

# The Intuition of Essential Impoverishment and its Effect on the Actions and Outlook of Man from the Point of View of ‘Allamah Tabataba’i

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## Abstract

‘Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i was one of the greatest commentators of the Qur’an in the contemporary world. He approached this subject with the outlook of specific monotheism. Also, he was one of those who had been trained in the mystic school of the late Sayyid ‘Ali Qadi. In his commentary on the Qur’an, in some places, he coincidentally discusses a very important topic related to the knowledge of divinity, i.e. the intuition of essential impoverishment [of the creature]. The present paper analyzes this problem from the point of view of the late ‘Allamah. It is for this reason that in the beginning, a reminder is made of the nobility and greatness of the subject; that is, monotheism. Then, the connection between

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monotheism and the intuition of essential impoverishment [of the creature] is discussed. While discussing some of the divine attributes, the effects of these attributes on man's view [of reality] will be examined.

**Keywords:** *monotheism, essential impoverishment, divine intention and will, divine sovereignty, divine guidance, divine sustenance*

### **A Presentation of the Problem**

Those individuals who are acquainted with the true shariah of Islam and who bear the responsibility of explaining the teachings of revelation have invited people to practice the shariah in their writings. Some of these great individuals have said that there are some acts which are more important than others in the path of the service of the Truth and which are vital conditions for the attainment of the goal [of this spiritual path]. Examples of such acts are the remembrance of God, sincerity in action, religious austerity, the performance of certain acts for forty days and nights, the repetition of this forty-day performance and the acquisition of the love of God.

One of the loftiest views on this subject is that of the disciples of the monotheistic school of the late Sayyid 'Ali Qadi. One of the foremost of his disciples and trainees – who can even be considered to be the greatest of them all – is the late 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i. This scholar had imbued the knowledge of religion in his being and was also a paradigm of righteousness. He was also one of the true spiritual wayfarers on the path of mystical monotheism. In his writings, especially in his grand commentary on the Qur'an, *al-Mizan*, he has presented important discussions that have explained the

sovereignty of the divine unity over the entire Universe. Also, by means of the attention he has drawn to this sovereignty and the absolute divine will, he has proven the essential impoverishment of humanity, in all of its dimensions.

In this article, the view of the late 'Allamah Tabataba'i regarding the essential impoverishment of the human being will be examined. The answer to the following questions will also be given: did he believe in essential impoverishment? What was his interpretation of this 'essential impoverishment'? What does the belief in this essential impoverishment entail? What does this great Qur'anic commentator say about the effect that belief in essential impoverishment has on the actions and views of a human being? What verses of the Qur'an did he refer to in this discussion? What effect does the intuition of essential impoverishment have on the understanding of the Islamic sciences?

The purpose of this article is to answer these questions. While drawing attention to the importance and greatness of the topic of monotheism, it presents the verses that 'Allamah Tabataba'i refers to in this discussion and reviews the analysis and interpretation [of these verses] as mentioned in *al-Mizan*. This has been done so that the great role of this topic in the understanding of the lofty teachings of revelation and as a result, the conception of essential impoverishment may be understood.

### **The nobility and greatness of the topic of monotheism**

The topic that is monotheism and the divine unity is from one point of view, the simplest of problems which man may comprehend with his primordial nature. The Qur'an says, 'Is there any doubt in God? [He is] the Originator of the heavens and the earth?' (14:10) From another point of view, it is also one of the most difficult problems

which has only been grasped by a few human beings. Imam Baqir (A) said: 'Everything that you conceive with your power of conjecture and estimation with respect to God is your own creation and is rejected by the Truth, even if it is one of the most precise of meanings' (Kashani 1360 SH: p. 7). Without a doubt, there is no way to attain the core of the reality of monotheism. This is because there is no way to understand something without comprehending [and encompassing] it. And God is not comprehended [or encompassed] by anything; rather, He is what comprehends and encompasses all things. However, the light of His existence has illuminated the entire world, from the point of view of His appearance in the manifestations of the divine Names and Attributes. The Qur'an says: 'Soon, We will show them our signs in the heavens and the earth and in themselves so that it will be clear for them that He is the Truth' (41:53).

