Chapter 1

Introduction to Islam

Dheen Mohamed M. Meerasahib

Introduction

Islam, one of the most rapidly spreading religions in the world, is practiced by more than a quarter of the world's population [1]. As a distinct religious entity, Islam began with the encounter of Muhammad bin ʿAbd Allāh of Makkah (peace be upon him [PBUH]) (570–632 CE) with archangel Jibrīl (Gabriel) who appeared to him during his contemplative retreat in the cave of Hira on the outskirts of Makkah in 610 CE [2]. This encounter also witnessed the first revelation of God to Muhammad in which the first five verses of chapter 96 of the **Holy Qur'an** – the revealed word of God according to Muslims – were revealed.

Defining Islam and Muslim

The Arabic word ***Islām*** derives from the root S-L-M which denotes a variety of closely linked connotations, which we will mention separately to bring out their import. Its first most common and literal meaning is to submit, to resign, or to surrender; it is from the active participle of the fourth form of this root that we get the word "Muslim" which literally means "one who surrenders himself," in this case, to God. Submission encompasses obeying God through the principles He revealed in the Qur'an and following the example set by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who is regarded as the final messenger of God and has been entrusted with the task of interpreting the final revelation to mankind (Q Al-Baqarah 2:151; Al-Qiyamah 75:17–19). Secondly, it also denotes peace and tranquility: "Anyone abiding by or submitting to the teachings of Islam attains peace and lives in peace in this world and in the hereafter" [3]. Thirdly, it means safety and security, meaning that by following the path of Islam one becomes saved in this life and the hereafter. Finally, the term Islam is used in the Qur'anic lexicon to depict the religion of all Prophets sent by God (Q Al ʿImran 3:67; Ash-Shura 42:13; An-Nisa 4:163).

A person becomes a Muslim by accepting and pronouncing the statement, "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's messenger," a statement known in the Muslim tradition as *al-Shahadah* (literally, witnessing).

Islam views itself as a continuation of previous dispensations of God's revelation. Its sacred scripture, the Qur'an, is, as Muslims believe, the concluding chapter of divine revelation to humanity. This belief prompts Muslims to recognize two significant facets of their faith: the acknowledgment of the natural presence of other faith traditions and religions and the affirmation of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as the final messenger of God, thereby establishing the belief in the "finality of his Prophethood." The Qur'anic term "Seal of the Prophets" (Q Al-Ahzaab 33:40) unequivocally states this truth, and

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Muslim theology takes it to be a foundational criterion for determining the "Muslimness" of a Muslim, meaning thereby that anyone who denies this truth ceases to be a member of the Muslim community [4].

Revelation (*waḥy*) and Reason (*'aql*)

Islam establishes itself upon Divine revelation, as manifested in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH), and it introduces this revelation alongside human reason as the principal sources of Islamic faith and practice across all facets of human life. A harmonious interaction between reason and revelation ensures the perpetuation of divine guidance for Muslims, both individually and collectively. It is thus little wonder that the Qur'an repeatedly exhorts Muslims to think and reflect and invites them to continue the pursuit of knowledge from diverse sources in order to excel in understanding and comprehension.

For Muslims, the Holy Qur'an, with its 6,200-odd verses spread over 114 chapters, represents the final revelation of God to the Prophet (PBUH), revealed over 23 years (610–632 CE). As it came in bits and pieces, it was immediately preserved through memorization and writing in the right order under the precise instruction and guidance of the Prophet (PBUH) in his lifetime [5, 6, 7].

The Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH) denotes his sayings, actions, tacit approvals, and behavioral patterns and plays the three-fold role of a) interpreting the Holy Qur'an, b) carrying a distinctive legislative function, and c) providing the model *par excellence* worthy of emulation by Muslims. This role of the Sunnah has been clearly defined in the Qur'an itself: "*And We have sent down the Reminder unto thee that thou mightest clarify for mankind that which has been sent down unto them, that haply they may reflect*" (Q An-Nahl 16:44); "*Whatsoever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatsoever he forbids to you, forgo, and reverence God*" (Q Al-Hashr 59:7); "*It is not for a believing man or a believing woman, when God and His Messenger have decreed a matter, to have a choice regarding the matter. Whosoever disobeys God and His Messenger has strayed into manifest error*" (Q Al-Ahzaab 33:36).

