

## Sura al-Ikhlās



Sura 112, called al-Ikhlās, is one of the shorter Meccan Suras. As the Suras in the Quran are arranged by length, starting with the longest one after the opening verse al-Fatiha, this Sura is found near the end. This Sura is an early revelation that came to the Prophet when he was asked to define the nature of Allah. It is often recited during the *salat*, the obligatory prayer and it is one of the first ones that Mus-

lims learn by heart.

*Al-Ikhlās* means purity or sincerity. As it is a strong expression of the monotheistic character of Islam and the unique oneness of the Divine, the core and foundation of Islamic faith called *tawhid*, this Sura is also called *Sura al-Tawhid* or *al-Asas* (the Foundation).

*Qul huwal laahu ahad  
Allah hus-samad  
Lam yalid wa lam yoolad  
Wa lam yakul-lahu kufuwan ahad*

*Say, 'He is God, one  
God forever, the refuge, the rock  
Not begetting, unbegotten,  
and having as an equal none.'*<sup>1</sup>

### **Polytheism**

Unfortunately, this Sura has been used more as *Sura al-Tawhid* than as *Sura al-Ikhlās*, not only in a positive way to confess the absolute Unity of the One Being, but also in a negative way to denote Christianity as polytheistic, as the Christian faith asks its followers to believe in the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, as is expressed in the Nicæan Creed.

The main source to testify against this is the Quran itself, as it asks us to believe not only in the one Being as the source of all that exists, but also in the message of Muhammad and of all his predecessors, the prophets of the *Bani Israel* (children of Israel) and Jesus (Quran 42: 13).<sup>2</sup>

To this, the Quran adds in the next line that humankind became divided out of mutual jealousy only after the knowledge had reached them.

A certain religious intolerance is embedded in all monotheistic faiths, as it is seemingly a small step from believing in one God towards believing that the God you believe in is the only real God and that the God of all other faiths is false.

However, by doing this we compare the Divine who is beyond comparison. Seen from a strict Islamic perspective, this can be seen as *shirk*, the blasphemy of placing others besides God.

<sup>1</sup> Translation Michael Sells: *Approaching the Qur'ān*. White Cloud Press, 2001, p. 136. Sells offers three different translations for *samad*. Here, they are given all three.

<sup>2</sup> See W. van der Zwan: *The Sufi Path of Love and Understanding*, second edition, 2019 p. 59.

## Creation

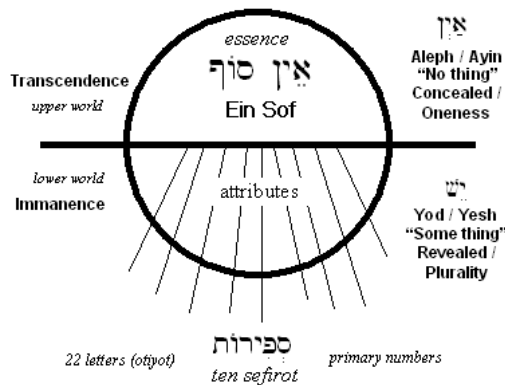


By looking at the cosmology and cosmogenesis of different traditions in relation to their God-concept, we can shine more light on the apparent paradox of the Christian Trinity within a monotheistic faith.

The big question in cosmology is what was before creation. Modern scientists claim to have gone back to milliseconds after the so-called Big Bang that started

the universe, but they cannot go to before the Big Bang. As Stephen Hawkins said, that is like asking what is north of the North Pole.

In the same vein, Lord Buddha asked his followers not to think about these matters, as any theory would be speculation and would keep his followers away from more important issues, such as exploring deeper layers of the inner self. This way, beyond the thinking and plotting mind, Lord Buddha discovered different layers. He made unconscious layers conscious and experienced an emptiness that he called *sunyata*, Nothingness.



