

# What does it mean to be a Muslim today?

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To be a Muslim today—or any day—is to live in accordance with the will and pleasure of Allah. Muslims often say, with joy and pride, that it is easy to be a Muslim since Islam is ‘the straight path’ leading to paradise. What this means, in other words, is that the principles of Islam are simple and straightforward, free of ambiguities, confusions, inconsistencies or mysteries, and that comprehending them or living in accordance with them is not difficult. The assumption here is that if one somehow comes to ‘the straight path’ by accepting Islam, which is Allah’s last and final revelation to humanity, one will fairly effortlessly arrive at the destination which is a state of eternal blessedness in the presence of Allah. I must confess that I am totally amazed, and overwhelmed, by this assumption. To me, being a Muslim today—or any day—seems to be exceedingly hard, for to be a Muslim one has constantly to face the challenge, first of knowing what Allah wills or desires not only for humanity in general but also for oneself in particular, and then of doing what one believes to be Allah’s will and pleasure each moment of one’s life.

In view of the stereotyping of Islam and Muslims which has gone on in the West for many centuries, and especially since the Arab oil embargo of 1973 and the Iranian Revolution of 1979, it is necessary to state at the outset of this article that ‘the world of Islam’ is not a monolith and that Muslims differ as sharply within their ‘*ummah*’<sup>1</sup> of one billion persons as do adherents of other major religious traditions within their own respective communities. Therefore, my perception and understanding of Islamic ideals and Muslim realities as presented here ought not to be taken as those of Muslims in general. At the same time, from my encounters with many Muslims in different parts of the world I believe that my response to the question ‘What does it mean to be a Muslim today?’ is grounded in an Islamic perspective which is shared by a number of contemporary Muslims.

To be a Muslim means, first and foremost, to believe in Allah, who is ‘*Rabb al-‘alamin*’: creator and sustainer of all peoples and universes. The Qur’an, which to me is the primary source of normative Islam, tells me that Allah’s creation is ‘for just ends’<sup>2</sup> and not in ‘idle sport’<sup>3</sup>. Humanity, fashioned ‘in the best of moulds’<sup>4</sup>, has been created in order to serve Allah<sup>5</sup>. According to Qur’anic teaching, service of Allah cannot be separated from service to humankind, or—in Islamic terms—believers

in Allah must honour both "Haquq Allah" (Rights of Allah) and "Haquq al-'ibad" (Rights of creatures). Fulfilment of one's duties to Allah and humankind constitutes righteousness, as stated in Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*:177, which reads as follows:

It is not righteousness  
That ye turn your faces  
Towards East or West;  
But it is righteousness—  
To believe in God  
And the Last Day,  
And the Angels,  
And the Book,  
And the Messengers;  
To spend of your substance,  
Out of love of Him,  
For your kin,  
For orphans,  
For the wayfarer,  
For those who ask,  
And for the ransom of slaves;  
To be steadfast in prayer,  
And practise regular charity;  
To fulfil the contracts  
Which ye have made;  
And to be firm and patient,  
In pain (or suffering)  
And adversity,  
And throughout  
All periods of panic.  
Such are the people  
Of truth, the God-fearing.<sup>6</sup>

As I reflect upon the above passage, as well as many others in the Qur'an, I am struck deeply by the integrated vision of the Qur'an, which does not separate belief in Allah and Allah's revelation ("iman") from righteous action ("amal"), or regular remembrance of Allah ("salat") from regular discharge of one's financial and moral obligations to Allah's creatures ("zakat"). Thus, to be a Muslim means—in a fundamental way—to be both Allah-conscious and creature-conscious, and to understand the interconnectedness of all aspects of one's life, of the life of all creation and of our life in this transient world to life eternal.

