

Islam

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Introduction

The word Islam is derived from the Arabic root 'salima' which means peace, harmony and submission. Islam, referring to the religion, is the submission of the creation to the will of God and its co-existence in peace and harmony. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) began to receive the last and final revelation from Allah in the year 610 CE. Over a 23 year period, the revelation was received and recorded in the form of the Qur'an. Today, Islam is a worldwide religion with over 1,220 million adherents. This is about 19% of the world's population and it is growing rapidly.

The resources contained in the list of subjects to the right are a basic introduction to the facts and beliefs of Islam. They are a portal or window into the world Islam and by following the websites and bibliographies, an enquirer may discover more and more about this faith.

The six units are based on the QCA non-statutory framework for Religious Education and the Areas of Enquiry. They provide not only a comprehensive guide to the factual and belief structures of Islam but also address the issues that Islam encounters as it engages with the 21st century.

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Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

Interpreting teachings, sources, authorities and ways of life in order to understand religions and beliefs;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

Basic Beliefs

There are two main sources for religious truth claims within Islam – the Qur'an and hadith. The Qur'an is the final revelation from God; it is the word of God. The corpus of hadith literature contains the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh); this is known as his Sunnah (Practice).

The Qur'an teaches the concept of Tawhid, the unity of God (Surah 112:1-4), that the whole of creation with the exception of human beings is in a state of submission (Islam) to God. To realize our fullest potential as God's vicegerents on earth (khalifah), we must follow His guidance relating to every facet of our lives.

As an expression of His love and compassion He sent Prophets and Messengers (Surah 16:36) to remind humanity of the Unity of God and to remind them of their purpose in creation.

The Qur'anic teachings place great emphasis upon social justice and the striving towards the creation of a just society (Surahs 5:8, 6:162-164). God's justice is inescapable and human beings are reminded continuously of accountability to God on the Day of Judgment (Surah 17:13-14). For Muslims, the Prophet is the Insan-i-Kamil, the Perfect Human being, and therefore must be emulated, and the seminal community of Muslims established in al-Madinah is the paradigm community.

The central beliefs and teachings of Islam are contained in a famous hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) called the hadith of Jibra'il, in which he defined Islam as constituting three dimensions – Islam, Iman and Ihsan. Islam is to testify there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad (pbuh) is the Messenger of Allah, to perform the Salah, to give Zakah, to fast in the month of Ramadan, and to perform the Hajj, if one is able to. Iman or faith is defined as belief in Allah, His angels, His Revealed Books, His Messengers, the Day of Judgement, and in destiny, both the good and the evil. Ihsan or perfection of faith is to worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you see Him not, know that He sees you.

Islam is one of the Abrahamic faiths and maybe referred to as a cousin faith of both Christianity and Judaism. The central difference between Christianity and Islam is their conceptions of God. Christianity proclaims a Trinitarian nature of God and Jesus as the Son of God. Whereas for Muslims Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the final Messenger of Allah and therefore the Qur'an is the last and final revelation of Allah and His word. Allah is One, He neither begets nor is begotten (Surah 112) and is nothing like His creation (Surah 42:11). For Jews, Moses is the human receptacle through whom God reveals Himself and His law.

Founders and Exemplars of Faith

Without doubt, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the key figure who has been the most influential for Muslims. In Islam, he is the Seal of the prophets sent by God and it is through him that the foundations of Islam were laid down. It is because of him that Islam flourished and nowadays is the fastest growing religion in the world even after 14 centuries.

Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), is seen as the mother of Islam, as it is she who gave all she had in the way of Islam which initiated the success of the religion in the early days. She was an eminent woman who was highly respected by both men and women. She was the wealthiest woman in Arabia who was very powerful and influential. There is a difference of opinion between the two main sects in Islam (Sunni and Shi'ah) as regards the succession of the Prophet.

The Sunni hold the companions (ashab) of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in high regard and consider the first four as the rightly guided successors (Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali). The Shi'ah Muslims believe that the first legitimate successor is Imam 'Ali, as they believe he was chosen by God as opposed to being elected by the people.

'Ayshah, daughter of Abu Bakr and one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), is the lady who shaped Sunni Islam. She is held in very high esteem by Sunnis.

His family (Ahl al-Bayt) are also very important to Muslims, especially Shi'ah Muslims, who regard the family of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as the true authorities and successors after his demise.

Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and wife of Imam 'Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)), was a lady of knowledge and piety. Men and women would seek guidance and knowledge from her on many Islamic issues. It is Fatimah who shaped Shi'ah Islam. Imam Hussein, the third Shi'ah Imam is considered, particularly by Shi'ah Muslims, as the saviour of Islam who sacrificed his life for the faith along with some of his family members and companions.

There are also contemporary personalities who are regarded as being influential in Islam. Malcolm X was a convert and a promoter of civil rights. He was affiliated with the Nation of Islam until 1964 when he entered mainstream Islam but was assassinated in 1965. Imam Khomeini was the founder of the Islamic Republic in Iran (1979) after an uprising the Shah regime. His thought and movement was inspired by Imam Hussein (mentioned above). He was a political and a spiritual leader.

The Prophet

Before the dawn of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was someone who attracted many people towards him. He was known as the trustworthy (al-aman) and to be very truthful (sadiq). Prior to the announcement of Islam and his Prophethood, there is a famous story about a Christian monk who saw the sign of prophecy in him and informed his uncle that he must look after him as he was destined for greatness. The migration (hijrah) from Makkah to al-Madinah is another notable event in the history of Islam as well as the night of ascension (mi'raj) where the Qur'an states that he was taken up to the heavens and travelled on a mystical and spiritual journey. There are many more stories about the Prophet and his mission in his biography (sarah).

There are numerous stories about the way in which the Prophet interacted with people prior to and after the birth of Islam. He treated all people equally, male or female, prince or pauper, black or white, rich or poor. He never discriminated against anyone and everything he did was for the sake of God and for His pleasure.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the best example of spiritual and moral values. The Qur'an states:

'Indeed you have in the Messenger of Allah an excellent exemplar (of moral conduct) for he whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day and who (frequently) engages in the remembrance of Allah' (Surah 33:21).

God tells Muslims that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the most perfect example of moral conduct and who possesses sublime ethics. He is seen as the epitome of perfection in morals, conduct and in his very being as a human, he is the manifestation of the Beautiful Names of God on earth. According to some Muslims, Imam Khomeini is an example of someone who in modern times showed something similar to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as he was a charismatic leader. His teaching and humble way of life influenced and attracted hundreds of thousands of Muslims to re-evaluate their Islam in this day and age.

Although the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) passed away more than 14 centuries ago, his teachings are still leading Muslims today. Islam is a universal religion that caters for all people of all times. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the eternal word of God and therefore Islam and its teaching are able to accommodate any society and any people, it should be adapted to cater for the society in which someone lives.

For all Muslims, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the very person who gives a meaning to their lives, it is he who sets the standards of human behaviour and it is he whose message is the very key to salvation in this temporal world and the eternal next.

Inspiration

God is the source of inspiration. There is a saying in Islam that when a person takes one step towards God, God takes ten steps towards them (as in gaining closeness, not literal steps). Although God is the One who inspires and guides, the human being has to be ready to 'receive' that guidance.

The Qur'an (cf. Surahs. 2:285, 112:1, 45:26) and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) are replete with statements relating to principal beliefs of Islam. However, following the passing away of the Prophet, the early Muslim community was confronted with numerous doctrinal and theological challenges and to safeguard the community from heretical beliefs the leading scholar-jurists sought to provide creedal clarity and refine certain points of contention. The major Sunni creeds were articulated by Imam Abu Hanifa (80-150), Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal (780-855), Imam al-Ash'ari (873-935) and Imam al-Tahawi (d. 933). Whereas Allama-i-Hilli (1250-1325) expresses the mainstream Shi'ah creed.

Visitors to Islamic countries often comment that one of the striking features of their visit is the Adhan, the Muslim call to prayer, called at every minaret of every mosque five times a day, the call is timed in such a way that the completion of one leads to the beginning of another, punctuating the air space of the village or town witnessing of the unity of Allah and the Messengership of Muhammad (pbuh). It invites Muslims to the congregational performance of the Salah and therefore all Muslims share the space for worship. The standing in rows shoulder to shoulder, the facing towards the qiblah, the recitation of the Qur'an, the movement of the body, culminating in the placing of one's nose, forehead, and both hands on the floor in sijdah, is the greatest symbol of a Muslim's complete and utter submission to Allah. After the Salah, Muslims will often recite litanies in glorification, praise and greatness of Allah by using the tasbeih and will also recite the salawaat (blessings) upon the Prophet. Imams will often provide tafsir (commentary) on verses of the Qur'an or hadiths of the Prophet reminding one of Allah, the stories of the Prophets, the transient nature of this life, the grave and the ethical, moral and spiritual practice of the Prophet.

The Qur'an

The Muslim holy book, the Qur'an, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) between the years 610-632 CE. The first revelation took place in the month of Ramadan 610CE. in the cave of Hira on a mountain called al-Nur.

That this is indeed a Qur'an Most Honourable,

In Book well-guarded,

Which none shall touch but those who are clean:

A Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds. (Surah 56 77-80)

The word Qur'an means 'reading' or 'recitation' in Arabic. The original Qur'an, 'the mother of the book', is in heaven. The Qur'an is the words of Allah. The words of the Qur'an were read or recited to Muhammad (pbuh) by the archangel Jibril at the command of Allah. Jibril's first words to Muhammad (pbuh) were, 'Proclaim (or read) in the name of Allah ...'

The first revelation came on Laylat-ul-Qadr, the night of Power, one of the last ten days of Ramadan in the year 610 CE. It is said to have been twenty two years, five months and four days after the first revelation that the last verse was given:

This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion. (Surah 5:3)

In Surah 97 it says that the Qur'an came to earth in its entirety on Laylat-ul-Qadr.

Theologians explain that it came to a spiritual sphere above the earth called the Bait al-Izza, the House of Glory, where eternity meets the world of time.

The Qur'an is divided into surahs which are made up of verses, ayat. One verse or unit is an ayah 'a sign'.

The 114 surahs are arranged according to length with the longest chapters at the beginning and much shorter surahs at the end. The main exception is the first surah Al-Fatihah, the Opening, which is short but very significant for iman – 'faith'.

Every surah apart from Surah 9 begins with the words, 'Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim', 'In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.'

The Qur'an is divided into thirty parts or 'juz'. The whole book is a unity and is called al-kitab, the book or the scripture. Muhammad (pbuh) memorised the Qur'an as he heard it and then repeated it to his followers who learnt it and wrote it down. The Qur'an was not compiled as one book until after the death of the Prophet, since when it has remained unchanged.

Two years after Muhammad's (pbuh) death, the first Khalifah, Abu Bakr, had all the pieces of the Qur'an collected into one book. Just before he died, Muhammad (pbuh) had sorted the revelations into surahs according to themes or because they had been received at the same time.

In 652 CE the third Khalifah, Uthman, had four copies of the Qur'an made based on the official version and sent one to each of four Islamic cities: Basra, Damascus, Kufh and al-Madinah.