In some of his writings, 'Allamah Tabataba'i has beautifully pointed to the greatness of the topic of monotheism. And he has informed the seekers of the Truth of some of the divine secrets. In an unparalleled passage, he says the following:

If they are properly analyzed, it will be understood that all of the parts of the Islamic religion somehow go back to the subject of monotheism. Also, if monotheism is composed [with other teachings], it turns into [monotheistic] ethics and actions. If monotheism descends from the lofty station of beliefs, it becomes the ethics and acts [that monotheism advances]. Also, if [religious] ethics and acts ascend from their station, they will be nothing but [the teaching of] monotheism. According to the tenth verse of Surah Fatir, 'The good word [i.e. monotheism] ascends to God and the righteous conduct uplifts it.' (Tabataba'i 1370 SH: p. 13)

Certainly, the spirit of all of the teachings and rules of Islam are branches of the divine unity and they ultimately return to it. In the words of Sayyid Haydar Amuli, all of the prophets and saints have been sent to express the teaching of monotheism and to invite the creation to it. If it were not for monotheism and its expression, no prophet or saint would come into this dark and filthy world, even if it were for an hour (Amuli 1368 SH: p. 49). It is for this reason that the foundation of all perfection and all of the spiritual stations is the principle of monotheism. Also, no knowledge is as valuable as it. All apparent and hidden perfections are contained within it. And the measure of the truth of all the sciences and [ethical] values is nothing but monotheism. This is also true of the identity of everything.

The Commander of the Faithful (A) said the following in response to the person who asked him, 'Did you recognize God through the Prophet (S) or did you recognize the Prophet (S) through God?' 'I did not recognize God through the Prophet (S); rather, I recognized [the Prophet] Muhammad (S) through God' (Kashani 1375 SH: p. 77). Yes! Nothing – even the existence of the last prophet (S) – can be recognized while the light of monotheism does not shine upon it.

### **The attainment of monotheism**

What does the 'attainment of monotheism' mean? Is God something that is able to be attained? Certainly, God exists, and He is the source of all beings. Nevertheless, this is not the same god that we have imagined with our deficient faculties of imagination and conjecture. The 'attainment of God' is in reality, the true knowledge of God, which is, in the end, nothing but the direct knowledge of the baseness of the servant and the honour of the Lord. This is nothing but the goal of all of man's spiritual efforts and struggles.

Ibn Ata'allah Sikandari says the following:

If you desire that lofty graces fall upon you [from God], then you should properly witness [the] poverty and need [that is] within you. This is because God says the following in verse 273 of Surah Baqarah: 'The only ones who deserve charity are the poor.' (Sikandari 1420 AH: p. 39)

We mean to say that the knowledge and power that you brag of is nothing but a glimmer of the knowledge and power of the Divine that has been given to you. It has no station near God and there is no reason to brag about one's self. However, the more one expresses one's poverty and dependency on the Truth, the more will it be accepted by the Divine. The Qur'an says the following in this regard: 'O men! You are the poor who depend on God and God is the self-sufficient and the most praiseworthy' (35:15). In this verse, poverty has been said to be limited to human beings and self-sufficiency has been said to be limited to God. What is more, the thing that men need God for has not been mentioned. This implies that human beings need Him in every respect [otherwise, if they only needed Him in some respects and not others, then it would have been necessary to mention that in the verse]. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 50, p. 17) In the words of the mystic, Shaykh Sa'd al-Din Hamawiyah, when the Mahdi (A) reappears, the monotheistic cry will be heard from every one of his limbs, even his shoelaces (Ashtiyani 1370 SH: p. 794).

Imam Khomeini says the following:

Man should understand with his heart that, aside from one thing, there is nothing spoken in the realm of existence and that is the pure phrase, 'There is no

god but God.' Also, the 'stamp' of this word should be imprinted on the heart. (1371 SH: p. 53)

As a result, since all of creation has been created by God, they are poor with respect to Him and need Him. Also, since God is their Creator and the overseer of their affairs, no one other than Him is self-sufficient. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 17, p. 50) Then, when this matter is understood, the sovereignty of monotheism and the divine unity will begin to rule over the heart. This sovereignty will increase in proportion to the increase in this understanding. In the view of 'Allamah, the real perfection of man is nothing but the annihilation of his essence, his attributes and his actions in the Truth. These are respectively called the unity of the 'essence,' the 'attribute' and 'the act'. This station refers to the station where man – because of the witnessing of his own poverty – realizes that no essence, attribute or act belongs to anyone other than God, as He deserves (Tabataba'i 1382 SH: p. 62).

Here, the role of the prophets and the divine saints is to make the creation acquainted with their Creator and the Source of their existence. They have been commanded by the Truth to perform this task. The way that they make them acquainted with Him is to remind them of their essential incapacity and poverty. The great prophets help people cast aside their attachments to the material and to imaginary things and to orient them towards God, who is naturally known by them. They help them intuitively witness their incapacity and impoverishment as well as their other imperfections. It is for this reason that the source of the monotheistic knowledge, which is the goal of the delegation of all of the prophets, their successors and the saints is the awareness of this poverty, which is subject to gradation and which has no conceivable end.

