

God and god of Science

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In this text the author presents a world-view based on monotheism and attempts to answer some of nowadays' challenging questions. The book uses the Qur'an, hadith from various Imams and quotes from scholars, as well as scientific details to establish why utilizing an Islamic framework to understand our world does not compete with science, but rather bridges it with other forms of truth that cannot be quantified through the scientific method.

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Acknowledgements

Dedicated to

The *sun* hidden behind the clouds

وَقُلْ جَاءَ الْحَقُّ وَزَهَقَ الْبَاطِلُ ۚ إِنَّ الْبَاطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقًا

And say: The truth has come and the falsehood has vanished; surely falsehood is a vanishing (thing). (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra^{١٧}, 17: 81)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

All praise belongs to ***“God! There is no god but He – the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting, Eternal” and “He is the Most High, the Great.” (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:255)***

Peace and blessings be upon His servant Muhammad (S) and his purified progeny as God says in the

Qur'an, "Surely God and His angels bless the Prophet; O you who believe! Call for (Divine) blessings on him and salute him with a (becoming) salutation." (Qur'an, Surah al-Ahzab, 33:56)

This book was written over a period of fourteen months, but it took me forty years to be able to write it. I must acknowledge some of those who enabled me to pen this book.

Foremost in my acknowledgment is my mother, for she taught me everything I know, and my father who is the root of any goodness in me, and just as God says:

وَاخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذُّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا

And make yourself submissively gentle to them (your parents) with compassion, and say: 'O my Lord! Have compassion on them, as they brought me up (when I was) little.' (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra^{١٦}, 17:24).

Then I must acknowledge my brothers, for they are my protection and shield, and my sister for she is my constant support and guide.

Then I need to acknowledge my wife, for she accepted me when others rejected me, and just as God says in the Qur'an:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He put between you love and compassion; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect. (Qur'an, Surah al-Rum, 30:21).

Then the light of our eyes, our sons Husayn (‘a) and Ali (‘a), I hope they will one day read this book and improve it further, and as God says:

وَإِذْ قَالَ لُقْمَانُ لِابْنِهِ وَهُوَ يَعِظُهُ يَا بُنَيَّ لَا تُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ

And when Luqman said to his son while he admonished him: 'O my son! Do not associate anything with God; most surely polytheism is a grievous iniquity.' (Qur'an, Surah Luqman, 31: 13).

Then I must acknowledge and thank Dr. Sulaiman Darrat, who though an engineer by training, has profound knowledge of classical Arabic. We regularly met on Sunday mornings for many months to discuss the grammar rules of classical Arabic.

I also want to acknowledge and thank Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, one of the most senior and respected clerics in North America for writing the Foreword of this book.

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I also wish to thank Café Yasmeeen in Houston where I spent many evenings writing and editing the manuscript.

Lastly, I cannot begin to express my gratitude towards my teacher and mentor, Dr. Mansour Leghaei, for developing a wonderful online course in Islamic theology, philosophy and mysticism (www.ehawza.com [7]), ideal for people like myself. This book could not have been possible without this course. I hope to meet him in person one day.

Syed Hasan Raza Jafri

Preface

As self-conscious beings we have an innate desire to know. We want to know about ourselves as well as our surroundings. Initially our knowledge comes from our parents and family. Then as we start to interact with individuals outside of our family, either at the school or in our neighborhood, we learn new things and different ideas. As we mature further we start to interact with the society at large. We learn to read, watch television, browse the internet and exchange ideas with others. As we make these interactions, our personal ideology and world view begins to take shape. Once we grow further to become a teenager and reach early adulthood, our personal ideology takes a firm root in our being. We live the rest of our lives consciously or unconsciously according to this ideology. This book gives a world view based on the ideology of monotheism.

Monotheism is an ideology which dates back as far as early recorded human history. It is centered around the concept of one supreme being called God, the One who created the universe – including us – and holds us responsible for our conduct.

But does God exist? If yes, why can't we see Him. If we can't see Him, how do we know that He even exists? Can we be sure of His existence without actually ever seeing Him? If He exists then why did He create the universe? If He created the universe, then who created Him? Is it possible for the universe to

exist without a creator? These questions cross the minds of many of us at least at some point in our lives.

Our personal ideology is not only shaped by our social interactions, but also by which era of human thought we live in. Undoubtedly, the present era is dominated by science. In this era, science has taken a center stage and there is no area of our life which is not affected by science. Scientific method and knowledge is based on carefully made observations, empirical evidence and reason, and this method has helped us use nature for our benefit.

In this era of science, many have questioned the ideology of monotheism, rejecting it altogether, something which was part of human society before the scientific revolution, but today has no place in our personal lives. Faith in the unseen realities is considered similar to fairy tales with no rational foundation for accepting them. Major world religions are considered remnants of human thought from the pre-modern era and those who continue to practice them (a majority of the world population) are considered as being immature in their thought. Surveys of prominent scientists show that many of them do not believe in God at all.

Major scientific theories like the “Big Bang Theory” and the “Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection” can explain how the universe came into existence and how intelligent life evolved on earth. As for morality, some say that we can rely on reason and empirical knowledge alone to figure out what is morally right and wrong – we do not need to believe in God to be good to others.

In the busy modern life, our focus generally revolves around getting an education, employment, personal relationships, raising children and enjoying life with leisure activities. Even if God exists, what does He or religion add to our lives anyways? The role of God or religion in our personal lives seems less and less important.

If God exists, and He is all powerful and all knowledgeable, then do we have free will? If we do not have free will then how can He hold us accountable for our actions, and if we do have free will, then does that not challenge His authority?

Moreover, there is so much suffering, death and destruction and pure evil all around us in the form of diseases, crimes, natural disasters, wars, that the notion of a benevolent, all powerful God seems implausible. Is He really indifferent to all of this?

There are many world religions, some followed by billions of people. Most of the time people follow the religion of their parents. Is one religion better than others? If yes, then is it not unfair for those who are born into other faiths? If no one religion is better than others, then it does not make a difference which religion one follows. How does one resolve this confusion?

Some people believe that faith in God or following Divine revelation is fundamentally incompatible with the pursuit of life based on reason and science. However, at least in the context of Islam, pursuit of

science or philosophy was never considered incompatible with following the teachings of the Qur'an.

Prominent Muslims scientists and philosophers like Avicenna and al-Tusi were men of science and reason as well as theology.

One of the most prominent scientists of all times, Sir Isaac Newton, also wrote a book on theology called *The Philosophical Origins of Gentile Theology* (see Chapter Ten) defending the idea of monotheism.

However, as the scientific understanding of the world has also increased, for many the compatibility between science and theology has become increasingly difficult.

In this backdrop I thought it was important to write a book about monotheism. I personally have many friends and acquaintances who no longer believe in God and consider religion obsolete. Similarly, there are many others who are believers, but religion plays only a peripheral role in their personal lives, lacking the insight as to why religion should be important to them.

In my role as a Thoracic Medical Oncologist (Lung Cancer Specialist), a Cancer researcher and a faculty member at a medical school in Houston, Texas, the scientific approach is part and parcel of my daily work. In my personal belief, I belong to the Shi'a school of thought within the fold of Islam. I have also taken short courses on Islamic theology, philosophy and mysticism.

My primary exposure to religious knowledge has been through attending the religious gatherings (*majalis*) dedicated to Imam Husayn ('a), the 3rd Imam of Ahlul Bayt ('a) (the Family of Prophet Muhammad (S)) (see Chapter Four). These gatherings which are held across the globe every year during Muharram, the first month in the Islamic calendar, are a great source of infusing the community with religious knowledge. These gathering provide a gateway to expose ordinary people like myself to intellectual and academic discussions about various theological issues. If it were not for these gatherings I would have been wandering aimlessly as well, unable to resolve the conflict between science and religion like many of my colleagues.

When it comes to the importance of Imam Husayn ('a) and his role in Islam, Prophet Muhammad (S) has been quoted as saying:

Indeed, Husayn is the lamp of guidance and the ship of salvation.

The Qur'an, the primary text of Islam, constantly reminds the readers to use reason and intellect, and invites us to ponder over the natural world. The Shi'a school of thought in its approach, lays great emphasis on reason and rationality, not only in the fundamental beliefs (*usul al-din*) but also in jurisprudential issues (*fiqh*). Moreover, the use of both philosophy and mysticism are emphasized greatly in addition to relying on the revealed text i.e. the Qur'an.

This book, *God and god of Science*, represents a synthesis of different branches of knowledge namely theology, philosophy, mysticism and science.

Chapter One deals with the epistemological description of various types of knowledge. It is important to have an outline of how knowledge is acquired before we can shape our world view. This chapter compares revealed knowledge – meaning the Qur'an, with other branches of knowledge like science and philosophy. Throughout this book, the Qur'an has been quoted to provide a basis of different opinions. This Divinely-revealed book is an argument itself and needs no other proof to be accepted. The validity of the Qur'an will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Chapter Two deals with the description of God as explained by the Divinely-appointed successors to Prophet Muhammad (S), namely the twelve Imams of Ahlul Bayt ('a) (the Family of Prophet Muhammad (S)), Muslim theologians, philosophers and mystics. It is important to know what is meant by God before answering the question whether He exists or not. We cannot prove or disprove the existence of something without first describing what it is.

Chapter Three deals with the philosophical arguments about existence of God. How, by using pure reason, not only can we show that God exists, but that in fact, God is the only reality which exists and everything else is just a manifestation of His existence.

Chapter Four deals with two of the greatest signs of God – the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad (S) and his pure progeny ('a). The uniqueness of the Qur'an, its language and how this speech could not have come from any human being will be discussed. The second part of the chapter will narrate anecdotes from the lives of Prophet Muhammad (S) and the Imams of Ahlul Bayt ('a) (the Family of Prophet Muhammad (S)) to highlight the nobility of their character and mannerism which itself is an argument for monotheism.

Chapter Five deals with questions about God's knowledge and His actions. This chapter lays the foundation of how God plays an active role in nature and in our personal lives.

Chapter Six discusses the reality of this life and the life to come after death. Without a clear understanding of how the afterlife is linked with this life we cannot comprehend the philosophy of this life nor the role of religion in it.

Chapter Seven discusses the purpose of creation, our role in this world and what we are supposed to achieve from this life. What is the ultimate goal of our existence?

Chapter Eight discusses practical aspects of monotheism. Monotheism is not just for philosophical discussions, but rather, it is a practical ideology to live by. The degree of belief in monotheism is reflected in our actions.

Chapter Nine discusses how love, in addition to the intellect, allows us to soar towards our perfection. Sometimes it is the logic of love which supersedes the intellect to bring out the best in us.

Chapter Ten deals with the history of human thought from the time of the Babylonians, through the

philosophy of ancient Greece, Islamic/Arab science and culminating in the scientific revolution of the West. It describes how some people have replaced idol worshipping done by the ancients with the worship of the god of science.

Chapter Eleven deals with the relationship between reason and revelation and it describes that when applied correctly, these guide towards the same reality. This chapter shows us how reason is insufficient for us to be moral and how revelation raises the bar for our morality.

Chapter Twelve deals with the non-believers and discusses reasons why some people end up losing faith even though they may have advanced degrees in science or philosophy.

Chapter Thirteen discusses the modern understanding of the universe in light of physics, and its inability to explain how the universe could have come into existence on its own. It also briefly discusses the metaphysical aspect of reality which lies beyond the physical universe.

Chapter Fourteen discusses the theory of evolution by natural selection and the evidence in support of it. A critique of scientific evidence is discussed to show how broad conclusions are drawn from this theory without actually having solid empirical evidence to back up these tall claims. This chapter also discusses philosophical and spiritual aspects of human existence and presents a viewpoint about the descent of Adam ('a) and the start of the human race.

Chapter Fifteen discusses the relationship between religion and spirituality. It also touches upon religious pluralism in the context of Islam.

Chapter Sixteen looks at how revelation tells us about the existence of other intelligent beings besides humanity and how that changes our perspective about ourselves.

As described above, this book gives a monotheistic world view from the perspective of Islam. It is not a comparative study of different religions to show what they say about God, rather it covers many questions in relation to monotheism and gives answers from the viewpoint of Islam. It relies heavily on the Qur'an and the teachings of the twelve Imams of Ahlul Bayt ('a) (the Family of Prophet Muhammad (S)). It also draws concepts from the philosophy known as "Transcendent Theosophy" or *al-Hikma al-Muta'aliya*, developed by the most prominent Muslim philosopher of the past four centuries, namely Mulla Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi (c. 1571/2–1640).

This book also contains many mystical insights and ethical points. It is a fast-paced book which covers a lot of topics, and at times the content may appear dense and complicated, and some of the points have been repeated at more than one place. If some areas are difficult to follow, then that reflects my inability to convey the meaning properly, for which I hope you overlook my shortcomings. Please attempt to read the difficult parts more than once or refer to the references for a more in-depth study.

I hope people can gain something from reading this book.

Syed Hasan Raza Jafri
Houston, Texas
Rabi^u al-Awwal – 1439 AH
November 2017

Introduction By Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

In the Name of the Almighty

May He bless Prophet Muhammad (S) and his purified progeny ('a)

Belief in God is the foundation of religion. In Shi'a Islam, every person who attains the age of maturity is required to study and reflect on the fundamental beliefs of the faith. *Taqlid* – blind faith – in matters of belief is not permitted; it should be based on *tahqiq* – understanding and knowledge. However, this does not mean that everyone has to become a theologian, a philosopher or a scientist; but it does mean that you, on your own level, should reflect on the basics and attain a degree of certainty.

Almighty God says:

سُنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ ۚ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

Soon We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truth. Is it not sufficient that your Lord is a witness to all things? (Qur'an, Surah Fussilat 41: 53).

The world within us and around us is a sign (ayah) of God's power and glory.

Unlike the tension that we see in the West between science and Christianity, there is no real tension between science and Islam since the latter considers former to be a window of appreciating the handiwork of God.

Centres of learning like Fez, Cairo, Baghdad, Isfahan or Andalusia, at the peak of Muslim civilization, did not separate the religious sciences from secular sciences; a theologian could be a scientist and a scientist could be a philosopher.

The decline of Muslim civilization and influence of the Western mode of education created a gulf between the centres of religious and secular sciences. Gradually, religious scholars and Muslim scientists are rekindling the link between the two dimensions of knowledge, and are using their expertise in their relevant fields to study the universe as a way of enhancing their understanding of their own faith.

Syed Hasan Raza Jafri's book, *God and god of science*, is an example of a Muslim who has attempted to understand the fundamentals of his faith and also to explain them to others.

I have read the initial part of the book and have glanced through the remaining chapters. I commend Hasan Raza Jafri for his efforts in presenting the arguments from the Islamic perspective. He has worked hard and referred to quite a few sources to support his arguments. My recommendation for the future edition is to rearrange the chapters in a more seamless manner.

Hopefully this book will motivate other Muslims in the field of science to present and defend their faith with pride and conviction.

Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

April 30th, 2018 ce

Sha'ban 13th, 1439 ah

Chapter 1: Knowledge And Its Sources

We want to know if God exists, and if He does, then what can we learn about Him? Before we get to the question of God, the preliminary step is to first learn about knowledge itself. How do we know what we know? Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which deals with what knowledge is and how it is acquired. Let us lay the foundation of this book by first discussing knowledge.

Knowledge is a metaphysical reality which is present in every existent being; and knowledge is inherent with existence. It has also been described as light which by its very essence brings out hidden realities. It is human nature to pursue and seek knowledge and there are obvious benefits and merits in acquiring it.

The sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq ('a) has said:

Knowledge is the basis of every sublime state and the culmination of every high station.[1](#)

In addition, Prophet Muhammad (S) has said:

The good of this world and the world to come is through knowledge.[2](#)

Knowledge of one "being" (Arabic: *wujud*) can be acquired by another. This ability to acquire knowledge is variable and follows a hierarchical order. The higher beings have the ability to acquire knowledge of the lower beings (e.g. we can learn about plants and animals), and this ability gives us a higher order in existence. Thus, the highest being in existence which is the source of all existence should have

knowledge of everything and this is exactly what we learn about the most perfect being i.e. God.

هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ ۚ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

He (God) is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent: and He (God) has full knowledge over all things. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:3).

Knowledge is broadly understood to be of two realities in existence:

a) Apparent realities (Arabic: *al-Shahadah*)

b) Hidden realities (Arabic: *al-Ghayb*)

هُوَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ ۚ هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ

He is God besides whom there is no other god; the Knower of the unseen and the seen; He is the Beneficent, the Merciful. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hashr, 59:22).

وَعِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِحُ الْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْلَمُهَا إِلَّا هُوَ

And with Him (God) are the keys of the unseen – none knows them but He. (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:59)

Knowledge of apparent or visible realities is available and can be acquired by those who seek it using the means available to them, whereas knowledge of the hidden or invisible realities is exclusive and is not available ordinarily except by special endeavor or favor:

عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ فَلَا يُظْهِرُ عَلَى غَيْبِهِ أَحَدًا إِلَّا مَنِ ارْتَضَىٰ مِنْ رَسُولٍ فَإِنَّهُ يَسْلُكُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِ رَصَدًا

He (God) alone knows the unseen, and so He does not make any one acquainted with His Mysteries, except a messenger whom He has chosen – and then He makes a band of watchers (guards) march before him and behind him. (Qur'an, Surah al-Jinn, 72: 26–27)

At birth, human beings have limited or no knowledge, and as they grow they are gradually given knowledge through various means, but primarily through the use of sensory organs:

وَاللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُمْ مِنْ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۚ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

And God has brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing; and He gave you hearing, sight, and intelligence that you may give thanks (to God). (Qur'an, Surah al-Nahl, 16:78)

This process of acquisition of knowledge continues throughout an individual's life, as well as the collective knowledge of humanity which has grown tremendously over many centuries and millennia. But despite tremendous advancement in human knowledge, the extent of our collective knowledge as a proportion of total knowledge is still miniscule:

وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

...and you have been given very little knowledge. (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra^٩; 17:85).

Besides the use of the sensory organs, knowledge can also be acquired by using the pen (Arabic: *qalam*). Here, the pen can denote its use in the ordinary sense of the word, but it can also refer to a metaphysical reality of “the pen” which has been described by philosophers as the “first creation” or the “intellect.”

The very first revelation of the Qur'an talks about imparting knowledge to mankind through the pen.

الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ ۚ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ

He (God) who taught (with) the pen, Taught the human being that which they did not know. (Qur'an, Surah al-Alaq (96: 4-5)

Sources of Knowledge

Knowledge is ordinarily acquired by one of the following sources:

1. Sensory Observation

Perhaps the most primitive way of acquiring knowledge is by means of the sensory organs. A newborn has no knowledge, not even language skills and learns mostly by observing his or her parents and caregivers. Thus, the sensory organs help us to perceive our surroundings and explore the environment, so that we can learn:

وَاللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُمْ مِنْ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۚ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

It is God who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing; and

He gave you hearing, sight, and intelligence that you may give thanks (to God). (Qur'an, Surah al-Nahl, 16:78)

2. Communication

The single most important phenomenon which has helped mankind accumulate a vast amount of knowledge is the development of language. Through language, knowledge can be preserved and propagated. Communication can be both verbal such as a teacher imparting knowledge in a classroom, or written like reading a book.

الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ

The Beneficent (God). He taught the Qur'an. He created the human being. He taught them the mode of expression (utterance). (Qur'an, Surah al-Rahman, 55 1-3)

3. Experimentation

Experimentation is fundamental to the scientific pursuit of knowledge. Scientific process involves identifying a particular problem and then posing a question and hypothesis about it. This hypothesis is then tested by performing experimentation to prove or disprove the hypothesis. Through that process, new knowledge as well as new hypothesis and questions are generated. For example, if we wanted to know whether elephants have kidneys or not, then we can take a sample of elephants and dissect them to detect the presence or absence of kidneys – thus, through experimentation we can prove or disprove this hypothesis.

4. Intellect and Reasoning

Reasoning or the use of intellect is another very important way of acquiring knowledge. Reasoning is employed to make sense of knowledge acquired by other methods like observation, communication and experimentation. Great insights and understanding are achieved by employing reasoning. For example, if we want to answer the same question as to whether elephants have kidneys or not, then we can attempt to solve it using deductive reasoning. Our argument can look something like this:

- a) All elephants are mammals,
- b) All mammals have kidneys,
- c) Therefore, all elephants have kidneys.

The above mentioned sources and methods have been employed to generate a tremendous amount of knowledge. However, those who pursue knowledge at the highest level employing these methods, like

scientists or philosophers, realize the limitations of these methods. There are often unknowns and probabilities, estimations and errors, biases and confounding factors which can limit the conviction in our findings, and often leave many questions unanswered or answered incompletely. In fact, sometimes the entire hypothesis is rendered incorrect once new data becomes available.

There are however, other methods of acquiring knowledge besides the ones mentioned above which help us acquire the highest form of knowledge, in which there is no doubt and can lead to certainty and conviction. This knowledge comes from within and is imparted directly through a special favor to a few who deserve to receive it – it is called direct knowledge or as it is known in the Arabic, *ʿilm laddunni*:

فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِنْ عِبَادِنَا آتَيْنَاهُ رَحْمَةً مِنْ عِنْدِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ مِنْ لَدُنَّا عِلْمًا

So the two of them found an individual from among Our servants upon whom We had bestowed mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge to by Ourselves. (Qur'an, Surah al-Kahf, 18:65).

This direct knowledge, is obtained by directly witnessing the reality, as opposed to merely reading about it or trying to get an estimate of it using empirical methods or philosophical arguments. The clarity and certainty obtained by direct knowledge far exceeds that from other methods.

This direct knowledge or *ʿilm laddunni* has a method to itself and does not come without an effort – in fact obtaining it requires continuous effort throughout one's life. This way of gaining knowledge comes about through spiritual self-purification and controlling the bestial urges.

Spiritual self-purification means that one must decrease and finally eliminate human vices such as arrogance, greed and jealousy from ourselves; and to avoid lying, cheating, oppressing others and many other spiritual evils. It means to respect others, give them their rights, deal with them with kindness and fairness, and help them whenever possible.

When we speak about controlling the bestial urges, this means that we must limit excessive eating, drinking, sleeping, sexual activity, anger, insulting others, vile talking and other such traits. In short it requires spiritual discipline and it means to follow a spiritual path which ordinarily is also known as religion.

Examples of direct knowledge are:

5. Intuition (Ilham)

Intuition or “*ilham*” is a way of obtaining knowledge which can be experienced by many ordinary individuals as well. An example of it is when an idea comes into the mind from “nowhere” and gives a degree of certainty to a person. Or it is an epiphany about something that clears the problem in the

mind. Of course, this has to be differentiated from random thoughts that cross our mind. Another example of intuition is a true dream.

A person witnesses something in his or her dream which one later finds out by other sources to be true. Other examples include unveiling (*Arabic: mukashifa*), or witnessing (*Arabic: mushahida*). An institute based in California called the *Institute of Noetic Sciences* founded by a former astronaut, Edgar Mitchell, has been doing scientific research on these phenomenon for a number of years now.[3](#)

6. Revelation (Wahi)

The highest form of knowledge that can be acquired by mankind is by way of direct revelation from God or *wahi*. Very few select individuals who have special favor and character have experienced this form of gaining knowledge. It is the most certain and the most accurate form of knowledge – whether it is about past events, future phenomenon, human nature, ethics, morality, scientific facts and most importantly about events that happen after death.

A living example of such a form of knowledge is a book called The Qur'an. It consists of over 6,000 sentences and short paragraphs known as *ayat* or signs which are a direct communication from the original source of knowledge – God – to a man named Muhammad (S) and it is revered by billions of people. He introduced this book to humanity between the years 609–632 AD.

To summarize, knowledge is a metaphysical reality instinctively pursued by human beings. Knowledge is a Divine favor, the acquisition of which results in innumerable benefits and is the basis of every excellence. The extent of human knowledge is very limited as compared to the entire body of knowledge which exists in the world. Some knowledge is available to most people through the means available to them, but other types of knowledge require special endeavor or favor.

The reality (*Arabic: haqiqah*) of existence is one. We can approach existence through sensory observation or using empirical methods, or through philosophy, mysticism or revelation. Those who have the spiritual insight (*Arabic: basirah*) can reconcile within themselves knowledge obtained through these different methods and know that their method does not change the reality of existence, the difference is only how they look at this reality.

This basic description of knowledge and its sources is very important in developing our world view, our approach towards life, our values in our personal and social life, and what we regard as important and significant.

In this book, I will attempt to give a world view from a monotheistic perspective, using a synthetic approach of combining different methods of knowledge mentioned above to discuss some of the fundamental questions that are important to humanity, which all generations have attempted to answer and will continue to do so in the future as well. Questions like: is there a God and if yes then what is He like He ? Why does the Universe exist? What is the purpose of life and is there life after death? I will

quote from the Qur'an and its interpretation based on the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (S) and his family ('a), just as previously stated that Qur'anic quotations are an argument in themselves and that we will discuss the validity of the Qur'an in Chapter Four.

1. Sadiq, Imam Ja'far al-, Lantern of the Path, Ansariyan Publications, Qum, First Edition, 2005. Online at:

<https://www.al-islam.org/lantern-path-imam-jafar-al-sadiq> [8]

2. Majlisi, Muhammad al-Baqir al-, Bihar al-Anwar, v. 1, p. 204.

3. See: <https://noetic.org/> [9]

Chapter 2: Knowledge about God

Since the beginning of human history whether in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq), the Indus Valley (modern day Pakistan and India), the Mayan Civilization (modern day Central America), Egypt or China, we find that all of the major civilizations have developed their own system of beliefs and religions. This common behavior in otherwise distinct and separate human societies points towards an inherent need or a desire in human beings to seek a higher meaning for their lives in which religion plays a fundamental role. Most belief systems or religions are founded on the idea of a higher being, a Deity, a God, or even multiple gods who exercise authority over our lives and provide a meaning or purpose to our existence.

Now who God is, or what God is and how does one even begin to answer this question is not very simple to say the least. Also, is there only one God or are there multiple gods? In addition, there are those who completely reject the idea of God and claim that belief in God is a complete delusion affecting the majority of mankind and there is no evidence that God even exists.

The Qur'an brings forth the following conversation between the Pharaoh and Prophet Moses ('a):

قَالَ فَمَنْ رَبُّكُمَا يَا مُوسَى قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى

(Pharaoh) said: 'Who then, Moses, is the Lord of the two of you (Moses and Aaron)?' He (Moses) said: 'Our Lord is He Who gave to each (created) thing its form and nature, and further gave (it) guidance.' (Qur'an, Surah Taha, 20: 49-50).

To address the question in regards to knowledge about God, let us start by going back to the first chapter in which various sources of knowledge were listed and see which ones we can utilize to answer the question of who or what God is?

Since we cannot perceive God using our ordinary senses like sight, sound and touch, then we cannot use our sensory organs to obtain knowledge about God. Experimentation on God in the lab seems

rather impossible as well since no one claims to have a “sample” of God which can be used to learn more about Him. So what we are left with is communication – both verbal and written, intellectual reasoning which in a more developed form is called logic and philosophy, and direct and intuitive knowledge.

What I will attempt to do in this chapter is to describe knowledge about God as has been described by Muslim theologians, mystics and philosophers using the revealed knowledge from the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (S) and his rightful successors (the twelve Imams).

In the next chapter, I will attempt to give rational and philosophical reasonings for the existence of God. I think this sequence is important as we cannot prove or disprove something unless we first describe it.

In describing God, the Qur'an says:

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He has no offspring, nor is He born from anything; And there is none like Him. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ikhlās, 112: 1-4).

God Resembles None in Creation

As one ponders over God and tries to get some level of understanding, the first thing to acknowledge is that God does not resemble anything in creation. When we try to learn about something we typically ask questions like: What is it? Where is it? Since when has it been? What caused it? What is its size, shape and color? What is it made up of?

The simple answer to the first question what God is, is that He is “*Rabb al-ʿAlāmin*” – The Sustainer and Maintainer of all the worlds. Other questions like where is He or since when has He been, are not only unanswerable, but they are in fact wrong questions. Asking where God is, is to confine Him to a space; asking since when God has been is to limit Him to a time; asking what caused Him is to make Him an effect of something else; asking His shape, size and structure is to give Him a body. All of these are wrong questions as He is the Creator of space, time, bodies, shapes and colors, and thus none of these attributes can apply to Him.

Imam ʿAlī (ʿa), the first successor of Prophet Muhammad (S) has said:

Praise be to God, who lies inside all of the hidden things (affairs), and towards whom all apparent things guide. He cannot be seen by the eye of an onlooker, but the eye which does not see Him cannot deny Him, and the mind that proves His existence cannot perceive Him. He is so high in sublimity that nothing can be more sublime than He, while in nearness, He is so near that no one can be nearer than Him. But His sublimity does not put Him at a distance from anything of His creation, nor does His nearness bring

them on an equal level to Him. He has not informed (human) intellect about the limits of His qualities. Nevertheless, He has not prevented it from securing essential knowledge of Him. So He is such that all signs of existence stand witness for Him until the denying mind also believes in Him. God is sublime beyond what is described by those who liken Him to things or those who deny Him.^{[1](#)}

God is Beyond Sensory Perception

One of the main reasons that people deny the existence of God is due to their inability to “see” Him. If we cannot see Him then how do we know that He even exists? God is beyond our sensory perception as our senses are very limited in ability, sometimes even weaker than other animals. God is not a body or a physical form that our vision can perceive Him:

لَا تُدْرِكُهُ الْأَبْصَارُ وَهُوَ يُدْرِكُ الْأَبْصَارَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ

No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: and He is All Subtle, acquainted with all things. (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6: 103).

In addition, we read the following statement:

All praise be to God who cannot be sensed, felt or touched, as He cannot be perceived by the five senses. Imagination cannot grasp Him. Tongues cannot describe Him. Everything that can be sensed is a creation. All praise be to God who was when there was nothing but He. He made all things according to a design. He knows what has been and what will be.^{[2](#)}

Our inability to see God is not because He does not exist, but on the contrary it is due to the intensity of His existence. On a typical day, we cannot stare at the sun for more than few moments because the light of the sun is very intense. So if God is the Creator of billions of stars in our galaxy, as well as billions of other galaxies then imagine His Might and Power. Can our senses withstand the Majesty of such a Being?

The Qur'an mentions an instance in which the Israelites insisted that they wanted to see God, so Prophet Moses ('a) took them to Mount Sinai and narrated to God what his community was demanding:

وَلَمَّا جَاءَ مُوسَى لِمِيقَاتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرِنِي أَنْظُرْ إِلَيْكَ ﴿٢٤﴾ قَالَ لَنْ تَرَانِي وَلَكِنْ انْظُرْ إِلَى الْجَبَلِ فَإِنِ اسْتَقَرَّ مَكَانَهُ فَسَوْفَ تَرَانِي ﴿٢٥﴾ فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّى رَبُّهُ لِلْجَبَلِ جَعَلَهُ دَكًّا وَخَرَّ مُوسَى صَعِقًا ﴿٢٦﴾ فَلَمَّا أَفَاقَ قَالَ سُبْحَانَكَ تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and his Lord addressed him (Moses), He (Moses) said: 'O my Lord! show (Yourself) to me, that I may look upon You.' God said: 'By no

means can you ever see Me (directly); But look at the mountain; if it stays in its place, then you will be able to see Me. “ When his Lord manifested His glory to the mountain, He made it as dust, and Moses fell down, unconscious. When he recovered, he said: ‘Glory be to You (God)! I turn to You in repentance, and I am the first to believe.’ (Qur’an, Surah al-A‘raf, 7: 143).

This brief moment of Manifestation of God’s Majesty on the mountain was too intense for the mountain to bear as the creation cannot withstand witnessing God directly, for surely He is the Most High, the Magnificent (*al-‘Ali, al-Adhim*).

Imagination Cannot Reach Him

When we want to learn about something new we use our imagination to make a mental picture of it. Imagination is much more powerful than sensory perception, and it helps us to better understand those things also for which we have no sensory perception, such as abstract ideas and concepts.

As you are reading about God, focus on what mental picture of God is coming into your mind. Different readers may come with different mental images of God. But all of the the mental images that the readers make about God are wrong, as God is beyond imagination. Our inability to imagine him does not mean that He does not exist because we can imagine things that don’t exist such as an animal with the head of a tiger but the body of a zebra. Our inability to imagine Him is due to limitations of our imagination. The intellect points towards Him but it is unable to grasp the reality of Him:

سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى عَمَّا يُصِفُونَ

Praise and glory be to Him! (For He is) above what they attribute to Him! (*Qur’an, Surah al-An‘am, 6: 100*).

It has been mentioned by Imam Hasan b. ‘Ali (‘a) in the Islamic sources that:

He can neither be perceived by intellects or imagination, nor by thoughts and concepts.^{[3](#)}

God is Unique and Only One

Monotheism is based on the idea that there is only One God in existence and there is no other independent and self-subsisting entity which is outside of His sphere of influence. This point however needs more clarification. When we say God is One (*Arabic: wahid*) it does not mean “one” in the numerical sense of the word as that would imply that there can be a second or a third god also. When we say that God is One we mean the One for which there can be no second, the only God.

وَاللَّهُمَّ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ

And your God is one God: There is no god but He, the most Gracious, the most Merciful. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 163).

He is also the One (*Arabic: ahad*) which means that He is one entity which is not composite, has no parts, nor components to Him. He is unique beyond the grasp of our perception and imagination. Our intellects fail to comprehend Him. The Creator is totally different from creation and does not resemble anything else: He is

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ

Say: He is God, the One and Only (Unique). (Qur'an, Surah al-Ikhlās, 112: 1).

The following two verses of the Qur'an shed further light on the concept of monotheism:

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ ثَلَاثَةٌ ثَلَاثَةٌ ۚ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ ۚ وَإِنْ لَمْ يَنْتَهُوا عَمَّا يَقُولُونَ لَيَمَسَّنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ

They certainly disbelieve who say: Surely God is the third of three; when there is no god save the one God. If they desist not from what they say, then a painful punishment will fall on those of them who disbelieve. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:73).

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ مَا يَكُونُ مِنْ نَجْوَى ثَلَاثَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ رَابِعُهُمْ وَلَا خَمْسَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ سَادِسُهُمْ وَلَا أَدْنَىٰ مِنْ ذَلِكَ وَلَا أَكْثَرُ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ مَعَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كَانُوا ۚ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُمْ بِمَا عَمِلُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ۚ

Have you not seen that God know whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth? There is no secret conference of three but He is their fourth, nor of five but He is their sixth, nor of less than that or more but He is with them wheresoever they may be; and afterwards, on the Day of Resurrection, He will inform them about what they did. Indeed God is Knower of all things. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mujadila, 68:7).

Based on these two verses, it is wrong to say that God is the third of the three as it implies that the other two are similar to Him which is impossible. For example, if there are three different cars, each one of them is different from the other, but they are all still cars. On the other hand, it is correct to say that if there are three, He is the fourth, as it keeps God distinct from everything else.

God's Essence, His Attributes and His Names

After explaining that God is not limited by time and space and is beyond sensory perception and grasp of imagination, and truly unique in existence, still the questions remain, what really is God?

God is a Nondelimited being (*Arabic: al-wujud al-mutlaq*) who exists through His very Essence. Knowledge of Him consists of the knowledge that He exists, and His existence is nothing other than His Essence, though His Essence remains unknown.[4](#)

His Essence cannot be known as there is nothing like Him. No one other than Him can know Him.[5](#)

It is stated in the Qur'an:

لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ

There is nothing like unto Him... (*Qur'an*, Surah al-Shura, 42: 11).

Imam ʿAli (ʿa), the 1st Imam is quoted as saying:

He is so powerful that when the imagination shoots its arrows to comprehend the extent of His power, or when the mind tries to reach Him in the depths of His realm, or when the hearts long to grasp the realities of His attributes, or when the intellect attempt to secure knowledge about His being crossing the pitfalls of the unknown, they will all be turned back. They will return defeated, acknowledging that the reality of His Essence cannot be grasped.[6](#)

In the famous supplication taught by the 1st Imam, ʿAli b. Abi Talib (ʿa), he supplicates to God saying:

O He Whom none knows what He is, nor how He is, nor where He is, nor in what respect He is, but He![7](#)

His Essence is unknowable, but we can know Him through His Divine names and attributes as He has made His names and attributes known to us:

He does not need to give any name to His Own Self; but He has assumed the names just for others to call Him by them. The reason is that if He is not called by any name, He cannot be known at all. The first and the foremost name that He assumed for Himself is al-ʿAli – The All-High, al-ʿAdhim – The All-Glorious, since He is Greater and Higher than every other thing.[8](#)

He is the First (*al-Awwal*) and the the Last (*al-Akhir*), the Manifest (*al-Zahir*) and the Hidden (*al-Batin*). He is the First who has no beginning so it may be said when did He come into existence, and He is the Last who has no end and everything other than Him is subject to change, decay, transformation from one form to another and annihilation. He is eternal and not subject to occurrence. He is manifest in everything and prevails over them and nothing is devoid of Him, and He is hidden from them as nothing

can withstand witnessing His majesty but His knowledge, providence and plan permeates everything. He is All-Hearing (*al-Sami*^٩) who hears whoever calls Him; He is All-Seeing (*al-Basir*) as nothing is hidden from Him. He is All-Hearing and All-Seeing but without the use of sensory organs as He hears and sees by Himself:

هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden: and He has full knowledge of all things. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:3).

He is Alive (*al-Hayy*) and there is no possibility of death in Him; He is the only Being who is truly Self-Subsisting (*al-Qayyum*) and does not depend on anything and everything other than Him is totally dependent on Him at all times:

اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ

God! There is no god but He - the Living, the Self-Subsisting, Eternal. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:255).

God is All-Knowing (*al-^{١٠}Alim*) and nothing is beyond His knowledge; and He is All-Powerful (*al-Qadir*) who exercises His authority over everything; His knowledge of a thing before it comes into existence is exactly the same as after its comes into existence:

وَعِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِحُ الْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْلَمُهَا إِلَّا هُوَ ^{١١} وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ ^{١٢} وَمَا تَسْقُطُ مِنْ وَرَقَةٍ إِلَّا يَعْلَمُهَا وَلَا حَبَّةٍ فِي ظُلُمَاتٍ الْأَرْضِ وَلَا رَطْبٍ وَلَا يَابِسٍ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ

And with Him are the keys of the unseen, the treasures that none knows them but He. He knows whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but with His knowledge; there is not a grain in the darkness (or depths) of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry (green or withered), but is (inscribed) in a clear book. (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:59).

The attributes and names of God are innumerable, but there are the famous ninety-nine names, also known as *Asma^{١٣} al-Husna*, or The Most Beautiful Names of God.

The Names of God are different from His attributes and essence as the one who is named is different from the name. The name “Allah” is the proper name for God, the most comprehensive name which represents the essence of God:

هُوَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ ۚ هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ ۚ هُوَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْمَلِكُ الْقُدُّوسُ
السَّلَامُ الْمُؤْمِنُ الْمُهَيْمِنُ الْعَزِيزُ الْجَبَّارُ الْمُتَكَبِّرُ ۚ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ۚ هُوَ اللَّهُ الْخَالِقُ الْبَارِئُ الْمُصَوِّرُ ۚ لَهُ
الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

God is He, other than whom there is no god; Who knows (all things) both secret and open; He is the most Gracious, most Merciful. God is He, other than Whom there is no god – the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace (and Perfection), the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme; Glory be to God! (High is He) above the partners that they attribute to Him. He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names: whatever is in the heavens and on the earth declares His praises and glory: and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hashr, 59:22-24).

In describing God, we read the following in the traditions:

The word 'Allah' is derived from 'Ilah' – that is, 'The One who is worshipped'; and the One who is worshipped necessarily implies that He must be worthy to be worshipped. The name is (always) different from what is named. So whoever worshipped the name rather than what it denotes has become a heathen and actually worshipped nothing; and whoever has worshipped the name and its meaning jointly has become a polytheist, since he has (actually) worshipped two gods (the name and the meaning). Whoever has worshipped the meaning (of the word God) apart from the name, in reality has worshipped the One God.

The Imam added: God has ninety-nine names. If each and every name was identical with the named, then each and every name would be a god. But 'God' is the One Reality to which all of His names point; and all of these names are other than God Himself.^{[9](#)}

For example, Mr. Smith is a doctor and a father. This person can be called a father, a husband, a doctor, a man, an American. All these names represent attributes related to him, but his proper name is Smith and his reality is other than any of the names attributed to him.

The attributes of God are perfect, with no possibility of further improvement or increment in them nor do they lack any deficiency or imperfection. The attributes of God are not different from or in addition to His Essence, because if we consider them in addition to His Essence then it will imply multiplicity in His being which is against Unity. His Attributes are His Essence.

If we take an example of a man who is initially ignorant but later on goes to school and gets a degree, then by doing this he has acquired knowledge and has become knowledgeable. His attribute of knowledge is in addition to his essence as once he lacked knowledge but later he acquired it. Moreover, later in his life he may lose or forget his knowledge. However, God has always been knowledgeable and perfect in His knowledge with no possibility of increase or decrease in His knowledge. His knowledge is

not in addition to His Essence but it is His very Essence. God's multiple attributes do not make him complex or composite. His knowledge is same as His Mercy and His Love and His Power are all the same as His Essence. There is only one Reality and Being and the different attributes are manifested from this reality.

It has been mentioned in a tradition that:

I have heard Abu ʿAbdillah [the 6th Imam] (ʿa) say: 'The Exalted, the Glorious God, our Lord, has been throughout all of eternity. Knowledge was His Essence when there was nothing to be known; Hearing was His Essence when there was nothing to be heard; Seeing was His Essence when there was nothing to be seen; Power was His Essence when there was nothing on which power could be exercised. When He brought things into existence and the cognizable objects appeared, His knowledge applied to the cognizable objects. His hearing to audible objects, His seeing to visible objects, and His power to objects on which power could be exercised.'¹⁰

In *Nahj al-Balagha*, ʿAli b. Abi Talib (ʿa) has said:

Perfection of sincerity is to deny His attributes, because every attribute is a proof that it is different from that to which it is attributed, and everything to which something is attributed is different from the attribute. Thus, whoever attaches attributes to God recognizes His like, and whoever recognizes His like regards Him as two; and whoever regards Him as two recognizes parts for Him; and whoever recognizes parts for Him mistakes Him; and whoever mistakes Him pointed at Him; and whoever pointed at Him admitted limitations for Him; and whoever admitted limitations for Him numbered Him.'¹¹

Here the denial of attributes does not mean that God has no attributes, rather the denial of attributes, as explained earlier, means that the attributes are not in addition to the essence. His essence without His attributes and the names of those attributes cannot be known.

As one of the successors of the Prophet (S) has said:

There is no veil between Him and His creation other than His creation. He is veiled without a veil, and He is covered without a cover. There is no god but He, the Great, the Exalted.'¹²

In the above section, I have attempted to describe various narrations which talk about God explaining Islam's position on God, His Essence and Attributes.

God is truly a Unique Being who has no similar in existence and anyone who ponders over this matter will acknowledge His Majesty, and will be left in bewilderment, and be mesmerized by Him, develop an awe for Him, and one will be forced to bow down to Him and accept Him as the One who deserves to be worshipped:

إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ

Those the only ones who are in awe of God, among His Servants, are those who have knowledge; for surely God is Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving. (Qur'an, Surah al-Fatir, 35:28).

Acknowledging His Majesty and bowing down to Him leads to attraction towards Him, this attraction leads to the development of intense love for Him until one is consumed by this love and constantly remembers Him:

وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَشَدُّ حُبًّا لِلَّهِ

And those of faith are overflowing in their love for God. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 165).

There are numerous other traditions on the subject of *tawhid* (monotheism) which the readers can access using the books mentioned in the references section.

I end this section by presenting a narration from Imam ʿAli (ʿa) mentioned in *Nahj al-Balagha*:

Praise be to God for whom one condition does not proceed another so that He may be the First before being the Last, or He may be Manifest before being Hidden. Everyone called one (alone) save Him by virtue of being small (in numbers); and everyone enjoying honor other than Him is humble. Every powerful person other than Him is weak. Every master (owner) other than Him is slave (owned).

Every knower other than Him is a seeker of knowledge. Every controller other than Him is sometimes imbued with control and sometimes with disability. Every listener other than Him is deaf to light voices, while loud voices make him deaf and distant voices also get away from him. Every on-looker other than Him is blind to hidden colors and delicate bodies. Every manifest thing other than Him is hidden, but every hidden thing other than Him is incapable of becoming manifest.

He did not create what He created to fortify His authority, nor for fear of the consequences of time, nor to seek help against the attack of an equal or a boastful partner or hateful opponent. On the other hand all of the creatures are reared by Him and are His humbled slaves. He is not conditioned in anything so that it be said that He exists there in, nor is He separated from anything so as to be said that He is away from it. The creation of what He initiated or administration of what He controls did not fatigue Him. No disability overtook Him against what He created. No misgiving ever occurred to Him in what He ordained and resolved. But His verdict is certain, His knowledge is definite, His governance is overwhelming. He is wished for in times of distress and He is feared even in bounty.¹³

1. Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 49, Ahlul Bayt Assembly of America, Potomac, Maryland, 1996. Online at: <https://www.al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-1-Sermons/Sermon-49-praise-...> [10]

2. Saduq, Shaykh al-, The Book of Divine Unity, Chapter 2:29, The Savior Foundation, London, UK.

3. The Book of Divine Unity, Chapter 2:5.

4. Ibn al-ʿArabi, The Meccan Revelations, vol. 1, p. 32, PIR Press, New York, 2002.

5. Khumayni, Sayyid Ruhullah, Light Within Me, Ansaryian Publications, Qum, Iran, 2001, Third Edition, p. 123. Online at:

<https://www.al-islam.org/light-within-me-mutahhari-tabatabai-khomeini> [11]

6. Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 90. Online at: <https://www.al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-1-Sermons/Sermon-90-praise-...>
[12]

7. Mafatih al-Jinan, Duʿā al-Mashlul.

8. Usul al-Kafi, v. 1. Book of Oneness, Chapter 15, p. 283.

9. Usul al-Kafi, v. 1, The Book of Oneness, Chapter 16, 310–2, p. 285.

10. Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1, The Book of Oneness, chapter 12, 290–1, p. 267.

11. Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 1.

12. The Book of Divine Unity, 28:12, p. 223.

13. Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 65.

Chapter 3: Signs (Ayat) of God

سَنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ

Soon will We show them our signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is a witness over all things? (Qur'an, Surah Fussilat, 41:53).

The fundamental mistake made by those who reject the existence of God is that they compare Him with other physical entities like themselves. People say we cannot see, touch or hear God. We cannot point to where He is. We do not know when He came into existence and what brought Him into existence. Based on our discussion from the last chapter “Knowledge about God”, all of these questions are fundamentally wrong, and cannot be asked about God as “there is nothing like Him.”

However, if God exists then there must be evidence for His existence. For us to believe in Him our intellect must point towards Him and be convinced of His existence.

People are at different levels in regards to the degree of conviction in God's existence. On the one hand, we have people who are convinced that God does not exist. But on the other hand, we have those friends of God (*awliya* ﷻ *Allah*) who are at such a high level of conviction that they do not see anything in existence other than God:

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ ۚ فَأَيْنَمَا تُولُوْا فَتَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ۚ

And to God belongs the East and the West, and wherever you turn, there is God's countenance. Indeed, God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 115).

In his famous supplication, known as the Supplication of the Day of ʿArafah, the 3rd Imam, Husayn (‘a) has been quoted as saying:

How can You be figured out through that whose existence relies on You? Can anything other than You hold a (kind of) manifestation that You lack, and thus it may act as an appearance for You? When have You ever been absent so that You may need something to point to You? When have You ever been far off so that traces may lead to You? Blind be the eye that cannot see You watching it. [1](#)

For the friends of God this question that, ‘does God exist’, is a bit amusing. A human being whose existence is no more than a dot on the surface of the earth and we know what the size of the earth in relation to the entire universe, and whose life span is no more than a moment compared to age of the universe, has the audacity to ask the question that does God even exist? Even this comparison with the universe is not accurate as we are comparing human beings to the physical universe and not God, who is eternal with no limitation!

As it has been said in the work, *Light Within Me*:

There is nothing in existence except God and His manifestations. [2](#)

God is the fundamental and absolute Reality in existence (*al-Haqiqa*). He is the only Being who is Alive (*al-Hayy*) and everything other than Him is as if it never existed or is dead.

Imam Khomeini explains that a simple way to understand the parable of the relationship between God and the creation is that of the sea and its waves. [3](#) The reality is the sea, and the waves are nothing but a manifestation of the sea’s existence. Waves have no existence independent from the sea. Similarly, everything other than God is perpetually dependent upon Him for their very existence. Moreover, all of the attributes possessed by creation whether their beauty, power, light, majesty, knowledge or mercy are nothing but a manifestation of God’s attributes:

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

God is the Extensive Light of the heavens and the earth... (Qur’an, Surah al-Nur, 24:35).

The entire creation is nothing but signs (*ayat*) of God pointing towards Him. The creation is like a giant mirror reflecting God’s attributes. Each locus manifests them per its capacity and shares in them. There is perpetual poverty in all of creation in relation to God:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَنْتُمُ الْفُقَرَاءُ إِلَى اللَّهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ

O mankind! You are the poor in your relation to God; and God is He who is the Self-Sufficient,

the Praised One. (Qur'an, Surah al-Fatir, 35: 15).

To believe in the existence of God is something fundamental to mankind. We are programmed to seek God and nothing except for Him.

Ask yourself, what do people seek? Knowledge, beauty, power, permanence, control, honor, love, perfection. Aren't all of these attributes of God? We all seek Him, some consciously and others unconsciously. Even the atheists seek nothing but God as there is nothing else to seek. But we seek them in different objects. When we do achieve what we are seeking we get bored quickly from it because we are programmed to seek perfection – perfection of beauty and perfection of knowledge, but these can only be found with God. Hence those that seek God seek the Reality whereas others are caught up in the shadows of that reality.

While all of us seek God, atheists claim that God does not exist. This false ideology of atheism can be completely demolished by a very small sign (*ayah*) from the Qur'an:

أَمْ خُلِقُوا مِنْ غَيْرِ شَيْءٍ أَمْ هُمُ الْخَالِقُونَ

Or were they created without there being anything, or are they the creators? (Qur'an, Surah al-Tur, 52:35).

Nothing can create itself because as it has to exist prior to doing the act of creation. Equally absurd is the notion that the universe came spontaneously from non-existence as some have suggested. Atheism has no rational answer to the question of how does the universe exist? Some go on to ask if God created the universe then who created God? This again shows shallowness of their understanding. God is Eternal and was never non-existent that He would require a cause to come into existence.

It is so simple to grasp the idea that God exists that even children can understand it. However, the degree of conviction in God varies based on a person's own efforts and capacity. In this chapter I will attempt to give rational reasons for God's existence for those who want to rely on pure reason to find God.

Rational reasons provide a common platform for those who accept God's existence and those who deny Him to share their ideas. By using sound rational arguments an idea can either be accepted or rejected with a degree of certainty.

Rationality is our basic operating system which allows us to interpret our sensory and imaginary experience. Still the rational approach is for those who lack vision of the heart and want to search for Him like a blind man trying to find his way using a stick, but for those who have already tasted the reality their conviction is much stronger than that can be obtained by using rational proofs alone.

There are two rational ways of demonstrating God's existence:

- a) Proving God by Himself
- b) Proving God through His creation

Proof of God by Himself

In his supplication for the morning, the Commander of the Faithful, Imam ؑAli (‘a) prays to God in the following way:

O He Who demonstrates His Essence by His Essence, and transcends from congeniality with His creatures and is exalted beyond conformity with His qualities.[4](#)

Most of the discussion in this section has been adapted from a book called *Bidaya al-Hikma – The Elements of Islamic Metaphysics* written by the late ؑAllama Tabaؑtabaؑi, and from the lectures of my teacher Shaykh Mansour Leghaei.[5](#)

Let us start the discussion by describing some terms and concepts.

1. Existence (Arabic: Wujud)

The concept of existence is a self-evident reality. Existence is the most fundamental concept prior to any other concept. It is so fundamental that it can't even properly be defined.[6](#) Everyone perceives existence instinctively and there is nothing more obvious than existence.[7](#) I exist, this book exists, the universe around me exists.

If you doubt existence of yourself or the universe around you, then I don't think you need to read any further. Please seek help to sort this out for you. If you need some evidence for your existence and existence of the universe around you, then a simple method is to go and gently step on the tail of a dog or a cat and you'll get your evidence!!

2. The Concept of Existence is Univocal

The concept of existence in our mind is the same for different objects, whether it is a man, a car, a mountain or even God. When we say that a man exists, a car exists or God exists, then in terms of concept of existence there is no difference between these different examples. When atheists claim that "God does not exist," their denial of "existence" of God in terms of its meaning is the same when they affirm existence to other things.

We can divide existence into different categories such as existence of the necessary being or a contingent being, or existence of days of the week into separate days, and this ability to divide existence points towards the unity of what is being divided. So in terms of the concept of existence there is no

difference between different objects. The opposite of existence is non-existence which is also a univocal term as there is no categorization in non-existence.

3. Existence (Wujud) and Quiddity (Mahiyyah)

When we perceive something in the external world we form two concepts about it:

- 1) What is it?
- 2) Does it exist?

The first question is about its quiddity, and second is about its existence. For example, if we see a dog we will perceive the concept of an “animal” which will be its quiddity, and then the second concept will be that the animal (dog) exists.

Quiddity and existence are two separate concepts in our mind. This is a self-evident fact and paying attention to it will make this clear. Moreover, we may have quiddity of something in our mind which may or may not exist. For example, if someone asks me: “Do you believe that aliens exist?” My answer will be “No, aliens do not exist”. In this conversation “alien” is the quiddity, and the fact that it exists or does not exist is an additional attribute to it. Thus, existence is in addition to quiddity.

4. The Principality of Existence

According to *transcendental wisdom* of the 17th Century Muslim Philosopher, Mulla Sadra, existence in the external world is principle i.e. source of all external properties and quiddity is its derivative or mental construct. The quiddities are delimitations of one reality which is existence. Existence is common to all the quiddities.⁸

We know that different objects like water, fire, man and animal exist in the external world, and their existence is the source of unity between them, and their quiddity or “whatness” is the source of their diversity. Also, when quiddity exists externally, then it manifests properties expected of it, whereas a mere mental concept of quiddity does not lead to any manifestations of its properties, e.g a mere concept of a fire does not lead to the heating up of the mind, but its existence in the external world does lead to the generation of heat. Thus, existence is principally real, i.e. it exists by itself, and quiddity is a derivative from it.

5. Existence is One Reality in Different Degrees

According to the *transcendental wisdom* of Mulla Sadra, there is gradational unity of existence, i.e. existence is one reality in different degrees in terms of imperfection and perfection, weakness and intensity.

For example, light is one reality which can come from a candle, a bulb, flood lights in a stadium, or from

the sun representing different degrees of the same reality which is light. The difference between them lies in their degree of their existence.

Similarly, numbers from 1 to 20 or so on represent one reality but in different degrees, the number 20 represents a higher degree of existence as compared to number 19 or the lower numbers.

Similarly, from a seed to a tree, or from a drop of sperm to an adult man – these all represent one reality in different degrees or stages of perfection and imperfection. The more perfect existence is more valuable, capable and more independent than a less perfect being.

The highest degree in existence is the most perfect existent called the Necessary Being which lacks limitations or deficiency and is perfect in every sense.

6. Division of Existence into Necessary, Contingent and Impossible

Existence can be divided into categories based on its causality.

a. Essential Necessary Being

The essential necessary being exists by itself and does not need anything else for its existence.

b. Contingent Being

The contingent being needs something else for its existence. Once that factor is available then the contingent being comes into existence. Everything in existence besides the essential necessary existence falls into this category. A contingent being is dependent not only for its coming into existence, but is dependent even for its continued existence.

c. Impossible Existence

Something which is not possible for it to exist, is impossible for non-existence to exist.

This division is again self-evident and needs no further proof. An everyday example to understand this concept is that sugar is essentially sweet (doesn't need anything else to become sweet), tea is possibly sweet (depends on addition of sugar to become sweet) and salt is impossible to be sweet.

Based on the above mentioned concepts we can develop rational proofs of God as follows:

1. Existence is a reality;
2. Existence is one and graded reality in different degrees, from the lowest degree of existence to the highest degree;
3. This graded reality must reach a point which is the highest degree and the most perfect existence;

4. God is a perfect Being without any limitation;

5. The highest degree and most perfect existence is the essential necessary being which is without any limits and does not depend on anything else for its existence, it exists by itself and is God.

Another proof provided by Mulla Hadi (a Muslim Philosopher from Mulla Sadra's school of thought) follows along the same line and is even simpler:

1. Existence is a reality;

2. Reality of existence cannot be its contradiction which is non-existence;

3. An existence that is impossible to be non-existence must be essentially necessary existence;

4. Reality of existence is the essential necessary existence i.e. God.

7. Essential Necessary Being is One

The Essential Necessary being has to be only one and unique. Having two will put some limit to each of them or unique distinction lacking in the other which signifies imperfection. Similarly, it cannot be three and one at the same time (e.g. trinity) as it will signify there must be something common (i.e. Divinity) and something distinct between the three. This suggests a composite being which is dependent on its parts for its existence. The parts have to exist first before the whole can come into existence and is thus a dependent being and not essential Necessary being. Hence Essential Necessary being is One Unique being with not components

The essence of the necessary being is its existence and it has no quiddity. If the essential necessary being had a quiddity then its existence would be accidental and in addition to its essence. Anything which is accidental needs a cause which is contradictory to it being an essential necessary being. Thus, all beings are nothing but existential relations to the Absolute which is both simple and all-comprehensive.⁹

Proof of God through His Creation

1. The Necessary and Contingent Beings

As explained earlier we can divide existents into the necessary being which exists by itself, or the contingent being which exists by something else.

Let's take the example of A. There are only three possibilities for A to exist:

a) A exists by itself;

b) A exists by B;

c) A does not exist.

If A exists by itself and does not need a cause for its existence, then it is a necessary being which exists by itself and is thus God.

If A does not exist, then it is non-existent and we do not need to worry about it.

If A exists by B, then B is either self-existing or is caused by C. If B is self-existing then it is God, if it is caused by C then the same questions apply to C and we go into an infinite regress.

We know that A i.e. the universe, exists and it cannot exist by itself, as it is a composite structure (depends on its individual components to exist). In other words: If $A=B+C$, then A is a composite structure and needs B and C to come into existence. Thus A (universe made up of different things) cannot self-exist as it needs B and C to come into existence. Thus A (the universe) needs something outside of it which is self-existing i.e. God.

Some people who do not follow the argument pose a question, "Then that who made God?" Well they are missing the point. As discussed in Chapter Two and Three, God never came into existence that we may ask what brought Him into existence, He is Eternal in His existence and exists by Himself. Please ponder over it! Do not apply characteristics of creation on the Creator. The creation can never be like the Creator or vice versa. The creation can manifest God's attributes in its limited capacity however God does not share human attributes, we manifest His attributes.

2. The Order of Composite Structures

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لَآيَاتٍ لِّأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ 190 الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا سُبْحَانَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ

Most surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day there are signs for men who understand. Those who remember God standing and sitting and lying on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: Our Lord! You have not created this in vain! Glory be to You; save us then from the chastisement of the fire. (*Qur'an*, Surah Ale ʿImran, 3: 190–191).

What would happen if we took a dump truck full of sand, drove it to the edge of a cliff and unloaded all of the sand from the top of the cliff? Simply put, a pile of sand would collect at the bottom. If we repeat this exercise multiple times, we would get nearly identical results.

What if we now filled this truck with all of the individual parts of a car like the engine, tires, body parts,

chassis, steering wheel, etc. What if we now dropped all of these things from the hill top. Will we see an assembled car at the bottom, or will we see a pile of car parts? If we repeat this experiment a thousand times will we eventually get an assembled car or not? The answer is obviously no.

This small experiment tells us that it is against the laws of physics for complex structures to assemble by themselves into a composite orderly structure, especially into something which is functional as well. This is not how the physical universe works.

So the question is why is it that the universe appears to be arranged in highly complex and sophisticated functional structures and systems? One scientific explanation is that at least in the biological system, evolution by natural selection is responsible for the gradual increasing complexity of existing beings (see Chapter 14 for more details) eventually resulting in intelligent beings like us who are probing how did the universe come into existence.

Can a non-intelligent universe give rise to intelligent beings? Can lifeless organic matter give rise to life containing bacteria, plants and animals? Can higher human consciousness evolve from bacteria who have no or little consciousness? The answer is no. I cannot give you what I do not have, e.g. I cannot give you a million dollars if I myself do not have a million dollars. I cannot teach you mathematics if I do not know it myself and you have the potential to learn it. A non-intelligent universe cannot give rise to intelligent beings. Lifeless organic matter cannot give rise to life containing bacteria. Unless the primitive bacteria already have the potential to become adult humans they will not be able to even after millions of years of evolution. So unless primitive bacteria at inception have this potential that one day they will reach adult humans through the process of natural selection which requires foresight and planning by an outside agent – such will not happen. (See Chapter 14 for other details) To argue otherwise is irrational.

The universe is governed by rules and natural laws. In our daily life we also observe rules and laws to facilitate a process e.g. traffic laws. Traffic laws are not only designed, but are actively enforced for them to achieve their objective. Through the same analogy, rules and laws of nature must not only be conceived by someone but also enforced for nature to work properly. To think otherwise is an escapist argument, trying to deny the obvious and look for an alternative explanation for why the universe is governed by laws if not intended to be so by someone.

The complexity of the universe is such that it is improbable for such a universe to come into existence by chance alone. However, if God designed the universe, then God will be even more complex and sophisticated than the universe – so who designed Him? The probability of such a complex being coming into existence will be even slimmer slimmer than the universe!?

