ISLAM AND GOD-CENTRICITY

EXAMINING THE ARTICLES OF FAITH

Shaykh Arif Abdul Hussain

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by

Shaykh Arif Abdul Hussain

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FOREWORD:

In the name of God, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful.

All praise belongs to God.

May benedictions and peace be upon Muḥammad,

His apostle and the best of His creation,

And upon the Pure Ones of his family.

THIS BOOK IS THE THIRD VOLUME in the Islam and God-Centricity series. It is comprised of the edited transcripts of the lectures delivered by Shaykh Arif Abdul Hussain in Muharram 1439 (September 2017). The lectures in this book critically analyse the prevalent perceptions of the articles of faith amongst Muslims and demonstrate how our interpretations of them shape our worldview. The lectures offer an understanding of the articles of faith based on the presumption that the purpose of religion is to facilitate human growth and evolution, and thereby to establish the khilāfa of Allah upon this earth. The source of this presupposition is the Quran: the entirety of humanity has been created in order to display the khilāfa of Allah, which can only be achieved by attaining growth and proximity to Him. Consequently, the success of the individual lies with the success of humanity in its entirety, and as such, the articles of Islam are meant to assist Muslims in achieving this aim. In light of this, it is evident that our theology and fundamental beliefs must be liberating and productive. They cannot be exclusivist and restrictive.

The articles of faith have a dual function: Firstly, they bestow statuses and rights reserved for the faithful upon the individual who assents to them. The basic articles of faith qualify a person as “Muslim”, and other additional beliefs qualify a person as a member of a particular sect. Secondly (and more fundamentally), they facilitate the individual in their journey of growth towards God. This means that they are meant to be “lived”. After they have been understood rationally, the individual is required to sincerely commit to them in

order to elicit the desired growth from within. For instance, the belief in God must go beyond its mere verbal declaration; it must be “lived by” for it to yield the inner confidence required to create a godly human being.

The lectures in this book cover the following theological issues: the purpose of humanity; the belief in unity of God; the worship of God; the true meanings of kāfir, kufr, mushrik and shirk; the belief in the destiny and decree of God; the belief in divine justice and the practice of iḥsān; the belief in prophethood; the belief in imamate; the notions of mediation and intercession, and symbolic practices; and the belief in the Day of Judgement.

The articles of faith operate on the three facets of the human being throughout his or her life: the intellectual, moral and spiritual. As we grow in these domains, individually and communally, the articles take on newer meanings. The examination of the articles of faith conducted in these lectures provides an understanding of them so that if they are inculcated in daily life will lead to directed growth towards Allah.

Night One

Islam and Khilāfa

We thank Allah for allowing us this opportunity to gather in the remembrance of our most beloved Imam Husayn once again. We hope that through his remembrance we can be enlightened to lead a meaningful life and gain Allah's pleasure. This lecture series follows on from the lectures that I have been delivering over the past two years entitled "Islam and God-centricity". We will be talking about our theology and the basic articles of faith: those fundamental doctrines that give the faith its identity and allow those who assent to their validity to be included as members of the faith. These discussions will not deal with the historical debate of when and under what circumstances these articles of faith emerged. Instead, we are going to look at what the articles of faith are, what they mean, how they shape our outlook, and the role they play in our lives. The articles of faith will be examined in light of the purpose of our existence. These talks will address certain ideas that have been discussed in previous years in order to clarify and develop them further.

We will begin by attempting to understand the purpose of our existence. To do this, let us start from the very beginning: the creation of Adam, and the conversation that takes place between Allah and the angels in the Quran. In Sūra al-Baqara, Allah says to the angels, "I am placing a khalīfa (vicegerent) on the earth." At first glance, it appears that Adam was the khalīfa, whilst the rest of us – his progeny – are the khulafāʾ (plural of khalīfa) through Adam; however, this does not seem to be an accurate understanding. On a closer reading, it actually seems that "Adam" encapsulates the whole of humanity (that is, all of us) within his creation. We read in Sūra al-Aʿrāf, "Indeed We created you, then We fashioned you, and then We said to the angels, 'Prostrate before Adam'." In this verse, the pronoun "you" is a plural in the Arabic language, and it indicates that all of us existed alongside Adam. We were all created and fashioned, and somehow, we were all embodied by Adam; and then finally Adam became the individual that the angels prostrated to.

Therefore, it is not the case that Adam came first and then all of us came after. In fact, the Quran informs us of a very different story wherein Adam represents the entire human species. Adam is an expression of humanity in its entirety. When the angels prostrated to Adam they were acknowledging the khilāfa (stewardship) of humanity in its entirety. You and I – we – are the khulafāʾ of Allah on the face of this earth. All of the nearly eight billion people that exist on the face of this earth are the khulafāʾ of Allah.

When God said to the angels, "I am creating a khalīfa," they protested and said, "But he is going to create bloodshed and corruption." Here, the angels are clearly stating that "causing corruption" and "the spilling of blood" are actions that are inconsistent with the khilāfa of God. The angels could not comprehend how God could create a khalīfa whose actions will be inconsistent with the khilāfa of Allah. This leads us to the conclusion that the khalīfa of Allah is supposed to be productive and should promote human life and growth. On the face of it, the angels were correct in their assumption regarding the creation of humanity, but Allah responds to them, "I know what you know not." Allah is ready to invest in the progeny of Adam based on His superior knowledge. Allah is willing to withstand the corruption and bloodshed for the sake of the achievement of the lofty objective that He has desired for humankind, and He – the All Knowing – is aware that we have the capacity to fulfil that objective.

The story begins to unfold when Iblis refuses to prostrate to Adam. Subsequently, Adam eats the forbidden fruit of which the Quran states:

But Satan made them slip, and removed them from the state they were in. We said: 'Get out, all of you! You are each other's enemy. On earth, you will have a place to stay and livelihood for a time' […] We said: 'Descend from it altogether! And whenever guidance comes to you from Me, then the one who follows this guidance will have no fear upon them, and they will not grieve.' (2:36–38)

In another verse, the Quran states, "From earth We created you, into it We shall return you, and from it We shall raise you a second time." (20:55) God is stipulating that there is a khalīfa coming upon this earth who has a certain role to

perform. He will be here for a brief duration and after that he will be returned to God. Again, the Quran exhorts, “Do you think that We have created you in vain and that you will not be brought back to Us?” (23:115) When we consider all of these verses together, we realise that there is a purpose to our existence. We have been destined for some lofty objective, which we must fulfil. This purpose – as discussed in previous years – is being fulfilled at a variety of levels in our lives.

As far as human potential is concerned, the first thing that Allah does is to draw the attention of the angels to the vast potential of knowledge in the human being. Observe our amazing achievements: the huge aircrafts that carry us through air, ocean liners that sail on the seas, and satellites in space. Which animal within the animal kingdom has been able to achieve this? We defy every restraint that nature places upon us. We travel from continent to continent. When our means were limited, we created crafts to sail upon the seas, then cars, and now planes. We are inquisitive about outer space, and so we have created space probes to go and discover the unknown. Look at the amazing achievements! We have become creators – although, we must be mindful of mother earth and ensure that we are not destroying nature in the process of our expansion and creation. Nonetheless, the khalīfa of Allah is one who creates like Allah, and this is what He takes pride in.

Imagine a futuristic world in which we genetically or artificially create a being, and then place him upon the earth and watch him grow. Would we not take utmost pride in what we have created? We would exclaim with pride, “Look at what I have created! He is able to defy nature. He is going to go beyond every limit.” For a creator, the degree of his pride and joy rests on the scale of the achievements of his creation. Look at the khilāfa of Allah that we are fulfilling in a variety of ways! Even in the defiance of God, we are displaying God through our handiwork. At one point in time, those who believed in God said, “Had God wanted us to fly, He would have given us wings!” By God, it is this very real nature of God vested within us that has created those wings. How amazing is this? This is the khilāfa of Allah in action. We find cures, give life, and defy sickness and diseases. The immense potential within us is tearing itself apart. It is actualising itself at every instance. All of this pertains to the intellectual level of the khilāfa of Allah.

Another level of khilāfa is the moral khilāfa. Moral resolutions include judgements such as “nobody should live in poverty” and “nobody should go to bed hungry”. The moral khilāfa also includes the human rights discourse and

developments. More and more people are awakening morally, despite the fact that this awakening has come through an evolutionary track of bloodshed and violence – the very thing that the angels frowned upon.

Finally, there is the spiritual khilāfa in which we are becoming God-focused and God-centric. Our role on earth is to be the khalīfa of Allah. Whether we choose to believe in God or not, we are His khulafāʾ and we are doing His handiwork. Even if we were to destroy this earth altogether, God would say that it was worth its while. Imagine, God is saying, "I have invested everything in this one. The earth can be dispensed with altogether as long as he grows and shows Me what I have created." Can you imagine how much confidence Allah has in us? He has placed us on this earth and allowed us to destroy the species that He has created over millions of years! In spite of this, He, the Almighty, perseveres with us and takes immense pride in His creation – and why would He not!?

Since humanity has been tasked with displaying the khilāfa of Allah at these three levels (the intellectual, moral and spiritual), then Allah's guidance has to conform to this purpose. After all, this purpose is the reason for which we have been created. Hence, the articles of faith given by God have to be in line with this purpose of actualising human potential. Now since we are the khulafāʾ of Allah, it means that we have a godly role to perform on earth. As I said earlier, it's not just Adam who was the khalīfa; rather, every human individual is the khalīfa. As such, every human being's role – both as an individual and as a part of the collective – is to become godlike and godly. It is to become as splendid as God is. Therefore, we are required to mature intellectually, morally and spiritually. The entire human race is required to progress towards a befitting and mature state of human existence.

Now in order for human progression and growth to be holistic, individuals have to learn how to become godlike (or in other words, they have to learn how to become the representatives of God on this earth). It stands to reason that those who relate to God directly will be the most efficient in fulfilling their purpose. For such individuals, a necessary element of their purpose is to assist the rest of humanity in doing the same. It is a gross mistake to imagine that God's purpose is limited to the success of a few or a chosen group. On the contrary, God's plan is for the salvation of the entirety of humanity. The blessed Prophet incessantly strove for the success of the whole of his community, which was comprised of people of differing persuasions. Therefore, the people of faith have to feel empowered to create a godly human family through their theology.

Thus, the articles of faith must be directly in line with the purpose of our creation. In other words, the articles must assist us in reaching the fullness of our existence (that is, the intellectual, moral and spiritual aspects of our existence) in a very directed manner. In order for these articles to aid us in actualising the objective of our creation, we need to first have an accurate appreciation of them and then make a commitment to live by them. For instance, take the belief in God: What is the belief in God? Is it something that we first have to deduce rationally and then become fully invested before it can be effective? Or is it something that we just subscribe to uncritically? Are we attaining the purpose of khilāfa through it or not?

What are the articles of faith and what do they mean? How are they supposed to govern us and shape our worldview? How much investment do we need to have in the articles of faith, and how do they fit in with the purpose of our creation? These are the kinds of discussions that we need to have. If we were to understand that we are on this earth for a short duration and the task at hand is not to be self-centred but to perform a dual-role of being good to humanity and becoming spiritually refined from within, then that would be a very directed life.

It is important, therefore, to ascertain the exact meaning of each of the articles of faith. In this respect, it is necessary for us to acknowledge that our language is extremely inadequate. We need to clarify what we are talking about so that we can appreciate the meanings and implications of the fundamental articles of faith accurately. Conventionally, we have become accustomed to talking of things without clarifying their meanings and definitions. However, once we have clarified the meanings and definitions of the articles of faith, we will realise how inaccurate our understanding has been.

It is a strange world! We converse effortlessly, and no one truly understands what the other is saying. If we were to analyse some of our conversations, we would conclude that each one of us is speaking in a personal language. The statement, “Islam is a complete religion” is one such instance. No one understands this statement as another understands it because no one understands the word “Islam” as another person understands it, and no one understands the word “complete” as the other. However, our assumption is that the other’s understanding is the same as mine. Clearly, this can be hugely problematic when it comes to the articles of faith because they govern our lives and we use them to judge other humans as “good” or “bad”. Therefore, there is a need to clarify the words and language of the articles of faith.

Since the khilāfa of Allah embraces humanity at large, we have to clarify the language of theology. The articles of faith must be comprehensive enough to allow humanity to swiftly and steadily advance to the purpose of its creation. The articles of faith cannot be restrictive or condemnatory of the creatures of God in the name of God. Thus, any form of negativity towards humanity will squarely be down to the misinterpretation of the articles of faith.

Once we have ascertained the validity and meanings of the articles of faith from their sources, then we will be able to refine our thinking and be directed properly. Now there are many secondary beliefs (or non-fundamental theological doctrines) that cannot be proven rationally. These beliefs are derived from the Quran and the statements of the blessed Prophet. Once we verify that the Prophet is indeed a truthful prophet and the Quran is indeed the communication of God, then we can derive all of the secondary beliefs from these sources. When we examine these secondary beliefs, we find that many are ambiguous and cannot be grasped by reason. This does not pose a problem as long as they are in line with the fundamental articles of faith and are not counterproductive.

The rational understanding of the articles of faith is insufficient in itself to actualise our potential as the khulafāʾ of Allah because it is incapable of refining the moral and spiritual levels of the mind and soul. Therefore, it is necessary to have an inner commitment to what we have understood rationally. In other words, in addition to objectively understanding the articles of faith, there has to be an individual and personal attachment to them. We can demonstrate this point with the most fundamental of all the articles, namely the existence of God: The mere statement “I believe in Allah” would bring an individual within the folds of faith. Beyond this, the individual can go through a process of rational deduction and then state, “I have proven that Allah exists”. However, there is a level that is higher than the rational understanding, and that is when the individual develops a personal relation with Allah. Then they can state, “I relate to Allah”. When we deduce that there is a God, then the next step is for the heart to find God internally; and when the heart finds God, then it becomes invested in God. That constitutes the intimate part of khilāfa.

Having stated this, we must remind ourselves that Allah is very kind and forgoes our inadequacies and limitations at the level of personal commitment to Him provided we do no harm to others. The Prophet said, “Say, ‘Lā ilāha illa Llāh’ and you will be successful.” Some people very simplistically repeat the phrase “Lā ilāha illa Llāh” and think that Allah accepts that and grants them salvation.

Then there is someone who has rationally deduced that there is no god but Allah, and then wishes to believe in it. That person's growth process is more accelerated, and their salvation is truer than the former type of believer. Finally, there is the person who says the phrase "Lā ilāha illa Llāh" with a rationally accurate understanding of what he is saying, and after that, he wholesomely gives himself over to Allah. There is a huge difference between the three: the first has mere salvation; the second may become the greatest theologian the world has ever seen; but the third becomes a grand humanitarian for whom religion is a means to embrace humanity in its entirety.

To conclude: Our discussions over the next ten nights will critically analyse the articles of faith in order to ensure that their meanings and implications are in line with the human stewardship (khilāfa) of God on this earth. Our basic presumption throughout the discussions is that the articles have to be liberating and productive; in other words, they have to be in line with human nature. After every discussion, we will see – God-willing – that each article is actively encouraging us (as individuals and collectives) to evolve towards God and contribute positively to the growth of the human family and the realisation of its Godly-objective.

Night Two

Principles of Faith (īmān) and Disbelief (kufr)

We initiated a discussion on the necessity of understanding the articles of faith and appreciating them accurately. This is needed in order to gain a proper perspective on life and to attain the purpose for which we are placed on this earth. The verse, “He is the One Who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the righteous religion so that it may prevail upon all of religion” (9:33) appears to be saying that Islam – that is, the real Islam of the Prophet – is the religion that will prevail over all other religions. This verse does not state that all religions will convert to Islam, but that it will “prevail” over all of religion. This means that Islam will confirm and accommodate all the other religions and ensure that they are meaningfully directed to the purpose for which we are created. However, there will always be a state of plurality and variety within humanity.

To illustrate this last point, imagine that everyone had accepted Imam Ali as the first Imam and the first Caliph after the blessed Prophet. Would there not have been any differences amongst the Muslims subsequently? We seem to have this naïve idea that if everyone had accepted Imam Ali as the first Caliph, then there would not have been any differences or sects within Islam. However, this is a false notion because we find variation even amongst the people who consider Imam Ali to have been the most eligible for the office of the caliphate. We know from history that a group of people accepted Imam Ali as the first Imam; however, by the time of the seventh Imam, there were three main groups: the Ismaili, the Zaidi and those who would become the Ithna Ashari. We cannot rid the human community of its plurality. Variety is an absolute norm of existence. The understanding of what constitutes the truth, and the individual’s commitment to it, is subjective to a great degree. I do not want to go into the philosophical basis of this but in brief, individuality yields subjectivity and variety.

The meaning of the verse, “He is the One Who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the righteous religion so that it may prevail upon all of religion” is that Islam, in its most glorious sense, will allow humanity in all of its variety and plurality to grow wholesomely. This is supported by the eschatological literature that states that the Mahdi will rule over the people of the Gospel with the Gospel, the people of the Torah with the Torah, and so on. Variety will persist, and Islam will be the mechanism that brings this variety to the fullest of its beauty and potential. In other words, Islam will be the apparatus that allows the khilāfa of Allah to display itself in the most glorious form on the face of the earth.

With this in mind, let us talk about the articles of faith. There are three distinct levels of the articles of faith: the first level pertains to the essential article of salvation; the second pertains to the articles that allow for the plurality of faiths; and the third pertains to the articles of particular faiths. The first level is just one article of faith that an individual must hold on to and live by in order to qualify for salvation. The Quran narrates the “exclusivist” claim to salvation espoused by the Jews and Christians of Medina: “Nobody will enter paradise except for the one who is a Jew or Christian.” The Quran’s response is, “This is their own wishful thinking. O Prophet say, ‘Produce your evidence if you are telling the truth.’” Then Allah says, “In fact, all who direct themselves wholly to God and do good will have their reward with their Lord: No fear shall befall them, nor will they grieve.” (2:111–112) Thus, the mere belief in the truth of a particular religion does not guarantee salvation at all according to the Quran; rather, salvation is guaranteed to anyone who surrenders to God and performs good deeds irrespective of whether they belong to a formal religion or not. Thus, we extrapolate from this that the belief in God together with the performance of good deeds constitutes the minimum article of salvation.

In addition to this, the Quran supplies us with the articles of salvation that are common to all of the people of the Abrahamic faiths. This is the second level of the articles of faith. Allah states twice in the Quran with a slight variation, “Indeed the people who bring faith (Muslims), the Jews, the Christians and the Sabians, whoever amongst them believes in Allah and the Last Day, and does righteous deeds, they will have no fear and they will have their reward with their Lord.” (2:62, 5:69) Here, there is an additional requirement of believing in the Day of Judgement alongside the belief in God and the practical aspect of performing righteous deeds.

The last level of the articles of faith are those fundamental beliefs that an individual must hold in order to classify as a member of a particular faith. The articles of formal “Islam” – that is, those articles a person must believe in to classify as a Muslim – are the beliefs in Allah, the Final Day and the prophethood of the blessed Prophet Muhammad. Similarly, a person believing in God, the Hereafter and the prophethood of the Prophet Isa classifies as a Christian, and a person believing in God, the Hereafter and the prophethood of the Prophet Musa classifies as a Jew.

The wholesome surrender to God is the criterion for salvation. From this, we deduce that the belief in God is the minimum article of faith required for salvation. The second level of the articles of faith, which are common to all of the Abrahamic faiths, has another fundamental article that assists salvation: the belief in the Final Day. However, the two verses from which we deduce these two levels of articles also emphasise the necessity of a practical and subjective element for salvation: the first mentions “doing good” (iḥsān), and the second mentions “righteous deeds” (sing. ʿamal ṣāliḥ). Both of these phrases refer to actions that pertain to the heart; hence, they are referring to actions that are subjective or “inner”. For instance, the Quran mentions the effect of prayers that results when prayers are performed with such a subjective or inner action; one effect of the prayer is that it wards off that which is reprehensible and unchaste from the individual. This effect is not the result of the formalistic performance of prayers, rather it is caused by the devotee’s internal interaction during the prayers.

A person can perform prostrations, but that may not prevent him from doing wrong. Look at the people who killed Imam Husayn. They were people who prayed. The person who slayed Imam Ali was a renowned reciter of the Quran. The formal prayer in itself does not constitute “the righteous deed”. That which a person becomes through the act of prayer constitutes “the good deed”. At that level, ʿamal ṣāliḥ and iḥsān go beyond the rational and objective understanding of God and the Day of Judgement; thus, they are subjective because they pertain to how the devotee relates to God personally and what the devotee becomes through his or her devotion to God. Ultimately, it is this that grants us salvation.

For a person to belong to the Shia Ithna Ashari faith, they must believe in the twelve Imams and the notion of divine justice (ʿadāla), in addition to the beliefs in Allah, the Last Day and the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad. To recap: The minimum article of faith is believing in Allah, and – through it –

incessantly performing good deeds. The articles of faith common to all of the Abrahamic faiths are the beliefs in God and the Last Day, and – through them – incessantly performing righteous deeds. The articles of faith of the Muslims are the beliefs in Allah, the Last Day and the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad, and – through them – incessantly performing righteous deeds. Finally, the articles of faith of the Shia are the beliefs in Allah, divine justice, the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams and the Last Day, and – through them – incessantly performing righteous deeds.

Whatever is inconsistent with this is classified as kufr (disbelief). Therefore, a person who does not believe in God is a kāfir (disbeliever). On the other hand, a person who believes in God and the prophets but does not believe in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad is classified as a kāfir kitābī (disbeliever of the Book). This notion predominantly refers to the Jews and Christians who believe in God, the former scriptures and the past prophets but do not believe in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad. It should be noted that a person who does not believe in God is sometimes termed as a kāfir ghayr kitābī (a disbeliever not belonging to the Book) when classified in contrast to the notion of kāfir kitābī.

The term kāfir has the negative connotation of damnation in the Muslim mindset. It carries the idea of one being at war with God and at odds with everything that is moral and virtuous. This is problematic since it imposes an immediate bias against anyone who is classified as a kāfir. It is inconsistent with the idea of human khilāfa which embraces all regardless of their persuasions, and it goes against the compassionate attitude of the blessed Prophet towards the Meccans. It is especially problematic in our contemporary pluralistic setting in which the non-Muslims are generally moral and virtuous people.

In order to get a clearer understanding of what the term kāfir means, we need to look at its root word kufr, and the utility of the word kāfir within the Quran. Kufr literally means to conceal or to deny. Notionally, it encompasses all instances of denial: knowing and inadvertent. Therefore, the term kāfir, which is the active participle of kufr, denotes one who knowingly or inadvertently conceals or denies. According to this dictionary definition, anyone who denies the existence of God or His Messenger classifies as a kāfir.

Now in terms of the utility of the word kāfir in the Quran, God states that Iblis refused to prostrate before Adam and boasted of his superiority, and hence he

became one of the kāfir. (2:34) However, Iblis neither denied the existence of God nor the unity of God. In fact, he even acknowledged the Last Day by directly asking God to grant him respite till the Day of Resurrection, and yet Allah declared Iblis as a kāfir. The kufr displayed by Iblis is his denial of the authority of God; he upheld his ego beyond the authority of God. Thus, kufr here is the denial of devotion to Allah. It neither means nor refers to the formalistic denial of God. Kufr or kāfir – in the case of Iblis – means the rejection of God's command and His authority.