A series of 'premises' must be prepared so that its 'conclusion' may be derived. Those 'premises' are all of the parts of the world and the afterlife and that 'conclusion' is nothing but the sovereignty of the divine unity. The world, with all of its parts and all of the pleasing and painful events that take place in it, is nothing but a 'premise' that makes man acquainted with his God. [Thus, God is like the 'conclusion' that is derived from these premises.] So, when he travels from the world to the afterlife – which is the day when truths will manifest themselves, not come into being – the sovereignty of monotheism will be clarified. On that day, God will say, 'To whom does the kingdom belong today? It belongs to God, the One, the Powerful' (40:16). The Day of Resurrection is the day when the unlimited poverty and dependency of the entire world [upon God] will be fully manifested. On that day, to the extent possible, everything other than God will discover the extent of their incapacity, weakness and poverty, from every point of view. This discovery of poverty is nothing but the comprehension of monotheism. Now, we will point to some of the most salient features of the intuition of essential impoverishment and the comprehension of the sovereignty of monotheism in the view of 'Allamah Tabataba'i, with reference to the verses of the Qur'an.

### **I. Divine ownership**

One of the things that shows the absolute power and sovereignty of the Divine is divine ownership. One of the most explicit verses of the Qur'an that reminds us of this matter is the noble verse,

Say: O God! Owner of the kingdom! You give the kingdom to whoever You want and take away the kingdom from whoever You want. You honor whoever you want and You dishonor whoever You want. In Your hand is all good. You have power over all things.  
(3:26)



This is also true of the verse that says,

Do you not know that to God belongs the kingdom  
of the heavens and the earth and that you have no  
sovereign helper besides God? (2:107)

According to 'Allamah Tabataba'i, the thing that comes into man's disposal is his property. However, if the property of people is at the disposal of someone else, then he is the owner of the property of people. This is what is called *mulk* or 'kingdom'. Therefore, *mulk* is a reference to the ownership of the property of the people. God is the owner of the human being and that which the human being owns (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 3, p. 253). [So, the *mulk* belongs to Him.]

In 'Allamah Tabataba'i's opinion, the foundation of God's ownership of the entirety of existence goes back to His absolute Lordship. Since God has absolute Lordship over all beings, He also owns all beings. All beings depend on His sacred Essence and He is their creator and the object of worship. Everything that can be called a 'thing' depends on Him, essentially needs Him and therefore does not possess any independence at all (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 3, p. 244). In conclusion, the message of these noble verses is that everything in the world and the afterlife, on the earth and in the sky and between them, regardless of whether it is immaterial or material, belongs to God and that nothing in any realm except God really owns anything.

One of the distinctions of the ownership of God is that He is the owner of the property of all. Meaning, if someone possesses some property – such as a human being that owns wealth, a home, his limbs and body parts – God owns all of this property and in reality, the conventional property of a person also goes back to God. Therefore, the expansiveness of the power of the Truth – just like His other existential

perfections – is so great that it includes all things and no being falls outside of it. It is for this reason that one of the important ordinances and teachings of the Qur’an is to ‘say: “I do not own for myself anything that might harm or benefit me”’ (10:49), and ‘I do not own anything from God to your benefit’ (60:4). The difference between the ownership of God and that of others is that the first is real while the second is [philosophically] metaphorical. The late ‘Allamah Tabataba’i says the following [in this regard]:

God is the owner of everything that belongs to the servants and He encompasses all of their dimensions. Also, the servants [of God] do not have any independence for themselves. Their essences are not independent nor are the things that follow their essences – such as their qualities or actions or other things that are related to them in some way such as their wives, children, wealth, status, etc. So, whatever they have – regardless of whether they are things that they really have such as their lives, bodies, ears, eyes, acts, effects or they are things that they come to possess due to social convention such as their wives, children, wealth, etc. – they have by the permission of the true owner, i.e. God. Meaning, it is God that has established this connection between them and their possessions. If He did not want to, He would not have. (Tabataba’i 1366 SH: vol. 2, p. 40)

One of the subtle meanings contained within the meaning of the divine ownership is the idea that God interferes in affairs. This concept is one of the necessary corollaries of the ownership of God. This is because divine comprehensiveness is not limited by anything and the independence of the servants in their actions is meaningless. It is divine permission that grants a being such as man the ownership of things

such as eating, going, speaking and the like. He is the one who has given man the blessing of ownership and He can take it back whenever He wants. It is for this reason that man has no independence. Therefore:

The essence of man and all of the necessary qualities of his existence, i.e. his faculties and actions, depend on God. This is the God that is his creator, the one who granted him existence, the one upon which everything relies in its generation and subsistence and which nothing is independent of. And, the true owner of his existence, faculties and actions is God, who can interfere in them as He wishes. And, in the face of His will, man cannot will anything on his own. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 1, p. 498)

God has not created anything but for the felicity of man. At the same time, He is free of the need of the obedience and worship of men and all of the beings, from the beginning of time till the end. At the same time, He made worship the goal of creation so that all things may attain the highest stations of proximity to God. So, how can man claim to own anything, assume that God owes him something, that he has a right over God and that it is necessary for God to be kind to him and answer his prayers, remove calamities from him, to secure his felicity, forgive his sins, and so on?

