

DISCOVERING

ISLAM



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# Discovering Islām

## ***Dedication***

*The authors would like to dedicate this humble effort to the Awaited Saviour in whose anticipation we are filled with hope.*

# DISCOVERING ISLĀM?

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# WHAT IS ISLĀM?

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Islām is the fastest growing religion in the world, with over one billion Muslims currently spread out throughout the world.

Islām is one of the world's three great monotheistic religions (with Christianity and Judaism) each of which preaches the belief in one Sovereign Lord.

Islām is the main religion in most countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Southeast and Central Asia.

China, Russia, and the Philippines each have over 50 million Muslims. The country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia.

Islām deals with all aspects of human life, including human rights, women's rights, the environment, and religion and science.

# INTRODUCTION

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Islām comes from the ʿArabic root SLM, meaning ‘peace’. The word Islām is pronounced “IS’LA:M”, with a soft “s” and a long “a”. Islām means complete submission to the will of God. A Muslim, therefore, is one who actively and completely submits him / herself to the will of God.

Islām is one of the world’s three great monotheistic religions, with Christianity and Judaism. It has over one billion followers at the present time, or roughly one-fifth of the entire world’s population. It is also the world’s fastest growing religion, especially in developed or industrialized countries like Canada and the United States. Muslims live in all parts of the world, from Albania to Argentina, from Uganda to the United States. Most of the nations in the Middle East and North Africa, together with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and parts of Southeast and Central Asia, have majority Muslim populations. The country in the world with the largest number of Muslims is Indonesia. There are over fifty million Muslims in Russia and China, and many more scattered throughout the world.

Muslims from around the world speak various languages. However, the official language of Islām is Arabic, the language of its holy book, the Qur’ān. Muslims believe that the Qur’ān was revealed by God to Prophet Muḥammad al-Muṣṭafā <sup>1</sup> (Peace Be Upon Him, [PBUH]<sup>2</sup>).

Despite the efforts of Muslims around the world, Islām is still a very misunderstood religion. The media has often grossly distorted the pure and simple message of Islām, and has portrayed Muslims as ignorant and violent. It is hoped that this book will allow the reader to understand better the true message of Islām.

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1 For a discussion of the term ‘Prophet’, please refer to the section *Nubuwwat – Prophethood*, on page 6

2 Out of respect for, and love of, the Holy Prophet, whenever his name is mentioned, Muslims recite the blessing “peace be upon him”. A similar blessing is used for other holy personalities, like the other Prophets and the Imāms.

# SHAHĀDAH (TESTIMONY)

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All Muslims believe in reciting the Shahādah (Testimony), in which they bear witness to the fact that there is none worthy of worship but God, and that Muḥammad (PBUH) is His messenger. This testimony reiterates the fundamental beliefs of all Muslims about submission to the will of God and following His chosen messenger.



Calligraphic example of the Shahādah (Testimony)

# SHĪCISM: OUR SECT

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Today Islām has over one billion followers, but not all belong to the same sect. Although many small sects have come and gone over the centuries, the two main sects in Islām are Sunnism and ShĪcism. (Similarly, in Christianity, two of the major sects are Catholicism and Protestantism.) The Sunni sect forms the majority of the Muslims, constituting approximately eighty percent of all Muslims.

It is important to note that there is far more in common in the beliefs of the ShĪcāhs and the Sunnis to unite them than there are differences to divide them. The key principles are similar in both sects, as are almost all major and minor acts of worship. In most countries where there are Muslim populations, ShĪcāhs and Sunnis coexist in peace and harmony; all are Muslims. In general, we, the ShĪcāhs, believe in the same God as the Sunnis, the same Qur'ān, the same Holy Prophet (PBUH), and the same religion of Islām. It is hoped that this book will enlighten the reader about the key beliefs of the ShĪcāhs as well as those tenets common to all Muslims.

For ShĪcāhs, the key tenets of the faith are divided into the roots of religion (Usūl al-Dīn) and the branches of religion (Furūc al-Dīn). The roots represent the basic doctrines of faith, while the branches incorporate the main facets of worship.

The five Usūl - namely Tawḥīd, cAdālat, Nubuwwat, Imāmat, and Qiyāmat (Belief in one God, Justice of God, Prophethood, Divine Leadership, Day of Judgement) - constitute the roots of religion. These are the key principles of faith for ShĪcāhs. Similarity can be found in Tawḥīd, Nubuwwat and Qiyāmat with the Sunni belief. The Sunnis and the ShĪcāhs differ with respect to cAdālat and Imāmat.

The following sections will deal with, each of the Usūl, beginning with an outline of the concept of God as understood by Muslims in general and ShĪcāhs in particular.

# USŪL AL-DĪN (ROOTS OF RELIGION)

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## GOD

Muslims believe that the Supreme Being, Creator, and Lord of the Universe is God. In Arabic, there is a special name for God, and that is Allāh. This name is as sacred to the Muslims as Yahweh (Jehovah) is to the Jews. Allāh cannot be simply translated as 'God' in English; this is because Allāh is a more complicated word in Arabic with a profound meaning. Unlike 'God' in English, there is no feminine or plural version of Allāh (by convention, Allāh uses the masculine form in °Arabic). For the sake of simplicity, however, 'God' will be used throughout this book as the English equivalent of Allāh, keeping the above caveats in mind.

God is the Creator of all that is in the Universe. He is Omnipotent (All-Powerful), Omniscient (All-Knowing), Omnipresent (Everywhere), and Eternal. God was there before anything else, and will remain after all else has ceased to exist. Muslims learn ninety-nine of God's Beautiful Names, each of which describes one of His many special characteristics. Examples of some of these names include Al-Baṣīr (the All-Seeing), Al-Samīc (the All-Hearing), Al-Aḥad (the Unique), Al-Ghafūr (the All-Forgiving), and Al-Raḥīm (the All-Merciful). Together, these names all sum up to give us the name Allāh, which is God's all-encompassing name in °Arabic.

## TAWḤĪD - BELIEF IN ONE GOD

As stated earlier, Islām is a monotheistic religion. Monotheism is defined by Webster's English Dictionary as 'the belief that there is just one God'. Before one can understand monotheism in general, or the Islāmic view of monotheism in particular, it is essential to first accept the existence of a Supreme Being.

For centuries, religious thinkers, philosophers and scientists have fiercely debated the existence of a Supreme Being. Let us assume for a moment that there was no first cause that brought this Universe into existence. Tracing the sequence of causes and effects that have led to the existence of the universe will then result in an infinite chain. This would obviously be a futile mental exercise.

Most thinkers agree, therefore, that this Universe had a Self-Sustaining First Cause. They also agree that this basic cause of the Universe is Eternal, that is, it has no beginning or end. The rationale for this is that all things in this Universe are transient. Hence, there must exist a force that brings them into existence or terminates their existence. They differ, however, on the nature of this First Cause. The materialists call it primordial matter, the religious thinkers call it God.

The twentieth century has witnessed significant advances in science and technology. As we stand at the threshold of the 21st century, the unfolding progress will undoubtedly be exponential. Despite all advances and anticipated advances, the human mind has never failed to marvel at the organization and precision that exists in the Universe. The progress has in fact helped humans appreciate the beauty around them.

For example, the construction of the human eye bears testimony that its Creator is fully conversant with the laws of optics; the composition of human blood with fixed proportions of its composite elements shows that its Maker is well aware of the required chemical balance; the design of the Solar System, particularly the relationship between the size, distance, and speed of each planet, is proof that its Designer is aware of the details of the Law of Gravity and the effects of circular motion producing centripetal forces.



Calligraphic example of *"There is none worthy of worship but God"*

In summary, having observed the precision with which the universe was created, and continues to function, one is bound to accept that the entire universe could not have come into existence by chance - as the atheists and agnostics claim - but that its Creator is Knowledgeable. Having accepted this, it is also obvious that the materialistic interpretation of the First Cause is unacceptable, since matter possesses no knowledge. Religious thinkers, therefore, call this Creator God.