In Sūra al-Kāfirūn it says:

Say O disbelievers, 'I do not worship what you worship. You do not worship what I worship. I will never worship what you worship. You will never worship what I worship. You have your religion and I have mine'. (109:1–6)

The word kāfir is not being used in the meaning of the one who denies God. It is being used to describe somebody who knowingly subscribes to an inaccurate notion of God. We see this again: "Those people who say that God is the third of three are defying the truth (committing kufr). There is only One God. If they persist in what they are saying, then a painful punishment will afflict those of them who persist." (5:73) Here, this notion of the trinity is declared as an act of kufr. They believe in God, but they are saying that God is one of three. Allah declares this understanding as an act of kufr.

A proper analysis of the verses reveals a distinction between kufr and kāfir. A person can be performing an act of kufr and yet not qualify as a kāfir. Take the example of the Jews and Christians. They are termed ahl al-kitāb (the People of the Book) in the Quran. The latter are not called kāfir despite their belief in the notion of the trinity, which the Quran deems as kufr. It is as if Allah is saying to a group of naïve people who believe that they are worshipping One God that their notion of the trinity is inconsistent with the notion of the unity of God and is therefore a form of kufr. However, that does not mean that they can be termed kāfir in the sense of knowingly denying the unity of God. At most, it can be said that they are uncritically infringing on the idea of the unity of God through their advocation of the notion of the trinity.

There are a variety of distinctions being made in the Quran. These distinctions can sharpen our thinking and attitude towards the other. Based on the above verse, it is clear that there were some Christians who were advocating the notion of the trinity at the time of revelation. However, Allah is saying that such a person is not a kāfir even though they hold an inaccurate belief that is tantamount to an act of kufr. That is all the verse is saying. It does not state that Christians are evil or that they must be condemned. On the contrary (as we stated above), Allah grants them salvation in the verse describing the articles of faith that are common to all the Abrahamic faiths. (2:62)

In contrast to this, when Allah refers to a kāfir in the Quran, He is not talking about somebody who denies God per se, rather He is talking about people who knowingly hide and conceal the truth within themselves, just as Iblis was. Iblis knew that the authority of God is final, and yet he allowed his ego to prevail over the authority of God; hence, Allah declares him a kāfir. The Meccans knew that Allah was the only God, as the verse states, “Ask them who is the Lord of the heavens and earth? They will say it is Allah.” (13:16) Their’s was a knowing denial, and hence Allah calls them kāfir. Therefore, kāfir is one who knowingly denies God or His authority.

In light of this, we ask: What is the status of a person who subscribes to God in a wrongful manner, as was the case with the Christians at the time of revelation? Do they become disbelievers? We may find many beliefs within the Muslim community that encroach upon the notion of the unity of God. Such beliefs also tantamount to acts of kufr; however, no one will say that such Muslims are disbelievers of God or His unity, as long as such beliefs are held naively and in an uncritical manner. What about the case of the person who simply does not have the intelligence to accurately understand the existence and unity of God? Would such a person classify as a kāfir? Never! Why? Because he is not concealing something that he knows. He just cannot understand the notion of the existence of God. Such a person can never be classified as a kāfir.

On the other hand, there may be a person who genuinely does not believe in the God portrayed by the Abrahamic faiths. A person who sees the suffering and evil in the world may contend, “You say that your God is all-kind, all-powerful, all-knowing, kinder than a mother and that He can do anything, and yet He allows suffering to continue! How can such a God exist? I cannot believe in such a God.” Is such a person knowingly concealing the truth that he already knows? No! He simply does not understand the problem of suffering or evil. Such a

person also does not qualify as a kāfir.

When we analyse these things accurately, we will see that the act of kufr can be tolerated by Islam to a great extent. This is because the act of kufr is part and parcel of human nature. In other words, it is part of the human condition through which we are growing. In contrast to this, the Quran applies the word kāfir only to the enemy of God. You cannot be an enemy of God until and unless you first know God, and then seek to defy Him. Therefore, a person cannot be called a kāfir until and unless it has been ascertained that they have denied or defied God despite knowing the truth of His being and unity.

The Quran states the following about hell:

It is incumbent upon Us to provide guidance. Indeed, this world and the next belong to Us. So, I warn you about the raging Fire in which none but the most wicked one will burn; the one who denied the truth and turned away. (92:12–17)

The Muslims are busy filling hell with humanity, whilst their Quran is emptying hell of humanity. How odd is this story? Imagine if we were to correct our thinking in accordance with the Quran, then we would emphatically state that no one will enter hell except the most wretched. In Sūra al-Wāqiʿa, Allah states that "the people of the right side" are those who will inherit paradise; then He says that they will comprise "a great many of those who have died, and a great many of those who are yet to come." (56:39–40) When Allah uses the phrase "a great many," can you imagine the extent to which we are talking? If we were to understand things correctly, we would never say that people such as the Jews and Christians who understand God differently to us are kāfir. In our minds, we have this bias against them, and it is based on a false understanding of kufr. It naturally creates a state of disharmony and incongruence, and a very hypocritical coexistence.

When I sit at the table with people who I believe are the enemies of my God, how can I be expected to interact with them wholesomely? The idea that they are the "bad ones" is already in my mind. However, this is not the case. This bias must be removed. It is an ungodly and an extremely unholy notion. Imagine how pretentious our interactions with our multifaith brothers and sisters would be if

we carried such attitudes. We would be bringing the following attitude to the table: “I know that I have the truth, and I know that none of you can ever give me anything of the truth because you are all wrong.” In contrast to this, if we had a refined understanding of kufr and kāfir, then at the very most we would say: “This person may be committing kufr ideologically, but he most certainly does not qualify as a kāfir. In fact, he is also eligible for salvation and paradise; for indeed, he is a good soul essentially. Thus, I can learn from his experiences and the way in which he relates to God.” Imagine how radical the transformation of humanity would be if we adopted such an attitude!

People become apprehensive that such ideas may cause Muslims to abandon their faith and convert to another religion. A Muslim will never abandon Islam and become a Christian or Jew as long as he has verified Islam rationally. This is because once you have ascertained that the blessed Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet, then you cannot choose to not know what you already know. When a Muslim becomes a Christian, they are choosing not to believe that the Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet. This would be a form of knowing denial or kufr. For example, after I have ascertained that the colour of this wall is cream, I cannot decide not to know what I already know. That is a rational impossibility.

Islam uncompromisingly preaches an extremely God-centric message. The whole theology of the Quran is based on the existence and the unity of God. Is it enough to give it lip service? Allah says, “And there are some people who say, ‘We believe in God and the Last Day’, but they are not believers. They seek to deceive God and those who believe, but they deceive only themselves whilst they perceive not.” (2:8–9) God has to be contemplated and reflected upon. No one has truly begun their journey into faith until the fundamental article of the existence of One God is realised properly. We need to understand that the belief in God and His unity is meant to liberate and transform us into godly people. It is supposed to broaden us. It is supposed to expand our intellectual horizons and make our souls virtuous. The best of people are those whose religion is the most encompassing. Their religion has taught them to help all the other creatures of God to evolve with them. The biggest person is the one who is the most charitable and forgiving, and whose mind is receptive to knowledge. Belief in this fundamental article of faith enables us to actualise the khilāfa of Allah.

Thus, it is not sufficient to say, “I believe in God because I was born in the cradle of faith.” God has to be reflected upon. That is what God expects of us. The constant emphasis in the Quran on reflection, contemplation and thinking is

precisely for this reason. Each and every one of us is supposed to take this journey into the enquiry of the existence and unity of God because it will assist us in our growth process. The prophets, Imams and saints were products of their refined understanding and personal relationship with Allah. Their rational understanding of the nature of God and their personal subjective involvement with God enabled them to grow and have a deep-rooted devotion to God.

In terms of personal salvation, God needs to be understood intimately by one and all. No two people share the same relationship with God. At that level, it is my journey – a very individualistic journey. Allah says that each of you will come to me individually just as I have sent you individually. Your truth is your truth, and my truth is my truth. I need to contemplate God and reflect upon Him in my individual capacity. You will find in the Quran that the journey of the Prophet – in one sense – was to enlighten us on our own journeys. The journey of Imam Husayn enlightens us as to what is the most befitting conduct to be adopted in our own journeys.

We need to embark upon our own personal journey. In that journey, Allah accepts us as we are and how we understand Him provided there is sincerity. We will never rid ourselves of the layers of kufr until Allah brings us to the fullness of our existence. The fact that I feel that the physician can cure me is a level of kufr insofar as it entails the denial of God's absolute authority. The fact that I can waste food is a level of kufr because it is tantamount to denying God's bounties. We will always be covered by layers of kufr until Allah brings us to a state of spiritual maturity and to that untarnished state of monotheism.

A person can believe in God by reflecting upon creation in the manner akin to the design argument, which the Quran often employs itself: "Look at how wonderfully the things of this world are arranged, how beautifully the ships sail on the ocean, and how beautifully the sun rises and sets. This cannot happen of its own accord. There must be a God." Even if a person thinks in such simplistic terms, it is perfectly fine. A person may believe in God through reflection like Ibrahim: "When he saw the star shining brightly in the sky, he said: 'This is my Lord'; and when the star faded away he exclaimed, 'I do not desire that which fades away.'" (6:76) The Prophet Ibrahim made a rational deduction in his mind: "If that star was God, then it would have to be ever-present in order to govern the world, but it has faded away and yet the world is still being governed. That star cannot be my Lord." It is a very simple and yet convincing argument, and one that is enough to set a person onto the path of finding one's true inner

relation with God.

Sometimes our notion of God is very inaccurate: We think of Him as sitting on a throne like a headmaster or policeman, and that He will take out books and tick boxes with a pen. Sometimes we think of God as a builder: He has built this world and stepped away. These are not accurate understandings of God. But as I said, even if someone has such simplistic understandings of God, it is fine, as long as they begin their own personal journey. The late Imam Khomeini used to say that when the angels come to the grave, they will not question the grey matter of the brain; rather, they will ask the heart. Even if you are the best of philosophers, when the angels ask you, "Who is your Lord?" they are not going to be concerned with your logical arguments. They want to see what is in your heart. If the heart is involved with Allah, then it will sing, "Allah is my Lord!" Imagine being on a journey without knowing Where or to Whom we are going. No wonder we are frightened of death. We do not know Where or to Whom we are going.

The best argument that I find for the existence and nature of God is the one given in the Quran: "People, it is you who stand in need of God. God needs nothing and is worthy of all praise." (35:15) Everything in existence is in a state of need. Find me anything that is not in a state of need. Nothing subsists by its own self. Nothing gives itself its subsistence. Only existence in its entirety – that fullness of beauty – exists by its own self. This is the most glorious understanding of Allah. Allah introduces Himself: "He is the first. He is the last. He is the apparent. He is the hidden." (57:3) It is nothing but the beauty of Allah that prevails. This is the best argument: "Every aspect of existence is in a state of need but existence in its entirety is in a beautiful state of needlessness." That is the most befitting way in which to understand Allah. Once this is grasped, then the heart readily yields to the beauty of God. This wholesome relationship with God allows the soul to accept the other and to meaningfully grow through them.

Now think on this verse: "O People of the Book, come to that which is common between us and you: that we do not worship other than Allah and we do not associate anything with Him."(3:64) Look at the way in which Allah talks about the People of the Book. He is saying that all of you share the same belief in One God. Therefore, they cannot be termed kāfir. It is a gross mistake to consider the Christians and Jews – who are the people of the Abrahamic faiths – as disbelievers. Islam is an agency of God that facilitates the wholesome growth of the human community in all of its variety to the status of khilāfa. This is how

comprehensive and pluralistic Islam is when we understand these articles of faith accurately. This understanding of Islam enabled the Prophet to forge an Ummah that included Jews, Christians and even certain pagans on the basis of common values and rights.

When we read the Quran, we find that there are verses that allow us to form the most comprehensive of relations with the Christians and Jews. This was the reason for the huge success of the early Muslim community. When the Muslims were in Jerusalem, they allowed the Jews and Christians to coexist with them harmoniously, whereas previously, the Christians had banished the Jews. This pluralistic community flourished under Muslim rule due to Islam's message that all of the diverse religious communities were essentially one in light of the main article of salvation: that only Allah must be worshiped.

To sum up: There is a distinction between kufr and kāfir. The act of kufr can be tolerated as long as it is due to the naivety of the people committing it; whereas kāfir is the one who has an attitude of defiance that entails concealing and opposing the truth from within. It is this attitude that qualifies a person as an enemy of God. The world might be filled with instances of kufr, but kāfir – in its true meaning – is seldom found.

Night Three

Tawḥīd and Shirk

We stated that we need to make a distinction between kufr as an act, and kāfir as somebody who is an “enemy of God”. We discussed the fact that there are different levels of kufr and that we are naturally immersed in them to some degree. Throughout the course of life, we are expected to relieve ourselves of kufr as we evolve towards Allah and assume the role of a khalīfa . In the final analysis, we came to the understanding that the condemned state of kufr is either to knowingly deny the authority of Allah, like Iblis, or to knowingly subscribe to a very inaccurate notion of God, like the disbelievers of Mecca. Therefore, reprehensible kufr is not a simple denial of God, as in the case of someone who cannot grasp the accurate notion of God; rather, it is the deliberate rejection of God after ascertaining the truth of His being.

This debate impacts our understanding of how we ought to interact with the other who does not subscribe to our notion of God: Can we tolerate the other? Can we accept the other as they are? Can we appreciate the other? Can we learn from the other? If the other, in principle, is devoted to God and His teachings, like us, but has a slightly different understanding of His being, then in that case the other is equally performing the role of a khalīfa in a positive and directed manner. Hence, we are supposed to interact genuinely and strive to attain a harmonious coexistence with the other by forging a relationship of reciprocal benefit. The Quran expects this of us and the People of the Book at the very least. The reason why it encourages spiritual and societal relations with the People of the Book only can only be because the People of the Book were present within the Medinan context. If this is the case, then the forging of such relations is not limited to the People of the Book in essence, and hence must be extended to the other faiths as well.

The following question arises at this point: Why does God grant salvation to the people of the other faiths, and why does He command us to unite with them on

the basis of a shared spirituality? As stated yesterday, the answer is that salvation, which is the wholesome surrender to Allah, is ultimately a subjective or an inner matter. It is contingent upon the individual's personal relationship with the truth. Of course, we share a common understanding of the existence of God, but the way in which we relate to that same God is individualistic. You have your God, and I have my God. The Lord of Musa is not the Lord of Ibrahim; if they were the same, then they would not be at different ranks.

The subjective component of truth refers to the relation between our subjective being and God and the growth that results from that interaction. In other words, the subjective component of truth pertains to how we are evolving internally through God. Truth is subjective in that sense. We construct rational and objective arguments for the existence and unity of God; but ultimately, how each one of us relates to God is very different, and that is how we get this beautiful plurality even within people sharing the same faith-system. To emphasise this point further, no two people will share the same paradise, and no two people will share the same hell. They are all very subjective experiences. There is no doubt that heaven and hell exist, but the way in which people will suffer and rejoice will be determined by the way they are within themselves.

Islam, as taught by the blessed Prophet, recognises and allows for the plurality of interpretations on the basis of our subjective relationship with God. Islam respects other people for their sincere pursuit of the truth. It appreciates and benefits from them, and it maintains that essentially there is no difference between any of us. We all belong to the same God. This is the hallmark of a godly religion. A successful and befitting human religion is one that has a broad worldview that is accepting and appreciative of others. Religions with a constricted outlook towards others will not flourish in a human community that is diverse by its very nature. Such religions are cultish, insular, prejudiced and discriminatory. It becomes very difficult to belong to them in our present world because they do not admit to the worth of other peoples' learnings and experiences.

There is another Muslim community near where we live. We know for a fact that they feel that we are all condemned and are going to hellfire. However, when we look at them, we say, "No, these are our brothers. They are mistaken and naïve; however, we pray that Allah gives them and us growth." What happens here is that we become bigger because we are able to embrace them. Now look at the democratic social system of Britain. It is oblivious to religious distinctions.

Instead, they operate on the basis of human rights for its citizens. Insofar as you are a human being, you are worthy of respect regardless of your faith. This is the attitude that I find to be the truest expression of a godly religion, as opposed to the discriminatory attitudes generated by certain religious interpretations. I find the former attitude more akin to the Islam of the blessed Prophet. When we look at the Quran, we find a very favourable understanding of humanity. Human beings are considered to be good and noble by their very nature. As long as humans are searching for the truth sincerely, there will be differences. Nobody can be the same. Therefore, accept the other and grow together hand in hand.

As stated, the term khilāfa (or stewardship) means to arrive at the fullness of our potential, and the Islamic teachings are supposed to direct us to that end. Our purpose is to become the stewards of God on the earth through Islam. We are to represent God as His khalīfa. The Prophet of Islam came with the Quran, and he purged a community consisting of immoral and animalistic people of their lowly tendencies. He brought them to the pedestal of fine human existence. Hence, they were able to touch the threshold of the angelic realms. The same Quran today drives the Muslim community to kill each other. The Quran that gave life to those pagans and monsters is, today, the Quran that takes away life from the finest of people. The problem is not with Islam. The problem is with the way we are. We will make Islam as narrow as we are; however, if someone is truthful, they will become as broad as Islam is.

Let us move on to the articles of faith. The acknowledgement of the existence of God is inextricably connected with the unity of God. This is as important as believing in God Himself. The only reason for Allah's insistence that we acknowledge His unity is because it is most influential in the process of becoming His khalīfa accurately. Throughout the course of life, we are being liberated of our restrictions. Disbelief in God (or in other words the prevalence of the ego beyond God) is an obstacle. Similarly, believing in a god alongside Allah is also an impediment. Allah says, "He does not forgive association with Him, but He forgives what is less than that for whoever He wills. And he who associates others with Allah has certainly fabricated a tremendous sin." (4:48) It is not that Allah does not want to forgive; rather that state is an unforgivable state. If you are not going to study, then you will not pass the exam. Your failure will not be due to the examiner not wanting you to pass, rather it will be due to you not having the capacity to pass.

When Allah introduces these articles, they are to be understood as existential

principles. Therefore, when Allah says shirk (associating partners with God) will not be forgiven, it is because shirk is an unforgivable state. The Quran supplies rational arguments for the unity of God; however, the unity of God was never meant to be simply understood rationally. The intention was for us to become monotheistic from within. This is because monotheism gives us that beautiful direction – a direction towards One God that cuts us away from all forms of distraction. The Quran points to this: “God puts forward this illustration: Can a man whose masters are several partners who are all at odds with each other be considered equal to a man who is wholly devoted to one master?” (39:29)

The blessed Prophet totally transformed his pagan community through the principle of monotheism. The Meccans used to worship multiple gods, and as a result they were very fragmented and always at odds with each other. In addition, they were extremely superstitious and lacked confidence in their abilities. The Prophet told them the truth about Allah and explained, “Allah is the only God. It is He that looks after you. He knows what is best for you. If He destines something, then nobody can do otherwise. Why don’t you liberate yourselves through the belief in the One God, for it is only He who can empower you? God has said that if you help Him, then He will help you. If you endeavour to change your affairs, then He will assist you and change them for the better.”

Monotheism brings us out of insecurity and grants us confidence through the reliance upon One God Who nurtures us through the tests of life. We lose sleep at night due to the fear of the events of the next day, and yet none of us can guarantee whether we will be alive in the morning. Allah is relieving us of these apprehensions. We are frightened at the loss of sustenance, and as a result we ruin the journey of life by being overly preoccupied with our livelihoods. At times, we are willing to bend our principles in search of sustenance, but if Allah has destined our sustenance, then why fear and have anxiety? The Prophet liberated his people from irrational fears. He refined them morally and purified them spiritually through monotheism.

When Allah is introduced as the One God in Islam, it is not simply stating the fact that God is One, rather it is meant to prompt a relation with Him at a very personal level. Hence, God is placed at the pinnacle of human aspiration. Life in its entirety is God. Beauty in its entirety is God. Mercy in its entirety is God. Forgiveness in its entirety is God. Generosity in its entirety is God. If a mother is blinded by her motherly love for her children, then she is a mere reflection of God’s parental aspect. Imagine how liberated we will become through Allah if

we can understand this! If only we could turn to Allah during the most difficult times and say, “It is Your destiny and I will accept it graciously. O Allah, because You know best, I will consider it as a sip of bitter medicine as far as You are concerned. O Allah, if I have lost my dear ones, then they belonged to You in any case and have returned to You. They were Your gifts to me to cherish for the time You allowed them to be with me.”

The belief in polytheism (the plurality of gods) stands in opposition to the unity of God or monotheism. The Quran terms it as shirk and condemns it severely as kufr. Its advocates are also declared as “the enemies of God”. However, the notion of shirk needs to be understood accurately, just like the notion of kufr. It is greatly misunderstood, which has resulted in the faithful condemning one another, as in the case of kufr. As soon as the label of shirk is attached to a person, it results in the dehumanisation of that person. First, it creates a bias in the mind that this person is an enemy of God and is condemned to hell because this person lacks any goodness in him, just like the kāfir. As soon as this bias enters our minds, our interaction with that creature of God becomes unwholesome and pretentious. Second, it carries the notion that the person is ritually unclean. How would the person we believe is a polytheist feel if we were to say to them, “You are a human being. Imam Ali says that you are equal to us in humanity but in actual fact we believe that you are filthy like a pig.” These attitudes are not warranted by the Quran, the blessed Prophet or any of the Imams. These ideas need to be discussed in order to clear our minds.

What is shirk within the Quran? On the Day of Judgement, Iblis will say to those who followed him:

Allah had promised you the promise of truth, and I promised you too, but I betrayed you. I had no authority over you except that I invited you, and you responded to me. So do not blame me but blame yourselves. I cannot be called to your aid, nor can you be called to my aid. Indeed, I deny your association of me with Allah. Indeed, for the wrongdoers is a painful punishment. (14:22)

Allah will say, “Call those people that you associated with me.” The people who were associated with Allah will cry: “We have no knowledge of this.”

Shirk in the Quran is either to say that there is another God alongside Allah, or to devote oneself to other than God in worship. So, what does it mean to associate another deity with God? It should be noted that the Quran gives salvation to the Sabians. They were monotheists in essence and believed in the past prophets; however, it seems that they also believed in lesser deities who were responsible for the creation of the universe. According to Allamah Tabatabai in his tafsīr, the belief system of the Sabians – who were being referred to by the revelation – seems most akin to the Hindu belief system. They had the notions of Ram and Sham, stars, gods, and so on. Now according to our understanding, this clearly classifies as shirk, and yet Allah neither calls them polytheists nor does He condemn them. On the contrary, Allah gives them salvation insofar as they believe in One God, the Last Day and do righteous deeds.

The Zoroastrians also believe in multiple lesser deities in addition to the One Supreme Being, and yet the blessed Prophet said, “Treat the Zoroastrians as you treat the People of the Book.” This means that they are not to be treated as polytheists. The blessed Prophet also said, “A divine book was revealed to the Zoroastrians, and prophets came to them, but they deviated subsequently.” In contrast to this, when the Quran refers to the Meccans, it is adamant that they are mushrik (those who commit shirk). Thus, we can see that the notion of shirk is multi-levelled. According to the Quran, condemnable shirk is to deliberately give the independency of lordship to other than Allah in spite of knowing that He is the One God.

