

## 1.5 Divine Attributes Continued

**The concept of creation itself is a continuous, on going, process. It's not a one-stop thing that is created today and then that's it. One would assume that hand in hand with the concept of creation, God should be pre-existent and eternal in the sense that He existed before everything and will remain in existence after the end of time. How does Islam view this idea?**

On this particular point, I'm glad to say that the stand of Islam on this is not that different from the Judea-Christian tradition. We hear our Christian and Jewish friends, for example, saying God is the only God, the first and the last. In fact, the phrase that is used in the Qur'an, in chapter 57 verse 3, "He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent: and He has full knowledge of all things." In that sense, yes, He must be the first and the last or how could we say that the whole universe emanates from Him?

Sometimes it is difficult for us, as humans, to understand how anything can be infinite. It's difficult for us to imagine this infinity. Let me give a very simple example to show that even finite things are difficult to describe. Many astronomers would tell us that the distance between earth and the farthest star is two thousand million light-years away. This is dazzling because to imagine the whole distance from the earth to the moon, which is relatively very close, the light of the moon reaches us in about one and a half seconds. The light from the sun, which is much, much farther, reaches us within a few minutes (about 8) or so.

Traveling at the speed of light, which is 186,000 miles per second, would take us two thousand million years to travel from the earth to the farthest star. It is dazzling. I can't imagine how this number even could be fully comprehended in our human minds.

The example I'm giving here is to show that even finite things are very difficult to imagine. When we think about Allah, the Creator, we should then be more accepting of the fact that He is the first and the last even though we might not totally comprehend how there could be nothing before Him and nothing after Him.

We can turn to the Qur'an to give us some clarification of this. First, it says, "And put thy trust in Him Who lives and dies not." (25:58) If God

dies who is capable of giving Him life since God controls life? Therefore, it is illogical for Muslims to believe that God is subject to death like humans. Furthermore, if God died, even on a temporary basis, who is going to run the universe in His absence? So everything is related to the will and eternal perpetuated life of God.

The second quote from the Qur'an, chapter 28 verse 88, says, "And call not, besides Allah, on any other god. There is no god but He. Everything (that exists) will perish except His own self. To Him belongs the Command, and to Him will you (all) be brought back."

"All that is on earth will perish: But will abide (for ever) in the presence of your Lord,- full of Majesty, Bounty and Honor." (55:26-27)

I'll conclude with a very famous and widely quoted passage in the Qur'an, known as Ayat Al Kursi, "Allah. There is no god but He,-the Living, the Self-sustaining, the Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who can intercede in His presence except as He permits? He knows what is ahead of them (future of His creation) and what is behind them. Nor shall they compass any of His knowledge except as He wills. His Throne does extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme in glory."(2:255) If you notice here, though it's only one passage, several things are emphasized. The first is the emphasis on the oneness of God- there is no deity but Him. The second is that He is a living God. He did not create all this and then leave. Third, that he is eternal. Fourth, His knowledge is all encompassing. Fifth, His throne (which can also be a symbol of power or sovereignty) extends over everything on earth and in the heavens. Sixth, there is intercession or intermediary except by His permission. This means that no one can act as a judge and that God is the ultimate Judge and any interceding is by the permission of God. Finally, He is not subject to some of the human weakness like feeling tired or needing sleep or rest.

**That's interesting for it brings us to the concept of the 'Day of the Lord' or the Sabbath if we are using the Judea-Christian term. How does Islam view this idea?**

In order to give a proper comparison, I have the King James Version of the Bible with me and in order not to use my own words I'll quote it and then I'll give you the Islamic perspective on this issue.

The book of Genesis (chapter 2 verse 2) says, "And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made."

Since your question is to see whether there are any parallel to the Judea-Christian view, in a nutshell, I could say that Islam does not have any parallel to this. In fact, there is an opposite statement in the Qur'an to this particular statement in the bible. Here are some passages from the Qur'an that reflect a different kind of understanding of this divine attribute.

First of all, in chapter 50 verse 38 of the Qur'an, it says "We created the heavens and the earth and all between them in Six Days, nor did any sense of weariness touch Us." Furthermore, to clarify the issue, the Qur'an says "Nor is Allah to be frustrated by anything whatever in the heavens or on earth: for He is All-Knowing. All-Powerful." (35:44)

Another statement (which is found more than once in the Qur'an including 16:40) is "For anything which We have willed, We but say to it, 'Be' and it is." In other words, once Allah decides on something it is enough to say 'be,' there is no tiring or fatigue involved at all. This is repeated, "Glory be to Him! When He determines a matter, He only says to it, "Be" and it is" (19:35)

Though there may be some fundamental similarities between Islam and Judea-Christian traditions there still are differences. Unfortunately, some writers make very superficial comparisons. For example, they'll find in the Qur'an the story about Adam and Eve, and so they conclude that everything that the Bible says also has parallels in the Qur'an, and this is quite different. When we assume that God could get tired and needs rest, then we are bestowing upon Him characteristics that are human, which do not apply to Him.

