

1.1 Monotheism- Source of Knowledge about God

Review of Intro and Terms

There are five basic points that should be remembered. First, is that it is a mistake to assume that every Muslim is an Arab. Not every Muslim is an Arab and not every Arab is a Muslim. To even tie Islam to the Middle East is also a misconception. The Muslim population is close to one billion in all countries and places in the world. Arabs are actually a small minority among the Muslims.

The second main point covers the notion of religion as understood by Muslims. It is not just a matter that is restricted to the basic rituals or religious observations but rather an all-encompassing notion. Religion is a way of life that includes the social, economic and political aspects of life and it's all integrated.

The third point that was discussed is the meaning of the term *Islam* itself. It is an attributive title. It is not just a name that is derived from the name of a person, a place, or locality. It is a name that carries within itself the meaning of Islam. The word Islam means, in Arabic, to achieve inner and outer peace as well as peace in the community and the world at large by submitting oneself to the Will of God and the obedience of His command. Within this kind of basic definition of Islam, following the path of God, we said that all prophets, throughout history actually preached the same kind of basic Islam and that it was simply fulfilled and completed with the advent of prophet Mohammed. We concluded not only that Mohammedanism is a mistaken and offensive name for Islam but the fact that all the prophets were brothers, preaching for the same God, and those who sincerely follow them are also regarded as following the same basic path of Islam.

The fourth point went over the definition of a Muslim. Based on the definition of Islam we can say that a Muslim is one who commits his self to live in accordance with the teachings, commands, and guidance of God as derived from the revelation. Being a Muslim is not just a title that someone can claim or pay lip service to. A true Muslim is one who actively follows the path of Islam.

The fifth and final point covered in the last lecture that may have some bearing in the coming lecture is this universal outlook of Islam towards prophets and towards followers of other faiths would provide a very good

foundation, a very good beginning, to remove or demolish the barriers of fanaticism, prejudice and stereotypes which are sometimes propagated by mistaken sources which prevents the Islamic faith in its true perspective. This should provide, hopefully, more cooperation between the various people following different prophets (who are all considered Muslims in Islam) for the good of all.

1.1 Source of Knowledge about God

God in Islam: His attributes and His essence

The first philosophical issue that is raised is how does a man with his limited capabilities come to know God? To be specific we are concerned with the concept of knowing- how does he know God? What strategies are used in the knowledge and what forces are used to reach the full knowledge of God in Islam?

We do not really have to venture far to get basic insightful knowledge and information not only about God but also concerning other things. The human being is created with a natural pure disposition to realize his Creator. I'm not talking about science or about prophets or revelations.

Even on a very fundamental level we find that throughout history there is a very strange phenomena that people of different backgrounds, living in so many different parts of the world at different points in time, have always had this strong urge within themselves to look and to yearn for the Creator. They see that there is some power, a magnificent and merciful power that is sometimes interpreted in a mistaken way by materializing that in some form or other (i.e. idols). The basic yearning has always been there. Even in places where there is no recorded history of a particular prophet there, people have yearned for a Creator. That's what I'm referring to as an innate nature. The Arabic term is 'fitra'. Fitra literally translates to: something that one is created with or created in accordance with: this innate nature.

An example of this is a verse in the Qur'an says, "So set thy face steadily and truly to the natural faith." (30:30) Notice the term here "natural faith." It's not some concocted doctrine. Natural faith is established by God. God's handiwork according to the person he has made mankind. No change in the creation of God that is the standard religion but most among mankind don't understand. The Qur'an relates the story of prophet Abraham when his people deviated from the worship of God. He simply addresses them by

saying, "Is there any doubt about God?" In other words he's not arguing or trying to provide equations or different kinds of approaches.

If you really think about it, honestly, is there any doubt about the existence or presence of God instinctively even or innately? The other thing that is quite observable is that it has been shown over and over again that even atheists, those who reject God, at some time or other when they are in real difficulty remember God. You might have seen the writings about what happened to people during the second World War, for example, where an atheist who doesn't believe in God or a person who just doesn't believe period has a problem with his parachute would say, "Oh my God!" Why would he remember that now? That shows there's something even despite of themselves that causes them to turn to this supreme power.

