

Short Guide to Understanding Islam

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Quotes from the author

The days of polemics are over. Polemics destroy three things: the people being spoken about, the people doing the speaking and the relationship between them. The way forward now must be through understanding one another both in the head and in the heart. I call this empathetic understanding. I may not agree with everything that Islam teaches but I need to understand it to build a relationship with my neighbour.

If you want to understand a religion, you need to learn to see it through the eyes of those who follow it.

As a Christian, I am guided by the ethics of my Master, Jesus. “Treat others the way that you would want them to treat you” (see Matthew 7:12). So I say, “Seek to understand Islam the way that you would like a Muslim to understand your Christianity.”

Both Christians and Muslims have “wonderful ideals” and some “awful realities”. We need to see the difference. Then we need to make sure that we compare like with like, ideals with ideals and realities with realities. Take care not to compare “my ideals” with “your realities” – you can see where that leads.

We have to hear the truth as Muslims understand it, even if it goes against something that we believe and hold dear.

Let us explore the essence of Islam the way that informed Muslims understand it. Let’s listen with our ears and with our hearts to hear what they are saying. Maybe we will hear the voice of God speaking to us through our neighbours to make us more faithful followers of the Way of Jesus.

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IN SEARCH OF A BEGINNING

There's a big temptation to begin the story of Islam with Muhammad. He was born in Makka in Arabia in 570CE. He said that he started to receive a revelation from God in 610. This was written down in the book, the Qur'an. For the next twelve years he stayed in Makka and his Muslim community grew to a few hundred. They were not liked by most of the people at first because he taught that there is only one God and the people there worshipped many idols. In 622, he moved from Makka to Madina, about 350kms further north. Gradually Madina became a Muslim city and Muhammad was the spiritual, political, legal and military leader. By the time that he died in 632, the rule of Islam had spread to most of Arabia.

The problem with starting here is that Muslims never say that Muhammad is the only Prophet sent by God. He is the last Prophet. Similarly, the Qur'an is the last book. If something is "the last" then there must have been others that went before. Starting here is like reading a detective novel but opening it at the last chapter. You get the ending but you miss the plot! We need to go back in search of a better starting point. Just notice, before we go on, that Makka can also be spelt Mecca, and Madina – Medina, and also Qur'an – Koran. We are trying to make the sound of an Arabic word using English letters.

We could go back to the Bible and start there (Genesis 16, 17 and 21). Abraham was married to Sarah but they had no children. Sarah suggested that Abraham take a second wife – Hagar, an Egyptian. Abraham and Hagar had a son called Ishmael. Then God sent a message to Sarah that she was to be blessed with a son too – Isaac. Jews and Christians are familiar with the family of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. They are the Hebrew people. Later we come to call them the Jews. Moses was their great law-giver. Jesus was born a Jew, so he comes from the same people. From Jesus, of course, we get Christianity.

We often forget the other side of Abraham's family. From Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael came the Ishmaelites as the Bible calls them. They pulled Joseph from the well and took him down to Egypt. We know them better today as the Arab people. The Bible tells us that God told Abraham to let Hagar and Ishmael go into the land between the Red Sea and the great rivers of Iraq. God said that God would protect them and raise up a great people from Ishmael. They are the Arabs. Muhammad was born into these people and so we can see that he is related to the family of Abraham. This means that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are cousin religions. Sometimes we say that Jews, Christians and Muslims are "cousins in the faith of Abraham". That is, the faith in the one and only God.

This is a better starting point because it has widened out a bit in history. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the last Prophet and that Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Moses and Jesus were earlier Prophets of God too. Muhammad

received a scripture called the Qur'an. Abraham, Moses and Jesus had received scriptures from God too. The problem with this starting point is that it only tells us something about one small group of people on earth – the people of the Middle East. It does not tell us anything about the people of Africa, Asia, the Americas or Europe. We need to go back further to find the real starting point.

Starting from the beginning

The only place that Muslims would start the story is with God. God is the only eternal being. God never had a beginning – God always existed. If we put the word God into Arabic, it is Allah. This means “the one and only God.” Just as when we put a capital G on God it cannot have an “s” on the end – it means the one and only God. So also, Allah has no plural form – it means the one and only God. The word Allah is used by Arabic-speaking Muslims, Jews and Christians when speaking about God. Muslims all over the world offer their formal prayers in Arabic and read the Qur'an in Arabic, so they always speak of God as Allah.

God is the creator of everything that exists. Nothing came into being except by God's command. God is the creator and we are part of the creation. We need to ask, “What is the relationship between God and the creation?”

God is perfect and so when God creates, God creates the best of all possible worlds. Our world can never be as perfect as God because we are locked into time and space. We get older and in the end we will die. God never gets older and wears out like us. When God created the creation it was according to God's design plan. God put everything in the right order. This was a state of harmony, balance, safety and security. It was a state of justice and peace. This could only be so because everything obeyed God's commands. It was the natural God-given state of creation.

What is *islam*?

If we take this idea into Arabic, then we can sum it up in one Arabic root word: **slm**. Arabic is a language made up around root words. The root carries the meaning into all the words made from it. By adding vowels, we can make up a family of words. Like this:

slm
islam
muslim
salam

We can see the root word **slm** running through all three words. They carry the root meaning of justice, peace, safety, security, harmony, due order and obedience. Now we can ask: What is *islam*? And answer that *islam* is the natural state of the whole of the creation, when it lives according to the divine

designer's plan. We can say that God creates the whole creation in the state of *islam*. Everything that is in the state of *islam* is *muslim*. So we can say, God creates a *muslim* creation.

Everything that God creates is *muslim* – not just human beings. The natural world around us follows the creator's plan. The planets follow their set orbits. Rivers run downhill. Sunflowers and daffodils turn towards the sun. Fishes swim in water, and so on. We live in a *muslim* universe – at least it was when God created it but sometimes time and human interference bring changes that disrupt the natural balance and order.

What about human beings?

Human beings are part of the creation. As far as we know, we are the top of the natural pyramid. What makes us different from the other creatures? We have the God-given gift of freedom. The planets do not choose to follow their orbits. They just do it. They are programmed by God, we could say. We have been given freedom to choose to live as God intended or to rebel. If we rebel, we are opting for something less than fully human or fully *muslim*. To be fully human is to live as God commands.

Now we can see that every new-born baby is created *muslim*, that is in harmony with God and the rest of creation. This is why people who become Muslims as adults sometimes call themselves “reverts” – they are reverting to their natural condition. Time and other influences can lead us away from God into rebellion and sin. This helps us to understand the third of our family of words: *salam*. We often hear Muslims greeting one another with *salam 'alaykum*. This we normally translate as “peace be with you”. But you can see that this is the deepest kind of peace. What it really means is: “May you come ever more fully and completely into that perfect peace (*salam*) that can only come about when you and every other creature lives according to the great designer's plan and commands.”

Why take the risk?

The problem about creating free beings is that you have to accept that they will use that freedom in a way that does not please you. I give my son some money and tell him that he is free to use it as he chooses. It may be that he will rebel against the training that we have given him and use it in a way that I do not like. God has given us freedom and guidance but we can choose to rebel against God's guidance and that would be sin. So why take the risk?

Consider this example. We have a washing machine at home. We fill it with clothes and turn it on. The rest is automatic. It does not choose to obey or not. It just does what it is programmed to do. I don't feel the need to thank it! Now one day it breaks down and the washing begins to pile up. I get up before

anyone else on Saturday morning and steadily work my way through the pile, washing things by hand. I know that my wife has had a hard week at work and want to save her the time and effort. My action is a free one based on love and concern for someone else. I have done what no machine can do; that is a free act. God has as many angels in heaven as God wants constantly worshipping God. They have no choice, no free will. They are programmed to do it. What God wants is the worship of a free being motivated by love.

Two high dignities

God has given every human being two high dignities and also responsibilities. These are summed up in two Arabic words: *abd* and *khalifa*. To be an *abd* is to be a loving servant of God. Service without love is forced slavery. Love without the discipline of service leads to chaos. Four things go together in Islamic thinking: worship, obedience, service and love.

In the Qur'an we read that God created human beings for no other reason than that we should worship God (Q. 51:56). If we want to worship God, then we must obey all God's commands and keep clear of those things that God forbids. This will lead us to a life of service – to serve God and our fellow human beings. Muhammad tells us that "you have not put your foot on the first step of the ladder of faith until you wish for your neighbour all the good that you wish for yourself". We must learn to serve our families and take care of our neighbours. We must also serve our own selves by not doing anything that will harm us. Suicide is forbidden in Islam as we take to ourselves the right of God to decide when we should die. Alcohol and drugs are forbidden as they ruin us physically and mentally. All life is of the highest value in the sight of God. As the Qur'an puts it (Q. 5:32): to take a life unjustly is like killing all humankind and to save a life is like saving all humankind.

The motive for all human actions should be love. We have a saying summarising this that is attributed to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad:

Some worship God out of fear, that is the slaves' worship.
Some worship God for reward, that is the businessmen's worship.
And some worship him out of love for him, that is the worship of freemen.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Rabi'a of Basra, an eighth century woman mystic:

O God, if I obey you out of fear of hell, send me there as I am unworthy of you.
O God, if I obey you out of hope of the reward of heaven, deny it to me as I am unworthy of you.
But, O God, if I obey you out of pure love for you alone, then hide not your face, for you are a loving God.

To be a *khalifa* is to be the regent, the agent or representative of God on earth. The *khalifa* is the one sent with full authority to tend the earth according to the guidance of God. If human beings are polluting or corrupting the earth in some way, then we must act to stop it and repair the damage. We have to bring out the full beauty and potential of the creation. Consider the roses in our gardens. They are not natural. They are the work of human rose growers bringing out the full beauty over many years of joining together rose bushes of different sorts.

The *khalifa* must also be active in society. Human beings are charged with building a just society. We have to establish the rule of law, make money circulate to those in need and promote a life that leads to peace, prosperity and goodness.

These two dignities are given to every man and woman that ever lived and ever will live. We are to worship, obey, serve and love God and we are to be the agents of God on earth. Muslim men are reminded of this by their names. Have you ever met a man whose name begins with Abd followed by one of the beautiful names of God? Think about Abdullah (Servant of God) or Abd al-Rahman (Servant of the Most Merciful) or Abd al-Karim (Servant of the Most Generous). The very names are reminders of our common human dignity.

Held to account

God has given us these two responsibilities and made us free so that we can freely choose to live according to them. It is only reasonable that God will hold us to account for our lives. Every human being will face the Day of Judgement. We will be questioned and judged according to the way that we have lived. You cannot be someone's agent without them telling you how they want the job done. It would be unjust of God to judge us without giving us guidance on the correct way to live. That would be like punishing someone for breaking the speed limit but without telling them beforehand what the limit is! Our good and bad actions do not affect God but rather expand or contract our relationship with God. Our bad deeds will eventually rebound on us as punishment (Q. 16:34) and our good deeds will expose us more to God's infinite blessings.

The need for guidance

All human beings are in need of God's guidance on how to live the human project. The first to receive guidance from God were the first human beings, Adam and Eve (Q. 2:37-39). The Qur'an tells us that no people or nation on earth has been left without guidance. God is one and all human beings are equal. God has no favourites. We all belong to the one human race. This means that the essence of the guidance sent by God is always the same. It

would be unjust for God to guide one group of people to live the human project one way and another group in a fundamentally different way.

Guidance from God is called revelation. The Qur'an tells us that revelation comes in two deposits: in the scriptures and in the world around us, the "book of nature." From the beginning of time, God has been sending scriptures to the earth. The first was sent to Adam and Eve. We should not think that "scripture" has to be something written down. It could be verbal guidance given by God. We do not know how many scriptures have been sent to the earth by God but we can assume that it must be hundreds. All the peoples of the earth have been sent at least one. We know for sure about five scriptures mentioned by name in the Qur'an. These were the ones given to Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad. They all received essentially the same guidance from God about how human life should be lived.

We can also read the signs of God in nature (Q. 3:190-191). By using our powers of observation, investigation and reason, we can draw out guidance from the natural world (Q. 91:1-10). This might be through observing the ways of life of animals. It might be through investigating the health-giving properties of plants. We can see that if we do certain things, like destroying our natural environment, certain consequences will follow.

