

ALI 416 – Theology and Worship in Nahjul Balagha

Readings #3 – Divine Unity

Divine Unity an Ontological, not a Numerical concept

Another feature of *tawhid* (monotheism) as propounded by the *Nahj al-balaghah* is that Divine Unity is not numerical, but something else. Numerical unity means the oneness of something which has possibility of recurrence.

It is always possible to imagine that the quiddity and form of an existent is realizable in another individual being. In such cases, the unity of an individual possessing that quiddity is numerical oneness and stands in opposition to duplicity or multiplicity.

'It is one,' means that there is not another like it, and inevitably this kind of unity entails the quality of being restricted in number, which is a defect; because one is lesser in number as compared to two or more of its kind.

But, if a being be such that assumption of recurrence with regard to it is impossible, since it is infinite and unlimited, and if we assume another like it to exist, it will follow that it is the same as the first being or that it is something which is not similar to it and therefore cannot be called a second instance of it. In such a case, unity is not numerical.

That is, this kind of unity is not one opposed to duplicity or multiplicity, and when it is said 'It is one,' it does not mean that 'there are not two, three or more of its kind,' but it means that a second to it is unconceivable.

This notion can further be clarified through an example. We know that the astronomers and physicists are not in agreement about the dimensions of the universe, whether it is limited in size or infinite.

Some scientists have favoured the idea of an unlimited and infinite universe; others claim that the universe is limited in dimensions so that if we travel in any direction, we shall reach a point beyond which there is no space. The other issue is whether the universe in which we live is the only universe in existence, or if there are other universes existing besides it.

Evidently, the assumption of another physical world beyond our own is a corollary to the assumption that our universe is not infinite. Only in this case it is possible to assume the existence of, say, two physical universes each of which is limited and has finite dimensions. But if we assume that our universe is infinite, it is not possible to entertain the assumption of another universe existing beyond it. For, whatever we were to assume would be identical with this universe or a part of it.

The assumption of another being similar to the Being of the One God-like the assumption of another physical universe besides an infinite material universe-amounts to assuming the impossible, for the Being of God is absolute: Absolute Selfhood and Absolute Reality.

The notion that Divine Unity is not a numerical concept, and that qualifying it by a number is synonymous with imposing limits on the Divine Essence, is repeatedly discussed by the *Nahj al-balaghah*:

“He is the One, but not in a numerical sense.” (Sermon 152)

“He is not confined by limits nor counted by numbers.” (Sermon 186)

“He who points to Him, admits for Him limitations; and he who admits limitations for Him has numbered Him.” (Sermon 1)

“He who qualifies Him limits Him. He who limits Him numbers Him. He who numbers Him denies His pre-eternity.” (Sermon 152)

“Everything associated with unity is deficient except Him.” (Sermon 65)

How beautiful, profound, and full of meaning is the last sentence. It states that everything except the Divine Essence is limited if it is one. That is, every thing for which another of its kind is conceivable is a limited being and an addition of another individual would increase its number. But this is not true of the Unity of the Divine Essence; for God's Unity lies in His greatness and infinity, for which a like, a second, an equal or a match is not conceivable.

This concept that Divine Unity is not a numerical notion is exclusively an Islamic concept, original and profound, and unprecedented in any other school of thought. Even the Muslim philosophers only gradually realized its profundity through contemplating the spirit of the original Islamic texts and in particular the discourses of 'Ali ('a), and ultimately formally incorporated it in the Islamic metaphysical philosophy.

From *Discursive Theology*, by Dr Ali Gulpaygani

https://www.al-islam.org/discursive-theology-volume-1-dr-ali-rabbani-gulpaygani/lesson-8-unity-gods-essence-and-attributes#f_4a4346e6_13

Someone once asked Imam Ali (a) concerning the Oneness of God. The Imām ('a) replied, “Oneness has four meanings; two of them can be applied to God while the other two cannot be applied to Him. The two inapplicable meanings are as follows:

1. Numerical oneness because in numerical oneness, any notion of two, three, etc. is impossible; and

2. Oneness of genus, such as the human beings that belong to the same species.

And the two applicable meanings [of oneness] are as follows:

1. God's uniqueness in Essence and Attributes, and

2. The indivisibility and inseparability of the Essence of God

The Unity of the Divine Attributes

The Unity of the Divine Attributes has two meanings:

1. God has no equal in His Attributes, because:

Firstly, the Attributes of God are of Him and no one has bestowed them upon Him.

