

Clear Your Doubts about Islam

By Sahih International

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Foreword

No one can deny that Islam is very much in the spotlight today. In spite of extremely negative portrayals by Western media (or perhaps because of them), increasing numbers of people are seeking to find out more about it. And more often than not, they are being pleasantly surprised by the fruits of their research. In fact, more people are embracing Islam today than they did prior to September 11, 2001.

However, there does remain a great deal of misconception and misunderstanding on the subject, frequently fuelled by political policies which deem it in their interest to support Islam's enemies. In addition, Muslims themselves, at first shocked and confused by the events of recent years, did not really know how to respond to the challenge. Now they have been rudely awakened to the urgency of refuting the many false claims and accusations being spread against their way of life and of defending the truth, and accordingly, the rights and honour of Muslims everywhere on earth.

Islam is the religion and way of life of about one-fifth of the world's population. Muslims are of diverse nationalities, cultures and races, but their religion teaches that all men are essentially equal and that no distinction should be made between them on the basis of such superficial differences as colour, class status or personal beliefs as long as they remain peaceful and law-abiding citizens. The behaviour of certain misguided groups or individuals outside the fold of mainstream Islam cannot be attributed to the religion any more than violence in North Ireland or mafia activities can be attributed to Christianity.

People of secular cultures often fail to understand why practicing Muslims cannot always fit in completely with modern Westernized lifestyles, why they insist upon a particular type of dress, or upon prayer at particular times. They tend to perceive Muslim attitudes as unnecessarily demanding and uncompromising. Misunderstandings are frequently due to unmistakable differences between the Western concept of religion and that of Muslims. Islam can indeed seem strange to a society in which religion no longer plays a major role in everyday life; but to a dedicated Muslim, Islam is life, and there is no division between the secular and the sacred.

Because religious practice occupies a narrow place in his outlook, the adherent to Western culture often does not comprehend the relationship between a Muslim and his religion or what motivates him to take a particular direction in life. But in the view of Islam, religion is not merely a personal issue or something symbolic pertaining to a limited area of one's existence. On the contrary, it involves moulding a balanced way of life suitable not only to Muslims but to everyone who inclines toward peace, justice and respect for rights. More simply, it can be said to mean the pursuit of happiness, security and moral perfection. In the hearts of Muslims their religion remains both a secure refuge and the most effective

motivator for tackling all kinds of challenges. At the same time, it preserves the distinctive character of the Muslim believer and the pattern of his particular culture.

An individual in the West might see religion within a limited context pertaining to worship alone - a private matter between a person and God. But in Islam it is a dynamic system that organizes the progression of life according to basic general principles and flexible rulings that guarantee potential benefit from advancements in science and technology as well as new material facilities. Since there is no conflict between Islam and scientific research, every new discovery in the world of matter, energy, time and space only increases the believer in faith and humility towards Him who devised, projected and systematized such a plan and then assigned to mankind his place and noble role within it. Within this understanding it remains to be said that knowledgeable Muslims are not in need of secularism since they have no problem with religion.

What Is Islam?

"Islam" is an Arabic word which means peaceful, willing submission - submission to the code of conduct ordained by God. So Islam is a religion, but it is also a complete way of life based upon a voluntary relationship between an individual and his Creator. It is the way of life ordained by God which was taught by each of His prophets and messengers. What distinguishes Islam from other religions is that it refuses to accept any form of creation whatsoever as a deity worthy of worship. Instead, it emphasizes the exclusive worship of the one God who created the entire universe and to whom all creation will eventually return.

Monotheism is the foundation of Islam and its most important concept which cannot be compromised in any way. Not only is God acknowledged as the sole creator and sustainer of everything in existence, but Islam declares that He is the only true deity and He alone is worthy to be worshipped. Further, it recognizes that the attributes of God are nothing like those of His creation and cannot be compared to it; He is absolute, perfect and unique.

What Is a Muslim?

A Muslim is someone who practices Islam; that is, who willingly submits to the revealed directives of God. Everything in the universe is inherently submissive to God, functioning according to the natural laws created by Him. Human beings are physically "Muslim" in that their bodies function according to the genetic program set by God for the period of time He has decreed.

A "Muslim" in the religious sense, however, is someone who consciously commits himself to the worship of God alone, not according to his own inclinations or those of other men but according to the method conveyed by God through His appointed prophets. The Qur'an gives many examples of people who lived before Muhammad and believed in and obeyed the prophet that God had sent them. They entered Paradise because of their obedience to God, and that is the meaning of "Islam."

All the prophets of God, from Adam to Muhammad, and those who believed and followed each of them during the period of his prophethood [i.e., until another prophet was sent after him] were called "Muslims." But since Prophet Muhammad was the last of God's messengers to mankind, a "Muslim" can now only be defined as one who accepts and complies with the final, completed message conveyed by God through him. For rationally, the most recently revised legislation always supersedes and invalidates whatever came before it.

Isn't it True that Islam is an Arab Religion?

This mistaken assumption is possibly based on the fact that Prophet Muhammad was an Arab, that most of the first generation of Muslims were Arabs, and that the Qur'an is in the Arabic language.

But in actual fact, only about 18 percent of Muslims in the world today are Arabs. The largest Muslim populations are found in Indonesia, the Indian sub-continent and other parts of Asia. Islam is also widespread in many parts of Africa, and there are substantial minorities in Europe, North and South America, and Oceania. Islam is the fastest growing major religion in the world, and its adherents on all continents include both Arabs and non-Arabs.

Further, not all Arabs are Muslims, for there are significant communities of Christian Arabs as well as a number who belong to other religions or profess atheism. While "Arab" is a geographic and cultural term, "Muslim" refers to an adherent to the religion of Islam.

While the revelation was still in its early stages, the Qur'an disclosed that Islam is indeed a global religion. Allah addressed His Prophet therein, saying:

"And We have not sent you but as a mercy to [all] the worlds." [21:107]

"And We have not sent you except comprehensively to mankind, as a bringer of good tidings and a warner, but most of the people do not know." [34:28]

Islam is meant for all people regardless of race, nationality, cultural or religious background. From the commencement of his mission, the Prophet's companions came from a wide range of lands and races. Among them was an African, a Byzantine, a Persian and a Jewish scholar. All were united in the brotherhood of faith.

There are many references in the Qur'an to the universal nature of Islam. It frequently addresses humanity, saying, "O mankind" or "O people." The Prophet, his companions and their followers made every effort to spread the message of truth to all nations and peoples. He naturally began the propagation of God's message among his own people, the Arabs, but that does not mean it was restricted to them - rather, only that initially conveying it to those nearest him was the logical first step toward the realization of a long-term goal. Later in his mission when conditions became more favourable, he sent letters of invitation to Islam to the rulers of the Byzantine and Persian Empires, Abyssinia, Egypt, Damascus, Bahrain, Yamamah, Oman and others who represented the influential world figures of the day.

Whatever, their response to it, the Prophet's message was fully acknowledged by the major powers of his time.

Don't all World Religions have Similar Objectives?

There are many areas in which religions agree, but there are also significant theological and practical differences between them. Undeniably, one will find in every religion expressions of wisdom, high moral values, warnings against evil, and promotion of good works. But what distinguishes Islam from other faiths is that it goes beyond simply urging people to be generous and morally upright. Islam identifies human problems and prescribes practical solutions to them, both individually and collectively.

Although there are a variety of religious communities in the world, each of them content with its own version of "the truth," Islam represents the completion of divinely revealed religion and the finalized legal code for mankind. For this reason the Qur'an states:

"Verily, the religion in the sight of God is Islam."[3:19]

The divine messages revealed prior to that of Prophet Muhammad all called for the worship of God alone and contained some legislation. However, each of them was addressed to a specific people at a specific period of time in order to remedy particular problems and circumstances such as moral degeneration, economic injustices and excessive materialism, misuse of power and political oppression. The final message of Islam addresses these same social evils but as part of a comprehensive program for the amendment, reform and benefit of every nation, community and individual that will exist until the end of the world.

The prophethood of Muhammad launched an era in which divine guidance became openly universal, more comprehensive in scope, and precisely detailed. The responsibility for man's fate and moral well-being depends completely on his own free choice and willing initiative to respond to the invitation of his Creator.

Do Muslims worship God or Allah?

One of the biggest misconceptions about Islam concerns the name "Allah." Some people believe that Muslims worship a different God than Christians, Jews and others, and some missionary organizations distribute literature in English in which they say such things as: "Allah is the god of the Muslims" and "Muhammad told people to believe in the god, Allah." They thus imply and reinforce the idea that "Allah" is some sort of false deity.

This is totally incorrect because "Allah" is the same word that Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews use for God. If you pick up an Arabic Bible, you will find the word "Allah" wherever "God" is used in English. "Allah" is also the proper name of God. Therefore, Muslims use the name "Allah" even when they speak other languages.

"Allah" is a special word. It indicates the only entity in existence who truly possesses the qualities of divinity and lordship, the Creator and Sustainer of the heavens and earth. It is the name of the only being worthy of worship, the one upon whom all creation is dependant at every moment. This name belongs to God alone and no one else.

"Allah" is the only word in the Arabic language equivalent to "God" with a capital "G." It is also a unique word grammatically since it cannot be made plural or given a masculine or feminine gender. This is consistent with the Islamic concept of God. In English and other languages the word "god" can be used in various forms such as "God," "gods" or "goddess," all with different connotations and meanings. The only difference between "god" (meaning a false god or any object of worship) and "God" (meaning the one true God) is a capital "G." Thus, a more accurate translation of "Allah" might be "the one and only true God."

But there is another important point, which is that Islam is particularly concerned with the correct concept of God.

Someone can have an erroneous concept of Him whether he uses the name "Allah" or the word "God." Followers of previous religions gradually deviated from the original pure belief in God due to the fact that their scriptures were not adequately protected from loss and alteration. None of these are still available for study in their original form or language.

But this is not true of the last divinely revealed message, the Qur'an. Hence, the accurate concept of God can be found therein.

If Islam opposes idol worship, why do Muslims pray to a square structure?

The simple cube-shaped stone building located in Makkah is called the Ka'bah or the Sacred House. It is the point toward which Muslims face when they pray. Although Muslims face the direction of Ka'bah during prayer, they do not worship it. Muslims worship and pray only to God.