Books are not enough!

We don't learn how to cook by reading cookery books. We need someone to show us by example. How do we put the guidance of God into practice? We need role models to show us and act as guides. These are the Prophets. They receive guidance from God, put it into practice so that we can follow it, and guide communities on the way that leads to Paradise.

If we think about role models for human beings, two things are obvious. First, they must be like us in every way. I cannot model my life on an angel or an animal but only on someone fully human like me. Prophets are 100% human, nothing more and nothing less (Q. 14:11). There is no divinity in any Prophet. Second, they must do the right thing all the time, they must be sinless. If they were sinning part of the time and doing the right thing part of the time, then we would never know when to believe them. God protects the Prophets from sin so that they can be perfect role models for us.

The Qur'an says we do not know how many Prophets have been sent to the earth. There is a saying of Muhammad that speaks of 124,000. This is a huge number and we are told that at least one Prophet has been sent to all the peoples or nations of the earth (Q. 10:47). In the Qur'an we learn the names of twenty-five of these Prophets. Twenty-one of them are also mentioned in the Bible. They include: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, Jonah, John (the Baptist) and Jesus. The four that are not mentioned by name in the

Bible are Hud, Salih and Shu'ayb (earlier Prophets sent to the Arabs) and Muhammad. Although the Qur'an says that Jesus spoke about the coming of Muhammad and so some Muslims have searched for references to him in the Bible.

A TURNING POINT IN HISTORY

Starting in 610CE, the Qur'an was sent down to Muhammad. It says of itself that it is the last scripture to be sent to the earth and that God will preserve it from error for all time (Q. 15:9). It is the final book of revelation to be sent to guide all men and women from that time onwards. In the same way, the Qur'an says that Muhammad is the last Prophet (Q. 33:40). His mission is universal, to all humankind (Q. 21:107). This marks a turning point in history. Before it, there were many communities on earth following earlier scriptures and Prophets, which taught essentially the same message. If the earlier Prophets had lived in the time of Muhammad, they would have recognised and accepted his prophethood and message. From now on, all men and women are called to follow the last scripture and the last Prophet.

Earlier, we could speak of everything being *muslim*, but from now on every human being is called to be Muslim with a capital M. This means a follower of the guidance of the Qur'an and Muhammad. Earlier, we could talk about God creating the world in the state of *islam*, but now we can speak of the final way of life for men and women being called Islam, with a capital I.

Introducing Muhammad

Muhammad was born in Makka, a city in Arabia, in 570CE. His father, Abdullah, came from a merchant family but he died before Muhammad was born. Muhammad's mother was Amina and she too died while he was a small boy. The key people in bringing up Muhammad after the death of his parents were his grandfather Abdul Muttalib until his death and then his uncle Abu Talib. He taught Muhammad the family business of trading by transporting goods with camels. They went south to Yemen to buy goods from India and East Africa. Some of these goods would be taken all the way to the markets of Syria. Makka was a great trading city.

In the middle of Makka stood a centuries-old simple cuboid building called the *Ka'ba*. Muslims believe that this was re-built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. It stood on the site of the first building on earth built by Adam for the worship of God. God contributed to the building of the *Ka'ba* by sending a stone from Paradise. This was called the Black Stone and was built into one corner.

Over the centuries between Ishmael and Muhammad, the Arabs stopped worshipping God and started to worship idols of their own making. When Muhammad was young, there were reckoned to be 360 idols in, on and around

the *Ka'ba*. It had become a great centre of pilgrimage. The Bedouin from the desert would bring one of their gods there and then come on pilgrimage a few times each year to worship the god. The merchants of Makka encouraged this as it meant that the Bedouin could buy all that they needed for their next season of travelling in the desert. Muhammad's own family were not idol-worshippers but instead worshipped the one God although they did not have much knowledge about God at that time. We call them the *Hanif*, the upright, the seekers after the truth.

In the countries surrounding Arabia, there were different Christian groups: in Egypt, Iraq, Ethiopia, Syria and Palestine. We know from Muslim sources of one Christian settlement south of Makka, at a place called Najran. There were also some Jewish clans north of Makka, in a city called Yathrib, which would later be called Madina.

On one of their trading journeys, when Muhammad was a boy of around twelve, he was travelling across the Syrian desert with his uncle, Abu Talib. A learned Christian monk, who lived there, called Bahira, had been inspired by God to stop the caravan and search for someone special. After going through all the men in the party, he came to Muhammad. They sat together and had a long conversation on spiritual matters. Bahira said to Abu Talib, "Take good care of the boy; I see the sign of prophethood on him." Muslims regard this as significant as it is the representative of the earlier Prophet Jesus recognising the last Prophet, Muhammad.

Marriage and adult life

When Muhammad became a man, he established a reputation for being wise and truthful. He was known as an honest merchant, who always dealt fairly with buyers and sellers. There was one day when they were doing some repairs to the walls of the *Ka'ba*. They had taken out the Black Stone during the work. The question came up as to who should replace it. The elders of all the clans of Makka wanted the honour and it would soon have come to fighting. They agreed to ask for Muhammad's help to decide. He laid a blanket on the ground and placed the stone on it. Then he asked for one from each clan to take hold of the blanket. Together they all carried the blanket and stone back to the *Ka'ba* and Muhammad steadied it into place. The tension was ended and all were satisfied that they had done their part.

There was a widow in Makka called Khadija. She had been left a trading business by her husband. Goods were bought in Yemen and taken by camel caravans to the markets of Syria. She could run the business but she needed a reliable manager to travel with the goods. She asked around to find the most reliable young merchant. People pointed her towards Muhammad. She appointed him as her manager. After a while, she was so impressed by his character that she proposed marriage to him. They were married for twenty-

five years until Khadija died in 619. One of their daughters was Fatima, who will become important later in the story. Their two sons died when they were infants.

The Qur'an is sent down

Muhammad was always a seeker after knowledge and spiritual wisdom. He had no time for the idol-worship of the Arabs. He wanted to keep away from their ways and develop a deeper knowledge of the one and only God. He used to go away from Makka into the surrounding hills. There was a cave on Mount Hira where he used to make a spiritual retreat. Sometimes he would take food and water with him and stay there for days.

It was in this cave, on an odd-numbered night towards the end of the month of Ramadan (probably on the 27th night), in the year 610 that an amazing event took place. It was a very dark night as the moon had nearly completed its cycle. A bright light appeared on the distant horizon and began to draw closer. Soon the light took the shape of the angel Gabriel or Jibril in Arabic.

Jibril stopped a distance from Muhammad; about twice as far as one can shoot an arrow. He spoke the Arabic word "*iqra.*" This comes from the verb "to recite" but it is the command form "Speak!" Muhammad did not know what to say. The angel drew closer and said again "*iqra.*" Still Muhammad did not know what to say. He told the angel that he was *ummi*, which means that he had never been to school and did not know what he should say; the term *ummi* comes to have a technical meaning: "without knowledge of the earlier scriptures." Jibril came right up to Muhammad and took him in a hug. This was a heart-to-heart hug. The heart is understood to be the place of wisdom and understanding. Muslims believe that the heart of Muhammad was purified by the sending down of the Qur'an on his heart at this time. Now when the angel stepped back and again said "*iqra,*" the first verses of the Qur'an just welled-up from his heart and appeared on his lips. They are recorded in chapter (*sura*) 96, verses (*ayat*) 1-5.

Recite in the name of your Lord who created; created the human being from a mass that clings. Recite! And your Lord is the most generous, who taught by the pen, who taught the human being what he/she did not know.

The process of revelation

It is really important that we get the process of revelation clear in our minds. Muhammad is not the author of the Qur'an. When he spoke these words, he knew that he was not in control. God was in control of sending it down and putting the Qur'an together in Arabic. God remained in control until the moment that the words left the lips of Muhammad. The Arabic word that we

are translating here as revelation literally means “to send down” (*tanzil*). Muhammad is the speaker and conveyor of the Qur'an. He is not in any sense the author. The Qur'an is not the word of Muhammad but the Word of God.

Different Muslim scholars through the centuries have given models to help us to understand this process. Two points help to give us a clearer picture. The Qur'an was sent down on the heart of Muhammad and not to his ears or his eyes; it is a deeper, more internal process than hearing or reading. Muhammad did not have to memorise the Qur'an in the way that we might; he just knew it once it had been sent down. Perhaps a simple computer metaphor would be good in our times. We can say that the Qur'an was “downloaded to the hard disk of Muhammad’s heart.” Throughout the rest of Muhammad’s life groups of verses were brought to his lips.

Muhammad in Makka

Muhammad told his wife Khadija what had happened and she became his first follower. Gradually he told other members of his family and close friends. Later he was told by a verse of the Qur'an to speak about the revelation in public. This began to attract some people to follow him and become Muslims. They were a small group of perhaps a few hundred. They were persecuted and people made fun of them for believing things that were unknown in Arab thinking at the time, like life after death. The verses of the Qur'an revealed during these years took three main themes. First, there is only one God and people should stop worshipping idols. Second, that people should live a just and moral life, being fair in all their dealings. Finally, that this life is not all that there is but there is also reward and punishment after death.

Three episodes from Makka

The persecution of the young Muslim community grew stronger. In the end, Muhammad sent part of his community away from Makka. They crossed to Ethiopia (Abyssinia) where there was a Christian king. They told the king that they had been sent by the Messenger of God and asked for protection. He asked them to recite verses from the Qur'an so that he could hear the message. When they did so, the king consulted with his bishops and judges then stood up with his royal staff in his hand. He drew a line in the sand. He said that the difference between what he had heard and his own Christianity was the thickness of the line. He took them in as refugees until it was safe for them to return.

One night Muhammad was woken by an angel. Together they rode on a mysterious mount all the way to Jerusalem (the Night Journey). It's called the Holy City in the Qur'an. They dismounted on the rock, later covered by the Dome of the Rock. There he met with all the earlier Prophets and led them in prayer. He was then taken up to heaven where he had an encounter with God

(the Ascent to Heaven). God taught him things that only God can know. This was when he received the instruction that Muslims should pray five times each day. He returned to the earth in Jerusalem. The angel then took him back to Makka. This was a mysterious “out of time” journey that all took place in a single instant. Jerusalem, the home of the Hebrew Prophets, has been of great importance to Muslims ever since this time. Muslims have made pilgrimages there throughout the centuries.

In 619 Muhammad suffered two tragedies. His wife Khadija died. She had been a great support both to him and the infant Muslim community. Also his uncle, Abu Talib died. He had become the head of their clan and so he was able to give Muhammad protection. Now that protection was withdrawn. The pressure built up and there were plots to kill Muhammad. He tried to take his message to a nearby city called Ta'if. They rejected him. Stones and dirt were thrown at him. The children drove him from their city. Muhammad rested, cut and filthy, in a vineyard outside Ta'if. The angel Gabriel came to him. He said that God had given him permission to destroy the city if Muhammad agreed. Muhammad said no. If the people were dead, then they would never have a chance to repent and choose to follow Islam. Muhammad then prayed. He said that he did not complain about the way that he had been treated but only about his own failure to put over the message properly. As long as things were in order between God and Muhammad, then he did not care about anything else.

A big change – to Madina

There was a city about 350kms north of Makka. It was made up of many different clans. There were disputes and people could not agree with one another. They decided that they needed a single leader to unite them. Groups of them came to Makka to listen to Muhammad's teaching and report back. In the end, they made him a formal offer to come to live with them as their collective leader. There were Arab idol-worshippers and Jews in the city as well as a group who had become Muslims. Muhammad agreed to go there with his Muslim community. This was called the Hijra or migration. They travelled in groups during 622. Muhammad and his companion Abu Bakr were amongst the last to leave. His cousin and son-in-law, Ali, slept in his place to cover his departure. From now on the city would be called Madina. This would be 1AH in the Muslim calendar: “year one, in the Year of the Hijra.”

