ISLAM THE WAY OF LIFE

Beliefs · Rituals · Customs · Society · Polity · Economy

A Brief Introduction | Dr. Azam Beg

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WHAT IS ISLAM?

A human being has two aspects of life. One is the biological system and life-cycle following the rules set by God $(Allah)^1$, the Creator. The other aspect of life is human intellectual abilities.

Allah has granted freedom to human beings to use these abilities to make decisions and to take actions regarding their way of life. A Muslim is a person who uses intellect to conform his life to the commandments of Allah. By doing so that person fulfills the purpose of his life and thus is in the state of 'Islam'. Islam is an Arabic word meaning submission, surrender, and obedience.

Allah in His Book, the Qur'an² says, "*The deen (code of life)* before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will)" [3:19]; "Die not except in a state of Islam." [3:102] Islam as a way of life provides guidance in all spheres of a person's life, be they individual or collective.

 $^{^{1}}$ Allah is the Arabic word for the God of Abraham, the one and the only God. Allah and God are used alternatively in this booklet.

² The Qur'an is in the Arabic language. This booklet includes only the English translation of the verses from the Qur'an. Full text of the Qur'an in Arabic and its translation in English is available online at: http://www.tanzeem.org/resources/quran/index.htm

ISLAM – AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

At the individual level, Islam is a religion that constitutes beliefs, rituals and social customs. Muslims are to spend their lives based on the teachings of the Qur'an, for example,

"Righteousness is not only that you turn your faces towards East or West, but it is also to believe in Allah and the Last Day and the Angels, and the Books, 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 practice regular charity, to fulfill the contracts which you have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth – those who are God-conscious." [2:177]

Fulfillment of Human Needs and Individual Development

Every human being has basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. It is a Muslim male's duty to work to provide these needs not only for himself but also for his dependants in a dignified manner. Islam stresses upon a balanced approach towards material needs. The Qur'an says: "O you who believe! Do not forbid (yourselves) the good things which Allah has made lawful for you and do not exceed the limits; surely Allah does not love those who exceed the limits." [5:87]

A Muslim is free to earn his living through fair and dignified means that include trade, employment, farming, industrial production, etc. Islam forbids income from sources such as cheating, stealing, gambling, interest/usury, prostitution, etc.

Islam provides a moderate and balanced approach to an individual's physical needs. Islam prohibits a person from harming his body by negligence and over-indulgence. Self-denial is strictly prohibited. In order to sustain a healthy life-style, personal hygiene and clean-liness are made an integral part of Muslims' daily lives. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him – PBUH) once said, "Cleanliness is half the Faith."

To maintain a sound mental health, importance is placed on selfcontentment and on living a stress-free life-style. There is a major emphasis on adopting higher human values such as honesty, truthfulness, kindness, sincerity, generosity, modesty, decency, dignity, steadfastness, cheerfulness, and hard work.

Islam nurtures a person's innate goodness. Muslims are taught to be servants of God answerable for their conscious actions throughout their lives. For spiritual guidance and development, Islam provides a Muslim a system of prayers and supplications – some of which are performed on a regular (daily) basis and others are left to an individual's discretion. During prayers, Muslims express their gratitude to Allah and seek His help and guidance, in words like: *"You alone we worship and you alone we ask for help. Keep us on the right path – the path of those on whom you have bestowed favors, not the (path) of those who earn your anger nor of those who go astray."* [1:5-7]

ARTICLES OF FAITH

The articles of Islamic faith define the place of a human being in this world and the next. Five articles of faith are mentioned in this verse of the Qur'an: "O you who believe! Believe in Allah and His messenger (Muhammad), and the scripture that He has sent to His messenger and the scriptures that He sent to those before (Muhammad). Any who denies Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messenger and the Day of Judgment has gone far, far astray." [4:136]

• Faith in Oneness of God

The most important article of faith is the belief in oneness of God. This is emphasized in the Qur'an in many places, for example: *"There is no god but He (Allah), the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal"* [3:2], *"Know, therefore, that there is no god but Allah"* [47:19] and *"Say: He is Allah, the One and Only. Allah, the Eternal, Absolute. He begets not, nor is He begotten. And none is like Him."* [112:1-4] Expression of the statement "There is no god but God (Allah)" differentiates a Muslim from a non-Muslim. The unlimited success in this life and the hereafter lies in willful and conscious acceptance of this canon. Oneness of God was the cornerstone of teachings of all of God's prophets and messengers. A Muslim must not, in any shape or form, ascribe partners to Allah, meaning, His personality, attributes, authority or rights.