The Ka'bah was built by the prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael in response to God's command over 4,000 years ago. Abraham consecrated the House for the worship of the one true God and invited all of humanity to visit it for that purpose. Even today Muslims who are physically and financially able are required to make a pilgrimage to it once in a lifetime. The Ka'bah has remained at the centre of a continuous tradition of worship and devotion up to the present day, symbolic of permanence, constancy and renewal.

There were periods in human history during which mankind deviated from the monotheism taught by God's prophets. Before the advent of Muhammad, religion among the Arabs had degenerated into polytheism and paganism, and Makkah was completely submerged in idolatry; some 360 idols had been placed in and around the Ka'bah to be worshipped there along with God. Prophet Muhammad was sent to restore to mankind the pure monotheism taught by all the messengers of God and reinstate the worship of Him alone. This he accomplished, and the Ka'bah was finally cleared of all manmade deities.

Among the ancient religious rites particular to the Ka'bah is walking around it. This suggests the integrating and unifying power of monotheism in human life and how a Muslim's existence should revolve around a pure devotion to God. The Ka'bah symbolizes the unity of all true religion, the brotherhood of all the prophets, and the essential consistency of their message.

When Muslims pray facing toward this single central point, they are reminded of their common purpose and long-term goal. Even when standing directly before the Ka'bah in prayer, one is not to look at it but rather at the ground before him. The spiritual focus is on God alone and never upon any created object.

What is the purpose of worship, and why should people worship at all?

The idea of servitude has become distasteful to the modern secular mindset which concerns itself with individual liberties. Some might say that humanity has no need to worship, and that doing so compromises freedom. They forget, however, that absolute freedom is neither possible nor even desirable for all members of a society, and that is why every social order has its laws and restrictions.

Studies in human psychology confirm that man is a worshipper by instinct, that worship is instilled in him as part of his nature, and that he tends to direct it to whatever he considers worthy - other human beings, revered customs or superstitions, materialist ideologies, or his own personal inclinations. An object of worship is that to which one devotes the greatest portion of his thought and effort. So one either worships God or he worships something other than Him - along with Him or instead of Him. The worship of God alone is liberating in that it frees one from servitude to all else.

Many people misunderstand the concept of worship, assuming that it is merely the practice of certain rituals. But in reality it includes everything done seeking the acceptance of the one worshipped. According to Islam, the worship of God means willing obedience to His orders and prohibitions which, besides prayer and other religious obligations, include the fulfilment of promises and agreements, honesty and precision in work, teaching and counselling, encouraging righteousness, assisting others, opposing injustice and so on.

Worship is the right of the Creator upon His Creation. It is based on the perception that everything was brought into existence by God and is dependent upon Him in whose hand is life and death, benefit and harm, and the outcome of every matter. Further, it is based on the knowledge that man is an accountable being in need of God's continuing guidance and acceptance. Islam confirms that although it is His divine right, God does not gain anything from the worship of His servants, nor is He harmed by their refusal. He ordains worship for the benefit of the worshipper himself, and this benefit is obtained by him or her in both this life and the next. When a believer understands that our Creator and Sustainer deserves to be worshipped, he wants to do so because of his gratitude and love for his Lord and because it is inherently right and correct.

Why only one God? Could He not create another God like Himself?

The implication here is that the existence of dual or plural deities is possible and hence probable in the view of a polytheist. However, if the questioner claims that God can create another like Himself, we ask, "How can this created being be God, who created all things, when it has itself been created? How can it be like God since it has a beginning, whereas God has existed from eternity? In reality, the phrase "create another God" is an erroneous contradiction because the mere fact that something is created means that it cannot be God. It is obviously illogical and irrational to say that something is God and cannot be God simultaneously.

The other implication in this question is that if we answer, "He cannot," then the power of God must be limited, negating His divinity. These suggestions are not valid because the absolute and unlimited power of God pertains to what is rationally possible and not what is rationally impossible. So when we say no, which is correct, it does not mean that the power of God is limited. Rather, it affirms the perfection of His power, meaning that He is not incapable of doing anything that is rationally possible.

Our minds cannot grasp the extent of His power, nor can our imaginations. Therefore, we must admit our inability to contain the essence and nature of God within the limits of our intellect.

What is the Purpose of our Creation?

Non-believers are unable to provide any convincing reason for the existence of this universe or of human life. People who believe there is a Creator assume that creation occurred by His will. But in a world where everything is shown to have a purpose, it is natural for a human being to wonder about the purpose of his own creation. One is surely justified in expecting the Creator who put us on this earth to inform us why He did so and what He expects of us.

The Qur'an informs us that He did just that. It says God created us for a test here on earth, conveying His words:

"Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you would not be returned?"[23:115-116]

A non-believer might decide that the objective of his life will be to collect wealth, obtain position or pursue pleasure to the greatest extent possible. But none of this will benefit him in the long run. According to His final scripture, God created man to test him with certain responsibilities [As stated in 18:7, 67:2 and 76:2]. He did not intend life on this earth to necessarily be comfortable or satisfying but merely a trial of limited duration, the punishment and rewards of which will be due in the Hereafter.

As mentioned previously, most of creation is "Muslim" in that it is programmed to obey the physical laws set by God, and (his is why the universe functions with balanced equilibrium. Man, however, was given a free will and the ability to either obey or disobey. But God will not allow His universal balance to be upset indefinitely by defiant, corrupt and sinful people, so He only grants human beings a measure of freedom in a temporary world. The scheme of birth, development, decline and death provides each with the opportunity to prove to himself without a doubt what he will deserve on the Day of Judgement, which God created for the manifestation of His ultimate justice.

This life is very meaningful and purposeful to the believing Muslim because he realizes that it will determine his outcome and permanent position in the next life. He lives to earn the approval of his Creator in preparation for the final return to Him.

We all recognize that people make things to perform specific functions for them, in other words, to serve them. God has made us to serve Him, but with one major difference; it is not for the benefit of the Creator Himself but for the benefit of us, His creation. The purpose of our existence is thus stated in the Qur'an:

"I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me." [51:56]

But man's worship of God is not automatic like the vast majority of created beings but by his own choice and effort, and this is what entitles him to honour and reward.

"How should one worship God in order to fulfil that purpose?" This question can undoubtedly best be answered by Him. God has provided every element of His creation, living and inanimate, with guidance. We can thus expect that He would provide us with guidance as well. His revelation instructs humanity what to do, what to avoid, and the reason for it. It informs man what is expected of him, how to accomplish it, and the results of continual positive effort. Through Prophet Muhammad, God revealed to man the ways of worship suitable to his physical and psychological nature and individual talents, and in harmony with his particular role on the earth. These, in combination, are what enable Him to fulfil the purpose of His creation.

How do you know there is Life after Death?

We live in a world that demands logic and proof and is not content with only belief. Someone might wonder how a rational, practical minded person could believe in life after death. People tend to assume that anyone who believes in the Hereafter does so on the basis of blind faith. But in fact, belief in the Hereafter is completely logical. And it is the only way the injustices of this world can be reconciled with a just and all- powerful Creator.

We know that in addition to physical pleasures and comforts there are certain ideal conditions that human beings instinctively desire and strive to attain, such as love, respect, security and contentment. Though many people are able to acquire a portion of these objectives here on earth, there remains one that is largely unobtainable - and that is justice.

Most people hold the conviction that life is not fair: that they have often been misunderstood or not appreciated, that in some way they have been harmed, cheated or oppressed. Daily newscasts disclose the killing, torture, displacement and starvation of countless innocent people by powerful tyrants and nations, lives ruined by the vicious or careless acts of others or by natural disasters, and the poor and helpless being subjected to theft and deception. Seldom is even partial justice ever restored. Yet, every human being desires justice. Even if he does not seek it for others, he certainly wants justice for himself.

So why has the Creator instilled in man a longing for something he cannot experience in this world? The answer is that this life is only one portion of his existence and that the logical conclusion which restores the equilibrium found in all creation is in the Hereafter. It is there that every person will be fully and precisely compensated for his good and evil deeds. This is the perfect and absolute justice which God has promised all people.

The present life is a trial in preparation for the next realm of existence. The explanation given by the Qur'an about the necessity of life after death is what the moral consciousness of man demands. If there was no life after death, the belief in God would be meaningless, or it would be a belief in some kind of indifferent and negligent deity who, after having created the human race, is no longer concerned with its welfare.

But certainly, God is just. He will indeed punish the tyrants who have killed thousands and caused suffering to their families, corrupted institutions and societies, enslaved people and nations, robbed, deprived and plundered. And what about those who patiently endured so much injustice and hardship, suffered to uphold truth, saved lives or sacrificed in order to assist many people? What earthly compensations could possibly restore the balance for them?

This can only take place in an eternal life where every individual affected in the least by someone's actions will testify for or against him, and where the innermost thoughts and intentions, known completely to God, will be judged precisely and perfectly. Since man's term of life in this world is limited and because numerous individuals are affected by one's actions, adequate rewards and punishments are impossible in the present life. The Qur'an states categorically that the Day of Resurrection must come and that God will then decree the fate of each soul according to its record of deeds.

Additionally, God has stated in the Qur'an that the present creation is in itself a clear proof that He is able to create and re-create as He wills, whatever He wills, however He wills and whenever He wills, for God originates and repeats creation with equal ease. Consider these words revealed to His final Prophet:

"Say, 'Travel through the land and observe how He began creation. Then Allah will produce the final creation.'"[29:20]

"Did We fail in the first creation? But they are in confusion over a new creation."[50:15]

"Is not He who created the heavens and the earth able to create the likes of them? Yes, and He is the Knowing Creator."[36:81]

"Do they not see that Allah, who created the heavens and earth and did not fail in their creation, is able to give life to the dead?"[46:33]

"Does man not remember that We created him before, while he was nothing?"[19:67]

"And you have already known the first creation, so will you not remember?"[56:62]

"Have they not considered how Allah begins creation and then repeats it? Indeed that, for Allah, is easy."[29:19]

"And it is He who begins creation; then He repeats it, and that is easier for Him."[30:27]

"As We began the first creation, We will repeat it. [That is] a promise binding upon Us. Indeed, We will do it."[21:104]

In fact, the material of creation is already in existence, merely to be developed once again at His command. Observable evidence of this ongoing process is now being presented regularly by astronomers and specialists in other fields of modern science.

Are the Good Deeds of Non-believers Rewarded?

