

Faith in Allah

Abul A'La Mawdudi, Towards Understanding Islam

The most fundamental and the most important teaching of Prophet Muhammad (blessings of Allah and peace be upon him) is faith in the unity of God. This is expressed in the primary *Kalimah* of Islam as "There is no deity but Allah" (*La ilaha illallah*). This beautiful phrase is the bedrock of Islam, its foundation and its essence. It is the expression of this belief which differentiates a true Muslim from a *kafir* (unbeliever), *mushrik* (one who associates others with God in His Divinity) or *dahriyah* (an atheist).

The acceptance or denial of this phrase produces a world of difference between man and man. The believers in it become one single community and those who do not believe in it form an opposing group. For the believers there is unhampered progress and success in this world and in the hereafter, while failure and ignominy are the ultimate lot of those who refuse to believe in it.

But the difference between the believers and the unbelievers does not result from the mere chanting of a few words. Obviously, the mere utterance of a phrase or two is not in itself important. The real difference lies in the conscious acceptance of this doctrine and complete adherence to it in practical life. Mere repetition of the word 'food' cannot dull hunger; mere chanting of a medical prescription cannot heal the disease.

In the same way, if the *Kalimah* is repeated without any understanding, it cannot work the revolution which it is meant to bring about. This can occur only if a person grasps the full meaning of the doctrine and accepts and follows it in letter and spirit. We avoid fire because we know that it burns; we keep away from poison because we know that it can kill. Similarly, if the real meanings of *Tawhid* are fully grasped, we avoid, in belief as well as in action, every form of disbelief, atheism and polytheism. This is the natural consequence of belief in the Unity of God.

The Meaning of the Kalimah

In Arabic the word *ilah* means 'one who is worshipped', that is, a being which on account of its greatness and power is considered

worthy to be worshipped: to be bowed to in humility and submission. Anything or any being possessing power too great to be comprehended by man is also called *ilah*. The concept *ilah* also includes the possession of infinite powers and conveys the sense that others are dependent on *ilah* and that he is not dependent on anyone else. The word *ilah* carries, too, a sense of concealment and mystery. The word *Khuda* in Persian, *Deva* in Hindi and *God* in English have similar connotations. Other languages also contain words with a similar meaning.

The word *Allah*, on the other hand, is the essential personal name of God. *La ilaha illallah* literally means "There is no *ilah* other than the One Great Being known by the name *Allah*." It means that in the whole of the universe, there is absolutely no being worthy to be worshipped other than Allah, that it is only to Him that heads should bow in submission and adoration, that He is the only Being possessing all powers, that we are all in need of His favour, and that we are all obliged to seek His help. He is concealed from our senses, and our intellect cannot perceive what He is.

Now we know the meaning of these words, let us look more closely at their real significance. From the earliest known history of man as well as from the oldest relics of antiquity that we have been able to obtain, it appears that in every age man recognised some deity or deities and worshipped them. Even today every nation, from the most primitive to the most advanced, believes in and worships some deity. Having a deity and worshipping him is ingrained in human nature. There is something within man's soul which forces him to do so.

But the question is: what is that thing and why does man feel impelled to do so? The answer to this question can be discovered if we look at the position of man in this huge universe. Neither man nor his nature is omnipotent. He is neither self-sufficient nor self-existing; nor are his powers limitless. In fact, he is weak, frail, needy and destitute. He is dependent on a multitude of forces to maintain his existence, but all of them are not essentially and totally within his powers. Sometimes they come into his possession in a simple and natural way, and at times he finds himself deprived of them. There are many important and valuable things which he endeavours to get, but sometimes he succeeds in getting them, while sometimes he does not, for it is not completely in his own power to obtain them. There are many things injurious to him; accidents destroy his life's work in a single moment; chance brings his hopes to a sudden end;

illness, worries and calamities are always threatening him and marring his way to happiness. He attempts to get rid of them, and meets with both success and failure.

There are many things whose greatness and grandeur overawe him: mountains and rivers, gigantic animals and ferocious beasts. He experiences earthquakes, storms and other natural disasters. He observes clouds over his head and sees them becoming thick and dark, with peals of thunder, flashes of lightning and heavy rain. He sees the sun, the moon and the stars in their constant motions. He reflects how great, powerful and grand these bodies are, and, in contrast to them, how frail and insignificant he himself is!