There are several fallacies in these arguments. The foremost is that God by definition does not need a designer or creator. He exists by Himself and this is what makes Him unique as compared to everything else. The second point is that God is not a complex structure otherwise it will also imply a composite structure made up of smaller units which is impossible viz-a-viz God. The third point is about the

extremely low probability of existence of such a unique being as God even if He is not highly complex and the probability of His existence being even lower than a sophisticated universe. Well this is also a frivolous argument as God was never non-existent that He may have needed to come into existence, and we may need to estimate the probability of such an event. He is Eternal in His existence and so there is no probability of Him coming into existence. Non-existence for God is impossible!

We as humans are the most advanced species in terms of knowledge and intelligence on the face of this earth. There is clearly more knowledge and intelligence at play in the functioning of the universe than what can be attributed to mankind. So what is the source of this supra-human knowledge and intelligence? I will leave the answer to you.

● In this chapter I have attempted to give rational reasons for the existence of God. Now many people after reading them will disregard them, find faults in the arguments or may not accept them even though they may not have an answer for them. This is up to them. Nevertheless, one thing should become clear that belief in God or conviction in His existence is not an irrational idea or a delusion or just based on “blind faith,” but it is based on very sound rational arguments and reasoning.

1. Mafatih al-Jinan, Duʿā al-ʿArafah.

2. Khumayni, Light Within Me.

3. Ibid.

4. Mafatih al-Jinan, Duʿā al-Sabah.

5. Tabaʿtabaʿi, Muhammad, S. Husayn al-, Bidaya al-Hikmah – The Beginning of Islamic Philosophy.

6. Meisami, Sayeh, Mulla Sadra, One World Publication, 2013, London, England.

7. See www.mullasadra.org [13].

8. Meisami, Mulla Sadra.

9. Meisami, Mulla Sadra.

Chapter 4: The *Thaqalayn* – the two weighty items

Prophet Muhammad (S) has said:

Verily, I am leaving among you the *thaqalayn* (two weighty and precious things) – the Book of God (the Qurʾan) and my progeny (ﷺ), the members of my household (*Ahlul Bayt* (ʿa)). If you hold to both of them, then you will never go astray. These two will never separate from each other until they meet me at the Pool of *al-Kawthar* on the Day of Judgement.¹

The belief in God comes naturally and by instinct to many. We can also establish His existence in our minds by using philosophical arguments as discussed in the previous chapter, though His existence is

independent of our reasoning as He exists by Himself and is not in need of our reasoning to come into existence.

The entire universe is a sign (*ayah*) of God, pointing towards Him. He is not visible by the physical eyes, but the hearts can not deny His existence. He is manifest in everything as nothing is devoid of Him. Everything manifests God according to its nature and capacity. But there are two things where His manifestation is the most perfect and complete – one is His last book called the Qur'an and the second is His last prophet Muhammad (S) and his purified progeny.

In this chapter, I will attempt to discuss the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad (S) and his household as being the two most important signs (*ayat*) of God. Analyzing and discussing them is not a trivial task and I certainly lack the capacity and ability to comment on them, but I will make my best effort, by relying on Divine assistance.

1. The Qur'an

a. Historical Context

Six centuries after Jesus Christ the son of Mary ('a), a man named Muhammad (S) rose in the Arabian Peninsula and declared himself to be the last messenger of God, acknowledging and attesting to the prophets and messengers who came before him like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus Christ('a).

Muhammad (S) was not formally schooled and had no known teachers, and at the age of 40 he stated that he started to receive revelation (*wahi*) from God via the Arch-angel Gabriel through which he invited humanity towards monotheism – just as had been done by previous messengers. The first 5 verses (*ayat*) revealed to Prophet Muhammad (S) through the angel were:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ إقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ إقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ

In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful. Proclaim! (or Read!) In the name of your Lord and Cherisher, who created. Created the human being out of a (mere) clot clinging (to the wall of the womb). Proclaim! And your Lord is Most Bountiful. He who taught with the pen, taught the human being that which he did not know. (Qur'an, Surah al-ʿAlaq, 96: 1-5).

This process of revelation continued at regular intervals for approximately the next 23 years with this series of revelations, in the form of verses (*ayat*) whose number by the end of the 23 years exceeded 6,000.

As the Prophet (S) started to narrate the revelations to his community of followers, he encouraged his

companions to memorize the *ayat* and to write them down. These verses were compiled during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (S) in the form of a book known as the Qur'an (meaning: Recitation). The *ayat* of the Qur'an were arranged, by Prophet Muhammad (S), in the form of 114 chapters (*suwar*) of various lengths – some containing as little as three verses whereas others exceeded 200.

b. Qur'an is the Preserved Word of God

The *ayat* of the Qur'an are the actual verbatim of God as revealed to Prophet Muhammad (S) which makes this book distinct from other religious books like the Bible which in its current form, represents writings by various individuals based on Christ's teachings, and are not necessarily the actual words revealed to him by God.

The Qur'an was initially preserved through memorization by the early Muslims and as at that time, paper was not readily available, initially the Qur'an was written down on leaves, stone tablets, animal skin and bones. This process of preservation of the Qur'an is quite extraordinary as in its current form, the Qur'an is exactly the same as it was 1,400 years ago when it was first compiled in the form of a book.

Moreover, despite over a billion followers who regard it as a sacred text, spread across all of the continents of the world and divided into dozens of sects, and multiple publishers promulgating it, there is only **one** "version" of the Qur'an:

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ

We have, without a doubt, sent down the Reminder (the Qur'an); and We will most surely guard it (from corruption). (Qur'an, Surah al-Hijr, 15:9).

c. Qur'an is a Reminder

The Qur'an describes itself as a Reminder. A Reminder to all of us about the real purpose of coming onto this earth and the ultimate purpose of existence:

وَهَذَا ذِكْرٌ مُبَارَكٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ ۗ أَفَأَنْتُمْ لَهُ مُنْكَرُونَ

And this is a blessed Reminder which We have revealed; will you then deny it? (Qur'an, Surah al-Anbiya^٩, 21:50).

The daily struggle of life and competitions between people makes us oblivious of the real focus of where our efforts should be. Reading the Qur'an wakes us up from the slumber of materialism, and takes our focus back to the reality and gives us a true context of our role in this world:

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِنْ مُدَكِّرٍ

And certainly We have made the Qur'an easy for remembrance, but is there anyone who will mind (and take admonition from it)? (Qur'an, Surah al-Qamar, 54:32).

4. Qur'an Confirms Previous Scriptures

Qur'an acknowledges existence of previous Divine scriptures like the Torah and the Bible and does not reject them. Qur'an is for guidance of mankind, a criteria to differentiate right from wrong.

نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَأَنزَلَ التَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ مِنْ قَبْلُ هُدًى لِلنَّاسِ وَأَنزَلَ الْفُرْقَانَ ۚ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ ذُو انتِقَامٍ

It is He Who sent down to you (step by step), in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the (Torah) Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the criterion (of judgment between right and wrong). Then those who reject Faith in the Signs of God will suffer the severest penalty, and God is Exalted in Might, Lord of Retribution. (Qur'an, Surah Ale ʿImran, 3:3-4).

d. Language of the Qur'an

إِنَّا أَنزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

We have sent it (the Qur'an) down as an Arabic recital in order that you may understand. (Qur'an, Surah Yusuf, 12:2).

The Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language which is spoken by millions of people even today. Arabic is one of the Semitic languages –other commonly known Semitic languages are Hebrew and Aramaic.

In 7th Century Arabia, literature was primarily preserved in the form of oral tradition which were recited in social gatherings. Arabs were very proud of the eloquence of their language and could compose poetry extempore. Such was the pride in their language that they would refer to non-Arabs with the term “*ʿajam*,” meaning “mute” or “silent.”

Indeed, Arabic is a very eloquent language and even small phrases and sentences can convey a lot of meanings.^{[2](#)}

Most verbs in Arabic are derived from a three letter root, which can then be modified to form different versions of the same verb to give a variety of meanings. Working with Arabic verbs reminds me of basic

organic chemistry in which modification of a parent structure by the addition of chemical groups leads to different compounds with predictable nomenclature and properties. Similarly, Arabic root words can be modified, by the addition of letters which gives rise to a variety of meanings from the same root word.

In this background of a rich oral tradition of the Arabs, Prophet Muhammad (S) started conveying the verses of the Qur'an which literally mesmerized his audience. No one had heard such words before and locals were dumbfounded by what the Prophet was reciting. What made all of this even more perplexing was that Prophet Muhammad (S) was not known to have had any formal schooling and teachers. How can a man who lived with them for forty years, suddenly start speaking in a way that had not been spoken by anyone before him, they wondered. They started saying that he had been possessed by a spirit or has lost his mind:

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ بِهِ جِنَّةٌ ۚ بَلْ جَاءَهُم بِالْحَقِّ وَأَكْثَرُهُم لِلْحَقِّ كَارِهُونَ

Or do they say: “He is possessed”? On the contrary, he has brought them the truth, but most of them hate the truth. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'minun, 23:70).

وَمَا صَاحِبُكُمْ بِمَجْنُونٍ

And your companion (Prophet Muhammad (S)) is not insane. (Qur'an, Surah al-Takwir, 81:22).

As I mentioned earlier, the Qur'an essentially is an oral narrative from God which has been delivered to us by Prophet Muhammad (S).

Such was the captivating power of the Qur'anic recitation that those who did not believe in the Prophet (S) started to discourage others from even listening to it:

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَا تَسْمَعُوا لِهَذَا الْقُرْآنِ وَالْغَوْا فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَغْلِبُونَ

And the disbelievers say: “Do not listen to this Qur'an, but talk at random in the midst of its (reading), that you may gain the upper hand!” (Qur'an, Surah Fussilat, 41:26).

If one goes over the Prophet's other statements, they will be able to tell that there is a clear distinction between the Qur'an and his regular daily speech – what is referred to as the *hadith*. I encourage the readers who are not familiar with the Qur'an to take a moment to listen to the Qur'anic recitation which are readily available online. Even though you may not understand it, but just listening to the Arabic recitation will capture your attention. Judge for yourself!

e. What is so Special about Qur'anic Arabic?

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِعَشْرِ سُوْرٍ مِّثْلِهِ مُفْتَرِيَاتٍ وَادْعُوا مَنْ اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

Or they (the disbelievers) may say: “He has forged it (the Qur’an).” Say: “(If this is the case then) Bring ten chapters forged like them, and call (to your aid) whomsoever you can, other than God, if you speak the truth!” (Qur’an, Surah Hud, 11: 13).

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِسُوْرَةٍ مِّثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا مَنْ اسْتَطَعْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

Or do they say: “He forged it”? Say: “Bring then a chapter like it and call (to your aid) anyone you can besides God, if you speak the truth!” (Qur’an, Surah Yunus, 10:38).

By the 3rd Century AD, Arabic had developed into a full-fledged written language – although it was present in a written form before the coming of Islam and the revelation of the Qur’an, however those who could read and write the language were few and far between. It was through the encouragement of Prophet Muhammad (S) and his successors and the Qur’anic verses which stressed on the importance of knowledge and its preservation that the skills of reading and writing Arabic took a greater level of prominence in the early generations of Muslims.

Although an ancient language, today Arabic still retains its deep-rooted rules of grammar, syntax and vocabulary which makes it an archetype of the entire family of Semitic languages.

The Qur’an was delivered orally and written down over 1,400 years ago, but even today a native Arabic speaker who has basic proficiency in the style of Qur’anic Arabic can read the Qur’an in its revealed language and understand most of its meaning. This is in stark contrast to other ancient texts whose languages often do not survive such prolonged periods of time (e.g. Latin is no longer in widespread use) and even if they do, the language is modified to such an extent that even the native speaker has difficulty understanding the original text.

Take for example Shakespeare’s plays which were written 400 years ago in early modern English. Many native speakers today will have difficulty following the text and will need some help in understanding Shakespeare’s original works. Now compare the texts from old or middle English which were written around the same time as the Qur’an and without a doubt, most native speakers of English will not be able to read them, let alone understand them.

I present one example which is an Old English, Caedmon poetry hymn from the 7th Century to show this reality³:

Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard

*metudæs maecti end his modgidanc
uerc uuldurfadur— sue he uundra gihuaes
eci dryctin or astelidæ
he aerist scop aelda barnum
heben til hrofe haleg scepen
tha middungeard moncynnæs uard
eci dryctin æfter tiadæ
firum foldu frea allmectig*

The modern English translation of this hymn would be:

*Now [we] must honor the guardian of heaven,
the might of the architect, and his purpose,
the work of the father of glory –
As He, the eternal Lord, established the beginning of wonders.
He, the holy Creator,
first created heaven as a roof for the children of men.
Then the guardian of mankind, the eternal Lord,
the Lord Almighty, afterwards appointed the middle earth,
the lands, for me.*

This is not the case with Qur’anic Arabic. It is as if alongside the preservation of the Qur’an, the Arabic language has been preserved as well.

The Qur’an has great consummate power and beauty, it takes hold of its listeners and often address the reader directly by saying “O you who believe or O mankind”; it is neither prose nor poetry, but it has its own unique style; it intermingles both metric and non-metric speech; its words rhyme with each other producing a unique sound; its profound meanings appeal to the intellect and its acoustics stir up the soul generating a spiritual impact on the reader and the listener; it produces vivid imagery using words which stir up the imagination; and finally, it combines rhetoric and cohesive features to produce unique sentences which also have subtle meanings.

I present an example of two short chapters from the Qur’an, however I must point out that the beauty of the language is completely lost in the translation. Nevertheless, if you cannot read Arabic, attempt to listen to these two chapters in their original language, and notice that despite having different syllables in the sentences, they still rhyme at the end.

[a. Surah al-Ikhlās \(chapter 112\)](#)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ 3 وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He has no offspring, nor is He born from anything; And there is none like unto Him. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ikhlās, 112: 1-4).

b. Surah al-Kawthar (chapter 108)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَانْحَرْ إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

We have granted you (O Muhammad), the Fountain (of abundance). Therefore turn towards Your Lord in prayer and sacrifice. Surely it is your enemy who will be cut off (from future hope – his progeny). (Qur'an, Surah al-Kawthar, 109: 1-3).

The Qur'an presents an open challenge to anyone who can produce a work like it – ten chapters – or even one! In response, there have been several attempts throughout history to take on the Qur'anic challenge. Even as late as 1999, a book in Arabic called *The True Furqan* was produced to match the Qur'an. True Furqan while trying to imitate the eloquence of Qur'an, has only brought embarrassment to the author. For example, the very first line of the very first chapter of "The True Furqan" starts by saying that "Behold this is the authentic True Furqan that We inspire". This is an incorrect statement as "True Furqan" is not an inspiration from God but authored by non-Muslim Arabs.

f. What Makes the Qur'an a Unique Book?

There are many things which make the Qur'an a unique Book. I will mention a few of them here:

1. The Qur'an is a living miracle of Prophet Muhammad (S). It has survived for past the 1,400 years and remains unadulterated. Despite millions of copies in circulation from multiple independent publishers, there is only one "version" of the Qur'an which exists with no modification to its original script. This is a unique aspect of the Qur'an which is not seen in any other book.
2. The Qur'an was not given to mankind in the form of a physical book – rather it was given as oral speech. The Qur'an is the accumulation of a series of verses (*ayat*) from God, to the Prophet (S) which was eventually assembled into the form of a book shortly before the passing away of Prophet Muhammad (S). These *ayat* were not delivered at one time but rather, over a period of 23 years. What is very interesting is that there is a remarkable resemblance in the style of all the verses without any

significant change over a period stretching almost 23 years. We know that human beings evolve and change over time, and so does their thinking and style of speech. Our thinking and world view at the age of 24 is very different from when we cross 40 and then 60 years of age. If the Qur'an was created by a human being, then its style should have changed with time, however we don't see this change or evolution in speech over the 23 year period.

3. The *ayat* of the Qur'an were never physically written by Prophet Muhammad (S) himself, but by his close family members and companions who acted as scribes. The Prophet helped them in placing the verses and chapters in their correct order and sequence, ultimately determined by God. During the period of compilation of the book, there was no revision or editing done of the verses of the Qur'an as revelation once given by God and narrated by the Prophet (S) to his community was final. This is very different from books authored by human beings which always need revision or editing. While compiling a book the author goes back again and again to edit, modify and improve on what one has written. But this was not the case with the Qur'an. This aspect was also essential in having only one version of the Qur'an. Had there been any modifications or revisions, there were bound to be more than one version of the book. This is another unique aspect of the Qur'an that is not seen with any other book, religious or otherwise.

4. When we write books it usually follows an order or structure which in turn reflects the author's style of conveying his thoughts. Certain chapters come first and others later. There is usually an introduction, main body of the book and then a conclusion. Generally speaking, books have to be read in this sequence to get to the author's point of view. We do not see this style in the Qur'an however. The chapters do not have to be read in a sequence; the chapters carry complete meaning in themselves. Even single *ayat* often gives a complete meaning in themselves and as such, the formatting of the Qur'an is unique and is not seen in any other book.

5. The Qur'an covers a variety of subjects from monotheism to ethical instructions, human nature to natural phenomenon, stories of previous generations, to life after death. These topics are spread throughout the Qur'an and a single topic is not confined to a specific chapter. For example, one of the most commonly discussed subjects in the Qur'an is the story of Prophet Moses ('a). It is narrated throughout the Qur'an (in 44 different locations) in different chapters mixed with other topics and is not confined to a single *surah*. This again is very different from a typical book in which the author usually writes about a specific topic in detail in one chapter and then discusses something else in the next chapter. The Qur'an does not follow this style. A particular topic is often dispersed in various chapters of the book but even with this style, the message still gets across easily and there is no discordance or contradiction in the various discussions of the same topic, and this scattered and fragmented composition completely shatters human style of speech.⁴ In my opinion it is nearly impossible for a human being to discuss thousands of different topics in one book where a particular topic is not confined to a particular section of the book but dispersed throughout the book. If someone tries to do that, most likely the book will not make any sense at all to the reader, however the *ayat* of the Qur'an move from

one subject to another without losing the attention of the reader. Let me quote a section of Surah Yasin (36) to demonstrate this:

وَمَنْ نُمِمْزُهُ نُنَكِّسْهُ فِي الْخَلْقِ ۚ أَفَلَا يَعْقِلُونَ وَمَا عَلَّمْنَاهُ الشِّعْرَ وَمَا يَنْبَغِي لَهُ ۚ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ وَقُرْآنٌ مُبِينٌ لِيُذَكِّرَ ۚ
كَانَ حَيًّا وَيَحِقُّ الْقَوْلُ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّا خَلَقْنَا لَهُمْ مِمَّا عَمِلَتْ أَيْدِينَا أَنْعَامًا فَهُمْ لَهَا مَالِكُونَ وَذَلَّلْنَاهَا لَهُمْ
فَمِنْهَا رَكُوبُهُمْ وَمِنْهَا يَأْكُلُونَ وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ وَمَشَارِبُ ۚ أَفَلَا يَشْكُرُونَ وَاتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ آلِهَةً لَعَلَّهُمْ يُنصَرُونَ لَا
يَسْتَطِيعُونَ نَصْرَهُمْ وَهُمْ لَهُمْ جُنْدٌ مُحْضَرُونَ فَلَا يَحْزَنكَ قَوْلُهُمْ ۚ إِنَّا نَعْلَمُ مَا يُسِرُّونَ وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ أَوَلَمْ يَرَ الْإِنْسَانُ أَنَّا
خَلَقْنَاهُ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ فَإِذَا هُوَ خَصِيمٌ مُبِينٌ وَضَرَبَ لَنَا مَثَلًا وَنَسِيَ خَلْقَهُ ۚ قَالَ مَنْ يُحْيِي الْعِظَامَ وَهِيَ رَمِيمٌ قُلْ يُحْيِيهَا
الَّذِي أَنْشَأَهَا أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ ۚ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ خَلْقٍ عَلِيمٌ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ الشَّجَرِ الْأَخْضَرِ نَارًا فَإِذَا أَنْتُمْ مِنْهُ تُوقِدُونَ أَوَلَيْسَ
الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِقَادِرٍ عَلَى أَنْ يَخْلُقَ مِثْلَهُمْ ۚ بَلَىٰ وَهُوَ الْخَلَّاقُ الْعَلِيمُ إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُ إِذَا أَرَادَ شَيْئًا أَنْ يَقُولَ
لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ فَسُبْحَانَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ مَلَكُوتُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ

Whoever reaches old age, We reverse in natural disposition. Do they not have sense (to see)? We have not taught (Muhammad) to versify, nor is it worthy of him. This is nothing but a reminder and illuminating discourse. So that he may warn him who is alive and feels, and justify the word against those who do not believe. Do they not see the cattle among things We have fashioned by Our power, which they own, whom We made subservient to them so that some of them they ride and some they eat? And they derive other advantages and drinks from them. Even then they do not offer thanks, and take other gods apart from God that they may perhaps give them help. They will not be able to help them and will be brought (to Us) as their levied troops. So be not grieved by what they say. We certainly know what they hide and disclose. Does not man see We created him from a drop of semen? Even then he becomes an open contender, and applies comparisons to Us, having forgotten his origin, and says: "Who can put life into decayed bones?" Say: "He who created you the first time. He has knowledge of every creation, who gave you fire from a green tree, with which you ignite the flame." How can He who created the heavens and the earth not be able to create others like them? Why not? He is the real creator All-Knowing. When He wills a thing He has only to say: "Be," and it is. So all glory to Him who holds all power over everything, to whom you will go back in the end. (Qur'an, Surah Ya Sin, 36:68-83).

Just pay attention to how the subject matter shifts from one topic to another without losing attention of the reader, while at the same time giving profound meanings and guidance. There is no other text that I have come across that has this style. This is indeed very unique.

The tone of the Qur'an is very different from typical human speech and thus, when we read the Qur'an it does not appear to be the speech of a human being. In some *ayat*, intense kindness and forgiveness of God is manifest:

قُلْ يَا عِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا ۚ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ
الرَّحِيمُ

Say: “O My servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of God; for surely God forgives all sins, for He is Oft-Forgiving, the Most Merciful. (Qur’an, Surah al-Zumar, 39:53).

In other verses, His Majesty and Splendor of His authority is apparent:

الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا ۚ مَا تَرَىٰ فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِن تَفَافُوتٍ ۚ فَارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَىٰ مِن فُطُورٍ ثُمَّ ارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ كَرَّتَيْنِ يَنقَلِبْ إِلَيْكَ الْبَصَرُ خَاسِئًا وَهُوَ حَسِيرٌ

He who created the seven skies one above another; you see no incongruity in the creation of the Beneficent God; then look again, can you see any disorder? Then turn back the eye again and again; your look shall come back to you confused while it is fatigued. (Qur’an, Surah al-Mulk, 67:3-4).

We can clearly see that the speech and tone of the Qur’an is not a typical human speech – we simply do not speak like this!

By presenting these few examples, I have attempted to convey that the Qur’an is not a typical book. After reading the Qur’an – even in its translations – one can easily come to this conclusion that this is not human speech.”

g. Qur’an is a Book of Guidance

الر ۚ كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ لِتُخْرِجَ النَّاسَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ

Alif. Lam. Ra. (This is) a great Book which We have revealed to you that you may bring mankind, by the permission of their Lord, out of different kinds of darkness into light, to the path of the All-Mighty, the Praiseworthy. (Qur’an, Surah Ibrahim, 14: 1).

The Qur’an is primarily a book of guidance for humanity. It is an ocean of knowledge whose depth cannot be reached, and whose vastness cannot be crossed. It provides knowledge about those things whose knowledge is not accessible to mankind by using sensory perception and intellect alone. Its primary subject is monotheism, God’s attributes and names. It talks about a system of guidance in place for mankind to understand the purpose of their existence and what they are supposed to do during their life on earth. It narrates stories of previous generations to whom various prophets were sent, culminating in the prophethood of Muhammad (S).

نَحْنُ نُقْصِرُ عَلَيْكَ أَحْسَنَ الْقَصَصِ بِمَا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ وَإِن كُنْتَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ لَمِنَ الْغَافِلِينَ

We narrate to you the most beautiful of stories, in that We reveal to you this (portion of the) Qur'an; though before this, you were among those who knew it not. (Qur'an, Surah Yusuf, 12:3).

It discusses life after death and how to prepare for it. It has sublime ethical messages and prescriptions for our spiritual growth. The Qur'an also discusses various natural phenomenon and gives insight into the workings of both the physical and metaphysical universe.

وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تِبْيَانًا لِّكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ

And We have sent down to you the Book explaining all things, a guide, a mercy, and glad tidings to the Muslims. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nahl, 16:89).

The Qur'an is a light which helps us see things as they are using the eye of our intellect. Its teachings help us lead a balanced and purposeful life.

h. The Meta-Physical Reality of the Qur'an

As we have said, the Qur'an has been sent down for the guidance of mankind. In the physical realm of existence, it is available to us in an easily understandable speech compiled in the form of a book. But the Qur'an also has a meta-physical reality which is present in the higher realms of existence. The manifestation of the reality of the Qur'an in this world is in the form of a book. Thus, the Qur'an represents one reality but in different degrees.

حَم وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُمِّ الْكِتَابِ لَدَيْنَا لَعَلِيَّ حَكِيمٌۭ

Ha, Mim. By the Book clear in itself and clearly showing the truth. We have made it a recitation (a Qur'an) in Arabic so that you may reason (and understand it and the wisdom in its revelation). Surely it is in the Mother Book with Us, exalted, firm and decisive. (Qur'an, Surah al-Zukhruf, 43: 1-4).

Just as the Qur'an is one reality in different degrees, its *ayat* also have multiple levels of meanings. Some meanings are apparent and obvious, whereas others are subtle, and thinking deeply on them or comparing them with other *ayat* or narrations will make them clear. Still there are other deeper meanings which are only known to those who have spiritual insight. Let us take the example of this short *ayah*:

فَلْيَنْظُرِ الْإِنْسَانُ إِلَىٰ طَعَامِهِ

Then let each person look towards their food. (Qur'an, Surah al-Abasa, 80:24).

The obvious meaning is that we should pay attention to what we are eating, making sure that it is not harmful to us. However, a secondary meaning can be that we should make sure that what we are eating has been earned from a lawful source and not through wealth earned through illicit means. But an even deeper meaning that has been mentioned in the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (S) and his successors (a) is where they explain “food” in this verse as being a metaphor for “knowledge” and thus, we must look at the source from which we obtain our knowledge – especially religious knowledge. We need to question the ideology of the person from whom we are learning, because any knowledge that we absorb will influence our own thinking and values.

i. Discussion of Natural Phenomenon in the Qur'an

The Qur'an is a complete manifestation of God available to us in the form of a book. The nature or the cosmos is also nothing other than a manifestation of God. The Qur'an is not a book of science, but it does touch upon various objects in nature, natural phenomenon and encourages the exploration of nature:

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَالْفُلْكِ الَّتِي تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِمَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ مَّاءٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ دَابَّةٍ وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيَّاحِ وَالسَّحَابِ الْمُسَخَّرِ بَيْنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ

Verily, in the creation of the skies and the earth and in the alternation and the sequence of the night and the day and in the ships that sail in the ocean carrying the things which are useful to the people and in the water which God sends down from the clouds with which He brings the dead earth into life and (in) all sorts of crawling animals which He has spread all over it and (in) the turning about of the winds and (in) the clouds subjected to (His) law between the heavens and the earth, there are, indeed, signs for a people who use their understanding. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 164).

I will briefly examine three natural objects and phenomenon that have been touched upon in the Qur'an to show that this book deliberates upon facts which were unknown to mankind in 7th Century Arabia.

1. Iron

وَأَنْزَلْنَا الْحَدِيدَ فِيهِ بَأْسٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَنَافِعُ لِلنَّاسِ

And We have sent down Iron which has great strength and wherein is material for violent warfare and for many other uses for humanity. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:25).

Elements like carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen are the basic building blocks of the physical

universe. They differ from each other in terms of the number of protons present in their nucleus. Elements are arranged in the periodic table based on their atomic weight and chemical properties, starting from the simplest element called hydrogen, continuing to over a hundred known elements with increasing atomic weight. Ninety-four of these occur naturally and others are made synthetically. One of the most abundant elements found on earth is iron (its Atomic Number is 26).[5](#)

Humans learned to use iron several thousand years ago and the use of iron has helped advance human civilization tremendously.

Iron is extracted from the earth through mining and is then modified for various uses. One can speak about the nearly 100 elements found in the periodic table and ask why the Qur'an makes specific mention of iron, and then states that it has been "sent down" and it has "might power" in it? This is in contrast to the general understanding that iron comes from the earth and it does not "come down" from somewhere else.

It is estimated that there are over 100 billion galaxies in the universe each made up of billions of stars. These stars, like our sun, combine hydrogen (its Atomic Number is 1) to form helium (its Atomic Number is 2) through a process known as nuclear fusion resulting in the release of a tremendous amount of energy which is responsible for the heat and light coming from the sun. The tremendous energy produced by nuclear fusion in the sun provides an outward pressure that resists its collapse under its own gravity.

This process can go on for several billion years until the entire amount of hydrogen is converted into helium.

However, there are stars in the universe which are much bigger in size than our sun which can burn their hydrogen fuel much more quickly and convert all of their hydrogen into helium in a shorter period of time than the sun can.

As these massive stars begin to collapse due to their own gravity, tremendous temperature is achieved resulting in the nuclear fusion of helium atoms during which, three helium atoms combine to form a higher element in the periodic table called carbon (its Atomic Number is 6). Carbon then combines with helium to form oxygen (its Atomic Number is 8). In this way, higher elements in the periodic table are produced until we reach an Atomic Number of 26 – Iron!

Iron is the densest and the most stable of all atomic nuclei. When a massive star's core has transformed into iron, then no further nuclear fusion can take place and the star begins to collapse under its own gravity which produces a massive explosion called a supernova. Thus, elements higher than iron are produced during this supernova explosion.

Therefore, massive stars are the source of all of the naturally existing element and even us – our bodies are literally stardust.[6](#)

Now if we go back to the *ayah* of the Qur'an and re-examine it then we can understand why Qur'an mentions that iron has been "sent down" as opposed to "coming from earth."

Iron is the most stable and densest atom in which there is "mighty strength." Iron is responsible for critical reactions in photosynthesis (through which plants produce oxygen), energy transport in the mitochondria (which gives energy to organisms to carry out the cellular functions), and the transport of oxygen via hemoglobin (which contains iron).

In short iron is one of the most fundamental elements in nature without which life as we know it would not be possible, and it truly has come down from outer space.

One can ask why not mention other important elements in the Qur'an like oxygen and carbon as opposed to iron. Well the obvious answer is that people in the 7th Century in Arabia were not familiar with carbon or oxygen, but they had familiarity with iron. So this *ayah* of the Qur'an – while it was relevant to people living in the 7th Century, contains facts which are correct even after 1,400 years of scientific advancement.

2. Fingerprints

أَيَحْسَبُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَلَّنْ نَجْمَعُ عِظَامَهُ 3 بَلَىٰ قَادِرِينَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ نُسَوِّيَ بَنَانَهُ

Does the human being think that We cannot assemble his bones? Actually, We are able to put together in perfect order the very tips of his fingers. (Qur'an, Surah al-Qiyamah, 75:3-4).

Resurrection of the dead back to life is a common theme in the Qur'an; and when the Qur'an gave this message, many people objected as to how can someone who has been dead for ages be brought back to life, when nothing is left of them except for their bones?

The Qur'an answers their objection in a number of places but in one particular *ayah* it mentions that not only can God bring dead bones back to life (obviously recreating the human being's bones, clothing them with tissue, fat, muscle, skin and giving it life again), but that God can even re-assemble an individual's very fingertips.

A question comes up that why talk about fingertips? Is there something special about fingertips?

What we know now is that each person has unique fingerprints. The uniqueness of fingerprints was first described in the medical literature in 1880 by the English physician, Henry Faulds.^{[7](#)}

This is something which was certainly not known in the 7th Century in Arabia that each individual has unique fingerprints.

Therefore, the implication of this *ayah* is that not only can God bring a dead person back to life, but He

can even restore minor details such as the fingerprints which in turn ensures each person's individuality and accountability for their actions.

3. Development of the Human Embryo

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِنْ طِينٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُطْفَةً فِي قَرَارٍ مَكِينٍ ثُمَّ خَلَقْنَا النُّطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ مُضْغَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْغَةَ عِظَامًا فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَامَ لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنْشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا آخَرَ ۖ فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ

We create the human being from an extract of clay; then We reduce him to a drop of sperm (and placed him) in a safe depository; Then We form the sperm into a clot; then We develop the clot into a lump of flesh; then We fashion bones out of this lump of flesh, then We clothe the bones with flesh, thereafter We evolve him into another being. Therefore blessed be God – the Best of Creators. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'minun, 23: 12–14).

Human embryology is a science that deals with the development of the embryo in the womb of the mother.

Initially the sperm from the male, and an egg from the female join to form a zygote. This zygote then undergoes a series of changes during the nine months of gestation resulting in the birth of a human baby. The first eight weeks of development is called the embryonic period during which most of the organs are formed. After eight weeks of gestation, the fetal period starts which lasts until the birth of the child.

Pre-natal human development is a multi-staged process starting from the zygote. The zygote undergoes rapid cell division to form a mass of cells called morula which then develops a cavity inside it and is changed into a blastocyst. At the end of the first week of gestation, the blastocyst begins its attachment to the lining of the uterus and this attachment will later turn into a placenta and will serve as the life-line for the growing embryo. At this the stage embryo starts to secrete the human chorionic gonadotrophin hormone (HCG) which is clinically tested in a mother's urine to confirm pregnancy (this is usually detected in commonly used home pregnancy tests).

The blastocyst undergoes the process of gastrulation resulting in the formation of a three layered embryo. These layers are called the ectoderm, mesoderm and the endoderm. The ectoderm gives rise to skin and nervous system, endoderm to gastrointestinal and respiratory organs, and the mesoderm to muscle, bones and blood.[8](#)

The Qur'an – though not a book of science – also talks about the multi-staged development of a human fetus. It describes various stages of human development in a simplified manner. It is worthy of mentioning that other ancient religious texts like the Hindu Garbha Upanishad and Jewish Tamlud written before the Qur'an also talk about the embryonic development.[9](#)

The Qur'anic discussion of the multi-staged human fetal development is not only quite accurate, but also alludes to the existence of the human soul at the time of an early developing fetus. This concept was later developed by Mulla Sadra to explain the development of the human soul through a process which he termed as trans-substantial motion (See Chapter 14).[10](#)

In this brief description of the Qur'an, I have attempted to describe why the Qur'an is a very unique book. From the eloquence of its language, immutability of its words over the last 1,400 years, the unique style of its layout, the profound meanings, the spiritually uplifting message, and an accurate description of physical and metaphysical realities – this book is clearly from a non-human source.

It is a “physical proof” for those who seek such proofs, for the existence of God. Unless someone can produce a masterpiece like the Qur'an, it remains an indisputable *ayah* (sign) for the existence of God and a guide for mankind.

God has made it (the Qur'an) a quencher of thirst for the learned, a bloom for the hearts of religious jurists, a highway for the way of the righteous, a cure after which there is no ailment, an effulgence with which there is no darkness, a rope whose grip is strong, a stronghold whose top is invulnerable, and an honor for one who loves it, an excuse for one who adopts it, an argument for one who argues with it, a witness for one who quarrels with it, a success for one who argues with it, a carrier of burden for one who seeks the way, a shield for one who arms himself (against misguidance), a knowledge for one who listens carefully, a worthy story for one who relates to it and a final verdict for one who passes judgements.”[11](#)

2.The Messenger (S) and his Ahlubayt (‘a)

In the several thousand years history of mankind on the earth, there have been individuals amongst us who have claimed to be the representatives of one God. They appeared in different eras and at different locations.

Some were in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq), others were in Palestine, Egypt and Arabia.

These individuals claimed that they were receiving revelation from God and their mission was to invite mankind to the ideology of monotheism.

In the beginning, their message faced numerous challenges from the status quo and was slow in acceptance, but with time their teachings became the basis of the most successful social movements in our history.

Even after the passage of thousands of years, billions of people still adhere to their teachings and feel proud in being part of their movement. One such personality was Prophet Muhammad (S) who rose in Arabia in the year 610 AD, and is regarded by some people as the most influential man in the history of mankind.[12](#)

Prophethood and Imamatus (Divinely-Appointed Leadership)

Prophet Muhammad (S) and others before him including Prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus (‘a) were the recipients of Divine revelation – known in Arabic as *wahi*. With the death of Prophet Muhammad (S), the phenomenon of Divine revelation stopped completely, however the preservation and implementation of the message continued through his successors known in Islamic terminology as the *imams*.

There have been twelve such *imams* who are the true inheritors of not only Prophet Muhammad’s (S) message, but of all of the Divinely appointed prophets before him.

The first amongst them is ʿAlī (‘a), the final Prophet’s son-in-law, followed by Hasan (‘a) and the Husayn (‘a) – the two grandsons of Prophet Muhammad (S) through the marriage of his daughter Fatima (‘a) with ʿAlī (‘a). They are followed by nine *imams* from the lineage of Husayn (‘a). Along with numerous Islamic sources, a reference to them can actually be found in the Bible as well:

And as for Ishmael¹³, I have heard you: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.¹⁴

The *imams* are the true inheritors of the prophets, the storehouse of knowledge, the doors to true faith, the straight path to God, an argument and proof of God against people. They are a manifestation of His light, the essence of His wisdom, center of His blessings, possessors of His command; obedience to them is obedience to God, and disobedience to them is tantamount to disobedience to God.¹⁵

The prophets and *imams* are a clear sign and proof of God. They reflect all of the Divine names and attributes in their being to the fullest, and studying their lives forces one to reflect on God.

In this section I will give examples from the life of three individuals namely Prophet Muhammad (S), his son-in-law ʿAlī (‘a), and his grandson Husayn (‘a).

Instead of focusing on certain “miraculous acts” performed by them, I want to highlight some aspects of their character which show their clear distinction from the others which in turn is due to their complete immersion in the ideology of monotheism.

1. Prophet Muhammad (S), the Last Messenger

Prophet Muhammad (S) grew up in an era dominated by pagan customs and values. During that time, there was widespread idol worshipping, constant tribal infighting, little regard for human rights, abuse of slaves and total disrespect towards women. In fact, it was not uncommon for fathers to bury their newborn daughters alive out of the shame that they felt on the birth of a daughter.

Even during this time, Muhammad (S) was known in the community with two unique titles, *al-Sadiq* (The Truthful) and *al-Amin* (The Trustworthy). The Prophet (S) invited people to the path of monotheism, high

morals and respect for human rights, and what made his message so successful was his sublime character, his quality of humbleness, the show of love and kindness towards people – and all of these are actually a manifestation of the teachings of the Qur'an.

Let me quote a few incidents from his life:

A. Anas b. Malik used to serve at the Prophet's (S) house and used to prepare meals for him. One day, Prophet Muhammad (S) was fasting and was due to return home in the evening to break his fast. Anas had prepared a meal for him, however that night, the Prophet (S) was late in returning home. Anas thought that he must have broken his fast somewhere else, so he decided to eat the meal which he had prepared for the Messenger. When Prophet Muhammad (S) returned home later that night, he started looking for his meal but did not find it. Instead of asking any questions to Anas, the Prophet (S) got busy with his night prayers and went to bed hungry. Anas realized that the Prophet had arrived home and may not have broken his fast, so he inquired from another person who had accompanied the Messenger of Allah who confirmed that indeed the Prophet (S) had not broken his fast. Anas was really embarrassed when he learned about this as it was his job to prepare meals for him and after fasting and travelling the entire day, Prophet Muhammad (S) had to go to bed hungry, and was due to fast the next day also. [16](#)

وَأَنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ

And most surely you (stand) on an exalted standard of character. (Qur'an, Surah al-Qalam, 68:4).

This small incident in the personal life of the Messenger of God gives an insight into the sublimity of his character. If we were put in a similar situation, many of us would be angry or at least upset at not being able to find anything to eat. After fasting and travelling the whole day especially when we are anticipating a meal at the end of the day, many of us will likely get upset and take it out on the person whom we think is responsible for it.

The Prophet of Islam not only controlled his anger, but more importantly, he acted in a way as to not show that he has not eaten, to avoid causing embarrassment to the person who was responsible for preparing the meal.

This truly is outstanding, that even in this situation he is more mindful of not causing any embarrassment to another person and is more concerned about others than himself.

Those who make an effort to improve themselves and try to polish their mannerism know that acting like this does not come easily – it requires a very high degree of self-control and empathy.

B. Prophet Muhammad (S) invited the people of Mecca and the surrounding areas towards the path of monotheism and felicity in this life and life of the next world. He discouraged idol worshipping and asked

his followers to be mindful not to violate the rights of others. His movement challenged the status quo and he faced stiff resistance from the local community and its leaders. He and his followers were severely persecuted, many were tortured and forced to migrate to other areas. The Prophet (S) along with his extended family and some companions faced an economic and social boycott for three years during which they had to live in the desert, cut off from the rest of the community. Due to the harsh living conditions of the desert, at the end of this three year old boycott, the Messenger of God (S) lost his beloved wife Khadija ('a) as well as his uncle Abu Talib ('a) who brought him up and was like a father to him. The people of Mecca used to throw garbage and the carcasses of animals on him, calling him names, throwing stones at him and even conspired to assassinate him; and after thirteen years of struggle, the Prophet (S) was forced to leave Mecca and settle in the town of Medina. Even in Medina he and his followers had to go through numerous wars in which he lost many of his beloved companions and relatives including his uncle Hamza – whose body was also mutilated by the pagans of Mecca. Eight years after being forced out of Mecca, the Prophet's (S) movement gained such strength that along with nearly 10,000 followers, he marched towards Mecca and took it over without shedding even a single drop of blood. He was now in a position to take revenge and punish those who had persecuted him and his followers. The Meccans not only tried to suppress his movement and force him out of his hometown, they also harmed him personally and because of the embargos and wars on him and his community, he ended up losing his beloved wife and two uncles. After twenty years of struggle, at this moment of triumph, Prophet Muhammad (S) was capable of persecuting his enemies.... but he did not. He was magnanimous to them and being a prophet of mercy, he forgave them all.

The Prophet of God (S) said:

I shall say to you just as the Prophet Joseph had said to his brothers: 'No harm upon you; go, for you are free'[17](#)

In the end let me quote a French historian, Lamartine where he states:

If greatness of purpose, smallness of means and astounding results are the three criteria for human genius, then who could dare to compare any great man in modern history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislation, empires, peoples and dynasties, but millions of men in one-third of the then inhabited world; and more than that, he moved the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and souls.... his forbearance in victory, his ambition, which was entirely devoted to one idea and in no manner striving for an empire; his endless prayers, his mystic conversations with God, his death and his triumph after death; all of these attest not to an imposture but to a firm conviction which gave him the power to restore a dogma. This dogma was two-fold, the unity of God and the immateriality of God; the former telling what God is, the latter telling what God is not; the one overthrowing false gods with the sword, the other starting an idea with the words. Philosophers, orators, apostle, legislator, warrior, conqueror of ideas,

restorer of rational dogmas, of a cult without images, the founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire, that is Muhammad. As regards all the standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, “Is there any man greater than he?”¹⁸

2. ʿAli – the Commander of the Faithful

Imam ʿAli (ʿa) by relation, was Prophet Muhammad (S)’s cousin and later became his son-in-law. From the time of ʿAli’s (ʿa) birth inside of the Kaʿbah, he was brought up, taught and trained by the Messenger of God (S). ʿAli (ʿa) was the first true successor after the Prophet’s death, and later went on to become the fourth caliph of the general Muslim population.

ʿAli (ʿa) was an embodiment of noble virtues and high morals, and his bravery was unmatched. During the heat of a battle when others deserted the Prophet (S), ʿAli (ʿa) stood by him; he was an ocean of knowledge and wisdom, his oratory left listeners spell bound, wealth and position had no value in his eyes, he was extremely kind and courteous and looked after the destitute and orphans, justice in its perfection was crystallized in him, such was his charisma that even his enemies could not help but like him. His virtues are countless and are at their peak in his personality. He was described by the final Messenger (S) as the one who:

...embodies the knowledge of Adam, the insight of Noah, the endurance of Abraham, the asceticism of John the Baptist, and the courage of Moses.¹⁹

I will describe two examples from Imam ʿAli’s (ʿa) life – one showing his wisdom and wit, and the other displaying his courage and self-control – both due to his unmatched belief in monotheism.

a. ʿAli’s (ʿa) Knowledge and Wisdom

A narration from Prophet Muhammad (S) says:

O ʿAli, I am the city of knowledge, which is Heaven and you, O ʿAli are its gate.

ʿAli’s (ʿa) sermons and teachings have been compiled in a book called *Nahj al-Balagha – The Peak of Eloquence* – which is not only a masterpiece of Divinely-inspired knowledge and wisdom, but also uttered in the most eloquent Arabic language.

In this book, he extensively talks about monotheism, the reality of life in this world, the hereafter and various other topics ranging from the behavior of bats to rules of good governance. This book also contains numerous aphorisms about everyday topics useful in daily life. In addition, he is also credited for developing the fundamental rules of Arabic syntax and grammar.²⁰ His teachings are the fountainhead of Islamic philosophy and rationality as well as esoteric knowledge about religion which have become the basis of Islamic mysticism. I have also quoted him at multiple places throughout this book. He is credited to have said:

Ask me (about anything) before you lose me.[21](#)

In one instance, a man approached him and asked him if humans have free-will or are they bound by pre-determination? ʿAli (‘a) asked the questioner to lift one foot off of the ground. The man complied. Then he asked him to lift the second foot also. The man responded that it is impossible to lift up both feet at the same time to which ʿAli (‘a) replied:

It seems that you have free-will, but there are limits to it as well.[22](#)

Through this very simple and easy to understand example, Imam ʿAli (‘a) solved a great philosophical question about man’s free will and pre-determination which countless philosophers have also attempted to answer but none have been able to do so with such simplicity and so succinctly (More about this in Chapter 8).

There are numerous other examples that can be given as well about ʿAli (‘a)’s knowledge, but to understand more about this man and his level of understanding, I encourage the readers to refer to the book, *The Peak of Eloquence*. H

b. Valor of Imam ʿAli (‘a)

During the early days of Islam, Imam ʿAli (‘a) took part in numerous military expeditions and was always victorious – no matter how difficult the circumstances were. There was no one on the entire Arabian Peninsula who could equal him in the art of swordsmanship during a war, and anyone who confronted him was comprehensively defeated. Because of his might, he was known as the “Lion of God.”

During the heat of a battle, Imam ʿAli (‘a) would firmly ground his feet in one place. He neither retreated in the face of an onslaught, nor did he chase the retreating enemy, however his real bravery did not lie in his fearless conduct during the battles, but rather in his ability to master his ego through his unmatched devotion to monotheism. Let me quote one instance during a battle which has been narrated by the famous Persian poet, Rumi, in his *Mathnawi*.[23](#)

During one of the battles, Imam ʿAli (‘a) was able to overcome his enemy and was about to finish him off. The fallen enemy out of desperation spat on ʿAli (‘a)’s face. At this, Imam ʿAli (‘a) held his sword and did not kill him at that moment. He then took a walk and came back and finished off the enemy. When asked why did he spare the enemy initially, Imam ʿAli (‘a) replied that when the man spat in his face, this made him angry and he did not want to kill his enemy for his own personal anger, but he wanted to do it purely for the sake of God.

In describing this event, Mawlana Rumi states the following:

Anger (is a) king over kings, but (it is) my slave; I have also tied anger underneath the bridle.

The sword of my restraint has struck the neck of my anger, and God’s anger has come upon me like

mercy.

I am drowned in light even though my roof is destroyed, I became a garden, even though I am (called) the Father of Dust.

Since a cause (other than God's cause) came (into my mind) during the battle, I found (it) suitable to hide (my) sword.

So that one loves for (the sake of) God, may become my name, (and) so that one hates for (the sake of) God may become my desire.

So that one gives for (the sake of) God may become my generosity, (and) so that one withholds for (the sake of) God may become my existence.

In another instance, an enemy soldier lost his sword while fighting against Imam ؑAli (‘a) and was sure that he would now lose his life. Imam ؑAli (‘a) was ready to strike him but stopped when he noticed that he was unarmed and so the Imam asked the enemy soldier to run away and save his life. The enemy soldier was astonished at this behavior and asked ؑAli (‘a) why is he sparing his life, to which the Imam replied:

We the Ahlul Bayt (‘a) do not kill any person who is unable to defend himself.

The soldier said:

If what I hear about your generosity is true, then let me see if you will give me your sword.

ؑAli (‘a) immediately handed over his sword to the enemy, and the enemy soldier said:

Who will defend you now against my attack?

The Commander of the Faithful (‘a) replied with calmness:

O ignorant man! If He (God) so Wills, He will defend me. Neither you nor anyone else can cause even the slightest harm to me. If death, which is sure to come, is destined for me now, then by God, no one can save me.

This reply showed Imam ؑAli's (‘a) complete trust in God, and his conviction. In fact, it left the enemy so impressed that he decided to join Islam instead of fighting against it.[24](#)

At the end of his life, Imam ؑAli (‘a) was struck on the head with a poisoned sword while prostrating to God in the Grand Mosque of Kufa (present day Iraq), and when hit, he immediately shouted, “By the Lord of the Ka’bah, I am successful.”[25](#)

He died two days later from this wound and the poison that had spread in his entire body.

At the time of his death, ﷺ Ali (‘a) was the ruler of a vast Muslim empire stretching from Africa to South Asia.

During those last few days, his assassin was brought to him. He noticed that the assassin was uncomfortable due to a tight rope tied around his hands. He asked the rope to be loosened, and he then offered the assassin a drink. The assassin refused the drink thinking that it may have been poisoned to which the Imam said, “Had he taken the drink I would have forgiven him.” He told his family to offer the assassin the same food that he was being offered. He then asked that the one who had fatally wounded him be struck only once as he was struck once also – as a show of implementing the Islamic option of retribution.

Let me ask you what makes a man pay attention to the rights of his assassin and show kindness to his enemy? This kindness by Imam ﷺ Ali (‘a) to his own assassin is due to his complete submersion in monotheism. Instead of a desire to take revenge and give a painful punishment to his assassin, he was mindful of his enemy’s rights and well-being.

قَالَ عَذَابِي أُصِيبُ بِهِ مَنْ أَشَاءُ ۖ وَرَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ

He said: “(As for) My chastisement, I will afflict with it whom I please, and My mercy encompasses all things.” (*Qur’an*, Surah al-A‘raf, 7:156).

3. Imam Husayn (‘a) – The Chief of Martyrs

Prophet Muhammad (S) said:

Indeed Husayn is lamp of guidance and the ark of salvation.

Prophet Muhammad (S) had two grandsons – Hasan (‘a) and Husayn (‘a) through his daughter, Lady Fatima (‘a) who was married to his cousin Imam ﷺ Ali (‘a). After the death of the Prophet (S), the early Muslims disputed on his successor and Imam ﷺ Ali (‘a) was not chosen as the first caliph (successor of the Prophet), though many regarded him to be the rightful successor – they were later called the *shī‘a* (followers) of ﷺ Ali (‘a). The majority of the Muslim community regard ﷺ Ali (‘a) is the fourth caliph.

Some forty years after Prophet Muhammad’s (S) death, ﷺ Ali (‘a) was assassinated and the caliphate of the Muslims eventually came to a man named Mu‘awiyah, through a peace treaty signed between him and Imam ﷺ Ali (‘a)’s eldest son Imam Hasan (‘a).

Shortly thereafter, Imam Hasan (‘a) was poisoned to death during the reign of Mu‘awiyah and a few years later, prior to his own demise, Mu‘awiyah nominated his son Yazid to become the caliph of the Muslims – not only was this against the conditions of the peace treaty which Mu‘awiyah had signed earlier with Imam Hasan (‘a), but it also laid the foundation for the rule of monarchy which is against

Islamic principles of government.

As for Yazid, he was an openly lewd, immoral young man unfit to hold the office of caliphate of the Muslims. He forced everyone to pay allegiance to him either through threats or through offering large bribes. Yazid also ordered Imam Husayn (‘a) to pay allegiance to him or else face death, to which Imam Husayn (‘a) replied:

A person like me can never pay allegiance to a person like him.

For the Imam (‘a) to accept Yazid as the leader and representative of the Muslims would have undermined and brought about irreparable damage to the entire movement of the Divine religion which his grandfather, Prophet Muhammad (S), and the other prophets before him had helped to establish and which his father Imam ʿAlī (‘a) and elder brother Imam Hasan (‘a) had helped maintain and preserve. It was not possible for him to accept Yazid at the helm of affairs of the Divine religion no matter what the cost was and because of this, he clearly said:

If the religion of Muhammad (S) does not stand except for my blood (to be shed), then swords come and kill me!

What followed was an epic stand by Imam Husayn (‘a) along with his family and companions against the tyrannical and unjust regime of Yazid – a stand the like of which the world has never seen, nor will ever witness.

In the following section, I will give a brief account of what befell the grandson of the Prophet (S) on the plains of Karbala, a city in present day Iraq, in the year 61 AH – fifty years after the Messenger of Islam’s death – an event which changed the course of history of Islam forever and set a very lofty example of perseverance and patience against injustice that has no equal in the entire history of mankind.

After refusing to pay allegiance to Yazid, Imam Husayn (‘a) was forced to leave his hometown of Medina along with his family including the women and the children.

He initially settled in the city of Mecca for a few months and was looking forward to taking part in the annual pilgrimage of the *hajj*, however he was again forced to leave Mecca a day before the *hajj* rituals began due to the presence of assassins, disguised as pilgrims.

Along with his family and close companions, they started to travel towards the city of Kufa, in present day Iraq, where he had a significant following. Before his caravan reached Kufa, he was confronted by some of Yazid’s soldiers, led by a commander named Hurr.

Hurr’s army had lost its way and had run out of water and his soldiers were dying of thirst. Even though Hurr was there to stop him, Imam Husayn (‘a) ensured that all of the soldiers and animals in Hurr’s army were given water. Although Hurr was grateful for Imam Husayn’s (‘a) benevolence, he had to act on the

government's orders and did not allow Imam Husayn ('a) to travel towards Kufa. The Imam ('a) camped near the bank of the Euphrates river at a place known as Karbalaؑ – a name which literally means a place of trial and tribulation – in present day Iraq.

Shortly thereafter, the government reinforcements started to arrive and laid siege around the Imam's camp. They forced Imam Husayn's ('a) camp to move away from the Euphrates, and eventually blocked all access to the water. During the few days when they were in the desert plains, negotiations were held between Imam Husayn ('a) and Yazid's forces who were demanding that the Imam pay allegiance to the illegitimate caliph which he refused. They also blocked his way so he could not go back.

Imam Husayn ('a) along with close to one hundred (some historians differ and state he was accompanied by seventy-two close family members and companions) was now completely surrounded by nearly 30,000 government soldiers and a war was inevitable. It was clear that if a war breaks out, there was no chance that the Imam or his companions would survive.

A night before the battle, Imam Husayn ('a) asked his companions to leave in the darkness of the night as Yazid's forces were only interested in fighting with him. He even extinguished the lamp so no one would be embarrassed to leave, but astonishingly none of his companions left. They preferred to die with him rather than live without him! Such loyalty is rarely seen.

The next morning on the day of ؑAshuraؑ (the tenth day of the first month of the Islamic calendar), Imam Husayn ('a) and his companions came face to face with 30,000 men in Yazid's army. The Imam ('a) was travelling with his family members including women and many small children. Their thirst and hunger of three days was evident on the faces of everyone, especially the young children who were raising their cries because of the intense thirst.

Seeing this scene, Hurr, a commander in Yazid's army who had earlier blocked the Imam from travelling forward was getting impatient. His conscience was making him restless. He remembered how earlier, Imam Husayn ('a) had quenched his thirst and the thirst of his soldiers and even his horses and other animals were given water, and now because of his actions, the small children in Imam Husayn's ('a) camp are wailing from thirst.

Hurr asked himself: "How can I let Yazid's forces massacre Prophet Muhammad's family?"

He had to make a decision between fighting against Imam Husayn ('a) and facing eternal damnation or joining the Imam's camp and facing certain death. He chose the latter, and ashamed, with his eyes cast down, he walked towards Imam Husayn's ('a) camp seeking pardon. The Imam forgave him immediately and let him fight on his side.

Before the fighting broke out, Imam Husayn ('a) tried to dissuade Yazid's forces from killing him. He reminded them that he was the only surviving grandson of their Prophet and that he had done nothing

wrong. However Yazid's commanders were promised monetary rewards and governorships of the Muslim lands and so they were eager to fight against him.

After dawn on the 10th day of Muharram, the fighting broke out. Imam Husayn's ('a) companions – though thirsty for three days – fought valiantly vowing not to leave their leader alone. One by one they fell giving the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their leader.

Then it was the turn for the Imam's family members. Seventeen family members that day including his sons, brothers, nephews and cousins were ruthlessly killed. Imam Husayn ('a) made efforts to personally go and collect the body of each fallen soldier and bring it back to his camp. Those who have buried a close family member or a friend know how difficult it is to carry the dead body of even one relative. Imam Husayn ('a) did it dozens of times that day.

The most prominent amongst them was his son ʿAli al-Akbar ('a) whom Imam Husayn ('a) loved immensely and his dear brother ʿAbbas ('a). When ʿAli al-Akbar ('a) went forward towards the enemy after bidding his father farewell, he noticed someone is coming behind him. He turned around and found his father Imam Husayn ('a) following him. ʿAli al-Akbar ('a) stopped and asked his father why is he following him? To this Imam Husayn ('a) replied: "O son you don't know what is like for a father to send his young son to die". The death of ʿAli al-Akbar ('a) truly left him heart broken.

The Imam also lost his dear brother ʿAbbas ('a) that day, whom the enemy feared the most due to his unrivalled chivalry and battlefield skills. Both of the arms of ʿAbbas ('a) were severed while attempting to fetch water from the Euphrates for the young thirsty children in the camp of Imam Husayn ('a). On losing him, Imam Husayn ('a) said: "My back has been broken."

Eventually, when everyone had been killed, it was now Imam Husayn's ('a) turn to go forth. Since morning he had lost close to one hundred companions and family members. He was tired, thirsty and heart-broken – physically and mentally exhausted. He came to the women's tent for the last time to bid them farewell; and at that time his infant son ʿAli al-Asghar ('a) fell down from his crib. The baby had not had any milk to drink for three days as his mother was unable to produce any due to the severe dehydration.

Imam Husayn ('a) had a plan – he took his infant son to the battlefield and asked the enemy soldiers to give some water to the infant as the baby had no fault in this conflict. As the baby was exposed to the scorching heat of the day, he was opening and closing his mouth like a small fish does when it has been out of the water for some time and is about to die.

Many of the enemy soldiers could not bear the sight of a father requesting the enemy soldiers to give some water to his infant son and started to cry. However, they showed no mercy on that day and one of the enemy soldiers shot a three-pronged arrow which struck the six-month old baby's neck – it slit his throat and pierced into his father's arm. The baby moved his arms like a bird flapping its wings as life seeped out of his tiny little body. Imam Husayn ('a), holding his now lifeless infant son in his arms,

started to walk back towards the tent, but he had the impossible task of delivering the news of the slaughter of his infant son to his mother. Seven times he moved forward and seven times he moved backwards saying:

Indeed we are all from God and back to Him is our eventual return. Satisfied at Your (God's) decree, and submitting to Your (God's) command.

After burying the baby in the ground behind the camp, Imam Husayn ('a) was ready to head towards the battlefield to meet his own fate.

He bid farewell to the women and children in his camp asking them to remain patient in the face of the calamities that will come upon them after his death, as Yazid's forces would invade the tents, loot them of their belongings and take them all as prisoners. His four-year daughter Sukayna ('a), clinged to her father's feet not letting him go as she knew that whoever goes to the battle field never came back. Imam Husayn ('a) gently persuaded her to let her go.

Imam Husayn ('a) gave his last will and testament to his only surviving son ʿAlī Zayn al-ʿAbidin ('a) – the only man who could not fight due to the severe illness he had. The Imam reassured his sister Zaynab ('a) and asked her to look after the surviving women and children after his death – especially his four year old daughter Sukayna ('a).

Imam Husayn ('a) then mounted his horse and charged towards the enemy. After a day long battle he was injured, tired, and extremely thirsty, but more importantly heart-broken at how his grandfather's nation had treated him and his family. Nevertheless, he attacked them ferociously. One man who was injured, tired and thirsty and has lost his entire family is attacking several thousand soldiers and forcing them to retreat! No one had seen such a courageous fighter who had no fear of the enemy, who penetrated deep into the enemy's rank, like a hungry lion attacking a herd of sheep, dismembering their formations and making them run like headless chickens in all directions.

The enemy soldiers did not have the courage to fight him from close range, rather, they preferred to shoot arrows at him from a distance. Imam Husayn's ('a) armor was pierced with innumerable arrows and he had lost a significant amount of blood. Then, one arrow pierced through his chest gushing out a fountain of blood. The Imam could not stay on the back of the horse and fell down.

Imam Husayn ('a) was now laying on the ground injured and bleeding. Such was the fear of him in the enemy ranks that they dare not approach him for close combat – even in this state. They waited to see if he was still alive. Some of them started to move towards Imam Husayn's ('a) camp, at which he raised his head and said to leave the women alone:

If you have no religion, then at least be free men. Do not attack the women while I am still alive!

They respected his wish and spared the women's camp for a little while.

Then one of them approached Imam Husayn (‘a) and mounted on his chest. The Imam was heard praising God, remembering Him. He had done his part in fulfilling his duty. He had sacrificed everything that a person can possibly sacrifice for God, for the sake of upholding His religion.

In this situation when the Imam (‘a) laid injured on the hot sands of Karbalaؑ ready to die, such radiance was coming from his face that none had seen such a noble countenance and a calm demeanor in the face of such colossal calamities.