Prophet Muhammad disclosed that God rewards according to the intention of each individual. The non-believer expects to be rewarded for his deeds in the present life because he denies or doubts the existence of another life after his death. Thus, he is keen that people should recognize what he does; when he is praised and his deed publicized, he is pleased, for this is the reward he sought. He might also obtain a sum of money in payment for it or a prize. This is the compensation he likes most, and God grants it to him. But he is not given additional reward in the Hereafter simply because he neither desired it nor worked for it.

The believer, on the other hand, is not duly concerned with compensation in this life because he is striving for the greater eternal reward of the Hereafter. He does so by worshipping God as He stipulated and by working patiently, honestly and correctly to the best of his ability, even when no person appreciates his efforts. Because his deeds are done seeking God's acceptance, they are appreciated by Him and rewarded.

Islam teaches that there are two conditions for God's approval and reward of any deed: 1) that it is done explicitly for His acceptance and approval and 2) that it is consistent with the methods ordained by Him. In other words, a person must work for God according to the terms He has specified and not according to his own preferences or those of other people. In order to know exactly what God expects of His servants, it is necessary to refer to the legislation revealed by Him in its final form through Muhammad, the final prophet.

Why should someone be a Muslim? Can't we follow any religion we please?

There are many people who follow the teachings of a religion as best they can and others who believe in God in some way without practicing any formal religion.[Anyone to whom God's message was not adequately conveyed yet believed in Him and tried to worship Him with sincere intention will be judged by God according to what is in his heart and mind, for He is the ultimate judge of all affairs. The Qur'an states that God never punishes a people until after He has sent them a messenger with the clear order to worship their Creator alone without any associates. It also states that He does not punish for what people are unable to know or what is beyond their capability] Many have abandoned the thought that there could be any true religion because nearly all religions claim to be true. And some allow that all religions are legitimate paths to God and are acceptable to Him. So how is Islam different from other religions?

Islam has several unique features which can be confirmed through deeper study:

1. Islam is the only religion whose sources have remained free of human alteration and interference.
2. Its divinely revealed scripture is in harmony with established facts of science, clearly bearing the signature of the Creator of this universe.
3. Islam provides answers to the essential fundamental questions which occur to the mind of every intelligent person, those related to the purpose of creation and life, and concerning a further existence after death.
4. Islam is the only religion which insists upon worship of the Creator alone and completely rejects the worship of any aspect of creation.
5. Islam dispenses with all intermediaries between man and God and allows every individual to contact Him directly, thus eliminating religious hierarchies and other sources of exploitation which have characterized the history of religions throughout the ages. In Islam no cleric or establishment can come between a person and his Creator.
6. While monotheistic faiths share a fundamental belief in God, their understanding of Him differs greatly. Islam declares that God is unique and in no way similar to any of His creation; nor does He merge with it in any form. His attributes are those of complete and absolute perfection without the slightest deficiency or limitation.
7. Unlike other religions and ideologies which emphasize some aspects of human nature at the expense of others, Islam accommodates the physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects of man. Islamic beliefs and practices are natural and appeal to common sense. They present a balanced program of life that fulfils both physical and spiritual needs.
8. Islam prohibits blind following without knowledge and is based upon evidence and logic. The rational mind is the basis for religious accountability and responsibility. All aspects of Islamic belief are clear, without any obscurity or ambiguity. It contains no tenet that contradicts reason or observable reality, and it calls on people to study and contemplate as a means of strengthening faith.

9. Islam's religious, moral, economic, political and social ethics are permanent and remain constant. They are governed by a set of unchanging principles which include such universal values as justice, freedom, equality, brotherhood and social responsibility. History provides an outstanding example in the model Islamic society established by Prophet Muhammad and his companions and maintained for decades by devoted Muslims, where truth and transparency, justice, and compassion were implemented as a vital expression of the religion.

Islam also declares that it is the religion of truth, for this is stated unambiguously in the Qur'an. However, the Creator does not force His preference on anyone. He wants people to accept right guidance by their own choice and free will because that is what makes them worthy of His approval and reward. The Qur'an states:

" There is no compulsion in [accepting] religion. The truth has been made distinct from falsehood."[2:256]

"Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so hasten to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together

Isn't Islam fatalistic?

Muslims know that all things are from God and occur by His will. Thus, they tend to worry less about material matters and view the life of this world in proper perspective. A Muslim believer relies completely on God and knows that whatever happens is always for the best, whether he recognizes it or not, so he graciously accepts whatever cannot be changed.

However, this does not mean that a Muslim sits around awaiting destiny and takes no positive action in life. On the contrary, Islam demands action and effort to change every undesirable situation, and this is a requirement of the faith. It totally rejects the teaching that one should not go to a doctor when ill but only pray to God for cure. If human beings had no ability to act, God could not justly expect them to do and not to do certain things. Far from being "fatalistic," Islam teaches that man's main obligation in life is to exert effort in obedience to God, which includes seeking benefit and avoiding harm.

Islam teaches that human beings should take positive action in life and supplement it with prayer. Some people are lazy and careless and then blame the negative result on destiny or fate. Some even say that if God had willed, they would not have sinned or committed crimes. All this is entirely incorrect because He has provided complete guidance and instruction on how to live and has ordered upright conduct at all times. God has not ordered anything that man cannot do or prohibited anything he cannot avoid because His justice is complete and perfect. Each individual is held responsible within the limits of his own ability, but not beyond it.

Although our deeds and our destiny are decreed by God and known to Him, it does not mean He compels us to do anything. Rather, He willed to give us options about our course of

action; and thus, whatever decisions we make are within the framework of His will. God knows what every person will choose to do and then allows him to do it, while not necessarily approving of his choice. While He does not call anyone to account for what is beyond his control, human beings are indeed responsible for every free choice they make, and they will find the consequences of their choices and actions in both this life and the next.

"Cause and effect" is a natural law created by God to be utilized by His creatures. It is the law by which one's destiny is determined. So the destiny of each individual is predetermined by God, but it is also the direct result and consequence of his or her own choices and actions, and this is what the Creator has willed and decreed.

Are there sects in Islam?

Islam is one path, has one direction, and is based on one methodology -- that which Prophet Muhammad taught according to the instruction he received from God. The religion God ordained for mankind was meant to be a unifying factor. In fact, He addressed mankind in the Qur'an, saying:

"And this is My path, which is straight, so follow it, and do not follow [other] ways for they will separate you from His way." [6:153 The subtitle change in the verse from first to third person expresses the progressive process of distancing oneself from God's path]

This divine command emphatically makes it binding on all Muslims to be united as one community of believers; thus, all forms of schism and sectarianism are un-Islamic.

The Prophet's companions and following generations adhered very closely to the path of God, and thus He protected them from separating in this manner. But with later generations certain factors led to the emergence of divisions and divergence, among them: increasing concern with worldly affairs, the influence of non-Muslim cultures, and political rivalries. Initially, some small groups split off from the path adhered to by the majority of Muslims. They introduced innovations into the religion and followed opinions differing from the original teachings of the Prophet.

These schisms were rejected and opposed by the recognized scholars of Islam and the majority of Muslims, which meant that initially they were contained and that their influence did not become widespread during the major part of Islamic history. The majority of Muslims remained on the Sunni [A Sunni is one who takes his religion from the Qur'an and Sunnah, i.e., the authentically narrated teachings of Prophet Muhammad as practiced by him and his righteous followers.] path, and whenever forms of deviation emerged among them, the pious scholars always hastened to oppose them and point out their error.

Prophet Muhammad foretold that such divergences would emerge. He warned against schism and instructed Muslims to remain within the main body of Islam.

Nevertheless, over the centuries a number of people have deviated and corrupted their religion, forming sects that claim to belong to Islam but whose stated beliefs are clearly contrary to it. Some have distorted the concept of God and attributed to Him what is unfitting or incompatible with His divine status - claiming, for example, that everything in existence is God or that He is incarnate or present within His creation, while the Qur'an states that He is superior to His creation and distinct from it. And some have been misguided regarding various major tenets of Islam to the degree that they no longer submit to God and obey Him, while others have innovated and changed some of the prescribed forms of worship.

Those sects which deviated from mainstream Islam are not the same as the schools of Islamic jurisprudence [The Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali schools and a few others less known] which developed within it and are based on the immutable principles of the faith. These eminent schools of thought have provided a vision of the highest degree of scholarship for Islamic legislation and serve to complement one another. Differences and disagreements within the framework of Islam do not become matters of partisanship and intolerance except among the extremely ignorant.

Islam recognizes the individuality of human beings and that not all diversity of opinion and difference in analysis is negative. However, the kind of dissension that leads to divisions and sectarianism has been denounced in the Qur'an:

"Indeed, those who have divided their religion and become sects -you, [O Muhammad], are not [associated] with them in anything. Their affair is only [left] to Allah; then He will inform them about what they used to do."[6:159]

Although Muslims now appear to be divided more than ever before, the number of divisions in Islam remain fewer than in other religions. One can still find many Islamic associations calling people to truth, proclaiming God's original message, and naming against that which is contrary to it. Salvation does not depend on affiliation with any specific group but rather on true faith proven by obedience to God and upright conduct in the manner revealed by Him.

Who was Muhammad?

Muhammad bin Abdullah was a descendant of Prophet Abraham through his son, Ishmael, [Isaac, another son of Abraham, was the ancestor of the Children of Israel, among whom a number of prophets were raised.] and was from the prominent Arab tribe of Quraysh. He was not the founder of Islam but its final prophet and the last messenger sent by God to the world as a mercy to mankind. Every detail of his private life and public speech has been documented and carefully preserved up to the present day.

During the 23-year period of his prophethood, he changed the entire Arabian Peninsula from paganism to worship of the one true God, from tribal warfare to national unity, from anarchy to disciplined living, from barbarism to the highest standard of moral excellence. At the time of his death most inhabitants of Arabia and the southern regions of Iraq and Palestine had

voluntarily embraced Islam. To posterity he left a creed of pure monotheism that included comprehensive legislation based on a balanced system of moral values.

No other man in history excelled in so many different aspects of life. He not only taught and established the religion but founded a state, initiated numerous political and social reforms, built a powerful and dynamic society, and completely revolutionized the realm of human thought and behaviour - all within just over two decades.