The Muslim community changed a lot during the next ten years. The Muslims from Makka were traders. Those in Madina were farmers. Muhammad paired up one from each community so that they could share their land and talents. They came under attack by armies from Makka three times. The Makkans wanted to kill Muhammad and stop the rise of Madina. Muhammad had to lead his men into battle against them. Eventually there was an end to the fighting and Makka surrendered peacefully. Muhammad granted a general amnesty to his enemies and Makka became a Muslim city. It became the

spiritual centre of Islam while Madina was the centre of administration. Muhammad made the formal pilgrimage to Makka, the Hajj, just once in his lifetime a few months before he died.

The number of Muslims grew rapidly over these years and Madina became a place of importance. The Bedouin of the desert and people from other parts of Arabia, including Jewish and Christian clans, made treaties with Muhammad. By the time that he died in 632, most of Arabia was under his leadership. The Muslim community had grown from a persecuted minority to become the major influence in the region. Never had the Arab clans been so united. Muhammad was the leader in every way. He was not only the spiritual guide but also the political, legal and military head of the community. According to the Constitution of Madina, the people were to be one *umma*, one community.

Leadership after Muhammad

When Muhammad died in 632, there was great distress amongst the Muslims. A group of elders felt that immediate strong leadership was needed. They decided that the first head of the community after Muhammad should be his respected companion Abu Bakr. The majority of the people followed their elders and gave him their support but a group thought that this decision was wrong. The majority would later be called the Sunnis. They believe that neither the Qur'an nor Muhammad laid down who should be the leader of the community. They understood that the leader must be the most pious and wise Muslim – no matter what family, clan or nationality. They called the leader the Caliph. There were four “Rightly-Guided Caliphs” from 632 to 661 before the first dynasty rose up. These were the Umayyads and they are generally regarded as being corrupt rulers.

The group that did not agree with this process are now called the Shi'a. This means “party.” They are the Party of Ali. They understand things differently. They interpret verses of the Qur'an (Q. 33:33) to mean that God chose and purified the Family of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*). This was a clear sign that leadership should come from this family only. The members of this family were Muhammad, Fatima (his daughter with Khadija), her husband Ali (the cousin of Muhammad), and their two sons, Hasan and Husayn. They understand another verse in the Qur'an to be God identifying Ali, as the one who should lead the community after Muhammad (Q. 5:55). They also interpret events from the life of Muhammad to show that he appointed Ali to follow him (Q. 5:67). Especially they point to an event just after the pilgrimage that Muhammad and the Muslims made to Makka shortly before his death. On this occasion, they say, Muhammad publicly declared him to be the one who should follow him as leader and then the final verse of the Qur'an (Q. 5:3) was revealed. The Sunnis have a different interpretation of these verses and events.

What's particular about the Shi'a?

The Shi'a point to a saying of Muhammad that he would leave two precious things after him to guide the community: the Qur'an and his Family. They are to be like the twin rails of a railway track. With only one rail or if the rails separate, then the whole system collapses. The Family were purified and made sinless so that they could guide the community without any error. They hold that Muhammad, speaking under God's direction, appointed Ali as the one who should follow him as leader and that God gave him a share of the light that inspired Muhammad. So Ali is the first divinely-appointed leader or Imam (with a capital I). All Imams share in this purification and this light. They are God's chosen ones to guide the community (Q. 4:59). Each Imam infallibly names the one that God has chosen to succeed him.

As they are without sin or error, these Imams could interpret the Qur'an correctly through inspiration (*ilham*). They could guide the community on the right path (Q. 4:54). They established a detailed pattern for following the way laid out by the Qur'an and Muhammad. For the majority of Shi'a, there were twelve of these divinely-appointed Imams. This number was symbolic like the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus. The Twelfth Imam did not die but went into hiding (occultation) and is out of contact with human beings since 941. God will never leave the earth without a guide. Although he cannot be seen or contacted, he is alive. He is the Living Imam and Shi'a Muslims ask for his guidance and intercession. In the last phase of human history, he will return as Imam al-Mahdi (The Awaited Imam) to establish the rule of justice on the earth. The Imams will also have a particular role in intercession on the Day of Judgement.

There are minorities amongst the Shi'a. They disagree with the majority about the correct lines of Imams to be followed. Amongst these are the Zaydis, found mainly in Yemen, who disagree as to who should have been the Fifth Imam. Much larger are the Ismailis, found today in Central Asia, East Africa, India, Pakistan, North America and Europe, who disagree with the majority about the identity of the Seventh Imam. The largest community of these Ismailis are those who follow the Aga Khan but the Bohra are also significant in East Africa and India.

The Shi'a are concentrated in certain regions of the world. They are a majority in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, and significant minorities in East Africa, India, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Syria.

The Qur'an in context

Muhammad's active prophetic ministry lasted twenty-two years. This was from 610, with the first revelation, until his death in 632. The Qur'an was revealed throughout this period, usually in small groups of verses. It is made

up of 114 chapters (*suras*). These vary greatly in length from three to 286 verses (*ayat*). About 86 *suras* were revealed in Makka (610-622). The remaining 28 were revealed in Madina (622-632). From this we can see that every group of verses was revealed into a certain context. To understand what they mean, we need to see them in that context and ask how Muhammad and the young Muslim community understood them. How did they put them into practice?

If we read verses from the Qur'an out of context, there is a good chance of drawing a wrong meaning from them. Let us take the question of alcohol. What is the teaching of the Qur'an? There are three verses that speak of alcohol. They were revealed at intervals with some years between each of them. This gives us the idea of God gradually reforming the life of the community in stages. One says, "Do not come to your prayers when you are drunk" (Q. 4:43). The next says, "There are good things in alcohol and bad. [If only you knew it,] the bad outweigh the good and you would keep clear of it" (Q. 2:219). The final verse says, "All alcohol is forbidden" (Q. 5:90). So what is the teaching of the Qur'an on alcohol?

To answer the question, we need to know the contexts of each verse. The earliest was revealed to warn Muslims not to be like the idol-worshippers who used alcohol as part of their religious rituals. The second verse appeals to Muslims' good sense to keep clear of alcohol. The final verse was revealed later and it forbids alcohol completely. How did Muhammad and the Muslim community understand it? They destroyed all their stocks of alcohol in Madina. It is clear then that the teaching of the Qur'an from that time onwards is that alcohol is forbidden.

Interpreting the Qur'an

To understand what the Qur'an teaches about something, we must take every verse on that topic to be found in the Qur'an. Only rarely does the Qur'an say everything on a subject in a single place. The Arabic of each verse must be examined carefully to draw out its precise meaning. Every verse must be interpreted in its own context. Then we have to allow the different verses of the Qur'an to interpret one another. The Qur'an acts as its own commentary and the guidance needs to be understood in relation to the overall principles of Qur'anic teaching.

Next we have to look at how Muhammad understood the teaching and put it into practice. His customary practice in living out the Muslim way of life is called the *Sunna*. He is the best interpreter of the Qur'an. He was inspired by God and sinless. He made no errors in interpreting the guidance. We find this information by looking in his biographies (*sira*). Some details are kept for us in the early commentaries and histories. The most important source to know his teaching is in his Hadith or Traditions. These are things that Muhammad

said, taught, did or of which he approved. They have been collected with great attention to detail. They have been checked to make sure that they agree with the Qur'an. They were handed down orally and in writing within the community, so the chain of those who handed them down is inspected in minute detail. For the Shi'a, they need to be traced back according to the particular rules of their scholarly tradition including the transmission of one of the infallible, divinely-appointed Imams.

It cannot be a surprise that over 1400 years many different commentaries have been written on the Qur'an. They come from every major language group. From many different cultures and periods of history. They approach the task from various angles: language, history, law, mysticism, philosophy and the traditions of Muhammad. New commentaries are being written today. Not surprisingly, they do not all agree with one another. Although the text of the Qur'an is one and common to all Muslims, interpretations of the meaning of the text vary significantly. Such diversity is accepted and permitted within the Muslim community, although some people will always want to say that their interpretation is the only correct one.

Drawing up a way of life

It was the duty of Prophets who were given a new scripture to establish a way or pattern of living that put the guidance into practice. This "established way" is called in Arabic a Shari'a. The word itself means a well-beaten path that leads straight to the goal. This is like the path from a village to the well from which the people draw their water. It will be the straightest quickest route and so well-marked that one could find it in the dark. The goal for a Muslim's life is to follow this path in obedience and draw closer to God.

The sources for the Shari'a are first the Qur'an and second the *Sunna* or customary practice of Muhammad. The Qur'an is not a book of law but a book of ethical guidance. The *Sunna* gives us guidance on what Muhammad did in many specific instances. Based on these sources, the scholars of Islam have drawn up a code of life to guide people on the way to Paradise.

Muhammad wanted to send a man as governor to the Yemen. He called the man that he wanted and asked him how he would give guidance on the Islamic way of life to the people there. He replied that he would use first the Qur'an and then the *Sunna*. "And then?" said Muhammad. "I will use my own reason," came the response. The man got the job. Using human reason is the way that the guidance must be applied.

The Sunnis do this by looking for something similar that has already been covered. One of the first examples in history was about wine. The verses in the Qur'an that we noted earlier actually speak about grape-wine. The Arabs also made wine from dates; was that forbidden too? What about alcohol in

general? The scholars reasoned that grape-wine makes people lose self-control and changes the balance of the mind. Date-wine and grape-wine are similar in the way that they work. The ruling was extended to all forms of alcohol. What we generally call “drugs” have a similar effect, therefore they are forbidden too.

The Shi'a have a different method. They like to deduce things from agreed general principles. Eating any animals that eat dead animals is forbidden. Hyenas eat dead animals, therefore they are forbidden for Muslims to eat.

Schools of Law

In the first few centuries of Islam, in different regions of the growing Islamic Empire, various ways developed to give detailed guidance on living the Islamic Shari'a. Over time, five main Schools of Law were accepted within the community. The vast majority of Muslims follow one of these Schools; some choose to take their guidance directly from the Qur'an and *Sunna*, thus relying on the earliest generations of Muslims rather than later scholarly reasoning. The Schools agree on a huge amount but there is room for difference of opinion. These differences are seen as a blessing and not a weakness. The Shari'a has the ability to accommodate legitimate diversity as an enrichment.

The Shi'a who recognise twelve Imams follow the Ja'fari School, named after the Sixth Imam. The four Sunni Schools are named after their most important early scholars. They are the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali Schools. They are traditionally rooted in certain parts of the world. If a Muslim was born in North or West Africa, for example, she would be likely to follow the Maliki School. With modern transport and the movement of peoples, there is more mixing. It is permitted for a Muslim to change from one Sunni School to another for good reasons.

A complete way of life

Islam gives guidance for every aspect of human life: personal, family, community, society, political, economic, business and spiritual. Islamic Law covers personal, civil, commercial and criminal law. The central Islamic ethic is justice. Muslims are required to promote justice on the earth. Justice must be done, even if it goes against oneself (Q. 4:135). There can be no favourites under justice. On one occasion someone suggested to Muhammad that he should let a guilty person go free because she came from a high-ranking family. His response was to say, “Even if it was my own daughter Fatima, she would get justice.” Justice does not carry a label. There is no such thing as “Muslim justice.” Justice is based on reason and evidence. Wherever justice is found, there is the Shari'a.

Criminal Law

There are 350 specifically legal verses in the Qur'an out of a total of 6235. Of these 350, only 30 verses speak about criminal law. A few of the most serious crimes that destroy the balance of society are mentioned with particular punishments; these are called the *hudud*. There were no prisons in seventh century Arabia, so punishments were physical or financial. Beatings and even executions were to be done in public so that the rest of the society would learn a lesson from the humiliation and suffering of the guilty person.

Muhammad taught that the *hudud* punishments are to be avoided if there is any room for doubt. An extremely high level of proof is needed. Let us take the case of adultery, which under certain circumstances, following the Hadith, can carry the death penalty. To find someone guilty would require the evidence of four adult eye-witnesses. They would need to have seen the actual act itself in detail. All their evidence would have to agree and stand up to investigation and cross-examination. They would have to stand by their evidence until witnessing the execution. If less than four witnesses came forward, the case would be dismissed through lack of evidence. The witnesses would be beaten for destroying the person's honour. If witnesses changed their evidence, they would be beaten and never accepted as a witness in future. Even after all this, one needs to ask what kind of people stood by and watched such an act and why did they not attempt to stop it. It is also possible to convict someone on the basis of their own confession, which they keep repeating over a period of time. Here the judge would have to question whether the person is sane and free from any kind of pressure to make such a confession. The law applies equally to both men and women.