For Muslims, the Qur'anic notion of righteousness has been actualised in the life of the Prophet Muhammad—known in the Islamic mystic tradition as "Insan al-kamil" or the complete human being. Through his Allah-centredness, the Prophet of Islam attained the highest degree of "ubudiyat" (Service of Allah) and became a model of

righteous living not only as the spiritual and political leader of the Muslim "ummah", but also as a businessman, citizen, husband, father, friend, and a human being in general. Following him, there have been individual Muslims—recorded and unrecorded—in every age, who have known that being a Muslim means more than seeking or worshipping Allah. The poet Iqbal speaks for them when he proclaims, 'There are many who love Allah and wander in the wilderness, /I will follow the one who loves the persons made by Allah'<sup>7</sup>.

Considering the emphasis placed upon the interrelatedness of "Haquq Allah" and "Haquq al-'ibad" both in Qur'anic teaching and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the exemplar par excellence of this teaching, it is difficult to understand their compartmentalization in the minds and lives of many present-day Muslims. But what has happened is not surprising given the fact that many generations of Muslims have been told by their leaders that the primary duty of a Muslim is to engage in "ibadat"—which is understood as 'worship' rather than 'service' of Allah—and to obey those in authority over them rather than to engage in "jihad fi sabil Allah"<sup>8</sup> to ensure that the fundamental rights given to all creatures by Allah are honoured within the Muslim "ummah".

For many contemporary Muslims, being a Muslim means following the "Shari'ah" of Islam, as pointed out by the well-known Muslim scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who says:

The Shari'ah is the Divine Law by virtue of accepting which a person becomes a Muslim. Only he who accepts the injunctions of the Shari'ah as binding upon him is a Muslim although he may not be able to realise all of its teachings or follow all of its commands in life. The Shari'ah is the ideal pattern for the individual's life and the Law which binds the Muslim people into a single community. It is the embodiment of the Divine Will in terms of specific teachings whose acceptance and application guarantees man a harmonious life in this world and felicity in the hereafter ... The Shari'ah is Divine Law, in the sense that it is the concrete embodiment of the Divine Will according to which man should live in both his private and social life. In every religion Divine Will manifests itself in one way or another and the moral and spiritual injunctions of each religion are of Divine origin. But in Islam the embodiment of the Divine Will is not a set only of general teachings but of concrete ones. Not only is man told to be charitable, humble or just, but how to be so in particular instances of life. The Shari'ah contains the injunctions of the Divine Will as applied to every situation in life. It is the Law according to which God wants a Muslim to live ... (It) is the blue print of the ideal human life. It is a transcendent law which is at the same time applied in human society, but never fully realised because of the imperfections

of all that is human. The Shari'ah corresponds to a reality that transcends time and history. Rather, each generation in Muslim society should seek to conform to its teachings and apply it anew to the conditions in which it finds itself. The creative process in each generation is not to remake the Law but to reform men and human society to conform to the Law.<sup>9</sup>

There is much in the above passage which is of crucial significance for modern Muslims. However, before reflecting on this, it may be useful to note that the term "Shari'ah" comes from the root "Shar'a", which means 'to open, to become clear'. E.W. Lane points out in his monumental *Arabic-English Lexicon* that, according to the authors of the authoritative Arabic lexicons, the *Taj Al-'Arus*, the *Tadheeb*, and the *Misbah*, the Arabs do not apply the term "shari-at" to 'any but (a watering place) such as is permanent and apparent to the eye, like the water of a river, not water from which one draws with the well-rope.'<sup>10</sup> A modern lexicon, *Lughat ul Qur'an*, states that the term "Shari'ah" refers to a straight and clear path, and also to a watering place where both humans and animals come to drink water provided the source of water is a flowing stream or river.<sup>11</sup> It is not a little ironic that the term "Shari'ah", which has the idea of fluidity and mobility as part of its very structure, should have become the symbol of rigid and unchanging laws to so many Muslims in the world.

That the "Shari'ah" has played a pivotal role in Islamic history as a means of bringing diverse groups of Muslims within a single legal-religious framework, is beyond dispute. However, the assertion that one is a Muslim only if one accepts the "Shari'ah" as binding upon oneself, and, further, that the "Shari'ah" is divine, transcendent and eternal, can be seriously questioned (and, in my judgment, ought to be).