## ***Belief in God: A Natural Instinct***

An atheist once asked the great-grandson of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), Imām Jaʿfar al-Sādiq (PBUH), if he could convince him of God's existence. Knowing that the man had been on several sailing voyages, the Imām asked him, "Have you ever been caught in a fierce storm in the middle of nowhere, your rudder gone, your sails torn away, desperately trying to keep your boat afloat?" The atheist replied, "Yes." The Imām then asked, "And sometimes perhaps even that leaking boat went down leaving you exhausted and hopeless at the mercy of the raging waves?" The answer again was "Yes." The Imām asked again, "Was not there, in all that black despair, a glimmer of hope in your heart that some unnamed and unknown power could still save you?" When he agreed, the Imām said, "That power is God."

Having accepted the existence of a Supreme Entity, we can now look at the Islāmic perspective of monotheism. The uniformity of the system in the world contradicts the concept of separate dominions, each having its own god. Otherwise, various parts of the world would have their own independent systems. Conversely, the world's compactness refutes the theory of multiple gods in one dominion, as this would lead to a realm of chaos and confusion. Therefore, there can only be one Supreme Entity - God. This is expanded upon by Chapter 112 (entitled "The Unity") in the Qur'ān:

*In the name of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful.*

1. *Say: "He is Allāh the One."*
2. *Allāh is Independent.*
3. *He does not beget nor is He begotten.*
4. *And there is no one like Him.*

The above verses describe the essence of the Islāmic belief in Allāh (God). The Qur'ān uses the word 'aḥad', meaning 'one', to describe God. This 'one' is not used in the numerical sense of the word; rather it implies a unique being. This uniqueness and unity implies that He has no parts and is not divisible. Even in one's own imagination, can there be no second or third, to follow the only.

# ‘ADĀLAT - JUSTICE OF GOD

The word ‘adl’ in ‘Arabic implies the idea of making two things equal, and distributing equally. This leads, therefore, to the concept of equity and justice.

In most cases, injustices are committed due to one of the following reasons:

- a) Either an individual does not know that the action is wrong;
- b) Or s/he needs something which cannot be obtained without wrongdoing;
- c) Or s/he is compelled by somebody else to commit the wrongful act.

God, however, is Omnipotent, Omniscient, and free from need. Logically therefore, He cannot be unjust in His actions. Furthermore, the Shī‘ahs believe that God never acts without purpose or reason. Although we may not know or understand the reasons behind His actions, they are all based on His Infinite Wisdom.

## ***Compulsion or Freedom***

One of the more significant differences amongst the major sects in Islām is with regard to the question of compulsion or freedom. Some sects believe that humans are completely free to do whatever they wish. Others say that humans have no power over their actions. They are compelled to do everything that they do. The Shī‘ahs believe that humans are neither completely independent, nor are they forced to do anything. The Shī‘ahs therefore believe, just as the great grandson of the Holy Prophet, Imām Ja‘far al-Sādiq (PBUH) stated, “There is no compulsion (by Allāh), nor is there absolute delegation of power (from Allāh to man) but the real position is between the two extremes.”

This, in summary, is the Islāmic concept of God, as taught by His Holy Prophets and Imāms throughout the history of humanity.

# NUBUWWAT PROPHETHOOD

Humans are among the most unique of God’s creations. Unlike most other creations, they possess innate tendencies that can both incline towards noble actions, and also lead to the most evil of deeds. God has provided humans with an intellect that guides them towards virtues, and a conscience that dissuades them from vices. Yet there has always been an



internal struggle in humans between reason and desire. It is for this reason therefore, that the Divine institution of Prophethood was created. God sent His chosen servants as Prophets to guide the masses, purify them of impurities and provide salvation.

### ***Infallibility and Divine Appointment***

An integral part of Prophethood is to accept that all Prophets are infallible and, hence divinely appointed. The Prophets were sent as models for humanity. Since they were sent down to humankind to act as leaders and guides, why would anyone want to follow the teachings of individuals who were prone to making the same mistakes as everybody else? It would defeat the purpose if they, too, made mistakes and committed sins.

Yet another important characteristic of the Prophets in this regard was that they had control over their own lives. In other words, their purity is admirable not because they were NOT able to commit sins, but because they did not make mistakes or commit sins in spite of having the ability to do so.

Having accepted the fact that there is a need for the institution of Prophethood and that logic dictates that all Prophets must be infallible, then reason requires that all Prophets be divinely appointed. Humans are not capable of appointing or selecting anyone with the above qualities. The Qur'ān bears testimony to this: *“Allāh knows best where (with whom) to place His Prophethood ”* (6:125).

### ***History of the Prophets***

From the teachings of the Qur'ān and the Holy Prophet (PBUH), Muslims believe that God sent 124,000 Prophets. Some were sent to certain regions, others were sent to specific tribes but only the last Prophet (PBUH) was sent to the whole of humanity. All of these individuals were chosen by their Lord to be His messengers; all of them came to teach the Lord's message and help people to understand the truth, and all of them were sinless and holy. The first Prophet sent on this earth was Ādam, and the last was Muḥammad, the Seal of the Prophets (PBUT). Between these two model individuals came other Prophets, like Nūh (Noah), Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Lūt (Lot), Ismācīl (Ishmael), Ishāq (Isaac), Yacqūb (Jacob), Yūsuf (Joseph), Ayyūb (Job), Mūsā (Moses), Hārūn (Aaron), Yūshac bin Nūn (Joshua), Ilyās (Elijah), Dāwūd (David), Sulaymān (Solomon), Yūnus (Jonah), Zakariyyah (Zachariah), Yahyā (John the Baptist), and cīsā (Jesus Christ) [PBUT].

Like Christians and Jews, Muslims hold these Prophets of God to be virtuous and honourable people. They spent their lives teaching God's word to the people. Many of their stories and their miracles are outlined in the Qur'ān. Jesus (PBUH), in particular, is believed by Muslims to have been born miraculously from the Virgin Mary, a very holy woman held in high esteem by Muslims. There is an entire chapter in the Qur'ān dedicated to Mary and Jesus (PBUH), along with numerous passages in other chapters.

Because Islām shares a belief in Jesus and Moses (PBUT) with Christianity and Judaism respectively, they hold a special place for Muslims. Their followers are called the Ahl al-Kitāb, "The People of the Book".

### ***The People of the Book***

Christians and Jews are considered by Muslims to be People of the Book. The book refers to the divinely revealed scriptures that God sent down to both Christians and Jews. Through the Prophet Moses (PBUH), God revealed the Torah to the Jews. Through the Prophet Jesus (PBUH), God revealed the Bible to the Christians. Both religions share with Islām divine messengers and revealed books.

Muslims also believe that God revealed His message in various stages, so that as the society evolved so, too, did the religion. Religion began with Prophet Ādam (PBUH), the first human and the first Prophet. Religion evolved over the centuries through the Prophets Noah (PBUH) and Abraham (PBUH), among others. Moses (PBUH) was sent with the next major book and stage of revelation of God's message - the Torah. Then David (PBUH) was sent with the Psalms. Thereafter came Jesus (PBUH) with the Bible and the second last stage of the Lord's religion. Finally, the evolution of religion and society were completed when Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) was sent with the Qur'ān, to serve as God's final revelation to humanity until the Day of Judgement.

### ***Prophecies about the Holy Prophet (PBUH)***

The coming of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) with a final and universal message for all of humanity, and as the Seal of the Prophets, was presaged by many of his predecessors. Their prophecies can be found even today in the religious books of the Hindus, Jews and Christians. The Qur'ān confirms this as follows, "(And) those who follow the messenger, the Prophet, the ummi whom they find mentioned in writing in the Torah and the Gospel ..." (7:157). For brevity, we will only take a cursory glance at some of their predictions.

