

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Nine: What is the purpose of religion?

This is a question that every religion has to answer, especially in a world in which many people have an underdeveloped notion of what religion might be about and in which many have given up on the idea of “being religious” at all, whatever they might mean by that. As regards Islam, we can begin by answering that it is a way of life that trains people to become fully human and draw ever closer to God.

We can begin with the question: What is this life all about? Islam does not see this life as something hard and burdensome. Excesses of asceticism are not part of Islam and there is no sense of the body being bad or somehow low or unworthy. This life should be something to be enjoyed and prosperity is a blessing from God. On several occasions in the Qur'an we read of God making things easy for those who follow the guidance [Q. 65:4] and indeed it becomes a principle of Islamic law that, faced with two equally possible outcomes, the easier one is to be taken. At the same time, the Qur'an does not promise that this life will be “a bed of roses” and one of the principal virtues of an Islamic way of life is patience (*sabr*) with which afflictions and hardships are to be born. Critical to an Islamic understanding is that this life is not all that there is but there is also the life hereafter. This life has something of the character of a test and preparation for that life [Q. 2:155]. In Paradise there will be no more suffering or want and thus it is a reward for those whose lives on earth have seen suffering patiently borne.

The treadmill of time

The nature of being a creature with a beginning and an end is that we are caught up in time. Yesterday's resolution and dedication to do good will not automatically carry us through today. Every day, and indeed, every minute, must be dedicated to the service and worship of God. Imagine that one is on a moving walkway, such as we experience in airports, but we are trying to walk the wrong way along it, against the direction of movement. To stand still would mean to be carried backwards. We need to keep pressing on in order to make progress. Such is life. Time is always coming at us and demanding a fresh exertion in the way of God. Up until our last breath, we are to keep on obeying the commands of God and keeping clear of those things that have been prohibited. The histories record an episode in the last months of the life of Muhammad when he was ill, weak and rather frail. He was being helped into the mosque for prayers and some of the community suggested that he spare himself the effort but he rebuked them saying that he too, like them, should keep on living in the tension between hope of the reward promised by God for the obedient and fear of the punishment of God for the disobedient.

All human beings are born *muslim* and so Islam does not have a concept of Original Sin. Human beings are basically good but we have a natural tendency to forgetfulness and this is compounded by the ploys of the *Shaytan* to make us forgetful [Q. 6:68]. This means that we are engaged in a life-long struggle against our lower inclinations. This struggle is our principal *jihad*: to struggle and strive in the way of God against temptations and forgetfulness. This is where the practices of the religion come to the aid of the Muslim:

- The regular routine of daily prayer, five times per day at set times, so that never more than a few hours go by without the believer being called back to stand again before God, to recollect sin and seek forgiveness, to hear afresh the guidance of the Qur'an and to prostrate in total humility before God in submission.
- The annual month-long fast of Ramadan teaches self-discipline, breaks the habits that control us (“I cannot function without regular coffee-breaks during the day!”) and teaches us compassion for those who have to go without the food and drink that we take for granted.

There is always a human tendency towards hoarding money to use for ourselves at a later date. Muhammad here sets the example. It is reported that he made a practice of giving away whatever was given to him on the day that he received it, thus “going to bed with empty pockets” and relying on God’s generosity for tomorrow. This is encapsulated in the Arabic term *sadaqa*, which we can translate as “bearing one another’s burdens.” When I arrive at the house of an African Muslim friend just as food is being prepared, I am greeted: “You must have a well-trained camel that brings you to our door at a time when we can have the blessing of sharing our food with you.” When there were sudden and devastating floods in the far south-west of England, an area in which few Muslims live, that deprived them of drinking water, a Muslim charity responded by saying: “This is our chance to show them what Islam is about.” And they loaded a lorry with as many bottles of water as possible and sped down the motorway to share it with those in need. A bishop in Africa appealed to a Christian friend in London for money to help build a road to open up the region and when the local mosque heard about it, they responded immediately with a gift to help suffering fellow human beings. A Christian lady was going to Palestine to help rebuild the house of a Muslim family that had been demolished to make way for the segregation wall and local Muslim women opened their purses to press money on her to help buy building materials. In Islamic understanding, one of the characteristics of Jesus was that he was “the tender-hearted Prophet,” who followed a life of voluntary poverty and had a special capacity for compassion. In this way *sadaqa* is practised and those who have are trained to bear the burdens of those who have not.

A life of God-consciousness

Sabr is one of the principal virtues of Islam and the other is *taqwa*, which we can translate as “God-consciousness.” That we might be aware in every fibre of our being, in all that we do, say and are, that we are the creatures of God, given the high dignities of being servants and regents of God, that we stand in the sight of God at

every moment and that ultimately we will be called to give an account of our lives on the Day of Judgement. There is a sense here of awe at standing in the presence of God and, as an earlier form of English would put it, “the fear of the Lord.” Indeed, in modern Arabic, the word for vaccination is derived from the same root as *taqwa*, giving us the sense of protection in the awesome presence of God. The practices of Islam, which we will explore more in the next two series, can be understood as a training ground in *taqwa*, to build and maintain that sense of being always in the presence of God.