His coming was foretold in previous scriptures, and he was described therein. The honest and open-minded among the Jews and Christians recognized him from those descriptions and believed in his message. But the message he communicated was not meant for a particular people, place or period; it was a global message. Muhammad was appointed to instruct all of mankind and invite humanity to the same objective as did the prophets before him: the worship of God alone without associates or intermediaries.

There is explicit evidence for the prophethood of Muhammad. As the revelation descended upon him, his companions noticed certain effects on his body; however, he never lost consciousness or showed any signs of illness. His life was protected by God during times of severe danger throughout the entire period of his prophethood until the divine message was complete. Like the prophets before him, Muhammad was supported with miracles, but by far the greatest of them was the Qur'an, an eternal miracle containing evidences for people of intellect for all time to come.

Prophet Muhammad was chosen by the Creator of the universe and of mankind to invite all people to correct beliefs and follow the pure way of life preferred by Him, and to demonstrate the measures and methods leading to His acceptance. He spared no effort and no sacrifice in carrying out this duty for the benefit of mankind. Through him, God made known truth from falsehood and wisdom from error. And through him He showed man how to attain eternal Paradise. Thus, Prophet Muhammad directed humanity to the one divine source of values and rules of conduct.

Do Muslims worship Muhammad?

Islam is based on uncompromising monotheism. God alone is to be worshipped and nothing else, so Muslims cannot worship Muhammad or any other human being.[The basis for this misconception actually comes from the early orientalists who called Islam "Mohammedanism," implying that Muslims worship Muhammad]Like all prophets he was a man, and despite his extraordinary accomplishments he never claimed divine status. Rather, he always maintained that he was human like everyone else, that he spoke nothing of his own accord, and that the Qur'an was a message from God, revealed to him by God, to whom alone belongs all glory and praise. He never took personal credit for any success. All the principles he taught, the legislation he pronounced, and the great achievements for which he could have attained personal renown and advantage were attributed to the guidance and support of God alone.

Muslims strive to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad. Additionally, Islam teaches Muslims to respect all of God's prophets and messengers. However, respecting and loving them does not mean worshipping them, for all forms of worship must be directed only to the Creator.

Muhammad was himself a devout worshipper of God. He gave away everything he obtained in charity, fasted often, and would spend a great portion of the night in prayer. He was constantly aware of his Lord, remembering Him in every situation, and his words of praise and supplication reflected the highest degree of sincerity and servitude. His entire life was dedicated to the cause of God. He called on people to worship God alone, and insisted that they refer to him as merely a servant of God, telling his followers, "Do not exaggerate in praise of me as the Christians did with Jesus, son of Mary. I am only His servant, so say, 'the servant of Allah and His messenger.'"

Why should Muhammad be the Final Prophet? Haven't there been others after him?

Prophethood is not something acquired by a person who proves himself worthy, nor is it granted in recognition of piety. Prophethood is an office to which God appoints a man in order to fill a particular need. The Qur'an mentions four conditions under which prophets were sent to the world:

1. When no prophet had ever been sent to a people before and no divine message had reached them
2. When the message of an earlier prophet had been forgotten by the people or the teachings of former prophets had been altered with time
3. When a second prophet was needed to assist a first one
4. When a people had not yet received complete instruction from God

In each of these cases a prophet was appointed to convey divine revelation, updating previous messages and correcting deviations that man had introduced into the religion of God.

After God's message was completed through revelation to Muhammad and its preservation guaranteed, there was no further need for messengers to convey revelation; only for teachers and reformers to remind people of what God had revealed. [The Qur'an states: "Muhammad is not the father of [any] one of your men, but [he is] the Messenger of Allah and seal [i.e., last] of the prophets." (33:40)] From the time of Muhammad's prophethood, conditions in the world have been conducive to the transmission of God's message to all civilizations, making the appointment of additional prophets unnecessary. This final message has undergone no amendment or alteration by man; not a single word has been added to it or deleted from it.

If God intended to send another prophet after Muhammad, He would have made that fact clear in the Qur'an or commanded His Messenger to declare that a prophet would follow him. But the Qur'an clearly affirms that God has now completed His divine mission through Prophet Muhammad. [God stated therein: "This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favour upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion." (5:3)] Therefore, the office of prophethood has been cancelled, enabling the world to unite in allegiance to the final prophet and obedience to God. For everyone who accepts Muhammad as the divinely appointed final messenger will seek instruction only within the message he conveyed.

Didn't Muhammad write the Qur'an or borrow from the earlier scriptures?

Opponents of Islam sometimes allege that Muhammad himself wrote the Qur'an or that he copied or adapted it from previous scriptures. But it is known that the Prophet's contacts with Jews and Christians was negligible before his emigration from Makkah, and after it his role was that of a teacher, openly inviting the Jews and Christians to accept Islam while pointing out how they had diverged from the true monotheism taught by their prophets.

It is true that there are some similarities between the Qur'an and the Bible, but this does not indicate that later prophets plagiarized from former ones. It merely reflects the common source, which is the Creator of mankind, and the continuance of His basic message of monotheism. Moreover, there was no Arabic version of the Bible in existence at the time of Prophet Muhammad. The earliest Arabic version of the Old Testament is that of R. Saadiah Gaon of 900 CE - more than 250 years after the death of Prophet Muhammad. And the oldest Arabic version of the New Testament was published by Erpenius in 1616 CE - about 1000 years after his death.

Historically and logically, it cannot be established that there was any human source for the Qur'an or that the Messenger of Allah learned it from the Jews or Christians. His enemies kept a close watch on him hoping to find confirmation of their claim that he was a liar. But they could not point to a single instance when the Prophet might have had secret meetings with people of other faiths.

It was a sign of Muhammad's prophethood that he was illiterate. Thus, he could not be credited with composing or editing the revelations, and suspicion that he learned what he preached from earlier scriptures is eliminated. At the time the Qur'an was revealed, his contemporaries among the Arabs, known for linguistic eloquence, acknowledged that its language was unique and distinctly different from the speech of Muhammad, a man they knew well. The Qur'an states that the Prophet was an unlettered man, so if that had not been true, his opponents would surely have exposed him. There is, however, not a single report to this effect, and no one denied his illiteracy. At the same time, no one denied that the Qur'an was unequalled in eloquence, impact and clarity, including those who rejected its message.

It is not difficult to verify that Muhammad did not possess knowledge of many things mentioned in the Qur'an, such as historical events, natural phenomena and future occurrences. The kind of information he conveyed could not have been obtained through reading and research, so it was obviously something that could only have come directly from the Creator. The Qur'an states in several places that Muhammad and his people did not know these facts, so had it been otherwise, his adversaries would have capitalized on that claim to discredit him. Only recently, within the last two centuries, have advancements in research technology led to the discovery of facts that were mentioned in the Qur'an by the unlettered prophet over fourteen centuries ago. Here are a few examples:

1.The creation of the universe from a single entity and of life from water: "Have those who disbelieved not considered that the heavens and the earth were a joined entity, and We separated them and made from water every living thing?"[Qur'an 21:30]

2.All creation is based on duality, made up of pairs, counterparts or opposites: "And of all things We created two mates."[Qur'an, 51:49. In contrast, God is one, with no counterpart and nothing resembling Him in any way.]

1.The different natures of the sun and moon: "It is He [Allah] who made the sun a shining light and the moon a derived light and determined for it phases - that you may know the number of years and account [of time]."[Qur'an, 10:5. Other verses (25:61 and 71:16) refer to the sun as a burning lamp.]

2.The rotation of the earth: "He created the heavens and earth in truth. He wraps the night over the day and wraps the day over the night."[Qur'an, 39:5. The alternate "wrapping" of sunlight and darkness is caused by the earth's turning in one direction.]

3.The expansion of the universe: "And the heaven We constructed with strength, and indeed, We are [its] expander."[Qur'an 51:47. The Creator refers to Himself in the plural form which denotes power, grandeur and majesty]

1.The sun is not stationary but moves in a specific direction for a limited term: "And the sun runs [on course] toward its stopping point."[Qur'an, 36:38. The sun, as a tiny member of this vast universe, is progressing within it toward a final destination, which indicates an end to the present creation.]

These are words recited by Muhammad, the unlettered prophet. The Qur'an addresses recently established scientific facts with the precision of a scientist. Could the most highly literate, well read or scholarly man of that period, or even of the centuries that followed, possibly have come up with anything similar?

[How does the Qur'an differ from other Scriptures?](#)

The Qur'an was revealed over 1400 years ago. It states in no uncertain terms that it is a revelation from God conveyed by the angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad. It is regarded,

not only by Muslims but by scholars of religion and historians, as the most authentic religious text in existence today. Unlike earlier scriptures the Qur'an has been preserved unchanged in its original Arabic text since the time of revelation, as God had promised within it. [Its preservation was guaranteed when God revealed: "Indeed, it is We who sent down the message, and indeed, We will be its guardian." (15:9) Note: God often refers to Himself in the Qur'an as "We," which does not denote plurality, but rather, power and majesty]

History witnessed the fulfilment of that promise, for the Book of God remains to date exactly as it was revealed to the Prophet and recited by him. Immediately memorized and recorded by large numbers of his companions, it was passed on in exactly the same form by thousands of Muslims generation after generation up until the present day. The Qur'an of today is literally the same scripture as was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. There is no other book in the history of man that has been memorized precisely and accurately, word for word, letter for letter, by millions of people over the centuries. This in itself is a miracle.

There is only one version of the Qur'an; the same revealed words continue to be read, recited and memorized in their original Arabic language by Muslims throughout the world. Translations of the meanings into other languages assist in understanding but cannot be called "the Qur'an," as this term refers only to the actual revealed words of God.

The Qur'an contains God's final message to humanity and legislation which encompasses all spheres of human life. It is allied to all peoples and all times. It appeals to logic, following clear reasoning and citing evidences from the created universe, from history and from the human soul to establish not only the existence of God but also His uniqueness and absolute perfection. It also contains answers to the questions which naturally occur to the human mind about the purpose of creation and what occurs after death.

It is the primary source of the Islamic creed and its legislation. But in addition to religious guidance it contains numerous verses that speak of the universe, its components and phenomena - the earth, sun, moon, stars, mountains, wind, rivers and seas, plants, animals and successive stages of human development. As can be seen from examples in the previous chapter, the Qur'an speaks with the perfect knowledge of the Creator about His creation. Being the final revelation to mankind, God has made the Qur'an a continuing miracle containing evidences to be uncovered gradually as humans increase in knowledge of their universe.

