

CHAPTER 25

The Teachings of Islam

Muslims believe that God's revelation to man came in four great stages. First, through Abraham, God revealed His Oneness; second, through Moses, He revealed the Ten Commandments; third, through Jesus, He revealed the commandment that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves; and fourth, through Muhammad, He revealed how to put this into practice, both in private and in social life. Islam teaches one to walk the straight path, a path that is neither crooked nor corrupt. This way of life encompasses the moral, social, economic and political realms, and Islam clearly explains how a person or society should be ordered in each of these areas.

The Koran

Muslims believe that a person's life ultimately can be fulfilled only through his relationship of service to God. In fact, man is created to be *abd*, meaning "worshiper" and "servant" of God. However, how can we know how God wants us to live? Since God is just, He has a duty to reveal His will and give a code of conduct by which we should live.

God has revealed this through His prophets many times. The problem was that the God-given principles of social ethics and morality, called by Muslims the *Shari'ah*, were ignored and forgotten as people departed from the path of truth. But God does not force people to live in His way, because of the freedom and responsibility that He has given them. Instead, He has appointed virtuous men to be prophets. Muslims believe there were at least 124,000 prophets who came to show people the right way of life by their own personal example.

Of these thousands of prophets, five enjoy a special status: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and finally Muhammad, who came as "the seal of prophets." Each of these prophets was given a complete revelation of the book of the knowledge of God. However, Muslims believe that these books and teachings were not preserved properly. Abraham's was lost altogether, and the revelations that Moses and Jesus received were written down



many years after their deaths. Still, Muslims respect the scriptures of both Jews and Christians.

We believe in Allah and what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and his children, and what was given to Moses and Jesus, and what was given to all other Prophets from their Lord. We make no difference between any of them; and to Him we submit ourselves.

— Surah 2:136

In the Koran, God revealed through Muhammad the same revelation that he had given before.

Nothing is said to you that was not said to the messengers before you.

— Surah 41:43

Muhammad made sure that all the revelations he received were committed to memory, written down, put in order and checked during his lifetime. They were arranged into 114 surahs, or chapters, and this is the form in which the Koran exists today. Thus, for Muslims, its authority is final, and every word is holy and unchangeable. Muslims believe that the Koran is the final and most perfect of God's revelations. However, according to the Koran, all these revelations of The Book are still only a limited manifestation of the unlimited knowledge of God.

And if all the trees that are in the earth were pens, and the ocean were ink, with seven oceans added to them, the words of God would not be exhausted.

— Surah 31:27

According to biblical history, there have been several covenants between God and man. These covenants, as we saw when studying Judaism, are binding agreements between God and man. The metaphors used to describe this relationship, such as parent and child or husband and wife, stress how intimate this bond is. According to the Bible, God made covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, King David and Jesus. According to the Koran, its revelation is a new covenant which completes the previous ones.

Hadith

Hadith, often referred to as "traditions," are the recorded words, actions and instructions of the Prophet Muhammad. After Muhammad died, many collections of his sayings and deeds appeared. These are held in great respect but are quite separate from the Koran.

Shari'ah

Shari'ah is the code of behavior for a Muslim, the law that determines the rightness or wrongness of any action. It provides a criterion for judging all behavior and conduct, the relationships between people, with society and with one's own self.

The moment a Muslim opens his eyes and becomes conscious of God, the most important questions become "What shall I do now? How shall I live?" Being aware of God alters a Muslim's entire motivation for doing things, and stops him from doing many things that would give a great deal of selfish pleasure.

Muslims believe that many societies have made many attempts to establish justice without making laws dependent

This is my straight path, so follow it, and do not follow any other paths which will separate you from this path.

— Surah 6:153

God does not accept belief if it is not expressed in deeds; and He does not accept your deeds unless they conform to your beliefs.

— Hadith



on God's will. Without God's help, none of these attempts have worked. While it is important that individuals live righteously, true justice will never come about until the whole society follows the will of God. Individuals and the society must together find the Shari'ah, meaning "the path," and follow it.

