

Aqáid **(Beliefs)**

Lesson 1

Religion – A Means not an End

Often we get confused when we see people that are very ‘religious’ but who reveal a lack of morals and integrity, such as cheating others or displaying extreme hatred, jealousy or selfishness. To add to this confusion, we may even meet people who seem very good and decent but are irreligious and may not even believe in God. Why does this happen and what does Islām have to say about such contradictions?

In the case of individuals who are religious but lack integrity, the problem is that they have assumed religion to be an end rather than a means to an end. And in the case of those who appear to be ‘good’ but are irreligious, the problem is that we mistake religion as only being a means to achieve personal and individual goodness. Let us first discuss this second group.

I’m Spiritual but not ‘Religious’

Often we meet people who we deem to be ‘good’ even though they do not follow any religion in particular. They may even claim to be ‘spiritual but not religious’. Life experience will show you that this self-prescribed spirituality only works when all is well in the individual’s material life and in due course leads only to more confusion and innovations in spiritual practices that are not useful (if not harmful). In fact, if we understand religion as a way of life, then every individual has a religion, even if he or she does not give it a name. In that sense, even an atheist follows a ‘religion’ that is governed by some principles and values.

Islām as a religion (deen) has other purposes besides encouraging goodness and morality in an individual. These purposes include, for example, upholding justice in society, teaching an individual about the hidden world that lies beyond death and how to prepare for it, correcting the human understanding of God and helping people free themselves from fear and greed, from superstitions and being enslaved by materialism and all forms of addictions by surrendering to the One God besides Whom there is no other, and so on.

The importance of holding on to Islām and the value of faith in Allāh is shown in verses of the Qur’ān such as this:

﴿وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً
فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَىٰ شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُمْ
مِنْهَا...﴾

Hold fast, all together, to Allāh's cord, and do not be divided [into sects]. And remember Allāh's blessing upon you when you were enemies, then He brought your hearts together, so you became brothers with His blessing. And you were on the brink of a pit of Fire, whereat He saved you from it...

-Surah Aal-I Imrān, 3:103

What this verse is alluding to is hatred amongst the warring Arab tribes before Islām and how they united as brothers through Islām. It reveals how religion unifies and saves people as opposed to the hate and disunity that permeate in society when man is driven by the illusion of being self-sufficient and thinks he lives in world where only the fittest survive. Atheism is satanic and ignorance masquerading as intelligence. It gives man the illusion that he came into existence by a random chance and he is 'the master of his own universe' when man deep down knows how fragile and vulnerable he is.

When a human believes he evolved from worms, he has no reason to seek nobility or any moral traits. His 'goodness' without religion is always surface-deep only and when challenged with difficult circumstances, he will always behaves like an animal that only has the motivation to survive and to overcome others in order to enjoy his temporary physical existence. On the flip side, when God is brought into the equation, man now has a greater purpose in life. He takes his true position in the universe as one who submits and surrenders unconditionally to God and in doing so, becomes His representative and one through whom God acts and manifests His attributes on the rest of His creation. Islām as a religion plays a role in ensuring man's understand of God is true and not imaginary.

We have discussed the need for religion at length in Book 8 (Aqāid Lesson 1). In this lesson we wish to focus on the second group that is religious but lacks integrity because of mistaking religion for an End rather than a Means.

Religion – A Means not an End

When Rasulullāh (s) declared his mission, he did not say, 'I have come to teach you how to pray, how to fast' and so forth, even though he came to instruct these acts of worship as well. Instead he said:

إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ مَكَارِمَ الْأَخْلَاقِ

Indeed, I was sent to perfect (human) character.

This tells us that the 'End' goal is to be a perfect human being with integrity, conviction, bravery, and the most noble and most excellent of character. Everything else is a means to help us achieve that.

When the Qur'ān talks of why Rasulullāh (s) was sent, it first mentions the matter of purification i.e. self-reform and spiritual purification:

﴿هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ
الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ﴾

*It is He who sent to the unlettered [people] an apostle from among themselves, to recite to them His signs, **to purify them**, and to teach them the Book and wisdom, and earlier they had indeed been in manifest error.*

- Surah al-Jumu'ah, 62:2

In a sense, when one sheds negative traits and mean habits and adopts noble characteristics, they come forth from darkness into light. Neither the Messenger (Rasulullāh (s) nor the Message (the Qur'ān) are the End. They both the means to this movement from darkness into light:

﴿يَهْدِي بِهِ اللَّهُ مَنِ اتَّبَعَ رِضْوَانَهُ سُبُلَ السَّلَامِ وَيُخْرِجُهُمْ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ
بِإِذْنِهِ وَيَهْدِيهِمْ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ﴾

*With it (the Qur'ān) Allāh guides those who follow [the course of] His pleasure to the ways of peace, and **brings them out from darkness into light** by His will, and guides them to a straight path.*

- Surah al-Māidah, 5:16

﴿رَسُولًا يَتْلُو عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ مُبَيِّنَاتٍ لِيُخْرِجَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنَ
الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ...﴾

*An apostle reciting to you the manifest signs of Allāh that He may bring out those who have faith and do righteous deeds **from darkness into light**...*

- Surah at-Talāq, 65:11

The examples to show and prove that religion is a Means and not an End are endless. But here are two examples. Salāh is a Means. The End is to prevent us from indecencies (fahshā) and wrong (munkar):

﴿... وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَى عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ...﴾

*... and maintain the prayer (salāh). Indeed the **prayer (salāh) prevents indecencies and wrongs**...*

- Surah al-Ankabut, 29:45

Similarly, fasting (sawm) is a Means. The End is to have constant Godwariness (taqwa):

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تَتَّقُونَ﴾

*O you who have faith! Prescribed for you is fasting as it was prescribed for those who were before you, **so that you may be Godwary.***

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:183

When we insist on practising Islāmic rituals but it does not change us as individuals and we do not grow from that practice, it shows that we have stopped at the means and forgotten the end.

For example, when we pray but do not keep away from shamelessness and indecent acts, it proves that religion is only an End for us and the real End of perfecting our ethics and morals is misplaced.

Similarly, when we commemorate the ‘azā of Imām Husayn (‘a) and spend all our time and wealth on weeping for the martyrs of Karbala but we are indifferent to the injustices being committed to our fellow Muslims and neither do we speak out against the tyrants of our time, then Karbala and Muharram has become an End for us - when in fact, it was meant to be a Means to our becoming courageous and champions of justice.

Why does a Muslim praise Imām Husayn (‘a) for praying Salāt adh-Dhuhr on time and even praying Salāt al-‘Asr as he was being killed but he still doesn’t pray salāh himself? Why does a Muslim woman weep that Sayyida Zainab (‘a) lost her veil but her heart does not weep that other men look at her as she walks about in public without hijāb? Why do we praise our Imāms for going out in the middle of the night to distribute food to the poor but we do not care if anyone in our community is hungry? Why do Shi’ah in many parts of the world praise the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) for sitting to eat their meals with their servants and maids but they themselves keep their servants and maids in the kitchen while they eat? Why does a Muslim go for Salāt al-Jumu’ah in a holy city and then when he leaves and goes back to his trade, he cheats others by overpricing his goods? Why do some Muslims praise Rasulullāh (s) for eradicating racism and they praise how Muslims of different ethnicities and cultures all stand together in salāh as brothers yet they would never let their daughter marry someone who is of a different culture or ethnicity, even if he is a pious Muslim?

The answer to all these – and more – is that such Muslims have made religion an End rather than a Means. By practising their ‘religion’, they feel they have protected themselves from Hellfire and secured a place in Jannah. And this pseudo-religiousness shields them from their guilt for lacking integrity, honesty and true Islāmic values.

To put it differently, until we understand that religion is a Means to something greater, Islām will only remain on our lips and minds but not enter our hearts, and we will practice our own individual versions of 'Islām', which Allāh condemns in the Qur'ān:

﴿قَالَتِ الْأَعْرَابُ آمَنَّا قُلْ لَمْ تُؤْمِنُوا وَلَكِنْ قُولُوا أَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ الْإِيمَانُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ... إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَرْتَابُوا وَجَاهَدُوا بِأَمْوَالِهِمْ وَأَنْفُسِهِمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الصَّادِقُونَ. قُلْ أَتَعْلَمُونَ اللَّهَ بِدِينِكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ. يَمُنُّونَ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ أَسْلَمُوا قُلْ لَا تَمُنُّوا عَلَيَّ إِسْلَامَكُم بَلِ اللَّهُ يَمُنُّ عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْ هَدَاكُمْ لِلْإِيمَانِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ﴾

*The Bedouins say, 'We have faith.' Say, 'You do not have faith yet; rather, say, "We have surrendered", for faith has not yet entered into your hearts...' The faithful are only those who have attained faith in Allāh and His Apostle and then have never doubted, and who wage jihād with their possessions and their persons in the way of Allāh. It is they who are the truthful. Say, 'Will you inform Allāh about your 'religion' (deen) while Allāh knows whatever there is in the heavens and whatever there is in the earth, and Allāh has knowledge of all things?' They count it as a favour to you that they have embraced Islām. Say, 'Do not do me any favours with your 'Islām'. Rather, it is Allāh who has done you a favour in that He has guided you to faith, should you be truthful.'*¹

- Surah al-Hujurāt, 49:14-17

The first step therefore, towards purifying our souls, towards understanding the real message of Islām, and towards reforming our Muslim societies is to realize that Deen (Religion) is a Means – not an End.

Discuss this in class with your teacher. Can you think of other examples where Muslims confuse the Means with the End? How would you describe your goal in life as a Muslim? And how do you see religion playing a role as a means towards that goal?

¹ That is, should you be sincere in your claim of having embraced Islām.

Lesson 2

Islām – The Universal Religion

Al-Islām means to surrender one's will to God and it comes from the Arabic root *s-l-m* (س - ل - م) from which words like *at-taslim* (surrender) and *as-salām* (peace) are also derived. Yet Islām is one of the misunderstood concepts in the world, by most Muslims as well.

The Meaning of Islām in the Qur'ān

It is true that there is only one religion with Allāh and that is Islām:

﴿إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ...﴾

Indeed, with Allāh religion is Islām

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:19

It is also true that no other religion is acceptable to Allāh besides Islām:

﴿وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ﴾

Should anyone follow a religion other than Islām, it shall never be accepted from him, and he will be among the losers in the Hereafter.

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:85

But what does this really mean? The debate on pluralism vs. exclusivism arises only when we see Islām as one amongst many religions i.e. just as there is Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and so on, some see Islām as yet another 'religion'. Furthermore, just as the Christians follow Jesus ('a) and regard the Bible as their sacred text and the Jews follow the teachings of Moses ('a) and regard the Torah as their sacred text, similarly, many Muslims see themselves as simply, the followers of Muhammad (s) who regard the Qur'ān as their sacred Book. And this precisely is where the problem lies. Before we explain the problem further and correct our understanding of what Islām is and what it means to be a Muslim, let us review the verses of Qur'ān that will give us a holistic understanding of Islām:

﴿فَلَمَّا أَحَسَّ عِيسَى مِنْهُمُ الْكُفْرَ قَالَ مَنْ أَنْصَارِي إِلَى اللَّهِ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ

أَنْصَارُ اللَّهِ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَأَشْهَدُ بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ﴾

And when Isa sensed their (the Jews) faithlessness, he said, 'Who will be my helpers toward Allāh?' The Disciples said, 'We will be helpers of Allāh. We have faith in Allāh, and bear witness that we are Muslims.

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:52

Nabi Ibrāhim ('a) and his son Nabi Ismā'il ('a) prayed:

﴿رَبَّنَا وَاجْعَلْنَا مُسْلِمِينَ لَكَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِنَا أُمَّةً مُسْلِمَةً لَكَ...﴾

'Our Lord, make us submissive to You (lit. **Muslims for you**), and [raise] from our progeny a Muslim nation (i.e. submissive to You)...

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:128

﴿وَوَصَّىٰ بِهَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ بَنِيهِ وَيَعْقُوبُ يَا بَنِيَّ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَىٰ لَكُمُ الدِّينَ فَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ. أَمْ كُنْتُمْ شُهَدَاءَ إِذْ حَضَرَ يَعْقُوبَ الْمَوْتَ إِذْ قَالَ لِبَنِيهِ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن بَعْدِي قَالُوا نَعْبُدُ إِلَهَكَ وَإِلَهَ آبَائِكَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا وَنَحْنُ لَهُ

﴿مُسْلِمُونَ﴾

Ibrāhim enjoined this [creed] upon his children, and [so did] Ya'qub, [saying], 'My children! Allāh has indeed chosen this religion for you; **so never die except as Muslims**. Were you witnesses when death approached Ya'qub, when he said to his children, 'What will you worship after me?' They said, 'We will worship your God, and the God of your fathers, Ibrāhim, Ismā'il and Ishāq, the One God, and to Him do we submit (lit. 'for His sake we are Muslims').'

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:132-133

﴿رَبِّ قَدْ آتَيْتَنِي مِنَ الْمُلْكِ وَعَلَّمْتَنِي مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ فَاطِرَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَنْتَ وَلِيِّ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ تَوَفَّنِي مُسْلِمًا وَأَلْحِقْنِي بِالصَّالِحِينَ﴾

(Nabi Yusuf ('a) said), 'My Lord! You have granted me a share in the kingdom, and taught me the interpretation of dreams. Originator of the heavens and earth! You are my guardian in this world and the Hereafter! **Let me die a Muslim** (i.e. in submission to You), and unite me with the Righteous.

- Surah Yusuf, 12:101

﴿وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ يَا قَوْمِ إِن كُنتُمْ آمَنْتُمْ بِاللَّهِ فَعَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلُوا إِن كُنتُمْ مُسْلِمِينَ﴾

And Musa said, 'O my people! If you have faith in Allāh, put your trust in Him, **if you are Muslims** (i.e. have submitted to Him).'

- Surah Yunus, 10:84

﴿... قَالَتْ رَبِّ إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي وَأَسْلَمْتُ مَعَ سُلَيْمَانَ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ﴾

She (the Queen of Sheba) said, 'My Lord! Indeed I have wronged myself, and **I submit** (lit. 'become a Muslim') with Sulaymān to Allāh, the Lord of all the worlds.'

- Surah an-Naml, 27:44

﴿وَإِذْ أَوْحَيْتُ إِلَى الْحَوَارِيِّينَ أَنْ آمِنُوا بِي وَبِرَسُولِي قَالُوا آمَنَّا وَأَشْهَدُ بَأَنَّا

﴿مُسْلِمُونَ﴾

And when I inspired the Disciples (of Isa ('a)), [saying], 'Have faith in Me and My Apostle,' they said, 'We have faith. **Bear witness that we are Muslims.**'

- Surah al-Māidah, 5:111

We can clearly see from all the verses above that Islām is not a 'religion' that started in the year 610 CE when Rasulullāh (s) was 40 years old. Rather, Islām is simply the one and only natural path that Allāh chose for the human race and that began with the first human being – Nabi Adam ('a).