Authoritative Scriptures

Islam teaches that throughout history, from the time of the Prophet Adam and Hawwa (Eve), the first humans, Allah has sent revelations to help people to live according to his will. The last of these revelations was received by Muhammad. The earlier ones were:

- Sahifah revealed to the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham)
- Tawrah, Torah, the Law revealed to the Prophet Musa (Moses)
- Zabur, the book of Psalms revealed to the Prophet Dawud (David)
- Injil, the Gospel revealed to the Prophet Isa (Jesus)

Sunnah (Hadith): After the Qur'an, the second textual source for Islam is the record of the sayings and doings of the Prophet. These are known as the sunnah, the trodden path. Individual verbal records of what the Prophet said or did are known as hadith – a saying (plural: ahadith).

There are two types of ahadith; the Prophetic (sayings and advice from the Prophet) and the Qudsi or Sacred – insights about Islam in the words of Muhammad (pbuh). The number of ahadith reached thousands and some seem to be contradictory. A Muslim scholar, Bukhari made a list of 600,000 Hadith. He then rejected all those which could not be traced back to the companions of Muhammad (pbuh). Others were rejected because they contradicted the principles of the Qur'an. His final collection numbered 2762. He died in 870 CE.

Authoritative Leadership

The authority for leadership arises from the Qur'an (Surah. 4:58-59), hadith and historical precedence. All Muslims will adhere to the belief in Allah and the finality of the Messengership of Muhammad (pbuh) and practice the five pillars of Islam.

However, the point of departure relates to the question of authority. For Sunnis, the sources of authority are the Qur'an, hadith, ijma and qiyas. Over the first four centuries of Islam a sophisticated and complex methodology was developed for an authentic understanding of these sources. This led to the emergence of four major schools of law or madhahibs – Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali and Maliki. For the Shi'ah, the major school of law is the Ithna Ashari (Twelvers) or also known as the Jafari, named after Imam Jafar as-Sadiq. The legitimate interpreters of the Qur'an are the Imams, who are from the ahl al-Bayt, the family of the Prophet. The major groups from these are Jafaris, Ismailis and Zaydis.

Islam is Din, a whole way of life and provides Muslims with guidance permeating every aspect of human existence. The life and example of the Prophet provides the ideal for all Muslims to aim for and emulate. The whole purpose and aim is to develop a perpetual consciousness of Allah within the life of the individual, to remind one of the ephemeral nature of her existence and to cultivate a human personality that seeks the peace, compassion and harmony of all.

Following the passing away of the Prophet, the early Muslim community was confronted with the question of leadership of the Community. A large gathering of the companions selected Abu Bakr (r. 632-634 CE), a senior companion (sahaba) of the Prophet, following his death he was succeeded by Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634-644 CE), Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644-656 CE) and Ali ibn Abi Talib (r. 656-661 CE). These four are revered in Sunni Islam as the Calipha Rashidun (the Rightly Guided Caliphs). The assassination of Uthman led to a major rupture within the Islamic community, Mu'awiya's (r.661-680) refusal to accept Ali's leadership led to civil war and as a consequence resulted in the emergence of a group called Shi'ite Ali (the party of Ali). For the Shi'ah leadership was to be based upon the lineage to the Prophet's family (ahl al-Bayt) and they too would appeal to the

Qur'an and hadith for scriptural legitimacy. It was later that a fuller Shi'ah theology would develop the theory of the succession of twelve Imams (Ithna Ashari, Twelvers) and place Ali as the first Imam and the rightful successor to the Prophet and project back to the time of the Prophet's passing away as the moment at which Ali was denied his rightful place as leader of the community.

Over the first three to four centuries of Islam, Muslim scholar-Jurists invented a sophisticated and complex discipline of Usul al-Fiqh, (Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence). This provided a sophisticated methodology for the deduction of the law from the four primary sources in Sunni Islam – Qur'an, Hadith, Ijma and Qiyas. In Sunni Islam therefore the practice is expressed through following one of the four major schools of Islamic Law (Madhahibs) that emerged during the first four centuries of Islam, these are the Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali and Shafi'i. The major Shi'ah school of law is the Jafari.

The Madhahibs are a source of orthopraxis for the Muslims and therefore many of the classical books from the different schools of law are now available in English. This has in practice resulted in many English speaking Muslims seeking a return to the classical law manuals rather than the inherited forms of practice through Salafi or Wahhabi groups. In cases of family law, for example, divorce, Muslim men and women may utilize the services of a number of Shari'ah Councils that have emerged over the last four decades, these have enabled Muslim women a release from marriage which in some cases their husbands had refused to do. These Councils also provide significant mediation and conflict resolution assistance based within the framework of Shari'ah.

The major Sunni institution on the world stage that provides fatwas on contemporary issues, such as IVF, abortion, organ transplants, terrorism, etc. is the Al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt. For the Shi'ah their guidance emanates from the leading Ayatollahs from the Middle East. One of the contemporary challenges for British Muslims is the absence of a central authority, for example, the Mufti of Great Britain, who could address issues concerning British Muslims.

Due to the nature of Authority in Islam, there is continuous intellectual debate and discussion, and certainly in Sunni Islam it is evaluated through the degree to which an Ijma (consensus) of the community of Scholars may emerge. In relation to politics, of course, the greatest abuse of authority has been perpetrated by extremist violent ideologues who have sought to attack the madhahibs as outdated. By cutting off the primary sources, Qur'an and Hadith from their traditional complex and sophisticated methodology of interpretation invented by scholar-jurists, the extremists have sought to appeal to the literalist reading of these sources to justify their violent political ideology. The Islamist groups in their various guises throughout the Islamic world have sought to use their 'Islamist' credentials to gain power and many are leading campaigns for social justice and delivery of essential services often in deprived areas.

Ways of Living

Exploring the impact of religions and beliefs on how people live their lives;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

Religious Practice

Being Muslim impacts on every aspect of a person's life. 'Islam' means submission to the will of Allah and it is by living according to this will that Muslims can demonstrate their belief. In leading a life of submission to the will of Allah, Muslims are always conscious of their obligations to Allah, to their families and to others.

At the centre of Islamic life and belief are the Five Pillars of Faith:

- Shahadah – this is the declaration of faith and states: There is no god except Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.
- Salah – five compulsory daily prayers as a mean of communicating with and worshipping Allah. The conditions for Salah, the times, the preparations and the words are carried out in accordance with the ways which were taught by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). All prayer is in Arabic.

– Zakah – ‘the purification of wealth by the payment of an annual welfare due’. This should not be confused with charity. Muslims give 2½% of their surplus income as zakah each year. Zakah began in al-Madinah to care for the widows and orphans. Wealth is seen as a gift from Allah and is to be shared. After paying zakah, the remainder of a person’s wealth is kept pure and people are kept free from greed and selfishness. As well as this, Muslims are urged to make additional voluntary payments called Sadaqah.

– Hajj – the annual pilgrimage to Makkah, which every Muslim must carry out at least once in a lifetime if he or she has the health and wealth. A Muslim man who has completed Hajj is called Hajji, and a woman, Hajjah. The pilgrimage is made during Dhul Hijjah, the twelfth month.

– Sawm – this is fasting from just before dawn until sunset during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. Muslims must abstain from all food and drink (including water) as well as smoking and sexual relations during the hours of fasting.

The fulfilment of these five pillars is the duty of every Muslim as a demonstration of their obedience to Allah’s wishes.

Each of these five actions is ibadah; an act of worship performed with the intention of obeying the wishes of Allah.

The Qur’an and books of hadith are treated with reverence; the Qur’an especially would be placed in a reverential position at home, work or the mosque. Most mosques traditionally have wooden cabinets or shelving for placing of the Qur’ans and also ensuring that they are accessible to the worshippers. There are also special Qur’an stands available in mosques and most Muslim homes on which the Qur’an is placed when being read. Many Mosques will also stock collections of Hadith and these too must be treated with utmost reverence. In the UK there are estimated to be some 1600 mosques, many are not purpose built but often just large houses or similar buildings converted to a Mosque.

Worship

Much of Muslim life is centred on worship. The daily struggle of Greater Jihad (see below) could be said to inform all aspects of Muslim life, however, it is also stressed that there are set times for prayer which turn the thoughts of a Muslim from the secular world to the sacred one and that after prayer there is a return to daily life and work. This is also seen in the observance of Friday prayers, Salat-ul-Jumu’ah, all work stops for the prayers but after the service is over, daily life returns.

For the Muslim the whole of the earth is a Mosque and therefore Muslims are permitted to pray at any clean place. There is usually a Minbar for the Imam to stand and deliver his sermon. Most Mosques will also have a Mihrab, which signifies the direction of Makkah to which Muslims pray. Muslims will often make effort to pray in Jumu’ah (congregation). It is traditional for majority of Mosques also to have large quantities of tasbihs available, usually hanging off the wall so that when Muslims are reciting certain litanies these help to count and also focus the mind. Muslim men and women would be expected to cover their whole bodies including their heads when praying. Imams would often wear a turban and hold the staff as a symbol of Prophetic authority and practice.

The five daily prayers (Salah) mean that Muslims pray as a community, it is a great leveller as all stand side by side in rows, focused towards Makkah and as one body. The Prophet defined perfection of faith (Ihsan) as to ‘worship God as if you see Him, if you see Him not, know that He sees you’, so it is a means of focusing the whole of one’s being towards and in the presence of God.

The Journey of Life

Birth: When a Muslim child is born the adhan (call to prayer) is whispered in its right ear and the ‘iqamah (command to rise and worship) in the left. This means that the first words the baby hears are: ‘Allahu Akbar’. The words are usually said by the oldest male present but can be said by a Muslim woman.

In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh the tahnik ceremony is held. Sugar, honey or a squashed date is rubbed on the baby’s gums by an elderly relative. This expresses the hope that the baby will be sweet-natured, kind, obedient and considerate.

Aqiqah: Seven days after birth is the Aqiqah ceremony where the father announces the name of the child to friends and relatives. The parents or the grandparents choose the name. The baby is being welcomed into the ummah. Prayers are recited asking for

Allah's blessing and for the child's future health, prosperity and spiritual growth. The baby's head is wiped with olive oil then washed or shaved. The equivalent weight of the shaven hair, in gold or silver, is then given to the poor.

Some Muslims offer a sacrifice after the Aqiqah ceremony. A sheep or goat is offered for a girl and two animals for a boy.

The khitan, or circumcision, may be performed at the aqiqah ceremony or at twenty-one days or even later. It can be done any time up to the tenth birthday.

Bismillah: The Bismillah ceremony is the beginning of the religious education of the child. It takes place when the child is four years old: sometimes when the child is exactly four years, four months and four days. The child must be able to recite 'Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim' (In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful).

By the age of seven the child will be able to take part in the five daily prayers and, by the age of ten, to fast, though usually not for the whole month of Ramadan. By the time a child is twelve Muslims are usually considered old enough to be responsible for their own religious activities.

Marriage: Marriages in the Muslim community are often arranged but they can only take place with the consent of both parties. All Muslims are expected to marry. Men may have up to four wives but each must be treated equally:

If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice. (Surah 4:3)

A Muslim man may marry a Jew or a Christian but a Muslim woman may only marry a Muslim man. Divorce is regarded as a last resort.

A Muslim marriage usually takes place in the home or the mosque and the couple give their consent before at least two witnesses. There are readings from the Qur'an and the imam and the guests pray for the couple.