## ***Old Testament***

The Bible has a great number of verses which, when looked at closely, especially in the original Hebrew text, clearly indicate that the followers of both Moses and Jesus (PBUH) had been forewarned of the coming of the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

God told Moses (PBUH), “I will send them a Prophet like you from among their own people. I will tell him what to say, and he will tell the people everything I command. He will speak in my name and I will punish anyone who refuses to obey him.” (Deut. 18:18 19)

This prophecy, it is often claimed, predicts the coming of Jesus Christ (PBUH). In actual fact, however, it refers to Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), as is evident from the following facts:

1. Moses (PBUH) had a brother Aaron (PBUH) who was to succeed him. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) also had a brother, °Alī ibn (son of) Abī Tālib (PBUH), who was his immediate successor. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) is recorded in history as having told °Alī (PBUH) on several occasions, “You are to me as Aaron was to Moses, except that there is no Prophet after me.” Jesus, on the other hand, did not have a brother who succeeded him. In this regard, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was ‘like’ Moses (PBUH), but Jesus (PBUH) was not.
2. Moses (PBUH) left the religious leadership in the children of Aaron (PBUH). The Holy Prophet (PBUH) also entrusted the leadership responsibilities with the children of °Alī (PBUH). Jesus (PBUH), however made no such arrangements. In this regard also, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was ‘like’ Moses (PBUH) but Jesus (PBUH) was not.
3. Jesus never claimed to be the promised Prophet stated in the aforementioned verses. The Qur’ān, on the other hand, clearly asserts about the Holy Prophet, “Verily We have sent a messenger to you as a witness against you, as We had sent a messenger to Pharaoh” (73:15).
4. Jesus himself says that there will be another Prophet who will fulfill this prophecy. “When however the Spirit comes, who reveals the truth about God, he will lead you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own authority, but he will speak of what he hears, and will tell you of things to come” (John 16:13). The Qur’ān describes one of the characteristics of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as follows, “Nor does he speak out of (his own) desire” (53:3).

The prophecy of the coming of another Prophet, therefore, clearly refers to Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) and not to Jesus (PBUH).

### ***New Testament***

The Jewish authorities in Jerusalem sent some priests and Levites to John to ask him, “Who are you?”

John did not refuse to answer, but spoke out openly and clearly, saying, “I am not the Messiah.”

“Who are you then?” they asked. “Are you Elijah?”

“No, I am not,” John answered.

“Are you the Prophet?” they asked.

“No,” he replied.

(John 1:19-21)

“...if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah nor the Prophet, why do you baptize?”

(John 1:25)

These verses clearly indicate that in addition to Jesus Christ (PBUH), the Jews were awaiting another Prophet. This Prophet was Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH).

### ***The Holy Prophet (PBUH)***

Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) was born into a simple household in the town of Mecca (Makkah), located in the Arabian Peninsula (modern-day Saudi Arabia). He was born in the year 570 A.D. At this time, the majority of the citizens of Mecca and surrounding territories were Arabs who practised tribal and animist religions, often worshipping their ancestors and multiple deities. There were also a number of Jewish tribes and the occasional Christian living in and around the town.

Prophet Muḥammad spent much of his early life in quiet meditation in the hills surrounding Mecca. As a young adult, through word and deed he had earned the reputation of being a very honest and decent person, such that he was commonly known by the titles “Al-Amīn” (the trustworthy) and “Al-Sādiq” (the truthful). The Holy Prophet (PBUH) worked as a trader for many years. He travelled far and wide with caravans, initially with his uncle, later as an employee of a famous local businesswoman. He earned a reputation as a shrewd but honest trader, and made significant profits for his employer.

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) also spent much of his time meditating away from the hustle and bustle of the town, most often in a cave called Hira in a nearby mountain. It was while meditating in this cave, at the age of forty, that God informed the Holy Prophet (PBUH) to announce to the people that he was a divine messenger from the Lord. The first five verses of the Qur'ān were revealed to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) through the Archangel Gabriel. These verses were the first five verses of Chapter 96, entitled "The Clot Of Blood" and are as follows:

*In the name of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful.*

1. *Read (O Our Apostle Muḥammad) in the name of your Lord Who created;*
2. *He created humankind from a clot of blood.*
3. *Read (O Our Apostle Muḥammad) And your Lord is the Most Honourable.*
4. *(He) Who taught (to write) with the Pen,*
5. *(He) taught humankind what he knew not. (96:1-5)*

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) then began to spread the message of Islām, first to his close family, later to the people of Mecca.



Mausoleum of The Holy Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) in Medina, Saudi Arabia

Because of increasing hostilities instigated by the idolatrous Arabs in Meca, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) emigrated to a town called Medina (Madinah) that was several days (approx. 300 km) to the north. This event is referred to as the Hijra (migration), and marks the beginning of the Islāmic calendar, in the year 621 A.D. He then continued to preach Islām to increasing numbers of converts until he returned with his followers to peacefully reclaim his hometown eight years later. Three years later, at the age of 63, he was martyred through poison at the hands of his Meccan enemies. He died in Medina in 632 A.D. (11 A.H. [After Hijra]).

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) is the greatest role model for Muslims. Every facet of his life, his character, his behaviour, his sayings, and his actions have served to instruct and inspire Muslims on the ideal method of living. Like other Prophets whom God sent down to guide us, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was infallible.

As the messenger of God who was chosen to receive and teach the Qur’ān, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) is the most holy and revered of all creation. For human beings to receive the revelation, God chose to create a human messenger from amongst the people in order to most effectively deliver the truth. God inspired the Holy Prophet (PBUH) with divine intelligence and wisdom; therefore, although he was subjected to temptation, his will to resist was reinforced by the Divine will. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) was not formally schooled, yet he was able to read and write by the will and power of God.

**The Holy Qur’ān**

The Qur’ān is the holy book of Islām. The Qur’ān was revealed in °Arabic, the language of the people in Arabia at the time, to the Holy Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH). It was revealed in stages over twenty three years of



Chapter 49 (Al-Ḥujurāt, The Chambers),  
Verse 13 from the Qur’ān

his life in the most beautiful and eloquent language and style, a fact that continues to amaze its researchers to this day. Muslims believe that the Qur'ān is a living miracle that is flawless and perfect and is the word of God. It has also remained unchanged and unadulterated over the last fourteen centuries, another unparalleled feat.

The Qur'ān contains 114 chapters, the longest one having 286 verses, the shortest one only three. As the religion of Islām unfolded through the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), God revealed different verses and parts of verses at different times. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) would receive the verses, upon God's command, and then teach them to the people. This began when the Holy Prophet (PBUH) announced his Prophetic mission at the age of forty until shortly before his death at 63.

The Qur'ān is the culmination of the natural evolution of divinely revealed books such as the Torah and the Bible. God has stated in the Qur'ān that He will protect the book from anyone wishing to tamper with it. To this day, no one, neither Muslim nor non-Muslim, has found any errors in it. In fact, God attests to this in the Qur'ān when He says, *"Do they not think (carefully) about the Qur'ān? And if it had been from other than God, they would surely have found in it much discrepancy"* (4:82). It is the final guide for humanity until the end of time.

## IMĀMAT - DIVINE LEADERSHIP

In order to appreciate the concept of Imāmat in Islām, it is essential that one not only understand what leadership is in general, but also accept its necessity.

### ***Islāmic Leadership***

The concept of leadership in Islām is quite unique. A leader, as defined by the Webster's Encyclopedia Dictionary, is "someone who acts as a guide," while leadership itself is "the act of leading."

Let us first consider the necessity of a leader in general. Some of the frequently given reasons for the need of a leader are: so that he may act as a guide, a role model, a unifying force, and/or a decision maker. The next logical question would be, 'On what basis would a leader be selected?' Some may say age, others wealth, power, knowledge, number of followers and so on. The Qur'ān discusses this very issue. To understand it, however, it is essential to understand the context in which the verse was revealed.

