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Basic Beliefs

Islam is the religion which preaches *tawhid*, the Unity of God. *Tawhid*, then, is the starting point from which a Muslim sets out to build his creed deep inside his inner self; otherwise, he cannot be called a Muslim, nor can the light of faith shine in his soul. The sound definition of *tawhid* is what has been endorsed by the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) through their teachings and statements; anything other than that is but falsification and adulteration and insinuations which may have been necessitated by erroneous philosophical ideologies the inventors of which tried to reach the furthermost depth of the essence of the Divine, but the results they reached caused them to deviate from reaching even the beginning of belief, so they indulged themselves into the labyrinths of atheism and loss.

In researching such an extremely complex issue, we have to follow into the footsteps of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.). If we accept them as our guides, we shall have no fear about falling into destruction or departing from the Straight Path according to what is already reported about the Prophet (S) who said: "My Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) among you are like the ark of Noah: whoever boards it is saved, and whoever lags behind it is drowned and ruined."

Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) did not have a system of his own regarding the philosophy of *tawhid*; rather, his was the very same pristine system about which all Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) unanimously agreed and to whose safeguarding they dedicated their lives in the face of all other sects which may have deviated from the achievement of the noble objective.

We are not going here to make a comparison between these sects in as far as the belief in tawhid is concerned, for this may require a very lengthy research whose discussion will require us to go beyond the limits we have set for our study here; rather, what is important for us here is to present the limits of the concept of tawhid from the stories we have already narrated about Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.).

Misconception of the Similitude of God to His Creation

The first to come across in researching the *hadith* narrated by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in the subject of *tawhid* is this one: "Anyone who makes a similitude of God with His creation is a *mushrik* (polytheist),

and anyone who attributes to Him what He has prohibited is *kafir* (disbeliever)" which is, as reported about the Prophet (S), a clear answer to those who claim that "God created Adam in His Own Image."

In another text, the Imam (a.s.) explains to us the misconception in whose pitfall others have fallen; al-Husayn ibn Khalid reported saying, "I said to ar-Ridha' (a.s.), `O son of the Messenger of God! People say that the Messenger of God (S) said that the Almighty and Exalted God created Adam in His Own image.' He said, `May God fight them! They distorted the beginning of this *hadith*. The Messenger of God (S) passed by two men exchanging insults and abusive language, and he heard one of them saying to the other, `God made your face ugly and ugly is anyone who is like you,' whereupon he (S) said, `O servant of God! Do not say so to your brother, for the Almighty and Exalted God created Adam's image like his.'"

The Messenger (S) here is forbidding the man from articulating such an abusive language which abuses Adam, father of all men. The pronoun in the original text (i.e., "image like his") belongs to the man being abused, not to God; therefore, it is erroneous to say that the meaning here is that God created Adam in His Own Image. The Imam emphasizes this by narrating one *qudsi hadith* in which the Almighty tells the Messenger of God (S), "The one who makes a similitude of Myself to My creation is indeed ignorant of Who I am."

The *hadith* regarding the Divine is entangled and complex, but if you read it in the *hadith* narrated by the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), you will find it in full harmony with the human nature, lucidly interpreting the obscure concept in brief expressions with a full vision despite their inclusion of a spacious philosophical context.

God's Attributes are His Own Essence

While researching the *hadith* of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in this regard, we come across his treatment of the issue of His Attributes which are none other than a description of His Own Essence, and that it is impossible that they should be anything else.

For example, al-Husayn ibn Khalid said, "I heard ar-Ridha' (a.s.) saying, "God has always been Knowing, omni-Potent, Living, Eternal, Hearing, Seeing,' so I said to him, `O son of the Messenger of God (S)! People have been saying that God knows through His faculty of knowledge, omni-Potent through His faculty of power, Eternal through His ability to withstand time, Hearing through His faculty of hearing, and Seeing through His faculty of vision.' He (a.s.) said, `Anyone who says so and believes in it has indeed accepted other gods besides God, and he has nothing to do with our religion.'