The Aqd Nikah (contract of marriage) is spoken and written. The bride and groom sign three copies to ensure that they have both agreed to the marriage.

The groom gives mahr (a sum of money, property or other valuable gift) to the bride and this remains her property for life. Often a walimah or nuptial feast follows the ceremony.

Sometimes the bride does not attend the ceremony. She may remain at home while the bridegroom goes to the mosque and she appoints an agent and two witnesses to represent her part of the contract.

Death: The funeral rites for Muslims are not in the Qur'an but in law books. Rituals vary according to the customs of the country. Muslim graves in the UK run from north-east to south-west, so the heads can be at the south-west end facing right towards the direction of Makkah and the Ka'bah.

Muslims are buried and not cremated as they want the bodies to be intact for the resurrection of the dead from their graves at the Day of Judgement.

When Muslims are dying, they say the words attributed to Muhammad (pbuh) ('Allah, help me through the hardship and agony of death'). They also try to repeat the Shahadah (declaration of faith): 'There is no god but Allah; Muhammad is the messenger of Allah'.

Relatives recite verses from the Qur'an to call on the barakah (grace) of Allah and they repeat loudly, 'la-ilaha-illallah', 'there is no god but Allah' so that Satan will have no opportunity to confuse the dying person with doubts.

The dead body is placed on a stretcher with the head in the direction of the Qiblah. Ghusl a ritual washing is done by relatives of the same sex as the deceased. The corpse is washed three times, perfumed with scents such as camphor, wrapped in a shroud, a single piece of unsewn cloth, and placed in a coffin.

Laws in many countries require coffins but in some Muslim countries the body is placed straight into the ground, protected by planks or with a coffin inverted over it and then covered with earth. Salah is then performed in the house of the dead Muslim or in the mosque.

The funeral takes place as soon as possible, usually the next day, but certainly within three days.

At the graveside in the cemetery, funeral prayers Salat-ul-Janaza (which is salah with no prostrations), and al-Fatihah (Surah 1) are said.

When the corpse is lowered into the ground, the body is committed to the earth with the words, 'In the name of Allah, (we bury) according to the Way of the Prophet of Allah' and the 'From the (earth) did We create you, and into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you out once again.'(Surah 20:55).

Seven days after the burial, relatives try to visit the grave as a mark of respect.

Generally, mourning does not last more than three days.

Shi'ah Muslims have different traditions including rawdahs (memorial gatherings) on the fortieth day of mourning.

It is traditional for the grave to be raised a little above the level of the ground, simply to stop people from walking on it or sitting on it.

Relations with Non-Muslims

Islam does not require separation from the non-Muslim world but some of the laws of Islam require separation of a degree. Prayer times must be observed and food must be halal. The laws of modesty, particularly in relation to women have caused some difficulties for Muslims living in the western world. Whilst the Qur'an does indicate what is suitably modest dress for both men and women, much practice is based on the local cultures of the countries in which Islam developed. This has caused some difficulties, in particular for women, who wish to observe a strict code of dress in the outside world with corresponding negative reactions in the media.

The teachings of shirk (association), that is, regarding anything as being equal or partner to Allah, has caused problems when some western media have sought to represent the Prophet in drawings or cartoon form. Many of these representations have been derogatory and offensive to Muslims. Muslims do not condemn freedom of speech but nevertheless this cannot extend to this sort of treatment of the Prophet of Allah.

Many Muslims live in very tight-knit families and communities and feel that Islam has not been well reported in much of the media, especially in the light of the destruction of the twin towers in New York in 2001 and the London bombings in 2005. Such extremist atrocities are condemned by Muslims in the UK as having nothing to do with the true teachings of Islam.

It is important to note that these aspects separation from the non-Muslims world are not associated in any way with any idea of Muslims being better than others, such an idea is anathema and contrary to the teachings of the Qur'an.

Jihad

A further very important aspect of Islamic spirituality is Jihad.

Greater Jihad is defined as 'personal individual struggle against evil in the way of Allah'. This is a daily feature in the life of a Muslim as they try to ensure that every aspect of their life is lived in accordance with Allah's will.

The concept often referred to as Jihad, particularly in some parts of the media, is in fact Lesser Jihad. This is sometimes translated as a Holy War – fighting to protect Islam. The conditions of Lesser Jihad, like those of a Just War, are very strict and Muslims in the UK say that no Lesser Jihad has been legitimately called for many centuries.

Holy Days and Celebrations

There are two main festivals ('Id, sing.) in the Islamic calendar. The first comes after the yearly performance of hajj. It is called 'Id-ul-Adha (the festival of Sacrifice; some Muslims sacrifice an animal which is then distributed amongst family, friends, neighbours and the needy). The second is to mark the end of the month of the month of Ramadan and hence the end of fasting. It is called 'Id-ul-Fitr (the festival of the breaking of the fast). The day of Friday (yawm al-Jumu'ah) is also a festival but on a smaller scale. Muslims all over the world also commemorate the birth of the Prophet (Mawlid an-nabi). Shi'ah Muslims have many more festivals as they celebrate the birth of each of the Imams and other events such as Ghadir Khumm.

These two main festivals are celebrated over three days and people from different cultures have different practices. Festivals are celebrated with the family and with the community. On 'id, people wear their best or new clothes; go to mosque to pray and wish each other a blessed 'id ('id mubarak); and in some communities, breakfast is served at the mosque for 'Id-ul-Fitr. Families exchange gifts (children traditionally are given money), have lots of sweets, visit family and friends (to whom gifts or sweets may be taken), visit the graveyard and give charity (sadaqah) to the poor and the needy. The birth of the Prophet and the Imams is celebrated on the night before the day of their birth. There is usually a lecture at the mosque followed by the recitation of poetry (qasadah) and other acts of worship.

The importance of these festivals is in their religious and spiritual significance. 'Id-ul-Adha goes back to the story of the Prophet Abraham and the command of God to sacrifice his son. This 'id symbolises one's total submission to the will of God and one's readiness to give or sacrifice anything if God wished him to just like the prophet Abraham. 'Id al-Fitr is a time for Muslims to thank God for the opportunity they were given to fast another Ramadan and to ask God for the same opportunity again. During this month, it is recommended to pray for forgiveness and hence one hopes at the end of Ramadan that his prayers have been answered. Ramadan is sometimes also called the minor fast as it is a time in which Muslims would have been working on their spirituality and their closeness with God through discipline, self-control and more awareness but which they should carry on for the rest of the year which is the major fast (in this sense, fast no longer refers to the physical aspect of it only). Festivals are also an occasion for people to meet each other again. Every person is more careful about their duties and obligations and the spirit of 'id offers an opportunity to make amends and encourages reconciliation. These gatherings strengthen communities by bringing families and friends together as they worship God as a unit.

On the two 'ids, Muslims perform an ablution (ghusl) in the morning and then go to the mosque for a special 'id prayer performed in congregation and which is followed by a sermon. Muslims are recommended to spend some time in worship and to read certain supplications. Giving sadaqah is highly recommended on the day of 'id. On the day of 'Id al-Fitr, each household must pay a fixed amount of money called fitrah or zakat-ul-Fitr which is then distributed to the poor.

As the Islamic calendar is based on the lunar cycle, Islamic festivals do not always occur on the same days. An example of this would be the 'Id-ul-Fitr may take place on either the 29th or the 30th of the month of Ramadan depending on the sighting of the moon.

Ways of Expressing Meaning

Appreciating that individuals and cultures express their beliefs and values through many different forms.

Stories of Faith

The Qur'an tells the stories of only a number of prophets among the 124,000 prophets that have been sent. Some of the ones told in some detail are the stories of Adam and Eve and their fall from Heaven, Noah and the Ark, Abraham and his trials, Joseph, Moses and Pharaoh, and Mary and the miraculous birth of Jesus. Whilst the Qur'an makes reference to the Prophet's personality and being, it does not really tell stories about him in the way it does with those mentioned above. Nevertheless stories about the Prophet and his life are the most important in Islam but they are found in the Sunnah or in biographies (sirah). As for the Shi'ah who view their Imams as the extension of prophethood and hence as perfect examples just like the Prophet, stories about the Imams and their lives play a central role in their faith.

First, some of these stories are narrated in the Qur'an which Muslims believe is the verbatim word of God. Therefore it is a sacred book with God as its 'author'. Since the Qur'an is the eternal book, its teachings still apply today and forever. As for the

stories of the Prophet, and the Imams for the Shi'ah, they are sacred because these personalities are sinless and all their actions, sayings and approvals are in accordance with Islam and are the perfect example for Muslims of every age.

The stories of the Qur'an are sacred as the Qur'an is the Word of God. The Sunnah of the Prophet is sacred because everything he did or said was nothing other than revelation.

By the Star when it goes down—Your Companion is neither astray nor being misled. Nor does he say (aught) of (his own) Desire. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him. (53:1-4).

These stories are meant to bring a person closer to God. As the Qur'an says, the generations of the past have long gone. They alone are accountable for their own deeds. But God tells us their stories so humans can learn from their example because these stories are true and factual not fictional or mythical. These stories are important as they are reminders for Muslims of our own obligations and our own faith and we can benefit from them:

Therefore do remind, in case reminding does benefit [the hearer] (Surah 87:9)

As the Qur'an is considered the eternal word of God, each story or event mentioned can be interpreted according to context and time and people of all generations. In Islam, everything has a double meaning; one is apparent and the other is hidden. Hence these stories, other than their explicit meanings, have deeper implicit meanings. The Qur'an caters for the lay person just as much as for the learned, however based on each person's intellectual abilities and spiritual level, there would be different levels of understandings and meanings.

The purpose of these stories is to guide and teach. Through these stories, one can learn from the example of the prophets but also from the example of the people they were sent to; so, how to be and how not to be. They also show the responsibility of each individual not just to follow the crowd but to think for himself because one is easily influenced by his environment which may lead him astray. As prophets (and Imams for the Shi'ah) are infallible beings, people should model themselves on these exemplary beings.

Symbols of Faith

There are very few symbols in Islam; however some are significant such as the colour green, some numbers and, in the Shi'ah school of thought, the double-pointed sword of Imam 'Ali and a piece of earth known as the turbah.

Although the star and crescent typically seen on mosque domes and some flags have come to be associated with Islam, they do not originate from Islam. In fact, their use is seen by some as controversial.

Some objects used widely by Muslims such as the rosary beads (masbahah), prayer hats and prayer mats have come to symbolise Islam in the West. However, the objects themselves do not have any religious symbolism. A Muslim might wear certain passages from the Qur'an in his or her necklace, men might wear a prayer hat and rings with stones, some might carry the masbahah all the time and some will hang it on their car mirrors, as well as Qur'anic passages and other supplications.

The double-pointed sword of the Prophet which he gave to his cousin and son-in-law Imam 'Ali symbolises the loyalty and devotion of his followers who came to be known as Shi'ah 'Ali (the followers of 'Ali). Some Shi'ah wear the two-pointed sword as a symbol of their loyalty to the Imam.

The turbah is used by Shi'ah Muslims to place their foreheads upon when they pray. The turbah's significance is that it represents the martyrdom of the 3rd Imam al-Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). It also represents the cycle of life; the two prostrations on the earth symbolise being created from earth and the return to earth after death.

