

The Danger of Trying to Limit God

Islam has set for itself the noble task of always defending the honor of God. Can one find a greater proclamation of the grandeur of God than the one that we find in Surah 2 of the Qur'an – *Al-Baqarah*, aya 255 (known as the Aya ul Kursee):

“God: there is no deity save Him, the Living, the Eternal One. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belong whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth. Who can intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows all that is before them and all that is behind them. They can grasp only that part of His knowledge which He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth; and their upholding does not weary Him. He is the Sublime, the Almighty One!”

We Christians totally agree with this high conception of the almighty God. He is infinitely greater than all that we can conceive.

Unfortunately, in wanting to defend the honor of and proclaim the glory and the majesty of God, people sometimes end up limiting God in a way. On one hand, they reject what God Himself has revealed about Himself. On the other hand, they presumptuously say things about God that we cannot know. He alone can make known to us His true nature.

“GOD COULD NOT BECOME A MAN”

We all know that God is powerful, majestic and glorious, beyond what we can imagine. He is completely holy, righteous and pure. His royal authority is absolute, and his knowledge is perfect. When we try to take into account all His greatness, we may find that it would be unreasonable, even unthinkable, that He might divest Himself and humble Himself in order to take on the form of a contemptible, mortal human being, in order to live in the midst of sinners, in order even to suffer for them. It is not fitting for the Supreme Being to lay aside His dignity and humble Himself in this way. But that is not all. According to what Christians say, God supposedly allowed wicked men to mistreat Him,

unjustly, of course. They supposedly tortured and finally killed Him. We may naturally conclude that this is simply not possible.

We believe, however, that since God is totally free, sovereign and all-powerful, He can do whatever He wants to do. The only thing that would be impossible for God is to sin. The Bible says, for example, that it is impossible for God to lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). It would be contrary to the nature of the God of truth to engage in lying. It is the devil who is “the father of lies” (John 8:44). God remains true to His own holy, righteous and faithful character. “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (2 Timothy 2:12,13). Let God be praised, for He does not sin and He cannot sin; the reason is that it is not in His nature to want to sin.

But it is not a sin to be a man. Why should one say, then, that God could not become a man if He chose to? If God the Son became a human, He would have to accept the limitations of existence in a human body, but He would not stop being God. According to Surah 27 – *Am-Naml*, aya 8, when Moses came near to the burning bush in the desert of Sinai, “he was called: ‘Blessed is whosoever is in the fire, and whosoever is round about it! And glorified be Allaah, the Lord of the “Alameen (mankind, jinns and all that exists)”’” (translation of Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan). If Allah condescended to manifest Himself in a fire, can He not manifest Himself in the form of a man; a human being is, after all, greater than a fire. Notice that the Qur'an specifies, and rightly so, that even if Allah was in the fire of the burning bush, he continued to be all around it and the Lord of the universe. Similarly, though God was in the body of Jesus, He was at the same time in every place and still the Lord of all that exists. Even when the body of Jesus was in the tomb, God still reigned and still filled the universe.

What we must understand is that God can do whatever He wants to do. The question, then, is not “How could God become a human being?”, but

“WHY WOULD GOD DECIDE TO BECOME A HUMAN BEING?”

Even more, why would God accept to suffer unjustly and be put to death to save humanity. We can respond with a single word: love.

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5.8)

“We love Him because He first loved us.” (1 John 4.19)

If we do not understand the love of God, it may be because our own great pride prevents us from grasping the divine love which is described this way in 1 Corinthians 13:4,5: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud... it is not self-seeking.”

On the night Jesus was arrested, he was alone with his twelve apostles. For three years he had taught his disciples and shown them how to renounce one's own interests in order to serve others. According to Luke 22:24-26, however, his disciples had still not learned the lesson. This passage tells us:

“Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. And He said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called “benefactors.” But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.’”

Then Jesus did something to teach his disciples once again this important lesson. In John 13:1-5 we read:

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. During supper... Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.”

Washing others' feet was a sign of hospitality and love, but it was a very humble task, generally carried out by the least important person, the one with the lowest rank. Among the disciples of Jesus who were present that night, no one had thought of rendering this lowly service to his comrades. But Jesus himself, the Master, humbled himself in order to do it for his disciples. The reading in John 13 goes on:

“So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, ‘Lord, do You wash my feet?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter.’ Peter said to Him, ‘Never shall You wash my feet!’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’ Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.’ Jesus said to him, ‘He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.’”

We can certainly understand Peter's reaction. It did not seem normal for the Lord to do for his disciples that which was considered to be the job of a slave. John the Baptist had said that he was not even worthy to be the slave of Jesus, not worthy to untie the straps of his sandals in order to wash his feet. If he was unworthy to serve Jesus, he was even more unworthy to have Jesus serve him. That was Peter's feeling, as well. For him, as for men today, a great person, a very important man, should not have to do very humble jobs. Others should be the ones to serve such a person. That is one of the rights that come with high position. How much more this would be true if we were speaking of God.

The first verses of the chapter reminded us that Jesus was very conscious of his position as Son of God. He knew that he would soon be glorified, that he had come from God the Father and that he was going back to God the Father, who had put all things into his hands. But he did not cling to his rights. As Philippians 2:7,8 tells us, He “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” For Jesus, there was no conflict between greatness and

service to others. He said in Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

When Peter wanted to refuse having his feet washed by Jesus, the Lord told him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8). Next, he spoke, not of having clean feet, but of being entirely pure. He was not thinking of Peter's feet but of his soul. Jesus washes his disciples and makes them pure by his blood, by his death on the cross. Washing his disciples' feet might seem too humiliating for him to stoop to doing it, but being arrested, insulted, beaten and nailed to a cross would be a hundred times more humiliating. Yet Jesus was ready to endure all of that. Whoever is unwilling to let Jesus suffer in his or her place can never be purified of sin. There is no other solution. If Peter could not accept Jesus washing his feet, how could Peter accept Jesus dying for him? We must allow ourselves to be served, we must allow ourselves to be saved by Jesus, who is the Son of God.

A fundamental teaching of Christianity is that the greatest thing a person can do is to serve others, even to the point of dying for them. This selflessness, this humility, this self-denying love, is at

the heart of God. He is so great that he humbled Himself in order to be a servant. The Creator of the universe showed his greatness in humility, service and love.

CONCLUSION

We have already said this: in their desire to defend the honor of God and to proclaim His majesty, men end up limiting God in a way. He alone can make known to us His true nature.

It is for Him to tell us if His oneness is simple or complex. We must not be astonished to find out that the infinite God is more complex than we are, more difficult to comprehend. So let us show some humility when we speak of Him.

We must also be very cautious about declaring what God cannot be or do. Are we, with our limited intelligence and knowledge, qualified to be the judges of what the Almighty can do? Who are we to say that God cannot, if He so desires, take on the form of a man? Could we not end up being guilty of blasphemy? God is free to reveal Himself as He is, beyond what man understands or imagines. As the Qur'an says, "He knows all that is before them and all that is behind them. They can grasp only that part of His knowledge which He wills."