The core message and principle of Islām is simply this: there is no god but One God. He is the Only Creator and the Only One worthy of worship. He is Nameless and Formless yet He is omniscient and omnipresent. He cannot be brought to imagination or described. In fact, He can never be known directly. He is recognized only through His signs and His creation. The human being is unique in that he is able to surrender to his or her Creator out of choice and with freewill and so he or she is chosen by Allāh to represent Allāh in the universe and it is through this human being that Allāh manifests His attributes to the rest of His creation.

When we begin to understand Islām in this fashion, we also begin to see why idol worship and any bringing of Allāh into imagination or form, restricts the human being from every knowing Allāh. In the end, Allāh permeates all things yet nothing can embody or incarnate Him. He is in fact the Only Reality. It is as if He is the Sun and all else are simply rays of the Sun that have no reality or existence without Him.

The great mufassir (exegete) of Qur'ān, Allama Sayyid Husayn Tabatabai, wrote in his Tafsir al-Mizān, that during the life of Rasulullāh (s) when the Qur'ān was being revealed, the meaning of Islām was different to what it later came to be known as when the Caliphs ruled as political and temporal leaders and used their military force

to ‘spread’ Islām. What Allama Tabatabai meant was that the Qur’ān does not understand Islām as a ‘religion’ with boundaries like other religions. It simply regards Islām to be its meaning – surrender to the Creator. The Qur’ān therefore talks of Islām, not as a religion, but as a universal way of life that is most natural and that brings success to humans when they live by it, because the whole universe lives by it and it is the ‘religion’ to which our instinct leans.

We could say, other than humans who choose not to be ‘Muslims’, everything in the universe is a ‘Muslim’ (i.e. surrendered to Allāh) – the mountains, the oceans, the forests, the animals and birds, the angels, the planets and stars, and so on. Thus the Qur’ān tells us:

﴿أَفَغَيْرَ دِينِ اللَّهِ يَبْتَغُونَ وَلَهُ أُسْلِمَ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ طَوْعًا وَكَرْهًا وَإِلَيْهِ يُرْجَعُونَ﴾

Do they, then, seek a religion other than Allāh’s, while to Him submits whoever there is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they will be brought back?

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:83

So when the Qur’ān invites humans to be Muslims, it is not asking them to ‘change’ religions or adopt something new. It is simply asking them to restore their natural state of existence where they are in constant surrender to Allāh like everything else.

Rasulullāh (s) is reported to have said:

كُلُّ مَوْلُودٍ يُوَلَّدُ عَلَى الْفِطْرَةِ فَأَبَوَاهُ يُهَوِّدَانَهُ أَوْ يُنَصِّرَانَهُ أَوْ يُمَجِّسَانَهُ

Every newborn is born on the instinct (of Islām). Then it is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Zoroastrian.

Do you see why, therefore, it makes no sense at all to talk of pluralism or how ‘all religions are right because they teach the same good values’ and so on? There is no multiple religions – not because one is right and another is wrong – but because there *cannot* be more than one religion from One Creator. Two opposing understandings of God cannot both be ‘natural’. One will have to be unnatural.

What we can say, of course, is that every time humans went astray and forgot the original message of Islām, and Allāh sent another messenger (nabi or rasul) to guide people back to Islām. Those who refused to accept it still remained with some of the original truth that a previous prophet had taught. This is why we see parts of every religion still showing the same truth as the original religion of Allāh - Islām.

When a non-Muslim wishes to embrace Islām today, they require several years of research and thinking before they revert to Islām. Yet in the days of Rasulullāh (s) and the Aimmah (‘a), people would often embrace Islām after a brief conversation

only. Why do you think so? It is because today, we present Islām mixed with a lot of culture and it appears to be a very complex religion that one has to ‘study’ fully before embracing it. Whereas in the original message of the Qur’ān, people were told to simply shed what was wrong in their beliefs and they became Muslims.

As an example, in the Qur’ān’s vision, if a Hindu wanted to become a Muslim, he doesn’t need to change his language, what he eats, how he dresses, his name, and so on. He simply gives up worshipping idols and multiple gods or deities. He professes that there is only One God and that he will prostrate and surrender before none other than God and worship Him alone. And as a mark of this surrender, he acknowledges all the prophets and messengers or Allāh and all the scriptures and angels. And he is a Muslim!

﴿أَمَّنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ كُلٌّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ
وَرُسُلِهِ لَا نَفَرَقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْ رُسُلِهِ وَقَالُوا سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا غُفْرَانَكَ رَبَّنَا وَإِلَيْكَ
الْمَصِيرُ﴾

The Apostle has faith in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and all the faithful. Each [of them] has faith in Allāh, His angels, His scriptures and His apostles. [They declare,] ‘We make no distinction between any of His apostles.’ And they say, ‘We hear and obey. Our Lord, forgive us, and toward You is the return.’

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:285

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا آمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَالْكِتَابِ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ عَلَيَّ رَسُولِهِ وَالْكِتَابِ
الَّذِي أُنزِلَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ
ضَلَالًا بَعِيدًا﴾

O you who have faith! Have faith in Allāh and His Apostle and the Book that He has sent down to His Apostle and the Book He had sent down earlier. Whoever disbelieves in Allāh and His angels, His Books and His apostles and the Last Day, has certainly strayed into far error.

- Surah an-Nisā, 4:136

﴿قُلْ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ
وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَالنَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نَفَرَقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ
لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ﴾

Say, ‘We have faith in Allāh, and in what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down to Ibrāhīm, Ismā’il, Ishāq, Ya’qub and the Tribes (of Bani Isrā’il), and that

which Musa and 'Isa were given, and the prophets, from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit.'

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:84

Thereafter, the issue of praying, fasting, etc. are a part of the 'shari'ah' (Islāmic legislation) rather than deen (religion). The shari'ah may even have changed from one prophet to another – but deen never changed and cannot ever change. A revert Muslim prays, fasts, etc. as a sign of his or her acceptance of the Qur'ān's commands and his or her surrender to God's laws that are meant to bring him or her closer to the Creator.

One could therefore say that just like Allāh, Islām actually does not have a name or a limited form. The word Islām simply highlights the primary call to return to the universal and most natural way of life i.e. surrendering to the One and Only Creator. That is why, in some verses of the Qur'ān, when Allāh mentions how the Jews boast of being 'Jews' and the Christians boast of following 'Christianity', the Muslims are not told to say, we follow 'Islām' or we are 'Muslims'. Instead of labelling themselves, Muslims are told to simply say, they follow the upright (*hanif*) and natural path that Nabi Ibrāhim ('a) followed:

﴿وَقَالُوا كُونُوا هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَى تَهْتَدُوا قُلْ بَلْ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنْ

الْمُشْرِكِينَ﴾

And they say, 'Be either Jews or Christians, that you may be [rightly] guided.' Say, 'Rather, [we will follow] the creed (millah) of Ibrāhim, a hanif, and he was not one of the polytheists.'

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:135

﴿وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ دِينًا مِمَّنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ وَاتَّبَعَ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا...﴾

And who has a better religion than him who submits his will to Allāh, being virtuous, and follows the creed (millah) of Ibrāhim, a hanif?

- Surah an-Nisa, 4:125

﴿قُلْ إِنِّي هَدَانِي رَبِّي إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ دِينًا قِيمًا مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنْ

الْمُشْرِكِينَ﴾

Say, 'Indeed my Lord has guided me to a straight path, the upright religion, the creed of Ibrāhim, a hanif, and he was not one of the polytheists.'

- Surah al-An'ām, 6:161

﴿وَاتَّبَعْتُ مِلَّةَ آبَائِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ مَا كَانَ لَنَا أَنْ نُشْرِكَ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ

شَيْءٍ...﴾

(Nabi Yusuf ('a) said), 'I follow the creed of my fathers, Ibrāhim, Ishāq and Ya'qub. It is not for us to ascribe any partner to Allāh.'

- Surah Yusuf, 12:38

﴿ثُمَّ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ أَنْ اتَّبِعْ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ﴾

Then We revealed to you [saying], 'Follow the creed of Ibrāhim, a **hanif**, and he was not one of the polytheists.'

- Surah an-Nahl, 16:123

Nabi Ibrāhim ('a) is mentioned repeatedly because he is seen as 'the father of monotheism' since he restored Tawhid in the world when Shirk (polytheism) was rampant. All religions that claim to be monotheistic trace their origins back to him. Notice however that when the Qur'ān says Nabi Ibrāhim ('a) was neither a Jew nor a Christian, it first describes him as a 'hanif' and then as a 'Muslim':

﴿مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُسْلِمًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ

الْمُشْرِكِينَ﴾

Ibrāhim was neither a Jew nor a Christian. Rather, **he was a hanif, a Muslim**, and he was not one of the polytheists.

- Surah Al-i Imrān, 3:67

Why doesn't the verse call Ibrāhim ('a) a 'Muslim' directly? It is for fear that it will be seen as a label and a contrast to being a 'Jew' or a 'Christian'. In other words, one who surrenders to Allāh (i.e. a Muslim) is not 'this' or 'that'. He is simply one who follows the natural and universal way that all of Allāh's creation follows. It is only to be able to talk about this Path and relating to it, that Allāh has given it the name Islām and named those who follow this Path, Muslims:

﴿هُوَ سَمَّاكُمْ الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَفِي هَذَا...﴾

...He named you 'Muslims' before (in previous scriptures), and in this (the Qur'ān)...

- Surah al-Hajj, 22:78

So when the Qur'ān declares that 'the only religion with Allāh is Islām' (3:19), we need to bear in mind that we are not followers of Prophet Muhammad (s) only. We are followers of all the prophets. And Rasulullāh (s) is simply the final messenger who brings the final revelation to all mankind and clarifies the original message that

Adam, Nuh, Ibrāhim, Musa, Isa (peace be on them all!) and all the prophets and all the messengers between them brought and preached. The Ahl al-Bayt ('a) are also simply a continuation of God's guidance to the human race towards Islām and primarily and essentially Teachers of Tawhid.

Allāh promised Nabi Ibrāhim ('a) that there will be Imāms from his descendants but they will not unjust (2:124) and Allāh also mentions His favours and blessings on the progeny of Nabi Ibrahim ('a) (4:54) and we know that the Imāms from the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) are descendants of Nabi Ibrahim ('a) and of course the most worthy of those qualified by these verses of the Qur'ān.

We should therefore invite others to Islām. But when we invite them to follow Islām as taught by the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) of Rasulullāh (s), remember we are not inviting people to 'a new' or alternative religion. We are simply asking them to restore their understanding of God to the original, universal and natural understanding that God always wanted for the human race. And it is to this understanding that Imām al-Mahdi ('atfs) will bring all of mankind. This is what the Qur'ān means when it says, there will come a time when Islām will prevail over all false understandings of God and there will be nothing but Islām in the whole world:

﴿وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كَمَا
اسْتَخْلَفَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَيُمَكِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ دِينَهُمُ الَّذِي ارْتَضَى لَهُمْ وَلَيُبَدِّلَنَّهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ
خَوْفِهِمْ أَمْنًا يَعْبُدُونَنِي لَا يُشْرِكُونَ بِي شَيْئًا وَمَنْ كَفَرَ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ
الْفَاسِقُونَ﴾

*Allāh has promised those of you who have faith and do righteous deeds that He will surely make them successors in the earth, just as He made those who were before them successors, **and He will surely establish for them their religion which He has approved for them**, and that He will surely change their state to security after their fear, **while they worship Me, not ascribing any partners to Me**. And whoever is ungrateful after that—it is they who are the transgressors.*

- Surah an-Nur, 24:55

﴿هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ
الْمُشْرِكُونَ﴾

*It is He who has sent His Apostle with the guidance **and the religion of truth, that He may make it prevail over all religions**, though the polytheists should be averse.*

- Surah at-Tawbah, 9:33

Project Ideas:

Choose any one of these four points and write a brief essay on it, explaining what you understand of it:

1. Muslims insist on calling the final message brought by Rasullāh (s) 'Islām' and themselves as 'Muslims'. Other religions are named after a person (Christianity, Buddhism) or place (Judaism, Hinduism). The Orientalists tried quite hard to name Muslims as 'Mohamedans' and Islām as 'Mohamedanism' but failed to do so. Why is it so important that we insist we are Muslims and our deen is Islām?
2. Imām 'Ali b. Ali Tālib ('a)'s definition of Islām:

لَأَنْسِبَنَّ الْإِسْلَامَ نَسْبَةً لَمْ يَنْسِبْهَا أَحَدٌ قَبْلِي الْإِسْلَامُ هُوَ التَّسْلِيمُ وَالتَّسْلِيمُ هُوَ
الْيَقِينُ وَالْيَقِينُ هُوَ التَّصَدِيقُ وَالتَّصَدِيقُ هُوَ الْإِقْرَارُ وَالْإِقْرَارُ هُوَ الْأَدَاءُ وَ
الْأَدَاءُ هُوَ الْعَمَلُ

'I will define Islām in a manner no one has defined before me: Islām is submission (*at-taslim*); and submission is conviction (*al-yaqin*); and conviction is affirmation (*at-tasdiq*); and affirmation is acknowledgement (*al-iqrār*); and acknowledgement is the discharge (of obligations) (*al-adā*), and the discharge of obligations is action (*al-'amal*).'²

Explain this hadith by elaborating on it.

3. In 16:52, the Qur'ān calls Islām *the enduring religion* (*ad-din wāsiba*).

﴿وَلَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَهُ الدِّينُ وَاصِبًا أَفَغَيْرَ اللَّهِ تَتَّقُونَ﴾

To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth, and to Him belongs the enduring religion. Will you, then, be wary of other than Allāh?

- Surah al-Nahl, 16:52

Discuss the verse above with emphasis on why you think 'the enduring religion' is such an apt description of Islām. What do you think it means?

² Sayyid ar-Radi, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, aphorism 125; al-Alusi, *Tafsir Ruh al-Ma'āni*, 3:19.

4. A Jew once asked Imām Ali b. Abi Tālib ('a), 'what is Islām?' Imām Ali ('a) replied him that Islām is:

التَّعْظِيمَ لِأَمْرِ اللَّهِ وَالشَّفَقَةَ عَلَى خَلْقِ اللَّهِ

To respect the command of Allāh and to have love and compassion for the creatures of Allāh.

In other words, Islām is about service to the Creator and service to His creation. Allāh's creation includes all human beings, regardless of their faith or race and all animals, birds and everything we perceive as living or non-living around us, including the environment and the entire universe.

If we ever wish to see how much of a 'Muslim' we are, we should ask ourselves: 'how much do I respect Allāh's commands and how much love do I have for His creation?' Elaborate on the importance of these two facets of Islām: Submission to the Creator and Service to the Creation.

Lesson 3

Allāh (s.w.t)

In this and the next lesson, we wish to look at Tawhid more deeply. Tawhid is the root and cornerstone of Islām. Everything else in Islām rests on and depends on Tawhid. How perfect one's 'Islām' is depends on how deeply one understands Tawhid.

