

Islam

the universal faith

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Islam and the Universe

Islam, which literally means peace, submission, and obedience, is the religion of the whole universe. The universe is orderly, a cosmos whose parts are linked together and work together for the same purpose and goal.

Everything is assigned a place in the grand scheme of the universe, which works in a magnificent way. The sun, moon, stars, and all

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heavenly bodies are knit together in a splendid system, follow unalterable laws, and never deviate from their ordained course.

The universe, although seemingly monotonous and blindly obeying a set of laws, is neither a factory, as thought by eighteenth-century theists, nor a chaos, as conceived by Existentialist philosophers. Rather, it is like a lively and dynamic organism, each part of which works according to the position it occupies and which fulfils its role in the system of mutual relationships. On the other hand, God is not a passive power that set up the universe to work automatically, but an "ever-active" Power Who unceasingly reflects His Names in the mirror of the universe. Each such reflection renews the universe, meaning that a new one is manifested each moment. But this renewal depends upon certain immutable princi-

ples that allow us to regulate our lives and, therefore, make human life possible. These principles, which we deduce by observing “natural” events and call “natural” laws, have only nominal existence. The universe’s Creator and Ruler established them; creation obeys them.

This is why Islam is the universe’s religion, for Islam is nothing other than obedience and submission to God, the Lord of the universe. The sun, moon, Earth, and all heavenly bodies are *muslim*, as are air, water, heat, stones, trees, and animals, for everything in existence obeys God by submitting to His laws. Even unbelievers and atheists are *muslim* as far as their bodily existence is concerned, for each part of their bodies follows the course God established for it, from birth until death and dissolution.

Islam is nothing other than obedience and submission to God, the Lord of the universe.

Islam teaches that God, nature, and humanity are not remote, alien to, or opposed to one another. God makes Himself known to humanity through nature and humanity itself, and nature and humanity are two books (of creation) that make God known. Islam is the name of the code according to which nature functions in perfect obedience and by which humanity is required, but not forced, to live by using its free will.

Islam Defined with Respect to the Universe

Islam, derived from *silm* (submission, salvation, and peace), is the expression of God’s Grace flowing in the arteries of the universe. Being the Divine system to which all creation, except humanity, has submitted, the universe contains no disorder. Islam is the firm, unbreakable rope stretch-

ing from Heaven to which all creatures hold fast and by which humanity will ascend to Paradise, our original home. Islam connects all creatures in a single unity, and thus is the religion of universal brotherhood, sisterhood, and solidarity.

Tawhid (monotheism), which is the bedrock of Islam, implies the necessity of humanity's harmony with nature. The universe, which has submitted to God, displays a coherence and harmony of which our world is

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also a part. Although our world is subject to the general laws of "nature" as well as its own unique set of laws, it is in harmony with other laws governing those phenomena beyond it. Humanity, which alone does not tread the path of nature, has free will and the gift of freedom, as well as the obligation to harmonize its life with the rest of nature. This harmony, moreover, is also the path of human exaltation and progress, the path upon which God originated human nature:

So set your face to the religion, a man [woman] of pure faith—God's original nature in which He originated humanity. There is no changing God's creation. That is the right religion, but most people know it not. (30:30)

Islam seeks to unite us with the vast domain of being, and strives to create an absolute unity between us and the universe. We are the most essential partner in the Realm of Existence, and each Muslim is the co-religionist of all creatures:

What, do they desire another religion than God's, while to Him has surrendered whosoever is in the heavens and Earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they shall be returned? (3:83)

Have you not seen how all who are in the heavens and in Earth, the sun, moon, stars and mountains, trees and beasts, and many of humanity prostrate to God? (22:18)

The Universal Message

While constant change is observed in nature, there is an underlying aspect of permanence in everything. For instance, a seed germinates underground and grows into a tree without the laws of germination and growth changing. Likewise the essential character of humanity and human life with all its vital, indispensable necessities, regardless of any external material or other changes in our lifestyles, despite their impact upon our lives and environment, have remained unchanged since the creation of Adam and Eve. All of us share certain general conditions of life and value: we are born, mature, marry, have children, and die; we have some degree of will and common desires; we share certain values, such as honesty, kindness, justice, courage.