Being a Muslim is dependent essentially only upon one belief: belief in Allah, universal creator and sustainer who sends revelation for the guidance of humanity. Believing in Allah and Allah's revelation to and through the Prophet Muhammad, preserved in the Qur'an, is, however, not identical with accepting the "Shari'ah" as binding upon oneself. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has remarked insightfully, 'A true Muslim ... is not a man who believes in Islam—especially Islam in history; but one who believes in God and is committed to the revelation through His Prophet'<sup>12</sup>.

Most Muslims regard the "Shari'ah" as a sort of umbrella that stretches over the length and breadth (and perhaps even the depth) of their lives and they feel secure under its cover. However, many of them do not know about the sociological process whereby the 'divine' "Shari'ah" came to be codified. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes the process briefly in the following passage:

In essence all of the Shari'ah is contained in the Qur'an. The Holy Book, however, contains the principle of all the Law. It

contains the Law potentially but not actually and explicitly, at least not all the different aspects of the Shari'ah. There was, therefore, a gradual process by which this Law became promulgated in its external form and made applicable to all domains of human life. This process was completed in about three centuries during which the great books of law in both Sunni and Shi'ite Islam were written, although the exact process in is somewhat different in the two cases. The principles of Law contained in the Qur'an were explained and amplified in the prophetic Hadith and Sunnah which together constitute the second basic source of Law. These in turn were understood with the aid of the consensus of the Islamic community (ijma'). Finally, these sources of Law were complemented by analogical reasoning (qiyas) where necessary. According to the traditional Islamic view, therefore, the sources of the Shari'ah are the Qur'an, Hadith, ijma' and qiyas, of which the first two are the most important and are accepted by all schools of law while the other two are either considered of lesser importance or rejected by some of the schools.<sup>13</sup>

It is to be noted that of the four sources of the "Shari'ah" mentioned in the above passage, three are human, and not divine, in origin, and that two 'are either considered of lesser importance or rejected by some of the schools.' The author has also accepted that while the Qur'an contains the Law 'potentially', it does not do so 'actually and explicitly, at least not all the different aspects of the Shari'ah'. What this means, in other words, is that while the Qur'an elucidates the essentials of Islam, the details of the code of rules and regulations pertaining to all aspects of a Muslim's life which is cumulatively referred to as the "Shari'ah" cannot be regarded as divine—as Seyyed Hossein Nasr and many others assert—since the Qur'an categorically rules out the possibility of any human being (including the Prophets, the Imams of the Shi'is and the great scholars of Islam) being divine. Unless *all* of the "Shari'ah" can be shown to be of non-human origin—as Muslims believe the Qur'an to be—the claim that it is divine, transcendent, eternal or immutable cannot be validated logically or theologically.

Not only are the majority of the sources of the "Shari'ah" not divine in origin but they can also be regarded as problematic in other ways. For instance, as every scholar of Islam knows, Hadith literature, crucial as it is in the development of Islam law and even doctrine<sup>14</sup>, is surrounded by controversies regarding all its aspects. In particular, the question of the authenticity or otherwise of individual "ahadith"<sup>15</sup> as well as of the Hadith literature as a whole has occupied the attention of many scholars of Islam since the time of Ash-Shafi'i (died in A.H.204/A.D. 809). Regardless of the fact pointed out by one of the most important Muslim scholars of our times, Fazlur Rahman, namely, that 'a very large

proportion of the Hadiths were judged to be spurious and forged by classical Muslim scholars themselves<sup>16</sup>, Muslims, in general, continue to believe in the 'sacred' character of the Hadith literature. Furthermore, on the basis of a "hadith" which states, 'My Community will never unite in an error'<sup>17</sup>, they also continue to believe that "Ijma'" of the first three centuries of Islam (during which the four "Madhahib" or Schools of Law accepted as equally 'orthodox' by Sunni Islam were established) is 'protected from error' i.e. it is infallible, hence binding upon Muslims of all times. The theological point made by some modern Muslim thinkers and legal scholars that since infallibility belongs only to Allah, the "Ijma'" of any place or period cannot be regarded as infallible and hence eternally binding, is disregarded—even as the scholarly criticism of the Hadith literature by Muslim scholars is disregarded—by a large number of Muslims who believe that the preservation of the 'sacred' nature of the "Shari'ah" is essential for the continuance and well-being of Islam.