According to most Muslims, the colour green is significant as the prophet used to wear a green turban and it has been used ever since on flags for example to represent Islam.

According to some Muslims, some numbers have religious symbolism. For example, 786 equates with 'In the Name of God' (Bismillah).

Symbolic Actions

Islam encompasses every aspect of a person's life; for example the recitation of the adhan and iqamah in the baby's right and left ear right after birth symbolizes that the baby is born Muslim and will recognize the call.

All Islamic rituals have symbolic meanings. Every action performed during the liturgical prayer or during the pilgrimage (hajj) for instance has spiritual meanings such as the stoning of the three pillars during hajj which symbolizes the rejection of the temptations of the devil.

Muslims do not need a building in order to worship Allah. They can pray in any clean place, but the Qur'an recommends praying with others:

'And be steadfast in prayer; practise regular charity; and bow down your heads with those who bow down (in worship)' (Surah 2:43).

The Muslim place of worship is a mosque or a masjid (place of prostration).

Muhammad (pbuh) built the first mosque in 622 CE in al-Madinah. In Muslim countries, the Mu'adhin (muezzin) calls the believers to prayer five times a day from the minaret where he stands facing the Ka'bah in Makkah. Inside the prayer hall he repeats the call with slightly different words just before prayer begins.

The first prostration during the daily prayers symbolizes being created from dust and the second the return to dust after death. This is to remind the human being to remain humble as everything will perish except God who alone can have pride. Lifting hands in prayers is a sign of asking for something you need and which only God who is needless can give.

The Arts

As God is the absolute transcendent being, Muslims believe that there are no religious symbols whatsoever that represent the Divine in any shape or form whether through images, sculpture or any other means, even in an abstract way. Such an act is considered as idolatry (shirk), the one sin that God will not forgive (Surah 4:48)..

As it says in The Qur'an:

(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves, and pairs among cattle: by this means does He multiply you: there is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things) (Surah 42:11).

Islamic art therefore seeks to capture the spiritual rather than the material, the essence rather than the physical. This is achieved through certain techniques such as geometry and repetition.

Geometry dominates Islamic art and one of things it symbolizes is logic and order present in the universe. Repetition is widely used to portray infinite patterns which have no beginning and no end and ultimately undifferentiated unity. Many Muslims also decorate their homes with Islamic calligraphy instead or with other forms of art. Iranian art incorporates nature with Islamic calligraphy, for example writing Bismillah (In the Name of God) in the shape of a bird or tiger.

Islamic music: Nowadays, music is been used to attract mainly the youth towards Islam. According to some Muslims, music is considered strictly forbidden however many of the earlier eminent scholars of Islam studied music as a science. Today, Islamic music takes many forms such as rap, classical, Sufi, etc.

Islamic songs (nashids) have become very popular especially amongst the youth. The genre now varies from classical to rap. Yusuf Islam (formerly known as Cat Stevens) was a popular singer before converting to Islam. He now promotes Islam through his music. One modern famous singer is Sami Yusuf who sings in various languages but mainly in English.

Poetry (shi'r) has always played an important part in Arab and in Islamic culture and tradition; it was used to describe historical events and people (for example, famous battles and leaders of Islam). Rumi is probably the most famous Muslim poet whose work has been translated into many languages and has attracted people of different faiths.

Today, poetry is still very popular in many Islamic gatherings such as the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). This is especially so for Shi'ah Muslims who use poetry extensively for the birth and the death of the Imams, the most important of these events being the martyrdom of Imam al-Hussein during the month of Muharram.

Hymns (qasidah) are also very popular in Islamic gatherings especially in Sufi circles. Hymns are used to praise God and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his family.

Muslim Architecture

Since God cannot be represented in any shape or form, mosques and religious centres are bare rooms decorated only with Islamic Calligraphy and art. There are no pictures or statues, not even of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as it is also forbidden to depict the Prophet and this is why in films or in other forms of art there is usually a light on his face.

Although mosques and Islamic shrines differ in style due to period and region they were built in, many of them display fine Islamic architecture. Some are extravagantly decorated with Islamic calligraphy, gold, mirrors and colours.

Mosques can be quite distinct (especially in the West) when they have minarets where someone stands to call to prayers (mu'adhin) and domes. The dome of a mosque symbolises the universe which Allah created. Many mosques have four minarets and a dome. Outside of the prayer hall is a place for ritual washing – wudu. There are no chairs in a prayer hall and the only furniture is the minbar from where the imam preaches the Friday khutbah (sermon). The Qiblah (direction) wall faces the Ka'bah in Makkah and a niche called the Mihrab indicates the direction for prayer.

Shirk forbids any representations of people and so the walls of a mosque are often decorated with calligraphy. This is usually texts from the Qur'an. Decorative patterns in tiles and mosaics such as arabesque are also used.

In the United Kingdom mosques serve many community functions. It is the madrassah (school) where children learn Arabic and there may also be a reading room, a library and a bookshop. The prayer hall itself is also used for funeral services but not for weddings.

Mystery and Meaning

Muslims believe that everything in existence has an apparent (zahir) and hidden (batin) meaning. Furthermore, our limited intellect is unable to grasp fully the Being of God. God is beyond this limited material world as we can see in this example:

When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and his Lord addressed him, He said: "O my Lord! Show (Thyself) to me, that I may look upon thee." Allah said: "By no means canst thou see Me (direct); But look upon the mount; if it abide in its place, then shalt thou see Me." When his Lord manifested His glory on the Mount, He made it as dust. And Moses fell down in a swoon. When he recovered his senses he said: "Glory be to Thee! To Thee I turn in repentance, and I am the first to believe." (Surah 7:143)

Hence, God describes Himself to His creation in order to know Him; one important example is the verse of Light (Ayah al-Nur): 'Allah is the Light of the Heavens and the earth...' (Surah 24:35).

The Qur'an consists of explicit (muhkamat) and ambiguous (mutashabihat) verses (Surah 3:7). The latter may be interpreted in many ways and some cannot be taken as literal. Hence there are many verses that have symbolic meanings especially the ones describing God, for example:

[...] the Hand of Allah is above their hands [...] (Surah 48:10).

[...] Everything (that exists) will perish except His own Face [...] (Surah 28:88).

These two examples (referring to God's power (hand) and His eternal presence (face)) cannot be understood literally as the Qur'an asserts that there is nothing like God. God is beyond anything that we can imagine, but the use of analogy and metaphor in the Qur'an help the human being to grasp the deeper meanings behind some of the verses. The Qur'an also uses symbolic language as explanation, for example:

For Him (alone) is prayer in Truth: any others that they call upon besides Him hear them no more than if they were to stretch forth their hands for water to reach their mouths but it reaches them not: for the prayer of those without Faith is nothing but (futile) wandering (in the mind) (Surah 13:14).

But the Unbelievers—their deeds are like a mirage in sandy deserts, which the man parched with thirst mistakes for water; until when he comes up to it, he finds it to be nothing: But he finds Allah (ever) with him, and Allah will pay him his account: and Allah is swift in taking account (Surah 24:39).

Pilgrimage

The Hajj, the Pilgrimage to Makkah, is one of the Five Pillars of Islam on which the faith rests. The Hajj takes place annually and is the duty of every adult Muslim, male or female, who is physically and mentally fit and can afford it, to make the pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime. Hajj is the Greater Pilgrimage and can only be taken in Dhul-Hijjah, the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar, whilst 'umrah is a lesser pilgrimage which can be taken at any time.

If people cannot make the journey themselves they have only to declare that it is their Niyyah, their sincere heartfelt intention, to go on Hajj and the duty is considered to have been fulfilled.

Before starting on the Hajj pilgrims put on ihram, a white seamless garment similar to the clothes worn by Muhammad (pbuh) and the earlier prophets.

Ihram requires:

- no perfume, not even in soap, nor in food,
- no jewellery, except women's wedding rings,
- no wearing of gloves, though hands may be wrapped in cloth,
- no deliberate cutting of hair or fingernails, so as not to interfere with nature,
- no uprooting of plants nor cutting down of trees on the journey
- no hunting nor blood shed, except in dealing with bedbugs, fleas, snakes and scorpions,
- no carrying of weapons
- no sexual relations, not even kissing, nor flirtatious thoughts
- no engagements nor taking part in weddings.

On the first day, at Makkah, the pilgrims visit the Great Mosque and walk round the Ka'bah, the cube shaped building at the centre of the mosque, seven times anticlockwise. They then walk quickly seven times between the hills of Safa and Marwah (to commemorate the seven times that Hagar, wife of Ibrahim, ran between those hills searching for water for her and her son, Ishmael).

Pilgrims then travel to Mina to camp. On the ninth of Dhul-Hijjah they go to the plain of Arafat before sunrise for the stand before Allah. After sunset, the pilgrims go to Muzdalifah where they collect stones. The following morning the pilgrims return to Mina and throw stones at three pillars. The pilgrimage ends with an animal sacrifice.

After a final circling of the Ka'bah, the pilgrims go home or visit al-Madinah.

The essential parts of Hajj are the four rites which are obligatory in the Qur'an:

- Putting on Ihram
- Doing tawaf (circling the Ka'bah)
- Going to Arafat
- Making the last tawaf after returning from Arafat.

Identity, Diversity and Belonging

Understanding how individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through faith or belief;

Exploring the variety, difference and relationships that exist within and between religions, values and beliefs.

Foundations of Identity

The main figure associated with the foundation of Islam is Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who Muslims believe was chosen by God as His last messenger to humanity. Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation in the year 610 at the age of 40 and which he continued to receive for 23 years until his demise in 632. The first person to become his follower was his wife Khadijah, and then his cousin 'Ali and his uncle Hamzah. The Qur'an also acknowledges the previous prophets whose mission culminated in Islam as the most complete religion of all the revealed religions. In the Sunni school, the first four caliphs are considered as the rightly guided ones (al-khulifa' al-rashidun). The first two caliphs especially help the spread of Islam. According to the Shi'ah, Fatimah (the daughter of the Prophet) and her progeny, the Imams, played an important role in the foundation of the faith. They are seen as the extension of Prophethood and the preservers of the message.

Stories regarding the Prophet are mainly found in the sunnah (traditions) as well as some history books or biographies of the Prophet, for example: The Prophet, aged 12, was accompanying his uncle's caravan. When they stopped for a rest on their way to Damascus, a Christian hermit recognised the sign of prophecy on Muhammad (pbuh) and told his uncle that the boy was destined for greatness. On a night of Ramadan in the year 610, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was meditating in the cave of Hira when the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and ordered the Prophet to 'recite' (iqra!). The Prophet who was illiterate told the Angel he cannot recite, the Angel repeated two more times and the Prophet began uttering the words of the Qur'an. Even before the revelation, the Prophet was known for his remarkable reputation amongst his tribe and others. He was highly respected and trusted (he was named al-Aman, the trustworthy). After the revelation of his Prophethood, it is stories about his impeccable character, kindness, gentleness and love towards others, as well as his patience and endurance towards those who opposed and harmed him because they did not believe in his mission that teach us about the personality of the Prophet and how his personality helped found and spread the message of Islam.

