

The religion of Islam*

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The very first point to be noted in a discussion on the religion of Islam‡ is that the name of the system is not Muhammadanism, as is generally supposed in the West, but Islam. Muhammad was the name of the Holy Prophet through whom that religion was revealed, and Western writers call it Muhammadanism after him, on the analogy of such names as Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism and the like, but the name Muhammadanism was absolutely unknown to the followers of that religion to which it has been given by the Western writers, and is not to be found either in the Holy

* This extract from *The Religion of Islam: A comprehensive discussion of the sources, principles and practices of Islam* (1936) reproduces the introduction (including footnotes) to that work. Numerical references in brackets are to the Qur'an by *sura* (chapter) and verse. Thus (22:78) refers to *sura* 22, verse 78. Literal references are to reference works and Quranic authorities: (R.) = *Al-Mufridat fi Gharibi-l-Qur'an*, of Imām Abu-l-Qāsim al-Husain ibn Abu-l-Fadzl al-Rāghib; (LL.) = Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon*.

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‡ The Arabic word for *religion* is *dīn* or *milla*, the root-meaning of the former being *obedience* and *requital*, and that of the latter *to dictate*. *Milla* has special reference to the prophet through whom the religion is revealed, and *dīn* to the individual who follows it (R.). Another word for religion is *madhhab* which is not used in the Holy Qur'an. It is derived from the root *dhababa* meaning *he went*, and *madhhab* signifies *a way that one pursues in respect of doctrines and practices in religion, or an opinion respecting religion* (LL.). According to some authorities, the distinction between the three words is thus expressed: *dīn* in relation to God Who reveals it, *milla* in relation to the prophet through whom it is revealed, and *madhhab* in relation to the *mujtabid* who expounds it. The word *madhhab* as used in Urdu or Persian carries, however, the wider significance of religion.

Qur'an or in the sayings of the Holy Prophet. The name of the system as clearly stated in the Holy Qur'an is Islam,* and the name given to those who follow that system is Muslim.† So far from the system being named after its founder, the founder is himself called a Muslim.‡ In fact, every prophet of God is spoken of in the Holy Qur'an as being a Muslim,§ thus showing that Islam is the true religion for the whole of humanity, the various prophets being the preachers of that religion among different nations in different times and the Holy Prophet Muhammad its last and most perfect exponent.

Among the great religions of the world Islam enjoys the distinction of bearing a significant name, a name that points to its very essence. The root-meaning of the word *Islam* is *to enter into peace*,** and a *Muslim* is *one who makes his peace with God and man*. Peace with God implies complete submission to His will, and peace with man is not only to refrain from evil or injury to another but also to do good to him; and both these ideas find expression in the Holy Qur'an itself as the true essence of the religion of Islam: 'Yea, whoever submits (*aslama*) himself entirely to Allah and he is the doer of good to others, he has his reward from his Lord, and there is no fear for such, nor shall they grieve' (2:112). Islam is thus, in its very inception, the religion of peace, and its two basic doctrines, the unity of God and the unity or brotherhood of the human race, afford positive proof of its being true to its name. Not only is Islam

* 'This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favour on you, and chosen for you Islam as a religion' (5:3). 'Surely the true religion with Allah is Islam' (3:18).

† 'He named you Muslims before and in this' (22:78), where *before* refers to the prophecies, and *this* to the Holy Qur'an.

‡ 'And I am the first of the Muslims' (6:164).

§ 'And the same did Abraham enjoin on his sons and so did Jacob: O my sons! Allah has chosen the religion for you, therefore, die not unless you are Muslims' (2:132); 'We revealed the Torah, in which was guidance and light; with it the prophets who submitted themselves (*aslami*) judged matters for those who were Jews' (5:44).

** Islam means *entering into salm*, and *salm* and *silm* both signify *peace* (R.). Both these words are used in the sense of *peace* in the Holy Qur'an itself, see 2:208 and 8:61.

