

Introduction to the World Religions Series

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

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INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM

ISLAM means *submission* of the “self” to the will of God in complete consciousness. It exegetically means the *peace of soul* that can only be achieved through *submission to the Almighty*. Islam is, in fact, not only a religious path of life but a lot more than simply to be a creed. It is the manifestation of *Nature* whose very laws Islam connotes in a quite intelligible way. Thus, Islam is but the *code of natural life*.

It seems appropriate at present that we critique the word *Islam* before getting into the details of a comparative study. The word Islam, as above stated, means *submission* or *surrender* to the Almighty; hence, all of the doctrinal teachings of Islam revolve around the law of central importance i.e. *submission*. The root word for Islam is “SLM”, which lexically means “to submit, to surrender”, or “to give up one’s will”. It literally implies to conduct “peace by the act of submission”. The submission Islam demonstrates is two-fold in its nature, which, according to scholars, represents two different phenomena of human life simultaneously. One belongs to man’s physical or apparent state and the other to his mental or rational state. The state of being Muslim, for instance, can be interpreted as a coalescing of *internal* and *external* states of submission. Man from his birth to death continues to be perfectly submissive to the laws of nature that have been functioning in universe like a mechanism ever since the creation event. A baby gets birth, turns into a toddler, then he shifts into his childhood, which entails pubescence and teenage, and thus he becomes a blooming youth; at next, he passes on to his thirties and the middle-age, and then grows old to meet his ultimate i.e. the invincible and imperishable death. This is the usual pattern of human life that none can deny and/or elude. There are, however, many exceptions in this natural course, such as a premature or unnatural death either incidental or accidental. But these exceptions themselves imply and confirm the governing role of Nature in human life—since Nature decides the fate of the submitters on every step. Man is universally submissive to these laws of nature, for they are static as well as inflexible from the first creation to the present day, and no essential or anticipatable change can be predicted in the coming times. The type of submission to Nature that any or every living object of an evolving universe does not perpetrate willingly but Nature itself enforces upon to brand the matter subject to changes is called *external* or *physical* submission. The other phenomenon, which is *internal*, is an exclusive right of human beings; hence, it belongs to mankind alone. Man is the very central creature that has been gifted with the faculties of reason and contemplation juxtaposing wisdom and intellect. *Internal* or *rational* submission is the stage where man’s intellect and fanciful speculation play the key-role in constructing or destructing one’s conscious belief in the Creator. In a typically doctrinal standpoint, *belief* means the willful submission to the Creator, the Ultimate and the only Real; and if the matter be otherwise, *disbelief* implies God’s conscious, existential denial. The core issue of this thesis, i.e. being confined in spatio-temporal laws, must be borne in mind whether one believes in the existence and sovereignty of God or not, for the rational does not affect the nature of external submission. Every human being is *muslim* i.e. *submissive* thereof and stays submissive from birth to death by the very instinct and nature. Every material object of our universe, from a tiny electron to gigantic stars and galaxies, is *muslim* (submissive) by/in its nature before the *Samad*—“the Cause of all causes”. This religious assumed Creator or, scientifically speaking, the central power of the universe is what the rationalists and skeptics call *Nature*. It is very likely that most of the readers are aware of the word *mechanism* that skeptics

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interpret as *self-controlled* system of the universe. Indeed, we can observe a systematic *order* in every object, from an electron to nebulae, of the universe.

Mawlana Abul Aa'la Maududi, a celebrated Muslim scholar, explains the jurisdiction and theological framework of the word "Islam" in his book "*Towards Understanding Islam*":

"Everyone can see that the universe we live in is an orderly universe. There is law and order among all the units that comprise this universe. Everything is assigned a place in a grand scheme, which is working in a magnificent and superb way. They follow an unalterable law and do not make even the slightest deviation from their ordained course. The earth rotates on its own axis and in its revolution round the sun scrupulously follows the path laid down for it. Similarly, everything in the world, from a little whirling electron to mighty nebulae, invariably follows its own laws. Matter, energy, and life – All obey their laws and grow and change and love and die in accordance with those laws. Even in the human world, the laws of nature are quite manifest, and man's birth, growth, and life all are regulated by a set of biological laws.

"This powerful, all pervasive law, which governs all that comprises the universe, from the tiniest specks of dust to the magnificent galaxies in the high heavens, is the 'law of God', the Creator and the Ruler of this universe. As the entire creation follows obeys the law of God, the whole universe, therefore, literally follows the religion of ISLAM – for ISLAM signifies nothing but obedience and submission to Allah, the Lord of the universe... These are all obedient to the Divine Law, and their functions and movements are governed by the injunctions of that law alone." ¹

