

# A comparative study of the concept of God in Hinduism and Islam

Abid Mushtaq Wani

**Abstract:** In this research paper we will discuss the concept of God in Hinduism and Islam, the two major world religions. The theme of this paper is to show that monotheism is at the core of both these great religions. Islam is strictly monotheistic but Hinduism has pantheistic and henotheistic tendencies as well. While monotheism means the oneness and transcendence of God pantheism means that the Supreme Being is immanent in His creation and is present everywhere and in everything. Henotheism is the belief in one Supreme Divinity with the belief in other lesser deities.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of God is the basic tenet of almost all religions. I said almost because renowned religions like Buddhism and Jainism do not hold the belief in an Absolute Creator of the world. Theologians usually define God as all-powerful, all-knowing, transcendent, eternal and infinite. My research paper is about the concept of God in one of the two major world religions of the world; Hinduism and Islam. We shall hypothesize that the unity of God is the central part of both these great religions. While Hinduism is pantheistic when Vedanta is taken into consideration, Islam is purely monotheistic. Most of the Hindus worship many gods and goddesses but they believe that they are the manifestations of One Absolute Being.

I have consulted the basic sources of both these religions. In Hinduism the Upanishads are the basic philosophical treatises describing the nature of the God and soul. Quran is the main source of theology believed to be revealed from God to Prophet Muhammad. Quran stresses the oneness of God and how people should relate to Him.

## II. CONCEPT OF GOD IN HINDUISM

The concept of God in Hinduism is found in the Upanishads or Vedanta. Although the Vedas precede Upanishads they contain hymns to various gods and goddesses which are regarded as the entities ruling nature. But these deities are not divine in the strict sense of the word, rather they are considered as a host of natural powers and symbols of the laws embedded in the visible universe. The four Vedas at their ends contain philosophical books known as Upanishads and these are the treatises which contain the description of the Supreme Divinity.

Upanishads are usually in the form of dialogues between masters and disciples. Furthermore Bhagavad Gita, 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mahabharata, is also viewed as an Upanishad because of its resemblance to the philosophy of Upanishads and its being a dialogue between Arjun as a seeker and Krishna as a teacher.

The importance of Upanishads over Vedas is clearly described in Chandogya Upanishad where Narada comes Sanatkumar to grasp the meaning of soul and Supreme Divinity. Narada tells him that he has learnt all the Vedas including all other subjects prevailing at that time. Narada comes to know that this knowledge of Vedas, legend, mathematics, logic, astrology, science of gods or devavidya etc is not enough until one grasps and realizes the Self and the Supreme Soul.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore in Gita Krishna tells Arjuna, "He is free from Karmic involvement who is contented with whatever comes to him uninvited; who is even minded and untouched by duality; who is without envy, jealousy and animosity; and who finally views success and failure with equanimity. All the effects of karma (action) are nullified, and one achieves liberation, when ego attachment ceases, when one becomes centered in wisdom, and when one's actions are offered up to the Infinite in sacrifice. For such a person, both the act of self offering and the offering itself are, equally, aspects of the One Spirit. The fire (of wisdom) and the person making the offering are both Spirit. In this realization, the Yogi, freed from ego-identification, goes straight to Brahman (Spirit)."<sup>2</sup> These verses depict the deep spiritualistic ethos of Hinduism without ritualistic emphasis. This also shows the importance of philosophical Upanishads over ritualistic Vedas.

About the philosophy of Upanishads and the deep meaningful myths contained in the puranas, professor Radhakrishnan writes, "The Gita and the Upanishads are not remote from popular belief. They are the great literature of the country, and at the same time vehicles of the great systems of thought. The puranas contain the truth dressed up in myths and stories, to suit the weak understanding

of the majority. The hard task of interesting the multitude in metaphysics is achieved in India<sup>3</sup>. This implies the deep philosophical and metaphysical aspects embedded in Upanishads which the laymen understand through analogies and relevant myths of puranas.

Upanishadic concept of God, unlike Judeo-Christian and Islamic belief is though monist or pantheistic but still many scholars have understood it in panentheistic paradigm. This interpretation of God's existence as panentheistic means that God is beyond time and space as well as His omnipresence. The incarnation of God in human form and other anthropomorphic archetypes of the Supreme Being is a later development in the puranic period. As we quoted Prof. Radhakrishnan earlier it was to suit the weak understanding of the multitude.

