

Introduction to Islam

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Preface

This book has evolved from a presentation intended for non Muslims in North America. The literature on books that introduce Islam is abundant, but it is felt that this book fills a void that exists in the literature. The book gives a birds view of the basics of Islam. It is very brief yet it answers many of the questions that the authors received during presentations made to a non Muslim Audience.

The book relies mainly on quotes from Quran and the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh). The abbreviation (pbuh) that follows the mention of the Prophet means “peace be upon him”. Muslims are required to utter this expression whenever the Prophet is mentioned. Several English translations were used, a list of these translations is given in the Appendix.

This effort is prepared with the intention that it serves to eradicate some of the misconceptions about Islam. The authors seek the pleasure of Allah, and hope that He will forgive any shortcomings that may exist in the work.

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Glossary

Asshhada: Pronunciation of the confession of faith. “I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His messenger”

Auliya: God’s friends

Ijtihaad: Independent reasoning

Shariah: Islamic Law

Aqueeda: Creed

Zakat: Poor dues

Iman: Faith

Rouh: Spirit

Mushreekin: Those who associate partners with God

Rabb: Lord, Guardian - Lord

Muttaquoon: Pious, God conscious

Kafer: Unbeliever

Assalmu alaikum
Peace be with you

History

A Prophet is Born

The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (pbuh) was born in the year 570 AD in the city of Mecca. Mecca is a city on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula, not very far from the Red Sea. The Arabian Peninsula was bounded from the east by the Red Sea, from the north by the Byzantine Empire, from the east by the Persian Empire, and from the south by the Indian Ocean, see the map in Figure 1. His father died before he was born and his mother died when he was six years old. He was raised by his grandfather Abdel Muttalib, and his uncle Abu Taleb. Both his grandfather and his uncle were merchants, and Muhammad (pbuh) grew up to become a merchant himself. Muhammad (pbuh) was known among the people in Mecca to be an honest, truthful and trustworthy person. He was knick named "the truthful, the trustworthy." The people of his tribe used to entrust their precious belongings to him while they travel. In today's terminology, he was the keeper of safe deposit boxes for his community. Moreover, he offered this service for free.

The Prophet (pbuh) Marries Khadeeja

When he was twenty five years old, he was working for a woman by the name of Khadeeja who proposed to him (according to the Arab's tradition of the time) and they got married. Khadeeja bore him two sons and four daughters. The two sons died in infancy. The marriage continued until the death of Khadeeja at the age of sixty five.

Although, polygamy was the norm of the society at that time, but Muhammad (pbuh) practiced monogamy until the death of Khadaaja. Muhammad (pbuh) loved Khadaaja very much and he used to express his feelings about Khadeeja even after her death, to the extent that his second wife Aisha, who has never seen Khadeeja, said: "I never felt jealous of someone more than I felt of Khadeeja."

First revelation

Another norm of the society that Muhammad (pbuh) broke was the worship of idols. The Arabs used to worship Idols. Although, they recognized that God is the creator; but they thought that the idols that they carve themselves out of wood and stone can intercede on their behalf. The Ka'ba, which Muslims believe to be the site of first house of worship of God on earth, was full of these idols. Muhammad (pbuh) had a natural aversion towards idol worship. The question of the creation was lurking on his mind continuously. He used to retreat to a cave in the desert for a period of one month every year to contemplate and reflect on the questions of creation, God, and the life after death.

On one of these trips, when he was forty years old, he was visited by the Arch-Angel Gabriel who delivered to him the very first verses of the Quran. These read as: "Read in the name of your Lord who created. Created man from a clot. Read and your Lord is the Most Gracious. He taught man by the pen. He taught man that which he knew not." [96:1-5]. Muhammad (pbuh) was taken by surprise, the encounter with Gabriel left him bewildered. He thought he was losing his mind. He hurried back to Khadeeja who comforted him. Khadeeja had an uncle who was knowledgeable and well versed in the monotheistic religions: Judaism and Christianity. She

suggested that they would go and consult him about this encounter. When Muhammad (pbuh) narrated what happened to Waraqa (Khadeeja's uncle), Waraqa came to the conclusion that Muhammad (pbuh) will be a prophet of God. Waraqa told Muhammad that he would support him when the time comes for Muhammad to deliver the message. He also warned Muhammad that he will be banished from Mecca.

Verses from the Quran continued to be revealed to Muhammad (pbuh) and he was told to call people to Islam. The call to Islam started as a clandestine movement. The first person to embrace Islam was Khadeeja, she was followed by Muhammad's close friend Abou Bakr. The group started to grow and eventually, Muhammad went public with the call. To the chiefs of Mecca, this new message brought its threat and menacing aspects. The message sought to change fundamental institutions that the Arabs practiced for many years. They were afraid that the call to abandon idol worship carries the menace of Mecca being abandoned as a center for pilgrimage, which meant a loss of the money that the pilgrims brought to Mecca. It also meant a loss of the prestige that the tribes of Mecca had over the years. The call for equality carried the threat of losing power and influence based on birth right.