KEY BELIEFS

We have only the space here to select a few of the most important beliefs of Islam and explore them a little.

There is only one God

There is only one eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing God. God alone is worthy of worship by all creatures. God is unlike any created thing and God does not share divinity with anything else, either created or uncreated. God cannot be divided into parts. God has no partners and it is a major sin to worship anything alongside or in addition to God (Q. 4:48). God is beyond time and space. God existed before time was created and so God is not measured or restricted by days, years or centuries in the way that we creatures are. God is not a material being, so God is not limited by space – there is nowhere that we can say God is and nowhere that God is not.

God does not belong to our created world, so we can say that God is transcendent or “beyond.” This means that our earthly language cannot stretch to describe God as God really is. All that we can do is to use the language that we have to speak about God knowing that we glimpse only a dim reflection of the true reality of God. When we say that God is merciful, just or generous, these are our earthly concepts applied to God – they are true but they do not do any kind of justice to the true nature of God. The whole of our lives, both in this world and in the life that comes after death, are a journey of exploration to strive to grasp little-by-little the infinite and unknowable nature of God.

God is not distant or unapproachable (Q. 2:186). Rather, God is closer to us than our jugular vein (Q. 50:16), so God is always interested in the life and needs of each one of us. The scholars of Islam searched the Qur'an and the Hadith or teachings of Muhammad for the names by which God is known (Q. 7:180; 59:23-24). Each of these gives us an insight into the characteristics or qualities of God. We learn, for example, that God is: the Source of Goodness, the All-forgiving, the Patient, the Light, the Loving, the Source of Peace, the Friend, the Provider and so on. These names give us ways of speaking about God while always remembering that we are using human qualities to speak about the transcendent God. By meditating on these names, we are purified and can journey on our quest to understand something of the infinite God.

Angels and Jinn

Human beings and the other creatures of the earth are not the only beings that God created. There are also the angels. They are spirit beings created of light who are totally obedient to God in every way. They act as God's agents to bring messages to the earth and to perform all the tasks that God commands to keep the creation operating as God wills. We cannot even imagine how many angels there are but two are assigned to each human being to record all our good and bad deeds during life so that these records can be presented on the Day of Judgement.

There is another form of life also called the *jinn*. They are beings created of fire, who are invisible to human beings most of the time. They have freewill, so they can be good obedient servants of God and can also be rebellious agents of temptation. One of these *jinn*, whose piety gave way to arrogance, rebelled against God to the extent that he said that he knew better than God. His name was Iblis and he became the Great Tempter or *Shaytan* (Q. 15:31-39). He will live until the end of the world and, together with his rebellious companions, spends his time tempting human beings who are not mindful of God into rebellion and sin.

Sources of guidance

We have seen that human beings are in need of guidance from God as to how to live the human project and thus grow in purity and wisdom throughout this life in preparation for the life after death. This guidance comes through the scriptures, the last of which is the Qur'an, and through our reason, which allows us to reflect on the world in which we live and read the signs of God there. We have seen also that God sends the Prophets as guides to show us how to put that guidance into practice. The last of these Prophets was Muhammad. After the death of Muhammad, pious, wise and scholarly Muslims have the responsibility of guiding the community, based on the Qur'an and teaching of the Prophet.

In the Shi'a tradition, God sent also the Imams as successors to Muhammad to act as infallible guides to the Muslim community. They shared the same light that was in Muhammad but they are not Prophets but Muhammad's co-workers to reinforce and unpack the guidance that he brought in the Qur'an. Through the blessing and will of God, they are sinless and thus perfect examples for human beings to follow. The first of the Imams was Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, who was followed by his two sons, Hasan and Husayn. They, together with Fatima, Muhammad's daughter, Ali's wife and the mother of their sons, comprise the purified and exalted Family of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt). All the divinely-appointed Imams are descended from this family. They were twelve in number, according to the majority of the Shi'a, with the Twelfth Imam disappearing from our sight and being out of contact from 941 onwards. He will reappear as Imam al-Mahdi towards the end of the world, to bring in an age of justice and peace on earth.

Power, freedom and destiny

God is all-powerful and the source of all power within the creation. This means that the power that human beings use to do good and bad deeds is ultimately God's power. Our good deeds are done in obedience to God but we have also the ability to rebel and abuse God's power to do bad deeds. This is a great gift to human beings and one of our dignities – to be free to obey or to disobey God.

If we ask: "What kind of a being is God?" then we must answer: "God is good." There is no evil in God. God wants only what is good for humankind. This means that, if we obey God, the outcome will be good. Our freedom lies in learning the will of God and putting it into practice so that we flourish as human beings and do not fall into rebellion and sin. Some Muslims put great emphasis on the freedom of the human will, emphasising that God gives us permission to act and therefore responsibility for our own destiny. Other Muslims emphasise the determining power of God and would speak more of God determining our lives, whilst still leaving us the freedom to obey or

disobey: nothing is written for us until we write it ourselves. The ultimate responsibility for our lives rests with us; God does not predestine anyone for damnation.

Let us explore this with an example. Imagine a parent teaching a child how to swim so that the child can safely navigate the water. The parent gives guidance also on where to swim and which places to avoid. If the child obeys the guidance, then dangers will be avoided. On the other hand, if the child rebels and disobeys the guidance, then the gift of learning how to swim can be abused by swimming in dangerous waters with disastrous consequences. The human being has been given the power to act and all the guidance necessary to avoid disaster and thus to flourish but with freedom comes the possibility to rebel and thus bad outcomes are the responsibility of the individual. Good gifts can be used for bad ends but the gifts and the intention of the giver remain good.

WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF RELIGION?

Now here's a question that every religious person should consider: What's the point? What's the purpose of religion? Where is it all leading? A Muslim answer would be that religion is a training ground in *taqwa*. *Taqwa* means God-consciousness; that I may be aware in every element of my life, words, actions and thoughts, that I am the creature of God, that God has given me a high vocation to serve, love, obey and worship God, that I am accountable to God and that, even though I cannot see God, God sees me all the time.

The modern Arabic word for vaccination is drawn from the same root as *taqwa*. We can see that part of the meaning is about protection. If we live fully God-conscious all the time, then we would be protected from sin. There would be no room for the devil to enter in. To live fully conscious of God is *ihsan* – “to live as though you see God, for even though you cannot now see God, God sees you.”

All the practices of religion are to push up our level of *taqwa* and keep us in that state. Our prayer, economics, fasting, social life, pilgrimage, obedience to the law, study of the Qur'an, family life, and imitation of Muhammad in every way are to promote our level of *taqwa*. When we meet problems, this increases our *sabr* – patience. These are the two key virtues of Islam.

Worship God alone!

The first duty of Muslim men and women is to focus their worship on God alone (Q. 112). Nothing else is worthy of worship instead of God, or in addition to God, or in partnership with God. This obviously rules out worship of idols, multiple or local gods, semi-divine people, and things that were worshipped by our ancestors. It also rules out modern-day idols, such as money, power, ideology, racial superiority or military might. This is not just a

one-off declaration. Muslims need to consider whether their work serves God or something else. Do our financial or political practices serve God? Am I serving God in my family relations or are there other values at work? By checking everyday that it is God alone that we worship, we promote our sense of *taqwa*.

The main statement of Muslim faith is called the *Shahada*. This reads, “I bear witness that there is no god (that is, nothing worthy of worship) except God and Muhammad is the Messenger (Prophet) of God.” This comes in every call to prayer from the mosque (*adhan*). It is recited in every formal prayer (*salat*). It is common to find it written on walls in mosques, public places and homes. The challenge is always before a Muslim’s eyes: am I worshipping God alone or allowing my service to fall short and to worship something else instead?

Three types of prayer

In Islam, we meet three types of prayer. These are given the Arabic names *salat*, *du'a* and *dhikr*.

Salat is formal prayer. It happens five times each day. It provides the skeleton of the day on which hangs everything else. The times are set according to the passage of the sun:

- before sunrise (*salat al-fajr*)
- after the sun has passed the highest point in the sky (*salat al-zuhr*)
- in the late afternoon when the shadows lengthen (*salat al-‘asr*)
- just after sunset (*salat al-maghrib*)
- at night-time (*salat al-isha*)

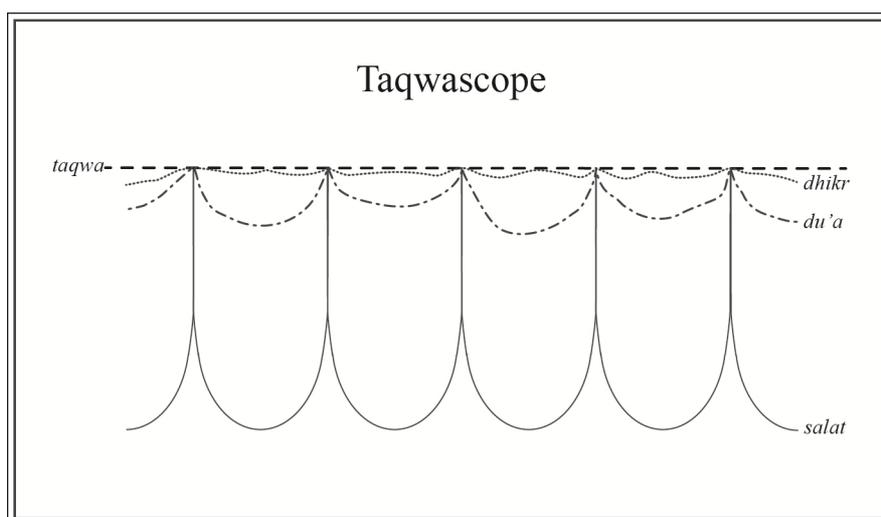
Du'a is informal prayer. It is the believer talking to God or making a petition. This can happen in any language, at any time, in any place. There are *du'a* found in the Qur'an and in the sayings of Muhammad. Holy people of earlier generations left collections of their *du'a*. Muslims can use their own words to talk to God. *Du'a* cover every aspect of life: prayers of praise, glorifying God, thanksgiving, seeking forgiveness and intercessions. They can be thought of as raising the mind to God throughout the day to dedicate every action to the worship of God. The most commonly used *du'a* is simply to say *Bismillah*: “In the name of God”. If every thought, word and action during the day is truly *Bismillah*, then this pushes up our level of *taqwa* and keeps us away from sin.

Dhikr is training our hearts to remember God continuously. It is the raising of our hearts to God by repeating the beautiful names of God. When our bodies and minds are doing other things, our hearts can be singing God’s praises. This is recommended for all Muslims but the sufis or mystics have developed special methods to lead people into such remembrance. Simple prayers, like the Arabic name of God, Allah, are recited. First by the lips. Then the breath takes up the prayer. Then it begins to enter deeper within us to our hearts.

Eventually our whole being can be praising God. This pushes up our level of *taqwa* even though we are not conscious of this deeper “remembrance” of God.

Prayer is a transforming process. It raises our level of *taqwa* until, God willing, we reach the permanent state of “living as though we see God” (*ihsan*). Over the centuries, from the time of Muhammad, the sufis have developed ways of training the heart to remember God and help this process of transformation. Through this transformation, the believer ascends in closeness to God just as Muhammad ascended in his Night Journey and Ascent into Heaven. God has more names than we could know but there is a famous list of Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God, which are found in the Qur'an and Hadith. Each name speaks of a quality of God. Through taking these Names deep within our hearts, these qualities can begin to shine through us. Some of these Names are: Most-merciful, All-forgiving, Giver of Peace, Most-gracious, All-knowing, the Truth, and the Trusted Friend.

The following diagramme shows a “*taqwascop*e”. It is a way of showing how the three forms of prayer combine to push up and maintain our levels of *taqwa* during the day. The solid line with five peaks shows the skeleton of our daily *salat*. The broken line at the top is the line of *taqwa*. We reach *taqwa* at the climax of our daily *salat*. Unfortunately, we get distracted by other things and drift into a trough of forgetfulness. Never more than a few hours go by before we are called again to seek forgiveness and guidance and enter again into the state of *taqwa*. The line with dashes shows the troughs being pushed up through our *du'a*. This raises our level of *taqwa* between formal prayers. The dotted line finally shows our heart at work making *dhikr*, to keep us closer to *taqwa* all through the day.