The above verses of the Qur'an make it evidently clear that both the Qur'an and Sunnah are inseparable, and the prophetic model has been made authoritative. The Qur'an further says, "*Indeed, you have in the Messenger of God a beautiful example for those who hope for God and the Last Day, and remember God much*" (Q Al-Ahzaab 33:21). It is for this reason that the person of the prophet has been made an object of love without which the faith of the believer remains incomplete.

As for reason, it is considered a divine agent infused with "divine light" and incorporates multiple degrees of understanding [8]. Moreover, it plays a central role in understanding revelation and deriving applications that aid Muslims in meeting the challenges of time and responding to ever-new evolving life situations. Its most advanced function manifests through the exercise of *Ijtihad* (literally, striving), whose crucial hermeneutic and legislative roles in the interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunnah and the derivation of injunctions, rulings, and guidance for the Islamic way of life, both for individuals and society, cannot be overemphasized. This exercise of *Ijtihad*, which is Islam's doorway to interaction with and exploration of new ideas and applications, led to the birth and development of methodological tools, preserved as the Science of Uṣūl al-Fiqh (Principles of Jurisprudence).

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It is worth noting that Muslims, when engaged with interpretation and legislation, ensure that the process is free of rationally hostile or irrational (not to be confused with suprarational) elements, both at the level of the premises and the derived conclusions. After all, the core of Islamic epistemology itself is nothing but the constructive engagement of reason with revelation.

Understanding Islam

In approaching Islam, one must keep in mind two essential facts: one, that Islam defies all endeavors to impose on it categories foreign to it, and two, that its revelational criteria are absolute and non-negotiable. Accordingly, any attempt to understand Islam should start on its own terms, as should be the case with all religions and philosophies. To begin with, Islam introduces itself as ***dīn*** (loosely translated as "religion") [9], a "divinely ordered comprehensive way of life," or, as technically defined by Muslim scholars, "a divine order which is in harmony with reason and leads its followers to success and happiness in this life and in the Hereafter." It provides a worldview that inspires and guides a theological system, ethical norms and practices, legislation and rituals, culture and civilization, spirituality and eschatology, intellectual and scientific pursuit, individual and public health, and a scheme for personal and social transformation.

Ḥadīth Jibrīl

Perhaps, the most useful tool for gaining a comprehensive understanding of Islam is that which has been provided by the prophetic tradition known as *Ḥadīth Jibrīl* (the Prophetic tradition related to Angel Gabriel). This Hadith elaborates on the concept of religion, presenting it as a multidimensional philosophy of life intertwined with eschatology and the "signs of the time" to strengthen the believers' practical connection to this philosophy. It takes the form of a dialogue which unfolds as Angel Gabriel, appearing as a stranger whom only the Prophet (PBUH) could recognize, poses five questions to the Prophet (PBUH): "what is Islām," "what is *Imān*," "what is *Iḥsān*," "when is the Day of Judgement," and "what are its signs." The Prophet (PBUH) responded to each of his queries. After Gabriel had left, the Prophet (PBUH) disclosed to his companions, "This was Jibrīl; he came to teach you your dīn" [10]. Since the Prophet (PBUH) used the term *dīn* in his final comment on this tradition, his statement has been understood by Muslims to mean that his concept of religion encompasses the elements Angel Gabriel inquired about. Moreover, it is understood that any exploration of Islam as a religion ideally needs to start with this tradition.

