

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

CONTENTS

<i>Islamic viewpoint.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>God is known through Divine Revelation.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>God is known through His Attributes.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>The Attributes of God cannot be encompassed and must be believed in</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Secular viewpoints.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>God exists only in the imagination.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Scientific evidence proves that God does not exist</i>	<i>7</i>

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

ISLAMIC VIEWPOINT

GOD IS KNOWN THROUGH DIVINE REVELATION

Muslims say that God can be known because the Qur'an is the Word of God:

تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

The revelation of the Book [this Qur'an] is from Allah [swt], the All-Mighty, the All-Wise.¹

Therefore, Muslims know that God speaks.

GOD IS KNOWN THROUGH HIS ATTRIBUTES

The Qur'an, in turn, reveals what God is like, for example,

GOD IS UNCAUSED

لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ﴿٢٠﴾

He [Allah (swt)] begets not, nor was He begotten.²

GOD IS THE CREATOR

هُوَ اللَّهُ الْخَلِيقُ الْبَارِئُ الْمُصَوِّرُ لَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ﴿٢١﴾

وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٢﴾

*He is Allah, **the Creator**, the Inventor of all things, the Bestower of forms. To Him belong the Best Names. All that is in the heavens and the earth glorify Him. And He is the All-Mighty, the All-Wise.³*

GOD IS ONE

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ﴿١﴾

*Say [O Muhammad (saws)], "He is Allah, **[the] One**."⁴*

¹ Surah Al-Jathiyah Chapter 45 Verse 2 ; Al-Ahqaf Chapter 46 Verse 2

² Surah Al-Ikhlâs Chapter 112 Verse 3

³ Surah Al-Hashr Chapter 59 Verse 24

⁴ Surah Al-Ikhlâs Chapter 112 Verse 1

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

GOD IS SELF-SUFFICIENT

﴿يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ أَنْتُمْ الْفُقَرَاءُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ﴾

O mankind, you are those in need of God, while God is **Free of need**, the Praiseworthy.⁵

GOD IS TRANSCENDANT

سَبِّحْ اسْمَ رَبِّكَ الْأَعْلَى

Glorify the Name of your Lord, **the Most High**.⁶

GOD IS NOT IMMANENT AND IS IMMATERIAL

﴿وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَنْ يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَآيِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ حَكِيمٍ﴾

It is not given to any human being that Allah should speak to him unless by Revelation or from behind a veil or He sends a Messenger to reveal what He wills by His Leave. Verily He is Most High, Most Wise.⁷

﴿فَاطِرُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَمِنَ الْأَنْعَامِ أَزْوَاجًا يَذَرُوكُمْ فِيهِ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ﴾

The Creator of the heavens and the earth. He has made for You mates from yourselves and for the cattle mates. By this means He creates you. **There is nothing like Him**, and He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer.⁸

GOD HAS AN INDEPENDENT WILL

﴿إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُ إِذَا أَرَادَ شَيْئًا أَنْ يَقُولَ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ﴾

Verily His [God's] Command, **when He intends a thing**, is only that He says to it "Be!" – and it is.⁹

⁵ SIT Surah Fatir Chapter 35 Verse 15

⁶ Surah Al-A'la Chapter 87 Verse 1

⁷ Surah Ash-Shura Chapter 42 Verse 51

⁸ Surah Ash-Shura Chapter 42 Verse 11

⁹ Surah Ya-Sin Chapter 36 Verse 82

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

هُوَ الَّذِي يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ فَإِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ ﴿١٨﴾

It is He Who gives life and causes death. **And when He decides upon a thing** He says to it only, "Be!" – and it is.¹⁰

مَا كَانَ لِلَّهِ أَنْ يَتَّخِذَ مِنْ وَلَدٍ سُبْحَنَهُ ۚ إِذَا قَضَىٰ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ ﴿٣٥﴾

It befits not Allah [swt] that He should beget a son. Glorified is He. **When He decrees a thing**, He only says to it, "Be!" – and it is.¹¹

GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَلَمْ يَعْ يَخْلُقْهُنَّ بِقَدْرِ عَلَىٰ أَنْ تُحْيِيَ
الْمَوْتَىٰ بَلَىٰ إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

Do they not see that Allah [swt] Who created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation is Able to give life to the dead? Yes, He surely is **Able to do all things**.¹²

GOD IS ALL-KNOWING

يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تُسِرُّونَ وَمَا تُعْلِنُونَ ۚ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ ﴿٤١﴾

He knows what is in the heavens and on earth and He knows what you conceal and what you reveal. And Allah [swt] is the **All-Knower** of what is in the breasts [of men].¹³

¹⁰ Surah Ghafir Chapter 40 Verse 68

¹¹ Surah Maryam Chapter 19 Verse 35

¹² Surah Al-Ahqaf Chapter 46 Verse 33

¹³ Surah At-Taghabun Chapter 64 Verse 11

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

GOD IS PERSONAL

وَإِذْ قَالَ اللَّهُ يٰعِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ ءَأَنْتَ قُلْتَ لِلنَّاسِ اتَّخِذُونِي وَأُمِّي إِلَهَيْنِ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ ۖ قَالَ
سُبْحٰنَكَ مَا يَكُونُ لِيْ أَنْ أَقُولَ مَا لَيْسَ لِيْ بِحَقِّ ۖ إِن كُنتُ قُلْتُهُ فَقَدْ عَلِمْتَهُ ۚ تَعَلَّمْ مَا فِي نَفْسِي
وَلَا أَعْلَمُ مَا فِي نَفْسِكَ ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ عَلَّمُ الْغُيُوبِ ﴿١١٦﴾

And [remember] when Allah [swt] will say, 'O 'Isa [Prophet Jesus (as)], son of Maryam [Mary]! Did you say unto men, 'Worship me and my mother as two gods besides Allah [swt]?' He will say, "Glory is to You! It was not for me to say what I had no right[to say]. Had I said such a thing, You would surely have known it. You know what is in my inner self **though I do not know what is in Yours**; truly You, only You, are the All-Knower of all that is hidden."¹⁴

GOD IS ETERNAL

اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ ۚ لَا تَأْخُذُهُ سِنَّةٌ وَلَا نَوْمٌ ۚ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمٰوٰتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ
مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ ۚ يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ ۖ وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ
بِشَيْءٍ مِّنْ عِلْمِهِ إِلَّا بِمَا شَاءَ ۚ وَسِعَ كُرْسِيُّهُ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْأَرْضَ ۖ وَلَا يَئُودُهُ حِفْظُهُمَا ۚ وَهُوَ
الْعَلِيُّ الْعَظِيمُ ﴿٢٥٥﴾

Allah [swt]! None has the right to be worshipped, but He, **the Ever-Living**, the One Who sustains and protects all that exists. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who is he that can intercede with Him except with His Permission? He knows what happens to them in this world and what will happen to them in the Hereafter. And they will never compass anything of His Knowledge except that which He wills. His footstool extends over the heavens and the earth and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them. And He is the Most High, the Most Great.¹⁵

¹⁴ Surah Al-Ma'idah Chapter 5 Verse 116

¹⁵ Surah Al-Baqarah Chapter 2 Verse 255

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD CANNOT BE ENCOMPASSED AND MUST BE BELIEVED IN

Although God can be known through His Attributes, His Attributes cannot be comprehended completely.

يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِهِ عِلْمًا ﴿١١﴾

He [Allah] knows what happens to them [His creatures] in this world and what will happen to them, **but they will never compass anything of His Knowledge.**¹⁶

It is not possible therefore to know **how** the Attributes of God are, because God is unlike His creation.