But its main purpose is to guide mankind as to how one should relate to his Creator, to his fellow men, and to the universe in general. It outlines the practical methods of earning the approval of God and obtaining peace and contentment in the permanent existence to come. By following its guidance, man can fully experience his human worth and his special position among created beings. The Qur'an was revealed containing complete guidance in all matters of faith and its application to the affairs of human life in order that everyone might attain the happiness and contentment of this world and the next.

Is it true that Muslims don't believe in Jesus? What does Islam say about him?

One cannot be a Muslim if he does not believe in Jesus as well as all other prophets sent by God [The Qur'an names twenty-five prophets and messengers and suggests that there were many more], including Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, Solomon, Moses and Muhammad. Muslims have the highest regard for Jesus and await his second coming.

The Islamic view of Jesus is one between two extremes. The Jews rejected his prophethood and called him an impostor, while many Christians regard him as the son of God and worship him as such. Islam considers Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, as one of the great prophets of God, worthy of respect and honour but not worship. He was sent to confirm and renew the basic doctrine of belief in God alone and obedience to Him.

According to the Qur'an, he was born miraculously without a father. [Refer to Qur'an, 19:16-35] And he was not crucified but raised up to God. [Refer to Qur'an, 3:55 and 4:157-158] The Qur'an attributes to him miracles that are not even mentioned in the Bible. However, Islam sees the deification of Jesus as a reversion to paganism, and the divinity of Jesus is categorically rejected within the Qur'an's text [Refer to 5:72]. Such doctrines as the "trinity," "divine sonship" and "atonement" are not accepted by Muslims simply because they did not originate from Prophet Jesus himself.

It is known that most of the Gospels were written by men long after the time of Jesus and that much of the New Testament was compiled from the writings of Paul and his students. Unmistakable contradictions have appeared in the various "modern," "revised" and "amplified" versions of the Bible. The once purely divine message conveyed by Jesus has obviously been corrupted by human input and altered through numerous translations; the original texts no longer exist.

The Gospels were written several decades after Jesus' departure, and none of their authors had actually seen Jesus or heard him speak. Moreover, they were written in Greek while Jesus spoke Aramaic. Those Gospels presently in circulation were not selected from among the others and authorized by the Church until the decisions of the ecumenical Council of Nicea in the year 325 CE.

Nevertheless, belief in the divine scripture, not in its present form but as it was originally revealed to Prophet Jesus, is an article of Islamic faith. The final revelation from God is the only criterion by which information in previous scriptures can be evaluated. Therefore, whatever the Bible says about Jesus that agrees with the Qur'an is accepted by Muslims, and what is contrary to it is rejected as a product of human intervention.

What is Shari'ah?

The Arabic word "shari'ah" refers to the laws and way of life prescribed by God for his servants. It deals with ideology, faith, behaviour, manners and matters of daily life. We recognize that customs and traditions, good taste, and civil law all have some authority over people in every culture, preventing them from doing certain things and obliging them to do others. So it is to be expected that religion, too, would have some authority over people. In Islam, this authority rightfully belongs to God and is derived from His final revelation.

The Islamic Shari'ah is a divinely ordained legal system whose primary objective is benefit to mankind. Its principles are designed to protect people from evil and direct them to what is best in all aspects of life. Moreover, its benefit is for everyone - rich and poor, rulers and ruled, men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, whose right to worship and manage their personal and family affairs according to their own norms is explicit. The Shari'ah provides injunctions that guarantee justice, promote the general welfare, preserve order, safeguard human rights, and define responsibilities.

Its established constants are derived from the texts of the Qur'an and teachings of Prophet Muhammad, and have been confirmed by a consensus of Muslim scholars both in theory and practice. These basic principles are agreed upon by all, while differences over variables are acceptable and, in fact, provide the flexibility necessary for the system to accommodate changing circumstances.

Besides defining methods of Islamic worship, the Shari'ah provides an outline for thought and education based upon such moral values as justice, generosity, chastity, honesty, mercy and respect for humanity in general. It provides the standard for social and political issues - the choice of a ruler, consultation within the government, opposition to injustice, defence of truth and right, individual and collective duties, intellectual enlightenment based on evidences and proofs, respect and tolerance for the viewpoints of others, and the encouragement of open and frank discussions.

Generally, anything that is neither known to be harmful nor mentioned as forbidden in Islamic law is permitted. In what pertains to daily life, all is allowed except for what was explicitly prohibited in the Qur'an or by Prophet Muhammad, and this includes everything harmful, whether or not it is considered so by limited human perception. What is forbidden in Islam is a small segment of the whole, so that what is permitted is sufficient to make what is forbidden unnecessary. For example, the encouragement and facilitation of lawful marriage greatly reduces the temptation toward fornication and adultery. When Islam forbids sexual relations outside the framework of marriage, the aim is to purify individuals and societies physically and morally. Similarly, interest can be replaced by lawful business gains, gambling replaced by competition in sport and religion, fornication replaced by lawful marriage, and forbidden food and drink replaced by healthy food and drink.

The general purpose and objectives of the Shari'ah do not change. It clearly defines what is prohibited and considers all other things to be permissible. Only harmful things have been prohibited, and whatever has benefit has been permitted. Islamic legislation maintains a balance between the needs of the individual and society, allowing neither to outweigh the other.

The inner deterrent of man's moral conscience is fully integrated with external supervision. Islam stresses the role of the individual conscience and is concerned with cultivating within it the fear and love of God and the hope for His mercy. This ensures that an individual will be responsive to the commandments of God even when there is no external monitoring system and that he or she will voluntarily avoid what is prohibited. However, the system does not rely exclusively upon the conscience. It complements its role by providing laws to be upheld by society and enforced by the judicial authority.

It is true that the system includes a few severe penalties for certain types of criminals, but in practice, crime has always been drastically reduced within societies that applied Islamic Shari'ah, and this is the real purpose of its legislation. Crime and punishment cannot be treated as separate issues. When the Shari'ah is considered in totality, one finds that initially every measure is taken to provide what is lawful and block all avenues leading to the unlawful. Moreover, punishment cannot be applied unless it is established beyond any doubt that the crime was committed by someone of legal age and sound mind having knowledge of its prohibition and without being under the least compulsion. Further, an additional burden of providing trustworthy witnesses in some cases makes conviction highly unlikely. In light of the numerous constraints, a determined transgressor, once convicted in a court of law, may rightly be made an example as a further deterrent to others. Thus, the system is not only just but most merciful to society as a whole.

On another level, the Shari'ah operates to satisfy the sense of justice of the victim and his heirs. Contrary to what some people suppose, there is no capital punishment for murder. Retribution is a legal decision given to the victim's family and carried out by the courts according to their instruction. They have three options:

1. They can demand that the state executes the murderer on their behalf.
2. They can opt instead for a payment of blood money from the murderer.
3. They can forgive the murderer and forgo any kind of compensation.

Forgiveness in this world, however, does not necessarily mean acquittal in the Hereafter. A would-be offender is deterred not only by the threat of physical or pecuniary punishments, he is first and foremost accountable before God, who may forgive or punish as He sees fit.

One of the features of Islamic legislation is that it has a moderate approach to issues and problems regarding the relationship between the individual and society. The Shari'ah has left particular areas open for scholars to make interpretive judgments according to changing norms and circumstances. It responds to the demands of social progress in a way that keeps it compatible with the practical realities of a changing world and reconciles the issue of progress with that of ideological continuity, striking a balance between progress and continuity in matters of human life. At the same time, it maintains continuity in its primary goals and objectives. Its religious, moral, economic and social values remain constant, governed by a set of unchanging principles.

What are the "pillars" of Islam?

The "five pillars" are the main requirements of Islam. Like the pillars of a building, the religion can neither stand nor be completed without them. These requirements are:

The declaration of faith

To be a Muslim, one must believe in and pronounce words which mean, "I testify that there is no deity other than God [Allah], and I testify that Muhammad is His servant and messenger." It expresses the belief that God exists, that He is unlike and superior to His creation, and that none is worthy to be worshipped but Him. And it confirms that Muhammad is among the prophets who conveyed God's revelation to mankind. Thus the Qur'an, being the final message revealed by God, and the authentically narrated teachings of His final prophet are the basis of the religion, completing and superseding all that came before it, and they define the Islamic way of life. It is a declaration by the believer of acknowledgement and willing obedience.

The performance of regular prayer

Prayer was practiced in some form throughout history by all the prophets and their followers as an indispensable part of God's religion. Islam, the final stage of monotheistic religion, considers prayer essential. A Muslim prays five times daily within specified intervals, as taught by the Prophet. These prayers are obligatory and are a direct and continuous bond between the worshipper and his Creator. Most believers are inclined also to pray additional voluntary prayers whenever convenient, as it was the practice of their Prophet.

Zakah (obligatory annual expenditure)

An important principle of Islam is that all things belong to God and that all wealth, possessions and properties are held by human beings in trust. Muslims are commanded to obtain and spend their wealth in lawful ways. The divinely ordained system of zakah is the right of Allah within His dominion. It is neither a charity nor a tax but an obligation due from those Muslims who possess wealth in excess of their basic needs. It is the ideal way to meet the needs of the poorer sections of society without causing hardship to the rich. The word "zakah" means purification and growth. Its regular payment purifies the owner's remaining wealth and purifies his heart from such ailments as greed and selfishness. Every Muslim calculates his own zakah individually, and in most cases it involves the payment of two and a half percent of his excess capital or savings each year.

Fasting

Islamic fasting, which involves abstinence from eating, drinking, smoking and marital intercourse, is observed throughout the daylight hours of the lunar month of Ramadhan. Done in obedience to God's command, it teaches believers patience and self-control, as well as reminding them of their responsibility toward the millions of human beings who lack adequate food and provisions or are victims of their unjust distribution. The month of fasting

is accompanied by increased efforts toward good manners and righteous deeds, along with additional worship at night. It is not a retreat from life but rather a supplement to the Muslim's ordinary activities.

Hajj

Hajj, the annual pilgrimage, is an obligation once in a lifetime only for those who are physically and financially able to perform it. In spite of that, over two million Muslims journey to Makkah each year from every corner of the globe, providing a unique opportunity for people of various nations and cultures to meet one another as guests of God. Hajj is an expression of pure faith and total submission to His command, and the pilgrim performs rites of unqualified obedience, seeking nothing but the Creator's acceptance of his efforts and forgiveness of his past sins. He returns home with a fresh outlook on life, a purified soul, and I blessings from his Lord.

