

Contentment personified, Ishmael stood before me like a warm fire. The rain sodden door step on which he stood began to dry out, so intense was this man's satisfaction. Alternately I experienced all the warmth of a penguin's bottom before the onset of global warming. "God cannot have a form" he said "If God had a form He would be limited, and as we all know God is unlimited, so the obvious conclusion is, God has no form."

For a while I just stood there blinking. The energy to correct him was not immediately available, I was tired. So I simply yawned, nodded and muttered something like "whatever." Ishmael however was in his element, "Look" he said, his black beard glistening in the morning dew, his eyes darting like a symphony conductor's baton, "you have a form, yes, and you can only be in one place at one time, yes, which means you are limited, yes, so how can God who is unlimited have a form, yes."

The more I stared, the more his happiness increased. Even his family seemed to join in, children appeared intermittently, laughing, then disappearing into a warm kitchen. His elder daughter combing her hair in the hallway mirror glanced seductively, like Draupadi before her svayamvara. And finally his wife came gliding down the stairs like a yogini dipping into the Ganges as she made her way to the higher planets, such was the warmth his family was experiencing.

As molten lava makes its way to the mouth of a volcano, I could no longer contain my ego, words, thoughts clothed in various symbolic gestures began to form. The first one was juvenile,

quickly followed by infantile, and finally the mind rested on fetal. I decided that his philosophy, the crest jewel of the Ishmael household, was a kind of Fred Flintstone, fetal philosophy. Mother Sarasvati however had other ideas. The great goddess of learning sensing my dilemma provided the word which so encapsulated his amazing philosophy - kebab.

Srila Prabhupada wrote in his beloved Bhagavatam "only the meat eater cannot understand the message of Godhead." Now I sensed where Ishmael was coming from (the local kebab shop). "My dear Ishmael", I began, "the Lord is not a material being, so how can you observe material phenomena, come up with a conclusion and then automatically apply that conclusion to God, who is not material". "You say I have a form, which by the way is material, and then you say it can only be in one place at one time, which means it is limited, but then you go and spoil it all by applying this conclusion to God."

"Consider this, water is wet, salty and travels in waves, now does this mean we can apply this to fire? Should we also conclude that fire is wet, salty and travels in waves ? And the reason for this is that fire and water are two completely different things, so you cannot apply the conclusions from the observations of one to the other. In a similar way you may observe material phenomenon and come up with a conclusion, but can you automatically apply this conclusion to God who is not material.

Also, i can see, hear, speak, love, create and possess knowledge, but in every way my God given abilities are limited. God can also see, hear, speak, love, create and possess knowledge, but in every way they are unlimited. The reason for this is because I am limited everything in relation to me is limited, whereas because God is unlimited everything in relation to Him is unlimited. Now I have a form and in keeping with my limited nature it is limited, now by what line of reasoning are we to conclude that if the Supreme unlimited being had a form it would limit Him? How can anything limit the unlimited, it is surely a contradiction."

Ishmael's face no longer expressed the warm satisfaction it had previously held. The children, when they appeared, no longer had their heads stroked but were greeted by loud barks, and his stair gliding wife and seductive glancing daughter had closed the kitchen door.

Looking up at the sky I pointed towards the sun. Ishmael, his face bearing the countenance of an animal returning from a day out at the local halal slaughterhouse, followed suit. "Have you noticed, Ishmael, how the sun has a form, is in one place and yet pervades the universe with its sunshine. Is this not an example of something which has a form, is localised and yet all pervasive. Now I know this is not a perfect example, but then we are talking about the sun. In comparison with the universe the sun is less than atomic, in comparison with God it is not even worth mentioning. Now if something so comparatively mundane, trivial, whimsical, irrelevant and not worth mentioning can have a form, be localised and at the same time be all pervasive, cant God?"

By now everything had gone quiet in the Ishmael household and his doorstep was once again rain sodden. I shook his hand and departed wondering whether I had done the right thing. He was after all a pious man busy raising his family, in many ways I could see he had far more qualities than I had. What right did I have to throw verbal spanners in the mechanics of his faith. None probably. However, the philosophy I had just presented to Ishmael need not compromise his faith. In the Koran there is a verse which says: "He is manifest and He is unmanifest, He is the beginning and He is also the end." It is a verse which explains the nature of something which is unlimited. It contains everything, manifestation (form), non manifestation (no form), beginning and end. If Ishmael wants to believe in a God with no form, that's okay, because we know that this is an attribute of a Supreme unlimited being. And if we believe that God has a form that should also be no problem, because form is also an attribute of a Supreme unlimited being, and according to the ancient Vedic scriptures - the highest.

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