أَمْ تَقُولُونَ إِنَّ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطَ كَانُوا هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَىٰ ۚ قُلْ ءَأَنْتُمْ أَعْلَمُ أَمِ اللَّهُ ۚ وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ كَتَمَ شَهَادَةً عِنْدَهُ مِنَ اللَّهِ ۚ وَمَا اللَّهُ بِغَافِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Or say you that Ibrahim [Prophet Abraham I(as)], Ishma'il [Prophet Ishmael (as)], Ishaq [Prophet Isaac (as)], Ya'qub [Prophet Jacob (as)] and the offspring of the twelve sons of Ya'qub [as] were Jews or Christians? Say, **"Do you know better or does Allah?"** And who is more unjust than he who conceals the testimony he has from Allah? And Allah is not unaware of what you do.¹⁷

God therefore knows Himself better than any of His creation.

فَلَا تَضْرِبُوا لِلَّهِ الْأَمْثَالَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

So put not forward similarities for Allah [swt]. Truly Allah [swt] knows and you know not.¹⁸

God's Attributes must be affirmed without likening them to His creation, because God knows Himself and we do not and cannot. Therefore, the rational course of action, according to the Qur'an, is to believe in God as He has described Himself without interpreting away His Attributes from the apparent meaning which first springs to mind.

¹⁶ Surah Ta Ha Chapter 20 Verse 110

¹⁷ Surah Al-Baqarah Chapter 2 Verse 140

¹⁸ Surah An-Nahl Chapter 16 Verse 74

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

SECULAR VIEWPOINTS

GOD EXISTS ONLY IN THE IMAGINATION

It could be argued that God exists only in the imagination. If God exists only in the imagination, He does not exist in reality and therefore cannot be known. However, the entire external world could also exist only in the imagination as well.

Under this skeptical viewpoint, it is possible that we are all brains in a vat and that our sense perceptions of the external world are generated from electrical stimulations to our brains in vats. No one can prove that the external world exists in reality outside of our sense perception. So it is possible that the external world does not exist in reality independently of our sense perception. Therefore taking the same line of reasoning the external world cannot be known either.

If it is possible that everything we perceive could be in our imagination, God would still be in our imagination even if we could perceive Him. That we cannot perceive Him does not, therefore, prove that He does not exist any more than perceiving the external world proves that it exists, because it is possible that the external world exists only in our imagination and does not exist in reality outside of our sense perception.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE PROVES THAT GOD DOES NOT EXIST

It could be argued that scientific evidence such as the “Big Bang Theory,” the theory of evolution and the Higgs Boson “God particle” prove that God does not exist and therefore cannot be known.

“BIG BANG THEORY”

The “Big Bang Theory” or the accelerating inflationary big bang model is used in the cosmological causal argument for the existence of God to prove the premise that the universe began to exist.

While the “Big Bang Theory” explains the creation of the universe from a pre-existing singularity, but it does not account for the creation of the singularity.

THEORY OF EVOLUTION

The theory of evolution suggests that living organisms came from other pre-existing living organisms and are related by descent from common ancestors with the variations in living organisms due to changes in successive generations.

So it is said

- that mammals including human beings descended from shrew-like creatures that lived more than 150 million years ago;
- that mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes descended from aquatic worms that lived 600 million years ago;
- that all plants and animals descended from bacteria-like microorganisms that lived more than 3 billion years ago.

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

Again, while the theory of evolution explains the variety of living organisms by common ancestry whose lineage diverge through generations in time, it does not account for the creation of the bacteria-like microorganisms from which it is said all plants and animals descended.

HIGGS BOSON “GOD PARTICLE”

The Higgs boson or “God particle” is a particle of the Higgs field which permeates space. It is hypothesised that the elementary subatomic particles like electrons and photons acquired mass through interactions with the Higgs field when the universe cooled and became less energetic following the Big Bang. The recent discovery of the Higgs boson indicates the existence of this Higgs field.

Again, while the Higgs Boson “God particle” explains how matter was created with mass immediately following the Big Bang, it does not account for the creation of the pre-existing singularity from which the Higgs Boson “God particle” originated.

THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE

A scientific explanation requires a set of pre-existing laws operating on a set of initial conditions.