In order to understand what amounts to a virtual deification of the "Shari'ah" by many Muslims as well as the strong impetus towards 'Islamisation' evident in a number of Muslim societies in recent years, it is necessary to know that of all the challenges confronting the contemporary Muslim world, the greatest appears to be that of modernity. "Shari'ah"-minded Muslims who consider themselves the caretakers of 'the Islamic way of life' are aware of the fact that viability in the modern technological age requires the adoption of the scientific outlook, which inevitably brings about major changes in modes of thinking and behaviour. Unable to come to terms with modernity as a whole, present-day Muslim societies make a sharp distinction between two aspects of it. The first—generally referred to as 'modernisation'—is largely identified with science, technology and a better standard of life; the second—generally referred to as 'westernisation'—is largely identified with 'mass' western culture and moral degeneration and disintegration. While all Muslim societies of today desire 'modernisation', most of them reject 'westernisation', which is associated not only with the colonisation of Muslim peoples by western powers in the not-too-distant-past, but also with what is perceived to be a continuing onslaught upon traditional Islam by Westerners as well as by westernised Muslims who want to apply modern methods of scholarship or analysis to the study of Islam.

In strong and startling contrast to conservative Muslims who are deeply fearful of any form of creative thinking which might liberate Muslim masses from the straitjacket of traditionalism, is the refreshing voice of Muhammad Iqbal, modern Islam's most outstanding thinker and visionary, who was a passionate advocate for "Ijtihad"—the principle of independent reasoning—which he, perceptively, called 'the principle of movement in Islam'. In his lecture on "Ijtihad", Iqbal says:

I know the Elema<sup>18</sup> of Islam claim finality for the popular schools of Muslim Law, though they never found it possible

to deny the theoretical possibility of a complete Ijtihad<sup>19</sup> ... For fear of ... disintegration, the conservative thinkers of Islam focused all their efforts on the one point of preserving a uniform social life for the people by a jealous exclusion of all innovations in the law of Shari'ah as expounded by the early doctors of Islam. Their leading idea was social order, and there is no doubt that they were partly right, because organisation does to a certain extent counteract the forces of decay. But they did not see, and our modern Ulema do not see, that the ultimate fate of a people does not depend so much on organisation as on the worth and power of individual men. In an over-organised society the individual is altogether crushed out of existence...<sup>20</sup> The closing of the door of Ijtihad is pure fiction suggested partly by the crystallisation of legal thought in Islam, and partly by that intellectual laziness which, especially in a period of spiritual decay, turns great thinkers into idols. If some of the later doctors have upheld this fiction, modern Islam is not bound by this voluntary surrender of intellectual independence ...<sup>21</sup> Since things have changed and the world of Islam is today confronted and affected by new forces set free by the extraordinary development of human thought in all its directions, I see no reason why this attitude (of the Ulema) should be maintained any longer. Did the founders of our schools ever claim finality for their reasonings and interpretations? Never. The claim of the present generation of Muslim liberals to re-interpret the foundational legal principles in the light of their own experience and altered conditions of modern life is, in my opinion, perfectly justified. The teaching of the Qur'an that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems.<sup>22</sup>

To me being a Muslim today means taking a stand against those who insist that being a Muslim means following the trodden path and sanctifying tradition without subjecting it to serious reflection or scrutiny. According to the Qur'an, Adam was elevated even above the celestial creatures on account of his capability to 'name' things, i.e. to form concepts or to exercise the rational faculty<sup>23</sup>. And in one of the most significant passages of the Qur'an<sup>24</sup>, we are told that Allah offered the 'trust' of freedom of will to all creation but only humanity accepted it. What this says to me is that it is not only a right of Muslims, but also their duty—and indeed their glory—to think and to choose. As Iqbal has pointed out<sup>25</sup>, freedom is a precondition of goodness and a person who is totally determined (whether by tradition or anything else) cannot produce goodness.

