

INTRODUCTION TO ISLAMIC BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The approach to the presentation of Islamic beliefs and practices depends upon the addressee's religion and culture. A reference point of commonality or contrast is useful. For example, the Christians believe in the "original sin"; the connotation is that a human being has the stigma of being born as a sinner and is dirty filthy by nature. What has a newborn done to be a sinner or to be a filthy person? Contrast this with the Islamic teaching that every human being is born in nature, meaning good with no stigma of any kind and, if left alone without any brain washing will do no wrong. Such a person has a natural ability to distinguish between right and wrong and his tendency is to do right. In the society which raises a person brain washed, many times when he reaches puberty he is all confused – good has become bad and bad has become good under the influence of the society. He was not dirty by birth but the society has made him dirty in beliefs and practices.

Purification

When clothes get dirty, they are washed; when the body gets dirty, a bath or a shower is in order. Similarly, when beliefs and practices have become dirty, a purification job is in order and this purification is the entry into Islam through the door of witnessing or *shahadah*. Once a person has entered Islam he is purified as a newborn and has a second chance to start over again. His past sins are washed away while keeping his good works as assets.

Analogy of a Building

There are two aspects of purification: (a) physical, and (b) spiritual. Physical purification consists of purifying the body, clothes and environment. Spiritual purification consists of purifying beliefs and practices (works or deeds). The analogy of Islam is that of a building. A building has its foundation, pillars, roof, walls and other components. The foundation of a building is underground and not visible; similarly, the foundation of Islam consists of beliefs and remains invisible. The pillars, walls, roof and other parts of a building are visible. Similarly, what a Muslim says and does is visible and becomes the pillars, roof and walls of Islam. Frequently, Muslims talk about the five pillars of Islam without thinking that five

pillars cannot stand without a foundation and only pillars standing on the ground are not called a building. It is, therefore, necessary that Islam be presented in its totality not just five pillars. Five pillars are a necessary but small part of a Muslim's life.

Beliefs as the Foundation of Islam

As the foundation of a building consists of many components, such as, steel, cement, rocks, etc., the foundation of Islam consists of seven components.

1. Allah, the Only True God

Nothing is made without its planner and maker. Similarly, this universe, the earth and life on it, did not happen by itself – the first cause is the Creator, Allah or the God. Allah is the Creator of life and death, hence He is free of death and is Ever Living or Eternal. He created males and females for procreation, hence He is free of gender. Whatever He created He knows in its minutest detail, hence He is All-Knowing. Similarly, He is All-Seeing, All-Hearing, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful, Forgiving, Just; He has many attributes or good names – Muslims are told that He has ninety-nine names. All of His names are not abstract words but they have relevance in every Muslim's life. He created everything and humankind for a purpose: to serve Him. The God, in Islam, is the bedrock of the foundation of Islam.

2. Prophets and Messengers

Only Allah can tell the purpose of the creation of humankind which He does through his chosen human beings called prophets and messengers. Islam recognizes many prophets of the Bible, such as, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and many in between them. Muhammad Ibn Abd-Allah Ibn Abd-al Muttalib was the last prophet-messenger of Allah who lived fourteen centuries ago. He received guidance from Allah, gave its meaning in words and deeds, thus becoming the role model for humankind.

3. The Guidance from Allah

When one accepts a new job he is given a job description and someone shows him how to do various tasks. Similarly, Allah gives the job description in His revelations and the Prophet shows the meaning and implementation of what and

how. All the prophets of the Bible fulfilled their duties and the last prophet, Muhammad, did also. He left behind the Word of Allah, the Qur'an, and his teachings, Hadith, were collected by his companions. The Qur'an and the Hadith are the textual sources of Islamic teachings and will remain so as long as there is life on earth. Allah Himself has taken the responsibility for their preservation.

4. The Angels

Another creation of Allah, scattered all over the universe doing the work for Him, is angels. Human beings have been given very little knowledge about angels. One much honored angel, Gabriel or Jibrail, brought Allah's guidance to the prophets. Along with other angels mentioned in the Qur'an there are two angels with each human being writing his deeds.

5. The Last Day

Allah has created everything with a preset life span. Everything and everyone, from the moment of creation, are running towards its destruction or death. Modern sciences have arrived at the same conclusion. Science tells us that the solar system is middle-aged; when sun arrives at the moment of its death, that will be the end of its planets, including the earth. Similarly, the whole universe has its life span and there will be a Big Crush, the opposite of the Big Bang.

The last day for each human being is the day of his/her death, as there is a last day for life on earth. On the last day of the earth, there will be earthquakes, mountains will either be rendered to sand or will float in space like carded wool, water of the oceans will either be sucked into the earth or will boil away and the valleys thus created will be filled with earth or rocks. The earth will become smooth without mountains or valleys with no life on it. However, this is not the end of human beings. There is life hereafter or the afterlife.