This is not the only example. I can give you another citation, which is very similar to this from the Bible; again Genesis chapter 3 verse 8 talks of Adam and Eve after committing their mistake. It says "And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." Now this as well as the other citation on God resting after creating the

heavens and the earth, both depict God in human form. This is called anthroporphism, to think of God in human terms- that He walks, becomes tired, and rests.

Now, like I said, as far as the Qur'an is concerned there is no single parallel in the entire Qur'an that shows this kind of anthroporphism configuration of understanding of deity.

This leads to one more question, since you raised specifically the concept of Sabbath. A very common mistake that we find in Western media and books (even ones written by scholars) say that, for example, the Jewish Sabbath is Saturday and the Christian Sabbath is Sunday and the Muslim Sabbath is Friday. This again is a very superficial comparison. It is true that on Friday, Muslims are supposed to have a congregation of prayer. However, the concept of Sabbath, which is derived as the 'Day of the Lord' or the day when the Lord rested, has no analogy whatsoever. Fridays, to the Muslims, does not have that connotation.

**It is interesting now to look at another aspect of the affirmative attributes of God. They really go hand in hand again with the concept of creation and eternal life and the concept of the indefatigable nature of God and that is the knowledge and wisdom in several of the quotations that you have made in the Qur'an. You reiterated the idea of omniscience of all knowledgeable (when talking of God). Could you elaborate a little on the knowledge and omniscience of God?**

We must keep in mind that the knowledge of God is absolute and complete and is not limited by time. The best way to discuss this is to refer directly to the Qur'an. First, the Qur'an says, "From Allah, verily nothing is hidden on earth or in the heavens. He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases. There is no god but He, the Exalted in Might, the Wise."(2:5-6)

The second passage says, "Verily the knowledge of the Hour (the Day of Judgment) is with Allah (alone). It is He Who sends down rain, and He Who knows what is in the wombs. Nor does any one know what it is that he will earn on the morrow: Nor does any one know in what land he is to die. Verily with Allah is full knowledge and He is acquainted with all things." (31:34)

The third passage is quite interesting, it is in the sixth chapter of the Qur'an, verse 59, "With Him are the keys of the unseen, the treasures that none knows but He. He knows whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf does fall but with His knowledge: there is not a grain in the darkness (or depths) of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry (green or withered), but is inscribed in a clear record." I find it difficult to find something more to add to this. The expression in the Qur'an is so powerful and so clear that even with the difficulty of translating the meaning into English, I supposed it could give us the answer better than any human prose since it is the words of God Himself.

**One thing that we should possibly add here is the idea a lot of people have that, yes, God is omniscient and God is AllKnowing, but He is only omniscient and All-Knowing of what is manifested, of what is external, of what can be seen and what can be heard, of what is tangible so to speak. How about our innermost thoughts? If someone says, "I'm thinking of something evil, but I'm not going to do it so God will never know about it." That kind of a thing. I may be putting it in a simplistic way but what is Islam's position on this?**

Actually this is another form of anthroporphism because in our understanding as human beings we say that we cannot have knowledge unless we have some source of that knowledge. Again, like I said this does not apply to Allah when you're talking about the absolute and perfect knowledge. I can refer, again, to the Qur'an, covering specifically two areas. The first is what happens when a few people conspire together in secret- would Allah know about this? And second, like you said, does God know the innermost thoughts in our minds?

The first aspect is talked of in the Qur'an, "See you not that Allah does know all that is in the heavens and on earth? There is not a secret consultation between three, but He makes the fourth among them, - Nor between five but He makes the sixth,- nor between fewer or more, but He is in their midst, wheresoever they are." (58:7) No matter where you hide, He is there.

The second citation discusses more directly the inner dialogue that you may have. "And whether you hide your word or publish it, He certainly has full knowledge, of the secrets of all hearts. Should He not know, - He that created? And He is the One that understands the finest mysteries

and is well-acquainted with them.” (67:13-14) It follows that if He is the one who created us, who created our innermost thoughts, how can He not know what we think of? The slightest thought that even passes in our mind without telling anyone, He definitely knows of.