Thus, all Prophets sent by God were sent with the same message. Each created being naturally depends upon his or her Creator. Only the Creator is Self-Existent, unique and single, and not composite, subject to change, or contained by time or space. Belief in such a Divine Being constitutes the primary foundation of the Divine religion preached by all Prophets. Its other pillars are belief in the Resurrection, all Prophets without distinction, angels, Divine Scriptures, and Divine Destiny (including human free will).

Those who do not use their free will to discipline themselves face the danger of enslavement by their passions. Such a lack of self-discipline

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causes us to wrong others, for the goal of such behavior is to satisfy our desires. Since the Divine religion does not allow such wrongdoing, those who pursue it try to corrupt religion in order to justify their whims and fancies. This causes disorder, oppression, unending conflict, and destruction. God wills mercy for His creation, not oppression or injustice; He wills that its members live in peace so that justice prevails. However, history relates that the followers of earlier Prophets split into opposing factions and tampered with the religion to serve their preferences or interests.

All previous Prophets were sent to restore the Divine religion to its original purity by purging the innovations and deviations added by its adherents. This is why Prophet Muhammad was sent after Jesus to preach the same pillars of faith. God revealed to him the Qur'an, which contains the eternal principles for our individual and collective life. Since God decrees that the Qur'an is absolutely and permanently preserved, the Prophet is the last Messenger.

Islam honors the religious experience of those who came before its revelation, because Islam confirms and completes what is true in those religions. Given this, Muslims say that Prophet Abraham and all other Prophets were *muslim*. Such an outlook explains why Islamic civilization,

from its very beginnings, was and remains tolerant, plural, and inclusive. It has always been this way, except for the rarest of exceptions.

Islam says that God's universal providence would be denied if Prophets were raised for one nation only and if other nations had no Prophets. The Qur'an states that God is the Lord and Sustainer of all worlds. He did not discriminate among nations when sending His Revelation, and so Muslims must not distinguish between any of His Messengers:

The Messenger (Muhammad) believes in what was sent down to him from his Lord. Each believer believes in God and His angels, His Books, and His Messengers. We make no distinction between any of His Messengers. They say: "We hear and obey. Our Lord, grant us Your forgiveness. Unto You is the homecoming." (2:285)

God wills mercy for His creation, not oppression or injustice, and that its members live in peace so that justice prevails.

Islam is the consummation of all religions. By accepting the Prophets and Scriptures of all nations, Islam affirms God's Unity and universal providence, as well as the universality of religious experience. Muslims are true followers of all Prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

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Muslims reject the term *Muhammadanism*, for they do not worship Muhammad. To understand Islam as its adherents do, such words as *Muhammadan* or *Muhammadanism* need to be dropped. Muhammad never claimed to be more than a man

who received revelations from God. He did not make Islam; he simply received it.

Islam Does Not Accept Contradictions

Tawhid implies the equality and unity of all people in their relation with God, and thus indicates homogeneity, equality, and the unity of human origin. Humanness is the one element ingrained in the nature of all individuals. People of different social strata were not created by separate deities with varying levels of power, for this would violate *tawhid* by allowing possible disparity in their essential nature and erecting insuperable barriers between them. The same God created everyone, and so all people have the same fundamental essence:

O humanity, be conscious of your Lord, Who created you of a single soul. (4:1)

Given this, Islam rejects legal, physical, class, social, political, racial, national, territorial, genetic,

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or even economic factors. *Tawhid* means considering humanity as a unity and working to eliminate all efforts at division based upon such factors as color, social status, occupation, education, geography, religion, and ideology. All such divisions are reconcilable only by replacing *tawhid* with *shirk* (dualism, trinitarianism, or polytheism).