6. The Life Hereafter

Allah is Just but there is much injustice on earth. Murderers are getting away with murders, embezzlers are getting away with their loot, dictators are getting away with their oppression and injustices, and other criminals are getting away with their crimes. Are they really getting away with their crimes? No, it only appears that way. Everyone will be accountable for his deeds to Allah on the Day of Judgment and will receive reward or punishment. The life of the earth is the life of trials, not

the place of real reward or punishment. This leads to the reality of Life Hereafter. After destruction of life on earth Allah will command human beings to come back to life with body and soul, their resurrection. Resurrection is followed by the judgment by Allah. No judgment is complete without reward for good doers and punishment for evil livers. The reward is the life of paradise and punishment is the life of hell. Both are believed to be eternal.

7. Al Qadr (Measure, Destiny, Decree)

People are created as males and females, short or tall, black, white, brown, yellow, smart or not so smart, with appointed parents, having a given time and place of birth and death and so on. All this is decreed by Allah. However, human beings have choices and enjoy limited freedom. The result of their activities depends upon their level of knowledge, level of effort and permission of Allah to succeed. Since human beings do not have perfect knowledge, sometimes they succeed and other times they fail in their pursuits. The admission that only Allah has perfect knowledge and human knowledge is imperfect and practical implications of this admission is *Qadr*.

Note: It is true that everything happens in this world with the permission of Allah but not everything is Allah's will. These are two different things. Allah never wants His or Her slave to do bad things and disobey Him, but if His slave wants to commit crime, Allah will not forcibly stop it. Otherwise there will be no test and everybody will be righteous person. So Allah's will (That is His desire that His slave do not disobey Him and commit wrong deeds) and His permission to facilitate if His slave insists on doing bad things are two different things. Also people have wrong concept about Qadr (destiny, decree). Like if somebody commits suicide and blame on Allah's decree or his destiny is totally wrong, because Allah knows with His infinite wisdom and the knowledge of the future, that this person will commit suicide that's why He wrote in his destiny that he will commit suicide.

Works and Deeds as the Building of Islam above Ground

The visible part of a building is whatever exists above ground built on a stable foundation. Similarly, a Muslim's life, his talk and his activities must represent his beliefs. They are summarized below.

Five Rites (Acts) of Worship

The term worship has two aspects: (a) Love for Allah more than the love for anyone or anything in life, including the love of one's own life. It simply means that one is willing to give up anyone or anything for the love for Allah. (b) Obedience of Allah and His Messenger for the love of them. If one looks for worldly benefits in obedience of Allah or desires to avoid worldly harm by obeying, then it is for business not for the love of Allah. Five rites of worship are given below.

1. *Shahadah*, Witnessing

If one believes in the seven aspects of beliefs and is willing to live his life accordingly, he declares his intention voluntarily and publicly or at least in front of two or more witnesses. Such declaration consists of pronouncing, “*La Ilaha illa-Allah wa Muhammadur-Rasool-Allah*” meaning there is no deity but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger. This pronouncement has the connotation that my Creator, Provider and Sustainer Lord is Allah and I have been brought to this world by Allah to serve Him for which I will be accountable on the Day of Judgment. The Messenger of Allah, Muhammad(S), brought the guidance from Allah, delivered to me and became a role model for me, therefore, I am going to live by the Qur'an and *Sunnah* (the way of the Messenger of Allah, Muhammad(S)).

2. *Salah*, Prescribed Prayers

Once a person takes *shahadah*, he is a Muslim and is required to perform the five daily prescribed prayers. In prayers a person addresses Allah directly without any intermediary or intercessor. Islam is the only religion in the world which has removed all kinds of intermediaries and intercessors between man and Allah.

3. *Zakah*, Wealth Cleansing Tax

The basic principle is that Allah is the owner of heavens and the earth, therefore, He is my owner and everything in my possession belongs to Him. I am only a trustee of Allah for anything in my possession. I must do whatever Allah requires me to do. Allah demands that when a certain amount of money is in one's possession for a year, a small percentage (typically 2.5%) must be spent for Allah's causes. In general, collection of *Zakah* is spent to help the poor and needy and other Islamic causes.

4. *Sawm*, Fasting in the Month of Ramadan

Ramadan is the ninth month of Islamic lunar calendar. During this month Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk, meaning not to eat, drink, smoke or indulge in sex. After sunset all lawful food, drink and sex are allowed. However, one must implement the moral code of Islam very strictly because non-adherence has double jeopardy, namely, violating the moral code and nullification of the fast. The fast is a test of one's sincerity to Allah.

5. *Hajj*, Pilgrimage to Makkah

A Muslim must perform Hajj once in a life time provided expenses can be met without borrowing or owing any money to anyone, health is good and the way is safe. Hajj is the re-creation of some of the trials and tribulations of Prophets Abraham and Ishmael, and Hagar, the wife of Abraham, with a few additional rituals. The Hajj lasts for five days from the 8th to 12th of Dhul Hijjah. Approximately two million people perform Hajj every year.