Islām

The first, most evident, and exterior dimension of Islam – the religion – is submission (***Islām***). It is traditionally represented through "the five pillars of Islam." Of these, the first is the ***Shahadah*** (witnessing or attesting to the truth), that is, to believe that "there is no God but Allah and Muhammad (PBUH) is Allah's messenger." By pronouncing this statement, an individual becomes a full-fledged member of the Muslim community and is obliged to accept all that has been prescribed by the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH) and practice them to the best of their ability. This enactment has to be carried out by Muslims in love for Allah (Q Al 'Imran 3:31) and His

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Prophet (PBUH) [10, 11] and in imitation of the excellent example of the Prophet (PBUH) (Q Al-Ahzaab 33:21). This makes love the basis of everything Islamic. The remaining four pillars are establishing daily prayers (***salah***), paying the alms (**zakat**), fasting during the month of Ramadan (***sawm***), and performing the pilgrimage (**hajj**) to Makkah if and when one is physically and financially capable of doing so [10]. While these pillars constitute foundational Islamic practices, the Shahadah embraces the whole body of **Sharia**, the Islamic guideline to all aspects of Muslims' personal and communal lives, from personal hygiene to public health, and from international relations to environmental concerns.

Īmān

The second and slightly deeper metaphysical dimension is that of ***Īmān*** (faith), that is, to believe in "God, His angels, His books, His messengers, the Hereafter or Day of judgment, and divine providence" [10]. The denial of any of these articles renders a Muslim unfaithful to the degree of his denial. Together, these articles largely constitute the subject matter for Islamic theological, philosophical, and spiritual studies. They also provide the basics of the theoretical worldview of Islam, which is a God-centered worldview focusing on a God who is known through certain attributes, "whose whole creation is His family" [12] and "who created Adam (the first man) in His image" [13] and made him His vicegerent to all creation (Q Al-Baqarah 2:30). He guides His most noble creation "man" to Himself through human messengers whom He handpicks, each from and to his own community and, in the case of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), to all communities to come until the day of judgment. Most great religions share belief in these articles either partially or comprehensively, at times under externally variant yet internally similar garbs, thus rendering Islam innately poised to converse with all of them.

Iḥsān

The third dimension, ***Iḥsān***, literally, doing something excellently, is defined by the Prophet (PBUH) as, "To worship God as if you see Him, if you do not see Him then He certainly sees you" [10]. Here, the Prophet (PBUH) refers to the innermost or spiritual dimension of Islam. Put simply, it refers to the condition of the heart when it becomes awakened to the reality of "perpetually living in the presence of God." As such, this aspect of Islam is almost entirely concerned with the activity of the heart, and thus it is inalienably connected to the other two dimensions and prompts Muslims to seek excellence in their faith and practice.

Historical Manifestations of Islamic Dimensions

Together, the three previously mentioned dimensions address three aspects of human behavior: bodily activity (body), discursive reasoning (mind), and activity of the heart (spirit) – or, in other words, actions, beliefs, and psychological/spiritual conditions. Early Muslim generations applied the term ***fiqh*** (literally, understanding), but technically understanding the true message of the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah applies to all three dimensions. The study of the first dimension was called **Fiqh al-Jawāriḥ** (the *fiqh* of the physical rituals), the second dimension, **al-Fiqh al-Akbar** (the greater *fiqh*), and the third dimension, **Fiqh al-Qulūb** (the *fiqh* of the heart/spirit) [14]. Intellectual deliberations over

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the three dimensions of Islam and their application in Muslim societies organically led to the development of three broad disciplines along with several ancillary ones: a) **ʻIlm al-Kalām** (the science of Creed, popularly known in western academia as Islamic or Kalam Theology), b) **ʻIlm al-Fiqh** (the science of Law and Jurisprudence), and c) **ʻIlm al-Taṣawwuf** (the science of Islamic spiritual quest), respectively [15]. Later historical development led to the rise of several juristic, theological, and spiritual schools of thought in each of the above areas. Today, two large schools, the mainstream **Sunni** tradition and the smaller **Shīʻī** tradition (with their respective internal diversities) in addition to the Ibāḍīs of Oman have, however, prevailed [16].

