

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Six: What can we say about God?

The most fundamental belief of Islam is that there is only one God and that nothing, either created or uncreated, is worthy of worship except the one God. This doctrine is associated with the Arabic term *tawhid*. God is one in two senses: God is utterly unique and unlike any other being and God is one in the sense of being indivisible [Q. 112:1-4]. There can be no parts of God and nothing can be associated with God. God cannot share divinity with any other being. The one sin that God will never forgive is *shirk*, that is to give God partners or to associate God with any other being [Q. 4:48]. This obviously rules out the worship of idols, multiple or local gods, semi-divine people, and things that were worshipped by our ancestors. It also rules out modern-day idols, such as money, power, ideology, racial superiority or military might.

It is not enough for a Muslim just to believe this. A Muslim has to demonstrate his or her belief through action [Q. 103:1-3]; to devote their whole existence to the worship of God. That is what human life is all about - to serve, obey, love, and worship God [Q. 51:56]. Muslims need to consider whether their work serves God or something else. Do our financial or political practices serve God? Am I serving God in my family relations or are there other values at work?

The transcendence of God

God is beyond our comprehension and human language lacks the capacity to describe God fully. There is always a resistance to use human terms to speak about God, but they are all we have. Besides, God uses such terms to speak of himself in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an itself contains many descriptions of God and the ways that God acts. We are told that God sits on a throne [Q. 2:255]. There are references to God's hands [Q. 3:73], eyes [Q. 11:37] and face [Q. 2:115]. The Qur'an speaks of God seeing, speaking and hearing. Some scholars have taken these to be metaphorical and others have said that they are real but they do not mean that God has human features [Q. 42:11b]. God is beyond such allusions [Q. 112:4].

The Qur'an also speaks of God in more abstract terms. God is all-perfect. God is all-knowing and all-powerful [Q. 6:59; 34:22]. God is beyond all time and space [Q. 7:7]. God alone existed before time began and time itself is created by God. God is not a material being, therefore there is nowhere that we can say that God is and nowhere that we can say that God is not; God is not limited by space [Q. 2:115]. God is transcendent or totally other.

The unknowable essence of God

The essence of God is unknowable; we cannot make any adequate positive statement about God. We must proceed by negatives – saying what God is not. So we can say that God is not like a human being, for example. Technically, we can use two terms here to refer to God: God is ineffable and God is transcategorial – beyond all our categories. We have a category of mercy, for example, and we can say that God is all-merciful but we do not have any idea of just how merciful God is or the quality of God's mercy; we do not have a category that will stretch to God's essence. The Islamic tradition tries to speak of this with a saying: God has one hundred mercies and God sends one mercy to the earth to suffice all beings for all ages. This means that if we could possibly imagine the sum total of all mercy on earth throughout the ages, then we would know only one per cent of the mercy of God.

Whenever we speak of God we must use the language of analogy. Let us proceed by a two-stage example. If I say that my foot is located on the end of my leg, we all know what that means. We possess the category of foot. So, by analogy, I can say that I am going to walk to the foot of the mountain. Mountains do not have feet but by analogy, we know that I am not going to walk to the summit of the mountain or half-way up; we know where the foot of the mountain is located. In the second stage, we take a category that we do not possess. Let us say that I want to explain the colour scarlet to a person who was born blind. Such a person does not possess the category of colour. How would we do it? We have to use a category that the person does possess and see if that can give some inkling of the colour scarlet. Imagine first the colour scarlet as we see it with our eyes: not crimson or cherry-red but scarlet. Then what non-visual images of scarlet come to our mind: “she wore a scarlet dress!” or “she was a scarlet woman!” Now let us imagine that our person born blind has the category of sound; what sounds might convey something of scarlet to them? We could take them to a group of trumpeters and get them to blow a blazing, raucous fanfare. Try first to hear it – and then what non-aural associations does it convey? Can you see that there is a tiny carry-over from the fanfare of trumpets to scarlet? That is where we are when we speak of God. Whatever we say of God is within our own categories – a fanfare of trumpets – but we do not have the necessary categories to stretch to God's essence – we speak of a fanfare of trumpets but God speaks of scarlet. Everything that we can say of the essence of God is like that – we cannot know or speak about God in God's very essence.

The immanence of God

This total otherness of God does not mean that God is distant or unapproachable [Q. 2:186]. The Qur'an says that God is nearer to us than our jugular vein [Q. 50:16]. How intimate is that? Our life-blood courses through our jugular vein and we cannot imagine life without one.

Speaking about God

How can we speak of God if the essence of God is unknowable? The scholars of Islam have searched the Qur'an and Hadith to find the names by which God has called himself or is called by Muhammad [Q. 7:180; 59:23-24]. These give a list of characteristics or qualities of God. They give us some insight into the way that God acts. The names of God are beyond number but there are ninety-nine that are most commonly used. Among these Beautiful Names are:

the Most Great, the Just, the Almighty, the Source of Goodness, the Majestic, the All-seeing, the All-forgiving, the Acceptor of Repentance, the Guide, the Wise, the Abaser, the Truth, the Patient, the Creator, the Protector, the Light, the Compassionate, the Source of Peace, the Compeller, the Loving, the Unique, the Friend, the Provider, the Giver of Death, the Judge, the All-knowing.

Colouring oneself with the names

These are the names by which Muslims call on God and they provide a rich source of meditation. The prophets are people of the highest spiritual order, whose lives are characterised by purity and wisdom. They are like polished mirrors on which these qualities of God shine and are then reflected so that, in looking at them, we glimpse something of the character of God. The spiritual journey of each individual is one of growing in purity and wisdom also, so that we are shaped by the beautiful names and in turn come to reflect something of these qualities, to the limits of our human capacity. The sufis have a saying that conveys this well: to colour oneself with the colours of God.

Muslims memorise these ninety-nine beautiful names and then recite them; often with the aid of a string of ninety-nine beads to help in counting, called a *tasbih*. One name can be taken and recited continually as an aid to meditation on this quality of God. In sufi practice, someone might take one of these names and repeat it many times a day, meditating on it, to allow that quality of God to enter their hearts and shape their lives. Their sufi teacher (masc. *shaykh*, fem. *shaykhah*) might choose a name which refers to a quality in which the student is deficient. So someone lacking in generosity might be told to repeat the name *al-Karim* "the Most Generous" a thousand times a day.

The *tasbih* is used in other pious exercises too, for example, to repeat thirty-three times each: all glory be to God – *Subhan Allah*, all praise be to God – *al-Hamdu lillah*, and God is the greatest – *Allahu Akbar*. This is often done at the end of each prayer session but it is also a recommended practice frequently during the day.

The importance of these beautiful names is reflected in the names that are given to some Muslim men and women. Men are often named by adding the prefix Abd (Loving Servant) to one of these beautiful names. So it is common to find men called: Abd ar-Rahman (Servant of the All-merciful), Abd as-Samad (Servant of the Eternal), Abd al-Wahhab (Servant of the Bestower), Abd al-Malik (Servant of the Sovereign)

Lord), Abd al-Latif (Servant of the Subtle One) and so on. Muslim women are often named with reference to one of these beautiful names, such as Salma (from Salam – Peace), Nurallah (Light of God), Azizah (from Aziz – Almighty), Karimah (from Karim – Most Generous) and so on. In this way, there is a parallel to the old English tradition of naming girls by the Christian virtues: Grace, Hope, Charity, Patience and so on. The bearer of the name is given a quality of God to emulate.