The Absolute Being in Vedantic terminology is called Brahman, not to be confused with the Brahmin of the caste system. Brahman is Absolute, Eternal, Bliss, Consciousness, without a second and without beginning or end. That (Tat) is not to be worshipped or invoked but to be known and experienced everywhere and within one's own self. Creation out of nothing (ex nihilo) is alien to Vedanta. It is the Brahman itself out of which everything evolves and into which everything dissolves in endless cycles. Hence, creation is cyclic and not linear like Semitic belief.

A symbolic name to denote Brahman in Chandogya Upanishad is Aakaasha or space. In Gita it is stated, "I, the Unmanifested, pervade the entire universe. All creatures abide in me, though I abide not in them"<sup>4</sup>. "That which is invisible, ungraspable, without family, without caste, without sight or hearing and or foot. Eternal, all-pervading, omnipresent, exceedingly subtle. That is the imperishable, which the wise perceive as the source of beings"<sup>5</sup>. Vedantic God is close to an impersonal existence that can be described in symbols, negation and paradoxes. As a spider emits and draws in [its thread], as herbs arise on the earth, as the hairs of the head and the body from a living person, so from the Imperishable arises everything here.<sup>6</sup>

There are six systems of Indian philosophy out of which only sankhya is silent about the existence of Supreme Being. Dvaita school opines that Brahman is the Absolute Being but that which is other than Brahman has its own existence but dependent on Brahman. It is the Advaita School of the Indian philosophy which clearly states the Oneness of Being. The greatest profounder of Advaita or non-dual school was Adi Shankaracharya. In my opinion it is the Advaita branch of Indian philosophy that is closer to the Vedantic aspect of Reality as depicted in the Upanishads. Says Adi Shankaracharya; "Brahman is other than the universe. There exists nothing that is not Brahman. If any other object than Brahman appears to exist, it is unreal like a mirage."<sup>7</sup>

All these descriptions stated earlier is of Nirgun Brahman which in related to creation is called Sagun Brahman. Guna means attributes. While nirgun is the name of Brahman alone sagun is that aspect which manifests itself through or cosmic illusion. This is the reason that numerous puranas were written wherein various forms and symbols were given to Sagun Ishwar depicting that as a personal god or ishta devata. Shrimad Bhagvatam, Vishnu puran, Shiva puran, Devi puran, etc, has descriptions of these extra Vedic gods and goddesses. Any person can concentrate on an ishta devata as a ladder to reach a higher consciousness of the Supreme Divinity.

Most of the humans cannot remain satisfied with an impersonal aspect of God. This is the reason that Bhakti tradition took its roots on Indian soil which reached its epitome in medieval period. Worship of Shiva, Vishnu and his incarnations and the manifestations of goddess Shakti flourished during that time. In Gita it is attributed to Krishna that he speaks as an incarnation of God. This can be put in these words that Krishna as Parbrahm indwelling in a special manner of Mystery speaks about himself. "The Blessed Lord said, many have been my births, and many also yours. I remember all of mine, though you remember yours not. Though I am the Lord of whole creation, and I am in my true self and abiding in my cosmic nature, forever unborn, yet I, by my yoga-maya, assume an outward form."<sup>8</sup>

Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism emerged as three main Bhakti movements believing in Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti as the aspects of Divinity. But one thing is important to mention that bhakti movement was highly monotheistic also apart from above mentioned traditions. Almost all Hindus have the omnipresent aspect of God in their minds combined with His non-dual Oneness. They see the same Brahman in various incarnations and idols. Once Yogananda Paramhansa went to a place where numerous common laymen used to worship and prostrate before a small round stone. As a learned man he considered it a little superstitious. After that he went to meet a saint and saw that saint coming towards him in anger questioning him about the residing place of God. Yogananda answered that God is everywhere. Then sadhu asked him that was God not present in that stone towards which Yogananda hesitated to prostrate<sup>9</sup>. This anecdote clearly shows the Hindu mentality of the Unity of God in a unique way, the God who can be worshipped in any form. In

is written Gita, "He who beholds me everywhere and who beholds everything in me, never loses sight of me nor do I lose sight of him"<sup>10</sup>.

