

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Two: What is *islam*?

In the first part we saw that God is the only eternally existing being. God existed before the creation was created and everything that exists came into being by the divine command [Q. 39:5]. God alone is perfect. God exists beyond time and space; therefore there is no aging or “wearing out” where God is concerned. Creation exists within time and space; therefore it cannot be perfect like God. All that we can say is that God creates the best of all possible worlds [Q. 95:4]. Now that we have a creator and a creation, we can ask about the relationship between them. First, it is clear that this is not a relationship of equals. God is dependent on no-one and nothing whereas the whole of the creation is dependent on the creator, who brought it into being.

Islam understands this relationship between God and the creation as being one of harmony and balance with everything in due order and in its rightful place. We can speak of this as a relationship of justice, which Plato described as everything being in the right relationship to everything else. It is then in a state of security and safety; a state of deep and abiding peace. This can only come about when the whole of creation functions according to the great designer’s plan; when everything is obedient to God. For the human being, who is possessed of freewill, this includes the submission of the human will to the divine will. It entails learning that I am not God; I am to learn my place and submit. God is by definition good; there is no evil in God. God wills what is good for each element within the creation; what will bring it to live in this relationship of peace, harmony and balance. If I am in harmony with God and you are in harmony with God, then we must be in harmony with each other. Not just us but the whole of creation. That is the way that God created the universe and how God wants it to live; then we will flourish and grow to our full stature.

The reality is that the creation is limited by time and space. Over a period of time, things go wrong; things, if you like, “wear out.” This is the way in which some Muslim scholars have spoken about natural disasters, like the moving of the tectonic plates of the earth, which can result in an earthquake or tidal wave. This is part of living in a physical universe; sometimes things go wrong. This is not to mention the effect that human beings can have on the natural order of things by the way that we disturb the balance of creation. We are responsible for things like pollution and destroying the ozone layer and suchlike.

Arabic is a language in which most words are based on three-letter roots. Such a root carries within it a whole range of meanings. All the words that are based on that root form a family of words with a shared set of meanings. One such Arabic root is made up of the three letters *slm*. This root carries that range of meanings that we mentioned

above when talking about the relationship of God to the creation. By adding vowels to the root, we can make a series of words as follows:

s l m
i s l a m
m u s l i m
s a l a m

We can see the three-letter root *slm* running through all three. Now we can ask: What is *islam*? And answer: *islam* is that natural state of the whole of creation in harmony, balance, justice, peace etc. with God and within itself, which is the way that God created things and the state in which God wants them to live. This can only come about when everything lives according to the designer's plan, which for human beings means choosing to submit our wills to the divine will. Only then will we and all creation flourish in this world and the life hereafter. Our second word, *muslim*, is an adjective based on the same root; it describes something in the state of *islam*. We can say that God creates the universe in the state of *islam* or God creates a *muslim* universe. You might also recognise the third of our words, *salam*, from the greeting that Muslims exchange: *Salam 'alaykum*. This is often translated as, "Peace be with you" but we can now see its deeper meaning: "May you come ever more fully and completely into that state of perfect peace, which is *islam*, which will only come about when you submit to the divine will in every way" [Q. 33:44]. That state of abiding *islam* is the condition of Paradise, one of the names for which is *Dar al-Salam*, the Place of Peace [Q. 10:25]. You might also notice that this word is similar to the word *shalom* in Arabic's sister language, Hebrew.

Now we have found the true beginning of *islam*: it is the natural state of the universe right from the very first moment of creation. Everything that God creates is created *muslim* [Q. 64:1-3]. Every thing, not just human beings [Q. 17:44]. The mineral world is *muslim*: the planets follow their God-given orbits, metals have their God-given properties – the softness and density of lead, the hard workability of iron, and so on. Rivers are *muslim*; they flow downhill. We might say, they are obeying the law of gravity, which is their God-given nature. The vegetable world is *muslim*: trees, flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Have you ever noticed the daffodils or sunflowers? The way that they turn their heads to absorb the sun's rays? We could say that this is imprinted in their DNA or that this is their God-given *muslim* nature. The same applies to the animal world. The human being is the top of the pyramid of creation [Q. 17:44]. Like the rest of it, we will flourish if we obey our God-given nature.