Secondly, His Attributes of Perfection are infinite and limitless, and these two characteristics are concomitant with God being the Necessary Being by essence as well as His absolute self-sufficiency and independence.

2. The Attributes of Perfection of God are identical with His Essence. That is, although they differ in terms of meaning (*mafhūm*), in terms of applicability (*miṣdāq*) they are in unison. In other words, it is not the case that the Essence of God, on one hand, is All-knowing, and on the other hand, All-powerful and Sovereign; rather, His knowledge, power and will are His very Essence, because if the Attributes of God were extraneous to His Essence and distinct from each other, this implies a sort of multiplicity (*kathrah*), compositeness (*tarkīb*) and limitation (*maḥdūdiyyah*) in the Divine Essence, and all these characteristics cannot be applied to God.

In the traditions reported from the Imāms of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a), the Unity of the Divine Attributes has been much emphasized, and the belief in the Essential Attributes of God as separate from His Essence has been considered unacceptable. Imām 'Alī ('a) has regarded purging the Essence of extraneous attributes as the perfection of purity in the Divine Unity (*tawḥīd*), saying:

وَكَمَالُ تَوْحِيدِهِ الْإِخْلَاصُ لَهُ، وَكَمَالُ الْإِخْلَاصِ لَهُ نَفْيُ الصِّفَاتِ عَنْهُ.

“And the perfection of believing in His Oneness is to regard Him as Pure, and the perfection of His purity is to deny Him attributes (Khutba #1)

“Thus, whoever attaches attributes to Allah 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 mistook Him.” (Khutba #1)

It is evident that what is meant by the negation of the Attributes of God is the negation of attributes which are separate from His Essence and not the real Attributes, because negation of the Attributes of Perfection of God is impossible.

It can be deduced from some traditions that belief in attributes separate from the Divine Essence was prevalent during the time of the pure Imāms ('a) such that some Shī'ah were also inclined to it and the Imāms of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) have explicitly declared it to be incorrect. The reasons for the incorrectness of this belief as mentioned in the traditions are as follows:

1. Belief in attributes separate from the Divine Essence is a kind of polytheism (implicit polytheism);
2. This belief necessitates anthropomorphism; and
3. It is in conflict with the Indivisibility and Oneness of the Sacred Divine Essence

From <http://www.shiavault.com/books/monotheistic-conception-of-the-universe/chapters/5-attributes-of-allah>

Monotheism

Allah has no associate or partner. There is none like Him. It is basically impossible that there should be anyone like Him, for in that case we shall have two or more Gods instead of one. To

be two, three or more is a characteristic of the limited and relative things. Plurality has no meaning in regard to an absolute and infinite being.

For example, we can have one child. We can also have two or more children. Similarly we can have one friend. We can also have two or more friends. A friend or a child is a limited being, and a limited being can have a like of him and can be multipliable. But an infinite being is not multipliable at all. The following example, though not adequate may be found useful for the purpose of elucidating the point.

In respect of the dimensions of the material world, that is the world which we can see and perceive, the scientists have two theories. Some of them maintain that the dimensions of the world are limited. In other words this perceivable world reaches a point where it ends. But some others are of the opinion that the dimensions of the material world have no middle, no beginning and no end.

If we accept the theory that the material world is limited, a question arises as to whether it is one world or more than one? But if we maintain that this world has no limits, the question of the existence of another world becomes absurd. Whatever we may presume to be another world, it will either be identical with this world or a part of it.

This example applies to the material world as well as the material beings which are limited, conditional and created. The reality of none of them is absolute, independent and self-existing. The material world, though limitless from the viewpoint of its dimensions, is limited from the viewpoint of its reality. But as its dimensions are limitless, we cannot presume the existence of another world.

Almighty Allah has an infinite existence. He is an absolute reality, and He pervades everything. No space or time is devoid of Him. He is closer to us than our jugular vein. Hence it is impossible that He should have a like of Him. We cannot even suppose the existence of another being like Him.

Furthermore, we see the signs of His wisdom and attention prevailing everywhere and pervading everything. We observe that one single will and one single system govern the entire world. That shows that our world is uncentred, not multcentred.

Furthermore, had there been two or more Gods, evidently two or more wills would have applied to everything and two or more realities having a different centre would have existed in every existing thing. As a result everything would have become two or more things. This being an absurd proposition, in fact nothing would have existed at all. This is what the Holy Qur'an means when it says:

"If there were therein (in the Universe) Gods besides Allah, then surely both the heavens and the earth had been discorded." (Surah al-Ambiya, 21:2)