

Transcript: Setting the Scene

What is *islam*?

If we were to ask ten Muslims in the street to sum up in one sentence the essence of Islam, it's highly likely that most of them would recite the central statement of belief: "I bear witness that there is no god but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God".

There we have it. There is only one God, who alone is worthy of all worship, obedience, service and love. But we only know about God and how to live our lives in accordance with his will because God sent us revelation through the Prophets, who put it into practice. At the heart of Islam lies a life devoted to divine justice, which we learn by following the revealed ethical will of God.

But before we can get to this point, we need to go back to before the beginning of time, when God and only God existed.

We humans live within time and space. Our language is rooted in the circumstances of our physical surroundings. So it's very difficult to understand anything which lies outside these boundaries. That's what makes the very idea of the existence of God so hard to talk about. God is beyond time and space, beyond the Universe. God has no beginning and no end. God is a being beyond our knowledge. God does not have a body, the way that creatures do, so we can't say God is or is not anywhere, and yet people speak of an acute sense of the presence of God.

As we speak about God, we are continually aware of the inadequacy and inaccuracy of what we are saying.

God was never created. God cannot be divided into parts. No created being or thing can share divinity with God [Q. 112:1-4].¹

So much for what God is not.

What can we say about what God is?

God is the creator of everything that exists and everything depends on God. God chose to create everything by a free act of will. God didn't need to do it, but chose to. God has only to say 'be!' and it is [Q. 36:81-82].²

¹ Q. 112:1-4 Say, "He is God, the One. God is the All-embracing. He neither begat, nor was begotten, nor has he any equal."

² Q. 36:81-82 Is not He who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like of them? Yes indeed! He is the All-creator, the All-knowing. His command is only, when he wills something, to say to it "Be" and it is.

God is the sustainer of the whole universe [Q. 11:6].³ Without God's ongoing presence and interest, the whole of creation would cease to exist. Nothing can exist without being in a relationship with the Creator [Q. 2:255].⁴ God and God alone exists without the need for anything else. In Arabic, the word for God is Allah, which means simply 'the one and only God'. Just as the English word God with a capital 'G' can have no plural, so in Arabic Allah has no plural form. Allah is used in Arabic by Muslims, Christians and Jews.

God is all-perfect and therefore creates a perfect creation - or rather as perfect as it could be given that it is bound by both time and space [Q. 39:5, 95:4].⁵

That's why from the moment we are born, we are wearing out, getting older and will eventually die. That's why we can only be in one place at a time. Creation can only be as perfect as possible within these limitations.

According to the Qur'an, the first two human beings, Adam and his wife, made an error of judgement in thinking something evil was good. This led to them being cast out from the Garden. Eventually they repented and were reconciled to God [Q. 2:30-39].⁶

³ **Q. 11:6** There is no animal on the earth, but that its sustenance lies with God, and he knows its [enduring] abode and its temporary place of lodging. Everything is in a manifest Book.

⁴ **Q. 2:255** God! There is no god but he; the Living, the Self-subsisting. No slumber or sleep overcomes him. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there to intercede in his presence except by his permission? He knows that which is before them and behind them. Nor do they comprehend anything of his knowledge except as he wills. His seat extends over the heavens and the earth and preserving them does not fatigue him. He is the Most High, the Supreme.

⁵ **Q. 39:5** He created the heavens and the earth in truth. He winds the night over the day, and winds the day over the night, and he has subjugated the sun and the moon, each moving for a specified term. Look! He is the All-mighty, the All-forgiver!

Q. 95:4 We certainly created the human being in the best constitution.

⁶ **Q. 2:30-39** And when your Lord said to the angels, "I will place a regent on earth." They said, "Will you place on the earth one who will make mischief and shed blood, while we celebrate your praises and glorify your holy name?" He said, "I know what you do not know." And God taught Adam all the names; then He placed them before the angels, and said, "Tell me the names of these if you are truthful." They said, "Glory to you, we know nothing except what you have taught us: in truth it is you who are the All-knowing and the Wise." He said, "O Adam! Tell them their names." When he had told them, God said, "Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth, and I know what you reveal and what you conceal?" And when We said to the angels, "Prostrate to Adam" and they prostrated. Not so Iblis; he refused and was arrogant; he was one of those who reject faith. We said, "O Adam! live in the Garden with your wife and eat of the many things that are there as you wish, but do not go near this tree or you will both be among the wrong-doers." Then Satan made them slip from the [Garden], and got them out of the state in which they had been. We