The enemy soldiers started to strike the back of Imam Husayn’s (‘a) neck with a dull dagger. He was struck twelve times, eventually beheaded like a sheep while he lay thirsty on the hot desert plains of Karbalaؑ.

The loyal horse of Imam Husayn (‘a) came galloping back towards his camp as if to give news of what had happened. Seeing the empty saddle of Imam Husayn (‘a) on the horse, the women and children started to wail. The only question young daughter Sukayna (‘a) had was my father given some water before being killed?

After the decapitation, his head was mounted on a spear with the enemy soldiers celebrating. They had killed the grandson of their own Prophet, only fifty years after passing away of the Prophet of Islam (S).

Soon after Imam Husayn’s (‘a) death, the enemy soldiers attacked his camp and started to loot the valuables from his family members. They set the camp on fire and took the women and children as captives. To add insult to injury, they then robbed the Imam’s body of his armor and clothing and trampled his body with the horses’ hoofs, leaving Imam Husayn (‘a) and his companions’ bodies without a burial on the sands of Karbalaؑ.

Among the captives was Imam Husayn’s (‘a) sister Lady Zaynab (‘a). She took charge of the surviving women and children. The caravan of captives was paraded through different cities enroute to Damascus in Syria, the capital of Yazid’s empire. In Yazid’s court Lady Zaynab (‘a), delivered fiery sermons, shaking the conscious of the Muslims as to what they had done to the Prophet’s family. She and Imam Husayn’s (‘a) only surviving son, ؑAli Zayn al-ؑAbidin (‘a) ensured that the supreme martyrdom and the message of Islam do not go to waste and the memory of his sacrifice was kept alive.

Indeed, both Imam ؑAli Zayn al-ؑAbidin (‘a) and Lady Zaynab (‘a) were successful as the memory of Imam Husayn (‘a) is still alive today, over 1,350 years later. The evidence of this claim is that there is not a single major metropolis in the east or the west today where Husayn’s (‘a) sacrifice is not remembered every year during the first ten days of the first Islamic month of Muharram – and more especially on the 10th day, known as ؑAshuraؑ.

Processions are taken out in his memory and his story is repeated in a wide variety of languages – whether it is in Australia, many of the countries in Africa, throughout Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and North America – there is no place on the earth where Imam Husayn (‘a) is not remembered every

year by his followers.

The peak of this remembrance is in the form of the annual pilgrimage on the day of Arbaʿin – literally forty – which takes place exactly forty days after the commemoration of the day of ʿAshura – in Karbala, Iraq, in which upwards of thirty million people from all across the world including Christians and Hindus gather in the very small city and pay their homage to the Imam.

His message, as they all attest to, is universal and eternal. He taught humanity how to take a stand for their principles and not to bow down to tyranny and oppression. He taught humanity how to be courageous in the face of oppression. Imam Husayn (ʿa) accomplished this and is a beacon of inspiration for all of those facing oppression because of his firm conviction in monotheism – an ideology by which he lived and for which he died.²⁶

The 12th Imam, al-Mahdi (ʿa) has been quoted as saying:

O people of the world! My grandfather Husayn was killed while he was thirsty!

In this section I have attempted to give a few glimpses from the lives of three personalities whose lives centered on monotheism. They lived by this ideology and died for it.

Studying their life in an unbiased manner forces one to think about God. Some may move the focus on those things which took place in the lives of these three personalities and even other figures in Islam which we are unable to relate to in our contemporary society – practices such as polygamy. However, it is important to know that in the context of life in 7th Century Arabia, polygamy was perfectly normal and an acceptable behavior.

Even after the passage of 1,400 years, these personalities are still admired and idealized by billions of people. One must ponder what is in their lives that continues to affect so many people until today? The fact is that the prophets and *imams* are the path to God, a door to Him, the true face of monotheism, and His greatest sign. God is known through them; and those who want to know God must know them, and reach God through them.

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². Author: For the record, I am not a native Arabic speaker.

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Chapter 5: God's Knowledge and His Acts

God's Knowledge

Knowledge is one of the attributes of God and its opposite, ignorance, cannot be applied to Him, as there is nothing that can be known which is beyond God's knowledge. He is described as being *al-'Alim* – The All-Knowing:

هُوَ الْأَوَّلُ وَالْآخِرُ وَالظَّاهِرُ وَالْبَاطِنُ ۚ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

He is the First and the Last, and the Evident and the Hidden; and He has full knowledge over all things. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:3).

God's knowledge encompasses both the hidden and the apparent realities, as the realities are hidden

from our perspective but not from Him:

وَعِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِحُ الْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْلَمُهَا إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ ۚ وَمَا تَسْقُطُ مِنْ وَرَقَةٍ إِلَّا يَعْلَمُهَا وَلَا حَبَّةٌ فِي ظُلُمَاتٍ الْأَرْضِ وَلَا رَطْبٌ وَلَا يَابِسٌ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ

With Him are the keys to the Unseen; none knows them but He. And He knows whatever is on land and in the sea; and not a leaf falls but He knows it; and neither is there a grain in the dark layers of earth, nor anything wet or dry, but is (recorded) in a Manifest Book. (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:59).

God is also aware of our secret glances and what is in our thoughts which we have not expressed to anyone:

يَعْلَمُ خَائِنَةَ الْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِي الصُّدُورُ

He knows the stealthy looks and that which the chests conceal. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40: 19).

God is not only All-Knowing (*al-ʿAlim*), but He is also All-Capable or All-Powerful (*al-Qadir*) and He exercises His authority over everything:

اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ وَمِنَ الْأَرْضِ مِثْلَهُنَّ يَتَنَزَّلُ الْأَمْرُ بَيْنَهُنَّ لِتَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ أَحَاطَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عِلْمًا

God is He Who has created seven heavens and of the earth the like of them; His commands (concerning the creation and its operation, and the life of the inhabitants of the heavens and earth) descend through them, so that you may know for certain that surely God has full power over everything, and that God indeed encompasses all things in (His) Knowledge. (Qur'an, Surah al-Talaq, 65: 12).

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَلَمْ يَعْْيَ بِخَلْقِهِنَّ بِقَادِرٍ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يُحْيِيَ الْمَوْتَىٰ ۚ بَلَىٰ إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Have they (the unbelievers) not considered that surely God, Who has created the heavens and the earth, and never wearied with their creation, is able to bring the dead to life? Certainly He is; He has full power over everything. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ahqaf, 46:33).

Omnipotent does not mean that He can do whatever we want Him to do, or do irrational acts, e.g. come to earth in the form of a man or eat Himself¹ as some have suggested. Omnipotent denotes that He can

do whatever He wants to do – as nothing can stop Him from carrying out His intention. However, the acts have to be consistent with basic pattern of existence and reason e.g. expecting God to eat Himself is illogical as God is not a body and He does not eat. These are frivolous and nonsense expectations, He is above what they attribute Him with.

With this understanding that God has knowledge and control over all things, the question arises that how does God exercise this knowledge and authority in the universe and in the lives of individual human beings?

In terms of God's knowledge and actions, various terms have been used in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Ahlul Bayt ('a). The terms include God's *mashiyya* (will), *irada* (want), *qadr* (allotment or measure), *qada* (decree) and His *af'al* (acts). Let us look at some narrations to understand these in further detail.

Imam al-Sadiq ('a) said:

When God wants something He allots it, and when He allots it, He decrees it, and when He decrees it, He enacts it.[2](#)

Imam al-Kazim ('a) said:

Nothing will happen except that which God wills, wants, allots and decrees. Explaining these further, he said: The *will* is when He decides to do something. The *want* is perfection of His *will*. The *allotment* is giving proportions in terms of length, width and duration. He then said: Surely, when God *wills* something He *wants* it, and when He *wants* it He *allots* it, when He *allots* it He *decrees* it, and when He *decrees* it He *enacts* it.[3](#)

Imam al-Kazim ('a) was asked: "How is God's knowledge?" He replied:

He *knows*, *wills*, *wants*, *allots*, *decrees* and *enacts*. That is He *enacts* what He has *decreed*; He *decrees* what He has *allotted*; He *allots* what He has *wanted*. Therefore, His *will* is according to His *knowledge*; His *want* is according to His *will*; His *allotment* is according to His *want*; His *decree* is according to His *allotment*; and His *enactment* is according to His *decree*. Therefore, first is *knowledge*, second is *will*, and third is *want*. *Allotment* is realized by a *decree* that has been *enacted*. It is for God to change what He has *willed* as He knows, and what He has *allotted* as He *wants*; but once His decree is *enacted* then there is no change.[4](#)

To understand these concepts, reflect on the following example. In one instance, Imam ʿAli ('a) moved from an unstable, dilapidated wall to another wall which was stable and sturdy. He was asked:

O Commander of the Faithful! Are you fleeing from God's decree?

He replied:

I flee from God's decree to God's allotment.⁵

In the light of the above narration, we understand that God's knowledge is unlimited and without any bounds. Within God's knowledge is His will which can be thought of as All-Encompassing knowledge, a grand scheme about all things and all affairs and nothing can happen outside of what is already in God's will or fore-knowledge.

وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ

But you cannot will (to do so) unless God wills, the Lord of the worlds. (Qur'an, Surah al-Takwir, 81:29).

Another fine point is that the Arabic root word for will and things (*shay*^٦) is the same (ش ي أ), pointing to the fact that if a "thing" exists, then it must be within God's will.

قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ مَالِكُ الْمُلْكِ تُؤْتِي الْمُلْكَ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتَنْزِعُ الْمُلْكَ مِمَّنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُعِزُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُذِلُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ ۚ بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Say: O God, absolute Master of all dominion! You give dominion to whom You will, and take away dominion from whom You will, and You exalt and honor whom You will, and abase whom You will; in Your hand is all good; surely You have full power over everything. (Qur'an, Surah Ale Imran, 3:26).

An important clarification here is that all that happens within God's will does not necessarily mean that it is also what God approves of as His want is different from His will.

For example, a person is unjustly murdered by another person. Now if it has happened then it must be within God's will/fore-knowledge. If it was not in God's will, then it could never have happened. But it is not the same as God's approval, or He wants it to happen, because He forbids the unjust killing of anyone.

Another example is that of a couple who are trying to conceive a child but are unable to do so. If it is in God's will that they do not have children, then it will be impossible for them to have children, as it is not in the grand scheme of things:

لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ يَهَبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ إِنَاثًا وَيَهَبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ الذُّكُورَ ۚ أَوْ يَزْوِجُهُمْ ذُكْرَانًا وَإِنَاثًا ۚ وَيَجْعَلُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ

To God belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth. He creates whatever He wills. He

grants to whom He wills daughters and grants to whom He wills sons. Or He mingles them, both sons and daughters (granted to whom He wills); and He leaves barren whom He wills. Surely He is All-Knowing, All-Powerful. Qur'an, Surah al-Shura, 42:49-50).

God's will is conditional and changeable depending on how an individual acts – e.g. the lifespan of an individual can increase or decrease depending on his conduct towards his relatives as reported in some narrations.

In this regards, Prophet Muhammad (S) has been quoted as saying:

Verily (it happens that) a person joins his relationship while only three years have remained from his life, so God increases his life to thirty-three years; and verily (it happens) that a person severs his relationship and thirty-three years have still remained from his life, and God shortens that life to only three years.[6](#)

Maintaining our relationship with our relatives increases our life span and cutting off relationships decreases our life. Multiple social studies have also shown strong causal relationship between social relations and longevity and health.[7](#)

Think of the changeable will of God as different algorithms determining course of our life. If we act in a certain way, we move in a particular direction but if we act in another way, a different course of events happen in our lives.

لِكُلِّ أَجَلٍ كِتَابٌ يَمْحُو اللَّهُ مَا يَشَاءُ وَيُثَبِّتُ ۖ وَعِنْدَهُ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ

For each period is a Book (revealed). God blots out or confirm what He pleases: with Him is the Mother of the Book. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ra'd, 13:38).

Thus, the will is the all-encompassing boundary within which we can operate and cannot go beyond it no matter how hard we try, though we have room to maneuver within that boundary and course of our life can take different turns depending on what choices we make.

God's want/desire is when God also wants something to happen, not that He only has the knowledge about it.

وَنُرِيدُ أَنْ نَمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتُضْعِفُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَنَجْعَلَهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ

But We wanted to bestow Our favor upon those who were humiliated and oppressed in the land, and make of them exemplary leaders (to guide people on the way to God and in their lives), and make them inheritors (of the glory of the Pharaoh and the land in which We produced blessings

for people). (Qur'an, Surah al-Qasas, 28:5).

يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ أَنْ يُخَفِّفَ عَنْكُمْ ۖ وَخُلِقَ الْإِنْسَانُ ضَعِيفًا

God wants to lighten for you (your burdens), for human has been created weak (liable to err). (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa, 4:28).

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَحْكُمُ مَا يُرِيدُ

Assuredly, God decrees as He wants. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'idah, 5: 1).

The next point to understand in regards to the knowledge of God is *qadar* or allotment which can be thought of as measure, estimate, details of how things will happen, to what extent and at what time. *Qadar* involves the needed components, ingredients and conditions for something to happen.

وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا عِنْدَنَا خَزَائِنُهُ وَمَا نُنَزِّلُهُ إِلَّا بِقَدَرٍ مَعْلُومٍ

There is not a thing but the stores (for its life and sustenance) are with Us, and We do not send it down except in due, determined measure. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hijr, 15:21).

أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَسَالَتْ أَوْدِيَةٌ بِقَدَرِهَا

He sends down water from the sky and the valleys flow (in abundance) each according to its measure... (Qur'an, Surah al-Ra'd, 13: 17).

After *qadar* comes *qada* or decree, which is a decision which when it is passed about something, is final without any change in it, and is thus executed:

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ طِينٍ ثُمَّ قَضَىٰ أَجَلًا وَأَجَلٌ مُّسَمًّى عِنْدَهُ ۚ ثُمَّ أَنْتُمْ تَمْتَرُونَ ۚ

He it is who has created you from clay (in the beginning, and the material origin of every one of you is clay), and then decreed a term (of life for you), and there is with Him another unchanging term determined by and known to Him. Yet, you are in doubt (concerning these manifest truths, some of which you experience and some others you can deduce). (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:2).

إِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

...when He decrees a thing, He does but say to it 'Be!' and it is. (Qur'an, Surah Ale ʿImran, 3:47).

God has All-Encompassing knowledge about everything and He acts based on His knowledge. He acts without a need to fulfill any personal needs. He acts without a need to think or plan or to consult or take assistance from anyone. His knowledge about something is the same before it has come into existence, as it is after it has come into existence.

Acts of God: al-Khalq (The Creation) and al-Amr (The Command)

Broadly speaking there are two acts which are repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an attributed to God, one is His act of creation and the second is His act of command.

1. The Creation (al-Khalq)

God is a self-existing necessary being who is independent of everything. Everything else has been created by Him and is totally dependent upon Him for not only coming into existence, but also for its continued existence:

ذَلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ خَالِقُ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ فَأَنَّى تُتَفَكَّرُونَ

Such is God, your Lord (Who creates you, and maintains and provides for you), the Creator of all things. There is no deity but He. How then are you turned away from the truth (and adopt false deities to worship)? (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:62).

يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

He creates whatever He wills. God has full power over everything. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:17).

أَوَلَا يَذْكُرُ الْإِنْسَانُ أَنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُ مِن قَبْلُ وَلَمْ يَكُ شَيْئًا

Does (that) human not bear in mind that We created him before when he was nothing? (Qur'an, Surah Maryam, 19:67).

God has created the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them. There is duality and multiplicity in His creation. There is male and female, day and night, hard and soft, up and down, near and far, black and white. God is the only being that is truly Unique who has no equal. Each creation is a

unique manifestation of God and is not repeated. Take for example any human being, each of us is a unique being as there has never been a person like us before, nor will there ever be a similar person in the future. Each individual has a unique appearance, voice, fingerprints, and DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) – identical twins have the same DNA, but different fingerprints. Every one of us is the first and the last example of us as we are all a manifestation of the One who is “The First” and “The Last.” The act of creation is perpetual as contingent beings are unable to exist on their own for even a moment. There is constant renewal of creation.

2. The Command (al-Amr)

The other action attributed to God is His command:

بَدِيعُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَإِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

The Originator of the heavens and the earth with nothing preceding Him to imitate. When He decrees a thing, He does but say to it “Be!” and it is. (Qur’an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 117).

وَكَانَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ مَفْعُولًا

(Bear in mind that) God’s command is always executed. (Qur’an, Surah al-Nisa’, 4:47).

One example of the command of God is about the operation and working of the natural phenomenon. It represents His authority and control over them through which objects of nature operate and function. The nature of things as they are, is due to the command of God. The laws through which nature works (what is referred to as the natural laws) are due to the command of God.

إِنَّ رَبَّكُمُ اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ اسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ يُغْشِي اللَّيْلَ النَّهَارَ يَطْلُبُهُ حَثِيثًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ وَالنُّجُومَ مُسَخَّرَاتٍ بِأَمْرِهِ ۗ أَلَا لَهُ الْخَلْقُ وَالْأَمْرُ ۗ تَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ

Surely your Lord is God, Who created the heavens and the earth in six periods of time, and He is firm in power; He throws the veil of the night over the day, which it pursues incessantly; and (He created) the sun and the moon and the stars, made subservient by His command; surely His is the creation and the command; blessed is God, the Lord of the worlds. (Qur’an, Surah al-A’raf, 7:54).

At another instance, the Qur’an describes how each sky (there are 7 mentioned) receives its command:

فَقَضَاهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ فِي يَوْمَيْنِ وَأَوْحَىٰ فِي كُلِّ سَمَاءٍ أَمْرَهَا ۗ وَزَيْنَا السَّمَاءَ الدُّنْيَا بِمَصَابِيحَ وَحِفْظًا ۗ ذَٰلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ

So He ordained them seven skies in two periods, and revealed in every heaven its affair (command); and We adorned the lower sky with brilliant stars and (made it) to guard; that is the decree of the Mighty, the Knowing. (Qur'an, Surah Fussilat, 41:12).

The command of God can also be a general command to mankind who exercise free will giving them instructions on how they should conduct themselves, encouraging them to act in a certain way and to avoid other ways – what moral choices they should make and what they should avoid. Ultimately however, it is up to us to act according to God's command to our benefit or go against it for our own detriment:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ وَإِيتَاءِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَيَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَالْبَغْيِ ۚ يَعِظُكُم لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

Surely God enjoins the doing of justice and the doing of good (to others) and the giving to the kindred, and He forbids indecency and evil and rebellion; He admonishes you that you may be mindful. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nahl, 16:90).

The entire system of existence works based on these two acts of God, one is the act of creation and the second is the act of command. One produces a structure and the second gives it function, one is the body and the other is the soul, one is like “hardware” and the other is like “software.” In my opinion, the laws of nature as deciphered by the scientists are a manifestation of the commands of God. He is the source of their origin and implementation. We understand them using empirical knowledge from our perspective and call them the laws of nature.

Based on God's acts of creation and command, two systems in existence have been described. One is related to the existence of natural phenomenon called the system of “*takwin*,” and the second is the system of guidance is called “*hidaya*.” The “natural system of existence” – “*takwin*” – is created by God and operates by His command and there is no possibility of it working outside of the command of God:

وَأَيَّةٌ لَهُمُ اللَّيْلُ نَسْلَخُ مِنْهُ النَّهَارَ فَإِذَا هُمْ مُظْلِمُونَ وَالشَّمْسُ تَجْرِي لِمُسْتَقَرٍّ لَهَا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ الْعَزِيزِ الْعَلِيمِ وَالْقَمَرَ قَدَرْنَاهُ مَنَازِلَ حَتَّىٰ عَادَ كَالْعُرْجُونِ الْقَدِيمِ لَا الشَّمْسُ يَنْبَغِي لَهَا أَنْ تُدْرِكَ الْقَمَرَ وَلَا اللَّيْلُ سَابِقُ النَّهَارِ ۚ وَكُلٌّ فِي فَلَكٍ يَسْبَحُونَ

And another clear sign for them is the night: We withdraw the day from it, and see, they are plunged in darkness. And the sun runs the course appointed for it for a term to its resting-place. This is the measured determining of the All-Glorious with irresistible might (to Whose omnipotent ordering the whole universe is submitted), the All-Knowing. And for the moon We have determined phases until it returns like an old shriveled palm-leaf. It is not for the sun to

overtake the moon, nor does the night outstrip the day. All (the celestial bodies and systems) float in an orbit (determined for each). (Qur'an, Surah Ya Sin, 36:36-40).

So if the sun, the moon, the stars, the plants and animals behave in a certain way what we call “nature” then it is due to God’s system of creation and command operating in them. Everything in the natural world is according to His acts of “Creation and Command.” It is wrong to say that God is only involved in those phenomenon for which we don’t have a good explanation and there is a gap in our knowledge, so called “god of gaps”. He is involved in every aspect of nature through various determining factors some of which we can understand and manipulate and others are beyond our grasp.

The second system is the “system of guidance” – “*hidaya*” – which represents what God wants us, humanity, to do for our own benefit. The guidance to mankind can be in the form of our instincts or conscience which tells us what is right and wrong. Each one of us already have these. We already know if what we are doing is “right” or “wrong”.

وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا ۖ

And the human selfhood and that (All-Knowing, All-Powerful, and All-Wise One) Who has formed it to perfection; And Who has inspired it with the conscience of what is wrong and bad for it and what is right and good for it. (Qur'an, Surah al-Shams, 91:7-8).

Other important components of the system of guidance are the prophets and the revelation which were sent down to us detailing what is the purpose of our creation, what action is good for us to perform in terms of its effects, and what actions are harmful for us in terms of its consequences, so that we should avoid them – almost like a user manual for us.

This system of guidance in common terminology is also known as “religion”. This system operates with a caveat that mankind has “free will”, thus, we may choose to act based on what has been commanded or prohibited, or choose not to act – with the understanding that the consequences will be only ours to face.

إِنْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ لِأَنفُسِكُمْ وَإِنْ أَسَأْتُمْ فَلَهَا

If you do good, then you do good for your own souls, and if you do evil, it shall be for yourself too. (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17:7).

In this chapter, I have given some details about God’s knowledge and His acts which will help us to understand the practical aspects of monotheism (Chapter 8). However, before we can get to that stage we have to understand what the extent of our own life span is!

2. Taba'taba'i, Sayyid Muhammad, S Husayn al-, Tafsir al-Mizan, v. 25. pp. 97–99. Tawheed Institute Australia 2015.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Rizvi, Sayyid Saeed Akhtar, Islamic Family Life, Published by World Organization of Islamic Services, as found at: <https://www.al-islam.org/islamic-family-life-sayyid-saeed-akhtar-rizvi> [21]
7. Yang, Claire Yang et al., Social relationships and physiological determinants of longevity across the human life span. Proc Natl Acad Sci USA 2016, 19;113, 3, 578–583.

Chapter 6: The Nearer Life (al-dunya) and the Afterlife (Al-Akhira)

In addition to monotheism, a constant theme discussed in the Qur'an is about the two phases of human life; life in this world and the life that starts after death. The worldly life has been referred to as *al-Dunya* (the nearer or ordinary life), and the life after death is called *al-Akhira* (the later life or the afterlife). They represent two stages or degrees of human existence inseparable from each other – one transient and changing, the other permanent and constant; one representing the sphere of actions, and the other the sphere of results.

Our understanding of the universe and our role in it is incomprehensible without knowing about these two stages of life; a knowledge which has come primarily from the revealed sciences.

1. The Nearer Life (Hayat al-Dunya)

The Qur'an uses the term *al-dunya* for life on this earth. The word *dunya* means “nearer” or “something less important or ordinary.” In multiple places, the Qur'an comments on the real nature of life on earth and warns us about its true disposition. It has been described as something of a transient nature, a place of transit, test and trials, and actions. It is also a place for learning, spiritual development and growth. What one achieves here is manifested during the next phase of existence which is a constant, higher and more permanent phase of existence:

وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ

And what is the life of this world other than play and amusement? (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:32).

The Qur'an describes the life in this world as only a play and amusement, something which is not “real”

in comparison to the life after death. In this life, one goes through different roles and situations; an idea that also resonates in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.*

The duration and time span that a person spends in this world has also been described as short and brief. Each person who is alive today will be overtaken by death tomorrow. When one looks back at the time that one spent in this world, even if forty years may have passed, it appears as if it was only yesterday that he/she was a child.

The Qur'an highlights this by saying that when people go into the next world, and they are asked how much time they spent in this world, they will respond by saying only a little. We understand in the light of physics that time is relative to the frame of reference of the observer – it changes as the frame of reference changes. (See Chapter 13 in this book).

قَالَ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ عَدَدَ سِنِينَ قَالُوا لَبِثْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ فَاسْأَلِ الْعَادِينَ قَالَ إِنَّ لَبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا لَوْ أَنْتُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنْمَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنْتُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ

(God) says: For how many years did you stay on earth? They reply: We stayed for a day or part of a day. Ask of those who are able to keep count of this. Says He (God): You stayed but for a short while, if only you had known (how short it was to be and acted accordingly)! Or did you think that We created you in vain, and that you should devote all your time to play and entertainment, and that you would not be brought back to Us? (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'minun, 23: 112–115).

The Qur'an also describes life on earth as a life of illusion and deception, where the reality is hidden and the truth often gets obscured by falsehood. Things are often not how they appear to be; and we often have to experience betrayal of trust and treachery. People occupy themselves chasing ordinary desires and mediocre things, and are forgetful of their real purpose and goal during this life:

وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْغُرُورِ

(Know that) the present, worldly life is nothing but a transient enjoyment of delusion. (Qur'an, Surah Ale Imran, 3: 185).

وَذَرِ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا دِينَهُمْ لَعِبًا وَلَهْوًا وَغَرَّتْهُمُ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا

And leave those who have taken their religion for a play and an idle sport, and whom this world's

life has deceived. (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:70).

In our day to day life there is intense struggle and competition for accumulating wealth, power and position. There is a desire to dominate others and stand out in terms of material possessions, family and prestige. Morals and good actions are valued less whereas money, children, fame and power are given a lot more importance:

الْمَالُ وَالْبَنُونَ زِينَةُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَالْبَاقِيَاتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ خَيْرٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ أَمَلًا

Wealth and children are an adornment of the present, worldly life, but the good, righteous deeds (based on faith and) which endure are better in the sight of your Lord in bringing reward and better to aspire for. (Qur'an, Surah al-Kahf, 18:46).

There is also uncertainty, ups and downs, and overnight changes in fortune and situations. One may be very well placed in life, financially secure, have family, fame, in full control of their situation – but then something like an illness or loss in business, or some other type of calamity occurs and things change drastically:

إِنَّمَا مَثَلُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا كَمَاءٍ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَاخْتَلَطَ بِهِ نَبَاتُ الْأَرْضِ مِمَّا يَأْكُلُ النَّاسُ وَالْأَنْعَامُ حَتَّى إِذَا أَخَذَتِ الْأَرْضُ زُخْرُفَهَا وَازَيَّنَّتْ وَظَنَّ أَهْلُهَا أَنَّهُمْ قَادِرُونَ عَلَيْهَا أَتَاهَا أَمْرُنَا لَيْلًا أَوْ نَهَارًا فَجَعَلْنَاهَا حَصِيدًا كَأَن لَّمْ تَغْنِ بِالْأَمْسِ ۖ كَذَلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

The present, worldly life is like this: We send down water from the sky, and the earth's vegetation, of which humans and animals eat, mingles with it, until, when the earth has taken on her ornaments and has been embellished, and its inhabitants suppose that they are its masters with a free hand over the earth, Our command comes upon it by night or day unexpectedly, and We cause it to become like a field mown down, as if it had not flourished the previous day. Thus We set out in detail the signs (the signposts of Our way and the relevant commands and guidance included in the Qur'an) for a people who reflect (on them and draw the necessary lesson). (Qur'an, Surah Yunus, 10:24).

After reflecting on these *ayat* of the Qur'an, one cannot help but agree with them as we really do compete with each other in terms of material possessions and we try to dominate one another. There is also a tremendous amount of deception and illusion as often things are not how they appear to be, and one can easily make mistakes which can have deleterious consequences.

Another important feature of this life's material possessions is how quickly they lose their appeal. Let us take an example of our favorite food. Initially we will crave it and want it every day. But if we actually continue to eat it every single day then within a few days it will no longer appeal to us and after a while

we may actually not even want it. The same is the case with most material possessions and temporal positions. Whether it is a new car, a new job, a new phone or a new video game, after a while we get used to that thing and start considering it as mundane. This points towards our inherent nature which craves perfection, and is seeking something everlasting – and this world and what it contains is unable to fulfil that need. Those with spiritual insight and clear knowledge of the life to come, regard this world as ordinary and are not possessed by its embellishments.

Imam ؑAli (‘a) has said:

...In my view this world of yours is no better than the sneezing of a goat.[1](#)

In *Nahj al-Balagha*, Imam ؑAli (‘a) constantly warns us about the perils of this world and gives advice on how to navigate through it. In one sermon, he says:

O creatures of God! I advise you to keep away from this world which is (soon) to leave you even though you do not like its departure, and which will make your bodies old even though you would like to keep them fresh. Your example and its example is like the travelers who travel some distance and then as though they traverse it quickly or they aimed at a sign and reached it at once. How short is the distance to aim if one heads towards it and reaches it; and how short is the stage of one who has only a day which he cannot exceed, while a swift driver is driving him in this world until he departs from it.

So do not hanker after worldly honor and its pride, and do not feel happy over its beauties and bounties, nor wail over its damages and misfortunes because its honor and pride will end, while its beauty and bounty would perish, and its damages and misfortunes will pass away. Every period in it has an end and every living being in it will die. Is not there for you a warning in the relics of the predecessors and an eye opener and lesson in your fore-fathers, provided that you understand?

Do you not see that your predecessors do not come back, and the surviving followers do not remain? Do you not observe that the people of this world pass mornings and evenings in different conditions? Thus (somewhere) a dead is wept for, someone is being consoled, someone is prostrate in distress, someone in enquiring about a sick, someone is passing his last breath, someone is hankering after the world, while death is looking for him, someone is forgetful but he is not forgotten (by death), and on the footsteps of the predecessors walk the survivors.[2](#)

He further says about the present abode of existence:

This is a house surrounded by calamities and well-known for its deceitfulness. Its conditions do not last and those who inhabit it do not remain safe. Its conditions are variable and its ways are changing. Life in it is blameworthy and safety in it is non-existent. Yet its people are targets; it strikes them with its arrows and destroys them through death.[3](#)

He further warns, and wants us to prepare for the life that is coming:

O creatures of God! Fear God and anticipate your death by good actions. Purchase everlasting joy by paying transitory things – pleasures of this world. Get ready for the journey, for you are being driven, and prepare yourself for death since it is hovering over you. Be people who wake up when called, and who know that this world is not their abode, and have it changed with (next).

Certainly, God has not created you aimlessly nor left you as useless. There is nothing between anyone of you and Paradise or Hell except death that must befall everyone. The life that is being shortened every moment, and being dismantled every hour must be regarded as very short. The hidden thing namely death which is being driven (to you) by two – over (every) new phenomenon, the day and the night, is certainly quick to approach. The traveler who is approaching with success or failure (namely death) deserves the best of provision. So acquire such provisions from this world while you are here with that which you may shield yourself tomorrow (on the Day of Judgement).⁴

Now avoidance or cautionary approach to the world and its embellishments does not mean that the Qur'an or the Imams are advocating a monastic life in which one lives away from society, is aloof from people and does not take part in social transactions, business, learning, explorations and entrepreneurship. On the contrary exploration of nature and social interaction is one of the often repeated messages of the Qur'an.

What is being cautioned against is to not take this world as a permanent and everlasting place, its success and failure as absolute and being cautious about the perils that inherently exist in it (e.g. the thorns that exist within its attractive rose flowers).

لِكَيْلَا تَأْسَوْا عَلَىٰ مَا فَاتَكُمْ وَلَا تَفْرَحُوا بِمَا آتَاكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ ۝

So that you may not grieve for what has escaped you, nor exult because of what God has granted you: God does not love anyone proud and boastful. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:23).

This approach will keep our feet stable during the ups and downs of this life, and allow us to maintain our focus on what is to come, which is everlasting and permanent and for which we are asked to work for, i.e the life of the hereafter.

In regards to this life and that of the world to come, Imam Husayn ('a) has been quoted as saying:

It is as if the world never was, and it is as if the hereafter has never declined (has always been).⁵

2. The After Life (al-Akhira)

In the Qur'an, the life that comes after this worldly life has been described as the real life, a life for which our intentions and efforts here should really be focused on”

وَمَا هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا لَهُوٌّ وَلَعِبٌ ۚ وَإِنَّ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ لَهِيَ الْحَيَوَانُ ۚ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ

The present, worldly life is nothing but a pastime and play, but the abode of the Hereafter is truly alive. If they but knew. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ankabut, 29:64).

These two phases of life (*al-dunya* and *al-akhira*) are linked and inseparable from one other. The hereafter represents another dimension of existence which is more real, vivid and long lasting. In terms of graded realities of existence, it is a higher level than the current phase of existence which we find ourselves in. What our experiences will be in that dimension are dependent on what we believed to be true in this life, what actions we have performed and what our intentions have been. It is as if we are building our own hereafter literally with our own hands.

Now some may wonder where is the hereafter, and why do we not experience it right now?

An analogy that can help explain the comparison between the two worlds – i.e. life on this earth and the hereafter is that of a fetus growing inside of its mother's womb, and then the life outside of the womb after birth.

Inside of the mother's womb the life of a fetus is confined and sensory experience and knowledge are limited. If someone was to tell the fetus that there is a large, spacious world outside of the mother's womb with all sorts of activities, people, food, pleasures and sightseeing, it will be very hard for the fetus to imagine this as they would have no context of what we are telling them.

In the same way, the life after death or the hereafter – in terms of its vastness and expanse and what lies there – is beyond what we have seen or what we can ever even imagine:

يَعْلَمُونَ ظَاهِرًا مِّنَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ عَنِ الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ غَافِلُونَ

They only know (what reaches to their senses from) the outward aspect of the life of this world, but they are heedless and unaware of (what lies beyond it and) the Hereafter. (Qur'an, Surah al-Rum, 30:7).

يَا قَوْمِ إِنَّمَا هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا مَتَاعٌ وَإِنَّ الْآخِرَةَ هِيَ دَارُ الْقَرَارِ

O my people! The life of this world is but a (passing) enjoyment, while the Hereafter – that is indeed the home of permanence. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:39).

3. Death (al-Mawt)

The most certain thing in the life of an individual is death. Anyone who was alive previously experienced death and anyone who is alive now will certainly die as well:

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ

Every soul shall taste of death. (Qur'an, Surah Ale ʿImran, 3: 185).

In fact, an examination of nature around us also points towards the decline and death in all that exists – whether it is a plant or an animal, a celestial object like a star or a galaxy – even the entire universe is not expected to last forever. It is in the nature of existence around us to perish and not last forever which makes it distinct from God who never dies:

نَحْنُ قَادِرُونَ بَيْنَكُمْ الْمَوْتِ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ

It is also We (God) who decree death among you – and We (God) cannot be overcome. (Qur'an, Surah al-Waqi'ah, 56:60).

Death is a great equalizer, no one whether strong or weak, rich or poor, a person who is good or bad can escape it. It will get to all of us. But death does not mean an end, destruction or annihilation, like a cell phone whose battery has run out and is considered “dead.” In fact, death represents a new beginning, a transfer from this phase of existence to the next.

According to philosophy of trans-substantial motion by Mulla Sadra (to be discussed in detail later on in this book in chapter 14), in the beginning, our soul (Arabic: *al-nafs*) is more corporeal and physical in its nature, and through motion in its substance it gradually becomes more spiritual and less corporeal. This process continues throughout life resulting in gradual perfection of the soul and its independence from the body. As the soul becomes more independent from the body, the body begins to decline and starts showing signs of old age. When the soul has become completely independent from the body, then natural death occurs i.e. separation of the connection between the body and the soul.

Death is a separation of that last connection between the body and the soul which was already getting weaker due to gradual perfection of the soul.

A parable of death is the ripening of a fruit and its separation from the tree stalk. Once the fruit is fully mature and ripe, it can no longer stay on the tree. Similarly, once a soul is perfected in its independence from the body and the decree for its separation has arrived, it must leave the body resulting in death. Death due to illness or injury also results in separation of the body and soul and is different from natural

death.

When describing death, Imam ʿAli (‘a) has stated:

Death is inscribed on the offspring of Adam just like a necklace hangs on a young girl’s neck.⁶

4. Intermediate Realm (al-Barzakh)

After death, the soul moves to a new realm of existence called the “*barzakh*” which is a higher realm of existence compared to this physical realm.

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ رَبِّ ارْجِعُونِ لَعَلِّي أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا فِيمَا تَرَكْتُ ۖ كَلَّا ۚ إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَائِلُهَا ۖ وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِم بَرْزَخٌ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ

(Those who persist in their evil ways will not cease from their false attributions to God, and from their harsh reaction to you) until when death comes to one of them, and then he implores: My Lord! Please, let me return to life, that I may act righteously with respect to whatever I have left undone in the world. No, never! It is merely a word that he utters over and over again. Before those (who are dead) is an intermediate world (of the grave, where they will stay) until the Day when they will be raised up. (Qur’an, Surah al-Mu’minun, 23:99–100).

The soul stays in this realm until the “Day of Reckoning” when all of the souls will be gathered.

During its stay in *barzakh*, the soul maintains interest and attention towards the physical realm of existence in which we currently exist. The duration of this stay is related to the soul’s attachment to the physical realm of existence. The stronger the soul’s connection and attachment is to the physical world, the longer the stay in *barzakh* will be.⁷

Once the soul has moved to *barzakh*, the perception and vision of the soul is enhanced manifold as it severs its connection with the physical world. So death does not result in diminishment and annihilation, but on the contrary to enhancement and permanence:

لَقَدْ كُنْتُمْ فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِنْ هَذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنْكَ غِطَاءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ الْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ

Indeed you were in heedlessness of this, and now We have removed from you your veil, so your sight today is sharp. (Qur’an, Surah Qaf, 50:22).

The experience of every soul in *barzakh* is related to its belief and actions during life on earth. If the soul is of a righteous individual, then its experiences will be of comfort and ease whereas if the soul is that of a wretched individual, then the perception will be that of fear and pain.

One may question how do we know if it is true that after death the soul leaves the body and enters another realm of existence or not? Do we have any proof besides the revealed sciences? Also can some individuals experience the life of *barzakh* while still alive in this world?

The answer to these questions is that we all have experienced the life of *barzakh* to some extent while living in this world. When we fall asleep the soul partially departs from the body and enters into a realm of *barzakh* temporarily, in which we perceive visions, visit places and meet individuals, hold conversations, experience emotions such as pleasure and fear – all along while our bodies remain confined to our beds:

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا فَيُمْسِكُ الَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

God takes the souls at the time of the death of (the person), and in their sleep those (of the ones) that have not died. He withholds (the souls of) those for whom He has decreed death, and the rest He sends back (to their bodies to live on) for a term appointed by Him. Surely in that are signs (important lessons) for people who reflect and are mindful. (Qur'an, Surah al-Zumar, 39:42).

The reason a soul can have these meta-physical experiences during sleep is due to its lack of attention and attachment with the physical body while it is sleeping. The same phenomenon is repeated at the time of death when the soul completely and permanently leaves the body where as during sleep the departure is partial and for the duration of sleep. Sleep is like mini-death.

Those individuals with enhanced spirituality like the prophets and saints can have “visions” and “spiritual experiences” in which they can witness the reality of *barzakh* while alive and awake. Due to spiritual practices and less attachment towards the physical realm, their “eyes” towards *barzakh* are turned open and they witness realities which others can not.

Similarly, the Near Death Experience (NDE) is a well described phenomenon reported in medical literature, in which up to 18% of patients who were revived after undergoing cardiac arrest report having an Out of Body Experience (OBE). During these episodes, individuals reported witnessing their own body being resuscitated, meeting dead relatives, perceiving intense light and having joyful or fearful emotions.⁸ The experience of these individuals was quite vivid which left a lasting impression on them.

The “physics” of the hereafter will be different from the “physics” of this world. The concept of space, time and motion will be different. Travelling may not require the use of automobiles and can be instantaneous. Communication may not require use of speech, and ideas may be exchanged by transmitting thoughts alone. Surroundings like walls, trees and plants will appear conscious as well. Knowledge about something will be acquired by just paying attention to it. The intention and desire of

wanting something will be sufficient for its availability without a need for a pre-requisite or a cause. Our consciousness and degree of existence will be much higher than what we experience during this material existence. Deep thinking on our experience during vivid dreams will help us to understand what our experiences may be like in the hereafter.

5. Resurrection (al-Qiyamah)

The life in *barzakh* will lead everyone to the most important event in our journey, which has been mentioned multiple times in the Qur'an with different names. It is called the Day of Qiyamah, the Day of Gathering or the Day of Reckoning. On this day, every soul from the beginning of time until the end will be gathered to receive judgement on what it did, or achieved during its stay in the physical realm of existence:

اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ لِيَجْمَعَ بَيْنَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ ۚ وَمَنْ أَصْدَقُ مِنَ اللَّهِ حَدِيثًا

God, there is no deity but He. He will gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, about (the coming of) which there is no doubt. Who can be truer in statement than God? (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4:87).

The entire setup on the Day of Judgement will be different from the current set up of the world. The stars and galaxies, the mountains and seas will all be replaced by something new and different. Everything will go through a process of death and then resurrection:

إِذَا الشَّمْسُ كُوِّرَتْ وَإِذَا النُّجُومُ انْكَدَرَتْ وَإِذَا الْجِبَالُ سُيِّرَتْ وَإِذَا الْعِشَارُ عُطِّلَتْ وَإِذَا الْوُحُوشُ حُشِرَتْ وَإِذَا الْبِحَارُ سُجِّرَتْ وَإِذَا النُّفُوسُ زُوِّجَتْ وَإِذَا الْمَوْءُودَةُ سُئِلَتْ بِأَيِّ ذَنْبٍ قُتِلَتْ وَإِذَا الصُّحُفُ نُشِرَتْ وَإِذَا السَّمَاءُ كُشِطَتْ وَإِذَا الْجَحِيمُ سُعِّرَتْ وَإِذَا الْجَنَّةُ أُزْلِفَتْ عَلِمَتْ نَفْسٌ مَا أُحْضَرَتْ

When the sun is folded up (and darkened); and when the stars fall (losing their luster); and when the mountains are set moving; and when (highly prized) pregnant camels are left untended; and when the wild beasts (as also the domesticated ones) go forth from their places of rest (in terror of the destruction of the world, and then, following their revival, are gathered together before God, for the settlement of their accounts); and when the seas rise up boiling; and when the souls are coupled (the righteous men with pure, righteous spouses, and the evil ones with their evil spouses and with devilish companions); and when the female infant, buried alive, is questioned, for what crime she was killed; and when the scrolls (of the deeds of every person) are laid open; and when the heaven is torn away (with all the truths becoming manifest); and when the blazing flame is kindled (to fierce heat); and when paradise is brought near (for the God-revering, pious to enter); every person will (then) come to know what he has prepared (for himself). (Qur'an,

Surah al-Takwir, 81: 1-14).

Such will be the horror and anxiety on that Day, that no one will have any concern for anyone except their own self. People will not even worry about their own children or their spouses:

فَإِذَا جَاءَتِ الصَّاخَّةُ 33 يَوْمَ يَفِرُّ الْمَرْءُ مِنْ أَخِيهِ وَأُمِّهِ وَأَبِيهِ وَصَاحِبَتِهِ وَبَنِيهِ لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مِنْهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ شَأْنٌ يُغْنِيهِ

But when the piercing cry (heralding the resurrection) sounds; On that Day when a person flees from his brother, and from his mother and father, and from his spouse and his children; everyone on that Day has concern of his own enough to make him heedless (of anything else). (Qur'an, Surah al-Abasa, 80:33-37).

This is a day of the manifestation of God's authority in full display and no one will be allowed to even speak except by His permission. This is a day for secrets and hidden realities to emerge, actions that were performed in desolate places, and in the darkness of the night will no longer be hidden, and even their true intentions will be made manifest:

يَوْمَ تُبْلَى السَّرَائِرُ

On the day when hidden things shall be made manifest. (Qur'an, Surah al-Tariq, 86:9).

The disputes and the ideological differences that we quarrel about, and the personal conflicts that remained unresolved will now be settled:

فَاللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ

So God will judge between you all on the Day of Resurrection. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4: 141).

This is also a day of intense regret and disappointment, as well as of real success and victory. There is no escape from it nor respite:

وَأَنْذَرُهُمْ يَوْمَ الْحَسْرَةِ إِذْ قُضِيَ الْأَمْرُ وَهُمْ فِي غَفْلَةٍ وَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

And warn them about the day of intense regret, when the matter shall have been decided; and they are (now) in negligence and they do not believe. (Qur'an, Surah Maryam, 19:39).

The calamity of the Day of Judgement is so intense that a person will be willing to give up everything that they held so dear in this life just to save themselves. They will realize that this is it, there is no

turning back from here and one must face and live the consequences of what they had done to themselves and to others:

يُبْصِرُونَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْمُجْرِمِ لَوْ يَفْتَدِي مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمِئِذٍ بَنِيهِ وَصَاحِبَتَهُ وَأَخِيهِ وَقَصِيلَتَهُ الَّتِي تُؤْوِيهِ وَمَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ يُنْجِيهِ

Though they will be in sight of each other. Every disbelieving criminal will yearn to ransom himself from the punishment of that Day even by his sons, and his wife and his brother, and all his kinsfolk who sheltered him, and whoever else is on the earth, all of them, so that he might then save himself. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'arij, 70: 11-14).

This is also the day of special mercy of God through intercession of His select beings for those who are in need of it:

مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ

Who is he that can intercede with Him but by His permission? (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:255).

The Day of Judgement is the final culminating point of our efforts, and of finding out how we did with our lives. It is a day when things will appear as they truly are without any veil or a doubt about their reality.

Some will be extremely happy and pleased with their efforts; and others will be deeply sorrowful and regret their actions. However one thing is certain – no one will be wronged in the least bit as each soul will find out exactly what it has earned.

6. The Book of Deeds

On the Day of Judgement each one of us will be given our “book of deeds” detailing all that we had done during our lives. This book of deeds is not necessarily an actual “book” but the appearance of our soul shaped by our actions and intentions. Let us look at some examples to better understand this point.

When we do something, that action leaves an impression on our souls. If we continue to do this action repeatedly then a permanent impression will be made on our souls, sort of our habit or our nature.

For example, a person gives some money to help the needy. Then he repeats this action multiple times in different circumstances until it becomes his second nature or habit to help those in need. His soul thus acquires the quality of generosity.

وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ

And let every soul consider what it has sent on for tomorrow... (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57: 18).

Similarly, a person lies and cheats someone at an occasion; then he lies and cheats repeatedly with different individuals for his own advantage. Now, lying and cheating have become his habit or second nature and he will have to face the consequences of this evil habit.

Sometimes we do bad actions, such as hurting someone, and we can get away with it without facing any immediate consequences for it. However, this action is recorded on our soul and there is no escaping from it on the Day of Judgement, unless we make corrections and are regretful of our bad actions:

وَوُضِعَ الْكِتَابُ فَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَا وَيْلَتَنَا مَا لِهَذَا الْكِتَابِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا ۚ وَوَجَدُوا مَا عَمِلُوا حَاضِرًا ۚ وَلَا يَظْلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا

And the record (of everyone's deeds) is set in place; and you will see the disbelieving criminals filled with dread because of what is in it, and they will say: Alas, woe is ours! What is this record? It leaves out nothing, be it small or great, but it is accounted! They have found all that they did confronting them (in the forms thereof particular to the Hereafter). And Your Lord wrongs no one. (Qur'an, Surah al-Kahf, 18:49).

Besides our actions, even our beliefs and intentions are of utmost importance as well. For example, a person may be doing acts of charity and appears to be generous, but his intention is really seeking popularity and respect in the community, not necessarily helping the needy.

As each of us act with a particular intention, we start to make impressions upon our souls. Some actions are done repeatedly which leave a lasting impression on our souls, while others are done occasionally which have a lesser impact. Sometimes we regret after performing an action and try not to repeat it again. At other times, we do not care and continue to do so despite knowing that it is against societal moral norms. However the true calamity and horror of the Day of Judgement is this very inseparability of our actions from us:

إِنَّا أَنْذَرْنَاكُمْ عَذَابًا قَرِيبًا يَوْمَ يَنْظُرُ الْمَرْءُ مَا قَدَّمَتْ يَدَاهُ وَيَقُولُ الْكَافِرُ يَا لَيْتَنِي كُنْتُ تُرَابًا

We have surely warned you against a punishment near at hand. On that Day a person will look at what he has forwarded (from the world) with his own hands, and the unbeliever will say: Oh, would that I were mere dust (instead of being a responsible being with consciousness and free will)! (Qur'an, Surah al-Naba', 78:40).

In the end, each one of us has done millions of actions throughout our lives. Each of these actions leave an impression on our soul, some make our soul brighter and luminous, while others make it darker and dull. In the end our soul becomes a product of what we have done throughout our lives.

Thus, this “book of deeds” which will be ‘brought forth’ on the Day of Judgement is the appearance of our own soul which is a product of our intentions and actions. (Good actions of those who do not believe in God will be discussed in chapter 15).

7. Paradise (al-Jannah)

The monotheistic teachings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam talk about an abode in the hereafter which is a place of tranquility, peace, abundance and pleasure. Dwellers of paradise will live forever in comfort and ease, and not face any danger or harm:

لِلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا فِي هَذِهِ الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةٌ وَلَدَارُ الْآخِرَةِ خَيْرٌ وَلَنِعْمَ دَارُ الْمُتَّقِينَ جَنَّاتُ عَدْنٍ يَدْخُلُونَهَا يُجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ لَهُمْ فِيهَا مَا يَشَاءُونَ ۚ كَذَلِكَ يَجْزِي اللَّهُ الْمُتَّقِينَ الَّذِينَ تَتَوَفَّاهُم الْمَلَائِكَةُ طَيِّبِينَ ۚ يَقُولُونَ سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ ادْخُلُوا الْجَنَّةَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

Whereas it is said to those who keep from disobedience to God in reverence for Him and piety: What is it that your Lord sends down (on the Messenger)? They answer: That which is purely good and to our benefit (in both worlds). For those devoted to doing good in this world, aware that God is seeing them, there is good, and the abode of the Hereafter is indeed better. How excellent indeed, is the abode of the God-revering, pious! Gardens of perpetual bliss which they will enter, through which rivers flow. Therein they will have whatever they may desire. Thus does God reward the God-revering, pious – Those whose souls the angels take while they are in a pious state (free of evil, and worshipping none but God alone), saying: Peace be upon you! Enter Paradise for what you have been doing. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nahl, 16:30–32).

The Qur'an is quite explicit about the abode of paradise in the hereafter for those who believe, do good and avoid evil actions. It gives vivid imagery of paradise and the various comforts, pleasures and honors that are bestowed on those who enter it. This is the reward for an individual, after leading a disciplined life in this world, facing its hardships and tests with forbearance and patience, and protecting their soul from moral corruption and bad habits:

عَلَى سُرُرٍ مَوْضُونَةٍ مُتَكِّئِينَ عَلَيْهَا مُتَقَابِلِينَ يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَانٌ مُخَلَّدُونَ بِأَكْوَابٍ وَأَبَارِيقَ وَكَأْسٍ مِنْ مَعِينٍ لَا يُصَدَّعُونَ عَنْهَا وَلَا يُنْزِفُونَ وَفَاكِهَةٍ مِمَّا يَتَخَيَّرُونَ وَلَحْمِ طَيْرٍ مِمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ وَحُورٌ عِينٌ كَأَمْثَالِ اللُّؤْلُؤِ الْمَكْنُونِ جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا وَلَا تَأْثِيمًا إِلَّا قِيلًا سَلَامًا سَلَامًا

(They will be seated) on lined thrones (encrusted with gold and precious stones), reclining upon them, facing one another. There will go round them immortal youths, with goblets, and ewers, and a cup from a clear-flowing spring, from which no aching of the head ensues, nor intoxication of the mind; and with fruits such as they choose, and with the flesh of fowls such as they desire;

and (there will be) pure maidens, most beautiful of eye, like pearls kept hidden (in their shells). A reward for all (the good) that they used to do. They will hear there neither vain talk nor accusing speech; (they will hear) only speech (wishing) peace and security after peace and security. (Qur'an, Surah al-Waqi'ah, 56: 15-26).

The rewards and blessings of paradise are nothing but the embodiment of our good actions in this world. What our soul experiences in the next world is a direct result of what it has done in this world. The actions of this world and the experiences of the next world are directly linked to one another. They are two aspects of the same reality.

When we help others, are kind and courteous to them, remove hardships from them, avoid unnecessary temptations and cultivate Divine manners in ourselves, then our soul immediately feels an ease, joy and bliss. With repeated actions this becomes our second nature and paradise is nothing but a manifestation of what the soul has already acquired for itself. The righteous souls during meditation and prayer, and while helping others feel spiritual ecstasy and comfort. It is as if they are already in paradise at that moment, and in the hereafter they will witness manifestation of the spiritual station that their souls have already achieved.

Besides the comfort and ease of paradise, there is still more for those who are sincere in their belief of monotheism. These individuals do not act for the sake of paradise, nor out of fear for hellfire, but they purely act for the pleasure and company of their true beloved – meaning God. They seek the Beloved and not His reward:

وَيُطْعِمُونَ الطَّعَامَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ مِسْكِينًا وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكُورًا

They give food, however great be their need for it, with pleasure to the destitute, and to the orphan, and to the captive, (saying): We feed you only for God's sake; we desire from you neither recompense nor thanks (we desire only the acceptance of God). (Qur'an, Surah al-Insan, 76:8-9).

The pleasure and approval of God is higher for them than what is available in the paradise:

۞ وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَمَسَاكِينَ طَيِّبَةً فِي جَنَّاتٍ عَدْنٍ وَرِضْوَانٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ۞ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ

God has promised the believers, both men and women, Gardens through which rivers flow, therein to abide, and blessed dwellings in Gardens of perpetual bliss; and greater (than those) is God's being pleased with them. That indeed is the supreme triumph. (Qur'an, Surah al-Tawbah, 9:72).

The closeness to God and witnessing His beauty and majesty is higher than the pleasures and comfort

of paradise itself:

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَهَرٍ فِي مَقْعَدٍ صِدْقٍ عِنْدَ مَلِكٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ

And the God-revering, pious ones will be in Gardens and by rivers; In the assembly of honor composed of the loyal and truthful in the Presence of the One All-Omnipotent Sovereign. (Qur'an, Surah al-Qamar, 54:54-55).

8. Hell (al-Jahannam)

The second abode of the hereafter that is repeatedly mentioned in the literature of monotheistic religions is called hell or *jahannam* (in Arabic, this word means a deep pit). It is the abode for the guilty. Those who were oppressive to others as well as to their own souls.

Just as the physical body can suffer from multiple illnesses, our souls can also have many diseases. The most important of these are: arrogance, greed and jealousy.

One of the main goals of following a religion or spiritual code of life is to purify the soul from these illnesses. It is not an easy task to overcome these illnesses and many of us including those that follow a religion fail to do it properly.

Based on the teachings of Islamic ethics, our soul has a few basic faculties which help guide our behavior. They are:

- a. **ʿAql** (Faculty of Intellect)
- b. *Shahwa* (Faculty of Passion)
- c. *Ghadhab* (Faculty of Anger)
- d. *Wahm* (Faculty of Imagination)

The faculty of intellect has the power of reason and rational inquiry and is attracted towards knowledge and finding out the real nature of things. It controls and regulates the other faculties; and it differentiates us and our behaviors from animalistic behaviors.

The faculty of passion helps us acquire things which we think are useful for us. This power generates the desire to eat, drink, have sexual relations, and acquire wealth and possessions.

The faculty of anger helps us to generate a repulsive response to things which we find harmful for us, and it also generates a desire to dominate others.

The faculty of imagination helps us to acquire universal and particular concepts, as well as plan and

scheme our affairs.

These powers of the soul are not bad or evil in themselves but in fact are necessary for our existence in this life. But for optimal behavior they need to remain under the control of our intellect. However, when these faculties dominate our intellect, then we demonstrate behavior which crosses societal and moral norms and we can end up oppressing ourselves and others.

Hell and its torments and sufferings are not a revenge from God for disobeying His commands, but it is a natural outcome of our own actions and beliefs. When we abuse the faculties of passion, anger and imagination, we are generating suffering for us in the afterlife.

For example, a person abuses his faculty of passion by becoming greedy and starts accumulating and misappropriating the wealth of orphans who are under his care. According to the Qur'an, by doing this, in reality one is only accumulating fire for oneself, and in the afterlife one will face the consequences of it:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَأْكُلُونَ أَمْوَالَ الْيَتَامَىٰ ظُلْمًا إِنَّمَا يَأْكُلُونَ فِي بُطُونِهِمْ نَارًا ۖ وَسَيَصْلَوْنَ سَعِيرًا

(As for) those who consume the property of the orphans unjustly, surely they only swallow fire into their stomachs and they shall enter burning fire. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4:10).

Similarly, those who satisfy their sexual urges outside of the bond of lawful marriage, transgress the limit of the faculty of passion and will certainly face the consequences of their actions:

وَلَا تَقْرُبُوا الزِّنَىٰ ۖ إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَاحِشَةً وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا

Do not draw near to any unlawful sexual intercourse; surely it is a shameful, indecent thing, and an evil way (leading to individual and social corruption). (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17:32).

The misuse of the faculty of anger is to verbally and physically abuse others. Unleashing a burst of anger on others on trivial matters, or trying to unjustly subdue others by putting them down is a manifestation of this faculty. Similarly, nations and countries who wage wars on others for domination or stealing their resources is also a manifestation of this faculty. Those who unjustly murder others will certainly face the consequences of their actions in the next world:

وَمَنْ يَقْتُلْ مُؤْمِنًا مُّتَعَمِّدًا فَجَزَاؤُهُ جَهَنَّمُ خَالِدًا فِيهَا وَغَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَلَعَنَهُ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُ عَذَابًا عَظِيمًا

Whoever kills a believer intentionally, his recompense (in the Hereafter) is hell, therein to abide; and God has utterly condemned him, excluded him from His mercy, and prepared for him a tremendous punishment. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa, 4:93).

The abuse of the power of imagination is found in deceiving and cheating others. Other examples are lying, intentionally making false promises and tricking others into believing something which is not true. This behavior will also lead to an unpleasant outcome:

﴿يُخَادِعُونَ اللَّهَ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَمَا يَخْدَعُونَ إِلَّا أَنفُسَهُمْ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ 9﴾

They desire to deceive God and those who believe, however they deceive only themselves and they do not perceive. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:9).

The hell-fire or a painful and unpleasant experience in the hereafter is what people have earned from their own hands through their false beliefs and wrong actions. Just as lung cancer is a direct result of smoking and not a “punishment” from God, similarly abusing various faculties and oppressing others leads to consequences for which we can only blame ourselves. Thus, we state that: Hell is not a “punishment” from God but is an outcome of our own actions. It is a manifestation of Divine Justice. Divine religions have cautioned and warned us against crossing certain limits (e.g. the Ten Commandments), as we cannot escape the consequences of our actions.

However, the hell which is described as a place of pain and suffering, is also a form of Divine mercy. Certain individuals have developed very bad habits and traits (e.g. abusive conduct, constant lying) and as such, no one wants to deal with them. Sending them to hell is a way of keeping them away from those who have upright, moral conduct and have fair dealings (also known as the people of heaven). We as human beings do this all of the time to those who have disruptive behavior in the society, we remove them from the society and place them in jail.

Moreover, the abode of hell gives these individuals with evil traits a chance to reform themselves from the bad, evil habits. The spiritual growth that they should have achieved while living as a believer in this world but did not due to their indulgence in various passions and lusts can be achieved to a certain extent by spending some time in hell. As for those who are truly unrepentant, stubborn in their denial of the reality and signs of God or are too proud to change their behavior in the light of clear arguments and Divine teachings and are hopeless of the mercy of God, they have chosen hell for themselves and will stay in there forever.

The Qur'an talks about the reality and the consequences of various actions – many of which we consider trivial. For example, backbiting or talking about the bad habits of someone in their absence for the sake of gossip – even though it may be true – is something which at best is discouraged and however may also be prohibited. The manifestation of this action (backbiting) in the hereafter is as if we are eating someone's flesh:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اجْتَنِبُوا كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ الظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ ۖ وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا ۚ وَلَا يَغْتَبَ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا ۚ أَيَحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَن يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَّحِيمٌ

O you who believe! Avoid much suspicion, for some suspicion is a grave sin (liable to God's punishment); and do not spy (on one another), nor backbite (against one another). Would any of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would abhor it! Keep from disobedience to God in reverence for Him and piety. Surely God is One Who truly returns repentance with liberal forgiveness and additional reward, All-Compassionate (particularly towards His believing servants). (Qur'an, Surah al-Hujurat, 49: 12).

Based on the above discussion, it should be clear that the concept of hell in the afterlife is something which is a direct result of what we ourselves have done in this world. No one should feel immune from his or her own actions. If a man is unjustly murdered, or a woman is sexually abused, the culprit may or may not face the punishment in this life – however, there is no escaping from one's actions in the hereafter:

فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُۥ

So then, however has done an atom's weight of good will see it; and whoever has done an atom's weight of evil will see it. (Qur'an, Surah al-Zilzal, 99: 7-8).

