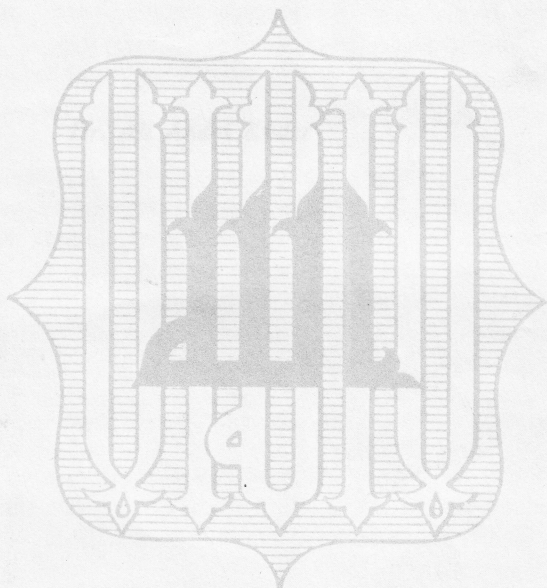


THE CONCEPTION OF GOD IN ISLAM

by Dr. Ali Abdel Kader



There is no god but Allah

THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTRE
Regents Lodge, 146 Park Road, London, N.W.8

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The conception of God in Islam is based on the belief that there is an *unseen* order. This religious attitude can be analysed into three points: *first*, the reality of the *unseen* behind and above our ordinary experience, which is the background to life, and which is unattainable to our physical senses; *second*, man's relation to the *unseen*—his faith and insight; his whole emotional religious life ranging at the simplest from a prayerful attitude and a sense of God's presence—to the vision of the mystic aspects and *lastly*, the discipline of the worshipper on his way to attain a direct knowledge of God during his life.

But before dealing with these points, I want to make clear from the beginning the difference in the conception of the *unseen* in the Eastern and modern Western thought and experience. To the Oriental mind, the supernatural is the familiar, the usual. It is not subject to reason, and the Oriental never dreams that it could be. The attitude to the *unseen* held by Eastern and Western people is different intellectually, socially, and from a religious point of view. When the Oriental is confronted by things which he cannot explain, he accepts them as such, believing that they spring directly from the will of God. The Western mind, on the other hand, feels vaguely that there is a divine element in the world, but it is far off. An impenetrable shell separates him from that fact. To the Muslim, this shell does not exist, as he believes that all his action and reaction spring from the immediate will of God.

Islam holds the belief of the *One* God which may have been grasped by man at his earliest coming onto the earth, and which has been reached by various nations at various times, maybe with different degrees of clarity. This is in the nature of man. All Religions before Islam had some idea of the *One* God, and all the great teachers and prophets of the past have had the same thought and the same message.

For instance, the ancient Egyptians believed in the supremacy of One God, Ra, above all others. They called on him at the beginning of all their religious pronouncements and drew a winged disc which stood as a symbol of Ra on the top of their important inscriptions and documents. They did this, even though most of their priests and thinkers were polytheists. Yet King Ech en Aton, about 1375 B. C., believed that there is one God alone who is responsible for the creation, and that

he is the protector of Nature and the human race. He permitted his subjects to worship God in one symbol only, the disc of the Sun with its rays reaching every human being. Similarly, the pagan Arabs before Islam believed in one supreme God—they had their various idols, but these were only worshipped as mediators between man and God.

Conceptions of God which have influenced more recent religions are those of the ancient Hebrews, Indians, Persians and the Greek philosophers. These teachers had a clear conception of God, which proved, and which the Greek and Indian often felt, too lofty for the mass of the ordinary worshippers. Islam, in the Koran and by the preaching of Mohammed, confirmed this original and natural conception of God, but stripped it of all its many theological and mythical elaborations and brought it within reach of the human mind by stating the facts so simply, naturally, and, clearly that they could be understood by every human being. When Islam came into touch with other civilizations and their philosophy and mysticism, the Koran was reinterpreted by Muslim philosophers and Sufi mystics, still keeping the same original message of the Koran, and expressing it in more philosophical or mystical terms in the light of their own experience. But in doing so they never lost sight of the original message and meaning of the Koran, and its teachings have thus been elaborated through a wider and more subtle understanding.