Many of us in our own human experience sometimes become ill [or know someone who is ill] and is really suffering or in pain and says something to the effect, "Oh if I'm just cured, I'll try to be better! I'll be good!" But of course once we get over that we forget our promise.

That's why the Qur'an analyzes this weakness in human nature. For example, in one verse it says, basically, that when people go on ships and then there's a problem and the ship is about to sink suddenly those on board remember and they pray to God to save them. But once they get to shore, they forget. This is the kind of indirect proof from our nature, as humans, that we know God.

Finally, another thing that can be relevant here is derived also from the Qur'an. The Qur'an tells us that beyond this basic knowledge of the existence of the Creator, that a person is inspired with the basic knowledge of right and wrong. One passage in the Qur'an says that God has fashioned the soul and He inspired into it the fundamental knowledge of right and wrong. (91:7-8) This knowledge of course could be perverted through the influence of personal reasons or other social pressure.

So human being, by his or her nature and in his or her purity, recognizes some of these points. And these, to me, are quite legitimate sources of information. It is not scientific in a sense that you can put it in a test tube, but it is so common and so one cannot really overlook it.

Does the instinctive way of knowing God contradict the intellect? Some may say that the intellect is the enemy of faith or a challenge of faith. Some may believe that faith requires that one close one's

mind; doesn't think but instead just accepts things because he is incapable of understanding.

I don't think that there are any contradictions not only with intellect but in general. All human faculties such as the senses including also the intellect are part and parcel of the whole process of seeking the truth. None of these by themselves will be sufficient, but on a whole they are not really in contradiction. In fact I would say, even more positively, that from a Muslim point of view one of the main things that make the human being distinct, one of the basic blessings that he is given by God to make him different from animals since animals can think as well, is intellect. So the intellect is a God given gift or blessing. How could we interpret that as a challenge or antithesis of faith? This doesn't really stand.

On the other hand, we can also say that the use of intellect and the human faculties in general could be in themselves a source of knowledge, a source of reinforcing the faith and making sure that the person is on the right track. Even in the areas of beliefs, where most people would say that belief is not something you can apply normal human reasoning to. Yes, human reasoning may fall short of it but it is not useless.

In fact, the Qur'an even addresses people who did not use their minds and in many of the passages in the Qur'an the appeal is made for us to utilize our minds if we use it in the right way. Again by preserving our basic innate nature, we would be able to discover the truth. The matter of belief is not just a dogmatic presentation where you should not think about it and only accept it by faith. Intellect could also be a strong foundation for a firmer type of faith.

The way I classify my understanding of this area is that the Qur'an implores the human being to search for truth, to search for knowledge of and about God on three basic interrelated levels. [Those three levels are] by looking into oneself, by looking into the environment in which one is living, and by looking into the social universe- the cosmos if you will- as a whole.

On the personal or individual level, one doesn't have to venture far to realize that God does exist. Just look into yourself, you don't have to be a scientist but if you are then you'll appreciate more the construction of the body; how it is made up of many cells. One cell becomes a cell for sight and the other for hearing; it's amazing. How does the brain operate? The circulatory system? The digestive system? The nervous system? Such coordination and beauty [is shown through their functioning]. This shows that these things didn't come to be in a haphazard way, there must have been a deliberate

design behind them. So if you want to find God then look into yourself. The Qur'an says, *Wa fee anfusiqum afala yubsiroon*, which translates to "By looking into yourselves, you will find evidence to the presence and powers of God."