After the death of Moses (PBUH), several Prophets were sent to maintain the laws of the Tawrāt (Torah), but as time passed, people started neglecting the laws and began worshipping idols. There came a time when the Jews had no Prophet to guide them and their enemies were killing their men and capturing their land. The children of Israel (Israīl, another name of Jacob) prayed to Allāh for a Prophet. Allāh appointed Prophet Shamūyīl (Samuel) as their Prophet. They asked Samuel to choose a King for them, a King who would be their political leader. This is also quoted in the Bible (1 Samuel 8:19-20): “The people paid no attention to Samuel, but said ‘No! We want a king so that we will be like other nations, with our own king to rule us and to lead us out to war and to fight our battles’.” The Qur’ān talks about this appointment, *“And their Prophet said to them: ‘Verily, Allāh has raised Ṭālūt (Saul) for you (to be) a king (over you).’ They said: ‘How can he hold kingship over us when we have a greater right to kingship than he does, and he has not been granted an abundance of wealth?’ He said: ‘Verily, Allāh has chosen him over you, and has increased him abundantly in knowledge and physique. And Allāh grants His kingdom to whomever He pleases; and Allāh is Omniscient, All Knowing’.”* (2:247)

Although the people did not at first accept Prophet Shamūyīl’s (PBUH) decision, this verse clearly states the essential qualities of a leader, namely:

- a) Regardless of whether the leadership is spiritual or not, the leader is chosen by Allāh;
- b) The qualities on the basis of which Allāh chose Ṭālūt included knowledge and physical strength.

Having discussed leadership in general, we can now turn to the institution of Imāmat. An Imām is a man who, after the last Prophet (PBUH), has universal authority in all religious and secular affairs. Imāmat is a concept about which Muslims have differed over the centuries. Of the two major schools of thought in Islām, the Sunnis do not accept this concept while the Shīʿahs do.

### ***Necessity of Imāmat***

The Shīʿahs view this institution as absolutely essential, and provide several rational arguments for this:

- a) Firstly, just as it is necessary for Prophets to serve as guides for humanity, it is essential that there be individuals who will carry on this responsibility after the last Prophet has departed from this earth. The Shīʿahs believe that God, in His Justice, has ensured that there is a person who will see that His instructions are carried out. This person is the Imām.



- b) Knowledge of Islāmic laws cannot be derived merely from the literal text of the Qur'ān. There are verses that need interpretation and clarification. Once again, God cannot leave humans who vary in their levels of understanding to interpret the Qur'ān in any way they deem appropriate. This will result in as many interpretations as there are people, and will lead to chaos and disarray. The Imām fulfils the role of an interpreter. This argument is based on several verses of the Qur'ān. One of these verses is, "Verily you are a warner and to every people there is a guide." (13:7). When examined in its context, this verse is referring to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as a warner. It also confirms that there must be a guide in every generation. This guide, the Shī'ahs believe, is the Imām.

### **Qualities of an Imām**

- a) The Imām, like the Prophet, must excel over people in all virtues such as knowledge, bravery, piety, charity and so on. This is a logical requirement. An inferior person cannot be given authority over one who is superior to him.
- b) The Imām must be sinless. This, too, is a necessary quality since, without it, the Imām's followers cannot rely on his words or actions. The same applies to the Prophets.
- c) The Imām must be divinely appointed. If he is infallible, then it is impossible for him to be selected, elected or nominated by the public; God, and God alone, chooses. This is confirmed by the Qur'ān; "*Your Lord creates whatever He wills and chooses. They do not have the choice to choose...*" (28:68).

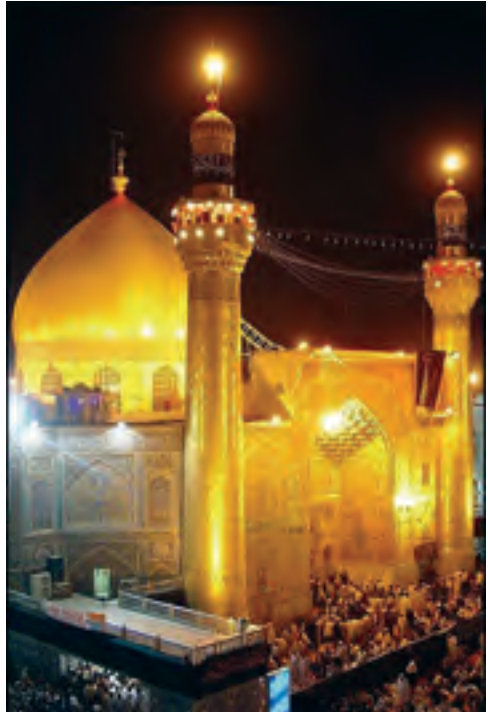
### **Succession to the Holy Prophet (PBUH)**

The differences between the various sects in Islām lies in the disagreement on the issue of whether the last Prophet, in his lifetime, appointed his successor.

Muslims are in agreement that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) never said anything of his own volition. He only spoke as he was commanded to by Allāh. The Qur'ān attests to this fact, as stated earlier, where it describes the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in the following words, "*Nor does he speak out of (his own) desire.*" (53:3)

Keeping the above fact in mind, the Shī'ahs believe that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) informed his companions, on several occasions, about the appointment of ʿAlī ibn Abī Tālib (PBUH) as his successor.

a) During the initial stages of the Holy Prophet's (PBUH) propagation, he organized a feast in which he invited his close relatives, and conveyed to them the message of Islām. Having delivered the message, after the feast he asked; "Who amongst you will administer this cause for me and be my brother, my successor and my caliph?" Only ʿAlī (PBUH) responded to the Prophet's call. The Prophet then said, "O my people! This ʿAlī is my brother, my successor and my caliph amongst you. Listen to him and obey him." Thus, the appointment of succession was made. This event is called Daʿwat-i-Dhul ʿAshīrah.



Mausoleum of Imām ʿAlī (PBUH) in Najaf, Iraq

b) The formal declaration of ʿAlī's appointment as successor was made at a place called Ghadir Khum. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) was returning from what was to be his last pilgrimage when the Archangel Gabriel descended with Verse 67 of Chapter 5. In this verse, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was commanded to, "*Deliver what has been sent down to you from your Lord; and if you do not do it, then, (it will be as if) you have not delivered His message (at all); and surely Allāh will protect you from (the mischief) of men; verily, Allāh does not guide a disbelieving people.*" The Holy Prophet (PBUH) gathered all the people and delivered a sermon. He clearly stated in the sermon that ʿAlī was his successor just as Aaron (PBUH) had succeeded Moses (PBUH), except that there would be no Prophet after him. The descendants of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) through ʿAlī would continue the Imāmat. Toward the end of the sermon, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) said the famous words, "For whomsoever I am the *mawlā* of, ʿAlī is his *mawlā*." The word *mawlā* has several meanings and it is the interpretation of this word that is the most consequential point of difference among Muslims.

The Shī'ahs believe that the context in which the sermon was delivered, and especially in which the phrase was uttered, clearly shows that the word was used to mean 'a person having authority.'

