



ISLAM

THE ESSENTIALS

THE ISLAMIC FOUNDATION
United Kingdom - Kenya - Nigeria

Perspectives of Islam — 1.

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Islam: The Essentials

'Islam' is an Arabic word. It means the act of resignation to God. The root word is *SLM* pronounced *silm* which means peace from which comes the word *aslama* which means he submitted, he resigned himself. Al-Islam or Islam is the religion which brings peace to mankind when man commits himself to God and submits himself to His will. According to the Holy Book revealed to Muḥammad (peace and blessings of God be on him), this is the only true religion professed by all Prophets from Adam to Muḥammad, the Last Prophet. A 'Muslim' is one who resigns himself to God and thereby professes the faith of al-Islam. A Muslim therefore believes in all the Prophets and makes no distinction between one and the other. He also believes that God had sent His prophets to all corners of the earth to preach the same religion, that His message stopped coming after the last revelations received by the last Prophet Muḥammad (peace and blessings of God be on him), and that the message received by the last Prophet is the most comprehensive and the final form of God's message to Man.

FAITH, ACTION AND REALIZATION

In order to be a true 'Muslim' three things are necessary: Faith, Action according to that faith and the realization of one's relation to God as a result of action and obedience.

FAITH

Faith which is described in the *Qur'ān*, the Holy Book of Islām, as *īmān* consists in believing that Allah (God) alone is worthy of worship and that Muḥammad (peace be on him) is the Messenger of Allah, and in bearing witness to the above statement. This implies:

- (1) True existence is that of Allah alone; Man and the entire creation exist only because Allah wills them to exist.
- (2) As there cannot be two sources of creation, as Allah alone is the Creator, everything comes from Him and goes back to Him; hence the entire creation including Man is the manifestation of Allah's power and glory and hence of His qualities or attributes.

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- (3) The relation between Man and Allah is that of a servant and the Master. As Man owes his very existence to Allah, to worship anything else is to commit the gravest of sins.
- (4) The above three aspects of Faith in Allah are realized by Man only when he responds to the Message of Allah and this is possible when Man believes in Muḥammad (peace be on him) as the messenger of Allah.
- (5) As a messenger he is the last and the greatest, about whom the early messengers have predicted and who thus completes the process of revelation.
- (6) He is therefore the Perfect Ideal for Mankind, the perfect servant of Allah, and hence the most complete and the ideally balanced manifestation of the attributes of Allah.
- (7) To believe in him is to believe in all the other prophets of Allah.
- (8) To believe in him is also to believe that the *Qur'ān* contains all the revelations sent to mankind through him, that these revelations provide guidance to us and that we should worship Allah by following these revelations according to the method prescribed for us by Muḥammad (peace be on him) and hence in accordance with his sayings and practice, known as *Ḥadīth* or *Sunnah*.
- (9) To believe in him is also to believe in the carriers of this message, the angels, who are described in the *Qur'ān* as functionaries.

ACTION

Described in Arabic by the word *ʿamal*, is the manifestation in actuality how far we are true servants of God. As action needs rules and regulations according to which we organise our individual and social behaviour, the revelations and the actual physical embodiment of these revelations in the action of the Prophet (peace be on him) provide both the basis and the structure of the Law of human conduct, known as *Shari'ah*. Besides *īmān* (faith) which provides the central pillar that sustains the whole structure, the four other pillars in the four corners are: *Prayer (ṣalāt)*; *Fasting (ṣawm)*; *Charity (zakāt)*; *Pilgrimage (Ḥajj)*.

A Muslim has to pray five times a day, before sunrise, between mid-day and afternoon, in the afternoon, immediately after sunset and between the time when the twilight is over and just before dawn. It means he cannot be forgetful of his dependence of Allah and derives sustenance and new initiatives and strength through this remembrance.

He fasts for one lunar month in a year, every day from dawn till sunset, the month of Ramaḍān. Physically he does not eat, drink or smoke or have sexual intercourse. Spiritually he abstains from all evil thoughts, actions and sayings. In other words he tries to realize his true self by striving to realize within himself some aspects of the divine character.

Charity (*Zakāt*) implies that everything that he seems to possess belongs to Allah and therefore anyone in need has a share in it and he should willingly and gladly help individuals and society when they are in need. As mankind has never been free from some kind of need, an annual amount is prescribed out of one's income and savings.