Rational Arguments for the Hereafter

The knowledge about the hereafter contained in the Abrahamic religions has come primarily from revelation such as the Bible and the Qur'an. However, are there any rational arguments in this regards? Should we believe that those who died long ago, and have now turned into bones and dust will ever be raised again? Can dead bones really come back to life:

وَضَرَبَ لَنَا مَثَلًا وَنَسِيَ خَلْقَهُ ۖ قَالَ مَنْ يُحْيِي الْعِظَامَ وَهِيَ رَمِيمٌ ۚ قَالَ مَنْ يُحْيِي الْعِظَامَ وَهِيَ رَمِيمٌ قُلْ يُحْيِيهَا الَّذِي أَنْشَأَهَا أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ ۚ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ خَلْقٍ عَلِيمٌ

And he coins a comparison for Us, having forgotten his own origin and creation, saying: ***Who will give life to these bones when they have rotten away? Say: He Who produced them in the first instance will give them life. He has full knowledge of every (form and mode and possibility of) creation (and of everything He has created He knows every detail in every dimension of time and space).*** (Qur'an, Surah Ya Sin, 36: 77-79).

We witness resurrection in nature all of the time. Nothing grows on a piece of land that has been devoid of water for a long time and is dead until rain falls on it and it starts to show signs of life again:

فَانْظُرْ إِلَىٰ آثَارِ رَحْمَتِ اللَّهِ كَيْفَ يُحْيِي الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا ۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Look then at the signs of God's mercy, how He gives life to the earth after its death, most surely He will raise the dead to life; and He has power over all things. (Qur'an, Surah al-Rum, 30:50).

But still for some people the default position is that since we have not witnessed the hereafter why should we believe in its existence? Who knows what happens after death? Why should I worry about facing the consequences of my actions after my death?

Let us try to analyze this.

The basic principle in the concept of the hereafter is that our beliefs and actions have consequences. I think most of us will agree with this line of thinking that our beliefs and actions at least have consequences in this life.

If a student works hard, attends all of the classes and prepares for the examination, then he is likely to do well in the test as opposed to another student who does not study, misses classes and takes their examination lightly.

The actions of a hardworking student are based on a belief that they need to give importance to their studies for a successful outcome in their academic endeavors. On the contrary, a student who takes their studies casually despite having the ability to work as hard as the other student does not really believe in achieving academic success, or is distracted by other habits such as sports or videogames.

This example illustrates that our beliefs and actions based on that belief, have real consequences. The opposite of this way of thinking is that our beliefs and actions are inconsequential – but this is absurd.

Now, are the consequences of our actions limited to this current life only or do they extend beyond this life? Many a times a person intends to do good and is sincere in their efforts but ends up facing an adverse outcome.

For example, a woman is sincere to her husband and is devoted to him, but he ends up betraying her and abandons her for another woman. This woman, despite her sincere intentions and efforts had an adverse outcome.

Similarly, sometimes we see that a person is murdered and the killer is never found and never punished for this serious injustice. In other words, there appears to be no consequences for the killer despite committing a severe act of aggression.

If the scope of our actions and their consequences was limited to this life only, then this world will be a very unjust place. Often good is responded by good and bad by bad, but it is certainly not true in all situations. Our instincts tell us that there should be more to our efforts than what we see in this limited life.

All of us are bound by the time limit of life allotted to us. Some of us live to be 60 and 70, others die at 30

or 40 or even younger, but we all have the same end. We all must die without exception. This is despite all of us wanting to live forever, as we have an built-in instinct for permanence. Moreover, all of us must fall asleep for a good part of our lives, and none of us can escape this. We must sever connections with our work, families, possessions, hobbies and even our bodies every night for a good number of hours when we fall asleep. Every day we are reminded, that everything we have accumulated and is so dear to us will be separated from us when the overwhelming event of death will happen.

During sleep, we experience dreams which are truly a meta-physical experience just as Near Death Experiences (NDE) are, as reported by thousands of patients who have survived cardiac resuscitation. These observations (dreams and NDE) point towards a level of consciousness that is beyond our baseline level of consciousness during the awake state.

The inevitability of death (and mini-death i.e sleep) and the incomplete outcomes and consequences of our actions makes one wonder that there must be consciousness beyond death and it is at this point that the revelation from God gives further insight into the nature of the afterlife:

أَفَحَسِبْتُمْ أَنَّمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ عَبَثًا وَأَنَّكُمْ إِلَيْنَا لَا تُرْجَعُونَ

What! Do you then think that We have created you in vain and that you shall not be returned to Us? (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'minun, 23: 115).

The belief in the hereafter gives a depth of vision and extends our focus beyond the physical reality of this life. Whatever we do has consequences both in this life, and more importantly in the life to come. There is no escape from God's dominion and the consequences of our own actions:

يَوْمَ هُمْ بَارِزُونَ ۚ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ مِنْهُمْ شَيْءٌ ۚ لِمَنِ الْمُلْكُ الْيَوْمَ ۚ لِلَّهِ الْوَاحِدِ الْقَهَّارِ ۚ 16

The Day when they will come forth (from death), with nothing of them being hidden from God. Whose is the absolute Sovereignty on that Day? It is God's, the One, the All-Overwhelming (with absolute sway over all that exist). (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40: 16).

[1.](#) Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 3.

[2.](#) Ibid., Sermon 99.

[3.](#) Ibid., Sermon 226.

[4.](#) Ibid., Sermon 64.

[5.](#) Najmi, Husayn bin Ali – Sermons, Sayings and Letters from Medina till Karbala, Letter from Imam Husayn (‘a) to his half-brother Muhammad, b. Hanafiyya.

[6.](#) Tawus, Sayyid ibn, Al-Luhuf, p. 33; Ibn Nama, p. 20.

[7.](#) Khomeini, Ruh Allah, Maṭṭad, Published by the Institute of Education and Upbringing, Lahore, Pakistan.

[8.](#) Near-death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands, Lancet, December 15, 2001, 9298:2039–45; Eben Alexander. Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife. Simon and Shuster

Chapter 7: Goal and Purpose of Life

In the contemporary society, people are driven by various goals and objectives. All of us pursue wealth as one of our main objectives in life. Wealth allows us to obtain the comforts and luxuries we need – and sometimes simply want. Through wealth, we can obtain what we think is important for our well-being and also what society expects us to have as a measure of being prosperous, for example owning a house or a car. Wealth also gives us respect in the society and generally, wealthy people are considered as being important. It is also useful during an illness and injury so we can obtain the best possible health care. Wealth gives us a sense of power and control over the physical world and gives us self-confidence.

To obtain wealth, people pursue different paths. Some go into learning skills and craftsmanship; others pursue education and degrees to work in knowledge-based jobs while others go into business, retail and trade to make a living.

Besides money, we also want to find the right life partner to have a family with. Once we have children of our own, our lives are devoted to their upbringing and well-being. In this way, the circle of life continues with most of us pursuing education, jobs, family and travel for leisure, etc. as our main objectives and goals in life.

Some people are driven by academic pursuits, trying to make a discovery or develop a new device, or write a paper for publishing in a leading journal. Those who are materially successful in life also want fame and recognition and so some go on to become politicians and hold public office. Those with higher goals want to help others and make a difference in society and even leave behind a legacy. In pursuit of our objectives and goals there is little that religion and spirituality adds to this outlook on life and many, including those who may regard themselves as religious, often do not see how religion helps them in these objectives of life.

Our degrees of success in obtaining these goals and objectives is variable. Some people become very successful while others are not as much. In the end, death knocks at our door – often unexpectedly and usually to our displeasure – and we are forced to leave all what we thought was important to us, and for which we spent our entire life, money and resources. That is all folks, this is the story of life and so let us try to ‘enjoy’ it while it lasts, because soon the appointed term will be over.

Another way of looking at the question of our goal and purpose in life is to see it in the context of the teachings of monotheism. In this book I have tried to narrate a view point in which God is the Originator

and Creator of everything and to Whom everything returns to as well. I have also described how there are two phases of life, one in this world and the other in the hereafter. If God created the universe and settled us on this earth, then there should be a reason behind it. What is the goal of my existence? What am I doing here? Does He want some of us to enjoy the various comforts of this life, and others to suffer in poverty, war and illness? Is that really it?

Role of Mankind

Everything that exists is dependent upon God for coming into existence and for maintaining its existence. Any attribute that a being possesses is not of its own, but it is a reflection of God's attributes. For example, a flower is attractive to the eye simply because it is reflecting God's beauty; a mountain is majestic in its stature as it is reflecting God's majesty; the love of a mother towards her children is a reflection of God's unconditional love and affection towards His creation.

Amongst the God's creation the only being who has the potential to reflect God's attributes to the fullest is mankind. We can reflect life, beauty, goodness, wisdom, knowledge, power, compassion, justice, revenge, forgiveness, vision, hearing and love which are all God's attributes. According to the Qur'an, mankind is a vicegerent of God on the earth:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً

***And when your Lord said to the angels, I am going to place in the earth a representative...
(Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:30).***

Mankind is superior to both animals and angels. Animals have desires, but they do not have intellect and so, they are forced to act according to their desires. When a goat sees grass or fodder, it will start eating it without checking if the grass is from its owner's yard or from the neighbor's yard. Angels are endowed with only intellect and do not have temptations or desires, therefore they do not have to make moral choices.

However, mankind has both the power of desire and intellect. We get hungry just like a goat, but we do not just eat anything that comes our way; we get angry when our rights are violated, but we can not just attack the aggressor like animals do to chase them away. Our desires and anger are controlled by the faculty of the intellect... Maybe not all of the time but most of the time!

According to the Qur'an, mankind enjoys a special rank in relation to other creations:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

Assuredly We have honored the children of Adam (with many distinctions): We have sustained their traveling on the land and the sea, and provided for them (their sustenance) out of pure, wholesome things, and preferred them above many of those whom We have created with particular preferment. (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17:70).

The interplay of desires and intellect gives rise to conflicting choices allowing us to exercise our free will. When given various options, we can choose to act or not to act in a certain way resulting in different outcomes. We have rational decision making capacity and the ability to differentiate between what is good for us and what is bad, what is beneficial and what is harmful:

إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَنْ يَحْمِلْنَهَا وَأَشْفَقْنَ مِنْهَا وَحَمَلَهَا الْإِنْسَانُ ۖ إِنَّهُ كَانَ ظَلُومًا جَهُولًا

We offered the Trust to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains, but they shrank from bearing it, and were afraid of it (fearful of being unable to fulfill its responsibility), but the human being has undertaken it. He is indeed prone to doing great wrong and misjudging, and acting out of sheer ignorance. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ahzab, 33:72).

Based on the above discussion, mankind has a special role as the vicegerents of God, enjoys a special honor, and is the carrier of God's Trust (which has been explained as free will or viceregency).

Life as a Test

The next question is that what then is our role or duty in this life? What are we supposed to do with this role of vicegerency and trust from God?

The Qur'an further explains that God created life and death to see which one of us is better than the other in terms of one's actions:

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْغَفُورُ

He (God) who has created death and life, so that He may try you (and demonstrate to yourselves) which of you is better in deeds; and He is the All-Glorious with irresistible might (Whose will none can frustrate), the All-Forgiving. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mulk, 67:2).

According to this verse during our entire lives, we are constantly undergoing trials and tests to see how we act in the context of our lives on earth with its various challenges and temptations. Whether a person is poor or wealthy, sick or well, hungry or fed, all are going through a test:

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى الْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لَهَا لِنَبْلُوهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا

We have surely made whatever is on the earth as an ornament for it (appealing to humanity), so that We may try them (by demonstrating it to themselves) which of them is best in conduct. (Qur'an, Surah al-Kahf, 18:7).

The embellishment of this earthly life is further clarified in another verse as follows:

الْمَالُ وَالْبَنُونَ زِينَةُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَالْبَاقِيَاتُ الصَّالِحَاتُ خَيْرٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ أَمَلًا

Wealth and children are an adornment of the present, worldly life, but the good, righteous deeds (based on faith and) which endure are better in the sight of your Lord in bringing reward and better to aspire for. (Qur'an, Surah al-Kahf, 18:46).

Just to clarify that having wealth and children is not bad or evil in itself, but what is being cautioned about is not to be too involved in chasing after them and accumulating wealth or feeling too proud of one's family ties or lineage, or compromising morals for money or family relations. Good moral actions done with pure intentions have more value than any amount of wealth or number of children. Thus, life and various aspects of it are ways of testing us to see how we act in a particular situation.

Spiritual Growth

1. Moral Self-Restraint (al-Taqla)

Mankind has a special role as vicegerents of God on the earth and we are constantly being tested during this life. When students take a test, there is a score or a result to find out how the participants did in those tests. What is the measure by which we know how we did in the test of life? The Qur'anic measure of success is a quality called *taqla* or God-Consciousness.

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

O humankind! Surely We have created you from a single (pair of) male and female, and made you into tribes and families so that you may know one another (and so build mutuality and co-operative relationships, not so that you may take pride in your differences of race or social rank, and breed enmities). Surely the noblest, most honorable of you in God's sight is the one best in piety, righteousness, and reverence for God. Surely God is All-Knowing, All-Aware. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hujurat, 49: 13).

One of the most important and often repeated messages of the Qur'an is for believers to acquire the quality of God consciousness. The word *taqwa* is derived from the Arabic root word "*waqaya*" which means to safeguard and protect, which in the context of monotheism is defined as self-restraint and self-control from that which is harmful to the soul as instructed by God.

The immediate goal and outcome of religious practices like prayers and fasting is to acquire the quality of *taqwa*. It can be looked at as self-control or mastery of the self for the sake of God. *Taqwa* is to refrain from something which is poisonous and harmful for the soul. To clarify this point let me give an example which most people can relate to. Let us say that there is a person who is self-conscious about his health, but he also has a bad habit of smoking. Once he learns more about the hazards of smoking and attends multiple sessions about its harmful effects, he decides to stop smoking. This ability to say no to something which is harmful for us (in this case for health reasons) is called *taqwa*.

In the context of religion, various things have been described as harmful for the soul, which in common terminology are called sins such as lying, cheating, backbiting, illegitimate sexual relations, etc. This ability to refrain from activities which are harmful for the soul is *taqwa*.

None of us consider lying a good trait but many of us lie in our daily lives for various reasons and thus, the ability of not lying and speaking the truth out of fear of breaking God's laws and speaking the truth even if doing so is against our self-interest is *taqwa*.

Similarly, restraining oneself from illegitimate sexual encounters out of fear of transgressing the laws of God is also an example of *taqwa*. Our loyalty should be to our spouse, and even more importantly with God, as a wife may not be present everywhere, but God is always present. This feeling of God consciousness which prevents us from crossing the limits is *taqwa*.

وَهُوَ مَعَكُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ ۖ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ

And He is with you wherever you may be. And God sees well all that you do. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:4).

The religious practices like prayers and fasting help us to cultivate this ability in the soul. If someone is engaging in the religious practices but is not gaining the quality of God-consciousness, then one's practice of religion is futile and is not beneficial to the soul. Only those religious practices are relevant which simultaneously raise our God-consciousness and improve our self-control. Having *taqwa* is a sign of spiritual maturity; and this quality is the best provision for the life in the hereafter:

وَتَزَوَّدُوا فَإِنَّ خَيْرَ الزَّادِ التَّقْوَىٰ ۚ وَاتَّقُونِ يَا أُولِيَ الْأَلْبَابِ

Take your provisions. In truth, the best provision is righteousness and piety (taqwa), so fear Me

(be concisous of Me), O people of discernment! (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 197).

Many routine struggles of life actually help in our spiritual growth. When I am single its all about me and what I want. When I get married, now its about us and what we want and when we have children its about them and what they want. Adjusting our personal habits and lifestyle to accommodate our spouses and then struggling 24/7 to raise children is a great way of moving away from egocentric nature to self-less devotion to others. Giving up personal habits for our spouse or controlling anger while raising kids is a great exercise to cultivate Taqwa.

A person who cultivates the quality of *taqwa* leads an upright and honest life. They are well grounded in their ideals and are not easily influenced by the various temptations of the world. Since such a person has control over the desires and is not easily influenced by outside factors, they can focus on their goals and work towards fulfilling them and avoiding the distractions, and is likely to be a high achiever in the professional pursuits as well.

Such a person is very easy to get along with as we expect honesty and trust from them too. Such a person is self-conscious of their responsibilities and does not betray others. They would be moderate in their affairs and would not chase what others covet.

Such a person very easily earns self-respect amongst their peers and is well liked.

Taqwa is also important in avoiding conflicts in personal and family relationships and can help in their quick resolutions where as a lack of *taqwa* gives rise to inter-personal and societal conflicts.

Those who can safe guard themselves from the temptations of this world and enjoy God consciousness rightfully deserve eternal bliss and God's pleasure in the real life to come:

زَيْنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبُّ الشَّهَوَاتِ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ وَالْبَنِينَ وَالْقَنَاطِيرِ الْمُقَنْطَرَةِ مِنَ الذَّهَبِ وَالْفِضَّةِ وَالْخَيْلِ الْمُسَوَّمَةِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ
وَالْحَرْثِ ۚ ذَلِكَ مَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۗ وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الْمَآبِ ۚ قُلْ أُوتِيتُكُمْ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْ ذَلِكَ ۖ لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ
جَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَأَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ وَرِضْوَانٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ

Made innately appealing to men are passionate love for women, children, (hoarded) treasures of gold and silver, branded horses, cattle, and plantations. Such are enjoyments of the present, worldly life; yet with God is the best of the goals to pursue. Say (to them): Shall I inform you of what is better than those (things that you so passionately seek to obtain)? For those who keep from disobedience to God in due reverence for Him and piety there are, with their Lord, Gardens through which rivers flow, wherein they will abide, and spouses purified, and God's good pleasure (with them). God sees the servants well. (Qur'an, Surah Ale ٱl-Imran, 3: 14-15).

Controlling our desires, bringing them under the control of the intellect and overpowering the 'self' is not an easy task and requires rigorous spiritual discipline throughout one's life. However what we can say is

that one trait which can definitely help achieve *taqwa* is the quality of servitude (ʿUbudiyya).

2. Servitude to God (ʿUbudiyya)

ʿUbudiyya has also been described as one of the main objects of our life in the context of monotheism:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ

And I have not created the jinn and the men except that they should serve Me. (Qur'an, Surah al-Dhariyat, 51:56).

The concept of servitude entails that one is devoted to the service of a person, king or an organization. In servitude, one follows the rules and regulations of the entity whom we are serving.

Early in human history, the concept of servitude was embodied in the practice of slavery. Slaves were owned by their masters; they had little or no possessions and had no say in their own affairs. The best slaves were those who were the most loyal to their masters and followed the orders diligently. The slave modified his entire life according to the wishes of their master. They worked for the benefit and profit of the master.

In the context of monotheism, no one can give any benefit or profit to God as this would entail a dependent and a needy God and this is impossible. On the other hand, servitude in the context of monotheism means modifying our lives in accordance with God's rules and instructions but for our own benefit. Serving God means following His guidelines and living according to His rules but only for our own prosperity.

One may argue and say: Why should I base my life according to someone else's (God's) wishes? After all it is my life, my body, my wealth, my house, my children, thus I should be the one deciding what to do with it.

Well are all of these things really yours? Is your life truly yours? If it is really yours, then why does death overtake you and end your life when you may not want it to end. If your body was really yours, then why does it get old and weak when you want it to remain young and strong. If your wealth and house are yours, how come you can lose them in an instant through a loss in business, a calamity or a natural disaster. If your children are truly yours, then why do they sometimes abandon you when you get old or in some instances, die in front of your eyes through an accident or illness and there is nothing that you can do about it?

The answer to all of these questions is that there is nothing truly yours nor under your true ownership, even as personal as your own body – but they have all been given to us during our temporary stay in this life.

All of this will be separated from us at the time of death and there is nothing that anyone can do about it. This is a very hard reality which is not that easy to acknowledge. Ponder over it!

يَا سَرِيعَ الرِّضَا

O He who is very quickly pleased!

اغْفِرْ لِمَنْ لَا يَمْلِكُ إِلَّا الدُّعَاءُ

Forgive the one who owns nothing except prayer. [1](#)

Once this reality sets in our souls, then we will be willing to cultivate the quality of servitude. Our servitude viz a viz God is our true status in the scheme of things. Servitude towards God is the key to unlocking and acquiring everything which is worth acquiring – especially the quality of *taqwa*:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

O humanity! Serve your Lord Who created you and those before you so that you may guard (against evil). (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:21).

☞ *Ubudiyya* is not only a desirable spiritual state in mankind, but an actual state in all of creation. The entire creation – the sun, the moon, clouds, animals and plants all are in a state of ☞ *ubudiyya* with no possibility of them going against the will of God.

إِنْ كُلُّ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِلَّا آتِي الرَّحْمَنِ عَبْدًا

There is no one in the heavens and the earth but must come to (God) the Beneficent God as a servant. (Qur'an, Surah Maryam, 19:93).

Mankind however, due to being endowed free-will has the possibility of going against the will of God. Only those who realize their true poverty and dependence viz a viz God will be in a position to cultivate the spiritual state of ☞ *ubudiyya*. The state of servitude does not make a person weak, low, or poor but instead, it is the key ingredient to real strength, power and wealth. Servitude towards God is not against freedom, on the contrary servitude towards God frees us from every other servitude and gives rise to true freedom. It is only through acquiring the status of servanthood that any spiritual status can be achieved.

☞ *Ubudiyya* in relation to God means that we deny attributing anything to us which truly belongs to God

alone, but may manifest in us also. God, is the Greatest and I am insignificant; He is All Powerful and I am weak; He is truly rich but I am utterly poor; He is Honorable and I am debased; He is Alive and I am as if dead; He is Eternal and I am transient; He truly exists, but I am as if I never existed – and there is none but He.

Paradise

In the context of Divine religions, a successful believer is rewarded with paradise in the afterlife for leading a pious and upright life in this world.

For many people, achieving paradise is the goal of their life.

Paradise has been described as a place of tranquility, abundance, beauty and such blessings which no eye has ever seen, and no mind has ever imagined. One may ask why does mankind have to go through trials and troubles of this worldly life in order to reach paradise, why can't the Merciful God just send everyone to Paradise directly?

The answer to this lies in the discussion about spiritual growth mentioned above.

As conscious beings exercising free will, we live in this world with our individual identity and our own ego. If we are given everything without going through spiritual training of this worldly existence, then we will become egocentric, self-focused thinking all that I see around me belongs to me and I deserve it. We will not be able to realize and appreciate the existence of God. Due to our egocentric nature, we will lack compassion and end up oppressing others.

Many people who are born into riches, or who do not face many hardships and get whatever they demand, end up acting like this. Without going through the ups and downs, hardships and ease of worldly existence, the human soul will not be able to move towards maturity and perfection. Once the soul has reached a degree of maturity it will be able to live in harmony with others in the abode of peace – known as Paradise.

The Final Goal

Mankind, as vicegerents of God on the earth have been bestowed with intelligence and free will, and in their journey of life they, are inflicted with various challenges and tests. This journey allows us to grow spiritually and cultivate the traits of servitude and God Consciousness as explained above. Those who have faith and do righteous actions and remain patient in the face of various struggles have been promised an everlasting abode of comfort in the form of Paradise after death. But is reaching Paradise then the ultimate aim of our existence? Is that where all of the roads will lead us to or is there something beyond Paradise?

In various verses, the Qur'an explains to us what the final purpose and goal of our life is. What is the

ultimate reason for our existence?

وَأَنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الْمُنْتَهَىٰ

And to your Lord is the final goal. (Qur'an, Surah al-Najm, 53:42).

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ إِلَيْهِ الْمَصِيرُ

There is no god but He; to Him is the final goal. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:3).

The final aim and purpose of our existence is God, He is the source of our existence and to Him will be the return:

الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمْ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

Those individuals, who when afflicted with a calamity say: Surely to God We belong, and to Him is our return. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 156).

Now this may be surprising to many people – how can God be the final goal or purpose of our existence? Most of us do not think this way or have God as the focus of our efforts and endeavors. But the Qur'an repeatedly asks us to reflect on the creation of our own selves, as well as the universe to find the meaning of our existence:

أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ ۚ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ النَّاسِ بِلِقَاءِ رَبِّهِمْ لَكَافِرُونَ

Do they not reflect upon themselves (even once)? God has not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them save with truth (meaningfully and for definite, wise purposes, and on solid foundations of truth), and for an appointed term. But surely many among the people are in unbelief about the meeting with their Lord. (Qur'an, Surah al-Rum, 30:8).

If we ponder over what people seek and want, we can see a similarity in our efforts. All of us want to survive and live, so we seek existence and life. We also want to be in control of our affairs and surroundings, so we seek wealth, power and authority. We also want to know and come out of ignorance, so we seek knowledge and wisdom. We also want things that are good, so we reject what is bad, and seek goodness. We also seek beauty, and reject ugliness; we seek love and reject hate. Thus, all of us seek life, permanence, power, knowledge, goodness, beauty, love and perfection and they are nothing but God's attributes. We may seek them in various objects or different people but we basically

seek the same things. So intentionally or unintentionally we all are seeking God, we are programmed to seek Him and Him alone, and even the atheists who completely reject the idea of God seek nothing but Him. We are hard wired to do that; and we cannot escape this design.

The ultimate aim and goal of our struggle is to cultivate God's attributes within us – meaning to have life, knowledge, power, beauty and love. This world reflects these attributes in different objects, but by its very nature it is temporary and changing.

A flower that looks beautiful today will wither away tomorrow; a powerful person today will lose his power tomorrow.

Thus, those who seek objects reflecting these attributes are seeking the shadows, but those who are God-conscious seek the light behind these shadows. They seek the reality as it is, while the rest of the people are caught up in the shadows. The closer we are to God, the more we reflect His attributes – just like a piece of iron gets hot if placed close to a fire. In the same way the practice of religion gets us closer to God, and as a result we should be able to reflect God's attributes in our selves.

As my teacher, Dr. Mansour Leghahei states:

Life is a journey, religion is the path, faith is the beacon, taqwa is the provision, and the destination is God.

'Meeting' with God (Liqaʿ Allah)

From birth through childhood, then adulthood and up to old age we are constantly struggling – struggling to survive, struggling to improve our lives, to explore the world, and to make it a better place for us and for others. The final goal of this struggle and journey of life is nothing except God:

يَا أَيُّهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَدْحًا فَمُلَاقِيهِ

O human! You are ever toiling toward your Lord in a labor, you will meet Him. (Qur'an, Surah al-Inshiqaq, 84:6).

God is not a person whom we can meet like meeting other people. Meeting here implies paying attention to someone, communicating with them or witnessing them. Meeting with God can be realized during acts of worship. The daily prayers (*salat*) and supplications are a time for personal communication with God. Going to visit the House of God (the Kaʿbah in Mecca) for pilgrimage is meeting with God. Even visiting the sick has been described as meeting with God.

The experience of meeting God has various degrees and levels. The time of death has been described as a time when everyone – whether a believer or an unbeliever will truly experience “meeting with God.”

The post death experience of paradise or hell is also witnessing a manifestation of God's beauty or His justice, and is a result of how a person has lived during this life. Meeting with God is certain for everyone – but the degree of it will be different.

Those who deny such a meeting, will be dreadful of it when it arrives and will be the losers. Their apathy towards it is because of what they have done with their lives. However, there is no escape from it:

قَدْ خَسِرَ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِلِقَاءِ اللَّهِ ۖ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَتْهُمْ السَّاعَةُ بَغْتَةً قَالُوا يَا حَسْرَتَنَا عَلَىٰ مَا فَرَّطْنَا فِيهَا وَهُمْ يَحْمِلُونَ
أُوزَارَهُمْ عَلَىٰ ظُهُورِهِمْ ۖ أَلَا سَاءَ مَا يَزِرُونَ

Assuredly, those have lost who deny the (truth of the final) meeting with God until, as the Hour comes upon them all of a sudden, they cry, Alas for us! how negligent we have been in this regard, when they have already loaded their burdens on to their backs. Evil indeed is the burden they are loading themselves with! (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:31).

But for the believers, it is a time of rejoicing, something to look forward to, something that they have been waiting for:

وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّكُمْ مُلَاقُوهُ ۖ وَبَشِّرِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

And be careful (of your duty) to God, and know that you will meet Him, and give good news to the believers (of this meeting). (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:223).

The spiritual status of select individuals like the prophets or imams or the *awliya* of God (friends of God) is much higher than we can ever understand. They are completely immersed in monotheism such that they do not have any desire except for God. They seek neither worldly possessions, nor paradise in the hereafter. Their goal is nothing but God.

Such is their degree of servitude (*ʿubudiyya*) that one in this station annihilates their own being completely (i.e. their own desires, wishes, likes and dislikes). They live for the sake of God; they die for the sake of God; they see for the sake of God; they talk for the sake of God; they meet people for the sake of God; they love for the sake of God; and they hate for the sake of God – in short, their entire existence is centered around God. There is no “I” left in them:

قُلْ إِن صَلَاتِي وَنُسُكِي وَمَحْيَايَ وَمَمَاتِي لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ ۖ وَبِذَلِكَ أُمِرْتُ وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ

Say: My Prayer, and all my (other) acts and forms of devotion and worship, and my living and my dying are for God alone, the Lord of the worlds. He has no partners; thus have I been

commanded, and I am the first and foremost of the Muslims (who have submitted to Him exclusively). (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6: 162-163).

These are the perfect human beings whose desire is God's desire and whose actions are God's actions:

وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ

But you cannot will (to do so) unless God wills, the Lord of the worlds. (Qur'an, Surah al-Takwir, 81:29).

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ

Those who swear allegiance to you (O Messenger), swear allegiance to God only. God's 'hand' is over their hands. (Qur'an, Surah al-Fath, 48: 10).

They experience "meeting with God" at a much different level than ordinary people even in this world.

A reference to such a meeting is mentioned in relation to Prophet Moses ('a):

وَلَمَّا جَاءَ مُوسَى لِمِيقَاتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرِنِي أَنْظُرْ إِلَيْكَ ۖ قَالَ لَنْ تَرَانِي وَلَكِنْ انظُرْ إِلَى الْجَبَلِ فَإِنِ اسْتَقَرَّ مَكَانَهُ فَسَوْفَ تَرَانِي ۖ فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّى رَبُّهُ لِلْجَبَلِ جَعَلَهُ دَكًّا وَخَرَّ مُوسَى صَعِقًا ۖ فَلَمَّا أَفَاقَ قَالَ سُبْحَانَكَ تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

And when Moses came to Our appointed time, his Lord spoke to him. (Then, in the rapture of nearness to God arising from his being addressed by Him) he said: My Lord, show me Yourself, so that I may look upon You! He (God) said: You cannot see Me (with your eyes in the world). But look at that mountain: if it remains firm in its place, then you will see Me. And the moment his Lord manifested His glorious Majesty to the mountain, He made it crumble to dust, and Moses fell down in a faint (as if struck by lightning). When he awoke, he said: All-Glorified are You (in that You are absolutely above having any defects and any resemblance with the created)! I turn to You in repentance (for my desire to see You), and I am the first of the (true) believers (who realize that You are beyond any resemblance to any creature and beyond the grasp of any creature's senses). (Qur'an, Surah al-A'raf, 7: 143).

And in the hereafter their dealing and interaction with God is at a much different level:

فِي مَقْعَدٍ صِدْقٍ عِنْدَ مَلِكٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ

In the assembly of honor composed of the loyal and truthful in the Presence of the One All-Omnipotent Sovereign. (Qur'an, Surah al-Qamar, 54:55).

For some people, the “meeting with God” starts at the time of death; because in death they lose the “I,” and the reality becomes manifest to them such that there is no doubt about the existence of God.

If a dying person is a believer with good actions then the post-death experience is pleasant; but if one is a wretched person then the experience is unpleasant.

Those who experience death for the sake of God have been described in the Qur'an with the term “*al-shahid*,” i.e. those who are a witness to the Glory and Majesty of God.

The friends of God who have annihilated themselves in God during this life are a witness to God's Majesty and Glory even before death; they see nothing but God and His manifestation:

وَلِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ وَالْمَغْرِبُ فَأَيْنَمَا تُولُّوا فَثَمَّ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

To God belong the East and the West (and therefore the whole earth with its east and west: wherever you are, you can turn to Him in the Prayer). Then, in whatever direction you turn, there is the ‘face’ of God. God is All-Embracing (with His mercy), All-Knowing. (*Qur'an*, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 115).

The likeness of annihilation in God is that of a drop of water merging with the sea. As long as the drop of water maintains its individuality it remains separated from the sea. Only when it loses itself and annihilates by merging into the sea, it becomes part of it. The seed – as long as it remains a seed is a tiny being – but when it loses its existence it becomes a mighty tree. Those individuals who annihilate their own being in God, subsist by His subsistence. For some it is achieved during this life and for many it is achieved at the time of death especially for those who give up their life for the sake of God.

In the whispered prayer (*munajat*) of Imam ؑAli (‘a) recited in the month of *Shaʿban*, he prays as follows:

*O my God, (please) grant me absolute devotion to You,
And illuminate the sights of our hearts with the light of observing of You,
So that the sights of the hearts will penetrate the Screens of Light,
And arrive at the Core of Magnificence,
And that our souls hang to the majesty of Your Holiness.*[2](#)

[1](#). Mafatih al-Jinan, Duʿa Kumayl.

[2](#). Mafatih al-Jinan, Munajat al-Shaʿbaniyya.

Chapter 8 Practical Monotheism

Practical Monotheism¹

In this book, I have attempted to give a world view based on monotheism. God is an unlimited self-existing reality who is completely independent from anything and everything else, and everything is totally dependent on Him, even for its mere existence. Those who submit to this reality are called believers.

Is believing in God a matter only restricted to having a particular ideological worldview? Is it something which is only for the satisfaction of our innate curiosity about our own existence and the existence of the universe? Is it something for academic and philosophical discussions and arguments only, or are there practical implications for having a monotheistic world view? In other words, does God play any role in our personal day to day lives?

The common sense answer to this question is that an Omniscient and Omnipotent God should definitely have a role to play in our day to day lives. One obvious consequence of this understanding is to follow a monotheistic religion and to live our lives according to the rules of that religion. This can include performing specific rituals and prayers as well as living by the ethical code of conduct that the religion asks its followers to abide by. The necessity and reason for doing so have been touched upon in the Chapter 7, concerning the goals of life.

But the question still remains, does God have a role to play beyond religious rituals and practices? What about our career, our marriage and children, our sickness and health, or social dealings? Does God have a role to play in those as well? Or is God restricted to the practice of religion only?

The ideology of monotheism is not something which is restricted to intellectual discussions, academic debates and the practice of religious rites only. It has tremendous practical application for a believing person and it is only through practice that a person can really find the degree of his or her personal belief in monotheism.

People are at different levels and degrees in terms of their beliefs and conviction in God, and many falter at applying monotheism in their practical day to day lives:

وَمَا يُؤْمِنُ أَكْثَرُهُمْ بِاللَّهِ إِلَّا وَهُمْ مُشْرِكُونَ

And most of them do not even believe in God without associating partners with Him. (Qur'an, Surah Yusuf, 12:106).

Let us look at some examples from our daily lives to understand this point a little better.

Sustenance (al-Rizq)

Let us say that I want to earn a living by applying for a job in a company. In order to successfully qualify for the job, I have to have the necessary training and skills for that position. Then when the position becomes available, I need to apply for it and go through the selection process. Eventually, I get hired and I start working in the company and have a steady income which is sufficient for my needs.

This is a fairly typical scenario for many individuals and there does not seem to be any role for God to play in the entire process.

Or is there?

From the monotheistic worldview, the process is not as godless as it appears to be.

One of God's name is *al-Razzaq* – The One who Continuously Provides Sustenance. He has created us, and it is His promise to provide us with the sustenance that is needed for our survival. In the modern world, the source of sustenance is typically in the form of the salary or income from our job or business. This income allows us to obtain the necessary resources needed for our survival.

We have to appreciate that God created the necessary conditions for us to be able to work in the particular position and attain the needed sustenance. First was the the ability and skill to work in a particular field, which of course requires effort on our part as well. Second was the job vacancy. Third was a successful completion of the selection process. Finally, it was the successful discharge of our responsibilities at work. All of these factors need to fall into place for this process of earning a living to take place.

The apparent source of sustenance is the income coming from the specific job, and obviously this sustenance can also come from another job in a different field, and it can also come from a business or investment income. The important thing is to have the realization and conviction that sustenance for our survival is coming from God alone – He is the real source – though He gives it through different means. However, ultimately, He is the real provider.

Therefore, no one can provide any benefit, nor take it away except by His permission. He can also either increase the sustenance or decrease it as He deems fit:

لَهُ مَقَالِيدُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ ۚ إِنَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

His are the keys of (the treasures of) the heavens and the earth. He enlarges provision for whom He wills, and limits it (for whom He wills). Surely He has full knowledge of everything. (Qur'an, Surah al-Shura', 42: 12).

Needless to say, obtaining the sustenance requires effort on our part also, but neither our skills, efforts, our boss, nor the company that we work for are the real source of our sustenance, they are merely the means, for the true source is God alone. This is how a monotheist must view their situation, in regards to sustenance.

This view does not mean that we ignore the obvious processes – no one is saying do not work hard, do not listen to the boss, do not follow the job requirements, or the company rules as God will grant our sustenance! What it does mean however is that we do not regard them as the absolute source, but merely the means through which we attain our sustenance.

To what extent we see this reality is dependent on our conviction in God and His ability to provide for us through various sources, because God alone is the provider and maintainer of everything in existence:

وَمَا مِنْ دَابَّةٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ إِلَّا عَلَى اللَّهِ رِزْقُهَا وَيَعْلَمُ مُسْتَقَرَّهَا وَمُسْتَوْدَعَهَا ۚ كُلٌّ فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ

No living creature is there moving on the earth but its provision depends on God, and He knows its every lodging and disposition (every stage of its life), and the duration of its stay and the moment of its transition therefrom. All is in a Manifest Book. (Qur'an, Surah Hud, 11:6).

Cultivation of Plants

Let us look at another every day example of a woman who wants to grow figs in her backyard. She finds an appropriate spot and plants the fig seeds. After some time, the sapling starts to emerge from the ground. For the optimal growth, she needs to water the plant regularly, remove any weeds from the nearby soil, add fertilizer as needed and trim the branches. If she sees any insect infestation, then she needs to apply the necessary insecticide. Finally, after some time as the plant matures, figs will start to grow. All of these actions on her part are needed for successful growth of the plant, however none of them will yield a positive result without God providing the necessary ecosystem needed for the tree to grow.

The seed coat must split for the seed to germinate and turn into a young sapling; the nutrients and the water from the soil must be assimilated into the growing plant; the gas exchange must take place between the plant and the atmosphere needed for the sophisticated plant cell metabolism; the sun light must be available for the process of photosynthesis which converts light energy into chemical energy. As we can see, in the entire process of planting a seed and anticipating its growth into a tree, human intervention is a very small portion in the growth and survival of the tree.

What we call “*nature*” is a manifestation of God’s creation and His command (see Chapter 5). Through His acts of “creation and command,” He has laid out a system for us to interact with and manipulate according to our abilities and based on our desired outcome – in the example above, the harvesting of

the fruit from the tree:

أَفَرَأَيْتُمْ مَا تَحْرُثُونَ أَأَنْتُمْ تَزْرَعُونَهُ أَمْ نَحْنُ الزَّارِعُونَ

Have you ever considered the seed you sow (in the ground)? Is it you who cause it to grow, or is it We Who make it grow? (Qur'an, Surah al-Waqi'ah, 56:63-64).

Again, I do not want to disregard the importance of the ecosystem and the biological factors that are needed for plant growth, however this amazingly complicated and sophisticated system which we call “nature” is being managed by “someone”.

God is involved in the entire system of nature through various factors some of which we can manipulate also. It is wrong to say that His involvement is only in those things for which we don't have a reasonable explanation and for which we have a gap in our knowledge sometimes referred to as “god of gaps”.

God not only created and maintains the ecosystem which allows for the growth of plants, but He is actively involved in the process as well and this is the correct understanding of nature:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ فَالِقُ الْحَبِّ وَالنَّوَى يُخْرِجُ الْحَيَّ مِنَ الْمَيِّتِ وَمُخْرِجُ الْمَيِّتِ مِنَ الْحَيِّ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ اللَّهُ ۚ فَأَنَّى تُؤْفَكُونَ

God is He Who splits the grain and the fruit-stone (so that they germinate by His command). He brings forth the living from the dead, and He is the One Who brings forth the dead from the living; Such is God: how then are you turned away from the truth and make false claims? (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:95).

Disease and Health

Let us take yet another example. There is a forty year old man who is otherwise healthy, has optimal body weight and does not smoke or drink. Suddenly he starts getting very tired and weak within his daily work regiment and then starts to develop shortness of breath while walking. People around him notice that he is pale in appearance. Afterwards, he starts getting a fever almost daily. He goes to his physician who calls for blood work and upon reviewing the results, to the man's surprise, is told that he has acute leukemia (blood cancer). This comes as a shock to him. He meets the cancer doctor who advises that the man take cancer chemotherapy. The doctor tells him that based on his cancer genetic subtype, he has a 60% chance of going into remission (becoming cancer free) and that he may also need a bone marrow transplant.

The man starts to wonder why did he fall ill; why has he developed leukemia? He does not recall any bad habits that could have led to this. Will chemotherapy resolve this? Will the doctor be able to cure

this?

From the worldview of monotheism, both our sicknesses and health are from God. Due to unhealthy lifestyles, we can contribute to our own illness (e.g. smoking which may lead to lung cancer, obesity which may lead to a heart attack) and increase the chance of getting sick, but sometimes we can fall ill without even having any known risk factors for an illness.

We seek the necessary medical treatment for the illness such as: surgery, medication and preventive care, however the cure lies in God's hands alone. The physicians, nurses and medication are the necessary means of achieving a cure, but they are not the real source. In fact, many times medication does not work, or may cause serious side effects making the illness even worse. Sometimes the doctors make a mistake and may cause further complications.

The doctors, nurses and medication cannot be considered as the real source of cure, but they may be thought of as being the means through which we can be successful in getting rid of an illness, or we may have to succumb to it.

This does not mean that a sick person should not seek medical treatment or follow the doctors' recommendations, but what it means is that a successful outcome of the doctors' treatment is not in their hands, but in God's hands alone:

وَإِذَا مَرَضْتُ فَهُوَ يَشْفِينِ ﴿٢٨﴾

And when I am sick, it is He (God) that cures me. (Qur'an, Surah al-Shu'ara', 26:80).

From the monotheistic worldview presented above, God is an active player in our day to day lives. In fact, He is the only One with real power and the only effective agent who can bring about any real change, everything else only reflects His power and ability:

مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ

Whatever God wills (has and will come to pass); there is no strength (to achieve anything) save with (the permission of) God. (Qur'an, Surah al-Kahf, 18:39).

The approach towards life by a person who has an understanding of the practical implications of monotheism will be very different from one who does not believe in God. The individual understands that their life is choreographed by a Wise and Merciful God. A monotheist will feel less and less dependent on others and their abilities to bring about benefit or harm. Such an individual will be less concerned by who did what or what they are capable of doing.

This belief will lead to true freedom and independence from others which we all crave, however are unable to achieve otherwise. Therefore, the stronger we are connected with the immutable permanence of God, the less we are affected by the changing landscape of our lives and personal relationships. This is true freedom which is achieved through the servitude of *al-Rahman* (The Most Merciful).

The viewpoint which puts God as the real source of power and change raises some important philosophical and ethical questions, such as:

- a) Do humans have any real choice and freedom in making their decisions or are we compelled by God's will and plan?
- b) If God is the real source of power and change and He is All-Merciful, then how do we explain the existence of so much evil and corruption on the earth?
- c) What is the role of prayer (*duʿā*) in our lives? Do prayers make any difference?

Predestination and Free Will: An Affair Between Two Affairs (al-Amr bayn al-Amrayn)

We can look at the issue of predestination and free will from two different angles – one view is that there is no free will and all of us are just following what God has already ordained for us. We really do not have any true choice. We are merely actors playing out a script already written for us. The second view is that we are completely independent in our actions and are not bound by any limitations set by God or “destiny” or “karma.” We can do whatever we want and there is no higher authority interfering in our affairs.

If we take the first view that we are completely bound by God's plan and have no real choice, then we cannot be blamed for any actions committed by us and therefore should not receive any punishment for our actions in this world or in the hereafter. However, this is contrary to our instincts and common sense.

In our social life, we hold people responsible for their actions. If after going through the due process of the law, someone is found guilty of committing a crime, then that person is punished according to the law. There must be free will in committing an action in order to justify punishment for that crime, otherwise there is no basis for a legal justice system or punishing anyone for any act. Thus, human free will is a self-evident reality.

Similarly, complete freedom in our actions implies independence from God's authority in doing whatever we want to do. Based on our everyday experiences we know that complete freedom in whatever we want to do is also not true as there are many factors which are beyond our control. For example, we do not choose our parents or our ethnicity, our country of birth, socio-economic conditions of our family, early education or lack of it. In everyday life, even after the best of intentions, plans and preparation,

some unforeseen factors and events can force us to change our plans, such as cancellation of a planned event due to a death in the family or unfavorable weather. We may desire something, but the outcome might turn out to be completely opposite to what we were intending to do.

In this regards, the Commander of the Faithful, ﷺ Ali (‘a) has said:

I came to know God, the Glorified, through the breaking of determinations, change of intentions and loss of courage.[2](#)

There is a middle position between these two explained by the infallible leaders – the Ahlul Bayt (‘a). According to their view, there is neither complete free will nor complete predetermination – but rather, it is something between the two extremes.

Someone asked Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) about predestination and absolute free will and he replied as follows:

There is neither predestination nor absolute freewill, but between them there is a position in which is the truth, and no one knows it except the learned person or one who is taught by a learned person.[3](#)

When he was asked to further explain this concept, Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) said:

Allegorically, the ‘position between the two positions’ is like seeing someone who is committing a sin. You dissuade him from doing so, but he does not pay any attention to you, so you leave him alone. In this case, neither did you command him to commit the sin, nor did you persuade him to do so.[4](#)

In another instance, Imam al-Hadi (‘a) quoting his fore-father, Imam al-Sadiq (‘a), said:

With regards to ‘destiny’, people are divided into three categories: The first is the one who assumes that God has given him full authority – this (person) has weakened God in His kingdom, thus, he is perished. The second is the person who assumes that God has forced people to sin and He has held them responsible over things that they have no power over – this person is unfair to God in His judgment, thus he is [also] perished. The third is the individual who assumes that God has held people responsible for what they do and does not hold them responsible for what they have no power over – thus when a person does something good, he praises God and when he does something evil, he seeks God’s forgiveness – this person is a mature Muslim.[5](#)

There is indeed free will in our actions and we are all responsible for the decisions we make and the deeds we perform, however these actions and decisions are not independent from the All-Encompassing authority of God over our affairs. How we act in a certain situation is up to us, but the orchestration of that situation is not necessarily under our control.

For example someone is shopping in a mall and discovers a box containing a diamond ring on the floor, with a tag attached to it indicating that it is likely from a nearby shop. That person can then choose to

pick up the ring and keep it or return it to the shop owner. The situation that arose in which a diamond ring of considerable value is found on the floor is out of our control, but what we do with that ring is in our choice.

Moreover, the ability to perform actions and the power and strength to do anything is from the God, and not independent of Him but how we act with this ability in a particular situation is under our control and that is why we are responsible for our actions.

Even after acting with a clear intention, pure determination and complete planning, the outcome may not be what we desire – in fact it may actually be the complete opposite. For example, a man wants to kill his enemy by shooting him. He follows this man and studies his routine. He finally gets an opportunity to shoot his enemy and even succeeds in lodging a bullet into him, but the bullet hits the man's arm and he survives the assassination attempt. An off-duty police officer who just happens to be there shoots the assailant and ends up killing him. The person who wanted to murder actually ends up getting killed. This scenario demonstrates our free will and ability to act, but at the same time our inability to have full control over the outcome of our actions.

God is the necessary self-existing Being and everything other than Him is a contingent being which is dependent on Him not only for its existence but also for its attributes and actions. The will and want of a contingent being is also a manifestation of God's will and want and not outside of it (see Chapter 5). Therefore, the contingent being's attributes like life, hearing, vision and power are a manifestation of God's life, hearing, vision and power.

Any manipulation in the realm of existence by a contingent being is only through God's permission. If He takes away the power to act, a person is unable to do even a simple task such as moving a finger (as happens in people who suffer a stroke). The source of all power is God. Truly speaking there is no impactful being in existence except for God, as no one has any power or attribute independent of God:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ ضُرِبَ مَثَلٌ فَاستَمِعُوا لَهُ ۖ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَنْ يَخْلُقُوا ذُبَابًا وَلَوْ اجْتَمَعُوا لَهُ ۚ وَإِنْ يَسْلُبْهُمُ الذُّبَابُ شَيْئًا لَا يَسْتَنْقِذُوهُ مِنْهُ ۚ ضَعُفَ الطَّالِبُ وَالْمَطْلُوبُ

O humanity! A parable is given, so pay heed to it: Those whom, apart from God you invoke will never be able to create even a fly, even if all of them were to come together to do so. And if a fly snatches away anything from them, they cannot recover that from it. Powerless indeed is the seeker, and (so is) the sought! (Qur'an, Surah al-Hajj, 22:73).

The discussion on free will and pre-determination is explained briefly here and still requires a more in-depth discussion for which readers can refer to other sources, however I would like to repeat an explanation of this concept which was mentioned in Chapter 4, through a small incident in the life of Imam ʿAli (a).

Once, a man approached the Imam and asked him if humans had free will or were they bound by pre-determination? In his response, Imam ʿAli (ʿa) asked the questioner to lift one foot off of the ground. The man complied. Then the Imam asked him to lift the second foot also. The man said it is impossible to lift both feet at the same time. To this Imam ʿAli (ʿa) replied: “It seems that you have free will, but there are limits to it.”[6](#)

Let me end this discussion with the following narration from Imam al-Rida (ʿa):

God has said: O progeny of Adam, it is with My will that you are such a being that you will for yourself whatever you will; and it is with My power that you carry out the duties that I have prescribed for you; and it is with My bounty that you find strength to disobey Me. I made you hearing, seeing and strong. Whatever good visits you is from God, and whatever evil strikes you is from your own self. That is because I have a greater right to your virtues than yourself, and you are worthier of your vices than Me. Therefore, I am not asked concerning what I do, and they (the creations) will be asked.[7](#)

God and the Existence of Evil

The world in which we live is full of unpleasant events and harmful objects. There is widespread hunger and poverty on the Earth with billions of people living on less than \$2.00 per day, having no access to even basic necessities such as clean water and sanitation. There are widespread diseases and illnesses with millions of people dying every year from heart disease, stroke, infections like tuberculosis and malaria and who have little to no access to health care. There are large scale conflicts and wars, and millions of people have been forced to leave their homes and are living as refugees. Many societies have gun violence, sexual assaults on women, armed gangs and rampant cases of child abuse. Then, there are natural disasters such as tornados, earthquakes and floods which at times, kill tens of thousands of people. Many children come into the world with birth defects and many more die at a young age due to various illnesses.

If God is so Merciful and Benevolent, then why is there so much suffering and evil in this world? If nothing can happen without His permission, then why does He allow so much injustice? These questions cross the minds of many unbelievers as well as believers. Let us see if we can develop an understanding of suffering based on the teachings of the Qur'an.

We live in a material world which by its very nature is limited, temporary and constantly changing. Due to the limited and fluid nature of things, there are bound to be ups and downs, highs and lows. In this world, things exist in pairs and have their opposites. There is right and left, night and day, black and white, male and female, hard and soft, high and low, and naturally good and evil:

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا مِمَّا تُنْبِتُ الْأَرْضُ وَمِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَمِمَّا لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

All-Glorified is He, Who has created the pairs all together out of what the earth produces, as well as out of themselves, and out of what they do not know. (Qur'an, Surah Ya Sin, 36:36).

Things are often known through their opposites. Unless something is dry we will not know what wet is; unless we have darkness, we will not know what light is and if there was only light and no darkness then it would have been impossible to appreciate light. Darkness is not something which has an existence like light, instead it is lack of light which gives the perception of darkness. Similarly, it is the lack of knowledge which results in ignorance, and the lack of beauty which appears as ugliness. Injustice and cruelty is the lack of justice and compassion. Often times only when we get sick, do we realize the value of health. When we see a person with physical limitations (e.g. a blind person or a child with polio), only then can we appreciate a healthy body with all of the organ systems working so perfectly:

قُلْ هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَكُمْ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۖ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ

Say: He (God) it is Who has brought you into being and endowed you with hearing, and eyes, and hearts. How little you give thanks! (Qur'an, Surah al-Mulk, 67:23).

Now what may appear evil for one, may be good for another. The venom of a snake is bad for the prey but it is very good for the survival of the snake. The decomposition of food by bacteria and fungi is bad for a person who wanted to eat that food, but it is good for the environment as it allows the recycling of the nutrients. Even the dreadful event of death allows for renewal and replacement in a society by the next generation of human beings which help advance society. Moreover, death also marks the exit of the soul from the physical realm of existence to a higher and more perfect realm of existence as discussed in Chapter 6.

Death is a natural phenomenon which marks the end of the temporary stay in this physical realm of existence. Not only must humans die, but everything around us such as plants, animals, and even celestial objects like the sun are expected to die one day. If we have been created to die, then of course there are going to be scenarios through which death will come, such as through an illness or injury and so in short, death in itself is not evil, rather, both life and death are a part of creation:

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْغَفُورُ

He (God) Who has created death and life, so that He may test you (and demonstrate to yourselves) which of you is better in deeds; and He is the All-Glorious with irresistible might, the All-Forgiving. ***(Qur'an, Surah al-Mulk, 67:2).***

Human beings commit a lot of injustice to each other, as well as to the ecosystem. Due to human activity, the natural habitat of many animals has been destroyed and many species of animals have

become extinct or are at the verge of extinction.

Some blame God for the widespread hunger and poverty in certain parts of the world, whereas we know that there are more than enough resources in the world to feed and provide basic necessities for everyone. The widespread hunger, poverty and resulting poor life expectancy and quality of life in certain parts of the world does not stem from a lack of sufficient resources in the world, but rather this is due to our mismanagement of these resources and a lack of social justice.

People cheat one another, physically and verbally abuse each other, and even murder one another! Those in power launch wars on other groups of people for the sake of dominating them. However, none of these atrocities committed by mankind can be blamed on God – He cannot be held responsible for the actions which we have committed, exercising our free will:

ظَهَرَ الْفَسَادُ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِي النَّاسِ لِيُذِيقَهُمْ بَعْضَ الَّذِي عَمِلُوا لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

Corruption and disorder have appeared on land and in the sea because of what the hands of people have (done and) earned (of evil deeds). Thus He causes them to taste the consequence of some of what they have done, so that they may (take heed, repent and reform, and so) return (to the right way). (Qur'an, Surah al-Rum, 30:41).

Moreover, the world is a place to undergo trials and tribulations. It has been designed such so that we have to make moral choices between right and wrong, between our self interests and the rights of others. These trials help us to grow spiritually and cultivate better morals in us. The difficulties help us distinguish who is a true believer and who is still weak in faith:

أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا آمَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ فَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا وَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ الْكَاذِبِينَ

Do people reckon that they will be left (to themselves at ease) on their mere saying, We believe, and will not be put to a test? We certainly tested those who preceded them so that God will certainly mark out those who prove true (in their profession of faith) and He will certainly mark out those who prove false. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ankabut, 29:2-3).

The trials facing us can be of different sorts depending on an individual's circumstances. Sometimes it may be a lack of resources or poverty. Sometimes it could be having wealth beyond our needs to see if we prefer to live a luxurious life oblivious of others or if we will show empathy towards them and extend a helping hand to the needy. Sometimes the trial is about a lack of security and peace. For others, it could be by living with a disrespectful spouse or a child with a medical condition. But what is for certain is that everyone will be tested in different ways to see if they have patience and perseverance during the

difficulties or not:

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالتَّمَرَاتِ ۚ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ عَلَيْهِمْ صَلَوَاتٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ ۚ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُهْتَدُونَ

We will certainly test you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and fruits (earnings); but give glad tidings to the persevering and patient: Those who, when a disaster befalls them, say, Surely we belong to God (as His creatures and servants) and surely to Him we are bound to return. (And they act accordingly.) Such are those upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy; and they are the rightly guided ones. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 155–157).

Sometimes what we consider as a misfortune ends up being something good for us. For example, a person is fired from his position due to restructuring in the company. He is initially very depressed and starts wondering why God put him through such a difficulty while he had been a good person, and he knows others at that same company were not good people but are enjoying various comforts – including their job. After some emotional struggle, he decides to take additional courses in his field and learn new skills. Soon, another job opening comes based on his newly acquired skills and he gets a job which was far better than his previous position from which he was fired. That initial loss of the job ends up being a blessing in disguise for him, for which of course he was depressed about initially:

وَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَعَسَىٰ أَنْ تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَّكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

...It may well be that you dislike a thing but it is good for you, and it may well be that you like a thing but it is bad for you. God knows, and you do not know. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:216).

At times, what people face is a direct result of their own actions and cannot be blamed on anyone else except for themselves.

Let us say that a bright college student gets into the habit of using drugs. Due to his bad habit, his grades start to go down and eventually he drops out of college and does not graduate. Without a college degree and being addicted to drugs he struggles to keep a job and remains in financial difficulties for years. He falls behind his peers who after graduating from college, became well established in their professional careers. This poor outcome of an otherwise bright and promising student is a result of his own bad habits and he has no one else to blame except for himself.

Let us take an example of another person who has a well-paying position at a multi-national corporation. In his personal life, he is married and has two kids. A new employee joins the office and they become good friends. Soon however, this friendship changes into a romantic relationship and he

starts to cheat on his wife. His wife eventually finds out and files for divorce and also gets custody of the children. Later on, the man ends up losing his house, his family and a takes a big financial hit during the course of divorce – all due to the mistake of committing adultery. The girl he was having the affair with finds a better job in a different city and leaves him as well. Now what has befallen this man is entirely his own doing:

مَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ حَسَنَةٍ فَمِنَ اللَّهِ ۖ وَمَا أَصَابَكَ مِنْ سَيِّئَةٍ فَمِنْ نَفْسِكَ ۚ وَأَرْسَلْنَاكَ لِلنَّاسِ رَسُولًا ۖ وَكَفَى بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا

(O human being!) Whatever good happens to you, it is from God; and whatever evil befalls you, it is from yourself. We have sent you (O Messenger) to humankind as a Messenger, and God suffices for a witness. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4:79).

There are also other challenging situations in which people really have no apparent fault of their own. For example, a couple has a new born who seems to be doing well initially, however by the age of six months, the child starts to show signs of progressive physical and mental decline. Shortly thereafter, the baby begins to lose vision and hearing, and upon consultation, the doctors diagnose the child with a rare lysosomal disease (Tay-sachs disease); and dies by the age of four. In this situation, the couple went through tremendous sorrow and hardship without any fault of their own. Why did God put them through this? We cannot say that every calamity is a result of our own faults. Sometimes it is a test to elevate a person spiritually and give them a much higher rank in the hereafter. In fact, the closer a person is to God and the stronger one's faith, the harder the test tends to be.

The prophets and the imams went through tremendous trials and tests but never complained about their situation – such as the test of Prophet Job ('a) mentioned in the Bible and the Qur'an; or the events surrounding the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn ('a) as mentioned in Chapter 4 of this book.

مَا أَصَابَ مِنْ مُصِيبَةٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ نَبْرَأَهَا ۚ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ

No affliction occurs on the earth or in your own persons but it is recorded in a Book before We bring it into existence – doing so is surely easy for God. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:22).

When we look at individuals going through different challenges it often appears very hard to us to accept. A couple loses their teenage child in a car accident – we wonder how will they manage in that situation? However in the monotheistic worldview, when God puts someone in a challenging situation He gives them the patience and courage to handle the situation as well. No soul is tested more than it can bear:

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا ۚ لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتْ وَعَلَيْهَا مَا اكْتَسَبَتْ

God burdens no soul except within its capacity: in its favor is whatever (good) it earns, and against it whatever (evil) it merits. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:286).

Moreover, whatever happens during this life is temporary and is not our final outcome. The challenges will come to an end, just as this temporary life comes to an end. The excellent compensation given in the next world for facing calamities and injustice in this world, will be more than sufficient to remove all of the sorrow and grief:

جَنَّاتُ عَدْنٍ يَدْخُلُونَهَا يُحَلَّوْنَ فِيهَا مِنْ أَسَاوِرَ مِنْ ذَهَبٍ وَلُؤْلُؤًا ۖ وَلِبَاسُهُمْ فِيهَا حَرِيرٌ ۝ ٣٣ وَقَالُوا الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي أَذْهَبَ عَنَّا الْحَزْنَ ۖ إِنَّ رَبَّنَا لَغَفُورٌ شَكُورٌ الَّذِي أَحَلَّنَا دَارَ الْمَقَامَةِ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۖ لَا يَمَسُّنَا فِيهَا نَصَبٌ وَلَا يَمَسُّنَا فِيهَا لُغُوبٌ

(So) Gardens of perpetual bliss will they enter, therein adorned with armbands of gold and pearls, and their garments therein will be of silk. And they will say: All praise and gratitude are for God, Who has removed grief from us (such as we had suffered until we were admitted here). Surely Our Lord is All-Forgiving, All-Responsive (to the gratitude of His creatures), Who, out of His grace, has made us settle in the abode of eternal residence, wherein no toil touches us, and wherein no weariness afflicts us. (Qur'an, Surah al-Fatir, 35:33-35).

When we are faced with a trial, we often do not know if it is because of our own doing or if God is testing us. It is difficult to know for sure, but often our response and reaction to the trial can give clues about it.

Some people, on facing a difficult situation, start complaining and show frustration. They ask why God has put them through the difficulty? Some blame God or even question His existence. Others show patience and perseverance, and through the calamity their faith in God actually increases. They see these trials as a way of spiritual growth. In reality, the soul will not grow unless it is put through trials and tribulations.

Going through difficulties is like going to the gym for physical exercises – in the same way, tribulations strengthen the soul and spirit of the individual.