Islam is indubitably the greatest as well as most complete religion of the world—though the most misunderstood one—that ever came down to man from Heaven. This is not merely an assumption or claim but a fact that finds the acceptance of Islam's opponents and enemies on countless occasions recorded in the annals of historians. In the modern age of skepticism, metaphysical discussions in the search of God have, to a considerable degree, gone out-dated, as the captives of reason assert, and there is no scope for such beliefs in the empirical structure of present-day civilization that solely and sufficiently feed upon metaphysics alone. One has to put forth, in order to make others admit one's view, lofty arguments in the support of one's proposition. These arguments must imply reason and empiricism, which should necessarily be reciprocated with the consequential bedrock of facts. The facts that arguments need to be supported with must be mathematical in their character. Similarly, the facts should be widely celebrated, and their acceptance in the relative circles should be *universal*; thus, the process should design a theorem. After having applied our criterion formula, if a speculative reasoning is corroborated with the empirically observed facts that are universal in their magnitude and vividly acceptable for all of the observers, we may then well be in a position to proclaim that we have discovered the *Truth*—the ultimate truth. The nature of *truth* spoken of here is, however, not that of a common understanding, but this is the *ultimate truth*, which is all-pervasive instead of being one or two dimensional. Every statement of truth, carefully speaking, leads to the same, sole ultimate i.e. to God, the Creator and Cherisher. Although religious debate does not fall into the realm of science, its theoretical empiricism and mass-observance, however, bring forth a science of life. A careful observation of present day religions will display that Islam literally embraces the aforementioned criteria, and explicitly wins the honor of being the most accurate. Islam, the most misunderstood religion of the world, is the most perfect receptacle of empirical and valid conceptualization of relationship between the Creator and the creation, especially Man. Relation between God and Man is the bedrock for every religious dogma, and, realistically speaking, no other religion could

¹ Maududi, Syed Abul Aa'la, Khurshid Ahmad (Trans.), *Towards Understanding Islam*, Lahore: Idara Tarjuman-ul-Qurân, Urdu Bazaar, 1998, p.2

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at length satisfy the athirst spirits of human race by bestowing them a sense of God's presence within their "selves" (Arabic *Sakina*; Hebrew *Shekinah*). On these grounds, the theoretical precepts of Islam become applied and empirical when tested in the laboratory of human society.

Islam is unquestionably the fastest growing religion of the world today, which demonstrates the empirical picture of Islamic theory of the Creator and His relationship with His creation. *Huston Smith*, a scholar of comparative study of religions, has quite boldly confirmed this fact in his renowned book titled, "*The Religions of Man*". *Huston Smith* thus writes:

"Nor is Islam consolidating its position: it is expanding and expanding rapidly. As early as 1773, Goethe wrote a poem in which he compared Muhammad to a stream which moves onward always increasing, carrying his brothers with him to the eternal Father. Today, Islam is spreading not on in Africa and Southeast Asia but even to some extent in China, England, and the United States...to be the fastest growing religion in the world."²

The greatest gift of scientific age is the 'enhancement of knowledge' that ultimately enlightens and upgrades the faculty of thought. Thus man is relying more heavily upon his five senses than the so-called mythical descriptions of ancient in the current times. Scientific observation, experimentation, and deduction of material facts have won great importance in the belief-system of modern man. For these reasons, the world, the West in particular, faces a severe menace from the frontiers of *skepticism* and *atheism*, which have radically posed serious threats to Christian thought and ecclesiastical heritage. Likewise, *agnosticism* is another problem for Christian orthodoxy, which again speedily grows in posh societies—although it was never completely non-existent in Christendom since its birth in the late first century of Common Era. Liberation from the clumps of inquisitive clergy in thought and action has on one hand granted mankind an absolute confidence in reason and on the other caused grievous damages to the very fundamentals of West's Bible-based civilization. It is because that skeptical man of today has deliberately overridden all moral obligations what a religion could impose in past. As a conclusion, it suffices to say that man of today is much different in all aspects from the man of past.

Religion has always been an integral part of human life. The earliest civilized people recorded in history, the Egyptians, formally sowed the seeds of religion, perceiving the heavenly bodies as their divinities. The sun-disk god of Egyptians "**Ra**" was the earliest chief god to be recorded in the annals of historians. This metaphysical beginning of religious institution was the consequence of man's meditative assumptions of and about the universe, and this meditation, which was mere speculation by all contents, brought forth utterly unavoidable pantheistic supernaturalism, to which man was but a pathetic prey. The very chain continues even to this day in several respects. Some of the antiquity-civilizations that our earth experienced after *Homo Sapiens*' formation produced exclusively subjective theories and beliefs concerning the 'omnipotent' Creator, His physical and metaphysical creation, and system of rituals to win His trust. One thing, however, remained identical in all of these meditative religions, i.e. their *anthropomorphism*, and it has always found roots in the inconsiderate human psyche. We can undoubtedly sum up that the gods of such meditative religions were the product of human "fear of unseen" that the mysteries of the universe had inculcated in them. It is, of course, the instauration of *myth* and *legend*. Famous logician *Bertrand Russell* holds an identical idea about God and His attributes in his philosophical writings, but the difference between Russell and my opinion being his utter negation of God and mine only a partial one of false conceptions.