Other traditions did speculate. Not to explain the phenomenon of creation, but to give sense and meaning to it. let us look at the Jewish tradition. There, we have names for the One that can be pronounced, such as Elohim (used in the creation story of Genesis) or El-Elyon (the Highest), but also the Tetragrammaton JHWH, the Name that cannot be pronounced as a name forms an image and according to the Ten Commandments we are not to make images of God.

The creator-God Elohim is already mysterious, but beyond that mystery is the unspeakable mystery JHWH. Beyond that mystery, the Kabbalistic tradition postulates *Ayn Sof*, the Great Void, the most hidden of all that is hidden, Absolute Non-Duality (Zohar).<sup>3</sup> The Zohar (Book of Splendor), a main Kabbalistic treatise, tells us:

Before He gave any shape to the world, before He produced any form, He was alone, without form and without resemblance to anything else. Who then can comprehend how He was before the Creation? Hence it is forbidden to lend Him any form or similitude, or even to call Him by His sacred name, or to indicate Him by a single letter or a single point...

But after He created the form of the Heavenly Man, He used him as a chariot wherein to descend, and He wishes to be called after His form, which is the sacred name "YHWH".

The Nothingness of Lord Buddha and the *Ayn Sof* of the Kabbalah find their equivalent in the Ibn 'Arabi's ideas on creation. Let us now turn to these, as they are relevant for Sura al-Ikhlās.

<sup>3</sup> See i.a. Daniel C, Matt: *The Essential Kabbalah*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.

## Creation, according to Ibn 'Arabi<sup>4</sup>

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In Sufism, the *Ayn Sof* from the Jewish tradition is called *zat*, Essence. Ibn 'Arabi also calls it Necessary Being, as something has to exist to start creation.

This Necessary Being had a thought. This is the beginning of creation and thus of the dualistic world of thinker, thinking and thought. This thought did not in any way change Essence, but in an unimaginable way, it emanated from Essence without changing Essence itself.

This thought was 'I am a Hidden Treasure and I want to be known, so I will create Creation that I might be known.' Known as the *Hadith Qudsi of the Hidden Treasure*, this saying has in-

fluenced Sufis of all ages. Knowing, as in the Hebrew Bible, has the connotation of loving, so Essence wanted to express Itself<sup>5</sup> and chose love as the medium or agent through which It could be known.

As Essence is unlimited and includes everything, more than only Love poured forth in order to include every possible aspect and potentiality of life and creation. All these came together in Allah, the emanation of Essence as Creator. The possibilities and aspects emanated from of this all-encompassing Allah as *wazifas*, the Beautiful Names or Attributes (*asma' wa sifat* or the *sifat-i-Allah*) and thus started and shaped creation as we experience it.

In short, *zat* created *sifat*. The *wazifas* materialized by becoming denser and thus appeared as qualities within created forms. Traditionally, there are lists of ninety-nine *wazifas*, but in reality the number of *wazifas* is unlimited, as the One is unlimited.

Similar to the Jewish tradition, one of these 'Beautiful Names of the One' is the secret name of God, a name that no one knows or can know: whatever we know or think to know, there always will be a mystery that stays unknown to us.

## The One is known by many names



As the Rig Veda says, 'There is one Truth, and sages know it by many names.'

When someone addressed him after a lecture and proudly announced that he didn't believe in God, Inayat Khan answered, 'I also do not believe in the God you don't believe in.'<sup>6</sup>

Looking with the ancient Vedic eyes or with the modern eyes of Inayat Khan, it becomes clear that there are many names of the Divine. As Shakespeare said, 'What's in a name?'. What one person may call God, someone else may call an attribute or an idol, whereas they may refer to the same quality or

<sup>4</sup> Partly taken from the chapter on *wazifas* in W. van der Zwan: *Attunement, Direction and Forgiving*.

