?Why Theology

At first, we might see ourselves faced with this fundamental question: “What is the importance and necessity of endeavoring to understand God and what role does this understanding have in our personal and social lives?”

In order to answer this question, we must first recount several issues: A short reflection upon the individual and social characteristics of the lives of those around us reveals the fact that there is a fundamental difference between the lives of believers and unbelievers. Additionally, two people who each has a differing view of their God do not live in the same manner. This is because our belief in God, understanding of God’s traits, and relationship with God—especially when these beliefs become imbued into our souls and we wear the raiment of faith [īmān]—have a profound effect upon the various aspects of our lives. Humanity’s understanding of their creator influence their motives and causes, desires and ambitions, thought and speech, and actions and behavior. This understanding gives their lives direction, and it bestows upon them special identities.

Therefore, walking the path of theology and understanding God is not just a scientific endeavor to answer several questions of our inquisitive minds; rather, it is a movement towards choosing a special way of life and manner of living.

Indeed, belief in and love of God has never been an easily overlooked, subsidiary, or inferior issue. Persons who wish to strengthen the pillars of their lives upon the foundation of reason and sagacity would never allow themselves to neglect this matter. Belief in God is a fundamental issue in religious life, and it is not possible to make an informed decision about the best way of life without correct and comprehensive understanding of religious life.

History also supports the importance of theology. As far as historical facts show, enquiry concerning the source of existence and the creator of the world has always been one of the main concerns of thoughtful humanity. Additionally, theological opinions and beliefs, and discussions about existence and God’s attributes have greatly helped the general and historical culture of humankind.1

The Methods of Realizing God

It is befitting that we commence our discussion on the methods of realizing God with two definitions. Two fundamental stages can be identified concerning understanding God:

1. Cognizance of the existence of Allah,

2. Cognition of Divine attributes and actions and the relationship of Allah with humanity and the world.

In the first stage, one realizes that “Allah is”. This realization separates one from the ranks of atheists and agnostics, and joins him with the ranks of believers. Next, one enters the second stage, becomes acquainted with God’s attributes, and identifies God’s relationship with all creatures of the world. This stage consists of an endless path that each believer can only partially traverse depending upon his capacity.

In order to avoid mistaking these two fundamental stages with each other, we will term the first stage “realizing Allah” and the second stage “understanding Allah”.

From one perspective, we can place the most important methods of realizing God in three categories: the way of the heart, the way of experience, and the way of reason.2

1. The Way of the Heart

Sometimes through introspection, without needing logical deduction or empirical observation, humans realize their Creator and thus reach their Beloved by way of heart. The starting point of this path is innate [fi rī] realization of God, which is also called the way of nature [fi rat]. The advanced stages of this method pertains to a special group of mystics and illuminated Gnostics; through sincere worship, self-purification, and self-edification, these individuals observe the mighty and beautiful Divine attributes through the vision of their souls.

By studying the lives of devoted believers, it is apparent that many of them have realized and understood their Creator by way of their hearts; their religious faith is a robust tree that is watered from the spring of intuition. As a result of suitable circumstances and absence of impediments, the God-seeking and God-believing nature of many individuals matures and flourishes. These individuals feel the presence of their Lord with their hearts and souls and discover within themselves their deep-rooted dependence on the Divine Origin. Through mysticism, some of these individuals endeavor to lift the veils between themselves and God, which arise through their egocentricity and self-importance, thereby attaining the rank in which they may observe Almighty God through the vision of their souls and thus meet their Lord [liqā’ allāh].

In describing intuition, Mawlānā (Jalāl ad-Dīn ar-Rūmī) has written: The purity of the mirror is a description of the heart; The heart which is worthy to display the countenance of the Divine Infinite.

The Divine infinite countenance of the Invisible; Miraculously shined from the collar of Moses through the mirror of his heart.

The divine countenance of Allah cannot be contained in the heavens; Nor even in the Empyrean nor in the earth nor in the sea nor in fish.

For these are all limited and countable; But know that the mirror of the heart has no limit.

Sanctified mystics who have cleansed themselves of all scent and color (ego); See beauty every moment without pause.

The reflection of no image endures forever; Except for images both spiritual and mundane that radiate from the heart.

From the time the images of the seven Heavens shined upon the hearts of humans; Their hearts have been seeking Heaven.

They are superior to the Heavens and the Throne of Allah; The inhabitants of the true sanctuary of Allah.