² Smith, Huston, *The Religions of Man*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965 (Perennial Edition), p. 252

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To counter such misleading systems of belief that came into being in response to certain unconscious fears, *Allah*, the omnipotent Creator of the universe Whom we call “God” in English,³ has always sent his chosen individuals, the Prophets and Messengers. The culmination of this sending of Messengers is the ministry and person of Prophet Muhammad. It is an explicit stance of Islam that the Prophets act as *mediators* between God and mankind. Judaism follows the suit on this issue and Christianity does that with a little modification. Quite accordingly, the Greek word “*Parakletos*”, used four times in New Testament in relation to the coming of the *Spirit of Truth*, also means *mediator* or *intercessor*. It is sufficient to say that both of the conceptions converge at this stage. We, therefore, find a substantial testimony of New Testament for the argument being built in the present discussion. These Prophets spoke nothing of their own but what they were inspired and commanded ‘from on above’.

Islam’s standpoint on the guidance of mankind is crystallized in the belief that Allah, the Omnipotent Creator, has always led the *crown of creation* from ignorance to the ultimate truth, from darkness to light, in one way or another with no distinction of color, language and race. Glorious Qurân, the sacred book of Islam, emphatically rejects the Judo-Christian conception of “chosen people” or “God’s people”, for such a thing seems an utter injustice in both religious and social scenarios. Islam maintains that God did not cease to send His Messengers to humankind until Prophet Muhammad proclaimed the sealing of the Prophetic office. These Prophets, being divine emissaries, simultaneously taught misled nations about what the *revealed* truth was like and guided them to the path of righteousness. In short, God, the exalted Creator, managed to show the path of righteousness to different peoples in different ages through His ordained Messengers. This chain of Prophets consists of around 1,24,000 divine emissaries from Adam to Muhammad. There is a long list in between that consists of many great pre-Israelite, Israelite and non-Israelite Prophetic Messengers. We know some of them as Seth, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David, Solomon, Daniel, Ezra, John the Baptist and Jesus who delivered their respective obligations in no lesser way than appointed by their Sender. These mighty Prophets quite obediently surrendered their will to the Will of God and voiced in human societies, though in diverse regions, the most important but unanimous slogan, “*there is only one true God, the Lord of universe*”.

I have used both universally known and adopted epithets, *Allah* and *God* (with capital G), in this present treatise to refer to the *Almighty, Omniscient, Omnipotent, and Intelligent* Creator and Designer of such a beautiful, immense and intricate universe. Of course, every inch of the universe bears witness to the well-conceived and governed design of a central, all-powerful Entity. Similarly, some references to the Hebrew titles of God also occur in the text. The word *God* as supreme deity is today owned by Christianity exclusively. The case in point is in fact that of a linguistic difference, which has developed into semantic misunderstanding. Muslims have their own obsessions with the name, *Allah*, too. Both of the names are, nevertheless, used for the one and same true God whom Muslims name in Arabic and Christians in English; hence a linguistic difference. In New Testament Greek, God has been spoken of as *ho Theos*, “the God”. It is, therefore, safe to say that the problem remains with identity of believers rather than conception of God.

Word ‘*Allah*’ is, *in fact*, the most unique attributive epithet of the Almighty God in Qurân. It has not been adopted as a *personal* name by Islam, as some argue. The case for the name of God in both Old and New Testaments is not different either. Greek New Testament uses no stipulated

³ George Sale, the famous translator of Glorious Qurân in English, is of the opinion in the preface of his Quranic translation that it would be utter ignorance to deem Allah of Qurân and God of Bible as two different, i.e. mutually distinct deities.

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name for the supreme Deity, for the writers of New Testament harmoniously employ Greek definite article *ho* with common noun *theos*—as *ho Theos*, “the God”—for the description of God. Christian New Testament is also peculiar in addressing God as *Father*, but we are not concerned here with the Pauline conception of “*Abba*” i.e. “Father”, for it was only to express Creator’s love for mankind. Hebrew Old Testament, however, mentions a word ‘Yahweh’, which, the Jews strictly believe, is the personal name of God. This assumption, however, can easily be settled down when seeing the English translations of Old Testament translating it systematically as “Lord”. In addition, the word “Yahweh” lexically means ‘one who exists without beginning’. In Arabic, on the other hand, we have a conceptually as well as functionally corresponding parallel for Yahweh, ‘*Rabb*’, which Glorious Qurân has recurrently employed in its text. Linguistically, *Yahweh* equates Qurânic attribute of “*Qâ'im-Bil-Dhât*”. The conclusion, therefore, does not imply that *Yahweh* and *Rabb* are some personal names of our Creator. The discussion at present stage is, however, not a focus on an attribute or personal name of God, but a focus on the true divine *nature*. Therefore, I would like to suggest my esteemed readers not to indicate bias or uneasiness for different names of God when they go through the text of any religious book whether about Islam, Christianity or any other faith. Interestingly, about 20 million Arab Christians use the name *Allah* in their church worship services to refer to the *tri-une* God, which is, in fact, the most formal denotation for God in Arabic. That shows their conceptual clarity rather than a semantic obsession.

In conclusion, therefore, I would suggest that the God of Islam is the same as that of Bible. It is the final format of the religious path of ancient Prophets.