Pilgrimage to Makka implies Man's temporary suspension of all worldly activities and his realization of himself as a naked soul in front of Allah alone. This also symbolises the unity of the Muslim *Ummah* and the oneness of Mankind.

All these four are intimately tied up with all other aspects of man's individual and social behaviour. By following them and thereby living a life of complete dedication to the Will of Allah, a man becomes a true Muslim.

A Muslim is one whose outlook on life is permeated with this consciousness. He is committed to the values of life given by the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah*. He tries to live according to the guidance given by God and His Prophet and he strives to promote the message of Islam through his word and actions. This striving is known as *Jihād* which means a striving and a struggle in the path of God. It consists in exerting one's self to the utmost in order to personally follow the teachings of Islam and to work for their establishment in society. *Jihād* has been described in the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah* as the natural corollary of these pillars of faith. Commitment to God involves commitment to sacrifice one's time, energy and wealth to promote the right cause. It may be necessary at times to give one's life in order to preserve Truth. *Jihād* implies readiness to give whatever one has, including his life, for the sake of Allah.

This striving in the path of Allah with *īmān* (faith) as the guiding light and the scheme of *'amal* (action) as the system and structure has the following implications:

- (1) Man is accountable to Allah for all that he does. Allah will judge him on the Last Day of Judgement and send him either to Heaven, a stage of existence which leads to further blessings, or to Hell, a stage of suffering through which God purifies human souls.
- (2) This implies that Man's life does not end with his death in this world. He has life after death.
- (3) Therefore all human action should be organised in such a manner that he may not suffer in life after death.
- (4) This organisation of action in this world implies the organisation of all facets of human existence, individual and collective, hence educational, economic, political and social. *Shari'ah* provides the guidelines, the rules of external conduct.
- (5) This means Man is free in his will, choice and action.

REALIZATION

Realization of man's relation to Allah is a spiritual aspect known in Arabic as *ihsān*, which Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) explained in the following way:

"You should worship Allah as if you are seeing him, for He sees you though you do not see Him." (Bukhārī and Muslim). It means that all action should be performed with Allah in the vision. If that is not possible, always one must realize that Allah is seeing him. This realization is regarded as the basis of true devotion. It signifies that man has identified his will with the Will of God and has brought it, at least as far as he is concerned, completely in tune with the Divine Will. Consequently, he begins to like what is liked by his Lord and to abhor what is disapproved by Him. Man, then, not only avoids evils which God does not like to be spread on earth, but uses all his energy to wipe them off the surface of the earth. Similarly he is not content merely with adorning himself with the virtues which God likes, but also engages himself in an unceasing struggle to propagate and establish them in the world. Man comes nearest to God by excelling in this process of identifying man's will with the Divine Will. This enables him to develop the divine spark within him and to illuminate his entire being with that. The most complete example of the realization is that of the Prophet (peace be on him). Through constant remembrance of Allah, through Man's Love of God and the Prophet, through obedience to the commandments of Allah and His Prophet (peace be on him), and through constant struggle to promote good and forbid evil, Man may attain nearness to Allah. Contact with and guidance from those who attain this nearness helps the rest of mankind to attain this nearness or to be alive in spirit and hence to perform individual and collective action not mechanically but with whole-hearted devotion, and for the sake of Allah alone. This realization is the basis of *Piety*. This piety is the source of *righteousness* which is regarded by Islam as the core of *just* action. Persons who, through *īmān*, *ʿamal* and *ihsān* become living symbols of truth represent the reform movement established by the Prophet (peace be upon him) to reconstruct human life and bring it in accord with Divine Guidance. Such persons constantly remind the rest of Mankind of the true significance of Man's submission to the Will of Allah. And a society which realises these values in its collective life would be the ideal society which Islam wants to establish for the ultimate welfare (*Falāḥ*) of Man.

MAN AS THE REPRESENTATIVE OF GOD ON EARTH

According to Islam, when the above three, faith, action and realization are in perfect harmony, Man manifests the fact that he is the vicegerent of God on Earth. Though Man derives everything from Allah, he is the most complete manifestation of the attributes of Allah and as such he is Allah's representative on Earth. The entire creation is potentially under his dominion. Therefore Islam does not set any limit to Man's knowledge, authority and power except the fundamental limit that they are all derived and hence Man is not self-sufficient. Allah may take away his power whenever He wishes. Islam, therefore, teaches the sanctity of human personality, confers equal rights on all without any distinction of colour, sex or language and subjects the highest and the humblest, the richest and the poorest, the king and the commoner to the sovereignty of Allah and at the same time gives Man the highest imagin-

able initiative to proceed in the path of self-realization, hence the wielding of God's authority on the Creation.