So for example, the scientific explanation for a boiling electric kettle may be stated as follows.

Water is placed inside an electrical kettle which is connected to an electrical source. Once connected, an electrical circuit is created in which the heating coil inside the kettle functions as a resistor. When the electrical current passes through the heating coil, there is an energy transfer which heats the heating coil. The heat energy from the heater coil is then transferred to the water by conduction.

The particles near the coil get more kinetic energy, so they start moving around faster and the water temperature rises. The water near the coil expands and becomes less dense. This hotter water rises above the denser cooler water. As the hotter water rises, it displaces the colder water out of the way making it sink towards the heater coil. The hot coil heat the cold water and so on creating convection currents which travel up round and down thereby circulating heat energy through the water until all the water is hot.

Eventually, continual heating gives the particles in the water enough energy to overcome their attraction to each other until big bubbles of gas form in the liquid which starts to boil at a temperature called the boiling point. Water particles near the surface escape the intermolecular attraction of the other particles in the water in a process called evaporation, into the free space between the water and the top of the kettle as gaseous steam.

As the fastest and hottest particles with the most kinetic energy evaporate as steam, the average speed and kinetic energy of the remaining particles decrease, the temperature decreases, and the liquid cools. However, heat energy is continually being transferred by conduction into the water which rises by convection until all the remaining water reaches boiling point and escapes as gaseous steam.

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

As the steam rises through the perforated barrier in the spout of the kettle, some of its kinetic energy is converted into sound energy as the gaseous particles escape through the solid mesh and outside into the air through the small spout of the kettle. So the kettle whistles as the steam escapes.

This scientific explanation requires a set of pre-existing laws which include:

- the law of conservation of energy which states that energy can only be transferred from one form or another;
- particle theory which states that matter is composed of particles which have more or less kinetic energy.

and a set of initial conditions which include:

- an electrical source;
- the location of the heater coil at the bottom of the kettle to allow the circulation of heat by convection – hot water rises so there can be no convection current below the heater coil;
- a roundish or squarish container of water to allow circulation of heat through the water most efficiently by convection;
- the existence of water in a kettle;
- a kettle with sufficient space to allow hot water molecules to escape intermolecular attraction from the other water particles below it.

Can there be a scientific explanation for a boiling kettle in the absence of an electrical source or the absence of the law of conservation of energy?

A personal explanation on the other hand requires only an agent with an independent will. In the case of a boiling electrical kettle, the personal explanation is that a person with an independent will placed water in an electrical kettle, plugged it into a socket and switched the kettle on.

أَفَرَأَيْتُمْ مَا تُمْنُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾ ءَأَنْتُمْ تَخْلُقُونَهُ أَمْ نَحْنُ الْخَالِقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Then tell Me [about] the semen that you emit. Is it you who create it or are We the Creator?¹⁹

So in a similar vein,

- Who, but God, could have created the pre-existing singularity required for the “Big Bang Theory”?
- Who, but God, could have created the pre-existing bacteria-like microorganisms required for the theory of evolution?
- Who, but God, could have created the pre-existing singularity from which Higgs Boson “God particle” originated?

¹⁹ Surah Al-Waqi'ah Chapter 56 Verses 58-59

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

Any scientific explanation will, therefore, be inadequate because it will always require a set of pre-existing laws operating on a set of initial conditions. There can indeed never be a scientific theory of everything which can explain the creation of something from nothing because nothing is the absence of anything, and that includes the absence of the very laws and initial conditions required for any scientific explanation.

Therefore, there can never be any scientific evidence that proves that God does not exist. God, on the other hand, can be the ultimate personal explanation for the very first set of pre-existing laws and initial conditions on which the very first scientific explanations are based. God is therefore beyond scientific explanation. While His general attributes may be deduced by rational enquiry they cannot be subjected to scientific enquiry.

This personal explanation for the pre-existing set of laws and initial conditions is the basis for the teleological argument for the existence of God.