With respect to the schools of jurisprudence among the Sunnis, four continue to enjoy eminence: **Ḥanafīs** (followers of the Persian Abū Ḥanīfah), **Malikīs** (followers of Mālik bin Anas of Madina), **Shafiʻīs** (followers of Muhammad bin Idrīs al-Shafiʻī), and **Ḥanbalīs** (followers of Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal of Iraq). As for Shīʻahs, their two prominent schools include the **Ithnā ʻAsharīs/Jaʻfarīs** (Twelvers, after their fifth spiritual leader Jaʻfar al-Ṣādiq) and **Zaydīs** (after Zayd, grandson of Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson) [16]. As *fiqh*'s domain was bodily activities and changing life situations required continuous attention, Islamic scholarship virtually became synonymous with juristic expertise. In situations when Muslims were faced with issues where the primary sources seemed silent, jurists resorted to ***Ijtihad*** guided by the spirit of revelation and prophetic model to seek answers. Two foundational intellectual activities emerged in this regard – **Ijmāʻ** (general consensus of the scholars of a particular age) and **Qiyās** (to strive to drive appropriate rulings by logical inference and analogy) – which constitute the most renowned modes of *Ijtihad* still today [17].

Likewise, in the area of faith, or kalam, Sunnis are divided into three broad schools: **Ashʻarīs** (followers of Abu'l-Ḥasan al-Ashʻarī) and **Maturidīs** (followers of Abū Manṣūr al-Māturidī), who constitute the overwhelming majority of Sunnis, and a smaller **Ahl al-Ḥadīth** group (the literalists) who also survived the tides of times [18]. As for Shīʻahs, they were traditionally aligned with the rationalist **Muʻtazilīs**. Their major theological factions include the **Ithnāʻ Asharīs** (Twelvers), **Ismāʻīlīs**, and **Zaydīs**, all of whom share and disagree on a variety of topics with Sunnis and among themselves in varying degrees.

Finally, the discipline of Taṣawwuf relates to the art of disciplining the self to help Muslims gradually progress to the level where they become and strive to remain conscious of the Divine presence at all times. The system developed to facilitate this process came to be called the ***Ṭarīqah*** (the way) and involved the growth of centers of spiritual guidance called *Ḥalaqāt*, *Ribāṭ*, *Khānqāh*, or *Zāwiya* in various parts of the Muslim world [19]. They functioned under the leadership of a master, who provided spiritual guidance to the **sālik/murīd** (wayfarer). Over time, *ṭarīqahs* progressed into more structured entities usually named after their founders (**Qādiriyyah**, **Shādhiliyyah**, **Naqshabandiyyah**, **Chishtiyyah**, and **Suhrawardiyyah**, to name a few) that continue to this day and represent the most widespread depiction of Islam.

Islam and the Rise of a Benefactor Civilization

This three-dimensional understanding of Islam along with the disciplines and institutions that developed around it remain to this day the mainstream tradition of Islam. In addition, several other disciplines of knowledge such as **ʻUlūm al-Qur'an**,

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ʻUlūm al-Ḥadīth, **Uṣūl al-Fiqh**, and **ʻUlūm al-Lughah** were developed by Muslims to serve the purpose of scriptural reasoning and facilitate the exercise of *Ijtihad*.

The intellectual efforts of Muslim scholars were not restricted to these religious or "transmitted" sciences; rather, Muslims broke new grounds and often innovated in the fields of linguistics and literature, astronomy, geography, international relations, philosophy, psychology, ethics, governance, society, mathematics, physics, biology, botany and zoology, hydraulics, and so on. Their achievements were significant and far-reaching in their effect on subsequent human civilizations and contributed to their awakening and replenishment. Muslim scholars thus created knowledge on the one hand while also serving as a conduit of knowledge between ancient, contemporary, and later peoples [20].