In the story of Prophet Abraham ('a) and his young son Ishmael ('a), the Qur'an quotes both father and son, showing their patience and forbearance:

ۖ فَلَمَّا بَلَغَ مَعَهُ السَّعْيَ قَالَ يَا بُنَيَّ إِنِّي أَرَىٰ فِي الْمَنَامِ أَنِّي أَذْبَحُكَ فَانْظُرْ مَاذَا تَرَىٰ ۖ قَالَ يَا أَبَتِ افْعَلْ مَا تُؤْمَرُ سَتَجِدُنِي إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ

Then, when (his son) grew alongside him to the age of striving (for the necessities of life), he said: O my dear son! I have seen in my dream that I should offer you in sacrifice. So think about this and tell me your view! He said (unhesitatingly): O my dear father! Do as you are commanded.

You will find me, by God's will, one of those who show steadfast patience (in obeying God's commands). (Qur'an, Surah al-Saffat, 37: 102).

When people develop spiritual insight and their attachment to the material world is lessened, they realize that these trials and difficulties are actually helping them in their spiritual growth.

During the trials, the believers remember God intensely and are less concerned about following their desires – and this in turn induces spiritual growth in their souls. The friends of God actually welcome the trials and are grateful that they have been chosen for the difficult tasks that others are dreadful of. These are the people of high spiritual rank amongst God's chosen people, those who when facing difficulties are not only patient but even offer thanks for what they are going through, as they can see the reality of calamities as nothing but pure beauty.

At the conclusion of *Ziyarat Ashura*, the following portion is recited while in the state of prostration (*sajdah*):

O God, all praise belongs to You, the praise of those who thank You for their misfortunes! All praise belongs to God for my great misfortune.⁸

Calling out to God (al-Du'a)

Another very important implication of living by the ideology of monotheism is the ability to pray to God. Those with firm belief in God's existence enjoy a special relationship with Him. They communicate with Him during prayers and supplications. This act of prayer or calling out to God for help cultivates a relationship between the servant and God, making the bond stronger, God has promised that those who pray to Him, He will answer them:

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ ۖ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ ۖ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

And when (O Messenger) My servants ask you about Me, then [respond] surely I am near: I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he prays to Me. So let them respond to My call (without hesitation), and believe and trust in Me (in the way required of them), so that they may be guided to spiritual and intellectual excellence and right conduct. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 186).

The ability to pray to God for help during various circumstances and challenges of life gives the believers tremendous power and confidence. They can significantly change circumstances in their favor by calling out to God as there is no deficiency in terms of resources or ability viz a viz God.

Thus, if a believer calls out to God and He responds, then the prospect of success increases significantly. Of course, this does not mean that planning and practical steps should not be taken. But what it means is that through prayer a believer can have access to the source of all the goodness, power

and honor.

The Qur'an tells us:

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمْ ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ ۖ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِي سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ

Your Lord has said: Pray to Me, (and) I will answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me will enter Hell, abased. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:60).

The issue of prayers and health outcomes has been studied scientifically with variable results. Some studies have shown health improvement with prayers and others have shown no effect or even harm from the prayer⁹ (Even if God doesn't exist, prayers should not cause any harm to health of an individual). In my opinion there are so many variables involved in an individual's life that it's nearly impossible to control all of them in order to do a proper scientific study for the health effects of prayers. We should understand that scientific method also has limitations in its ability to answer certain questions.

Just like parents do not give their children whatever they demand, or do not give it to them immediately, in the same way, praying to God does not mean that every prayer will be accepted immediately or even accepted at all. Asking God for something specific is ok to do, but it is better to ask for something which is good for us even though not necessarily it may be to our liking. For many people with the correct understanding of monotheism, prayer is actually the only thing that is truly under our control, everything else including our physical existence, wealth, family and honor belongs to God and has been given to us temporarily during this life.

In the supplication to God known as Du'a Kumayl which is normally recited every Thursday night, we are taught to say the following:

يَا سَرِيعَ الرِّضَا

O He, whose pleasure is quickly achieved,

اغْفِرْ لِمَنْ لَا يَمْلِكُ إِلَّا الدُّعَاءُ

Forgive the one who owns nothing but supplication,

فَإِنَّكَ فَعَّالٌ لِّمَا تَشَاءُ

For You do whatever You will.

يَا مَنْ اسْمُهُ دَوَاءٌ

O He whose name is a remedy,

وَذِكْرُهُ شِفَاءٌ

And whose remembrance is a cure,

وَطَاعَتُهُ غِنَى

And whose obedience is the true wealth!

ارْحَمِ مَنْ رَأْسُ مَالِهِ الرَّجَاءُ

Have mercy upon the person whose only capital is hope

وَسِلَاحُهُ الْبُكَاءُ

And whose only weapon is his tears! [10](#)

Acting Exclusively for God (al-Ikhlās)

It should be clear to the readers that those who truly live their lives according to the ideology of monotheism have a very different perspective towards the world, the creation and the events happening in their own lives and the society at large. For them, God is everywhere and His presence is so strong that everything else appears insignificant compared to Him. Their closeness to God blinds them to everything else. They are conscious of God at all times as they know that:

وَهُوَ مَعَكُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ

And He is with you wheresoever you may be; and God sees well all that you do. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:4).

أَلَمْ يَعْلَمِ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَرَى

Does the person not know that God sees him? (Qur'an, Surah al-ʿAlaq, 96: 14).

They know that God is always watching them and that everything that happens in their lives is ultimately from God. They do not complain about any situation and are ready to face any challenge as they know that it is all from God:

قُلْ كُلُّ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ

Say: Everything is from God. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4:78).

In their day to day lives, their actions – whether ordinary tasks of daily living or those related to the practice of religion – are all done exclusively for the sake of God (*al-ikhlas*). They purify their intentions so as to not seek worldly fame and recognition, nor do they expect any reward for helping others, not even as little as a thank you:

إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكْرًا

We only feed you for God's sake; we desire from you neither reward nor thanks. (Qur'an, Surah al-Insan, 76:9).

Doing good things for our own self interest, self promotion, love for praise, expecting recognition or special treatment, or even a thank you – are all forms of hidden polytheism and many believers get into this trap.

وَمَا يُؤْمِنُ أَكْثَرُهُمْ بِاللَّهِ إِلَّا وَهُمْ مُشْرِكُونَ

And most of them do not believe in God without associating (other as partners) with Him. (Qur'an, Surah Yusuf, 12: 106).

However those who purify their intentions such that they act exclusively for the sake of God are free from hidden polytheism and are the true monotheists:

هُوَ الْحَيُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَادْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ ۚ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

He is the Living, there is no god but He, therefore call on Him, being sincere to Him in obedience; (all) praise is due to God, the Lord of the worlds. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:65).

Complete Trust in God (al-Tawakkul)

The universe works by the law of cause and effect. Fire has the property to burn, and when it comes into contact with an object, it burns it. Medicine has the property to cure an illness, and so when a sick person takes it, he gets better. The property of the fire to burn and of the medicine to cure is because God has made them as such.

In our daily life, we must rely on the causes to achieve the desirable effects. For example, if a sick person wants to get better, then he has to take the right medicine for that illness; but it is God who cures through the right medicine. The causes and means to achieve a desirable effect are necessary, but a monotheist still has to put their trust in God for the cure and not on the medicine, as sometimes the medicine may not work, or it may even cause an adverse reaction making an illness even worse.

Another example is if we want to safeguard our house from intruders then we must secure it by locking it, but the trust to keep the house safe should be in God and not in the locks. As we know that thieves can disable or by pass a lock, but God can protect the house from all possible intruders as He has control over everything. Not to apply locks is foolishness, and to rely on locks only is also not wise either. Those who put their trust in God, He is sufficient for them.

وَمَنْ يَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُ

...And whoever puts their trust in God, He is sufficient for him... (*Qur'an*, Surah al-Talaq, 65:3).

Let me emphasize again, trusting in God does not mean that one should not plan his affairs or ignore the necessary preconditions or factors needed for a desirable outcome. The property of medicine to cure, or a lock to secure the house are also through God and not independent of Him. We should utilize the means available in order to achieve the desirable effects.

However, a monotheist has wisdom and deeper vision of the reality and so is not caught in the causes and means only, but utilizes the means and still puts their trust in God to achieve the desirable outcome, as they know that the means may become ineffective and may not give the desirable result. However, behind the means there is a Higher power in whose hands is the end result of all of the affairs:

فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ

So when you have decided (on a particular course of action), then place your trust in God; surely God loves those who trust. (Qur'an, Surah Ale ٱlImran, 3: 159).

وَالِلَّهِ عَاقِبَةُ الْأُمُورِ

And with God rests the end and decision of (all) affairs. (Qur'an, Surah Luqman, 31:22).

Those who have trust in God, live a life free from fear and apprehension. When faced with overwhelming difficult situations, instead of panicking or running away, they face it with full confidence. The enormity of the situation does not overwhelm them easily, instead it only elevates their level of trust in God.

الَّذِينَ قَالَ لَهُمُ النَّاسُ إِنَّ النَّاسَ قَدْ جَمَعُوا لَكُمْ فَاخْشَوْهُمْ فَزَادَهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَقَالُوا حَسْبُنَا اللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ فَانْقَلَبُوا بِنِعْمَةِ
مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَفَضْلٍ لَّمْ يَمَسَّسْهُمْ سُوءٌ وَاتَّبَعُوا رِضْوَانَ اللَّهِ ؕ وَاللَّهُ ذُو فَضْلٍ عَظِيمٍ

Those to whom the people said: Surely the people have gathered against you, therefore fear them, but this increased their faith, and they said: God is sufficient for us and most excellent is the Protector. So they returned with favor from God and (His) grace, no evil touched them and they followed the pleasure of God; and God is the Lord of mighty grace. (Qur'an, Surah Ale Imran, 3: 173–174).

An Urdu poet has stated:

Don't get daunted by the fury of opposing winds, oh eagle!

These blow only to make you soar higher (into the skies). [11](#)

Leave it to God (al-Tafwidh)

There are situations in life in which we want to get things done but feel helpless. Sometimes we do not know the way out. We feel cornered with all attempts to advance facing a dead end. The goal or objective seems beyond our reach, like a person whose sail boat is lost at sea and does not know in which direction to go to find the land; or a person who is overwhelmed with financial debt and does not know how to get out of the situation.

In such situations, the monotheist does not lose hope, nor tries to end one's life like many people do, but rather, leaves one's affairs to God to find a way out for him:

وَأَفَوَضُ أَمْرِي إِلَى اللَّهِ ؕ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِعِبَادِهِ لَخَبِيرٌ ۖ فَوَقَاهُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِ مَا مَكَرُوا

And I entrust my affair to God, Surely God sees the servants. So God protected him from the evil (consequences) of what they planned... (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:44).

Those who have this ability to leave their affairs to God have full confidence in Him. They understand that all affairs are in God's hands and no one can benefit or harm them without His permission. None have any ability except by God's authority. They know that if they maintain God consciousness, then He will find a way out for them and help them from a source that one does not even know existed:

وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا وَيَرْزُقْهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ ۚ وَمَنْ يَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ فَهُوَ حَسْبُهُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بَالِغُ أَمْرِهِ ۚ قَدْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدْرًا

And whoever is careful of (his duty to) God, He will make for him an outlet, And give him sustenance from whence he thinks not; and whoever trusts in God, He is sufficient for him; surely God attains His purpose; God indeed has appointed a measure for everything. (Qur'an, Surah al-Talaq, 65:2-3).

Imam ʿAli (‘a) has been quoted as reciting the following in his famous supplication known as *Duʿa al-Sabah*:

My God, these are the reins of my soul that I have bounded with the ties of Your will...[12](#)

Submission (al-Taslim) and Contentment with the Outcome (al-Ridha)

The path of believing in practical monotheism leads one to a state of submission/acceptance (*al-taslim*) and pleased with the outcome (*al-ridha*) for what is happening in one's life.

A monotheist has conviction that all affairs are in God's hands and nothing can happen without His permission, and so accepts the end result of all of their efforts.

Now this does not mean that one should not struggle hard or strive one's best to achieve morally good objectives, but once it becomes clear that the outcome of our affairs are not going to be the way that we want them to be, accepting the reality and not complaining about it and not even feeling bad about it in the heart becomes the mainstay of the believer in monotheism.

For example, a couple's son develops a serious illness. They provide him the best possible medical care but despite their sincere and whole hearted efforts the son dies. There is nothing more that they or anyone else could have done to save the child. Those with a personal relationship with God at the level of submission and pleasure with the outcome will accept this reality and not question God's wisdom for taking their son. This does not mean that they do not feel the intense pain of losing their son nor does it mean that they will not grieve over him even years after his passing away, but they will accept the reality and are at peace with it. This submission comes from a very high level of faith in the heart which very few enjoy.

فَلَا وَرَبِّكَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ حَتَّى يُحَكِّمُوكَ فِيمَا شَجَرَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَجِدُوا فِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَرَجًا مِمَّا قَضَيْتَ وَيُسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيمًا

But no, (not so as they have asserted,) by your Lord! they are no believers at all unless they refer all their disputes (that arise between them) to you for judgment, then they do not find any demur

in their minds about the propriety of your judgment, and they submit (to your decisions) with entire submission. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4:65).

Monotheism as an ideology affects every aspect of the life of an individual who wants to live by it. Depending on the degree of one's conviction in monotheism, an individual applies this ideology in one's life. A true monotheist enjoys life to the fullest. The person develops a degree of independence from everything other than God. They are the true free individuals (*al-ahrrar*) who are not bound by expectations of others, nor do they feel threatened by anyone. It does not mean that they are careless about their duty to others, in fact they are very conscious of their obligations to people. However, they do not fear the powerful, or resourceful because in their personal relationships they are connected to the Most Powerful and the Most Resourceful. They never lose hope no matter how difficult the situation may be and they never get disappointed if the outcome is apparently not in their favor. They are the ones who are truly alive and they are surely the successful people:

لَا تَجِدُ قَوْمًا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ يُوَادُّونَ مَنْ حَادَّ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَوْ كَانُوا آبَاءَهُمْ أَوْ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ أَوْ إِخْوَانَهُمْ أَوْ عَشِيرَتَهُمْ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ كَتَبَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الْإِيمَانَ وَأَيَّدَهُم بِرُوحٍ مِنْهُ ۚ وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ حِزْبُ اللَّهِ ۚ أَلَا إِنَّ حِزْبَ اللَّهِ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

You will find no such people who (truly) believe in God and the Last Day, loving those who oppose God and His Messenger, even though they (the opponents of God) be their fathers, or their sons or their brethren or their kindred. It is they in whose hearts God has inscribed (true) faith and has strengthened them with His own revelation. He will admit them to Gardens served with running streams. They shall abide there for ever. God is well pleased with them and they are well pleased with Him. They are God's party. Behold! it is God's party alone that are the winners of the goal. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mujadilah, 58:22).

The best example of those who have lived by monotheism are the prophets and the imams; and a few anecdotes from their lives have been mentioned in Chapter 4 of this book. I encourage the readers to go over that chapter again after reading this one in order to understand their manners from the perspective of monotheism.

As we conclude this chapter, we are reminded of the words of Imam al-Husayn ('a) just a few hours before he was martyred on the 10th of Muharram – the Day of ʿAshura:

Satisfied at Your (God's) decree, and submitted to Your (God's) command.

1. Also referred to by its Arabic equivalent, al-tawhid al-afʿali.

2. Nahj al-Balagha, saying 250.

3. Usul al-Kafi, vol. 1, section on predestination and absolute freewill, tradition 10.

4. Ibid.

5. <http://www.asktheShaykh.com/what-does-islam-say-about-free-will-and-dete...> [22]

6. Lakhani, M. ﷺ Ali, On Freedom and Necessity found at: www.sacredweb.com/online_articles/sw27_editorial.pdf [17]
7. Usul al-Kafi, v. 1, p. 152, Book of Monotheism, Chapter on Mashi'a wa Irada, tradition 6.
8. Mafatih al-Jinan, Ziyarat ﷺ Ashura'.
9. Andrade, Chittaranjan, Prayers and Healing: A Medical and Scientific Perspective on Randomized Controlled Trials, Indian J Psychiatry 2009. 51, 4:247–253.
10. Mafatih al-Jinan, Du'a Kumayl.
11. Barg-e-Sabz, Syed Sadiq Husayn Shah.
12. Mafatih al-Jinan, Du'a al-Sabah.

Chapter 9: The path of Love

In this book, an attempt has been made to discuss the ideology of monotheism from a rational and academic point of view. The Qur'an and the teachings of the Ahlul Bayt ('a)(a) have been quoted to support the arguments. Philosophical and mystical ideas have been incorporated to narrate a world view based on monotheism. Some may not like going through pure philosophical ideas, and others may not be satisfied by the arguments presented in this book. Thus, is there another approach to monotheism besides the pure academic and rational?

The concept of God is actually a very simple one to grasp, even young children can understand it. One does not have to be a philosopher, mystic, religious scholar, nor need a university degree to accept the existence of God. For most people, it makes perfect sense that God exists. Those who believe in God also tend to develop a personal relationship with Him, and for many, this relationship blossoms into love.

In addition to the intellect, we also have also been granted with a very powerful faculty of love. It is the most important force that guides human behavior. According to a Sufi teacher, Shaykh Fadlallah Haeri, "Love is like superglue which binds opposite and different things together."

While rationality can guide us and tell us in which direction to move, it is love which propels us. Love fuels the engine of human endeavor and makes us reach new and uncharted territories.

The best example of love from our daily lives is a mother's love for her children. She carries the unborn baby for nine months during which time, her body is transformed to accommodate the growing child inside of her. She then puts her life at risk during delivery to bring the newborn into this world; and then spends countless sleepless nights to feed the infant, responding to every demand of the child. Her every activity is centered around the baby, constantly thinking about the child's well-being. She does not eat until the children have eaten, and does not rest until they have rested. In addition, she does all of this happily with a smiling face because she is in love, an unconditional love that is not looking for any compensation or reward.

The father gives his unconditional love to the children as well. He is the stem while they are his

branches. He is their support who gives the children a sense of belonging, that they are not on their own and someone is there to protect them and fulfill their needs, and to teach and guide them. Someone they look up to, feel proud of and emulate. It is love that lets parents go through the constant toiling of bringing up children from birth until they are adults, and they continue to guide and support them even afterwards.

It is love which makes siblings stand up for each other, which makes uncles bring gifts for their nephews and nieces, makes aunts look after them in the absence of the parents. Love makes us extend a helping hand to a stranger, pick up someone who has fallen, and makes people donate blood to save anonymous lives.

It is love which makes us dress up to look good for our partner, to find a way to bring a smile to someone's face. It is love for each other and for the children which binds a couple together through the many ups and downs of life. Sometimes parents do not get along well, but they decide to stick together for their mutual love for the children's betterment.

It is love which makes a small bird so courageous that it is willing to pick up a fight with a snake when it threatens her small chicks; makes a dog wait for its owner to return from work; makes a lioness hunt for a prey for her young cubs, who are too weak to find one on their own.

It is love which makes us write poetry; draw a painting; design a new house; develop a device to help the handicapped; solve a mathematical problem; explore uncharted territories; search for a cure for a deadly disease; and challenge an unjust system.

Love is not something which is understood by the intellect, but rather, it is experienced by our entire being. Getting goosebumps or a rush of excitement in the heart on meeting someone is an indication that we have affection for that person or that object. Sometimes we can understand more through the language of love than through the intellect. Love is enlightening as well as revitalizing.

So what is the source of this love? Where does it come from, and why is it so powerful? The Qur'an describes God as the Most Loving, even more loving than a mother is towards her children. In fact, motherly love is a reflection of Divine love. God created the role of mothers in our lives, so that we can understand what pure unconditional Divine love is. Without the role of a mother it would have been very difficult to understand Divine love.

وَهُوَ الْغَفُورُ الْوَدُودُ

And He (God) is the most Forgiving, the most Loving. (Qur'an, Surah al-Buruj, 85: 14).

When we love something or someone, we are in fact in love with what appeals to us or attracts us about them. Subconsciously we seek the perfection in that object – it could be their beauty; it could be the

manners and goodness in their conduct; it could be their selfless devotion to others; it could be their courage and valor while facing challenges and hardships; or it could be the charisma of their personality. But the actual and true love that we all seek is the love for the Divine, though we seek it in the beauty, perfection, power, awe, majesty, independence, and magnificence of others. These attributes are a reflection of God's attributes in these various objects or people.

Rumi says the following in a beautiful couplet:

*All through eternity,
Beauty unveils His exquisite form
In the solitude of nothingness;
He holds a mirror to His Face
And beholds His own beauty.
He is the knower and the known,
The seer and the seen;
No eye but His own
Has ever looked upon this Universe.
His every quality finds an expression:
Eternity becomes the verdant field of Time and Space;
Love, the life-giving garden of this world.
Every branch and leaf and fruit
Reveals an aspect of His perfection—
The cypress gives hint of His majesty,
The rose gives tidings of His beauty. [1](#)*

The path towards God is the path of true love. One does not have to be a philosopher, a scientist or a religious scholar to tread this path. To love and to hate is our most basic instinct. We automatically propel ourselves in the direction of our beloved and those associated with the beloved. Those who begin to recognize their Creator, make a connection with Him, develop a strong personal relationship with Him and feel an intense love for Him:

وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَشَدُّ حُبًّا لِلَّهِ

And those who believe are stronger (and more intense) in their love for God. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 165).

To have knowledge about God and religion is not enough to start practicing the religion. A lot of people “know” about God and religious teachings, but do not necessarily apply it in their lives because the love of other than God is more intense in them, such as the love of this world and its embellishments, or love of their own selves. It is only when one has respect and love for God and the articles of religion that faith

begins to set in.² In fact, love is considered the firmest handhold of faith, just as Prophet Muhammad (S), is quoted to have said:

The firmest handhold of faith is to love for the sake of God and to hate for the sake of God, to befriend God's friends and to renounce His enemies.³

Similarly, Imam al-Sadiq ('a) has said:

Is faith anything but love and hate?⁴

Imam al-Baqir ('a) is quoted to have said:

Faith is love and love is the faith.⁵

Those who love, are willing to give up their personal wants, likes, preferences, and comforts for the object of love. It is through love that self-purification, self-annihilation and perfection is achieved. Love makes us lose ourselves for the object of our love. But love is felt, not really understood.

If one has not loved, they have not lived life to the fullest. Unfortunate are those who are unable to love others because of their intense love for themselves. Just to like something or want something is not a sign of love, but to give up our personal choices and comforts for someone else points towards love.

Love is an elixir, a potion which transforms whoever drinks it. It is commonly observed that young people try to dress or act like their favorite movie stars or sports personality. They want to be like the one that they love; for love changes our behavior very easily, much more easily than by giving rational arguments.

When the love is for God, the messenger of God, and the religion that was brought by him, it becomes much easier to follow the path and to mold ourselves in accordance with the teachings of the religion.

قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

Say: If you love God then follow me (Muhammad). If you do so, God will love you and grant you protection from your sins. God is the All-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (Qur'an, Surah Ale Imran, 3:31).

Such is the importance of love in religion that it has been described as the foundation of Islam, and the monotheistic way of life:

Everything has a foundation and the foundation of Islam is the love for us, the Ahlul Bayt ('a).⁶

Another tradition tells us:

Love of us Ahlul Bayt ('a) is the highest form of worship.[7](#)

Those who try to follow the path of religion without this love and merely focus on the rituals, not only can they not tread too far spiritually, but in fact, they end up getting lost altogether. It is through love that faith is embodied in a person and takes a firm hold, and without love, no progress in religion can ever be achieved.

The poet has stated:

*A lifetime without love is of no account,
Love is the water of life,
Drink it down with heart and soul!*[8](#)

We can know a lot about ourselves by finding out who we love. A person is closer to the one who he loves the most. There is an invisible attachment and association between us and the object of our love. Sometimes we only find out about that association when we feel the pain of separating from the object of our love.

The love for truth, goodness and beauty cannot be perfected without the hate (or lack of love) for falsehood, evil and ugliness. It is through the love of goodness and the hatred of evil, that the plant of faith starts to take root in the heart of a believer; and nothing makes this plant grow faster than the love for the Ahlul Bayt ('a)(a) who are the most prominent signs of God. Christians similarly take inspiration of their faith through their love for Jesus Christ, the son of Mary (a).

This love is transformative. A person who harbors this love can never be indifferent to the suffering of others. Such a person can never be unjust and cruel to others, and at the same time can never accept oppression and injustice from others either. This love makes a person truly alive and free, and makes one fearless. While reason guides towards the truth and cautions against the dangers, it is through the flame of love that one is enlightened and soars up high towards the Truth.

Muhammad (S) Iqbal, the philosopher poet has said:

*It is good to guard the heart with Intellect
But sometimes you should let it go alone also*

True faith is when both the faculties of reason and love are well balanced in a person. These faculties should not contradict, but on the contrary, they should complement each other. Pure love without reason will make one aimless, whereas pure reason without love will make one stationary.

Muhammad (S) Iqbal, the philosopher poet of the Indian sub-continent gives a description of love and intellect in the following poem.

One day intellect said to the heart,

*"A guide to the misguided ones I am,
Being on the earth I reach up to the sky,
Look, how deep in comprehension I am.
Guidance on earth is my sole occupation,
Like the auspicious Khizr in character I am.
Interpreter of the book of life I am,
The Manifestation of God's Glory I am.
You are only a drop of blood, but
The invaluable ruby's envy I am."
Hearing this the heart said, "All this is true
But look at me as well, what I am.
You understand the secrets of life,
But seeing them with my own eyes I am.
Concerned with the manifest order you are,
And acquainted with the inward I am.
Learning is from you, but Divine Knowledge is from me,
You only seek Divinity, but showing Divinity I am.
Restlessness is the end of Knowledge,
But the remedy for that malady I am.
You are the candle of the assembly of Truth,
The lamp of the Divine Beauty's assemblage I am.
You are related to time and space,
The bird recognizing the Sidrah I am.
Look at the grandeur of my station,
The throne of the God of Majesty I am."*

Elsewhere the poet Muhammad (S) Iqbal says:

*O dejected nightingale your lament is immature still,
You should hold it in your breast for a little while still.
If Intellect is prudent it is considered mature,
If Love is prudent it is considered immature still.
Love fearlessly jumped into the fire of Namrud
Intellect is absorbed in the spectacle from roof-top still.* [9](#)

We should use reason, but a higher level of reason is the logic of love, which makes us do what reason may be reluctant to commit to but is easy for those in love. Love shatters the intellect's estimates of profit and loss, victory and defeat. It makes us fearless.

Rumi has summarized the contrast between love and intellect in this way:

*The intellectual is always showing off,
 The lover is always getting lost.
 The intellectual runs away.
 Afraid of drowning;
 The whole business of love
 Is to drown in the sea.
 Intellectuals plan their repose;
 Lovers are ashamed to rest.
 The lover is always alone.
 Even surrounded by people;
 Like water and oil, he remains apart.
 The man who goes to the trouble
 Of giving advice to a lover
 Gets nothing. He is mocked by passion.
 Love is like musk. It attracts attention.
 Love is a tree, and the lovers are its shade. [10](#)*

[1.](#) Rumi, Jalal al-Din, The Divan of Shams Tabriz.

[2.](#) Haydarpour, Mahnaz, Perspectives on the Concept of Love in Islam, Ansariyan Publications, Qum, Iran. Online at: <https://www.al-islam.org/perspectives-concept-love-islam-mahnaz-heydarpour> [23]

[3.](#) Al-Kafi, The Book of Faith and Disbelief, Section: Love for the sake of God and hatred for the sake of God, no. 6, p. 126.

[4.](#) Ibid., no. 5, p. 125.

[5.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, The Book of Faith and Disbelief, Section: Love for the sake of God and hatred for the sake of God, lxvi, p. 238.

[6.](#) Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 46, chapter on Nisbat al-Islam; Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 27, p. 82, chapter 4, tradition 22.

[7.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 27, p. 91, tradition 48.

[8.](#) Divan-i Shams, 11, 909.

[9.](#) Bang-e-Dra, 166.

[10.](#) Kuliyat-e-Shams, 21.

Chapter 10: The god of science

Mankind is clearly uniquely distinct from the other life forms that co-exist with us on earth. We walk upright on two feet and carry a large brain which is capable of rational inquiry and abstract thinking. Our hands have opposable thumbs, and by using the extensor pollicis brevis and flexor pollicis longus (muscles of the forearm which move the thumb) we can do tasks that require fine manual dexterity such as spinning yarn from wool and weaving it into a fabric. Although, compared to many other animals we are physically weak, nevertheless we have learned to subjugate many creations for our benefit like horses and camels for transportation, and cows and chicken for producing milk and eggs. Skilled

humans can even control very large animals such as elephants, and predators like lions, as is observed during circus shows.

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّا خَلَقْنَا لَهُمْ مِمَّا عَمِلَتْ أَيْدِينَا أَنْعَامًا فَهُمْ لَهَا مَالِكُونَ وَذَلَّلْنَاهَا لَهُمْ فَمِنْهَا رَكُوبُهُمْ وَمِنْهَا يَأْكُلُونَ وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ وَمَشَارِبُ أَفَلَا يَشْكُرُونَ

Do they not see that among the things that We have made with Our power are the cattle which We have created for them, and of which they are masters (now). And We have subdued these (cattle) for their use and benefit. So that some of them serve as their riding (beasts) and through others they obtain their food. They have many other uses in them. They provide them with drinks (of various kinds). Will they still give (Us) no thanks?(Qur'an, Surah Ya Sin, 36:71-72).

We have also developed language and writing skills which allows us to store tremendous amounts of knowledge to be passed from one generation to the next.

The impact of human activity on the surface of the earth is undeniable. From farming large swaths of land to building dams on mighty rivers, mining minerals from deep underneath the earth to developing large cities, traversing across the globe using ships and airplanes, communicating using electronic devices and satellites, venturing to the depth of oceans and walking on the surface of the moon, humans have transformed their surroundings like no other species.

This ability to conquer our surroundings and use it for our benefit is driven by our inborn inquisitiveness as well as our will power. We have an innate desire to know. We want to know about our surroundings and about each other. We want to inquire about ourselves. We want to know where this universe came from and how we ended up on this planet? What is our goal in this world? Why do we die and more importantly what happens to us after we have died?

When we take a look around us, we find ourselves in surroundings which are quite overwhelming. We are a tiny being living on a massive planet with a diverse landscape having vast expansive oceans. The environment and the weather can at times be harshly unforgiving. After nightfall when we look up, we see an unimaginably vast space filled with innumerable heavenly bodies, a dazzling and a mesmerizing sight to watch deepening the mysteriousness of the night. Our surroundings are a perfect fit for humans to apply their intelligence, will power and skill to explore, discover, understand and conquer.

In this backdrop, the human consciousness manifesting inside a sophisticated body interacting with a vast and complex universe trying to make sense of it has led to the development of three important disciplines: religion, philosophy and science.

The goal of the early humans was survival. Initially we used caves and large trees for shelter. We ate wild fruits, berries and small animals, and used animal hide to clothe ourselves. Gradually we learned how to utilize larger animals for our benefit – using them for transportation, food and clothing. We

learned to develop small tools for hunting and building structures. We then learned to grow our own food. Farming allowed us to produce and store large quantities of food, freeing up time for other activities.

As we conquered the environment and were successful in surviving, we grew in numbers, formed communities and tribes which later transformed into large civilizations. This gradual movement from survival mode to building early civilizations was due to our ability to reason and experiment with nature, while in the process giving birth to primitive science and technology.

One example of early technology was the invention of the wheel by the Sumerians (living in present day Iraq) who existed some 5,000 years ago¹ in the fertile crescent of the Middle East (near the Tigris and Euphrates River) – a place known as the cradle of human civilization.

Many other civilizations also appeared usually starting near a large river.

The Indus valley civilization developed near the Indus River in what is now Pakistan and Northern India; the Egyptians developed their civilization near the Nile River, while the Chinese civilization developed close to the Yellow River. In addition to primitive science and technology, a constant feature in all early human civilizations was the adoption of religion.

Religion is an integral part of human thought. Religion attempts to answer questions which come to any intelligent mind. Where did the universe come from? Is there a higher power or powers controlling the universe? Do we have consciousness beyond death? Is there a purpose or meaning to our existence? In day to day living, religion also gives us a code of conduct for guiding our behavior both individually as well as societally. Thus, it is no surprise that every early civilization developed its own religion and had a concept of a higher power/powers or a deity.

Major religious ideologies in different regions of the world were developed in what is termed as the Axial Age (800–200 BCE).²

Though the ideology of one Supreme Being existed early on, many early religions were polytheist, having many deities, gods and goddesses worshiped for various reasons. These gods and deities were thought to possess special powers or were linked to particular needs, such as worship of a goddess of fertility in the Indus valley civilization. Idols made of wood and stone were sculptured depicting the gods and goddesses for worship. Marduk, the sun god was important in Mesopotamia and it was thought that he was responsible for creating the world as well as humanity. The Canaanites (those who lived in present day Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan) had Baal–Habad, the god of storm and fertility, and El, the high god. The Egyptians had Amun, Horus and the female deity Isis.³

Greeks also had several gods, including Zeus, the king god; Athena, the goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty and pleasure.

Besides the mythical gods, heavenly bodies such as the sun, the stars, and even fire was worshiped as deities such as in the Zoroastrian religion.

One possible explanation of having various gods was the inability of early humans to explain various natural phenomenon such as lightning and thunder, or the motion of the heavenly bodies such as the sun and moon, or for the fulfillment of various personal needs such as food, security, fertility, wisdom, etc. Having various gods and goddess perhaps gave them a sense of understanding as to why things happen, or who can make things happen in our day to day lives.

In the early era of polytheism, another ideology emerged about one eternal, omnipresent and omniscient God, controlling not only the universe, but also involved in the personal lives of individuals. This ideology of monotheism likely existed in earlier eras as well, but it was best attributed to a man called Abraham ('a). Prophet Abraham ('a) is revered by the three monotheistic religions namely: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the primary source for the teachings of these religions is the Divine revelation (Arabic: *wahi*).

Prophet Abraham ('a) was a young man who was born and lived in Babylon (in present day Iraq) and later in life, moved to Canaan (present day region including Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan) and also traveled to the Arabian Peninsula (present day Saudi Arabia).

According to the Qur'an, he was a messenger of God, received revelation from God, and had a very high spiritual status near Him. He has been given the title of *al-Khalil* (The Friend of God), and also a much higher spiritual status of an *imam* (Divinely appointed Leader). He was a firm believer in monotheism and promoted this ideology wholeheartedly.

During the time of Prophet Abraham ('a), many people worshiped idols made of wood and stones and the Qur'an describes how in one instance, he tried to reason with the idol worshippers about the futility of worshipping man-made idols who cannot even help themselves – let alone help others:

وَتَاللَّهِ لَأَكِيدَنَّ أَصْنَامَكُمْ بَعْدَ أَنْ تُولُوا مُدْبِرِينَ فَجَعَلَهُمْ جُذَاءً إِلَّا كَبِيرًا لَهُمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ يَرْجِعُونَ قَالُوا مَنْ فَعَلَ هَذَا بِآلِهَتِنَا إِنَّهُ لَمِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ قَالُوا سَمِعْنَا فَتًى يَذْكُرُهُمْ يُقَالُ لَهُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ قَالُوا فَأْتُوا بِهِ عَلَى أَعْيُنِ النَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَشْهَدُونَ قَالُوا أَأَنْتَ فَعَلْتَ هَذَا بِآلِهَتِنَا يَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ قَالَ بَلْ فَعَلَهُ كَبِيرُهُمْ هَذَا فَاسْأَلُوهُمْ إِنْ كَانُوا يَنْطِقُونَ فَرَجَعُوا إِلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ فَقَالُوا إِنَّكُمْ أَنْتُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ ثُمَّ نَكِسُوا عَلَى رُءُوسِهِمْ لَقَدْ عَلِمْتَ مَا هَؤُلَاءِ يَنْطِقُونَ قَالَ أَفَتَعْبُدُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَنْفَعُكُمْ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَضُرُّكُمْ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ

And by God, I will indeed plan a stern plan against your idols after you have left turning your backs. So he smashed them all into pieces, except their chief (idol), that they might return to it (for inquiry as he planned). (When they saw their idols broken) they said: Who has done this to our gods? He (who has done this) must be of the wrong-doers indeed. Some (of the people) said: We heard a young man speaking (ill) of them, he is called Abraham. They said: Then bring

him before the eyes of the people so that they may bear witness (against him). (When he was brought) they said: O Abraham! Is it you who did this to our gods? (Abraham) said: Well, of course, someone has done it. Here is their chief (idol which witnessed all this). So better ask (him and) them, if they can speak. Then they turned to their leaders and to one another and said: You, yourselves are surely in the wrong. Then they were made to hang down their heads (in shame and said to Abraham): Indeed, you know very well that these (idols) do not speak. (Abraham) said: Do you then worship, apart from God, the things which can do no good to you, (who are their worshippers), nor can do harm to (those of) you (who are their destroyers). Shame on you and on the things you worship apart from God! Will you not then make use of (your) understanding? (Qur'an, Surah al-Anbiya', 21:57-67).

In another instance, Prophet Abraham ('a) tried to reason with the worshippers of heavenly bodies (the stars, moon and sun), and tried to showed them the futility of taking such beings as gods:

فَلَمَّا جَنَّ عَلَيْهِ اللَّيْلُ رَأَىٰ كَوْكَبًا قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَا أُحِبُّ الْآفِلِينَ فَلَمَّا رَأَىٰ الْقَمَرَ بَازِعًا قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَيْتُنِي لَمْ يَهْدِنِي رَبِّي لَأَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الضَّالِّينَ فَلَمَّا رَأَىٰ الشَّمْسَ بَازِعَةً قَالَ هَٰذَا رَبِّي هَٰذَا أَكْبَرُ فَلَمَّا أَفَلَتْ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ إِنِّي بَرِيءٌ مِّمَّا تُشْرِكُونَ إِنِّي وَجَّهْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّذِي فَطَرَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا أَنَا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

Then when the night darkened over him, he saw a star. He said (on seeing it to the idol-worshippers): Is this my Lord (as you assert)? But when it set he said: I do not love the setting ones (to accept as my God). Then when he saw the moon rise with spreading light he said (to the people): Is this my Lord (as you assert)? But when it set he said: Had my Lord not guided me aright I would have, invariably, been of the people who have gone astray. And when he saw the sun rise with spreading light (he said to them): Is this my Lord (as you assert, as) this is the biggest? But when it (also) set he said: O my people! I am surely (sick and) quit of that you associate (with Him). Surely, I have turned myself with devotion and in a most upright manner to Him Who originated the heavens and the earth. I have never been of the polytheists. (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:76-79).

Monotheism is best exemplified in the life of Abraham ('a) and lies at the core of the three most important Divinely inspired religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), that have shaped human history. Religion clearly stands out as a very important ideology that has helped us make sense of our lives, as well as the meaning and purpose of our existence.

Besides religion, another very important discipline which has helped us to understand the nature of existence is philosophy.

Philosophy attempts to understand the reality of things through pure rational inquiry including both the tangible realities as well as abstract ideas. It covers topics such as ethics (ideal conduct, good and evil), politics (ideal social order), meta-physics (ontological reality of existence), epistemology (theory of

knowledge) and logic (the proper way of thinking and reasoning).[4](#)

Ancient Greece can actually be considered the birthplace of philosophy though it developed independently in Ancient China (Taoism) as well.

In the beginning, philosophy was indistinguishable from what we now call the natural sciences such as physics, astronomy and biology. Even now the highest degree in sciences such as chemistry, physics and biology is called the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). It is only later on that the natural sciences based on empirical knowledge were separated from the pure rational inquiry of philosophy.

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are the most important philosophers of Ancient Greece whose teachings shaped human thought for thousands of years to come. In particular, Aristotle's work produced a lasting impact both on the European, as well as Islamic philosophy and he is credited with the development of the rules for the proper and systematic way of rational inquiry also known as logic and syllogism.[5](#)

Logical thinking allows us to differentiate between a true concept and a false idea. It includes both deductive and inductive reasoning. For example: the streets get wet when it rains; the streets are wet this morning; thus, it must have rained last night – this is an example of deductive reasoning. Another example is as follows: An infection causes fever; a patient has a fever, therefore this patient must have an infection (although there could be other reasons for having a fever, so obviously it has to be looked at in the context of a clinical situation).

Inductive reasoning looks at certain observations and then makes a generalization about how things work. It is sort of pattern recognition – so as an example, if we state that most patients who develop lung cancer are smokers; then smoking must cause lung cancer. Much of the scientific inquiry is based on employing deductive and inductive reasoning to help understand data obtained both from observation and experimentation. Logic is also employed by lawyers in judicial arguments, as well as by common people in every day decision making – such as: flowers make my wife happy, and I want to make her happy, so I should give her flowers. (I know this may not work all of the time even though it may appear logical to men!)

Ancient Greece excelled in philosophy and they also made important contributions in the fields of mathematics, geometry, astronomy, physics and engineering.

Building on astronomical data gathered by the Babylonian, Ptolemy based in Alexandria, presented his astronomical observations in an important work called *Almagest* (The Arabic rendition of his original work called *Megale Syntaxis*).

Euclid wrote the most important work on geometry and numbers theory in his book called *Elements*.

Archimedes, in his work *On Floating Bodies*, described the physical law of buoyancy, which helped explain the principle behind the flotation of solid bodies in fluids.[6](#)

Aristotle, though more famous for his philosophy, described earth to have spherical shape giving both theoretical and empirical arguments in his book *On the Heavens*. He also helped classify a large number of animals laying the foundation for zoology.

However, the understanding of natural world in ancient Greece was still primitive and in many cases outright wrong. For example, believing that the Earth was considered to be the center of the solar system as opposed to the heliocentric model discovered much later on; or Aristotle's assertions that women have less number of teeth than men.⁷ (When I was a child, my mother would explain the importance of science to me and would say that all that was required was for Aristotle to count the number of teeth in a sample of men and women to achieve the correct conclusion!)

With the decline of Greece, the intellectual epicenter of the world moved to the Middle East around the 8th and 9th Century and remained there for many centuries. The stimulus for this change was no doubt the birth of a new religion in that region called Islam.

Islam rose in the Arabian Peninsula when Muhammad (S), a direct descendent of Prophet Abraham ('a), started to receive revelations in 610 ad. The very first word revealed to him was: "Read". Learning and gaining knowledge was one of the most important messages making it obligatory upon all Muslims (men and women).⁸

For Muslims, one of the main impetus for learning was the Qur'an itself which was revealed in the most eloquent Arabic. It covers a wide variety of topics, and reading it no doubt broadens the vision, and enriches a person intellectually. In various *ayat*, the Qur'an invites the readers to observe and ponder over the heavens and the earth and other natural phenomenon – encouraging the exploration of nature.

After Prophet Muhammad (S), the bearer and inheritor of prophetic knowledge were the imams, the foremost amongst them being his first cousin Imam ʿAlī ('a), about whom the Prophet Muhammad (S) has been quoted as saying:

I am the city of knowledge and ʿAlī is its gate.⁹

Imam ʿAlī's ('a) main teachings were focused on monotheism, ethics, morality, human psychology, spirituality, social justice, rules of governance and politics.

His sermons, letters and maxims were compiled by the renowned scholar, Sayyid al-Radhi in the 10th Century in a book called *Nahj al-Balagha* (The Peak of Eloquence) which is a masterpiece of wisdom expressed in extraordinary, and very eloquent Arabic.

Imam ʿAlī ('a) is also credited to have developed the rules of Arabic grammar which were very helpful in the adoption of the Arabic language amongst the non-Arabs as Islam began to spread to many non-Arab regions of the world.¹⁰

Arabic soon acquired the status of a scientific language of that era and major works in science,

philosophy and medicine were written in Arabic language by both Arabs as well as non-Arabs.

Amongst the teachings of the Imams we find a book by the name of *Risala al-Huquq* or *The Treatise on Rights* written by the grandson of ʿAli (ʿa) who was also named ʿAli – and was the son of Husayn (ʿa). This remarkable document gives a detailed description of human rights for all possible human relationships. The rights of God, our body parts, our parents and other family members, our neighbors, teachers, students, leaders and even the rights of our adversaries and those who do evil to us are all mentioned. [11](#)

Amongst the descendants of Imam ʿAli (ʿa), the two Imams well known for spreading knowledge were the 5th Imam – Muhammad al-Baqir (ʿa) (677–733 ce) and his son the 6th Imam – Jaʿfar al-Sadiq (ʿa) (702–765 ce). The name *al-Baqir* literally means “the one who splits open knowledge.” Compared to the other imams, these two had a greater opportunity to spread the prophetic knowledge and thus, they established the first public academy at the mosque of the Prophet (S) in the city of Medina. Their prime teachings were in the fields of theology, jurisprudence, ethics, spirituality and meta-physics and they trained thousands of students who energized the intellectual and academic movement in early Islam. Some of their students went on to become jurists themselves like Abu Hanifa and Malik b. Anas whose jurisprudence is followed by millions of Muslims even today. Amongst the students of Imam al-Sadiq (ʿa) was the famous scientist Jabir b. al-Hayyan or as he is known in the West, Geber. [12](#)

Jabir b. al-Hayyan (721–815 ce) is one of the earliest scholars and researchers of natural sciences in the Arab world. He practiced alchemy and developed basic techniques of chemistry such as evaporation, sublimation, melting and crystallization. In the centuries to come, Muslims led the scientific and intellectual advancement and established an impressive civilization stretching from North Africa and southern Europe, to central and south Asia including Persia.

Among the dynasties that appeared during early Islam, the Abbasid caliphate patronized scientific work and established the *Bayt al-Hikma* or *House of Wisdom* in their capital, Baghdad. This became the center of much of the scientific learning, research and translation of Greek, Persian and Indian texts into Arabic. In particular, the Abbasid caliph Maʿmun al-Rashid (786–833 ce) – though a ruthless ruler who killed his own brother to seize power – patronized scientific and philosophic endeavors.

Maʿmun named the 8th Imam, ʿAli b. Musa al-Ridha (ʿa) as his successor and arranged many debates in his court between Imam al-Ridha (ʿa) and the leading scholars of his time – intellectual giants who belonged to different schools of thought including Islam, Christianity, Judaism and even Atheists. Some of these debates in which Imam al-Ridha (ʿa) clearly outshone every opponent have been compiled in a book, *ʿUyun al-Akhbar al-Ridha* by Shaykh al-Saduq. [13](#)

Unsettled by the rising popularity of Imam al-Ridha (ʿa), Maʿmun went on to poison him leading to the 8th Imam’s death. The 8th Imam is buried in the northern-Iranian city of Mashhad which is a major center of pilgrimage for the Muslims.

Among the early Muslim scientists was al-Khwarizmi (780–850 ce), a Persian by descent. The term Algebra was coined from the title of his famous book on mathematics called *Hisab al-Jabr wa al-Muqabalah*. From him also comes the term algorithm, a method of solving mathematical problems and data processing used today in a variety of fields including computer science.

In the field of Astronomy, al-Battani (Albatenius), al-Sufi (Azophi), al-Biruni, Ibn al-Shatir, al-Zarqali (Arzachel) and al-Tusi made important and lasting contributions. Al-Zarqali who was based in Toledo, al-Andalus (The Arabic name of Spain) along with other astronomers, constructed the Tables of Toledo, describing in detail the apparent motions of the sun, the moon and the planets.

Similarly, al-Tusi (1201–1274 ce) who was a Persian polymath, established an advanced observatory in Margheh – the Azerbaijan area of Iran – for conducting astronomical observations. He also invented a geometric construction called the “Tusi Couple” to help explain the planetary motions which was later used by Copernicus in his work. Many astronomical terms like “zenith” and even the names of numerous stars like “Rigel”, and “Vega” have Arabic origins. [14](#)

In the field of optics, Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen) (965–1040 ce) performed ground breaking experiments to understand the nature of light, compiling his work in a book called *Kitab al-Manazir – The Book of Optics*. He also wrote a critique on Ptolemy’s astronomy in his work called *Shukuk ʿala Batlamyus (Dubitationes in Ptolemaeum)*. [15](#)

According to Professor S.M. Razaullah Ansari, through his work, Ibn al-Haytham demonstrated the scientific method of conducting inquiry by proposing a hypothesis and then carrying out experiments to prove or disprove the hypothesis – laying the foundation of modern scientific discovery. [16](#)

In the field of medicine, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) (980–1037 ce) was a genius physician and a philosopher. His famous book *Qanun fi al-Tibb* – known as the *Cannon of Medicine* was used as a standard medical text book in the Middle East as well as Europe for several hundred years. Al-

Zahrawi (Abulcasis) (936–1013 ce), who worked in Andalusia (Islamic Spain), was the greatest surgeon of his times.

An Arab physician, Ibn al-Nafis (1213–1288 ce) discovered the pulmonary circulation, in which blood moves from the heart to lungs for oxygenation. [17](#)

In philosophy, Muslims embraced works of Greek philosophers and made important original contributions. Famous names from the peripatetic school of Aristotle include Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126–1198 ce). In particular Ibn Rushd was instrumental in explaining Aristotle’s work and dispelled the impression that philosophy and revelation are contradictory.

Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (1155–1191 ce), established his own school of philosophy called *Hikma al-Ishraq – The Illuminist Philosophy*.

However the greatest philosopher of them all was definitely Mulla Sadra (Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi – 1572–1640 ce). He was contemporary of Rene Decartes and established his own school of philosophy called *Hikma al-Mutaʿaliya – Transcendent Theosophy* which combines rational inquiry, Divine revelation, and personal spiritual insight into a unique and comprehensive school of thought unmatched in the East or the West for the past 400 years. [18](#) (His work has been quoted multiple times in this book).

During the Middle Ages, while the Middle East saw an advanced and sophisticated Arab/Islamic civilization, much of Europe was backward with no real intellectual or scientific achievement. The rich philosophical and scientific legacy left by the Greeks was lost, and in many cases actively discouraged from even being studied. This began to change as the Europeans started to interact with the Arab/Islamic civilization. In 1095, Pope Urban II at the council of Clermont in France, galvanized Christians from Europe to attack Muslim lands setting off centuries of wars known as The Crusades.

In the first of such crusades, the invading Christian army conquered the city of Jerusalem in 1099, which at that time was a center of learning and exchange of ideas between various ideologies and religions. The invading army was made up mostly of illiterate soldiers, who did not even know how to tell time, but nevertheless wreaked havoc in the city committing massacres such that “men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins.” [19](#)

But not every European who travelled eastwards was a warrior. There were intellectuals like Adelard of Bath who was truly interested in learning from the Arabs and such men helped a great deal in the intellectual resurgence of the West.

The interaction of Europeans with the Arab and Muslim world was so crucial and transformative that according to many scholars, the very idea of modern Western civilization was impossible to envision without a preceding Arab/Islamic era of science and philosophy. [20](#)

Many terminologies and ideas that are in use even today like alkali, alcohol, Arabic numerals (which originated in India), algebra, algorithm, zero, azimuth, zenith, admiral, check, tariff, arsenal, customs and double account book keeping have come to the West from the Arab/Islamic civilization.

The stimulus for the rise of Islamic civilization during the Middle Ages was the birth of Islam, and the stimulus for Renaissance in Europe was its interaction with the world of Islam.

The 14th Century saw great intellectual and cultural changes in Europe starting from Italy and then spreading to the rest of Europe, a period known as the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and Michelangelo (1475–1564) produced great works of art in the form of paintings and sculptures.

This period also saw sea exploration by the Europeans to find new trading routes to the east resulting in the discovery of the new world. The intellectual and social change in Europe resulted in unprecedented scientific accomplishments in a period known as the scientific revolution.

In 1543, building on the earlier work of the Greek and Arab Astronomers, a Polish scientist by the name of Nicholas Copernicus published *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (*On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres*) giving a heliocentric model of the solar system as opposed to the prevalent geocentric model.

Johannes Keppler (1571–1630) explained the planetary motion proposing that the planets move around the sun in elliptical orbits rather than in a circular motion.

Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) revolutionized astronomy by using a telescope to make astronomical observations and was the first to discover Jupiter's moon, thus giving validity to the Copernicus model of planetary motion around the sun. He was however prosecuted for his views by the inquisition of the Catholic Church, was put on trial, had his work banned and lived last part of his life under house arrest.

Perhaps the greatest scientist of all from that era was Sir Isaac Newton, who in 1687 published *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*) in which he stated his famous three laws of motion, explaining not only the motion of heavenly bodies but also the motion of small objects like the fall of an apple from a tree through a force called gravity. He is also credited to have developed calculus and a reflecting telescope. Acknowledging centuries of scholarly work preceding him, Newton is famously quoted to have said:

If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.

In 1859, an English biologist by the name of Charles Darwin published his famous work *The Origin of Species*, suggesting that different species of life on earth have evolved from common ancestors through the process of natural selection. This theory of evolution today lies at the heart of modern biology. (See more about this in Chapter 14)

Through the works of Michael Faraday and James Maxwell the 19th Century also saw a better understanding of electromagnetism, as well as the nature of light as a propagating wave of electromagnetic field.

While Newton explained the motion of bodies through an invisible force called gravity, this motion was better explained by Albert Einstein's theory of General Relativity published in 1905. Einstein proposed that heavy objects like the sun cause stretching of the fabric of four-dimensional space-time which in turn pushes objects like the earth to go around the sun on space-time curves which we feel as gravity. The same year, Einstein also described the relationship between mass and energy through the famous equation, $E=mc^2$, where E =energy, m =mass and c = the speed of light.

As the understanding of the atom and sub-atomic particles improved, the 20th Century also saw the birth of a new kind of physics called quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics states that objects at a sub-atomic level have both a particle and a wave form, and there are limits to which we can know the momentum and the location of a particle at the same time, also known as Heisenberg's Uncertainty

Principle.

Today, the existence of the universe is explained by what is called the “Big Bang Theory.” We know that the universe is not only expanding, but it is actually accelerating. Its beginning is thought to be from an infinitely dense point called the singularity containing all of the mass, energy and space–time of the existing universe. Some fourteen billion years ago this started to expand resulting in the appearance of the stars, galaxies and planets. (See Chapter 13 for further details)

The scientific revolution brought a new understanding of the universe based on verifiable, and empirical evidence. It seriously challenged the pure philosophical understanding of the natural world propagated by the likes of Aristotle, as well as a dogmatic understanding as proposed by the Christian Church. As the traditional understanding of God proposed by the Church started to be challenged, ideas like that of deism and pantheism began to gain acceptance.

Almost all of the Muslim scientists from the Middle Ages, and many eminent philosophers and scientists from the renaissance and the scientific revolution of Europe like Rene Decartes, Voltaire and Sir Isaac Newton were firm believers in monotheism. Their scientific pursuits did not seem to be in conflict with monotheism. In particular Sir Isaac Newton wrote an important work called the *Philosophical Origins of Gentile Theology*, narrating his belief in monotheism. He however rejected the doctrine of trinity or the divine status of Jesus, referring to it as ideas promoted by the Christian theologian, Asthanasius.

The scientific method has also given us a tremendous ability to manipulate the physical universe for our own benefit, transforming and improving the quality of our lives in an unprecedented way. In this scientific era when we can literally go to the moon and come back, use a hand–held device to talk to another person across the globe, understand the physical world at a sub–atomic level, and develop medical treatments which target specific molecular pathways, both philosophy and religion seem obsolete. In fact, the very idea of God is considered a figment of human imagination which is thought to have become acceptable in earlier human societies simply because we just did not understand the universe any better, therefore we invented God to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. The German philosopher Nietzsche even went on to claim that “God is dead,” and “We killed him.” Nietzsche later in his life suffered a complete mental breakdown.

While early Muslim scientists during the Middle Ages, and many prominent Western scientists during the Scientific Revolution did not find contradiction between their scientific work and belief in God, today we find many people have faith only in experimental evidence, and for them science has replaced God. A recent survey of eminent British scientists belonging to the Royal Academy of London showed that an overwhelming majority of scientists reject the idea of God (78%), as well as the belief in consciousness beyond death (85%). This rejection of God or a supernatural being was more common amongst those in biological sciences than those in physical sciences. There was less consensus on overlap between the domain of religion and science. Interestingly enough, only 23% of those invited for the survey responded, leaving a question mark on the belief of the rest of the 75% of the scientists.[21](#)

For many, only the knowledge obtained through the scientific method is considered accurate. Only scientists are considered to be those who are seeking the truth or reality. In particular, belief in God or practice of religion are considered false and dangerous ideas with no rational or scientific basis to them. Those scientists who continue to believe in God or practice religion are therefore considered not “true scientists”.

It is ironic that while science has broadened our horizons and given us a tremendous understanding about the universe, at the same time some of us have developed a tunnel vision, rejecting any form of knowledge that cannot be verified in an experiment. The paradox is that on the one hand, science has allowed us to uncover remarkable structures and mechanisms underlying the physical and biological systems, while on the other hand many have failed to answer the obvious question as to how these processes were put in order in the first place? The notion that this extraordinarily sophisticated universe has come about on its own and is operational without any outside factor or influence is not only absurd, but is statistically so improbable that it is impossible to be as such. Similarly, the idea that natural selection can give rise to complex forms from simple forms also does not have any sound rational basis nor is it backed up by strong experimental evidence. (See Chapter 3 and Chapter 14)

For many, the scientific progress has not been matched by an equal progress in their religious and philosophical understanding. Not everything can be blamed on the scientists as many dogmatic ideas held to be true in certain religious traditions have no rational basis and have failed to keep up with the evolving scientific world view (such as the age of the Earth). But what does not make any sense is to completely reject conviction in God just because we can now understand the function of the kidney a little better, or because we can make computer microchips.

There are many who continue to keep their faith as well as pursue science without having to choose between one or the other. But for many others, since science can now explain many natural phenomenon, therefore they choose to worship the god of science, like the ancients used to worship the false gods of Zeus and Apollo. For them, their god is now the “god of Science.”

One of the reasons for giving up on God is that many people are not exposed to the teachings of the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad (S) and the imams of the Ahlul Bayt ('a), and have not had exposure to the correct understanding of monotheism, therefore they waver towards rejecting the very idea of God.

In earlier chapters, I have attempted to give a correct understanding of God as explained through revelation. I hope that with a clearer understanding of God, His attributes, His role in our personal lives, and the ultimate goal of our existence, some people will make an effort to return from worshiping the god of science to worshiping the one true God. In the next chapter I will explore the relationship between reason and revelation to see if they contradict each other or if they point towards the same reality.

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Chapter 11: Reason vs. Revelation

The intellect, in Arabic, is known as “*al-ʿaql*,” whose root word is “*ʿaqala*,” which means to restrain a camel (so it will not run away, to restrict). The intellect is something which allows us to control our desires, emotions, thoughts and actions.

When children learn to move around the house, the parents have to restrain them from harming or injuring themselves. As their intellect matures, they learn to restrain themselves. Even as adults we want to say and do a lot of things, but it is the intellect which tells us what not to do and more importantly what not to say!

The intellect helps us sort out truth from falsehood; beneficial from harmful; correct from incorrect. It also allows us to make sense of the data coming from our senses and knowledge coming from other sources. It is the most sublime trait of the human being which gives us distinction over other creatures.

Imam ʿAli (ʿa) is quoted to have said the following about the intellect:

The intellect is what arrives at what is correct through reasoning, and recognizes what has not yet happened through what has already taken place. The first opinion of a person of intellect is the last opinion of an ignorant person. [1](#)

On numerous occasions, the Qur'an encourages its readers to use their intellect to ponder over the events of this world and in their own lives. For example:

كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

(Behold! this Qur'an is) a great Book which We have revealed to you; full of excellences, so that these (people) may ponder over its verses and so that those gifted with pure understanding may take heed. (Qur'an, Surah Sad, 38:29).

The first volume in the famous book of narrations (sayings of Prophet Muhammad (S) and his family('a)), *al-Kafi*, compiled by Shaykh al-Kulayni (864–941 ce) deals with the topic of the intellect. There are several narrations from that section which are worth of quoting here. [2](#)

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir ('a) is reported to have said:

When Almighty God created reason, He tested it. He ordered it to come forward and it came forward. Then He ordered it to go back and it went back. On this, the Almighty God said: I swear by My power and majesty that no creation of Mine is dearer to Me than you are, and I have only made you perfect in those whom I love. [3](#)

Imam ʿAli b. Abi Talib ('a) is quoted to have said:

[The Angel] Gabriel came to [Prophet] Adam and informed him: O Adam! I have been ordered to let you choose something out of three things, therefore choose one and leave the other two. Adam asked: What are the three things? Gabriel replied: Reason, modesty and religion. Adam said: I choose reason. So Gabriel ordered modesty and religion to withdraw and leave reason alone but they said: O Gabriel! We have both been instructed (by God) to remain with reason wherever it may be. [4](#)

Imam Jaʿfar al-Sadiq ('a) was asked:

What is reason?

The Imam replied:

Reason is by which servitude to *al-Rahman* (The Most Merciful) is carried out and through which paradise is earned. [5](#)

While talking to one of his companions, Hisham b. al-Hakam, Imam Musa al-Kazim ('a) is quoted to

have said:

O Hisham! God has given two proofs for the guidance of mankind – the explicit and the implicit. The explicit and the external proofs are in the form of prophets, divine messengers, and the imams (Divinely appointed guides); and the implicit and the internal proofs are in the form of reasoning and understanding.[6](#)

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq ('a) is quoted to have said:

The reasoning capacity is the chief pillar of human existence. It is the fountain spring of sagacity, comprehension, memory and knowledge. Man is perfected through reason, and it is this which is a guide, a discriminator and the key to every success. When reason secures the approval of the Divine light, it earns (perfection in) knowledge, memory, sagacity, level headedness, and God mindedness. It is through reason that one understands how, why and where. It is through reason that one knows who guides him and who misguides him. Having known all of this, a person comes to realize what sources of life one should adopt, who one should meet and who one should not. He becomes pure and sincere in his concept of the Unity of God, his acceptance; his belief and ultimately in His obedience and submission to Him. When a person has reached this stage, one has redressed every loss. He has acquired every gain that he can secure. He quickly comprehends where he stands, what is what, which is which, and why he has been sent here in the worldly life, where he is brought from and where he has to go. All of this can be secured with the assistance of reason.[7](#)

Intellect and reason is also the foundation upon which faith is established. A faith not founded on reason is on shaky grounds, and can be dislodged very easily, but a faith that is founded on reason is so strong that mountains may shatter, but the believer will remain standing.

