

ALI 416 – Theology and Worship in Nahjul Balagha

Readings #2 – Divine Attributes

The *Nahj al-balaghah*, while it ascribes all the Attributes of perfection to God, the Exalted, negates any separation of these Attributes from His Essence and does not consider them as an appendage of Divine Essence.

Of the many issues discussed by the *Nahj al-balaghah* is the notion that God is the First and the Last, the Hidden and the Manifest. God is the First, but His precedence is not temporal so as to be in contradiction with His being the Last. He is the Manifest, but not in the sense of being physically visible or perceptible to the senses; His Manifestness does not contradict His Hiddenness. In fact His Firstness is identical with His Lastness and similarly His Manifestness and Hiddenness are identical; they are not two different things:

Praise be to Allah, for whom one condition does not precede another, so that He may be the First before being the Last or may be Manifest before being Hidden ... (Nahjul Balagha, Khutba #65)

Time is not His accomplice, nor does He need the assistance of tools and agents His Being transcends time. His Existence transcends nothingness and His pre-eternity transcends all beginning. (Nahjul Balagha, Khutba #186)

The Divine Essence's transcendence over time, nothingness, beginning, and end is one of the most profound concepts of *al-hikmah* philosophy. God's pre-eternity does not mean that God has always existed. Certainly God has always existed but Divine pre-eternity (*azaliyyah*) is something greater in meaning than 'existence at all times'; because, 'existing at all times' assumes existence in time; but God's Being has not only been at all times, It precedes time itself. This is the meaning of Divine pre-eternity. This shows that His precedence is something other than temporal precedence.

“Praise be to God, whose creation bears testimony to His Existence; temporality (huduth) of whose creation is the evidence of His preternity the similarity and likeness amongst whose creation proves that He is unique. The senses do not perceive Him and nothing can conceal Him. (Nahjul Balagha, Khutba #152)

That is, God is both Hidden and Manifest. By Himself He is Manifest but is Hidden from the human senses. His Hiddenness from the senses is due to man's own limitations and not on account of Him.

It needs no proof that existence is synonymous with manifestation; the more powerful the existence of a being, the more manifest it would be. Conversely, the weaker its being is and the more intermingled it is with non-being, the less manifest it is to itself and others.

For everything, there are two modes of being: its being-in-itself (*wujud fi nafsih*), and its being-for-others. The being of everything for us depends upon the structure of our senses and certain special conditions. Accordingly, the manifestation of a thing is also of two kinds: its manifestation-in-itself (*zuhur fi nafsih*) and its manifestation-for-others.

Our senses, on account of their limitations, are able to perceive only a limited number of finite objects possessing the characteristics of similarity and opposition. The senses can perceive colours, shapes, sounds, etc., which are limited temporally and spatially; that is, their existence is confined within a particular time and place. Now if there existed a uniform light, always and everywhere, it would not be perceptible. A continuous monotonous sound heard always and everywhere would not be audible.

The Being of God, which is absolute being and absolute reality, is not confined to any particular time and place, and is hidden from our senses. But God in Himself is absolutely manifest; the perfection of His manifestness, which follows from the perfection of His Being, is itself the cause of His hiddenness from our senses. The two aspects of His manifestness and hiddenness are one and the same in His Essence. He is hidden because He is perfectly manifest, and this perfect manifestness conceals Him.

Thou, who art hidden on account of Thy perfect brilliance, Thou Art the Manifest, hidden in Thy manifestness.

*The veil on Thy face is also Thy face,
So manifest Thou art,
Thy manifestness conceals Thee from the world's eyes.*

From al-Ilahiyyat, By Shaykh Hasan al-Amilil

<https://www.al-islam.org/al-ilahiyyat-vol-1-hassan-muhammad-makki-al-amili>

His Attributes, Praise belongs to Him, are divided into two types: confirmative and negative, or aesthetic and majestic. If an attribute confirms goodness in what it describes and point out to a reality in Him, it is called “self-confirmative” or “aesthetic”. If the attribute aims at negating some shortcoming or need from Him, the most Praised One, it is called “negative” or “majestic”.