This natural way of life that leads to human flourishing is called in Arabic the *din al-fitra*. To live this way leads us to develop fully as human beings, living as God intended [Q. 30:30]. We are however free beings, therefore we have the potential to rebel [Q. 10:99]. Such rebellion will inhibit our growth into the fullness of humanity [Q. 18:29]. To put this another way, we can say that every human being has an *islam*-shaped vacuum in our hearts that needs to be filled with the correct, obedient, disciplined, natural, balanced way of *islam*. This is a useful point to keep in mind as

we go further in our study of understanding Islam. By virtue of the fact that we are human beings, the teachings and wisdom of Islam should resonate in our hearts as we reflect on them – whether we believe in Islam or not, Islam should in some way “make sense” or “speak to our hearts.”

Up until now, I have carefully used the words *islam* and *muslim* in italics and with small letters. In this way, I have tried to show the timeless natural way of things that was revealed in all scriptures to all the prophets that have ever been sent to the earth. We may call this *generic islam*. Beginning on that awesome night in 610, when God began to reveal the Qur'an to Muhammad, we can say that the creation entered into a new phase. The Qur'an is the last, definitive revelation for all time and Muhammad the final and universal prophet. Before that moment, there were many communities on the earth more or less accurately following that timeless *islam* that had been sent to them. From the time of the coming of the Qur'an and Muhammad, God has sent the ultimate guidance to cure the ills of humankind. As Muslims understand it, if human beings knew what was best for them from that time onwards, they would follow this ultimate guidance. From now on, we can speak of capital I, Islam, and capital M, Muslim, that is, that way of life based on the ultimate guidance conveyed in the Qur'an and the lived example of Muhammad.

A critical question

In speaking of God as creator of all that exists, the question often arises about Muslim attitudes to evolution. God is understood as both creator and sustainer of the creation; God is actively involved in maintaining the life of all creatures [Q. 11:6]. We can think of this as like the current that runs through a light bulb. The bulb in a sense exists even without being connected to the current but it only becomes a light bulb when it lights up due to the power that flows through it. Without the current, one has a thin glass structure.

The reality is that the vast majority of Muslims around the world and Muslim scholars are what we would call “creationists,” that is, they understand the various elements of creation to have been created by God in more or less their current form. The Qur'an does not go into detail about the process of creation but gives us the critical information that God only has to will a thing and there it is, or as the Qur'an puts it, God says “be” and it is [Q. 36:81-82]. God creates by the divine word of command.

So, are there Muslims who speak in evolutionary terms? Over recent decades, some Muslim scientists have come to examine the compatibility of various theories of evolution with Islam. In their working around this question, they have to keep four elements within their system. First, whenever whatever happened at the beginning, it was by the divine will and command; God is and must remain the first cause or originator of all that exists. Second, God continues to be involved in the outworking of the creation; it cannot all happen by chance and random selection. Third, somehow one must find a way to speak of the uniqueness of the human being. Various Muslim scholars through the centuries have done this in different ways, for example, by

speaking of the arrival of a human soul, as Aristotle also taught. The Qur'an speaks of God blowing God's spirit into human beings to make us human [Q. 38:72]. Today, some scholars might speak about the uniqueness of human consciousness in a similar way. Finally, the Qur'an speaks of Adam and his wife as the first human beings and so this has to be worked into the system, perhaps through seeing them as proto-parents from whom all human life is descended [Q. 2:35]. All scientists who develop different theories to speak of the origins of life on earth are trying to make sense of their observations and build them into a coherent system; these theories are "work in progress" rather than any definitive description of "what really happened."