The fundamentals of religion like the belief in monotheism, justice of God, Prophethood, Imamate, and the hereafter have to be questioned and adopted only after a thorough rational inquiry into their validity and with convincing rational proofs about their truth. They cannot be adopted blindly by merely imitating others. Faith is a matter of reasoning, not imitation.[8](#)

Reason is also what makes us responsible for our actions. Accountability of actions – whether religious or otherwise – is only for those who have sound intellect. Divine and man-made laws are suspended for a person who has not reached the age of maturity yet (e.g. children), or those deemed unable to make independent, rational decisions (mentally incompetent) such as the mentally incapacitated since birth, or those with significant psychiatric illness like schizophrenia.

There are factors that can make the intellect grow and become stronger or make it weak and dull. Overeating, oversleeping and excessive talking makes the intellect overshadowed. On the other hand, what illuminates the intellect is acquisition of another sublime human trait called knowledge. The first chapter of this book discussed knowledge and its merits, and readers can go back and review that chapter.

The intellect and knowledge go hand in hand and as such, Imam ʿAli (‘a) is quoted to have said:

Knowledge is the lamp of intellect.

Real knowledge is said to be present when it has penetrated into our being, and becomes manifest in our actions. Merely knowing something and not acting according to it is not true knowledge.

Epistemologically speaking, the concept of knowledge is self-evident. It is inherently present with existence and is immaterial (Arabic: *al-tajarrud*).

Muslim philosophers have divided knowledge into two categories⁹ – although some of this has been discussed in Chapter 1 but it is worth repeating it here:

1) Acquired Knowledge (*al-ʿIlm al-Husuli*): In this, the knower (subject) and the known (object) are separate entities, e.g. a person’s knowledge about a bird.

2) Knowledge by Presence – Direct Knowledge (*al-ʿIlm al-Hudhuri*): In this, there is no distinction between the knower (subject) and the known (object) e.g. a man’s knowledge about himself.

The methods of acquiring knowledge follows a hierarchal order with sense perception, i.e. knowledge acquired through sensory observation considered to be the most basic method of acquiring knowledge. We use sensory data to make sense of our surroundings in our daily lives. However, often times based on our sensory perception we make a conclusion which turns out to be false e.g. the phenomenon of a mirage.

On a bright sunny day while travelling on a highway it may appear that there is water at a certain distance, but as we get closer we realize that there is no water. Similarly, acts of illusion performed by stage performers make us believe something which our intellect knows cannot be true but our senses fail to deny; for example, bringing a rabbit out of a hat, or a pigeon out of a handkerchief. Our senses cannot tell how this happened, but our intellect knows that it cannot be true.

The next in the hierarchy of knowledge is empirical knowledge which is acquired from experimentation. During experiments, scientists control the conditions necessary to perform an experiment and then draw certain conclusions from it. For example, a scientist wants to know if a certain drug has anti-cancer properties against lung cancer. He first designs an experiment in which he tests this drug in a mouse model of lung cancer. He tests the drug at various dose levels to see if the drug will shrink the cancer in mice. If the drug successfully treats lung cancer in mice as compared to a placebo, then a conclusion can be made that yes, the drug has properties against lung cancer, but what is not known yet is if the drug will also work in lung cancer patients or not.

To answer this question the new drug is tested on a sample of lung cancer patients comparing it with the known standard lung cancer drug. If the patients receiving the new drug live significantly longer than can be explained by chance alone compared to those receiving the standard cancer drug, we can then

generalize this information to all lung cancer patients stating that the new drug will work in all lung cancer patients. What is not known is if the drug will work in a particular lung cancer patient. It may be that a particular lung cancer patient is resistant to this new drug. So despite extensive empirical knowledge in a particular lung cancer patient, it is not known with certainty if the drug will work or not. If a lung cancer patient asks if the drug will work in him, then the doctor can say, "The probability of it working is – let's say – 40%, but will it work in you or not cannot be known with certainty unless we give it to you to find out."

Compared to definitive rational propositions, there is an inherent lack of certitude in the empirical way of acquiring knowledge when applied to physical and biological sciences. This gets even worse in social and ethical sciences where it is even harder to control the conditions to perform a particular social experiment.

The next in hierarchy of knowledge is the knowledge acquired through pure reason or rational inquiry. Based on certain self-evident axioms, logical arguments can help us draw certain conclusions with a degree of certainty. An example of such axioms is the law of non-contradiction which tells us that, "Nothing can be both A and not A." For example, nothing can be both true and false at the same time; or for example, a woman is either pregnant or is not pregnant, she cannot be both pregnant and not pregnant at the same time.

However logical reasoning also has limitations as it is dependent upon what is currently known to be true. If we have missing information or if our premise is wrong, then although our logical reasoning may be correct it may not necessarily lead to a correct conclusion or the best answer. For instance, I fly into a city where my friend lives, and I want to go from the airport to my friend's house in the shortest possible time. I remember the way from my past trips and I know that I can get there in 45 minutes. After arriving at my friend's house, he tells me about a new highway that has shortened the travel distance between the airport and his house to a mere 25 minutes. Since I was unaware of the new highway I did not take it. So even though logically I took the correct route to get to my friend's house it was not the best route if my goal was to get to his house in the shortest possible time.

This example illustrates the limitation of pure logical reasoning to arrive at a certain conclusion. If we have some missing information or if our premise is wrong, then although we may make a correct logical conclusion, but it may not be the right or best conclusion.

Knowledge obtained by sensory input, empirical method and logical reasoning represents examples of acquired knowledge. The key is to understand the correct applications of these methods in our daily lives, as well as to know their limitations, so we do not make a false concept of reality.

The second type of knowledge is called *al-ʿIlm al-Hudhuri* or Knowledge by Presence or Direct Knowledge. It is a knowledge which comes from within, in which there is no separation between the subject and the object of knowledge e.g. a person's knowledge about himself. If I am tired or sleepy I

just know it and do not need to employ logic to conclude that I am tired. Other examples of direct knowledge are intuition (*ilham*), unveiling (*mukashfa*), spiritual visions (*shuhud*) and revelation (*wahi*) in which the soul directly experiences and witnesses the reality.

As for the last example of direct knowledge, the literal meaning of revelation is, “to give a message quickly, secretly.” It is a method of Divine guidance to the creation. It can be general guidance through nature or instinct or a more specific message as received by the prophets: [10](#)

قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى

He said: Our Lord is He Who gave to each (created) thing its form and nature, and then further gave (it) guidance. (*Qur'an*, Surah Taha, 20:50).

Another example of general guidance in creation is seen in the following verse:

سَبِّحْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ الْأَعْلَى الَّذِي خَلَقَ فَسَوَّى وَالَّذِي قَدَّرَ فَهَدَى

Extol the holiness of the name of your Lord, the Most High, Who creates (all things) and gives (them) suitable and perfect shapes. Who determines (the capacities and faculties) and furnishes them with (appropriate) guidance to achieve the final goal. (Qur'an, Surah al-A'la, 87: 1-3).

The term *wahi* has also been mentioned for the behavior of small insects like bees:

وَأَوْحَىٰ رَبُّكَ إِلَى النَّحْلِ أَنْ اتَّخِذِي مِنَ الْجِبَالِ بُيُوتًا وَمِنَ الشَّجَرِ وَمِمَّا يَعْرِشُونَ ثُمَّ كُلِي مِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ فَاسْلُكِي سُبُلَ رَبِّكِ ذُلُلًا ۚ يَخْرُجُ مِنْ بُطُونِهَا شَرَابٌ مُخْتَلِفٌ أَلْوَانُهُ فِيهِ شِفَاءٌ لِلنَّاسِ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

And your Lord inspired the bees (saying): Make your hives in the hills and in the trees and in the trellises which the people erect. Then eat of every (kind of) fruit and follow the ways (and laws) of your Lord as that have been made easy (for you). There comes forth from their insides a fine fluid of varying hues which is a cure for the people. Infact, in this there is a sign for a people who reflect. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nahl, 16:68-69).

The most common usage of the term *wahi* in the *Qur'an* is in reference to Divine revelation which is received by select individuals called the prophets.

إِنَّا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ كَمَا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ نُوحٍ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَعِيسَىٰ وَأَيُّوبَ وَيُونُسَ وَهَارُونَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ ۚ وَآتَيْنَا دَاوُدَ زَبُورًا وَرُسُلًا قَدْ قَصَصْنَاهُمْ عَلَيْكَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَرُسُلًا لَمْ نَقْصُصْهُمْ عَلَيْكَ ۚ وَكَلَّمَ اللَّهُ مُوسَىٰ تَكْلِيمًا ۚ رُسُلًا مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ لِئَلَّا يَكُونَ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى اللَّهِ حُجَّةٌ بَعْدَ الرُّسُلِ ۚ

وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا

Surely, We have sent down (Our) revelation to you as We sent it down to Noah and the prophets (who came) after him, and We sent revelation to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and his children and to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron and Solomon. And We gave David a Scripture. And (there are some) Messengers whom We have mentioned to you before and (some) Messengers We have not mentioned them to you, and God spoke (to you as He spoke) to Moses in explicit words at great length. All these messengers (were) bearers of good tidings (to the believers) and warners (to the disbelievers, and were sent) so that people may have no plea against God after (the advent of) the messengers. And God is All-Mighty, All-Wise. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4: 163-165).

There are various ways in which this Divine revelation is given to the prophets as explained in the Qur'an:

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَنْ يَكْلِمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ حَكِيمٍ
وَكَذَلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ رُوحًا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا مَا كُنْتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَابُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ وَلَكِنْ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُورًا يَهْدِي بِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ
عِبَادِنَا وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ صِرَاطِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ أَلَا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَصِيرُ
الْأُمُورُ

It is not given to a human being that God should speak to him except by direct revelation or from behind a veil or by sending a messenger (an angel) who should reveal (to him) by His command what He pleases. Indeed, He is the Most Sublime, the All-Wise. (O Prophet!) Just so (as We sent revelations to other Prophets), We revealed to you the Word by Our command. (Before this revelation) you did not know what the Divine Book was nor (which of) the faith (it teaches), but We made it (Our revelation to you) a light, whereby We guide such of our servants as We will. And truly you are guiding (mankind) on to the straight and right path. The path of God to whom belongs all that lies in the heavens and all that lies in the earth. Behold! to God do all things eventually return. (Qur'an, Surah al-Shura', 42:51-53).

The Qur'anic revelation is the speech of God. The soul of Prophet Muhammad (S) rose to such a high spiritual elevation as to perceive the Divine speech immediately. At the human sensory level, it manifests in human language, conveying the Divine message understandable to us. [11](#)

This Divine revelation received by Prophet Muhammad (S) has been compiled in the form of a book known as the Qur'an. It is in the Arabic language understood today by millions of people in the Middle East and beyond. The Qur'an available to us today represents the exact words which were revealed to Prophet Muhammad (S) over 1,400 years ago. The readers can refer back to Chapter 4 in which we had a detailed discussion in regards to the Qur'an and its merits.

It should be made clear that the Qur'an is accepted as a definitive revelation and true based on pure

rational inquiry as explained in detail in Chapter 4. The knowledge disclosed in the Qur'an is accepted to be true once reason has affirmed that the source of the Qur'an is Divine and not human. If someone brings a text claiming it to be Divine, but the reason does not approve of its Divine origins then it cannot be taken as true. Reason should attest to validity of the revelation. If someone does not accept the Qur'an as a definitive revelation, then they should bring forth their arguments against it. The minimum qualification for such a person is that he or she should be able to read and understand Arabic. If someone wants to reject the Qur'an as a definitive revelation and does not understand Arabic, then their argument is superficial and their claim is weak. The Qur'an itself appeals to the readers asking them repeatedly to use the intellect, exercise reason and not follow whims, desires and conjectures:

قُلْ هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

Say: Bring forth your argument, if you are telling the truth! (Qur'an, Surah al-Naml, 27:64).

Intellect and reason represent the sublime human faculty which allows us to acquire knowledge and make sense of the world. Revelation, as exemplified by the Qur'an represents the highest form of knowledge available to mankind. It discloses those realities which the intellect is not able to grasp on its own, such as the events of the afterlife, or the goal and purpose of existence. Now the question arises that what is the relationship between reason and revelation? Does reason affirm what the revelation conveys, and does revelation convey what reason finds to be true?

It is important to know that in the monotheistic worldview, the source of both reason and revelation is God. Just as revelation is from God, so is the Divine gift of reason which helps us to acquire knowledge and make sense of the world. So if the revelation is authentic and reason is correctly applied then there should be no conflict between the two. Reason should affirm what revelation discloses and revelation should authenticate what reason points to. [12](#)

We should also know the limitations of reason because there are realities that are beyond the reason's ability to grasp them, such as the events after death. What is important is that if authentic revelation points towards certain realities, then they can be accepted as true as long as they are not against the reason; for example, like the existence of heaven and hell. It is not possible to perceive them ordinarily but their existence in the afterlife is not an irrational idea.

Interpreting the Revelation

The Qur'an – as opposed to the other Divinely revealed books like the Torah and Evangel – is available in its original, unadulterated text. The text has been preserved over the past 1,400 years and there is only one 'version' of the Qur'an across the globe with no variation, and this gives a degree of confidence and certainty when interpreting the book.

One of the features of the Qur'an is a lack of discrepancy as if the Qur'an was the work of someone other than God, then surely there would be some contradictions in it:

Why do they not ponder over the Qur'an? Had it been from anyone other than God, they would surely have found a good deal of inconsistency therein. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4:82).

Moreover, in addition to analytic and academic work, still a deeper interpretation of the Qur'an requires a degree of self-purity and spiritual cleanliness. The esoteric meanings of the Qur'an are for those who enjoy a degree of spiritual rank and status, and are not for everyone. However it is important to note that the esoteric meanings are never in conflict with the apparent meanings:

That this is most surely a noble Qur'an, in a Book well preserved (in all its purity). No one can achieve true insight into it except those who are purified (by God). (Qur'an, Surah al-Waqi'ah, 56:77-79).

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا يَذَّكَّرُ إِلَّا أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

He (God) it is who has revealed to you this perfect Book, some of its verses are definite and decisive. They are the basic root (conveying the established meanings) of the Book (umm al-

Kitab) and other (verses) are susceptible to various interpretations. As for those in whose hearts is perversity, they follow (verses) that are susceptible to different interpretations, seeking (to cause) dissension and seeking an interpretation (of their own choice). But no one knows its true interpretation except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. They say: We believe in it, it is all (the basic and decisive verses as well as the allegorical ones) from our Lord. And none takes heed except those endowed with pure and clear understanding. (Qur'an, Surah Ale Imran, 3:7).

With correct understanding of the revelation, there should be no conflict between definitive reason and definitive revelation, they should both guide to the same reality. It is often an incorrect understanding of the revelation or a weak application of the intellect, e.g. argument based on conjectures that leads to conflict between the two.

An example to consider showing conformity between Divine revelation and reason is the prohibition of the use of intoxicants like alcohol. When it comes to alcohol, the Qur'an is very explicit about its prohibition:

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْخَمْرِ وَالْمَيْسِرِ ۖ قُلْ فِيهِمَا إِثْمٌ كَبِيرٌ وَمَنَافِعُ لِلنَّاسِ وَإِثْمُهُمَا أَكْبَرُ مِن نَّفْعِهِمَا ۚ وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ مَاذَا يُنْفِقُونَ قُلِ الْعَفْوَ ۚ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمُ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَفَكَّرُونَ

They ask you concerning intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both of them is a great sin and both are harmful too, and they have some uses for people, but the sin inherent in them is even more serious than their usefulness. They ask you how much they should spend. Say: The surplus (what you can spare after spending on your basic requirement). Thus does God make clear His commandments so that you may reflect. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:219).

Rationally speaking, alcohol targets and disables the intellect, therefore it is self-evident that consuming intoxicants like alcohol is an irrational behavior. Moreover, its use leads to many health and social problems. It may have some health benefits like raising the serum HDL (high density lipoprotein – a.k.a. good cholesterol), but that can also be achieved by doing exercises.

The harmful health effects of alcohol far outweigh any health benefits of using it, as it is linked with serious health problems such as gastritis (inflammation of the stomach), liver cirrhosis (damage to the liver), cardiomyopathy (heart damage), pancreatitis, fetal birth defects, low birth weight of infants, and a variety of cancers including cancers of the mouth, throat, esophagus, stomach and liver to name a few. Moreover, alcohol is also linked to serious social problems like driving under the influence of alcohol, and it is estimated that nearly 10,000 people die annually because of drunk driving in the United States alone. [13](#)

At a personal level, a very reasonable, educated person can demonstrate erratic and embarrassing

behavior under the influence of alcohol. It removes the inhibition that intellect puts on our desires, emotions and unwanted behavior. In addition, chronic alcoholism leads to serious social problems like an inability to maintain a job, problems with social relationships, domestic violence, and poor upbringing of children. Alcohol dulls our ability to use the intellect and think rationally. Many crimes like sexual violence, violent assaults and even murder are committed under the influence of alcohol which can destroy many lives leaving lifelong embarrassment for the offenders. Though for some cultures, the use of alcohol is important for socializing and relaxation, a rational and empirical inquiring into the use of alcohol clearly shows its harmful, embarrassing and deadly consequences. Thus, in the prohibition of alcohol we find a unanimous verdict between what the reason concludes, what the revelation commands, and what empirical evidence points to as well.

Reason and Morality

One of the main messages of revelation in all of the Divinely inspired religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) as well as other religions is in relation to moral conduct and behavior. Revelation asks for good upright conduct from its followers. It exhorts to honesty, truthfulness, kindness and mercy towards each other. The famous Ten Commandments mentioned in the Bible are an example of moral behavior expected from the followers of a Divinely inspired religion.

The message of morality delivered through revelation resonates with reason as well. This is another example where there is harmony between revelation and reason. Being honest, truthful, respecting the rights of others, not stealing from people, showing kindness, and helping those in need, makes sense to all of us. Likewise, lying, cheating, committing fraud, stealing, hurting others both physically and verbally, and killing others, are all actions which are discouraged and disliked by everyone irrespective of our ethnic, cultural and religious background – these are all timeless values.

Now, many who are opposed to revelation argue that reason can tell us what is right and wrong – we do not need revelation to figure this out. Moral norms and behavior should be based on reason alone and there is no need to resort to revelation. In fact, in some cases like capital punishment for committing murder, commandment by revelation is considered too extreme, not suitable for modern society, and against reason. Let us analyze this claim in some detail.

1. Should We Be Moral?

Revelation asks us to have a moral behavior and reason affirms this. The question however is, why? Why should we have moral, ethical conduct? According to revelation, it is for our own benefit, spiritual growth and a pleasant life after death”

إِنْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ لِأَنْفُسِكُمْ ۖ وَإِنْ أَسَأْتُمْ فَلَهَا

***If you did good, you did it for your own selves, and if you did evil it was only to the same end.
(Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17:7).***

Those who want to follow reason only also want to be moral. In fact, they try their best to take the message of morality away from the revelation and advocate about it basing it on the faculty of reason only. It is ironic that after declaring revelation null and void, they start doing more or less the same as the revelation was exhorting them to do anyways!

But looking at it further, if a person does not believe in religion, spirituality or hereafter then they may not see why they should be morally upright. Since their ultimate goal is survival, they should be extremely selfish and only worry about what benefits and harms them as an individual. They should take advantage of others whenever possible and use others for their own benefit. Even if they are being nice to others it should be so that they can continue to benefit off of them. Once they find that they do not need that person, then there is no point to show courtesy and kindness to them. (Surprisingly many people behave exactly like this even though they may be wearing the garb of religion).

Some people argue that we should be moral because it is good for our society and for the survival of our species. They may try to link this behavior with evolutionary biology that somehow we have learned what is good for everyone is also good for ourselves, but I really do not see how it should be like this.

Why do we have to worry about the long term prosperity of our society? We are expected to live for 70–80 years at the most, should we spend this time focusing on what benefits us and what harms us rather than worrying about things like global warming and the rise of poverty in economically underdeveloped countries? To advocate morality without a belief in spirituality or afterlife is based on hollow arguments and goes against the logic of personal, and short term benefit.

2. Why Does Reason Affirm Moral Behavior?

Moral values like honesty, kindness towards others, and respecting the rights of others are generally accepted across all societies. Similarly lying, cheating, and hurting others are disapproved universally as well. Why is it that we find these moral values universally present and in harmony with our existence? Why does reason affirm what revelation exhorts?

The answer lies in our design. We have a soul in addition to the body (see Chapter 14). Our soul has been programed to like certain behaviors and dislike others, therefore all of us like honesty and kindness, and dislike cheating and rude behavior. The Qur'an says:

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

And the (human) soul and That (Mighty Lord) Who made it perfect, then He revealed to it (the soul, the ways of) its evil and its righteousness. One who purifies it (his soul), certainly succeeds, and he indeed

is ruined who corrupts it. (*Qur'an*, Surah al-Shams, 91:7–10).

To be morally correct is in harmony with our design and existence, hence what the revelation commands, reason and instincts approve as well.

3. Criteria for Morality Based on Reason Alone

If we use reason alone to define moral standards then there is going to be a lot of variation amongst individuals, groups and cultures in regards to what is considered morally correct and what is not.

There are certain universal values which most of us can agree upon, but when it comes to applying them, then our personal bias, interests and goals are likely to come in the way. We have a tendency to justify our actions and try to rationalize what we want to do and have. “I was forced to do it,” “I did it because he started it,” “I had no choice,” or “he deserved it” – are some of the common phrases that we hear when people want to justify their unjust actions.

Take for example the mistreatment of the Europeans – particularly the Jews – at the hands of the Nazis during the Second World War. The Nazis committed all sorts of atrocities, but were able to justify their actions in their own minds – it was rational for them and they had a reason to do it so they did it.

If we leave morality on individuals and groups, then in many situations it may be hard to come to a consensus on what is morally correct.

Some people propose that we should develop a moral code based on reason alone which can then be adopted by everyone. First of all it will be very difficult to reach a consensus on one document, and it would need revision every so often – but having a universal moral code is what religion already provides!

4. Moral Expectations Based on Revelation

For those who want to base their morality on reason, they will continue to argue that reason is sufficient for identifying moral and ethical values and revelation does not add anything to it.

We can agree that basic moral values like honesty, truthfulness and goodness to others are self-evident truths in conformity with reason, however when we study revelation and the conduct of the teachers of revelation like the prophets and the imams, we find moral expectations that go well beyond what the reason argues.

The standard of morality in spirituality-based religions like Islam are way higher than can be proposed by reason alone.

Let us look at some examples to elaborate this point further.

a. Humility Towards Parents

Reason tells us that we should be kind to our parents, but revelation demands a much higher level of courteous behavior towards them. The Qur'an says:

وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا ۖ إِنَّمَا يُبَلِّغُنَّ عَنْكَ الْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَا أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُلْ لَهُمَا أُفٌ وَلَا تَنْهَرُهُمَا وَقُلْ لَهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا ۖ وَخَفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذُّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا

Your Lord has enjoined you to worship none but Him and to be good to [your] parents. If either or both attain old age (while living) with you, never say to them, 'Fie!' (any word expressive of disgust or dislike), nor reproach them (by your action). Rather address them with kind and respectful words (always). And lower to them the wings of submissiveness out of tenderness (treating them with humility and compassion). And say (praying for them): My Lord! have mercy upon them just as they nourished and brought me up as a child. (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17:23-24).

Revelation demands utmost respect towards parents, not even saying a word of contempt towards them or even looking at them with anger. This is more than what pure reason demands.

b. Favoring Others over Ourselves

Resources are often limited. If a person has something that another person also needs, then the courteous behavior is to share it with him also. However, if a person really needs something, they may just use it themselves and not share it with anyone else even though the other person may also need it. This will be considered as normal behavior since everyone has to fulfill their personal needs over others.

Religion encourages self-preservation however it also talks about preferring others over ourselves, and in the Islamic terminology, this is called *aethar* – self sacrifice.

If I have an item that both me and another person need, then I can use it myself, but a better gesture would be to give it up to fulfill another person's need. This can only happen if we have true belief in monotheism. With firm faith in monotheism, a person can fulfill another person's need while relying on God (See Chapter 8 and the discussion on reliance on God – *al-tawakkul*) for one's personal need to be fulfilled by Him. Reason alone will not make us prefer others over ourselves. People who prefer others over themselves expect nothing in return from others, but instead seek the pleasure of God only:

وَيُطْعِمُونَ الطَّعَامَ عَلَىٰ حُبِّهِ مِسْكِينًا وَيَتِيمًا وَأَسِيرًا ۖ إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكْرًا

They give food for the love of Him to the indigent, the orphan and the captive. They say: We feed you only to seek the pleasure of God, we desire no recompense from you nor thanks. (Qur'an,

Surah al-Insan, 76:8-9).

c. Replying Bad with Good

If someone is kind to us we like to be kind back to them, but if someone is doing bad to us, we want to behave the same way towards them.

The high level of morality expected from revelation tells us that in many instances it is better to repel bad behavior with goodness.

Often we find that the person who is receiving kindness from someone whom he has wronged will feel embarrassed and will be forced to change his behavior as well. Kindness in response to rude behavior can help neutralize the unnecessary animosity.

The lives of the prophets and the imams are full of such instances in which they showed kindness even to those who were harming them.

After Imam ؑAli ('a) was fatally struck with a poisoned sword while engaged in his morning prayers, his assassin was brought to him. The Imam offered his murderer a cold drink and the same food that was being served to him. This behavior is way beyond what reason points towards – for further details, see Chapter 4:

وَلَا تَسْتَوِي الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ ؕ ادْفَعْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِي بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِيٌّ حَمِيمٌ

And good and evil are not alike. Repel (evil) with that (benign and graceful way) which is best, and lo the person between whom and you there is enmity will behave as if he were your warm-hearted friend. (Qur'an, Surah Fussilat, 41:34).

d. Doing Justice – Even if it is Against Our Own Benefit

In many situations, we find that our truthful testimony can go against ourselves, our dear ones, or even our personal interests or associations. Although we like to be just, but when we see that our personal interests are getting harmed, many people will be tempted to either not give testimony or give a false one. Divine revelation clearly tells us to speak the truth and give correct testimony even if it is against our own interests.

These teachings and their application in real life can come only from revelation since it is very hard for a person to use reason to reach this conclusion and remain firm on a testimony that is against his one's own interests:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ إِن يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا

فَاللَّهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِمَا فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا الْهَوَىٰ أَنْ تَعْدِلُوا وَإِنْ تَلُوتُوا أَوْ تَعْرِضُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا

O you who believe! Be strict observers of justice, bearers of true evidence for the sake of God, even though it be against yourselves or (against your) parents or near of kin; (let neither of the parties) whether (the one against whom or the one in favour of whom you bear evidence) be rich or poor (weigh with yourself). (Bear in mind) God is more regardful of them both (than you are), therefore, do not follow your low desires in order to be able to do justice. And if you distort or evade (true evidence) remember God is Well-Aware of what you do. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa', 4: 135).

In many instances we need both reason and reinforcement from revelation to keep our behavior within the moral limits. For example, being a married person we should not cheat on our spouse – this is based both on reason as well as societal expectations. However, many people are unable to remain faithful to their spouses despite rationally knowing that what they are doing is incorrect. It is with the added layer of protection provided by revelation that we are more likely to be successful in our faithfulness – as the Qur'an tells us:

وَلَا تَقْرَبُوا الزَّانَا إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَاحِشَةً وَسَاءَ سَبِيلًا

And keep away from adultery and fornication; surely, it is an abominable act and an (extremely) evil practice. (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17:32).

We must also know that God is always watching:

أَلَمْ يَعْلَم بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَرَىٰ

Does the human being not know that God indeed observes (all)? (Qur'an, Surah al-Alaq, 96: 14).

Thus by using reason, revelation and the added protection of God consciousness (*al-taqwa*) we can expect upright behavior by most people, otherwise many of us will deviate in our conduct.

Revelation not only tells us about high expectations from a moral stand point, but it also tells us that there is no escape from our actions. If someone is unjust to another person, they cannot escape its consequences because there is an afterlife. One cannot cheat someone in this world, even though they may not get caught here as there is no escape from one's actions after death. It is only with revelation and belief in the afterlife that humanity can achieve a higher moral standard – thus, reason alone is highly inadequate:

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَنْ يَغُلَّ وَمَنْ يَغْلُلْ يَأْتِ بِمَا غَلَّ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ثُمَّ تُوَفَّىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

It is not possible for a Prophet to be guilty of a breach of trust, but whoever (else) is guilty of a breach of a trust he will have to bring forth that about which he had been guilty, on the Day of Resurrection when every soul shall be paid in full for what it has accomplished, and they shall not be done any injustice. (Qur'an, Surah Ale ʿImran, 3: 161).

The morality preached by Divine revelation is far above what reason can discover. Revelation demands the perfection of morals and in this regards, Prophet Muhammad (S) has been quoted as having said:

I have been sent to perfect good moral character. [14](#)

Let us look at a supplication called *Duʿā Makarim al-Akhlaq* attributed to the 4th Imam, ʿAli b. al-Husayn Zayn al-ʿAbidin (ʿa) in which he says:

O God, bless Muhammad (S) and his family!
Give me the grace that I can:
Counter one who is dishonest to me with good advice;
Reward one who forsakes me with goodness;
Repay one who deprives me with free giving;
And recompense one who cuts me off with union;
Oppose one who backbites me
With a good mention (of him),
Give thanks for good;
And overlook evil. [15](#)

So in summary, both reason and revelation are guides for mankind as we navigate through life. They both have their unique position and one cannot replace one for another.

According to the 17th Century Muslim Philosopher, Mulla Sadra¹, the likeness of reason is that of an eye, while revelation is that of light. [16](#) In order to see the reality, we need both the eyes and the light. Those who do away with revelation and rely only on reason will not be able to see far and will be left in darkness, and those who do not apply reason and focus only on revelation will not be able to make sense of what they are looking at.

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[3.](#) Ibid., narration 1.

[4.](#) Ibid., narration 2.

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[6.](#) Ibid., narration 12.

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Chapter 12: those who reject the signs (Al-kuffar)

According to the 2015 worldwide Pew Research Survey on World Religions, the three most common religions in the world are: Christianity (31%), Islam (24%) and Hinduism (15%) – comprising 70% of the world's population. There are many other smaller religions (in number of followers) such as Buddhism (7%) and Judaism (0.2%). In addition, nearly 16% of the world's population is not affiliated with any particular religion making them the third largest group after Christians and Muslims.

Most of these religiously unaffiliated live in the Asia-Pacific region (61% in China), however they are increasing in numbers in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. The significant increase in their numbers in these countries is primarily due to the switching of millions of those who were born into Christianity to the religiously unaffiliated group.^{[1](#)}

According to NatCen's 2016 British Social Attitudes Survey, the number of people in Britain without any religious affiliation has increased from 31% in 1983 to 48% in 2015 and this percentage is even higher (62%) in those aged 18–24.^{[2](#)}

In the United States, according to a recent Pew Research Poll, the religiously unaffiliated have increased from <10% few years ago to 23% and this number is close to 35% in the millennials (those born after 1980).^{[3](#)}

Not everyone who falls in the category of religiously “unaffiliated” is an atheist/agnostic however. According to the Pew Survey, only 33% of the religiously unaffiliated deny the existence of God or a

higher power (8% of the total population) while a majority of them believe in some higher power or spirit.

Based on the Oxford Handbook of Atheism, globally 7% of the adult population is atheist.

Countries with a large atheist population are mostly in Central and Western Europe (Czech Republic 55%; France 41%; Germany 36%; UK 30%) and in Asia-Pacific Region (South Korea 28%; Japan 28%; New Zealand 28%; China 18%).[4](#)

The lowest number as a percentage of population are in the Middle East and Africa.

In the United States according to a Pew Research Survey, 3.1% of the population identify themselves as atheists and 4% as agnostics.[5](#)

As discussed in Chapter 10, the major religions in the world started centuries ago in what is termed as the Axial Age. Today billions of people follow different religions. Even amongst those who give up on a particular religion belief in God or a higher power remain prevalent and there are very few amongst us (globally this figure is at <10%) who reject the idea of a God.

One should ask what is it that makes a person lose faith in religion, and in particular the very idea of a God? Let us first turn to the Qur'an to see if we can find some answers.

The term 'al-Kuffar' in the Qur'an

The Qur'anic terminology for those who are disbelievers is *al-Kuffar* (the plural of *al-kafir*). It is derived from the root word "*kafara*" which means to cover or hide something. In classic Arabic, this term was used for farmers who hid seeds underneath the soil. Thus, a "*kafir*" is someone who hides or covers up the truth or his/her innate tendency to believe in a Creator. It is also used for someone who is ungrateful for what has been given to them.

The "god" and "religion" of the Disbelievers

When disbelievers claim that they do not believe in any god, nor do they follow any religion, is that a true statement? If someone rejects faith in God, do they end up having no god at all? When someone claims that they do not follow any particular religion, do they end up having no religion at all? The Qur'an negates this. They do have a "god" and they do follow a "religion":

أَرَأَيْتَ مَنِ اتَّخَذَ إِلَٰهَهُ هَوَاهُ أَفَأَنْتَ تَكُونُ عَلَيْهِ وَكِيلًا

Have you considered one who has taken his own low desires for his deity? Can you then be a guardian over such a one? (Qur'an, Surah al-Furqan, 25:43).

At another place, the Qur'an mentions that due to worshipping their desires – their eyes, ears and understanding have been covered up making them oblivious of the realities:

أَفَرَأَيْتَ مَنْ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ بَصَرِهِ غِشَاوَةً فَمَنْ يَهْدِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ
اللَّهُ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ

Have you considered the case of him who has taken his own low desires for his god and whom God has forsaken and adjudged as lost on the basis of (His infinite) knowledge, and whose ears and heart He has sealed and whose eyes He has covered with a veil? Who then will guide him after God (has condemned him for his being given to evil ways)? Will you then pay no heed? (Qur'an, Surah al-Jathiyah, 45:23).

According to the above mentioned verses, the god of the disbelievers is their own “desires.” They worship their whims and wishes, doing everything according to them and to satisfy them. They worship the biggest idol, i.e. the idol of the “self.”

As for their religion, they just want to enjoy, play and have amusement in this worldly life. Their focus is on materialism, collecting things to satisfy their desires, competing with each other over material possessions, trying to live as comfortable as they can, seeking fame and prominence and dominance over others, not worrying about anything other than their own personal satisfaction. They follow their conjectures and the freedom to do whatever they wish to do:

وَذَرِ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا دِينَهُمْ لَعِبًا وَلَهْوًا وَغَرَّتَهُمُ الْحَيَاةُ لَدُنْيَا

And leave alone those who take their religion as a futile and frivolous thing causing diversion (from God). The present life has beguiled them... (Qur'an, Surah al-An'am, 6:70).

When someone asks them about existential questions, forcing them to think deeply, their response is equally absurd:

وَقَالُوا مَا هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا وَمَا يُهْلِكُنَا إِلَّا الدَّهْرُ وَمَا لَهُمْ بِذَلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ

They say: We have only this our present life (to live). We (people of one generation) die and we (people of a new generation from among us) come to life again (here in this very world). It is (the passage of) time alone that deals us death. But they have no real knowledge whatsoever about the matter (the Hereafter). They merely make conjectures. (Qur'an, Surah al-Jathiya, 45:24).

They only believe in the life of this world, with people being born and dying without a real cause or purpose behind it. It just happens, and we are a part of it so let us enjoy it while it lasts!

إِنَّ هِيَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا الدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَبْعُوثِينَ

There is naught but our life in this world; we die and we live and we shall not be raised again (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'minun, 23:37).

A manifestation of this way of thinking is the ideology of modern day secular humanism. Secular humanists reject God or revelation and focus only on human reason, empirical knowledge, conjectures, personal whims and desire to create a world view. Their focus is their personal well-being only during course of this life. To add some value to their life they promote secular morality, human rights and environmental concerns. They want to appear as intellectuals but are unable to satisfactorily answer questions about origin of universe or purpose of their existence.

These are the individuals whom the life of this world has occupied so much that they fail to realize the deeper meaning and purpose of existence. They are truly in delusion:

إِنَّ الْكَافِرُونَ إِلَّا فِي غُرُورٍ

The disbelievers are only in delusion. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mulk, 67:20).

Reasons behind Disbelief (kufr)

It is also important to recognize that there are many individuals who fall under the category of disbelievers or atheists, but the real reason of their disbelief is that so far, they are still searching for convincing arguments or satisfactory answers to their questions so as a default position declare themselves as agnostic/atheist. They find a conflict in scientific understanding of the world and the religious dogmas presented to them from the faith they were born into. If they do come across convincing arguments they will likely become believers and I hope this book may help answer some of their questions.

Before we get into the reasons behind “*kufr*” in some individuals, it must be clarified that a true “*kafir*” or a disbeliever is the one who has been presented ample evidence about the truth, is convinced of its reality but still rejects it due to personal reasons. He or she knows with convincing evidences and arguments what the reality is but still rejects it either because declaring faith makes life uncomfortable for them or changes their status quo, or they dread following the religious practices or prohibitions or they worry about being identified with a particular group or any other short term personal inconvenience or loss that they may anticipate due to adopting faith.

So why is it that most of us believe in God and a religion, but there are many amongst us who reject the signs of God, stop acknowledging His existence, and do not follow anything but their own personal whims and conjectures? The Qur'an sheds light on this.

1. False Pride and Arrogance (al-Takabbur)

One of the main characteristics of the disbelievers is the false pride and arrogance they have:

بَلِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فِي عِزَّةٍ وَشِقَاقٍ

The only thing is that the disbelievers are suffering from a sense of (false) pride and are hostile (to him). (Qur'an, Surah Sad, 38:2).

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُجَادِلُونَ فِي آيَاتِ اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ سُلْطَانٍ أَتَاهُمْ ۖ إِنَّ فِي صُدُورِهِمْ إِلَّا كِبْرٌ مَا هُمْ بِبَالِغِيهِ ۖ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

Those who dispute regarding the signs of God without any authoritative proof having come to them (from God in their support), there is nothing in their minds but (an ambition for) greatness to which (goal) they can never attain. So (do not bother about them rather) go on seeking refuge in God (against their mischiefs). Surely, He alone is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:56).

The reason why Satan (*Shaytan*) refused to obey God was also pride and arrogance, just as the Qur'an narrates:

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ أَبَىٰ وَاسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ

And (recall) when We said to the angels, Make obeisance to Adam. So they obeyed except Iblis (Satan), he refused stubbornly and waxed proud, and he was already one of the disbelievers. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:34).

This false pride can be due to anything. It can be due to a person's wealth, power, beauty, fame, or it can be, as in many instances, from having knowledge. Ironically sometimes those who get an advanced degree like a Masters or PhD – especially in science – feel very proud and haughty about their degree, scientific papers, or the discovery that they may have made. They think that they know more than ordinary people, they are smarter than ordinary folks who do not understand science or philosophy, and this feeling of looking down on others and belittling them ultimately leads to arrogance towards religion and God as well.

False pride or arrogance makes us stick to our original position even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. How can I be wrong? Or, I have already declared a certain position on a matter so going against it will cause embarrassment.

Another aspect of looking down on others is when the disbelievers notice that people who are of a lower social status or education than themselves have faith, they arrogantly react to it by saying that if the faith had any value, then they would have acquired it first before others as they are “smarter” and “better” than others. The Qur’an says:

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَوْ كَانَ خَيْرًا مَا سَبَقُونَا إِلَيْهِ ۚ وَإِذْ لَمْ يَهْتَدُوا بِهِ فَسَيَقُولُونَ هَذَا إِنْكَ قَدِيمٌ

And those who disbelieve say of those who believe, If these (the Qur’anic doctrines) were any good they would not have taken precedence over us in believing in it. Since they themselves have received no guidance from it they say (out of malice), It is an old lie. (Qur’an, Surah al-Ahqaf, 46: 11).

2. Immorality/Perversity (al-Fisq)

The term *fasiq* is used for those who display perverse behavior – actions which are contrary to social norms and such people may often have personal bad habits such as lying, sexual promiscuity and hypocrisy.

According to a Pew Survey, 40% of atheist/agnostic people have never been married (instead, they choose to engage in illegitimate sexual relationships) as compared to 23% of the general US population. If someone’s concern is only to satisfy their personal needs and desires, even at the detriment of others around them, they are going to become self-centered and selfish. Giving precedence to what I want even when it harms others or is against moral principles, will leads to rejection of the faith and religion also if it comes in the way of satisfying my personal desires. Their perverse behavior is often noticeable in their speech which includes excessive cursing to emphasize their point. Some of them are extremely selfish only focusing on themselves and disregarding others, or merely using others. They show elements of narcissism in their behavior.

وَلَقَدْ أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ وَمَا يَكْفُرُ بِهَا إِلَّا الْفَاسِقُونَ

And We indeed have sent down to you clear arguments which none reject but the perverse. (Qur’an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:99).

This does not mean that outwardly religious people cannot be perverse. If someone outwardly declares faith and claim to follow a religion but in their personal and private life remain “*fasiq*” then they are hypocrites which are even worse than the disbelievers as the latter are at least honest in their declaration of lack of faith. If someone remains strict to their religious teachings, they are less likely to be perverse in their behavior. Whereas those with a moral code subservient to their base desires, are really on their own in their behavior.

The combination of arrogance and the desire to pursue a behavior untamed by any religious moral code is a deadly combination which leads many to first reject the teachings of religion and finally give up on the very idea of God. It is often that people do not want to behave in a way expected of them from a religious moral code which leads them to giving up on religion and then finally on God. Once there is no God in their lives, there is no need to follow a particular moral code prescribed by the religion. This makes life easy for them.

3. Not Exercising Reason

Another aspect of disbelief is not paying attention to the obvious signs of God's existence all around the person and even within themselves. They disregard His signs, not acknowledging that these signs point towards the existence of their Maker. When someone reminds them about these signs, as they do not have a proper answer, they often tend to just close their eyes or look the other way. They fail to use reason. Disbelief is a direct result of not exercising reason properly, and they prefer to follow their conjecture:

وَمَثَلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا كَمَثَلِ الَّذِي يَنْعِقُ بِمَا لَا يَسْمَعُ إِلَّا دُعَاءً وَنِدَاءً صُمُّ بُكُمْ عُمًى فَهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

The case of (one that calls) those who refuse (to obey the commandments of God) is like the case of one who shouts to that (animal) who hears nothing, but a mere call and a cry (of a shepherd). (They are) deaf, dumb and blind, moreover they do not use their reason. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2: 171).

4. Despair

Sometimes people commit indecent or immoral acts which leave significant guilt inside. If they do not get caught or punished for their actions, then the feeling of guilt quietly grows inside of them ultimately making them depressed. This depression can lead to losing all hope and becoming despaired from the mercy of God and a chance to correct their behavior. This despair from ever being able to improve themselves is a serious spiritual illness which is worse than the original immoral act that made them depressed:

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَلِقَائِهِ أُولَٰئِكَ يَئِسُوا مِنْ رَحْمَتِي وَأُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ

And those who deny the signs of God and (deny) that they will meet Him are actually despaired of My mercy. It is they for whom awaits a grievous punishment. (Qur'an, Surah al-ʿAnkabut, 29:23).

The Foundation of Faith (al-Iman) and Disbelief (al-Kufr)

1. The Foundation of Faith (al-Iman)

It has been narrated from Abu Ja'far that: The Commander of the Faithful (a) Ali b. Abi Talib was asked about faith (*al-iman*) to which he replied:

God, Mighty and Majestic, made faith to rest upon four foundations – patience, conviction, justice, and struggle.

2. The Foundation of Disbelief (al-Kufr)

It has been narrated from the Commander of the Faithful (a) Ali (a) as having said:

Disbelief (*al-kufr*) is built upon four pillars – immorality, exaggeration, doubt, and suspicion.⁶

These traditions show that there are certain elements in one's personality like patience and immorality that lead to faith and disbelief. Both faith and disbelief progressively grow in individuals having degrees and levels. Faith requires one to have patience in daily life, conviction in their belief, justice in dealing with themselves and others and struggle in the path of truth. Disbelief comes from behaving immorally and indecently repeatedly without remorse, unnecessarily disputing about various issues in an obstinate way and having unnecessary doubts and suspicion. Both faith and disbelief have degrees and levels, and grow gradually in us depending on how we behave and conduct ourselves.

Human sensory experience, empirical knowledge and reason have limitations in terms of what we can experience directly or have an understanding about. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the hidden realities are much more extensive than the apparent realities. It is through the faculty of faith that we can acknowledge those realities which we are unable to witness directly right now but accept them to be true based on what we currently know and are convinced about. Faith is a deeper form of understanding about the reality of existence.

الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

Those who believe in the existence of hidden reality, that which is beyond the reach of human perception and ordinary cognisance, and who observe the prayer and spend (on others) out of that which We have provided for them. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:3).

As the degree of faith increases, the hidden realities are made manifest to the individual and that person will be able to witness what is beyond the ordinary sensory experiences:

مَا كَذَبَ الْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَى أَفَتُمَارُونَهُ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَىٰ وَلَقَدْ رَآهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَىٰ عِنْدَ سِدْرَةِ الْمُنْتَهَىٰ عِنْدَهَا جَنَّةُ الْمَأْوَىٰ إِذْ يَغْشَى السِّدْرَةَ مَا يَغْشَىٰ مَا زَاغَ الْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَىٰ لَقَدْ رَأَىٰ مِنْ آيَاتِ رَبِّهِ الْكُبْرَىٰ

(The Prophet) Whose mind made no mistake in (the interpretation of) that which he saw (during the ascension). Will you doubt and dispute with him concerning that (sight) which he saw with his own eyes (it being no figment of imagination)? And, of course, he saw Him (in His another manifestation to him) yet another time. It was near the farthest lote-tree. Near where also is the Garden which is the real eternal abode. (This was) when the sublime thing (the Divine Manifestation) which was to cover lote-tree had covered it. (When he saw the Divine Manifestation) his eye deviated not (from the certainty of the Truth) nor did it wander away (from the invincible faith on which he stood). (It was the moment when) he saw the greatly important signs of his Lord. (Qur'an, Surah al-Najm, 53: 11-18).

Faith involves not only knowing the truth but also accepting it, having an inclination towards it and liking it; whereas disbelief involves rejecting the truth and showing an aversion to it.

Prophet Muhammad (S) has said:

The firmest handhold of faith is to love for the sake of God and to hate for the sake of God, to befriend God's friends and to renounce His enemies.[7](#)

Imam al-Sadiq ('a) has said:

Is faith anything but love and hate?[8](#)

It is also narrated that Imam al-Baqir ('a) has said:

Faith is love and love is faith.[9](#)

Faith is not mere acknowledgement of certain realities, rather, after acknowledgment, one must act based on that acknowledgement. Our actions must reflect our faith and be clear from the by-products of disbelief.

When Imam ٱAli ('a) was asked about belief, he said:

Faith involves acceptance with the heart, acknowledgement with the tongue, and actions with the limbs.[10](#)

Is the Prevalence of Disbelief Linked with the Emergence of

Science?

As discussed in Chapter 10, some people have linked the decline of religion with the prevalence of scientific understanding in society. They argue that as scientific understanding of nature improves, people will give up on religion. It is true that as someone's scientific understanding improves they are more likely to question any idea which does not have a good rational basis.

We notice that in a Pew Research Survey, atheists/agnostics were more likely to have a college or higher degree than the general public (44% vs 28%). It is also true that some religious traditions have dogmas which do not have a sound rational basis, and the followers are told to just "accept" and have "faith" in them. Naturally someone with a scientific or philosophical background will not just "accept" a religious dogma or have "faith" in them. Unable to find a satisfactory answer to religious dogmas or utility of following their religion, they are likely to leave that religion – as we are witnessing in Europe and North America.

But if someone's faith is grounded in reason and backed by personal conviction, then a scientific understanding of the universe will not lead to a loss of faith – in fact it can actually increase it.

If increased scientific understanding of the universe is the main reason why people are losing faith in God, then we should not see atheist/agnostic ideology prior to the scientific revolution in the 16th/17th Century.

As per the verses of the Qur'an discussed in this chapter and the debates of atheist/agnostics with the imams of the Ahlul Bayt ('a), it is clear that atheist/agnostic ideologies existed in the 7th/8th Century or even before that.

If the prevalence of science is the main reason for losing faith and religion, then why do we see that the largest group of such people is in China – where people are not particularly more scientifically educated than the rest of the world? The opposite is true in America which is the most technologically advanced nation right now but has a sizeable population who value faith and religion in their personal lives. Scientific progress and lack of faith in a society are not necessarily directly linked with each other.

Moreover, if good scientific and philosophical understanding leads to a loss of faith in God, then many Muslim scientists and philosophers from the Middle Ages should not be believers. On the contrary, many leading scientists of the middle ages like Avicenna and al-Tusi were well grounded in religious and philosophical traditions, and even wrote many treaties about religion. Even one of the greatest scientific minds like Sir Isaac Newton was a firm believer in monotheism and wrote a theological treaty called *Philosophical Origins of Gentile Theology* (see Chapter 10).

Even today, there are many scientists and philosophers amongst both Muslims and non-Muslims who see no conflict between science and religion. To link science with the loss of religion is another

conjecture and false assessment of atheists/agnostics looking to justify their irrational ideology.

To summarize, disbelief or the loss of faith is a result of a personal immoral, obstinate, arrogant way of thinking and behavior and not exercising reason properly. It comes from excessive materialism and indulgence in a pleasure-seeking behavior. The disbelievers worship the idol of the self and their religion is enjoyment of life and experiencing its various pleasures. They may do charitable work or engage in beneficial social causes due to the natural instinct towards compassion and altruism, but they have no solid reason why they engage in such behavior based on their agnostic/atheist world view as discussed in Chapter 11.

Many religious people may also have a lifestyle which is not very different from irreligious people because they too prioritize materialism over everything else. The loss of religion or faith in God has nothing to do with increased scientific understanding or rationality, in fact it springs from not exercising reason properly. The Qur'an says:

إِنَّ الْكَافِرُونَ إِلَّا فِي غُرُورٍ

The disbelievers are not but in delusion. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mulk, 67:20).

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10. Reason, Faith and Authority: A Shiite Perspective.

Chapter 13: Science without Reason: A self-existing universe out of nothing

The Physics

When we look around us, we find ourselves on a vast terrain made up of grasslands, forests, deserts, plains and mountains. There are fresh water lakes and rivers making their way through the landscape.

The landmass is surrounded by vast oceans stretching as far as the eye can see and further beyond. When we look up, we see drifting white clouds in the background of an uninterrupted bright blue sky. Every morning the life-giving bright sun rises from the east illuminating our surroundings and bringing its warmth with it. In the evening as the sun sets in the west, everything is enveloped by the darkness of night. The sun is replaced by the moon, and the blue sky by a deep darkness studded with innumerable stars giving a splendid display. What a beautiful set up for mankind to dwell in, explore and learn.

We have learned that though the surface of the earth appears flat, we live on a spherical planet that is squashed at its poles and swollen at the equator. Though heavenly objects seem to move around us, in fact it is the earth which is moving, rotating on its axis with a slight tilt giving rise to the repetition of night and day, as well as the seasons of the year. The earth is also moving at a high speed in an elliptical orbit around the sun, as are eight other planets (including the dwarf planet Pluto). These planets orbiting around the sun make up our solar system. Our sun is one of the billions of stars present in the spiral-shaped Milky Way Galaxy. The next galaxy which is closest to ours is called the Andromeda Galaxy. Galaxies are grouped in clusters and we belong to the Virgo Supercluster. Our initial observations estimated close to 200 billion galaxies in the universe, but more recent estimates put this figure ten times higher, approximately two trillion galaxies in the observable universe. The vastness of the universe if not beyond our imagination, is definitely beyond the depth of our vision.

The Qur'an says:

مَا تَرَىٰ فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِن تَفَافُوتٍ فَارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَىٰ مِن فُطُورٍ ثُمَّ ارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ كَرَّتَيْنِ يَنقَلِبْ إِلَيْكَ الْبَصَرُ...
خَاسِئًا وَهُوَ حَسِيرٌ

... You can see no flaw, no incongruity and no imperfection in the creation of the Most Gracious (God). Then look up once more (to heaven). Do you see any flaw? Look again and yet again (to find out any confusion in Divine law). (The result will only be that) your eye will return to you dazzled while it is weary (and you will be unable to find any discordance). (Qur'an, Surah al-Mulk, 67:3-4).

Up until the 20th Century, it was thought that the universe is stationary. But now we know that the galaxies are moving apart, in fact they are accelerating away from us in all directions. In other words, the universe is expanding. The Qur'an says:

وَالسَّمَاءَ بَنَيْنَاهَا بِأَيْدٍ وَإِنَّا لَمُوسِعُونَ

As for the heaven, We have built it with (Our) Mighty power, and verily We are surely its expanders. (Qur'an, Surah al-Dhariyat, 51:47).

The physical universe that we experience every day is confined by space and time. According to Einstein's special relativity, space and time should be viewed as one entity, the three-dimensional space and the time make one four dimensional space-time. According to special relativity time is not uniform throughout the universe and is influenced by the frame of reference of the observer. Time dilates – meaning that it moves slowly for a fast-moving object.¹ Time is also influenced by being in the vicinity of massive objects. So for instance, if there are two very accurate clocks that give the same time on the surface of the earth; if one of them is sent to the top of Mount Everest, time will pass faster for the clock at the summit as compared to the one which is left behind on the surface of the earth.

If the earth is moving around the sun, and the sun itself is moving in our galaxy, and all of the galaxies are grouped in clusters, then what is it that keeps the heavenly objects in their orbits and stars close enough to form our solar system and galaxies?

In the seventeenth Century, Sir Isaac Newton described this force which governs the motion of heavenly objects, as well as the movement of physical objects in our daily life as gravity. The earth or other objects are attracted to each other via the force of gravity and are influenced by them as long as they are in that object's gravitational field. For example, the tidal waves in the sea are produced due to the gravitational field of the sun and the moon.

While Newtonian physics explains the motion of objects through the concept of gravity, at the beginning of the 20th Century, Albert Einstein completely changed the concept of gravity through his theory of general relativity. According to him a massive object like the sun causes the space-time to curve resulting in a pull felt by nearby objects which we call gravity.² Think of the shape of a piece of cloth in whose center is a heavy ball. The cloth will be stretched and anything on the surface of the cloth will tend to fall towards the ball in the center and feel a pull similar to a gravitational pull.

This vast universe confined by space-time is made up of matter and energy. Simply speaking, matter is something which has a mass (resistant to motion when a force acts upon it) and it occupies space – for example a car has more mass than a bicycle. Energy is the ability to do work or bring change. According to Einstein's general relativity, energy and mass are really two aspects of the same reality and this is described mathematically as $E=mc^2$, where E = energy, m= mass, and c = the speed of light. A practical application of energy-mass equivalence is the energy produced in the nuclear reactors and during nuclear explosions through the breakdown of uranium.

Matter exists in solid, liquid and gaseous forms (plasma is the rare fourth form of matter). The particular form of matter depends on how closely packed the constituent molecules of that object are. For example, water at room temperature exists in a liquid form; cooling the surroundings will change it into a solid form (ice); and boiling it will transform it into a gaseous state (steam), which on cooling again will transform into a liquid form (e.g. water particles on the cover of a boiling pot). The water molecule is made up of two atoms of hydrogen attached to one atom of oxygen.

Hydrogen and oxygen are examples of what we call the elements which make up the basic constituents of all matter. There are over a hundred different elements known to us, some existing naturally, while others are produced in the lab.

An object's elemental constituency and the interaction amongst its molecules determines its properties; so for example, a sword made of the element iron has properties different from a diamond which is made up of carbon atoms.

What makes an element like carbon distinct from other elements such as iron, oxygen and hydrogen is its basic unit – the atom. Each atom has a central nucleus made up of sub-atomic particles called protons and neutrons which are surrounded by a cloud of electrons. The number of protons, neutrons and electrons in each atom makes it a distinct element and gives it its ensuing properties.

The protons and neutrons are themselves made up of smaller particles called quarks. We always observe quarks as a set of three – and independent quarks are not observed. Quarks are held together by what is called the strong nuclear force which also holds the nucleus of an atom together. The strong nuclear force is made up of virtual particles that pop in and out of existence all of the time.³ Most of the mass of the neutrons and protons is because of the strong nuclear force (remember mass and energy are two forms of the same reality).

While a strong nuclear force holds the matter together, another force called the weak nuclear force is responsible for the decay of radioactive elements like uranium and the release of radioactivity.

In an atom, the sub-atomic particle proton carries a positive charge and the orbiting electrons carry a negative charge. Negatively charged electrons are held close to the nucleus containing positively charged protons in an atom by another force called the electromagnetic force. This force is also responsible for all of the chemical and biological reactions that take place between the atoms.⁴ It is also the force which we experience when we touch something. Although, when we interact with another object we never actually touch it at a sub-atomic level, but instead we feel a repulsion of electromagnetic force which appears as a touch. Depending on the atomic structure of that object it appears hard, soft or fluid-like. Inserting one's hand in water or cutting something simply displaces the atoms without actually touching anything!

The charged particles of an atom like an electron can transmit energy known as electromagnetic radiation (EMR); for example, the transmission of energy from the sun. The EMR has both an electric and a magnetic field, oscillating in the wave form at different wavelengths. The spectrum of the EMR ranges from low frequency radio waves and microwaves (used for heating food) to high frequency x-ray and gamma rays. Within this spectrum of EMR is visible light, so the light that comes from the sun or a bulb is electromagnetic radiation! Different colors of light correspond to different wavelengths of this EMR.

Therefore, besides the sub-atomic particles there are four fundamental forces or interactions in nature

called the strong nuclear force, weak nuclear force, electromagnetism and gravity which hold the material universe together. Stephen Weinberg, Sheldon Gand and Abdul Salam in the 1970's showed that electromagnetic and weak nuclear forces can be combined and this is known as electroweak force.

Light not only behaves as a moving wave, but also as moving particles called photons, thus the wave-particle duality for the nature of light. In other words, light can behave for us as a wave or as a particle depending on which set of experiments are being used to study its properties. This leads us to the concept of Model Dependent Realism⁵, which means that our concept of external reality is based on a particular model of the external reality, for example in some experiments light behaves as a wave. The same reality can be interpreted through a different model in which light behaves in the form of particles, nevertheless it remains a type of electromagnetic radiation.

Wave-particle duality is one of the key concepts of 20th Century physics known as Quantum Physics (quanta means a packet of energy).

Another main tenant of Quantum Physics is Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which tells us that there are limits to our ability to simultaneously measure the position and velocity of a particle. The more precisely we measure the speed, the less precisely we can measure the position of a particle and vice versa. This tells us about a fundamental uncertainty in nature where the future is determined by probabilities of various outcomes without a definitive certainty.⁶

The third aspect of quantum mechanics is that all of the variable aspects of an object exist only in relation to other objects. For example, the speed of a moving object is always in relation to another object. Similarly, time depends on the frame of reference of the observer. The variables of an object manifest themselves when it interacts with other objects. Merely observing a phenomenon can actually cause a change in it.

The universe has much more to it than just the visible matter which makes up the stars, galaxies, planets, plants, animals, and human beings. It must have much more "matter" or "something else" to account for the clustering of visible matter to form the stars and galaxies. This "something else" has never been directly observed as it does not interact electromagnetically with the visible matter, but its presence is indirectly observed due to its gravitational effect; for example the bending of light known as gravitational lensing. This matter is called the dark matter. In fact, only 5% of our universe is made up of visible matter, 25% is dark matter, and 70% is what is called dark energy. (Remember matter and energy are two aspects of the same reality). Dark energy is present in what we call the empty space. There is more energy in the empty space than in the visible objects⁷ and we do not know what the dark matter and dark energy are made up of and so we really only interact with a tiny fraction of what exists, but there is a lot more out there which we have no idea about.

If the universe is expanding and the galaxies are moving apart, then in the distant past they must have been closer together. It is estimated that some fourteen billion years ago, all of the matter and the

energy in the universe was concentrated in a very tiny region of unimaginable density and temperature. Georges Lemaitre in the 1920's proposed that the universe started to expand from this state in an event now known as the "Big Bang":

أَوَلَمْ يَرَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ كَانَتَا رَتْقًا فَفَتَقْنَاهُمَا وَجَعَلْنَا مِنَ الْمَاءِ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ حَيٍّ أَفَلَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

Do those who disbelieve not see that the heavens and the earth were (once) one mass all closed up, then We tore them apart. And it is from water that We created all life. Will they not believe (in the face of all this). (Qur'an, Surah al-Anbiya', 21:30).

The evidence for this explanation of the origin of the universe is the discovery of cosmic background radiation (CMBR) left over from the very hot and dense early universe that would have existed after the big bang. Moreover, the detection of a certain amount of helium in addition to hydrogen as predicted by this theory further cements the idea that the universe started from what is known as the Big Bang Theory.