GOD, PROPHETHOOD, THE QUR'ÂN AND THE SUNNAH

Islam therefore enjoins Man to:

- (1) believe that God is One, Omniscient and Omnipresent; He begets not, nor is He begotten.
- (2) believe further that Man is the vicegerent of God on Earth and has freedom of choice;
- (3) believe also that as he has freedom of choice he may go astray and therefore needs guidance from time to time so that he may know how to realize his own true greatness and that is why God sent His messengers from Adam to Muḥammad (peace be on them) and completed this process during the life of Muḥammad (peace be on him);
- (4) act on this message which is preserved in purity without any adulteration in the *Qur'ân* which asks Man to follow the Prophet (peace be on him) as his supreme ideal;
- (5) know and act upon that ideal preserved in collection of sayings of the Prophet (peace be on him) and the reports of his actions – the *Sunnah* or the traditions of the Prophet.

ISLAM AND OTHER RELIGIONS

Islam does not deny Truth to other religions but says that later followers adulterated that Truth by their own inventions and that was why God sent Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) to purify God's religion. Each religion manifests some aspect of the same Truth, but the emphasis may differ according to the need of Man of that period or age or race. Islam is the religion for all and as it is the most comprehensive manifestation of that Truth, it provides a complete way and a perfect equilibrium.

The second fact about this relationship with other religions is the chronology stated in the *Qur'ân*. Islam is in the line of all religions whose Prophets belonged to the family of Abraham. The Judaic tradition that started with Abraham's son Ishāq (Isaac) came to an end with Christ who was the last Prophet in that family tree. Muḥammad (peace be on him) was the descendant of the other son of Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Ismā'īl (Ishmael). Prophets in other lines among the descendants of Adam have been hinted at but not referred to except Nūḥ (Noah) as examples in the *Qur'ân*. But, as the *Qur'ân* clearly states that there is not a single human habitation on the face of this earth where a Prophet had not emerged and where God had not sent His messenger to guide people, a Muslim cannot deny Truth to religions not belonging to this tradition. All that he can point out is the adulteration of that Truth, the mixing up of the Word of God and the word of man, its non-preservation in its original form.

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) was born in Makka in 570 A.C. He lived a pure and simple life and was respected by his people as an honest and truthful person. He frequently visited a cave, Hira, in Mount Nūr, at the outskirts of Makka, and stayed there for prayer and meditation. It was here that in his fortieth year he received his first revelation and direction to preach. He was severely persecuted by his people. When they were ready to kill him in Makka, He was ordered by God to migrate to Madīna where the first Muslim state was established. By the time he died, in 633 A.C., the whole of Arabia had accepted Islam, the Byzantine and the Persian Emperors, to whom he had sent the Message, had attacked and were repulsed by that state and a new wave of creative revolution had spread through Arabia and was beginning to spread far beyond it. During the first four Caliphs who were some of the most intimate companions of the Prophet and combined in themselves worldly knowledge and spiritual authority, the Byzantine and Persian empires were crushed and conquered and Islam gradually spread up to India and China in Asia, up to Morocco in Africa, and up to Spain and Sicily in Europe. Presently, there are 750 million Muslims in the world, some 550 million in 50 Muslim states or countries with a Muslim majority and around 200 million in the rest of the world. In Europe, there are presently between 25 to 30 million Muslims with significant Muslim presence in almost every European country, communist or non-communist.

In the past, Muslims have made significant contributions in every field of human culture and civilization. In the context of the cultural crisis of our own times, Islam offers an alternate basis for the development of human personality and the organisation of human culture and society.



The Islamic Foundation is an educational and research organisation devoted to make Islam a living reality in our age. For this purpose, it aims at improving human communication and developing a better understanding of Islam among all people of the world, Muslim and non-Muslim, so as to galvanise man to the message and ideal of One God and the unity of mankind, as brought by all the Prophets of God throughout the ages, last of whom was the Prophet Muhammad (blessings of Allah and peace be upon him). An important aspect of the Foundation's multifarious activities is the publication of literature on Islam.

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