A life of prayer

Salat is the form of prayer that we see most often. This is the formal prayer in which people line up in straight rows and move as one body. This idea of

praying as a single congregation is important as it stresses the unity and equality of believers and their concern for one another. If two or more people are going to pray together, one must lead and the others follow the leader. The prayer leader is called the *imam*, who will be the most pious and learned Muslim present. When men and women come to prayers together, they pray as a single congregation but in two separate blocks. This is for reasons of modesty. If the congregation is all women or women and children, then the *imam* will be a woman. If the congregation is all men or mixed, men and women, then the *imam* will be a man. There is no priesthood in Islam. Any Muslim can lead the prayers provided that he or she lives a good life and has sufficient knowledge of the Qur'an and how to do the prayers.

Salat can be performed in any clean place – at home, at work, in the open air or in a mosque. A mosque is a place set aside for activities like prayer, teaching and community gatherings. A purpose-built mosque should have rooms designed for men and women. This might mean two rooms side-by-side, a downstairs room for men with a ladies' gallery above, or one large room in which the men pray at the front and the women at the rear – just as they did in Muhammad's mosque in Madina.

In union with all other Muslims

Salat is performed facing in the direction of the *Ka'ba* in Makka. Direction in Arabic is *qibla*. The *qibla* in a mosque is often marked by an alcove built into the wall, called a *mihrab*. At home or in any other place, Muslims will find the *qibla* by using a compass and then mark it for the future. All over the world Muslims turn towards the *Ka'ba* for prayer. This means that the *Ka'ba* is like the hub at the centre of a wheel. Prayers are timed by the passage of the sun, which is rising and setting somewhere on earth every minute. This means that there is no moment in any day when there are not Muslims somewhere on earth turning towards the *Ka'ba* in prayer. Not just today but back through history and on into the future. Each time that Muslims turn to face the *Ka'ba*, they are united with all other Muslims on earth and throughout the ages. This united community of believers is called the Muslim *umma*. *Salat* raises awareness of the *umma* and reminds people of their responsibility for one another.

Before performing *salat*, Muslims need to have ritual cleanliness. This means making the ritual washing or *wudu*. This is to wash the hands, arms, face (mouth, nose, ears), and feet. This is a kind of breaking-off from normal work to prepare for "God's service" in prayer. It is a way of calling to mind our sins so that we can ask for forgiveness. The actual place for prayer must also be clean. Most mosques have a carpet for this reason and shoes are taken off before stepping onto it. In other places, Muslims use a prayer mat. The final preparation is a pure intention. Muslims declare their intention (*niyya*) to draw closer to God before each *salat* begins.

Close ranks! Be a single body

When Muslims line up for *salat*, we see the stress in Islam on human equality. There are no reserved places. People fill the first row until it is full from wall to wall. Then the second row begins until it is full, and so on. Muslims stand physically touching the person next to them at their upper arms and in some Schools, at the sides of their feet too. All human beings are equal, no matter what colour their skin, their social position, their wealth or their education. All line up in straight rows depending on who is there first. Now we see the reason for men and women praying in separate blocks in the one congregation. A man feeling women touching his arms and the sides of his feet is likely to be distracted from the prayer. Women praying touching men will be distracted in the same way. Men seeing a row of women praying in front of them are likely to lose concentration on the prayer. If the men and women pray in the same room, the women leave a space behind the rear row of men. It seems that women have more self-control! Everyone fixes their eyes on the ground just in front of them to focus their attention.

For each *salat*, there is flexibility about the precise timing. This allows people to arrange their lives so that the prayers naturally fit it. It is a principle of Islamic law that God does not want to make life difficult for people (Q. 2:185, 286). The various Schools of Islam have rules about how these prayers can be grouped together or caught up if they have to be delayed, depending on circumstances. If people are going to join the congregation in a mosque, then there needs to be an agreed timetable so that people know when to attend. These times of prayer are drawn to people's attention by the call to prayer or *adhan*. This is called from a tower or *minaret* by a man called a *mu'azzin*. These days this can be done with loud-speakers and some mosques even play a beautiful recording. Even if people do not stop what they are doing for prayer, the *adhan* acts as a reminder that they should pray. For example, in some Schools of Islam, the *adhan* for the early-morning prayer includes the line "Prayer is better than sleep."

The structure of salat

Each *salat* is made up of cycles of prayer called *rakat*. Each *raka* contains bodily positions, recitation of the Qur'an and short prayers said aloud or quietly. People stand for the recitation of the Qur'an. This is followed by everyone moving into a deep bow from the waist. The climax of the prayer is when Muslims kneel, then bend forwards to prostrate before God with their foreheads and hands on the floor in worship. Shi'a men and women prostrate so that their foreheads rest on a small piece of dry unbaked clay, called a *turba*. This is a time of absolute humility and submission before God alone.

The Qur'an is recited in Arabic from memory. Each Muslim, or the *imam* if they are praying in congregation, chooses the passages to be recited. They can

be short or long depending on the time that someone has available. In congregational prayer, they are fairly short to allow for some people having to go about their business. The movements are accompanied by short prayers like “All praise be to you O God.”

Each *salat* has a set number of these cycles – two, three or four. At the end of these cycles, there is a time when Muslims sit in their places and declare their faith in God alone and the prophethood of Muhammad. Then they call down God’s blessings on Muhammad and his family, and on Abraham and his family. This is followed by a time of intercession, praying for those in need. The end of the formal *salat* is marked by exchanging greetings of peace – *salam 'alaykum* – to neighbours on either side, to the angels and to the whole of humanity and creation.

The principal congregational *salat* of the week is on Friday in the middle of the day. Men are obliged to join a congregation if at all possible. Women also have to pray at this time and are free and encouraged to join the congregation in a mosque but they are not obliged to do so. This allows for the fact that, in traditional societies, women have the responsibility for children and the elderly, who may not be able to be left alone. The prayer takes the same format as every other *salat* except that the prayer is shortened to two *rakat*. There is an address or *khutba* given by the *imam* or another learned person. The speaker in a mosque stands or sits on a set of steps called a *minbar*. The *khutba* would include spiritual guidance and also touch on any matters in the life of the community or wider society.

Fasting for body, mind and soul

Fasting during the month of Ramadan has been commanded by God as an act of obedience and worship, but why? Fasting, like prayer, was part of the earlier revelations too. It seems that it is an important part of religious training. Why has God placed it as a requirement on human beings?

During the month of Ramadan, all food, drink and sexual relations are forbidden during the daylight hours (Q. 2:185). This is not because these things are bad. Quite the opposite. They are some of the most powerful urges that we have as human beings. If we can learn to take control of these things, then we will develop our general self-control affecting all aspects of life. Fasting is not about torture; it is about strengthening our personal discipline and promoting our sense of *taqwa* (Q. 2:183).

If we fast, it increases our awareness of the hunger and thirst that millions of people experience every day. They do not choose to go hungry; it is just a fact of life. Part of the injustice of our world is that some go hungry and others have too much to eat and become ill. Fasting makes us aware of how dependent we are on things beyond our control, like the sun and rain. All adult Muslims are

required to fast during this month, so it strengthens our sense of community spirit. People support one another in fasting. The fast begins before dawn and ends at sunset, then there is often a community meal called *iftar*.

When not to fast

Some people do not fast because it would injure their health. Those who are too young or too old, those who are sick or travelling are exempt. Women do not fast when they have their periods and are excused during pregnancy and while breast-feeding. Fasting requires a mental decision, so those who do not have the mental capacity to decide for themselves do not fast. Older people decide when they are too old to fast. Fasting is not required of children before puberty but many like to take part in some measure of fasting during Ramadan before that. They just want to be part of things! Those who miss days of fasting for some temporary reason, like travelling or illness, catch up on missed days later. Those who are prevented permanently, like those with certain types of illness that require a regular controlled intake of food, join in the spirit of fasting by feeding those who are in need.

Ramadan is not just about fasting. It is also about a review of one's whole life. It is a time of annual stock-taking: Do I fulfil my family duties properly? Do I play my part in the life of the community? How do I earn and spend my money? Do I give enough time to prayer and study? Am I careful about what I read and look at? Do I gossip or tell lies? Do I give a proper proportion of my surplus money to those in need? Ramadan is the time of year when many Muslims calculate their annual contributions to the welfare of others (*zakat* or *khums*).

The month of the Qur'an

It was during Ramadan that the Qur'an was first sent down to Muhammad. This was the time of God's greatest blessing to humanity; the sending of the final book of guidance to lead people to Paradise. Many Muslims will try to read or hear recited the whole of the Qur'an during this month. Sunni Muslims hold special prayer gatherings during Ramadan (*tarawih* prayers) when one-thirtieth of the Qur'an is recited each night. Shi'a Muslims also gather for Qur'an recitation and spend part of the night in private prayers. The odd-numbered night towards the end of Ramadan when the first revelation took place, widely considered to be the 27th, is called Lailat al-Qadr, the Night of Power or Destiny. Many pious Muslims will try to spend the whole of this night in prayer and listening to any message from God that might be spoken in their hearts. Ramadan is "the Month of God" when God is the host and people the guests gathering in God's presence. Muhammad said that the gates of heaven are wide open during this month for our prayers to ascend and God's messages to be sent down to us. At the same time, the gates of hell are closed and the *Shaytan* (Satan) is chained so we are spared his temptations.

Every month in the Muslim calendar begins with the sighting of the new moon. A lunar month is technically 29.5 days long but in practice it lasts for 29 or 30 days. At the end of the 29th day, people go out to try to sight the new moon. If it is visible, then tomorrow is the first of the next month. If it is not yet visible, then tomorrow is the 30th of the present month and the day after will automatically see the start of the new month.

The festival to mark the end of Ramadan

The first day of the month after Ramadan is a special day of celebration called 'Id al-Fitr. It begins with breakfast after dawn followed by the whole community gathering for festival prayers. People wear their best clothes and gifts are given, especially to children. Families gather for a celebration meal and food is shared with neighbours. Before this festive day, charity must be given to those in need (*zakat al-fitr*) to make sure that they have enough to celebrate too. How could a person celebrate knowing that a poor neighbour does not have enough to buy food or give their children presents? There is much visiting of friends and family, including visits to the graves of loved ones. Often there are sports and games for the children. Ramadan is over for another year and people miss its special character and look forward to its arrival again next year.

Pilgrimage: the unity of humankind

Islam is not a private religion. It is about the best way of life for the whole human community. People are encouraged to pray in congregation whenever possible. This is why there are mosques on street corners and in different parts of a village. Once each week, for Friday middle-of-the-day prayers, Muslims gather in the principal mosques. For the major festivals each year, the whole community tries to come together, even if this means praying in the open air. The earthly focus of these prayers is the *Ka'ba* in Makka. Once each year, millions of Muslims allow their bodies to follow this direction so that they appear in person at the *Ka'ba* to make the annual pilgrimage of the Hajj. Here we see the biggest annual gathering of people on earth. The whole of humankind is represented here.

The Hajj not only binds together people alive today. It also emphasises a bond that goes way back before the time of Muhammad. All the main activities of the Hajj go back through Muhammad to Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar; some even go back to Adam and Eve. In Muslim understanding, Hagar and Ishmael settled in Makka. Hagar went in search of water and ran between the two hills of al-Safa and al-Marwa. Eventually God inspired Ishmael to dig his heels into the earth and the spring of Zam Zam appeared. It flows to this day. Abraham and Ishmael together rebuilt the *Ka'ba* and then walked around it praising God. The *Ka'ba* was originally built by Adam as the first building dedicated to the

worship of God on earth (Q. 3:96). It was outside Makka that Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son. They were tempted by the devil and the three places where this happened are marked by stone pillars. 12kms from Makka lies the Plain of Arafat, where Muhammad preached his last sermon and tradition has it that Adam and Eve were reconciled to God.