In light of the above, therefore, the Shī'ahs believe that the Holy Prophet (PBUH) through a direct commandment from God, appointed a line of twelve successors after him. History records that the Holy Prophet (PBUH), in his lifetime, had stated the names of these successors as follows:

- |   |             |             |
|---|-------------|-------------|
| 1) ʿAlī ibn Abī Tālib al-Murtaḍā (PBUH)   | b. 22 B.H.  | d. 40 A.H.  |
| 2) Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī al-Mujtabā (PBUH)       | b. 3 A.H.   | d. 50 A.H.  |
| 3) Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī al-Shahīd (PBUH)       | b. 4 A.H.   | d. 61 A.H.  |
| 4) ʿAlī ibn Ḥusayn Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (PBUH) | b. 37 A.H.  | d. 95 A.H.  |
| 5) Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Bāqir (PBUH)      | b. 57 A.H.  | d. 116 A.H. |
| 6) Jaʿfar ibn Muḥammad al-Šādiq (PBUH)    | b. 83 A.H.  | d. 148 A.H. |
| 7) Mūsa ibn Jaʿfar al-Kāzim (PBUH)        | b. 128 A.H. | d. 183 A.H. |
| 8) ʿAlī ibn Mūsa al-Riḍā (PBUH)           | b. 148 A.H. | d. 203 A.H. |
| 9) Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Taqī (PBUH)       | b. 195 A.H. | d. 220 A.H. |
| 10) ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Naqī (PBUH)      | b. 212 A.H. | d. 254 A.H. |
| 11) Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī al-ʿAskarī (PBUH)      | b. 232 A.H. | d. 260 A.H. |
| 12) Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan al-Mahdī (PBUH)    | b. 255 A.H. |             |

The last of these successors, Muḥammad al-Mahdī (PBUH), is alive and in occultation, awaiting the command from God to reappear.

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) has stated that there will come a time in the history of this world when it will be filled with injustices and instability, evil and oppression, and war and violence. Rulers will be tyrannical, the wealthy will be miserly, beggars will be imposters, love for worldly possessions will increase, lying will be customary, and backbiting a source of pleasure. It will be a time with frequent earthquakes and landslides, and countries will seek to conquer one another. These are only some examples of the socio political turmoil and environment that will exist in the world at that time. Some of the more specific signs of the coming of the Messiah require detailed discussions and are beyond the scope of this work.

Imām Muḥammad al-Mahdī (PBUH), the "Awaited One", will be the Saviour of this world. He is the same Saviour and Messiah whose appearance has been foretold in all the revealed books, and who is eagerly awaited for by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. He will fill this earth with equity and justice, just as it has been filled with tyranny and oppression. May God hasten his reappearance. Amen.

# QIYĀMAT - DAY OF JUDGEMENT

It is a universally accepted fact that humans do not always get rewarded and/or punished in this world, for their good and/or evil actions. Logic dictates that it is only fair, therefore, that a person be given his or her just due for his or her actions. Consequently, most religions accept the concept of the Day of Judgement. This will be the day on which all will have to account for their deeds, and be rewarded and/or punished accordingly.

## ***Death***

Death is inevitable. The Qur'ān itself states that, "Every soul shall taste of death" (3:185). There is no escaping this reality. Having accepted the necessity of the belief in the hereafter, death can rationally be accepted as a transitional phase, a transition from one life to the next.

## ***The Soul***

God created human beings with both a body and a soul; the body is a temporary host for this life, whereas the soul is eternal. The soul is not a physical object; it does not occupy any physical space in the body. Rather, it is the part of the human being that is intimately linked to the body and is imbued with the power of reasoning.

Muslims believe that God created each and every soul prior to creating the physical universe. Only human beings have been endowed with souls, reflecting their uniqueness. While the body is alive, it is bonded to the soul. Once the body dies, the soul separates and continues to exist, carrying an individual's true essence and self. It is this soul that will survive beyond the death of the body.

## ***Day of Resurrection***

The Day of Resurrection will take place at a pre-appointed time that is unknown to human beings. All those who are alive will die and be resurrected, and all those who are already dead will also be raised to life to be gathered for the final reckoning.

Resurrection of the body is one of the most basic beliefs in Islām and a person cannot be considered to be a Muslim if he or she rejects this concept. There are a number of people who believe in God, but reject the idea of resurrection of the body. They believe reward and punishment is for the soul and argue, "How can God resurrect the body after death, when it has already turned to dust?"

This argument is untenable. There is no justification in thinking that this act is difficult for an All-Powerful Being; if He can create human beings from nothing, He can certainly resurrect them at His behest.

Having been raised from their graves, everybody will be gathered on a vast plain. This is where the questioning and accounting will take place, after which some will be sent to Heaven and others to Hell, to abide therein forever.

# FURŪ<sup>c</sup> AL-DĪN (Branches of Religion)

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As mentioned earlier, Shī<sup>c</sup>ahs have ten branches of faith (Furū<sup>c</sup>), which constitute the key facets of worship, building upon the foundations of the Usūl. The Furū<sup>c</sup> include, among other items, prayers, fasting, and the Pilgrimage. Each will be briefly discussed below.

## ṢALĀT – PRAYERS

Ṣalāt is the first branch of faith. It refers to various prayers said by Muslims on various occasions. The most important of these prayers are the five daily prayers. Muslims pray once before sunrise, twice between noon and sunset, and twice between sunset and midnight in order to thank God for His many blessings and ask Him for guidance and forgiveness. Prayers consist of certain recitations in <sup>c</sup>Arabic and certain postures and positions. All Muslims around the world face the Holy Ka<sup>c</sup>ba when they pray. Each prayer takes only a few minutes to complete, and Muslims pray to God every day throughout their lives, whether at home or work or on vacation far away.

### *The Ka<sup>c</sup>ba*



The Ka<sup>c</sup>ba

The Ka'ba is the most important religious building and shrine in Islām. It is revered by Muslims from all over the world, and is located in Mecca, the town where the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was born. Upon receiving a commandment from God, the Ka'ba was built by Abraham and Ishmael, both Prophets of God. The Ka'ba and its precincts are God's sanctuary, where any person can go and will not be harmed. The Ka'ba is also the place Muslims go to when they perform the Holy Pilgrimage, the Hajj.

The Ka'ba is a very simple structure. It is a small cube made of bricks, less than the size of a small house. There is one door, no windows, and no decorations inside. Unlike the beautifully decorated mosques (places of worship for Muslims), churches, synagogues, temples, and other religious buildings of worship, the Ka'ba's design is simplicity itself. This is because the purpose of the Ka'ba is to unite the Muslims at various points in their lives. Although it is called the House of God, the Ka'ba (through its simple design and form) actually serves to focus people's devotional energies towards the Supreme Being, rather than towards itself.

Muslims face the Ka'ba at other times of their lives as well. There are numerous supplications that are recited facing the Ka'ba. As a sign of respect, when Muslims go to the bathroom, they make sure not to have their front or back facing the Ka'ba. If a Muslim becomes ill, the body is positioned towards Ka'ba, if possible. Finally, after a Muslim dies and is buried, the body is turned and positioned in such a way that the face is towards the Ka'ba.

## **SAWM – FASTING**

The Qur'ān instructs Muslims to fast during the holy month of Ramaḍān, one of the twelve months of the year. Within this holy month, the first and the last verses of the Qur'ān were revealed. Muslims fast from dawn to sunset every day. Fasting is both a physical and spiritual act. During the day, Muslims abstain from food, drink, sex, and other forms of material pleasure. Instead they focus their time on remembering God, reciting from the Qur'ān, doing good deeds, and disciplining themselves. The act of fasting is much more than mere dieting; there are very strong mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions to fasting that are far more challenging than mere abstinence from food and drink. After sunset Muslims are allowed to eat and drink. Upon completion of the month of Ramaḍān there is a great day of celebration and festivities, called 'Eīd al-Fitr.

The month of fasting serves to train and strengthen Muslims in all aspects of thought and behaviour, and these lessons are carried on for the rest of the year. Muslims strive to remember all those who are struggling against

poverty and oppression. Muslims also take special care during this month, over and above the usual almsgiving, to remember the poor and less fortunate members of society. Throughout the year, and particularly in this exalted month, Muslims are expected to share the blessings that God has showered upon them. Ramaḍān is also a great month of mercy and forgiveness, wherein Muslims are encouraged to remember their Lord and atone for their sins.