The Qur'an declares:

O humanity, We created you from one (pair) of a man and a woman and formed you into peo-

ples and tribes to know each other (not to take pride in your color or race, or claim superiority due to your color, race, or socioeconomic status). (49:13)

In fact, the noblest person in God's sight is the one who is most God-conscious. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Your Lord is One. You are from Adam and Adam is from dust. An Arab is not superior to a non-Arab, nor a white person over a black person, except for his or her piety and righteousness."

This belief in human unity is the corollary of God's Unity. The same God created and nourishes all people, regardless of race, color, creed, and culture. Thus everyone is His servant, and those most dear to Him are His best servants. The Prophet is reported to have said:

God says to His servants on the Day of Reckoning: "You did not visit me when I was sick." They reply: "How could I visit You, since You are the Lord of creation?" God says: "Do you not remember that My servant so-and-so fell sick and you did not visit him (or her)? If you had, you would have found Me with him (or her). You did not give Me food when I asked you for it." They ask: "How could we give You food, since You are the Lord of creation?" God says: "Do you not remember My servant so-and-so who asked you for food but you refused. If you had done so, you would have found Me with him (or her)." God says: "You did not give Me water when I asked you." They ask: "How could we give You water, since You are the Lord of creation?" God retorts: "Do you not remember My servant so-and-so who asked you

for water but you refused? If you had done so,
you would have found Me with him (or her).”

**“Your Lord is One.
You are from Adam
and Adam is from
soil...”**

The Prophet informs us that a prostitute deservedly entered the road leading to Paradise because she gave water to a thirsty dog out of compassion, whereas another woman entered the road leading to Hell because she let a cat die of hunger. This is Islam, with its arms wide open to all creatures, regions, and ages.

Despite all these facts and centuries of close contact with other cultures and its many similarities with Judaism and Christianity, Islam remains somehow alien and “other.” Having played a significant part in the colonized Muslim world’s struggle to throw off its colonial masters and resume its rightful place in the world, Islam inevitably became associated in the popular mind with politics and ideology. More recently, it has become associated with backwardness and anti-Western feelings as Muslims strive to rediscover their spiritual and cultural heritage and to live accordingly. And many people, always ready for simplistic answers to and explanations of an impossibly complex issue, latch on to such obvious associations and “truths” and probe no further.

The Meaning of Religion and a General Outline of Islam

The word “Religion” is derived from either the word *relegere* (“to read” or “to pursue together,” as well as “legible” and “intelligent”) or, much more likely and generally accepted, from the word *relegare* (“to tie back” or “to bind fast”). Hence a religious person used to mean a monk

tied by his vows. *Ligament* and *ligature* also come from this root. For Romans, it meant being tied back, staying connected with ancestral customs and beliefs, or a kind of loyalty. For Christians, the word originally meant being tied back or connected to God.

The corresponding Arabic word is *din*, which literally means restoring one's rights, obedience, adopting as a way of life, being in debt, calling to account, managing, rewarding or punishing, serving, and lending. Muslim theologians describe *din* as the set of principles revealed by God through His Prophets and Messengers, and the set that humanity should follow, of its own free will, to acquire happiness in both worlds.

Muslim theologians describe religion as the set of principles revealed by God through His Prophets and Messengers.

The concept of religion may be viewed from two perspectives: the human or the Divine. Monotheists

take religion to be God-revealed principles, values, and commandments, and so do not refer to humanity when explaining the origin of religion. In contrast, modern Western and Westernized people, under the influence of scientific materialism, say that humanity created religion and then used anthropology, sociology, and psychology to explain it away.

The common denominator in the Western "scientific" analysis of religion is that it is a human invention designed either to project repressed desires or weaknesses or the result of individual or collective efforts to systematize a community's beliefs and rites.

Religion in the Qur'an

The Qur'an uses *din*, usually translated as "religion," in different contexts with various meanings. The most important and common of these are the collection of moral, spiritual, and worldly principles, systems, and ways of conduct (33:5, 40:26); judging, rewarding, punishing (1:4, 51:6, 82:18-19); way, law, constitution (12:76); servanthood and obedience (16:52); and peace and order (8:39).