The Hajj takes place just once each year and lasts for five days. It is an obligation for every Muslim man and woman to make the Hajj once in their lifetime if they can afford it and their health will stand up to it. Before entering the holy city of Makka, men and women put on their pilgrim clothes (*ihram*). For men, these are two white unsewn sheets of cloth. One is wrapped around the lower body and tied. The other is worn around the upper body. Women have this material made into a simple dress without ornament or jewellery. By putting on these clothes, pilgrims stress the equality of humankind. All distinctions of colour, wealth, status, education and language are removed. Everyone is given the same dignity of being human.

DAY ONE

Pilgrims go around the *Ka'ba* seven times like Abraham and Ishmael reciting the praises of God. Then they jog or walk briskly between the two hills seven times like Hagar, seeking the providence of God. After this they can drink from the water of Zam Zam. At other times in the year, people can make a visit to Makka and perform only these two rites. This minor pilgrimage is known as *umra*. During the Hajj, these two rites can be performed during the preceding days but some pilgrims do them on the first day.

DAY TWO

The second day of Hajj sees everyone travelling together to the Plain of Arafat. Most of the pilgrims walk but some travel by bus. Here they will spend the afternoon in prayer to God seeking mercy and forgiveness. This site is associated with Adam and Eve; and by tradition it was here that they were reconciled with God. The clothes that the male pilgrims are wearing will become their burial clothes. During the afternoon, the pilgrims anticipate the Day of Judgement, when all human beings will appear before God to give an account of their lives and actions. The theme is forgiveness, so we need to explore this from God's perspective and from the human side.

Sin, repentance, making up and forgiveness

Islamic law makes a distinction between sins that damage our individual relationship with God, sins against oneself, and sins that damage both our relationship with God and other human beings. Failure to pray the *salat* is a sin that damages our relationship with God for which each individual is accountable on the Day of Judgement. Taking forbidden substances is a sin

against oneself. Theft is not only a sin against God but also against the people from whom the goods were stolen. People have to put right their sins against other human beings before they can access fully the forgiveness of God. This means that pilgrims will spend the months before the Hajj putting right their offences against other people. They will have sought human forgiveness and made up for the damage that they have caused to others before going to the Plain of Arafat.

When we look at forgiveness from God's perspective, two sayings of God given to Muhammad to share with us (*Hadith qudsi*) give us guidance. In one, God says "My mercy overcomes my wrath." In the other, God says "If you have sinned such that your sins reach to the skies and then you ask for forgiveness, I would forgive you." From this we can see that God has declared that mercy and forgiveness are always available for the repentant sinner. The only thing that can stop that forgiveness reaching me is me myself (Q. 39:53).

Four things are necessary for a sinner to open themselves to the mercy of God. First, the sin must be acknowledged and responsibility accepted. "I did it, it was wrong, and it was my fault." Second, they must stop the sinful practice. If I make my living by exploiting other people, I can't expect God to forgive me if I am going to carry on doing the same thing in the future. Third, change the circumstances that led you to that sin. "The company that I work for is always asking me to do things that I know are wrong." Then change your job. Fourth, make up for the harm caused by your actions. Give back what you have stolen. Repair the damage by doing voluntary work in society.

Who knows if the sinner has done these four things? Only God and the person concerned. And God cannot be fooled! This is a key point in understanding Islam; there are no priests with special powers, no sacraments, no-one to tell you that you are forgiven. The relationship with God is direct and personal. Each one must believe in their own heart.

The standing at Arafat

The assembly on the Plain of Arafat only takes place once each year during the Hajj. It is sadly true that most Muslims on earth today will never make the Hajj because they are too poor. God would be an unjust tyrant if this was the only way for someone to receive God's mercy and forgiveness. Rather, God's mercy can be reached at every second and in every place. A Muslim who becomes aware of sin will immediately seek to confess it to God, put it right and ask for forgiveness. What happens once in a lifetime on the Plain of Arafat symbolises in clear terms what is constantly available to any human being who will turn to God and seek forgiveness. The Plain of Arafat has an additional significance because it was here that Muhammad preached his "farewell sermon" during the Hajj a few months before his death. Pilgrims feel close to Muhammad in a special way on this occasion.

DAY THREE

The experience of the Plain of Arafat is spiritually and physically shattering for many pilgrims. They make only a short journey in the direction of Makka then sleep the night in the open. They gather small stones here and then walk on the third day to throw them at the pillars representing the places where the devil tempted Abraham and Ishmael. They symbolically “drive away” Satan and all his temptations from their lives. “If only we could remain always in this state of *taqwa!*” The men then have their heads shaved or trim their hair.

Remembering Abraham and his sacrifice

The test of Abraham is told in the Qur'an (Q. 37:102-107). He was commanded by God to sacrifice his son. The Qur'an does not name the son but Islamic tradition has understood it to be Ishmael on the grounds that, as the first-born son of Abraham, Ishmael was “the son” before Isaac was born. The remarkable thing about the story in the Qur'an is that Abraham told Ishmael what he had been commanded to do and asked him what he thought about it. Ishmael willingly agreed to do whatever God had commanded. The sacrifice is a test of obedience on both their parts. As Ishmael knows and is willing to be sacrificed, there is no question of his being tied or forced. He was prostrate on the floor waiting for Abraham to kill him when God told Abraham to stop. Both had proved their obedience. Instead God provided an animal for them to sacrifice.

The third day of the Hajj is also 'Id al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, when the sacrifice of Abraham and Ishmael is remembered. Those on Hajj sacrifice an animal. Today there are modern slaughter-houses and an army of skilled men to ensure that the job is done properly with the least possible suffering to the animals. Some of the meat will be canned or frozen so that it can be given to the poor later.

This is the only element of the Hajj that is celebrated by all Muslims around the world. An animal is killed and the meat divided into three parts: one for our family, one to be shared with neighbours and the third to be given to the poor. Festival prayers are said in an open-air gathering or in the main mosques of the town. A celebration meal is shared and there are presents, visits, sports and fun, like all festivals. In countries where there is no shortage of food, money is sent to places where people are hungry. This will be used to buy an animal and have it killed. The meat will then be given to those in need. The word *qurban*, meaning sacrifice, is often used for this meat.

DAYS FOUR AND FIVE

On the fourth and fifth days of Hajj, pilgrims return again to stone the pillars representing the devil. They can now change into their normal clothes. The pilgrims return to Makka to again circle the *Ka'ba* praising God. There is a final “farewell” circling of the *Ka'ba*, which completes the pilgrimage. The Hajj is over but the experience remains with people afterwards and many try to make another Hajj later in their lives.

Visiting the grave of Muhammad

Nearly all the pilgrims who go for Hajj will also want to visit the grave of Prophet Muhammad in Madina and pray to God in that place. Some go before the Hajj and some after. Some have the tradition of remaining there eight days so that they can pray the forty *salat* that occur in the Prophet’s own mosque. Muslims will go also to the ancient cemeteries in Madina where many of the early companions and family of Muhammad are buried. Traditionally, on the homeward journey, many pilgrims would travel through Hebron to visit the sites associated with Abraham and other biblical prophets.

BUILDING A JUST SOCIETY

We have seen already that even in the most intimate worship of God, like bowing in prayer or seeking God’s mercy and forgiveness, Muslims are not alone. Islam is a religion in which the individual stands within a community. On several occasions in the Qur’an, Muslims are commanded to “establish the prayer and pay the *zakat*” (Q. 2:277). But what does it mean: “to pay the *zakat*”? To answer that we need to go back a few steps.

Every human being has the high dignity of being the *khalifa* and the *abd* of God: the regent and the loving servant. To be the regent means to be the steward of the good things of God. To be the servant means to obey the commands of God. All that we possess is to be used according to God’s guidance for the benefit of humankind and in the service of God. Just as God has no favourites, all are sustained and guided, so the regent of God must practise *sadaqa*, which we can translate as “bearing one another’s burdens.”

Sadaqa emphasises human beings in need; not members of our families, peoples, nations or religions. Muslims have duties to all these but concern for human beings must not stop there. We can see the way in which Muslim relief agencies go to the help of anyone who is in need without considering race, colour, nationality or religion. Islam is not a mutual welfare society that only takes care of its members. Muhammad tells us that someone who goes to bed with a full stomach knowing that his neighbour goes to bed hungry should no longer be called a Muslim.

A welfare system

How is this principle of caring for other people to be put into a structure in Muslim society? Like in other societies, the welfare of people is cared for by a charitable trust, or in Arabic, a *waqf*. In Muslim societies, a *waqf* would be created to support an orphanage, library, hospital or place of learning. Often a particular family would establish a *waqf* and think of it as part of their family responsibility to keep that welfare organisation in funds and able to do its work.

Every human being has two angels assigned to them to record their good and bad deeds throughout their lives (Q. 82:10-12). These records will be brought out on the Day of Judgement. When we are dead, there is nothing more that we can do to affect our records of good or bad deeds – except for three things. Upright children full of *taqwa* can be an on-going credit to us after we die. If we do something for education, as a teacher or through writing a book, the knowledge goes on working after we die. Finally, we can establish a charitable trust to go on doing good for later generations. Imagine creating a water supply for a village or building some houses for elderly people; those who use them in future generations will bless the name of the person who established the *waqf*.

An economic system

Muslims will always be concerned about money; how it is made, saved and spent. Money must be made in ways permitted by God. If something is forbidden, then Muslims cannot profit by it. Alcohol is forbidden for Muslims to consume, therefore it is forbidden to profit from the sale of it or to invest money in its manufacture or distribution. Our money is a moral extension of our selves. Being in business for profit is good as it creates employment, provides a service and provides more money for us to use wisely according to God's guidance. But trade must operate on principles of fairness and justice. It is forbidden for a Muslim to withhold goods so that there is a shortage and thus an unjust price can be charged. Similarly a buyer must be prepared to pay a fair price for goods and not try to force the seller to let the goods go for an unjust price. Muhammad said that workers should be paid their wages before the sweat dries on their foreheads. When it comes to choosing a profession, Muslims are encouraged to look for something that builds up society and serves the common good.

The principle of *sadaqa* as “bearing one another's burdens” can also be seen in giving and taking loans. If someone needs to borrow money, then those who have surplus are encouraged to lend it to help them out but not to seek to make money out of the other person's need. Interest-free loans are a way of helping those in need without exploiting them. The borrower is obliged to pay back the loan in full on the agreed date.

No gain without risk

Profit in business is good but profit can only come when the money is exposed to a fair share of risk. An Islamic bank or wealthy person might invest in a business as a way of injecting money. The investment is open to both profit and loss. If the business does well, then both borrower and lender profit. If the business does badly, then both borrower and lender must accept a due proportion of the loss. A loan that is guaranteed against assets in such a way that the lender gets an agreed return without any danger of loss is not permitted.

Money lent at interest without risk is just such a forbidden loan. If someone takes a mortgage based on interest to buy a house in which the loan is guaranteed against the value of the house it means that the lender does not share in the risk. Even if the house goes down in value, the borrower still has to repay the original loan. If the lender owns a share of the house and it goes down in value, then the lender's share goes down in value too. This makes for a much more responsible lending system. It is in no-one's interest to see house prices rise and fall dramatically.

An example will make this clear. If I take an interest/guaranteed asset mortgage of 220,000 to buy a house for 250,000 and the house drops to a value of 200,000, then I still owe the bank 220,000. If the bank invests 220,000 to buy a house valued at 250,000, then the bank owns 88% of the house and I have to pay a rent to the bank for the use of their share. If the house drops to a value of 200,000, the bank now owns the same 88% share in the house, which means that their share is worth only 176,000; the bank has taken a share of the loss as well as me! In such an Islamic mortgage, in addition to the rent that I pay, I save up and buy an additional portion of the house each year and the bank's share and rent are reduced. In this way I gradually become the owner of the whole house as my share increases and the bank's share and rent decrease.

How to save money?

When it comes to saving money the same system applies. Money must be invested in things that build up society according to God's guidance. Such money must also share in a proportion of risk in order to make a fair profit. In practice, this might be done through ethically-screened unit trusts, in which money is invested in approved businesses in the expectation of making a profit, even though it is exposed to a share of risk. In this way, Muslims can save for a pension or to pay for their children's education or any other need.