To say that Lat and Uzza (the pagan idol goddesses that were worshipped as supreme deities by the Meccans during the time of revelation) are gods that can independently govern contrary to the dictates of Allah, or to worship Lat and Uzza whilst knowing the truth, would be shirk in the rightest sense. Since it is this shirk that is condemned, then all the other levels of shirk, which we all commit, is tolerated by Islam and forgiven by Allah. People who commit these other levels of shirk do not classify as mushrik. In other words, mushrik is a term given to people, like the Meccans, who knowingly ascribe equal partners to Allah, and then deliberately worship them in opposition to the teachings of Allah.

Shirk becomes conceptually problematic and condemnable when it entails knowingly giving the independency of lordship to other than Allah. At other levels, shirk is existentially problematic because it has the potential to impede

growth; however, it is not unforgiveable as long as it is not accompanied by conceptual shirk. In light of this, what is the status of the Christians who believe in the trinity, or the Jews of Medina who believed that Uzair was the son of Allah, according to the Quran? Shouldn't they be classified as "conceptual" mushriks? Why doesn't Allah call them mushrik? It is because they do not give the independency of lordship to Isa or Uzair. They understand that Allah is the only God, and that no one has any authority without Allah. As long as they have this understanding, they are not performing shirk in the formal "conceptual" sense, even though such beliefs have the potential to obstruct the growth process (and hence they do classify as "existential" shirk).

Muslim sects charge one another with shirk on the basis of certain beliefs and practices of the other. According to our broad theological understanding, such beliefs and practices do not constitute the sort of shirk that would make a person a mushrik. They do not constitute "best practice" but they are not shirk. If I say the phrase, "Gabriel assist me" with the assumption that he hears me and with the understanding that he cannot assist me independently without the consent of God, then how can that be shirk? I am not saying that it is "best practice" to say, "Gabriel assist me." If I were to say the phrase, "Ya Ali madad," then how is that shirk? I can give the following rational justification: people are not dead after martyrdom because the Quran tells us that they are alive; thus, since they are alive, I can ask them to help me. Theoretically, what is the difference between my asking them for help and my asking you for help? If I said the phrase, "Give me a glass of water" and in my mind there is this notion that you cannot act without the consent of God, then how is that shirk? Similarly, imploring Gabriel to assist through God cannot be shirk in essence.

If we define these notions accurately, then we will find that theology is very broad. It allows for the human condition to evolve gradually and slowly. Since neither Imam Ali nor Imam Sadiq employed phrases like, "Ya Muhammad madad" and "Ya Ali madad," respectively, then obviously they do not constitute best practice; however, best practice is one thing, and that which qualifies a person as a mushrik is another. We need to make such distinctions and not point fingers at others. In this way, we find that theology and the articles of faith are extremely broad, for they allow humanity to flourish from the cradle of infancy to a state of maturity. We are born into the cradle of shirk. As long as we do not knowingly associate the independency of lordship to other than Allah, then it is not the sort of shirk that qualifies a person as a mushrik.

At an existential level, we are immersed in shirk. As we grow, we purge ourselves of it. When we are young, we feel that our parents are our gods. As we grow, we know God is God. When we are young, we think and feel that our employers are sustaining us. As we grow older, we know that it is Allah Who sustains us. When we are younger, we feel that physicians cure us. As we grow older, we understand that Allah is the cure. As we grow, we become more and more liberated from shirk. However, all of these are subtle forms of shirk that are tolerated by Allah during the growth process. In fact, they necessarily have to be a part and parcel of the growth process. So shirk is very much embedded within human nature and existence. As long as it does not classify as the formalistic or “conceptual” shirk, it is tolerated.

Night Four

Tawḥīd in ʿIbāda

The article of faith that distinguishes formalistic Islam from all the other Abrahamic religions, or any other faith for that matter, is the belief in the unity of God (tawḥīd). It is the most important belief in formalistic Islam. This is because the belief in the unity of God has the potential to be extremely effective in our growth process towards Allah and in bringing us to the fruition of our existence. In fact, we have all already acknowledged the unity and oneness of God prior to taking birth. The Quran states that Allah asked, “Am I not your Lord?” We replied, “Yes.” God adds: “Lest you say to Me on the Day of Judgement that we had no knowledge of this, or that our forefathers did something and we followed them.” (7:172-3) Now you may say that I do not remember this pledge; however, it is not a question of remembering something that we have forgotten, rather it is about becoming attentive to something that is obvious.

The Prophet went to his community and gave them moral instructions: “Do not steal when you transact with people”, “Do not kill”, “Do not lie”, and so on. The Meccans said, “Yes, he is speaking the truth, and we had become mindless of it.” In other words, they were saying, “He is reminding us of the truth that we already knew.” This is why the Quran is known as a “reminder”; it is not called a reminder because it provides us with information that we have forgotten; rather it is called a reminder because it is awakening us to the obvious truth. The Quran is an awakener. Hence, “remembering” means becoming mindful of something that we have become negligent of. Therefore, when Allah says, “Am I not your Lord?”, and we answer, “Yes, You are”, it is an obvious truth that is embedded deep within us.

There are many rational arguments for the Unity of God. The most accurate argument is the one that Allah gives in the Quran: “Had there been other gods in the heavens and earth except Allah, then both the heavens and earth would be in

ruins.” (21:22) Existence in its entirety is just one existence, and the one existence is displaying its properties everywhere in a consistent manner. There is no conflict between any of the systems within the existence of Allah. Everything in the world of God grows: a foetus grows, a seed grows, galaxies grow, the earth grows, and so on. Show me one thing in which motion is arrested. Everything is moving and completing itself. It is one system, and this is what God is saying in the Quran: “There is no disharmony in the universe”, “there is one existence” and “this singular existence is abiding by the same principles”.

Let us make this point of the existence of a Singular Being that is consistently displaying itself a little clearer with the aid of the following Sufi parables: There was a group of fish. They were discussing amongst themselves and saying, “We have heard that we are created from water but we do not see water. We have heard that there is a wise fish at the end of the ocean who not only sees water but can show water to others.” As a result, they take an arduous journey to the end of the ocean. They find the wise fish and ask, “O wise one, we hear that you see the substance of life, and that you can show it. Show us water.” The wise fish replied, “Show me other than water, and then I shall show you water.” Look at the beautiful way that the Sufis depict this truth. The other example is of two people standing at the shores of the ocean. One says, “How mighty are the waves?” The other replies, “It is nothing but the ocean.” Allah introduces Himself in the same way in the Quran: “He is the First and the Last; the Outer and the Inner; He has knowledge of all things.” (57:3) There is nothing in existence but the One Singular Existence.

How beautifully Imam Husayn supplicates in Dua ʿArafah (and I am paraphrasing): “O Lord, how can one seek direction from that which is in need of You for its existence? Is it possible for anything that You have created to be more apparent than You in order for it to lead me to You? Why should I look at Your handiwork, when I see You standing before it, behind it, above it and below it?” This is how Imam Husayn sees Allah. Look at how Imam Ali describes Him: “Allah is with everything, and yet He touches nothing. He is other than everything, and yet there is no distance between Him and anything.” Imam Ali describes His unity as pervading and encompassing the entirety of existence. The entirety of existence is one existence. In that one existence there is nothing but the beauty of God. All the attributes of God are revealed through that one existence.

If we understand the unity of God accurately, then we will conclude that the

attributes of God are one with His being. When we observe existence, we see nothing but the knowledge of God, we see nothing but the life of God, and we see nothing but the ability of God. Look at existence: Every aspect of it is alive. Every aspect of it is filled with knowledge. Every aspect of it is meticulously balanced. This is the sort of unity that Allah introduces within the Quran. The purpose of this understanding of tawḥīd is to free us from all intellectual and psychological distractions. It allows us to grow and break free of the shackles that we carry in the name of other than God. It can empower us and give us the confidence to prevail over the universe as His khulafāʾ. At an emotional level, it allows us to rise above our insecurities and prevents us from falling to despicable levels.

In all honesty, our state is no different to that of the Meccans: They bowed to Lat and Uzza, and we bow to the people from whom we receive our sustenance. We hesitate to say the truth out of the fear of losing our lives. On many occasions, we give ṣadaqa (charity) just to ward off evil. We wear rings for protection. We have forgotten that the One Who has put potency in this ring is with us in any case. He has never left us. This was the message of tawḥīd in its entirety: It was meant to liberate us.

The Islamic texts inform us that the angels are the creative force of Allah. They are the ones who instil life into the foetus, fashion the human and give it death. They are the ones who bring down the rain. They make the earth produce its vegetation and its plants. The Quran talks about the meticulous workings of the angels, and yet Allah wants us to go beyond the angels and understand His tawḥīd for what it is worth. It is as if He is saying, “Cut through all the layers of the angels and see Me instead. Do not see the angels as the creative force, but see Me as the creative force.” In other words, God is the only Agent Who ordains all affairs directly or indirectly, and as such, He does not want His creatures to be reliant upon other than Him in the absolute sense. Allah is saying, “Despite the variety of agents at play within your lives, you are supposed to be directed to Me alone. I am the One doing all of these things.”

Look at how beautifully Ibrahim explains: “When I become sick, He is the One Who cures me.” (26:80) Ibrahim does not see the hand of the physician. He does not see the medicine, rather he sees God directly. It is only Allah doing this and no one else. We say to Allah, “O Lord, feed the hungry.” Allah says, “Be My hand and feed.” The person who receives the sustenance from another person will not say, “You have fed me”, rather he will say, “Alḥamdulillāh! O Allah,

you have fed me through him." This is the message of tawḥīd that Allah is imparting to us. It is the tawḥīd of Allah in existence wherein every beautiful thing that is happening is the attribute of Allah.

This leads us to the most essential feature of tawḥīd, namely the unity of ʿibāda (worship). After acknowledging that God is One, a Muslim is expected to be committed to the worship of the One God alone. This brings us to the pressing issue of the meaning of worshiping the One God. The issue of devotion is yet another theological sticking point that causes much strife within the Muslim community. A lot of the labelling and accusations of shirk and mushrik result from a lack of understanding of what constitutes worship.

In Sūra al-Yūsuf, the Prophet Yūsuf says to his father, "I saw eleven stars, the sun and moon; all prostrated before me."(12:4) Then many years later when the Prophet Yūsuf is inside his court and his father, mother and eleven brothers come and fall in prostration in front of him, he says, "O father, this is the meaning of the dream that I had, and Allah has made it come true." Now they are "prostrating" to Yūsuf! Does this count as "worshipping" Yūsuf? The Quran does not see this as shirk at all. Shirk occurs when gestures of devotion are offered with the understanding that the object of devotion is God or shares in His divinity, and hence that object has the right of being worshiped. Here, they are not prostrating to Yūsuf with the understanding that he is God, or that he has the right of being worshipped; rather, the prostration is performed as a mark of respect to Yūsuf, and hence it does not constitute shirk at all.

Think about this carefully: The Sharia of Islam prohibits the act of prostration to other than Allah because the act of prostration is a prominent extension of worship. The act of prostration has become so closely associated with devotion to Allah that its performance immediately gives us the impression that the one being prostrated to is being worshipped. I will explain this again: Prostrating to Yūsuf does not constitute shirk because the Prophet Yaʿqūb is not doing it with the belief or intention that Yūsuf is his Lord; indeed, such an intention would be problematic. However, since the actions of rukūʿ (bowing) and sajda have become so closely associated with the expression of devotion to Allah, the Sharia does not allow for their performance to other than Allah anymore. In principle, prostrating and bowing to anybody other than Allah is not shirk, as long as it is done as a gesture of reverence and without the notion of lordship or the right of devotion being attached to that entity.

After performing the ziyāra of Imam Husayn, Imam Sadiq offers two units of prayers and then supplicates, “O Allah, I have prostrated and bowed to You because prostration and bowing cannot be performed but to You.” The reason why he emphasised this was because the practice of prostrating and bowing to Allah alone (and no one else) had become firmly established in the Muslim mind by that time. Therefore, he was reminding his people not to perform them to other than God. However, prostration and bowing do not constitute worship in themselves, rather they are gestures of respect. That is why Imam Sadiq had to remind the Muslims that sajda to other than Allah is no longer allowed. This was not because prostration as a gesture of respect is a problem in itself; rather, it is problematic for the Muslim because of the sentiment that accompanies the act of prostration in the Muslim mind. So sajda on the earth can be done solely out of respect; however, a Muslim will never do sajda to other than Allah because it is concomitant with worship and devotion. But if a member of another faith is doing sajda to other than Allah without the sentiment of ʿibada, then they are not committing shirk.

Similarly, does asking from other than Allah mean that one is worshipping the other? If I were to go to the physician and ask him to cure me, then is this shirk? In response to this, it can be said that it all depends on the intention. If you feel that this person has “independency” in curing you, then in that case it is shirk. But even then, I would ask: Is it really shirk? As human beings, aren’t we doing this all the time? Isn’t this a human state that Allah forgoes? Are we that blinkered? Think about this carefully: We often go to other people and say, “Do this for me”, and in our minds, we imagine the individual in question doing those things independently. This is not shirk. It is our natural human condition. As we become more and more refined though life, we become more monotheistic and we relieve ourselves of all the veils of shirk. These are the existential levels of shirk. They classify as subtle shirk and are not the condemned forms of shirk that qualify a person as a mushrik. However, if we go to someone and say the phrase, “Do this for me because you are divine and worthy of worship and adoration”, then that would definitely classify as the shirk that is condemned.

There is a hierarchy within the existential scheme. If you were to say the phrase, “Help me” to the angels, then is this shirk? The answer is: No, it is not shirk. It is just like asking a representative of the prime minister to do something for us. In effect, we are saying to the representative, “You have independent discretion, so please do something for me through that independent discretion.” Why should this be classified as shirk? The point being made here is that the Islamic articles

of faith are meant to liberate us in a gradual manner. We cannot impose them in a way that is inconsistent with our human condition. We evolve gradually and slowly into the monotheistic message. Uncritical behaviour, as stated above, does not qualify a person as a mushrik. It is a human frailty that God forgives.

The problem with the Muslims is their labelling of each other. We label everything and each other: “This is shirk” and “He is a mushrik”. This is a sickness that we have, and it is entirely because of the ambiguity within the articles of faith. Today, we call somebody a mushrik, and tomorrow, somebody else will call us a mushrik. I used to say this in Pakistan, “You made those people kāfir; tomorrow, it’s your turn. What goes around, comes around.” Such an ignorant understanding of the message of God is ungodly, as is the arrogance that it begets. In any case, the Quran gives salvation to the very people that we are labelling as kāfir.

As stated earlier, Allah gives salvation to the Sabians in two verses:

Indeed the people who bring faith (Muslims), the Jews, the Christians and the Sabians, whoever amongst them believes in Allah and the Last Day, and does righteous deeds, they will have no fear and they will have their reward with their Lord. (2:62)

Indeed the people who bring faith (Muslims), the Jews, the Sabians and the Christians, whoever amongst them believes in Allah and the Last Day, and does righteous deeds, they will have no fear nor will they grieve. (5:69)

If anyone says, “These verses of the Quran do not mean what you are saying.” I will reply, “The Quran has 6,000 odd verses. In these limited number of verses, do you think God is going to repeat things needlessly? In these limited number of verses, He has to explain about the heavens and earth, right and wrong, spiritual connection with Allah, and the stories of the prophets. In spite of this, God states the verse twice with a slight difference in the sequence of the words ‘Sabians’ and ‘Christians’. Moreover, there are many other verses that support the same meaning. Therefore, we should be humble and accept that Allah is

giving salvation to the Sabians."

As for the polytheists of Mecca, in addition to worshipping other gods, they gave their gods independency of lordship and the right to command contrary to the command of Allah. Their gods, in opposition to Allah, condoned inhumane actions and moved them away from human values and spiritual purity. This is shirk in the proper sense. Thus, we can re-examine our present worldview and make it more compatible with the prophetic attitude by ensuring that it is as broad as the Islam of the Quran and the Prophet, which respected and accepted the Sabians and Zoroastrians.

Let us discuss the modern-day Hindus who are the most obvious example of the people we are likely to regard as polytheists and idolaters. Can Hindus be considered as mushrik? When we look at the Hindus, we find that they are not all the same. "Hinduism" is a collective term that refers to many different and distinct belief systems. If you dissect and analyse Hinduism, then you will find a group that does not worship idols. They believe that idols are not necessary as a means to God. They will state, "We are worshipping the One God Who is formless." You will find another group that believes that there is only One God and that He has several different expressions. How is this different from the Christian claim that the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are all one and yet different? If Allah tolerates such a claim of one faith group, then why can He not tolerate it of another faith group? Finally, there may be a naïve Hindu sect that takes a particular idol as god. Now if they actually consider the idol itself to be God, then this could be problematic; however, I beg to differ even here.

If you analyse the story of the mushrik of Mecca, it is obvious that they were "the enemies of God". They were not condemned because of shirk per se, rather their condemnation was due to their opposition to God. They were saying, "Our god is other than your God." Moreover, their gods ordained values that were contrary to the moral values ordained by Allah. This is why the Prophet said, "I do not worship what you worship." In contrast to the mushrik of Mecca, the modern-day Hindus say, "We worship the same God as you do. Our God does not tell us to exploit, cheat, lie, or kill. Our God does not condone immorality. Our gods teach us what your God teaches you."

An "enemy" of God is one who advocates and projects a system that is contrary to the one that God Almighty wants; that is, he establishes systems that impede growth. In contrast to this, God wants humanity to establish systems that are

most conducive to growth. For a system to be godly, it must be a just social order – one that neither exploits nor tyrannises. An enemy of God will justify the contrary; he will justify exploitation and argue that there ought to be social inequality. Recall how the mushrikūn of Mecca used to justify the burial of their live daughters by invoking the name of God. This is why the Quran says, “How can Allah ordain that which is indecent and reprehensible?” They used to say, “God ordains this”, and Allah responds, “You are worshipping another God altogether.” When we look at the modern day Hindus (regardless of the variety of their belief systems), they all state that God ordains decency and righteousness. Therefore, the most we can say about today’s idolaters is that they are mushrik in terms of their idolatry; however, we definitely cannot say that they are like the Meccan mushriks of the Quran. A different attitude needs to be adopted towards them.

With such deliberations, we begin to see that Allah has given us very broad principles of faith in order for us to accommodate the world in its entirety and thereby to allow it to grow properly. The world needs a comprehensive binding system. This comprehensive binding system is Islam or “God-centricity” in today’s parlance. It is a beautiful system that allows for growth through tolerance, acceptance and beautiful harmony. I will not hesitate in saying this: Many of the practices that the Hindus perform – and I ask for forgiveness before saying this – are very wasteful. The incessant rituals are distracting. We need to move on, grow, work and attend to our lives. Allah says that “working” in itself is worship. You do not need to be inside the mosque or on a prayer mat in order to be worshiping. The real worship begins when you start to engage with life fruitfully.

There is a story in which the companions came to the blessed Prophet and said, “There is a great devotee of God in our camp.” The Prophet asked, “What does he do?” They said, “He is engaged in constant worship on his prayer mat.” The Prophet asked, “Who attends to his needs – who cooks and cleans for him?” They replied, “Well we do that, O Prophet. Since he is worshipping Allah so much, it is an honour for us. We provide him with food, and we clean up after him”. The Prophet said, “You are greater devotees than he is.” So, I will say to my Hindu brothers and sisters, “With all due respect, maybe you need to look into your religion.” However, as soon as I say this, the finger points back and I have to ask myself, “How much of your religion is productive? How much of your time is spent going and sitting inside the mosque? How much of your time is spent celebrating and lamenting? How many of your days are spent in

ceremonies?" Then I am forced to introspect as well. Of course, this is not as problematic as shirk but it is distracting nonetheless.

When we examine shirk at a very intimate level, we find that it is not the outer proclamation of independent lordship to other than God at all, rather it is the inner self proclaiming itself as an independent lord – it is the inner self becoming the other God. The Quran states, "Have you seen the one who takes his desires as his God." I am the other God, and therefore it is my ego that must go before I can arrive at the unity of God devotionally. This is the whole message of the unity of Allah: You are the point of shirk, and you are in an existential form of shirk. As you grow and evolve, you begin to relieve yourself of this shirk and surrender to Allah in the noblest of ways.

I urge you to think about this: What did Iblis do? Iblis allowed his ego to prevail beyond the state of surrender to God. God is asking him, "You say that you are devoted to Me and worship none but Me; but if you are worshipping Me, and I am commanding you to prostrate before Adam for My sake, then how can you refuse?" What does the refusal of Iblis signify? He is giving preference to his own self over God's command. This is the point of shirk. Since he did not prostrate, the Iblis within us will not relent. When we uphold ourselves above God, we commit shirk, which then leads to kufr – the denial of God's authority. The root of both is our uncontrolled ego. It is only through a lifelong struggle that we begin to relent.

In conclusion, the discussion we previously conducted with regard to the idea of kufr, and the distinction we made therein between an act of kufr and a kāfir, also applies to the idea of shirk. Uncritical devotion to other than Allah is a form of "existential" shirk and not "conceptual" shirk, and hence it does not qualify an individual as a mushrik. A mushrik, like the kāfir, is one who knowingly gives the independency of lordship to other than God and deliberately opposes Him. Anything less than this does not classify as "conceptual" shirk, which is condemned.

Night Five

Divine Justice (ʿadāla)

We stated that God is One and that His being is all-prevalent. The reason for the necessity of believing in the unity of God is our existential need of liberation, which is contingent upon us being directed solely to God. Allah commands us to worship only Him, and it is only through a directed submission to the One God that we melt away and become like Him. Our mission on this earth is to be the khalīfa of Allah. Whether we like it or not, we are going to display the khilāfa of Allah because we have been created in the image of God. The image of God is comprised of all of the beautiful qualities of God: God is the Creator, Sustainer, Giver of life, the One Who wards away detriment and the One Who brings goodness. We are created with that nature, and we will inevitably display that nature through our humanity. We are constantly growing into the unity of God and His all-embracing being. Even if something seems impossible, it is not beyond God. As Imam Husayn supplicates, “O Lord, how can I stand defeated when You overpower every situation?” What a statement! Imam Husayn is saying that even if the whole army is against me, how can I admit to defeat when You are my aid?

The discussions on the unity of God and the unity of His attributes are some of the most demanding debates for the intellect. Imam Ali teaches us that to understand God, we must negate the opposites or contraries of His attributes. This is because we cannot conceptualise the “life” or “knowledge” of Allah. As soon as we think or make the statement, “Allah is alive” we confine Allah to a limited notion of life. Therefore, the Imam instructs that we should negate any lack or deficiency from Allah. For instance, we should state, “Allah is not dead”, or, “Allah is not ignorant”. Thus, that which is the opposite of “not being dead” or “not being ignorant” would be the attribute of God. Allah’s attributes are to be understood through their contraries.

In discussing the unity of God and His attributes, we come to the notion of

justice. When the notion of justice is applied to the acts of God, it is termed as "divine justice" (ʿadāla). In Islam, we talk about "a just socio-economic order" and "a just Sharia system". Allah says, "God commands justice, doing good, and generosity towards relatives; and He forbids what is shameful, blameworthy and oppressive." (16:90) The quality or state of justice exists or is realised when everything receives its proper due and proper measure. The Quran informs us that everything is created in a proper measure, or that things descend in measured quantities. What we are saying is that justice is about "balance", as Allah states, "He placed the scales; do not transgress the scales." (55:7–8)

The entire outlook of Islam is one of balance; for instance, balance between this world and the hereafter, and balance between the body and spirit. According to this understanding, God is just because everything is given its proper due and things are maintained in a proper balance. Thus, when we look at justice as a precept that governs human life (that is, when we look at the notion of justice as we commonly understand and apply the term), it ought to be appreciated in its existential capacity. This world is in a fine state of balance, and this beautiful balance allows the world to evolve and grow. Similarly, the human condition is in need of a balanced state between the mind and body, between the rights of God and the rights of humans, between the individual and family, between the family and community, between one religion and the other religions, and so on and so forth.