Such assumptions stem from self-love, the slavery to one's desires and selfishness. According to 'Allamah Tabataba'i, if Satan had not become enslaved to his lower self and had not limited his vision to the four walls of his own existence, he would not have seen himself as being independent [of God]. Rather, he would have witnessed the object of worship above him who sustained him and every other being. Also, he would have considered his own existence to be lower than His and would not have found any trace of independence in himself. So, he

would have obeyed the order of his Lord and would have willingly followed His commands. In brief, he would have never considered himself better than Adam (A) (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 8, p. 32). In the noble tradition of the Night Ascension, the following has been mentioned:

God said the following to His Apostle (S): 'If a servant puts My wish before his own and seeks My good-pleasure and understands Me to be great and realizes that I oversee him in all conditions, then I will fill his heart with love for Me so that his heart will completely be oriented towards Me and his heart will be empty of the [love of the] world. And, I will make him preoccupied with the afterlife. Also, I will bless him with blessings, as I do My other friends and I will open his ears and heart so that he will witness reality and My greatness and awesomeness.' (Daylami 1376 SH: vol. 1, p. 519)

'Allamah has an extremely subtle and at the same time, formidable explanation regarding this:

The obligation to follow God's commands stems from the fact that the command is His command, not from the fact that following this command is to the benefit of the servant or because it contains some good in it such that the problem of the obligation to follow the divine commands might revolve around the benefits [of this obedience] and the dimensions of goodness [in it]. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 8, p. 33)

The 'Straight Path' that terminates at the attainment of the good pleasure of God is nothing but the servitude to He who is free from all defect. The servant who submits to his God and who does not desire

anything other than that which God desires will not have any goal other than the performance of the demands of his servitude. Naturally, he will not feel that he deserves any reward such that he might complain or expect something from his Creator. The subtlety of this lies in the fact that when the servant makes his desire the desire of his Creator and completely submits to Him, then God, who is the Master of the Universe, will take up the responsibility of fulfilling the desires of His servant and will answer them.

## **2. The intention and will of God**

'Allamah Tabataba'i is of the opinion that the divine intention is an attribute that falls outside of the Essence of God. He says:

God is not attributed with intention and will in the same way that He is attributed with His essential attributes, such as knowledge and power. The attributes that are the divine intention and will are attributes of action of God and are abstracted from His action. Therefore, when we say that God 'intends' to do something this means that if He does such an action, then He did it with the knowledge that it was beneficial and with the knowledge that the benefit of doing it was more than the benefit of not doing it. Or, it means that He prepared the tools for its performance with the knowledge of their suitability [with respect to the performance of the action].  
(Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 14, p. 540)

The realm of existence is the place of action and affection and if we take a cursory glance at the world around us, we will see phenomena whose generation was affected by a cause or causes. When the Qur'an draws our attention to one of the lofty teachings of God, it does not want to deny the relation of an action to its agent or to negate the role

of other causes and the mediums between Him and an effect. Actually, it is God who created these mediums. Rather, the aforementioned verse denies the claim to independence that a being, especially man, who is proud of his free-will, may make. The Qur'an considers everything in the realm of existence – regardless of whether it is an essence or the effect of the essence – to be the property of God, who can interfere in His property as He wishes. He can pass any law He wants regarding it and no one can deny it. Fundamentally speaking, no one other than God owns anything unless God allows him to and unless God gives him the power to own it. Aside from this, after granting him ownership, He is still the true owner of the thing and He still has power over it. His granting of ownership is not like ours. When we grant ownership [of something] to someone else, then we are no longer owners of that thing. 'Allamah is of the opinion that each of the causes in the realm of existence is not essentially a cause; rather, it is God who has given it the power to do a certain action. So, when it manifests an effect, we can understand that God does not want other than it (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 13, p. 457).

The verses of the Qur'an say that every action that stems from some agent depends upon the permission of God: 'No soul can believe unless God gives it the permission to' (10:100); 'No calamity befalls you unless it is by the permission of God' (64:11); 'We did not send an apostle but that he should be obeyed by the permission of God' (4:64); 'The good earth brings out vegetation by the permission of God' (3:58). The 'permission of God' is actually God's removing the obstacles that stand in the way of the performance of the action. The person who has submitted to his God should not consider himself an independent agent with respect to an act. He should realize that the occurrence of every action is conditioned to the desire of God. Such a belief is the manifestation of the quality of servitude.