• Faith in God's Angels

Belief in the existence of God's angels is the second article of faith. God states in the Qur'an, "Praise be to Allah, who created (out of nothing) the heavens and the earth, who made the angels, messengers with wings, two, three, or four (pairs)" [35:1] God also says, "And the angels celebrate the praises of their Lord, and pray for forgiveness for (all) beings on earth." [42:5] The angels do not deviate from the commands of God but they are in no way related to God and have no share in His divinity. The Muslims are forbidden from worshipping angels or seeking any help or any intercession from them. One of the well-known angels of God is Gabriel who was responsible for bringing God's messages and revelations to His prophets.

• Faith in God's Books (Scriptures)

As the third article of faith, a Muslim must believe in all scriptures that were revealed by God in the manner the Qur'an was revealed upon the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). One place in the Qur'an, it affirms, *"It is He who sent down to you (step by step), in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it, and He sent down the Torah (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to human-kind."* [3:3] A Muslim must believe in the scriptures such as Books of Abraham, Psalms of David, Torah of Moses and Gospel of Jesus, but only in their original and unadulterated forms. However, full contents of these and other scriptures (whose names were not given to Muslims) were not saved. Consequently, translations of only parts of those earlier books are available today. Additionally, languages of the older books are extinct and thus are not accessible to common man of today. In comparison, Qur'an's language (Arabic) is fully preserved and alive to this day and so is the Qur'anic text in its entirety.

• Faith in God's Prophets

As the fourth article of faith, Muslims believe that God chose some human beings as His prophets and messengers for the guidance of all nations and peoples. Some of the well-known prophets are mentioned in the following verses of the Qur'an: "*That was the reasoning about Us (Allah), which We gave to Abraham (to use) against his people: We raise whom We will, degree after degree: for thy Lord is full of wisdom and knowledge. We gave him Isaac and Jacob: all (three) guided: and before him, We guided Noah, and among his progeny, David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron; thus We reward those who do good. And Zachariah and John and Jesus and Elias: all in the ranks of the righteous. And Ishmael and Elisha and Jonah and Lot; and* to all We gave favor above the nations. (To them) and to their fathers, and progeny and brethren: We chose them, and we guided them to a straight way." [6:83-87]

Teachings imparted by all prophets were applicable to the people they were sent to. Muhammad (PBUH) was the last prophet of God and his teachings superseded all previous teachings and hence applied to all people of his time and to all human beings who will follow him until the end of this world. About the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Qur'an says that "*We (Allah) have not sent you but as a universal (messenger) to mankind, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin).*" [34:28]

• Faith in Life After Death

Islam's fifth article is the faith in the life after death or the hereafter when all human beings will be brought back to life. God in the Qur'an says, "On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves on one another; the trumpet will be blown, and We shall collect them all together" [18:99] and "Verily the Hour is coming – My design is to keep it hidden – for every soul to receive its reward by the measure of its endeavor." [20:15]

Belief in the hereafter has the most profound effect on a Muslim's actions in this life because he believes that he is accountable for all his actions, small or large, covert or overt. On judgment day, complete records of every man and woman's actions will be presented to God. Based on the weights of these actions, God will justly decide every human being's destination in Paradise or Hell. Muslims believe that the ultimate success or failure of a person is what he attains in the life of the hereafter.

• Divine Decree (Qadr)

As the sixth article of faith, a Muslim believes in Divine Decree or destiny – *qadr* in Arabic. When Allah created each thing, He deter-

mined when it would come into existence and when it would cease to exist. He also determined its qualities and nature. And everything in the universe, the seen and the unseen, is completely subject to the overriding power of Allah. Nothing can happen outside His Will.

PILLARS OF ISLAM

The structure of Islam stands on its five pillars. Establishing these pillars is essential for a Muslim who wants to fulfill the duty of submission to God. Pillars of Islam are described below.

• Faith (Shahadah)

The declaration (*shahadah*) that, "There is no deity but God (Allah) and Muhammad is His Messenger" is the first pillar of Islam. A Muslim must have knowledge and full conviction in the attributes of God. For example, He is one and only one and has no partners; He is the Creator, the Ruler and the Sustainer of the whole universe; He hears, sees and knows all whether it is open or hidden; He is the most Merciful and the Just. In other words, He is Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Omnipresent.