<sup>5</sup> As Essence is above distinctions of gender, we use the neutral *It*. In a play with gender, in Arabic *zat* is male, as is *Allah* (so He, in Arabic *Hu*), whereas *sifat* (the Attributes *sifat-i-Allah*) is female. Within the *wazifas*, some are male, some female, thus weaving an intricate web of contradictions in Arabic, a gendered language, showing that the One transcends all duality, names, and forms.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Graham in Pirzade Inayat Khan (ed.): *A Pearl in Wine*. Omega Publications, 2001, p. 133.

archetypal force behind that name, or maybe even to no quality at all, but merely to a concept.

Some names denote a function – as in the *Trimurti*, where the three main aspects of the Divine in perennial philosophy of Mother India are called Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Sustainer) and Shiva (the Destroyer). In the deepest sense, even the Indian faith with its pantheon of deities, is monotheistic, as all emanates from Brahman, the One Being.

Some names have their reflection on earth (as is the case with many wazifas), some are beyond conception (as the name Allah) and beyond the beyond is something that cannot be named as it transcends duality and thus the world of names and forms. This is where all religions meet and merge in Huxley's perennial philosophy and Inayat Khan's Sufism.<sup>7</sup>



The Christian faith doesn't have a wide range of names for the One in combination with different 'functions' and translates the Hebrew *Elohim* as God and YHWH as the Lord. Jesus can be seen as the incarnated aspect of God, the Holy Spirit as the inspirational aspect of God, infusing humankind with revelations that can bring us to a deeper understanding.

All other aspects of the Divine merge not only in one God, but also in the one name 'God', the One who is called upon.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, in Christianity lies beyond the realm of names and forms, beyond incarnation and transcendence, the same and unique Oneness that is the Source of all religions, known and unknown to humanity.

As mystics in many traditions show, meditating on what cannot be known or proven may result in deep insights that have proven to be essential for these traditions, as Ibn 'Arabi shows. Christian mystics tend to meditate more on the Trinity and receive deep insights, making the Trinity as essential for the path of Christianity as any dogma is for other faiths. Christian meditation within the realm of creation results in similar aspects of God as in other traditions, albeit without any names for it beyond the word 'God'.<sup>9</sup>

If you focus on the differences, you are bound to see many and just as many reasons to denote other faiths. If you want to focus on the Unity behind the apparent differences, you still see the differences, but can honor these and trace them back to the unique source, to Pure Being, the starting point where the essence of all religions meet.

### **Sura of Sincerity**

According to the Prophet Muhammad, *Sura al-Ikhlās* equals one third of the rest of the Quran. *Ikhlās* means to be purified or refined and to express loyalty. Purity and loyalty are inner states of the soul that ask for more than describing the

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<sup>7</sup> For Inayat Khan, Sufism is not the mystical branche of Islam, but the core of religion out of which all religions came forth.

<sup>8</sup> Contrary to popular belief, 'God' is not related to 'good', but comes from an old Indo-Germanic root, meaning 'that which is called upon'.

<sup>9</sup> An example of this is the German Williges Jäger, a Benedictine monk and Zen master. One of his books is called *Jenseits von Gott*, meaning Beyond God.

uniqueness of the One. They ask us to be pure and sincere in our faith by placing nothing before us except the One; to have only the One as our source of inspiration and motivation in everything we think, feel, say, or do. The Sufis of the Golden Age liked to say that you should focus on the Creator instead of on the creation. Or, as the modern Sufi Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh said, Sincerity

Sincerity with people, which means not to do things simply for appearances in one's dealing and associations with others.

Sincerity with the master or beloved, which means having upright thoughts and actions both outwardly and inwardly.

Sincerity with God, which means never forgetting God and making sure that everything one says and does is for the sake of His satisfaction and in service to Him.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, the Gospels say, 'You cannot serve both God and mammon'. Here, *mammon* not only refers to wealth (the original meaning of the word), but to anything material that keeps us away from a spiritual life of service.