To follow

Shari'ah means to live a morally responsible life. If everyone lives this way, recognizing all people as one family, aware of their rights and defending them, grieving when they get hurt, being determined to bring about their good and not their harm, then they have already started to live according to the Shari'ah.

The basis of Shari'ah is wisdom, and the welfare of people in this world as well as the Hereafter. This welfare lies in complete justice, mercy, care and wisdom. Anything that departs from justice to oppression, from mercy to harshness, from caring to misery, and from wisdom to folly, has nothing to do with the Shari'ah.

— Ibn Qayyim
Muslim educator

It is important to note that even though religious practice is emphasized, spirituality is connected to the physical realities of everyday life. External acts of worship depend on the believer's internal intention, and so the goal is to preserve harmony and wholeness between the inner and outer aspects of life. In other words, not only is it the duty of Muslims to be mindful of God at all times, but every word they utter and every action they perform should also reflect that primal communion with God. Every action of a Muslim should be an indication of his obedience to God's will and should be offered so as to bring pleasure to God.

Rules of behavior

The Koran is the basis of the Shari'ah and is supplemented by the teaching and example of Muhammad. In applying the Shari'ah to the modern world, Muslims use their reason and judgment to decide on a course of action most in keeping with the spirit of the Koran and Hadith. In making a decision the following are taken into consideration:

- ✗ the opinions of respected people
- ✗ previous decisions and precedents
- ✗ justice and concern for the public good
- ✗ the acceptance of the masses

From this, five categories of behavior have been developed:

- ✗ **fard** — things that must be done, such as prayer
- ✗ **haram** — things that must never be done, such as drinking alcohol

- × **mandub** — recommended actions, such as unselfish hospitality
- × **makruh** — actions not forbidden, but disapproved of, such as divorce
- × **mubah** — actions to be decided by conscience because there is no clear guidance, such as smoking



Like other religions, Islam teaches that everyone is responsible for his own spiritual life.

Whoever commits a sin commits it only against his own soul.

— Surah 4:111

Whoever goes astray, he himself bears the whole responsibility of wandering.

— Surah 10:108

How a person lives his life on the earth will decide his fate in the world of the life after death. According to this accounting, a soul may be sent either to heaven or hell. The Koran gives a graphic and vivid description of these two states. Heaven abounds in deep rivers of cool, crystal water, lush fruit and vegetation, boundless fertility, and beautiful mansions with gracious attendants. Hell, on the other hand, is described as a place with molten metal, boiling liquids, and fire that splits everything into pieces. Whereas some understand these descriptions to be literal, other scholars regard them as metaphors.

Since a person is responsible for his own life, he has been given freedom by his Creator. Thus a person's religious devotion too must be rooted in his freedom of choice. This is why the Koran says,

“There should be no compulsion in religion.”

— Surah 2:256

A Muslim is one who of his own free will has chosen to submit to God. However, in submitting to God, all slavery to other things is broken — a person is no longer the servant of any other person, ideology or institution. When he submits to God, a person becomes God's khalifa, or vice regent on earth.

Jihad

Jihad means “striving” and applies to any sort of activity made by a person because of love of Allah. For most Muslims, it refers to the deliberate effort to serve Allah to the best of one's ability through a life of devotion, self-sacrifice, and love and compassion for others. It is this struggle against one's personal desires that Muhammad called the “great jihad.”

The word is also used when speaking about a military situation in which Muslims are called upon to fight for the honor or preservation of their faith. Jihad does not mean forcing other people to accept Islamic beliefs, but striving to bring about a society in which Muslims are free to obey Allah's laws, leaving others to worship or not as they wish.

Usually, when people feel oppressed or are aware that tyranny is spoiling the life of a community, they hope that if they point out the injustices, then the conscience of the rulers will cause them to put things right.

The most excellent jihad is to speak the truth in the face of a tyrannical ruler.

— Hadith

Sometimes, however, rulers do not respond, and it becomes necessary to make a decision about what to do next. If an individual, group or government tries to impose rules that are unacceptable to the will of Allah, they should be resisted, by force if necessary.