They were totally forgiven and returned to a state of absolute harmony with God. The key word here is harmony [Q. 17:44].⁷ Harmony exists between every created thing and God. If everything is in harmony with God, then the whole of creation must be in harmony within itself. Everything which exists is created in harmony with God and with every other part of creation [Q. 24:41].⁸

However, harmony between God and creation is not a relationship of equals. God knows best how creation should be run according to God's revealed will. It follows that harmony with God requires that every element in creation knows its place and obeys the will of God. In other words, all creation, including every human being, is called to be the obedient servant of God. Only then can there be true harmony and peace [Q. 64:1-3].⁹

The very word *islam* refers to this state of fundamental harmony with God and everything that exists. Most Arabic words are formed from roots of three letters. Subtle variations of meaning are made by adding to these three. Every word built on the same root is part of one family and shares a set of common meanings.

Arabic words with the root *slm* form a family of words all to do with harmony. This gives us the words *islam*, *muslim* and *salam*

islam is that state of harmony in which God created the world, and in which God wishes we should all live by following the revealed will of God.

said, "Go down [to the earth], all [of you], with hostility between you. On earth you will have a place and means of livelihood." Then Adam received some words from his Lord, and his Lord turned back towards him, for He is the one who always turns back, the All-merciful. We said, "Go down from here, all of you, and when guidance comes to you from me, whoever follows my guidance shall have no fear upon them, nor shall they grieve. But those who reject faith and deny our signs, they shall be the companions of the Fire; they will remain there forever."

⁷ **Q. 17:44** The seven heavens glorify God, and the earth [too], and whoever is in them. There is not a thing but celebrates his praise, but you do not understand their glorification. Indeed he is All-forbearing, All-forgiving.

⁸ **Q. 24:41** Do you not see that God is glorified by everyone in the heavens and the earth, and the birds spreading their wings. Each knows his prayer and glorification, and God knows best what they do.

⁹ **Q. 64:1-3** Whatever there is in the heavens glorifies God and whatever there is in the earth. To him belongs all sovereignty and to him belongs all praise, and he has power over all things. It is he who created you. Then some among you reject faith and some of you are believers, and God sees what you do. He created the heavens and the earth in truth, and he formed you and perfected your forms, and it is to him that you go.

It also contains the idea of submission, because this harmony can only come about when everything submits to the will of God and acts accordingly.

Maulana Raza explains Islam as the natural way of life:

God has created us and it is God who has endorsed and approved Islam as our way of life, and at the same time the teachings of Islam cultivate within us the values and different dimensions of our behaviour. For example, social, ethical, spiritual; and we become a full human being if we live a life according to the will of God. So this is how I believe that Islam is a natural way of life.

The word *muslim* describes something in the state of *islam*. Therefore we can say that God created everything in the state of *islam*, or to put it another way, God made everything *muslim*. At the dawn of creation, the planets, sun and stars were all created *muslim*. Mountains, rivers and minerals are all *muslim*. Trees, plants, flowers, vegetables; animals, birds and fish are all *muslim*. The initial state of the whole of creation is to be in harmony with God and everything else - that is, everything is naturally *muslim*.

Human beings were also created *muslim* and we are most completely at peace when we submit to the revealed will of God in all things. This leads on to the third word - *salam*. This is used as part of the traditional Arabic greeting between Muslims, *salam alaykum*. In short, this can be translated as 'peace be with you'. But the full meaning is more like : *May you come ever more completely into that state of perfect harmony and peace with God which is islam* [Q. 33:44].¹⁰ This is how people will be greeted when they finally reach heaven, one of the names for which is *Dar al-Salam - the Land of Peace* [Q. 10:25].¹¹

Anyone living their life in this state of harmony is like a flower turning to the sun or a bird on the wing, perfectly in tune with God's plan [Q. 30:30].¹² However, whereas animals and plants live by their nature instinctively, we are called to live an ethical life following the revealed will of God. This is revealed in the Books of guidance and creation itself. We perceive the divine will, obey it and thus bring out the full potential of the state of harmony.

¹⁰ **Q. 33:44** The day they encounter Him, their greeting will be, "Peace", and he has prepared for them a noble reward.

¹¹ **Q. 10:25** God invites to the abode of peace, and he guides whomever he wants to a straight path.

¹² **Q. 30:30** So set your face steadily on the religion as a person of pure faith [*hanif*], [that is] the natural condition upon which God has set humans. There is no alteration to God's creation; that is the upright religion, but most people do not know.