The Persian poet Jelaluddin Rumi was an advocate of this expanded interpretation of Islamic monotheism. In one of his stories from the *Mathnavi*,<sup>11</sup> Rumi explains the quarrel between a man and his wife as the internal battle between the ego-self (*nafs*) and the spiritual self (*ruh*, spirit) and compares it with the dispute between Pharaoh and Moses. In the Quran, Pharaoh is the archetype of *shirk* as he places himself next to God, is attached to worldly power and opposes Moses (archetype of a spiritual person who always places the One before him).

*Shirk* in a broader sense, as suggested in this sura, means to worship (*shirk-al-'ibadah*) anything in creation, rather than the Creator. The Quran advocates this sincerity i.a. in Sura 7 (*al-Araf*, the Heights), by relating the story of Moses and the golden calf (from line 143).

### **The lines of Sura al-Ikhlās**

*Allahu Ahad – He is God, one*

As said above, Sufism knows in the *wazifas* many names for the One. Two of these names refer to the unity of the One: *wahid* (nr. 66) and *ahad* (nr. 67).

*Wahid* is a name for the Divine on the level of the *sifat*, so the *wazifa* for Oneness amidst all the other *wazifas*, with the name Allah as the totality of all *wazifas*.

*Ahad* is also translated as the One, but is the name for a Oneness that paradoxically is part of the *sifat-i-Allah* and at the same time transcends the realm of the *wazifas*. It is a name for the Divine before the emanation of the *wazifas*.

*Ahmad*, one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad, is a word-play with this *wazifa*. Though derived from the same root as the name Muhammad, *hamd* (to praise), *Ahmad* or *Ahmed* can also be seen as *ahad* with an additional letter m. As the letter m in the Arabic language stands for embodiment, the name Ahmed is an epithet for the Prophet as embodiment of the Divine in its deepest knowable aspect.

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh: *The Crucible of Light*. Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 2009, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Mathnavi* I: 2252 – 2933. See also IV: 3085 – 3188, where Rumi places a prince as 'child of Adam' as symbol of a spiritual rebirth against a witch, symbolizing the attraction of the sublunar world.

*Allahu Samad – God forever, the refuge, the rock*

In Sura al-Ikhlās *ahad* forms a pair with *samad*. *Samad* is yet another name for unity and means indestructible, so perennial and everlasting. It is also the root of the Arabic word for rock (similar to the name of the apostle Petrus, from the Greek *petros* for ‘rock’). In pre-Islamic poetry the word was used for someone whom one approached for refuge,<sup>12</sup> so this is the Unity that is the foundation of faith, the indestructible and stable place to find shelter amidst the storms of life.

As everything depends on *samad*, but *samad* itself does not depend on anything, *samad* has the connotation that Allah is different from creation.

*Lam yalid wa lam yoolad – Not begetting, unbegotten*

This line refers to the already mentioned mysterious quality of the Divine, giving birth to creation and creating a changeable world without changing Itself. As such, this line can be seen as a further elaboration on *Ahad*.

*Wa lam yakul-lahu kufuwan ahad – and having as an equal none*

Sura al-Ikhlās ends with again emphasizing the transcendent quality of the One that has no equal and is beyond any comparison, sealing the sura by repeating the *wazifa ahad*. Concepts we may have of the One may have a relative truth and can be of support for our trust and faith, but in the end the One surpasses all human notions and is unfathomable.

As what can be named transcends language, but we cannot but use language to express ourselves, the Quran uses the paradox, so well-known from the Zen tradition that talks about the gateless gate and so forth.

So in the Quran, the One is both unfathomable and totally transcendent, and at the same time closer than your jugular vein, the caring parent of creation.

Here is an inspired melody for this Sura:

Bis - mil - lah e - rah - man e - ra - him  
Qul Hu - wa Al - lah Hu A - had Al - lah Hu Sa -  
mad Lam ya - lid wa lan Yoo - lad wa  
lam ya - kul - la Hu ku - fu - wan A - had

Text Traditional Quran  
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<sup>12</sup> Sells, p. 137.