Muslims believe that war can be justified in such circumstances, but the purpose of war is to establish a just peace. Once an enemy is defeated, the principle of mercy should be applied immediately and all hostilities should cease. Wounded enemy soldiers are to be given exactly the same treatment as wounded members of one's own forces, and the women and children of the enemy should never be molested or harmed. Muhammad said, "Hate your enemy mildly; he may become your friend one day." (Hadith)

Equality of mankind

Muslims believe that God created a single pair of human beings and that all people living today are descended from this couple. For some time, everyone had the same religion and spoke the same language. However, as people spread out across the world, they grew apart in customs and language and divided into different tribes. Their physical features changed to suit the different climates. However, these differences led to prejudices based on race, color, nationality and language.

Islam declares that since all have sprung from the same parents, all men are brothers and equal in their status as human beings. The differences among people that Islam considers important are those of belief and moral conduct. If two children of the same mother have different beliefs and moral values, they will have different ways of life. On the other hand, two people from opposite ends of the earth will tread the same path in life if they have the same beliefs and moral behavior. Islam seeks to build a community of people based not on nationality, race or color but on shared beliefs and moral principles. So within Islam there are no racial, national or class distinctions. This is why Muhammad strongly criticized nationalism.

Whoever proclaims the cause of nationalism is not one of us; and whoever dies in the cause of nationalism is not one of us. Nationalism means helping your people in unjust causes.

— Hadith

The House of Islam

A Muslim is expected to worship God for his whole life. For this reason eating, drinking and marriage all come within the scope of worship if a Muslim performs them with the right attitude. This is why Muslims refer to the "House of Islam." Just as you live much of your life in your house, so Muslims can live their whole lives in the House of Islam.

Essentially, every Muslim should live with God, not merely when he prays, but all the time, during every activity in which he engages.

And when you have finished the Prayer, remember Allah while standing, and sitting, and lying on your sides.

— Surah 4:103

The foundation of the House of Islam is the Koran. In the Middle East, every house was supported by pillars. The support of the House of Islam is the Five Pillars of confession of faith, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage. The Five Pillars are the principles that regulate the private life of a Muslim and clearly explain what is expected of him in his submission to God. All houses also need a roof, and for the House of Islam the roof is the Holy Law, the Shari'ah.

The Five Pillars of Islam

1. The confession of faith

Every religion contains convictions that orient its adherents' lives in some way. The creed of Islam, the shahadah, is,

La ilaha illal Lahu. Muhammadur rasulullah.

There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.



This sums up all one has to believe to be a Muslim. When spoken in Arabic and with sincere intention, these words represent a commitment to obey God and follow the Prophet. These are the first words whispered into a child's ear at birth, and the last that a Muslim utters with his dying breath. Although a practicing Muslim repeats this phrase many times a day, at least once during his lifetime he should say this creed correctly, thoughtfully, aloud, with full understanding and with heartfelt conviction in its truth.

2. Salah

The Koran defines a human being as a worshiper, and places the individual worshiper in the context of a worshiping community. Thus, prayer and worship are communal acts as well as acts of individual commitment.

Through prayer man is reminded that he is not God. He is a created being rather than the Creator. When people forget this, they try to place themselves at the center of the universe. When this happens and a person tries to play God, everything goes wrong. Man is a created being, and his life slips into place and stays in proper perspective only when he recognizes this fact. A Muslim prays partly in response to the natural yearning of the human heart to pour forth its love and gratitude toward its Creator, and partly to keep his life in its proper perspective and to submit himself to the will of God, his rightful sovereign.

Salah is the name given to the prayer that Muslims do five times a day. After ritual washing, Muslims gather together in rows as a community, prostrate themselves before God and pray facing Mecca. The realization that his brothers and sisters are doing likewise in every corner of the globe creates a sense of participating in a worldwide fellowship, even when a Muslim is physically isolated.

Prayer purifies the heart and brings about spiritual and moral growth. It draws people closer to God; brings a sense of peace and tranquillity; encourages equality, unity and brotherhood; develops gratitude and humility; demonstrates obedience; trains in cleanliness, purity and punctuality; develops discipline and willpower; draws the mind away from personal worries; calms passions and allows the mastery of the baser instincts.

The prayer consists of: praise of God, gratitude to Him for all His goodness, supplication, and asking God for guidance and forgiveness.