In particular, we would like to understand:

1. How the mind is incapable of 'knowing' the Creator directly. The Creator can only be known by the mind through His Signs.
2. How the Creator *can* be 'known' directly but only by the heart. This is done by undertaking a journey of complete surrender towards the Creator, such that one is 'stripped' of one's human attributes and one allows the Creator to use him or her to reflect His own attributes to the rest of His creation.

The Complexity of Becoming a Muwahhid

The subject of Tawhid (monotheism, unicity of God) is perhaps the deepest of all matters to grasp in religion. It is the most difficult to imagine and conceive, and most entangled to unravel, because it is highly above the general topics that human understanding grasps, and much beyond the common theories and ideas that the human intellect is familiar with.

Consider for example, the following hadith of Imām as-Sādiq ('a) to his companion Hishām b. Al-Hakam:

And the Name is different from the Named. So one who worshipped the Name ('Allāh') without the Meaning behind it has denied God (*faqad kafara*) and has worshipped nothing. And one who worshipped the Name and the Meaning has associated a partner to God (*faqad ashraaka*) and worshipped two gods. But one who worshipped the Meaning without the Name, then that is indeed Tawhid... (the word) 'Allāh' has a Meaning that all these Names (Asmā al-Husna) point to yet none of them are Him.³

Or consider the sermon of Imām Ali ('a) in which he describes God as follows:

Praise is due to Allāh whose praise cannot be achieved by speakers, whose bounties cannot be counted by those who count, and whose right cannot be fulfilled even by those who strive to do so. He, whom the highest of intellectual efforts cannot comprehend and the deepest diving of understanding cannot grasp. He, for whose

³ Kulayni, *Usul al-Kāfi*, v. 2, Chapter on the Meanings of Names, p. 114

attributes there is no limits; no eulogy of praise exists, no time is ordained and no duration is fixed.⁴

Clearly then, the subject of trying to understand our Creator who is nameless and formless is complicated and bound to be perceived in diverse ways by different minds, because of the multiplicity of thinking with which mankind is created. Every individual has a separate understanding and experience of life and this in turn affects his or her understanding of God.

The Qur'ān affirms this diversity when it says:

﴿... قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ﴾

Say, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?' Only those who possess intellect take admonition.

- Surah az-Zumar, 39:9

﴿فَأَعْرَضَ عَنْ مَنْ تَوَلَّىٰ عَنْ ذِكْرِنَا وَلَمْ يُرِدْ إِلَّا الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا. ذَلِكَ مَبْلَغُهُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ ...﴾

So avoid those who turn away from Our remembrance and desire nothing but the life of the world. **That is the ultimate reach of their knowledge.**

- Surah an-Najm, 53:29-30

﴿... فَمَا لِهَؤُلَاءِ الْقَوْمِ لَا يَكَادُونَ يَفْقَهُونَ حَدِيثًا﴾

What is the matter with these people that they would not understand any matter?

- Surah an-Nisā, 4:78

﴿... انظُرْ كَيْفَ نُبَيِّنُ لَهُمُ الْآيَاتِ ثُمَّ انظُرْ أَنَّى يُؤْفَكُونَ﴾

Look how We clarify the signs for them, and yet, look, how they go astray!

- Surah al-Māidah, 5:75

So although Allāh has hardwired the nature of all His creation to instinctively lean towards Him, their Creator, (what we call *fitra*⁵), yet there is a great difference and a wide chasm between what one human mind grasps as the meaning of Tawhid versus another.

⁴ Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 1.

⁵ Cf. Qur'ān, 30:30 for 'the *fitra* of Allāh on which He patterned humans' as well as the Prophetic hadith, 'every newborn is born on the *fitra*' that is given in Lesson 2.

What does 'One God' Mean?

Some people's intellect, for example, leads them to idol-worship. They are convinced that God incarnates in different forms. So they carve idols and statues from wood and stone, and even from flour, cheese and clay made with urine of goats and sheep. Then they declare these to be partners and colleagues of God. They worship these idols and beg them for their needs, showing utmost devotion to them. Even if they claim that there is only one God, it is not long before God is discarded and their full attention is devoted to the idols that they imagine fulfil their needs.

And if such people were to give up idol worship, their relationship with the One God will be the same as with the idols – only to ask for their needs and worship in fear of displeasing God. Furthermore, the call to 'One' God by Rasulullāh (s) was understood by the ignorant Arabs (before his *bi'thah*) as a call to a numerical 'oneness'. It was only a number to them. So they could not understand why they should give up the advantage of having many gods and limit themselves to One God.

﴿وَعَجِبُوا أَنْ جَاءَهُمْ مُنذِرٌ مِنْهُمْ وَقَالَ الْكَاْفِرُونَ هَذَا سَاحِرٌ كَذَّابٌ. أَجْعَلِ الْآلِهَةَ
إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا إِنَّ هَذَا لَشَيْءٌ عَجَابٌ﴾

And they are amazed that there has come to them a Warner from among themselves; and the disbelievers say: "This is a sorcerer, a liar. What! Does he make the gods a single God? This is surely a strange thing!"

- Surah Sād, 38:4-5

Whereas what the Qur'ān was calling them to was the realization that there is only One God - not as a number - but because there *cannot* be another God besides Him:

﴿وَإِلَهُكُمْ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ﴾

Your god is the One God, there is no god except Him, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful.

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:163

﴿هُوَ الْحَيُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَادْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ...﴾

He is the Living One, there is no god except Him. So supplicate Him, putting exclusive faith in Him....

- Surah Ghāfir, 40:65

In other words, it is not so much that there is 'One' God as much as the fact that there is 'Only God'. The problem with thinking of God as a numerical 'One' is that the mind will inevitably distinguish that 'One' from another or 'others' through confinement of space and dimension.

When we say Allāh is One, His Oneness cannot be compared and contrasted to anything. If I say ‘Zayd is one man’, you may be able to conceive that there can be another man but he does not exist in the context of my statement. But can the mind imagine Zayd as one man besides whom it is impossible and inconceivable for another man to exist?

It is difficult because the mind cannot comprehend how anything can exist without having a beginning and an origin. And if something has an origin, then surely another like it can also have an origin. It is for this reason that even when some people say ‘Allāh is Eternal’, they mistakenly think of ‘eternal’ as endless time. But what is time? It is a measure of the amount of movement in moving bodies. How can it be perceived for Allāh? He is not bound by the limits of time. He created Time. It is therefore hard to imagine eternity as timelessness, let alone imagine how Allāh is ‘Eternal’. Can you imagine something existing in a dimension of ‘no-time and no-space’ let alone the Creator Himself?

Besides the attribute of being *Ahad* (the Only One), the same is true with Allāh’s other attributes (*sifāt*). He is Living, but without any taint of non-existence. He is Powerful but not in the sense that He can be subdued or His Power can be measured against anything. Hence He says:

﴿... إِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا ...﴾

...indeed all might belongs to Allāh...

- Surah Yunus, 10:65

﴿... لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ ...﴾

...Nothing is like Him⁶...

- Surah ash-Shura, 42:11

Yet if we were to say, ‘Allāh is not just All-Powerful – He is Power itself. Allāh is not just All-Knowing – He is Knowledge Itself’ and so on, then the mind immediately thinks of Power and Knowledge as non-conscious and abstract concepts and therefore God becomes impersonal and pantheistic as simply a universal force or energy at best. It is for this reason that we are told in hadith not to try and rationally understand Allāh directly but to understand Him through His signs. And also, anything you imagine Allāh to be – that He is not. In other words, Allāh cannot be known by anyone but His own self. Even when we surrender to Him completely and lose ourselves in His Love, He is only known when He knows Himself through us and when there is no ‘I’ to know ‘Him’.

⁶ Which can also be translated as, ‘There is nothing like His likeness.’

Allāh says in the Qur'ān:

﴿... وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِهِ عِلْمًا﴾

...but they cannot comprehend Him in their knowledge.

- Surah Tā Hā, 20:110

﴿سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ إِلَّا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ الْمُخْلِصِينَ﴾

Clear (and above) is Allāh of whatever they describe [about Him], - [all] except Allāh's exclusive servants.

- Surah as-Sāffāt, 37:159-160

And yet, when these 'exclusive servants' describe their Creator, how do they describe Him? Rasullāh (s) 'describes' Allāh as follows:

لَا أُحْصِي ثَنَاءً عَلَيْكَ أَنْتَ كَمَا أَثْنَيْتَ عَلَيَّ نَفْسِي

I do not count Your praise; You are as You have praised Yourself.

And in Dua al-Mashlul taught by Amir al-Mu'minin ('a) - just before he glorifies Allāh with all His Beautiful Names (Asmā al-Husna) – Imām Ali ('a) confesses to Allāh:

يَا حَيُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ، يَا هُوَ يَا مَنْ لَا يَعْلَمُ مَا هُوَ وَلَا كَيْفَ هُوَ وَلَا حَيْثُ هُوَ إِلَّا هُوَ

O Ever-Living, there is no god but You! O He! O One Whom no one knows what He is or how He is or where He is, except He!

Therefore even the attributes of perfection that we use for Allāh (such as Omnipotent (al-Qādiru), Omniscient (al-'Aalimu), etc.) are limited attributes, and far be it from His glory to be subject to limitation and restriction.

In a most amazing expression on God, the Commander of the Faithful (Amir al-Mu'minin ('a)) said:

The foremost in religion is the knowledge of Him; the perfection of knowing Him is to testify Him; the perfection of testifying Him is to believe in His Oneness; the perfection of believing in His Oneness is to adhere to Him purely; and the perfection of adhering to Him purely is to deny Him attributes because every attribute testifies that it is different from that to which it is attributed and everything to which something is attributed testifies that it is different from the attribute.

Thus whoever attaches attributes to Allāh joins Him (to another thing) and who

joins Him (to another thing) regards Him two; and who regards Him two recognizes parts for Him; and who recognizes parts for Him is ignorant of Him; and who is ignorant of Him pointed at Him; and who pointed at Him admitted limitations for Him; and who admitted limitations for Him numbered Him ...⁷

The words of Imām Ali (‘a) in the sermon above, that *‘perfection of adhering to Him purely is to deny Him attributes...’* is alluding to the fact that when we say Allāh is All-Knowing, we are incapable of thinking of Him with all his other infinite attributes at the same time. And when we try and think of Him as being All-Powerful, All-Knowing, All-Loving, etc. at the same time, we merely ‘join’ these attributes and try and bring them together but that is wrong because Imām Ali (‘a) continues to explain, *‘Thus whoever attaches attributes to Allāh joins Him and who joins Him regards Him two; and who regards Him two recognizes parts for Him...’*

Allamah Tabatabai in his Tafsir al-Mizān explains that when a person reaches unique levels and understandings of Tawhid and becomes a ‘Friend’ of Allāh, then he or she also realizes his or her inability to know Allāh or to ascribe to Him the attributes worthy of His Greatness and Majesty. Such a person sees that whatever attributes he or she uses for Allāh are merely ideas that have been perceived by looking at created things and then amplifying them for Allāh.

The following beautiful sermon also shows that Allāh is described by what He *is not* rather than what He *is*:

Shaykh as-Saduq reports from Imām Abu Abd Allāh Ja’far as-Sādiq (‘a) that while Amir al-Mu’minin (‘a) was delivering a sermon on the pulpit of Kufah, a man named Dhi’lib stood up - and he had a fluent tongue, eloquent speech and a brave heart - and said, ‘Commander of the Faithful! Have you seen your Lord?’ Imām Ali (‘a) replied, ‘Woe unto thee, O Dhi’lib! I am not the one to worship Whom I have not seen.’ And Dhi’lib said, ‘Commander of the Faithful! How did you see Him?’ And Imām Ali (‘a) said:

‘O Dhi’lib! Eyes do not see Him through eyesight but hearts perceive Him through the realities of belief. Woe unto thee, O Dhi’lib! Indeed my Lord is the most kind yet He is not described in terms of kindness; the most exalted, but not described in terms of exaltedness; the greatest, but not described in terms of greatness; the most grand, but not described in terms of thickness.

He is before everything, yet it is not said that there is before; He is after everything, yet it is not said that for Him there is an after. He willed creation but not through effort; He is in everything, but neither intermingled with them nor separate from them. He is Manifest but not in physical sense; He is Evident but not through sighting with eyes. He is separate but not because of distance; He is near but not by proximity....

He is existing but not after non-existence. He is the Doer, but not under compulsion; the Ordainer, but not with movement... He hears and sees but not

⁷ Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 1.

depending on any organ. Space does not encompass Him, Time does not accompany Him and Attributes do not limit Him.

His Being preceded Time, and His existence preceded Non-existence, and His eternity preceded the beginning. By His creating the senses it was known that He has no senses; and by His making the substances it was recognized that He has no substance; and by His creating the contraries in various matters it is known that He has no contrary; and by the similarity between things it is known that there is nothing similar to Him.

He has made light contrary to darkness, dryness the opposite of moisture, and cold the contrast of heat. (And because He made all these, none of these apply to Him).

He produces affinity between separate things, which are then joined together. These things, by their separation lead us to their Separator and by their joining point to their Joiner; and this is the word of Allāh, the Mighty, the Great: *In all things We have created pairs that you may take admonition* (Qur'ān, 51:49). He separated them with a before and after, in order that it may be known that for Him there is no before or after.

They (all things created) prove through their nature that their Creator has no nature; their being bound by time makes it known that He Who thus binds them is not bound by time. He veils some of them from others, that it may be understood that there is no veil between Him and His creation - except the creation itself. He was the Sustainer when there was no sustained, the God when there was no worshipper, the Knower when there was no known, and the Hearer when there was nothing to be heard.'