They possess many signs from Allah, even so they are absolutely obscure; What are mere signs; they are in fact united with Allah.6 (Book I)

In addition, Hafiz recites: There exists no partition between lovers and the object of their love, You, yourself are your own shroud Hafiz, arise from the midst.3

A person asked, "O, Commander of the Faithful! Have you seen your Creator?" Amīr al-Mu'minīn4 ('a)—the originator of mysticism and leader of all mystics—declared in indication of intuitive and inner understanding of God, "Should I worship something that I have not seen?" The person then asked, "How do you see Him?" The Imam answered: "Eyes do not see Him manifestly, but hearts realize Him through the reality of faith."5

Those who have attained this status do not seek their Lord through other methods, such as the way of reason or experience, because they have realized Him with their whole beings; what else could one who has found what he has sought desire? Such intuitive people believe that immersing themselves in the observation of God's creations or logical reasoning hinders union with the Beloved and appealing to anything but God in order to prove His existence is improper. The condition of this group is similar to what is uttered in the prayer (munājāt) of Imam Hussein ('a): "O He whom I worship! When I consider each of the tokens of Your power in order to understand You, the path to union with You grows far… How can I prove Your existence through things that rely upon You for their existence? Is there any being besides you that has a manifestation that is not Your doing, which can manifest You? When have You become hidden that You must need a guide to show me the way to You? And when have You been apart from me to make it necessary that your creations bring me to You? Blind is the eye that does not see You, while You have always been its companion!"6

When have You left my heart that I must plea for You?

When have You become hidden that I must seek You?7

Naturally, even though the path of the heart is the most complete method of realizing God, it is not the only method of doing so. The state of many people is such that other methods, for example, contemplation of God's creations or logical reasoning can benefit them more and thus traveling these paths can help them realize, albeit to a lesser degree, the true Object of Devotion.

Religious Experience

The term religious experience has gained a special place in modern theological discussions in the West during the past two centuries. This term, at least in some narratives, has an absolute relationship with what we entitled "realizing Allah by way of heart". Of course, in contrast to what western philosophers of religion depict, religious experience is not specific to the presence and manifestation of God; rather, it often happens that the experiencer cognizes the presence of a metaphysical being or a person who has a special relationship with God (such as the prophets). In this discussion, we will take a brief glimpse at the subject of religious experience and the debates that it has initiated among various thinkers and philosophers, especially in the western world.

Even though various aspects of the issue of religious experience have been controversial, there is relative unanimity concerning the existence of such experiences. Religious experience is not religion specific; on the contrary, it is observed in various forms among the followers of diverse religions—encompassing Moslems, Christians, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists. Many people attest that in specific circumstances they have felt the presence of God or a divine being. Sometimes these experiences are visual, such as when one sees the visage of holy people—such as prophets and saints [awliyā' ilāhī]—and sometimes persons go deep into a spiritual and mystical state such that they achieve a form of ecstasy and experience the divine kindness, love, and providence of God. Dreams and spiritual calls are also specific forms of religious experience.

Additionally, gnostic inspiration is considered a form of religious experience. In the higher degrees of these revelations, the individual attains a state of unified mystical knowledge, meaning that the knowledge of the individual loses all attachment—through meditation and severe asceticism, the mystic individual strips all concepts, beliefs, and feelings from his mind to the point that only pure knowledge remains.

When confronted with the definition of religious experience, fundamental questions have arisen within the minds of religious philosophers and theologists: What are the historical factors and cultural foundations for the manifestation of these experiences? Basically, what is the essence

of religious experience? Do the extremely diverse religious experiences that are observed among the followers of various religions have a common core? How much does the religious belief of an individual influence his interpretation of his religious experiences? Finally, can religious experience be considered a secure basis for authenticating religious beliefs and customs—including belief in God?

Varying answers to these questions have given rise to diverse viewpoints concerning religious experience. For example, there are disparate interpretations and analyses concerning the essence of religious experience. According to one interpretation, religious experience is a sort of feeling that is attained without the intermediation of concepts and judgments and only through personal cognition. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834), William James (1842 – 1910), and Rudolf Otto (1869 – 1937) are several renowned supporters of this viewpoint. James declared, "I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue."8

In addition, Rudolf Otto believed that there is an aspect of God that reason can comprehend. We can allegorically attribute characteristics such as purposefulness, absolute power, and possession of personal identity to God. Nevertheless, regarding the deeper degrees of God's essence (meaning God's Holiness), God cannot be understood by reason; He is indescribable. We must realize the Holiness of God with something beyond reason (such as feeling). According to Otto, this feeling has various forms: "The feeling [of an awesome secret] may sometimes enter swiftly like a delightful breeze and suffuse the soul with a tranquility derived from the deepest layers of worship. This feeling may transform into a more stable and permanent spiritual state… It may appear suddenly like an eruption from the depths of the soul and be accompanied by intense rapture and tremors, or result in an extremely singular exhilaration, senseless rapture, ecstatic state, and entrancement."10

Schleiermacher believed that the fundamental essence of religion is a sort of feeling of absolute dependence: "…The essence of religiousness is this: knowledge of absolute dependence, or in other words, knowledge of one's relationship with God."11

Based on this, Schleiermacher extremely opposed the transition and referral of religion to theology, metaphysics, or ethics.