It is written in Gita, "In whatever way I am approached, in that way do I respond. All men, by whatever path come to me"<sup>11</sup>. This verse shows the inclusive character of Hinduism in approaching God through various ways and means. Hence we found a heterodox character of Hinduism in describing God and the paths to reach Him.

We will end the first part of the chapter concerning the concept of God in Hinduism in the words of the renowned authority on Hinduism and Indian philosophy Prof. Radhakrishnan. He says, "The Primordial Being, the primary datum, can be elucidated and not described. To indicate that it is not an object of knowledge many of the seers refuse to characterize the nature of the Supreme. They declare Supreme to be a Mystery, a hidden secret. The more it is experienced as the inexpressible, the more it is felt to be indubitable. This knowledge does not spring from belief or a process of reasoning. It goes beyond both of them without contradicting them. We can have wordless communication, a transcendental consciousness which exceeds all images and concepts, "a flight of the alone to the Alone."

### III. CONCEPT OF GOD IN ISLAM

In the Islamic belief system concept of God is peculiarly clear and uncompromising. The Holy Name of God in Arabic is Allah which has no plural or opposite gender as in the English word of god which can become gods or goddess. Allah is unique in His essence and attributes with which nothing can be associated. He is beyond time and space as He is the Creator of everything including time and space. He is Omnipotent, Omniscient and is present everywhere through His knowledge. But He is not present everywhere in a literal sense as His essence is not mingled with His creation. He is eternal and was present from all eternity without any partner and is changeless. He is the Absolute Being and is not dependent on anything. Everything is destructible without His essence.

Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was asked by his contemporaries about the attributes of God and these verses were revealed by Allah Almighty: "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the compassionate. Say, He is God, the One God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, nor has been begotten, and there is no one equal to Him"<sup>12</sup>.

Salafi scholars within Islam have classified Tawhid or Islamic monotheism into three parts which is inferred from the clear and simple verses of Qur'an. Classifying Tawhid into three categories is based on induction after scholars studied the relevant texts in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Let us discuss the classification below.

Defining the three terms:

1. Tawhid ur Rububiyah: It is the belief that Allah is the only Cherisher and Sovereign of the whole Universe or Existence. It is evident by the following verse of the Holy Qur'an; "All the praise is due to Allah, the Lord of all that exists"<sup>13</sup>. Allah is the *Rabb* of all the worlds i.e, the only Owner and Controller of the Universe.
2. Tawhid ul Asmaa was Sifaat: (Allah is) the Bestower of Mercy, the All-Merciful, the Owner of the Day of Judgement.<sup>14</sup> In this verse Allah gives Himself names and attributes as Ar Rahman, Ar Raheem and Al Malik.
3. Tawhid ul Uloohiyah: "(O Allah) You alone we worship and only from You we seek help"<sup>15</sup>. This verse demonstrates that Allah is the only God and He alone is worthy of worship and we should only seek His help in all affairs.

Tawhid or Islamic monotheism is not an innovation of the prophet Muhammad but a primal and basic concept common to all the prophets and messengers sent by God for the guidance of humanity. This view is clearly expressed in the following verse of Quran; "And we never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, 'There is no god but I, so worship Me'"<sup>16</sup>

The word for God in Islam is Allah which is not among the pantheon of pagan gods like Zeus or Vishnu but the name for the one true God and Absolute worshipped by Jews and Christians and realized by the seers of Upanishads as Brahman. According to basic Islamic tenets it is not for people to decide what the attributes of God are but God Himself sends prophets to describe Himself. Hence the essence and attributes of God are not a matter of speculations for philosophers but a subject of Truth revealed to prophets by God Himself. To nullify the right of mental introspection by men who are not guided by revelation Quran categorically proclaims:

*'Have you seen him who has taken his own caprice to be his god'?*<sup>17</sup>

*Who is more misguided than he who follows his own caprice without the guidance from God?*<sup>18</sup>

Allah is the only Absolute Being who does not depend on anything or anybody for His existence. All except God are contingent beings dependent on Him for their existence. First sentence of the Islamic Shahaadah is; there is no god but God. It means that there is only a single true and worthy object of worship, God. All other objects of worship, adoration and servitude are false. To worship anything else other than the one true God is considered the sin of highest order which is Shirk or polytheism.