Then Imām Ali ('a) recited, saying:

*“And my Master was always well-known by praise,
And my Master was always described for magnanimity;
And He was, when there was no light to illuminate,
Nor was there darkness keeping to horizons;
So our Master is unlike the whole creation,
And unlike all that could be imagined by minds.”⁸*

Conclusion

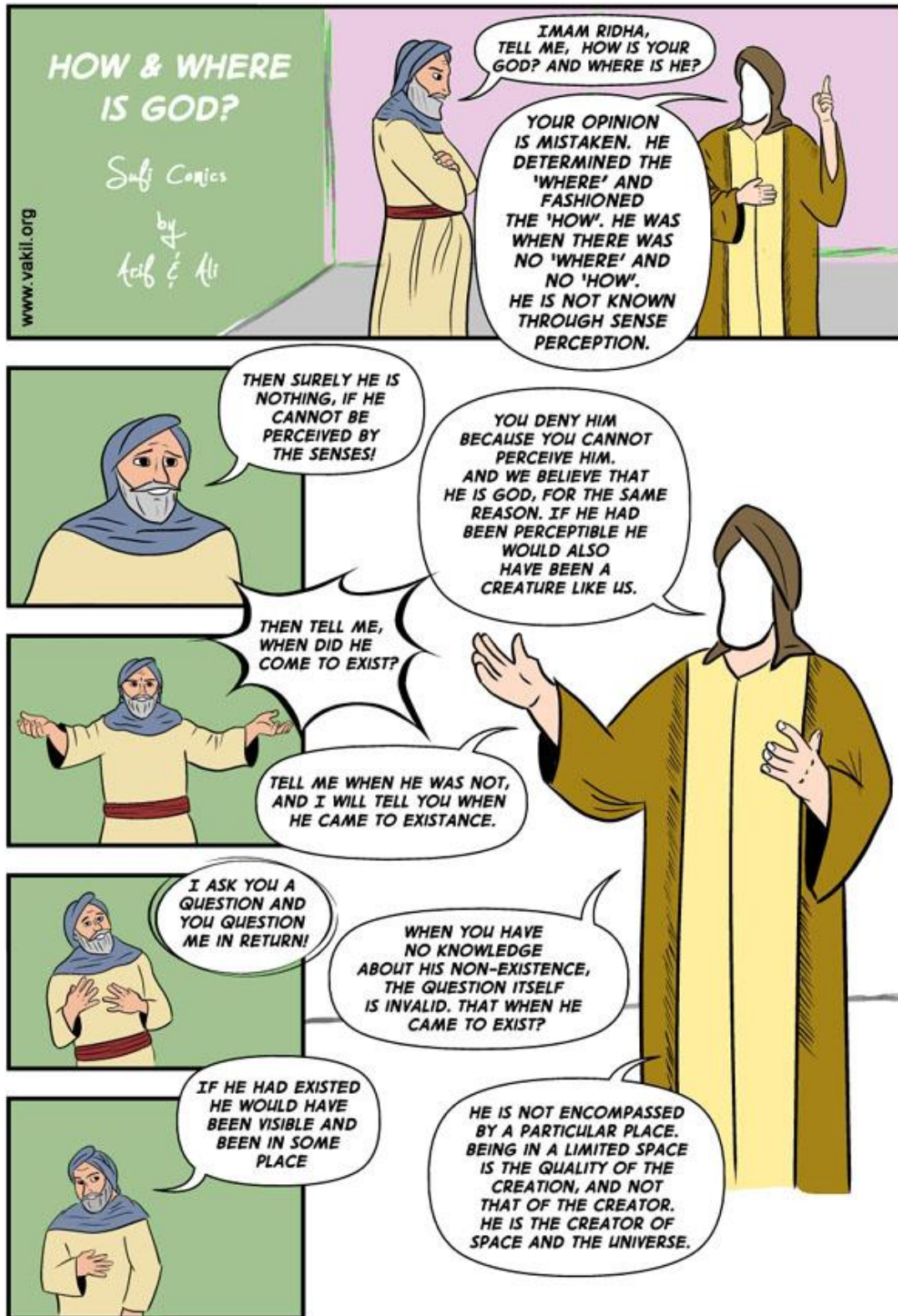
Explaining the meaning of 'One God' to a Bedouin, Imām Ali ('a) once said that when we say 'Allāh is One', we do not mean there is no other God in the numerical sense. Rather we mean there is nothing like Him and He is One in His Essence (Dhāt). He cannot be divided in existence, reason, or in imagination.

⁸ Shaykh Saduq, *at-Tawhid*. Some parts of this sermon can be found in Nahj al-Balāgha sermons 179 and 186. Tabatabai, *Tafsir al-Mizān*, v. 11, p. 121-122 (WOFIS edition).

Similarly, when we say 'Allāhu Akbar' (Allāh is Greater), we do not mean He is 'Greater than anything else' (*Allāhu akbar min kulli shay*) because nothing can be compared to His Greatness and in fact He was al-Akbar (the Greatest) even when there was nothing in existence. Rather by saying 'Allāhu Akbar' we mean 'Allāh is Greater than to be described by anyone' (*Allāhu akbar min an yusaf*).

And therefore any interrogative particle like When? Why? How? Who? Where? What? And so on, cannot be used for Allāh. For in the words of Imām Ali ('a), 'He who describes Him puts limits on Him, and he who puts limits on Him counts Him, and he who counts Him rejects His eternity.'

In the next lesson, we shall study how Allāh is 'known' through the heart and the validity of this process or journey 'towards' Allāh, otherwise known as the *Science of 'Irfān*.



Lesson 4

Allāh (s.w.t.) (cont'd)

In the previous lesson, we concluded that the human mind is incapable of knowing Allāh or understanding His Essence (Dhāt) directly. Hence the Qur'ān points us to Allāh, not directly, but through His creation and His favours as His signs and proof of His Being. For example:

﴿... إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَنْ يَخْلُقُوا ذُبَابًا وَلَوْ اجْتَمَعُوا لَهُ وَإِنْ يَسْلُبْهُمُ الذُّبَابُ شَيْئًا لَا يَسْتَنْقِذُوهُ مِنْهُ ضَعُفَ الطَّالِبُ وَالْمَطْلُوبُ﴾

Indeed those whom you invoke besides Allāh will never create [even] a fly even if they all rallied to do so! And if a fly should take away something from them, they cannot recover that from it. Feeble is the seeker and the sought!

- Surah al-Hajj, 22:73

﴿خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ بِغَيْرِ عَمَدٍ تَرَوْنَهَا وَأَلْقَى فِي الْأَرْضِ رَوَاسِيَ أَنْ تَمِيدَ بِكُمْ وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ دَابَّةٍ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَنْبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ زَوْجٍ كَرِيمٍ. هَذَا خَلْقُ اللَّهِ فَأَرُونِي مَاذَا خَلَقَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ دُونِهِ...﴾

*He created the heavens without any pillars that you may see, and cast firm mountains in the earth lest it should shake with you, and He has scattered in it every kind of animal. And We sent down water from the sky and caused every splendid kind [of plant] to grow in it. **This is the creation of Allāh. Now show Me what others besides Him have created...***

- Surah Luqmān, 31:10-11

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ هَلْ مِنْ خَالِقٍ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ يَرْزُقُكُمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَانِي تُؤْفَكُونَ﴾

O mankind! Remember Allāh's blessing upon you! Is there any creator other than Allāh who provides for you from the sky and the earth? There is no god except Him. So where do you stray?

- Surah al-Fātir, 35:3

﴿قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَصْبَحَ مَاؤُكُمْ غَوْرًا فَمَنْ يَأْتِيكُمْ بِمَاءٍ مَعِينٍ﴾

Say, 'Tell me, should your water sink down [into the ground], who will bring you running water?'

- Surah al-Mulk, 67:30

﴿قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ اللَّيْلَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ إِلَهُ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُمْ بِضِيَاءٍ أَفَلَا تَسْمَعُونَ. قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ النَّهَارَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ إِلَهُ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُمْ بِاللَّيْلِ تَسْكُنُونَ فِيهِ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ. وَمِنْ رَحْمَتِهِ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ لِتَسْكُنُوا فِيهِ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ﴾

Say, 'Tell me, if Allāh were to make the night perpetual over you until the Day of Resurrection, what god other than Allāh could bring you light? Will you not then listen?' Say, 'Tell me, if Allāh were to make the day perpetual over you until the Day of Resurrection, what god other than Allāh could bring you night wherein you could rest? Will you not then perceive?' Out of His mercy He has made for you the night and the day, that you may rest therein and that you may seek from His grace and so that you may give thanks.

- Surah al-Qasas, 28:71-73

And many other such verses.⁹

On the other hand, we find many verses of the Qur'ān inviting us to 'know' Allāh and to realize Who He is. Numerous traditions tell us that humans are very special to Allāh because they are His only creation that is able to 'know' Him and represent Him to His creation.

For example, consider the following verse:

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ﴾

I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me.

- Surah adh-Dhāriyāt, 51:56

The exegetes (mufasssirin) are unanimous, and the Shi'ah have quoted Imām Ja'far as-Sādiq ('a) as saying, that 'worship Me' (*ya'budun*) in this verse means 'know Me' (*ya'rifun*).

And this makes perfect sense because prior to the creation of humans, everything else was already worshipping Allāh (and continues to do so):

⁹ **Project/Homework Idea:** Review Surah al-Wāqī'ah verses 57-73 for other such arguments of the bounties of Allāh (s.w.t) and write a brief essay listing all the arguments can you find in these verses. In what ways are humans so dependent on these bounties for survival?

﴿تَسْبِيحُ لَهُ السَّمَاوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ
وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ حَلِيمًا غَفُورًا﴾

The seven heavens glorify Him, and the earth [too], and whoever is in them. There is not a thing but celebrates His praise, but you do not understand their glorification.

Indeed He is all-forgiving, all-forgiving.

- Surah al-Isrā, 17:44

If the purpose of humans was to glorify Allāh and worship Him in the ritual sense only, then there would be no special reason for Allāh to say humans and jinn were created to 'worship' Him.¹⁰

We therefore conclude, the purpose of life is to 'know' Allāh. This knowing however is not a rational or intellectual knowing that is often called 'ilm. Rather it is *ma'rifah*, which is better translated as 'realization'. And from the word *ma'rifah* is derived 'Irfān (the science of realizing God or becoming enlightened) and 'ārif(a), one who 'knows' Allāh (plural is 'urafā).

'Irfān – The Science of Journeying to God

Over the centuries, the humans who struggled physically against their egoic selves to 'know' their Lord have recorded their struggle as a 'journey' that involves various steps or stages of progression.

The purpose of this lesson is not to describe the 'journey' or stages in 'Irfān but to emphasize its validity in Islām as well as the fact that each human being must undertake this journey individually. The process of becoming an 'ārif and fulfilling the purpose of one's existence cannot be taught by one to another. A teacher of 'Irfān can only guide his or her students and help them experience and discover sublime truths for themselves. But in the end, it is an individual experience.

The reason why the 'realization' of tawhid cannot be taught in a class or explained in words is because to explain something we depend on language and words. Language is the result of human physical and emotional experiences and its words describe what we can see, touch, hear, smell, feel, taste. Tawhid is understood by the heart in a language that has no words and transcends physical sensation or sensory experience. No matter how hard we try to explain it in words, the mind will always misunderstand it. As we saw in the previous lesson, even Rasullāh (s) and his Ahl al-Bayt ('a) described Allāh only by saying Who He is not!

¹⁰ The jinn are also said to be sentient beings with freewill but while they have been given greater physical abilities over humans, their capacity to know Allāh is less; which is why, all prophets, messengers and Imāms were always human, even over the jinn.

The need to want to 'know' one's Creator is so natural that one could say it is also part of the human instinct (*fitra*). We see for example, that although most people are preoccupied with earning their livelihood and pay little attention to spiritual matters, yet every person has an inherent desire to know the truth. Sometimes a misfortune in life needs to be experienced before this desire becomes a determined purpose of one's life and forces one to think deeply about life and its purpose.

The lives of the 'urafā (pl. of 'ārif) also tells us that once one begins focusing on gaining proximity to Allāh, the 'pull' felt makes one forget all else and removes the desire of everything besides Allāh that other uninitiated humans feel. Most significant about the 'urafā is the fact that they no longer worship and obey Allāh out of fear or greed but out of love and with true sincerity. Such individuals are in fact ashamed of worshipping Allāh for His rewards instead of simply His Magnanimity and His being worthy of adoration. The 'urafā express how they feel with an anecdote given by the famous poet-mystic Sa'di in his famous work Bustān:

Someone once criticized Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna because of his love for Iyāz. 'What charm has he, the Sultan's friend Iyāz?' he remarked, 'A flower indeed with neither colour nor smell. How strange that the nightingale should set its heart upon such a thing.' Now Iyāz was a short, unattractive man whom most people would avoid and describe as 'ugly'.

Someone conveyed these remarks to the Sultan who said, 'I love Iyāz for his character and disposition and not for his looks or his stature.'

One day, the Sultan went out on a parade and passed by a narrow defile where one of his treasure-chests broke open after a camel fell. The Sultan, unlimited in his treasures did not care for it and moved on hastily. Those with him however fell upon the pearls and corals, their thoughts now turning from the Sultan to the treasure. None followed the Sultan... except for Iyāz.

Looking back, the Sultan saw him and beholding Iyāz, his face like a flower blooming with delight, asked him, 'what booty have you brought along O Iyāz?'

'None,' said Iyāz, 'I hurried after you, preferring Your service to treasures and bounties!'

The poet Sa'di then says:

*If you look to your friend for his favours,
You are attached to yourself not to your friend.
A breach of the Way it was if the saints
Desired of God anything other than God!*

The Validity of 'Irfān in Qur'ān

There are numerous āyāt of the Qur'ān that encourage people to embark on a journey of self-discovery and the ma'rifah of Allāh. We list a few just as a sample:

﴿... فَأَيْنَمَا تُوَلُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهَ اللَّهِ ...﴾

...so whichever way you turn, there is the face of Allāh!

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:115

﴿فَاذْكُرُونِي أَذْكَرْكُمْ...﴾

Remember Me, and I will remember you...

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:152

﴿وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِي إِذَا دَعَانِي...﴾

When My servants ask you about Me, [tell them that] I am indeed nearest. I answer the supplicant's call when he calls Me.

- Surah al-Baqarah, 2:186

﴿فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي...﴾

So when I have proportioned him (i.e. man) and breathed into him of My spirit...

- Surah al-Hijr, 15:29

﴿اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ

الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبَارَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ

يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ

وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ﴾

Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche wherein is a lamp—the lamp is in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star - lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it. Light upon light. Allāh guides to His Light whomever He wishes. Allāh draws parables for mankind, and Allāh has knowledge of all things.

- Surah an-Nur, 24:35

﴿... وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ﴾

...and We are nearer to him (i.e. man) than his jugular vein.

- Surah Qāf, 50:16

﴿هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ...﴾

He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden...

- Surah al-Hadid, 57:3

﴿وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا. فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا. قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا. وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ

﴿دَسَّاهَا﴾

(I swear) by the soul and Him who fashioned it, and inspired it (to distinguish between) its virtues and vices: one who purifies it (i.e. the soul) is felicitous, and one who betrays it fails.

- Surah ash-Shams, 91:7-10

And the list of verses goes on. All such āyāt arouse our curiosity and desire to look deeper into our selves and ask questions such as: Who am I? How did I get here? Who created me? How can I know God better? And so on.

Similarly, there are numerous ahādith that not only validate but actually encourage us to understand Tawhid deeply and realize who Allāh is (i.e. gain ma'rifah). Not through the mind and its logical deductions and philosophical arguments alone, but through purifying the heart and making this purification process a 'journey' towards Allāh so that He is known directly through personal experience and what is called an 'unveiling' (*kashf*). Below we present a very small sample of such ahādith.

The Validity of 'Irfān in Hadith

1. A very popular hadith al-qudsi, well-known amongst the 'Urafā as "Hadith Qurb al-Nawāfil" states:

Rasulullāh (s) has said that Allāh (s.w.t) says: 'When My slave seeks to attain closeness (*qurb*) to Me through non-mandatory acts of worship (*nawāfil*) and good deeds, I fall in love with him. And when I love him, I become his ears with which he hears, his eyes with which he sees, his tongue with which he speaks and his hand with which he grasps.'¹¹

2. And it is reported in al-Kāfi that one day after performing his dawn prayers, Rasulullāh (s) saw a weak and lean young man whose colour was pale, whose

¹¹ Shahid Mutahhari, *Light Within Me*, p. 24.

eyes were sunken and who could only balance himself with difficulty. Rasulullāh (s) asked him who he was and he said, 'I carry conviction (yaqin).'