When Muslims live in societies not governed by Islamic economic principles, this makes for some difficult decisions. How can one deal with banks that are based on interest? Can one live without a plastic payment card issued by such a bank? This leads to a struggle to live in such an economic system, which is

likely to involve compromises. The mere struggle alone is a constant reminder to the Muslim to strive to live as much by God's guidance as is possible in the circumstances. In this way, the economic struggle promotes an awareness of standing before God and being accountable to God. The struggle promotes a sense of *taqwa*.

Purifying one's wealth – *zakat*

Surplus money must be made to circulate to those in need. We are the stewards of what we earn and own. Each year a Sunni Muslim calculates the money that is surplus after they have met the basic living costs of their family. Once it has been calculated, one-fortieth, 2.5% of this surplus wealth no longer belongs to them but must be distributed as *zakat*. These funds are to be passed to eight categories of people: the poor, those in need, to assist people out of impossible debt, to assist the stranded traveller, to free slaves, to assist those who would suffer financial hardship if they converted to Islam, to spread the message of Islam and to pay those who administer the funds.

The Shi'a have a similar system calculated on surplus income and wealth (plus other specific monies or unused items) after the basic needs of the family and commercial expenses have been met. This is called *khums*. *Khums* is calculated at the rate of 20% and the funds are to be passed to a Grand Ayatollah to be used for the welfare of society. Both Sunni and Shi'a pay *zakat* on the produce of agriculture and gold and silver.

Part of the meaning of the word *zakat* is purification. By passing on the portion that no longer rightly belongs to them, the remaining wealth of Muslims is purified so that it can be used according to God's guidance. In addition, Muslims are recommended to perform charitable giving, which has no limits. Each individual adult Muslim is responsible for calculating their own *zakat* and *khums*. The scholars are there to help and guide as necessary but it remains the responsibility of the individual to calculate the funds honestly before God, to whom one will be accountable on the Day of Judgement. Again the relationship between the believer and God is direct and the struggle to resist temptation and calculate with care is itself a striving for *taqwa*.

More money than one needs?

Muslims have the first responsibility to take care of and provide for their families. This does not stop at spouse and children. There is a responsibility towards elderly parents and other members of both partners' extended families. There is a responsibility towards neighbours, those in need and for general welfare. People should make adequate provision for the future needs of their families for housing, health care, education, retirement and so on. What about if there is money left over after all these responsibilities have been met?

Such surplus wealth should not be hoarded: it would be ethically better to make it circulate and put it to good use for the welfare of society. This is the principle of *infaq* (the circulation of wealth). Here the money is given wisely to help others set up in business or otherwise become economically active so that they can take care of their families and become productive members of society. Such money is given without any return or control to the giver. God will reward the giver as God knows best, either in this life or in the life hereafter.

A reality-check

It is obvious upon reflection that not all Muslims, especially some of the wealthiest in the world today, organise their financial affairs fully according to the economic principles of Islam. If that were so, then the human condition on earth might be very different. This is a matter for which they are accountable ultimately to God.

ORGANISING THE AFFAIRS OF SOCIETY

Islam is a complete way of life, therefore the affairs of society are to be organised according to God's guidance. This we call politics, therefore politics are part of Islam. The important thing about Islamic politics is that the organisation of society is under God's guidance. Muhammad himself was not above the law of God. Rather he was subject to God's guidance, like everyone else. Every Muslim has the duty to listen to, understand and put into practice the guidance of God in the affairs of society. This is exercising the duty to be both the *abd* and the *khalifa* of God in society. The people are not free to do whatever the majority decide, just because it is a majority decision. Rather human laws must be worked out within the ethical guidelines laid down in the Qur'an and the *Sunna* of Muhammad.

We see this principle at work in the election of the first four Sunni Caliphs. They were chosen by a variety of methods but in each case the chosen candidate was proposed to the community as a whole and they affirmed the choice. The Caliph was acknowledged by the community to be its leader under God. They were to follow him in all things that agreed with God's guidance and to assist him in discerning what that guidance is and how it was lived out by the earliest generation.

As we have seen, the Shi'a have a different interpretation. The divinely-appointed Imams had a share in the inspiration of Muhammad, which equipped them uniquely to guide the community. They were able to give infallible guidance on how the message was to be put into practice. In our own time, as we have seen, the time of the Hidden Imam, this responsibility of guiding the community rests with the highest rank of Shi'a scholars, the Grand Ayatollahs. It is the responsibility of individual Shi'a Muslims to decide, by the use of their

reason, who is the most learned of these Grand Ayatollahs in every generation and, once they have done so, to follow that person's guidance.

The Sunni too recognise that not all human beings have the same level of intelligence or knowledge. The most learned scholars, the *ulama* (plural of *alim* – a scholar), have the responsibility of giving guidance to the community. This is likely to result in a variety of learned opinions. Each individual Muslim then has the task of listening to that guidance and putting it into practice. Each is accountable directly to God. In a Sunni Muslim society, like Pakistan, there is a body of scholars charged by the government with giving advice on how the Islamic message should be applied in modern times. The government listens to this advice and then brings forward laws. It is the duty of the electorate, the people, to put into government those who they think are best equipped to make laws that agree with God's guidance.

What about in a non-Muslim state?

In the modern world, hundreds of millions of Muslims live in mixed societies alongside citizens who are not Muslims. Muslims living in such societies are bound to obey the law of the land in everything that is not contrary to the law of God. God's guidance is not just for Muslims but for all humankind. Muslims in these countries have the duty to listen to that guidance and seek to move society in a godly way through the normal channels of citizens: writing, speaking, campaigning, standing for election and voting in those elections.

Realities in history

If we survey Muslim history, there have been only relatively short periods of time in which there was one united Caliphate. At other times there were regional caliphates or smaller stand-alone areas only theoretically under the rule of the Caliph. There have been many examples of hereditary kingdoms, sultanates or emirates. In the modern period there have been various forms of presidential rule and democracies. There are dozens of modern Muslim-majority countries, some of which use the title "Islamic" as part of their names but no serious scholar would suggest that any of them fully follow the principles of Islam. Some aim to have Islamic principles as their guiding ethos. Some are established as secular states and some, like Indonesia, the largest Muslim country on earth, are constitutionally religiously plural. The last Muslim Caliphate was the Ottoman Empire, which was formally ended by the Turkish government in 1924.

Life is one long struggle!

Although every human being is born in the state of *islam*, in harmony with God and creation, and although *islam* is the natural way of life for the human being, we do not remain in this state for long. It is the parents' responsibility to train

their children in the ways of Islam and raise them according to that guidance. The Qur'an speaks of the existence of *jinn* (Q. 51:56). They are neither angels nor humans but a different form of life. This is where we get the folklore of the genie in the lamp. One of these *jinn* was Iblis (Q. 18:50). He rebelled against God by saying that he knew better than God. He became the *Shaytan* (Satan), the Great Tempter. He has set himself to tempt human beings to rebel against God's commands (Q. 38:71-85). Society, influenced by the sins of others, can also lead people astray.

Even when we grow to adulthood and can make the decision to follow the way of Islam, we have a natural inclination to be forgetful and to stray off the path. The Qur'an tells us that this life is a test; an opportunity for human beings to put into practice the guidance of God, to do good and keep away from wrong (Q. 18:7). This requires a constant effort, a struggle, or in Arabic, a *jihad*. The word *jihad* means to struggle or strive. Any man or woman who wants to live the life of Islam must be ready to undertake *jihad* every day and every minute. To struggle against temptation, to obey God's commands and keep away from those things that God forbids. In this way we can say that *jihad* is a constant, life-long commitment that is obligatory for every Muslim (Q. 22:78).

This struggle is first of all an inner one, against our own lower inclinations, our laziness, impatience and arrogance. Unless this inner struggle is undertaken, we are no use in trying to guide wider society in the right way. It is reported that Muhammad was returning from fighting off an enemy attack when he told his companions that they were returning from the lesser *jihad* to resume the greater *jihad*, the inner struggle. The struggle must not end within ourselves but also has to affect the outer world of our lives too. The kind of work that we do, the people with whom we mix and the way that we carry out our duties within the family, are all part of the *jihad* too. This is where living within a Muslim community can be so important as we ought to find there people who are struggling in the same direction. Even if Muslims live in a society that does not share Islamic values, this does not mean that they can allow themselves to adopt them. They are called to live in the world but not necessarily to accept all of its values. This could mean changing one's job or one's companions, moving to another area or even moving to another country where it would be easier to live a godly life (Q. 4:97).

Promoting the good and opposing the evil

Every individual has the duty to promote the good of society. It is not enough just to be good and pious within oneself. Muslims are required to seek to *do* good not just to *be* good. Even the smallest thing can be part of a Muslim's duty to do good: smiling at someone, being the first to greet them, removing a stone from the pavement, showing hospitality, going to visit those who are sick, and so on. The Muslim habit of praying in community with others provides many opportunities for showing concern for them after the prayers are

over. The other side of doing good is opposing evil: not allowing others to tell lies about someone, standing up for those who are oppressed or trying to prevent an injustice.

Muslim wisdom sees three levels of this “promoting the good and opposing the evil” (Q. 3:104). First, through action. Second, if action is not possible, then speaking out, campaigning or writing about the matter. As Muhammad said, the greatest *jihad* is to speak the word of truth into the face of a tyrant. Third, if these are not possible, then at least not allowing the bad influence to take root in one’s own heart: but, as Muhammad said, “this is the weakest form.” This should make Muslims active citizens within society, engaged in all manner of public affairs, to seek the good of the whole and guide society away from anything that is or will lead to the bad. This could be on a large scale: setting up a charity to promote good works, campaigning against the evils of racism, ignorance, hatred or oppression, or joining a political movement for the betterment of all. Even if one cannot achieve all that the ideals of Islam would like, this struggle to do good is obligatory and part of promoting *taqwa* in one’s own life and being a model for others.

The *jihad* of legitimate force

What to do when men are intent on attacking innocent people and killing them? What to do when tyranny and oppression are walking the streets? What to do when campaigns, arguments, negotiation and appeals to international justice have proved useless and people continue to suffer? When all else has failed and injustice cannot be checked in any other way, then the Islamic position is not “peace at any cost.” It may be necessary to take up arms and use legitimate force to oppose the evil.

Fighting, and therefore being open to the possibility of killing other people, is the most serious thing that human beings can ever undertake. It must never be entered into lightly but governed by strict rules. An armed *jihad* must be the last resort and can only be defensive, either of one’s own community or of others who need help to defend themselves. It must be called by legitimate authority; historically, this was the Caliph but some scholars argue that in the present divided nature of Muslims worldwide, this could be the leader of a nation. There must be a reasonable chance of success and it must be a collective effort.

When it comes to fighting, this must be conducted according to the rules of engagement laid down for all fighting, both *jihad* and war, in Islam. These rules were drawn up in the earliest years of Islam based on the Qur'an and the teaching of Muhammad. People must distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Non-combatants include all women, children, the elderly, the sick and those who have thrown down their weapons. Such people must not be killed, attacked or intimidated. Fighting must not bring about a human or

ecological disaster. In seventh century terms, that meant not poisoning a water supply or burning food crops, whether in the field or in the barn; and trees must not be cut down. In 21st century terms, this means weapons of mass destruction: nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. By their nature, such weapons are indiscriminate and kill or injure non-combatants, therefore they are immoral and illegal. If all these conditions are met, then it may be necessary for every able-bodied man to take up arms and answer the call. As the Qur'an says, fighting may be required of you even though you detest it (Q. 2:216). If the only alternative is that evil is allowed to oppress people, then we can see the weight of the argument.

Facing reality

There have been occasions in history when aggressive wars to gain land have been called *jihads*. Sometimes, as in every other community, the rules of engagement have not been followed. Perhaps the closest that we have come to a legitimate *jihad* in modern times was the effort by the Mujahidin in Afghanistan to drive back the Russian invasion (1979-89) or the defence of the Bosnians in the war after the break-up of Yugoslavia. In both cases, Muslim men from around the world responded by going to join in the fight to defend those who could not defend themselves.

What about martyrs?