Hijrah to Yathrib (Medina)

Mecca was up in arms against the new fledgling religion. Muslims were persecuted and tortured. Some were forced to leave and seek a safe haven in Abyssinia. Eventually, the command to migrate to Yathrib, about five hundred kilometers to the north of Mecca, came. Yathrib had already a burgeoning Muslim community which opened its arms to the migrating Muslims from Mecca. A treaty was signed between the Muslims and the Jews who lived in Yathrib. It was stipulated in the treaty that Muhammad (pbuh) shall be the governor of the city. The treaty guaranteed the freedom of religion and equal rights for all people living in Yathrib. It also, outlined defense strategies for the city against invaders. The first Islamic state was born.

Death of Prophet Muhammad

The Prophet of Islam lived in Yathrib for another twelve years. Before he died, Muslims went back to Mecca and the city was claimed without much fighting. Islam has already become well established in the peninsula and people entered into the fold of Islam in droves.

Current Statistics

It is very difficult to get an accurate estimate for the number of Muslims in the world today. These numbers change quickly and it usually takes sometime before the results of official census are announced. However, the Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year 2005 estimates the number Muslims in the world to be 1,283,424,000. Other sources show an estimate of 1,520,788,144. Any of these numbers would place Islam as the second largest world religion, after Christianity. Its adherents form the majority population in fifty-six countries worldwide.

Contrary to the general impression one gets from the media in the West, less than 20% of Muslims live in Arab countries. It is estimated that Muslims represent 7.5%, 3%, 2.7%, and 1.5% of the population of France, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Canada, respectively. Islam is the fastest growing religion in North America.

Islam: a Way of Life

The word “Islam” is an Arabic word that means “surrender”, a derivative of this word is the Arabic word “salam” meaning peace. Thus, Islam is a way of life based on attaining peace through voluntary submission to God. This peace is comprehensive. It encompasses peace within oneself, peace with those around us, peace with the environment and peace with the universe. Quran mentions the word Islam when it refers to Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) (pbuh).

“When his Lord said to him: Surrender, he said : I surrender to the Lord of the worlds” [2:131] .

Quran uses the word Islam to refer to two different concepts: the general concept of submission to God, as mentioned in verse 131 of the second chapter mentioned above, and the specific message that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

The Underpinnings

Islam is a way of life that should be experienced day and night. Salvation is attained by truthfully subscribing to the philosophy and practice of this way of life. The Islamic way of life has its foundation in three basic concepts: the oneness of God, holism of life, and moderation. These concepts provide the foundation on which this way of life is built. All practices and applications of the Islamic way of life emanate from these three concepts.

Oneness of God

Islam came to Arabia at a time when idolatry was prevalent. Each tribe had its own idol. The Arabs believed that there was one god, but that there were a number of smaller deities, similar to the Greek concept of a pantheon of gods, who could intercede on their behalf. Islam brought a clear message that associating partners with God is the most heinous sin a person can commit. For the remainder of the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and throughout the history of Islam, the core message was that of belief in one God, the Creator. This core message is reiterated in numerous verses throughout the Quran. Chapter 112 has been devoted to convey this message.

“Say: He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begets not nor was begotten, and there is none comparable unto Him” [112:1-4]

In addition to being a philosophical concept, the belief in the oneness of God has its own practical implications. Islam inculcates in Muslims the precepts that God has the ultimate authority and power over His creation. And while we can get away with breaking the law of the land, if we were not caught, God is always watching over us, thus, He knows what we do. We should be careful not to break the divine law, because God sees and knows all what we do.

The belief in the oneness of God has two main aspects: the belief in God’s power as the one and only God, and the belief in God’s compassion as the one and only Lord. The first aspect deals with God as the Creator and His right to be worshipped by His creation. He is the Mighty, He is the Sublime, and He is the Powerful. The second aspect deals with God the Lord of the worlds

who takes care of His creation. He is the Provider, He is the Sustainer, and He is the Compassionate.

Holism of Life

Islam has a holistic approach to human life. The Quran explains that the purpose of life in this world is to serve God, and serving God encompasses all human endeavors.

“I have not created Jinn and Human kind except to serve me.”[51:56], “Say all my worship, my rituals, my life, and my death are for Allah, the Lord of the Worlds”[6:162]

Islam is a way of life that is practiced twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. One, should dedicate all his actions and deeds to God from the time one wakes up in the morning until he/she retires to bed every night. Ritualistic prayers are spread over the waking up period of man to act as a reminder of this concept. In addition, the prophet of Islam taught Muslims certain supplications that precede, and sometimes succeed, each human activity. When one wakes up in the morning, one says: “Praise be to God Who gave me life after death.” This refers to the idea that sleep is the “smaller death.” Similar supplications are recited as one enters the washroom, as one exits the washroom, as one sits down to eat breakfast, as one dresses to go out, and so on.