Islam is clear that all prophets are ordinary human beings chosen by God for special missions. They have been sent to guide the people towards God and teach them about what is good for them and to warn about what is bad. The only way that people will listen to a prophet and follow him is if the prophet was himself a good person. Hence Islam asserts the infallibility of each and every prophet as God, out of His grace and justice, would not ask a people to follow a sinner.

Muslims view all prophets as examples to follow in the way they interacted with others (kindness and tolerance) and the way they were committed to God. The Qur'an describes Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as the most perfect example to follow (Surah 33:21). Muslims follow the Prophet by referring to the traditions (ahadith) that describe his actions and words.

The Qur'an says:

By the Star when it goes down—Your Companion is neither astray nor being misled. Nor does he say (aught) of (his own) Desire. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him. (53:1-4)

Every single word and action of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is in accordance with the revelation of God. Hence everything that emanated from him represented the highest and most perfect level of spiritual and moral values.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an, revealed over 1400 years ago, is the eternal word of God and hence can be interpreted for today's world. A famous tradition (hadith) states: "What was permissible during the life of Muhammad will be permissible until the Day of Judgment and what was forbidden during the life of Muhammad will be forbidden until the Day of Judgment". Hence the person of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is an everlasting example. Muslims look at the example of the Prophet and interpret his actions and words for the time and the society they live in. As the epitome of perfection, Muslims of all ages strive to follow in his footsteps in order to reach perfection which is the purpose of creation.

For Muslims this life can only have a meaning with a belief in the next life as the purpose of this life is the Hereafter. Hence any deeds, exertion, or gains in this world must have as an ultimate end the next world.

All that the Prophet did was in accordance with Islam and for the pleasure of God. The Prophet showed that material gains, worldly powers, and high status for example are all part of the temptations of this temporal world but which no one takes with them to the next life. It is only the deeds of peoples' worldly life that will accompany them into the grave and which will determine their destiny. As a perfect role model, he put into practice all that he preached. He showed how humans can detach themselves from worldly temptations and overcome tests and difficulties. Nevertheless, he lived his life to the full; he was a husband, a father, a friend, a businessman, a leader, a teacher. He showed how people can contribute to society, help others and work hard to fulfil their material needs yet still remaining detached from the love of the world and its material temptations.

For Muslims, it is important to know that all belongs to God and the same way God gives it, God can take it away and that everything shall perish except the face of God. This life is no longer a goal but the means to bliss if one's deeds are good or to hell if they are bad. As the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the perfect example for Muslims, he was the embodiment of obedience to the One God knowing that this life is a mere transition to the eternal life which awaits. Throughout his life he had complete trust in God at all times and bore with patience in any difficult situation. He was certain that the justice of God will come and he knew that there is nothing other than God as attested by the Qur'an:

And call not, besides Allah, on another god. There is no god but He. Everything (that exists) will perish except His own Face. To Him belongs the Command, and to Him will ye (all) be brought back. (Surah 28:88)

God is the source of inspiration. There is a saying in Islam that when a person takes one step towards God, God takes ten steps towards them (as in gaining closeness, not literal steps). Although God is the One who inspires and guides, the human being has to be ready to 'receive' that guidance.

Being Human

Islam teaches Muslims that man was created from dust and that God breathed into him his spirit, favouring him over the rest of creation (Surahs 23:12-14, 32:7-9). Hence humans are both material and spiritual beings. Muslims believe that a human being can follow his material desires and become worse than animals or realise his spiritual potential and become better than angels. Therefore, the struggle of the human being is to realise fully in himself his humanity as opposed to his animalistic side. In Islam, the self is a trust (amanah) from God which was faultless when given. We must strive to return this trust in the same condition. Hence, it must be nourished and protected from anything that might tarnish it.

The Prophet said: 'Whoever knows his self, knows his Lord.'

Self-knowledge is very important in Islam as it leads to the discovery that the self is a divine entity upon which celestial virtues have been bestowed and which is far superior to its material and physical dimension.

The Qur'an teaches Muslims that the human being was created not only a material being as God says: "When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him" (Surah 15:29).

Islam not only asserts the existence of the soul but it emphasizes its superiority over the body. It is the soul that gives life to the body; without the soul, the body is just a corpse. It is through the purification and perfection of one's self that one can reach salvation in the next life. At the end of time, all human beings will be resurrected for the Day of Judgment where every single person from the very beginning of creation will be brought to account for all their deeds during their worldly life. The Qur'an stresses on the primacy of the life Hereafter (Akhirah) as the earthly life is only temporary and the Hereafter is the eternal abode, the Qur'an says:

Day (behold), ye prefer the life of this world; But the Hereafter is better and more enduring. (Surah 87:16-17)

There are many descriptions in the Qur'an of the Day of Judgment and Heaven and hell. The human being is constantly advised to believe and to do good in order to be rewarded with heaven in the afterlife.

Islam views the human being as a social being and discourages one to isolate himself from society as it is working together that a society and its individuals can evolve and progress. Belonging to a community can strengthen a person's faith by encouraging them or reminding them to carry out their religious duties and hence helping them progress in their spiritual journey.

Being a Muslim

A Muslim must establish belief in the fundamentals of religion (usal al-din): tawhid, prophethood and Judgment Day. The Shi'ah school of thought has a further two: imamah (God chosen successors to the Prophet) and justice. A Muslim must recognise that God is One (tawhid) and that Muhammad (pbuh) was His last messenger and hence must lead a way of life that is in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). A Muslim has obligations towards God, himself and others. A Muslim (when of age) is expected to perform their religious obligations such as the daily prayers, fast during the month of Ramadan, and pay their religious taxes (zakah and khums). He must treat others as his equals in humanity.

A committed Muslim carries out his religious duties, he may go to the mosque to attend lectures or to perform his prayers individually or in congregation, but he is primarily someone who does good deeds and refrains from sin:

To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee. To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute. (Surah 5:48)

[...] Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Surah 49:13)

Hence it is deeds that show real commitment and which will ultimately determine a person's destiny.

Without doubt the five daily prayers (salah) is the most important ritual in Islam which must be performed under any circumstance. Muslims will be seen praying in public places, at their work place and even on airplanes for instance. The prayers can also be performed every day in congregation at the mosque (or any place where there is a person leading the prayers and there are others following).

Charity (sadaqah) is vital in Islamic communities; Islam expects Muslims to be generous towards others. Through charity, communities raise money for different projects such as Iftars (food for breaking the fast) for poor families and running a 'Sunday school' (madrassah). A Muslim is expected to keep close ties with his family and the community.

Greeting (taslam: al-salam 'alaykum, reply 'alaykum al-salam) each other is very important in Islam. In effect the person who initiates the greeting is said to merit 99 rewards (hasanat) whereas the person who replies only merits one; this is to encourage people to greet each other but it also stresses the importance of not breaking ties.

There is also great reward in visiting the elderly and the sick, helping the needy, attending social gatherings such as weddings and funerals and visiting the cemetery. All this is part of belonging and contributing to a community. Islam forbids all kinds of intoxicants; a Muslim cannot consume, transact with, or even sit in the company of people who are consuming alcohol.

As far as dress is concerned there is no particular way a Muslim must dress. The key requirement is modesty and dignity as the Qur'an commands both men and women to 'lower their gaze and be modest'. The only outward expression of Islamic dress is the covering of the woman (hijab); however the way it is worn can vary greatly from one culture to another. Men are encouraged to keep a beard.

Commitment is generally seen as an intimate relationship between God and the person. Hence only God knows who is truly committed as only He knows what is in any person's heart. Although a person may have submitted to the way of Islam, he might not have established firm faith within his heart. (Surah 49:14). Any act done to boast to others is disliked (except giving to the poor as this can set an example or reminder to others).

The Prophet is reported to have said: 'Indeed, I have been sent to perfect the morals.'

The Qur'an describes him as a role model for human beings to follow as he put perfectly into practice everything that he preached:

Ye have indeed in the Apostle of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah. (Surah 33:21)

Amongst other things, the Prophet taught honesty, humility, hospitality, generosity, kindness, tolerance and love. He called the struggle of the soul (jihad al-nafs) as the greater struggle compared to the minor struggle that of war. It is worth noting that during the life of the Prophet Islam did not spread by the sword but people were attracted to him because of his way of life and this is what is expected of every Muslim.

The Prophet also said: 'Model yourselves with the qualities of God.'

Religious / Spiritual Identity

The Qur'an distinguishes between Islam (as a basic statement of belief) and iman (as true commitment) (Surah 49:14). Belief coupled with commitment is a higher level of submission and spirituality. For example, one may proclaim to be Muslim by uttering the testimony (shahadah) but still does not perform obligatory duties such as performing daily prayers. Nevertheless one who prays but whose trust in God is weak has not achieved a firm faith in his heart. Hence, rituals, other symbolising physical commitment, have as a purpose the reaping of strong faith and spiritual fulfilment.

The Prophet (and Imams for the Shi'ah) left people with a template to reach perfection and attain the highest degree of spirituality. Thus a Muslim must follow the way of the Prophet as it is the most perfect way. A Muslim cannot abandon a religious act ordained by the Prophet and replace with one that he constructs. However, there are recommended acts that one is free to do when and as much as one wishes. Within the religion, there are different schools of thought which one might choose to change from one to another. A follower of the Shi'ah school chooses a spiritual leader as a point of reference just as a Sufi chooses a spiritual leader or guide (shaykh or murshid), or an order or path (tariqah) to follow.

Each person has individual responsibilities for which that person will be accountable for on the Day of Judgment. This is a direct corollary of free will with which each human being is born. Free will enables the person to make their own choices without being coerced into anything as the Qur'anic verse states:

Let there be no compulsion in religion [...] (Surah 2:256)

The Qur'an emphasises greatly on the individual and their duties to God, to themselves and to others by talking directly to the person "oh human being" or indirectly "every male and female". Islam teaches Muslims that human beings have a central role to play in the universe as God has chosen the human being as His khalifah, His vicegerent. In order to represent God, one must know God and even share God's characteristics. Therefore, every person has the ability to acquire these by perfecting in one's self the 99 Names of God.

Family and Community

Islam begins at home with the children being taught Islamic values and way of life from a very young age. This way of life extends into the community with the family attending congregational prayers, 'Sunday school', 'Id celebrations and other social events. Pilgrimage to Makkah, as well as shrines of Imams and saints, further establishes even a greater sense of belonging.

Family is crucial in Islam (birth rituals, teaching children to pray and recite Qur'an and Islamic morals). It is forbidden to break ties (silah al-rahm) with family (unless one is asked to disbelieve) for which one will earn grave punishment. The Qur'an stresses on showing kindness towards the parents especially in their old age (Surahs 17:23, 29:8).

For most Muslims to be part of a family unit and a community offers them a sense of identity and security. They are usually a Muslim's first port of call for support and strength especially in times of need and act as a reminder to carry out one's religious duties hence making one stronger emotionally and spiritually.

The importance of family and community has its roots in the Qur'an. Muslims are instructed to keep close family ties and to treat their parents with nothing other than kindness:

Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour. (Surah 17:23)

Ramadan is a month in which family and community ties are strengthened: families endeavour to break the fast together; people often fund an iftir (breaking of the fast) for the whole community at the mosque; in the Sunni school, some Muslims will attend the mosque's tarawith prayers every night; all this culminates in the 'id prayer in which the whole community usually attends at the end of the month.

