

'Allah' in the Qur'an and Scholastic Theology

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The extraordinary sensitivity that Malaysian Muslims have manifested over the non-Muslim use of 'Allah' leaves one in no doubt that theoretical generalities would fail to address the situation we are faced with. It is clear that Malaysia is untypical of much of the rest of Muslim world and the issue we face here is one of its kind in that it touches on acute religious sensitivities one has little choice but to recognize. To address the issue on its own terms is also the correct Islamic advice as conveyed in a legal maxim of Syariah: 'Harm must be eliminated' as a matter of priority. According to another legal maxim "prevention of harm takes priority over the attraction of benefit." HRH the Sultan of Selangor's recent directive to keep 'Allah' for the use only of Muslims captures the essence of these guidelines. The harm that emanates from acts of violence and destruction of places of worship provided concrete evidence to support that decision.

The word 'Allah' derives from a contraction of the Arabic definite article *al* "the" and *ilaah* "deity, god" to *al-laah* meaning the "the sole deity, God". The Qur'an engages in Allah's reality, His various names, His actions, and how He relates to his creatures. Allah is unique, the only Deity, creator of the universe and the whole of humanity, which means that in reference to all monotheists, there should be no restriction to mentioning 'Allah' in the spirit, however, of remembrance, invocation and *doa*.

'Allah' has made Himself known to mankind by His Excellent Names, *al-asma' al-husna*, which are revealed in the Qur'an and are numbered at 99. That total does not, however, include 'Allah'. This is because Allah is the proper name (*ism al-dhaat*) of God whereas the *asma' al-husna* are all attributes (*sifaat*). Among the 99 names, the ones most favoured and frequently employed in the Qur'an are 'the Merciful' (al-Rahman) and 'the Compassionate' (al-Rahim). One of the consequences of this numerical specification at 99 is that the believer is discouraged from coining new names and attributes for God. Since the Almighty has described Himself by these attributes, it is through these that we seek knowledge of Him.

Rational theology provides much detail as to how to understand the meaning of these attributes and their relationship with the Self of Allah. The Qur'an is emphatic on the one hand on the transcendence of Allah- He is utterly beyond the human and no one can define Him. Yet the Qur'an is also replete with passages wherein the Almighty personifies Himself with human-like descriptions not only by references to His Exalted face, soul, eye, hand, fingers, foot etc., but also that He speaks, listens, answers, loves and hates - and yet despite all this the text says emphatically that "there is nothing like unto Him;" (42: 11) that "sight cannot perceive Him but He encompasses sight and He is the Subtle, the Aware (al-Lateef al-al-Khabeer). These last are two of the *asma' al-husna*. Thus no one is able, not even the Prophet Muhammad, to actually see Allah; except perhaps in the Hereafter on Resurrection Day (*ru'yat Allah*) in the opinion of some theologians. The Prophet has also instructed the faithful to "ponder upon the creation of Allah and not on His Exalted Essence".

Thus the question arises whether Allah's attributes and self description should be understood literally or metaphorically. The latter is discouraged for leading to speculative indulgence, while literal interpretation amounts to anthropomorphism (likening Allah to humans). The prevailing Ash'ari school of theology holds that we should keep to the literal meaning of Allah's attributes and view them in as being in some manner separate or distinct from the divine Essence, but not questioning 'how' this can be (the doctrine of *bi-laa kayf*). However the more rationalist Mu'tazilah school (expired 600 years ago) taught that such a distinction between Allah's

Essence and His most important attributes (between His *dhaat* and *sifaat*) violates the reality of Divine Oneness – That Allah’s illustrious essence naturally includes His seven most essential (Life, Power, Knowledge etc) without any distinction or separation. So Ash’arites developed the doctrine of *mukhalafah* “difference”; everything about Allah is different from all that is known to humans. Thus when we read in the Qur’an that Allah is ‘All- Merciful- *al-Rahman*’ it cannot mean that He has the human quality of mercy. He has only given Himself that Name and how or why this Name is chosen we cannot know nor should we enquire.

Since human knowledge of the universe is incomplete, knowledge of the Creator of the universe must also be a continuing effort. We are thus encouraged to investigate the world around us, to acquire knowledge of the mysteries of creation, and through it also to increase our understanding of Allah’s exalted names and attributes.

The Qur’an is expressive of the manner Allah relates to mankind, which He clearly made the prize of His creation and endowed him with nobility of the highest order: When Allah decides to create, He merely commands to ‘be and it is’ as the Qur’an tells us (2:117). But in the case of man, Allah created him with His *own hands*(Q., 38:75), fashioned him in the best of moulds (95:4), breathed into him of His own illustrious *Spirit*(38:72), appointed him as His vicegerent in the earth(2:30), taught him the names (and thus essential knowledge and ability to forming concept of) all things(2: 31), and dignified him above the rest of His creation (Q., 17:7). Then Allah, to Him be all praise, asked the angels to prostrate to the archetypal man, Adam, which they did in full submission to the Lord’s command (7:11). In sum Allah has endowed in man some of His own important attributes on a limited scale and in suitable quantities. Man has been given the capacity and power “and subjected to him (for his use) all that is in the heavens and the earth”(31:20) so as to harness their resources for his own benefit, yet with a sense of responsibility as a trustee and custodian of the earth.

We may invoke any of the Excellent names of Allah in prayer and supplication (Cf., Q, 7:180).It is usual for the worshipper to address the Almighty by that name or attribute which he wishes to appeal to. For example, in praying for pardon, one will address God as either *al- ‘Afuw* “the forgiving” or *al-Tawwab* “the receiver of repentance.” Yet of all these, the one name which the Almighty has used most frequently is ‘Allah’. This name and its derivatives occur in the Qur’an (2,697) times, mostly in the singular. For ‘Allah’ does not have a plural form. Yet one of its derivatives, *ilaaah*, does occur in both singular and plural (the latter as *aalihah*). Compare this to al-Rahman, which is the most favoured name, next to ‘Allah’ (Q.17:110), but which occurs only (57) times in the text. The Qur’an does not provide a clear explanation for this preferential use of ‘Allah’, but the Prophet, pbuh, has asked the faithful in a hadith to “call upon God by His greatest name (*bi-ismih al-a’zam*), He will respond to your call, and accept your prayer.” The hadith did not, however, specify the *‘ism al-a’zam*’ it referred to, and how, if at all, did it differ from the rest of *‘asma’ al-husna’*. But another hadith alludes that the *‘ism al-a’zam*’ occurs in two verses of the Qur’an (i.e., 2:163 & 3:2). When we look at these verses, ‘Allah’, occurs five times whereas ‘al-Rahman’ and ‘al-Rahim’ only once each in these short verses with a combined number of only 16 words -then it becomes clear that the *ism al-a’zam* is none other than ‘Allah’.

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