These vast phenomena, on the one hand, and the consciousness of his own frailty, on the other, impress him with a deep sense of his own weakness, humbleness and helplessness. And it is quite natural that a primitive idea of divinity should coincide with this sense. He thinks of the hands which are wielding these great forces. The sense of their greatness makes him bow in humility. The sense of their powerfulness makes him seek their help. He tries to please them so that they may be beneficial to him, and he fears them and tries to escape their wrath so that he may not be destroyed by them.

In the most primitive stage of ignorance, man thinks that the great objects of nature whose grandeur and glory are visible, and which appear to be injurious or beneficial to him, hold in themselves the real power and authority, and, therefore, are divine. Thus he worships trees, animals, rivers, mountains, fire, rain, air, heavenly bodies and numerous other objects. This is the worst form of ignorance.

When his ignorance dissipates to some extent and some glimmers of light and knowledge appear on his intellectual horizon, he comes to know that these great and powerful objects are in themselves as helpless and dependent, or rather, they are still more dependent and helpless. The biggest and the strongest animal dies like a tiny germ, and loses all his power; great rivers rise and fall and become dry; the highest mountains are blasted and shattered by man himself; the productiveness of the earth is not under the earth's control - water makes it prosperous and lack of water makes it barren. Even water is not independent. It depends on air which brings the clouds. Air, too, is powerless and its usefulness depends on other causes. The moon, the sun, and the stars are also bound by a powerful law outside whose dictates they cannot make the slightest movement.

After these considerations man's mind turns to the possibility of some great mysterious power of divine nature which controls the objects he sees and which may be the repository of all authority. These reflections give rise to belief in mysterious powers behind natural phenomena, with innumerable gods governing various parts and aspects of nature such as air, light and water. Material forms or symbols are constructed to represent them and man begins to worship these forms and symbols. This, too, is a form of ignorance, and reality remains hidden to the human eye even at this stage of man's intellectual and cultural pilgrimage.

As man progresses still further in knowledge and learning, and as he reflects more and more deeply on the fundamental problems of existence, he finds an all-powerful law and all-encompassing control in the universe. What a complete regularity is observed in sunrise and sunset, in winds and rains, in the motions of stars and the changes of seasons! With what a wonderful harmony countless different forces are working jointly. And what a highly effective and supremely wise law it is according to which all the various causes in the universe are made to work together at an appointed time to produce an appointed event! Observing this uniformity, regularity and complete obedience to one great law in all fields of Nature, even a polytheist finds himself obliged to believe that there must be a deity greater than all the others, exercising supreme authority. For, if there were separate, independent deities, the whole machinery of the universe would be upset.

He calls this greatest deity by different names, such as *Allah*, *Permashwar*, *God*, *Khuda-i-Khuda'igan*. But as the darkness of ignorance still persists, he continues worshipping minor deities along with the Supreme One. He imagines that the Divine Kingdom of God may not be different from earthly kingdoms. Just as a ruler has many ministers, trusted associates, governors and other responsible officers, so the minor deities are like so many responsible officers under the Great God Who cannot be approached without winning the favour of the officers under Him. So they must also be worshipped and appealed to for help, and should in no case be offended. They are taken as agents through whom an approach can be made to the Great God.

The more a man increases his knowledge, the greater becomes his dissatisfaction with the multiplicity of deities. So the number of minor deities begins to decrease. More enlightened men bring each

one of them under the searchlight of scrutiny and ultimately find that none of these man-made deities has any divine character; they themselves are creatures like man, though rather more helpless. They are thus eliminated one by one until only one God remains.

But the concept of one God still contains some remnants of the elements of ignorance. Some people imagine that He has a body as men have, and is in a particular place. Some believe that God came down to earth in human form; others think that God, after settling the affairs of the universe, retired and is now resting. Some believe that it is necessary to approach God through the media of saints and spirits, and that nothing can be achieved without their intercession. Some imagine God to have a certain form or image, and they believe it necessary to keep that image before them for the purposes of worship.

Such distorted notions of godhead have persisted and lingered, and many of them are prevalent among different people even today.

Tawhid is the highest conception of godhead, the knowledge of which God has sent mankind in all ages through His Prophets. It was this knowledge with which, in the beginning, Adam was sent down to earth; it was the same knowledge that was revealed to Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (God's blessings be upon them all). It was this knowledge which Muhammad (blessings of Allah and peace be upon him) brought to mankind. It is Knowledge, pure and absolute, without the least shade of ignorance. Man became guilty of *shirk*, idol-worship and *kufr* only because he turned away from the teachings of the Prophets and depended on his own faulty reasoning, false perceptions or biased interpretations. *Tawhid* dispels all the clouds of ignorance and illuminates the horizon with the light of reality.