Historically, divine justice was never regarded as an essential article of faith because it is one of the divine attributes of God, and hence it is included in the article of the unity (tawḥīd) of His attributes. In the first centuries after the demise of the blessed Prophet, there was a huge debate between the Muslim theologians on the nature of divine justice. A group of scholars advocated that Allah can forgive and punish whoever He wants. Another group said that Allah only punishes the evil doer, and He only forgives those who sincerely repent. The first group said that Allah is the sole creator of everything, and so all acts, which include human action, come from Allah. The implication of this is that human beings have no free will as such. The second group reasoned that if every act comes from Allah and there is no free will, then the notions of God's punishment and reward do not make any sense. This is because God would be punishing and rewarding individuals in the hereafter on the basis of actions that they had no control over.

This led to the discussion of whether actions are "good" or "bad" in themselves

or not. The first group of theologians stated that actions are only good or bad because Allah declares them as such. The other group was unsatisfied with this position, and so they questioned, “How can murder not be wrong in itself? Is a particular type of action ‘bad’ only because Allah has declared it as ‘bad’ through revelation?” Thus, they maintained that Allah only declares actions as “good” or “bad” through revelation because they are “good” or “bad” in themselves in relation to the human being. These were the historical debates that influenced the Shia who eventually adopted “divine justice” as an article of faith; hence, the Shia are also known as the ʿadliyya – the people of justice.

It should be noted that both of the positions are reconcilable within the existential framework. When the first group said that a thing is “good” only because God declares it as such, this is true because God’s word is creative, and so it gives things their existences and properties. The other group is also right in maintaining that God only declares things as “good” and “bad” in revelation because they are “good” and “bad” in themselves. The first group is talking about the goodness and badness of things from an ontological perspective, whilst the other group is talking about them from an epistemological one.

When we talk of divine justice, we cannot restrict God. God cannot be confined to the notion of justice because that would deprive Him of His right and limit Him. Divine justice does not mean that God is restricted in what He can and cannot do; rather, He stipulates the terms of justice for us to govern ourselves by, but He Himself is not bound by those terms. That being said, God can curtail His own right. As Allah says, “That is on account of what you stored up for yourselves with your own hands: God is never unjust to His servants.” (3:182) Our understanding of the justice of God is that He has committed Himself to not oppress in spite of it being His prerogative to do whatever He wants. Moreover, His choosing not to be oppressive also impacts our outlook on human justice and the way we organise ourselves.

For Muslims, justice within the human context means to act in accordance with the system of rights and duties of the Sharia. However, this system of rights and duties was formulated in a particular context; that is, it was formulated in accordance with what was “just” during the time of revelation. The human community has moved on since then, and what was “just” then may not be “just” in the contemporary world. Therefore, justice is an existential principle of balance that must be continuously reasserted in the human context, which is in a constant state of flux due to the evolutionary growth of the human community.

As such, when we designate the norms that were “just” in a particular time and place as “the fixed standards of justice” for all times and places (in a world where existential aptitudes and capacities are constantly changing), it will inevitably result in imbalance and injustice. Hence, there cannot be any “fixed standards of justice”.

This means that we can only understand what is just in contrast to something that is unjust. When we see instances of injustice (or imbalance), and then try to rectify the injustice by giving things their proper due, that is what constitutes justice (or balance). Accordingly, we can ask whether it is unjust for a woman to receive half the share of inheritance of a man in today’s contexts in which they are equal contributors, and they no longer have the right to be provided for by the male members of their families? If it is an eternal just law of the Quran, then why does it appear to be unjust? What is “just” today may not be “just” tomorrow, and that is the problem at hand. In the Prophet’s society, slavery was allowed in accordance with the justice of the time. Today however, slavery is inconceivable since it is inconsistent with justice. In reality, Allah not only commands justice but also generosity (iḥsān). “God commands justice, doing good, and generosity towards relatives; and He forbids what is shameful, blameworthy and oppressive. He teaches you so that you may take heed.” (16:90) Since we cannot properly conceive of justice, we always have to go beyond what is required to ensure that we are not committing any injustice. This is the meaning of iḥsān: to give beyond the worth. The word iḥsān is derived from the word haṣn, which means to beautify things. In the realm of human actions, iḥsān means to give more than what is expected, or more than what is deserved.

When the Prophet was asked, “What is iḥsān?”, he said, “It is to worship Allah as if you see Allah, and if you don’t see Allah, then to know that Allah sees you.” When we look closely at the notion of iḥsān in Islam as taught by the Prophet and practiced by the Imams, it means to beautifully make every act into a godly act. Therefore, when we are wronged, our response ought to be one that a khalīfa of Allah would offer in place of Allah. The khalīfa of Allah is supposed to offer a response of iḥsān, and not what the wrongdoer deserves. Does Allah not give us far more than what we deserve? How much do we deserve of the blessings and mercy of Allah?

Thus, iḥsān is an existential principle. This means that it has to be a fundamental principle of any Islamic legal code. We say that a criminal has to be punished,

but what is the objective of such a notion of justice? Is it the reformation of that criminal and the growth of humanity? If it is reformation, then we have to rethink whether punishment is the most befitting form of justice. The strict notion of justice of “an eye for an eye” or “a life for a life” is not an absolute rule. Allah says that if somebody forgives another, then it must be implemented, and if they demand recompense after forgiving the other, then they become oppressive people. In the Quran, Allah makes a provision for forgiveness; He emphasises that it is better to forgive than to seek justice. So, if there is a criminal who can be reformed by humane and compassionate means, then what is the point of subjecting them to draconian punishments? We hear that someone had committed adultery in the time of the Prophet, and that they were persuaded by a friend to go and confess to the Prophet. After the punishment was meted, the blessed Prophet questioned the man’s friend, “Why did you ask him to confess? Allah would have forgiven him, and he would have lived to do good.”

Allah says in the Quran, “Whoever has done a good deed will receive ten times the like to his credit, but whoever has done a bad deed will be repaid with its equivalent only; they will not be wronged.” (6:160) Allah is saying that He will not oppress anyone by punishing them more than they deserve, but if someone does good, then He will multiply their reward. God’s action of multiplying the reward does not qualify as an instance of justice by any definition of justice. His action goes beyond justice to an even better state. This is the meaning of iḥsān. A parent will always give to her child regardless of the worthiness of the child because it pleases the parent to see her child happy. Here, the parent goes well beyond the precept of justice, and that is the most befitting and natural attitude for a parent to have. This is the sort of confidence that Allah instils in us. He says, “You don’t have any worth but I will bestow favours upon you. You are My creation. If you succeed, then that is most pleasing to Me.”

There is a narration from Imam Ali that when the book of deeds will be opened on the Day of Judgement, the faithful will look inside it and find no trace of evil. Out of embarrassment, the believer will look towards the throne of God, and his heart will cry out, “O Allah, You know how evil I have been!” Allah will respond: “My sense of dignity does not allow Me to expose you.” Imam Ali supplicates in Dua Kumayl, “Forgive me those sins which You have concealed.” If we can understand that the Islamic legal system is supposed to operate on the basis of iḥsān and reformation, then we will no longer be the people that we are today. We would no longer be motivated to do good out of the fear of hell only. We would no longer condemn a person to hell the moment they do something

wrong. Islam is all about the utmost benevolence, kindness and goodness.

When the Prophet came, he did nothing but iḥsān. The people who buried their infant daughters alive were given a chance to start afresh, and after that, those very people became the best of men. I always say that my job is merely to curse the ISIS and condemn them to the pits of hell. In contrast to this, the Prophet's attitude would be to transform such individuals into the finest of humankind. That is the difference between us. The Prophet comes to monsters and makes them into the best of people, whereas people like me come to fine humans, and we make them into monsters. This is because we have not understood Islam correctly.

If we understood the importance of iḥsān, we would be the people who bring about the khilāfa of Allah by allowing ourselves and others to grow through forgiveness. The threat of punishment in the Quran is given only to bring out the best in us. Why do we threaten our children: "If you do this, then I will cut your allowances", "If you do this, then I will not let you watch television", or "If you do this, then I will ground you". Why do we say this? Is it because we hate our children? Or is it because we love them and want the best for them? Within this notion of divine justice is mercy and the want of growth. A father does not scold his child due to his desire to uphold justice for its own sake, rather it is a sign of kindness. This is the way we are supposed to understand Allah – not in the sense of the strictness of justice, but in the sense of iḥsān.

On a concluding note, Allah has absolute authority to do as He wills due to His ownership of the entirety of existence. He will not be questioned about His actions, as the Quran affirms. Therefore, when the Quran says that God can guide and misguide whomsoever He wants, we have to acknowledge it at face value without making justifications for God. Of course, the Quran qualifies that God does not misguide except the corrupt of heart, and He guides those who turn to Him. However, to feel that God will not misguide me because I am not corrupt is a form of arrogance and a claim of right upon God. This is inconsistent with the humility required in devotion to God. A soul is only able to grow into godliness through humility to God. The most appropriate and accurate attitude is to always be humbled before God, acknowledging that He has the full right and ability to do whatever He wills. The same is the case with verses that state, "To Allah belongs whatever is within the heavens and the earth; He will forgive whoever He wants and punish whoever He wants." A devotee must always acknowledge that he is at the absolute mercy of God and that he has no rights or

claims over God. If God chooses to forgive all the wrongs that have been done to us, then we ought to feel a sense of joy, since our beloved has taken charge of our affairs and done what is best. At times, our theological treatment of the notion of justice and the right of God fills the souls with arrogance that leads us away from God.

Night Six

The Quran

The Quran is a communication from God through the Prophet to humankind on how to bring about a godly community. The Quran convinces us of its divine origin through its prophecies, eloquence and accurate portrayal of the workings of nature, and its moral and spiritual teachings. Having said this, we have some very naïve assumptions about the Quran, and it is these assumptions that we need to address. There are three main assumptions that we have about the Quran: firstly, it is eternal and absolute; secondly, it is comprehensive and contains all things; and thirdly, it applies in its literal sense to everyone universally and without any distinction.

Now, to accept these assumptions is to accept that ISIS are not wrong in taking slaves. This is because the Quran has not banned slavery, and in fact there are verses that implicitly condone it. Thus, on the basis of these assumptions, those verses are eternal, universally applicable to all regions, and are to be understood literally. This would also apply to the verses stating that two female witnesses are equivalent to one male witness, and that the son's inheritance has to be greater than the daughter's. If we accept these assumptions, then we will also be faced with the problems of concubinage and the decapitation of criminals' limbs. Obviously, taking such norms of the Quran literally forces us back into a primitive state – a state that we are appalled by and condemn. We condemn what the ISIS are doing, but they say, "It is in the Quran."

These assumptions about the glorious Quran are forcing the Muslim into a state of life that is totally inconsistent with what they know to be the truth. I agree that the Quran is eternal. The Quran is most definitely absolute and eternal. The only thing that is not understood is that the Quran is also contextual. This is what the Muslims need to understand – the context of the Quran. If we were to understand that the Quran is eternal in essence but temporal in its form (or that it is absolute in essence but relative in its application), then it would make sense in every era.

The human community is on an evolutionary track that is in line with existential growth. We have been evolving and growing from the time of Adam until now. We have continued to acquire a greater sophistication that is akin to the evolutionary growth of a child. A child grows from the cradle of infancy to the maturity of adulthood. Throughout, the child is taught the salient principles of life that are formulated differently at different stages of its growth. We say to a child, “Don’t lie.” The principle, “Don’t lie”, will remain the truth until the end of its life; however, what constitutes a lie, and in what situations it is acceptable, changes with the moral growth of the individual. We will tell a child to pray to Allah. That will remain the truth, but how to pray will keep on changing as the child progresses: at first, we tell a child to make a little prayer before going to bed; then, to read a little of the Quran; gradually, this leads to the performance of the five daily prayers; and finally, the individual begins to perform the supererogatory prayers. The forms will change, but prayer in the sense of relating to God will never change. The salient, eternal truths remain the same, but the way in which they are formulated will change in accordance with the evolutionary trend of existential growth.

In the previous lecture series, we stated that there is a need to make a distinction between the Quran and the Book. We will develop our understanding of that discussion here due to its huge relevance to the present discussion. The Quran mentions “kitāb” – the Book – prominently: “We gave Musa the Book”, “We gave Isa the Book”, and “We gave you, O Muhammad, the Book”. What is the Book? The Quran emphasises that the Book came as the Torah, Gospel and Quran. It is talking about one salient reality known as kitāb, which is expressing itself time and again as different books.

Now the Book of Musa did not prescribe the fasts of Ramadan, the five daily prayers or the pilgrimage to the house of God, whereas the Book of the blessed Prophet prescribes the fasts, five prayers, and pilgrimage. It says in the Quran: “To every religion we have given rites and ceremonies which they must perform.” (22:67) Here, Allah is saying, “I gave them their Sharia, and I am giving you your Sharia. I gave them their rituals, and I am giving you your rituals.” So here we ask: What is changing? Why has the Book been revealed in so many different ways? Think about this carefully: What changed from the time of Musa to the time of Isa? Did lying become permissible? Did cheating become permissible? Did killing become permissible? Did ungodliness become permissible? No. Both Musa and Isa said the same thing regarding all of these, as did the final Prophet.

The salient truths have always been the same: “Do not cheat”, “Do not lie”, “Do not kill”, “Do not plunder”, “Do not exploit the other”, “Be charitable”, “Be forgiving”, “Abide by the precept of justice”, and “Create a virtuous society”. All of the beautiful godly sentiments are carried forward in every revelation. Therefore, the change is in how the salient truths are packaged for the individual, family and society of differing contexts. The Torah had the punishment of stoning to death, but by the time of Isa, he dissuaded people from it. When a woman who was guilty of fornication was brought to Isa, he dissuaded the people from killing her by saying, “Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone.” The Quran omits stoning to death altogether. As the human community matured, those salient truths had to be packaged accordingly. We can scold a child, but we will not demean a grown man by telling him off. Instead, we will reason with him. In the time of Musa, people were stoned to death, but by the time of Prophet, he understood that it was no longer appropriate or necessary.

The salient principles have remained the same throughout. What has changed is how they are packaged. That is what we are not understanding. The essential part is constant but the formulation of the essential principle changes from one era to the other. Let me clarify: In the Quran, certain verses cancel out other verses. This process is known as abrogation. If these verses are eternal and universally applicable everywhere, then why is God cancelling out one verse with the other verse, and why is He keeping both as part of the Quran? By doing this, does it mean that both of the verses are eternal and universal, and at the same time one is cancelling out the other? How do we make sense of this? We can only make sense of it within the evolutionary framework: A particular law was needed at a particular time, and as the community matured, another level of law came and abrogated the first one. The abrogated verse is still eternal in essence (that is, it is eternal in its esoteric sense), and hence it is part of the Quran, but its form has been nullified.

To further clarify the distinction between the Book and the Quran, consider this verse: “It is a Book whose verses have been detailed, an Arabic Quran for a people of understanding.” (41:3) The Book has been revealed in the form of the Quran in the Arabic language. The Arabic language is not an essential part of the Book. The Book has been revealed in Arabic for “the people of understanding”, just as it was revealed in another language before it. Consider another similar verse: “By the Apparent Book. We have made It in an Arabic Quran so that you may understand.” (43:2-3) The Arabic Quran is a reflection of the Book. The Book is a grand reality that is carried and manifested through the Quran.

Therefore, the essence is eternal and the forms carry and manifest the essence.

Now, let us examine the assumption of the comprehensiveness of the Quran. The verse states, “There is not a grain in the darkness of the earth nor anything fresh or dry save it is written in the kitāb al-mubīn (the Apparent Book).” (6:59) We assume that kitab al-mubīn is the Quran. If this is true, then why aren’t all things mentioned in the Quran? Which verse of the Quran mentions the banana or giraffe? The Quran has to talk in terms of those things that its immediate audience could relate to. Otherwise, it would be meaningless for them. Hence, the words “banana” and “giraffe” are not found within the Quran. However, the words “elephant” and “camel” are found within the revelation because the people were aware of them. The Quran could only express its salient truths in accordance with the limitations of its immediate audience. Hence, it is not comprehensive in the way that we naïvely assume it to be. The expression “kitāb al-mubīn” is not referring to the Quran. It is a reality in itself that contains all things, events and affairs.

Sūra al-Baqara was the first chapter to be revealed in the pluralistic context of Medina. When describing the God-conscious people, Allah says that they are “those who believe in everything that was revealed to you, and everything that was revealed before you.”(3:199) If there was any inconsistency between the Torah, Gospel and Quran, then why would “the God-conscious people” be required to believe in everything that was revealed previously? If we say that we believe in everything that was revealed to us and everything that was revealed before us, then it means that we believe in the consistency between the revelations, and that they do not contradict each other. It is the same Book. The only thing that has changed is the application and linguistic expression of those salient truths.

In essence, all of the revelations are the same. They only differ in their forms. I am not talking about the distortions that have occurred. I am talking about the revelations in essence. You might say that the Torah is distorted. I will then present the following counter-argument: Even if it is distorted, the moral and the spiritual truths have to be the same because Allah says in the Quran, “the Jews and Christians are upon nothing until they apply the Torah and Gospel”. Now, why would Allah tell them to “apply” their scriptures if they are distorted to an extent that the message of God is no longer carried within them?

There is an obvious problem in our understanding of the Quran due to our

assumptions. For instance, look at the verses that prohibit the Muslims from taking the Jews and Christians as friends or allies, and contrast them with the verses that praise the Christians. Among the verses praising the Christians are those stating that their eyes flood with tears at the recognition of the truth, and that they spend nights in worship of Allah. Then there is the verse stating that the people who love you the most (O Muhammad) are the Christians because they have priests and monks. In addition to this, there are verses that permit marriage with the People of the Book and the eating of their food.

Obviously, there is no conflict within the Quran. The problem is in our reading of the Quran. We treat each verse in isolation of its context of revelation and in isolation of other relevant verses. This inevitably causes serious misinterpretations. Thus, in order to ensure that we understand the verses accurately, we must interpret the verses in light of their respective contexts. The context of a verse can be determined by referring to the circumstances in which the verse was revealed. In addition to this, it is necessary to contrast the verse with other verses that have a bearing on its meanings.

Let us demonstrate this by presenting the context of the verse that stipulates the punishment of killing or exile for “the enemy of God”. This verse was revealed in response to the actions of a group of barbaric people who claimed to be Muslims: They ambushed a caravan, caught its people, torturously dismembered their limbs, and then murdered them. The primary referent of this punishment were those specific individuals only; however, the secondary referent of the punishment is anybody who behaves in that manner in similar situations. This context sheds light on the meaning of both the whole and parts of the verse, which enables us to understand the verse accurately. Thus, it is clear from the context of the verse that the expression “the enemy of God” does not mean “the non-Muslim” at all.

Similarly, when we study the verses that are prohibitive of befriending the Jews and Christians in light of their respective contexts, we find that the Jews and Christians were conspiring against the Muslims at those points in time. Today, if a group of Muslims is conspiring against the greater Muslim or Human body, then these same verses come into effect and prohibit us from taking them as friends, and this would then be a new form of the essence of the verse. The forms are determined by the context, and as such, the forms have no eternity or universality beyond the context. Thus, the verses of the Quran can only be applied to instances bearing the same or similar context.

The following is an example of deriving accurate interpretations by contrasting relevant verses with each other. First consider the two prominent verses granting salvation to the People of the Book. The Muslims, Christians, Jews and Sabians are promised the same degree of salvation provided that they believe in God, the Hereafter and perform righteous deeds. Now consider this verse: “Fight those of the People of the Book who do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden. Fight until they pay the tax and agree to submit.” (9:29) At first glance, there appears to be a contradiction. In order to resolve this apparent conflict, the Muslim scholars may assert that the latter verse (9:29) abrogates the former verses that grant salvation because the latter verse (9:29) came towards the end of the period of revelation. This interpretation indoctrinates and conditions us with an unwholesome attitude towards the People of the Book. Moreover, it is intuitively problematic and conflicts with many verses of the Quran that encourage cordial relations with the People of the Book. In fact, even inter-faith marriages are encouraged by the Quran.

Such interpretations point to the failure of the Muslim mind to understand the Quran. The two sets of verses are talking of two different sets of people. The first set of verses are describing people who have faith in God, the Hereafter and as a result, perform righteous deeds. The latter verse is talking of people who do not believe in God, the Hereafter and as a result, do not uphold the righteous religion. There is absolutely no conflict between these verses at all, and therefore there is no question of abrogation. The Quran is not concerned with the mere labels of faith. There are verses in which the Quran does not hesitate to declare the formal Muslim (the one who identifies or labels themselves as a “Muslim”) as a kāfir, mushrik or even a munāfiq (hypocrite). From the Quran’s perspective, anyone from the Abrahamic faiths can qualify as either a true believer, or as a kāfir, mushrik or munāfiq. Therefore, there are two levels of religion: the formal and the inner. As long as a person is sincere in their journey towards Allah, they will be in a state of greater Islam regardless of the religion that they follow formally.

The Muslims are perturbed by the theological understanding that grants salvation to one and all on the basis of their sincerity. Islam has been revealed to liberate all of us. It values humanity. However, the Muslims have a problem when I say that others will go to heaven as well. Leave aside the Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists and agonistics (all of whom are condemned), the Muslims are unwilling to grant salvation to other Muslims! Amongst ourselves,

we say that the people who fold their arms are also damned. So, who then is left for heaven? God is the biggest failure! Think about it! The angels said to God, “Your representative on Earth will cause nothing but bloodshed and corruption.” They were saying to God that this venture of khilāfa is going to end in failure. Now our interpretation that everyone is bad and will go to hell implies that the angels were right, and that God has failed.

If we look at the Quran properly (that is, in its proper existential capacity, or in its proper context), then it makes complete sense. Someone came to the sixth Imam and said, “This book is strange. Every time I read it, it has a newer meaning.” The Imam responded, “The Quran renews itself with every era.” That is the beauty of the Quran. It is an eternal book because its essence always refashions itself in every era. That is how the Imams have taught us to interpret the Quran.

When we interpret the laws of the Quran that are not devotional (for instance, the age of maturity, family law and transactions), we have to do so within their proper existential contexts. They were never meant to be applied universally (in all places) and eternally (in every time). The instructions in the Quran can be divided into two types: spiritual devotional instructions, and contracts. By contracts, we mean those instructions that deal with human interaction. These can change over time. There are no hard and fast rules that govern transactions other than the broad Quranic principles, such as being just and non-coercive. The eternity of the Quran is in its essence and not its form. Therefore, there is no universality in the application of the Quranic law outside of the realm of spiritual regulations. People of different regions are different, and so the law must apply to them in line with their circumstances in order to maximise their intellectual, moral and spiritual growth. Slavery was not abolished by the Quran, but it is abolished today as a result of the growth in human morals.