Serving God encompasses all daily activities: eating, drinking, working, playing, even removing a small stone from a road and making it safe for people to walk on is considered to be an act of faith.

The holistic approach is not limited to how we look at our life on earth, but it also provides a basis for the integration of this life with the life in the hereafter. Death is not a termination of life but it is a bridge between two lives: the “lower life” a term that is used to describe our life on earth and the “eternal” life in the hereafter. This concept is important and central to the Muslim thought, without it what is perceived as a sacrifice cannot be justified. Those who do good deeds may be rewarded for the deeds either in this world or in the hereafter. The idea is expressed in the prophetic tradition: “work for this life as if you will live forever, and work for your lasting life as if you will die tomorrow.”

Moderation

And thus We have made you a moderate nation (well balanced and just)”[2:143]

Moderation is one of the pinnacles of the Islamic way of life. The concept is so comprehensive and pervasive in the Quranic verses and the sayings of the Prophet, that one is lead to believe that it is the most important attribute that a Muslim nation should enjoy. The Arabic word used in the verse mentioned above is quite comprehensive in its meaning. It encompasses a wide variety of physical as well as non-physical activities.

Moderation is meant to be a mind set that tempers our feelings and controls our actions. Moderation should be practiced at the physical as well as the spiritual levels. Islam does not attempt to suppress or ignore human feelings and desires, but it admonishes against excesses. It is normal for a human being to love, hate, or be angry, but one should not allow such feelings to

cloud one's ability to think and to make rational decisions regarding one's relationships with the others. Eating, playing, and enjoying one's possessions are legitimate human activities that a Muslim can enjoy but it should be done in moderation.

Even religious duties need to be practiced in moderation. The Prophet (pbuh) once overheard three of his companions bragging about how devoted they were. One said: "I vowed to spend the whole night praying," the second said: "I vowed to fast every day," and the third said: "I vowed never to marry." The Prophet was angry for their lack of understanding of true Islam. He told them that although he is more knowledgeable of Islam than they are, he does not spend the whole night praying, he does not fast everyday, nor has he abstained from taking a wife.

Observing the Islamic percept of moderation implies that we should be objective in our decisions and views. Our judgment should not be clouded by whims or desires, but should be based on facts and rational thought.

The Value System

A way of life needs a value system that defines the rules of interaction between its adherents. It defines a model behaviour for the people. The value system of the Islamic way of life is comprised of four themes: enjoining goodness and prohibiting evil, justice, equality, and tolerance. These themes emanate from the three fundamental underpinnings mentioned earlier: the oneness of God, the holism of life, and the moderation. One can easily trace these four themes to one or more of the fundamental underpinnings. They can be easily identified from Quranic verses and prophetic traditions which describe model human behaviour.

The value system as a whole stems from the belief in the oneness of God, the Creator. The belief that we are accountable to God in all our deeds, that God knows everything we do, that serving God means that we abide by His injunctions, and that salvation is only attained through pleasing God, provide a major incentive in promoting this value system.

The belief in the oneness of God is the basic philosophy of Islam. It is the foundation upon which all laws, systems, and rules are based. In addition, individual elements of the value system can also be traced back to the two other underpinnings of the way of life: holism of life, and moderation.

Enjoining goodness and prohibiting evil can be traced back to the concepts of holism of life and moderation. The fact that a Muslim should consider that one's life is composed of this life as well as of the life after death provides the incentive for enjoining what is good and prohibiting what is evil even when there is no worldly gain in doing this. Moderation is another underpinning which supports the prohibition of evil, because evil is usually embedded in excesses.

Justice is founded on protecting the rights of individuals, combating aggression, maintaining balance between different interests, and supporting what is right. All these values stem from the concepts of the holism of life and moderation.

Similar arguments can be made for equality and tolerance. It is thus, clear that the four elements which constitute the value system that supports the Islamic way of life are founded on the three basic underpinnings: the oneness of God, holism of life, and moderation.

Enjoin goodness and forbid evil

“Let there arise out of you a group of people inviting to all that is good and forbidding what is evil, and those are the successful” [3:104]

One of the most important objectives for a Muslim to achieve in this life is to promote goodness and to prohibit evil. The above mentioned verse indicates that enjoining goodness and forbidding evil is a criterion of success. It is the way to salvation. Quran always links faith with good deeds. They are inseparable as far as Islam is concerned. Faith is not only an inner most feeling that does not affect the behaviour of the Muslim. This is clearly expressed in the oft cited saying of the

prophet:” Faith is the certitude of the heart that is truly expressed by the deeds.” A Muslim’s behaviour should reflect his/her faith. Other sayings of the prophet confirm and strengthen this concept. One of these sayings indicates clearly that prayers are in vain if they do not improve a Muslim’s behaviour.