According to another viewpoint, religious experience is a sort of sensory perception and therefore its general attributes are the same as all other sensory perceptions. One of the most prominent advocates of this viewpoint is William Alston. By analyzing the reason that our confidence in the data gathered by our senses is logical, Alston shows that religious

experiences are also logical and credible on the same grounds.

A third group believes that alleged religious experiences are experiences that can only be understood through the minds of their owner, based on their beliefs and religious teachings, even though these religious experiences may in truth lack any metaphysical cause. According to this belief, religious experiences are nothing more than the evolution of the experiencer's prior beliefs and ideology and therefore can be explained using empirical sciences without the intercession of metaphysics.

Regardless of the theoretical discussions and difference of opinions regarding religious experience, the important fact is that religious experience, at least for some contemporary western thinkers, is a doorway to understanding God and His attributes and acquaintance with metaphysical layers of existence. It is a path that does not require theoretical concepts and dry theoretical reasoning, and only utilizes the personal intuition of the experiencer. Today, a number of the most prominent contemporary western religious philosophers (such as William Alston and Richard Swinburne) are occupied with strengthening the philosophical principles of religious experience and answering the critiques of opposers.12

Notes:

1. - From long ago, Islamic philosophers [mutakallimīn] have emphasized two main principles that demonstrate the necessity of endeavoring to know and understand God.

Countering probable loss: Any wise person accepts the probability that they might be punished if they do not abide by religious teachings. Because reason demands the prevention of harm—albeit by possible punishment—it is absolutely necessary that humans inquire into the existence of God and His attributes so that if God truly exists and the call of the prophets is true, they can free themselves of divine punishment by following the divine teachings.

Necessity of thanking one's benefactor: There is no doubt that the many gifts and blessings that we enjoy have been given to us by a benefactor. Furthermore, logic dictates that we thank our benefactors. Because thanking others is not possible without first knowing who they are, reason demands that we endeavor to understand our true benefactor—i.e. God.

2. - It must be mentioned that this and similar classifications are categorized by taking into account the general methods that we realize God. However, if we consider the personal and individual attributes of these methods, it must be said that all persons are unique, and realize and understand their creator in their own distinctive way. According to this perspective, there are innumerable ways of realizing and understanding God.

3. - آن صفاي آينه وصف دل است صورت بي منتها را قابل است

صورت بي صورت بي‌حد غيب زآينه دل تافت بر موسي ز جيب

گرچه این صورت نگنجد در فلك ني به عرش و فرش و دريا و سمك
زانكه محدود است و معدود است آن آينه دل را نباشد حدّ بدان
اهل صيقل رسته‌اند از بو و رنگ هر دمي بينند خوبي بي درنگ
عكس هر نقشي نتابد تا ابد جز ز دل هم بي‌عدد هم با عدد
تا نقوش هشت جنت تافته است لوح دل‌شان را پذيرا يافته است
برترند از عرش و كرسي و خلا ساكنان مقعد صدق خدا
صد نشان دارند و محو مطلق‌اند چه نشان بل عين ديدار حق‌اند
(دفتر اول)

4. - ميان عاشق و معشوق هيچ حايل نيست تو خود حجاب خودي حافظ از ميان برخيز

5. - Amīr al-Mu’minīn (meaning Commander of the Faithful) is the title of Imam ‘Alī ibn Abī ālīb ('a). [trans.]

6. - Nahj ul-Balāghah, Sermon 179.

7. - The Prayer (du'ā) of the day of ‘Arafah.

8. - كي رفته‌اي ز دل كه تمنا كنم ترا كي بوده‌اي نهفته كه پيدا كنم ترا

9. - William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, New York: The Modern Library, 1902, p. 44.

10. - Reason and Religious Belief (‘Aql wa I'tiqādi Dīnī), p. 42.

11. - F. Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928.

12. - Several recommended references for supplementary reading: Peterson, Michael, et al, Reason and Religious Belief, Oxford University Press, chapter 2.

Proudfoot, Wayne, Religious Experience, University of California Press; Reprint edition, 1987.

Wainwright, William J., Philosophy of Religion, 2nd ed., (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), chapter 7, pp.120-141.