

1.2 Analysis of Creedal Formula

Concept of God in Islam Part 2

Am I correct in understanding that Muslims, when referring to God- to Allah, are referring to the same deity as the Christians and Jews for instance?

Fundamentally yes [Muslims refer to the same God as do Christians and Jews]. Just like when a French man says 'un dieu' which is the French equivalent of the word God. I have never seen anyone say that when the Frenchman says 'dieu' that he's talking about the God of the French people. This is a very simple and logical rule. However, often times this rule is violated when writers, who are not thinking from a Muslim point of view, write about Islam, which is the most common literature in this country. This leaves the reader with the distinct impression that Allah is the God of the Muslims. Indeed this false impression and stereotype still persists until today.

The other day I was addressing high school students in Queen Elizabeth High School and I kept explaining what the word Allah means and we talked about the same basic monotheistic concept of deity. After I finished, one student addressed me and asked me a question using "Your God." And I told him, "Brother, let's not talk about 'my God' and 'your God.' Let's talk about our God. The God of the entire humanity." This shows how persistent this kind of misconception is even until today.

This raises an even more interesting point. What term do Christians and Jews, living in the Arab world where Arabic is the mother tongue, use for God?

Well you'd be surprised that they use the exact same term as Muslims do, Allah. This is simply because Allah is the Arabic term for God. If you go, for example, to Lebanon, which has an approximate population of half Muslim and half Christian, you would not be able to distinguish [who is what]. If you hear people talking, you'll here them say Allah. The Christian will be saying Allah and the Muslim will too. They are basically the same thing.

Of course it is quite possible that a Jew, Christian and Muslim may have some differences about specific interpretation or definition of divine attributes. They may have differences in accepting or rejecting certain types of doctrines, like the idea of chosen people or the idea of the trinity. There may be differences on such kinds of doctrines but on a whole, on the fundamental level, they are really talking about the basic thing; they are talking about the one and only transcendent, all powerful, all merciful creator and provider of the universe.

In reality, the concepts are the same.

How can we reconcile ourselves with all the writers on Islamic studies that claim that Allah is not an Islamic term and that Allah existed as the name of a deity in the Arabian Peninsula years and years before Islam appeared?

I have already explained what the word Allah, in Arabic, means; the one and only creator. When a term has been perverted or used in a mistaken or erroneous way that does not change the reality (meaning) of it. In fact the name must be restored to its original use. This is one point. A very important point to bring up is that the pre-Islamic Arab knew nothing about monotheism. This is a common error and a common mistaken assumption that all they knew was idol worshiping.

This is a very common error because monotheism *was* known to the Arabs. Indeed, it was introduced centuries before Islam by prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael. We know that prophet Abraham took his son Ishmael to Arabia and this is why Prophet Ishmael is regarded to as the Grandfather of the Arabs.

You can say that the Arabs did have some notion and understanding of monotheism. Possibly at one time or another they used the term Allah in the proper sense. The fact that they perverted the practice and forgot the true teaching of Abraham and Ishmael, as happens in many nations: a prophet comes and when he is gone the people deviate from his teaching introducing their own ideas.

This does not necessarily mean that the term Allah really does not refer to what it actually is intended to refer to. With the advent of Prophet Mohammed, this term was restored back to its originality. To be more accurate, monotheism was restored back to its original purity just like in

the case of the Kabba, for example. The Kabba was built initially by Prophet Abraham as a shrine of monotheism, for the worship of the One God. Interesting fact: it's the first house to ever be built on earth as a shrine for monotheism.

The fact that pre-Islamic Arabs had perverted the use of the Kabba and put idols inside it, does not change its historical origin. That's why when Prophet Mohammed and the Muslims had attained victory, they destroyed the idols and cleansed the Kabba and restored it to its original self.

It's a matter of restoration of monotheism.

Having clarified the term Allah and clarified its meaning in Islam and how it relates to the word God in English, is Islam, as a faith, expressed in a [precise] form like the shayma for the Israelites?