An incident is recorded in the Qur'an in which a group of desert Arabs came to Muhammad to proclaim that they believed [Q. 49:14]. The Prophet was told to respond that so far they had only submitted to the way of Islam because faith had not yet entered into their hearts. This gave rise to a three-fold transition in the life of a human being, which was reinforced in an encounter between Muhammad and the angel Gabriel. This transition goes from *islam*, submission to the will of God, leading to *iman* or faith in God, and culminating in *ihsan* or “living constantly in the knowledge that one stands in the presence of God, knowing that even though we do not see God, God sees us.” This can be seen as the goal of life-long growth in *taqwa*.

Living constantly in the state of *ihsan* is as close as a human being can come in this life to the life of Paradise, in which the people of Paradise will be near to God, ever-conscious of the presence [Q. 54:55]. Those human beings who attain this state in this life can be thought of as the saints or the Friends of God (*waliullah*). They are those who have submitted their wills and their whole lives to God and are thus, in an abiding sense, truly *muslim*. However, as the example of Muhammad already cited reminds us, as long as we are in this life we always have the potential to forget and slip from this state, thus even Friends of God must continue in the daily struggle until the last breath.

A beautiful model

Muhammad himself serves as a beautiful model of a life lived in total submission to the will of God [Q. 33:21] and as a lamp that sheds light to guide his followers in that path [Q. 33:45-46]. His wife Ayesha is reported to have said of him that he was like a “living Qur'an;” to see the way in which he conducted himself was like reading the Qur'an and to read the Qur'an was to know the character of the Prophet. On this basis, we can say that the path of human growth in *taqwa* is the imitation of Muhammad. This requires Muslims to study his life and teachings and then to model their lives on his. Every incident that is recorded is an example of a Muslim way of life. We see him standing up out of respect as the body of a dead Jew from Madina was carried to its burial. We see him turning his face away from things that he need not see. He is reported to have mended his own clothes and sandals and given away things that he could well have used for his own family. His wives followed his example and were well-known for their concern for the poor and hungry. When he entered the assembly, he took a seat wherever there was a space with no special place reserved for him. He was fearless in standing up for those who had been wronged and did not hesitate to

challenge the traditional ways when they went against the teachings of the Qur'an. He never claimed to be other than the servant of God and held himself subject to the divine revelation not above it. There is a memorable story of a woman who sat by the pathway and hurled abuse and worse at him every time that he passed by. When one day she was not in her usual place, he enquired after her and was told that she was sick. He then went to visit her – to her amazement. When she encountered his example, she repented of her previous behaviour and became a Muslim and a changed woman. Such stories are numerous and recorded in the biographies, histories and Hadith. They give much material for Muslim character-building as Muslims model their lives on his in their quest for *taqwa*.

Manifestation of the beautiful names

Part of being a beautiful model for humanity is summed up in the Muslim understanding of Muhammad as *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being, so those who seek perfection should follow his example in all things. The first step in following the Prophet is to align the human will with the will of God by obeying all the commands and prohibitions of God. The second step is through additional voluntary acts of service, worship and love. This is summarised in a saying of God placed on the lips of Muhammad (*hadith qudsi*):

My servant draws near to me through nothing that I love more than what I have made obligatory for him. My servant never ceases drawing near to me through additional voluntary works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks.

Muhammad is the embodiment of all the spiritual virtues. He more directly manifests the attributes of God than any other creature. He thus lives most fully in the state of *ihsan*. The path of human perfection, the path of love, is thus “doing the good and beautiful” in all things in this life.

The pure and sinless Muhammad acts like a perfectly polished mirror on which the qualities of God can radiate and be reflected. In this way he manifests those divine qualities in the fullest possible way. The importance here is that the qualities belong to God and are reflected from Muhammad; he does not contain them within himself – he is not divine. A useful model is that of the moon. When we look at it, we see it glowing with light and shedding it towards the earth. Yet we know that the moon is not the source of its light; the light comes from the sun and is reflected from the moon. If the sun were not to shed light on the moon, it would be engulfed in darkness as it has no independent source of its own light. Muhammad is thus, in this model, like the moon reflecting the light of God.

Muhammad is not only the purest of beings in Muslim understanding but he also possesses knowledge directly from God that cannot be obtained except by this direct transfer. This is sometimes called “the knowledge of the unseen” or esoteric knowledge. This knowledge was given to Muhammad by God on his ascent to heaven

(*mi'raj*), some of which he shared with a group of people who sought his company and teaching on the inner journey of their own purification; these are the people who we know as the sufis. They in turn passed on these techniques of spiritual purification to their own students and so on down through the centuries. In Shi'a understanding, the divinely-appointed Imams shared in this esoteric knowledge and thus were privileged in their interpretation of the Qur'anic message so that they could guide humankind on the path of purification and seeking wisdom.

Just as Muhammad was the pure manifestation of the qualities or beautiful names of God, so Muslims work with those beautiful names by recitation and meditation, thus seeking to purify themselves better to reflect them too. As with Muhammad, such growth in spiritual wisdom must always find expressing in outer works and not just inner piety.

We will return to the centrality of *taqwa* as we come in the second and third series of Understanding Islam to look more closely at the practices of prayer and pilgrimage and the reform of society through ethical economics and politics.