Why is alcohol prohibited?

In Islam all things which are harmful or whose harm exceeds Ilu-ir benefit are unlawful. This includes every substance that affects the mind, damages it or decreases its abilities. Therefore, alcohol would be deemed unlawful even if it were not clearly prohibited in the Qur'an and prophetic traditions. For anything that causes harm in any way is considered unlawful. [Some people claim that they can exercise self-control and never get intoxicated. But investigations reveal that every alcoholic began as a social drinker. No one initially starts drinking with the intention of becoming an addict. It just happens along the way]

There are a number of medical reasons for the prohibition of alcohol consumption. Alcohol has been the scourge of human society since time immemorial. It continues to take countless human lives and cause misery to millions throughout the world. And it affects the mind, diminishing the individual's menial powers and making him accustomed to running away from his problems. It affects his finances as well, due to the expenditure that his generally expensive habit forces upon him. There is no need to go into detail about all the ill effects of alcohol since most of them are commonly known.

Because alcohol incapacitates the inhibitory centre in the brain, an inebriated person is often found to be indulging in behaviour that is completely uncharacteristic - using abusive language, becoming aggressive and violent, or committing shameful acts. Statistics showing a rising number of deaths, soaring crime rates, increasing instances of mental illness, and millions of broken homes throughout the world bear witness to the destructive effect of drinking alcohol.

The harm that results from alcohol is not limited only to the one who drinks; it is also damaging to others. The diseases caused by alcohol weaken society as a whole. Productivity is decreased due to its effects, and crimes result from addiction. According to a World Health Organization report on violent crimes in 30 countries, 86% of murders and 50% of rapes are

carried out under the influence of alcohol. There are similar statistics in most countries around the world. Additionally, public health officials have estimated that half of the road accidents resulting in deaths and permanent disabilities are caused by people under the influence of alcohol.

Islam agrees that prevention is the best treatment. However, Muslims do not abstain from drugs and intoxicants due to its detrimental effects, but rather, because God has prohibited them. So abstention is a form of worship and obedience for which they are rewarded by God in the Hereafter, as well as protecting them from harm in the present life.

Why is pork prohibited?

Again, obedience to God in this matter is the primary motivation, while prohibition is based on the principle of avoiding harm. In the Qur'an as well as the Bible, pig flesh has been forbidden and declared unclean. Regarding the physical harm caused by eating it, modern medicine has confirmed a number of facts, such as the following:

Pork is a kind of meat that contains much cholesterol, which is known to increase the likelihood of blocked arteries.

The pig's meat and fat have been found to contribute to the spread of cancers of the colon, rectum, prostate and blood. Bating it has been connected to scabies, allergies, stomach ulcers and lung infections.

1. Eating pig flesh has been connected to no less than fifty other diseases. Among them are the infections caused by roundworms, pinworms, hookworms and tapeworms, whose eggs, when present in the meat, are ingested by humans, enter their blood stream, and can reach and damage almost all organs of the body.

2. A common misconception is that if pork is cooked well, the worm eggs are destroyed. But in a research project undertaken in America, it was found that the ova present in pork do not die under normal cooking temperatures. [In particular, the trichinosis worm is not destroyed by cooking. Its growth in the body can cause infection of the cerebral membrane and brain, the heart muscle, the lungs, kidneys or nerves]

3. It is also known that some diseases such as rheumatism and joint pain are unique to humans and pigs, and are not shared by any other animals.

Muslims accept whatever legislation has been issued by God out of conviction and complete trust in the knowledge and wisdom of the Lawmaker.

Why do Muslims allow the slaughter of animals?

This question is often posed by vegetarians, advocates of animal rights, and some Hindus. In fact, there are people who consider the consumption of meat to be a violation of animal rights. But meat is not forbidden to Muslims.

While Islam enjoins mercy and compassion toward all living creatures, it maintains that God has created plant and animal life for the benefit of humankind. Man has been ordered and entrusted by the Creator to use every resource in this world judiciously because it is a blessing from Him and a trust.

Islam offers one of the most humane methods of animal slaughter. The objective of Islamic slaughter is to ensure minimal pain and maximal blood drainage from the animal as detrimental microorganisms flourish in blood. Besides Muslims, people from other ethnic and religious backgrounds are assured that meat slaughtered Islamically is healthy and of high quality. It remains fresh for a longer period due to the lesser amount of blood in the meat in comparison to other methods of slaughtering.

Animals are slaughtered in a swift and merciful manner with the pronunciation of words meaning, "In the name of God; God is Most Great." This acknowledges that the animal's life is being taken with God's permission to meet the lawful need for food. The Islamic mode of slaughtering an animal also requires that the following conditions be met:

1. The animal has to be fed as usual prior to slaughter and given water.
2. It may not be beaten or tortured in any way by man or machine. Stunning before slaughter is not permitted. [This is accomplished by use of a bolt pistol, electric shock or electrified water (in the case of poultry), all of which cause additional stress and suffering to the animal]
3. One animal should not be allowed to see another being slaughtered. [In an authentic narration by at-Tabarani, the Prophet scolded a man for even sharpening his blade while the sheep was watching him]
4. The knife should be large enough and razor sharp.
5. Slaughtering is done from the front of the neck, and the butcher must swiftly sever the respiratory tract, oesophagus and jugular vein without cutting the spinal cord. With swift cutting of the blood vessels in the neck at the proper place, rapid and profuse bleeding causes instant shock and anesthetization in the brain so that no sensation is felt. Thus, the animal does not suffer. [The Prophet instructed, "Allah has decreed proficiency in all things. So when you slaughter, slaughter well. Let each one of you sharpen his blade and spare suffering to the animal he slaughters." (Narrated by Muslim)]

The animal must be completely lifeless and the blood drained completely before skinning and removing the head.

The promotion of healthy and correct methods of food production is part of the Islamic way of life. Its legislation encourages a strong respect for the sanctity of life and an abhorrence to cruelty to animals.

What is the Islamic View on Suicide; "mercy" Killings and Abortion?

A true Muslim is satisfied with himself and his place in the universe due to the knowledge that he is not merely a worthless particle within an accidental existence or an insignificant creature with no purpose or role to play in life. He knows that he is a chosen servant of God, holding a position of honour, trust, favour and responsibility. He is certain of his Lord's perfection, all-encompassing knowledge and absolute wisdom, justice and mercy. He knows that nothing is created without purpose and that God's favours and blessings are infinite and beyond human perception.

Islam emphasizes the value of human life. It also teaches that one should not despair of God's mercy and recognize that this decree is always beneficial in some way, even when it might seem otherwise. The endurance of pain, discomfort or hardship while accepting God's decree is something that benefits a Muslim in the Hereafter and increases his reward. Prophet Muhammad said, "No tiredness, exhaustion, worry, grief, distress or harm befalls a believer in this world, not even a thorn that pricks him, but that God expiates some of his sins thereby." [Al-Bukhari and Muslim]

Suicide indicates impatience and a lack of trust in God. It is thus prohibited to Muslims and considered among the major sins that is subject to the will of God on the Day of Resurrection; He may either forgive it or punish for it.

So-called mercy killings come under the same ruling. Although painkillers may be prescribed for those who are terminally ill or badly injured, it is not allowed to use or be given medications that are known to cause death either sooner or later. A basic principle of Islamic Shari'ah is that harm cannot be removed by something else that is equally harmful, so it is not permitted to use medications that will cause greater harm than the disease itself, which is the taking of a human life without a legally just cause.

As for abortion, it is unlawful in Islam to terminate a pregnancy at any stage unless there is a justifiable reason, and then, only within very precise limits. If the pregnancy is within the first forty days and aborting it serves a legitimate purpose or will prevent harm, then it is permissible to do so. But fear of difficulty in raising children or maintaining and educating them or the couple's belief that they already have enough children is not a permissible justification for abortion.

After four months it is not lawful to abort a pregnancy unless a group of trustworthy specialists decide that keeping the fetus in its mother's womb will lead to serious medical consequences or threaten her life. Even then, it may only be done after all means of eliminating the danger and keeping the fetus alive have been exhausted. In this case the concession allowing abortion is made in order to avert the greater of two evils or serve the greater of two interests.

Doesn't Islamic Law Encourage Vengeance?

Islam is often accused of having legislation that encourages retaliation rather than forgiveness. But the Qur'an itself refutes this, saying:

"But whoever overlooks from his brother [i.e., a killer] anything, then there should be a suitable follow-up and compensation to [the victim's heir] with good conduct. This is an alleviation from your Lord and a mercy." [2:178]

"And the retribution for an injury is one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation - his reward is [due] from Allah. Indeed, He does not like the unjust." [42:40]

Justice is the ruling spirit of Islamic law. However, the changing definition of terms such as "civilized", "freedom" and "equality" have resulted in criticism of Islamic laws and the argument that in view of the changing world, the Shari'ah is outdated. To a believing Muslim this amounts to denial of the wisdom of God who put us on this earth with a purpose in life and a responsible role to fulfil.

Punishment has always been an integral part in the concept of justice. Islam considers crime an act of injustice towards society as well as a sin. Punishment is not atonement for sin because a sin can only be forgiven through sincere repentance. A crime, however, is the infliction of harm upon others which cannot be forgiven by repentance alone.

The object of all penal systems is to punish the offender and protect society from reoccurrence of the crime. However, if societies were to rely only upon punishment, they would fail miserably. An environment of healthy morality and faith must be the norm, where right conduct is encouraged by all and wrongdoing is opposed and made as difficult as possible.

In Islam, penalties are only part of a larger integrated whole. They cannot be properly understood nor justifiably implemented in isolation. God has ordained a body of mutual rights and obligations. He has also set certain bounds and limits to be observed by everyone for the maintenance of justice. If men and nations want to have peace and safety on the highways of life, they must remain within the "traffic lanes" marked out for them and observe the "signposts" erected along their routes. Otherwise, they endanger themselves and others and thus subject themselves to penalties - not out of reprisal but in order to regulate and preserve orderly interactions among all people in society.