Then he added, `God has always been Knowing, omni-Potent, Eternal, Hearing, and Seeing in His Own Essence; Exalted is God above the claims of the polytheists and those who make such similitudes a great deal of exaltation.'"

Knowledge, might, and other attributes of God are not actually different from His Essence; rather, they

are the same like the Essence in their existence and reality; otherwise, they would have been partners with God in His eternity which contradicts the very concept of *tawhid* which agrees with the nature of His being, that is, the eternity of the Self on its own, without having anything else as partner therewith.

Belief in Plurality of the Essence and Attributes is Shirk

In another *hadith* reported by Muhammad ibn Arafa, the Imam (a.s.) explains to us how one will be committing *shirk* if he considers the Essence of the Almighty and His Attributes as separate from each other. Muhammad said, "I asked ar-Ridha' (a.s.), `Did God create things by some sort of power or not?'

He answered, `It is not possible that He must have used some sort of power to do so because if you say that He created things by a power, you would be saying that you imagined a tool whereby He created things, which is *shirk*. And if you say that He created things which He subjected to His power, you would be saying that He made sure He would be able to overpower them, while He is not weak or incapable or in need of anyone else; rather, He, Glory be to Him, is Almighty due to the fact that His own Essence is Mighty.'"

The Difference Between God's Will and People's

In another part of the discussion, the Imam (a.s.) tells us about the difference between the Will of God and the will of humans. Safwan ibn Yahya said, "I asked Abul-Hasan (a.s.), `Tell me about God's Will and the will of His creation.' He said, `The will of a person is something he possesses, hence it is a possessive pronoun; as regarding God, His Will is His Action, nothing other than that, because He does not contemplate upon doing something, nor does He decide to do something, nor does he sets His mind to do something, and all these verbs have nothing to do with His Essence; they are among the faculties of humans, and they are among the characteristics of the creation. God's Will is His Action, nothing other than that. He says `Be!' and it is without articulating something, or using a tongue, or sets his mind upon something or contemplates upon doing something, nor does He think about the means to do so, nor does He think about how.'"

The previous chapter contained a discussion of the issue of eternity of God's Will in a debate between the Imam (a.s.) and Sulayman al-Maroozi, the Khurasani scientist of *kalam* who was invited by al-Ma'mun to debate the Imam.

Queries

There may be some innocent questions which come to the mind of anyone which the Imam may have tried to answer in a very simple way relying on clear Qur'anic verses whereby we may pass without being aware of their precise meaning and the depth of their context. For example, regarding the Knowledge of God, he was asked by al-Husayn ibn Bashshar, "Does God know about the thing which

never was how it would look like when it is?" He answered, "God Almighty knows of things before their existence; He has said: `We were wont to write down all that ye did,'[1] and He said to the inmates of Hell, `If they were returned (back to earth), they would certainly relapse to the things they were forbidden, for they are indeed liars.'[2]

The Exalted and the Almighty God knows that if those inmates were to be returned to earth, they would go back to their old ways and commit what they were prohibited from committing. When the angels said, `Wilt Thou place therein one who makes mischief therein and shed blood while we celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy Name?' He said, `I know what ye know not.'[3] So God always knows since eternity about things before He creates them."'

We may find in some Qur'anic verses that God is describing Himself with attributes which do not fit His Exalted Status such as mocking and ridiculing as in the verse, "God will throw back their mockery on them"[4] and "God will throw back their ridicule on them"[5] and "(the unbelievers) plotted and schemed, and God too plotted"[6] and "They strive to deceive God while He is deceiving them."[7]

But the Imam (a.s.) answers by saying that God Almighty does not ridicule, mock, cheat, or anything like that, but He rewards those who commit these sins with the reward they deserve for their ridicule, mockery, cheating, etc.