It does, it's simple yet very profound. Sometimes when people hear 'simple' they think it's only for simple people or simple minds. This is simple but very profound. In Arabic it is *Ashhadu ana la illaha illa Allah wa ashhadu ana Mohammadan rasula Allah*. This translates to English as "I bear witness that there is no deity (or no God) worthy of worship except Allah and I bear witness that Mohammed is His prophet and messenger."

As you may notice, you can say that this creedal form or confession of faith is composed of basically two points, which reflect two very important beliefs. The first part "I bare witness that there is no deity except for Allah" is a reference to the concept of pure monotheism; the oneness or unique oneness of Allah. The second part, "I bear witness that Mohammed is his messenger," is actually a reflection of another concept that we have which we'll be discussing in another lecture: the concept of prophet-hood in Islam.

You might wonder why I say prophet-hood and not just the belief in Mohammed, but the answer to that (as will be clarified later) is that once a person believes in Mohammed, who is the last of all the messengers, by definition one must believe in all the prophets before him.

The mere recitation with conviction, under no compulsion, of this according to Muslim jurors, this would be sufficient to enter the person (reciting this) into the folds of Islam. In other words there is no other

official process, no "church" structure or hierarchy. The person might say this phrase in front of anyone but actually saying it with conviction is sufficient. It's a matter of sincerity, deep understanding, and conviction and not ceremonies.

It is very interesting to note that the shahada or the creedal formula of Islam starts with negation. In other terms, it doesn't say 'There is one God' but it says 'I bare witness that there is NO God but one God.' Is there any significance to that initial negation?

There are at least three reasons for the use of negation. First, by definition, when a person admits the supremacy and oneness of Allah, then one must reject any other deity than Allah. In other words, it would be a contradiction to say that there is God but somehow implying [at the same time] that there are also other gods. Pure monotheism means the rejection of any other false deity and the negation of any 'god-hood' attributed to any of the creatures of Allah.

The second main reason is that even though pure monotheism has been preached by all prophets throughout history (according to the Qur'an), the concept still gets perverted and changed. People added their own ideas and philosophies, which results into a sort of 'paganizing' or changing the purity of the nature of monotheism. So it was necessary and very important to clarify the right from the wrong and which deviations are not authentic and relevant to the pure teachings of the prophets from Adam to Mohammed.

The mission of Prophet Mohammed as being the conclusion of this prophetic tradition (since Muslims believe that all the prophets had preached Islam) that extends throughout history leads to the third point. The third reason is that it is essential to clarify the errors that have taken place prior to the mission of Prophet Mohammed so that it warns people and brings to the attention of the believers what kinds of temptations and erroneous interpretations of God has already taken place so as to avoid them and maintain the future purity of the faith and the purity of monotheism.

Since it's a very wealthy and rich concept, we should start by looking at the negations and then move (in the next program) to the affirmative side of the creedal formula in Islam. To start with

the negations, could you elaborate a little bit more on the position of Islam vis a vis the idol worshiping that was rampant in the Arabian Peninsula?

The idol worshiping was not only rampant among the pre-Islamic Arabs but if you study history you'll find that it was rampant in so many other nations. The Qur'an discusses, for example, the dialogue between prophet Abraham and his father, "And mention in the Book the story of Abraham. He was a man of truth; a prophet. Behold, he said to his father, 'O my father, why worship that which hears not, and sees not, and can profit you nothing?'" (19:41-42)

A passage that is quite intriguing in the Qur'an talks of the story of Prophet Abraham and his people. His way of speaking to them helped show them the error of their ways. The story, just to keep it brief, says that the people went out of the town for one of their festivals and Abraham refused to go with them. He stayed behind. When everyone went out, he went inside the temple where they had their idols. He took an axe and smashed them to pieces. He only spared one idol, which was the biggest of the idols (and some scholars interpreted that Prophet Abraham placed the axe in the arms of this idol). When the people returned, they entered the temple and were outraged and very angry to find that their gods were all smashed to pieces. They suspected that it was probably Prophet Abraham because he was always talking about monotheism and the rejection of idol worshiping. They questioned him and the verse says "They told him, 'Are you the one who did this to our gods, o Abraham?' He said, 'Nay, their biggest idol did it. Ask them, if they can speak intelligently.'" In other words he was bringing home to them, in a very logical way, the point. Yes, there are so many gods here and they must have gotten into some quarrel and so the big idol smashed them. If you don't believe me then ask them. Where basically he's saying that these objects, which cannot hear, cannot defend themselves against destruction.