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stated to be the true religion of all the prophets of God, as pointed out above, but even the involuntary but complete submission to Divine laws which is witnessed in nature, is indicated by the same word *aslama*. This wider significance is also retained in the strictly legal usage of the word, for, in law, Islam has a two-fold significance; a simple profession of faith—a declaration that there is nothing that deserves to be worshipped but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and a complete submission to the Divine will which is only attainable through spiritual perfection.* Thus, the man who simply accepts the religion of Islam, the mere novice, is a Muslim, as well as he who completely submits himself to the Divine will and carries out in practice all the Divine commandments, subduing his desires to the will of God.

Islam is the last of the great religions—those mighty movements which have revolutionised the world and changed the destinies of nations. But it is not only the last religion, it is an all-inclusive religion which contains within itself all religions which went before it, and one of its most striking characteristics is that it requires its followers to believe that all the great religions of the world that preceded it have been revealed by God. It is a fundamental principle of Islam that a Muslim must also believe in all the prophets who were raised up before the Holy Prophet Muhammad:

‘And who believe in that which has been revealed to thee and that which was revealed before thee’ (2:4).

‘Say: We believe in Allah and in that which has been revealed to us and in that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and in that which was given to Moses and Jesus and in that which was given to the prophets from their Lord; we do not make any distinction between any of them’ (2:136).

* ‘Islam in law is of two kinds; one is a simple confession with the tongue . . . whether accompanied with belief (*īmān* or *real change*) in the heart or not. . . . The other is above belief (*īmān*), and it means that along with confession, there is belief (*īmān* or *real change*) in the heart and a fulfilment in practice, and resignation to God in whatever He brings to pass or decrees’ (R.).

‘The Apostle believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, and so do the believers; they all believe in Allah and His angels and His books and His apostles; we make no difference between any of His apostles’ (2:285).

Thus a Muslim believes not only in the Prophet Muhammad but in all other prophets as well. And prophets were, according to the express teachings of the Holy Qur’an, raised up among all the nations: ‘And there is not a nation but a warner has gone among them’ (35:24). A Muslim, therefore, is one who believes in the prophets and scriptures of all the nations. A Jew believes only in the prophets of Israel; a Christian believes in Jesus Christ and, in a lesser degree, in the prophets of Israel; a Buddhist in Buddha; a Zoroastrian in Zoroaster; a Hindu in the prophets raised up in India; a Confucian in Confucius; but a Muslim believes in all these and in Muhammad also, the last of the prophets. Islam is, therefore, an all-comprehensive religion within which are included all the religions of the world; and, similarly, its sacred Book, the Holy Qur’an, is spoken of as a combination of all the sacred scriptures of the world: ‘Pure pages wherein are all the right scriptures’ (98:2,3).

There is yet one more characteristic of Islam which gives it a special place among religions. In addition to being the last religion of the world and an all-inclusive religion, it is the perfect expression of the Divine will. Thus the Holy Qur’an: ‘This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favour on you, and chosen for you Islam as a religion’ (5:3). Like every other form of consciousness, the religious consciousness of man has developed slowly and gradually down the ages, and the revelation of the great Truth from on high was thus brought to perfection in Islam. It is to this great truth that the words of Jesus Christ allude: ‘I have yet many things to say unto you but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth’ (John 16:12,13). Thus it is the great mission of Islam to bring about peace in the world by establishing a brotherhood of all the religions of the world, to gather together all the religious truths contained in previous religions, to correct their errors and to sift the true from the false, to preach the eternal verities which had not before been

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preached on account of the special circumstances of any race or society in the early stages of its development, and last of all to meet all the moral and spiritual requirements of an ever-advancing humanity.