Significance of the Pillars

The above mentioned five rites of worship are also called the five pillars of Islam. Pillars are supporters of roofs and walls. If the pillars fall down there is no building left. Similarly, if a Muslim is not doing his five daily salah, this pillar is absent from his building of Islam and part of the building is destroyed. He may claim to be a Muslim but in practice he is a hypocrite. The same analogy is applied to other pillars.

Excellence in Knowledge and Conduct

A good believing and practicing Muslim is a role model for the people and the Muslim Ummah is the role model for all other societies. A Muslim scientist must be the best among his peers, a doctor must be the best, a car mechanic must be the best and so on. A role model must excel in all aspects of his life, that is, in knowledge, profession, on the job, in his moral character and honoring other people's rights. Most importantly he must excel in his service to his Lord, Allah.

Islamic Moral Code, Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil

Islam requires Muslims to be righteous, truthful, fulfill their promises, be courteous, gentle in disagreements, have humility, keep the trust and keep all other well known virtues. Naturally, Islam condemns the immoral and criminal acts of lying, cheating, backbiting, slandering, breaking promises, breaching the trust, arrogance, haughtiness, and all other well known vices. It is not enough to stay away from vices and adopt all virtues but he has a duty to promote the same good in the society and do everything possible to stop evil and vice.

Fulfill the Duty to Others

There are mutual rights and duties. However, Allah will not ask on the Day of Judgment if you have received all your rights but He will ask if you have done all your duties. Human duties fall under four categories:

1. Duty to Allah

The first and foremost duty is to Allah. There are three duties to Allah, (a) not to associate partners with Him, (b) not to worship anyone but Allah, and (c) not to depend upon anyone for help but Allah.

2. Duty to Other Human Beings

Whenever there is interaction with another person there are mutual rights and duties. One person's rights are other person's duties. There are duties to parents, spouse, children, relatives, neighbors, buyers, sellers, ruler, ruled, boss, subordinates and so on.

3. Community Duty

There is a duty to defend the family, the country and the community as a whole. In addition there are people who cannot provide for themselves, such as, the poor, orphans, widows, handicapped, refugees and others whom a single person cannot support fully but the community as a whole can. Every Muslim should be a part of such a support system. Every human being has five basic rights, namely, food, clothing, shelter, education and health maintenance; every Muslim should be part of the system providing basic rights to all those who cannot provide for themselves.

4. Duty to Manage the Earth

Allah has appointed man Khalifah on the earth, meaning that man is a trustee or manager of the earth for the owner, Allah. Humankind, in general, and Muslims, in particular, have the duty to see that the resources of the earth are not abused: air and water are not polluted, animals are not killed for fun or for greedy people, trees are not cut down unnecessarily and so on. Use resources of the earth but do not abuse them.

Lawful (*Halal*) and Unlawful (*Haram*)

This is a part of Islamic Shari'ah, civil and criminal law. Every Muslim is not going to be an Islamic lawyer or a judge, but he should know about a few unlawful things. The basic principle is that everything is lawful except those things which are explicitly unlawful. A few things are doubtful therefore it is advisable to avoid them. The unlawful things fall under four categories.

1. Food and Drink

There are a number of things which have been forbidden as food and drink, such as, flesh of swine, blood, anything offered in the name of anyone other than Allah, flesh of dead animals, carnivorous animals, birds of prey, all intoxicants including alcoholic liquor and drugs of abuse and anything poisonous to humans.

2. Sources of Income

Any business involving production, distribution or sale of unlawful food or drinks is unlawful. In addition, all trades of exploitation or taking others rights away are unlawful, such as, prostitution, gambling, usury and interest, stealing, robbery, embezzlement, monopolizing and hoarding to raise prices and others.

3. Spending the Wealth

It has been mentioned that all wealth is owned by Allah and human beings are trustees for whatever they possess. It is, therefore, necessary that Allah's wealth not be spent wherever Allah does not desire it to be spent. A few examples of such unlawful areas are already given above. One person's spending is another person's source of income. Additional unlawful areas are spending money on unlawful food and drinks to serve others.

4. Sexual Relations

A simple principle is no sex without marriage. An engagement is a social custom not a religious rite. A person closest in blood relation lawful to marry is a first cousin. There is no permission for homosexuality or such “marriages” in Islam.

Conveying the Message of Islam

A duty of every Muslim, male and female, individually and collectively, is to present Islam to the non-Muslims. A Muslim, by the Grace and Mercy of Allah, may go to paradise but a non-Muslim has no such chance. At least, a person must convey the message of Islam to his loved ones, giving them a chance to save themselves from the hell fire.

Implementation of the Rule of Allah

Every aspect of a Muslim’s life should be guided by Allah, including personal, family, social, economic and political life. None of the aspects of human life are outside the domain of Allah.

In summary, there are seven essential components of beliefs and seven essentials of good works required of every sane adult Muslim, male and female. The Qur’an and Hadith are essentially explanations of beliefs (*Iman*) and good works (*‘Amal-us-Salihah*) and learning them in detail could be a lifelong pursuit.