The universe, since its beginning, has been expanding like a balloon expands when it is filled with air. Soon after the big bang, there was a period of immense inflation in which the space expanded even faster than the speed of light, as supported by the discovery of tiny fluctuations in the background CMBR.[8](#)

When the physicists attempt to explain the origin of the universe employing Einstein's theory of general relativity, that theory predicts the existence of a point at which the temperature, density and curvature of the universe are all infinite, also known as singularity. In other words, it means that the general relativity breaks down and is unable to explain how the universe started.[9](#)

For a universe that is of an extremely small size, as it is thought it must have been at the beginning of space-time, quantum mechanics will have to be employed in order to understand its behavior and properties. On the other hand, gravity which keeps the stars and galaxies together is best explained by general relativity. Thus, a unified theory combining general relativity which deals with gravity and large structures like the stars and galaxies and quantum mechanics which deals with the existence at a sub-atomic level, something known as the "quantum theory of gravity" will have to be used to explain the beginning of the universe, but no such theory currently exists. At present, general relativity is not fully consistent with quantum mechanics.[10](#)

Without a working and generally accepted quantum theory of gravity, physicists have attempted to combine general relativity with quantum mechanics in a theory known as Loop Quantum Gravity. According to this theory, the space itself is made up of a quanta of something which gives rise to gravitational field. Another theory in this area of research, is known as the String Theory.[11](#) Neither of them however are well accepted standard models of the quantum theory of gravity.

Another idea that has been proposed is to consider the concept of a multi-verse instead of a uni-verse in which multiple universes with different sets of laws of physics exist, instead of only our observable universe. In this model, there is a spontaneous quantum creation of universes, like the appearance of bubbles of steam in boiling water.¹² Many bubbles appear and disappear – each bubble representing a tiny universe. Some of these bubbles expand, and last long enough to form a large universe like ours and possibly have stars, galaxies and intelligent life.

What can be said about this model is that the spontaneous appearance of multiple universes is a possibility, though at present we have no empirical evidence to back up this claim. We do not know if this model is a reality or just a figment of the imagination of some physicist trying hard to disprove the existence of God. Moreover, what these physicists do not explain is what is this “boiling water” or for some “boiling oatmeal”¹³ in which these tiny universes are appearing spontaneously through “quantum fluctuations”?

Some people have even suggested that the universe started from “nothing”, but “nothing” does not mean “nothing” but it actually means “something;” and “nothing”, which really is “something” is empty space and the laws of physics. So the universe started from “space” and “laws of physics.” Where did the space and laws of physics come from, is not to be asked as there is no answer to it. Moreover, the “empty space” has “non-zero energy” in it. So now we have space, energy and laws of physics from which the universe arose spontaneously¹⁴ and just as sub-atomic particles can appear and disappear spontaneously, some have suggested that empty space can also come into existence from nothing. This looks more like an explanation given by J.K Rowling in the Harry Potter series rather than a serious physicist giving a scientific explanation.

However, some people will wish that they lived in such a universe where things can just pop into existence from nothing. So when the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) asks them about the origin of a large unexplained deposit in their bank account they can argue that it originated from “nothing”, just as our entire universe originated from “nothing”. It looks like at singularity not only general relativity breaks down, but also the reason and logic of some physicists!

The notion that a self-existing universe has originated from non-existence is absurd. If our universe is one of the infinite numbers of multi-verses, then the question still remains that where did they all originate from? Is the source of origin of the universe a self-existing entity or not? If the source is not self-existing then the question will still remain that where did it all come from? On the other hand if the source is self-existing then it is God, you can call it empty space, energy, multi-verse or any other terminology that suits you (see Chapter 3). The idea of a universe without God is an irrational idea with no logical answer to it:

أَمْ خُلِقُوا مِنْ غَيْرِ شَيْءٍ أَمْ هُمُ الْخَالِقُونَ

Were they created of nothing, or were they themselves the creators? (Qur'an, Surah al-Tur, 52:35).

Meta-Physics

In the first section of this chapter, I described a brief overview of the physical universe as explained from physics. The visible matter makes up a small portion of what we know exists, and the dark matter and dark energy makes up a much larger portion of existence with which we do not interact with, like the visible matter. In the next few pages, I will attempt to paint a picture of the reality as described by Muslim philosophers and mystics. Philosophy is important in understanding the reality because the main subject of philosophy is existence (Please refer back to Chapter 3 to review some of these concepts).

Existence (Arabic: *al-wujud*) is a self-evident reality. The most fundamental concept that we can make about anything is that it exists. Some raise doubts about the reality of existence. If I get scared from a snake, it means that both the snake and I exist otherwise there was no need to get scared from it. Therefore, existence is a reality.

Existence is the commonality between everything that exists. What is common between a man, a horse and a banana is that they all exist. Existence is the source of all of the manifestations, and if something is perceived then it must exist. Non-existence does not exist; and it has no attributes as it does not exist.

When we explore the reality we not only ask whether something exists or not but also what is it? This makeup of something is called its quiddity (Arabic: *mahiyya*). Therefore, we make two concepts about everything – first does it exist, and second what is it?

Existence is the commonality between everything that exists, but the difference between a man, a horse and a tree lies in their quiddity or makeup. Thus, existence has primacy over quiddity. The quiddity of something is a secondary mental construct about a particular existence.

Existence is one reality but in different degrees. For example, light is a reality but has different degrees depending on whether it's coming from an ordinary bulb or from the sun. Both are examples of light therefore they are the same in their quiddity, but different in the degree of their existence.

If existence is a graded reality, then is there any existence which is higher than the material existence? Material existence by its nature is confined by four-dimensional space-time. It is also divisible into smaller units all the way to atoms and beyond. Material existence is also perishable.

For example, if someone has \$1,000 and it is distributed to 10 people equally, then they all will have \$100 each and the donor will be left with nothing.

But meta-physical realities have attributes different from the material realities.

For example, knowledge is a meta-physical reality; that does not occupy space. If a person increases in their knowledge, they will not start to bloat physically. Knowledge is not physically visible, there is no difference in the physical appearance of an astronaut and a surgeon, unless they are in their professional clothing. Similarly, knowledge does not decrease by distributing it to others. For example, a teacher can teach algebra to their students without losing the knowledge of algebra for themselves. The same teacher can teach fifty students in class at the same time, each learning algebra according to their capacity to learn, without any deficiency in the knowledge of the teacher. In fact, as opposed to material objects, knowledge is something which increases by distributing it. Therefore, we must acknowledge the existence of the meta-physical realities which behave differently from material objects.

In the hierarchy of existence, after the material realities comes the soul, and then the pure intellect or spirit. The soul is devoid of matter, but depends on it for action. It also has the potentiality for perfection. The intellect is higher in existence than matter, and the soul, it emanates from the Divine. It brings perfection to both the soul and the material objects. [15](#)

If the material realities exist in the material realm, then the meta-physical realities should exist in a meta-physical realm. There must be realms beyond the material universe where these realities exist. Islamic theologians, philosophers and mystics have talked about multiple realms of existence beyond the material realm. The Qur'an also talks about the existence of seven different realms of existence:

اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ وَمِنَ الْأَرْضِ مِثْلَهُنَّ يَتَنَزَّلُ الْأَمْرُ بَيْنَهُنَّ لِتَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ أَحَاطَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عِلْمًا

It is God Who has created seven heavens and (He has created) as many earths. The (divine) law permeates through them. (He tells this to you) so that you may know that God is Possessor of all power to do every desired thing and God encompasses everything in His knowledge. (Qur'an, Surah al-Talaq, 65: 12).

The lowest of these heavens is the one in which we live and it is filled with stars and galaxies:

إِنَّا زَيْنَّا السَّمَاءَ الدُّنْيَا بِزِينَةِ الْكَوَاكِبِ

Verily, We have beautified and embellished the lower heaven (the heaven visible to you) with an excellent embellishment, the stars and planets. (Qur'an, Surah al-Saffat, 37:6).

Beyond the material world lies a realm called the *barzakh* (buffer) or the intermediate realm where the soul exists. This realm is in between the material realm and the world of intellect; this is the realm of the soul:

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ رَبِّ ارْجِعُونِ لَعَلِّي أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا فِيمَا تَرَكْتُ كَلَّا إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَائِلُهَا وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ بَرْزَخٌ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ

Behold! when death approaches one of them he says (making entreaties repeatedly), Send me back, My Lord! send me back, So that I may do righteous (deeds) which I failed to do (in the worldly life). Never, that can never be, (is the answer he receives). It is but a word (of excuse) which he utters. And there is a barrier (buffer) behind them which shall remain till the day when they shall be raised to life (again). (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'minun, 23:99-100).

Beyond the realm of the *barzakh* are other realms such as the world of pure intellect (ʿaql). The experience in these meta-physical realms is much more intense than the physical realm. The experience in these realms is more permanent and there are less limitations and restrictions in perceiving their realities. They work with different physics and are higher in the degree of existence than the material realm.

As compared to higher realms of existence, the material realm is like a shadow, an illusion, and a deception of the reality. It is a restricted interface to a higher degrees of existence. Things in this material realm are often not how they appear to be, there is constant change in them, and they do not last long.

وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْغُرُورِ

And the life of this world is nothing but enjoyment of delusion. (Qur'an, Surah Ale Imran, 3: 185).

Our stay in the material realm of existence is also very brief. It is a common experience that when we look back at our lives it appears that not a lot of time has passed. It was only yesterday that we were going to school, or started our job or got married – though many years or even decades may have passed since that event:

قَالَ كَمْ لَبِيتُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ عَدَدَ سِنِينَ قَالُوا لَبِيتْنَا يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ فَاسْأَلِ الْعَادِينَ قَالَ إِنَّ لَبِيتَكُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ۖ لَوْ أَنَّكُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

(God) will (then) say, What number of years have you lived on the earth? They will say, We remained only for a day or part of a day (we have no exact idea), but ask those who keep the count. (God) will say, You sojourned but a little while, if only you knew (what loss you have incurred by missing doing good). (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'minun, 23: 112-114).

The higher realms of existence do have a concept of space, but their spatial layout far exceeds anything in the material realm. The likeness of the material realm as compared to the higher realms, is like that of

a fetus in the womb of the mother compared to living outside of the womb after birth. The fetus in the womb cannot possibly imagine the vastness of the world outside waiting for one, just as humans cannot imagine the vastness of the higher realms of existence.

سَابِقُوا إِلَى مَغْفِرَةٍ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ وَجَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا كَعَرْضِ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ

(Mankind!) Advance quickly, outstripping one another, towards the protection from your Lord and (towards) a Garden the extensiveness of which is (beyond measure) as the extensiveness of the heaven and the earth... (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:21).

There is a concept of time in the higher realms as well, though the experience of time leans more towards permanence and eternity, as opposed to transience and temporal events. As we know that time is relative and will depend on the level of existence, thus the concept of time will also vary. A day in that realm could mean a thousand years in relation to our time:

يُدَبِّرُ الْأَمْرَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ ثُمَّ يَعْرُجُ إِلَيْهِ فِي يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ مِمَّا تَعُدُّونَ

He plans the scheme from the heaven (and sends it) to the earth, then it shall ascend to Him in (the course of) a day the duration of which is a thousand years according to your computation (in this world). (Qur'an, Surah al-Sajdah, 32:5).

Or it could even be 50,000 years depending on which realm of existence we are talking about.

تَعْرُجُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَالرُّوحُ إِلَيْهِ فِي يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُ خَمْسِينَ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ

The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a day the measure of which is (equal to) fifty thousand years. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'arij, 70:4).

If there are higher realms of existence, then where are they and how come we do not experience them? In my understanding, we do not access the higher realms of existence just by travelling a physical distance in a certain direction. The higher realms are right beside us, we just have to have the ability to part away the covering of space, just like parting the two panels of a curtain to look beyond the material realm. All of us experience the higher realm of *barzakh*, when we fall asleep. The act of sleeping and experiencing dreams during sleep is through accessing the realm of *barzakh* to a certain extent. I will discuss this more in the next chapter (Chapter 14).

Another question that comes to mind is if there is any movement of objects between different realms? In other words, can things come to our realm of existence from the higher realms, or similarly can things move from the material realm to the higher realms?

There are several stories in the Qur'an which talk about the descent of food from the heavens to the earth. In the story of Prophet Jesus ('a) and his companions, the Qur'an narrates:

إِذْ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ يَا عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ هَلْ يَسْتَطِيعُ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يُنْزِلَ عَلَيْنَا مَائِدَةً مِنَ السَّمَاءِ ۖ قَالَ اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ 112 قَالُوا نُرِيدُ أَنْ نَأْكُلَ مِنْهَا وَتَطْمَئِنَّ قُلُوبُنَا وَنَعْلَمَ أَنْ قَدْ صَدَّقْتَنَا وَنَكُونَ عَلَيْهَا مِنَ الشَّاهِدِينَ 113 قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ اللَّهُمَّ رَبَّنَا أَنْزِلْ عَلَيْنَا مَائِدَةً مِنَ السَّمَاءِ تَكُونُ لَنَا عِيدًا لِأَوَّلِنَا وَآخِرِنَا وَآيَةً مِنْكَ ۖ وَارْزُقْنَا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ الرَّازِقِينَ 114 قَالَ اللَّهُ إِنِّي مُنَزِّلُهَا عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بَعْدُ مِنْكُمْ فَإِنِّي أُعَذِّبُهُ عَذَابًا لَا أُعَذِّبُهُ أَحَدًا مِنَ الْعَالَمِينَ 115

(Recall the time) when the disciples said: O Jesus, son of Mary! Would your Lord consent to send down to us a table spread with a sure and lasting food from heaven? He said: Keep your duty to God, if you are true believers. They said: We desire that we may eat of it and that our hearts be at rest and that we may know that you have indeed spoken the truth to us and that we may be among the witnesses thereto. Jesus, son of Mary, prayed: O God, our Lord! send down to us a table spread with a sure and lasting food from heaven that it may be to us a (source of) festival ever recurring, to the first of us and to the last of us and (serve as) sign from You and provide sustenance for us, for You are the Best of providers of sustenance. God said: I will surely be (always) sending it (the food) down to you but whosoever shows ingratitude afterwards, I will surely punish him with a punishment which I will give to no one else in the whole world. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'idah, 5: 112–115).

Similar events (or miracles) have been reported as happening to the Tribes of Israel and Mary ('a) – the mother of Prophet Jesus ('a).

If there is a movement between the realms, then there should be a concept of a door or opening through which things can travel. The Qur'an gives a concept of "opening" or a "door" in the heavens, perhaps similar to the concept of a "space-time wormhole":

وَفُتِحَتِ السَّمَاءُ فَكَانَتْ أَبْوَابًا

And the heavens shall be opened as if there were doors. (Qur'an, Surah al-Naba', 78: 19).

As for the movement from the material realm to higher realms, we have one instance in the Qur'an where Prophet Muhammad (S) was taken from the material realm of existence to a higher realm and then returned back within one night. His journey is described as a two-stage event – the *isra* – the physical journey upon the earth from Mecca to Jerusalem, and the *me'raj* – the journey from Jerusalem into the heavens:

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَى الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ آيَاتِنَا ۚ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ

Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque (at Mecca) to the Distant Mosque (at Jerusalem), the precincts of which (too) We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. Infact, He alone is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing. (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17: 1).

After travelling from Mecca to Jerusalem, the night journey of the Prophet continued to the highest possible point in existence. The Qur'an narrates this event as below:

وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَى ثُمَّ دَنَا فَتَدَلَّى فَكَانَ قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَى فَأَوْحَى إِلَى عَبْدِهِ مَا أَوْحَى مَا كَذَبَ الْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَى ۖ أَفَتُمَارُونَهُ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَىٰ وَلَقَدْ رَآهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَىٰ عِنْدَ سِدْرَةِ الْمُنْتَهَىٰ عِنْدَهَا جَنَّةُ الْمَأْوَىٰ إِذْ يَغْشَى السِّدْرَةَ مَا يَغْشَىٰ مَا زَاغَ الْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَىٰ لَقَدْ رَأَىٰ مِنْ آيَاتِ رَبِّهِ الْكُبْرَىٰ

And he (Prophet Muhammad (S)) attained to the zenith of heights (in his spiritual ascension). Then he drew near to Him and afterwards he descended. So that he became (as it were) one chord to two bows or closer still. Then He revealed that excellent and mighty revelation which He had to send to His servant (Muhammad), Whose heart (mind) made no mistake in (the interpretation of) that which he saw (during the ascension). Will you doubt and dispute with him concerning that (sight) which he saw with his own eyes (it being no figment of imagination)? And, of course, he saw Him (in His another manifestation to him) yet another time. It was near the Sidrah which stands at the farthest end, near where also is the Garden which is the real eternal abode. (This was) when the sublime thing (the Divine Manifestation) which was to cover Sidrah had covered it. (When he saw the Divine Manifestation) his eye deviated not (from the certainty of the Truth) nor did it wander away (from the invincible faith on which he stood). (It was the moment when) he saw the greatly important signs of his Lord. (Qur'an, Surah al-Najm, 53:7-18).

In this chapter, I have given a description of the observable universe as explained from physics.

Although our understanding of the physical universe has increased tremendously, there is lot more to know for which we have very limited understanding, for example the dark matter and dark energy. Some have attempted to give this notion that existence (universe) has come from non-existence which is an irrational and absurd idea. Without incorporating monotheism there is no rational explanation for the existence of the universe. But what the physics tells us about is only a description of the observable universe.

Based on revealed sciences, we understand that the scope of existence is far beyond the material realm of existence which is another way of describing the concept of the multi-verse. The material realm of existence is a very limited interface to a much larger meta-physical reality. All of us experience the meta-physical realm during the daily process of sleep. Those with a higher level of spirituality can access those realms even when they are awake however what is certain is that all of us will move to those realms after our death:

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ۖ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ

Every living being shall encounter death, then you shall be made to return to Us. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ankabut, 29:57).

- [1.](#) Rovelli, Carlo. The Reality is Not What it Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity, Riverhead Books, New York 2014.
- [2.](#) Ibid.
- [3.](#) Krauss, Lawrence, A Universe from Nothing. Why There is Something Rather than Nothing, Atria, New York, 2012.
- [4.](#) Hawking, Stephen and Mlodinow, Leonard, The Grand Design, Bantam Book Trade, New York, 2010.
- [5.](#) Ibid.
- [6.](#) Rovelli, The Reality is Not What it Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity.
- [7.](#) Krauss, A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing.
- [8.](#) Krauss, A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing.
- [9.](#) Hawking and Mlodinow, The Grand Design.
- [10.](#) Rovelli, The Reality is Not What it Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity.
- [11.](#) Ibid.
- [12.](#) Hawking and Mlodinow, The Grand Design.
- [13.](#) Krauss, Lawrence, A Universe from Nothing: Why there is Something Rather than Nothing, Atria, New York 2012.
- [14.](#) Ibid.
- [15.](#) For further details see Bidaya al-Hikma by Allama Taba'taba'i.

Chapter 14: Science without empirical evidence

The Conjecture of the Origin of Species by Natural Selection

Biology

Our planet earth is teeming with life. There are millions of species of plants and animals that inhabit the earth. Some are found in thick forests and jungles. Others can be found in extreme environments that exist in glaciers and hot deserts. The airborne birds make beautiful formations as they traverse from one place to another. The oceans and rivers are filled with aquatic forms of life. Even a single drop of water is filled with numerous microscopic creatures existing in a universe of their own, and it is in this water, that life is thought to have originated several billion years ago:

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنَ الْمَاءِ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ حَيٍّ ۖ أَفَلَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

...And it is from water that We created all life. Will they not believe (in the face of all this). (Qur'an, Surah al-Anbiya', 21:30).

Billions of years ago, certain gases like methane, ammonia and hydrogen were thought to have existed in the earth's atmosphere. Under optimal conditions of temperature and pressure, these gases in combination with water were transformed into organic (carbon based) compounds. These compounds then later formed a primitive molecule called the ribonucleic acid (RNA) which is considered to be the first genetic material. RNA then gave rise to another compound which forms the primary genetic material called the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA). This process further evolved until the first independent existing units called the cells came into existence, which form the basis of all life as we understand it. [1](#)

Individual cells display the properties of life such as obtaining nutrients and energy from the environment, responding to external stimuli, having a demarcating boundary called the cell membrane and the ability to make offspring through reproduction. These properties make living cells distinct from other objects like a stone or a mountain which lack them.

The earliest cells called the prokaryotes, e.g. bacteria, emerged approximately 3.5 billion years ago. They contain a single strand of DNA and lack a central nucleus and other intracellular organelles.

About 1.5 billion years ago, a much more advanced cellular form called the eukaryotes emerged. The DNA of eukaryotes is double stranded, organized in distinct structures called the chromosomes which are housed in a central nucleus. They also possess distinct intracellular organelles like the mitochondria which are used to generate energy. [2](#)

There are two distinct types of eukaryotes. One is photosynthetic, meaning that it can capture the sun's energy and convert it into carbohydrates (sugars) through chemical reactions using a green colored molecule called the chlorophyll. The green colored photosynthetic eukaryotes make up grass, trees, and flowering plants. They also act as the lungs of our planet in the sense that they absorb atmospheric carbon dioxide and in return generate oxygen. This oxygen is vital for the second type of non-photosynthetic eukaryote cells which the animals are made up of.

Though individual cells are very small and microscopic, they are remarkably complex and incredibly sophisticated structures. Their outer cell membrane regulates what molecules go in and out of the cells. The cells have an elaborate transport system moving molecules within the cell. Mitochondria act as power generating areas, and ribosomes are used to manufacture protein molecules. There are complex biochemical reactions taking place inside the cell which are tightly regulated. The entire cell machinery is controlled by genetic material housed in the central nucleus. The complexity of operation within each individual cell far exceeds that of a large metropolitan city. Each individual plant and animal is made up of trillions of such cells specialized to give rise to different organs and systems, such as the respiratory (breathing) or cardiovascular (heart and blood vessels) systems. An individual plant or animal is remarkably complex, and has a well-organized system working efficiently to maintain life in that organism.

There is also tremendous diversity of life on the earth, which contains several million species of plants

and animals. Each member of a specie has the ability to exchange genetic material with the other members of the same species.

When reviewing everything on Earth, scientists have divided all of the living things into five distinct categories called kingdoms.[3](#)

The first kingdom is called Monera, which includes mostly bacteria which are prokaryotes. Bacteria are the most diverse and abundant organisms on earth.

The next kingdom is called Protista, which includes organisms with eukaryotic cells. They include algae and molds, and are mostly unicellular, some of them undergo photosynthesis, and others obtain nutrients from the environment.

The next kingdom is called Fungi and they include yeasts and molds; mushrooms also belong to this kingdom.

The fourth kingdom is known as Plantae, and this includes common plants and trees. They have the distinct property of photosynthesis and release oxygen into the earth's atmosphere.

The fifth kingdom is called Animalia, and includes all of the different kinds of animals. They are distinct from plants in the sense that they demonstrate locomotion and have sensory appendages for sight and hearing.

The Animalia kingdom is then sub-divided into different groups called the Phyla. Some phyla lack a backbone such as the flatworms, insects and starfish. Others have a distinct backbone called the vertebral column and they include many types of fish, amphibians (e.g. frogs), reptiles (e.g. lizard), birds and mammals (e.g. cows and humans).

These tremendous varieties of life forms exist on the planet earth in their unique habitats that are suitable for their survival (e.g. fish inside water). The various species of plants and animals co-exist in tightly regulated and interdependent environments which make up their own unique ecosystems.

The question that comes to mind is how did life change from very early primitive microscopic cells to millions of distinct and unique species including intelligent beings like us who are trying to understand all of this? The most likely explanation given by scientists is known as the Theory of Evolution through natural selection which was first proposed by Charles Darwin in 1859.[4](#)

According to this explanation, life started several billion years ago in the form of simple cells like bacteria. It then slowly evolved or changed into more complex forms accompanied by a gradual change in their genome. New species appeared from pre-existing species. Members of one species can interbreed, but they are unable to breed with members of other species. The millions of species of plants and animals that exist today have descended from common ancestors who no longer exist. This entire process which spans billions of years is thought to have happened through what is known as natural

selection.

Natural selection means that within a particular species there are genetic differences between various members of that species, e.g. some are taller or faster than others. Some of these differences affect an individual's ability to survive. Therefore, those traits or genes which give survival advantage will be passed on to the next generation, whereas those traits or genes which give survival disadvantage will be gradually eliminated. Certain traits will slowly become more prominent among the members of a species than others. As the process goes on for millions of years and species adapt to the changing environment, they will evolve and look a lot different from their ancestors. This process eventually leads to generations of entirely new species distinct from their ancestors.

For example, certain members of a species have more hair on their body than others. Having more hair is helpful during colder temperatures as hair provides insulation and keeps the body warm. If in a particular habitat, the temperature becomes colder than usual, then those animals with more hair on their body surface will have a higher chance of withstanding the cold and thus surviving. Over many generations all members of this species will have more body hair than their ancestors.[5](#)

Similarly, female peacocks prefer to mate with those male peacocks that have a larger and brighter tail. Gradually only those male peacocks will survive that have larger, and brighter tails and those with smaller tails will be eliminated.

Now when we combine Theory of Evolution by natural selection with the fossil records of animals and plants, we can trace how life might have appeared on earth.

Billions of years ago, there were simple unicellular and multi-cellular organisms on the earth. Many were prokaryotes and some were eukaryotes. Around 570 million years ago, the Cambrian era started during which we see the appearance of marine invertebrates (sea animals without a backbone). Then marine vertebrates (such as fish) appeared along with mollusks (snails, octopus) and arthropods (shrimps and crab). We also see the appearance of land plants. This was followed by the appearance of amphibians who could live on both land and water (such as frogs).

Then we see the appearance of insects on the land as well as reptiles (e.g. lizards) which live mostly on the land.

This is followed by the Jurassic era in which dinosaurs dominated the earth, and we also see the appearance of some mammals (which give birth to babies instead of laying eggs).

Then there was an emergence of more land plants and trees.

During this time, birds also appeared which were thought to have evolved from reptiles. Then some 65 million years ago dinosaurs suddenly disappeared, and mammals began to flourish on the earth.[6](#)

وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَ كُلَّ دَابَّةٍ مِنْ مَاءٍ فَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ يَمْشِي عَلَى بَطْنِهِ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ يَمْشِي عَلَى رِجْلَيْنِ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ يَمْشِي عَلَى أَرْبَعٍ
يَخْلُقُ اللَّهُ مَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

And God has created every animal from water. Some of them move upon their bellies and some move upon two feet and some among them move upon four. God creates what He please. Verily, God is the Possessor of every power to do whatever He wills. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nur, 24:45).

Around four million years ago some mammals appeared which, like us, walked upright on two feet. One such species was called *Australopithecus afarensis*.

Around 1.8 million years ago another species called *Homo erectus* appeared who possessed large brains, knew the use of fire, and built complex tools.

Some 300,000 years ago another species called *Homo neanderthalensis* appeared which were the closest to modern humans. They lived all over Europe and the Middle East. Like us, they are thought to have buried their dead.

Some 28,000 years ago they suddenly disappeared. Based on the “out of Africa” theory *Homo sapiens* (modern humans) are thought to have appeared in Africa 100,000 years ago and they spread to the rest of the world out competing both *Homo erectus* and *Homo neanderthalensis*.⁷

Today *Homo sapiens* dominate the earth with an estimated population exceeding seven billion individuals.

The Scientific Evidence for Evolution

Evolution through natural selection is the dominant scientific theory which explains how life evolved on earth and how millions of plant and animal species including us have come into existence. This theory is used by atheists to reject the idea that life exists on earth through an act of creation from God. Let us examine the evidence to support this theory.

1. Artificial Selection/Breeding

It is well known that through carefully selecting animal and plant pairs for reproduction we can enhance certain traits in their offsprings. This has been done for thousands of years to rear cows which give more milk or meat, or horses with better speed and endurance such as the Arabian horses. There are hundreds of different kinds of dogs of various sizes, shapes and characteristics and all descend from a common ancestor, likely wolves. Similarly from wild cabbage, different vegetables such as brussel sprouts, broccoli and cauliflower have evolved.⁸ This shows that by choosing breeding pairs, future generations of offsprings can have traits which can be very different from their ancestors.

2. Fossil Evidence

Fossils are well preserved remnants of animals and plants which can be accurately dated due to the presence of radioactive carbon or potassium found in the rocks discovered along with the fossils. Fossils give us a history of which animals or plants came first and which came later. Fossil records clearly show us that life started with simple organisms billions of years ago. Then gradually more complex forms including amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals appeared. There are also transitional forms between two different types of animals having common features of both, implying that animals evolved from a common ancestor, e.g. an extinct animal archaeopteryx is thought to be the common ancestor of reptiles and birds having the features of both.

3. Homologous Anatomy/Embryology/Genome

There is a remarkable similarity in the anatomy and embryology of different animals. The upper limbs of humans and the forelimbs of dogs and birds are quite similar in their bony structures. Similarly, the early stage embryos of fish, tortoise, chicken and even humans look very similar to each other. As the embryos grow and become fetuses, they start to look different from each other. Moreover, during embryonic development the changes seem to follow an evolutionary sequence, for example our circulatory system during early development looks fish like and then changes to something similar to embryonic amphibians, and then embryonic reptiles and finally true mammalian circulatory system develops.⁹

Similar changes are observed during the development of kidneys as well. Developing embryos seem to follow an evolutionary sequence. If we were not derived from common ancestors then why do we need to follow such a sequence?

The similarity between different animals is not only apparent in their embryos and anatomy, but also in their genetic material. There is a remarkable similarity in the genetic code and the resulting proteins between various animals, plants and even bacteria. Such similarity points towards having a common ancestor between different species.

4. Bad Design

One of the arguments in favor of evolution by natural selection is the presence of vestigial organs which seemingly have no role, such as the appendix. This points towards our evolutionary past and it represents organs which are no longer needed. Similarly, there are instances of bad design such as the fact that there is a blind spot in our visual field due to the presence of an area called the optic disc on our retina from where the optic nerve passes. Most of us do not even notice it, but if we get our eyes tested there is a small area in our visual field from which we are unable to see. Another example of bad design is the long course of recurrent laryngeal nerve through the chest, especially on the left side. This nerve controls our voice box which is located in the neck and there is apparently no reason for the nerve

to go through the chest and then come back to the neck. If God created us, why are there certain features which do not make sense and appear as a case of bad design and can only be explained in the context of our evolutionary history?

5. Geographic Evidence

Oceanic islands like Hawaii in the Pacific and St. Helena in the Atlantic have many species of birds, plants and insects but they lack freshwater fish, amphibians, reptiles and land mammals. These islands arose from the seafloor and were never connected to a continent. It is thought that birds, plants and insects reached these oceanic islands through long distance dispersal, e.g. flying or floating in sea water from the nearest continent, whereas freshwater fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals lack this ability, thus we do not find them in oceanic islands. The question is why did God not create fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals in these oceanic islands? Why are there only certain kinds of animals and plants on these oceanic islands but not on the other?

Criticism of the Theory of Evolution

As I mentioned earlier that the scientific Theory of Evolution is used by atheists as an argument against the existence of God. Their argument goes something like this: Since life on this earth started on its own and gradually evolved into higher forms through natural selection, thus, God has no role to play in the existence of life on earth, and therefore, God does not exist.

Just paying a little attention to this line of thinking makes it clear that it is a very weak argument for the non-existence of God.

A monotheist can argue that what if God initiated life on earth and then gradually evolved it into higher forms through the process of natural selection? Natural selection is His way of creating higher forms. So it is quite obvious that this theory cannot be used to argue against the existence of God, though it does go against those who believe that life started only several thousand years ago as reported in certain religious texts.

Again, to rephrase, the Theory of Evolution as accepted by the scientific community is not a convincing argument against the existence of God, though it does give a different account of the origins of life on earth as opposed to those who believe that life started only a few thousand years ago.

Like any scientific theory, the Theory of Evolution by natural selection and the social and religious implications of it are open to criticism. As mentioned in the first chapter of this book, the beauty of scientific knowledge is that it is based on experimental evidence. We can perform experiments under certain conditions to prove or disprove a hypothesis. Others can repeat the same experiment under the same circumstances and should reach the same conclusion.

Within scientific knowledge there are various grades of evidence. Some scientific evidence is based on

observational studies only which are considered a lower level of evidence – for example, we observe that those who are obese are more likely to develop diabetes. From this, we can draw a conclusion that obesity causes diabetes or is a risk factor for diabetes. In order to prove this point, further experimentation is needed. As we know, doing such experiments in humans is not practical and so in order to study the link between obesity and diabetes, scientists have developed certain mouse and rat models in which genetically modified or high calorie diet fed animals are facilitated to develop obesity and they eventually develop diabetes as well. Thus, through experimentations, we can prove that obesity leads to diabetes or is a risk factor for diabetes.

With this brief background let us analyze the scientific evidence for the Theory of Evolution by natural selection.

Evolution is a self-evident reality. We live in a material world in which things are constantly changing and this is one of the reason why the future is unpredictable. Everything around us evolves. An individual, a family, a society, a company, a country all go through evolution. An individual evolves during his life time – from a baby and toddler to an adult and then an old person. We also evolve over successive generations – in inter-racial marriages, the children have features which are a mix of the parent's different races. If we look at successive models of a car, such as a Honda Civic, we can see how it has evolved from 1970's when it was first introduced to the latest 2017 model.

We also observe the phenomenon of evolution in biological sciences. A common example is bacterial resistance to anti-biotics. After repeated exposure to anti-biotics certain strains of bacteria evolve and develop resistance to the anti-biotic.

Similarly, there is a type of lung cancer called adenocarcinoma, which is often seen in non-smokers. Some lung adenocarcinomas, especially amongst non-smokers, carry a specific genetic mutation called the Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) mutation (exon 19 deletion or exon 21 L858R mutation). The lung cancer patients with EGFR mutation respond very well to a drug called Erlotinib, which is a once a day oral pill with minimal side effects. It is even better than chemotherapy in terms of its efficacy to treat this particular type of lung cancer. Typically, the drug works for 9–12 months after which it stops working. The reason for this is that the cancer, once exposed to Erlotinib, evolves and acquires an additional mutation called the T790M mutation which makes it resistant to the drug.[10](#)

So, through these example, it is clear that evolution is a self-evident reality and in the field of biology it is an undeniable scientific fact at the microlevel. Let us now dissect the evidence in favor of evolution further.

1. Abiogenesis

The first big claim or premise of the Theory of Evolution is that life started spontaneously many billions of years ago – presumably in water, through some organic chemicals. For life to exist, as we understand it

in the simplest form, there must be a self-replicating single cell. Now do we have any experiments which shows that if we add certain organic molecules like ammonia or methane into water they will transform into a living cell? The answer is no. We do not have any experimental evidence to back this claim. How about if we add RNA, DNA, ribosomes, amino acids and lipids in water, will they self-assemble into a living cell? The answer again is no. There is no experiment like this that I know of that has shown spontaneous emergence of self-replicating living cells.¹¹ I am not sure why abiogenesis is promoted as a scientific fact when there is absolutely no experimental evidence to back this claim! It is scientific speculation not a scientific fact.

2. Do Prokaryotes Change into Eukaryotes?

The two basic cell types in biology as explained above are the prokaryotes, as represented by bacteria, and the eukaryotes which make up all other living organisms. If life started as simple prokaryotes, at some stage it must have evolved into the more complex cell type i.e. the eukaryotes. Now if we let bacteria replicate for thousands of generations will they change into eukaryotes?

A biologist named Richard Lenski took commonly found bacteria called E.Coli bacteria, separated them into twelve flasks and observed their replication for two decades. There were some genetic changes observed in the later generations of bacteria over a period of two decades but all of them remained bacteria.¹² They did not evolve into algae or fungi. A period of two decades may be a small amount of time in the history of life on earth but at present we do not have any experimental evidence that shows prokaryotes can evolve into eukaryotes spontaneously or through natural or artificial selection. There is major gap in scientific evidence for this premise that prokaryotes have evolved into eukaryotes.

3. Macroevolution

Another central claim of the Theory of Evolution is that entire new phyla and kingdoms of animals can evolve from earlier forms. Primitive animals can change into more advanced and sophisticated animals over a period of time stretching millions of years. Needless to say, that such macroevolution or what I term as meta-evolution in which a clearly distinct and more sophisticated and complex animal species has been observed to evolve from simpler predecessors either in nature or in a lab experiment has not been seen. Slight adaptations like shorter elephant tusks, bigger spots on the skin of a fish or larger heads of lizards due to change in environment is hardly a “proof” for major changes in anatomy, physiology and biochemistry of animals needed to transform them into animals belonging to a different phylum. I understand that there are technical and time limitations to demonstrate this in the lab, however let us say that fifty years from now when the technology is expected to be much more advanced, a group of scientists devise an elaborate experiment. The experiment lasts several decades and involves two or three generations of scientists. In this experiment they start from simple animals like earthworms or fruit flies and try to evolve them into more complex forms like a frog in the later generations. They use various techniques like changing the animal’s habitat, giving them growth hormones, use gene therapy

and other such procedures to induce evolution in them and ultimately do succeed in producing a totally new species of animals clearly distinct from original fruit flies or earth worm. Will this prove the current Theory of Evolution? The answer is disappointingly no – as this experiment will prove that we need planning and intelligent operators with specific goal directed efforts to transform simple animals into more complex type, checkmate!

4. Homology Between Different Animals

There is tremendous homology between different animals. From basic DNA code for protein synthesis, to fundamental biochemical processes like glycolysis. Animals share very similar organ systems like respiratory, circulatory and digestive system and so evolutionary biologists have concluded that homology between animals represent evolution from a common ancestor. Well, one can argue that homology between animals can also represent a common Creator, with His trademark design which repeats itself in all the organisms with different degree of complexity from simple organisms to more advanced forms. Let's look at an analogy.

In a bakery there are a variety of products like small shortbread cookies, larger cookies with almonds on top, donuts with different icing on them, eclairs, muffins, pound cakes, large cakes with decorative icing and then very large wedding cakes. They all have same basic ingredients like, flour, sugar, milk and eggs. Did the basic ingredients like flour and sugar get mixed somehow by chance and enter into oven and come out as small shortbread cookies? Did the small cookies evolve into larger ones with almonds on top as somehow, they learned that having almonds will give them a survival advantage as people with an almond allergy will not buy them? I know this may not be a perfect analogy, but the conclusion is no less ludicrous.

5. Artificial Selection/Breeding

Through breeding, we can change certain characteristics of a particular organism. Hundreds of different kinds of dogs have been produced via artificial selection/breeding. But through this process they all still remain dogs. They do not change into leopards or elephants or some other form of animal. One exception I should mention here is that if we mate a male donkey with a female horse a distinct kind of animal called a mule is produced which has features of both the donkey and the horse. A donkey has 62 chromosomes and horse has 64 whereas a mule has 63 chromosomes. However most mules are sterile and are unable to breed specially with other mules. So, if a new species were to arise spontaneously in nature by interbreeding of species, at least through this example we learn that most such species will not be very successful at producing successive generations making this process an evolutionary dead end.

6. Bad Design

One more frivolous argument given in favor of evolution by natural selection as opposed to creation by a wise and knowledgeable God are the examples of how poorly designed some of the organs and

structures are.

As mentioned above, the presence of a blind spot in our visual field due to the passage of the optic nerve and blood vessels through the optic disc in the retina is cited as one such example. What the evolutionary biologists do not realize is that a big part of the field of ophthalmology centers on the ability of physicians to examine the optic disc to diagnose conditions like glaucoma, raised intracranial pressure and optic neuritis to name a few medical issues. If the optic disc was positioned somewhere else, it would have been very difficult to examine it. So, though a small unnoticeable blind spot may appear as a case of bad design to some narrow minded evolutionary biologists, it is actually very helpful to the field of ophthalmology.

Similarly, the long course of recurrent laryngeal nerve through the chest wall is cited as a case for bad design. It is well-known to physicians that many lung cancer patients seek medical care for the first time due to a hoarseness of voice. They suddenly notice a change in their voice and often go to see an ear, nose and throat doctor who, on examination, finds their voice box is not working properly. The doctor then orders a chest x-ray which shows that the patient's hoarseness in the voice is actually due to lung cancer which is pushing against the recurrent laryngeal nerve and reveals the disease before the patient has symptoms from a more advance disease.

But what I want to point out is that the ultimate "bad design" is what all of us experience – the process of ageing. After passing through childhood and growing to become young, strong and healthy we all – without exception – become old and weak and develop many physical limitations – that is, if we remain alive long enough to see old age. Isn't ageing the ultimate case of bad design?

Similarly, our bodies are very weak, prone to many injuries and trauma. There are thousands of ailments and diseases which can afflict the human body. Are these all cases of bad design? Or perhaps the bodies are designed to get old, get injured and suffer from disease and ailments and ultimately die.

Thus, the argument of bad design is produced by those who lack the depth of vision about our existence on earth and are looking at reality through their narrow scientific pinhole, unable to see and grasp the big picture.

7. Geographic Evidence

Why do oceanic islands have only a few types of animals like birds, plants and insects and lack freshwater fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals? It is likely that life came to these islands from a nearby continental land mass and due to geographical distance, only certain types of animals reached there. There is however no reason for every class of animals to exist in every habitat. Animals exist in habitats that are suitable for their existence as well as the existence of other species of animals in that habitat. When mammals are introduced in these habitats they are often detrimental to the local population of existing animals.

Another counter argument can be that if evolution is true, then the birds and insects found in these habitats should have evolved into mammals or some other distinct unique class of animals which are not found elsewhere – being distinct from reptiles and mammals. We should expect to see new phyla of animals not found elsewhere. Why is it that we see evolutionary block in these habitats?

8. Fossil Evidence

Fossil evidence tells us that life appeared on earth slowly. It was primitive and then became more complex. There is clear succession of generations of animals, one type getting extinct before the emergence of another type. However, fossil evidence does not prove that one type evolved from the preceding type – it just shows that one type appeared before the other. Thus, dinosaurs appeared before mammals, but fossil evidence does not prove that dinosaurs or other earlier forms evolved into birds or mammals. This conclusion is based on speculation and not on hard scientific facts.

So, in summary, evolution is an undeniable reality of life on earth in almost every aspect of existence. Micro-evolution is a well-established scientific fact in the field of biology. We observe changes in the form or a particular trait of a species of plants and animals. There are clearly adaptations in animals just as we see in the anti-biotic resistance in bacteria. However at present, there is no scientific evidence that spontaneous abiogenesis took place. We also lack experimental evidence which shows that prokaryotes can change into eukaryotes or a complete new phyla or kingdom of animals can evolve from earlier forms. There is definitely lack of good experimental as well as observational evidence that simpler types of animals have evolved into complex types. It is possible that it may have happened but currently we don't have convincing scientific evidence. There is more scientific speculation in this theory than scientific facts.

One may ask that if micro-evolution is true then why isn't macro-evolution also true? One reason is that mutations do not always lead to a gain of function or improvement in the organism's ability to survive. On the contrary, it can lead to development of fatal conditions like cancer which can be detrimental to the organism as well as the species. The complexity required for major transformation or the upgrade of an organ system in a particular species has never been observed and at present cannot be considered a scientific fact.

The fossil evidence or the evidence of geographic distribution of animals tells us the temporal sequence of emergence of animals and plants but it does not prove that one type of animal transformed into another type. Macroevolution or meta-evolution based on available scientific evidence remains a case of speculation and is certainly not a scientific fact as promoted by some.

Bio-Spiritual Model of Life

In this chapter so far, I have discussed the scientific understanding of life and how it originated on earth. Now let us take a philosophical and spiritual approach to life.

One of the Divine names is *al-hayy* (The Ever-Living). God is the one Who is actually alive and He is the source of all life in its various forms and manifestations:

O Ever Living who was before every living being.

O Ever Living who shall (exist) after every living being.

O Ever Living who existed when there was no life.

O Giver of life to the dead.

O One who causes death to the living. [13](#)

In biology, we describe living beings as those who take nutrients and energy from the environment, respond to stimuli and produce off spring. None of these apply to God. He neither takes nutrients nor produces off springs and so therefore, we need a different description for what being “alive” means.

One definition of living is: A living being is something which exists and is conscious of its existence. So, with this description will we consider plants to be alive? What about rocks and mountains? The spiritual and philosophical understanding is that everything that exists is conscious of its existence, and hence alive. The Arabic term for existence is “*wujud*” and its root word is “*wajada*” which means ‘to find something’. In other words, the one that exists has found itself or is conscious of itself. [14](#) Thus, whatever is in the heavens and earth is alive:

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

The seven heavens, the earth and all those inhabiting them extol His glory. Infact, there is not even a single thing but glorifies Him with His true and perfect praise, but you do not understand their glorification. Verily, Most Forbearing is He, Great Protector. (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17:44).

According to the biological sciences, human beings are made up of trillions of cells organized into different organs and system, which when work in unison, create life. We are physical bodies only and our beings cease to exist once our bodies die. In the bio-spiritual model of life, as learned through revelation, human beings are not just a physical body but exist as a body and soul unit. The best description of the relationship between the body and the soul has been given by Sadr al-Din Muhammad (S) al-Shirazi or Mulla Sadra, who is considered to be the most outstanding Muslim philosopher in the past 400 years.

According to Mulla Sadra:

The soul is corporeal in its advent and spiritual in its survival and perfection. [15](#)

According to this view, the soul is neither eternal nor a separate entity that existed prior to the creation of the body and later joined it, rather the soul is created along with the body but not in the body.

The soul is a being through which signs of life become apparent on matter, and it is also called the perfection of the body. By perfection we mean a thing by whose existence a species becomes a species. Therefore, the soul is something by which an animal becomes an animal, and a plant becomes a plant.

According to Mulla Sadra, human beings exist as a unit of a body and soul, two sides of the same coin, representing two grades of existence of a single entity, one more perfect than the other. There is no duality between the body and the soul, rather an amalgam, interdependence and mutual influence. The soul depends on the body for its development and the body depends on the soul for its perfection and survival. What happens to the body affects the soul and what happens to the soul affects the body.

The soul is generated from the material body and at its beginning, is primitive, which means it is more corporeal and less spiritual. As the soul matures and develops it becomes more spiritual and less material and it utilizes bodily tools for the development of its faculties.

1. Production of the Human Soul

The stimulus for production of the human soul is the “inblowing of the Divine Spirit” in the primitive but proportioned body. ¹⁶ The Divine Spirit is a “Command” from God belonging to a higher “realm of Command” which is different from the “realm of Creation” in which physical entities exist. (See Chapter 5)

This interaction of the Divine spirit with the body leads to the development of the human soul which is an intermediate between the body and the spirit having features of both. Thus the soul represents a barrier or “*barzakh*” between the spiritual and the physical. ¹⁷ The human soul after its generation becomes the maintainer of life and the governor of the human body.

إِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي خَالِقٌ بَشَرًا مِنْ طِينٍ فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ

(Call to mind) when your Lord said to the angels: I am about to create a human being from clay, And when I have fashioned him in perfection and I have inspired into him of My spirit then fall down submitting to him. (Qur'an, Surah Sad, 38:71-72).

At another place, the Qur'an describes the stages of human development as follows:

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ سُلَالَةٍ مِنْ طِينٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُطْفَةً فِي قَرَارٍ مَكِينٍ ثُمَّ خَلَقْنَا النُّطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ مُضْغَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْغَةَ عِظَامًا فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَامَ لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنْشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا آخَرَ فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ

We create a human being from an extract of clay. Then We reduce him to a drop of sperm (and place him) in a safe depository. Then We form the sperm into a clot; then We develop the clot into a lump of flesh; then We fashion bones out of this lump of flesh, then We clothe the bones

with flesh, thereafter We evolve him into another being. Therefore blessed be God the Best of Creators. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'minun, 23: 12-14).

This development into another creature is considered to be the generation of the soul from the body.

2. Different Levels of the Soul and their Faculties

The human soul exists in various degrees and grades with higher grades being more sophisticated than the lower ones. The most primitive form of the soul is called vegetal soul which has the faculties of nutrition, growth, development and reproduction. The intermediate form is the animal soul which in addition to the first one also has faculties of sensory perception and movement. The higher form is called the rational soul which in addition to the faculties of vegetal and animal soul, also has faculties of knowledge and the ability to discriminate between morally right and wrong.

The human soul, when it exists as a fetus in the womb, starts at the level of vegetal soul with its features. With continued development it becomes an animal soul and starts displaying features of movement and perception. As it acquires intellectual maturity, it becomes a rational soul. This rational soul continues to carry the features of the vegetal and animal soul. The rational maturity of the soul continues until around the age of forty when it becomes an actual human soul and potentially an angelic (virtuous) or satanic (immoral) form, depending on what it has done so morally in life.

The human body-soul unit can be envisioned as a continuous spectrum – on the one end of it is the physical body followed by the vegetal soul, then the animal soul and finally a rational soul. In a mature adult human being there is only one soul which is the rational soul having features of animal and vegetal souls also, but its degree of manifestation in various body parts is according to the preparedness of those body parts.

The vegetal soul maintains the body and its form and is responsible for nutrition, growth, development and reproduction. If it leaves, the body begins to disintegrate like what happens after death or the gangrene of limbs.

The animal soul is responsible for perception and movement, and if it leaves a person can no longer perceive nor move. The faculty of perception in the animal soul includes the perception of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. The physical body possesses corresponding organs like eyes, ears, tongue, nose and skin to manifest these faculties. There are also internal faculties of perception like imagination, estimation, etc.

The rational soul is responsible for reason and intellectual tasks. The rational soul also has knowledge, wisdom and reflection. If it is disabled due to the use of intoxicants like alcohol then a person can no longer use reason properly and one's mental sharpness declines.

3. Body–Soul Interaction

The human soul is connected to the body (it manifests in the body but is not inside the body) and is responsible for all the rational, animal and vegetal faculties, but the parts of the body differ in receiving and manifesting it. In the brain and heart it connects with more of its faculties, but in the case of nails, teeth and bones it connects with some of its faculties mostly vegetal with no part from the animal and rational soul. The soul uses the body to manifest its faculties, and if there is a defect in the body then the manifestation is limited or restricted.

To elaborate on this point further let us take the example of paralysis. In the case of a paralyzed limb, the vegetal soul continues to maintain the integrity of the limb so the limb appears intact and does not suffer from degradation, but the animal soul can no longer move it due to a physical defect present either at the level of the brain or at the level of the nerves, or the limb.

Another instance through which the body–soul interaction can be understood is during sleep and intoxication. In the state of sleep and strong intoxication, most of the faculties of the soul have receded from the body, the way the sun recedes at the horizon when its essence is hidden from the earth but some of its light can be seen. In the same way during sleep, the soul is limited in its manifestation on the body as compared to the awake state. If a human soul severs all of its connections from the body, then death occurs and the body will be destroyed.

This pre-programmed near complete departure of the soul from the body every night which happens during sleep, and complete departure which happens at death, are matters ordained which cannot be avoided by any human being.

The act of sleep is the single most important argument in favor of the existence of the human soul. There is no scientific explanation why we fall asleep, but the revelation sheds some light on this topic. The Qur'an says:

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا فَيُمْسِكُ الَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

God takes away the souls (of human being) at the time of their death and (also) of those who are not (yet) dead during their sleep. He detains (the souls of) those against whom He passes the verdict of death and sends (back those of) others till a fixed period of time. There are signs in this for a people who would reflect. (Qur'an, Surah al-Zumar, 39:42).

4. Transubstantial Motion and the Soul

One of the most important original contributions of Mulla Sadra was his concept of transubstantial motion (this is different from the Catholic concept of transubstantiation).

The philosophy of transubstantial motion explains the creation of the world and post death existence. According to him, existence is a single gradational reality that includes different levels starting from the highest level of existence which is the Necessary Existence i.e. God, to the lowest levels of existence i.e. ordinary matter. In between, there are various levels or grades of existence. Within existence there is movement towards perfection, each being trying to reach its perfection. This movement results in the intensification of the degree of existence of a being from a lower level of existence to a higher level, while still maintaining its individual identity. This movement is like an addition of a form of a higher degree to a pre-existing form to make something new of a stronger degree which is like “wearing a coat on top of coat”.¹⁸ With transubstantial motion there is intensification of the very existence of a being.

Before Mulla Sadra, Aristotle attempted to classify existence in what are known as ‘categories’. He described ten categories. The first of these is about the substance of an object something which exists in itself e.g. a man or a tree. The other nine are called accidents which happen to a substance, e.g. quantity, quality, relation, position etc. like the color of skin of a person or the hardness of a stone. Hardness or color always belong to a substance and have no independent existence in themselves. For example, we cannot see the color white in itself, it only exists as an accident of an object such as a white cloth or white car.

Prior to Mulla Sadra, motion was thought to take place in only four categories that being: quantity, quality, position, and location of an object which were all accidents. But according to him, in a particular being, motion happens not only in the quantity, quality, place and position, but also in the very substance of that being. The inner nature of a being is fluid and its substance is subject to change and movement, such as from a seed to a plant and then to a mature tree. Therefore, a seed to a sapling and then a mature tree represents one reality in different degrees and there is motion in the very substance of the seed towards its perfection which is to become a mature tree.

From the viewpoint of transubstantial motion, the form and matter of a being becomes the matter for a new form, and this process goes on continuously. For example, organic matter and water from soil is absorbed by the plants in the form of nutrients to become a higher form of existence (i.e. a plant), which in turn is consumed by animals to become an even higher form (i.e. an animal), and then it is consumed by humans and becomes part of the human body. In this way, original matter is transformed from a pure elemental form into a higher form of existence which is the human body. But the process does not stop here as the emergence of the soul from the human body is a further refinement of human existence moving from a pure physical to a metaphysical existence which subsists in higher realms, until it becomes pure intellect.

Thus the human soul is generated by the process of transubstantial motion of the body initially forming as a totally corporeal entity, emerging along with the body and gradually becoming spiritual. Transubstantial motion connects the physical and meta-physical realities.

If we look at the life cycle of a person, we see that the sperm and egg combination develops into the

fetus, then a baby, then an adult, then with the onset of old age, the body starts to get weaker, however the soul which was also developing along with the body, continues to grow stronger. With death, after separation from the body, the soul ceases to exist as a soul but exists as something higher than the soul such as the intellect. So the original elemental matter moved to become a body, then soul and then finally the intellect through its substantial perfection.

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ يُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوا أَشُدَّكُمْ ثُمَّ لَتَكُونُوا شُيُوخًا ۖ وَمِنْكُمْ مَنْ يَتَوَفَّى مِنْ قَبْلُ ۚ وَلِتَبْلُغُوا أَجَلًا مُّسَمًّى وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

It is He (God) Who created you from dust then from a sperm drop, then from a blood clot, then He brings you forth as an infant, (then He lets you live and grow,) with the result, that you attain to your young age of full strength. Afterwards it so happens that you become old. Though there are some of you who are called to death earlier. Indeed, He lets you live that you may reach (and complete your) appointed term and that you may refrain (from evil). (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:67).

As the human soul transforms and ascends, and is resurrected from the world of Creation to the world of Command (see Chapter 5), its existence becomes a separate, intelligible existence and it no longer needs the body. Like a fetus which needs the womb at first for its existence, but becomes independent of it later on due to the transformation of its existence, similarly the soul needs the body initially for its existence, but it becomes independent of it later on.

According to the philosophy of transubstantial motion, the universe is constantly in motion and is in a state of change or flux, at every moment it revives and renews. There is an innate movement of existence towards perfection i.e. the Creator. When the soul reaches the station of intellect, it connects to the Divine world and become restful, it is annihilated from its essence and subsists by the subsistence of God:

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ إِلَهٌ الْمَصِيرُ

There is no other, cannot be and will never be One worthy of worship but He. Towards Him is the eventual return. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:3).

5. Rational Demonstration for the Existence of the Soul

The soul is a meta-physical reality and as such cannot be observed by ordinary vision or radiological imaging like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or computerized tomography (CT). Rather, we will need indirect rational arguments to show that it must have existence.

Traces of life are observed in certain bodily forms like plants, animals and humans, but are not typically seen in other things like rocks, mountains and other physical structures no matter how large or complex they may be like a car or a computer. If we look at the composition of plants, animals and humans we find that they are made up of carbon based organic compounds. The traces of life then could either be from the organic matter or from beyond it. Organic matter in itself does not show traces of life unless it is organized in a perfect bodily form. This organization of organic matter into a perfect body either happens due to inherent nature of the organic matter or something beyond it. We know that organic matter is incapable of organizing itself into a highly complex and sophisticated functional unit, therefore an outside agent is needed to bring about this change. This act of organization into a sophisticated functional unit and the observance of traces of life on it is through an outside agent which can be called the spirit or soul. The soul maintains the structural integrity of these units and beings, and manifests traces of life like nutrition, growth, perception, reproduction, movement and rationality in them. When the soul leaves the body these traces of life are lost and the body disintegrates.

Another strong argument in favor of a meta-physical aspect of our existence i.e. the soul is the act of sleep which has been briefly described previously. There is no scientific explanation of why we fall asleep. According to the Qur'an, it is a partial departure of the soul from the body and is like a state of mini-death in which there is a receding of human faculties. During sleep, we experience dreams in which we see and hear things, talk to people and visit places while our eyes are shut and our bodies are still. This perception and experience during sleep also points towards a meta-physical aspect of our existence and not just a replay of our memories and emotions.

Lastly, near-death experience (NDE) or out-of-body experience (OBE) is a very well documented phenomenon in scientific literature. According to a 2001 study published in *The Lancet*, nearly 18% of patients undergoing cardiac arrest described an out-of-body experience in which they reported being conscious during resuscitation. They reported awareness of being dead, witnessing their own bodies, seeing light or pleasant scenery, and meeting dead relatives, and this is something which seems to be more common among younger people and women. Patients who underwent an NDE in a longitudinal follow-up reported significant change in their social and religious attitude compared to those who did not have such an experience¹⁹ – meaning that their NDE had a lasting impact upon them.

6. Life-Cycle of the Human Soul

The soul is the carrier of the body, not that the body is the carrier of the soul. The soul after a certain level of maturity separates from the body due to its gradual independence in being from it. It separates from natural modality of being to the next modality. As the soul gains strength and transforms in its essence from one level to another, the emanation of power from it on the body decreases due to its turning away to another direction. As a result, the body and its faculties become weaker, and the natural wasting and fading away occur as is seen in old age. When the soul reaches its utmost level in its substance and becomes independent, then its connection to the body is severed completely (like an

apple disconnecting from the stalk once it is fully mature), as well as its management of it resulting in death of the body. This is a natural death, not the untimely or accidental death that occurs due to some catastrophic injury or illness of the body.

So the changes in an elderly body after its strength, its withering away and occurrence of death is the transformation of the soul in various degrees and its substantive movement to the next modality of its being.

The bodily states witnessed in an individual such as childhood, youth, adulthood, old age and death are actually different states of the soul.

Initially the body grows and matures with the soul, but as the soul continues in its maturity and transforms in its substance, its emanation on the body gets weaker resulting in the withering away of the body to old age until the soul reaches independence from the body and is separated from it resulting in the natural death witnessed in old age. This withering away of the body can be accelerated by an illness or injury to the body, which if catastrophic, can lead to instantaneous or premature death. When the soul gains strength, the body gains weakness and feebleness until the soul subsists by its essence independent of the body, and the body is destroyed by its departure.

7. The Difference Between Natural Death and an Untimely Death

Mulla Sadra gives a simile of the human body and the soul like that of the wind and its carrying of a sailing ship. The wind is the carrier of the ship, likewise the human soul is the carrier of the body but not vice versa. In the case of dissolution of composition of the sailing ship, water enters in it, submerges it and ultimately destroys it. In the same way, when the human body is permanently damaged or rendered defective due to an illness or injury, the soul can no longer command it and thus leaves it resulting in its further destruction and death. The parable of natural death is like a very strong wind or gale which a ship has no capacity to bear, its parts are unable to perform the tasks, resulting in its destruction – similar to a very strong mature soul which can subsist without a body if the body is incapable of maintaining it.

Thus, based on the bio-spiritual model, we exist as a body-soul unit, and our reality is the soul not the body. Earlier, I presented some of the scientific criticism of the Theory of Evolution. Now when we analyze this theory from a bio-spiritual model of life, i.e. the existence of the human soul in addition to the body, it becomes clear that the Theory of Evolution cannot be true. Based on the philosophy of trans-substantial motion and the spiritual aspect of our existence, it is impossible that human beings evolved from other animals as claimed by this theory. The Qur'an says:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ

We have surely created the human being in the finest make and the best proportions. (Qur'an,

Surah al-Tin, 95:4).

Mulla Sadra's theory can also help us understand some of the biological observations that are given in the support of evolution. Based on the philosophy of Mulla Sadra, we understand that existence is one reality in different degrees. We see this in the gradation of life forms on the earth starting from simple bacteria and advancing to more complex things including plants, insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. In this hierarchy of life forms, it is not surprising to find intermediate or transitional forms between the various sub-types, which are taken mistakenly by some as a "proof" for evolution.

The homology observed between different animals is perhaps also due to all of them having a basic primitive animal soul in them. The body manifests the faculties of the soul, and if all of them have an animal soul there will be a degree of homology between them in their anatomy and physiology and bio-chemistry.

As mentioned above, in the beginning, the human embryo looks very similar to embryos of other animals. Perhaps the explanation of this is that the primitive soul that develops in all animals is similar or common between them, thus their bodies also look similar. As the soul matures and becomes more human like, the body also starts to look like a human body.

According to transubstantial motion from a seed to a sapling to a small plant and adult tree, they all represent one reality but in different degrees. We see a directional motion in the seed until it becomes an adult tree. The seed can become an adult tree because it has the potential to be so. An apple seed will only give rise to an apple tree and not an orange tree because an apple seed has the potential to become an apple tree, and not a walnut or orange tree. Things can become what they have the potential to become and not for which they don't have the potential. Similarly, we can give to others what we already have, not what we do not have. One cannot give someone a million dollars unless one has a million dollars to give. A person cannot teach mathematics unless one knows mathematics themselves and the other person has the potential to learn it. Therefore, unless lifeless organic matter has the potential to give rise to life containing bacteria, it will not be able to do so. Unless organic matter has life itself, it cannot give rise to bacteria containing life.

Unless the primitive bacteria at inception has the potential to one day become an adult human with a higher form of consciousness, they will not be so even after millions of years of evolution. The path of evolution proposed by scientists demonstrates motion in a directional manner moving from simple forms to more complex forms. This potentiality in bacteria to one day evolve into adult humans with a high form of consciousness requires foresight and planning by an outside agent without which it can never happen. To argue that life-less organic molecules just by chance assembled into living cells and then the living cells, without having the potential or a strategy and pre-planning just kept on evolving in the direction of a more complex thing for billions of years until we reach the age of modern humans is irrational and absurd. Thus, based on a lack of scientific evidence, spiritual dimension of our existence and the philosophy of the Trans-Substantial Motion, the Theory of Evolution by natural selection cannot be true.