A point that is very important in spiritual wayfaring is that in the realm of servitude, it is man's responsibility to make an effort to achieve his goals. However, in order to achieve it, God must desire that his efforts come to fruition. Also, God should remove the obstacles that stand in the way of the fulfillment of his efforts so that a person's effort and the affection of a cause may work in the external world. The Qur'an says: 'Man will have nothing but what he strives for' (53:39). Man has the responsibility to work hard towards the achievement of his goals. However, it is not true that every effort [he makes] will necessarily attain the goal towards which it is directed. In all of its teachings, the spring of all monotheistic wisdom that is the Qur'an draws the attention of men to the sovereignty and greatness of the unity of God so that they may see the one absolute power and will [that rules over the universe]. This power is such that if it wills something, nothing can will otherwise. It is for this reason that in the face of the divine will, man can do nothing and his will is not effective. The Qur'an says: 'Your God creates what He wants and they have no choice in the matter' (28:68). The late 'Allamah says the following in his commentary on the Qur'an:

This verse does not want to deny the relation between an action and its agent; rather, the thing that it denies is someone's claiming something for himself or for something else or that someone claims independence in an action and that he claims that he is not in need of the permission of God [in that action]. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 16, p. 460)

He also says:

All of the beings of this world fall under the perfect will of the Truth and they do not have any independence in any action. In their existence,

perfection, movements, stillness, intention, power and the other dimensions of their being, all of them are dependent [upon God]; rather, they are sheer dependency and completely poor. (Tabataba'i 1371 SH: p. 550)

In any case, when a person becomes aware of his poverty, then he will realize that he is not the independent agent of any act and he will not surmise that he is free of his Creator. In this case, he will completely submit to his Lord and will not trust in anyone other than Him. So, he will say that his profits, losses, honor, abasement, power and weakness are all from his God. Such a person, with such a belief, comes to possess a special type of spiritual peace. This peace is the necessary result of such a faith. In truth, this is nothing but the true peace, which God sends down into the hearts of the believing servants.

### **3. Divine sovereignty**

'Allamah Tabataba'i defines divine sovereignty as divine ownership. He is of the belief that divine ownership is the same as divine sovereignty, by means of which God takes the responsibility of the affairs of His servant (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 19, p. 639). When commentating on the following verse of the Qur'an: 'At that time the sovereignty will belong solely to God, the Truth. He is the best of those who reward and the best in the end' (18:44), he says the following:

When the causes of deliverance are destroyed and no longer work and the incapacity of these causes is manifested, the person who previously thought he was independent of God and did not need Him will realize that all of man's affairs as well as the affairs of every other being belong to Him and that the regulation of these affairs belongs to God. This is because He is the only one who truly deserves to be worshiped. And it is



the one who truly deserves to be worshipped that regulates and effects things and whose regulation is based on the truth. So all of the apparent causes that the misguided human being assumed were the partners of God in the regulation of affairs are essentially false and they do not have power over any effect. They only possess the power to effect and manifest that which God has given them the permission to and which He has made them the owner of. They do not possess anything but the word 'independent,' the reality of which they assume they possess. Therefore, essentially, every cause is false, and it is true by means of God. And, God is essentially true, independent and self-sufficient. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 13, p. 538)

The message of the divine sovereignty is the expression of the incapacity and poverty of man and the power and greatness of the divine. It is for this reason that the true believer places the control of his beliefs, ethical traits and actions in the hands of God and, reciprocally, God places him under the shadow of His love, assistance and help.

#### **4. Divine guidance**

According to 'Allamah Tabataba'i, divine guidance is a reference to:

taking a being to its goal and that which it desires. This object of desire is the goal for which that being was created. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 14, p. 253)

There are two types of guidance. In one, the path is shown. The goal of such guidance is to show the path. The verse, 'Verily We guided him to the path. He may be thankful or ungrateful' (76:3), points to this type of guidance. The other type of guidance occurs when the being is practically taken to the object of desire. This occurs when the person is

taken by the hand and led to the goal. This type of guidance is pointed to in the verse: 'If We wanted, We would have elevated him by it. However, he chose to cling to the earth and follow his desires' (7:176). The following verse also points to it: 'So, if God wants to guide someone, He will expand his breast for Islam' (6:125). According to 'Allamah Tabataba'i, at the time of this second type of guidance, a special light is cast into the heart. With this light, the person becomes ready to accept religious concepts and truths. With this condition, the person realizes what [spiritual things] he should place within his being and what he should not (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 7, p. 529).

When a person enjoys this guidance, then the path that he is on will not be subject to variation. This is because there is no variation or distinction in monotheism. The divine unity is one reality in which there is not even a trace of differentiation. In the words of 'Allamah Tabataba'i, the reason that the prophets did not differ amongst themselves is that they were on the path of divine monotheism. This is because all of the divine teachings and religions seek out one common goal and this is nothing but pure monotheism (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 7, p. 530).