In another verse it even says, "Do they not reflect in their own minds?" (30:8) In fact, if one really divorces himself from any prejudice caused by social pressures one way or the other, or the worship of science as the ultimate thing, if one utilizes science in the proper way, you wouldn't have to look at the body as a whole, just start analyzing one single organ and see how it works. Like some scientists would tell you that in order to duplicate the digestive system you'd need a huge laboratory and still it wouldn't operate as efficiently as a naturally created organ would such as the stomach. We have acids in our stomachs that can erode metal but it doesn't hurt us. How could that be haphazard? If one aspect of that was developed by chance would everything else falling in line and falling together also happen by chance?

Let's move on to beyond ourselves, to find further evidence, the Qur'an also implores people to consider and to think. Take one aspect that many people think about today as very fashionable, like the ecological balance for example. Many people would take that as very clear evidence again that there is a design in this universe; vegetation as it relates to animal life and to human life; and the various atmospheric layers that we have. Everything is put together to sustain human life. If you look into the Qur'an, you find this mentioned. In one verse, in the Qur'an, it says *Wa khalaqa qula shayin qadarahu taqdeera*. "God created everything in exact proportion." (16:25) This is a very important term "in exact proportion" it's not just that He created but that there is a deliberate design behind putting all of these things together.

Another verse in the Qur'an, for example, translates to say, "Glory be to God who created in pairs all things that the earth produces, as well as their own (human) kind and (other) things which they have no knowledge." (36:36)

In another verse, when people look at the whole scheme of creation, it says, "Were they created from nothing or are they themselves the creators?" No one claims that he's created from nothing nor can he claim that he is the creator [of the heavens and earth]. Then the verse continues, "Or did they create the heavens and earth?" No one claims that. Then it says, "Nay but they see not." (52: 35-36) So the science is there. It's whether we apply it in the right place and in the proper way or not that makes the difference.

Finally, if you move into what I would call the third circle, not just looking into ourselves or the environment around us but looking into the whole cosmic order, again there is a design. The planets. The solar system. The way everything is coordinated. The distance between the sun and the earth, which if decreased may burn everything and if increased everything would freeze. This is all deliberate. The succession of day and night, the circulation or changes of seasons, which has very important relevance to the lives of the people, to vegetation, and to animal life; all of these beautiful things that we are in awe at in the universe, we look at them with great admiration, definitely show that there is a design behind them and as is obvious any design needs a designer or creator it.

One verse in the Qur'an implores us in particular to this area and says, "Have they not reflected on the domain of the heavens and earth and what God created therein?"

In another verse it also says, in the general sense of the meaning: in the creation of the heavens and earth and in the succession of day and night there are certainly signs for those who reflect. Those who remember God while standing, sitting, and laying down and ponder on the creation of the heavens and the earth, saying: Our Lord you have not created this in vain. Glory be to You. Give us salvation from the penalty of the Fire. (3: 190-191)

The Qur'an repeats this giving examples even of how I said earlier in the area of belief, which mostly we'll take as dogmas, like the utilization of the human senses that the Qur'an uses, "Didn't they see...", "Didn't they hear...", "Didn't they think...", "Didn't they reflect..." all of these are integrated and regarded as a valuable source of knowledge.

Is there any contradiction, again, between the concept of using one's own intellect to arrive at a pure and correct knowledge of truth and the essence of God and the way, in which we are all familiar with, which is that of revelations? [Do] revelations [walk side by side] on that path [the coming of personal conclusions] or is it contradictory to it?

From the Muslim's point of view, there is no problem whatsoever with this because even though we said that the human innate nature, the pure nature and source of information or pondering in the universe, is a source of knowledge, it is useful but it is not perfect. The fact that it's not perfect again does not make it useless.

There are a number of reasons that make us in need, as humans, for additional guidance through direct revelation. For example, the pure human disposition, or fitra as I called it; this human feeling, or natural disposition, could also be perverted under pressure and under indoctrination of one side or the other which might make it not really operating in the proper direction. That's why you find many people following so many different cults. They say, oh that's great I found 'the way'. Well why did you? [They reply] I feel good.

Of course feeling good is one criteria but it's not the whole criteria. One could be feeling very good but for the wrong reasons or on the wrong path. Therefore, there is still some shortcoming in this.

