

Of monism and monotheism

The major religions of the world can be divided into two broad categories — the Aryan and the Semitic, with Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism in the first and Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the second. So far as their theological aspects are concerned, there is a marked difference between these two kinds of religions. While the Aryan religions are basically philosophy-based, the Semitic religions are revelation based. The former represent the culmination of the philosophical pursuit of truth by the great minds of the world. In the quest for reality, meditation and contemplation brought these saintly souls to the conclusions which gave rise to the principal, organised religions of the eastern hemisphere.

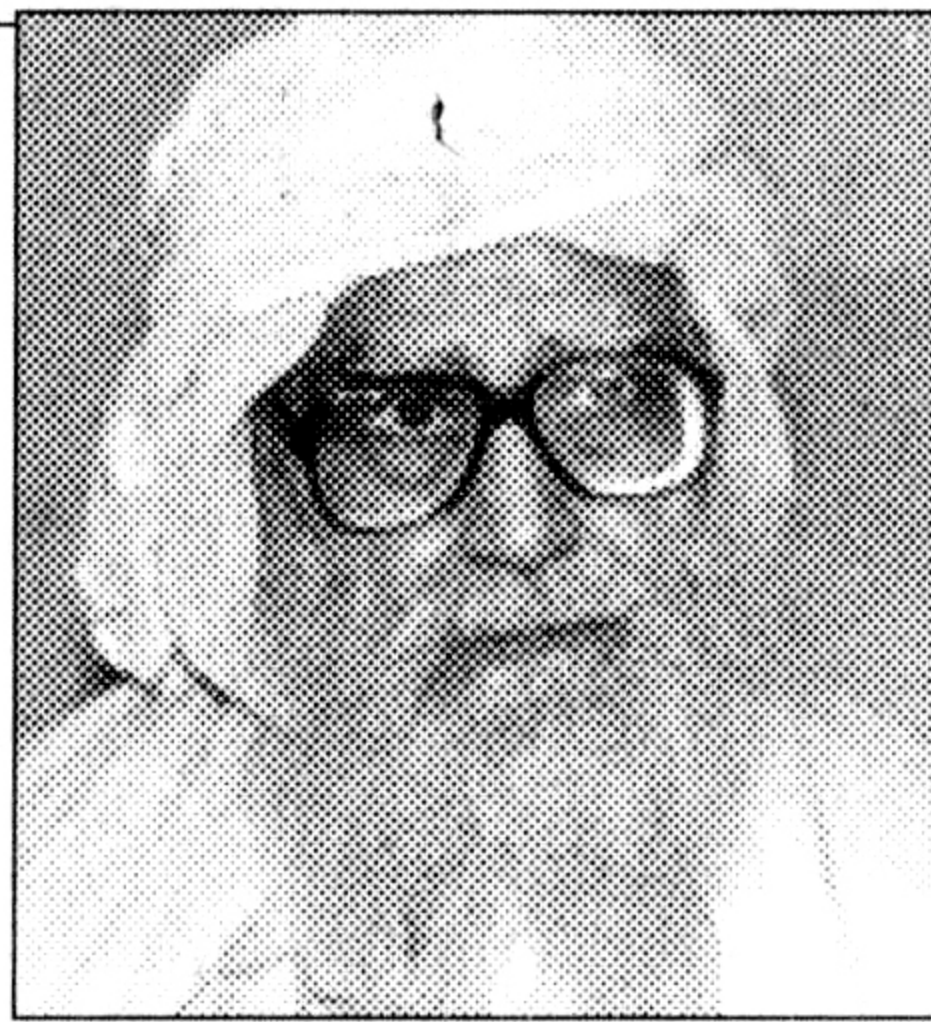
The creeds of the Semitic religions on the other hand, are based on divine revelation. That is, God chose a series of Semites to be His apostles and then imparted to them His commandments. These messengers became not only the bearers of divine scriptures but also their interpreters. It was these revelations and their divinely inspired interpretations which provided the fundamentals of the Semitic religions as they exist today.

The basic difference in respect of beliefs of the Aryan and Semitic religions can be briefly described in terms of monism and monotheism respectively.

Although both traditions — monism and monotheism — have the idea of God in common, there are fundamental differences in their conceptualisation of God. In the Aryan tradition, God is an all-pervasive force rather than an independent reality. Monism posits the totality of a single reality, with all the diverse phenomena of the natural world seen as different manifestations of the same reality. According to this concept, therefore, there is no real difference between the creator and the creature. Thus in monistic theorising, the concept of an individual, personalised God does not exist.

In Semitic religions, particularly in Islam,

Horizons



Wahiduddin Khan

the concept of God is entirely based on monotheism. This concept can also be termed dualism — that the Creator and the creature are completely different from one another. God has a real and eternal existence. As the Creator of all things, he is distinct from all He has created. His creatures in their seemingly independent existence totally depend upon the will of God. The sole possessor of all power, God has created man to live for a specific period of time, during which he is sent into the world to be tested. It is this concept of the Creator as totally distinct from the creature which sets the Semitic religions apart from the Aryan.

The philosophy of Islam is explicitly that of monotheism. It is true that the Sufi system has incorporated monistic concepts. This is in actual fact a deviation from the original Islam,

The Creator and the creature are completely different from one another. It is this distinction that sets the Semitic religions apart from the Aryan

and is held by the majority of Islamic scholars to be an incorrect interpretation, not truly representative of Islam.

Other presentations of Islam also figure in the books produced in the later period of Islam. But all of these, based as they are on personal interpretations, do not have the status of sacred books. In Islam, only the Qur'an and Sunnah (the Prophet's words and deeds) enjoy the status of the only authentic sources, and it is to them that we must turn if we are to have a true appreciation of the essence of the religion.

The mainstay of Islam is its monotheism — *tawhid* — belief in the oneness of God in the complete sense of the word. God is One. He has no partner. He created all things and has complete control over the universe. We should serve Him and submit to Him alone. Though He cannot be seen, He is so close to us that He hears and answers us when we call upon Him.

The distinctive aspect of this monotheism is that no intermediary link exists between the Creator and the creature. By remembering Him, any individual at any point in time may, quite independently, establish contact with God. There is no need for any go-between. Indeed belief in an intermediary link with God is alien to the Islamic religious system. Called *shirk* (associating others with God) it is deemed to be an unpardonable offence.

According to the Qur'an God in Islam is not a symbol, but a reality. God is not a kind of working hypothesis on which to found a religious system. On the contrary, God in Islam is a Personality. He has a real and independent existence. He is alive and self-sustaining, self-perpetuating. He has knowledge. He takes decisions, rewards and punishes. He is the Controller and Sustainer of human history.

The chapter of the Qur'an, *Al-Ikhlās* (Purity) sums up in a few terse words the unity of the Godhead. Say:

Allah is One, the Eternal God. He begot none, nor was He begotten. None is equal to Him.