The first part of the *shahadah* creates a direct link between a person and God. On one hand, it frees a human being from superstitions and any false gods and on the other hand, it frees humankind from the tyranny and oppression of other men, as there is no obedience to any other creature that violates obedience to God.

The second part of the *shahadah* covers the finality of prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH). He was the last in the chain of the prophets sent by God to guide the human beings to Him. The Qur'an says, *"He (Muhammad) is the messenger of Allah and the seal of the prophets."* [33:40] Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s mission is universal and for the whole of mankind. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had the unique status among all the prophets of not only teaching God's message to the people, but also implementing it as a way of life during his own lifetime.

• Prayers (Salah)

The five daily prayers (*salah*) constitute an important pillar of Islam. The Qur'an mentions this in many places, for example, "*And be steadfast in prayer and regular in charity*" [2:43], [2:110]; and "*Guard strictly your (practice of) prayers, especially the middle prayer, and stand before Allah in a devout (frame of mind*)." [2:238]

The *salah* is an expression of gratefulness to God and is a method of purifying the heart and the soul while safeguarding a person from indecency and evil. The obligatory *salah* is offered during five windows of time throughout the day; for optional prayers, however, there is almost no time constraint. The daily prayers (*salahs*) include recitation of parts of the Qur'an and the physical postures of bowing and prostration. The prayers can be offered almost anywhere: home, workplace, school, etc.

Salah in congregation especially in a mosque is highly recommended, as it is an expression of collective piety and solidarity of Muslims. During congregational prayers, all worshippers stand shoulder to shoulder, regardless of their color, race, or social status. Since there is no hierarchy in Islam, any male Muslim can be a prayer leader (*imam*), however, the *imam*-ship is usually given to a person who is more knowledgeable in Islamic matters. A Muslim female may lead female-only prayers.

• Fasting (Sawm)

Fasting (*sawm*), another pillar of Islam builds a spirit of patience and self-discipline in a Muslim. The Qur'an mentions fasting in several places, such as: "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may (learn) self-restraint" [2:183]; and "So every one of you who is present (at his home) during

that month (Ramadan) should spend it in fasting." [2:185] By denying oneself food, drink and intimate spousal relations, the fasting person suppresses his basic needs and desires, thus reinforcing his faith in God. Through fasting, a Muslim develops compassion for the needy and the hungry.

Every day of Ramadan (the 9th month in Islamic lunar calendar), the fast lasts from dawn to sunset. Muslims strengthen bonds within their families and with other Muslims by sharing meals at the end of the fasting day. Muslims also offer special nightly congregational *salah* (prayers) in mosques. During Ramadan, Muslims are expected to continue their usual daytime activities of earning a livelihood, going to school, etc. Muslims are exhorted to abstain from vain chat and gossip and to be more generous during this month. Outside of Ramadan, a Muslim may fast voluntarily any day of the year.

• Alms-Due (Zakah)

Zakah, as a pillar of Islam, is an act of charity for the social and economic benefit of a society and a way of achieving God-consciousness and spiritual elevation. Zakah is a means of minimizing the affliction of the poor and the deserving sections of a society. Paying of zakah (and other voluntary charity) cleanses a person's heart of greed, hatred and jealousy and replaces them with generosity, compassion and goodwill.

Every Muslim, male or female, who for one year, has owned cash, gold and other forms of wealth above a certain limit (approximately US\$1000), is obligated to give away 2.5% of his excess wealth³ as *zakah*. Beneficiaries of *zakah* are specified in the Qur'an: "Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer (the funds), and those whose hearts are to be reconciled, and to free the captives and for those in debt, and in the cause of Allah, and for the wayfarer; (thus is it) ordained by Allah. Allah is the Knower, the Wise." [9:60]

• Pilgrimage (Hajj)

Hajj or pilgrimage is the final pillar of Islam. The Qur'an states: "*In it are clear signs, the standing place of Abraham, and whoever enters it shall be secure, and pilgrimage to the House is incumbent upon men for the sake of Allah, (upon) every one who is able to undertake the journey to it.*" [3:97] Muslims from all over the world travel to Makkah (in Saudi Arabia) to perform *hajj* with hearts filled with an intense sense of devotion. These pilgrims embark on this journey with a common objective of acquiring the pleasure of God.