## **HAJJ – PILGRIMAGE**

Through the Holy Prophet (PBUH), God has commanded all Muslims who are physically and financially capable to perform the Pilgrimage at least once in their adult lifetime. However, all Muslims are encouraged to perform the Hajj every year. The pilgrimage is a spiritual and historical journey to the two holiest places in Islām, the cities of Mecca and Medina, both in Saudi Arabia. Over one million Muslims perform the Hajj during the last month of the calendar, Dhu al-Hijjah. Pilgrims visit the Holy Kacba and other sacred sites, reciting various prayers, performing various rituals, and remembering God. As a minimum, all Muslims who are physically and financially capable must perform the Pilgrimage at least once in their adult lives.

Both fasting and the Pilgrimage occur during two reserved months of the Islāmic year. The Muslim calendar is a lunar calendar; each month is 29 or 30 days long, depending on when the new moon is sighted. This makes the Islāmic year approximately ten to eleven days shorter than the solar (Gregorian-Julian) calendar that is used in most countries today.

## **ZAKĀT – WEALTH TAX**

Islām is a religion that addresses more than physical, mental, and spiritual needs of the individual. It is a social religion that promotes social justice and equity. To assist in fulfilling these goals, Muslims are required to pay two special taxes, the first of which is Zakāt. Zakāt is a levy on wealth, and is calculated on an annual basis. 2.5% of the value of certain classes of assets are to be paid per year. These asset classes fall into several categories, namely precious metals (gold and silver), livestock, and produce. The money is then used to alleviate poverty and improve the general condition through improvements in infrastructure (e.g. building roads, bridges, and hospitals).



# KHUMS – INCOME TAX

The second of two special taxes that Muslims pay is Khums. This tax is closest to modern-day income tax, and twenty percent of net savings per year is payable. Exemptions of amounts from the Khums calculation are made for the necessities of life, like food, clothing, shelter, and education. Monies from Zakāt and Khums are used to further Islām’s goals of establishing a social system of wealth redistribution to prevent economic polarization of the population.

All financial assets, resources, and monetary goods belong to God; human beings are only temporary custodians and/or consumers. God chooses to give different amounts of wealth to different people, but all will be tested based on how they use their wealth. Along with Zakāt and Khums, all Muslims are strongly encouraged to donate to charity. In numerous passages throughout the Qur’ān, God extols Muslims to the virtues of prayer and almsgiving. For example, in Chapter 2, Verse 277, the Qur’ān states, *“Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness, and establish regular prayers and regular charity, will have their reward with their Lord, and they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.”*

## JIHĀD

Islām is a religion of peace; even its °Arabic root can be traced back to the word “peace”. It then becomes difficult for non-Muslims to understand why there are so many conflicts involving Muslims. The issue becomes much clearer when one looks deeper at Islām and human rights.

Jihād is often incorrectly translated as “Holy War”. However, this is a misnomer; the terrible tragedies and sufferings that war brings can never be holy. Jihād, the sixth branch, literally means “to struggle”. Muslims do not believe in forcing others to convert at the point of a sword. Islām teaches us to live with non-Muslims in peaceful co-existence. As long as Muslims are allowed to practice their religion in peace, Islām does not allow Muslims to engage in combat. However, if and when a group of people, be they Muslims or non-Muslims, become oppressed, it is the duty of Muslims to rise up and struggle against the oppression. Hence the application of the word Jihād.

In order to ensure that human rights are not violated, Muslims can and must rise up against oppression in any and every form. If there is no oppression, then Muslims can live in peace with their neighbours. In fact, even during the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), Muslims lived in tranquillity with Christians, Jews, and some of the idol-worshipping Arab tribes. The

Holy Prophet (PBUH) never began a battle or war; he only fought when attacked or oppressed by those who wanted to destroy the religion. It was always an act of defence.

One of the most shining examples of this struggle against oppression and ignorance was led by the grandson of the Holy Prophet, Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī (PBUH). This event is known as the tragedy of Kerbala.

### ***The Tragedy of Kerbalā (Karbālā)***

In Islām, the first month of the lunar calendar is called Muharram. Every year, Shīʿahs around the world gather together in their respective centres to commemorate the tragedy of Kerbalā. Over 13 centuries ago, the grandson of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and several family members and companions were martyred on the burning plains of Kerbalā, Iraq. After the death of Ḥasan son of ʿAlī (PBUH), the second Imām and grandson of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), the Imāmat was bestowed upon his brother Ḥusayn (PBUH).



Mausoleum of Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) in Kerbala, Iraq

At the time, a man by the name of Mu<sup>o</sup>āwiyah was the Governor of Damascus. Upon his death, his son Yazīd took over the Governorship. Over the years, Yazīd and his father had corrupted the true message of Islām. Therefore, when asked, Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) refused to pledge his allegiance to Yazīd. Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) could not and would not pledge his allegiance and give legitimacy to the oppressive and corrupt regime of Yazīd. In order to avoid conflict, Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) left Medina, the burial city of his grandfather, and went to Mecca. When in Mecca, he found out that Yazīd had sent assassins to murder him. He did not want to desecrate the sanctity of the Ka<sup>o</sup>ba, so he left Mecca with the women and children of his family.

The caravan headed towards Kūfa, Iraq. Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) sent his cousin Muslim, son of <sup>o</sup>Aqīl, as his ambassador to Kūfa, but upon arrival, he was martyred. Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) and his caravan were stopped by Yazīd's forces and therefore camped near the River Euphrates, at Kerbalā. On the 7th night of MuHarram, 61 A.H, all supplies, including water, were cut off for Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH), his family and companions. For three nights the camp of Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) endured the harshness of the unforgiving desert and their cruel enemies, without food and water.

On the 10th of Muharram, the day of <sup>o</sup>Āshura, the forces of Yazīd attacked the camp of Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH). The battle fought on this fateful day was no ordinary battle. It was a battle of truth against falsehood. Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) and his companions fought valiantly. Yazīd's army consisted of thousands while Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) only had a handful of male companions. Before sunset, Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) and 72 of his companions were martyred. The enemies did not even spare Imām Ḥusayn's (PBUH) six month old son!

The enemies then looted the camps of Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH), burnt their tents and took the ladies and children as captives, forcing them to march for several days through the desert to Yazīd's court. History bears witness that although Yazīd won that battle, it was Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) who ultimately emerged victorious. After all, it is Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) and not Yazīd, who is remembered every year, in every corner of the world. Soon after these innocent victims were slaughtered, the flames of truth began to burn within the previously suppressed Muslim world. The forces of truth were galvanized into action, and Yazīd's dominion was eventually crushed.

Had it not been for Imām Ḥusayn’s (PBUH) supreme sacrifice, the true message of Islām would have been destroyed by Yazīd. Edward Gibbon writes in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,

“In the history of Islam, specially the life of Imam Husain stands unique, unapproached and unapproachable by anyone. Without his martyrdom, Islam would have extinguished long ago. He was the savior of Islam and it was due to his martyrdom that Islam took such a deep root, which is neither possible nor even imaginable to destroy now.” He also writes, “In a distant age and climate, the tragic scene of the death of Husain will awaken the sympathy of the coldest reader.”



Artistic rendition of the camp of Imām Ḥusayn (PBUH) immediately after his death

This, then, is the essence of Jihād.

## AMR BIL MAʿRŪF – ENJOYING THE GOOD

Amr bil Maʿrūf refers to the act of enjoining the good. Muslims are expected to encourage one another to do good deeds. This fundamental branch is one of the guiding forces for Muslims in their interactions with both Muslims and non-Muslims. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) is the inspiration for all Muslims in this respect, and in all other aspects of Islām. His life was a shining example of how one performs Amr bil Maʿrūf. He began by doing good, establishing himself as an honest, kind, and just person. He then guided others to the right path through word and deed. All Muslims strive to follow his example.