3. Zakah

Islam teaches that wealth is something given by God for the benefit of humanity and therefore is something to be shared. In Arabic Zakah means “purification,” and it is possible that one of the ideas behind Zakah is that wealth can be an evil thing and can separate a believer from God. The aim of paying Zakah is to keep one’s attitude toward wealth free of greed and selfishness. It is intended to cleanse the heart of the love of money and the desire to cling to it.

Material things are important in life, but some people have more than others. Islam is not concerned with the reason for this, but only with what should be done about the situation. The answer is simple. Those who have much should help lift the burden of those who are less fortunate. In the seventh century, Muhammad instituted Zakah by prescribing an annual tax. This money must be used to provide for orphans, widows, the poor, the homeless and strangers, and for religious purposes such as building a mosque or supporting a Muslim school.

The Koran is more concerned about the quality of the giving than the quantity. The attitude of the giver is in fact more important than what he gives. Giving should be discreet and not arrogant. For this reason, Zakah is usually paid in secret so that rich people receive no false praise or admiration, since they are doing no more than their duty, and poor people are not made ashamed in receiving.

He is not a believer who eats his fill while his neighbor remains hungry by his side.

— Hadith

4. Saum

Ramadan is Islam’s holy month, in accordance with the lunar calendar, because during this month Muhammad received his first message from God. So Ramadan is a celebration of the gift of the Koran to Muslims. During Ramadan, healthy adult Muslims will go without all the pleasures of the body between dawn and dusk. Saum, or fasting, is the deliberate control of the body by an act of will.

O believers, you must fast so that you may learn self-restraint. Fasting is prescribed for you during a fixed number of days, so that you may safeguard yourself against spiritual and moral ills.

— Surah 2:183-4

Hunger, comfort and sexual desire are the three things that have to be brought under control. Fasting, then, means no food, drink, smoking, or sexual intercourse. Also, a conscious effort must be made to avoid any evil thought or deed.

If you do not give up telling lies, God will have no need of your giving up food and drink.

— Hadith

After a few hours of fasting, the body feels uncomfortable and starts to complain. This is the time for the mind to take control and not allow the body to get its way. The path to obedience gradually becomes easier, and so does resisting temptation.

The social behavior of the whole community changes during Ramadan. The pace of life slows, and it is a time for reflection. It is a period when social relationships are reaffirmed, reconciled and the solidarity of the community is expressed. Everyone from the richest to the poorest fasts together. Fasting has several benefits. It makes a person reflect on his spiritual state. Fasting is an act of self-discipline. A person who can endure its demands will have less difficulty controlling his appetites at other times. Fasting also reminds the practitioner of his essential frailty and dependence on God. Fasting provides an opportunity to develop greater sensitivity and compassion, since only those who have been hungry can know what hunger means.

5. Hajj

The dearest wish of any devout Muslim is to be able to perform the Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. Hajj means “to set out with a definite purpose,” and it is the duty of every Muslim who can afford it, and who is physically fit, to undertake it once in his lifetime.