The largest assembly of millions of Muslims of all races and colors during *hajj* develops a universal brotherhood. *Hajj* is highlighted by a complete atmosphere of peace, the peace within pilgrims' souls and the peace with all creatures of God. Every Muslim man and woman is required to perform *hajj* once in his or her lifetime provided they are physically, mentally and financially capable. Many rituals of hajj date back to the time of Prophets Abraham and Ishmael (peace be upon them) who were the first pilgrims to the holy place of the Ka'bah in Makkah. *Hajj* culminates by the gathering of all pilgrims in the Plain of Arafat that reminds them of the assembly of all human beings on Judgment Day.

³ Excess wealth is beyond what one needs to provide for himself and his family.

ISLAM – AT THE COLLECTIVE LEVEL

Islam is a way of life (*deen*) that encompasses both individual and collective affairs of a society. Islam covers the religious, political, social, and economic facets of human lives. Islam provides a perfectly balanced approach to address the core issues of a society: rights and responsibilities of an invidual and government; privileges and obligations of men and women; distribution of wealth; etc.

Social System

The first and foremost principle of the Islamic social system is that all human beings are created equal regardless of their gender, race, or color. Equality of human beings is stated in the Qur'an: "Never will I waste the work of a worker among you, whether male or female; you are members, one of another." [3:195] The Qur'an also says: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (one who is) the most righteous (Godconscious)." [49:13] The family is considered the building block of an Islamic society. Islam creates a perfect equilibrium between the rights and responsibilities of a man and a woman tied in a marital bond. In the institution of marriage, men are responsible for the affairs of the family. A man is to provide for his wife and children the basic necessities. Proper upbringing and education is the duty of both mother and father of the children. Inheritance laws of Islam take into account the balance between duties and obligations of a female and a male.

Islam creates peace and harmony in a society by promoting and safeguarding the institution of marriage. Muslim men and women are to guard their chastity by dressing modestly. Promiscuity, homosexuality, and extra-marital relations are not allowed. A verse in the Qur'an says, "Nor come near to adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils." [17:32]

Islam puts great emphasis on good relationships with family and neighbors. Among close relatives, a person's parents deserve very special treatment. The Qur'an states: "And We have enjoined on mankind (to be good) to his parents. His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning takes two years. Be grateful to Me (Allah) and to both your parents" [31:14]; and "Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor." [17:23]

Consumption of alcohol and all other intoxicants is strictly forbidden in Islam. The Qur'an says in one place, "*Satan's plan is (but) to excite enmity and hatred among you with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from the remembrance of Allah and from His worship. Will you not then abstain?*" [5:91]

POLITICAL SYSTEM

The foundation of Islam's political system is the principle of divine sovereignty and human vicegerency as stated in different places in the Qur'an: "The Command is for none but Allah" [12:40]; "He (God) has no partner in His dominion" [17:111]; "Nor Does He (God) Share His Command with any person whatsoever." [18:26] The Qur'an further says that: "Behold, your Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth" [2:30], and "Allah has promised to those among you who believe and work righteous deeds, and He will, of surety, grant them in the land, inheritance (of power), as He granted to those before them..." [24:55] Yet another verse of the Qur'an says: "O David! We have made you a viceroy (caliph) in the land; so judge between men with justice." [38:26]

Systems of governments in modern times, be they presidential or parliamentary, can conform to Islam provided they implement the principles that sovereignty belongs only to God and no legislation can be made repugnant to the Qur'an or Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s sunnah (teachings and practices). Special importance is given to the principle of consultation as mentioned in the Qur'an: *"Who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation."* [42:38] In an Islamic state, a system of checks and balances is ensured. The leader of the state can be impeached if he transgresses the bounds of divine law.

Non-Muslims have full legal rights in an Islamic state. The state is obligated to guard their honor and lives, places of worship, and personal and business properties. Non-Muslims are freely allowed to practice their religion and to teach it to their children. They are permitted to follow their personal laws, if they desire. However, as the obligation of *zakah* is only applicable to Muslims, the non-Muslims pay a tax called *jizyah*.

Economic System

Genuine ownership of everything in this universe is with God and not with an individual or a group of people. The Qur'an in many places says that: *"Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth belongs to Allah."* [2:284]

Islam teaches its followers that God created the human beings as His trustees on earth. As a trustee, a person is granted custody of physical, bodily, and intellectual assets. He can acquire and retain any tangible and intangible assets, but only through fair and just means. The trustee, however, is accountable for all such possessions granted to him by God. The Qur'an in one place warns: *"Then on that (judgment) day you shall most certainly be questioned about the enjoyments you indulged in."* [102:8]

In modern economic terms, Islam supports the core principles of a free market economy: principles of individual ownership, the law of supply and demand, and employment-at-will. Islam eliminates economic exploitation by implementing a system of *zakah* and by banning gambling, *riba* (interest in all shapes or forms), absentee farming and feudalism. These economic laws of Islam keep the wealth from accumulating in the hands of the few at the cost of the deprivation of others.