In truth, even the forms of the spiritual and devotional acts of Islam can be subject to reinterpretation as a result of contextual changes. For instance, the Quran states that if you are in a state of fear, then pray whilst fleeing or on horseback. Now when you are fleeing or on horseback, you are obviously unable to prostrate, bow or face towards the Kaʿba, and yet you are still praying. The essence of prayer is retained but the form has changed due to the circumstances. This means that the person who is fleeing will uphold the sentiment of wholesome surrender to God, which is the meaning of bowing, without physically bowing. Similarly, they will not be able to prostrate but the sentiment

of prostration will be upheld. The sentiment will still be there, and that is the central tenet of spirituality.

I have one of two choices: either I can sit on this pulpit and tell you things that will please you, and you will be entertained for an hour, or I can tell you what I understand to be true with evidences, and as a result become very unpopular. I will choose the latter because it will not be easy to stand before God and His Messenger on the Last Day. We need to be true. We need to have hearts that can entertain a contrary opinion, and evaluate if what is being said has any worth. When the Prophet used to preach, a person would often shout out, “He is a madman”, and then another one would shout, and then another. Pretty soon the whole group would shout, “He’s a madman!” Allah responds, “Stand back individually or in twos, and then think about what he is saying. There is no madness in what he is saying.” In other words, Allah is saying, “Reason with what this man is saying, and then see if it is true or not.” Mob mentality is a disease that is endemic in all faiths today regardless of whether the faith is Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam. All of these religions are plagued. There are no free hearts, souls and minds.

Look at the Rohingya! The Buddhists are supposed to be the most peaceful people, but look at the barbaric acts that they have committed in the name of their religion against the Rohingya Muslims. ISIS are Muslims. The people who set the Muslim trains on fire were Hindus. The people who are killing the Palestinians are Jews. Previously, the British empire killed millions, and Christian theology was supplying the justification in part. Think about these things carefully. This human family is our family, and we are all responsible for its well-being. Such exclusivist attitudes are ungodly and stand in contrast to the conduct and teachings of the grand messengers of God.

Night Seven

Prophethood

We stated last night that the Quran is one of the formulations of the overwhelming reality known as the Book. The same Book has been revealed as the Torah, Gospel and Quran. Therefore, it is not possible for the messages of the three books to be different in essence. The difference between these three expressions of the same truth is in the way that each has been packaged, and this difference in packaging is due to the particular context of each. Now the identity or label of each group that follows one of these revelations exclusively is different, as is each group's form of spirituality; however, there is no difference in the objective of these forms. So, a Jew, Christian and Muslim will all assert that the aim is to become refined spiritual beings and uphold human values, but all three will advocate different spiritual systems to get to the same goal.

The next article of faith that we are going to examine is the belief in the prophethood of the blessed Prophet Muhammad, and the fact that a person must have this belief in order to be included within the folds of Islam. The belief in the prophethood of the Prophet differs from the other articles of faith because it is substantiated through indirect means. For instance, when we spoke about the belief in One God, we put forward the following rational argument: Had there been a partner to God, then there would have been discord between them, which would have resulted in the ruination of the heavens and the earth. However, it is not possible to substantiate the belief in the prophethood of a specific prophet by mere rational argumentation. Thus, we are convinced of the prophethood of a specific prophet by other means, such as miracles. One of the greatest miracles of the blessed Prophet Muhammad is the Quran through which he transformed people.

When the Prophet started to receive the revelation, the audience were baffled by the eloquence, depth of meaning and the detail of historical events previously unknown. On the weight of its content, the Quran gave a challenge: "If you are

in any doubt about what We have revealed, then bring something like it. If you cannot bring verses of its like, then submit and acknowledge that it is from a higher source." Now this Quran is so profound, and so phenomenally beyond human capacity, that it has to be from a higher source. Thus, the one upon whom it is revealed is declared as the Messenger of God. Due to the divine origin of the Quran, we can determine the veracity of the one who brought it. Moreover, we know that it could not have come from the Prophet himself, as the Quran clarifies: "You did not recite any scripture before it, nor did you inscribe one with your hand. Otherwise the falsifiers would have had cause for doubt." (29:48)

Believing in the station of prophethood in general qualifies a person as belonging to the category of "the People of the Book", which includes the Jews, Christians and Muslims. However, others who believe in a prophet of Allah prior to the Prophet Muhammad also qualify as "the People of the Book". As stated previously, the Prophet said that the Zoroastrians should also be treated like the People of the Book even though their ancestors had deviated by burning their scripture and abandoning their prophet. The Prophet included all the religions that he came across within the category of "the People of the Book", as long as they believed in Allah and His prophets.

In order for anyone to belong to the Muslim religion, they must believe that the Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet. Therefore, a person formally enters into the folds of Islam only after accepting the article of the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad. We need to make further qualifications because certain Christian brothers and priests state that they too believe in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad despite being Christians. In light of this, we will define a Muslim as the one who believes that the Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet, and the Quran was the final revelation that superseded the revelation of Isa. If an individual believes this, then they cannot consider Isa as the son of God due to the belief that the Quran was the final revelation.

The declaration "There is no deity except Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger" functions at two levels: First, it brings people into a system where they have certain rights that are reserved only for the people who belong to that system. It is like taking the oath of citizenship in the modern nation state. Once we pledge allegiance, we become part of a nation. We enjoy its benefits, and its laws become incumbent upon us. This is the "formal" role of the belief in the prophethood of the Prophet. Second, the declaration of the belief inevitably

results in the faithful emulating his example to some degree. This provides them with a high probability of salvation, which increases as their emulation of him increases. His example comprises of his practice and his attitude. It is only when both of these are emulated that we truly receive the fullness of his example. The Quran says, “Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah, you have the best example for the one who is desirous of Allah and the Final Day, and who remembers Allah abundantly.” (33:21) The objective is for you to find Allah, and if you want to find Allah, then the Prophet is the best example for you. The Quran states, “If you love Allah, then follow my example. Allah will love you” (3:31). Here, the Prophet of Allah is given the role of an intermediary; the objective is finding Allah! The Prophet is the perfect example for us to attain this goal.

The Prophet teaches that godliness (his attitude) and performing righteous deeds (his practice) enable us to meet with our God in the rightest manner. Our intention should be to find Allah, and it is by adopting this intention that we sincerely follow the blessed Prophet. Sincerity is of utmost importance. The people who killed Imam Ali and Imam Husayn were fasting, praying, and had memorised the Quran; however, they were not following the Prophet’s attitude at all. The Prophet’s example is in his attitude of godliness and morality. This attitude is the impetus of his practice, and hence his practice was pervaded by this attitude. Imagine what would happen if the Muslim community were to awaken to the real example of the Prophet Muhammad: He created an Ummah comprising of the Jews, Christians and pagans, together with the Muslims. He was known as the truthful one and the trustworthy. He kept his promises and was not oppressive. He did not lie or cheat. He was very mindful of the needs of others. He was merciful and forgave readily. People were drawn to Islam through his beautiful human qualities and devotion to God.

If we were to emulate the Prophet, then we would transform this world. Even the non-Muslims attest to this. I always say, if you want to read about the Prophet, then do not read the works of the Muslims because their views are distorted by their biases; instead, read the works written by the non-Muslims. Today, the non-Muslims say that we are in need of one like Muhammad who will bring peace and goodness back to this world – we are in need of one who can go beyond his biases, and who is not limited. This is how profound the example of Prophet Muhammad is. He created a league of nations. He initiated the emancipation of slaves and the institutionalisation of the rights of women. He allowed for a pluralistic community to harmoniously coexist, and guaranteed salvation to one and all. His social order was squarely based on the precepts of justice and

generosity.

There is no controversy over the fact that a person must believe in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad in order to be included into the formal faith of Islam; however, there is scope for debate on whether it is necessary to believe in the “finality” of his prophethood in order to be included into the formal faith. This ambiguity has been a source of great strife amongst the Muslims. Many groups of Muslims have been ousted from the folds of Islam due to either not believing in the finality of the blessed Prophet or believing that there is no finality to his teachings. This raises the question: Is the belief in the finality of the Prophet an essential component of being a Muslim? In other words, if an individual does not believe that the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet of God, then are they still a Muslim?

We know that the Prophet is the final prophet: “Muhammad is not the father of any one of you men; he is the Messenger of God and the seal of the prophets.” (33:40) The word “seal” implies the finality of Prophet Muhammad’s prophethood. The following statement of the blessed Prophet is agreed upon by both of the major sects of Islam: “Ali, you are to me as Harun was to Musa save for the fact that there is no prophet after me.” We ask, therefore, that in addition to believing in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad, do we also need to believe that the finality of his prophethood is an essential article of faith? Or is it only necessary to believe in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad with the understanding that he is the final prophet, but without the issue of “finality” being an essential tenet of Islam?

When we assert that a particular belief constitutes an article of faith, then a person cannot belong to that particular faith without believing in that article. If it is maintained that the article in question must be defined as not only the belief in prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad but also the belief in the finality of his prophethood, then anyone who claims that the Prophet Muhammad is not the final prophet is not a Muslim by definition. However, if we were to say that the article of faith is the belief in prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad without the finality of his prophethood being an article of faith, then in that case anyone who does not believe in him as the final prophet would qualify as a Muslim, even though they are wrong in their assertion that he is not the final prophet.

Of course, we know that the Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet of God, but where does it say that the belief in the finality of his prophethood is an

independent article of faith? My Sunni colleagues often tell me that there is a consensus amongst the ulama on this matter. I ask them to tell me what this consensus is based on? I agree that anyone who says that there is a prophet after the Prophet Muhammad is wrong because this is clearly written in the Quran, but if someone does not agree with this, then does that mean that they are not a Muslim? What makes a person a "Muslim"? Is it the belief in Allah, the Hereafter and the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad? Or is it the belief in Allah, the Hereafter, the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad and the finality his prophethood? A lot hinges on this. It is one thing to say that someone is mistaken in their belief, and another thing altogether to say that they are not Muslim, because if we declare anyone as a "non-Muslim", they immediately lose the sacredness that is reserved for Muslims. I am not offering a judgement here. I am simply asking the Muslim scholars to present sound arguments and to prove whether the belief in the finality of the prophethood is an article of Islam or not.

Let us look at the matter differently. Consider this position: "The Prophet Muhammad was the final prophet because he brought the final Sharia and the final revelation; however, there can be other prophets after him who are tasked with bringing the people back to the message and conduct of the blessed Prophet Muhammad." Now does this position encroach upon the finality of the Prophet's prophethood? Certain prominent Sufis state that the esoteric aspect of prophethood continues beyond the blessed Prophet Muhammad. Are such people denying the finality of the blessed Prophet? In any case, even if we assert that the one who does not believe in the finality of the blessed Prophet is not a Muslim, we still have to concede that they belong to the Abrahamic faiths, and that salvation is also available for them on the basis of righteous deeds.

Believing in the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad also entails the belief in everything that the blessed Prophet communicated. Every Muslim knows that there are certain practices that are undeniably part of the faith, like the daily prayers, fasting and pilgrimage. These constitute the necessities of faith. Thus, there is a belief that their denial is tantamount to disbelief. Based on this belief, there is a movement that considers the Ismailis as ritually impure, and hence regards them as non-Muslims. Interestingly, in Ayatollah Khoei's deliberations on this issue, he states that someone can only be deemed to be within the folds of kufr, and consequently to be ritually impure, if that individual denies those necessities of faith that tantamount to the denial of prophethood. Thus, if someone denies the obligation of the daily prayers or fasts, then they are not ritually impure unless that denial is equal to the denial of the prophethood of the

Prophet Muhammad. Therefore in principle, the only criterion that qualifies or disqualifies an individual as a member of the faith of Islam is their acceptance or rejection of the prophethood of the blessed Prophet.

Within the field of Shia theology, you will find its prominent scholars stating that the Prophet, and by extension the Imams, can abrogate any part of the Quran. Whether they have ever done so is another matter, but theoretically they have the authority to do so. Now the Ismaili's say, "We believe that our Imams have abrogated certain things in the Quran." How is that tantamount to the denial of prophethood? It is not. They might be wrong and misguided, but we cannot mock and label them. We need to understand their arguments on their own terms. We cannot tell people to act contrary to their convictions. All we can do is challenge the bases of those convictions with sound arguments.

We need to learn to engage with contrary opinions without labelling everyone as kāfir. If we feel that someone is wrong in their belief, then all we can do is engage with them in debates, and try to convince them otherwise. Allah says, "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and debate with them in a way that is most befitting." (16:125). This is the attitude that the Quran is promoting: Be broad people. Be greater people. Remember that humanity is at stake here. You cannot go around brandishing each other with the label of kāfir.

There have been countless sects in Islam, and not just seventy-three as is commonly believed. In the historical development of Islam, we find that the divisions within the major sects resulted in the emergence of numerous sub-sects. Contrary opinions and beliefs have always existed within Islam. This is something that we need to accept and deal with in a befitting manner. We believe in the narration of the seventy-three sects, out of which seventy-two will go to hell without ever scrutinising it. Does it make sense? Have we checked whether the number is accurate? This is how complacent the community has become. We are indoctrinated from infancy. We believe without even critiquing what we believe in, and if a contrary opinion comes, then swords are unsheathed.

Night Eight

Qiyāma

We have been discussing the articles of faith, and we have reviewed the oneness of God, divine justice and prophethood. Now we will examine the belief in qiyāma (the Day of Resurrection). We have a tenet of faith known as the belief in the Hereafter or the Last Day. It is the belief in the Final Judgment and the ensuing recompense in paradise or hell. The belief in the Final Day is part of the broader belief in the Unseen that includes many other things, such as the decree of God, the angels, the being of God Himself, and so on. However, the belief in the Unseen does not constitute an article of faith, generally speaking. In fact, scholars have been debating whether the belief in the Final Day classifies as an article of faith. The question is: Does a person who does not believe in the Day of Judgement classify as a Muslim? Scholars such as Ayatollah Baqir Al-Sadr and Imam Khomeini contend that it is not an article of Islam. A person is a Muslim as long as they make the declaration, “I believe in one God and the prophethood of the blessed Prophet.” Accordingly, it is not necessary for someone to believe in the Hereafter in order for them to qualify as a Muslim. In contrast to this, scholars such as Syed al-Khoei state that, in addition to the other two aforementioned articles, it is necessary for a person to believe in the Final Day in order for them to qualify as a Muslim.

The following verse of the Quran mentions the minimum requirements for salvation: “And give good tidings to those who believe and do righteous deeds that they will have gardens in Paradise beneath which rivers flow.” (2:25) Notice that the belief in the Last Day is not mentioned at all. That being said, the Quran often employs the phrase, “he who believes in Allah, the Last Day and performs righteous deeds”. Thus, we ask: What is so important about this belief?

At a pragmatic level, the promise of the Day of Judgement encourages us to lead righteous and productive lives. What impetus is there for humans – who are born in the cradle of animality – to be righteous? What keeps us in check and

balance? For the most part, humanity is kept in check by incentives, threats, rewards and punishments. Until and unless we know that there are consequences for our actions, we are not truly deterred from doing wrong. Until and unless we are incentivised by gains and rewards, we are not truly motivated to do good. The belief in the Hereafter assists us in reaching the fullness of our potential, and in attaining the objective for which we are created.

The Quran describes the Day of Judgement thus: “On the Day you see it, every nursing mother will think no more of her baby, and every pregnant female will miscarry. You will think people are drunk when they are not; so severe will be God’s torment.” (22:2) That Day is so intense, and yet when Allah will ask the sinners, “Did you commit this sin?”, they will start lying. After experiencing and witnessing that Day, how can anybody have the ability to lie to God, and feel that they can get away with it? God will bring forth the scribes, and their deeds will be shown to them. If that is not enough, then Allah will say, “I am placing a seal upon your speech, and now your limbs and skins are going to bear witness against you.” (36:65) The guilty will say to their limbs, “Why do you bear witness against us?” The limbs will reply, “The One Who induces speech in all things has caused us to speak.” (41:21) Imagine, that day is so intense, and yet the human whose heart is sealed will be deprived of the insight that Allah already knows everything.

The Day of Judgement needs to be understood accurately so that we appreciate why we have been instructed to believe in it, and hence we will realise the impact that it is supposed to have throughout our worldly lives. In contrast to the sinners who deny their deeds, when Allah will question the Prophet Isa, “Did you say to the people ‘Worship me and my mother as deities besides God?’”, Isa will answer, “O Allah, it would not have been possible for me to say that which I had no right to say. If I had said this, then You would have known of it. You know what is in my soul. You alone know all the things that are beyond the reach of a created being’s perception.” (5:116) Isa will display such insight, and yet another standing beside Isa will be deprived of that vision. This variety that will be displayed on that day is found among humanity here: at one end of the spectrum, there are those who are enlightened, and at the other end, there those who are totally unaware of what it means to be with God.

In the most profound sense, the Final Day is a meeting point with Allah. At a lesser level, it serves as an article that enables us to lead a balanced life in this world, and it helps us to become responsible people. This moral impact is

accidental and is not its true function. The actual purpose of the belief in the Final Day is only to awaken the real moral and spiritual being within us. It was never meant to be an end in itself. In order for us to be vested with a sense a responsibility, we needed a threat: “On that day, you will be asked concerning everything that you do.” This article had to be introduced in its crudest form in order for the khalīfa of Allah to become mindful in his growth process. However, when a person has fully grown, and they are no longer childish and immature, then they do not need the threat of “judgement” to be good. A noble man will do the right thing for the sake of it being right, whereas a thug does the right thing out of the fear of punishment.

We live within the notion of qiyāma and are bound by it. This means that it is an inescapable notion. Even if the human community desired to operate outside of the notion of qiyāma, it cannot because the notion is hardwired into humanity. “You are responsible for whatever you do.” This sentiment is a facet of humanity regardless of whether anybody believes in God or not. Do we not incentivise the human community to do good? Do we not threaten and deter them from doing evil? Such articles had to be introduced in order to initiate us towards a loftier and more beautiful journey – the journey of minds and souls, and not merely the journey of bodies. At this point in time, the Muslims are kept in check and balance only by the threat of judgement – a notion that is appropriate for bringing animals into control, and not human beings. The qiyāma of the body is the qiyāma of punishment and responsibility. The qiyāma of the soul is the qiyāma of meeting with Allah. It is a different thing altogether.

What cause do the people of Allah have with the paradise of sensuous pleasure? I will give the example of Layla: Imagine that she is sitting on her throne and is approached by her Qays. Then Layla says to Qays, “Ask me for whatever you desire!” Qays would be a fool if he asked her for plot of land, or even her entire kingdom. Qays would ask for only one thing, “Layla, I have lived for you and will die for you. All I want is you.” The people who find Allah are unconcerned with the paradise of the bodies. Imagine the state of that lover of Allah who cried out, “O Allah, even if I am able to bear the inferno of hell, how will I bear the separation from You? How will I bear Your indifference to me?”

Our understanding of the end determines our outlook and the way we govern our lives. If we have been taught to believe that the majority of humanity will be condemned on the Final Day, then inevitably our outlook will be extremely negative and counterproductive. Moreover, such an outlook is inconsistent with

the facet of humanity that wants to propel itself towards growth and goodness. Hope in a better tomorrow, and confidence in our ability to change things, sustains life. A negative understanding of the end defeats the actual purpose of existence altogether. We have gone wrong somewhere. The reality of qiyāma is not how we have understood it.

Similarly, our eschatology (the depiction of the end of time, and the coming of the Mahdi) is not as bleak as we have understood it. It is a very positive eschatology that is taking birth from the aspirations of humanity to do good and flourish. People say that hell will be filled. In response to this, I will say that the only way to gauge and understand the Hereafter is by observing this world. This is because both the world and Hereafter operate on the basis of the nature of God. Thus, the litmus test is to see how many prisons we have in our country? Out of the millions of people in our country, how many are in prisons, and how many are good citizens? Out of eight billion people in this world, how many are living free and normal lives, and how many are in prisons? You will find that a tiny percent of the population is inside prisons. Our prisons are an image of hell in our worldly context. They are representations of hell in this world. Hell will have far fewer people, and that is why the Quran says, “On the Day, We will ask hell, ‘Have you been filled?’ and it will say, ‘Are there some more?’” (50:30) Hell is supposed to be empty because humanity is supposed to strive towards a beautiful end. However, if somebody was to insist that hell will be filled up, then I would respond that hell is a very small place compared to paradise, just as a prison is miniscule in size when compared to an entire city.

Our minds are plagued with very pessimistic and negative beliefs about the destiny of our world, and the countless numbers of humanity that will inhabit hell. I went to lecture somewhere, and I asked the youths, “Since you’ve done your first degree, why don’t you go for masters, and then doctorates? They said, “What’s the point? The twelfth Imam is going to come and kill everybody because they are all evil.” What are we doing? We have taught them that the twelfth Imam will come and wipe everything clean! What incentive is there to do any good? What good can be expected from people who are taught to believe that every day is going to be worse than the previous day? The whole of the human community is crying out against what the Buddhists are doing to the Rohingya Muslims. These concerned souls are not Muslims, and yet they feel the pain. The amazing thing is that when we Muslims are faced with natural disasters, it is predominantly the non-Muslims who come to our assistance; those very people who we believe are going to inhabit hell.

When Tony Blair, our prime minister, wanted to initiate the war in Iraq under the pretext of Saddam possessing weapons of mass destruction, one million people protested. How many of those million protesters were Muslim? Those million people who stood for the rights of the Iraqi people were not just Muslims. In fact, the majority would call themselves secularists. Humanity has an inbuilt sense of righteousness and goodness, and it is coming to the fore in every era. Today more than ever, we are seeing that the distinctions of colour, ethnicity, religion and nationality are fading away. Today, the people of the world are collectively crying out for the rights of every minority population that is being discriminated against; whereas previously, the law of the majority prevailed – the strong ruled by might.

This is godliness. The khilāfa of Allah is growing from within us. Humanity is arriving at a pedestal where it does not need the belief in the Day of Judgement in order to feel responsible for its actions. People feel responsible through their human condition. Today, humanitarians do not need the incentive of reward in order to seek and promote human welfare. In fact, a lot of them do not even believe in a Hereafter. They do not spend their lives fighting for the oppressed and the poor in order to be rewarded, rather they do this because their godly nature compels them to do so. Noble people do not refrain from sinning out of the fear hell, rather they refrain from sinning because it is below their dignity. Thus, the Prophet never intended for these articles to simply address the animalistic level of humanity; rather, he introduced them for the sake of a nobler level inherent within humanity. A person holds himself accountable by virtue of their humanity. To drop from the pedestal of humanity is hell in itself, and to do good to others is a sufficient reward in itself.

Look at today's modern community. Humanity is evolving. People often tell me that the majority of people are bad. I say, "No, it is only a few who are ruining it for the majority of the people." But the majority are to be blamed for their complacency and for not doing anything. They are happy with their own particular situation. However, they should make a move and do something about the wrongs that are being committed in their names. Today, we are in the age of social media, and we are seeing huge pressure being exerted on our governments. However, we are all responsible when our governments sell arms to countries who use them to kill defenceless civilians. We need to stand against such crimes. We should mount protests and tell our governments to change their policy, or we must vote them out.

It is largely the heads of state and religions that are creating the problems. The heads of state act and react on the basis of their insecurities and want of this world, and the heads of religion act and react on the basis of their ungodly nature and biases. Both are equally ungodly people, and they are ruining the lives of the many. God forbid, but if there is a mighty war on this earth, and we end up destroying ourselves, then it will only be because of these few, but the rest of humanity will carry the burden and responsibility of the destruction.