With Islam, God completed the religion He revealed and chose for humanity:

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

Literally, Islam means "submission, peace, and salvation." In its most fundamental aspect, Islam is epitomized in the most frequently recited of all Qur'anic phrases,

the *Basmala*—In the name of God, the Merciful (*al-Rahman*), the Compassionate (*al-Rahim*). Both words are related to *rahma* (mercy and compassion). God manifests Himself via His absolute, all-inclusive Mercy and Compassion, and Islam is founded upon that affirmation. The Qur'an calls Prophet Muhammad's mission *a mercy for all the worlds* (21:107).

Islam is distinguished from other religions by several characteristics, among them the following:

God manifests Himself via His absolute, all-inclusive Mercy and Compassion, and Islam is founded upon that affirmation.

1. Monotheism

Islam is uncompromisingly monotheistic, for its theology begins and ends with God's Unity (*tawhid*). Given this, the universe is seen as an integral whole of interrelated and cooperative parts in which a splendid coordination, harmony, and order are displayed throughout the universe and within each living organism. This harmony and order come from the Unity of the One Who created them and Who is absolute, without partner, peer, or like. It is God Who has created the universe with whatever is in it and who administers it. What we deduce from the operation of the universe and call "natural laws" are, in fact, God's regular ways of creating things and events and administering the universe. From this perspective, the universe, which is governed by God and obeys Him, is literally *muslim*—submitted to God. Thus, its operations are orderly and harmonious.

2. Humanity

The quality of being human comes from our immaterial and spiritual aspects, not from our natural and material aspects. The spirit and intellect do not originate in the physical body; rather, the spirit uses the body, and only life gives the body any meaning.

It is God Who has created the universe with whatever is in it and Who administers it.

A fruit tree's future life is encapsulated in its seed, and a tree is worth only as much as the value of the fruit it

yields. In the same way, each person's life-history is recorded and is of value only in proportion to the number of good deeds done and

the level of virtue attained. Again, just as a tree increases by means of the seeds in its fruit, we prosper by our good deeds, the weight and consequence of which one day will be revealed to us.

We have three principal drives: desire, anger, and intellect. We desire or lust after the opposite sex, and love our

Who am I? Where do I come from? What is my final destination?

children and worldly possessions. We direct our anger at what stands in our way, and by using it can defend ourselves. Our intellect enables us to make the right decisions. The Creator does not restrain these drives, but rather requires us to seek perfection through self-discipline so that we do not misuse them. If they remain undisciplined, immorality, illicit sexual relationships, and prohibited earnings, tyranny, injustice, deception, falsehood, and other vices will appear in individuals and spread throughout society. In addition, humanity cannot help but ask these vital questions since its appearance on Earth: Who am I? Where do I come from? What is my final destination? What does death demand from me? Who is my guide on this journey, beginning from clay and passing through the stages of a sperm, a blood-clot, and a lump of flesh, another creation where the spirit is breathed into my body, and finally reaching the grave and through there to the Hereafter?

It is in all of these questions that the essential problem of human life lies, and our individual and collective happiness requires being able to give the correct answer to the vital questions mentioned, as well as in disciplining our faculties so that we may produce a harmonious peaceful in-

dividual and social life. Since it is not possible for the human intellect to totally comprehend where true human happiness lies in both this world and the next, humanity needs a universal intellect, a guidance from beyond human reason and experience, to whose authority all may assent freely. That guidance is the religion revealed and perfected by God through His Prophets.

3. Prophets

All Prophets came with the same essentials of belief: belief in God's Existence and Unity, the world's final destruction, resurrection and day of judgment, Prophethood and all Prophets without distinction, all Divine Scriptures, angels, and Divine Destiny and Decree (including human free will). They called people to worship the One God, preached and promoted moral virtue, and condemned vice. Differences in particular rules and injunctions were connected with the existing economic and political relationships. Thus, to be a Muslim means believing in all of the Prophets and the original previous Scriptures.