'What is the sign of your conviction?' asked Rasulullāh (s) and the young man said, 'It is my conviction that grieves me and keeps me awake during the night (in worship) and thirsty during the day (in fasting). It has made me oblivious of everything in the world. I see as if the Throne of Allāh has been set up for the accounting of deeds and the inhabitants of Paradise enjoying themselves while the inmates of Hell are being punished. Even now, it is as if I can hear the roar of the flames of Hellfire.'

Rasulullāh (s) turned to his companions and remarked, 'This is man whose heart Allāh has illumined with the light of faith.' Then he turned to the young man and said, 'Keep up this state of yours and do not lose it.'

The young man asked Rasulullāh (s) to pray for him to attain martyrdom and he was killed in a battle soon after.

Note: This incident shows us that if 'Irfān or the practical striving to know Allāh (s.w.t) was wrong, then Rasulullāh (s) would have condemned the young man.

3. Imām Ali ('a) said in a sermon: 'Certainly, Allāh, the glorified, has made His remembrance the light of hearts which hear despite deafness, see with its help despite blindness, and become submissive with its help despite unruliness. In all the periods and times when there were no prophets, there have been individuals with whom Allāh - precious are His bounties - spoke in whispers through their conscience and intellects.'¹²

Note: These words of Amir al-Mu'minin (a') show how the heart is the organ of receptivity to truth and knowing Allāh, and not the mind. Even one who is blind, deaf or mute can know Allāh as long as he or she has a heart and it is purified. It is beautiful that Allāh and His remembrance is accessible to all His creation and can never be taken away from them. Whether one is male or female, free or imprisoned, rich or poor, educated or illiterate, able-bodied or handicapped... in every circumstance, Allāh and His remembrance is accessible. Such that sometimes one even hears a child or one who is mentally-handicapped glorifying Allāh. This, so that, no one can say on the Day of Judgement that they were unable to journey to Allāh because they were poor or illiterate or imprisoned or handicapped, and so on.

4. In another sermon, Imām Ali ('a) is reported to have said, 'He (the faithful) revives his intellect and mortifies his self, until his body becomes lean and his coarseness turns into refinement. Then an effulgence of extreme brightness shines forth for illuminating the path before him, opening all the doors and

¹² Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 222.

leading him straight to the gate of safety and the (permanent) abode. His feet, carrying his body, become fixed in the position of safety and comfort on account of that which engages his heart and on having won the good pleasure of his Lord.¹³

Note: Observe once again how, Tawhid, attaining of realization, enlightenment and even salvation is attained by purifying one's self and polishing the heart. Of course it is not simply devotion and worship. The attainment of knowledge through Qur'ān, hadith and deep reflection are a necessary means towards the ma'rifah of Allāh. But ultimately it comes about through direct experience and an unveiling (*kashf*) rather than a rational process of philosophical arguments. Only in this way is one completely convinced of the truth and beyond any doubt regarding Allāh and the Real World to come.

Terminologies in 'Irfān

The following are some terms we may come across in relation to 'Irfān.

Sayr wa Suluk. This is commonly translated as 'wayfaring'. It refers to the actual spiritual journeying that one chooses to undertake and all the stages one encounters in that journey.

Sufism. Some people like to say 'Irfān is to the Shi'ah what to Sufism is to the Sunni. Both terms have, however, been used by both groups interchangeably. The Shi'ah have tried to avoid associating themselves with the term 'Sufism' because often Sufism is identified by organized groups following a particular leader and some Sufi groups having been known to practice extreme rituals that have no basis in Islām. Some Sufi groups have also promoted a particular lifestyle, dressing or behaving in a particular manner, growing their hair, wearing rosaries around their necks, giving up social life or earning a living, and so on. The Shi'ah insist that there is no 'Sufism' in the madhhab of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) because the same Imāms from whom we take our theology ('aqidah) and jurisprudence (fiqh) are also our spiritual guides. We shall look at Sufism in more detail in the last two Aqāid lessons of this Book when discussing Sects in Islām.

Shari'ah, Tariqah, Haqiqah. In the language of mystics (*'urafā*), shari'ah is the exoteric or outer dimension of Islām i.e. its laws. Tariqah is the esoteric or inner dimension of Islām. It is the spiritual path that one follows by understanding the wisdom behind the shari'ah and acting on it sincerely. For example, one who follows shari'ah only, prays salāh in a series of standing, bowing and prostrating. One who follows the tariqah as well, is as concerned about his or her heart standing, bowing and prostrating before Allāh as he or she is concerned about the outer body. And

¹³ Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 220.

Haqiqah is simply the Truth and the core of Islām that one seeks to reach after following the Shari’ah and Tariqah.

In other words, shari’ah is the husk and tariqah is the kernel. And in comparison, tariqah is the husk and haqiqah is the kernel; which is why some mystics refer to Haqiqah or the ultimate truth of Tawhid as “the kernel of the kernel”.

The first condition of embarking on the journey of ‘Irfān is of course that one must follow the shar’iah to the letter and neither skip any wājibat nor indulge in muharramat. ‘Irfān is a duty on all but it is not an alternative to following the rules of Islām. It is responding to the Call of Allāh within the framework of the laws of Islām but with greater devotion and sincerity. One cannot be ‘spiritual’ without following the shari’ah. To explain with an analogy: Shari’ah is the ship. Tariqah is the ocean. Haqiqah is the Great Pearl that lies in the middle of the ocean. It is impossible to get to the Great Pearl without both the Shari’ah and the Tariqah.

Project Idea

Using at least (but not limited to) three Qur’ān verses and three ahādith from the Qur’ān and Hadith references below, write an essay arguing that in the opinion of Islām, it is the heart that knows truth beyond doubt and not the mind. The mind is a tool and means to help direct our contemplation but ultimately conviction can only come from the heart.

Remember: You don’t need to quote the entire Qur’ān verse that you choose to use. You can quote only the parts of it that are relevant to your essay.

You will require an English translation of the Qur’ān to look up the verses. It is recommended that you glance at the translation of every verse of Qur’ān in the list below before deciding which three (or more) verses you will use in the essay.

Qur’ān References:

Al-Baqarah, 2:74	Al-i Imrān, 3:8	Al-Anfāl, 8:24
Al-A’rāf, 7:179	Ar-Ra’d, 13:28	Ash-Shu’arā, 26:88-89
Ghāfir, 40:35	Muhammad, 47:24	Mutaffifin, 83:14

Hadith References:

In a hadith al-Qudsi, Allāh says: ‘Neither the heavens nor the earth can contain Me. But the heart of a faithful (mu’min) contains Me.’

Rasulullāh (s) said, ‘The heart of a believer is the throne of the Merciful.’

Rasulullāh (s): 'Allāh, the Most High, has vessels (or 'containers') in the world. Behold! They are the hearts. So the ones most loved by Allāh, and the purest of them and most solid are the ones that are most affectionate and loving to their brethren, the purest from sins and the most solidly rooted in the Essence (dhāt) of Allāh.'

Rasulullāh (s): 'Allāh, the Glorious and Most High, does not look at your faces or your wealth. He looks at your hearts and your actions.'

Imām Ali ('a): 'The hearts are receptacles. So the best of them are the most receptive.'

Imām as-Sādiq ('a): 'The status of the heart (*qalb*) to the body is like that of the Imām to the people.'

Lesson 5

Sects in Islām

All Muslims believe there is no god but Allāh and Muhammad (s) is His Messenger. All Muslims pray five times a day towards the Ka'bah. All Muslims believe in the Qur'ān as the final revelation from Allāh, and so on. But there are also some important differences between various groups of Muslims. The major groups or sects in Islām are broadly divided into the Shi'ah Muslims and the Sunni Muslims.

One who understands Islām as the religion of Allāh chosen for the human race, is still faced with the decision of which sect of Islām to follow. Sometimes a new Muslim may even get frustrated with all the different groups in Islām and say, 'I am just a Muslim, neither a Shi'ah nor a Sunni!' But of course this does not help him or her because some of the differences between the Muslim sects are quite important, as we shall see.

Shi'ah and Sunni Differences

The reason why sects formed in Islām is because after the passing away of Rasulullāh (s), many different opinions began to form and each group promoted its own opinions and came to be identified with a name for their own 'sect'.

In matters of belief and the law, most Muslims simply followed local scholars that they looked up to and whose views the rulers and governments of their times encouraged, promoted or at least tolerated. This is what we see in all ages, even today. Most people are occupied with earning their living and go about their daily chores, simply following along with the culture and ideology they are born into. In terms of obeying the law, they simply go along with the laws and rules of the country they live in, even if they don't agree with all of its laws. Very few people speak out against the wrongdoings of a government or their community and when they do, they are quickly labelled as 'fanatics', 'rebels', 'renegades' and essentially trouble-makers and outcasts.

We, the Shi'ah Ithnā Ashari believe that Rasulullāh (s) did not pass away without appointing a successor. Rather, he declared Imām Ali ('a) as his successor on many occasions. We also believe that Rasulullāh (s) himself, on numerous occasions, mentioned words like "Ali and his Shi'ah" and therefore neither the title "Shi'ah" of Ali nor the loyal following of Imām Ali ('a) is an innovation in Islām. For example:

It is reported in several Sunni sources of hadith and tafsir, from Ibn Abbās that when the verse, '*Indeed those who have faith and do righteous deeds - it is they who are the best of creatures (khayr al-bariyya)*'¹⁴ was revealed, Rasulullāh (s) said to Imām

¹⁴ Surah al-Bayyinah, 98:7

Ali ('a), 'It is you and your Shi'ah (that are being referred to in this verse), on the Day of Judgement, pleased with Allāh and He pleased with you [all].'¹⁵

The Shi'ah therefore insist that they are not a later formation nor are they a breakaway sect in Islām; rather they are the best of Muslims, loyal to the Household (Ahl al-Bayt ('a) of Rasulullāh (s) as per the instruction of Rasulullāh (s) in his famous Hadith ath-Thaqalayn.

In contrast to this, the word 'Sunni' did not exist in Islām until much later. During the early years of Islām, the majority of the Muslims simply followed along silently with whatever the rulers and their tribal leaders advocated. Those who remained loyal to the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) were called 'Shi'at Ali'. Later when Mu'āwiya and his son Yazid ruled the Muslims, the division became more defined and people spoke of being "Shi'at Ali" vs. "Shi'at Mu'āwiya", or Alawi vs. Umawi. It was only much later on, during the reign of the Banu Abbās when the government began officially promoting certain schools of law and adopting specific madhāhib (schools of law) that the rulers and their governments began calling themselves "Ahl as-Sunnah" (meaning the followers of the Sunnah of the Prophet (s)). The idea was to promote the belief that anyone who complied with them was a part of the orthodox or original Islām and anyone else, such as the Shi'ah of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) who opposed them, were 'renegades' (rāfidi) and so on.

Besides the few years that Imām Ali ('a) held power as the Caliph, the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) and their Shi'ah have never held political authority. This means the 'official' history of Islām was always written with a bias against the Shi'ah. It is only in modern times where individual countries like Iran and Iraq can be talked of as being a Shi'ah government.

The purpose of studying the differences between the Shi'ah and the Sunni is not to promote division and hate. Rather it is to understand our own faith and why we, who call ourselves the Shi'ah Ithnā Ashari, follow the School (madhhab) of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) and not any other school or sect. Unless we know our history, we will neither value what we have nor will we have a clue on how to preserve it for posterity.

Theological Differences

Theology is called *'ilm al-kalām* or simply *kalām* in Islām. It is a science that discusses and debates all matters of belief (usul or 'aqidah) and in particular the differences of opinion in matters of belief between the various sects (madhāhib) in Islām. Muslim theologians (i.e. those who engage in kalām) are called *mutakallimun*.

The Muslim scientist and scholar al-Farābi (d. 339 AH / 950 CE) for example, defined kalām as 'a science that enables a person to support specific beliefs and actions laid

¹⁵ Ibn Mardawayh, *Manāqib Ali*, hadith 578-581; Suyuti, *Durr al-Manthur*, v. 6 p. 379; Ibn Hajar, *Sawāiq al-Muhriqa*, p. 161; as well as other sources.

down by the Legislators of religion and to refute all opinions contradicting them.’ And Ibn Khaldun (d. 807 AH / 1404 CE) defined kalām as, ‘the science that involves arguing with rational proofs in defence of the articles of faith and refuting innovators who deviate from the beliefs of early Muslims and Muslim orthodoxy.’¹⁶

This means ‘Ilm al-Kalām discusses matters ranging from the Being and Attributes of God to matters relating to Prophethood, Imāmah and Ma’ād. A major cause of Muslim division into sects stems from their differing views regarding the matters that are discussed under kalām.

It is important to note however that despite its importance, ‘ilm al-kalām does not hold a central place in Islām as it does in Christianity. Theology has, over the centuries, played a profound role in the religious and spiritual understand of Christians whereas in Islām it has played a more peripheral role. As well, much of what is discussed under ‘theology’ in Christianity is to be found in Islāmic Philosophy (as we shall see in Lesson 7).

It is true that kalām is very important to understand certain aspects of Islāmic thought and how sects formed in Islām, but the deepest spiritual and intellectual expressions of Islām are to be found in *falsafa* (philosophy) and ‘*irfān* (gnosis) and not *kalām*.¹⁷

This is important to note because the Shi’ah are often criticized for not having their own ‘kalām’ until much later; and even of simply borrowing and taking from the Sunni Mu’tazilite kalām after it was dying out and was replaced by the Sunni Ash’arite theology. As we shall see, the Mu’tazilites were supportive of the use of rationality in understanding theological matters and the Ash’arites were not. The Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) always encouraged the use of rationality and the intellect. It is therefore natural that one might see similarities between the all but extinct Mu’tazilite theology and the Shi’ah theology. But the differences between them are also significant and for the latter, it comes from the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) only.

Early Kalām

Traditionally, Imām Ali b. Abi Tālib (‘a) is credited with having established the science of kalām in Islām and his sermons in Nahj al-Balāgha contain the first rational proofs of the unity of Allāh (tawhid), outside the proofs in the Qur’ān and hadith. This in itself proves that the Shi’ah did not take their understanding of *usul* or kalām from the Mu’tazilites even if they never felt the need to put their theology in writing until much later in their history.

At first, Muslims felt the need to engage in kalām only as a protection and defence of Islām. The theology of other religions – especially Christianity – challenged the young

¹⁶ Nasr & Leaman, *History of Islāmic Philosophy*, vol. 1, p. 75.

¹⁷ Nasr, *Islāmic Spirituality*, vol. 2, chp. 22, p. 396.

faith of Islām. Added to this, texts on Greek philosophy were being translated into Arabic and raising new questions for Muslim scholars.

As well, the rapid spread of Islām brought diverse groups into the fold of the Islāmic community and therefore necessitated a clear definition of the creed to prevent confusion. Before that, Muslims were mostly concerned with Divine Law (shari'ah) and its practice but these challenges forced the creation of theologians who could respond to external challenges that questioned the general understanding of God and other theological matters, which in turn forced the theologians to look at the Qur'ān and hadith more deeply.