With the advent of Islam, religion has received new significance. Firstly it is to be treated not as a dogma, which a man must accept if he will escape everlasting damnation, but as a science based on the universal experience of humanity. It is not this or that nation that becomes the favourite of God and the recipient of Divine revelation; on the contrary revelation is recognised as a necessary factor in the evolution of man; hence while in its crudest form it is the universal experience of humanity, in its highest, that of prophetic revelation, it has been a Divine gift bestowed upon all nations of the world. And the idea of the scientific in religion has been further strengthened by presenting its doctrines as principles of actions. There is not a single doctrine of religion which is not made the basis of action for the development of man to higher and yet higher stages of life. Secondly, the sphere of religion is not confined to the next world; its primary concern is rather with this life, and that man, through a righteous life here on earth, may attain to the consciousness of a higher existence. And so it is that the Holy Qur'an deals with a vast variety of subjects which affect man's life below. It deals not only with the ways of devotion, with the forms of worship of the Divine Being, with the means which make man attain communion with God, but also, and in richer detail, with the problems of the world around us, questions of relations between man and man, his social and political life, institutions of marriage, divorce and inheritance, the division of wealth and the relations of labour and capital, the administration of justice, military organisation, peace and war, national finance, debts and contracts, rules for the service of humanity and even of dumb creation, laws for the help of the poor, the orphan and the widow, and hundreds of other questions the proper understanding of which enables man to lead a happy life. It lays down rules not only for individual progress but also for the advancement of society as a whole, of the nation and even of humanity. It casts a flood of light on problems relating to

relations not only between individuals but also between the different tribes and nations into which humanity is divided. And all these rules and laws are made effective by a faith in God. It prepares man for another life, it is true, but only through making him capable of holding his own in this.

The question which perturbs every mind today is whether religion is, when all is said and done, necessary to humanity.

Now a cursory glance at the history of human civilisation will show that religion has been the supreme force in the development of mankind to its present condition. That all that is good and noble in man has been inspired by faith in God is a truth at which perhaps even an atheist would not cavil. One Abraham, one Moses, one Christ, one Krishna, one Buddha, one Muhammad has, each in his turn and his degree, changed the whole history of the human race and raised it from the depths of degradation to moral heights undreamed of. It is through the teachings of this or that great prophet that man has been able to conquer his lower nature and to set before himself the noblest ideals of selflessness and the service of humanity. Study the noble sentiments that inspire man today and you will find their origin in the teachings and example of some great sage who had a deep faith in God and through whom was sown the seed of faith in other human hearts. The moral and ethical development of man to his present state, if due to any one cause, is due to religion. Humanity has yet to find out whether the lofty emotions which inspire man today will survive after a generation or two of godlessness, and what sentiments materialism will bring in its train. To all appearance, the reign of materialism must needs entail the rule of selfishness; for a cut and dried scheme for the equal division of wealth will not inspire the noble sentiments which are today the pride of man and which centuries of religion have instilled into his very being. If the sanction of religion be removed today, the ignorant masses—and the masses must always remain ignorant though they may be able to read and write a little—will sink back, gradually of course, into a state of savagery, while even those who reckon themselves above the common level will no longer feel the inspiration to noble and high ideals which only faith in God can give.

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As a matter of fact, human civilisation, as we have it today, is, whether it likes the idea or not, based on religion. Religion has made possible a state of civilisation which has again and again saved human society from disruption. Trace back its history in all nations, and it will be seen that whenever it has begun to totter, a new religious impulse has always been at hand to save it from utter destruction. It is not only that civilisation, with any pretence to endurance, can rest only on a moral basis, and that true and lofty morals are inspired only by faith in God, but even the unity and cohesion of jarring human elements, without which it is impossible for any civilisation to stand for a day, is best brought about by the unifying force of religion. It is often said that religion is responsible for much of the hatred and bloodshed in the world, but a cursory glance at the history of religion will show this to be a monstrous misconception. Love, concord, sympathy, kindness to one's fellow-men, have been the message of every religion, and every nation has learnt these essential lessons in their true purity only through the spirit of selflessness and service which a faith in God has inspired. If there have been selfishness and hatred and bloodshed, they have been there in spite of religion, not as a consequence of the message of love which religion has brought. They have been there because human nature is too prone to these things; and their presence only shows that a still greater religious awakening is required, that a truer faith in God is yet a crying need of humanity. That men shall sometimes turn to low and unworthy things does not show that the nobler sentiments are worthless but only that their development has become a more urgent necessity.