The home and the mosque are the main places where a Muslim family practises its faith. At home, the whole family can pray together in congregation, recite supplications together, children are taught the Qur'an. Many Muslim families will have Qur'anic passages in their homes. A Muslim should care for the elderly and visit the sick. Islam is present in every aspect of our everyday life and hence one can be constantly God conscious. There are supplications or praises for almost anything a person can do: waking up in the morning, before one leaves the house, before and after eating, entering or coming out of the restroom.

A very important concept in Islam is ummah (community). It encourages Muslims to support and help each other especially in times of need such as after the loss of a loved one. Also Imam 'Ali says in a famous tradition: 'A person is either your brother in religion or your brother in humanity.'

It is highly recommended that a person lives near a Muslim community as it can serve as a support for the person and a reminder of one's duties to God. Islam in its totality is based on unity. First, unity (tawhid) is recognising that God is One. But unity extends to every other aspect of the religion for example the Islamic rituals such as hajj which is probably the greatest symbol of unity where people of all ages, colour and status perform the same act at the same time in the same way submitting themselves completely to the One God. Hence for Muslims, belonging and being a unit is part of their faith.

And hold fast, all together, by the rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves [...] (Surah 3:103)

Muslims are described in the Qur'an as brothers. This brotherhood which is not based on blood relations unites them spiritually.

The Believers are but a single Brotherhood: So make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers; and fear Allah, that ye may receive Mercy (Surah 49:10).

Hence, both the family and the community have since the beginning of Islam been important elements of a Muslim's life.

Most Muslim communities hold a congregation for the daily prayers at the mosque. The Friday prayer (salah al-Jumu'ah) including the two sermons (khutbah, sing.) plays a very important role in Muslim communities; usually the mosque is full for the Friday prayers so it is a great opportunity to educate those attending about Islamic issues as well as to raise issues affecting the local and global community. The Islamic festivals ('id, sing.) are celebrated with the family as well as the community. The 'id prayers are held at the mosque and some communities organise a whole day of activities for the whole family. Weddings and funerals are important times for the community to come together. In weddings, there may be Qur'an recitation, supplications, poems and Islamic songs (nashid, sing.). In funerals, everyone joins the prayer of the deceased. As the first night in the grave is known to be the most difficult night for the deceased, the members of the Shi'ah community usually recite individually after the evening prayer a special prayer called salah al-wahshah which is performed the night of the burial as it is known to reduce the suffering in the grave. 'Sunday schools' are run now in most communities to teach children about their faith and to have a sense of belonging.

Many Muslims nowadays live in multi-ethnic multi-faith western communities. For these Muslims, to belong to a community is vital as it helps stay strong in their faith and to keep an Islamic way of life. This becomes even more important as in today's climate as Islam has been in the spotlight for different reasons. Some Muslims might feel a sense of insecurity as they may be directly or indirectly affected by some extremists' actions in the name of Islam. Therefore belonging to a community offers them security and comfort.

One of the most powerful experiences of what it means to belong to the Islamic faith tradition is the annual Hajj. Muslims gather from every corner of the world, with every ethnic group, every nationality, every language represented, one truly experiences the depth and breadth of what it means to belong to the Ummah of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). It is a point at which one is touched

by Tawhid at its deepest level – not just the Oneness of God but the witnessing of Oneness of humanity too. The stories of Hajj are brought back home by the Hajji, a memory, a reminder, to the community of his journey in the footsteps of the Prophet and his great ancestors – Adam, Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar. It is an affirmation of Islamic beliefs, history, and the realization and fulfilment of the primordial covenant of Alastu bi Rabbikum (Q. 7:172) and the link between the local and global community of Muslims.

Muslim Diversity

The Prophet defined Islam as constituting three dimensions – Islam, Iman, Ihsan. Traditionally:

- Islam is reflected by the Madhahibs (religious schools) – Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali.
- Iman is dialectical theology and the major schools are Ashari and Maturidi.
- Ihsan is Tasawwuf or Sufism, containing numerous Sufi tariqas (orders), the main ones being Naqshbandi, Qadari, Chishti and Shadhili

There is a difference of opinion between the two main sects in Islam (Sunni and Shi'ah) as regards the succession of the Prophet.

The Sunni hold the companions (ashab) of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in high regard and consider the first four as the rightly guided successors (Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali). The Shi'ah Muslims believe that the first legitimate successor is Imam 'Ali, as they believe he was chosen by God as opposed to being elected by the people.

'Ayshah, daughter of Abu Bakr and one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), is the lady who shaped Sunni Islam. She is held in very high esteem by Sunnis.

Fatimah, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and wife of Imam 'Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)), shaped Shi'ah Islam. Imam Hussein, the third Shi'ah Imam is considered, particularly by Shi'ah Muslims, as the saviour of Islam who sacrificed his life for the faith along with some of his family members and companions.

In Shi'ah Islam the major group is Jafari or twelvers, named after Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d.765). They follow the twelve Imams, all descendants of Imam Ali (d. 661) and Fatima (d. 633). Other groups dispute the right of succession and therefore two other main groups emerged – the Zaydis or Fivers, named after Imam Zayd ibn Ali (d. 740) and the Isma'ilis or Seveners, named after Imam Muhammad ibn Isma'il.

A number of reform movements emerged under colonial rule in the 19th and 20th centuries. Many Sunni Muslims in the UK may be adherents of one of these movements – Barelwi, Deobandi, Ahl-i-Hadith, Tablighi Jama'at and Salafi / Wahabi.

Islamic communities in the UK come from diverse ethnic and denominational backgrounds. This often means differences not just in clothing and cultural attitudes but also in religious practice as each ethnic group emanating from a particular Islamic geographical area will traditionally have adhered to a particular Madh'hab. However, this situation somewhat evolved and other groups substantially funded through the oil boom of the 1970s led to the establishment of new groups that were opposed to the traditional Madhahibs, these may be termed to as Wahhabi/Salafis. A consequence of this has been that second or third generation Muslims have been exposed to a Theology that is anti-mainstream and literalist. Despite these differences, Mosques nonetheless will maintain an open policy to all denominations for congregational prayers or other religious practices.

Other Religions & Beliefs

Islam is an inclusive religion. It stresses equality of all human beings where there cannot be a people superior to another. The differences people share are only there to learn from each other as the Qur'an says:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Surah 49:13)

For Muslims, a person is either your brother in religion or your brother in humanity.

Hence brotherhood should be extended to people of all faiths. The same way God loves and provides for the whole of His creation, just so are Muslims expected to model themselves with the attributes of God. They must therefore treat others with love, respect and equality.

Islam from its very inception has encountered other faiths, especially the two Abrahamic faiths – Christianity and Judaism, adherents of these are referred to in the Qur'an as Ahl al-Kitab, Peoples of the Book. Historically as the Islamic empire expanded Muslims were able to extend this definition of Ahl al-Kitab to include Zoroastrians, Buddhists and Hindus. Following the Prophet's proclamation of his mission, there followed intense persecution of Muslims, which led to the migration of eighty-three men and nineteen women to Abyssinia, a Christian land in 616 CE. Other examples include the Constitution of al-Madinah, the Prophet allowing a Christian delegation from Najran to pray in the Mosque and there are numerous verses of the Qur'an (Surahs 2:62, 3:63, 3:113-115, 3:199), that clearly instruct Muslims to tolerance of other faiths and the Shari'ah guarantees religious freedom to all faiths. The following verse especially is so relevant for our times:

[...] To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute (Surah 5:48).

This however does not mean that Muslims from a literalist persuasion will not ignore these verses and rather seek to utilize verse 5:51 and argue against friendships with Christians and Jews. Their interpretation is literal and flawed. It fails to take into account the *asbab al-nuzul*, the occasion of revelation. In this instance this verse was revealed during a time at which the very survival of the nascent Muslim community was at stake. A number of Muslims sought to make alliances with Christian and Jewish tribes, if they were permitted to do so, this would have broken Muslim unity and led to a possible annihilation of the community by the pagan Arabs. This verse therefore instructed Muslims not to take those Christian and Jewish tribes as their supporters or friends. The word 'awliya' can mean 'friends' and also 'supporters', subject to context. At another point the Qur'an states:

Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just. (Surah 60:8).

Over the last decade, interfaith activity throughout many of our cities has begun to intensify.

Pluralism combined with post-modernism has forced religious traditions to seek to develop a theology of mutual respect, accommodation and tolerance. Muslims, particularly living in western pluralist societies are drawing on aspects of their Sufi heritage that has been neglected for the last three centuries. The recovery of Sufi teachings means often that the majority of British Muslims are re-discovering the Islam of their parents, and this will also lead to a movement towards the emergence of a British Islam that is rooted in Muslim beliefs but is expressed through the British social and cultural context. A famous Sufi dictum is: 'The other is my Brother'. This worldview allows Muslims to work with and build friendships with people of other faiths or of none and yet remain rooted to a deeper Ihsanic vision of Islam.

Human beings have been created to worship (Ibadah) God. The concept of Ibadah is broad and all-embracing, is not simply confined to the practice of the 5 pillars – Shahadah (Oneness of Allah and the finality of the Messengership of Muhammad), Salah (five daily prayers), Sawm (Fasting in the month of Ramadan), Zakah (Alms) and the performance of Hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah) if one is able to physically and financially. The concept of ibadah, of worship penetrates and permeates through every aspect of human action. Imam Baihaqi for example informs us that even the removal of some litter from the street is part of one's faith. Smiling at one's parents, kindness to neighbours, visiting the sick, contributing to the betterment of society and earning a halal living are just some examples of Ibadah, of worship. In sum it is to serve God and service is through worship, through ethical and moral action, indeed to serve our fellow human beings and the rest of creation is the true realisation of the concept of Ibadah. Citizenship therefore is to develop and instil in our young and old a sense of responsibility and duty to positive action for the benefit of the individual and society.

Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Exploring some of the ultimate questions that confront humanity, and responding imaginatively to them;

The ups, downs and meaning(s) of life's journey.

Religious Experience

There is a famous saying in Islam that when you want to speak to God you pray, and when you want God to speak to you, you recite the Qur'an. God tells us in the Qur'an that He is closer to humans than our jugular vein (Surah 50:16) and hence Muslims can have a very close and intimate relationship with God. In fact, the Qur'an makes it clear that we can speak to God directly and that God also speaks to us but we need to listen and be attentive:

When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way (Surah 2:186).

Praise and thanks are key things which are emphasised in Islam when communicating with God. This is especially so in one's private and personal prayer when asking for something or the alleviation from something. One must not be indifferent to the many bounties which God blesses the human being with. Muslims also have the habit of constantly saying certain phrases in the praise of God such as al-hamdu-li-Llah which means all praise be to God which is said in thanks to God and which shows that one is always pleased with God's will. Another phrase is masha'a Allah (lit. whatever God wills) which is said when one is surprised, or pleased with or to praise an achievement or beauty. An example of awe in the Qur'an is the way God communicates to Moses through the burning bush (Surah 28:30) and when the mountain crumbles as Moses loses conscience after asking to see God:

When Moses came to the place appointed by Us and his Lord addressed him, He said: "O my Lord! Show (Yourself) to me, that I may look upon You." Allah said: "By no means can you see Me (direct); But look upon the mount; if it stands still in its place, then you shall see Me." When his Lord manifested His glory to the mountain, He made it crumble. And Moses fell down in a swoon (Surah 7:143).