**The last thing we can mention regarding the attributes of omniscience and knowledge of Allah is how does the Islamic concept of the omniscience of Allah compare and relate to the similar attribute in the Judea-Christian tradition?**

I hope I don't sound like I'm always trying to show the differences between the faiths. Of course I must show (and we've repeated this in several previous programs) the origin of the monotheistic faith (and the others that have also proceeded from Allah) but of course as time went on apparently philosophical and theological arguments have been inserted in the Christian revelation. Even though you can say that the basic notion of the all-embracing knowledge of God is in the Qur'an as it is in the Bible. The Qur'an is stricter. There is no muddying of the thought by any citation that could be misinterpreted to mean anything less than God having full knowledge of all things.

In order to make the discussion on a clear basis, I will refer to the Bible. There are two passages that strike me as really inconsistent with the Quranic conception of the knowledge of God. Quoting them directly; the first is in the book of Genesis in chapter 11 verses 5-7. It describes the attempt of humans to build the Tower of Babel. It says, "And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people *is* one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

When I read that I get the impression that God did not realize that people would be smart and intelligent and not able to build the Tower of Babel, which He just discovered that they built. Aside from the fact that this passage may give the connotation that God was worried about the arrogance or scared of the power of humans, which again would be contrary to the Islamic concept that God is All- Powerful and All-Knowledgeable.

The second passage is in the book of Exodus chapter 32 verse 14. "And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." Notice here 'the Lord repented of the evil.' We as human beings can repent because we are sinful, we are imperfect, and we don't have full knowledge. Sometimes when we do something wrong we say things like, "I was ignorant," or "I was bad," and so "I repent." But to attribute to the Creator Himself that He has to repent, also carries the meaning that somehow He didn't know or rushed to His decision so He didn't have full knowledge when He decided.

As I indicated before, this notion does not have any parallel in the Qur'an, which insists that the knowledge of Allah is perfect, complete, and He does not go into these human types of faults. In fact, this might relate to another interesting issue, which relates to the knowledge also.

One time I participated in interfaith debates. One of my friends in Montreal who is a priest, said that the fact that the Son of God, Jesus (Muslims view Jesus as a prophet), came as a human being is a blessing because after all this means that God is sharing with man his feelings. God becoming man gives Him the ability to feel what man feels, to sacrifice and suffer as humans do. He gave me an example, saying that a human being, as great as he may be and as big as he may be, cannot fully understand an ant. He must be an ant in order to fully understand how the ant feels or behaves.

My answer to him was that as humans it's true that we are imperfect and it's impossible for me to understand how the ant feels. But the knowledge of God is so embracing that he does not need to become man to understand man because He created man. He knows all the secrets. Does it mean that for God to be able to understand animals He has to turn into them? No, His knowledge is All-Embracing, it is so complete that his full knowledge of the sufferings, the feelings, and the faults of human beings is there without His need to materialize in any physical form.

**Now we can move from that to another misconception that is perpetuated in most western literature concerning Islam and that is the 'God of Islam' is put on such a high pedestal, that He is untouchable and unapproachable. He is so remote and far from His creatures that He cannot relate to them. What do you have to say about this?**

This again is another misconception. It is true, like we said, that God has perfect knowledge, perfect will, and perfect power. This does not mean that he is unapproachable. And this is the beauty of it. In fact, the very first statement in the Qur'an is *Bismi Allah il Rahman Al Raheem*, which translates to "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent and the Merciful." This is the very first thing you read when opening the Qur'an. Every chapter of the 114 chapters in the Qur'an begins with this line.

Muslims believe that whenever you start any act you should always say 'In the name of Allah, the Beneficent and the Merciful.' In that opening the attributes of mercy are used. When you begin eating, when you go to sleep and awake from sleep, when you leave your house, when you get into your means of transportation, when you enter the house and so on and so forth; a true and devoted Muslim would always start with that phrase. This, like I said, emphasizes the attributes of the mercy of Allah.

There is something even more beautiful than that. The original words used to convey the mercy of Allah are both *Al Rahman* and *Al Raheem*. *Al Raheem* simply means the Merciful, which is an attribute that can be shared with humans. You can say that I am merciful or that you are merciful and that Allah is merciful. In that sense, the term is not unique. But the other term, *Al Rahman*, according to one interpretation, doesn't just mean that Allah is merciful but that all mercy emanates from Him. He is the source of all mercy, which is much more beautiful.

One whole chapter in the Qur'an carries the title *Al Rahman* (The Source of Mercy). We also find that the passages that deal with mercy in the Qur'an are plentiful.

"My mercy extends to all things. That mercy I shall ordain for those who do right, and practice regular charity, and those who believe in Our signs" (7:156)