To me being a Muslim means knowing that the Qur'an is *the* Magna Carta of human freedom and that a large part of its concern is to free human beings from the bondage of traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic, or any other), tribalism, racism, sexism, slavery or anything else that prohibits or inhibits human beings from actualising the Qur'anic vision of human destiny embodied in the classic proclamation: 'Towards Allah is thy limit.'<sup>26</sup> Though it is necessary to set limits to what human beings may or may not do so that liberty does not degenerate into license, the Qur'an safeguards against the possibility of dictatorship or despotism and states with clarity and emphasis: 'It is not right for a human being that Allah should give him the Book of Law, power to judge and (even) Prophethood, and he should say to his fellow-beings to obey his orders rather than those of Allah. He should rather say: "Be ye faithful servants of Allah by virtue of your constant teaching of the Book and your constant study of it."<sup>27</sup>

To me being a Muslim today means carrying forward the message of the Muslim modernists who have raised the cry 'Back to the Qur'an' (which, in effect, also means 'Forward with the Qur'an')<sup>28</sup> and insisted on the importance of Ijtihad—both at the collective level (in the form of "Ijma"<sup>29</sup>) and at the individual level—as a means of freeing Muslim thought from the dead weight of outmoded traditionalism. It is a profound irony and tragedy that the Qur'an, despite its strong affirmation of human equality and the need to do justice to all of Allah's creatures, has been interpreted by many Muslims, both ancient and modern, as sanctioning various forms of human inequality and even enslavement. For instance, even though the Qur'an states clearly that man and woman were made from the same source, at the same time, in the same manner, and that they stand equal in the sight of Allah, men and women are extremely unequal in virtually all Muslim societies, in which the superiority of men to women is taken to be self-evident.<sup>30</sup> To me a very important part of what it means to be a Muslim today is to acquire the competence to develop a hermeneutics for interpreting the Qur'an in such a way that its fundamental teachings, such as those pertaining to human equality of justice, are separated from historical and cultural accretions which—though they represent the biases or prejudices of specific Muslims or Muslim societies—are taken by the Muslim masses to be part of the Qur'anic message.

Living in the West, I am all too painfully aware of the fact that westerners in general—including many Christians and Jews who, like Muslims, are 'People of the Book'—perceive Islam as a religion spread by the sword, and Muslims as religious fanatics who are zealously committed to waging 'Holy War' against non-Muslims or even against non-conforming Muslims. While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the historical roots of these perceptions, being a Muslim today means not turning away in hatred or anger from those who regard Muslims as 'adversaries' but engaging in dialogue with them in a spirit of

amity and goodwill.<sup>31</sup> Being a Muslim today means paying serious heed to the Qur'anic teaching that Allah, universal creator and sustainer, who cares for all and sends guidance to all, has decreed diversity for a reason, as the following passage tells us: 'O men! behold We have created you out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware.'<sup>32</sup> What this passage says to me is that we should be mindful both of our unity and our diversity, that one of the basic purposes of diversity is to encourage diverse groups and persons to 'know one another', that a person's ultimate worth is determined not by what group he or she belongs to but how Allah-conscious he or she is.

Being a Muslim today means taking serious note of the Qur'anic imperative, 'Let there be no compulsion in religion'<sup>33</sup>, knowing that the right to exercise free choice in matters of belief is unambiguously endorsed by the Qur'an, which says: 'The Truth is/From your Lord: /Let him who will/Believe, and let him/Who will, reject it.'<sup>34</sup> Being a Muslim today also means realising that by merely professing Islam we do not attain to Paradise, and that Muslims have no special claim upon Allah's grace, for the Qur'an tells us:

Those who believe (in the Qur'an)  
And those who follow the Jewish (scriptures),  
And the Christians and the Sabians,  
Any who believe in God  
And the Last Day,  
And work righteousness,  
Shall have their reward  
With the Lord; on them  
Shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, to me being a Muslim today—and always—means being on a journey, both external and internal, toward attaining a state of peace which is the goal of Islam. However, peace is not merely the absence of conflict, even as health is not merely the absence of sickness. According to the perspective of the Qur'an, peace is a positive state of safety or security in which one is free from anxiety and fear. It comes into being when human beings honouring the divine imperative to live justly, learn to be just to themselves and to others. Constant striving is required to overcome the fragmentation to which most human beings are subjected in the technological age and also to eliminate sexism, racism, classism, and all forms of totalitarianism which lead to the injustices and inequities which characterise the world in which we live. To engage in such striving (which the Qur'an calls "jihad fi sabil Allah": striving in the cause of Allah) is the purpose of a Muslim's life.