8. The Descent of Adam ('a)

Fossil records tell us that many life forms such as dinosaurs previously dominated the earth's landscape, but are now extinct. There was certainly a time period before modern humans came on the scene, and in this regards, the Qur'an says:

هَلْ أَتَى عَلَى الْإِنْسَانِ حِينٌ مِّنَ الدَّهْرِ لَمْ يَكُنْ شَيْئًا مَّذْكُورًا

There did pass over mankind a period of time when he was not a thing worth mentioning. (Qur'an, Surah al-Insan, 76: 1).

Based on fossil records and the above mentioned verse from the Qur'an, there certainly was a significant time period in the history of the earth when modern humans did not exist. So who inhabited the earth prior to modern humans? Were there other advanced life forms? And more importantly where did modern humans come from?

According to the Qur'an and the statements from the family of Prophet Muhammad (S), there existed two other intelligent life forms prior to modern humans – they are called the “*jinns*” and the “*nusnas*”.

For example, the existence of jinns has been mentioned in the Qur'an multiple times:

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ صَلْصَالٍ كَالْفَخَّارِ وَخَلَقَ الْجَانَّ مِنْ مَّارِجٍ مِّنْ نَّارٍ

He (God) created human being from the essence extracted from dry ringing clay like a piece of baked pottery (with the faculty of speech and possessing pliant and submissive nature). And He created the jinn from a flame of fire (possessing fiery nature). (Qur'an, Surah al-Rahman, 55: 14–15).

The jinns represent a distinct creation, different from mankind in the sense that their physical form is made up of “fire” as opposed to “clay”. Please refer to the last chapter (Chapter 16) of this book about a more detailed discussion on the Jinns.

The second life form that existed prior to us has been termed as nusnas, distinct from us, “*insan*”, which is the term used for mankind. They were hominoid creatures, but were not actually humans and likely represented earlier species like Homo habilis or Homo neanderthalensis. They became extinct prior to the advent of modern humans. Thus, humankind is one of God's many creations, not the only one – though it is considered the best of them:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

And most surely We have made the Children of Adam greatly honoured and have carried them over land and sea, and We have provided them with good and pure things and have distinctly exalted them far above most of Our creation. (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17:70).

The fifth Imam, Muhammad al-Baqir ('a) has been quoted as saying:

It seems that you think God only created this world and He did not create other than you. Rather, by God! He created millions of worlds and millions of Adams, and you are simply in the last of those worlds, descended from last of those Adams.[20](#)

أَفَعَيَيْنَا بِالْخَلْقِ الْأَوَّلِ بَلْ هُمْ فِي لَبْسٍ مِنْ خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ

Are We wearied with the first creation (that We will not be able to create them the second time on the Day of Resurrection)? The fact is that they are in confusing doubt about a new creation. (Qur'an, Surah Qaf, 50: 15).

Imam al-Baqir ('a) is quoted to have said that when God will put an end to the universe, He will create a new creation, in which there will be no gender.

So then how did humans emerge? Did they evolve from the nusnas or do they have a separate origin? According to the Qur'an, the first human to be created was Adam ('a) (In Arabic, the name of the first creation, Adam, comes from the phrase *adim al-ardh* which literally means dust from the surface of the earth, and this was then summarized into the one word, Adam) and then his wife Eve ('a). The Qur'an clearly refutes any claim that Adam ('a) evolved from earlier life forms as he had no father or mother:

إِنَّ مَثَلَ عِيسَىٰ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ آدَمَ خَلَقَهُ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ قَالَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ

Verily, the case of Jesus is as the case of Adam in the sight of God. He fashioned him out of dust, then He said to him: Be, and he came to be. (Qur'an, Surah Ale Imran, 3:59).

Thus, the origin of Adam ('a) is from "dust" or "*adim al-ardh*" and it means that the structural or material aspect of Adam's existence is from dust originating from the earth. The other main ingredient of material aspect of our existence is water:

وَهُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ مِنَ الْمَاءِ بَشَرًا فَجَعَلَهُ نَسَبًا وَصِهْرًا وَكَانَ رَبُّكَ قَدِيرًا

And it is He (God) Who created the human being from water and has given him relations by descent and (kindred) by marriage (and thus sought to establish a civilization and social life based on oneness of humanity under oneness of God). And your Lord is All-Powerful. (Qur'an,

Surah al-Furqan, 25:54).

Nearly two-thirds of the adult human body is made up of water molecules, and the other one-third contains oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and many trace elements including iron. These elements exist on the earth and the atmosphere surrounding the earth. The soul is in addition to the material aspect of our existence, as discussed previously in this chapter.

The next question that comes to mind is that if Adam (‘a) was a special creation without a father and a mother then how or where was he created? There are two possibilities – either Adam (‘a) was created on earth just like the other life forms are created through a combination of *khalq* and *amr* – Divine Creation and Command; or that Adam (‘a) was created somewhere else and then transported to the earth.

Although it is hard to definitely say, but based on the interpretation of the verses of the Qur’an and statements of Prophet Muhammad (S) and his family, in our understanding, Adam (‘a) was most likely created somewhere else and then moved to the earth. This is also the view of a leading contemporary Shi’a scholar, Ayatollah Jawadi Amoli.²¹ Again, this is based on our personal opinion of what we have studied and is subject to further investigation.

According to the Qur’an, after creation, Adam (‘a) and his wife were asked to dwell in a “garden” and to eat as they like but not to approach a certain tree:

وَقُلْنَا يَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ وَكُلَا مِنْهَا رَغَدًا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَا وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ

And We (God) said: O Adam! Dwell you and your wife in this garden and eat freely and plentifully from it as you will. But you shall not go near this tree lest you should be of the unjust. (Qur’an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:35).

However, due to satanic temptation, they did approach the tree and afterwards were asked to leave the garden and descend to earth:

فَأَزَلَّهُمَا الشَّيْطَانُ عَنْهَا فَأَخْرَجَهُمَا مِمَّا كَانَا فِيهِ وَقُلْنَا اهْبِطُوا بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ وَلَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمَتَاعٌ إِلَىٰ حِينٍ

After sometime the Satan caused them both to slip from this (order of not going near evil) and thus brought them out of (the happy state) which they were in. And We (God) said (to them): Go forth, some of you are enemies of others and for you there is a sojourn in the earth and a provision for a time. (Qur’an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:36).

This “garden” was not the paradise that is promised to the believers after death but rather, it was

another garden. It was likely in a higher realm of existence, and afterwards they were asked *'ihbitu'* which means to 'go down,' or 'to float down,' or "come down gradually" towards earth and dwell on the earth for a period of time – until death takes them. After death, God promises that We will return you back to the higher realm of existence. This movement of objects between the material realm of existence and the higher realms has been discussed in detail in the previous chapter.

The same concept is repeated elsewhere in the Qur'an as well suggesting that we are in this world temporarily, and will be returning back to our origin:

قَالَ اهْبِطُوا بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ عَدُوٌّ وَلَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمَتَاعٌ إِلَىٰ حِينٍ قَالَ فِيهَا تَحْيَوْنَ وَفِيهَا تَمُوتُونَ وَمِنْهَا تُخْرَجُونَ

(God) said: Get down. Some of you are (indeed) enemies of others, and there will be for you on this earth a habitation and (enjoyment of) provision for a while. And (He added): In this you shall live and therein you shall die and from it you shall be brought forth (in the Hereafter). (Qur'an, Surah al-A'raf, 7:24-25).

Satan, or as he is known by his Arabic and Qur'anic title of *Iblis*, came down to earth along with Adam ('a) and his wife, Eve ('a). Iblis is not a human being but rather, belongs to another type of creation known as the jinn:

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ كَانَ مِنَ الْجِنِّ فَفَسَقَ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِ أَفَتَتَّخِذُونَهُ وَذُرِّيَّتَهُ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِي وَهُمْ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ ۚ بِئْسَ لِلظَّالِمِينَ بَدَلًا

And (recall the time) when We (God) said to the angels: Submit to Adam. So they all submitted (bowing), but Iblis (did not); he was one of the jinn, he disobeyed the command of his Lord. (Mankind!) Would you (then) take him and his progeny (and cohorts) for friends rather than Me while they are your enemies? How evil is the substitute (of God) the unjust have chosen! (Qur'an, Surah al-Kahf, 18:50).

Thus, Adam ('a) and Eve ('a) were the first couple created by special means. They were most likely made in an extra-terrestrial realm of existence and were then sent down for a specific period of time.

The progeny of Adam ('a) continued through his son Seth ('a) for whom a wife was sent from the higher realm of existence also.²² As the descendants of Adam ('a), we can maintain consciousness in this realm of existence for only a certain number of hours at a stretch each day and after that our faculties start to fade and sleep overtakes us. During sleep we are disengaged from our earthly life to be returned to it once the period of sleep is over. This process repeats itself until our term on the earth is complete, and then death permanently separates us from this material realm of existence returning us back

towards our origin:

إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

To God is the return of you all, then He will inform you as to that wherein you were at variance. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:48).

In this chapter I have discussed that evolution, change and adaptation is a self-evident reality in the physical realm of existence. The phenomenon of evolution also takes place in biology at microlevel resulting in adaptive changes in species e.g. (anti-biotic resistance or longer body hair due to colder temperature).

Right now there is insufficient scientific evidence to say that abiogenesis happened on its own and that complex species have evolved from simpler forms by natural selection. There is no experimental evidence to back these claims.

When we analyze this issue from philosophical and spiritual aspects it becomes clear that origin of complex species by natural selection as described by evolutionary biologists is impossible to be true.

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Chapter 15: Spiritual but not religious

During the Axial Age, the world saw the appearance of major religious ideologies. The last major worldwide religion to appear is Islam which rose in Arabia in the 7th Century. At present there is also a growing group of religiously unaffiliated people who do not identify themselves with any particular religion. Though they may not be linked to a particular religion, many of them do claim to be spiritual.[1](#)

According to a 2017 Pew Research Survey, 27% of Americans stated they are spiritual but not religious which is up by 8% compared to 2012. In addition, another 48% claimed in this survey to be both religious and spiritual, down from 59% in 2012. Overall this shows that while affiliation with a particular religious tradition has gone down, but still 75% of the surveyed Americans claim to be spiritual.[2](#)

So what does it mean to be spiritual? It can have many different meanings for different people. But a general definition of “spiritual” is something sacred, higher, valuable, meaningful that a person wants to achieve. For some people it is a connection with nature that defines their spirituality. So spirituality is something more than just the pursuit of material possessions in one's daily life. This desire in the majority of the population to be spiritual, even amongst those who do not follow a particular religion, points towards an inherent understanding amongst us that there is something higher and more valuable out there than just the material possessions of this worldly life.

Generally speaking, to be considered religious is to have certain beliefs, perform certain rituals, and avoid certain acts – whereas to be spiritual is to aim for something higher and more meaningful. Some individuals confuse these two terms and think that to be religious is something separate from being spiritual.

In my understanding, the purpose of following a religion is to be more spiritual. If someone wants to be spiritual without following particular beliefs and practices then they will not advance in their spirituality. On the other hand, those who rigorously follow religious practices without focusing on their spirituality are simply going through the actions without understanding their meaning and purpose.

Religion is the path towards spirituality.

In the context of Islam, to be spiritual means to be closer to God. Any concept of spirituality that is devoid of God is a false concept of spirituality. To be spiritual only makes sense in the context of belief in

one eternal self-existing reality of God, but everything else is like being caught in the shadow of that reality. Being closer to God does not mean covering any physical distance because He is closer to us than our jugular vein, as the Qur'an says:

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ

We created a human being and We know what (dark) suggestions his mind makes to him. We are nearer to him than even (his) jugular vein. (Qur'an, Surah Qaf, 50: 16).

Being closer to God means to manifest God's attributes in our being and this is only achieved by having faith and performing the religious obligations.

Human beings are multi-dimensional, with physical, mental and spiritual aspects to their existence. If someone is expected to reach a height of 5 feet 8 inches, but due to malnourishment or a chronic illness reaches only to a height of 5 feet 2 inches, then such an individual will be considered as physically limited. Similarly some individuals are mentally challenged with significantly lower IQ than others. But what we do not realize is that many of us may not be physically or mentally deficient but are spiritually challenged. We do not reach the spiritual potential that we are capable of achieving for various reasons, including not acknowledging the spiritual aspect of our existence.

Spirituality is a path to tread on and with spiritual growth there is an actual inner transformation in our being as one moves from stage to stage. Take the example of life cycle of a butterfly which goes through different stages of development starting from larva, then transforming into pupa and then finally a beautiful butterfly. With spiritual growth we should become "butterfly" but many of us fail to achieve our potential and remain spiritually underdeveloped.

لَتَرْكَبُنَّ طَبَقًا عَنْ طَبَقٍ

You will surely travel from stage to stage. (Qur'an, Surah al-Inshiqaq, 84: 19).

Some people are of the view that they can be more spiritual without necessarily following the religious practices. They are like those patients who want to control their diabetes without taking medication or controlling their diet or doing exercise. The only path to spirituality is through sincerely performing the religious practices and avoiding those things that damage our soul such as lying or cheating, etc. The path of religion is the program or regimen that one must follow to progress in spirituality. The daily prayers (*al-salat*), fasting (*al-sawm*), charity (*al-zakat*), being conscious of others' rights (*huquq al-ʿibad*) are some of the prescriptions that one needs to achieve spirituality.

On the other hand, it may be that some people appear to follow religion strictly, but do not show any improvement in their spirituality. Their practice of religion appears to have no impact on their souls. This

may be because they are not sincere in their practice or they lack insight into what they are doing; but one cannot enhance spirituality without following a religion.

In order to understand how to enhance our spirituality it is very important to understand the soul.[3](#)

Imam ؓAli (‘a) has said:

Whoever knows his soul knows his Lord.

In the last chapter I discussed the human soul based on the teachings of Mulla Sadra. Building on this further, the soul is a meta-physical reality which is our true essence. All of our beliefs, actions, consciousness, thoughts and emotions are from our soul – we are our soul. Every thought that we contemplate, every decision that we make, every word that we speak, every voice that we hear, every look that we cast, and every action that we perform – has an impact on our soul. Our soul is being shaped every moment by what we are doing; and there is no escape from our actions. In this regards, the Qur’an tells us:

وَاتَّقُوا يَوْمًا تُرْجَعُونَ فِيهِ إِلَى اللَّهِ ۖ تَمَّ تُوفَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

And guard yourself against (the evil of) the day when you shall be made to return to God; then every soul shall be paid in full for what it has accomplished, and no injustice shall be done to them. (Qur’an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:281).

Our soul has certain faculties which merit further discussion here.

The animal aspect of our soul carries two important faculties. They are called:

1. Concupiscence (Arabic: *al-Shahwah*)
2. Irascible (Arabic: *al-Ghadhab*)

The concupiscence faculty gives rise to desires and lusts for various things which are only satisfied by obtaining them. These include a desire for food, material possessions and sexual pleasure. The irascible faculty gives rise to the desire to dominate or overcome any potential adversary and is manifested as anger.

These faculties are not bad in themselves, in fact they are necessary for our survival. Due to concupiscence, we obtain desirable things for ourselves which ensures our survival, and through the power of the irascible self, we fight off dangers and overcome undesirable situations. These two faculties should be under the control of the rational soul which is responsible for reason and intellectual tasks.

If the faculty of desire goes out of the control of the intellect, then a person will become greedy, selfish

and gluttonous. Whereas if the faculty of anger goes out of control, then a person will become bad tempered, violent and oppressive. The task of a rational soul is to keep these two faculties under the control of the intellect.

Just as our body can develop various physical ailments and illnesses, our souls too can develop various spiritual diseases. The most important of these are arrogance, greed and jealousy.⁴ Most other spiritual diseases spring from these three main spiritual diseases. All of the human sufferings in our personal, family and social lives are due to the presence of these spiritual illnesses and so, one of the main tasks of having faith and following the religion is to purify or cleanse the soul of these spiritual ailments as we cannot improve our spirituality without spiritual cleanliness:

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

And the (human) soul and That (Mighty Lord) Who made it perfect, Then He revealed to it (the soul, the ways of) its evil and its righteousness. One who purifies it (his soul), certainly succeeds. And he indeed is ruined who corrupts it. (Qur'an, Surah al-Shams, 91:7-10).

The act of spiritual cleanliness has been termed as “*al-tazkiyah*” which is similar to removing “weeds from the ground”. Arrogance, greed and jealousy are like “weeds” in our soul, and unless we remove them we are not able to “grow” spiritually. This is a must for any spiritual growth.

Spiritual cleanliness begins with faith in God and the hereafter. There can be no substantial spiritual improvement without having faith in God. Those who neglect God are only hurting themselves by neglecting their own souls:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَأَنْسَاهُمْ أَنْفُسَهُمْ ۖ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

And do not be like those who gave God up so that He too made them give their own selves up. It is they who are downright sinners. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hashr, 59: 19).

Many people preach morality and ethics without faith in God. They claim that they can use reason alone to be moral and thus do not need monotheism. As discussed in Chapter 11, our view point is that, yes, basic morality can be achieved using reason alone, but in order to progress on this path, monotheism and the practice of religion is essential. We need both reason and revelation to enhance our spirituality and improve our morality.

To progress spiritually we must remove the ailments of arrogance, greed and jealousy from our soul; and this can only be achieved by firm belief in monotheism.

Let me elaborate this further.

If a person has a firm belief in monotheism, then that individual will know that all that they have is from God. Their physical appearance, family lineage, knowledge, education, wealth, fame, even their very existence is totally dependent on God. Whatever they have achieved is through His favor:

وَاللَّهُ الْغَنِيُّ وَأَنْتُمُ الْفُقَرَاءُ

Otherwise God is Self-sufficient (having no needs) and it is you who are the needy ones. (Qur'an, Surah Muhammad, 47:38).

Our own efforts definitely play a role in things, but it is meaningless without the Divine opportunity and support. If people have this understanding of the reality, then there is very little room for arrogance as it is only with a correct understanding of monotheism that we can root out arrogance.

Similarly, if our lives are bound by Divine *mashia*, *qadar*, and *qadha* (See Chapter 5), then what belongs to us will find its way to us and what does not belong to us will not come and we would not regret not having it. This understanding of the reality helps overcome greed. Moreover, the true success or failure is in the hereafter, therefore there is no need to be excessively happy on gaining something or overly sad on losing something:

لِكَيْلَا تَأْسَوْا عَلَىٰ مَا فَاتَكُمْ وَلَا تَفْرَحُوا بِمَا آتَاكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ

That you may neither grieve over that (good) which is lost to you, nor exult because of that which He has granted you. God has no love for all those who are haughty and boastful. (Qur'an, Surah al-Hadid, 57:23).

This is the correct neutral position of detachment (*Arabic: al-zuhd*) vis-a-vis worldly possessions. The term *zuhd* does not mean not to possess anything, but rather *zuhd* means that we are not possessed by anything.

Following the same line of thinking, if everything truly belongs to God, then how can one be jealous of something that another person has? It is He who has given, so one should be satisfied with what others have as it is coming to them from God (See Chapter 8 about *ʿubudiyya*). There is no need to be jealous over other people's success.

Therefore, monotheism is necessary to remove arrogance, greed and jealousy from the soul. The stronger our understanding of the reality of monotheism is, the higher our spirituality will be; the higher our spirituality is, the closer we will get to God; the closer we are to God, the more we will manifest His attributes in us. In other words, those who are more spiritual or closer to God, have more compassion, mercy, kindness, justice, benevolence, knowledge, wisdom, forbearance, love, truthfulness and independence from others and what others have. They will feel full, content, and relaxed in their own

being, unaffected by what is happening around them. Through their spirituality, they are connected to the source of “Light upon light.”

One of the ways to know our spiritual status is to see how much dependent we feel on others. How much do we rely on others’ help or assistance? Again, the point is not to be socially isolated, but to realize that every possession that we have and every relationship that we have, and everything around us is temporary and dependent on something else, and it could change or walk out of our lives or be taken away from us at any point. The stronger our connection is with the Reality of all realities, (i.e. God), the less we will feel dependent on shadows. Those who are soaked in monotheism – the friends of God – are at peace with themselves, they emanate contentment and their company even relaxes other people:

أَلَا إِنَّ أَوْلِيَاءَ اللَّهِ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Behold! The friends of God, neither fear shall overwhelm them, nor shall they (ever) remain in grief. (Qur’an, Surah Yunus, 10:62).

Another important point should be mentioned here is that spirituality does not come by merely reading or writing about it or attending a seminar on spirituality. One has to really struggle against the soul and its base desires; it is a life-long practice in which every aspect of a person’s life style helps shape their spirituality. It is a stepwise program in which a person progresses, or regresses based on what they believe and how they live. In other words, spirituality is a practical science, not just a theoretical discourse. The final destination is God and people are at different levels and stages in their ascent towards God, some are conscious of this motion, while others are oblivious to it, bewildered by worldly pursuits and goals.

It must be cautioned that some people in the society use spirituality for their own material gains. They sell “spirituality” by offering expensive courses or seminars. They seek fame and following for their apparent spiritual conduct. But this “spiritual materialism” is the worst form of materialism in which one is using spiritual knowledge or insight to earn money or seek fame. Beware of such traps!

Religious Pluralism

There are several different religions in the world with millions of adherents. Most of the time people adhere to the religion in which they were born or which is followed by their family, with a few exceptions when people give up on the religion of their birth and start following a different ideology. A question that is often asked is that: Is there only one religion that God wants us to follow as opposed to all other religions and ideologies? If there is only one true religion, then what will happen to the people who are born into other religions and by default follow that way of life? If there is no one religion that is better than others, then does it really not matter what religion a person follows?⁵ This question troubles many

believers, as well as non-believers and requires some further discussion.

It should be kept in mind that this book has been written from the perspective of Islam. With that said, Muslims believe that the last revelation to humanity available to us today is the Qur'an and this text clearly states that the only acceptable religion with God is Islam:

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

Decidedly, the true faith acceptable to God is Islam. Those who were given the Scripture were not at variance except after the knowledge had come to them; (their differences were) due to mutual envy and to spite one another. And whoso denies the Messages of God (should bear in mind that) then God indeed is Quick at reckoning. (Qur'an, Surah Ale Imran, 3: 19).

The expectation from mankind today is that they should adopt the latest and most comprehensive ideology – Islam – in their lives. There are many analogies which we can give for the variations of Divine monotheistic religions however the one which I present here is that the various religions are like the different versions of the Windows OS in the computer. Every few years, we have a new version of the OS with more enhanced features. The latest version has the most advanced features and the user get the most out of it. But they all are versions of the same basic operating system. Similarly, as human thought has evolved, the Divine monotheistic religions have also been upgraded – and the most up-to-date system is Islam.

If Islam is the correct religion with God, then do all the followers of Islam automatically achieve salvation even though they may live a wicked life and act cruelly towards others? Are all of the followers of other religions condemned even though they may have lived an upright moral life making useful contributions to the society? In other words, do Muslims get punished for their bad actions, and do non-Muslims get rewarded for their good actions?

The answer to the first question is very straightforward, if a Muslim intentionally commits an evil act and is not remorseful about the action, this will damage the soul and one will have to face its consequences which may be in the form of hell-fire depending on the severity of the bad action.

As for the good actions of a Muslim or a non-Muslim, one has to see the intention of the action. The reward or punishment in the hereafter is dependent on the intention of the action, not necessarily its outer appearance or quantity. Is the action performed for the sake of God to seek His pleasure, following His orders, or is it performed for secondary gains like fame, boasting in front of others or any other secondary advantage. The reality of actions in the afterlife is heavily dependent upon our intentions, which most of the time are hidden from others and thus we should be cautious before judging others as we often do not know what other people's true intentions are.

The majority of the world population is made up of non-Muslims, so do their good actions have merit with God – meaning, will they be rewarded for them? Or are all of their actions null and void since they do not follow Islam? The second scenario does not appear to be just. We understand God as just and The Creator who deals fairly with everyone:

وَمَا اللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلْمًا لِّلْعِبَادِ

And God does not want injustice for His servants. (Qur'an, Surah al-Mu'min, 40:31).

Though the Qur'an clearly states that the religion with God is Islam, it also states that:

شَرَعَ لَكُم مِّنَ الدِّينِ مَا وَصَّى بِهِ نُوحًا وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَى وَعِيسَى أَن أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ ۚ كَبُرَ عَلَى الْمُشْرِكِينَ مَا تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَيْهِ ۚ اللَّهُ يَجْتَبِي إِلَيْهِ مَن يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي إِلَيْهِ مَن يُنِيبُ

He (God) has ordained for you the same course of faith as He enjoined on Noah (to adopt), and which We have revealed to you, and it is that (same faith) which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, Jesus, so keep the faith and do not differ in it. (He ordains you) to establish obedience (to God) and not to be divided (in sects) therein. Hard upon the polytheists is that (teaching) which you call them to. God draws (him) towards Himself who wishes (to be drawn to Him), and guides him to Himself who turns (towards Him with a sincere heart). (Qur'an, Surah al-Shura, 42: 13).

In another verse we read:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالنَّصَارَى وَالصَّابِئِينَ مَن آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Surely, those who (profess to) believe (in Islam), and those who follow the Jewish faith, the Christians and the Sabians, whosoever (of these truly) believes in God and the Last Day and acts righteously shall have their reward with their Lord, and shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (Qur'an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:62).

Each community has been given its own teachings and way of life, to be judged according to it to see do they follow the teachings or do the follow their conjectures and personal whims.

وَأَنزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيْمِنًا عَلَيْهِ ۚ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ ۚ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ ۚ لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا ۚ وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِّيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَاكُمْ ۚ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ ۚ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

And We have revealed to you this perfect Book comprising the truth and wisdom, fulfilling (the prophecies of) the Scripture which was present before it and stands as a guardian over it, then judge between them according to that which God has revealed (of the Qur'an), and do not deviate from the truth that has come to you in order to follow their low desires. For each one of you did We prescribe a spiritual law and a well-defined way. And if God had so willed He might have made you all one community (by force), but He wishes to show your perfection (the capacities and capabilities) that He has endowed you with. Therefore vie one with another in (doing) good deeds. To God is the return of you all, then He will inform you as to that wherein you were at variance. (Qur'an, Surah al-Ma'idah, 5:48).

Therefore, based on these verses, we understand that there is a commonality between the teachings of the different prophets. We also understand that those who believe in God and the afterlife, will get rewarded and will not be condemned even though they may be followers of different religions beside Islam. But the key point is to understand that they must have faith in God and the afterlife, and they must perform good actions with pure intentions.

Now does that mean that as long as one has faith in God and the reality of the afterlife, there is no difference between the different religions? In other words, if everyone who believes in God and the hereafter – even though they may not follow any religion – will be rewarded for their good actions? If so, then what is the advantage of being a Muslim, or why is Islam the right religion with God?

The answer is because Islam provides the most comprehensive and sophisticated program for spiritual development, and unless one follows that program, one cannot achieve a high spiritual rank. If someone believes in God and the afterlife and does good actions with pure intentions but does not perform the Islamic practices, then they will be rewarded in the afterlife, but will not be able to achieve a spiritual status that they could have achieved had they followed Islam. For example, Muslims are obligated to fast for thirty days every year and also perform five daily prayers. If someone follows this regimen with pure intentions, then their spiritual growth should be much more than someone who does not perform these acts.

What about those who do not believe in God or the afterlife? Within this group there are some whose circumstances are such that they were never able to learn about the reality of Islam but not out of a fault of their own – for example, maybe they lived in an isolated community. These people cannot be questioned about something that they have no knowledge about and as such, they will be judged by God according to their own individual circumstances. But there are those who know the reality of Islam, or God and the afterlife, but are obstinate in front of the truth and do not want to change their ways and their lifestyle that comes with accepting a Diving religion like Islam. Will they be rewarded for their good actions?

Well first of all, they should not expect any reward in the afterlife as they never even believed in anything after death. So if they do not get anything there, it will not be unjust for them. They cannot expect to

achieve felicity and salvation in the afterlife as they never aimed or worked towards it. For them everything is the life of this world and they expect everything in it only, with no regards to what will happen to them in the afterlife:

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ الْعَاجِلَةَ عَجَّلْنَا لَهُ فِيهَا مَا نَشَاءُ لِمَنْ نُرِيدُ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَا لَهُ جَهَنَّمَ يَصْلَاهَا مَذْمُومًا مَدْحُورًا وَمَنْ أَرَادَ الْآخِرَةَ وَسَعَىٰ لَهَا سَعْيَهَا وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ سَعْيُهُمْ مَشْكُورًا كَلَّا نُمَدُّ هَؤُلَاءِ وَهَؤُلَاءِ مِنْ عَطَاءِ رَبِّكَ ۖ وَمَا كَانَ عَطَاءُ رَبِّكَ مَحْظُورًا

For him who desires the present (transitory) life (only) We shall hasten an immediate reward for him in this very life (giving) what We will to whom We will. But We have prepared Hell for him, he shall enter it, condemned and rejected. As for those who choose the Hereafter and strive for it, the striving that is its due, and are believers, it is these whose striving shall find favour (with their Lord). To all of them, these (who hanker after this world) as well as those (whose choice is the life to come) We render aid, (and this is) out of the bounty of your Lord; the bounty of your Lord is not confined (to any one section of the people). (Qur'an, Surah al-Isra', 17: 18-20).

Will they get any compensation for their good actions? If a non-believer performs good actions with a pure intention of doing a good deed without any expectation for getting secondary benefits like fame or recognition, then they should get a reward for it. Due to lack of belief in the hereafter the reward however may come in this life in the form of riches or fame or good fortune. They may also get some relief from the misery that they have created for themselves in the hereafter, and God knows best:

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَرَمَادٍ اشْتَدَّتْ بِهِ الرِّيحُ فِي يَوْمٍ عَاصِفٍ لَا يَقْدِرُونَ مِمَّا كَسَبُوا عَلَىٰ شَيْءٍ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الضَّلَالُ الْبَعِيدُ

The works of those who disbelieve in (the Messages and blessings of) their Lord, are like ashes on which the wind blows violently on a tempestuous day. They shall have no power to reap the fruit of their deeds. That is indeed an extremely ruinous error. (Qur'an, Surah Ibrahim, 14: 18).

The expectation from mankind today is that they should adopt the latest and most complete ideology i.e. Islam in their life. Islam takes a comprehensive position regarding the true teachings of the earlier prophets. It does not reject any of them, but at the same time in today's world compared to Islam, the other ideologies will not be sufficient. The important thing is to ask if we are following what we regard as the truth and are submitting to it, or are we obstinate in front of it and prefer to follow our desires and conjectures?

قُلْ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَالنَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ

Say: ‘We believe in God and in that which has been revealed to us and in that which was revealed to Abraham and Ismail and Isaac and Jacob and his children and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus and to all other Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between anyone of them (in believing them) and to Him alone do we submit.’ And whosoever seeks a faith other than Islam (complete submission to the will of God,) it will never be accepted from him, and he shall be of the losers in the Hereafter. (Qur’an, Surah Ale ʿImran, 3:84–85).

1. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-t...> [34]

2. Ibid.

3. Jibouri, Yasin T. al–, The Concept of God in Islam, Published by Ansarian Publications, Qum, Iran.

4. Naraqī, Muhammad, S. Mahdi b. Abi Dharr al–, Jamiʿ al–Saʿadat – The Collection of Felicities, Ansariyan Publications, Qum, Iran. Online at: <https://www.al-islam.org/jami-al-saadat-collector-felicities-muhammad-ma...> [35]

5. Mutahhari, Murtadha, Islam and Religious Pluralism, Islamic Publishing House, Ontario, Canada, 2004. Online at: <https://www.al-islam.org/islam-and-religious-pluralism-murtadha-mutahhari> [36]

Chapter 16: other intelligent beings

We live in an unimaginably large universe. Our earth rotates around a medium size hydrogen/helium star that we call the Sun. There are billions of stars in our Milky Way Galaxy alone, and there are billions of galaxies in the observable universe. As far as we know, we are the only intelligent beings who exist in this universe. Is there life elsewhere in the universe? Are there other intelligent beings who have developed civilizations like ours and are trying to make contact with the outside world? If earth is the only place where life exists, then the universe will have an “awful waste of space”, a quote famously attributed to the renowned cosmologist Carl Sagan, whose very popular television series in the 1980’s called “Cosmos: A Personal Voyage” was one of my favorite TV shows broadcasted in Pakistan during my childhood years.

Cosmologists have looked for signs of life and especially intelligent life on other planets in the solar system including Venus and Mars, but so far there is no convincing evidence that life exists elsewhere. However, this has not dampened the spirits of scientists, many of whom have dedicated their professional lives in this pursuit. The quest for life outside of this Earth is famously known as the Search for Extra–Terrestrial Intelligence or SETI.

One of the scientific approaches to SETI is to search for planets similar to ours which are also rotating around a star and then look for signs of life. Using large radio telescopes, scientists are attempting to detect signals which may be transmitted by other advanced civilizations, just as we have been broadcasting radio signals since the beginning of the 20th Century.

The chance of detecting an advanced civilization like ours is calculated by what is known as Drake's Equation.¹ This equation takes into consideration how many stars are present in the universe; how many of those stars have planetary system like ours; how many of those planets have optimal conditions to start life spontaneously; how many of those life forms evolve to become intelligent species like us; and how many of those intelligent species create technology like radio transmission which can be broadcasted across interstellar distance for us to be able to detect it. Putting all of these different factors together, the chance of detecting such a signal from an extra-terrestrial source is slim, but considering how many stars exist in the universe it is certainly possible to do so.

Detecting other forms of life or making contact with them certainly has serious social and religious implications. Do those civilizations also have a concept of God? Did they develop religion or have prophets who claimed to have received revelation from God? What moral codes do they follow? How can we mutually benefit from one another?

Some people are of the view that since we have not found life outside of earth, this makes the chance of God's existence less probable. Nevertheless, the scientific pursuit for other intelligent life forms continues.

Now let us take a look to see if the Qur'an, the last revelation to mankind, sheds any light on alien life? Did God create other life forms besides us who still exist? If yes, where are they and what do we know about them?

The Jinn

The Qur'an talks about another intelligent life form known as the *jinn*, different from mankind who are called *ins* or *insan*. The word *jinn* means something which is hidden, unseen or occult.² The idea of the existence of the *jinn* predates even the advent of Islam, and people of the early times were familiar with their existence. The Qur'an confirms their existence, chapter 72 of the Qur'an is called The Jinn and they have been mentioned dozens of times at other places in the Qur'an as well.

1. The Physical Nature of the Jinn

Like humans, the *jinn* too have a material aspect to their existence, but their form/matter is different from the human being. While human bodies are made of "clay" i.e. carbon, oxygen, nitrogen etc., the *jinn* are made of a "fiery substance" or "scorching wind." The Qur'an says:

وَخَلَقَ الْجَانَّ مِنْ مَّارِجٍ مِنْ نَارٍ

And He (God) created the jinn of a flame of fire. (Qur'an, Surah al-Rahman, 55: 15).

The Qur'an also mentions:

وَالْجَانَّ خَلَقْنَاهُ مِنْ قَبْلُ مِنْ نَارِ السَّمُومِ

And the jinn race, We had created before, from the fire of a scorching wind, (Qur'an, Surah al-Hijr, 15:27).

This makes them distinct entities, different from the physical entities which we experience around us. Their physical substance is finer and subtler than the humans which gives them a degree of invisibility in appearance and fluidity in shape. Could this fiery substance be “dark matter” or something totally new which does not interact with matter, neither reflects nor emits light? Little is known about the exact nature of the physical aspect of their existence.

Jinns are “pre-Adamites,” meaning that they occupied this earth long before the emergence of mankind. They still exist around us on the earth, in the seas and on the vast desolate plains but they are not perceived by our senses. They are said to be able to move between the visible or material realm, and the higher invisible or imaginal realm (a higher realm beyond the confines of our space-time – see Chapter 13 for further details).[3](#)

In terms of physical abilities, the jinn are more capable than mankind. Their sensory perception is also better as they can see us, but we cannot see them. They can exist with us in the material realm not outside of it, but our lives do not cross each other in the day to day living:

إِنَّهُ يَرَاكُمْ هُوَ وَقَبِيلُهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا تَرَوْنَهُمْ

For he and his tribe watch you from a position where you cannot see them. (Qur'an, Surah al-Araf, 7:27).

Like humans, the jinn have genders – male and female, use language, and also form tribes and communities. Their lifespan can be long, much longer than a typical human's life span sometimes lasting hundreds or thousands of years. They are intelligent beings and can discern between good and evil.

2. Jinn Listening to the Qur'an

The Qur'an narrates that when Prophet Muhammad (S) started preaching his message and used to recite the Qur'an, a group of jinn listened to it and were very impressed by what the Prophet (S) was reciting. After attentively listening to it, they communicated it with their comrades. This tells us that they can understand human language. In Surah al-Jinn it says:

قُلْ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ أَنَّهُ اسْتَمَعَ نَفَرٌ مِنَ الْجِنِّ فَقَالُوا إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا قُرْآنًا عَجَبًا 1 يَهْدِي إِلَى الرُّشْدِ فَآمَنَّا بِهِ ۚ وَلَنْ نُشْرِكَ بِرَبِّنَا أَحَدًا

Say: 'It has been revealed to me that a party of the jinn listened (to the Qur'an), so they said (to their people on their return), 'Surely, we have heard a wonderful Qur'an. It guides towards righteousness, so we declare our faith in it. We shall no longer worship any god besides our Lord.' (Qur'an, Surah al-Jinn, 72: 1-2).

At another instance, a different group of jinn listened to the Qur'an and compared it with the revelation that was sent before to Prophet Moses ('a). This is how the Qur'an narrates that event:

وَإِذْ صَرَفْنَا إِلَيْكَ نَفَرًا مِنَ الْجِنِّ يَسْتَمِعُونَ الْقُرْآنَ فَلَمَّا حَضَرُوهُ قَالُوا أَنْصِتُوا فَلَمَّا قُضِيَ وَلَّوْا إِلَى قَوْمِهِمْ مُنْذِرِينَ
قَالُوا يَا قَوْمَنَا إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا كِتَابًا أُنْزِلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مُوسَى مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ وَإِلَى طَرِيقٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ يَا قَوْمَنَا
أَجِيبُوا دَاعِيَ اللَّهِ وَآمِنُوا بِهِ يَغْفِرَ لَكُمْ مِنْ ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُجِرْكُمْ مِنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ

And (Prophet! recall the time) when We brought some people from among the jinns to you. They wished to listen to the Qur'an. When they attended it (its recitation) they said (one to another): 'Be silent (and listen).' When this (recitation) was over they went back to their people as warners. They (having gone there) said: 'O our people! we have listened to a Book which has been revealed after (the time of) Moses confirming that (divine Scripture) which is before it. It guides to the truth and to the right and straight path. O our people! accept the call of one calling to God and believe in Him. (If you do so) He will keep you safe from (the woeful consequences of) your sins and will screen you from the woeful punishment.' (Qur'an, Surah al-Ahqaf, 46:29-31).

3. Do the Jinn Follow Religion?

Jinns are a parallel creation to mankind and like us also have free will, knowledge and wisdom. Amongst them some are believers and others are non-believers; and for spiritual guidance they tend to follow what has been revealed to mankind. The Qur'an says:

وَأَنَا مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ وَمِنَّا دُونَ ذَلِكَ كُنَّا طَرَائِقَ قَدَدًا

And some of us are righteous and some of us are otherwise. We follow different ways. (Qur'an, Surah al-Jinn, 72: 11).

وَأَنَا مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَمِنَّا الْقَاسِطُونَ فَمَنْ أَسْلَمَ فَأُولَئِكَ تَحَرَّوْا رَشَدًا

And some of us submit (to the will of God) while some of us are deviators (from the right course). (It has also been revealed to the Prophet that) those who submit (to God's commandments) are actually those who earnestly aim at the right way and find it out. (Qur'an, Surah al-Jinn, 72: 14).

In many instances, the Qur'an addresses both mankind and the jinn collectively giving general guidance applicable to both of them:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ

And I (God) have not created the jinn and humanity except that they should serve Me. (Qur'an, Surah al-Dharyat, 51:56).

4. Prophet Solomon (S) and the Jinn

The Qur'an narrates that Prophet Solomon (S) had a vast kingdom. His authority was not only over humanity, but also animals and the jinn:

وَوَرِثَ سُلَيْمَانُ دَاوُودَ وَقَالَ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ عُلِّمْنَا مَنْطِقَ الطَّيْرِ وَأُوتِينَا مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ إِنَّ هَذَا لَهُوَ الْفَضْلُ الْمُبِينُ وَحُشِرَ لِسُلَيْمَانَ جُنُودُهُ مِنَ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسِ وَالطَّيْرِ فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ

And Solomon succeeded David and he said: 'O you people! we have been taught the language of the birds (and also the technique of horsemanship), and bestowed with everything (essential for us). This indeed is a distinct favour (of God and His grace).' And there were gathered together before Solomon his hosts comprising of jinn and (ordinary) people and birds and swift footed horses, and they were then arranged in separate well-disciplined columns. (Qur'an, Surah al-Naml, 27: 16-17).

The jinns worked for him and performed various tasks which included construction and art work, as the Qur'an says:

وَمِنَ الْجِنَّ مَنْ يَعْمَلُ بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِ وَمَنْ يَزِغُ مِنْهُمْ عَنْ أَمْرِنَا نُذِقْهُ مِنْ عَذَابِ السَّعِيرِ يَعْمَلُونَ لَهُ مَا يَشَاءُ مِنْ مَحَارِبَ وَتَمَاثِيلَ وَجِفَانٍ كَالْجَوَابِ وَقُدُورٍ رَاسِيَاتٍ اعْمَلُوا آلَ دَاوُودَ شُكْرًا وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنْ عِبَادِيَ الشَّكُورُ

Also (given into his service were) some of the jinns, who worked under him as trained craftsmen) by the command of his Lord. And (We also told them) whoever of them deviated from and disobeyed Our command (that they should obey Solomon) We shall make him suffer the agony of burning. Those (jinn) made for him (Solomon) whatever he desired, places for worship and plans and basins (as large) as the tanks and large and heavy cooking pots well-set (on their trivets due to their large size). (And We said,) 'Act gratefully, O people of David.' Yet few are My people who are (really) grateful.' (Qur'an, Surah al-Saba', 34: 12-13).

In one instance, Prophet Solomon ('a) asked which of his courtier's can bring him the throne of the queen of Sheeba. A jinn present offered to do the task:

قَالَ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ أَيُّكُمْ يَأْتِينِي بِعَرْشِهَا قَبْلَ أَنْ يَأْتُونِي مُسْلِمِينَ قَالَ عِفْرِيتٌ مِنَ الْجِنِّ أَنَا آتِيكَ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَقُومَ مِنْ مَقَامِكَ وَإِنِّي عَلَيْهِ لَقَوِيٌّ أَمِينٌ

(Later on addressing his courtiers Solomon) said: ‘Nobles! which one of you will bring me a throne befitting her (the Queen) before they come to me surrendering in submission.’ A stalwart from among the jinn said: ‘I will bring it to you (prepared as you desire), before you rise and depart from your place of encampment. Surely, I am strong and expert enough (to accomplish this task and can be) trusted (with it).’ (Qur’an, Surah al-Naml, 27:38–39).

Ultimately however, it was not a jinn who did the task which Prophet Solomon (‘a) wanted, it was someone who had an even greater level of power and ability who rose to the occasion:

قَالَ الَّذِي عِنْدَهُ عِلْمٌ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ أَنَا آتِيكَ بِهِ قَبْلَ أَنْ يَرْتَدَّ إِلَيْكَ طَرْفُكَ ۚ فَلَمَّا رَآهُ مُسْتَقِرًّا عِنْدَهُ قَالَ هَذَا مِنْ فَضْلِ رَبِّي لِيَبْلُوَنِي أَأَشْكُرُ أَمْ أَكْفُرُ ۚ وَمَنْ شَكَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ رَبِّي غَنِيٌّ كَرِيمٌ

But one who had knowledge of the letter, said: ‘I will bring it to you in the twinkling of an eye.’ When Solomon saw it before him, (he said): ‘This is by the grace of my Lord that He may test me whether I am grateful or I am thankless. Yet if one is grateful, he is grateful for himself, and if one is thankless, then surely my Lord is unconcerned and magnanimous.’ (Qur’an, Surah al-Naml, 27:40).

This encounter tells us that though the jinn may be physically more capable but overall mankind has superiority over the jinn. We both have freewill, but humans have the potential of achieving a much higher spiritual position than the jinn.

5. Satanic Jinn

The jinns existence predates mankind and when God wanted to appoint His vicegerent on earth in the form of Prophet Adam (S), He ordered all who had gathered in that heavenly assembly, which included not only the angels, but also Iblis (who is a jinn) to bow down to Adam (S). Everyone did except Satan who refused – keeping in mind that Satan is not one of the angels, but is actually a jinn:

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ كَانَ مِنَ الْجِنِّ فَفَسَقَ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِ ۖ أَفَتَتَّخِذُونَهُ وَذُرِّيَّتَهُ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِي وَهُمْ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ ۚ بِئْسَ لِلظَّالِمِينَ بَدَلًا

And (recall the time) when We said to the angels: ‘Submit to Adam.’ So they all submitted (bowing), but Iblis (did not); he was one of the jinn, he disobeyed the command of his Lord. (Mankind!) would you (then) take him and his progeny (and cohorts) for friends rather than Me while they are your enemies? How evil is the substitute (of God) the unjust have chosen! (Qur’an,

Surah al-Kahf, 18:50).

Adam ('a) as a vicegerent of God on the earth has a superior spiritual status over the other creations including the jinn. The satanic jinn and his descendants, due to animosity towards the progeny of Adam ('a), whisper in our ears and try to incite us towards hatred, suspicion of others, racism, violence and disobedience towards God. They cannot force us to do anything, but can certainly incite us towards that which is harmful to us.

The Qur'an as a book of guidance warns us about Satan, and we have been asked to be mindful about such evil thoughts which always cross our minds, and to seek protection of God from such satanic whispering.

In this regards, the last chapter in the Qur'an states:

مِنْ شَرِّ الْوَسْوَاسِ الْخَنَّاسِ 4 الَّذِي يُوَسْوِسُ فِي صُدُورِ النَّاسِ 5 مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ

From the evil (of the whisperings) of the whisperer, the sneaking one. Who whispers evil suggestions into the hearts of mankind, From among the jinn and the (ordinary) mankind. (Qur'an, Surah al-Nas, 114:4-6).

In fact, the Qur'an clearly warns us that Satan is mankind's open enemy, so we need to be careful of him and not fall into his traps and temptations:

أَلَمْ أَعْهَدْ إِلَيْكُمْ يَا بَنِي آدَمَ أَنْ لَا تَعْبُدُوا الشَّيْطَانَ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ

O Children of Adam! did I not enjoin on you never to worship satan, for he is to you an enemy severing (your) ties (with Me). (Qur'an, Surah Ya Sin, 36:60).

In *al-Sahifa al-Kamila al-Sajjadiyya*, a book of supplications by the 4th Imam, ʿAli b. Husayn ('a), he teaches a supplication in which he warns us about satanic temptations, about him having access to our inner being, and seeking refuge in God from his whisperings. In a portion of supplication number 25, he prays:

*You assigned to us an enemy who schemes against us,
[You] gave him an authority over us in a way that You did not give us authority over him,
[You] allowed him to dwell in our breasts and let him run in our blood vessels;
He (Satan) is not heedless, though we be heedless, he does not forget, though we forget...*

The acknowledgment of existence of other intelligent life forms help us understand our own position in the large scheme of things. We are one of the creations of God not the only one. He has created other

intelligent life forms as well who predate our existence.

Revelation in the form of the Qur'an can give us insight into the many pure scientific questions like SETI. It helps us make a world view which is much broader in scope than what can be obtained from using pure empirical knowledge only. What is important is to use the knowledge of the revelation to direct our scientific research towards a path which will help us make better sense of the world around us as well as our position and goal in it.

وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ تَبْيَانًا لِّكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ

And (that is why) We have revealed to you this perfect Book explaining every (basic) thing and (which serves as) a guidance and a mercy, and (gives) good tidings to those who submit (to God). (Qur'an, Surah al-Nahl, 16:89).

1. <https://www.seti.org/drakeequation> [37].

2. Zein, Amira el–, Islam, Arabs and the Intelligent World of the Jinn, Syracuse University Press, 2009, New York.

3. Zein, Amira el–, Islam, Arabs and the Intelligent World of the Jinn, Syracuse University Press, 2009, New York.

Conclusion

Human beings by their very nature seek a higher meaning and purpose to their own existence and that of the universe around them. Monotheism as an ideological framework shapes our worldview, gives a meaning and purpose to our existence and provides a moral code to live by. God is an absolutely perfect Being, who exists by Himself – completely independent of everything else. All things in existence manifest God's existence and His attributes according to its share and capacity, and any limitation and deficiency is that of the creation not of the Creator. Each one of us including those who deny the existence of God are seeking nothing but God as there is nothing else to seek – though they may be seeking Him in different objects and goals. We are programmed to seek nothing except Almighty God.

Reason – which is our main guide in this world also points towards the existence of one God. There is no rational explanation for the existence of universe without an eternal self-existing Being i.e. God. It is ironic that some claim to base their world view on reason alone but fail to provide sound rational argument for the existence of the universe without a self-existing God. To believe in God is not a matter of blind faith or imitation, but it is actually a conclusion based on pure reason. To reject the existence of God is irrational.

In addition to reason, authentic revelation is our other main guide. The Qur'an delivered to us through Prophet Muhammad (S) 1,400 years ago is the preserved word of God, available to us today without any

mutation. Not only is the Qur'an preserved, but its language (Arabic) is also preserved not undergoing significant change over the past 1,400 years. The Qur'an despite being a very old text, can be easily understood today by modern day native Arab speakers as well as millions of non-Arabs. The message of this Divinely-sent Book remains relevant to mankind today, despite tremendous advancement in human thought and understanding of the natural world; and it remains one of the most important signs of God.

The likeness of reason is that of an eye and revelation is that of light. When applied together they can help one see further into the reality of existence. Those who want to dispense with one or the other either have a myopic view of the reality or are unable to comprehend what they are looking at.

The conduct of Prophet Muhammad (S) and his true successors, the twelve Imams and their teachings are also as relevant to us today as they were in their lifetime. An unbiased reflection on their lifestyle and conduct forces one to turn towards God. They embody the ideology of monotheism in their beings to the fullest and are His biggest signs.

Monotheism is not only for philosophical discussions and academic debates, but it is actually an ideology to live by. Through His acts of creation and command God is manifest in the entire universe as well as in our own personal lives. Monotheism shapes our personal goals, perspectives, conduct and the very meaning of our existence. The peak of embodiment of monotheism is to put our trust in God alone and to realize the inadequacy of anything to benefit or harm us except with the permission of God, and to be satisfied with the outcome of our affairs which is always good for the believers. The world which we live in and its occurrences in our lives make better sense when viewed through the lens of monotheism.

A life lived by the ideology of monotheism prepares us for a higher level of existence which starts after death. Free will and the resulting responsibility that we have been given in this material realm of existence, prepares us for our stay in the higher non-material realms of existence. What we experience after death is nothing other than how we conducted ourselves in this life. We are responsible for our own actions and there is no escape from them.

In addition to pure reason and revelation, scientific method is another important way of acquiring knowledge about the reality of existence. Scientific method relies on studying and experimenting with analyzable factors to draw conclusions about the working of natural phenomenon in a systematic way. Some have wrongly concluded that atheism or secularism is a premise for conducting scientific inquiry. The rise of Islam in the 7th Century Arabia ushered the birth of Islamic/Arab civilization which propelled human thought to the next level. Muslims scientists and philosophers made valuable contributions to rational and empirical sciences. Islamic/Arab civilization was one of the main factors that led to renaissance and scientific revolution in Europe. Over the past several centuries the application of scientific methods has transformed the face of earth, as well as our understanding of the universe.

For some this greater understanding of nature through science has led to self-conceit and contemptuous

rejection of God and religion, though science in no way rejects or disproves the existence of God. Scientific theories like the “Big Bang Theory” and the “Evolution of Species by Natural Selection” are presented as an alternative to monotheistic worldview and are worshiped like false idols. To suggest that the universe came into existence from non-existence through the initial process of “big bang” or “quantum fluctuations” is irrational and absurd, as the follow up question will be how can non-existence give rise to singularity or quantum fluctuations or the laws of physics? Similarly, though micro-evolution in biology is a self-evident reality, there is paucity of scientific evidence about abiogenesis and macro-evolution. When this theory is subjected to critical scientific analysis and viewed through the prism of philosophy and spirituality it appears impossible to be true.

Humanism is an increasingly popular world view and has a slightly positive connotation to it as opposed to the dry and uninspiring atheism. In the table below a comparison is presented between monotheism and atheism/humanism.

	Monotheism	Atheism/Humanism
Sources of knowledge	Reason, revelation, empirical method, intuitive knowledge	Reason, empirical method
Origin of the universe	Self-existing Being (God)	Non-existence
Extent of existence	Physical and meta-physical realms of existence	Only physical realm of existence
Human being	Multi-dimensional being with body and soul	Physical body only
Status of mankind	Vicegerent of God manifesting His attributes	Evolved primate closely related to chimpanzee
Goal of life	Spiritual development, perfection of morals and God’s attributes in our beings	No real purpose, defend human rights, enjoy life as one wishes
What happens after death?	Real life starts. Outcome depends on acts during this life and the degree of one’s spiritual development	Nothing

It is clear that atheism/humanism has a much narrower and myopic perspective of the reality as opposed to monotheism. In atheism/humanism there is no rational explanation for the origin of the universe; and the limit of reality is as far as our five senses and empirical methods can detect. Human beings are only physical bodies and have come from other animals, so human psychology must be studied in the context of animal behavior. There is no real goal or purpose to our existence; and when we die we just cease to exist. It is a rather depressing and uninspiring ideology. Atheists are not missing the elephant in the room, but in fact they are missing the entire room.

While humanism is presented as a progressive forward looking world view, it is actually a major obstacle to further human development and perfection. Rejection of God disconnects us from our origin and source of all perfection, and denying the afterlife shifts our focus away from the real purpose and goal of our lives. Relegating mankind to an evolved primate seriously limits the fulfilment of mankind’s potential. There is no bigger injustice done to mankind than through adopting atheism/humanism.

In this book I have attempted to answer many questions from the perspective of monotheism that cross the minds of almost all of us during some point in our lives. I hope everyone who reads this book ponders and reflects on these questions further. Some may find these views convincing and satisfactory, while others will out rightly reject them. Your response to this book depends on your level of preparation to receive it. You now know whether your heart is ready to accept it or reject it!

وَمَا عَلَيْنَا إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ

And our duty is only to proclaim the clear message. (Qur'an, Surah Yasin, 36: 17).

وَأَخِرُ دَعْوَاهُمْ أَنِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

And the conclusion of their prayer will be: Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds! (Qur'an, Surah Yunus, 10: 10).

Other Publications Available

Other Publications Available¹

1. *40 Ahadith: Completion of Islam – Ghadir* written by Mahmud Sharifi and translated by Saleem Bhimji³
2. *40 Ahadith: Qur'an* written by Sayyid Majid Adili and translated by Arifa Hudda and Saleem Bhimji³ and 4
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6. *A Code of Ethics for Muslim Men and Women* written by Sayyid Mas'ud Ma'sumi and translated by Arifa Hudda and Saleem Bhimji¹
7. *A Mother's Prayer* compiled and translated by Saleem Bhimji and Arifa Hudda¹ and 2

8. *A Summary of the Rulings of Salat al-Jama'at according to the edicts of Ayatullah al-Uzma Sayyid 'Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani* compiled and translated by Saleem Bhimji1
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...and more to come, Insha-Allah (God Willing)

About The Islamic Publishing House

قَالَ جَاءَ رَجُلٌ إِلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ فَقَالَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ مَا الْعِلْمُ؟ قَالَ الْإِنصَاتُ. قَالَ ثُمَّ مَهْ؟ : (ʿa) عَنْ أَبِي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ عَنْ آبَائِهِ قَالَ الْإِسْتِمَاعُ. قَالَ ثُمَّ مَهْ؟ قَالَ الْحِفْظُ. قَالَ ثُمَّ مَهْ؟ قَالَ الْعَمَلُ بِهِ. قَالَ ثُمَّ مَهْ؟ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ؟ قَالَ: نَشْرُهُ.

Abu ʿAbdillah narrates from his ancestors(ʿa) who said the following: “A man once came to the Messenger of Allah and said, ‘O’ Messenger of Allah, what is knowledge?’ The Prophet replied, ‘It is

silence.’ The man then asked, ‘Then what?’ The Prophet said, **‘It is listening.’** The man asked, ‘Then what?’ The Prophet replied, **‘Then it is remembering.’** The man asked, ‘Then what?’ The Prophet said, **‘Then it is to practice (according to what one has learned).’** The man then asked, ‘Then what O’ Messenger of Allah?’ The Prophet replied, **‘Then it is to disseminate (what one has learned).’”²**

Established in early 2001, gaining inspiration from the above quoted statement from Prophet Muhammad (S), the *Islamic Publishing House* has developed into Canada’s premier publisher of high quality Islamic literature for Muslims of all ages. Our mission is to ensure that the authentic teachings of normative Islam — in all aspects of life — as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad (S) and his immaculate family, the Ahlul Bayt (‘a), are made available for everyone in a clear and easy to understand language.

Over the past several years, we have been fortunate to publish **30 full length texts** which have been distributed throughout the world in print; released **7 ePublications**; and authored hundreds of articles – all thanks to the blessings of Allah (SwT), the grace of the Prophet, and the Ahlul Bayt (‘a) and the continued material support from donors all over the world.

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Our publications and video productions are all financially supported by the generous donations of individuals and non-profit institutions in North America and Europe, for whom we are eternally grateful.

As we continue to produce English publications and unique and original video content, we continually appeal to all of those people who have a passion for the spread of the faith of Islam, as taught by the family of the Prophet – to assist us in any way possible in promoting the teachings of Islam as taught by Prophet Muhammad (S) and the Ahlul Bayt (‘a).

To support us in any way, please contact us at: iph@iph.ca [38]

¹. The following is a list of books which are available from the Islamic Publishing House and publishers which it has worked with. A note on the publishers noted above:

1 = Islamic Humanitarian Service, Canada – www.al-haqq.com [39]

2 = Al-Fath Al-Mubin Publications, Canada – www.al-mubin.org [40]

3 = World Federation of KSIMC, UK – www.world-federation.org [41]

4 = Islamic Publishing House, Canada – www.iph.org [42]

5 = Various publishers

6 = Not available in print [either an eBook] or out of print

7 = Jaffari Propagation Centre, India – www.jpconline.org [43]

Most of the above books and hundreds of other articles can be read for free at www.al-mubin.org [40] or www.al-islam.org [44].

². Al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 48, trad. 4.

Source URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/god-and-god-science-syed-hasan-raza-jafri>

Links

- [1] <https://www.al-islam.org/person/syed-hasan-raza-jafri>
- [2] <https://www.al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/101768>
- [3] <https://www.al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/101768>
- [4] <https://www.al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/101768>
- [5] <https://www.al-islam.org/tags/existence-god>
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- [7] <http://www.ehawza.com>
- [8] <https://www.al-islam.org/lantern-path-imam-jafar-al-sadiq>
- [9] <https://noetic.org/>
- [10] <https://www.al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-1-Sermons/Sermon-49-praise-belongs-god-who-knows-inside>
- [11] <https://www.al-islam.org/light-within-me-mutahhari-tabatabai-khomeini>
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- [13] <http://www.mullasadra.org>
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- [19] <https://www.al-islam.org/hidden-truth-about-karbala-ak-ahmed-bsc-bl>
- [20] <https://www.al-islam.org/restatement-history-islam-and-muslims-sayyid-ali-asghar-razwy>
- [21] <https://www.al-islam.org/islamic-family-life-sayyid-saeed-akhtar-rizvi>
- [22] <http://www.asktheShaykh.com/what-does-islam-say-about-free-will-and-determinismpredestination/>
- [23] <https://www.al-islam.org/perspectives-concept-love-islam-mahnaz-heydarpoor>
- [24] <https://www.al-islam.org/shiah-and-islamic-disciplines-sayyid-hasan-al-sadr>
- [25] <https://www.al-islam.org/treatise-rights-risalat-al-huquq-imam-ali-zayn-al-abidin>
- [26] <https://www.al-islam.org/survey-lives-infallible-imams-murtadha-mutahhari>
- [27] <https://www.al-islam.org/uyun-akhbar-ar-ridha-volume-1-shaykh-saduq>
- [28] <http://en.unesco.org/news/sm-razaullah-ansari-ibn-al-haytham-s-scientific-method>
- [29] <https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol10-n2-2009/reason-faith-authority-shiite-perspective->

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<https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol1-n2/divine-revelation-human-reason-and-science-abdullah-jaw-adi-amuli>

[31] <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/812231.pdf>

[32] <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/1236081/religious-affiliation-over-time-british-social-attitudes.pdf>

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<https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol11-no1-no2/concept-love-shii-creed-sayyid-muhammad-rida-hij-az>

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<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>

[35] <https://www.al-islam.org/jami-al-saadat-collector-felicities-muhammad-mahdi-naraqi>

[36] <https://www.al-islam.org/islam-and-religious-pluralism-murtadha-mutahhari>

[37] <https://www.seti.org/drakeequation>

[38] <mailto:iph@iph.ca>

[39] <http://www.al-haqq.com>

[40] <http://www.al-mubin.org>

[41] <http://www.world-federation.org>

[42] <http://www.iph.org>

[43] <http://www.jpconline.org>

[44] <http://www.al-islam.org>