Knowledge, ability and life are confirmative qualities that point out to the existence of perfection and are factual in the Divine Self. But negating physical qualities, space limitation, motion, are among the negative attributes that aim at removing what constitutes a shortcoming or what is lacking in Him, High above that is He. Sadr al-Mutaalliheen, Mulla Sadra al-Shirazi, has pointed out to both terms, the aesthetic and the majestic, as being close to what is stated in the Holy Quran where the most Glorified One says, **“Blessed be the name of your Lord, full of majesty, bounty and honor” (Qur’an, 55:78).**

The attribute of majesty means He is above being compared with anything else, while the attribute of honor describes His own Self, beautifying it aesthetically. Thus, He is described with attributes of perfection and is held as being high above everything and everyone through His majesty.

Scholars of creeds have restricted the aesthetic qualities to eight: knowledge, ability, life, hearing, vision, self-will, speech and independence. They also restricted the negative qualities to seven: He, the most Exalted One, is neither a body, nor an essence, nor an expanse, invisible, non-biased, not possessing anyone and is not limited by anything.

Yet precision examining dictates that qualities must not be restricted to a particular number. It is true to say that the criterion in identifying aesthetic and majestic qualities is that anything described as being perfect, Allah is described as having it. And everything regarded as shortcoming and inability, He is held to be high above it, and we do not have to restrict perfection and majesty into a specific number.

A precious statement by Imam Ali (as) advocates a midway path. He (as) has said, “He (the Almighty) did not acquaint the minds with determining how He is, nor did He obstruct them from the need to get to know Him.’ (Nahjul Balagha, Khutba #29) This statement aims at saying that although the minds are not permitted to determine the Divine characteristics, they are not obstructed from seeking such knowledge as much as possible.

Accurate and perfect adoration is not possible except when the achievable knowledge of the worshipped One becomes available. Had man’s function been to establish adoration without the detailed knowledge of the One Whom he adores, adoring Him would be similar to adoring all other existents, even much lower than that. Man can get to know in detail the One Whom he adores according to the extent of intellectual might he is given and which nobody else has.

If realizing godhead is meant to be realizing the essence of the Self, it is impossible, and nobody ever claimed it. If knowing His Names, Attributes and Actions is sought, within the human capacity in the light of logical criteria, the Quran and the absolutely sound Sunnah, this exactly is the function of reason.

Rational Way [of knowing His attributes]

Nothing is needed to prove that He, Praise belongs to Him, is independent, not in need of anything. This matter can be a starting point for proving many of His Attributes of greatness. Any description that requires a shortcoming in His independence and something lacking in Him has nothing to do with Him, and it must be stripped of His entity. Naseer ad-Deen al-Tusi, the Islamic philosopher, undertook this path to prove a group of Attributes of Greatness. He said, “The need for existence proves that He is eternal. It negates what is superfluous, that He has a partner, a similitude, a composition, an antithesis, a space, an incarnation, a unification, a direction, events that affect Him, a need, an absolute pain and a transient pleasure, the superfluous meanings, conditions, attributes and vision.” He also said, “The need for existence proves that existence is positive, and so are the (attributes of) dominion, completion, soundness, goodness, wisdom, dominance, control and aseity.”

He was preceded in doing so by the author of *Al-Yaqut* who said, “It (the need to exist) negates a group of attributes from the Divine Self, and that He is not a body, nor is He an essence, nor a causality; events have no impact on Him; otherwise, He would have been an eventuality.”

Thereupon, the perfection and goodness that exist in the divine world can be rendered to the evidence of one principle, that is, He, the most Praised One, is an independent existent whose existence is a must in order to disprove the serialization which you have already come to know. Proving His independence and the need for His existence is not a problem for the souls.