The concept of goodness and evil goes beyond what is allowed and what is proscribed by the Islamic law. It deals with a higher level of human behavior over and above the mundane. It delves into the domains of ethics, morality, and moral sensibility. It encompasses truthfulness of speech; fulfilling of obligations; returning trusts to their owners; good behavior toward parents; maintaining of family ties; cooperation in all acts of righteousness and good; and benevolence and generosity toward one's neighbors, orphans, poor people, stranded travelers, companions, spouses, and servants. It also involves acts of forbearance such as establishing relations with those who cut you off, giving those who deny you, and forgiving those who oppress you.

There are rules and etiquette that delineate who is responsible for such an undertaking and how it should be accomplished. One of the traditions of the Prophet (pbuh) identifies three levels of enjoining goodness and forbidding evil: physically, orally, or using conscious objection. The interpretation of the tradition relegates the different levels of action to the government, the scholars, and the lay people, respectively.

When scholars are involved in enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil, either through speeches or by writing articles and books, they are reminded that they should do it lovingly and with compassion. They should always remember the saying: ”Let your enjoining of good be good, and let not your forbidding of evil be evil.”

The determination of what is good and what is bad is not left for the whims of man. Quran and the tradition of the Prophet (pbuh) are the first two sources (in that order) to be consulted for the determination of what is good and what is evil. If there is no clear answer in these two sources, or if a new situation that has not been discussed before arises, then there is room for “Ijtihad.” Ijtihad is the term used to describe the process to be used to determine answers to new problems that face Muslims. It is a process of intelligent deduction based on the understating of the first two sources. The process of Ijtihad has been extensively studied and different methodologies have been formulated and used by the different schools of thought.

Justice

“O you who believe! Be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice, and let not the hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably; act equitably; that is nearer to piety, and heed God. Surely, God is aware of what you do.”[5:8].

Justice is a fundamental percept of Islam. Two main measures are taken to ensure that justice will prevail. One regarding the way judges should handle their decisions and the second deals with witnesses. The above mentioned verse admonishes judges to be fair and equitable in their judgment, even in the extreme case when the accused is their enemy. The fact that the accused is a friend or foe; kin or foreigner; rich or poor should not have any bearing on a judge’s decision. A judge’s decision should be based on facts and should not be colored by emotions or bias.

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even though it be against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, be he rich or poor. God is a better protector (than you) to both. So follow not your whims, lest you avoid justice, and if you distort your testimony or refuse to give it, verily, God is ever-well acquainted with what you do.”[4:135]

This verse commands witnesses to provide accurate and unbiased testimony. A person is a sinner if he/she is able to give a true and accurate testimony and abstains from giving the testimony. The Prophet (pbuh) likened such a person to a mute devil. The requirements that in some cases at least two witnesses, and in major crimes, at least four witnesses are needed ensures that the testimonials given are accurate. Only testimonies based on what a witness has actually seen are admissible.

The concept of justice in Islam goes beyond legal disputes and criminal cases. It applies to all human activities. Whenever we are faced with a choice between alternative solutions or we have to make decisions that will affect other people’s lives, we have to observe justice. Business transactions should be fair and equitable to all involved parties. A father or a mother should be fair in dealing with their children. Fairness and objectivity have to be observed when recommendations are issued or decisions regarding hiring, firing, or promoting employees are made.

Equality

O’ Mankind! Surely We have created you of (a single pair) a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may get to know each other, surely the most honorable of you with Allah is that who is most God conscious.” [49:13]

This verse establishes the foundation of equality in Islam. It states clearly that all human beings are created from a single couple (a male and a female), all humanity is but one single family. The diversity in the creation is a divine plan intended to make life on earth more interesting. Human beings having different ethnic backgrounds and cultures, speaking different languages, and enjoying different habits can learn from each other. They should live in peace with each other and they should respect one another. They should cooperate together to fulfill man’s mission on earth: to make life flourish and thrive.

Quran addresses the question that lingers in man’s mind all the time: who is more honorable? What is the criterion against which people are judged in the sight of God? Is it wealth, power, ethnicity, or influence that makes someone more honorable than the others? The verse establishes two principles: it is only God’s prerogative to decide who is more honorable, and honor is decided only by how much a person is conscientious of God.

Tolerance

The traditional definition of tolerance is, "to recognize and respect (others' beliefs, practices, etc.) without necessarily agreeing or sympathizing" (Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary). Islam’s definition of tolerance is very much similar to this definition. Tolerance in Islam does not mean putting up with bad things. Tolerance in Islam means that differences are recognized and

respected. Tolerance is a fundamental percept in Islam. Muslims are commanded by their religion to be tolerant. To ensure that the command is understood and honored by Muslims, the Quran provides logical basis for tolerance. The following four concepts enshrine tolerance as a sacred percept that man has to practice: Mankind is one family, Diversity of the creation is God's will, Freedom of faith is guaranteed, and Justice should be uphold.

Verse 13 of Chapter 49 indicates clearly that the whole of mankind can be traced back to a single couple. Despite being different in shape, gender, color, language, or ethnic origin we are somehow related to one another. We should treat each other with respect and compassion as we treat our kin.