Islam allows the increase in one's personal wealth by investing it in a business and not by earning *riba* (interest and usury). One verse in the Qur'an says, *"They say: Trade is just like usury; whereas Allah permits trading and forbids usury."* [2:275]⁴

⁴ Refer to the book "*Economic System of Islam*" by Abul-Ala Maududi for a detailed analysis of usury/interest and other economic principles of Islam.

SUMMARY

Islam is a comprehensive way of life based on the belief of the oneness of Allah. This belief is at the core of the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Only by following these teachings can a person gain genuine success while the society attains complete social and economic justice.

Common Questions and Answers

Q: How does Islam view Judaism and Christianity?

A: Original forms of Judaism and Christianity had the same origin as Islam. The Qur'an refers to Jews and Christians as the people of the Book. Prophets like Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon them) were all descendants of Prophet Abraham (PBUH) and were among the thousands of God's chosen prophets.

Q: Who wrote the Qur'an?

A: The Qur'an is the Word of God brought gradually by angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) over a period of 23 years. Many companions (*sahabah*) of Muhammad (PBUH) memorized the whole Qur'an during his life. Muhammad (PBUH) himself organized the Qur'an in its current sequence. The Qur'an was compiled in the form of a book shortly after Muhammad's (PBUH) demise and has been completely preserved in its original form in Arabic ever since.

Q: Does Islam condone oppression?

A: Islam frees humanity from all forms of oppression be it social, political, economic, or religious. Islam teaches that no human being should subjugate any other because they are all created equal by God.

Q: What is *jihad*?

A: The word *jihad* means to struggle to one's utmost capacity. Any intellectual, material, or financial effort in the way of God is considered *jihad* in Islam. Fighting in the way of God is also a form of *jihad* – the Qur'an uses the term *qital* (fighting) for this type of *jihad*. *Qital* is permissible for the purpose of defending an Islamic state and to eliminate injustice and oppression.

Q: What does Islam say about terrorism?

A: Islam is a religion of peace. Islam respects and protects sanctity of human life and does not promote or tolerate terrorism. Even in the event of war, Muslim soldiers are to refrain from harming civilians including women and children and from destroying crops and livestock.

Q: Where do Muslims come from?

A: There are over a billion Muslims in the world today. Nearly 30% of them live in the Indian sub-continent, 20% in Africa, 17% in Southeast Asia, 18% in Arab countries, and 10% in China and former Soviet republics. Approximately 6 million Muslims live in North America; close to half of them are indigenous Muslims.

Q: What do others say about Islam?

A: "Islam is much more than a formal religion; it is an integral way of life. In many ways, it is a more determining factor in the experience of its followers than any other world religion. The Muslim ("One who submits") lives face to face with Allah at all times and will introduce no separation between his life and his religion, his politics and his faith. With its strong emphasis on the brotherhood of men cooperating to fulfill the will of Allah, Islam has become one of the most influential religions in the world today".

[John A Williams (editor), *Islam*, George Braziller, New York, 1962, inside dust cover]

Q: What do others say about The Qur'an?

A: "It [Qur'an] has created all but new phase of human thought and afresh type of character. It first transformed a number of heterogeneous desert tribes of the Arabian Peninsula into a nation of heroes, and then proceeded to create the vast politico-religious organizations of Muhammadan world which are one of the great forces with which Europe and the East have to reckon with today". [G Margoliouth, Introduction to J M Rodwell's *The Koran*, New York, Everyman's Library, 1977, p VII].

Q: What do others say about Muhammad (PBUH)?

A: "My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by others, but he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels".

[Michael M Hart, *The 100, A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, New York, Hart Publishing Company, Inc., 1978, p 33].

Q: How does a person convert ('revert') to Islam?

A: According to Islamic beliefs, all human beings are born in the state of Islam and free of sin. To revert to Islam, a person simply has to profess that: "There is no god but Allah (God) and Muhammad (PBUH) is His messenger". The person returning to Islam rejects the notion of any partnership in God's personality, authority or traits.

V

Acknowledgments

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The Islamic Organization of North America, is a non-profit organization dedicated to reviving the Qur'an into the hearts of Muslims while bringing its message to non-Muslims.

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