All Prophets called people to worship the One God, preached and promoted moral virtue, and condemned vice.

A Prophet, one purified of sin and vice and having a deep relation with God, guides people to truth and sets a perfect example for them to follow.

Such people have the following essential characteristics: absolute and complete truthfulness, trustworthiness, communication of the Divine Message; the highest intellectual capacity, wisdom, and profound insight; sinlessness, and no mental or physical defects. Just as the Sun attracts planets by the invisible force of gravitation,

Prophets attract people by the force of their profound relation with God, certain miracles, and the sheer nobility of their person, purpose, and character.

Islam honors the religious experience of those who came before its revelation, because Islam confirms and completes what is true in those religions. Given this, Muslims say that Prophet Abraham and all other Prophets were *muslim*. Such an outlook explains why Islamic civilization, from its very beginnings, was and remains tolerant, plural, and inclusive. It has always been this way, except for the rarest of exceptions.

4. Belief

Belief, the essence of religion, is far more than a simple affirmation based upon imitation. Rather, it has degrees and stages of expansion or development, just as the seed of a tree is gradually transformed into a fully grown, fruit-bearing tree. Belief contains so many truths pertaining to God and the universe's realities that the most perfect human science, knowledge, and virtue is belief in and knowledge of God originating in belief based upon argument and investigation. Those who attain the degree of "certainty of belief coming from direct observation of the truths on which belief is based" can study the universe as a kind of Divine Scripture.

The Qur'an, the universe, and humanity are three manifestations of one truth. In principle, therefore, there can be no contradiction or incompatibility between

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Qur'anic truths (issuing from the Divine Attribute

of Speech) and truths derived from the objective study of its counterpart, the created universe (from the Divine Attributes of Power and Will). An Islamic civilization true to its authentic, original impulse contains no contradiction between science (the objective study of the natural world) and religion (the personal and collective effort to seek God's good pleasure). True belief is not based on blind imitation, but rather appeals to our reason and heart and combines affirmation of reason and the internal experience and submission of the heart. As Said Nursi reminds us:

Belief in God is creation's highest aim and most sublime result, and humanity's most exalted rank is knowledge of Him. The most radiant happiness and sweetest bounty for the jinn and humanity is love of God contained within knowledge of God. The human spirit's purest joy and the human heart's sheerest delight is spiritual ecstasy contained within love of God. All true happiness, pure joy, sweet bounties, and unclouded pleasures are contained within knowledge and love of God. (Nursi, *The Letters*, Kaynak, 2:1-2)

5. Worship

Belief in God is creation's highest aim and most sublime result, and humanity's most exalted rank is knowledge of Him.

Belief engenders different kinds of worship, such as responding to explicit injunctions (e.g., the prescribed prayers, fasting, alms-giving, and pilgrimage) and obeying prohibitions (e.g., avoiding all intoxicants, gambling, usury, unlawful killing, oppression, usurpation, deception, and unlawful sexual

relationships). Those seeking to strengthen their belief and attain higher ranks of perfection should be careful of the acts of their heart and intellect. (e.g., contemplation, reflection, invocation, recitation of God's Names, self-criticism, perseverance, patience, thankfulness, self-discipline, and perfect reliance upon God). Moral virtues are the fruit of religious life. As Prophet Muhammad said: "I have been sent to perfect good morals." (Tabarani, *Mu'jam al-Awsat*, 7:74)

6. Universal Moral Virtues

As mentioned above, Islam encourages such virtues as honesty, love, compassion, generosity, altruism, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and helpfulness, and refraining from all vices such as lying, ostentation, and deception. These are essentially reflections of our true nature. Created by the One Who is All-Wise, All-Generous, All-Compassionate, every person has an innate inclination toward these virtues. Therefore, they are confirmed and established by Islam, which was revealed by God through His Prophets to show humanity how to resolve all of its psychological and social problems.