After the Prophet's (PBUH) death, the Muslim community entered into a period of experimentation with respect to governance. Four rightly guided caliphs saw through the first thirty years, after which dynastic rule took over (**Ummayyads**, **Abbasids**, **Fatimids**, **Seljuqs,** etc.) and the Muslim world experienced periods of political fulfillment and disgrace. The **Mongol invasion** of the thirteenth century dealt a fatal political blow to the Muslim world but failed to dampen their passion for knowledge and both intellectual and scientific advancement. When the Ottomans established their caliphate, the Muslim world was able to recover some of its lost glory.

Islam as *dīn* stands faithful to a way of life that is God-centered. No separation between this world and the next is envisaged. Individuals and societies ought to be governed by the "revealed guidance" and discursive reasoning based on it. There is no bar on benefiting from the positive achievements of other cultures, provided they do not contradict the core teachings of Islam. At the same time, religious freedom is guaranteed; "*There is no compulsion in religion*" (Q Al-Baqarah 2:256) is one of the hallmarks of the Qur'anic teachings, and hence Muslims do not have the right to impose their religion on anyone. A friendly attitude towards other religions is an obligation (Q Al-Mumtahanah 60:8; Al-Hujuraat 49:13).

Islam's social philosophy is based not only on faith and the brotherhood of all humanity but also on the nurturing and purification of the individual soul. All human problems, in the final analysis, are ethical in their origin, which is why Islam accords the utmost importance to morality, so much so that the Prophet (PBUH) described the ultimate purpose of his advent as an ethical one by saying, "I have been sent to perfect the highest moral virtues" [21]. Human dignity and social responsibility are foundational, and all systems are supposed to be erected on them. Muslim social systems are inherently geared to create an environment of justice, prosperity, and social security for all – whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims. These systems are largely driven by moral precepts which are virtually incumbent upon all Muslims; these include visiting the sick, condoling family members of the deceased, caring for orphans and the poor, and so forth. This moral order plays a significant role in ensuring the preservation of the social and psychological welfare of the individual and society.

The Islamic principles of faith and practice are intertwined with the notion of safeguarding public health. Central to Islamic belief is the concept of *Tawḥīd*, or the oneness of God. This principle underscores the interconnectedness of all beings and emphasizes that all creatures belong to God alone. Consequently, Muslims are called upon to recognize the sanctity of life and to uphold practices that promote the well-being of the individual and society as a whole. Through adherence to rituals grounded in

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meditation, purity, and cleanliness, individuals cultivate a sense of inner peace and serenity which extends outward to their interactions with the "other."

Islam also emphasizes the importance of nurturing a harmonious relationship with nature, characterized by love, mercy, and charity. Muslims are encouraged to be stewards of the environment, recognizing that the Earth is a trust from God. This entails adopting sustainable practices and showing compassion towards all living beings. By embracing these teachings, Muslims contribute to the preservation of public health as they prioritize the protection and promotion of life in all its forms. Through acts of charity and kindness, they seek to remove suffering and promote physical, psychological, sociological, spiritual, and public health and well-being within their communities. Thus, Islam offers a holistic framework for addressing public health challenges that is rooted in principles of unity, compassion, and reverence for creation.

With the dawn of the modern era, when most Muslim lands were colonized and Muslim societies became nation-states, their fortunes began to change. The spirit of Islam dampened, and intellectual activity stalled. Muslim subjugation to the gradually dominating culture of the West, particularly in technological sciences, resulted in them forgetting their worldview. Scholars differ in the assessment of the several revivalistic efforts made by Muslims from the nineteenth century onwards as they differed in determining the cause of Muslim "stagnation and backwardness." In my opinion, however, the cause does not relate to the status of scientific progress as much as it relates to two factors foretold by the Prophet (PBUH) centuries ago: "unwarranted love of this world and abhorrence to meeting the Lord" [13], and here lies the elixir.

Further Reading

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