The Qur'an says that nothing has the ability to guide other than the Truth. So, the existential perfection that is 'being a guide' is limited to God in the eyes of the Qur'an. It says: 'Verily, upon Us is guidance' (92:12). It also says the following: 'And, God speaks the truth and He is the one who guides to the path' (33:4). Also, God says the following when addressing His Prophet: 'Surely, you do not guide the one you love; rather, it is God who guides whom He wants to' (28:56). It is for this reason that guidance belongs solely to God, regardless of whether it is the guidance that is the showing of the path or the guidance that is the leading to the goal. God is essentially the guide of creation.

However, God has given His prophets the permission to guide others. Nevertheless, they are not independent in this act – just as no agent is independent in its act. The act of guidance is the same as other acts. 'Allamah says that there is a difference between the guidance that is the showing of the path and the guidance that is leading to the goal. He says the following in this regard:

The difference between the guidance that is showing the path and the guidance that is leading to the goal is that the first guidance is the direct act of the prophets, their successors and the other guides. However, the effectiveness of such a guide depends on the permission of God. However, because the second type of guidance is an instance of creation, it is directly the act of God. Of course, the causes that fall between Him and His creation in this case and in all cases of creation are mediums and they play a role in this. Therefore, this guidance can also secondarily be related to someone other than God. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 20, p. 707)

He understands the guidance that means the leading to the goal to be an instance of creation by God. This occurs after belief and good action, which a believer acquires after following the divine law. In other words, when a person follows the divine guidance and submits to the divine law, then God rewards the person by guiding him in a special manner: 'If someone performs suitable actions, regardless of whether he is a man or a woman, and he is a believer, then We will revive him with a good life and We will grant them their reward, which is greater than what they used to do' (16:97).

Since God is the owner of all aspects of His servants, He comprehends all of their dimensions, including their guidance. And, the servants are

not independent of Him in any way. It is for this reason that if God wants to guide one of His servants, then nothing can prevent this. Also, if He turns away from one of His servants and leaves him to himself, then he will be attacked by the Devil, regardless of who he is [and in this case, nothing can save him]. The servant should use the will that God has granted him to seek the truth and to perform that which God wants him to. He should not desire anything but the acquisition of the good pleasure of God. Also, he should believe that all of the beings essentially depend on God and that nothing in the realm of existence is primary other than Him. Unfortunately however, the infatuation with other causes and means has misguided the vision of man and prevented it from witnessing the sacred realm of light.

Therefore, the monotheist who possesses the quality of essential impoverishment and the eye of whose heart witnesses his essential impoverishment does not relate any action, attribute or existence to himself or anyone else if it is not accompanied with the clause that it is 'by the power and strength of God.'

## 5. The Divine Sustenance

'Allamah Tabataba'i says the following regarding the meaning of sustenance:

Everything that man receives and which he benefits from is called 'sustenance,' even if it is not food – such as position, station, beauty, knowledge and the like. (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 3, p. 256)

According to the divine teachings of the Qur'an, 'sustenance' is one of the functions of God's Lordship. He increases or decreases this when He feels it is wise and to the benefit of the servant. However, out of our own ignorance, we relate sustenance to others. It is the responsibility of

the servants to seek out sustenance and they should not stop using secondary causes and means. This is because our world is a world in which these secondary causes and means have been placed [by God]. So, forgoing these mediums of grace is tantamount to exiting the servitude to God and is contrary to the wish of the Creator. However, the important point is that the attention of the monotheist's heart should be directed to God and he should view the other causes as being of secondary importance. It is for this reason that the believing human being does not stop seeking out his sustenance. However, inside, he knows everything is from Him and realizes that they fall under His absolute power. So, he does not think that his efforts are the complete cause of the acquisition of sustenance.

'Allamah Tabataba'i is of the opinion that the expansion and contraction of sustenance do not occur by chance. At the same time, they does not occur simply because of the efforts of the servant. Rather, there is an absolute power that stands above all of the causes of sustenance and that controls all of the mediums of sustenance. These secondary causes are not effective without His permission and unless He deems them prudent (Tabataba'i 1366: vol. 1, p. 437). The Qur'an says: 'Do they not know that God increases sustenance for the one He wants to [increase sustenance for] and decreases [the sustenance of the one He wants to decrease the sustenance for]?' (39:52) 'Allamah Tabataba'i is of the opinion that the phrase 'for one He wants to' implies that the 'desire' that man brags of and the experience and effort that he claims are not effective in the least [in the acquisition of sustenance]. Thus, that which occurs in the world does not occur by chance, nor does it occur simply by the effort of man. It is for this reason that the system of this world occurs by means of the desire of the One who regulates this system. Meaning, it occurs by means of God (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 1, p. 437). The revelatory message of this noble

and important matter is that man must understand his own incapacity and weakness and that his soul must accept the idea that: 'Surely it is God who is the sustainer, the possessor of noble power' (51:58).