7. Collective Life

By means of belief and worship, as well as its intellectual, moral, and spiritual principles, Islam educates us in the best possible way.

The life of religion proclaims that the aim of individual and collective life is to attain virtue and God's approval.

In addition, it uses its socioeconomic principles to establish an ideal society free of dissension, corruption, deception, oppression, anarchy, and ter-

ror, one that allows everyone to obtain happiness both in this world and the next.

The life of religion and serving God accepts right, not force, as the point of support in social life. It proclaims that the aim of individual and collective life is to attain virtue and God's approval instead of realizing selfish interests, and mutual assistance instead of conflict. It seeks the internal and external unity of communities through ties of religion, profession, and country, not through racism and negative nationalism. It works to erect a barrier against worldly desires and encourages us to strive for perfection by urging the soul to pursue sublime goals. Right calls for unity, virtue brings solidarity, and mutual assistance means helping each other. Religion secures brotherhood, sisterhood, and attraction. Self-discipline and urging the soul to virtue brings happiness in this world and the next.

8. God's Two Kinds of Laws

God has established two kinds of laws: the religious rules (issuing from His Attribute of Speech and governing our religious life) and the so-called laws of nature (issuing from His Attribute of Will and governing creation and life). The reward or punishment for following or ignoring them is given at different times. Reward and punishment for obeying or disobeying the former usually comes in the next life, while for the latter, in this life.

God has established two kinds of laws: the religious rules and the so-called laws of nature.

The Qur'an constantly draws our attention to natural phenomena, the subject matter of science, and urges us to study

them. In the first 5 centuries of Islam, Muslims united science and religion, intellect and heart, and the material and spiritual. Later on, however, in addition to losing the lead in science due to their negligence of the Divine laws of nature, they no longer practiced Islam's religious rules. This is why Muslims are now in a wretched state, lagging behind the powers equipped with science and technology. So salvation requires following both kinds of laws.

We Need God and Religion More Than Ever Before

Although modern technology has blinded us to some fundamental human limitation, causing us to consider ourselves omnipotent, self-sufficient, and self-existing or possessors of unlimited power, in reality we are weak, frail, needy, and destitute. Although we cannot create a leaf or a gnat, or even a molecule of water, our entrapment by modern technology's spell makes us loathe to admit this. We are content to ascribe all natural events, from the sunrise and sunset to the movements of atoms, to nominal natural laws that function without our intervention. Even our bodies work independently of us, for we cannot prevent ourselves from sleeping, becoming hungry or thirsty, or dying at the hands of a microscopic creature.

We always are accompanied by sorrows arising from past misfortunes and by worries about the future. Fear, love, and expectations are inseparable from our existence, while such things as youth and beauty, of which we are very fond, leave

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without saying "good-bye." We greatly fear and are overwhelmed unexpectedly by misfortune, old age, and death. Countless requirements must be maintained if we are to go on living, yet we have total control over none of them. We may be injured, accidents may end our hopes, and disease and unexpected events always threaten and block our way to happiness. We endure earthquakes, storms, floods, fires, and other natural catastrophes. Both the vast variety of phenomena and our awareness of our own frailty make our own weakness and helplessness quite clear.

Despite our claims of dominating nature and conquering space, we have more need of religion than our ancestors ever did. We may not be worshipping fetishes as they did, such as trees, animals, rivers, fire, rain, and heavenly bodies, but, according to Erich Fromm, millions of us have our own fetishes: national heroes, movie stars, politicians, sports figures, musicians, and many, many others.

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Furthermore, millions of us practice such modern religions as transcendental meditation, necromancy, Satanism, and spirit worship in the hope of satisfying that which cannot be satisfied with scientific and technological advancements. Others seek fulfillment in stadiums, nightclubs, casinos, jobs, and trade unions. They transform such places into places of devotion because they cannot suppress their need to worship. Inevitably, those who do not believe in and worship the One God become the slaves of numerous deities.