The Arabs before Islam had their share of this kind of perversion just like many other nations did. In fact, there were so many idols worshiped by the pre-Islamic Arabs that sometimes you'd have a tribal god (an idol for a specific tribe) and so when they'd travel they'd carry their gods with them. Imagine a god being carried in your pocket or in your caravan. This was so ridiculous. What is even more comical is that they would get dried dates and then would press it into the form of a statue and that would be

their idol they'd worship. Then when they get hungry during a shortage of food, they eat it. They eat their god. They also used to sacrifice animals to their gods thinking that they were gaining favor with them. These are just few examples of pre-Islamic Arabia.

With the advent of Islam all of these forms were totally annihilated and monotheism was restored.

What would make human beings to worship a piece of stone, a statue- an inanimate object?

It is very rare that you'll find someone in his or her heart that really believes that this is their God. There are other reasons for this perversion. For example, historically at times when some people died, a pious man died for example, some may make a shrine or a statue in memory of that good person. As Ibn Abaas, one of the companions of the prophet, explains (as quoted in Bukhari) that gradually people forget the origin of the idol or the statue and actually turn it into an object of worship. This was one of the reasons people turned to idol worshiping.

Another reason is that many idol worshipers did not believe that those idols are Gods in themselves but in fact they used them, more or less, as intermediaries between God and man. They thought that by appeasing those idols, by worshiping them, by sacrificing animals at their feet would lead to their favor with God.

The third reason is perhaps more common because it applies to not only the idol worshipers but to others as well. That is the human weakness and tendency to try and materialize everything into a tangible and physical form, which is a human inclination. Especially in the early stages of human development, the higher concept might be difficult to accept and touchable things might be closer to people's minds.

With this kind of attitude people started searching for God, and in that search they tried to create an image for God that they could identify and relate to.

The worship of natural phenomena and forces of nature like the sun, the moon, and the wind was again very common in mythology as well as pre-Islamic Arabia. What would cause people to worship these?

This is another example, or another faucet of man's error while searching for truth. The motive for searching for truth is good and commendable but again there are errors on the way and that's why you mentioned earlier that you'd need divine revelation to guide that search.

In the search for The Power behind the universe, people get so fascinated with powers of nature; the powers that they feel can benefit them, or the powers that are capable of bringing harm to them. People had many superstitions concerning the impact of the heavenly bodies, and stars, and astrology is a reflection of this kind of thinking.

With this kind of mindset, people gradually may turn from admiring these forces of nature, to worshiping them, trying to appease them, or seeking benefits from them. Islam fully rejects this type of worship. In fact, it is indicated in the Qur'an that these are only creatures [and creations] of Allah and not substitutes and they definitely do not have parallel powers with Allah.

In the Qur'an it says, "Among His signs (of God's existence and power) are the night and the day, the sun and the moon. Adore not the sun or the moon but adore (or prostrate) to Allah who created them if it is Him you wish to serve." (41:37) This is very simple logic and very powerful at the same time. The night and day, the sun and the moon are created by Allah and so we should worship Him who created them.

Since prophet Abraham is a common prophet for all monotheistic faiths, he is mentioned in the Qur'an often. In this one instance he was educating his people and wanted to give them a practical example. It says, "Lo! Abraham said to his father Azar: "Takest thou idols for gods? For I see thee and thy people in manifest error." So also did We show Abraham the power and the laws of the heavens and the earth, that he might (with understanding) have certitude. When the night covered him over, He saw a star: He said: "This is my Lord." But when it set, He said: "I love not those that set." When he saw the moon rising in splendor, he said: "This is my Lord." But when the moon set, He said: "unless my Lord guide me, I shall surely be among those who go astray." When he saw the sun rising in splendor, he said: "This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all)." But when the sun set, he said: "O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to Allah. "For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to Allah." (6:74-79)