'Allamah Tabataba'i is of the belief that sustenance is not in the hands of man. This is because it [i.e. sustenance] is the difference of individuals in what they possess and do not possess, their health, children and other things that are considered their sustenance. This is while every person that you take into consideration wants to possess the largest amount of sustenance. He wants to have more than others can even imagine. Nevertheless, no one ever gets such a wish. From here we can understand that sustenance is not in the hands of man. This is because if this was true, then no one would be poor and no one would need nourishment; rather, no two individuals would be different in the sustenance they had. So, the difference in the sustenance of individuals that we see is the clearest proof that the sustenance of this world is divided amongst the creatures by the will of God, not the desire of man. Aside from this, the intention and action of man with respect to the acquisition of sustenance is only one out of hundreds of its conditions. The rest of these conditions are not in man's hands. Now, the sustenance that man desires is only acquired when all of these conditions and causes are prepared. The coming together of these conditions is in the hands of God, at whom all of the causes terminate (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 18, p. 157).

In conclusion, God is the owner of all things. He does not own things from one point of view but lack them from one or two other points of view; rather, He owns them from all points of view. And, nothing falls outside of His sovereignty and ownership. All of the affairs of people – regardless of whether these affairs are related to the worldly life of human beings (such as their sustenance, position, station, etc.) or they

are related to their afterlife (such as the deliverance from the fire of Hell, eternal felicity, etc.) are in the hands of God and He can interfere in these affairs as He wants to. In fact, there is nothing that is truly 'other' than Him such that it might want to interfere in the affairs of this world without His permission.

Yes, the religion of Islam is founded on monotheism and the introduction of God. This goal is attained by means of the realization of the impoverishment and incapacity of the servant. It is for this reason that it can be claimed with certainty that all of the divine teachings possess two salient features. The first is the realization of the impoverishment, weakness and incapacity of the human being and the second is the knowledge of the divine unity. Now, the more the first feature increases, the more the knowledge of monotheism will increase.

It is necessary for a fundamental change to occur in the principle beliefs of the human being and he must become acquainted with the intensity of his poverty and dependency [on God]. He should realize that his existence is completely poor and weak and that no action stems from him or anyone else unless it is by the permission, power and strength of God. So, unless God deems it, no intention will be fulfilled in the external world. Behind every phenomenon, He has made an intention and there is wisdom and a will hidden in it. Every hit that the body of the faith and guidance of a human being takes – from the first evil deed that the Devil did till the last evil deed that a man or jinn will perform – stems from him viewing himself as independent. God desires that man have the ability to intend. Nevertheless, the only thing that will take place is that which God has intended.

It is important to remember that the thing that will occur is the thing that God has intended to occur. However, this does not mean that God

will be satisfied by it. All of the divine prophets – who were the ones who implemented God’s commands and prohibitions – strove to purify man, establish justice and help man achieve perfection and his real felicity. However, apparently, these goals were not accomplished as they should have been. The servitude to God was not manifested everywhere and the desire to obey God’s commands did not always fall into the hearts of men. God was never pleased with the killing of the most valuable of human beings, i.e. the prophets, their successors and the righteous servants of the Truth – and He will never be happy at this act. It is for this reason that everything that exists is by means of God’s intention but this does not mean that He is pleased at it. The reappearance of the Saviour at the end of time and the rectification of the life of men is a proof for this.

In any case, the practical conduct of man in his spiritual wayfaring to God is to pay attention to the essential self-sufficiency of God and the intensity of his poverty and dependency [on God] in all of the dimensions of his being. If such a fundamental outlook comes about in man’s actions, then he will never exit the path of pure monotheism.

The Commander of the Faithful (A) asked the following from the person who was debating the divine intention: ‘O servant of God! Has God created you for that which He wanted or for that which you wanted?’ He replied: ‘[He created me] for that which He wanted.’ Imam ‘Ali (A) said: ‘When He makes you sick, does He want this to happen or do you?’ He replied: ‘[This occurs] when He wants it to happen.’ Then he (A) said: ‘When you recover, does He intend this or do you?’ He again replied: ‘It happens when He wants it to happen.’ Then he (A) asked: ‘When He takes you to Heaven, does He do it because He wants to or because you want to?’ The man replied: ‘It is because He wants to.’ Then Imam ‘Ali (A) said: ‘I swear to God! If you had given any



answer other than this, I would have struck the limb in which your eyes are located [i.e. your head] with a sword!' (Tabataba'i 1366 SH: vol. 14, p. 539)

If God intends to perform an act or to forgo an act, then man cannot do anything about it. The Qur'an says: 'When God and His Prophet (S) have passed a judgment regarding something, then the believer does not have any choice in the matter' (33:36). It is for this reason that man's will is ineffective in the face of the religious commands and prohibitions of God as well as the existential and cosmological will of God. In the words of 'Allamah Tabataba'i, according to the verse, 'and your Lord creates what He wants and chooses [what He wants],' God is absolutely free [to do what He wants] (Tabataba'i 1366: vol. 16, p. 101).