Now what is this conception of God in Islam? According to Islam God alone exists absolutely. Everything else that we may find to exist does so only that through His will. In other words, He has created all other things, or may create them in the future. The very essence of God is *existence*, and all created things have only an existence derived from him. Judaism, Christianity and Islam accept this. So does Hinduism, Zaratustra, Greek philosophy and the teachers of China.

To have knowledge of the works of God and of his powers is not yet the same as to have a knowledge and awareness of the being of essence of God. Yet the lack of our complete knowledge of God does not destroy the value of that knowledge as far as it goes. It is plain in Islam that there is a God, but what He is in essence and nature is not throughout comprehensible.

The Koran stresses the *Oneness* of God and it is this which characterises the preaching of the Prophet Mohammed. He is One; He is *the One*. (Koran 27, 61: 7, 191); He cannot be imagined as having any peer or equal or similar.

God says in the Koran: "Say, 'Praise belongs to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen.' Is God, best or what they associate with Him? He who created the Heavens and the Earth and sends down on you rain from Heaven! And we cause to grow therewith gardens fraught with beauty; ye could not cause the trees thereof to grow. Is there a god with God? Nay, but they are a people who make peers with him. He who made the earth, settled and placed among it rivers, and place upon it firm mountains, and places between the two seas a barrier, is there a god with God? Nay, but most of them know not. He who answers the distressed when he calls upon Him and removes the evil and makes you successors in the earth, is there a god with God?" (Sura xxii, 61ff.); "God, there is no god but He, the Living the Self-subsistent. Slumber overtakes Him not, nor sleep. His is what is in the heavens and what is in the earth. Who is it that intercedes with Him, without His permission? He knows what is before them and what is behind them and they comprehend naught of His knowledge but of what He pleases. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and it tires Him not to guard them both, for He is High and Grand" (Sura ii, 256); "Will they associate with Him those who cannot create anything, but they associate with Him those who cannot create anything, but they themselves are created, which have no power to help themselves?" (Sura vii, 191). Besides these passages of the Koran there are many other passages proclaiming the *Oneness* of God. This is asserted against paganism and also against those who associate others with God, and against dualism, however, it is stated in many verses of the Koran that the God of the Jews and Christians is Allah, the One True God.

In Islam very great stress is laid on the *Oneness* of God—in worship, prayer, meditation, thought, religious service and everyday life. The Muslim faces the One God, he confides in Him, concentrates upon Him in his worship and continually seeks and appreciates Him in daily life envisaging His Creation, as everyone who lives among Muslims can testify. The philosophical thinkers in Islam too, urge very strongly the *Oneness* of the Divine Essence. For instance, the Mutazilites, the free thinker, have given themselves the title of "Adherents of the Unity" thus showing how very strongly they feel about this. The Mystics too have given themselves this title; they strongly believe in the *Oneness* of God. The worshipper, when in a state of grace, may fully realize and share the experience of *Unification* with God. Some extremists among these Mystics believe that God and the World is one. Here there is a strain

of Pantheism. This is a very extreme attitude indeed, not shared by the orthodox Muslims.

Regarding the Attributes of God, the Koran states that God is Almighty, He is Omni-present, He is Eternal. He is at the same time transcendent and imminent. He is yonder, and He is here, with us—at all times. He is Personality, yet should by no means be conceived as anthropomorphic.

God is manifest. He reveals Himself continuously in Nature and in Creation. He also reveals Himself in Revelation, in the Revelations given by Him to the Prophets before Mohammed, and in the Holy Koran; the final Revelation given by God to Mohammed.