An animal in its natural state is *muslim*. It has no choice. That is how it was created. Human beings are different. We are the pinnacle of God's creation [Q. **17:70**].¹³ We have the gift of free will which means we can choose to follow the divine guidance in all things [Q. **10:99, 18:29**].¹⁴ On the other hand, we have the potential to rebel against God's will –which would be sin.

This raises the question: Why did God give us free will? A course of action that is chosen, is essentially different from one which is compulsory or automatic or programmed. Only by being free can we act out of concern, compassion and love. When the cooker buzzes to tell us that our food is cooked, we don't thank it or congratulate it. We know it is not acting out of any feelings towards us.

Only a human being can choose to become God's servant, to live according to God's will, to live ethically and rely totally on God's mercy. According to Islam, all these things are our duty and our human dignity lies in choosing them. Of course, the concept of free will does not in any way detract from the absolute power, authority, wisdom and justice of God in all things.

Looking more closely at how people can freely carry out the will of God, the first aspect of the role is that of servant. The Arabic word *abd* means loving servant or slave. *Abdullah* means *the servant of Allah*. The fact that this is such a common name for men shows how central this role is to living the Muslim life. The servant obeys the Master's will and lives according to God's commands. The servant seeks to attune his or her will completely to accept the divine will in all things.

Professor Michot speaks of submission to the revealed ethical will of God:

Some classical theologians in Islam have distinguished two wills of God: what they have called the creational will of God and also his ethical will; in reference to what is created, and on the other hand what is revealed, which is not the same thing. And to submit to the will of God is not just to live in total harmony with the universe but is also to

¹³ **Q. 17:70** Certainly We have honoured the children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with the good things, and shown them special favour above many of those we have created.

¹⁴ **Q. 10:99** And had your Lord wanted, all those who are on earth would have believed all together. Would you then force people until they become believers?

Q. 18:29 And say, "The truth is from your Lord: so anyone who wants let him believe, and anyone who wants let him reject." Indeed We have prepared for the wrongdoers a Fire whose curtains will surround them. If they cry out for help, they will be helped with a water like molten copper which will scald faces. What an evil drink and how ill a resting place!

develop an action in total conformity to the revealed ethical will of God, because there are some things that are created by God but that are not automatically loved by him. There is a difference between what is and what should be, and creation becomes an opportunity for revelation, but through revelation and through obedience to the revealed will of God, through ethics and religion, we're invited to develop the creation, not to improve it but to lead it to its fulfilment, which will mean that there will be more justice in relation to everybody, every human being on this planet and in the world in general. Ethics is the essence of religion, and justice of course is the core.

The second aspect of human life takes us on to the concept of tending, cherishing and bringing out the full perfection of God's creation. As such, we are called to be God's regents on the earth. The Arabic word for this is *khalifa*. Every human being is called to the high dignity of being *khalifa*, and through this worshipping God [Q. 2:30, 51:56].¹⁵

The Islamic understanding of creation is that it is dynamic. Everything is created in time so that it can never stand still. The best of all possible worlds created by God needs constant attention to preserve and bring out its full potential. It is the role of every human being to contribute with others as far as they are able to take on this responsibility and relationship with the creation [Q. 2:285].¹⁶

The responsibility of being *khilafa* brings with it the duty of care and support for our fellow human beings, it also means having respect for nature, using it to satisfy our needs where necessary but always being careful not to waste or pollute it. Ecology, care for the environment, is a natural part of being the Regent of God on the earth [Q. 31:20].¹⁷ Abuse of the earth for our own selfish ends would be a rebellion against God's will and thus a sin, but careful

¹⁵ **Q. 2:30** And when your Lord said to the angels: "I will place a regent on earth." They said: "Will you place on the earth one who will make mischief and shed blood, while we celebrate your praises and glorify your holy name?" He said: "I know what you do not know."

Q. 51:56 I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me.

¹⁶ **Q. 2:285** The Messenger believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, as do the believers. Each one [of them] believes in God, his Angels, his Books, and his Messengers. [They say] "We make no distinction between one and another of his Messengers." And they say, "We hear, and we obey, [we seek] your forgiveness, our Lord, and towards you is the journey."

¹⁷ **Q. 31:20** Do you not see that God has disposed for you whatever there is in the heavens and whatever there is in the earth and he has showered upon you his blessings, the outward and the inward? Yet among the people are those who dispute concerning God without any knowledge or guidance or an illuminating scripture.

husbandry, such as tending plants and animals, is our way of living out our responsibilities. We are stewards of the earth; trustees accountable to God.