Humanity is godly in essence, and thus it cannot be destined but for a good end. When we examine the notion of hell, we see that it is no different to our justice system in this world. We punish the criminal to the extent that they deserve, and not beyond that. The whole purpose behind punishment is the rectification and reformation of the offenders. God, the Most Merciful, who has instilled His nature within us, is no different. He will not allow for people to abide in hell forever – not all of them. We have prison sentences that come to an end, after which the reformed individuals are readmitted into the community, at least that is the hope. People will not be in hell forever. Allah makes this clear in the Quran: "They will remain there for a long period." (78:23). If people are going to abide in hell forever, then why does the Quran say that they will abide in hell for as long as the heavens and the earth exist, or for as long as Allah wishes?

When we talk about sins and good deeds, they actually operate on several levels: the first is the material; the second is the moral; and the last is the spiritual. For instance, if we give zakat without intention (niyya) or the care for humanity, it will nonetheless feed the poor, and it will be serving its purpose at the material level. If we give zakat out of the care for humanity, then it is serving two purposes: it is feeding humanity, and it is instilling a refined sense of care within our souls. The third level is wanting to become godlike, and seeking God Himself through the act. Here, when we give zakat, we see ourselves simultaneously as a means from God, and as being indebted to God for allowing us to be His hand through which the poor are fed. This is the meaning of qiyāma: To meet with Allah at every point.

The detrimental effects of sins are not to be determined by the act alone, rather they are to be determined by the intention as well. The real sin lies in the intention more than the act. Likewise, the real goodness of the deed is in the intention more than the act. Allah says, "Whatever is with you will perish, and whatever is with Allah shall remain." (16:96) It is the intention that connects us with Allah. For example, somebody only has a little to give in charity, but if they

give it with such sincere intentions, then they will be rewarded for it.

There is a story of a scholar who was writing a book, and a drop of ink fell. A fly came and started feeding on that drop of ink. His instinct was to fan it away but suddenly, a godly sentiment prevailed upon him, and he said to himself, “No, this is a creature of God partaking of the sustenance that God has given to it.” So he left it. He fell asleep. Suddenly, it is the Day of Judgment, and the angels are saying to God, “We are trying to find his good deeds but there are no good deeds. Every single deed of his is tarnished with some form of impurity.” Allah replies, “Nonetheless, find something good.” Allah is insistent, just like a parent, that there must be some good. They say, “Yes, there is one deed that qualifies him for paradise.” The man was in tears. He enquired as to what that good deed was? They replied, “That drop of ink that you allowed that fly to feed off. It was a sincere deed, and it allows you to go to paradise.” There is a narration of the Prophet that if anybody smiles at the other, then Allah will give them paradise. Paradise is earned so easily.

We need to understand that when we talk about qiyāma, we are talking about God consciousness. We are talking about being aware of the presence of God and the meeting with God. Actions done with this appreciation of qiyāma acquire a very deep-seated meaning because they connect us with Allah. This is how qiyāma was supposed to be understood – in this most beautiful way. We are not going to judge others because we do not have access to their intentions. What we have to do is to purify our own intentions, make them godly, and move towards god-centredness.

In the Hereafter, Allah says to the wrongdoers, “Taste what you used to earn.” (39:24) We are making our own heaven and hell, and it is internal. Yes, heaven and hell exist but everybody experiences it very differently and in accordance with their own sentiments. Two people are placed in a dungeon: A nobleman and a thug. The thug enjoys himself but the nobleman finds it the biggest chastisement. It is not the same punishment at all. They are in different forms of punishment. Two people appear before their mother when she is about to die: One who does not understand the meaning of a mother, and the other who has struggled and flown across continents to be with her. They are having two very different experiences.

Paradise and hell are in the making. We are creating them constantly with our attitudes and our inner beings. You must have heard this story but I’ll repeat it:

There was an Abbasid Caliph who asked Bahlool where he had just come from. Bahlool said that he had just come from hell. The Caliph asked whether it was hot, and Bahlool replied, “It was neither hot nor was there any fire.” The Caliph said, “That is strange, isn’t it?” He replied, “Yes. I asked the keeper of hell why there was no fire. He told me that hell does not have any fire. People bring their fire with them.” This is what the Quran says, “Fear hell whose fuel is man and rocks.” (2:24) Hell is here within us, and we will project it in the Hereafter.

Tell me: If a person cannot forgive another creature of God, then is that not hell inside themselves? If I see another creature of God burning and I rejoice, then is that not imposing hell on my own self? It is only because I am in hell that I want to put everybody else in hell! If I was in paradise, then why would I want any of my beloved brothers and sisters – who are the reflections of my beautiful God – to burn? If I go and injure the heart of a lover of Imam Husayn after proclaiming that I love my Husayn more than myself, and would let myself be cut into a thousand pieces for him, then does that not show that I have not really loved Imam Husayn at all? Rather, I have only been loving myself in his name. If I had truly loved him, then his lover would be my beloved. If somebody came and cried for my parent more than I cried, then I would feel indebted to that person. Thus, I am not truly a lover of God when I say that I am a lover of God. Rather, I am a lover of my own self.

Today, the Muslim community needs to introspect and assess itself. It has moved away from the pedestal of godliness. Qiyāma means to acquire the presence of God within one’s being to such a level that the individual becomes totally God-centred. It is at this point that one begins to create paradise within one’s self in this world. That is the meaning of the khilāfa of Allah.

Night Nine

Destiny and Decree

We have been discussing the fundamental articles of faith, and how they can liberate humanity at large so that we begin to collectively perform the function of the khalīfa of Allah. The articles of faith have to generate motion in a positive manner. They have to be liberating. They have to assist us in actualising the potential that God has created us with. Otherwise, the whole purpose is defeated. Now we come to the belief in qaḍāʾ (destiny) and qadar (decree). Simply explained: “Destiny” is the eventual end towards which we are all going, and “decree” is every step of our destiny, and how we get to it (i.e. our destiny). If these two notions are not understood accurately, then they can be very defeatist; however, if they are understood properly, then they can promote growth in the utmost sense.

Our Sunni brothers consider the belief in destiny and decree as an article of faith. We also believe in destiny and decree but not as an article of faith. Undeniably, it has a fundamental impact on the way in which we understand our relationship with God and others. Throughout history, we find that inaccurate interpretations of destiny and decree have plagued both the human mind and communities. However, if they can be understood accurately, then they have the potential to promote and assist growth.

When communities accept an inaccurate understanding of destiny, it inevitably leads to exploitation and passivity. The Indian caste system is often justified by the theological view that God has destined a hierarchy between groups of people, which means that one group is at the top of the chain and another is at the bottom. The “untouchables” have accepted this theological assumption, and hence they are passive and resigned towards their supposed fate. In Islamic history, we find that the Umayyads were promoting the belief that Allah had destined for Imam Husayn to be killed in the way that he was. Similarly, the Meccan elites used to justify their oppressive and exploitative social systems by

promoting the notion of the predestiny of their gods. This notion has always been used to sustain the exploitative aspects of the status quo by rulers and elites throughout history.

In stark contrast to this, our natural condition as human beings is to defy limitation and the idea of predestination. Had we been resigned to what is predestined, we would not have found cures for the ailments that we suffer. Instead, we would have had this attitude: “If God wants to cure us, then He will. So there is no need for us to strive towards finding cures.” When we faced the limitations of darkness, we took the reins of destiny into our own hands and created light beyond darkness. It is because of the khilāfa of Allah that we are becoming God-like, and it is for this reason that we are able to overpower destiny altogether.

To explain and clarify this further, let us construct an argument, and then deconstruct it. Does God know whatever is going to happen before it happens? The answer is yes. Can anything happen contrary to the way that God knows it is going to happen? The answer is no, otherwise God’s knowledge would have been defied. Finally, can anything happen without the consent of God? Again, the answer is no. In other words, we are only playing out what God knows is going to happen. So here I ask God, “If You knew everything before it happened, and You created it as such, then what was the point of creating a khalīfa on the earth? You are not really placing a khalīfa on the earth at all. You are simply putting certain characters on earth that have already had their roles determined. They cannot defy Your knowledge and they cannot act without Your consent. The angels should have said: ‘What is the point of calling them khalīfa and boasting over us?’”

On the contrary, the angels understood that this is actually a real story that is going to be played out, and hence they said, “O Lord, they will cause corruption and bloodshed against Your will.” In other words, they were saying to Allah, “Your khalīfa can never cause bloodshed and corruption because such acts are inconsistent with Your nature; however, this one – whom You are choosing to be Your khalīfa – will.” So immediately, they are absolving God of corruption and bloodshed whilst stating the fact that the khalīfa would defy the nature of God with the free will that God has given him. This defiance is also foreseen by Iblis who makes the following statement immediately after Allah had chosen to bestow excessively upon Adam: “He will not be grateful for all the endowments that You have given him.” (7:17) All of this shows that a real story was about to

take place, and that there is freewill.

Someone asked one of the Imams whether it is true that everything happens with the will of God. The issue at hand was that if God knows everything, then surely we cannot be held responsible for our actions. In light of this, the Imam said, “If that was the case, then God would be most unjust. The tyrant would be the most oppressed person because God makes him into a tyrant in this world, and then burns him.” In another incident, someone asked one of the Imams, “Does God force us to do things?” The Imam replied, “God is more just than that.” Then the man asked, “Has God left it upon us to do everything?” The Imam said, “God is more powerful than that. There is a middle path: You are on a destined path, but you do have choices, and hence you are responsible for your wilful actions.”

That being said, our choices are limited and directed. The choices made by so many individuals will inevitably limit the scope of choices available for each and every one of us. Similarly, our choices are limited by the nature of the earth, the DNA inherited from our parents, and the existing cultures and pre-existing socio-economic conditions that we are born into. For instance, our physical nature does not allow us to fly in the air like birds. All of these factors limit our choices, and when we do make choices, we make them within given contexts that direct our choices. Thus, all of our choices are highly predictable; however, does that mean that the system of God is a fixed system, or a closed circuit, in which we are only able to act within preset parameters?

This is what the Jews said during the time of the Prophet when people were converting to Islam. They lamented, “This is how the system is. It is fixed. God has destined it. Since God has already destined failure for us, He cannot change it.” They understood predestiny in a strictly causative sense, like a domino effect. The Quran narrates that the Jews used to say the expression, “the hand of Allah is tied”, which meant that God cannot change anything. Allah corrects them: “Their hands are tied… Allah’s hands are open; He can do whatever He wishes.” (5:64) Therefore, Allah is saying that this system is very much alive, and that it is not determined in that strictly causative sense.

To say, “Allah knew what was going to happen before it happened” is incorrect because Allah is beyond time. If Allah is beyond time, then to say, “Allah knew” is false. We have to say, “Allah knows what is happening” because Allah is in the absolute present. This is the first point: Allah is not limited by time. The second point is: If we look at ourselves and this world, we will see that there is

no such thing as the past. The past is a recollection of my present that has gone. We are always in the now, and we are always in the present. There is no past. Bring me the past. Touch the past. You will not be able to. There is only motion, and there is only the now. There is neither the past nor yesterday. Not in the way we understand it. If you put a paper boat into a stream, then it will sail. You will always see the paper boat in the present. You will have a recollection of where it was, which you call a past, but the past in the real sense does not exist.

The most real and accurate statement is “Allah knows everything”. Everything is in the absolute present. Everything is in the making. Everything is in the becoming, and everything can change. Read quantum physics and see that there are an infinite number of possibilities at any given instance, and when one course is fixed, it does not necessarily negate another simultaneous course. There is nothing that cannot change. Everything is destined, and everything is undetermined. I am making my decisions now, and Allah is destining now. God’s divine destiny and my choice are one and the same. That is why Allah says, “Each person has guardian angels – before him and behind him–that watch over him by God’s command. God does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves. However, if He wills harm on a people, then no one can ward it off. They have no protector apart from Him.” (13:11). It is all happening right now. In that sense, nothing has been destined. This is also why Allah says, “O you who believe! If you help God, then He will help you, and make you stand firm.” (47:7) It is happening in the now. Destiny is in the making. That is the way to understand it most accurately.

This is exactly what the Prophet of Allah expressed to the people of Mecca: “You are not destined for failure. You are your own failure, and you are your own success. You can change your state at any moment through your will. It is up to you. Take the reins of your destiny.” The Quran depicts this so clearly. If only we could understand it accurately. The story in the Quran about the khilāfa of Allah is so amazing. It cannot be fathomed unless we open our hearts and minds to it. Imam Husayn supplicates in Dua ʿArafah, “O Lord, how may I be defeated when You are my overpowering God.” He strikes such a beautiful balance. He is saying, “O Lord, since You can change destiny at every point, I will never feel defeated. I will be defiant in the face of destiny with full belief that I can change it through You, and O Lord how can I be jubilant when You overpower me.”

Let us elaborate on the idea that everything is in the present, and that even

destiny is being made in the now. We hear this story that the Prophet Isa said to his companions during a particular wedding that the groom would die by the next morning. They passed by the house the next day and saw that the groom was still alive. The companions said, “Isa, you are the spirit of God and have access to the Unseen, and you told us that he would die. Why is the man still alive?” The Prophet Isa replied, “I do not know. God has the final say.” The Prophet Isa went to the bride and asked if anything out of the ordinary had happened during the wedding. She said, “There was a knock at the door whilst everybody was busy with the wedding preparations. I hesitated but when I heard the plea of a hungry man, I opened the door and gave him some food.” Isa said, “That was the cause for the prolongation of your husband’s life.” He removed the mattress and discovered a dead snake. “This snake was supposed to deliver a fatal dose of venom to your husband but that act of yours caused the death of the snake instead. I couldn’t see that. I did not have access to that level of knowledge.” Even the grand Prophet Isa’s knowledge does not grasp the depth of what is happening in the present.

This is how open Allah has left the system. He says in the Quran, “God erases or confirms whatever He wills; the Mother of all Books is with Him.” (13:39) Can you imagine how open the system is? This is what the Quran teaches us. It says to the Prophet, “Either We will show you What we have promised them, or We might just take you before that.” The Prophet is not being given any guarantees because destiny is in the making. Things are constantly changing. It is a living and a dynamic system. Anything can happen. Nothing is fixed. Allah can change anything at any point. This is how open Allah leaves destiny. Therefore, the belief in destiny is very positive. It encourages and empowers us to arrive at a greater level of our existence.

In our theology, the notion of badāʾ refers to an unforeseeable change in God’s destiny. God is in the absolute present, and He is destining in the absolute present. He can do whatever He wants, and whatever He destines is eternal in the absolute present. Therefore, God destines, and He can change His own destiny. To us it appears eternal and unchangeable because we are caught in a causative scheme set within the parameters of time. It is for this very reason that the Prophetic report states, “Nothing can change destiny except for supplication.” If we assert that Allah cannot change destiny, then it means that God is not God by definition. Thus, all we can say is that God binds Himself to upholding a particular decree. God can do whatever He wants but He binds Himself and says that He will not do any injustice to anybody.

On a side note, there are instances in the Quran of God stating that He has decided to finalise a decree, as in the cases of the sealed fate of Abu Lahab and the victory of the Romans. In all such instances of genuine prophecy, it may seem to us that God is limited in exercising His will to change the destiny that He has committed Himself to; however, this is not the case because He can change His decree if He so desires even in such instances. The evidence for this is the process of abrogation in the Quran. Here, verses understood to be eternal in their formal capacity at the time of their revelation were cancelled by other verses revealed at a later date. Having said this, the cases of Abu Lahab and the Romans are instances of God informing us about the natural progression of events at an existential level in view of all the factors entailed in the two cases.

Thus, when the Quran foretold the eventual victory of the Romans, it was informing its audience about the future in light of the knowledge of all of the factors involved in the situation. This is similar to what the meteorology department does when they predict the weather. The only difference is that the meteorology department does not have the knowledge of all of the factors entailed, and hence their forecast is probabilistic.

Similarly, the Quran's foretelling of Abu Lahab's eventual end was in light of the knowledge of his existential state. When the Quran talks of sealing the hearts, it is informing us of a natural effect that occurs in souls due to specific regressive existential states reached by them. Essentially, souls that have degenerated to such a level become blinded to the truth. The fate of Abu Lahab and the sealing of hearts are not to be understood as God destining to withhold salvation. Rather, it is to be understood as God bearing witness that they have existentially degenerated to a level of no return in this world due to their own choices. It is no different to the case of the person who blinds himself by gouging out his eyes, and the physician stating that he will never be able to see again because the eyes have been destroyed.

As alluded to previously, the word "can't" can never be applied to Allah in the sense of limitation or incapacity. However, when we say, "God cannot oppress" – this is not a limitation upon God; rather it is actually adding to the beauty of God. When you state, "This man cannot kill" it can mean one of two things: either that he does not have the ability to kill, or that his nobility will never allow him to kill. Thus, in the case of God, our affirmative understanding of God can never conceive of Him doing anything that is below what is expected of Him.

Allah has left destiny in our hands. You intend, and Allah will destine it for you. You make a move, and Allah will make it happen for you. When the belief in destiny and decree is understood in this way, it plays a positive and an empowering role in our journey of realising the khilāfa of Allah.

The Quran talks about two things as far as khilāfa is concerned: The first is“the best of deeds”. “He has created death and life to test you, and to see who is the best in deeds amongst you.” (67:2). The second are “the righteous deeds”. Thus, Allah wants to see who are the best in deeds during the course of human history, and He wants His khalīfa on earth to perform righteous deeds. We are hard-wired to want to perform the best of deeds. Hence, we constantly defy limitations, or the false sense of god, because of this existential state of wanting to perform the best of deeds. As soon as an obstacle is placed before us, we want to overcome it. Our human condition of khilāfa – the godliness inside us – wants to defy it.

The khalīfa of Allah is always being challenged with suffering, trials and difficulties, and it is through these that the khalīfa of Allah is becoming God-like. We excel and thrive through challenges. If there were no challenges, then we would not excel. Nature engulfs mankind in darkness, and then he tears it apart and creates light. Nature brings cold, and then he creates heat. In sickness, he brings a cure. Eventually, he may overcome death itself. Through all of these trials, the khalīfa of Allah is exceling. Had it not been for these trials, the khalīfa of Allah would have remained dormant. The khilāfa of Allah emerges most brilliantly only within the parameters of death and life.

Allah is saying that He will not change the state of affairs of people until they change their own state of affairs. (13:11) Therefore, if people find themselves condemned, then that is what they have earned. It has nothing to do with Allah. If a community finds themselves right at the bottom of their society, then that is their own doing. If people who do not believe in Allah are right at the top of the human race, then it is because Allah has honoured them for their striving. Now in light of this, let us try to discern who the “friend of God” is and who “the enemy of God” is. Obviously, the friend of God is the one who gives cure on behalf of God, the one who gives light and heat on behalf of God, and the one who sits in the United Nations and says that poverty and slavery must be eradicated. These are the real khulafāʾ of Allah, as opposed to the one who does not do the same despite having the ability.

The best of deeds come through trials of this sort. Allah takes pride in His khalīfa: “I did not give them wings, and yet they created them. I did not give them light, and yet they created it. I did not give them any cure, and yet they created it. Indeed, they are displaying Me through themselves.” We are so small and insignificant that you cannot locate any person in an image of the whole earth; you cannot even locate the earth in an image of the whole of our galaxy; you cannot locate our galaxy in an image of the whole of the observable universe; and yet we are able to understand the beginning of this immense universe and its end. Which animal has this ability to excel? Which animal has this moral conscience that demands that the hungry must be fed? Which angel can do this? There is no angel in the heavens or the earth that can do what we can do, and that is why they fell to prostrate before us upon God’s command. In this way, Allah has left destiny in our hands. It is your destiny. You intend, and Allah will destine it for you. You make a move, and Allah will make it happen for you.

As for righteous deeds, they pertain to our inner states and interactions in any given situation; ultimately, they determine our salvation. A narration from the blessed Prophet states that you have a place in heaven and hell simultaneously. You will eventually decide which one you inherit, and which one you vacate. Allah says this in the Quran, “So that Allah may purify the people who believe through trials and destroy the disbelievers.” Then Allah says in the next verse, “Did you think that you would enter the garden, and God has yet to know which of you would struggle for His cause and remain steadfast.” (3:141-142) Why does Allah say, “and Allah has yet to know”? Because it has not been decided. If it had already been decided, then that would tantamount to oppression. Thus, salvation or damnation is left open. Just as destiny is made in the present, so too are salvation and damnation. It is totally up to us where we go.

Let us explain this further: In each of our lives we are faced with innumerable situations that we find trying irrespective of whether they are created by us or others. How we interact with those situations determines what we become inwardly. If I receive abuse from somebody, then either I become so miserable about it that I end up wasting a day or two feeling bad, or I can just let it go, and not let it affect me. How I interact with this situation is contingent upon me. The first interaction makes me miserable and wasteful, and the second one allows me to go beyond the situation and become bigger than it. In addition to the second interaction, if I am able to pray for that person, and see the situation from that person’s perspective, then in that case I am an even bigger person. Better still is

to consider that person as a gift from God through whom I can grow. This is the meaning of the righteous deed. It is this beautiful godly interaction. Righteous deeds are not prayers, fasting and hajj per se. People perform the daily prayers, and then they cheat. People fast, and they do not lose any sleep over the poverty in the world. These are not righteous deeds.

Therefore, righteous deeds are the individual's godly interactions with the challenges of this world. Take the example of a person inside the plane at the moment when turbulence strikes. Here, the danger is real but the fear that grips the person is psychological. The state of confusion, anxiety and trauma within the person is greater than the turbulence outside. The way that people lose their composure in that panic and how they make bargains with God is all due to inner instability. Now, imagine if a person can stay calm during that turbulence, and say to Allah, "O Lord, if You have wished for me to die, then let me spend this time remembering You calmly." The first reaction is of one who is not even alive. He is like a little infant that has woken up in a cradle that is being shaken. The other response is of one who is alive. He is living. He is interacting with the situation in a befitting manner. When the plane returns to its course, the first one will start laughing, rejoicing and watching a movie, and the second one will still be as calm he was.

Recall the composure of Imam Husayn. Even the people of his army exclaimed, "How can he have such a calm demeanour? How can he have a smile on his face amidst all the swords?!" Imam Husayn was unpanicked. That was his interaction with the situation. It is as if he is saying, 'If death has been destined for me, then I shall embrace it.' Did he not say, "If the religion of Muhammad cannot be saved except by my killing, then O swords, await not and shred me to pieces." How wonderful is his interaction with the situation!

If my wealth diminishes or my world collapses and I lose my confidence, then my truest nature has been revealed by my interaction with such situations. However, if in such situations I say, "O Lord, You gave it, and You can take it away, but I still have You; and since I have You, then what have I lost?"

We must arrive at an awakened state in the present where we do not react out of our conditioning and impulses but pause and reason with the situation, and then interact positively with it. In other words, we need to emerge from the mechanical robotic state of slumber and awaken. Then we will begin to interact with situations actively, and not in a preconditioned and predictable state.

The best deed – according to my interpretation – concerns the outward motions of humanity; whereas the righteous deed is the inward motion towards God-centricity. The godly outward motion lies in defying the false gods of outward limitations by saying lā ilāha. The inward motion towards God-centricity lies in defying our ego by saying illa Llāh. The belief in qaḍāʾ and qadar are supposed to empower us, and make us defiant. Whenever there is a situation that seems impossible, we must always say that Allah can overpower it.