Moslem thinkers have endeavored to put into words the attributes of God. They use adjectives with the article "the" thus expressing the idea that God alone possesses these positive qualities in perfection. Human qualities derive from the attributes of God, and will remain always imperfect. God is The Greatest, The Beneficent, The Merciful. He is The Just, The Knowing, The Wise, The Beautiful, The Victorious, and many other qualities are thus pronounced. The Mystics hold additionally that God is overwhelming, all-vivifying, all-embracing, engulfing the soul in His infinite Love and absolute Presence. This is the experience of Unification of the Sufi Mystics.

To sum up, Muslims of all walks of life, simple people, thinkers, philosophers, have all clung to this primary belief and experience—the *Oneness* of God, which characterises the Creed of Islam. All Muslims schools of thoughts and social and political groups, all accept this and they are all held together within this idea—the Unity of God.

The Islamic Creed regarding the Conception of God, as described in the following passages by Al Ghazzali, the leading Muslim thinker of the 11th Century A. D., can give us a very clear and subtle systematic form, universally accepted by every Muslim.

PART OF A SHORT CREED BY AL-GHAZZALI

"God in His essence is One without any partner, Single without any similar, Eternal without any opposite, Separate without any like, He is One, Prior with nothing before Him, from eternity, without any beginning abiding in existence with none after Him, in Eternity, without any end, subsisting without ending, abiding without termination. He hath not ceased and He will not cease to be described with glorious

epithets. He is the first and last, the external and the internal and He knoweth everything."

"We witness that He is not a body possessing form, nor a substance possessing bounds and limits: He does not resemble bodies either in limitation or in accepting division. He is not a substance and substances do not exist in Him, nay He does not resemble an entity, and no entity resembles Him; nothing is like Him and He is not like anything; measure does not limit Him and boundaries do not contain Him; the directions do not surround Him and neither the earth nor heavens are on different sides of Him."

"There is not in His essence His equal, nor in His equal His essence. He is far removed from change of state or of place. Events have no place in Him and mishaps do not befall Him. Nay, He does not cease, through His glorious qualities, to be far removed from changing, and through His perfect qualities to be independent of perfecting increase."

"We witness that He is living, powerful, commanding, inadequacy and weakness befall Him not; slumber seizes Him not, nor sleep. Passing away does not happen to Him, nor death. He is the Lord of the Worlds, the Visible World and the Invisible, that of Force and that of Might; He possesses Rule, Creation and command: He created the creatures and their works and decreed their sustenance and their terms of life."

"We witness that He knoweth all the things that can be known, comprehending that which happeneth from the bounds of the earth unto the highest heavens; no grain in the earth or the heavens is distant from His knowledge; yea, He knows the creeping of the little ant upon the rugged rock in a dark night, and He perceives the movement of the mote in the midst of the air; He knows the secret and the concealed and has knowledge of the suggestions of the minds and the movements of the thoughts and the concealed thing of the inmost parts, by a knowledge which is prior from eternity."

"We witness that He is a Willer of the things that are, and of the things that happen; there does not come about in the world, seen or unseen, little or much, small or great, good or evil, advantage or disadvantage, faith or unbelief, knowledge or ignorance, success or loss, increase or diminuation, obedience or rebellion, except by His will. What He wills is, and what He wills not is not. Not a glance of one who looks, or a slip of one who thinks is outside His will: He is the Creator, the Bringer back, the Doer of that which He wills."

"And we witness that He is The All Hearing, The All Seeing, and no audible thing is distant from His hearing, and no visible thing is far from His seeing, however fine it may be. Distance does not curtain off His hearing and darkness does not dull his seeing."

"And we witness that He speaks, commanding, forbidding, praising, threatening, with a speech from all eternity, prior, subsisting in His essence, not resembling the speech of created things. He is Living, Knowing, Powerful, a Willer, a Hearer, a Seer, a Speaker through Life, Power, Knowledge, Will, Hearing, Seeing, Speech, not by a thing separated from His essence."



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