Islam, like other religions, has always given a place of honour to martyrs. Traditionally, they were thought of as being granted a place in Paradise and they have been buried with special respect. They made the ultimate act of generosity to humankind and obedience to God by willingly accepting death rather than give in to tyranny. A martyr is someone who is killed unjustly, someone who makes a stand for justice and right against the oppressor, even at the cost of their own life if the enemy should kill her or him. It is the enemy who kills the martyrs, not themselves; therefore those who commit suicide cannot be martyrs. Suicide is forbidden in Islam and it is a major sin. It is an act of rebellion against the right of God to say when someone's life should end. Martyrdom depends on the inner disposition of the person: did they take their stand for justice or for some lesser reason? Only God, who knows the human heart, can judge.

Where does that leave the suicide bombers?

Suicide missions were used by the Japanese during the 1939-45 war and by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. The first Muslim suicide mission was in the Lebanon in the 1980s and they happened again in the Palestinian conflict in the 90s. They have become more common in the 21st century. As we have seen, suicide is forbidden in Islam and a bomb against a civil society is by its nature indiscriminate and thus breaks the rule to discriminate between combatants and

non-combatants, for these two reasons they have been ruled as immoral and illegal according to Islamic law. This is the position of the overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars from all major Schools as can be seen by the Amman Message of 2004 (see: www.ammanmessage.com). This has been signed by Presidents, Prime Ministers, Kings, etc. and by the leading scholars from 84 countries; totalling more than 500 in all. Some scholars have made an exception to this rule in the case of Palestinian attacks in occupied territory that do not target innocent civilians. They have argued that these are not suicides but acts of self-sacrifice by people who have no other way to fight back against the military might that oppresses them. Only those inspired by the tiny extremist al-Qaida way of thinking have turned them into a common occurrence. Leaders of the vast bulk of Muslims worldwide have declared that such extremist thinking has no justification within Islam.

A MUSLIM WAY OF LIFE

One of the most important changes that Muhammad made in Arab life was to make marriage the foundation stone of society. A man and woman must freely enter into a public contract with each other. Marriage became the only acceptable place for sexual relations. Adultery was declared immoral and illegal. The husband takes on the responsibility to house, feed, clothe, and educate his family. The wife is to guard the family honour and establish a Muslim pattern of life within the family home.

The status of marriage

Marriage is a contract between the two parties in Islamic understanding. Like any other contract, both parties must enter into it freely and with knowledge of what they are doing. A forced contract is not binding; so a forced marriage is no marriage at all. We have the example of a young woman who came to Muhammad to complain that her father had forced her to marry a man without her consent. Muhammad said that the marriage was invalid. Then the woman asked the Prophet to marry her to the man! Now it was her choice. Muhammad duly married them.

In traditional societies, marriage is more than the coming together of two individuals. It is a bond between two families. The husband takes on responsibilities to his wife's extended family and she does the same for his. This makes it important that the two families can get on together. In a society when unmarried men and women do not mix freely, how are they to find their marriage partners? These two factors normally mean that the families get involved in the search for a suitable partner. In Indian society, for example, this happens in all religious communities. The idea is that if two people and their families are well matched, then a loving bond will grow between them. In the end, of course, the two people themselves must make the final decision.

Marriages in any culture are full of local customs and practices. The Islamic parts are actually quite simple. The couple freely agree to the marriage. They agree a marriage gift, which the man will transfer to the woman, and they draw up a marriage contract, which these days is generally a written document. Provided that they both agree, they may include in their marriage contract anything that they please, as long as it is acceptable within Islam. For example, they might agree that both will complete their education before they start a family or that they will have their own quarters and not live within either extended family.

Choosing a marriage partner

Muhammad taught that the most important quality in a marriage partner should be their piety. Their commitment to living a godly Muslim life was more important than beauty, wealth or social status. A Sunni Muslim man can marry a Muslim, Jew or Christian wife and she is free to continue in the practice of her faith. A Sunni Muslim woman must marry a Muslim man. The scholars pointed to the reason that in a traditional society a woman normally moved into her husband's family home on marriage. What chance would a Muslim woman have of retaining her faith living in an extended Christian or Jewish family? Similarly men were seen as the head of the household, so there was a fear that a Muslim woman might be drawn away from the practice of Islam. The Shi'a interpret things differently; both a man and a woman should marry another Muslim, although some scholars permit a Shi'a man to marry a Jew or Christian but (strongly) caution against it. Sunni-Shi'a marriages happen quite often in places where both communities live together.

More than one wife?

The Qur'an gives permission for a Muslim man to marry up to four wives provided that he treats them all equally (Q. 4:3,129). The Qur'an goes on to say that this is extremely difficult and so "one is better." The scholars point to this as a preference for monogamy but permission is given for limited polygamy, if this is desirable. The verse giving this permission was revealed in the context of there being widows and orphans after men were killed in battle. They needed protection and stability in a traditional society; better then to marry them into an existing family if this was the right solution. Warfare around the world before the invention of modern weapons resulted in the death of men. This made society imbalanced with widows and single women having a shortage of available partners. Rather than being forced to remain single, the Islamic solution would be limited polygamy, provided that the man could afford it and could treat his wives equally. Similarly, if the first wife was unable to have children; better to leave her with the dignity of being the first wife within the family and bring in a second wife, who would have children for the family. The same might be true in the case of a woman who was divorced and needing a new family in which to live. After the death of his first wife,

Khadija, with whom Muhammad had a monogamous marriage for twenty-five years, he himself set the example of marrying widows and divorced women polygamously in his later life. In reality, the vast majority of Muslim marriages are monogamous. Polygamy is common in certain cultures around the world where it is practised by people from various religions, including Islam.

What if the marriage does not work out?

Everyone knows that marriage is not always an easy or smooth relationship. If problems arise, the couple are to try to work them out themselves. If this fails, then the extended families are called on to help to find a solution. Often this extended family support can provide the advice or practical solution to help the marriage survive. Ultimately, if the marriage cannot be made to work, then divorce is the solution. Both husband and wife can begin divorce proceedings. Once the divorce has taken place, there is a waiting period to see if the wife is pregnant. After this, both parties are free to re-marry and begin life again.

The blessing of children

Children are a gift from God and are to be welcomed into Muslim families. "Marriage," Muhammad said, "is half of religion." It is a natural training ground in patience (*sabr*) and God-consciousness (*taqwa*). Children certainly give plenty of opportunity to grow in both virtues. They teach us to rely on God for all the blessings of life. Contraception is permitted to delay starting a family, to space children and when the couple judge that their family is complete. The scholars normally point to a girl and a boy as being the minimum "completeness" because they ensure the continuation of humanity. Muslim boys are circumcised as part of the customary practice of Prophet Abraham.

Stress on education

From the beginning of Islam, Muslims were keen to memorise the guidance of God in the Qur'an. This practice has continued through the centuries, and children are taught to memorise verses of the Qur'an and prayers from an early age. When they are old enough, the practice becomes formal in learning how to recite the Arabic properly and to memorise the prayers and verses of the Qur'an that are necessary for any practising Muslim.

It is the right of every Muslim boy and girl to receive an education and they have a responsibility to seek it. Education takes place within a moral framework. Knowledge that will build up the individual and society in a good way is to be encouraged but things that are harmful and destructive should be avoided. Parents have the responsibility not just to promote knowledge but also to train the characters of their children so that they will grow in *taqwa*.

Education, as Muhammad said, “from the cradle to the grave,” should be about equipping people to become more obedient to the commands of God, to allow people to contribute to the welfare of society and to push back the cloud of ignorance as befits the regents of God on earth.

The place of women in Muslim society

The Qur'an and the *Sunna* of Muhammad brought about a revolution in the status of women in seventh century Arabia. Women were given rights in society that are hard to imagine for that time. A woman is a legal person in her own right, which means that she keeps control of her own property and any money that she makes in business or earns. She may keep her own name on marriage and is free to sell or give away property and make her own will according to the Islamic rules of inheritance. She is entitled to engage in any trade, profession or business – Muhammad's own wife was a successful businesswoman who initially employed him. She has to give her consent in marriage and the marriage gift that she receives is hers and cannot be touched by her husband. She can initiate divorce proceedings. Women have their own direct access to God; they do not need to go through a male priesthood. The Qur'an – and therefore God – addresses women alongside men. Women have the same religious obligations as men: to pray, fast, pay *zakat*, pursue justice, promote the good and oppose the evil, and go on Hajj, etc.. Technically a mother can ask to be paid by her husband for breast-feeding their children, the man should see that hot food is placed in front of her at least once per day and she may ask to be paid a proper rate for any housework that she does! Muhammad consulted the women of the community before making major decisions. As we have seen, women have an equal right to education and an equal responsibility to seek it.

A reality-check

It is one thing to be given rights but being able to claim them depends on education. The reality is that women have often been denied education so that they do not know what rights they have. This has been compounded from one generation to the next so that women lost contact with the rights that they were given. Men were often only too ready to keep privilege in their own hands. In the modern period, when women have much greater access to education, they are using Islam to liberate themselves from the limitations imposed by culture and men – just as the Qur'an and Muhammad intended from the beginning.

A modest way of life

Part of Muslims' *jihad* is to learn to control their desires and thoughts. It is natural for people to feel sexually attracted and to take delight in the appearance of others, therefore God's guidance is that this should be kept under control and sexual activity should be confined within marital relationships.

The most powerful instrument is our heart: our thoughts and feelings. The first verse of the Qur'an to address this speaks to men and tells them to "lower their gaze" and guard their modesty (Q. 24:30). The next verse repeats the same wording to women (Q. 24:31). The eyes are an obvious way in which images can enter into our thoughts and feelings; therefore we need to keep them under control. Just as eyes let images in, so words express thoughts and desires; so there should be modest control of our tongues.

The word *hijab* means a partition or curtain. We meet it in the Qur'an when Muhammad draws a curtain (*hijab*) to screen off part of the room to form an intimate space for himself and his wife (Q. 33:53). This gives us the idea of seeing our world divided into different spaces: an intimate space, a family space and a public space. Different words and behaviour go with each space. Our clothes form a kind of partition between our bodies and the world around us. Different styles of dress are appropriate in the intimate, family and public spheres. The Qur'an tells us that modesty in dress raises the dignity of all human beings, not just Muslims (Q. 20:116-121).

Human clothing should not be "see through" and should not reveal the figure underneath. This is why you will often see Muslim men and women wearing loose-fitting clothes that hang from the shoulders. Hands, feet and face can be seen in the public space; the "private parts" belong to the intimate space. As a minimum outside the intimate space, a man should be covered from the navel to the knees and for a woman the top-half is included in "private parts". Different groups of Muslims will have their own understanding of skirt-, trouser- and arm-lengths but the general principle is to "cover up".

In the desert, everyone, men and women, wears a head cloth to keep out the sand and protect their hair. These cloths have long ends that can be wrapped across the nose and mouth during a sand storm. When the Qur'an addresses a verse specifically to women, telling them to cover all their alluring or attractive parts, this is interpreted by most scholars to include covering their hair – hence the headscarf. A tiny group amongst Muslim women also wear a face veil (*niqab*).

A time to die

Death is a natural consequence of being born: everything that is alive will die (Q. 3:185). A Muslim should not fear death but it is something to be taken seriously because it is not the end. Whenever a Muslim hears of the death of someone, they say "to God we belong and to him is our return" (Q. 2:156). After death and burial, we enter into another dimension generally called "life in the grave" (*barzakh*). Here we will all await the end of the world, which will be followed by the general resurrection, when all who have been alive will be raised up to face judgement. On the Day of Judgement, God, who alone knows the human heart, will be the judge (Q. 88:26). The records of our lives will be

brought out and we will be weighed in the balance by God. Fortunately, the mercy of God will not desert us on that day (Q. 39:53). We are told that one good deed will weigh as much as ten bad deeds. This means that hope is never lost. Bad deeds can always be outweighed by good deeds in this life. No matter how sinful life has been, there is always the opportunity for repentance, for turning over a new leaf and filling our lives with good deeds. God is ever-merciful! (Q. 1:3). There are two possibilities based on this judgement: Paradise, with “all that your heart desires” and the potential for growth in closeness to the infinite and eternal God, or Hell, marked by torment and suffering.