

# Islam—Part 4

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## **The problems of agnosticism.**

Since God has no essence, at least not one that the names (or attributes) of God really describe, the Islamic view of God involves a form of agnosticism. Indeed, the heart of Islam is not to know God but to obey him. It is not to meditate on his essence but to submit to his will. As Pfander correctly observed of Muslims, “If they think at all deeply, they find themselves absolutely unable to know God.... Thus Islam leads to Agnosticism” (Pfander, 187).

Islamic agnosticism arises because Muslims believe God caused the world by extrinsic causality. Indeed, “the Divine will is an ultimate, beyond which neither reason nor revelation go. In the Unity of the single Will, however, these descriptions co-exist with those that relate to mercy, compassion, and glory” (Cragg, 42-43). God is named from his effects, but he is not to be identified with any of them. The relation between the Ultimate Cause (God) and his creatures is extrinsic, not intrinsic. That is, God is called good because he causes good, but not because goodness is part of his essence.

Among the significant weaknesses inherent in this agnosticism, a moral, a philosophical, and a religious problem stand out immediately.

First, if God is not essentially good, but only called good because he does good, why not also call God evil, since he causes evil? Why not call him sinful and faithless, since he causes people not to believe? It would seem consistent to do so, since God is, named from his actions. If Muslims reply that something in God is the basis for calling him good, but nothing in him is the basis for calling him evil, then they admit that God’s names do tell us something about his essence. In fact, they admit an intrinsic relation between the cause (Creator) and the effect (creation). This leads to a metaphysical problem with the Islamic view of God.

Second, at the root of medieval views of God, an entrenched neo-Platonism springs from Plotinus. Plotinus’ belief that the Ultimate [God] was absolutely an indivisible One heavily influenced Muslim monotheism. Further, Plotinus held that the One is so utterly transcendent (above and beyond all) that it cannot be known, except by mystical experience. This influenced both orthodox Muslim agnosticism and Sufi mysticism. The fundamental reason there can be no similarity between the One [God] and what flows from It (the universe) is because God is beyond being, and there is no similarity between being and what is beyond it.

Thomas Aquinas provided the definitive answer to plotinian agnosticism and mysticism. Aquinas argued that an effect must resemble its cause. “You cannot give what you have not got.” Hence, if God causes goodness, he must be good. If he caused being, he must be (Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas*, chap. 9).

Objections to this view generally confuse either a material or instrumental cause with an efficient cause. The efficient cause of something is that by which it comes to be. The instrumental cause is that through which it comes to be. And the material cause is that out of which it is made. Material and instrumental causes do not necessarily resemble their effects, but efficient causes do. The painting does not resemble the artist’s paint brush, but it does resemble the artist’s mind. The brush is the instrumental cause, whereas the artist is

the efficient cause.

Another mistake is to confuse material and efficient causality. Hot water is soft, yet it can cause an egg to get hard, because of properties in the egg. The same hot water softens wax. The difference is the material receiving the causality. Thus an infinite God can and does cause a finite world. God is not thereby finite because he caused a finite cosmos. Nor is he contingent because he, as a Necessary Being, caused a contingent universe. Finiteness and contingency are part of the very material nature of a created being. God is unlike creation in these kinds of ways. On the other hand, everything that exists has being, and God is Being. There must be a similarity between Being and being. God is pure actuality, with no potentiality whatsoever. Everything else that exists has the potential not to exist. So all created things have actuality; since they actually exist, and potentiality; since they could possibly not exist. God is like creatures in their actuality but unlike them in their potentiality; This is why when we name God from his effects we must negate whatever implies finitude and limitation or imperfection, and attribute to him only the pure attribute or perfection. This is the reason that evil cannot be attributed to God but good can. Evil implies imperfection or privation of some good characteristic. Good, on the other hand, does not in itself imply either limitation or imperfection. So God is good by his very nature but he cannot be or do evil.

Third, religious experience within a monotheistic context involves the relation between two persons, the worshiper and God. It is, as Martin

Buber correctly observed, an "I-Thou" relationship. But how can a person worship someone about which he can know nothing? Even in Islam, one is supposed to love God. But how do we fall in love with someone of which we know nothing? As atheist Ludwig Feuerbach put it, "The truly religious man can't worship a purely negative being.... Only when a man loses his taste for religion does the existence of God become one without qualities, an unknowable God" (Feuerbach, 15).

Some critics have suggested that the extremely transcendent Muslim view of God has led some Muslim sects to deify Muhammad. Since relationship with the transcendent God is seen to be distant, it is only through Muhammad that one even dares to approach the throne of God. In *Qawwalis* (a popular cultural event), Muhammad is praised in verse. This often takes the form of deification: "If *Muhammad* had not been, God himself would not have existed!" This is an allusion to the close relationship Muhammad is supposed to have with God. Muhammad is often given titles like "Savior of the World" and "Lord of the Universe." The popular deification of Muhammad, who so violently opposed any such idolatry; only shows the theological bankruptcy of the Muslim view of a God so distant and so unknowable that the devotee must make contact with something they can understand, even to the extent of deifying the prophet who condemned idolatry.

(To be continued)