It may seem an overstatement to translate *khalifa* as ‘regent’, as a regent is literally the representative of a Ruler. However, this is no exaggeration. All human beings, both men and women, are called to be Regents of God. This is the dignity and duty of being human. At the end of our lives all human beings will be called to account for the way we have discharged our duties as God’s Regents on earth [Q. 6:21-31, 2:48, 99:6-8].¹⁸ Accordingly, we will enjoy the rewards of Heaven or the punishments of Hell.

However, it is important to note that a Regent is always the representative of a higher authority and carries out the duties assigned to them according to the guidance of that authority. To send servants without guidance and then hold them responsible for their actions would not be just. That’s why God sends guidance in the form of revelation [Q. 12:2, 16:64, 2:2].¹⁹

¹⁸ **Q. 6:21-31** Who is more unjust than someone who forges a lie against God, or treats his signs as lies? Indeed the unjust will not prosper. On the day when we gather them all together, we shall say to those who gave partners [to God], “Where are your partners that you used to claim?” Then their only excuse will be to say, “By God, our Lord, we did not give you partners.” Look how they tell lies against themselves, and what they used to forge is lost from them! There are some of them who prick up their ears at you, but we have cast veils on their hearts lest they should understand it, and a deafness into their ears; and though they should see every sign, they will not believe in it. To the extent that when they come to you, to dispute with you, the rejecters of faith say, “These are nothing but myths of the ancients.” They dissuade [others] from [following] him, and [themselves] avoid him; yet they destroy no-one except themselves, but they are not aware. Were you to see when they are made to stand before the Fire, whereupon they will say, “If only we were sent back [into the world]! Then we will not treat as lies the signs of our Lord, and we will be among the believers!’ Rather, what they used to hide before has now become evident to them. But were they to be sent back [to this world] they would revert to what they were forbidden [to do], and they are indeed liars. They say, “There is nothing but the life of this world, and we shall not be resurrected.” Were you to see when they are made to stand before their Lord. He will say, “Has this not been proved true?” They will say, “Yes, by our Lord!” He will say, “So taste the punishment because of what you used to reject.” They are certainly losers who deny the encounter with God, to the point that when the Hour overtakes them suddenly, they will say, “Alas for us, for what we neglected in the world!” And they will bear their burdens on their backs. Look! Evil is what they bear!

¹⁹ **Q. 12:2** Indeed We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur’an so that you may apply reason.

Q. 16:64 We did not send down the Book to you except [for no other purpose than] that you may clarify for them that thing about which they differ, and as a guidance and mercy for a people who believe.

In an Islamic understanding, God sends guidance in two forms. One is in the Books or scriptures, the other is in creation itself - which is full of the signs of God [Q. **6:98-99**, 3:190].²⁰ By exploring God's handiwork, we come to an understanding of how God intended things should be organized. This means that both religious scholars and believing scientists worship God - the one by seeking to understand the books of revelation; the other by exploring the creation with faith.

There is no opposition between religion and science in Islam. Both have their source in God and ultimately must agree. If it appears that reason and religion do not agree, then we are either not understanding our Books properly or we have more work to do on our science so that we understand the creation better. Again and again in the Qur'an, we read that we should use our heads to puzzle things out, to reason and question, so that we more perfectly understand the world around us 'in which there are signs from God' [Q. **3:190**].²¹

Dr Buaben speaks of the signs of God in nature:

We can read the signs of nature looking at the variations of day and night. The Qur'an affirms to us that all these things happening around us every day and night are signs of God's authority, God's creation in nature. Science itself affirms this of various planets in their orbits, and if there had been any problem with regard to authority behind all this, there would have been utter chaos in all these natural phenomena.

In the Islamic system, the way of life that pleases God is revealed. It is the duty of the human being to listen to this and obey it. We are all called to serve God through obedience, worship and love. As one well-known statement of God related by the Prophet Muhammad (*Hadith Qudsi*) puts it,

My servant keeps on coming closer to me through performing good deeds beyond what are commanded, until I love him. When I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, I am the sight with which he sees, I am the hands with which he holds and I am the feet with which he walks.

²⁰ **Q. 6:98-99** It is God who made you grow from a single soul, and [there is for you] a place to live and then leave. We have certainly clarified in detail the signs for a people who understand. It is he who sends down water from the sky, and brings forth with it every kind of growing thing. Then from it we bring forth vegetation from which we produce the grain, in clusters, and from the palm-tree, from the buds of it, low-hanging clusters [of dates], and gardens of grapes, olives and pomegranates, similar and dissimilar. Look at its fruit as it grows and ripens. Indeed there are signs in that for a people who have faith.