Diversity is God's plan to make life more interesting, challenging, and a true testing ground for mankind. We have to respect God's will to create this diversity of human life, and honour our brothers and sisters in humanity irrespective of their color, creed, ethnic background, or gender.

If we accept the concept of free will, we have to accept the right to be free to espouse whatever belief we may regard as the truth. The concept of free will is not valid unless man has the freedom of faith. Islam unequivocally states that

“Let there be no compulsion in religion,” [2:256]

Islam teaches that justice should be upheld to all members of society, regardless of their creed, color, gender, or ethnic background. No person should be discriminated against because of his/her color, creed, language, ethnic background, health, or social status.

The Message of Islam

The message of Islam encompasses two main components: the creed and the law. The two components support and strengthen each other. No Muslim can ignore one or the other. The creed delineates the set of beliefs that Muslims should embrace, and the law organizes their lives.

The Creed

The creed of Islam encompasses the belief in the One God, the day of Judgment, the Angels, the Books, the Messengers, and the unseen. The belief in the oneness of God is the corner stone of Islam and has already been discussed. The belief in the Day of Judgment is a direct consequence of the fact that this life is nothing but a trial for mankind. God created man and blessed him with intellect, skills, and resources to achieve certain objectives. On the Day of Judgment God will judge us and every one will see the results of his/her deeds. This concept has been articulated in several verses, of which we mention

“Blessed He Who owns the Kingdom, and He is able to do anything. He Who created death and life to test you, who among you will have the best performance in this life, and He is the Forgiving ” [67:1]

God gave man guidance to be able to differentiate between right and wrong. Guidance came through messengers, ordinary human beings chosen by God to deliver his message. God sent men with his guidance so that they not only deliver the message but to act as role model for humanity.

The Angels were the medium that communicated God’s message to the messengers. The message was documented in the Books. The Quran mentions several examples for revealed books that came with guidance for mankind. These include: the Torah, the Psalms, and the Bible.

The unseen is everything that humans are unable to witness. God knows what we can witness and that what cannot be seen by us. Some of the verses in the Quran describe what will happen on the Day of Judgment, or what man will see in heavens or in hell. It is beyond our capability to see this, but we have to believe in it because it is part of the Quran.

The Law

Muslim scholars were able to deduct the objectives of Islamic law from the verses of Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The fundamental objective of Islamic law is to protect faith, life, wealth, dignity (honor), and intellect. Protection of faith guarantees the freedom of belief for all human beings. No person should be forced to relinquish or adopt a set of beliefs against his/her own will. The Quran says:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion.” [2:256]

Verses in the Quran state that had God willed, He could have created all people to embrace a single faith. However, this would have defeated the whole concept of life as a trial period for mankind. The Quran also quite emphatically tells the Prophet (pbuh) that he was only sent to

deliver the message, to bring the glad tidings to people, and to warn them from the consequences of not following the right path. He was not sent as a keeper, a guardian, or a judge over people.

Life is sacred in Islam. The Quran says: ” **We ordained for the children of Israel that whoever slew a soul – except as a punishment for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it is as though he slew all men**” [5:32].

Islamic law endeavors to protect people’s property, not only against thieves and criminal but also against unjust man made laws.

The concept of honor in Islam is a comprehensive concept. It includes protecting people against verbal and physical abuse, harassment, and slander.

Guaranteeing freedom of speech comes under protection of intellect. Protection of the intellect also includes prohibition of the use of drugs and alcohol which would affect the clarity of thought process.

Islam legislated these five principles more than fourteen hundreds years ago. Today, we refer to them as human rights.

The Pillars

The prophet of Islam (pbuh) has been quoted to have said:” Islam was established on five pillars.” These pillars are the confession of faith (ashahada), the obligatory prayers, fasting of Ramadan, paying the pure dues, and performing pilgrimage. These five pillars are practiced by Muslims daily as a way to worship God, and to remind them of their duties as Muslims.

The pillars to Islam are like the foundation to a house. They provide the foundation which supports the Muslim character. They are not ends in themselves, but they are a vehicle that can bring people closer to an Islamic way of life. These five structured activities instill in Muslims the qualities needed to lead an Islamic way of life. They inculcate in Muslims qualities like discipline, cleanliness, God consciousness, truthfulness, mercy, generosity, and much more.

The Confession of Faith

The confession of faith emphasizes the belief in the oneness of God and that Muhammad (pbuh) is His messenger. A person becomes a Muslim by uttering the confession of faith: there is no deity except Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger. During the day, a Muslim repeats this statement a number of times during his/her prayers. It is also repeated by Muslims as a way to remember God.

All the tenets of Islam are embodied in this simple statement. It clarifies who has control over us, who has authority and power to run the universe, and who is most deserving of our worship. The confession of faith frees human beings from forms of subjugation or slavery.

Prayers

Prayers are a tool to remind the Muslim of continuing to be faithful to God. They act as a tool to prevent people from committing evil acts.