The Mu'tazilites

The first systematic school of kalām grew from a circle of traditional scholars of Qur'ān and hadith in the second (AH)/eighth (CE) century and came to be known as the Mu'tazilite school. Its founder Wāsil b. 'Ata (d. 131 AH/748 CE) was a student of the famous hadith and Sufi teacher Hasan al-Basri. But he separated from his master and established his own school in Basra. His teacher, Hasan al-Basri, is said to have remarked, "*i'tazala 'anna Wāsil*" ('Wāsil has withdrawn himself from us') and from his word "*i'tazala*" is said to have come the name Mu'tazilites (i.e. 'the Withdrawers').

The Mu'tazilites were seen as free-thinkers and rationalists. They dominated the scene in Iraq for over a century and created an imposing theological school that emphasized the use of reason and the importance of freewill. In fact, their main flaw was that they gave preference to reasoning even above revelation (i.e. the Qur'ān).

This lasted until the time of the Abbāsi Caliph al-Ma'mun and in the early third (AH)/ninth (CE) century, the Mu'tazilites began to decline and they were replaced by the Ash'arite school of kalām, strongly supported by al-Ma'mun's successor al-Mutawakkil.

The Mu'tazilites did not die out complete though. They continued to survive in small groups and in recent times there has been some revival of their ideas.

The Mu'tazilites taught that God is unknowable to a point that God is almost seen as an abstract idea. Their aim was to oppose any notion of anthropomorphism (that God has a form or a physical being) and to this end, they emphasized that even the Speech of God (i.e. the Qur'ān) is a creation just like other creations. This last belief came to be a serious matter for the Ash'arites and much blood was shed between Muslims over the issue of whether the Qur'ān was eternal in its essence (the Ash'arite view) or whether it was created (the Mu'tazilite and also the Shi'ah view).

On the matter of Justice ('adālah), the Mu'tazilites emphasized that God's justice and promise in the Qur'ān demands that He rewards the good and punishes the evil, to the point that He cannot do otherwise; and those in Hellfire cannot be taken out of it

nor can they benefit from any intercession. In opposition to this, the Ash'arites later reacted strongly and went to the other extreme of saying, if God wills, He can and He will put all the righteous in Hell and all the evil in Paradise and that man's action do not earn him the right to Paradise. The Ash'arites went further to say that 'justice' as it is understood by humans does not apply to God. Whatever God does is just even if He admits the prophets and their successors in Hell and Fir'aun and his likes in Paradise. The Shi'ah, taking from the Ahl al-Bayt ('a), argued that there is a difference between what God 'can do' and what He 'will do'. It is true that God *can* do as He pleases but God as well, takes pride in the Qur'ān that He never breaks His promise and therefore it is wrong to say that He may cause the righteous to enter Hell or that 'whatever He does is just even putting the righteous in Hellfire.'

The Mu'tazilites also taught that man is completely free and that God does not interfere in creation. Everything is determined by cause and effect. The Ash'arites opposed this greatly and again, in extreme reaction, argued that man is completely bound by God so much so that God predestines every action. Every good deed and every sin is willed and committed by God. But man is the puppet through whom this action takes place. And because man 'acquires' (*yaksibu*) the action, therefore he can be punished for what occurs through him.

The Imāms from the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) naturally opposed this (as we have discussed in detail in Book 10) and Imām Ja'far as-Sādiq ('a) in particular taught the principle of "*al-amr baynal amrayn*" (the matter is between the two matters) meaning neither are the Mu'tazilites right (that man is completely free) nor are the Ash'arites true (that Allāh forces people to act in good or evil). It would be unjust for Allāh to punish a person for an act He commits and it also makes no sense that Allāh should warn and ask people to refrain from sins (in the Qur'ān) if they have no option but to do what He intends. In the Shi'ah understanding therefore, man is free in his actions but many matters such as his birth, what he earns, when he dies, his sustenance, etc. are not entirely in his hands but decreed by Allāh. Man must learn to surrender to Allāh and be pleased with Allāh's decree and then act freely to prove this surrendering and therefore earn eternal bliss.

In conclusion then, the Mu'tazilites were the first group of Muslim thinkers to apply rational arguments systematically to various questions of religion and it is the development of a rational theology that they are most known for in the history of Islāmic thought. In this way, they influenced all later theological debates including the discussions of the Sunni Ash'arites and the Shi'ah Muslims.

The Ash'arites

During the third (AH)/ninth (CE) century, after the reign of Ma'mun, who made the Mu'tazilite doctrine compulsory, the traditional jurists (*fuqaha*) and traditionists (muhaddithun), especially the followers of Ahmad b. Hanbal, opposed all rational proofs for the tenets of faith. Muslims were asking to accept the doctrines of faith 'without asking how' (*bilā kayf*).

Naturally, this extreme reaction against the rational tendencies of the Mu'tazilite kalām could not last indefinitely. The Qur'ān itself emphasized the use of the intellect ('aql) and invited people to ponder on its verses. This would be impossible without the use of rationality and 'asking how'. Those who saw themselves as leaders of orthodox Islām were therefore forced to allow the use of rationality in theological discussions – even if it was within defined limits - rather than banning it altogether.

And it was this task that Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari attempted to undertake and thus he came to be known as the founder of the Ash'arite theology that the whole Sunni world subscribes to today.

Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari was born in Basra around 260 AH/873 CE and he died in Baghdad around 330 AH/941 CE. Until the age of 40, he was a student of the famous Basrean Mu'tazilite al-Jubbā'i but then he turned against the Mu'tazilite doctrines and 'repented' seeking to return to what he saw as the authentic teachings of the Qur'ān. He is said to have gone to the main mosque of Basra and publicly declared his repentance as follows:

He who knows me, know who I am. And he who does not know me, let him know that I am Abul Hasan Ali al-Ash'ari; that I used to maintain that the Qur'ān is created, that the eyes of men shall not see God, and that the creatures create their actions. Lo! I repent that I have been a Mu'tazilite. I renounce these opinions and I take the engagement to refute the Mu'tazilites and expose their depravity.¹⁸

Some of the essential views of the Ash'arites can be derived from the words of al-Ash'ari himself: that the Qur'ān is in its essence as eternal as God; that people will be able to see Allāh on the Day of Judgement and that God is responsible for all the actions of man.

One of the most famous doctrines of the Ash'arites (which was later expanded on by famous Ash'arites like al-Ghazāli) was the rejection of causality. What this means is that, for the Ash'arites, nothing has an independent nature to cause anything. Only God is the cause of everything. For example, fire does not burn because it is in its nature to do so but because God has willed it. Tomorrow He could will otherwise and as a result fire would cease to burn. There is no such thing as 'the nature of fire', they argued. What in fact appears to us as cause and effect – for example, fire causing a piece of cotton to burn – is nothing but a habit of the mind ('ādah), because we have constantly seen fire being brought near a piece of cotton and then the cotton being in flames. God is the only cause; it is His Will that makes fire burn the cotton. Miracles are in fact nothing other than breaking of this habit of mind.

Then to prove this theory, the Ash'arites backed it with verses from the Qur'ān and said, 'do you not see how when Nabi Ibrāhim ('a) was thrown in fire, it did not burn him because God did not will it?'

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 400.

Our response to the Ash'arites is that this very same incident in the Qur'ān proves that Allāh has given everything its own nature and ability to cause things. Their ability to cause is of course by Allāh's Will that He can retract at any time, but it doesn't prove they don't have any ability to affect another thing. Look at the verse where Allāh commands the fire not to burn Nabi Ibrāhim ('a):

﴿قُلْنَا يَا نَارُ كُونِي بَرْدًا وَسَلَامًا عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ﴾

We said, 'O fire! Be cool and safe for Ibrāhim!'

- Surah al-Anbiya, 21:69

Notice that Allāh commands, 'O Fire! Be cool...' If the cause of fire burning was Allāh alone, then why would He order the fire not to burn Nabi Ibrāhim ('a)?

In summary then, if we imagine God's Will to be a vertical cause and all actions of creation (including humans) as horizontal causes that bisect the Vertical Cause, then we could say that Ash'arite kalām sought to dissolve all horizontal causes and deny their existence. It is no wonder then that Ash'arites strongly opposed Islāmic philosophy, which seeks to know the cause and nature of things leading ultimately to the First or Ultimate Cause (i.e. Allāh).

The famous Ash'arite scholar al-Ghazālī studied philosophy and then wrote against it his well-known *tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*). Later, the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) responded to al-Ghazālī and wrote a rejoinder calling his work *tahāfut al-tahāfut* (*Incoherence of the Incoherence*). Similarly, one of the most famous Ash'arite scholars and exegetists of Qur'ān, Fakhr ad-Din ar-Rāzī wrote criticisms against the Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and his criticisms were counter-challenged by the Muslim philosopher Nāsir ad-Din at-Tusi in his work *ishārāt wal tanbihāt*.

The Ash'arites did not contribute to the flowering of Islāmic science either, because most Islāmic scientists were also philosophers and very few of them were Ash'arite *mutakallimun* (theologians).

One of the contributions of the later Ash'arites however was the merging of Ash'arite theology with Sufism. At a time when traditional 'ulama were at odds with the mystics, al-Ghazālī (a strong proponent of Ash'arite theology as well as Sufism) and others were able to reconcile the two parts and show how they can co-exist. This in itself is remarkable – how despite its 'anti-intellectualism' the Ash'arite view not only became the prevalent theology in the Sunni world but also combined (in certain aspects) with Sufism at whose heart lies gnosis (ma'rifah) and illuminative knowledge (more on this in the Lesson 7).

In more modern times, Sunni (Ash'arite) scholars like Muhammad Abduh (d. 1323 AH/1905 CE) and Muhammad Iqbāl (d. 1357 AH/1938 CE) have given greater importance to the use of reason in their works, thus reviving some Mu'tazilite perspectives.

The Shi'ah Kalām

For the Shi'ah, the dominant Ash'arite view that opposes the use of rationality in theological matters is seen as an impediment to acquiring Divine knowledge. It goes against the very basic teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) that encourage deep intellection of the Qur'ān and hadith and understanding Tawhid and its branches beyond just the literal translation of Qur'ān verses and hadith.

Based on the Prophetic hadith, 'I am the City of Knowledge and Ali is its Gate', the Shi'ah argue that if true understanding of Tawhid lies in the City (i.e. with Rasulullāh (s)) and access to this treasure of divine knowledge comes through the Gate (Imām Ali ('a) and by extension the Ahl al-Bayt ('a)) then the Ash'arite doctrines of opposing the use of rationality are the 'walls of the city' that act as an impediment to the City.

Indeed the dominant non-Shi'ah view has been that any interpretation of the Qur'ān is 'off limits' and discussing and debating theological and philosophical matters are wrong and an innovation (*bid'ah*). The famous Imām Malik b. Anas¹⁹ (d. 179 AH/795 CE) who died even before al-Ash'ari was born, is reported to have said, 'Beware of innovations... those who talk about the names and attributes of God, His Word, His Knowledge and His Power, and do not keep silent about things which the Companions of the Prophet (s) and their followers have kept silence.'²⁰

And when he was asked to explain verses of Qur'ān such as '*Indeed your Lord is Allāh, who created the heavens and the earth in six days and then settled on the Throne...*' (Al-A'rāf, 7:54), as to how exactly God 'settled' Himself on the Throne, Imām Malik b. Anas responded by saying, 'We know He settled Himself on the Throne. How it occurred is not understandable. The belief in it is obligatory and asking questions about it is an innovation (*bid'ah*)!'²¹

In other words, Imām Malik (and later on the Ash'arites) believed that instead of interpreting verses of Qur'ān that do not make literal sense, we should simply accept them 'as is' and remain silent without asking how (*bilā kayf*).

The Shi'ah on the other hand have argued that if God did not want us to understand such verses, then what was the point of revealing them? The reason for not knowing the answer to such questions is not because there is none but because of turning away from the Imāms of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) who are the true inheritors of the knowledge of Rasulullāh (s) and the Qur'ān. It is concerning them that Allāh revealed, '*...ask the People of the Reminder (ahl adh-dhikr) if you do not know...*' (an-Nahl, 16:43).

Ash'arite scholars like Ghazāli and Suyuti lamented that Muslims were plagued with theological and philosophical concerns only because of the infiltration of Greek philosophy into Islām. But this is not entirely true. We know from at least one report

¹⁹ Founder of the Maliki madhhab.

²⁰ Nasr & Leaman, *History of Islāmic Philosophy*, vol. 1, p. 71.

²¹ Ibid, p. 106.

that Rasulullāh (s) himself came out one day and found a group of Muslims discussing the subject of predestination (*qadar*).²²

Furthermore, the Qur'ān discusses matters of law (*fiqh*) in less than 600 verses out of it's over 6600 verses. Most of the Qur'ān explains matters of aqāid and kalām such as the unity of Allāh, prophethood, the refutation of idol worship and polytheism, the Hereafter, and so on.

From a Shi'ah perspective, there are numerous examples of atheists and philosophers who debated theological matters with the Imāms of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a). Nahj al-Balāgha has numerous examples of Imām Ali ('a) discussing tawhid in deep philosophical terms. The theological debates of Imām al-Bāqir ('a), Imām as-Sādiq ('a), Imām ar-Ridā ('a) as well as other Imāms with the scholars of other faiths are widely recorded in the Shi'ah books of hadith.

It is true that Rasulullāh (s) and the Imāms ('a) did not encourage people to ask too much about certain matters like predestination or the Hour of Judgement; but this was not to discourage curiosity or learning. It was because the matter was beyond the understanding of the people at the time. When Rasulullāh (s) was asked by a companion, 'when is the Hour of Judgement?' he replied, 'what have you prepared for it?' In other words, Rasulullāh (s) wanted him to realize is that if he has prepared for it, then 'when' is not important and if he hasn't prepared for it, then again, knowing 'when' will not be of any use to him, given that he could die at any moment.

Rasulullāh (s) himself engaged in theological debates, such as with the Christian delegation from Najrān regarding Nabi Isa ('a), after which the Ayāh of Mubāhala (3:61) was revealed. These debates, recorded in many tafāsir works, clearly show Rasulullāh (s) arguing with logic and reasoning as to why God cannot have a son and why Jesus was human and not divine.

The Shi'ah and the Ash'arites also differ on the issue of Imāmah and concepts related to them but these have all been discussed in previous books. For the Shi'ah understanding of Imāmah and its necessity, see Book 8. For the concept of Infallibility ('ismah), see Book 7. For the subject of Intercession (*shafā'ah*), see Book 8 and for the matter of Intermediaries (*wasila*), see Book 10. Regarding the possibility of a Prophet or Imām having hidden knowledge ('ilm al-ghayb), see Book 9. In all these matters, the Shi'ah believe in and uphold these concepts while the Ash'arites do not or are not unanimous in their belief on them.

It is often said that the early Shi'ah thinkers were mostly concerned with hadith, tafsir (Qur'ānic commentary) and fiqh (jurisprudence) and that Shi'ah kalām did not develop until much later when Shaykh Mufid (d. 413 AH/1022 CE) developed Shi'ah kalām after taking from the Mu'tazilites. As mentioned earlier, this is not true.