²¹ **Q. 3:190** Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day, there are signs for those who have reason.

Adam was the first human being to receive revelation from God. He was the first Prophet of the *islamic* way of life. But guidance is needed by every human being and so the Qur'an tells us that revelation has been sent to all peoples on earth. None were left without a Prophet to help them live an *islamic* way of life [Q. 35:24].²²

All peoples, wherever they live on earth and whenever human life began in that place, have received essentially the same guidance on how to live according to God's plan for creation [Q. 17:107-109].²³

The question arises: how are we to judge what remains from the original revelation sent by God and what has been added or lost down through the centuries? From a Muslim perspective, the Qur'an is the final revelation sent by God that has been preserved intact from the time of Muhammad. This was not a new revelation but in essence the same as all that had gone before [Q. 3:3, 41:43].²⁴ The Qur'an serves as the benchmark by which all other earlier revelations are to be judged [Q. 25:1, 6].²⁵

The Qur'an not only confirms earlier revelations but also corrects any errors and practices that have occurred over time. The life of the Prophet Muhammad, being based on the Qur'an, acts as a universal model for a life lived in submission to the revealed will of God [Q. 33:21].²⁶

²² **Q. 35:24** Indeed We have sent you with the truth as a bearer of good news and as a warner; and no community has been left without a warner.

²³ **Q. 17:107-109** Say, "Whether you believe in it, or do not believe in it, indeed those who were given knowledge before it when it is recited to them, fall down in prostration on their faces, and say, "Glorified is our Lord! Indeed Our Lord's promise is bound to be fulfilled." Weeping, they fall down on their faces, and it increases them in humility."

²⁴ **Q. 3:3** He has sent down upon you the Book, in truth, confirming what preceded it, and he sent down the *Taurat* [Torah] [to Moses] and the *Injil* [Gospel] [to Jesus] before this, as guidance to humankind, and he sent down the criterion [of judgment between right and wrong].

Q. 41:43 Nothing is said to you except what has already been said to the Messengers before you. Indeed your Lord is forgiving and one who metes out a painful retribution.

²⁵ **Q. 25:1** Blessed is He who sent down the criterion [*al-furqan*] upon his servant that he may be a warner to the worlds.

Q. 25:6 Say, "It has been sent down by Him who knows the hidden in the heavens and the earth. Indeed He is All-forgiving, All-merciful."

²⁶ **Q. 33:21** In the Messenger of God there is certainly for you a beautiful model, for the one who hopes in God and the Last Day, and remembers God greatly.

A Muslim is required to believe that Abraham, Moses and Jesus, amongst others, were also Prophets sent by God to teach essentially the same message as Muhammad and the Qur'an [Q. 40:78].²⁷ The Qur'an names twenty-five Prophets of God and five Books that were sent.

Every Book sent by God must be respected by Muslims as a revelation from God [Q. 2:136, 2:285].²⁸ Similarly, every Prophet sent by God must be respected and his example is an example of a God-conscious life [Q. 4:150-152].²⁹ However, the lives and teachings of many of the earlier Prophets have not been preserved as fully as the life and teaching of Muhammad and so cannot be relied on in the same way. Therefore, the Qur'an, sent to the Prophet Muhammad, is the master text. Whatever disagrees with it is not from God.

It follows from this that Islam does not see itself as a new religion revealed for the first time in the 7th century. On the contrary, Islam is part of that on-going revelation from God that goes right back to Adam and Eve and encompasses every human being that has ever lived [Q. 2:38-39].³⁰

From the beginning of time, we have been speaking about *islam* and *muslims*. But from the coming of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, we have the definitive and universal “capital I Islam” and “capital M Muslims”.

The message that the Prophets received from God was not for them alone. They were called to lead a community of people into a way of life that was in

²⁷ **Q. 40:78** Certainly We have sent Messengers before you. Of them are those we have recounted to you, and of them are some we have not recounted to you. A Messenger may not bring any sign except by God's permission. Hence when God's command comes, judgment is made with justice, and it is then that those who speak falsely become losers.

²⁸ **Q. 2:136** Say: "We believe in God, and what was sent down to us, and what was sent down to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus, and what was given to the Prophets from their Lord: We make no distinction between one and another of them, and to God we are submitting."

