

Monotheism - the Bedrock of Islamic Belief

Building upon the evidences and arguments presented in the previous chapter, we shall now move unto the ultimate foundation of the Islamic faith, and that is monotheism. The best definition of monotheism from the Islamic perspective is the practice of devoting all of your worship to the One and Only God, Allah. It is to know that Allah is One, without partner in His domination and His decisions; One who has no comparison in regards to His essence and traits; and One without equal in His divinity and in worship. Abraham summarized these points the best when he said (as Allah recorded in the Quran):

"Truly my prayer and my sacrifice, my life and my death, are all for Allah, the Master and Sustainer of the Universe." (6:162)

Although many people may think of themselves as followers of monotheism, the worship of Allah as One has many dimensions that most non-Muslims have never considered in their daily lives. The primary source of this problem is that although most, if not all, people truly believe that Allah is the Creator and that He alone possesses the attributes of being All-Knowing, Almighty, etc.; they still direct their worship, either partly or entirely, to other created beings. A careful study of the Quran though, clearly explains and calls the reader's attention to many of these dimensions and clarifies them.

The first fundamental concept in regards to His Oneness is that He is the Master and Sustainer of all of the creation. Allah alone caused all things to come into existence. He maintains and provides for His creation although He has no need from them, or for them. He is the Master of the Universe and everything in it, and no one is able to contend with Him in His authority and supremacy. Nothing can happen except what He permits. When confronted by difficulty, many Muslims (in following the practice of the beloved Messenger of Allah) frequently remember this reality by saying, "La hawla wa laa quwwata ilaa billaah", which means: "there is neither ability nor power except by the will of Allah". The following verses from the Quran bear out this dimension of Allah's Oneness:

"Allah created all things and He is the One upon which all things depend."
(39:62)

"And no calamity strikes except by Allah's permission." (64:11)

In the hadith of the Prophet we also see a basis for this concept. For example, in the following authenticated narration, the Prophet taught his followers "Know for sure that if the whole world came together in order to do something to help you, they would only be able to help you with that which Allah had already determined for you. Likewise, if the whole world came together to harm you, they would only be able to harm you with that which Allah had already determined would happen to you"

Translating these points into practical understanding, we begin to see that our ability to direct our own lives or the lives of others around us is rather limited, since all we can do is make the most of *what we are given*. Even in that attempt, the results are still dependent upon the will and permission of Allah to either allow our efforts to succeed, or to prevent them from attaining their intended effect. What otherwise seems like "good luck" and "bad luck" are all decisions from Allah and are not at all influenced by supposed "good-luck charms" such as horseshoes, rabbit's feet, four-leaf clovers, or lucky numbers. In the same way, bad luck superstitions like breaking a mirror, seeing a black cat, or walking under a ladder are equally ineffective. Indeed in Islam, the belief that charms or omens have any power in and of themselves is considered to be a way of associating partners with Allah in His dominion, and this is the only unforgivable sin in Islam since it implies a denial of the Oneness of Allah.

Also, the Oneness of Allah can be seen in His traits and names as mentioned in the Quran and Hadith. Amongst the numerous verses of the Quran concerning His attributes, we read the following:

The Most Beautiful names belong to Allah, so call on Him by them. (7:180)

Allah! There is none worthy of worship except Him! And to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names. (20:8)

Yet in regards to His names and attributes there exist rules and parameters that the worshipper must take care not to exceed. Firstly, we can only know of Allah that which He and His Prophet have described to us concerning His names and attributes, and furthermore we cannot take any license in explaining those traits except by that which He and His Messenger have stated concerning them. For example when Allah states in His book the Quran:

"And truly, your only Master and Sustainer is Allah who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then He exalted (or established) Himself over the Throne." (7:54)

Many of the noble scholars of the past have commented on this statement of Allah but all made sure to avoid trying to explain the meaning of His statement that He "exalted (or established) Himself over the Throne" since Allah did not explain it further Himself.

When asked to interpret the meaning of this phrase, one of the great scholars of Islam, Imam Malik inclined his head and was silent until sweat covered his brow, upon which he looked up and said: "Istiwa' (the concept of establishing or exalting oneself over something) is linguistically understood, the "how" of it is inconceivable in the mind; but the belief in it is obligatory, and inquiring about it is a heretical innovation." And thus do we stop at where Allah and His Messenger stop when it comes to interpreting the attributes of the All-Mighty.

Now, in other parts of the Quran Allah describes Himself with qualities that are known and seen in His creation like: Love, Mercy, Generosity, Anger, and Strength. Although these traits are indeed found in His creation, the similarity stops there. The rule is that any perceived similarity between Allah's attributes and those of mankind is only in name and not in degree or perfection. When Allah refers to Himself with these attributes, they are to be taken in the absolute sense, free from human shortcomings.

Additionally, there are certain attributes of the creation that cannot be applied to Allah because of the imperfection, weakness and deficiency they entail. For example, it is claimed in the Bible and Torah that God spent six days creating the universe then rested on the seventh. For this reason, Jews and Christians take either Saturday or Sunday as a day of rest in which work is viewed as sinful. Such a claim assigns to God the attributes of His creation. It is man who tires after heavy work and needs sleep to recuperate. And furthermore, in our current modern societies many people regularly work two, three and sometimes four weeks straight without taking a day off. Are these people then superior to the Lord and Creator of the Universe? Exalted is He above all the imperfection they seek to attribute to Him!