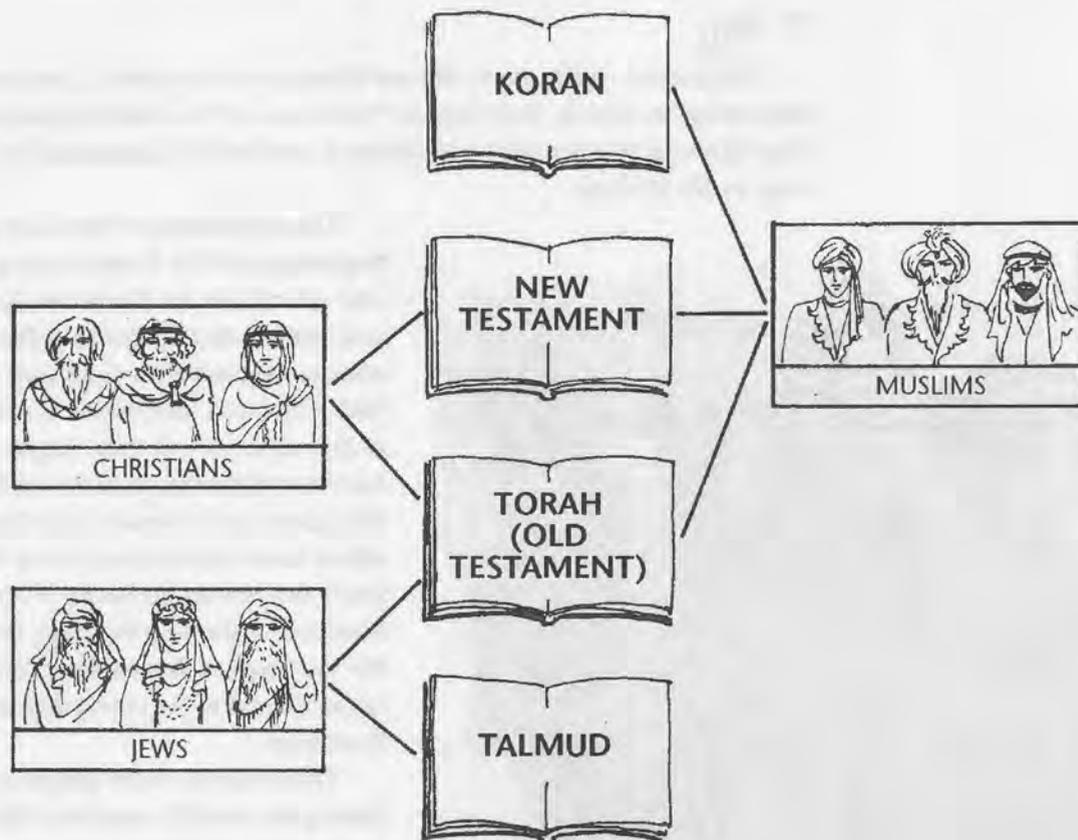


The symbolism of the Hajj goes back to the beginnings of the human story, to Adam and Eve, and after them to Abraham. It was at one of the sites visited during the Hajj that Adam and Eve were reconciled with God, and it was at another that Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son. It was to this area as well that Hagar went after leaving Abraham’s family, and it was the place where Abraham and Ishmael together built a sanctuary which later became known as the Kaaba. For 4,000 years the Kaaba has been a very holy place. When Muslims undertake the Hajj, they are following in the footsteps of Adam, Eve, Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael and re-enacting important episodes in their lives.

The purpose of the pilgrimage, undertaken during the twelfth month of the lunar year, is to heighten the pilgrim’s devotion to God. It is also a reminder of the equality of all people. Upon arriving in Mecca, pilgrims remove their usual clothes, which carry a clear indication of social status, and don simple white garments. All distinctions of rank

and hierarchy are removed, and prince and pauper stand before God in their undivided humanity. The first act, no matter what time of day or night the pilgrim arrives, is to hurry to the Kaaba and walk around it seven times, at a fast pace, to symbolize love for God. This is followed by visiting other sites and performing other symbolic acts to re-enact scenes from biblical history.

Pilgrimage brings together people from various countries and demonstrates that they have in common a loyalty that transcends the loyalties of the warring kingdoms of man. Pilgrims gain information about their brothers in other lands and return to their own with a better understanding of one another. Whereas in 1939 there were 60,000 pilgrims on the Hajj, in 1990 there were more than 2.5 million pilgrims from all over the world.



Something to think about



- How do you understand the phrase “Submission to God destroys any other kind of slavery”? Do you agree?
- What can you include (from your own life) in the five categories of behavior for Muslims?
- Try to formulate five pillars that form the basis of your own life.
- In what ways does the practice of Zakah help a person become detached from love of self and love of possessions?
- Is a person who gives money away richer than the person who keeps it?
- In what ways do you think the experience of the Ramadan fast draws Muslims together in a special feeling of brotherhood?
- How does the practice of discipline and self-control build up a defense against moral and spiritual weakness?



To read

This Too Shall Pass, by Fariduddin Attar, 12th century Persian mystical poet
From Tales from the Land of the Sufis, by Mojdeh Bayat and Muhammad Ali Jamnia