“Recite that which has been revealed to you of the Book and keep up prayer; surely prayer keeps one away from indecency and evil, and the remembrance of God is the greatest, and God knows what you do.” [29:45]

There are five obligatory prayers for a Muslim everyday. The day is roughly divided into five periods, during each period one has to perform a particular prayer. The first prayer is the Dawn prayer, which can be performed between Dawn and Sunrise. The time between Noon and Sunset is divided roughly into two equal periods. The noon prayer is performed in the first of these, while the afternoon prayer is performed in the second. The time for the fourth prayer, the Sunset prayer, extends from after Sunset till the disappearance of the twilight. The time for the fifth prayer, the night prayer, extends from the time of the disappearance of the twilight till dawn. These prayers are structured. They consist of similar modules but differ in their length and form. Muslims are encouraged to perform these prayers in congregations at Mosques. However, Muslims can pray any place that is clean, and free from distraction.

Muslims can also perform voluntary prayers. A voluntary prayer is similar to the obligatory prayers in form but the number of modules in each prayer, and when it can be performed is left to the discretion of the believer. These prayers are usually done on an individual basis except for the night prayers in Ramadan. It is recommended that Muslims perform night prayers in Ramadan in congregation.

1 Fasting

Obligatory fasting is observed during the month of Ramadan (the month of fasting). One abstains from food, drink, and intimate relationship with spouses from Dawn till Sunset. One of the benefits of fasting is to release the human soul from the clutches of desire and produce within it a semblance of the divine attribute of the freedom of want. Yet, a balance between carnal desires and spiritual purification should always be maintained. The purpose of fasting is iterated in the following verses from the Quran:

“O you who believe fasting has been prescribed upon you as it has been prescribed upon those before you so that you may become God conscious” [2:183]

“The month of Ramadan is the month in which the Quran was revealed, a book of guidance with proofs to guide in distinguishing between right and wrong.” [2:185]

These verses indicate that there is a special relationship among God consciousness, fasting, and Quran. The term God consciousness is a very comprehensive term. To understand some of its aspects let us look at the following verse:

“O children of Adam ! We have indeed sent down to you clothing to cover your shame, and (clothing) for beauty and clothing that guards (against evil), that is the best. This is of the communication of God that you may be mindful” [7: 26]

The verse shows that as we need clothing to cover and beautify our bodies, God consciousness provide the cover that will beautify our souls. This cover is obtained by addressing our shortcomings and disposing of our bad habits. The ultimate status is to serve God as if we were able to see Him.

Fasting is one of the vehicles that can bring man to this status. It provides a unique way of communicating with God. A purely private communication, because only God and the person who is fasting know whether the conditions of fasting have been kept by the fasting person. These conditions are not only limited to the physical act of abstaining from material pleasures, but they also include keeping a high level of moral conduct. The ultimate goal is to keep the heart and mind in perpetual remembrance of God.

Ramadan also provides an opportunity for being God conscious on a continuous basis. Fasting during the day and praying by night provide a perpetual way to remember God.

Fasting frees man from the prison of want. It teaches man to control his/her desires. It provides the opportunity for reflection on one's deeds and mistakes. It provides an opportunity for man to feel how it is like to be hungry and it provides man with the strength to conquer greed by urging the believer to be generous to those who are less fortunate.

When we reach this level of God consciousness we are ready to receive the benefit from Quran. This is the same benefit that the messenger of God received when the Quran was first revealed to him.

Ramadan is labelled the month of generosity. Several measures are taken to instil generosity as a character in the believer. A person who is physically unable to fast and cannot make up for these lost fasting days, should offer a meal for each non-fasting day to a poor person. Feeding a poor person in Ramadan is equivalent to fasting an extra day. A special charity is paid to the poor at the end of the month to render the fasting complete.

Some people are exempted from fasting because of their health or physical condition. An old or a sick person, a woman who is pregnant or nursing, or a person who is on a long trip are examples of those that are exempt from fasting. Some of these are asked to make up for the lost days later when their conditions allow them to fast. Those who are unable to fast should then offer a meal to a poor person for every fasting day they miss.

Obligatory Charity (Zakat)

Zakat is an obligatory monetary contribution to be paid by the rich to the poor (in the first instance) and to other categories of people that have been named in Quran. This type of charity is called in Arabic **AZakat@** which means growth but can also mean purity. Muslims understand the term to mean growth in wealth as a result of its purification. This is like pruning a tree. By removing the excess branches, one helps the tree to grow. It also has the spiritual implication that paying Zakat purifies oneself from greed and niggardliness and purifies the beneficiary from jealousy and hatred. The purifying aspect of Zakat is mentioned in verse 103, Chapter 9.

AOf their wealth, take alms, that so you might purify and sanctify them.@ [103:9].