# NAHYI ʿANIL MUNKAR – FORBIDDING THE EVIL

The other side of the coin of Amr bil Maʿrūf is Nahyi ʿanil Munkar. Not only are Muslims expected to do good and enjoin the good, but they are expected to forbid the evil. Muslims are commanded to follow the tenets of Islām and reject all forms of evil and vice. By forbidding the evil, a Muslim does not commit any acts of evil him/herself and helps other people to avoid succumbing to the temptation to do evil deeds.

These two branches are key principles to help remind a Muslim of his/her responsibilities towards fellow human beings. Muslims can enjoin the good and forbid the evil in many ways. First, one can speak out, encouraging good deeds and criticizing bad deeds. Second, one can use the pen (or the computer) to communicate in writing. Finally, one may need to resort to physical means in order to stop oppression and establish peace. Because Islām is a social religion, its followers are expected not only to follow God's laws but to help others to come to the right path. This is done through Amr bil Maʿrūf and Nahyi ʿanil Munkar.

# **TAWALLA** **(ASSOCIATING WITH FRIENDS OF AHL AL-BAYT) AND** **TABARRA** **(DISASSOCIATING WITH ENEMIES OF AHL AL-BAYT)**

The Holy Prophet (PBUH) dedicated his life to worshipping God and spreading Islām. He left behind a legacy of change that is unparalleled by any other human being in the history of humanity. He also left behind a devout and wondrous family, the Ahl al-Bayt. In the Qur’ān, God says of the Ahl al-Bayt, *“Verily God intends to keep from you (every kind of) uncleanness, O’ you the People of the Household, and purify you (with) a thorough purification”* (33:33). The Ahl al-Bayt include the Lady of Light, Fātimah al-Zahrā, daughter of the Holy Prophet and the Twelve Imams (PBUT) mentioned earlier, each of whom is a shining light and an inspiration to all.

The last two branches, Tawalla and Tabarra, deal with the relationship Muslims have with those who are friends and enemies of the Ahl al-Bayt respectively. Because each of the glorious individuals who comprise the Ahl al-Bayt are pious and saintly individuals, Shī’ahs ally themselves with those who love the Ahl al-Bayt and follow their example. Conversely, Shī’ahs disassociate themselves from those who are the enemies of the Ahl al-Bayt through words and actions. However, the principle of Tabarra does not, in and of itself, equate to violent opposition to the enemies of the Ahl al-Bayt.

# OTHER TOPICS

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Along with the Usūl and the Furūq, there are a number of other important beliefs and practices in Islām. Many of these echo the teachings of Christianity and Judaism, and are accepted by all Muslims. Some of these are discussed below.

## THE ANGELS

Muslims believe in many angels, and the Qurʾān attests to their existence. They are creatures of God, having been created by Him to serve Him in various capacities. There are an untold number of angels who exist in Heaven and frequent the Earth for various reasons. Among them are also four Archangels, named Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Azrael. Each of these has a special purpose and special duties given to him by God. Gabriel was the first angel to meet the Holy Prophet (PBUH), and Gabriel was often the intermediary through whom God sent verses of the Qurʾān to the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Azrael is often referred to as the Angel of Death, for it is said that he comes to remove the soul from the body at the time of death. Michael and Raphael also have special roles and responsibilities, but interacted less often with the Holy Prophet (PBUH) during his lifetime.

## ISLĀM AND HUMANITY

Muslims believe that God has created human beings as one of His blessings and mercies. Human beings are the ultimate creation and the most perfect of creatures. Humans are the main creation that is capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, good and evil, and possess both reasoning and vices. Animals are also creatures of God, as are the angels, but neither is like the human being. Animals are given the basic vices and animal instincts but do not possess higher reasoning. Angels are gifted with reasoning powers, but are not subject to the temptations of human beings. Only we have both and face the continuous struggle between good and evil; we can rise above the angels by conquering our vices, or fall below the animals by succumbing to our lusts.

# ISLĀM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

As a natural extension of the human being's wondrous state at the peak of nature, God requires human beings to behave in a certain manner with one another. Every human being is privileged to have certain inalienable rights; these rights were gifted to people through the religion of Islām over fourteen centuries ago.

Each person has a fundamental right to pursue his or her destiny. Every person is entitled to live in peace and harmony with every other person. Islām does not believe in forcing people to accept the religion at the point of a sword or a gun. The Qur'ān itself attests to this: "There is no compulsion in religion; truly the right has been made manifestly clear from the wrong ..." (2:256).

Ever since the advent of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), Muslims have coexisted in peace with their neighbours, be they Christians, Jews, Hindus, atheists, or pagans. For centuries, mosques have stood next to churches, synagogues, and temples. Islām only asks that Muslims be allowed to live in peace to pursue their dreams and aspirations of becoming closer to God. In turn, Muslims are forbidden to oppress, torture, harass, or harm other human beings. Muslims resort to physical force only in self-defence and in the pursuit of justice. All serious crimes that are perpetrated by one human being against another (e.g. lying, stealing, rape, murder) are expressly forbidden. This is true regardless of the other person's belief; all human beings are expected to be treated with equal respect by a Muslim.

Muslims also believe that God does not distinguish between His creatures on the basis of intelligence, wealth, position, status, colour, or gender. Rather, the only quality that puts one person above another in the eyes of God is his/her piety.



# ISLĀM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

As previously stated, there is no difference in God's eyes between a man and a woman. However, one of the most misunderstood aspects of Islām is its position about women's rights.

Men and women are created equal. This is a simple yet profound truth in Islām. Islām was the first religion to recognize women as equal contributors to society. Historically, Muslims do not believe that Eve tempted Adam; both were tempted by Satan. Since the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), learning knowledge has been emphasized as much for women as for men. Men and women both play critical roles in society; however, a key point here is that Muslims believe that men and women have different roles and responsibilities. Men are created as breadwinners; their major role is to provide for the protection and comfort of the family. Conversely, women are the nurturers and are given the authority to raise the family. Islām does not see one sex as superior to another. Instead, their roles are complementary and necessary for the smooth functioning of family and society.

Several critics who do not understand Islām have therefore unfairly criticized Islām's achievements and accused it of oppressing women. Many of these critics have mistakenly equated local cultures and traditions to Islāmic teachings. This is unfortunately due to a lack of understanding about Islām. Of interest, modern society has dealt vicious blows to the importance of women as human beings by denigrating them to the status of sex objects, not recognizing the important roles women play as the backbone of the family and the society. The institution of marriage is now seen as an anachronism. Women are expected to have careers outside the home and bear the brunt of childrearing. Yet this same society has produced individuals.

Islām allows women the right to own property. Women are allowed to choose whom they wish to marry, and a fair dowry is their right. Women are allowed to fight for their rights in a court of law. Women can vote. (Of interest, women in the West were only given the right to vote in the 20th century, many centuries after Islām.) A woman can also demand payment from her husband for raising children. Overnight Islām abolished the barbaric ritual of burying alive infant daughters, a heinous act practised by the Arabs before the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). All of this happened many centuries before modern countries recognized women's rights. Islām made it incumbent upon both men and women to educate themselves. God judges men and women not on the basis of sex but by the good and evil deeds they perform.

# HIJĀB (MODESTY OF DRESS AND BEHAVIOUR)

One of the most visible signs of Muslims in countries like Canada is the presence of Muslim women wearing head scarves. These scarves are part of an Islāmic dress code that is within the field of Ḥijāb. Ḥijāb refers to a standard of dress and behaviour that is expected of all Muslim men and women in order to promote values of modesty and decency. The rules of Ḥijāb come from the Qur'ān and the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and his holy family. It is important to remember that the rules of Ḥijāb apply to both men and women who have reached the age of majority or maturity. Ḥijāb can be divided into three broad categories - Ḥijāb of the eyes, Ḥijāb of the body, and Ḥijāb of the mind.