- 1 "Ummah": community.
- 2 *The Qur'an*, Surah 15: *Al-Hijr*:85.
- 3 *The Qur'an*, Surah 21: *Al-Anbiya*:16.
- 4 *The Qur'an*, Surah 95: *At-Tin*:4.
- 5 *The Qur'an*, Surah 51: *Adh-Dhariyat*:56.
- 6 Translation of *The Holy Qur'an* by A. Yusuf Ali. McGregor and Werner, Inc., USA, 1946, pp. 69—70.
- 7 *Bang - e - Dara*, Shaikh Ghulman Ali and Sons, Lahore, 1962, p. 151.
- 8 "Jihad fi sabil Allah": to strive in the cause of Allah.
- 9 *The Ideals and Realities of Islam*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1975, pp. 93—96.
- 10 *Arabic-English Lexicon*, William and Norgate, London 1863, Book I. Part 4, p.1535.
- 11 Parwez, G.A., *Lughat ul Qur'an*, Idara Tulu' e Islam, Lahore, 1960, Volume II, pp.941—944.
- 12 *Islam in Modern History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957, p.146.
- 13 *The Ideals and Realities of Islam*, p.99.
- 14 Hodgson, Marshall, G.S., *The Venture of Islam* (Conscience and History in a World Civilization), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, Volume One (*The Classical Age of Islam*), p.332.
- 15 "Ahadith": plural of "hadith": a saying ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad.
- 16 *Islam*, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1968, p.64.
- 17 Reported by Al-Tirmidhi and Ibn Majah on the authority of Abd Allah ibn 'Umar, cited by K.A. Faruki in *Islamic Jurisprudence*, Pakistan Publishing House, Karachi, 1962, p.27.
- 18 "Ulema": scholars.
- 19 *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1971, p.168.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.151.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.178.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.168.
- 23 Reference here is to *The Qur'an*, Surah 2:*Al-Baqarah*:30—34.
- 24 Reference here is to *The Qur'an*, Surah 33:*Al-Ahzab*:72.
- 25 *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p.85.
- 26 Reference here is to Surah 53: *An-Najm*:42; translation is by Iqbal (*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, p.57).
- 27 Reference here is to *The Qur'an*, Surah 3: *Al-Imran*; 79.
- 28 In this context, the 'double movement' outlined by Fazlur Rahman in his book *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982), pp.5—8 is important.
- 29 Iqbal's remarks about "Ijma'" in modern times, stated in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, pp.173—174, are thought-provoking.
- 30 Those interested in the issue of woman-man equality in the Islamic tradition may refer to my articles 'Made from Adam's Rib?' in *Al-Mushir*, Christian Study Centre, Rawalpindi, Volume XXVII, No.3, Autumn 1985, pp.124—155, and 'Equal Before Allah?' in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Volume XVII, no.2, January—May 1987, pp.2—4.
- 31 See *The Qur'an*, Surah 29: *Al-Ankabut*:46.
- 32 This passage (Surah 49: *Al-Hujurat*:13) is taken from *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, translated by Muhammad Asad (Dar Al-Andalus, Gibraltar, 1980) p.793.
- 33 *The Qur'an* (Surah 2:*Al-Baqarah*:256).
- 34 *The Qur'an* (Surah 18:*Al-Kahf*:29).
- 35 *The Holy Qur'an*, pp.33—34 (Surah 2: *Al-Baqarah*:62) and *The Holy Qur'an* p.265 (Surah 5:*Al-Ma'idah*:69).