When Talut took his band of people to meet Jalut, they were faced with this monster of a person and his army. They said, “We have no strength against Jalut and his army.” But that small band of people – who presumed that they would be meeting with their Lord very soon – said, “How many a time have a small group of people overpowered a mighty army by the consent of Allah.” (2:249) This is the real effect of the belief in qaḍāʾ and qadar. It is supposed to instil the spirit of defiance in us that Imam Husayn embodied and displayed.

Therefore, it is our human nature to better our situation against all odds. However, we learn from the great men of God – like the grand prophets and the blessed Imam Husayn – that during the course of striving to change the outer situation, we are supposed to be content and unperturbed internally. We simply say to Allah, “I will do my best to change things for the better but inwardly I am satisfied. If Your decree is final, then I shall not struggle from within, and I will accept it; for You know best, and Your decree is the best.”

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Night Ten

Imamate (Leadership)

What beliefs must a person have in order to classify as a Muslim? What must a person believe in before they are accepted within the formal Muslim faith so that they can marry, transact, live and enjoy the rights of that group? We stated that scholars such as Imam Khomeini and Syed Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr consider the belief in Allah and the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad as sufficient to qualify a person as a Muslim. Syed al-Khoei maintained that in addition to these, the belief in the Final Day is also necessary. Now we come to the issue of imamate. The belief in imamate is not an article of faith as such. It is an article of the Shia sect. If a person does not believe in imamate, then they are a Muslim nonetheless.

The belief that Ali ibn Abi Talib is the first Imam qualifies a person as a Shia. When we speak of Imam Ali, we have to make a distinction between imamate and the caliphate. This will solve many of the issues that we are facing. Imamate is a divine bestowal that cannot be granted or taken away save by God; whereas the caliphate, which is political authority, can be given and taken away by the people being governed. For instance, the people pledged allegiance to Imam Hasan and gave him the caliphate after which it was rescinded, and Imam Sadiq refused to accept the caliphate altogether when it was offered to him by the Abbasid rulers.

In principle, a person qualifies as a Shia as long as they believe in either the minimalistic understanding of the imamate of Imam Ali, or the maximalist understanding of his imamate: the former states that Imam Ali is the first Imam without it being necessary to place him within the scheme of the caliphate; whereas the latter states that in addition to being the first Imam, he was most eligible to be the first Caliph but he was denied his right.

If we have understood this, then we can address the fact that this issue has become a point of great division within the Muslim Ummah. The Prophet said,

“I and Ali are the two fathers of this Ummah.” Imam Ali was never meant to be a point of division for the Muslims. He was meant to be a unifying factor for the Muslims. Our Sunni brothers have a narration which states that the Prophet said to Imam Ali, “You are like the Kaʿba. You will not go out to the people, rather they will come to you.”

When we look at the issue of the caliphate historically, we find that there were three methods of determining a caliph: election, appointment and through a council. It is only in the case of Imam Ali that we find the people converging and unanimously making him their Caliph. At that point, there was no Sunni or Shia. All of the people converged upon Imam Ali. I have no doubt – and I say this with an open heart – that had Imam Ali become the first Caliph, and if we had twenty-five years under him, then the Muslim community would be different today because he was the best one to explicate the Islam of the Prophet. We would have learned a great deal from this exceptionally great man. I have no doubt that he would have taught us how to interpret Islam and how to understand the Quran in different contexts.

Historically, it is a fact that Imam Ali was the fourth Caliph. It is undeniable. He was the first Imam and the fourth Caliph. The Sunnis and the Shias need to understand that they are both believing in the same thing: the Shias cannot deny that he was the fourth Caliph historically, and the Sunnis should not deny that he was the Imam after the blessed Prophet. Instead of making Imam Ali a point of disunity, Imam Ali should be a point of unity. Many of our Sunni scholars – who are conducting research – are beginning to state that no one can contend against the fact that Ali ibn Abi Talib was the best of the best after the blessed Prophet.

I say that we have a right to be objective but not to be disrespectful. We can objectively discern history but we cannot be disrespectful, as it is wrong. This is not what Imam Ali has taught us. During the Battle of Siffin, when the people began to abuse Muawiya, Imam Ali said, “Keep your tongues clean.” They replied, “He is worthy of abuse.” Imam Ali replied, “Your tongues are worthier of being kept clean.” The Imam instructed his people to talk with the other side and to admonish them about the truth, for this would bring the other side to the truth and give his own people the decisive argument with Allah. This is the mindset of the Imam. He was not the way that we have understood him to be. The Imam is meant to unite diverse peoples, and to facilitate their completion. Instead we have made Imam Ali – who is the greatest one after the blessed Prophet – a point of division amongst the Muslims.

The Quran states, “As for those who have divided their religion and become factions, you have nothing to do with them O Prophet. Their case rests with God. In time, He will tell them about their deeds.” (6:159) The khalīfa of Allah is supposed to bring about the beauty and growth of all of God’s creatures through their limited capacities, and to allow them to harmoniously coexist and evolve. If Imam Ali was here, I do not think that he would care whether we were Sunni or Shia. He would appeal to the human community at large. The blessed Prophet Muhammad constructed an Ummah of Jews, Christians, Muslims and pagans, and he designated his brother Ali as the father of that Ummah alongside himself.

We have always been led to believe that Imam Ali was in constant struggle with the first three Caliphs, but Imam Ali married the widow of Abu Bakr, and he raised Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr in his lap. Undeniably, huge mistakes were made insofar as Imam Ali was not given the leadership of the Ummah, but do you think that every moment of those twenty years was spent in hatred and dislike? We must also look at the cordial relations that they had. There were times when Caliph Umar would make a decision and Imam Ali would advise otherwise. Then Umar would say, “Listen to what Abu al-Hasan is saying.” On so many occasions, Caliph Abu Bakr would summon the companions of the Prophet and ask, “What is the view on this issue?” Then he would ask, “Abu al-Hasan, what is your view?” When Imam Ali would give his view, Abu Bakr would say, “Follow Abu al-Hasan’s view.”

Historically, we find that on occasions Imam Ali admonished Caliph Umar for the greater good. I do not mean to be disrespectful but I do reserve the right to be objective. The Ummah of the Prophet Muhammad is killing itself over the one who is the point of unity. Imam Ali says to Caliph Umar, “When you go to battle in Persia, don’t position yourself at the front of the forces because if they kill you, then the morale of the army will break.” According to the way that we imagine their relationship to be, surely it would have been better if Imam Ali had told him to go to the front so that the chances of him being killed would have been greater! Compare our mentality with Imam Ali’s actual advice. When Caliph Uthman was being attacked, he sent for Imam Ali to come and help him. Imam Ali responded by sending Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn to protect Caliph Uthman. We need to understand that the history that we are being fed from the pulpit is a history that needs to be critiqued. A lot of hatred is stemming from this history. A lot of theology is coming from this history. We need to realise that in reality, this history may not be accurate at all. We need to understand that Islam was not what it has become.

The noble Imams incessantly confronted sectarianism and its resulting tensions within the Muslim community. Imam Sadiq exhorts us to pray with them, to have familial relations with them, and to maintain their trust. At the time of the eleventh Imam, we find the exact same message being imparted. The blessed Imams were trying their utmost to control the situation and diffuse the tension. One of the narrations says, “The one who prays with their brothers is like the one who is praying with the Prophet.” Why would the Imam need to make such a strong statement if it was not for the reason that sectarian tensions were destroying the Muslim community?

Read the early history of Islam. You will find that there was so much tension, and there were so many factions and so many groups everywhere. After the third Imam, there were two groups of Shias. After the fourth Imam, there were two more groups of Shias. After the sixth Imam, there were three prominent groups. After the seventh Imam, there were more groups, and so on. Show me one place within the history of the Sunnis or Shias where there has not been sectarian divisions and strife. Ask the people who claim that if Imam Ali had been the first Caliph, then there would not have been any divisions amongst the Muslims, “Why were there divisions after the third Imam amongst those who followed Imam Ali, Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn?”

It appears as if nobody is aware of their history. We are all being fed sectarian sentiments, and unverified theology and history. We believe it all uncritically, like sheep. Any sound mind would say that the Imams are the noblest of people. They can never be a part of the problem. They are part of the solution. Imam Ali can never be a part of the problem. He is supposed to be a solution for the problem. All of us – the Shias, Ismailis, Zaydis, Sunnis and so on – have conveniently made up our own versions of history to prove our preferences of the events, and no one is critical enough to think that perhaps all of them are biased accounts.

When it comes to Imam Ali nobody can deny his lofty merits and unrivalled virtues. All of our Sunni brothers attest to the event of Mubahala, and that it was only Imam Ali, Lady Fatema, Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn who accompanied the blessed Prophet. They will readily acknowledge that there is a sound narration from Lady Ayesha stating that when these personalities were beneath the cloak, the blessed Prophet said, “They are my ahl al-bayt.” Nobody will deny that these four personalities constitute the most close-knit ahl al-bayt of the blessed Prophet. Everyone agrees that they were spiritually and morally superior

to all other Muslims on the basis of the fact that they accompanied the blessed Prophet in Mubahala. There is the famous narration of the blessed Prophet that is agreed upon by the Sunni and the Shia: “I leave you with these two heavy weights.” Nobody denies that the first weight is the Quran, and the second weight is the ahl al-bayt, meaning these four in particular. No Sunni of sound mind will deny this. Our Sunni brothers will never deny the status of Imam Ali, Lady Fatima, Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn.

Look at the verse of purification: “Allah intends only to remove the impurity from you, O people of the Prophet’s household, and to purify you with an extensive purification.” (33:33) According to a report, the verse means that Allah has guarded the ahl al-bayt from disbelief, association with God, and hypocrisy at the spiritual level. At the moral level, God keeps them away from character deficiencies, such as greed, jealousy, love of this world, lying and cheating. Now, the notion of “household” has tiers. If this is taken into account, then the Shias have to accept that the wives of the Prophet also classify as his household, although to a lesser degree than the children and siblings. However, the Sunnis also have to agree that a man’s children constitute the first tier of his household because you cannot dissolve the relationship with your children unless you disown them. Thus, the Shias need to admit that at the second tier, the household of the Prophet includes his wives. Both Sunnis and Shias need to awaken to the truth.

I say this with full confidence that Lady Ayesha made a huge blunder in mounting a battle against Imam Ali. Objectively, we cannot deny this. At the same time, I cannot deny that Lady Ayesha was the wife of our beloved Prophet. I can objectively discern things but that does not give me the right to disrespect, swear and curse. If cursing and belittling was appropriate, then our Imams would have cursed her; however, Imam Ali, Imam Hasan, Imam Husayn and the rest of the blessed Imams have not cursed her. Therefore, what gives me the right to go beyond my role models? We have gone terribly wrong somewhere.

The worst thing that has happened to Islam is sectarianism. It has made us into intolerant people. We cannot deny that we have a problem. We have to resolve it before the Muslim community can move on. It is only then that the Muslim community will be able to arrive at the level where it is supposed to be. The issue of imamate and the appointment of Imam Ali has divided the Ummah. Imam Ali was clearly designated by the blessed Prophet in his sermon at Ghadīr Khumm, but we still need to become tolerant and open when we discuss this

matter. The Sunnis do not accept that Imam Ali was appointed by Allah to lead the Ummah after the blessed Prophet. Here, they can legitimately argue that the divine appointment of Imam Ali as the political leader of the Ummah after the blessed Prophet is not mentioned in the Quran. If it was an obligation upon the Ummah to select Imam Ali as the political successor of the blessed Prophet, then this would have had to have been stated in the Quran. Therefore, the Shias must reason with the situation better, and in a more convincing manner, so that the Sunnis are satisfied that the political designation of Imam Ali was indeed through the command of God.

We do need to acknowledge that Imam Ali is not mentioned in the Quran, which is the Word of God that He Himself has guaranteed to protect: “We have revealed the remembrance, and We are its protectors.” (15:9) Similarly, Allah has guaranteed that “falsehood cannot touch it from any angle.”(41:42) In fact, Imam Ali has categorically stated that this Quran, which was compiled during the reign of the third Caliph, is the entirety of the Quran. Now in this divinely protected Quran, the name of Imam Ali is not mentioned. Therefore, we can appreciate the other side of the argument, and hence we need to express our own beliefs in a more befitting and convincing manner.

I will say this much that you cannot appoint a leader for a people against their will. The people have to give their consent. Look at Imam Husayn: he stated to the people of Kufa, “You have asked me to come to you. If you do not want me, then let me be and I will go back.” The blessed Prophet came to the people of Mecca and stated, “I am a Prophet”, but he was not effective there because the people did not give him authority over themselves. He became a leader when the people of Medina handed over the reins of authority to him. This point is a simple one, but it needs to be understood. We cannot impose a leader upon the hearts and minds of people. Leadership of the heart has to be earned. The Prophet earnt the leadership in Medina. He was able to bring about a morally refined and spiritually progressed community in Medina only after the people had decided to yield to him.

The Prophet took the community through a democratic process at Ghadīr Khumm. He asked them, “Do I not have a greater right upon you than you have over your own selves?” They said, “Yes, O Messenger of God.” Then he said, “In that case, for whomsoever I am a master, Ali is his master.” The Prophet secured a right to designate, and then he appointed Imam Ali. No one can doubt that the Prophet was designating Imam Ali as his successor. If we could just

become objective and have big enough hearts to accept that firstly, Imam Ali was the best of God's creatures after the blessed Prophet, and secondly, the Ummah made a terrible mistake in its decision to not give him the caliphate, even though that decision was its prerogative.

We need to resolve these issues in the calmest possible manner. The lack of clarity is creating sectarian tensions and leading to the charges of kufr and shirk against the other. On this side, we say that anybody who does not believe in the Imam is a kāfir because kufr is to deny the truth. On that side, they say that anybody who believes in an Imam in the way that the Shias do is a kāfir. We say that the prayers of those who fold their arms are not accepted, and they say that the prayers of the people who leave their arms open are not accepted. Seriously! Is each side saying all of this on behalf of Allah? Historians will tell you that inevitably there would have been people on the side of Imam Ali during the Battle of Siffin who were praying with their arms folded, and that Imam Ali would not have had any problem with that. Similarly, there would have been people on the side of Muʿawiya who prayed with their arms open. We need to take the time to study history objectively.

It is time for the Muslim community to wake up and rise to that level of glory that was destined for the khalīfa of Allah on behalf of formal Islam. The Sunni brothers acknowledge that the Imams were godly people. We often discuss that the Sunni texts mention the twelve chiefs that are to follow after the blessed Prophet, and how the previous prophets also had twelve disciples.¬ Do we find twelve people in Muslim history after the blessed Prophet who are from the lineage of the Lady Fatima, and who are better than the blessed Imams? The Sunni texts state that when the Mahdi comes, he will say to the Prophet Isa, "Lead the prayer, O spirit of God." Isa will reply, "It is your time. You lead, and I will pray behind you." Imagine the greatness of Imam Mahdi. Isa is offering his prayers behind the Mahdi. From this we can understand how lofty imamate is.

When some of the Shias compare imamate with prophethood, I will say that there is no one greater than the blessed Prophet Muhammad. The prophethood of the blessed Prophet will continue till the end of time. The Imams are great in their own right, and we do not need to compare them with prophethood. Look at the greatness of Imam Ali. After the blessed Prophet, Imam Ali stands unequalled in every way: his knowledge, wisdom, spirituality, gallantry, resolve and care for the creatures of God. It is a shame upon the Ummah that we have

reduced him to historical and sectarian polemics. He needs to be studied, and we need to learn from the unending wealth of his knowledge and godly character.

We need to be objective for the sake of our Prophet and these great Imams. We must work to arrive at an Islam that is befitting for the Muslim community; an Islam that allows us to display the gems of khilāfa through the teachings of these people. I say to the Muslims: If we learn from this great man, then we will become better people. What difference does it make whether he was the first or the fourth Caliph historically? What difference does it make whether we call God by the name of “Allah”, “Jehovah” or “Bhagwan”? If we are devoted to Him, then we will become godly people no matter what name we call Him by. For people who want the essence of the truth, the name and position does not matter. For people who do not want the truth, there is a perversion in their own souls, and hence they will justify killing and tyranny in the name of the very truth that came to free us from killing and tyranny.

Night Eleven

Intercession, Mediation, and Symbolism

Having spoken about the blessed Prophet and Imams, we are now going to address the issue of the intermediaries between ourselves and God. How are we to understand the notions of mediation (tawassul), intercession (shafāʿa) and symbolism? The Muslims have understood human mediation in a variety of ways: Some Muslims have taken the Prophet as an end in himself, and as a result Islam has become “Prophet-centric” for them as opposed to being “God-centric”. Other Muslims have made the Imams the centre of Islam. Their Islam is neither God-centric nor Prophet-centric, rather it is “Imam-centric”. Lastly, some other Muslims have gone to the other extreme. According to them, the blessed Prophet has no value beyond his example of what he did, and how he behaved. For these Muslims, there is no need for any emotional and spiritual connection with the blessed Prophet.

Both of these extremes are equally inconsistent with theology and our human condition. On the one hand, centricity belongs to God alone. The blessed Prophet was entirely invested in his own journey of discovering Allah. The Quran attests to his devotion to Allah and speaks of his lengthy prayers during the night in Sūra al-Muzzammil. This devotion added to the growth of the blessed Prophet. In fact, every prophet before him was on that same individual journey of finding God. Therefore, centricity can only ever be towards God. On the other hand, we – as humans – naturally require role models with whom we can relate and form an intimate bond of love during the course of our gradual journey to the truth and to God.

In order to gain a proper perspective, let us consider the evolutionary trend of growth towards God-centricity displayed in the lives of the blessed prophets. Recall the incident mentioned in the Quran, when the Prophet Ibrahim said, “My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.” Allah said, “Have you not believed?” He said, “Yes, but I ask only that my heart may be satisfied.” (2:260)

At this point, Allah instructs Ibrahim to slaughter four birds, mix them together and put a portion on different hills. Allah resurrected the birds so that Ibrahim may attain inner contentment. We see the Prophet Ibrahim evolving towards God and gaining a greater level of certainty. First, he becomes a nabī (prophet), then he ascends to the level of a rasūl (messenger), then a khalīl (friend of Allah), and then finally an imam.

We have this naïve understanding that none of the prophets were evolving, and that they were the same from birth till death. On the contrary, the Quran clearly demonstrates that these blessed personalities were all evolving and constantly growing. The Quran speaks of the rage of the Prophet Yunus, and how Allah caused him to be swallowed by a fish, and then kept him within its belly because of this rage: “And remember the man with the whale, when he went off angrily thinking that We could not restrict him; but then he cried out in the deep darkness, ‘There is no deity except You; exalted are You. Indeed, I have been of the wrongdoers.’” (21:87) Allah saved him only after he understood and acknowledged his lack. However, it is only after experiencing this rage and learning his lesson that the Prophet Yunus is promoted a notch higher and sent to a community of a hundred thousand people.

Similarly, it is only after Adam eats from the forbidden tree and sincerely repents that Allah raises him to an even higher station. We also have the story of the Prophet Musa, when he says to Allah, “My Lord, show me Yourself. I want to see You.” He faints. When he regains consciousness, he says, “Glory be to You. I am of the believers.” Now at this point, Allah says to him, “I have chosen you for my communication.” The prophets displayed their frailties, learnt their lessons, and grew. These beautiful beings are human to the core, just like the rest of us. In the Quran, we see the journey of our blessed Prophet. His human emotional states are described: his anxieties, aspirations, human fragility and constant growth towards God-centricity. It becomes very clear that these wonderful prophets were on their own individual journeys to Allah. They were not in a stagnant state of perfection, as we like to imagine.

Thus, we understand that the prophets are not ends in themselves. Their message was one of God-centricity, and this is what they were constantly aspiring to in their own lives. However, our emulation of the prophets as spiritual role-models entails much more than just a formalistic appreciation and following of their example. It requires a very deep-seated and intimate bond of love and belonging to them before the soul can be spiritually purged from everything other than

God.

The group of Muslims who advocate that the Prophet was merely a formal example for us quote the following verse: “Indeed, you have a prime example in the Messenger of Allah for one who desires Allah and the Last Day.” (33:21) They infer from this verse that only the formal Prophetic example is of importance, and not the person of the Prophet. What they seem to overlook is that the journey to Allah is one where the devotee has to hand himself over to Allah in the most intimate manner. Therefore, the prime example of the blessed Prophet is more intimate than just his actions. Children fall deeply in love with their parents prior to falling in love with God. The love of parents is a necessary preparatory stage for the soul’s initiation into the love of God. Similarly, the love of the Prophet refines us morally and prepares us spiritually to receive the love of Allah.

Therefore, God has to be the centre of our universe but not at the exclusion of the prophets, Imams and other saintly figures. The Prophet and the Imams are not our focus. Allah is our focus. However, this does not mean that the prophets and Imams have no part to play in our spiritual evolution. They play an intimate part: “Indeed Allah is your walī and His Messenger and the believers who bow and give charity.”(5:55) In another verse, the Prophet is commanded by God, “Say: I do not ask for any reward save love for my near ones.” (42:23) These verses are talking of intimate belonging with the blessed Prophet and his family.

This love and belonging enables us to actualise our potential and become godly people who are totally directed towards Allah. This state is the deeper level of khilāfa. When we create, give life, and work for justice and equality, we are displaying the khilāfa of Allah at the intellectual and moral levels. However, there is a deeper level of the khilāfa of Allah that needs to emerge from the depths of our beings, and it is the true sense of existence; however, it needs to be discovered. As we discussed in last year’s lectures, without the discovery of this level of existence our intellectual and moral pursuits seem to be very arbitrary. It is like the example given in the Quran: “The deeds of those who reject their Lord are like dust that the wind blows furiously on a stormy day. They have no power over anything they have gained.” (14:18) Our prayers, fasts and even the charity that we give are unproductive in a substantive way until and unless there is a deep rootedness with God.

When we emerge from the cradle of infancy, we cannot understand God. He is

far too abstract, and it is difficult to form an affectionate relationship with Him. Instead, we naturally form a bond of love with our parents, siblings and children. These natural forms of love become a gateway into the love of our God. Through experiencing things naturally (that is, in accordance with our human condition), we move towards our truest calling. When we really love the Prophet and his family, it leads us to our true calling, and our true calling is Allah from within. It makes us strong and empowers us, and it makes us charitable and merciful. We all need to love the Prophet and his family at that level. It will nurture and fulfil us, and it will give us growth at a substantive level. This is what the love of the blessed Prophet and Imams is supposed to do for us. If a person who has the habit of cursing Sunnis thinks that he is the lover of Imam Husayn, then he is deluded because the love of Imam Husayn prevents us from behaving immorally. Such a person is displaying the love of his own self in the name of Imam Husayn.

Thus, we need human mediation in order to learn how to connect with God independently. During the course of our spiritual journeys, we naturally look toward those personalities with whom we can relate. If somebody is displaying godly attributes, then this will naturally resonate with us because there is a godly calling within us. We are hardwired to find God, and therefore, we are immediately attracted to people who portray the beauty of God. I will state this again: As human beings, we are in need of godly human examples in order to find God. When we fall in love with the blessed Prophet and the Imams, we slowly and gradually get introduced to Allah, and start to become godly ourselves.