The servitude of a servant is not complete until he becomes a pure servant of God and does not do anything but that which his Master wants him to do. Therefore, if the Truth desires that man uses the tools [that He has placed at his disposal] to attain his goals, then the servitude to God necessitates that he uses those tools. Also, if God intends that the servant understands that the occurrence of every event is conditioned by the will of God, then this should happen. Fundamentally speaking, all of existence is the place of the manifestation of the servitude of man.

When man pays due attention to the greatness and magnitude of the station of Lordship, he will become more acquainted with the intensity of his own poverty and dependency [on God]. And, if he attains in his spiritual wayfaring the highest spiritual stations, then he will know that it is not something to brag about. This is because man is essentially poor and does not possess anything that he might brag about. So, if on the path of servitude, some should manifest some miracles or see some

mystic visions and due to this make some unwarranted claims, then this stems from the fact that they have not realized the depths of their essential poverty. Qualities such as pride, haughtiness and envy, which are qualities that destroy the soul spiritually and endanger the felicity of man, all stem from the soul that claims something for itself and thinks that it owns something.

There is nothing that stands in contrast to any of the existential perfections of God, who is absolutely independent of all things. Nothing opposes these nor is anything similar to them. It is for this reason that every instance of perfection that everything possesses is simply a ray from the light of the existence of the Truth that has shined upon it. Without deserving it, the grace of God has encompassed him.

This way of looking at the divine unity plays a fundamental role in the actions of man and to an extent, it brings man closer to monotheism. It also makes man acquainted with the subtlety of monotheism, from which all of the teachings and rules of Islam branch out. This is the view of the saints, who do not believe that anything other than God possesses any type of independence in its act and whose attention is always directed towards the greatness of the Truth and their own poverty and who know that their greatest wealth is nothing but this poverty. How great has the poet Hafiz sung the following verse!

Give me the wealth of poverty, O God! Since this grace  
is the cause of my nobility and strength!

## **Conclusion**

‘Allamah Tabataba’i was one of the students who had been trained in the school of monotheism of the divine sage, Sayyid ‘Ali Qadi. When commenting on the verses of the Qur’an in some places, using the same special monotheistic outlook, he draws attention to one of the most

fundamental of the divine concepts, i.e. 'the intuition of the essential poverty.' In line with the teachings of the Qur'an, he considers everything in the realm of existence – regardless of whether it is an essence or an effect of that essence – to be the property of God. This is the same God that can interfere in His property as He so desires and comprehends and owns everything. In the face of the absolute ownership and power of God, man does not possess anything such that he might oppose God in His sovereignty. He cannot use his intelligence, which is also the property of God, to think of a way to reject the command and will of God. Therefore, God is the absolute owner and is the only one truly free.

The reality of the matter is that God is absolutely free, both at the level of law-making and the level of creation. In relation to God and the command and prohibition that He has religiously declared as well as that which He intends to create, man has no freedom or will. So, everything that takes place in the realm of existence takes place through the will of God. Thus, if God does not give permission, nothing will take place. How is it possible for something to disobey the will of God and to follow someone else when there is really no one 'else' other than God to whom this thing can be related?

The natural causes that exist in the realm of existence are not causes that are parallel to the Truth; rather, God encompasses all of these causes and each cause obtains its quality of being a cause from Him. So, it does not possess any independence in this regard. There is only one true Owner, will, intention and sovereignty that rules over the world. All of the guidance, sustenance, honour, and so on that exists in this world is the manifestation and necessary effect of His Lordship.

This belief has a profound effect upon the outlook and actions of a human being and this effect is felt the most when man realizes his incapacity and poverty and sees that he is sheer impoverishment and that this poverty has engulfed his entire being. Rather, this occurs when he sees that his entire being is a copula and relation [to God]. It is at this time that the unity of God will manifest itself to him. Then, he will attain the unity of God's actions, attributes and His essence and the goal of his humanity, which is his turning into a monotheist, will come about.

By witnessing his complete poverty, man will realize that there is no essence, attribute or action that does not belong to God. This is the same intuition of essential impoverishment that manifests the knowledge of monotheism when it is acquired and fills the heart of the monotheist with the love of God's greatness. This is true to the extent that nothing rules the heart of such a person other than the love of God and no trace of polytheism or love of other than God can be found in it. This is the goal of humanity, creation and the goal of the invitation of the prophets and their successors. It is also the reason for the existence of all of the worlds.

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