The Imam's answer is derived from the meaning of the Qur'anic verse which states, "The plotting of evil will hem only the author thereof."[8] When these individuals ridicule, mock, plot, or cheat, they do not sense the destined consequences for such a behavior when the tables are turned and they have to suffer perpetual pain and torture. This is proven by the verses, "They plotted and planned, but We too planned, even while they perceived it not. Then see what the end of their plot was! We destroyed them and their people, all of them."[9]

There are Qur'anic verses which deserve a serious look into them when their superficial meaning gives the impression that they invite one to uphold what must not Islamically be upheld, departing from the concept of the Divine Perfection. For example, the Almighty has said, "They have forgotten God, so He has forgotten them,"[10] and "We shall that day forget them as they forgot the meeting of this day of theirs."[11]

To attribute forgetfulness to God is erroneous because it is an attribute of His creation; besides, such a superficial meaning contradicts another verse which says, "... and thy Lord never forgets."[12] But the Imam interprets "forgetfulness" in these texts to mean abandonment, and that God abandons them by not allocating for them the rewards He allocates to those who yearn for such meeting. Since they forgot about God and did not do good deeds prior to such meeting, God will make His good rewards distant from them and will reward them with torture and eternal Hellfire.

What is meant by "forgetfulness" in these texts is not overlooking or bypassing, nor does the meaning of abandonment is negligence. The Imam pointed this out when he answered someone who asked him

about the meaning of the verse "... and God left them in utter darkness so they could not see"[13] by saying, "God, the Sublime and Praised One, cannot be described as abandoning as can His creation, but when He knows that they would never leave disbelief and straying, He would stop His support for them and His kindness, leaving them to have their own way."

Seeing God

The discussion of "seeing" God is one of the subjects of the science of *kalam* in which views of Islamic schools of thought differed since the battle and argument on *kalam* started, shattering the unity of the Creed's interpretation of many doctrinal bases upon which the structure of the Islamic Message was established. The Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) took a stance towards the subject of "seeing" God which was in harmony with the pristine concept of *tawhid* as Islam intends it to be, regarding Him above being physically seen simply because that would be possible only for an object of limited dimensions.

As regarding the verses which give the impression that "seeing" God is possible, such as "Some faces on that Day shall be bright, looking towards their Lord,"[14] and "Verily, from (the Light of) their Lord, that Day, will they be veiled,"[15] and "Thy Lord comes, and His angels, rank upon rank,"[16] as well as other such verses, Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) interpreted them in a way which kept them in the context in which they were revealed. For example, the meaning of "... looking to their Lord" is that they were bright with hope and anticipation waiting to be awarded with their Lord's rewards, that is, anticipating His generosity and prizes.

The meaning of the second verse is that they are veiled from receiving the rewards of their Lord, for God Almighty cannot be said to occupy a physical space, a place, in which He would settle, veiling Himself from His servants. In the third verse, what is coming is God's Decree, that is, your Lord's Decree is coming to pass; otherwise, God Almighty cannot be said to come and go, for these movements are characteristic of His creatures, and it is impossible that He should have their attributes, for this would mean that there would be a place where He is not there! God is highly elevated above this degradation.

Thus are the Qur'anic verses interpreted according to the occasion upon which they were revealed. Moreover, such an interpretation which takes into consideration both context and occasion (or reason for revelation) does not depart even a little bit from the particular appearance of such verses simply because such an understood appearance is not derived from the verbal text alone; rather, other aspects which encompass the subject's angles, and for whose explanation the text was revealed, have also to be taken into consideration.

Compulsion and Empowerment

While researching the way Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) employed to explain the subject and relevant topics related to the unity of God, we are faced by others with many questions inquiring about the theory of compulsion and empowerment which occupied the minds of Muslims for a long period of time and

caused a great deal of more division among them due to the debates among the scholars of the science of *kalam* of various sects at that time. Some endorsed compulsion, others endorsed empowerment, while still others preached taking an in-between approach.

1. Al Jathiya:29
2. Al An'aam:28
3. Al Baqara:30
4. Al Baqara:15
5. Al Tawba:79
6. Aali 'Imran:54
7. Al Nisaa:142
8. Fatir:43
9. Al Naml:50-51
10. Al Tawba:67
11. Al A'raaf:51
12. Maryam:64
13. Al Baqara:17
14. Al Qiyama:22-23
15. Al Mutaffifin (or Tatfif):15
16. Al Fajr:22

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