We will now discuss the validity of the theology and religious practices that rely heavily on mediation between us and God. Here, we are referring to the notions of seeking intercession or mediation from the holy personalities, intercession itself (including theirs) and symbolism. The meaning of the words “intercession” and “mediation” are inextricably connected. Intercession – known as shafāʿa – is the intervention of another, whereas the act of seeking the intervention of another is known as mediation, or tawassul. Are such beliefs and practices consistent with God-centricity? The simple answer is that if these beliefs and practices are sourced accurately from valid texts, and provided that they do not infringe on God-centricity, then in principle they ought to be fine. In order to substantiate our practices, the first port of call is the Quran and Sunna. If the Quran and Sunna are silent about the performance of a particular practice, then we can say that no evidences were found that prohibit that practice. In this

instance, the general precept of permissibility will allow us to engage in that particular practice. Thus, if there is no evidence suggesting that an act is not allowed, then we can perform that act on the presumption that it is permitted.

When we analyse the notions of intercession and mediation, we see that they are human conventions that we employ in the interactions of everyday life. As such, they are reflections of God's nature vested within us. Just as there are a variety of ways in which we approach people in our everyday life, our interactions with God are no different. In fact, human interactions are a yardstick for our interactions with God to a great extent. There are a variety of ways of performing tawassul to Allah, and we will now discuss which forms may not be the most befitting and hence are not to be considered "best practice".

We can seek the intercession (tawassul) of God Himself in a variety of ways. We can say, "O Allah, I seek Your intercession for the sake of You, Yourself." Another way to express this is, "O Allah, I seek my needs from You for the sake of Your care and love for Your creation." We are in effect performing tawassul to Allah through Allah Himself. This was the method employed by the prophets and Imams as demonstrated in their supplications. At times, we say to Allah, "O Allah, we seek means to You through Your beautiful Names, al-Raḥmān and al-Raḥīm, and through the best of Your creations." This is mediation to Allah directly through His beautiful attributes and His creation.

Our natural human condition necessitates that we reach out to our most beloved God. This necessity is perfectly aligned with the unity, authority and centricity of God. We are at liberty to improvise when reaching out to our God. It is our prerogative to speak to God in the way that is most comfortable to us. For instance, when we want a favour from someone we would praise them and remind them of their kindness and then ask. Similarly, we can begin by praising Allah and recounting His favours upon us before asking Him for our needs. The blessed Prophet and Imams have stated that praising Allah is a key to Him responding to us. At other times, we ask a person through the love he has for his children and parents. Similarly, God responds when we approach Him through His Self, His wonderful creation, His beautiful names, and His pardoning nature.

As opposed to this way of approaching God there is another form of tawassul that is not God-centric. It entails asking the Prophet and Imams to grant us our desires. This is not necessarily wrong as long as we ascertain that such personalities have been given the right to respond to our requests. However, it

must be stressed that they themselves have never approached God in this way. Since they are our role models, we should understand that this form of tawassul does not constitute “the best practice” even if it is allowed in itself. We should say, “O Allah, for the sake of Your Prophet, grant me such and such”, as opposed to saying, “O Prophet, grant me this”. Our blessed Prophet and illustrious Imams always practiced and taught tawassul to God through God; that is, in a manner that is God-centric. In the Sahifa Sajjadiyya, the fourth Imam often utters the words, “O Allah, send salutations to Your Prophet and his family. Send salutations to all Your prophets and dear ones.” Therefore, this is the best formula of tawassul to Allah through the blessed prophets and Imams.

We can also state our desires to the Prophet and his progeny directly in a manner that is God-centric. For instance, we can say, “O Prophet, ask Allah to do this for me”, or, “O Prophet, pray for me”. In such statements, we acknowledge the life of the blessed Prophet beyond his physical worldly existence, and through it seek his mediation to Allah. One of the great companions came to the grave of the blessed Prophet during a drought and pleaded, “O Messenger of God, seek water for your Ummah.” He did not say, “Give water to your Ummah”. He used the words “seek water for your Ummah”. Seek from whom? From Allah. The etiquette of tawassul is that it ought to centre around God. When we go to the grave of the Prophet, we should either say, “O Allah, for the sake of this blessed Messenger of Yours, do this for me”, or, “O Messenger, plead to Allah for me”.

Now what is the etiquette of intercession? It is also a human practice. It is something that we see in our daily lives. Therefore, God does honour it. However, it must be remembered that the focus of intercession is fundamentally Allah. We can say to Allah, “O Allah, You have given this person such a lofty stature! I know for a fact that if I were to appeal to that person to intercede on my behalf, You will respond”, and Allah honours that. The Quran talks about this type of intercession: “If when they wronged themselves, they had come to you, O Muhammad, and asked forgiveness of Allah, and you had asked forgiveness for them, then they would have found Allah accepting of repentance and Merciful.” (4:64) Thus, Allah accepts the repentance of wrongdoers when they approach Him through an intermediary. Therefore, it is perfectly fine to call out “O Muhammad, O Ali, O Fatima, O Hasan and O Husayn, beg for my forgiveness”, and they will seek forgiveness on our behalf because Allah will give them the right to do so. The Quran states that Allah gives certain people the right to intercede for others: “On that day, no intercession will be of benefit except that of whom God allows and whose word He is pleased with.” (20:109)

All of this still has to be God-centric, and it has to be understood that another's intercession is only effective through Allah's authority. There are certain things that the Prophet cannot do. Allah is making it very clear that if a person is an enemy of God, He will not accept the Prophet's intercession even if he were to intercede seventy times. God says to the Prophet, "Even if you should seek forgiveness for them seventy times, Allah will never forgive them. That is because they disbelieved in Allah and His Messenger, and Allah does not guide the defiantly disobedient people." (9:80) What this means is that if there is no recognition of God within the heart, then there is no possibility for another's intercession.

Therefore, intercession is only possible if God is in our hearts. Intercession is like bailing someone out of prison. The judge asks, "I can see that this person is not a flight risk, so if you choose to bail them, then I will release them?" The judge will only allow the person to bail the accused if it is first ascertained that they are not a flight risk. This is what happens when we ask for intercession; it is the same interaction that happens with God. If there is a prestigious person, the judge will take their word as long as they can see that the accused is honourable enough not to be a flight risk. Allah does the same thing. He has given the right of intercession to His friends, but their intercession will only work if God is within the heart of the one who has sought the intercession of His friends. It is like a teacher saying to the principal, "Give the student another chance because I know he will pass. I know he has the aptitude." Now the aptitude has to be there before the principal can give another chance to the student. There has to be something there to work on. Similarly, there has to be godliness within the heart before intercession is accepted.

Imam Sadiq says, "The one who belittles prayer is not from us, and he who belittles prayer will not have our intercession." Therefore, intercession will only operate if we have started the journey of becoming godly from within and begun to actualise our humanity. In other words, Imam Sadiq is saying, "We have no kinship with God. I cannot influence the decision of God." In light of this, we realise that our thinking is naïve and very distorted: We feel that we do not need to acquire any goodness, that we do not need to recognise God, and that the blessed Prophet and his illustrious family will intercede for us nonetheless. However, the fact is that they just cannot do it. Their intercession is totally conditional. The Prophet expressed this in his sermon on mount Marwa: "If the best of the Quraysh comes to me without godliness, then I will be unable to do anything for him on the Day of Judgement. But if one who is lowly in your sight

– a slave without a good lineage – comes to me with godliness in his heart, then I will be able to intercede for him." Thus, we need to get these things right because these theological notions do have the potential to add greater colour and depth to our human interactions with Allah; however, if we do not, then they will remain as meaningless tropes.

Symbolism is an intrinsic part of human existence, so let us briefly address it. There is nothing wrong with symbolism (for instance, drawings and alams). There is nothing wrong with it, as long as the factor of God-centricity is assured. Symbolism is a beautiful means of igniting the passion in our souls of wanting to meet with God. As Rumi says, "I looked at this beautiful drawing of a warrior upon a wall. I looked at his hands so powerful, and the unsheathed blade shining and so sharp. However, I when I went close to it, neither were the hands charitable nor did the blade cut. I said: 'Of what use are you, O painting on the wall?' Then I said to myself: 'But yes, there is a use for you. You have initiated me into an inquiry of finding out who you represent, for if you were drawn on the wall in this way, then the real thing must be somewhere." Thus, everything is potentially a means towards Allah and God-centricity. Even the symbolisms that we employ can be a means to God.

Having said this, there are a couple of things that we must clarify. Firstly, symbols are not ends in themselves. They are there to fulfil a greater function, and if they fail to do so and become a distraction, then we need to reconsider their place in our lives. The conduct of the blessed Prophet and Imams has to be the guiding factor that directs our lives and behaviours. If they did not do something, and if they did not place such an emphasis on symbolism, then we ought to learn from that. We need to understand that we are a community that has been given the greatest gift: the blessed Prophet and Imams. If the wider community is not being drawn to these beautiful personalities, then it is because we are failing to represent them adequately. At times, our fervour for symbolic expressions is so great that it leads to practices that are devoid of the essence of the blessed Prophet and Imams.

When people see us hitting swords on our foreheads in the love of Imam Husayn, they become disenchanted with Imam Husayn. Of course, no act of love can be enough for Imam Husayn; for even if I were to cut off my head, it would not be enough. However, I will not be so selfish as to cut myself in front of people who do not understand what it means. That would be very naïve. People may be doing it sincerely – and may Allah reward them for the sincerity of their

devotion – but a lot of damage is being done. Similarly, so many practices are done in the name of the blessed Prophet and his family – who are so pristine and beautiful – but when they are scrutinised, we find that they are far from their teachings and practices.

To summarise: mediation, intercession and symbolism are all human needs, and as such, they are acceptable provided that they do not get out of hand and are fundamentally God-centric. As long as they are directing us towards God and making us godly, they are permitted.

On a concluding note, we can make a distinction between “private” and “public” practice: Our public practices of symbolism have to be in line with what is acceptable and appreciated within the public domain; whereas our private practices are those features of symbolism that are acceptable by Sharia standards but are not appropriate within the public space. Such practices ought to be confined to our private spaces.

Night Twelve

Conclusion

The topic of this lecture series has been the articles of faith, and tonight we will tie up what we have been discussing. The articles of faith are those beliefs that a person must attest to in order to classify as a Muslim. There are the basic articles of faith that qualify a person as a Muslim, and other additional articles that qualify a person as a member of a particular sect. From the outset, we have presumed that the truth of a "formal" religion lies in the capacity of its articles of faith to promote intellectual, moral and spiritual growth. Therefore, these lectures have focussed on the influence and implications of the different understandings of the articles of faith on our outlook and mindset. On the basis of our existential condition, we stated that whatever gives growth and generates productivity is most befitting for the human community. As such, we have interpreted each of the articles of faith in line with human liberation and evolution.

Accordingly, a theology that empowers is better than a theology that takes away our confidence. A theology that tells us that humanity is good, and grants it salvation, is better than a theology in which everyone is consigned to the hell fire. A theology that brings about moral growth is better than one that does not allow for moral growth. A theology that enables spiritual refinement is better than the one that is unconcerned with spirituality. A true commitment to the articles of faith ought to bring us to a state of godliness. This was our founding assumption. We already have this notion within us but where does this notion come from? This is what I want to talk about: Where does this assumption come from?

Existentially we are hard-wired to grow. This is why whenever a reformer has come and given a message of growth (that is, a message of becoming better, more empowered and spiritual), the message appeals to all of us. Whenever the prophets came, they stated that the society's degeneration was due to structures

that were based upon exploitation and oppression. Every heart will immediately say that greed and exploitation are wrong. At the core of myself, I know this is wrong. We find that this is what appealed to the masses when the blessed Prophet came. He said, “Do not lie”, “Do not steal”, “Do not cheat” and “Do not be indecent”, and the people said to themselves that this man is actually making sense. When he said, “Be confident and productive”, “Go and explore” and “Find and make your destiny”, it appealed to them. They already understood it at their existential level, and that is why they were drawn to the blessed Prophet.

The Quran calls itself a reminder. All the Prophet did was to remind the people of something that was obvious and forgotten. We are hard-wired to grow and become the agents of God, but what happens is that because of our material and animalistic desires, our sense of reasoning becomes distorted. From time to time, reminders are sent in the form of revelations to awaken and put us back on the pedestal of godliness and self-liberation. Whenever a reformer comes, they only preach a message of reversion to the basics. They do not do anything else, and nothing new is given. They only unpack things, go back to the bare bones and try to understand it from there. It is like a complex mathematical equation that we just cannot get right. At that point, our lazy tendency awakens and judges, “It’s just too complicated, and it cannot be understood”, but what we actually need to do is to rub it all out and go back to basics. This is exactly what we need to do. We must go back to the basics, and from there we will find that theology has to be self-liberating and growth-promoting.

Is the theology to which we subscribe liberating? Is the theology that determines the validity of prayers on the basis of whether your arms are open or folded liberating? Immediately, we know that this cannot be liberating because it is missing the essence of prayer altogether. If a theology says that you cannot interact with your fellow human beings because they are lesser in their humanity, then immediately you will say that since there is One God Who creates in His image, then He cannot prefer one of His creatures over the others. Thus, you will say that this theology is restrictive. If you say that another person is ritually impure, then there is an obstacle in the mind – a bias that the other is not equal to you in their humanity. It is an ungodly sentiment, and for anybody to feel that Allah will burn a sincere person who is seeking the truth, just shows the sheer level of their arrogance. Our theology is supposed to bring about a state of humility, liberation, productivity and growth.

At the outset of these talks, before we began to examine the articles of faith, we

stated that human beings are the khulafāʾ of Allah upon this earth. Although, the angels protested at our creation, Allah knew our potential, and He knew that His godly light would prevail within us. Now imagine if we got all of the above things right, then the Muslim community would indeed be at the helm of humanity. It would be the community that becomes the agency of productivity and growth, and harmonious coexistence. If we could understand that the agent of God is not one individual but humanity at large, then we would realise that unless all of humanity gets it right, we cannot fulfil our purpose on earth. A university does not succeed by producing one graduate. A university has to increase the numbers of its successes well beyond its failures – that is how Oxford becomes Oxford, and Cambridge becomes Cambridge.

Proceeding on the basis that our success is the success of humanity at large, and that we are tasked with establishing the khilāfa of Allah upon this earth, we realise that our understanding of the meaning of faith and kufr has been inaccurate. A kāfir is not somebody who does not believe in Islam or God. In the truest sense, Islam means to surrender to Allah. Therefore, its contrary is knowingly not surrendering to Allah. This deliberate non-surrendering to the truth is kufr. The biggest kāfir, according to the Quran, is Iblis who believes in One God. Now how interesting is this? The Muslim community believes that the kāfir is anyone who does not believe in God, and from the very beginning, Allah is declaring Iblis to be a kāfir even though He believes in God. This just shows that we have to incorporate these distinctions into our theology: A kāfir is a person who knowingly refuses to submit to the truth. It cannot be applied to a person who genuinely doesn't believe in the same religion as you and I.

We talked about the unity of God and shirk, and we stated that the Quran is making a distinction between kufr and kāfir, and shirk and mushrik. Allah tolerates the subtleties of kufr and shirk because they are a part of the human condition. Thus, they do not qualify a person as a kāfir or a mushrik. When I wear this ring with the belief that it is giving me some sort of protection, then that is a form of shirk; however, this is not the shirk that Allah condemns as the greatest sin. People who do not have an accurate conception of God, such as the Zoroastrians, have not been termed as kāfir or mushrik in either the Quran or Sunna. This is because an uncritical and a mistaken understanding of God is not condemnable. What is condemned is the deliberate refusal to acknowledge the truth and Allah after the truth is known, understood and assented to.

After accepting the existence and unity of God, we discussed the attributes of

God, and in particular, the attribute of divine justice. We can never restrict Allah by saying that He “can’t” do something. Instead, all we can say is that Allah chooses never to be oppressive or unjust towards His creatures out of His own nobility. Through an accurate appreciation of divine justice, we can update the Islamic legal system, and shape a befitting outlook and mindset towards others. When we examine the teachings of the Quran and the blessed Prophet, we realise that in reality, Allah is continually doing iḥsān. Iḥsān is to give to an entity beyond its due measure (or beyond what it deserves), and the adoption of the practice of iḥsān is strongly advocated for both the individual and society. In contrast to the strict notion of the justice of an eye for an eye or a life for a life, we see that Islam is all about forgiveness, kindness and generosity. If we can understand the importance of iḥsān and implement it, then we would be the people to bring about the khilāfa of Allah. This is because the practice of iḥsān transforms our mindset to one of forgiveness, kindness and generosity, all of which are essential to allowing both ourselves and others to grow.

The Quran, which is Allah’s communication to humankind, is the best guide for us to actualise our potential provided that we are able to appreciate it accurately. We stated that our basic assumption regarding the Quran – namely, that it is universal in its literal capacity – results in a very inaccurate understanding of God’s message. If we say that the verses of the Quran have to apply in a literal manner to every region in every era, then we will have to concede that the actions of ISIS, like slavery, are sanctioned. However, slavery is deemed by all of us to be unequivocally wrong due to the fact that we have collectively grown at the moral level of khilāfa. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that the Quran has to be appreciated in its proper context.

We have to distinguish between the form and essence. The Quran is universal in its spiritual and moral message; however, there is no universality to its particular forms. Based on Quranic evidences, we stated that the Quran is one of several revelations that have issued from the overwhelming reality and truth known as the Book. That Book has manifested itself in the forms of the Torah, Gospel and Quran. That Book is an ever-living Book. The eternal message of the Book remains constant throughout the different revelations but the forms of the eternal truths keep changing. With this understanding, we can begin to talk about the ethos and the eternal message of the Quran.

In the discussions on prophethood and imamate, we made the following distinction: To qualify as a Muslim, a person must believe in the prophethood of

the Prophet Muhammad in addition to the unity of God; whereas, to qualify as a member of the Shia Ithna Ashari sect, a person has to also believe in the imamate of the twelve Imams. In light of our fundamental purpose of connecting with Allah, the importance of believing in the Prophet lies in the fact that it aids us in our journey towards becoming godly. The Quran tells us that the Prophet is the best of examples. The question is, "'Example' for what?" In reality, the goal is to become God-centric. We can become the khalīfa of Allah on this earth by emulating the Prophet's etiquettes, human interactions, and spiritual and moral actions.

The discussion on imamate touched upon the sectarianism that is destroying the Ummah. We concluded that an Imam is a point of convergence for the diverse Muslim community. We discussed some of the examples of the cordial relations that existed between Imam Ali and the first three Caliphs. We also stated a few narrations of the other Imams emphasising the necessity of a united Ummah. There will always be different interpretations on the issue of leadership, but the plurality of interpretations does not preclude us from operating as one unified Ummah. Plurality exists even amongst those who accept Imam Ali as the first Imam, and hence there are many factions and sects amongst them. Humanity cannot rid itself of plurality because diversity is an aspect of the khilāfa of Allah.

We spoke about the belief in the Final Day, and how the notion of judgement and recompense functions at a variety of levels in human life. At the crudest level, the promise of reward and punishment acts as an incentive and a deterrent to keep human beings in check. This is necessary whilst humanity is in a childlike state; in other words, in a state that needs enticements in order to be motivated to do good. At a more refined state of existence, qiyāma means to meet with Allah. It is to acquire the presence of God to such a degree that one becomes totally God-centric, after which one creates one's own paradise within one's self in this world. At this stage, we no longer do good out of the fear of hell or the want of paradise, rather we are motivated due to our intimate connection with Allah.

The next lecture discussed the belief in the destiny and decree of God, and the notion of predestination. An inaccurate understanding of destiny leads to exploitation and passivity. The powerful exploit the weak by popularising the theology that equates the status quo with the destiny of God. This results in the weak becoming submissive and accepting their fate. However, if destiny is understood accurately, then it is actually a promoter of growth that plays a positive and an empowering role in enabling us to attain the khilāfa of Allah. We

stated that Allah has left destiny in our hands, and that there are two important facets to this: the best of deeds and the righteous deeds.

The notion of “the best deeds” refers to our outward actions that defy external limitations, trials and tribulations. Instead of becoming complacent with our lot, we become creators, invent tools, and find cures for diseases. We become empowered through God to challenge the restrictions that face us. In contrast to this, the notion of “the righteous deeds” refers to the inward state of composure. It is the ability to remain calm and have full confidence in God, just as we see in the example of Imam Husayn. The righteous deed is the inner acceptance of God’s will together with the certainty that nothing is impossible for God.

The lecture series concluded by defining the notions of intercession and mediation, and evaluating the various forms of mediation that are practiced. Within this topic, we also discussed symbolism. We stated that all of them are a part of our natural human condition, and therefore they are perfectly fine as long as they are in line with God-centricity. We have an in-built need for human mediation because through it, we are able to learn how to connect with God independently. We are hard-wired to be attracted towards those refined souls who display godliness throughout their lives. We are naturally attracted towards them. When we fall in love with the blessed Prophet and Imams, we slowly and gradually get introduced to Allah, and start to become godly ourselves. When we love the Prophet and his family to that level, it leads us to our true calling, which is Allah from within. It is very similar to the way in which a child loves a parent, and then evolves into a good human being through that love. The deep-seated connections that we form with others are a part of human nature.

Having said this, it is necessary for our practices to be in line with the examples of the blessed Prophet and Imams. We should be aiming to do that which constitutes best practice. We do not find any of the Imams asking the blessed Prophet or the other Imams to grant them something independently of God. Therefore, to ask the blessed Prophet or Imams to fulfil our desires with the understanding that they can do so without the consent of Allah is definitely wrong. If we seek intercession, then we have to bear in mind that another’s intercession can only be effective through the authority of Allah. We can say, “O Prophet, plead on my behalf in front of Allah”, or, “O Prophet, ask for my desires to be granted from Allah”. On the other hand, we can also plead directly to Allah through those who are close to Him: “O Allah, grant me this for the sake of your beloved Prophet”. Both of these formulations are fine because they

are God-centric. We must be aware that the authority is solely with Allah, and that the blessed Prophet and Imams dedicated their lives to being totally directed to Allah. Thus, we must acknowledge that they have no independent power or authority.

Similarly, we stated that the need for symbolism is a part of human nature, and so it is perfectly acceptable as long as it is a means towards Allah. However, it is always possible for symbolic practices to get out of hand whereby there is a real danger of losing the essence altogether. Therefore, we have to be continually mindful of our symbolic practices and ensure that they are directed towards God. They must not give a bad impression of Islam to the other. Some of our mourning rituals are not understood by the wider Muslim and non-Muslim community, and because of this, our other brothers and sisters are actually being deterred from the Imams. Thus, it must be acknowledged that such symbolic practices are counterproductive and contrary to best practice. Both our beliefs in the articles of faith and our actions must be aligned with the aim of evolving and becoming godly.

This lecture series has analysed the articles of faith in accordance with the following presumption: The function of the articles of faith is to facilitate the emergence of godly individuals and the spiritual khilāfa of God upon this earth. Humankind as a whole are the khulafāʾ of Allah. Therefore, our success is the success of the entirety of humanity. In our analysis, we found that the articles of faith are actually very broad and inclusive. They do not condemn anybody on the basis of not subscribing to the same religion or sect. On the contrary, condemnation is reserved exclusively for those who either knowingly deny the truth and God, or knowingly ascribe partners to Him and uphold falsehood. This broad understanding of the articles of faith instils us with confidence in humanity as a whole and motivates us to arrive at the lofty pedestals that we have been destined for. Believing in the blessed Prophet, Imams and the Final Day aids us in our journey towards this lofty destination.

The themes discussed in this lecture series, and those dealt with previously, have set the groundwork for the next series of lectures: “Islam and Religious Pluralism”. By the grace of God, they will address the issues of the truth of the other faiths, and the salvation of those who do not belong to the formal religion of Islam.