

Background article: Expressions, *Halal* and *haram*

Classification of actions

Drawn from the sources of Qur'an and *sunna*, Islamic law came to recognise five categories of human actions. These are:

- Those actions that are obligatory (for *fard* we can also say *wajib*)
 - for every Muslim individually (*fard 'ayn*) e.g., prayer, fasting
 - for the community as a whole but which can be performed by a group on behalf of the community (*fard kifaya*) e.g., taking part in funeral prayers
- Those recommended acts that carry a reward if performed but do not involve punishment if omitted (*sunna* or *mustahabb*) e.g., visiting the sick
- Neutral acts which carry neither punishment nor reward as people are free to choose (*mubah*) e.g., types of diet, styles of dress
- Actions that are disapproved of but attract no specific punishment (*makruh*) e.g., smoking
- Any actions that are clearly forbidden and carry a punishment if they are committed (*haram*) e.g., drinking alcohol.

The opposite of something that is forbidden (*haram*) is something that is permissible (*halal*); this is exemplified in the dietary laws in Background article 1. Only relatively few acts are classified as *fard* or *haram*, the vast majority of human acts are neutral (*mubah*). Human life is much more inspired by good etiquette and manners, rather than prohibition or obligation. The role model for Muslim etiquette and manners is Muhammad himself. Naturally, there are some variations of opinion amongst scholars regarding the three middle categories but there is a principle that nothing that God has made *haram* can be made *halal* and vice-versa. As time goes on and knowledge advances, some actions in the middle categories may well be re-classified. For example, some would today classify smoking as forbidden, as it is now known seriously to damage health. The rulings derived from the Qur'an and *sunna* are a blessing from God as they guide human beings on the path of flourishing in this life and to the reward of paradise.