²⁹ **Q. 4:150-152** Those who reject faith in God and his Messengers and seek to make a difference between God and his Messengers, and say, "We believe in some and disbelieve in some" and seek to take a way in between; it is they who truly reject faith, and we have prepared for those who reject faith a humiliating punishment. But those who have faith in God and his Messengers and make no distinction between any of them; He will give them their rewards, and God is All-forgiving, All-merciful.

³⁰ **Q. 2:38-39** We said, "Go down from here, all of you, and when guidance comes to you from me, whoever follows my guidance shall have no fear upon them, nor shall they grieve. But those who reject faith and deny our signs, they shall be the companions of the Fire; they will remain there forever."

accordance with the will of God. Some of the Prophets took positions of authority within their societies and established a path or way of life that embodied the guidance from God. Those Prophets, who received a Book and a new Way of Life, or Shari'a, are called *rasul*, sometimes translated as Messenger. Others were sent to call people back to the way of life that had been established by an earlier Prophet, in Arabic these are called *nabi*. A good example would be of the *rasul* Moses (Musa) and the *nabi* Elijah (Ilyas). It stands to reason that if the Prophets had the recipe for a fully human and perfectly happy way of life that will lead to fulfilment in this life and the reward of eternal life in Heaven, then they would want to share it with others and encourage others to live by that guidance.

Muhammad received the Qur'an from God as a literal, verbal revelation [Q. **32:2**, **35:31**].³¹ He then modelled his whole life perfectly on that guidance and taught others to do the same [Q. **33:21**].³² The things that Muhammad did, what he said and taught, and the things of which he approved become important for all subsequent generations. What he did, how he conducted his personal, family, business and community life, serve as a model to be followed. Everything that he said and taught, the way in which he dealt with questions or cases that were brought to him, acts as a source for applying the revelation of the Qur'an in daily life [Q. **33:45-46**].³³

Muhammad was born at a point in history, in a society that already had established ways of doing things. This means that if he approved of some customary practice it agreed with the guidance of God. Anything in the Arabian society of his time that was against God's guidance, he changed.

The records of Muhammad's actions and teaching, and the things of which he approved, are collected in the Hadith or the Traditions of Muhammad. These form a crucial source for living a Muslim way of life. This way of life, based on the Qur'an and Hadith, was gradually drawn up into the Shari'a, which is a clearly drawn pathway through life that leads to Paradise.

³¹ **Q. 32:2** The sending down of the Book, in which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the worlds.

Q. 35:31 That which We have revealed to you of the Book is the truth, confirming what preceded it. Indeed God is All-aware, All-seeing about his servants.

³² **Q. 33:21** In the Messenger of God there is certainly for you a beautiful model, for the one who hopes in God and the Last Day, and remembers God greatly.

³³ **Q. 33:45-46** O Prophet! Indeed We have sent you as a witness, as a bearer of good news and as a warner and as a summoner to God by his permission, and as a lamp spreading light.

As well as simply acting in the right way, in Islam we all need to develop a deep sense of closeness to God and an awareness that we stand in the presence of God (*ihsan*), that can help us to make the right decisions in life and bring all this guidance into every fibre of our own daily living. At the end of the day, each and every human being is called to be the Regent of God and each will be answerable directly to God for the way in which they have fulfilled their duties as servants of their Lord.

This profound sense of the presence of God is summed up in the Islamic term *taqwa*, which can be translated as ‘God-consciousness’ and carries with it a sense of protection before the awesomeness of God (a word from the same root is used in Arabic for ‘vaccination’). This does not just happen naturally but must be built up by living according to the guidance of God. The practices of Islam are designed to help build up and sustain a deep sense of *taqwa*. These principal practices are summed up in what are generally called the ‘five pillars of Islam’.

Professor Michot distinguishes between different forms of speech that come from Muhammad:

The Qur'an and the Hadith, the Traditions of the Prophet, are all sayings that can be said to have come out of the mouth of the Prophet. But still there is a great difference because in the case of the Qur'an it is considered as God speaking, whereas the Hadith is the Prophet speaking. So I think a good way to approach this difference is to see that the Prophet himself was aware that when the Qur'an was revealed to him, he was not in charge and he made very clearly himself the difference between what was divine and what was his own words. The *Hadith Qudsi*, or Holy Traditions of the Prophet, are a third category of words that came out of the mouth of the Prophet. They are not considered as part of the Qur'an, but in those traditions it is God who is the speaker and the Prophet himself was speaking on behalf of God. He was not transmitting a message that would be part of the final revelation, but because it is God who is speaking those Hadith, they are given a special importance by the Muslims.