If unification be the true basis of human civilisation, by which phrase I mean the civilisation not of one nation or of one country but of humanity as a whole, then Islam is undoubtedly the greatest civilizing force the world has ever known or is likely to know. Thirteen hundred years ago it was Islam that saved it from crushing into an abyss of savagery, that came to the help of a civilisation whose very foundations had collapsed, and that set about laying new foundation and rearing an entirely new edifice of culture and ethics. A new idea of the unity of the human race as a whole, not of the

unity of this or that nation, was introduced into the world, an idea so mighty that it welded together nations which had warred with and hated each other since the world began. It was not only in Arabia, among the ever-bickering tribes of a single peninsula, that this great ‘miracle’, as an English writer terms it, was wrought,* a miracle before the magnitude of which every thing dwindles into insignificance. It not only cemented together the warring tribes of one country but it established a brotherhood of all nations of the world, even joining together those which had nothing in common except their common humanity. It obliterated differences of colour, race, language, geographical boundaries and even differences of culture. It united man with man as such, and the hearts of those in the far east began to beat in unison with the hearts of those in the farthest west. Indeed, it proved to be not only the greatest but the only force unifying man, because, whereas other religions had succeeded merely in unifying the different elements of a single race, Islam had actually achieved the unification of many races, had harmonised the jarring and discordant elements of humanity. How great a force it was in bringing back his lost civilisation to man, is attested by a recent writer:†

‘In the fifth and sixth centuries, the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place . . .

‘It seemed then that the great civilization which it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next and law and order were unknown. . . . The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. . .

* ‘A more disunited people it would be hard to find till suddenly the miracle took place. A man arose who, by his personality and by his claim to direct Divine guidance, actually brought about the impossible—namely the union of all those warring factions’ (*The Ins and Outs of Mesopotamia*, p. 99).

† *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, by J. H. Denison.

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The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. . . . Civilization like a gigantic tree whose foliage had over-reached the world . . . stood tottering . . . rotted to the core. . . . Was there any emotional culture that could be brought in to gather mankind once more into unity and to save civilization?' (pp. 265—268).

And then speaking of Arabia, the learned author says:

‘It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south’ (p. 269).

Thus Islam laid the basis of a unification of humanity of which no other reformer or religion has ever dreamed; of a brotherhood of man which knows no bounds of colour, race, country, language or even of rank; of a unity of the human race beyond which human conception cannot go. It not only recognises the equality of the civil and political rights of men, but also that of their spiritual rights. ‘All men are a single nation’ (2:213) is its fundamental doctrine, and for that reason every nation is recognised as having received the spiritual gift of revelation. But the establishment of a vast brotherhood of all men is not its only achievement. Equally great is the unparalleled transformation which Islam has brought about in the world; for Islam has proved itself to be a spiritual force the equal of which the human race has never known. Its miraculous transformation of world conditions was brought about in an incredibly short space of time. It swept away the vilest superstitions, the crassest ignorance, the rank immorality, the old evil habits of centuries over centuries, in less than a quarter of a century. That its spiritual conquests are without parallel in history is an undeniable fact, and it is because of the unparalleled spiritual transformation effected by him that the Holy Prophet Muhammad is admitted to be the ‘most successful of all prophets and religious personalities’ (En. Br., art. Koran).

Islam has a claim upon the attention of every thinker, not only because it is the most civilising and the greatest spiritual force of the world but also because it offers a solution of the most baffling problems which confront mankind today. Materialism, which has become humanity’s ideal in modern times, can never bring about peace and mutual trust among the nations of the world. Christianity

has already failed to do away with race and colour prejudices. Islam is the only force which has already succeeded in blotting out those distinctions and it is through Islam only that this great problem of the modern world can be solved. Islam is, first and foremost, an international religion, and it is only before the grand international ideal of Islam, the ideal of the equality of all races and of the unity of the human race, that the curse of nationalism which has been and is responsible for the troubles of the ancient and the modern worlds, can be swept away. But even within the boundaries of a nation or a country there can be no peace so long as a just solution of the two great problems of wealth and sex be not found. Europe has gone to two extremes on the wealth question, capitalism and Bolshevism. There is either the tendency to concentrate wealth among the great capitalists or by community of wealth to bring the indolent and the industrious to one level. Islam offers the true solution by ensuring to the worker the reward of his work, great or small, in accordance with the merit of the work, and also by allotting to the poor a share in the wealth of the rich. Thus while the rights of property are maintained in their fullest sense, an arrangement is made for equalising conditions by taking a part of the wealth of the rich and distributing it among the poor according to the principle of *zakāt*, and also by a more or less equal division of property among heirs on the death of an owner. Thus H.A.R. Gibb¹ writing towards the close of *Whither Islam* says:

‘Within the western world Islam still maintains the balance between exaggerated opposites. Opposed equally to the anarchy of European nationalism and the regimentation of Russian communism, it has not yet succumbed to that obsession with the economic side of life which is characteristic of present-day Europe and present-day Russia alike. Its social ethic has been admirably summed up by Professor Massignon: “Islam has the merit of standing for a very equalitarian conception of the contribution of each citizen by the tithe to the resources of the community; it is hostile to unrestricted exchange, to banking capital, to state loans, to indirect taxes on objects of prime necessity, but it holds to the rights of the father and the husband, to private property, and to commercial capital.

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Here again it occupies intermediate position between the doctrines of bourgeois capitalism and Bolshevist communism” (pp. 378-379).

Similarly Islam’s solution of the sex question is the only one that can ensure ultimate peace to the family. There is neither the free-love which would loosen all ties of social relations, nor the indissoluble binding of man and woman which turns many a home into an actual hell. And by solving these and a hundred other problems which puzzle the minds of men today, Islam, as its very name indicates, can bring true happiness to the human race.

The anti-religious movement which has taken root in Russia is based on a misconception as to the nature of the religion of Islam. The three chief objections to religion are:

(1) That religion helps in the maintenance of the present social system which has borne the fruit of capitalism with a consequent crushing of the aspirations of the poor.

(2) That it keeps the people subject to superstition and thus hinders the advance of sciences.

(3) That it teaches them to pray for their needs instead of working for them and thus it makes them indolent.*

So far as Islam is concerned, the facts are entirely contrary to these allegations. Islam came as the friend of the poor and the destitute, and as a matter of fact it has accomplished an upliftment of the poor to which history affords no parallel. It raised men at the lowest rung of the social ladder to the highest positions of life, it made of slaves not only leaders in thought and intellect but actually kings. Its social system is one of an equality which is quite unthinkable in any other nation or any other society. It lays down, as one of the fundamental principles of religion, that the poor have a *right* in the wealth of the rich, a right which is exercised through the state which collects annually a fortieth of the wealth amassed by the rich, to distribute it among the poor.

* As summed up in *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, p. 506.

As regards the second allegation that religion discourages the advancement of science and learning, this is equally devoid of truth, so far as Islam is concerned. Islam gave an impetus to learning in a country which had never possessed a seat of learning and was sunk in the depths of superstition. Even as far back as the caliphate of 'Umar, the Islamic state undertook the education of the masses, while the Muslims carried the torch of learning to every country where they gained political ascendancy—schools, colleges and universities springing up everywhere as a result of the Muslim conquest—and it is no exaggeration but simple truth to say that it was through Islam that the Renaissance came about in Europe.

The third allegation that religion makes people idle by teaching them to pray is also belied by the history of Islam. Not only does the Holy Qur'an teach men to work their best and hardest for success in life, and lay down, in plain words, that 'man shall have nothing but what he strives for' (53:39), but it actually made the most neglected nation in the world, the Arabs, a nation of supreme conquerors in all phases of life. And this great revolution was brought about only by awakening in them a desire for work and a zest for hard striving. Islam does teach man to pray, no one will dispute that; but prayer instead of making him idle is to fit him for a still harder struggle, and to carry on that struggle in the face of failure and disappointment, by turning to God Who is the Source of all strength. Thus prayer in Islam is only an incentive to work and not a hindrance.

Notes

- 1 Sir Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb (1895–1971) was a Scottish historian and Orientalist.