In general, the key formula that is used Islamically when dealing with Allah's attributes is the Quranic verse,

"There is nothing like Him and He is hearer and seer of all." (42:11)

From this verse we gather that man can only know about the Creator what He has revealed to him through His Prophets and revealed books. Therefore, we must stay within these limits, for if we don't we are liable to fall into misguidance and even possibly disbelief and heresy by assigning to Allah the limited attributes of His creation.

Although the dimensions of monotheism mentioned above are essential to the belief of a Muslim, they in and of themselves are incomplete and useless without the final dimension of Islamic monotheism – submission to the Oneness of Allah in worship and deed. Allah clearly states this point when He records the responses of the Arabian idol worshippers during the time of the Prophet Muhammad when they were asked a series of questions:

"Say: 'Who is it that gives you all sustenance from the sky and earth, governs sight and hearing, brings forth life from dead (matter) and death from the living, and plans the affairs of man?'" They will all say 'Allah'." (10:31)

The pagan Arabs all knew that Allah was their creator, provider, their Lord and Master yet that knowledge was not enough to qualify them as believers according to Allah. In fact, Allah said:

"Most of them do not believe in Allah except while joining partners to Him." (12:106)

So, the idol worshippers and pagans of that era knew and acknowledged that it is Allah who created them, provides for them, and responds to them in their time of distress. But that knowledge did not stop them from giving elements of their worship to others or from calling upon others for their needs. Indeed, they even tried to cover up their associating of partners with Allah, the worst sin, by saying:

"We only worship them so that they may bring us closer to Allah." (39:3)

Thus, the most important element of Islamic monotheism is that of directing all of your worship to Allah alone, for He alone is deserving of worship, and it is only Allah that can ever benefit you as a result of your humility and devotion to Him. Indeed, this is the purpose for which He created mankind

"I did not create the Spirits and Mankind except for to worship Me." (51:56)

Moreover, every Muslim recites in their daily prayer several times a day the following verse to remind them of this elemental understanding and practice of the Oneness of the All-Mighty:

"You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help." (1:4)

This simple yet profound verse plainly demonstrates that all forms of worship should only be directed to Allah, the only One capable of responding. And Allah also reminds His beloved worshippers that He is not a distant God who is unconcerned about their needs and worries, but instead that He is close to them and pleased when they turn to Him:

"And when My servants ask you (O Muhammad) about Me tell them that I am near to them, I hear the prayer of every one who calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me and believe in Me properly in order that they may be guided aright." (2:186)

"Who listens to the distressed soul when it cries out to Him, and Who relieves its suffering, and makes you the inheritors of the earth? Can there be another god besides Allah? Little do they reflect!" (27:62)

The Prophet Muhammad further established this understanding of Islamic monotheism when he taught his Companions, "If you ask in prayer ask only from Allah, and if you seek help, seek it only from Allah." And the Prophet was also reported to have said, "Nothing is more beloved to your Lord than calling upon Him for your needs".

Turning now to the subject of worship, we observe that in the Islamic view this word is very comprehensive and includes more than just fasting, paying charity, and praying. It includes emotions like love, trust, and fear; all of which should only be directed to Allah at that level. Allah mentioned these emotions and warned against excesses in them or misdirection of them when He stated:

"There are among men those who take for worship others besides Allah as equals to Him. They love them as they should only love Allah. But those who believe have a much greater love of Allah..." (2:165)

"So put your trust in Allah if you are truly believers." (5:23)

And lastly, the concept of worship in Islam also involves total obedience to Allah's commands and considers Allah to be the ultimate Legislator. Thus, the rejection of His divinely revealed laws and the implementation of secular (man-made) legal systems is an act of disbelief, and is also one of the forms of associating partners with Allah. Allah said in the Quran:

"Those who do not rule by what Allah has revealed are disbelievers/deniers (of the Supremacy and Authority of Allah)." (5:44)

On one occasion, the Prophet's companion 'Adee ibn Haatim, who was a convert from Christianity, heard the Prophet recite the Qur'anic verse,

"They have taken their rabbis and monks as lords besides Allah," (9:31)

So he said: 'Surely we did not worship them,' The Prophet then turned to him and said 'Did they not make forbidden what Allah had made permissible, and as such you obeyed them and made those actions forbidden? And did they not make permissible what Allah made forbidden and you again obeyed them and declared those actions to be permissible?' He replied, 'We certainly did.' The Prophet (saws) then said, 'That was how you worshipped them'." So we understand then from the above-mentioned Quranic verses and hadith that obeying the creation in disobedience to the Creator is equal to worshipping them and taking them as gods besides Allah.

These multidimensional concepts should cause many of us to stop and re-examine our actions, beliefs and emotions in the light of Islamic revelation. Does it truly make sense to say that we love and worship God alone when we turn to others as intermediates? Or when we set aside His divine injunctions for constitutions and laws which represent the opinions and desires of men subject to misguidance, temptation and corruption?

So in summary, we need only turn back to the glorious words of Allah in His book, the Quran, to best understand Him and the concept of Islamic monotheism through His own description of Himself:

Say: He is Allah, the One, Indivisible. Allah is the One upon Whom all depend, but as for Himself, He is Self-Sufficient. He gives birth to none and He was not given birth to; And no one is comparable to Him." (112:1-4)