaking and therefore as Majlisi notes, quoting the classical grammarians, serves "to approximate the past to the present" (p. 242).

[112.](#) Majlisi explains that none of these words can refer to God since each of them implies temporal or other limitation, while God transcends time and knows all things in eternity. Thus, "ever since" indicates a point of beginning in time, and if it applied to God it would indicate that what was before that point was concealed from Him. He can have no doubt concerning the future, so "perhaps" cannot apply to Him, etc. (pp. 241-2).

[113.](#) Majlisi remarks that "instruments and means . . . or physical organs and corporeal faculties . . . allude to the existence of corporeality like themselves . . . And it is not improbable that by 'instruments' are meant the words which are negated from Him in the previous section and that this passage is meant to be an explanation of that" (p. 242).

[114.](#) "The activities and the results of these instruments and means are found in creatures, not in God" (Majlisi, p. 242).

[115.](#) "The fact that the words mudh, qad and lawla are attributed to instruments indicate that the latter are neither beginningless, nor eternal, nor perfect. Therefore instruments could not delimit or allude to Him because, by reason of their temporality and imperfection, they are far from being commensurate with (God,) the Perfect, Absolute and Eternal in His Essence... (This is) because mudh refers to beginning in time . . . qad approximates the past to the present . . . and law la is employed to speak of what would have been good . . . (for example), 'How good it would have been if only it had been such and such' . . . and thus it points to imperfection in the situation and deters from absolute perfection" (Majlisi, p. 243). Majlisi also points out two alternative readings for this passage which need not concern us here.

[116.](#) The text reads "through them", and in a long passage (pp. 242-3) Majlisi demonstrates that the pronoun should refer to "powers of reason" rather than to "instruments", although in a similar passage in the Nahj al-balaghah it refers to the latter.

[117.](#) "He becomes veiled to sight through the powers of reason because it is the powers of reason which judge that the vision of Him is impossible, and it is to the powers of reason that imaginations appeal when they differ among themselves" (Majlisi, p. 244).

[118.](#) "From the powers of reason the proof of things is derived, and through these powers God makes known to the reason, or to its possessor, the acknowledgment of Him" (Majlisi, p. 244).

[119.](#) 'Sincerity' is to make the knowledge of Him pure from all that is not appropriate to His sacred Essence, i.e., materiality, accidentality, extraneous attributes (al-sifat al-za'idah) and temporal phenomena. To say that he means 'sincerity in devotion' would be artificial and forced (takalluf)" (Majlisi, p. 244).

In the Quran the chapter called "Sincerity" (al-ikhlas) is also called "The Profession of Unity" (al-tawhid), and the meaning of sincerity in Islam is tied to the correct profession of divine Unity in terms of the negation of all "Associationism" (shirk). The meaning of sincerity is discussed most profoundly perhaps in Sufi writings, where it means complete negation of self. See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 140, 155–6.

[120.](#) "I.e., whoso affirms that He possesses extraneous attributes does not negate an understanding of Him in terms of comparison" (Majlisi, p. 244).

[121.](#) That is, if these temporal events and changes referred to Him they would indicate that He had been created, and He would then be proof of another Creator, just as possible beings are proof of the Necessary Being (Majlisi, p. 246).

[122.](#) There is no substance to the absurd arguments that would prove Him temporal and possessed of extraneous attributes, and no answer to such arguments precisely because of their self-evident absurdity. By saying such things one does not glorify Him, rather one attributes to Him imperfection (Majlisi, p. 246).

[123.](#) According to Majlisi this means that there is nothing wrong with distinguishing Him from creation, unless we consider a perfection–His lying above duality and beginning–to be a fault. He cites the following line of poetry as an example of this type of expression: "They have no fault except that their swords/ Are dented from slashing the enemy forces". I.e., their only "fault" is a perfection (p. 246).

Another possible interpretation of this passage, which however is made doubtful by the context and structure of this and other sayings of the Imams, is to say that there is always something provisional about distinguishing God from creation, for this implies some sort of fundamental duality, which precisely—as asserted by the Shahadah, la ilaha illallah—God transcends.

The world cannot exist "independently" of God, otherwise it would be another deity. If God is one, then ultimately the world cannot be other than He. Certainly He is other than the world, however, as this and all the other hadiths cited from the *Bihar al-anwar* emphasize so strongly. See F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, pp. 17–18 and 125–6.

[124.](#) Cf. such Quranic passages as the following: "Whoso associates with God anything, has gone astray into far error . . . Whoso takes Satan to him for a friend, instead of God, has surely suffered a manifest loss" (4 : 116–9).

[125.](#) The *zanadiqah* (sing.: *zindiq*) are identified specifically in Islamic history with the Manichaeans, but the word is also used more generally, as here, to mean unbeliever and heretic.

[126.](#) Concerning the use of the term "thing" to refer to God, see above, note 92.

[127.](#) Majlisi comments on the unbeliever's question and the Imam's answer as follows (p. 38): "The apparent meaning is that he is asking about the beginning of God's being and existence. But it is also possible that the question concerns the principle of time for His existence. According to the first (possibility), the gist of his answer is that beginning in time pertains to that which is temporal, to that which had been nonexistent and then became existent. But as for God, nonexistence is impossible (so He cannot have a beginning in time).

"According to the second (possibility), the meaning is that the existent in time would be so through transformation in essence and attributes, for time is the relationship of the changing (al-mutaghayyir) to the changing. So in one moment of time it has a state which it does not have in another. But God transcends change in essence and attributes."

[128.](#) Cf. Quran 13 : 12.

[129.](#) Cf. Quran 2 : 164.

[130.](#) I.e., He is not veiled, for He sees all things. It is men who have veiled themselves from Him.

[131.](#) These are all divine names which occur in the Quran. It should be noted, however, that the name *latif* ("Subtle") is particularly difficult to render into English in a manner which would do justice to its various shades of meaning, as will be

apparent from the passage. Nevertheless it seemed better to maintain the one word in English than to try to change it according to context and lose the point which the Imam wishes to make. In another hadith Imam Rida explains the meaning of the divine name al-latif as follows: God is "Latif, not because of being scanty, slender or small, but because of penetrating into things and being impossible of comprehension God is too subtle to be grasped within a definition or limited by a description, whereas, 'subtlety' for us is in smallness of size and quantity" (al-Tawhid, p. 189).

[132.](#) "Wisdom" (al-hikmah) is defined as "knowledge which puts everything in its place", and therefore implies application and "workmanship".

[133.](#) Here subtle and majestic, latif and jalil, are meant to be two contrasting attributes, referring to the very small and the very large, etc.

[134.](#) Cf. Quran (6: 59): "With Him are the keys of the Unseen; none knows them but He. He knows what is in land and sea; not a leaf falls, but He knows it. Not a gram in the earth's shadows, not a thing, fresh or withered, but it is in a Book Manifest."

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