The growth aspect is explained in the following verse:

“And whatever you lay out as usury, so that it may increase in the property of men, it shall not increase with God; and whatever you give in charity (zakat), desiring God’s pleasure- it is these (people) that shall get manifold.” [30:39]

Zakat is a fundamental act of faith in Islam. It has been mentioned repeatedly in Quran in connection with establishing prayers. These verses emphasize the link between establishing prayers and paying Zakat on one hand and the strength in faith, the goodness of deeds and the excellence of God’s reward in this life and in the hereafter on the other hand.

Zakat is a practical application of a fundamental concept in Islam: wealth belongs to God. Human beings are entrusted with the management of wealth on earth and it is our responsibility to spend it in appropriate ways. **And spend (in charity) out of that which He has made you heirs@ [57:7].** This concept has far reaching implications both social and economic. It implies that the society is a close knit family. Thus, it is the responsibility of the rich in the family to look after the poor. The system of Zakat maintains a balance between the personal drive to accumulate wealth and the interest of the society as a whole. An economic aspect of Zakat is that it provides the incentive for people to invest their money. This leads to creating more jobs and minimizes unemployment.

Paying Zakat is a personal responsibility. It can be either paid directly to those who deserve it or given to the state for distribution. In either case, the dignity of those who receive it is to be protected. Paying Zakat is a duty for those who can afford it and receiving it is a right for those who are eligible for it. The following verses describe the etiquette of paying Zakat.

Those who spend their wealth for the cause of God and do not follow their spending with taunts and insults shall be rewarded by their Lord; they shall have nothing to fear or regret. A kind word and forgiveness is better than charity followed by injury. God is self-sufficient and indulgent. O believers, do not mar your almsgiving with taunts and mischief-making, like him who spends his wealth for the sake of ostentation and believes neither in God or in the Last Day. Such man is like a smooth rock covered with earth: when rain falls on it leaves hard and bare.

But those who give away their wealth with a desire to please God and to reassure their souls are like a garden on a hill side, when rain falls on it yields up twice its normal crop.@ [2:262-265]

The categories of people eligible for receiving Zakat money are clearly indicated in the Quran. On the top of the list are the poor and the needy. The tradition of the Prophet (pbuh) explicated the kinds of wealth and the percentage of money that should be paid. Zakat is paid once a year as a percentage of the wealth that exceeds a certain limit. Farmers pay Zakat at harvest time.

Charity in Islam is a comprehensive concept. It encompasses a wide variety of activities. These include monetary sacrifices, good deeds as well as acts of kindness and friendship.

A central theme that runs through a great number of verses in the Quran is about feeding the poor and the needy. These verses exhort Muslims to care for the poor, the needy and the orphans. They paint vivid images illustrating the great reward awaiting those who give charity and cast in a

harsh light those who do not give. A large number of the sayings of the Prophet are devoted to urging Muslims to give charity. These sayings stress the comprehensive nature of charity. AEvery good deed is a charity@; AMeeting people with a smile is a charity@; AAn act of kindness to a living thing is a charity@.

Pilgrimage

A Muslim is required to perform Pilgrimage once in lifetime, if he/she can afford it. It consists of rituals to commemorate Prophet Abraham (pbuh), in addition to rituals which permit Muslims to reflect on their previous lives and make decisions for a new and better life.

Pilgrimage is perhaps the most ritualistic act of worship in Islam. A person who intends to perform pilgrimage has to prepare for the trip. Travel expenses should be paid by the person him/herself. It should be money earned as a result of legitimate transactions. Special attire has to be used. Males use two flat white sheets, one is wrapped around the waist and the other is used to cover the upper part of the body; while women are dressed in simple white gowns.

When a person intending to perform pilgrimage arrives in Mecca he/she should circumambulate around the Kaa'ba. The Kaa'ba is a stone structure that has a great significance for Muslims. It is understood that this structure is built on the site of the first place of worship of God on earth. This is where Adam and Eve and their children used to worship God. Then the person should perform a prayer and drink from the well of Zamzam in addition to going seven times between the two hills Safa and Marwa. In doing this pilgrims trace the steps of Hajar when prophet Abraham (pbuh) left her and her young son (Ismael) alone, in what was then a barren land.

The climax of pilgrimage happens on the Day of Arafat. All Muslims performing pilgrimage are required to spend part of the day and part of the night of that day on a plateau called the mount of Arafat. Muslims have time to reflect on their lives, pray, ask for forgiveness, and resolve to embark on a new life.

“The pilgrimage is performed in the well known months; so whoever intends to perform pilgrimage therein, there shall be no intercourse, fornication, nor quarreling amongst one another.” [2:197]

1 Jihad or Holy War

In one of his sayings, the Prophet of Islam defines a Muslim as a person around whom people would be safe. In other instances, the Prophet (pbuh) urges Muslims to love for others what they love for themselves. The Qur'an prohibits converting people to Islam by force, saying, **"There is no compulsion in religion" [2:256]**; and it equates killing a single innocent person to the killing of the whole of humanity in the text reading, **"We ordained for the children of Israel that whoever slew a soul – except as a punishment for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it is as though he slew all men" [5:32]**. Finally, translating *Jihad* as "holy war" is misleading; the term "holy war" has not been mentioned once in the Qur'an. As a matter of fact, in the statement, **"Fighting is ordained for you, even though it be hateful to you" [2:216]**, Qur'an says clearly that fighting is a hateful duty that Muslims must undertake only when it is absolutely necessary.