In many non-Muslim societies today, there are ongoing debates about the death penalty. In Islam the matter has been decided by the Creator, who said:

"And there is for you in legal retribution [saving of] life, O you [people] of understanding, that you may avoid [sin]." [2:179]

The verse alludes to the fact that such punishments serve as a strong deterrent to crime. They are of a functional nature, to regulate and prevent reoccurrence.

There are basically three categories of punishment in Islamic Shari'ah: First is hadd, fixed punishments for a few specific crimes that were divinely ordained. Second is qisas, for homicide and assault, in which the victim or family of the deceased has the right to legal retribution or else to accept monetary remuneration or even to pardon the offender, both of which serve to avert capital punishment. The Qur'an highly recommends forgiveness. An injured party may take particular circumstances into account or overlook the offense with the expectation of being compensated by God in the next life. And third is ta'zeer, which is a discretionary penalty decided by the court. There are stringent conditions which must be met for any of these to be applicable, and strict procedures must be followed before any person can be convicted and punished.

Another important function of these penalties is educational. They are intended to instil in society a deep feeling of abhorrence for transgression against fellow human beings and against God. Once one understands the basic concepts, objectives and framework of Islamic Shari'ah, he cannot but conclude that it is capable of creating the most humane and just society. Difficulties arise only when critics try to measure the ocean of divine knowledge, wisdom and justice with their own imperfect criteria and understanding.

Why does Islam Demand Harsh Punishments for Sex outside of Marriage?

As mentioned previously, punishment in Islam has a social purpose, which is to dissuade others from committing the same crime. People nowadays, especially Westerners, are opposed to the Islamic punishment for fornication and adultery because they see it as too harsh or disproportionate to the offense. A basic problem is the difference in standards by which the severity of a crime is measured.

The Western view of man-woman relationships is usually that of permissiveness, one that accepts extramarital and illicit relationships as normal. There is an increasingly driving passion for more money, more comforts and more pleasure, particularly physical pleasure. The greatest casualty of irresponsible sexual behaviour has been the family, in particular, children.

Islam views sexual relationships outside of marriage as a very serious matter because they destabilize the family and thus contribute to the breakdown of the entire social system. Islam emphasizes protection of the family by imposing severe punishments for activities that threaten the family foundation. These punishments are the same for men and women, and only a legitimate Islamic government has the right to implement them.

Moreover, the prescribed punishments are only one aspect of a complete system which, in addition to providing prohibitive obstacles in the path of unlawful relationships, strongly encourages and facilitates lawful marriage. In cases of confirmed incompatibility or dissatisfaction, a wife as well as a husband may request separation, enabling each to seek a more harmonious union. In addition, Muslims, whether married or unmarried, are instructed as to proper dress and behaviour at all times. Privacy is to be respected and compromising

situations strictly avoided as a matter of obedience to God. And finally, the punishment prescribed is severe enough to deter any who might still consider it.

Any case that comes before the court for judgment must be investigated thoroughly and proper evidence brought in order to satisfy all the requirements of Islamic law. Conviction is subject to strict conditions which are most difficult to fulfil and is contingent on one of two requirements:

A repeated and persistent confession by the offender, who must also be proved to be of age, mentally sound, aware of the divine prohibition, and must have committed the act knowingly of his own free will. The slightest doubt about any of these matters will prevent acceptance of the confession. In addition, a married adulterer must be legally bound in a consummated marriage, and there must be no physical defect in the spouse preventing a normal relationship. Furthermore, people are not encouraged to confess their sins; rather, they should repent to God privately.

In the absence of confession there can be no conviction unless four reliable male Muslim witnesses known for honesty and righteous conduct testify that they actually saw the act taking place. It is insufficient that the couple was seen together, even if undressed and in an embrace. Witnesses must be unanimous about the time, place and other details; otherwise, the case will be rejected. This means that in reality the punishment is seldom carried out and serves primarily as a deterrent. As an additional precaution, anyone who makes such an accusation outside the framework of these conditions is himself subject to a severe punishment.

Any government under which Shari'ah legislation is applied must establish justice as its core value in all affairs so that the social and cultural environment is suitable for all its people to live an upright and moral life. It is only after these conditions have been fulfilled that a government is entitled to implement penalties on its land.

Why is a woman's share of inheritance half that of a man's?

The Islamic system of property distribution after death is based on rulings ordained by God in the Qur'an. It abolished the former custom in which the entire estate was taken by the oldest male heir and established the right of children, parents and spouses to inherit a specific share without leaving the matter to human judgement and emotion. When Islam established inheritance for the woman, it was the first time in history that women were able to enjoy this right. The Qur'an stipulates that a woman automatically inherits from her father, husband, son and her childless brother.

This system of inheritance is perfectly balanced and is based on the closeness of relationship, also taking into account the responsibilities imposed upon various members of a family in different situations. In the absence of close relatives a share is apportioned to more distant ones.

When the male is given a larger share, there is a logical reason behind it, which is that in Islam economic responsibility is always upon the man while the woman has no financial obligations, even if she should be wealthy or have her own income. Generally, the woman is in charge of running the household and taking care of those within it, so she is justly freed from financial responsibilities. When unmarried, it is the legal obligation of her father, brother or guardian to provide her food, clothing, medication, housing and other needs. After marriage it becomes the duty of her husband or adult son. Islam holds men responsible by law for fulfilling all the needs of their families. So the difference in shares does not in any way mean that one sex is preferred over the other. Rather, it represents a just balance consistent with the needs and responsibilities of family members.

When a son and a daughter inherit from either of their parents, the son's share will be depleted by giving an obligatory dowry to his wife upon marriage and maintaining his family, including his sister until she marries. While the daughter has no required expenses, she still receives a share of the inheritance which is her own property to save, invest or use as she pleases. When she marries, she will also receive a dowry from her husband and be maintained by him, having no financial responsibilities whatsoever. Thus, one might conclude that Islam has favoured women over men!

Although, in most cases the male inherits a share that is twice that of a female, it is not always so. There are certain circumstances when they inherit equal shares, and in a few instances a female can inherit a larger share than that of the male.

In addition, a Muslim can will up to one third of his property by bequest to anyone who would not inherit from him by law. The bequest may be a means of assistance to other relatives and people who are in need, whether men or women. One may also allocate this portion or part of it to charities and good works of his choice.

Why is the testimony of two women required in place of one man?

What is meant by testimony is: giving information by which something is known to be true and correct. With regard to the witness of two women being equal to the testimony of one man, it is not always the case; and the Qur'anic verse that specifies this is related only to financial dealings, where two men are preferred and the alternative is one man and two women. Financial transactions constitute the sole case in which two female witnesses are required in place of one male witness. It is in view of the fact that financial responsibility is usually shouldered by men so they are expected to be better versed in financial transactions than women. It also takes into account the generally more emotional nature of women, as well as the roles of men and women in society as envisaged by Islam.

This does not reflect inferiority on the woman's part. Some women surpass many men in various aspects, including religious commitment, reasoning and memory. They may be able to give proper testimony better than that of a man regarding the issues about which they have knowledge and insight. They can even become references regarding those matters, as did

some women at the time of the Prophet. A judge may accept the testimony of any person of exceptional qualifications.

Two female witnesses are not always considered equal to one male witness. There are other verses in the Qur'an which speak about witnesses without specifying male or female. In those cases, a female witness is equivalent to a male witness. It is well known that Aishah, the Prophet's wife, related no less than 2,220 narrations which are considered authentic only on her solitary evidence. Other women have also been recognized as reliable narrators of prophetic traditions. This is sufficient proof that the witness of one woman can be accepted.

In fact, female witnesses are preferred in certain cases. There are incidents which require only female witnesses and the testimony of a male is not accepted. Issues pertaining to women alone, such as childbirth or menstruation as related to divorce disputes and private matters where no men were present, obviously necessitate the witness of a woman.

Isn't Islam intolerant of other religions? How are Muslims supposed to treat people of other faiths?

Tolerance is the attitude that should govern the dealings of all people with one another. Religious tolerance is an essential principle of Islam, and Muslims are ordered to have good relations with people of all religions and be kind and courteous to everyone. Muslims are ordered by the Qur'an to uphold their promises and agreements with non-Muslims and not betray or transgress against them. The lives, families, properties and honour of non-Muslims must be protected under any government that claims to apply Islamic law. Non-Muslims are also guaranteed the right and freedom to practice their own religions in an Islamic state.

Islam is a religion of mercy and justice. It teaches its adherents to interact with all people and to cooperate with them for the betterment of mankind. More than ever today, Muslims need to work together with other groups that oppose oppression, bloodshed, corruption, promiscuity and perversion. They should also cooperate with non-Muslims in upholding truth and combating falsehood, in supporting the oppressed, and eliminating such dangers as pollution and disease.

Only enemies who harbour hatred and contempt against Islam are addressed by those Qur'anic verses that warn Muslims against taking them as intimates and allies. Muslims are ordered to deal with all other human beings with justice and compassion as members of the human brotherhood. They are always to behave kindly toward any non-Muslims who are not hostile, whether by offering financial help, feeding the hungry, giving loans when needed, or interceding in connection with permissible matters, even if only by speaking kindly and advising them. The Qur'an addresses believers, saying:

"Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who are just." [60:8]

Thus, it is not permissible under any circumstance for Muslims to mistreat a non-Muslim who has not committed any aggression against them; they are not allowed to harm, threaten or terrorize him, steal his wealth, cheat him or deprive him of his rights. It is obligatory upon Muslims as well to honour whatever lawful treaties and agreements are made with non-Muslim parties.

Coexistence does not mean that we cease to promote our positive values. As an aspect of their kindness and concern for humanity, Muslims are expected to invite non-Muslims to the truth of Islam with words of wisdom, sound arguments and a pleasant manner. This is a debt owed by Muslims to the peoples of the world in gratitude to God for His guidance and countless blessings.

What is Islam's Attitude toward Western Civilization Today?

Humanity lives crowded together in an increasingly small world of various cultures. Undoubtedly, Western culture is the dominant influence in the modern world today. Hence, it is inevitable that others interact with it and assimilate its positive values and achievements, but without adopting its negative ones. There is a cultural dimension of most human phenomena, religion included, and modern societies are tending to become less exclusive and more multi-religious. But while people are developing an outlook that is more accommodating toward others, acknowledging these differences does not mean that there should be no distinction between good and evil.

As well as being a religion and way of life, Islam is also a complete worldview. Its attitude toward the present Western civilization is the same as that manifested toward every past civilization: it accepts the goodness that such civilizations can yield but at the same time rejects their evils. It allows for the acquisition of particular benefits such as scientific and technical knowledge, yet many social aspects are seen to be destructive and contrary to Islamic teachings.

Islam has never advocated a policy of isolationism. It does not oppose other civilizations merely because they are non-Muslim but believes in the unity of humanity and good relationships with people of different races and inclinations. And Muslims do not object to benefiting from modernity in discovering the mechanisms for solving common problems or to the solutions themselves, as long as they do not contradict Islamic legislation.

Islam neither rejects the West totally nor does it accept it uncritically. Led by political and economic interests, the upholders of Western civilization often follow policies which are detrimental to the collective good of Muslims. What Muslims and many other peoples of the world today reject is the presumed centrality and universalism of the West and its self-centered attitude. They opposed the oppression and exploitation perpetrated by Western colonialism in the past, and they object presently to the newer, albeit more subtle forms, which are no less malevolent. Injustices caused by arrogant attitudes and demeaning policies are unacceptable to everyone.

Opening up to the modern worldview and critically interacting with it has alerted Muslims to certain problems raised by Western modernity. International relations, globalization, the menace posed by the media and central government to the human individual, the increase of leisure time available to ordinary people, and the processes of standardization were issues seldom raised in the past. The study of Western modernity in a critical and interactive manner may serve to sharpen the awareness of Muslims concerning the magnitude of the global culture crisis and consequently, increase their knowledge and confidence in their own divinely ordained way of life.

It can be fairly said that Islam does not oppose any civilization as long as it serves the interests of humanity. But customs of other cultures involving principles or conduct prohibited in Islam can never be considered as lawful for a Muslim, even one who resides permanently in non-Muslim lands. The limits set by God are protective ones which must always be observed, and Islam stands firm to uphold this right for mankind.

Why is so much of the Muslim world underdeveloped?

No one can deny that the Muslim world has been in decline for several centuries, the causes of which go back into history. In the Muslim nation's early stages, wealth, centres of learning and public works were abundant. But affluence, excessive concern with worldly life, and the spread of corruption eventually weakened religious consciousness. The inevitable result of these human failures was an ebb in conversions to Islam and territorial expansion, losses sustained in East Asia and Europe, the ascension of Western power and influence, and a change from an ascendant to a defensive posture. The present backwardness of most Muslim societies, their political degradation and their peoples' suffering, in spite of their human and material resources and of Islam's noble values and principles, is the unfortunate reality of the present day.

The calamities that befell the Muslim world after the period of its early expansion, eventually leading to the fall of the caliphate, cannot be attributed to Islamic thought or even entirely to errors in political leadership. The prophetic period and that of the early caliphs which followed presented the best examples for all succeeding generations. However, the rapid influx of new peoples and nations into the community of Islam before they were properly educated as to Islamic objectives and values resulted in a later political leadership that never developed and matured as it should have. The Islamic vision became obscured and its spirit reduced to mere form, empty words and a heritage venerated, but seriously misunderstood, by later generations. The natural trend of the Islamic legal system to expand was arrested, and the vital physical sciences, economics, sociology and political thought - all essential aspects of previous development - were neglected. At the same time the Muslim world was becoming increasingly weak and vulnerable, Europe was beginning to benefit from the achievements of Islamic scholarship and assert itself.

The fact that most Muslim regions of the world were then conquered, dominated and exploited by Western colonial powers for some time is not an excuse that is condoned by

Islam. Rather, it was the natural outcome of the widespread neglect and failure by Muslims to conscientiously and comprehensively adhere to the teachings of their religion.

The importance of obtaining knowledge and working conscientiously with determination was made clear by the Prophet of Islam. Muslims are taught that because man has been given a certain amount of free will, it must be exercised properly in accordance with Islamic teachings to earn approval of the Creator. This in itself is motivation for Muslims to be the most knowledgeable and productive people possible. If Muslim societies today are not meeting their potential, it is surely not due to Islam; rather, it is from their ignorance of the religion and failure to apply and practice it.

If Islam is such a good religion, why do we find many Muslims dishonest, unreliable and lazy?

Islam came as a message of guidance from God to all creation at a time when ignorance and corruption were universal. It opened peoples' minds and souls to learning, development, refinement and morality. The achievements of Islamic thought in that early period were sufficient to bring light, guidance and knowledge to humanity.

However, as among every other people, there are indeed some Muslims who are heedless, undependable, corrupt and selfish, and the media projects this stereotype about Muslims in particular. It can be readily noted that whenever an adherent to any other faith commits a crime, the media seldom brings up the issue of religion, but when a Muslim is involved, it is Islam that is blamed and portrayed in a negative light before public opinion.

The fact cannot be denied that many Muslims today are unmindful of the teachings of their religion, due either to a lack of religious knowledge or to various worldly inducements and attractions. But even if one recognizes that some Muslims may be dishonest, immoral or impulsive, he should not judge Islam by its nonconforming or disobedient members but rather by those who conscientiously adhere to its teachings. Since Islam categorically forbids such evils as lying, cheating and negligence, the wrongdoer must be blamed for his crimes rather than the religion. One should instead examine the system itself, understand its principles, and disregard the acts of those who have serious deficiencies in their knowledge, beliefs and practice.

While today's Muslim societies are not model ones by any means, they still enjoy a comparatively stable family life, absence of delinquency, low crime rates, greater freedom from drugs and alcoholism, as well as the warmth of brotherhood, generosity and mutual aid. It may be observed that taken as a whole, the Muslim community produces the best citizens in any society. As a matter of religious observance, the majority avoids the consumption of alcohol and drugs, eliminating many intoxicant-related crimes. Collectively, Muslims are the community which gives the maximum amount of charity in the world. And no community can equal Muslims where modesty, sobriety and human ethics are concerned.

Islam may be fairly and justly assessed not by negative stereotypes portrayed by the media but by what its authentic sources contain and by the practice of the most excellent follower of the religion, Prophet Muhammad. There have been a number of unbiased non-Muslim historians who have declared that Muhammad was an exemplary human being. It is his pattern of life that demonstrates the true Islamic ideal and example to be followed by Muslims.

What is Islam's view about education, science and technology?

The framework of Islamic thought represents a comprehensive view of life and the universe.

A Muslim is therefore required to acquire both religious and worldly knowledge. In fact, Islam advocated knowledge at a time when the whole world was engulfed in ignorance. In a matter of years the early generation of Muslims became a learned and refined people, for Islam had awakened in them the faculty of intellect. Those early Muslims understood from the teachings of their religion that useful knowledge is necessary for the benefit of the self and of humanity. Hence, they pursued it to such a degree that they surpassed other nations in development and productivity and carried the torch of civilization for many centuries.

Muslim history abounds with examples of scientific and cultural ingenuity. Muslims inherited the knowledge of the nations that came before them, developed it and placed it in the context of a precise moral framework. Muslim scholarship made a vital contribution to the enrichment and advancement of human civilization.

While Europe was still in the dark ages, religious Muslims were making great advances in the fields of medicine, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, architecture, literature, and history documentation to mention but a few. Many important new procedures were transmitted to medieval Europe from Muslim regions, such as Arabic numerals with the principle of the zero vital to the advancement of mathematics and the use of algebra. Sophisticated instruments, including the astrolabe and the quadrant, as well as good navigational maps, were first developed by Muslims. Only after people lost sight of their religious beliefs and obligations did the scientific achievements of the Muslim world cease and fall into obscurity.

Similarly, Islam does not now oppose any modern inventions that are beneficial to mankind. It is sufficient that they be used in the name of God and for His cause. In reality, machines, instruments and devices have no religion or homeland.

They can be used for either good or bad objectives, and the way they are used can affect much of the earth's population. Even something so simple as a glass can be filled either with a nourishing drink or with a poison. Television can provide education or immorality. It is up to the user to decide, and a Muslim is commanded to make good use of all the means at his disposal while being prohibited from causing harm to himself or others. Failure to use the proper means toward benefit is, in effect, a deprecation of Islamic teachings.

A truly Islamic government is required to the best of its ability to provide all means that promote adequate education for its citizens. Education is a right for all individuals and the required moral duty of every capable Muslim. All able, intelligent and skilled individuals in an Islamic society are required to educate themselves not only in the basics of their religion but in necessary worldly affairs. Further, it is obligatory upon qualified people to study every beneficial field of knowledge. For example, since every society needs doctors, it becomes obligatory for some people to go into the field of medicine to fulfil the needs of society.

Advancements in science and technology are among the ways and means to achieve development of the Muslim world. Islam calls upon Muslims to pursue knowledge in the broadest sense of the word. Prophet Muhammad said, "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim." [Narrated by Ibn Majah] He also said, "For one who treads a path to knowledge, Allah will make easy the path to Paradise." [Narrated by Muslim] And the Qur'an contains numerous references to knowledge and its importance, such as:

"Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day are signs for those of understanding." [3:190]

"Say, 'Are those who know equal to those who do not know?'" [39:9]

"Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge by degrees." [58:11]

Qur'anic verses encourage study and contemplation of the universe that surrounds us and is particularly concerned with those sciences that give human beings the ability to benefit from the world around them. While encouraging investigation, the Qur'an contains references to a variety of subjects which have been shown to be scientifically accurate. [A few such examples were cited on pp. 27-28. "41:53]. This is the fulfilment of God's statement over 14 centuries ago:

"We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth." [41:53]

Thus, when a Muslim has a sincere and wholesome intention to obtain knowledge, it will also have a positive effect on his faith. For knowledge reinforces textual evidence for the existence of the almighty Creator and assists in appreciation of the many scientific allusions found in the Qur'an.

There has never been an established scientific fact that contradicted the teachings of Islam. Whatever modern science discovers only increases the Muslim's knowledge of God's magnificent creation. Thus, Islam actively encourages scientific endeavours and the study of God's signs in nature. It also welcomes beneficial technological advances and allows people to enjoy the fruits of human ingenuity.

To a Muslim, conflict between science and religion is an impossibility, for religion comes from God and so does His system of creation and development. The modern, purely materialistic approach to scientific and technological advancement has indeed granted man a measure of physical comfort, but not mental or spiritual comfort. Islam advocates

the incorporation of knowledge within a just and balanced value system where anything beneficial for one's spiritual and worldly improvement is encouraged and advocated.