In talking about the senses and the intellect or knowledge, I think anyone, even a person who does not believe in God, would admit readily that our senses are limited. Our perceptions are limited. Our sight, hearing, etc- we know that. Also, we know that our perceptions could also be deceived or they can deceive us. If you put a spoon in a glass of water, it looks crooked. A very well known phenomenon is of people traveling in the desert or in hot areas and would see in front of them a lake or a puddle of water- the mirage- but it actually does not exist. At the time it's seen it is a reality to the person seeing it. So our perception is very useful, but it still falls short of getting to know everything.

On the other hand, science is fine. Science can resolve many issues and problems that are purely scientific- that are purely technical. Science can tell you for sure how to use technology for example to communicate sounds and pictures; this can be determined fully by science. However, there are many aspects in lives of people that are beyond science also. There is the moral aspect, there are the ethical standards, and there is the application of the fundamental principal of good and bad. As we said the [principle of good and bad] is instinctive but still needs some modifications and limitations. And we know throughout history that people have always had differences as to what exactly defines the proper ethical or moral standards. In order to resolve that problem, there must be a higher authority, God, Himself, telling us and providing us with stable standards of ethics and morality within which you can interpret various details.

Finally, and perhaps this is in my mind the most important reason, is that we know that knowledge is not only limited to science or books or perception. We know that there are certain aspects of knowledge, legitimate knowledge, which does not lend itself to any of those tools. For example,

take the knowledge of the unseen. What happened in the past before history was recorded? If you wanted to get any information on that there is no recorded history. Or at least there is dispute about the recorded history. Revelation can tell you what, for example, the stories of previous prophets and what they said and what their message was.

There are issues that no matter how much you use your mind you will not be able to arrive at a final conclusion. An example of that would be the knowledge about God. You can't feel the presence of God. You can feel the attributes of God but you can't have full knowledge without having a prophet or messenger in receiving that revelation from God and the communication from Him to us. So, in essence, I don't see contradiction. Actually, they all supplement each other. They have to be simply used in the proper context.

Now back to God in Islam, do Muslims in general have a special term or a special name for God or do they just use the word God?

The proper terminology used, in Islam, for God is "Allah." There are a number of reasons for having a special word for God. First of all, the term "Allah" means, in Arabic, the one and only universal God or Creator and Provider of the universe. Notice here I am emphasizing "the one and only." So a Muslim would not simply say, "There is one God." That would not be as accurate or as strong an expression as saying 'the one and only God'.

The main point to be emphasized here is that, unfortunately many of the writings that are found in various libraries in the West, which are not written from a Muslim standpoint or how Muslims understand Islam, depict Allah as if He is some type of a tribal Arabian God or even the 'God of Muslims'. For example, they'd say Mohammed worshiped *his* Allah. Or Muslims worship Allah. Even if they use the term Allah they put it in such a way that leaves the reader or audience with the impression that maybe it is not exactly the same God.

The reason for considering the term Allah as more accurate, is that Allah is not only just a meaning of God it is also a personal name for God, both a reference to God and His personal name. This is beautiful in a sense. You don't just say God but you can also say Lord but when you say Allah you're invoking the name, the personal name, of God. It establishes a personal touch or a pull between the human being and the creator.

The other thing, which I consider also relevant, is that the term Allah, in Arabic, is not subject to plurality. For example, in English you can say God and you can also say gods. In Arabic there is nothing that is equivalent to

[the English term] Gods, nothing whatsoever. In other words, there is no Allahs for example. This emphasizes the purity of Islamic monotheism.

A third reason, which is quite interesting as well, the term Allah does not lend itself to any gender. In other words, there is no female or male gender for the term Allah. In English you can have god and goddess. In Arabic, this simply doesn't exist, which shows that the term Allah is a lot more accurate than using the term God even if you are using a capital G. At least it is relatively more accurate in conveying the true nature of the Supreme Creator.