Let us see what significant realities the concept of *Tawhid* - this little phrase: *la ilaha illallah* - embraces: what truth it conveys and what beliefs it fosters.

First, we are faced with the question of the universe. We are face to face with a grand, limitless universe. Man's mind cannot discern its beginning or visualise its end. It has been moving along its chartered course from time immemorial and is continuing its journey in the vast vista of the future. Creatures beyond number have appeared in it - and go on appearing every day. It is so bewildering that a thinking mind finds itself wonderstruck. Man is unable to understand and grasp its reality by his unaided vision. He cannot believe that all

this has appeared just by chance or accident. The universe is not a fortuitous mass of matter. It is not a jumble of unco-ordinated objects. It is not a conglomeration of chaotic and meaningless things. All this cannot be without a Creator, a Designer, a Controller, a Governor.

But who can create and control this majestic universe? Only He can do so Who is Master of all; Who is Infinite and Eternal; Who is All-Powerful, All- Wise, Omnipotent and Omniscient; Who is All-Knowing and All-Seeing. He must have supreme authority over all that exists in the universe. He must possess limitless powers, must be Lord of the universe and all that it contains, must be free from every flaw and weakness and none may have the power to interfere with His work. Only such a Being can be the Creator, the Controller and the Governor of the universe.

Second, it is essential that all these divine attributes and powers must be vested in One Being: it is impossible for two or more personalities having equal powers and attributes to co-exist. They are bound to collide. Therefore, there must be one and only one Supreme Being having control over all others. You cannot think of two governors for the same province or two supreme commanders of the army! Similarly, the distribution of these powers among different deities, so that, for instance, one of them is all- knowledge, the other all-providence and still another life-giver - and each having an independent domain - is also unthinkable. The universe is an indivisible whole and each one of such deities will be dependent upon others in the execution of his task. Lack of co-ordination is bound to occur. And if this happened, the world would fall to pieces. These attributes are also untransferable. It is not possible that a certain attribute might be present in a certain deity at one time and at another time be found in another deity. A divine being who is incapable of remaining alive himself cannot give life to others. The one who cannot protect his own divine power cannot be suited to govern the vast limitless universe.

The more you reflect on the problem, the firmer must your conviction be that all these divine powers and attributes must exist in one and the same Being alone. Thus, polytheism is a form of ignorance that cannot stand rational scrutiny. It is a practical impossibility. The facts of life and nature do not fit in with it. They automatically bring men to Reality, that is *Tawhid*, the Unity of God.

Now, keeping in mind this concept of God, look closely at this vast universe. Exert yourself to the utmost and say if you find among all the objects that you see, among all the things that you perceive, among all that you can think, feel or imagine - all that your knowledge can comprehend - anyone possessing these attributes. The sun, the moon, the stars, animals, birds or fishes, matter, money, any man or a group of men - does any of them possess these attributes? Most certainly not! For everything in the universe is created, controlled and regulated, is dependent on others, is mortal and transitory; its slightest movements are controlled by an inexorable law from which there can be no deviation. Their helpless condition proves that the attire of divinity cannot fit their body. They do not possess the slightest trace of divinity and have absolutely nothing to do with it. It is a travesty of truth and a folly of the highest magnitude to attribute divine status to them.

This is the meaning of *La ilaha*, (i.e. there is no god) no human and material object possesses the divine power and authority deserving worship and obedience. But this is not the end of our quest. We have found that divinity is not vested in any material or human element of the universe, and that none of them possesses even the slightest trace of it. This leads us to the conclusion that there is a Supreme Being, over and above all that our eyes see in the universe, Who possesses Divine attributes, Who is the Will behind all phenomena, the Creator of this grand universe, the Controller of its superb Law, the Governor of its serene rhythm, the Administrator of all its workings: He is Allah, the Lord of the Universe and no one and nothing is associated in His Divinity. This is what *illallah* (but Allah) means.

This knowledge is superior to all other kinds of knowledge and the greater you exert yourself, the deeper will be your conviction that this is the starting-point of all knowledge. In every field of inquiry - be it that of physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, biology, zoology, economics, politics, sociology or the humanities, you will find that the deeper you probe, the clearer become the indications of the truth of *La ilaha illallah*. It is this concept which opens up the doors of inquiry and investigation and illumines the pathways of knowledge with the light of reality. And if you deny or disregard this reality, you will find that at every step you meet disillusionment, for the denial of this primary truth robs everything in the universe of its meaning and significance.