²² Ibid, p. 71.

Shaykh Mufid himself has refuted the claim that Shi'ah theology was copied from the Mu'tazilites in his book *Awā'il al-Maqāl*.²³

What is true however is that the Shi'ah did not occupy themselves with kalām as did the others because rather than treating it as a separate subject, they discussed the issues of kalām under their philosophical (falsafi) and hadith works. In fact, some of the greatest Shi'ah theologians were philosophers and experts in other sciences.

For example, even though Shaykh al-Mufid is regarded as one of the earliest Shi'ah scholars to discuss kalām independently, a systematic treatise on Shi'ah Ithna Ashari kalām is said to have first been written by Nāsir ad-Din at-Tusi (d. 672 AH/1273 AH), who was a celebrated mathematician and philosopher. And though he was a scientist, Tusi's work *Tajrid al-'Itiqād* rapidly became a standard theological text; more than a hundred commentaries have been written on it. The most famous commentary is the *Kashf al-Murād* of Allama Hilli (d. 726 AH/1326 CE), who is the most notable Shi'ah mutakallim (theologian) after Tusi.

These works clearly show how the Shi'ah defer from the Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites in their theological views. But as we shall see in Lesson 7, many of these issues are best discussed under philosophy. Indeed, to understand Shi'ah kalām thoroughly, one has to study the philosophical works of the Shi'ah.

An example of issues in kalām that necessitate a study of philosophy is the Shi'ah confirmation of the reality of horizontal causality (that the Ash'arites deny). Another example is the Shi'ah rejection of all 'hadith' that portray God in anthropomorphic terms.

The Shi'ah pride themselves in upholding the purest form of Tawhid (as taught by the Ahl al-Bayt ('a)) and this in itself is impossible to discuss without engaging in philosophy. Perhaps it is because the two sciences are so intertwined that Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kāshāni (d. 1091 AH/1680 CE) and Abd ar-Razzāq Lāhiji (d. 1071 AH/1660 CE) - the most notable students of the famous Shi'ah philosopher, Sadr ad-Din Shirāzi (Mulla Sadra) (d. 1050 AH/1640 CE) – are regarded by some to be more scholars of kalām than of falsafa.²⁴

Shi'ah Divisions

The term 'Shi'ah' is not used exclusively for the followers of the twelve Imāms of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a). Those who follow up to the 4th Imām ('a) and then follow his son Zayd are known as Zaydi Shi'ah. And those who stop at the 6th Imām ('a) and then follow his son Ismāil are known as Ismāili Shi'ahs and they are further divided into the Dawoodi Bohra Shi'ahs and the Nizari Ismāili (or Aga Khani) Shi'ahs.

²³ Ibid., p. 123.

²⁴ Nasr, *Islāmic Spirituality*, vol. 2, chp. 22, p. 409.

In all these lessons, when we mention the word, 'Shi'ah' we do not mean any of the above sects but rather we mean the Shi'ah Ithnā Ashari who follow the twelve Imāms and believe in the final Imām as being the Mahdi ('atfs) who is in ghaybah.

The words "Ithnā Ashar" means 'Twelve' in Arabic and some people therefore also refer to us as 'the Twelver Shi'ah'. The Shi'ah Ithnā Ashari form the majority amongst all sects referred to as 'Shi'ah'.

All Muslims acknowledge that Rasulullāh (s) declared that the Imāms and leaders after him will be twelve and they will all be from the Quraysh. All Muslims also believe that Rasulullāh (s) said, 'I leave behind two important things: the Book of Allāh and my Ahl al-Bayt. If you hold on to them, you will never go astray after me.' (Hadith ath-Thaqalayn). But no Muslim sect follows the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) in all matters of Islām as well as believes in precisely twelve Imāms, except for the Shi'ah Ithna Ashari Muslims.

The Shi'ah Ithna Ashari are also divided into the Usuli and Akhbāri, the majority being the Usuli Shi'ah Ithna Ashari.

Akhbāri Shi'ah Ithna Ashari

The Akhbāri Shi'ah Ithna Ashari rely on hadith (also called *akhbār*) only for their laws. They reject the following of a mujtahid who is not infallible (ma'sum). Thus they are opposed to taqlid and marja'iyā as found among the Usuli. Today the Akhbāris are found mostly in India, Bahrain and some parts of southern Iraq and western Iran.

But the differences between the Usuli and Akhbāri are not limited to fiqh matters only. Amongst their differences in beliefs, the Akhbāri regard the Kutub al-Arba'a (Four Shi'ah Sources of Hadith) to be all authentic while the Usuli Shi'ah Ithna Ashari do not. The Akhbāri believe in Tahreef of Qur'ān i.e. that the Qur'ān in our hands today is not the complete Qur'ān and that the original complete Qur'ān is with Imām al-Mahdi ('atfs). We the Usuli believe the present Qur'ān is the complete, unchanged revelation of Allāh. The Akhbāri also believe that declaring "Aliyyun Waliyullah" is an obligatory (wājib) part of the Kalimah while the Usuli do not consider it to be wājib in order for one to be accepted as a Muslim.

Lesson 6

Sects in Islām (cont'd)

Jurisprudence Differences

By jurisprudence (fiqh) we mean the laws of practice (or what is called the Shari'ah) in Islām. In the early decades of Islām after Rasulullāh (s), the Muslims continued to practice Islām based on what they had learnt from Rasulullāh (s). Around the time of Imām Ali Zayn al-Abidin ('a), Imām Muhammad al-Bāqir ('a) and Imām Ja'far as-Sādiq ('a), many of the companions of Rasulullāh (s) had died and Islām had expanded rapidly to other lands. It therefore became necessary to preserve the shari'ah from corruption or even disappearing.

The Shi'ah simply continued following the Imāms from the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) in their practices just as they did in all other matters such as beliefs, Qur'ān interpretation, hadith and spirituality. And in due course, the Shi'ah madhhab also came to be known as the Ja'fari School of Law because it followed Imām Ja'far as-Sādiq ('a), in whose times the Sunni Schools of Law began acquiring a formal name and structure.

The Sunni Muslims today follow one of four schools of law: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i or Hanbali. But this was not always the case. After Imām Ali ('a) when the Banu Umayya reigned as Kings and were not knowledgeable in Islāmic law themselves, they relied on scholars to be judges in their courts. Different cities have different 'mujtahids', each promoting their own opinion or 'school'. At one point it is believed there were almost twenty schools of law, including the school of Hasan al-Basri, the school of al-Awzāi, the school of Tabari, the school of Sufyān ath-Thawri, and so on.

The government of the time was concerned with all these unregulated schools of law cropping up and therefore most schools of law were either banned or died out, with only four of them being allowed to crystallize and survive over time.

The Four Sunni Schools of Law

Hanafi

It is the oldest of the four and was founded in Iraq by Abu Hanifa (d. 150 AH/767 CE). Abu Hanifa's real name was Nu'man b. Thābit. He was a Persian but he was born in Kufa and died in Baghdad. Abu Hanifa studied under Imām Ja'far as-Sādiq ('a) in Madina and later developed his own opinions in Islāmic law.

The Hanafi School allows deriving legal judgements and Islāmic laws based on self-opinion (ra'y) and the use of analogies (qiyās). It is therefore the most liberal and flexible of the four Sunni Madhāhib. Today, the Hanafi madhhab has the largest following in the Sunni Muslim world and it is particularly dominant in Central and Western Asia (Afghanistan to Turkey), parts of Egypt, and the Indian subcontinent. It

is basically dominant in the countries that were once a part of the Turkish Empire and in India.

Because Abu Hanifa had supported a Zaydi revolt, he was arrested and he died in prison. His followers later on ascribed to him a genealogy that made him a descendant of Persian Kings and he was regarded as a hero because he refused to serve as a religious judge (qādi) under the Umayyads. Under the Abbāsids however, his followers readily entered government service and gained favour by a willingness to accommodate the needs of the ruling princes in matters of law. Abu Yusuf (a Hanafi) who wrote a treatise on land tax became the first Supreme Judge (Qādi al-Qudāh) under the Caliph Hārūn ar-Rashid, and gained official sanction for what became known as the Hanafi School of Law.²⁵

Maliki

The second surviving school was founded in Madina and the Hejaz by Malik b. Anas (d. 179 AH/795 CE). Malik b. Anas was born and died in Madina. Like Abu Hanifa, he studied under Imām Ja'far as-Sādiq ('a) and later started his own school.

He was a collector of hadith but even more a supporter of the customary practices (a'māl or sunnah) of Madina, which he saw as the earliest centre of Islāmic law and government and on which he relied heavily in his approach to the Shari'ah. Unlike Abu Hanifa, he relied on the customary practices of Madina first and then on Consensus (ijmā') and Opinion (ra'y) secondarily.

Malik's famous work, Al-Muwatta ("The Path Made Smooth") is the earliest collection of Hadith and the first book of law for Sunnis. It contains his opinions and judgments and the sources he used to reach them. The Maliki madhhab is prominent today in North & West Africa (including parts of Egypt) and Arab West.

Shafi'i

This madhhab is attributed to Muhammad b. Idris ash-Shafi'i (d. 205 AH/820 CE). Shafi'i was born in Palestine and raised in Makkah. He is buried in Cairo. He studied law in Madina under Malik b. Anas and he also pursued studies in Baghdad thus becoming intimately acquainted with Hanafi law. He was therefore a student of the students of Imām Ja'far as-Sādiq ('a).

Against Malik b. Anas's practice of depending primarily on the customary usages (sunnah or a'māl) of Madina and against Abu Hanifa's methods of deriving laws based on deductions and speculations, Shafi'i promoted the idea that the Hadith and Sunnah of Rasullāh (s) should be the primary authority for interpreting the Qur'ānic laws and injunctions. These, he argued, were more important than analogy (qiyās) and Consensus (ijmā') in legitimizing any law.

²⁵ Glasse, *The New Encyclopedia of Islām*, entry on "Abu Hanifa".

Shāfi'is arrangement of the Qur'ān, hadith & sunnah, qiyās and ijmā' as jointly being the 'roots of jurisprudence' (usul al-fiqh) and the principles on which laws were to be derived, became the standard methodology that was later adopted by all the four surviving Schools of Law. This is seen as his greatest contribution.

Shafi'i did not himself found a school of law. This was done by his disciples. The Shafi'i madhhab is dominant in Malaysia, Indonesia, East Africa and the Philippines. It is also found in Egypt along with the Maliki and Hanafi sects.

Hanbali

It was founded by Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241 AH/855 CE) who carried Shāfi'is enthusiasm and trust in hadith farther than any other jurist had. He was extremely conservative and founded a rather fundamentalist school. This is perhaps why the Wahhābi school in Arabia was influenced by his thoughts.

The Hanbali School is observed only in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Technically the Wahhābi consider themselves to be 'non-imitators' or 'not attached to tradition' (*ghayr muqallidun*) and therefore answerable to no school of law at all. They instead claim to follow what they call the practice of early Islām (salafism). However, to do so corresponds to the ideal aimed at by Ahmad b. Hanbal and thus they can be said to be of his 'school'.

Conclusion

From this we can conclude:

- The four Sunni Schools of Law came about by coincidence. Any of the innumerable schools could have survived. These survived not because of any particular legitimacy but because of certain reasons such as their founder being venerated as a martyr and so on.
- The four Sunni Imāms never saw themselves as founders of any school or representatives of God's laws. It was their followers and circumstances that made them the 'founders'.
- Those followers of a madhhab who supported a caliph or government had the chance to make their madhhab legitimate and 'orthodox'. In other words, if the Imāms from the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) had served the ruling princes and kings and worked for them in their courts as religious judges, then the Ja'fari madhhab would also have been accepted as a 'valid' madhhab in Sunni Islām today. And therefore we cannot ignore the politics that was involved in determining whether a particular school of law was valid in Islām or not.

Nonetheless, in time, the Sunni Muslims came to believe that one had to follow one of these four schools of law otherwise one was not a part of 'orthodox Islām' and one's acts of worship were invalid.

Yet the clear flaw with this is that the early Muslims, who were the companions (sahāba) of Rasullāh (s) as well as the followers of the sahāba (i.e. the tābi'un) did not follow any of these schools (because they never existed!). And none of these schools are legislated by Islām (i.e. by Qur'ān or hadith). They simply represent the opinions and research of four scholars or 'mujtahids'.

Furthermore, to believe that Islām has precisely four shari'ahs only, all of which are valid simultaneously, seems convenient but not sensible. This is not the same as the case with the Shi'ah madhhab where living mujtahideen may express minor differences of opinion in the law. No Shi'ah mujtahid is permitted to express his personal opinion in the law and no one has the right to claim that only certain mujtahids are to be followed and only their views represent the true Islāmic law, even long after they are dead.

Besides, any sect making such a claim would have to have one School of Law only. To say there are four schools, no more no less, and all these four are 'equally correct', though their creation was a coincidence in history and has no proof of legitimacy in Qur'ān or hadith, is hard to accept. It suggests uncertainty - that we don't really know what the true law of Islām is.

The clearest criticism to such an idea is given by Imām Ali b. Ali Tālib ('a), ironically long before the formation of these sects:

When a problem is put before anyone of them he passes judgement on it from his imagination. When exactly the same problem is placed before another of them he passes an opposite verdict. Then these judges go to the chief who had appointed them and he confirms all the verdicts, although their Allāh is one, their Prophet is one, their Book (the Qur'ān) is one.

Is it that Allāh ordered them to differ and they obeyed Him? Or He prohibited them from it but they disobeyed Him? Or (is it that) Allāh sent an incomplete Faith and sought their help to complete it? Or they are His partners in the affairs, so that it is their share of duty to pronounce and He has to agree? Or is it that Allāh the Glorified sent a perfect faith but the Prophet fell short of conveying it and handing it over (to the people)? The fact is that Allāh the Glorified says:

﴿... مَا فَرَطْنَا فِي الْكِتَابِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ...﴾

...We have not neglected anything in the Book (Qur'ān)...

- Surah al-An'ām, 6:38²⁶

²⁶ Sayyid ar-Radi, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, Sermon 18.

Lesson 7

Islāmic Philosophy (Falsafa)

and the merging of kalām and ‘irfān in falsafa

In the Islāmic perspective, the intellect (al-‘aql) and the spirit (al-ruh) are closely related and represented by the sciences of philosophy (falsafa) and gnosis (‘irfān) respectively. We have said in previous lessons that the Truth is known by the heart but the mind plays a role in guiding the heart and acts as a vehicle towards self-purification and the realizations that come to one’s heart.

Some scholars engage in theology and intellectual debates alone. Others focus on spiritual practices only. But by far, the most eminent of them all are the philosopher-mystics who combine the two and who are purified not just in action and in body but in thought and spirit as well.