Muslims are encouraged to recite the remembrance of God (dhikr) through phrases of praise as mentioned above or others. This is because one finds peacefulness and comfort in this as the Qur'an says:

Those who believe, and whose hearts find satisfaction in the remembrance of Allah: for without doubt in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find satisfaction (Surah 13:28).

One can experience feelings of awe and wonder through many devotional acts such as fasting, reciting the Qur'an or supplications. However, the liturgical prayer is one of the most important acts regarding which the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said:

The prayer (al-salah) is the ascension (mi'raj) of the true believer.

As a means to gain proximity to God, the prayer allows one to detach himself from worldly affairs and it allows the soul to enter a spiritual ascension and to experience feelings of awe and wonder. Prayer and reciting supplications are also recommended to be performed in congregation. This is because of the effect that collective worship has on the individuals. When a number of people are reciting the same thing simultaneously, it creates a powerful feeling, a greater spiritual effect and a greater sense of unity and spirit within the ummah.

Islam stresses the importance of knowledge, reflection and awareness of one's faith and condemns the blind or ignorant following and practice (Surah 7:179):

Many are the Jinns and men we have made for Hell: They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle—nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning).

[...] "Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endowed with understanding that receive admonition" (Surah 39:9).

One who believes out of conviction and understanding, his belief is more worthy than the one who practices out of habit and tradition. A person with knowledge and understanding of his actions can attain higher states of spirituality and experience the feelings of awe and wonder.

Every act of worship in Islam is meant to bring about a religious experience, for example fasting. There are many traditions which criticize a person who only feels hunger, thirst and tiredness hence only the physical effects of fasting, whereas the true purpose and meaning of fasting is spiritual experience and growth. There are many Muslims who say to have experienced some sort of a spiritual event in which they believe they have had a special connection with God, seen the Prophet Muhammad in their dream, have been given some sort of message or guidance, or have had their prayers answered when asking for the removal of illness or some other type of distress. Religious and numinous experiences happen more in sacred places such as at the Ka'bah or shrines of Saints. People say to have felt a Divine presence there and some even say to have been cured from incurable illnesses such as paralysis.

The purpose of religious practice is to attain spiritual experiences. Most of these experiences would generate something within the person to begin to reflect and evaluate their life for the better. They encourage a person to become a more dedicated Muslim and to seek proximity with God.

Religion & Science

Whether there is a real tension between religion and science in Islam depends to an extent on the view of Islam being considered.

The account of creation in the Qur'an says:

Your Guardian-Lord is Allah, Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, and is firmly established on the throne (of authority): He draweth the night as a veil o'er the day, each seeking the other in rapid succession: He created the sun, the moon, and the stars, (all) governed by laws under His command. Is it not His to create and to govern? Blessed be Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds! Do no mischief on the earth, after it hath been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts): for the Mercy of Allah is (always) near to those who do good. It is He Who sendeth the winds like heralds of glad tidings, going before His mercy: when they have carried the heavy-laden clouds, We drive them to a land that is dead, make rain to descend thereon, and produce every kind of harvest therewith: thus shall We raise up the dead: perchance ye may remember. From the land that is clean and good, by the will of its Cherisher, springs up produce, (rich) after its kind: but from the land that is bad, springs up nothing but that which is niggardly: thus do we explain the signs by various (symbols) to those who are grateful (Surah 7:54, 56-58).

There is no order given for creation, simply that everything was created by Allah. Although translations, as here, tend to say that the process of creation took six 'days' – the word being translated is more properly understood as 'long periods' or 'ages'.

The creation of humanity:

I have only created Jinns and men, that they may serve Me. No Sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. For Allah is He Who gives (all) Sustenance—Lord of Power—Steadfast (for ever). For the Wrong-doers, their portion is like unto the portion of their fellows (of earlier generations): then let them not ask Me to hasten (that portion)! Woe, then, to the Unbelievers, on account of that Day of theirs which they have been promised! (Surah 51:56-60).

The Jinn are spirits made of fire and are neither good nor evil. The Mala'ikah are angels and the messengers of Allah but they have no free-will and no physical bodies.

Islam has always been at the forefront of scientific discovery and therefore modern theories of evolution and cosmology do not present a problem.

Although the Qur'an is viewed as the Word of Allah and therefore true, this does not mean that science cannot explain further what is written in the Qur'an. As humanity grows and learns science helps further understanding of Allah's message.

There are some details in the Qur'an however, which show what appears to be a very modern approach to science:

Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe? And We have set on the earth mountains standing firm, lest it should shake with them, and We have made therein broad highways (between mountains) for them to pass through: that they may receive Guidance. And We have made the heavens as a canopy well guarded: yet do they turn away from the Signs which these things (point to)! It is He Who created the Night and the Day, and the sun and the moon: all (the celestial bodies) swim along, each in its rounded course (Surah 21:30-33).

This passage seems to show an understanding of the beginning of life in what is now often referred to as a 'primordial soup'. It also demonstrates that the sun and the moon have separate and particular orbits.

Muslims might argue that Allah wished to explain these things to humanity even though the supporting scientific discoveries had not yet been made.

A further verse explains the role of water in life:

Seest thou not that Allah sends down rain from the sky, and leads it through springs in the earth? Then He causes to grow, therewith, produce of various colours: then it withers; thou wilt see it grow yellow; then He makes it dry up and crumble away. Truly, in this, is a Message of remembrance to men of understanding. (Surah 39:21)

In addition it is shown that bodies can carry out physical changes on substances:

And verily in cattle (too) will ye find an instructive sign. From what is within their bodies between excretions and blood, We produce, for your drink, milk, pure and agreeable to those who drink it. And from the fruit of the date-palm and the vine, ye get out wholesome drink and food: behold, in this also is a sign for those who are wise. (Surah 16:66)

Scientific discoveries are therefore seen as supporting what has already been revealed.

Values and Commitments

Understanding how moral values and a sense of obligation can come from beliefs and experience;

Evaluating their own and others' values in order to make informed, rational and imaginative choices.

Rules and Ethical Guidelines

The core precepts of Muslim morality and behaviour are found in the Qur'an and are also guided by the Ahadith.

Islam is a religion of peace (this is implied in the name itself). Salam which means peace is one of the 99 names of God. Islam promotes peace and harmony but it also promotes justice. For example, The Prophet taught Muslims never to initiate a war but also that you have the right to defend yourself.

Any form of injustice is a hindrance to peace hence fighting against it is essential in Islam to preserve the harmony between all of creation. It is important to note that the injustices seen in Islamic societies are nothing to do with Islam but are generally based on culture and traditions. As a matter of fact, such actions are condemned by Islam and will be punishable. The fourth Imam of the Shi'ah, 'Ali ibn al-Husayn (b. 658-9), wrote a treatise of rights (Risalah al-Huquq) in which he outlines different categories of rights of the human being towards God, himself and others. Islam views itself as the champion of the downtrodden. It promotes a just social system in which the weak and the needy are protected. Imam 'Ali said: 'He who makes no effort to alleviate the suffering of an oppressed person is an oppressor.'

Women were given rights never accorded to them by past religions and some of which were only adopted by the West in the 20th century. The most important is a woman's equality to man. The Prophet taught righteousness towards the orphans; in a tradition (hadith), he says that the Prophet himself and the sponsor of the orphan will be neighbours in Heaven.

According to the Qur'an, the poor and the needy have a right in the wealth of the rich which is established through zakah and khums (both of which are to purify one's earnings by giving a share of it to the poor):

And those in whose wealth is a recognised right. For the (needy) who asks and him who is prevented (for some reason from asking) (Surah 70:24-25).

Giving is one of the most important attributes of a believer. Hence in addition to the ordained zakah and khums, Muslims are encouraged to give charity (sadaqah) out of their own free will. Traditions tell us that when we give in charity God returns it to us tenfold. But when one gives, he should give to others what he likes for himself, the Qur'an says:

By no means shall ye attain righteousness unless ye give (freely) of that which ye love; and whatever ye give, of a truth Allah knoweth it well. (Surah 3:92).

Today in the UK, charity organizations have been set up to help and protect the poor and the weak such as Islamic Relief, Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) as well as Islamic charity shops. Many countries such as Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran and others have set up orphanages (adoption is forbidden in Islam). As the human being is God's vicegerent (khalifah), God put everything in existence at his disposal so that he can achieve perfection and to be in harmony with all that surrounds him. As a result, he is accountable for the way he treats his environment. Muslims have great respect for the other creation as everything in existence is a sign of God (Ayah Allah). The Qur'an gives examples of animals and nature so that we learn lessons from them. One such example is how a colony of bees is organised and governed. In addition, there are Islamic rulings (which if not followed, a person is committing a sin) derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah regarding environmental issues for example, it is forbidden to litter. Waste of any kind is forbidden in Islam; the Qur'an condemns those who waste:

[...] eat and drink: But waste not by excess, for Allah loveth not the wasters. (Surah 7:31).

As with everything else in Islam, the Qur'an and the traditions from the Prophet (and from the Imams for the Shi'ah) form the basis of any discussion. Friendly and respectful dialogue is essential as the Qur'an advises:

Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance (Surah 16:125).

Furthermore, since 'enjoining the good and forbidding the evil' are items of faith, these issues are the responsibility of every Muslim and to be passive to oppression for instance is a sin. Islam expects us to endeavour to stop every form of evil and to encourage all that is good. Muslim have taken part in peaceful protests (e.g. protests against the Iraq invasion and during the uprising prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran, thousands took to the streets in a peaceful protest when opposition forces began shooting line after line of protesters). They also boycott companies, organizations or countries that carry out, fund or support violations of human rights.

Individual and Social Responsibility

It was the greed and selfishness of the merchants in Makkah which prompted Muhammad to emphasise Muslim concern for the poor. He implemented these teachings when he moved to al-Madinah.

All wealth and riches come from Allah and are for the benefit of all humanity. Zakah (purification of wealth by payment of welfare due) one of the Five Pillars, is central to this view.

And be steadfast in prayer and regular in charity: and whatever good ye send forth for your souls before you, ye shall find it with Allah: for Allah sees well all that ye do (Surah 2:110)

Zakah is a central aspect of the ummah (the worldwide brotherhood of Muslims) and is also an act of 'ibadah, duty and worship.

Zakah is 2.5% of the income and savings of all Muslims after they have taken care family concerns. It is not charity but an obligation on all Muslims. However, the rich pay more than others and the very poor people pay nothing at all.

The calculations for zakah are complex:

- Money and savings 2%
- Produce from naturally irrigated land 10%
- Produce from artificially irrigated land 5%
- Cattle one per 30 animals
- Goats and sheep one per 40 animals
- Five camels: one sheep or goat
- Precious metals: 7%
- Mining produce 20%
- Rent 2%

In Islamic countries zakah is a form of social security.

Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer the (funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to the Truth); for those in bondage (slavery) and in debt; in the cause of Allah; and for the wayfarer (traveller). (Surah 9:60)

Extra zakah is given at Id-ul-Fitr and Id-ul-Adha. Additional voluntary charity called sadaqah can also be given when someone is in need.