Men and women who are not related to one another by blood or marriage are expected to avoid or minimize direct eye to eye contact, in order to maintain dignity and respect for the opposite sex. Islām, being a religion that was revealed in order to benefit society, believes strongly in preventing any form of sexual or sensual impropriety. Lust begins with the eyes, and therefore there is Ḥijāb of the eyes for both men and women.

In order to decrease physical attractiveness of men and women towards one another, Islām has also established Ḥijāb of the body. Men are required to cover their private parts and highly recommended to cover their bodies from neck to feet, including the arms. Women, being the sex that physically attracts the other sex more, are expected to cover themselves from head to foot, only allowing the face and hands to show.

The most important aspect of Ḥijāb involves the mind. Men and women are reminded to think, act, and behave with one another in a morally and spiritually upright manner, avoiding those things that might lead to sin and temptation. This is the most challenging aspect of Ḥijāb, but one that is often forgotten as non-Muslims focus on Ḥijāb of the body. It should be emphasized that the rules of Ḥijāb do not preclude men and women interacting with one another at all; rather, they are expected to restrict themselves to useful interactions that further the goals of religion and society. In order to maintain the boundaries of modesty, men and women who are unrelated by blood or marriage will not shake hands or have any physical contact with one another. Frivolous and petty meetings between men and women are seen as leading only to temptation and sin, and should therefore be avoided by practising Muslims.

# MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

The institution of marriage is holy and cherished by all Muslims. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) highly encouraged all young men and women to seek out partners, marry them, and establish families. Marriage is seen as a bond of love and devotion that brings together a man and a woman in order to support and nurture one another. In order to create harmony within family and society, Muslims are expected to marry other Muslims. This does not mean that Muslims cannot marry outside Islām; rather, non-Muslims should become Muslims prior to marriage.

As mentioned earlier, a Muslim man must offer a mutually agreeable dowry to a woman before they can be married. This dowry is the wife's property, to expend as she pleases. The wedding ceremony is a simple ritual, reflecting the pure and simple spiritual goals of marriage. All else is cultural.

One area that is often mentioned but usually misunderstood is that of polygamy. Islām allows a man to marry up to four wives, provided he can support each of them in a fair manner and treat each woman equally. The historical and social circumstances behind this concept are beyond the scope of this publication. Suffice it to say that throughout history, few Muslim men have married more than one woman. Along with the key elements of equal treatment and affection, the importance of maintaining the cohesiveness of the family was, and is, always emphasized.

For those troubled marriages that cannot be reconciled, Islām allows either men or women to seek divorce. Divorce is seen as the last step, after all reasonable attempts have been made to find alternative solutions. Regardless of custody, fathers are expected to provide for any children. Rates of divorce in Muslim marriages are far lower than that of industrialized nations, but Islām does not make divorce nearly as difficult to obtain as Catholicism. As in most things, Islām seeks a path of moderation.

# ISLĀM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Our unique position as the most perfect creation necessitates a special relationship with the rest of God's creation. Muslims believe God has placed a sacred trust upon us such that we are the guardians of this earthly paradise. There are numerous examples from the life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) about his kind treatment of all living things. God has taught us not to waste any of the precious resources we have been gifted, nor should any person hoard valuables to the exclusion of the rest of society. Because animals and plants do not have the powers of reasoning, their very actions are considered to be acts of worship of God, fulfilling His plans for them. Hence Muslims are expected to be very careful of their duties towards nature, taking care only to use what is necessary and disrupt the natural surroundings as minimally as possible. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) has even taught us special prayers to ask God to forgive us for slaughtering animals to use as food.

# ISLĀM AND SCIENCE

In this modern era, it is difficult for many people to accept the miracles of science and technology as well as the miracles of religion. Furthermore, many religions do not promote science. Islām, on the other hand, has always encouraged Muslims to learn about the physical world around them. As mentioned earlier, the first verse of the Qur'ān that was revealed commanded Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) to read. Moreover, seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim man and woman, from cradle to grave.

Many of the greatest scientists, astronomers, mathematicians, and physicians have been Muslims. During the time Europe was plunged into the Dark Ages, Muslim scientists were flourishing. Their achievements helped facilitate the Renaissance of the West. Famous Muslim philosophers include Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes), both of whose works are extensively studied even today. Ibn Sina was also an accomplished physician; his book *Canons of Medicine* was a standard medical text for 800 years. Muslims introduced the concept of the number zero to mathematics, and algebra was developed by a Muslim mathematician and philosopher, Al-Khawarizmi, whose book included the term "Al-Jabr". Al-Tusi published a proof of Pascal's Triangle (the Binomial Theorem) hundreds of years before Pascal himself was born. Ibn Al-Haytham wrote a seminal textbook on the eye and optics, which was a standard medical reference for several centuries in both the East and the West, and was a foundation stone for Sir Isaac Newton's theories.

Another one of the influential Muslim physicians was Al-Rāzi (Rhazes) whose extensive medical textbook, *Al-Hāwi* (*The Comprehensive Book*) was one of the most detailed tomes ever written by a medical scientist.

Not only did Islām contribute to Western Art and Science, it enriched the English language itself with hundreds of new words. Some examples include sugar, alcohol, alkali, alchemy, and qadhi.

The Qur'ān itself mentions many scientific miracles, including the embryological development of the human foetus, the concept of the Solar System, and the water cycle. Clearly Islām and Science are quite harmonious.



Muslim astronomers at work in an observatory, from an Ottoman manuscript

# CONCLUSION

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It is hoped that this booklet has provided the reader with an introduction to Islām in general, and to Shī'ism in particular. Islām is a powerful and growing religion, with believers scattered around the world. Through the revelation of the Qur'ān and the teachings of the Holy Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) and his Ahl al-Bayt, Islām teaches Muslims to live a simple life in this world. Through the love of God and our fellow human beings, we hope to create a world of peace and order in this life and earn the right to enter Heaven in the Hereafter. The pure and simple message of Islām unfortunately is often misunderstood or distorted in today's world, and we hope that this book presents a true picture of Islām and Shī'ism.



# APPENDIX:

## The ʿArabic Alphabet & Pronunciation

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ʿArabic is written from right to left. The script is cursive and there is no separate printed form of the letters as there is in European languages.

The alphabet consists of 28 letters, all of which are consonants. Three of them however, are also used as long vowels and diphthongs. The letters are all pronounced as in the English equivalent, except the following:

1. The long vowels represented by *Ā* and *ā* are pronounced as the *a* in *far*
2. The letters *Th* and *th* are pronounced as the *th* in *think*
3. The letters *H* and *h* are pronounced as a strong guttural *h*
4. The letters *Kh* and *kh* are pronounced as the guttural *ch* in the Scottish *loch*
5. The letters *Dh* and *dh* are pronounced as the *th* in *this*
6. The pairs (*Ṣ, ṣ*), (*Ḍ, ḍ*), (*Ṭ, ṭ*) and (*Ẓ, ẓ*) are pronounced with an emphatic sound as in the respective English equivalents. In pronouncing these letters, the tongue is pressed against the edge of the upper teeth, and then withdrawn forcefully
7. The letter ʿ is pronounced as a strong guttural sound produced by the compression of the throat and expulsion of breath
8. The letters *Gh* and *gh* are pronounced as the sound made in gargling
9. The letters *Q* and *q* are pronounced with an emphatic sound corresponding to the letter *k*; this sound is produced from the back of the throat



1. The long vowels represented by Ū and ū are pronounced as the *u* in *June*; the diphthong au (aw) is pronounced approximately as the *ow* in *low*
2. The long vowels represented by Ī and ī are pronounced as the *ee* in *been*; the diphthong ay (ai) is pronounced approximately as the *ay* in *lay*

Note that the above is simply a practical approximation of the pronunciation. The correct pronunciations of the letters are best learned from one who is familiar with its phonology.

Adapted from: *A new Arabic grammar* of the written language by J. Haywood & H. Nahmad

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