In this final lesson, we wish to discuss Islāmic philosophy and the role it has played in the development of other sciences such as kalām (theology) and ‘irfān (gnosis). To understand the significance of Islāmic philosophy, we must go beyond the definition of philosophy in the West, which is simply an intellectual study of matters that are related to existence, knowledge, values, language, and so on. We must also go beyond the prevalent Western view of Islāmic philosophy, according to which ‘falsafa began with al-Kindi and terminated with Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Ibn Khaldun.’²⁷

First, we must understand that *falsafa* is Islāmic philosophy and not Arabic philosophy. It is true that al-Kindi and Ibn Rushd were Arabs but the majority, including major figures like Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, were all Persian. In particular in later centuries, Muslim India and Persia were the home of Islāmic philosophy.

Falsafa is also Islāmic because it is tightly related by its concepts, roots and world view to the Islāmic revelation (Qur’ān and hadith), which also moulded the mind and soul of those intellectual figures who developed this philosophy.

Mashshā’i (Peripatetic) Philosophy

One of the earliest and most well known schools of Islāmic philosophy is the Mashshā’i or Peripatetic philosophy. It is a synthesis of the tenets of Islāmic revelation with the Aristotelian and Neo-platonic schools.

The word ‘peripatetic’ literally means to pace or walk about. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle (whom some Muslim scholars believe was a Nabi) used to walk

²⁷ Nasr, *Islāmic Spirituality*, vol. 2, chp. 22, p. 410.

around while teaching; and his students would also pace while thinking and discussing their philosophical ideas. Hence they came to be known as the 'Peripatetics'. The Arabic word 'Mashshā'i' is an almost literally translation, also meaning, 'one who walks about'.

The Mashshā'i school of philosophy was founded in the third (AH)/ninth (CE) century in the rich intellectual climate of Baghdad by Abu Ya'qub al-Kindi (d. 260 AH/873 CE). Al-Kindi was known as 'the philosopher of the Arabs' and composed over 200 treatises, in which he dealt with science as well as philosophy thus beginning a trend that later produced a whole class of philosopher-scientists who studied philosophy alongside astronomy, mathematics, medicine, chemistry, physics, arts, and so on.

Much of the Greek philosophical works were translated to Arabic in Baghdad during the lifetime of al-Kindi. And al-Kindi's main concern was the discovery of the truth wherever it might be. Some of his famous words that are quoted often are:

We should not be ashamed to acknowledge truth and to assimilate it from whatever source it comes to us, even if it is brought to us by former generations and foreign peoples. For him who seeks the truth there is nothing of higher value than truth itself; it never cheapens or abases him who reaches for it, but ennobles and honours him.²⁸

In a sense, Al-Kindi was echoing the words of Imām Ali ('a), 'wisdom (hikmah) is the lost property of the faithful. So take wisdom even if it is from hypocrites.'²⁹

It was this universal conception of truth that always characterized Islāmic philosophy – a truth, however, not bound by the limits of reason. Rather it is the illimitable Truth reached by the intellect (al-'aql), which al-Kindi and later Islāmic philosophers, distinguished clearly from 'reason' as the analytical faculty of the mind (that Western philosophers relied on solely).

If a Nabi or Rasul was an instrument and means for Allāh's "outer revelation" then this intellect ('aql) - sometimes called the heart (qalb) - was the instrument of "inner revelation" that could be used to reach to the Truth. And this again relates to the words of Imām Ali ('a):

In all the periods and times when there were no prophets, there have been persons with whom Allāh, precious are His bounties, whispered through their reflections and spoke to them through their intellect.³⁰

Al-Kindi was also deeply interested in the relation between religion and philosophy, or faith and reason, and tried to create harmony between the two. Al-Kindi's greatest achievement was the moulding of the Arabic language as a vehicle for the expression of philosophy. He pioneered the creation of Arabic philosophic

²⁸ Ibid., p. 411.

²⁹ Sayyid Radi, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, Saying No. 80.

³⁰ Ibid., Sermon 222.

vocabulary and himself a devout Muslim, came to be known as the father of Islāmic philosophy.

Al-Kindī's immediate students were mostly scientists and it was only a generation later that his real successor in Mashshā'i falsafa was born in Khorāsān. He was Abu Nasr al-Farābi (Alfarabius) (d. 339 AH/950 CE). Al-Farābi was born in a family with Turkish background and was raised in Persian culture. He was already a famous philosopher when he came to Baghdad for a short period, before migrating again to Damascus, where he spent the rest of his life. He was also a logician, a metaphysician and a political thinker.

Al-Farābi was attracted to the spiritual life from an early age but he was also well versed with all of Aristotle's works and he commented on all of them. In time, he came to be known as The Second Teacher (*al-mu'allim al-thāni*), the First Teacher being Aristotle himself.

It took another two generations for Al-Farābi's real successor to emerge. This was Abu Ali Sina (Avicenna). With Ibn Sina, Mashshā'i falsafa reached its peak. He is regarded by some to be the most influential Islāmic philosopher and even the great philosophers who came after him, such as Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra, developed their philosophies on his foundation.

Ibn Sina was a Persian born in Bukhara in 370 AH/980 CE. He wandered most of his life in various Persian cities, especially Rayy, Isfahan and Hamadan, and finally died from colic in Hamadan in 428 AH/1037 CE at a relatively young age.

Ibn Sina was an incredible intellectual figure. He was at once a philosopher as well as the most famous physician in the period that the West calls 'Middle Ages'. He composed more than 200 books, including the monumental Kitāb ash-Shifā (The Book of Healing), which is an encyclopedia of peripatetic philosophy and science.

Ibn Sina is regarded as the greatest Mashshā'i philosopher because he created the final synthesis of Islām with Aristotelian and Neo-platonic philosophy. However, towards the end of his life, Ibn Sina criticized mashshā'i philosophy, including his own, as being the common philosophy meant for everyone. Instead he pointed to another philosophy that he considered to be for the intellectual elite, which he called *al-hikmah al-mashriqiyyah* (Illuminating Philosophy). This philosophy was based on knowing the truth by illuminating the soul and 'journeying' with the help of a guide, towards Allāh, the Ultimate Truth and Reality.

A century and a half later, Shihāb ad-Din Suhrawardi would build upon this and found his School of Illumination (*ishrāq*) and after him, Mulla Sadra would develop and perfect this philosophy in what he called *al-hikmah al-muta'āliya* (Transcendent Philosophy).

Ibn Sina was therefore not only the elaborator of the most complete version of mashshā'i philosophy but he was also the guide to the start of the *theosophy*

(theology + philosophy + mysticism) of illumination whose main mark was the inseparable union between philosophy and spirituality.

After Ibn Sina, *mashshā'i* philosophy became temporarily eclipsed in the eastern lands of Islām as a result of the attacks of Ash'arites against it.

Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination (al-Ishrāq)

The complete harmonization of spirituality and philosophy in Islām was achieved in the School of Illumination (al-*ishrāq*) founded by Shaykh al-Ishrāq Shihāb ad-Din Suhrawardi. Born in the small village of Suhraward in Western Persia in 549 AH/1153 CE, he studied in Zanjān and Isfahān (both cities in Iran), where he completed his formal education in religious and philosophical sciences and entered into Sufism. He then set out for Anatolia and settled in Aleppo (Halab) (city in the north of Syria), where as a result of the jealousies and opposition of certain jurists (*fuqaha*), he was sentenced to death by the King at a young age in 587 AH/1191 CE.

Suhrawardi was a great mystic and philosopher. He saw theosophy as the result of the wedding between the training of the theoretical intellect through philosophy and the purification of the heart through *'irfān* (or Sufism). He considered the means of attaining supreme knowledge to be "illumination" (*ishrāq*), which at once transforms one's being and bestows knowledge.

One of Suhrawardi's most important works in Islāmic philosophy is his *hikmat al-ishrāq* (the Philosophy (or Wisdom) of Illumination). Suhrawardi insisted that there existed from the beginning an "eternal dough" (*al-khamirat al-azaliyyah*), which is none other than eternal wisdom. It is hidden in the very substance of man ready to be "leavened" and actualized through intellectual training and inner purification.

That said, Suhrawardi insisted however that the real means of attainment of true knowledge was through Allāh and His revealed Book (i.e. the Qur'ān). He therefore based much of his teachings on the Qur'ān and quoted verses to prove his views. He is therefore regarded to be the first major Muslim philosopher to quote the Qur'ān extensively in his philosophical writings.

In the teachings of Suhrawardi, a philosopher or *hakim* was expected to be not only a person possessing cerebral knowledge but a saintly person transformed by his knowledge. Philosophy here onwards ceased to be just a mental activity divorced from spiritual realization and the inner life. It was only a legitimate undertaking when it was a wisdom thought and reasoned as well as lived and experienced. Suhrawardi called the first "discursive philosophy" and the latter "intuitive philosophy" and in the introduction to his magnum opus, "The Philosophy of Illumination" (*al-hikmah al-ishrāq*), he wrote:

This book of ours is for the student of both intuitive philosophy and discursive philosophy. There is nothing in it for the discursive philosopher not given to,

and not in search of, intuitive philosophy.... the reader of this book must have reached at least the stage in which divine light has descended upon him – not just once but regularly. No one else will find any profit in it.³¹

Mulla Sadra and the School of Isfahān

Three centuries of the drawing together of the various schools of Islāmic thought culminated in the Safavid period in Persia with the School of Isfahan. Its founder was Mir Dāmād (d. 1041 AH/1631 CE), a theologian, philosopher, mystic and poet but its most important figure was to be Mir Dāmād's student, Sadr ad-Din ash-Shirāzi, best known as Mulla Sadra.

Mulla Sadra was a Shi'ah Ithna Ashari and is regarded to this day to be the greatest of all Muslim metaphysicians. This remarkable figure was born in Shiraz about 979 AH/1571 CE. He studied in Isfahan at first and then due to opposition of the jurists (*fuqaha*) of the time, he retired to a village outside Qum and disappeared from public view for about 10 years. Mulla Sadra then emerged in Shiraz, where he spent the last thirty years of his life writing and training students who came to him from as far away as North Africa and Tibet. He died in Basra in 1050 AH/1640 CE while returning from his seventh pilgrimage on foot to Makkah.

Mulla Sadra incorporated the ideals of Suhrawardi to which the perfect philosopher or theosopher (*hakim muta'allih*) must have undergone both intellectual training and inner purification. But he also challenged some of the basic philosophical ideas in Suhrawardi's philosophy and his (Mulla Sadra's) own philosophy remains unchallenged to this day.

Later Islāmic philosophers bestowed Mulla Sadra with the title *Sadr al-Muta'allihin* (the Foremost amongst Theosophers).

Mulla Sadra composed some fifty works, the most famous of which is his *al-hikmah al-muta'aliyya* (Transcendent Theosophy), also sometimes called *al-asfār al-arba'ah* (the Four Journeys). His teachings were based on the fact that there are three paths to the truth open to man, namely, revelation (*wahy*), intellection (*'aql*) and mystical unveiling (*kashf*). In his *Asfār*, Mulla Sadra has dealt with the philosophies of great masters like Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi as well as Shi'ah and Sunni *kalām*.

He also wrote a mystical commentary to various surahs of the Qur'ān and his commentary on the Shi'ah hadith collection *Usul al-Kāfi* (of Shaykh al-Kulayni), is one of Mulla Sadra's philosophical masterpieces.

All the works of Mulla Sadra reveal the central significance of the Qur'ān and the ahādith of Rasulullāh (s) and the twelve Imāms as the source of all philosophical meditations and inspirations. Among Mulla Sadra's major achievements is the creation of a perfect harmony between faith and reason or religion and philosophy -

³¹ Suhrawardi, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, p. 4 (BYU Press, 1999. Transl. by Walbridge & Ziai)

the achievement of the goal of some nine centuries of Islāmic theology and philosophy.

It is simply amazing how extensively Mulla Sadra quotes the Qur'ān and the ahādith of the Ma'sumeen ('a) to back all his views; he therefore took pride in the fact that he was able to synthesize the two with no contradictions.

The other great achievement of Mulla Sadra is the range of issues he was able to discuss and deal with. No other Islāmic philosopher has dealt in depth with matters of faith ranging from the basis of ethics to eschatological imagery depicted in the Qur'ān and hadith as has Mulla Sadra. His writings on Islāmic eschatology (dealing with life after death and the Hereafter) from a philosophical perspective are simply magnificent.

Nor have any of the philosophers dealt as thoroughly as he with all the questions which concerned the scholars of kalām. In fact, Mulla Sadra claimed that the mutakallimun did not possess the divine knowledge (*ma'rifah*) necessary to deal with the questions they were treating and that therefore their activity was illegitimate. It was for the *hukamā al-ilāhi* (literally, 'the theosophers') to deal with such questions and provide answers for the enigmas and complex problems in religious teachings.

Much of what Christians understand by theology would find its counterpart in Islāmic thought in the writings of Mulla Sadra rather than the Ash'arite vs. Mu'tazilite kalām, except that Mulla Sadra's "theology" was always immersed in the light of 'irfān (gnosis) and not restricted to rational arguments concerning the tenets of faith.

Mulla Sadra's "transcendent theosophy" (*al-hikmah al-muta'āliyyah*) is in fact falsafa (philosophy), kalām (theology) and 'irfān (gnosis) combined.

Due to his personal spiritual experience and intellectual visions, Mulla Sadra was able to create a revolution in Islāmic philosophy and perfect what Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi had started. You will notice that in this lesson, we have discussed the history of Islāmic philosophy but not as much about 'what' the core ideas of these philosophers were. This is because it is a vast subject that requires separate treatment and a lot of background knowledge. It must be pursued as higher studies for those interested.

Mulla Sadra's most famous immediate students were his two son-in-laws, Mulla Muhsin Fayd Kāshāni (d. 1091 AH/1680 CE) and Abd ar-Razzāq Lāhiji (1072 AH/1661 CE). These two students however devoted themselves mostly to pure religious sciences such as hadith and kalām and not directly the transcendent theosophy of Mulla Sadra, due to the opposition of the exoteric (traditional) 'ulama to the teachings of Mulla Sadra. But they were well versed with this school of thought and did train students who kept the tradition alive.

The celebrated philosopher on Mulla Sadra's teachings however came two centuries later and he was Hājjī Mulla Hādi Sabzwāri (d. 1289 AH/1878 CE). He was a great

saint, philosopher and poet. He wrote the *sharh manzumah*, which summarizes the principles of Mulla Sadra's philosophy, and numerous other philosophical and gnostic works in both Arabic and Persian, including a commentary on the *mathnawi* of Rumi. He was also revered as a saintly figure throughout Persia and even the king went to visit him in his home in Sabziwar in Khorāsān.

After the Second World War in 1945 CE, Qum also became an important centre for the teaching of Islāmic philosophy thanks mostly to Allama Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai, Ayatullah Khomeini and others, who in turn trained students like Shahid Murtada Mutahhari (d. 1399 AH/1979 CE). This revival of interest in Islāmic philosophy has continued to this day and is not limited to Iran alone.

When one studies later Islāmic philosophers, the close relationship between intellection and spiritual experience is immediately realized. This fact – that knowledge is inseparable from inner realization and mystical unveiling (*kashf*) – is perhaps why Islāmic philosophy has been and remains to this day an important element in the world of Islāmic spirituality.