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness – to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practise regular charity, to fulfil their contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity (trouble), and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing. (Surah 2:177)

Charity must always be given privately:

There is a man who gives charity and he conceals it so much that his left hand does not know what his right hand spends (Hadith).

The only exception to this rule of privacy is when the giver needs to provide an example which will encourage other people to give.

Every day, each person has two angels near him who have descended from heaven. One says, 'O Allah!, compensate the person who gives to charity,' the other says, 'O Allah! Inflict a loss on the person who withholds his money.' Zakah helps the poor but it can also be seen as helping them to help the rich. When people accept zakah they are worshipping Allah and accepting the wisdom of the will of Allah.

It is He Who hath made you (His) agents, inheritors of the earth: He hath raised you in ranks, some above others: that He may try you in the gifts He hath given you: for thy Lord is quick in punishment: yet He is indeed Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful (Surah 6:165).

God tells people in the Qur'an (Surah 2:30) that He made the human being His vicegerent (khalifah). As the representative of God on earth, this brings in the question of responsibility and consequently accountability followed by reward or punishment in the Hereafter. Hence, this makes every person aware of their individual as well as collective role regarding these issues.

Euthanasia

Muslims are opposed to euthanasia:

O ye who believe! Seek help with patient perseverance and prayer; for Allah is with those who patiently persevere. And say not of those who are slain in the way of Allah: "They are dead." Nay, they are living, though ye perceive (it) not. Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere, Who say, when afflicted with calamity: "To Allah We belong, and to Him is our return"— (Surah 2:153-156).

O ye who believe! Eat not up your property among yourselves in vanities: But let there be amongst you Traffic and trade by mutual good-will: Nor kill (or destroy) yourselves: for verily Allah hath been to you Most Merciful! (Surah 4:29).

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that anyone who killed themselves would go to hell:

Anyone who throws themselves down from a rock and commits suicide will be throwing themselves into Hell. A person who drinks poison and kills themselves will drink it for ever in Hell. A person who stabs themselves will stab themselves for ever in Hell. (Hadith)

Muslims say that the time when someone will die can only be decided by Allah:

If Allah were to punish men for their wrong-doing, He would not leave, on the (earth), a single living creature: but He gives them respite for a stated Term: When their Term expires, they would not be able to delay (the punishment) for a single hour, just as they would not be able to anticipate it (for a single hour) (Surah 16:61).

Nor can a soul die except by Allah's leave, the term being fixed as by writing. If any do desire a reward in this life, We shall give it to him; and if any do desire a reward in the Hereafter, We shall give it to him. And swiftly shall We reward those that (serve us with) gratitude (Surah 3:145).

Suffering is a test of iman (faith) and euthanasia is seen as zalim, wrongdoing against Allah.

Sex and Marriage

Marriage and the family form the basis of Islamic society:

It is He Who has created man from water: then has He established relationships of lineage and marriage: for thy Lord has power (over all things) (Surah 25:54).

No institution in Islam finds more favour with God than marriage (Hadith):

The father or any other guardian cannot give in marriage a virgin or one who has been married before without her consent. (Hadith)

... and men are warned to be careful in whom they choose to marry: A woman is taken in marriage for three reasons; for her beauty, for family connections or the lure of wealth. Choose the one with faith and you will have success. (Hadith)

Islam teaches that sexual intercourse is an act of worship which also fulfils human emotional and physical needs as well as being the means of procreation. Children are then the means by which humans contribute towards Allah's creation. The pleasure of sexual intercourse is a gift from Allah and must only take place within a married relationship:

It is He Who has created man from water: then has He established relationships of lineage and marriage: for thy Lord has power (over all things) (Surah 25:54).

Marriage includes the responsibility of both parties to meet each other's sexual needs. Men are forbidden from being alone with women except for their wives in case they are tempted by them:

Let no man be in privacy with a woman who he is not married to, or Satan will be the third (Hadith).

Sex outside of marriage is forbidden and a serious crime.

Nor come nigh to adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils) (Surah 17:32).

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication-flog each of them with a hundred stripes: let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment (Surah 24:2).

Abortion

In general Islam is opposed to abortion. The foetus is considered to be a human being and therefore abortion is a crime. It is allowed, however, if a doctor is convinced that continuation of the pregnancy will cause the mother's death. Some Muslims believe that for the first four months of pregnancy the mother's rights are greater than those of the child. After this time their rights are equal.

In Arabia, before Muhammad (pbuh), unwanted female baby were often buried alive. The teaching of the Qur'an in respect of this practice is now often applied to the issue of abortion:

Kill not your children for fear of want: We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily the killing of them is a great sin (Surah 17:31).

... the child's innocence is stressed:

When the female (infant) buried alive, is questioned – For what crime she was killed? (Surah 81:8-9).

There are different beliefs amongst Muslim about when a foetus becomes a person. Muslims believe that the soul is breathed in by the first 42 days of pregnancy. What has led them to this opinion is the hard fact of embryology, that all stages – seed, clot of blood and morsel of flesh occur in the first 40 days of life.

Before 120 days from conception, the foetus lacks a human soul. Only at the end of 120 days is the foetus ensouled. To consider in the same light abortions that are performed before the 120-day period and after, as the Anti-Abortion lobby does, is therefore both ridiculous and un-Islamic. Muslim jurists prohibit, absolutely, any abortion taking place after ensoulment when the soul enters the body, but many of them permit it before 120 days under certain conditions, for example the poor health of the mother, in the case of rape, etc.

Crime and punishment

Judgment and the treatment of criminals is based on Islamic law, shari'ah -the 'way to water', or the source of life.

Islam considers there to be three types of sin:

- Shirk: associating someone or something with Allah;
- Zalim: crimes such as murder, theft, suicide and illegal sexual relations;
- the third type covers lying, cursing and envy.

Muslim punishment is not about the removal of sin, as only Allah can forgive. Punishment is to protect and strengthen society.

Penalties are known as hudu – 'boundaries' as they enforce the boundaries between right and wrong that have been crossed by the crime. Hudu applies to crimes which are dealt with in the Qur'an or Hadith.

...if anyone slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew the whole people (Surah 5:32).

However, it is not permitted to kill anyone except through legal means.

Adultery or fornication:

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication – flog each of them with a hundred stripes: let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment (Surah 24:2)

Defamation:

And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegations) – flog them with eighty stripes; and reject their evidence ever after: for such men are wicked transgressors (Surah 24:4).

Theft:

As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from Allah, for their crime (Surah 5:38).

War

Jihad is often wrongly translated as 'Holy War'. Jihad means 'to struggle in the way of Allah' and as Greater Jihad is the personal struggle made by every Muslim to devote his or her life to carrying out Allah's will.

The most excellent jihad is the uttering of truth in the presence of an unjust ruler. (Hadith).

Lesser Jihad: many Muslims believe that the fight against evil and the preservation of Islam may sometimes justify going to war. This is described as Harb al-Muqadis: a Holy War.

The Prophet was asked about people fighting because they are brave, or in honour of a certain loyalty, or to show off: which of them fights for the cause of Allah? He replied, 'The person who struggles so that Allah's word is supreme is the one serving Allah's cause' (Hadith).

Islam teaches that self-defence is a just cause for war, but Muslims are forbidden from being the first to attack.

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors (Surah 2:190).

A war cannot be described as jihad if:

- the war is started by a political leader rather than a religious leader;
- an individual person declares war without the backing of the Muslim community;
- the war is aggressive not defensive;
- peaceful ways of solving the problem have not been tried first;
- the purpose of the war is to force people to convert to Islam;
- the purpose of the war is to gain land or power;
- innocent women and children are put at physical risk;
- trees, crops and animals have not been protected;
- the war involves the destruction of homes or places of worship.

Jihad is a way to peace and the purpose is to create a society where Muslims can worship Allah in peace. If the enemy offers peace, then Muslims too must put down their weapons. Muslims are highly critical of any struggle or fighting between Muslim countries as this is completely goes against the concept of jihad.

The Environment

Islam teaches that Allah is the creator of the world. Humans have the role of 'vice-regents' or 'trustees' – they are to look after the world and rule it as Allah wished. However, they do not own it.

So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: (establish) Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah: that is the standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not (Surah 30:30).

Allah is He Who raised the heavens without any pillars that ye can see; is firmly established on the throne (of authority); He has subjected the sun and the moon (to his Law)! Each one runs (its course) for a term appointed. He doth regulate all affairs, explaining the signs in detail, that ye may believe with certainty in the meeting with your Lord. And it is He who spread out the earth, and set thereon mountains standing firm and (flowing) rivers: and fruit of every kind He made in pairs, two and two: He draweth the night as a veil o'er the Day. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who consider! And in the earth

are tracts (diverse though) neighbouring, and gardens of vines and fields sown with corn, and palm trees-growing out of single roots or otherwise: watered with the same water, yet some of them We make more excellent than others to eat. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who understand! (Surah 13:2-4).

Say: "Shall I seek for (my) Cherisher other than Allah, when He is the Cherisher of all things (that exist)? Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself: no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another. Your goal in the end is towards Allah: He will tell you the truth of the things wherein ye disputed." It is He Who hath made you (His) agents, inheritors of the earth: He hath raised you in ranks, some above others: that He may try you in the gifts He hath given you: for thy Lord is quick in punishment: yet He is indeed Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful (Surah 6:164-165).

Many traditional Muslim countries are dry and arid with large areas of desert. It is only to be expected then that Islam should be particularly concerned with plant life and the environment.

Islamic medicine has always concentrated on the use of drugs and herbs from the environment rather than on surgery. Al-Razi (d. 925 CE) was the first scientist to distinguish between smallpox and measles and Ibn Sina (d.1037 CE) described how epidemics spread.

The teachings of the Qur'an stress the responsibility of humanity.

It is He Who hath made you (His) agents, inheritors of the earth (Surah 6:165).

The Muslim representative at the World Wide Fund for Nature at Assisi in 1986, Dr Abdullah Omar Nasseef, stressed the human responsibility to look after the earth:

'The central concept of Islam is tawheed or the Unity of God. Allah is Unity; and His Unity is also reflected in the unity of mankind, and the unity of man and nature. His trustees are responsible for maintaining the unity of His creation, the integrity of the Earth, its flora and fauna, its wildlife and natural environment. Unity cannot be had by discord, by setting one need against another or letting one end predominate over another; it is maintained by balance and harmony. There Muslims say that Islam is the middle path and we will be answerable for how we have walked this path, how we have maintained balance and harmony in the whole of creation around us.'

So unity, trusteeship and accountability, that is tawheed, khalifa and akhrah, the three central concepts of Islam, are also the pillars of the environmental ethics of Islam. They constitute the basic values taught by the Qur'an. It is these values which led Muhammad (pbuh) the Prophet of Islam, to say: 'Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded'.

Islam sees the benefit and well-being of all humanity as being a human responsibility in looking after the world which God has created for us to live in and believes that every effort must be made to be 'green' and to slow down and halt destructive trends.

There are Muslim organisations such as the Islamic Foundation for Ecology & Environmental Sciences which work closely with governments and other faith groups.

Websites

<http://www.altafsir.com/>

http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Q_Studies/

<http://www.livingislam.org/>

<http://www.uqa.edu/islam/home.html>

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