Polytheism or *Shirk* in the Islamic context means to associate something or someone with God in worship or Divine servitude. It also means to share, to be a partner, to make someone share in and to give someone a partner. Hence in pure Islamic theological sense it means to give God partners and, by implication, to worship them along with God or exclusive of God. Some Quranic verses nullifying polytheism or *shirk* are as follows;

*Worship God, and do not associate any others with Him.*<sup>19</sup>

*Do not associate others with God; to associate others is a mighty wrong.*<sup>20</sup>

*Say [O Muhammad!]: Surely God is one god. Surely I am free of the others you associate.*<sup>21</sup>

*Say: I have only been commanded to worship God, and not to associate anything with Him.*<sup>22</sup>

The grave falsity of *shirk* is clearly depicted in Koran as it is the only unpardonable sin:

*God forgives not that any others should be associated with Him, but less than that, He forgives to whomsoever He will.*<sup>23</sup>

*If someone associates any others with God, God will prohibit paradise to him.*<sup>24</sup>

In Islamic theology the sense of *Tawhid* is considered innate in human nature and the signs of God are clearly visible and perceivable throughout the cosmos which further gets a strong impetus by the guidance of prophets and messengers sent by God Almighty. One has to be fully aware consciously about the importance of the oneness of God and the nature of associating partners with Him in order to be guilty of *shirk*. Moreover caprice and reliance on self instead of the precepts of God is also considered a kind of worship of other than God as seen in the verse stated earlier.

In Islamic theology God's essence is considered unknowable but Koranic verses depict many attributes of God as Praiseworthy; "Praise belongs to God who is the sustainer of the worlds"<sup>25</sup>. He is Merciful and omnibenevolent. He is Merciful, Benevolent"<sup>26</sup>. God is All-powerful. "The strength, all of it, belongs to God"<sup>27</sup>. He is the Creator of all that is. "Is there any creator apart from God?"<sup>28</sup>. Everything changes and gets annihilated except the One Permanent God. "Everything is perishing except His Face"<sup>29</sup>.

There are many beautiful names of God apart from these which taken together are considered as *Al Asmaa ul Husnaa* or The Beautiful Names. Though there are attributes of God which we share like sight or hearing but God's sight and hearing is not like creatures but unique and eternal while we depend on His physical laws and do not share eternity. That is the reason that in Islam prefix *Abd* or Slave has to be used before the names of God to keep them as names. For example God is All-seeing or *Al Baseer*, a Muslim cannot keep this as a name but only after prefixing *Abd* before it as *Abd al Baseer*, the servant of All-seeing God.

God in Islamic theology is not imminent in creation but He is Transcendent and beyond Time and Space because He created everything ex-nihilo, out of nothing. There is nothing like the Essence of God. This is known as *Tanzih*. There is a simple expression of *Tanzih* or the transcendence of God in the following Koranic verse. "Nothing is like Him"<sup>30</sup>. How can God be mingled in creation when He Himself created Time and Space.

Islamic monotheism is a way to free human beings from every kind of slavery except the submission to the one true God. It is in the remembrance of God only that hearts feel bliss and tranquility. "Surely hearts feel tranquil whenever God is mentioned"<sup>31</sup>. It is the oneness of God which brings order in creation. Like the concept of singularity in theoretical physics, metaphysical singularity of the oneness of God is the Ground of existence in Islam.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

So far we have seen the concept of God in Hinduism and Islam from original sources. The gist of the paper is that monotheism is at the core of the two religions. When talking of a Unitarian concept of Godhead there is only one Supreme Deity in both the metaphysical world views. Be it the Brahman of Vedanta or Allah of Islam, it is one and the same thing. People related to both the religions should realize this which should bring them close.

It is true that there are pantheistic tendencies in Hinduism but a large number of Sufis or Muslim mystics in Islam also believed in some form of pantheism which is known as Wahdat ul Wujood. Henotheism is also a part of Hinduism which means revering or worshipping in lower deities with the belief in a Absolute Divinity. But most of the Hindus recognize that these lesser gods and goddesses are manifestations of the One Divine Being. And I hope my proposal will bring both the adherents close.

#### Bibliography

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