Jihad is an Arabic word that means "strive" or "struggle." The concept of Jihad in Islam is also comprehensive. It encompasses the struggle against the temptation to sin, the struggle against succumbing to one's own desires and whims, the struggle against ignorance, and the struggle against oppressors. The struggle may be spiritual, intellectual or physical. This means that Jihad can be accomplished by peaceful means as well as by force. A well-established principle in Islamic jurisprudence is that struggle by force can only be performed by the state. Only the state can declare war. This is an important concept because it negates the basis on which so-called "literalists" justify their acts of violence. Furthermore, for a fight to be an act of Jihad it must pass muster on three criteria: justice of the cause, nobility of the means, and the intent of Godliness.

War can be declared in cases of self defence, as the Quran said, **"Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress the limits; for God loves not the transgressors" [2:190]**. Equally, with reference to the words, **"Those who have been wronged are permitted to fight" [22:39]**, it may be invoked to combat oppression and anarchy. A war can only be declared after certain criteria have been met: the war must have a noble cause; all peaceful means to resolve a conflict must have been exhausted; and the war must be the lesser of the two evils.

There is a strict protocol for the conduct of war in Islam. Under Islamic law, non-combatants are protected. Unnecessary harm to the environment is prohibited. The standing order for the army at war is **"do not harm an innocent non-combatant, do not harm children, women, old people or priests/rabbis. Do not burn, cut or flood a tree nor kill an animal unless for food."**

Thus the development and use of weapons intended to cause non-discriminate damage and carnage - so-called weapons of mass destruction - would be problematic from an Islamic point of view. Lastly it is incumbent on Muslims to come to peace if the enemy chooses to incline to peace at any time after the inception of hostilities, as the Quran has said, **"And if the enemy incline towards peace, you also incline to peace and trust in God" [8:62]**.

Women in Islam

Islamic laws and practice changed dramatically the way the society in Arabia treated women around 610CE. It suffices to say that infanticide against baby girls was somewhat of a norm in Arabia at that time to understand how women were treated. A male who grew up to be a warrior or a poet brought honour to his tribe and helped it in its struggle against other tribes. Islam decisively abolished the practice and introduced the laws and practices which ensure gender equity and women's rights. Islam gave women the right to education, the right to own property, the right to vote, the right to choose their spouses, and the right to divorce their husbands.

The principles of the equity between genders and of the equal accountability of males and females were enunciated more than fourteen hundreds years ago in the Quran:” **O’People! Be conscious of your duty to your Lord, Who created you from a single being and created its mate of the same kind, and spread from them two, many men and women; and be conscious of your duty to Allah ...**”[4:1], **“Surely, the men who submit and the women who submit, and the believing men and the believing women, and the obedient men and the obedient women, and the truthful men and the truthful women, and the persevering men and the persevering women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the almsgiving men and the almsgiving women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and the men who guard their chastity and the women who guard, and the men who remember Allah much and the women who remember- Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and mighty reward.”** [33 : 35] .

The wives of the Prophet played very active role in helping the Prophet and educating Muslims about Islam. It is intriguing that the Quran uses the Queen of Sheba as an example of a wise leader, while it uses Pharaoh as an example of a tyrant leader. The Quran depicted the wife of Pharaoh and Mary as role models for the believers.

Islam recognized the role of women in bearing and raising children, and honoured their role as mothers. One of the companions of the Prophet (pbuh) once asked the Prophet (pbuh): **“Who is the person most deserving of my company?” the Prophet (pbuh) answered:”Your mother”, the companion repeated the question two more times and the Prophet (pbuh) repeated the same answer. When the companion asked for the fourth time, the answer came: then your father.** The Prophet (pbuh) has been quoted to have said:” **“Paradise under the feet of mothers”**

Unfortunately, many of these rights were later revoked in lands whose people profess to be Muslims. This was partly caused by lack of deep understanding of Islam, the strength of local and tribal cultures, and the general backwardness of man in these countries.

APPENDIX

English Interpretations of the Quran

1. The meaning of the Glorious Quran, by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall. Islamic Book Trust Kuala Lumpur, 2001.
2. The Message of the Quran, by Muhammad Asad, Maktaba Jawahar ul uloom, Samanabad, Lahor, Pakistan.
3. The Quran, translation and commentary by T.B. Irving (Al-Hajj Ta'lim Ali), Amana Books, Brattleboro, Vermont, USA, 1991.
4. Interpretation of the meaning of the Noble Quran, by Dr. Muhammad Taqi-ud-din Al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Darussalam, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia