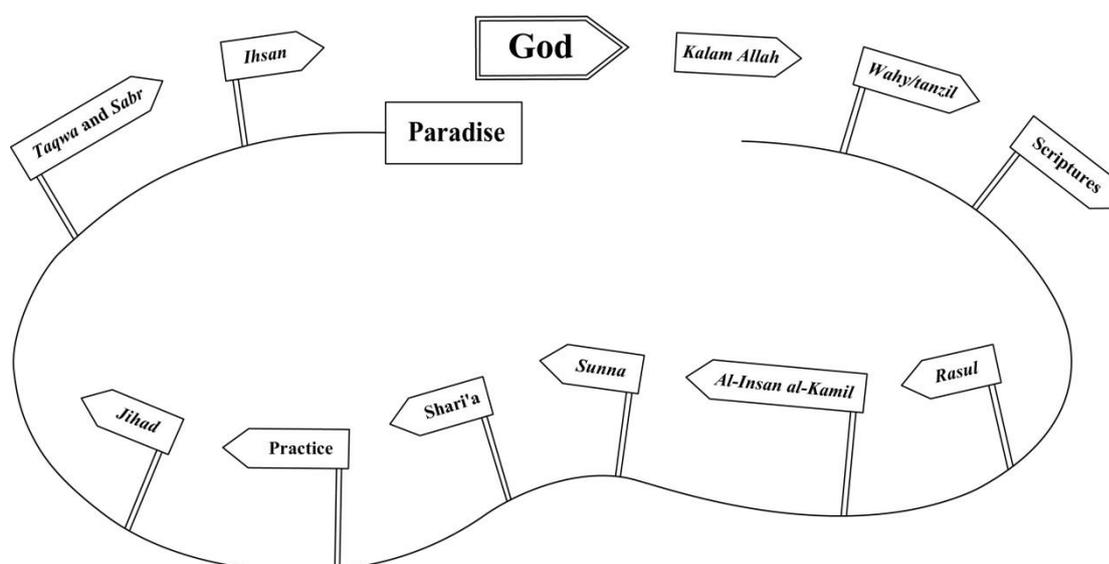


A Sunni paradigm of Islam

To understand any religion, we need to see it within a certain framework. How does it all fit together? What is it all about? How does one thing relate to another? What's the big picture? If I have a pile of boxes of books that need to be sorted so that they can be used, the first thing that I need is a set of shelves. These will give a structure into which I can fit the books and arrange them in a usable order. If I am building a house, I may have a set of plans but I need to make sure that I first lay the foundations, then start on the walls, then the roof and the floors and so on. Without the framework, built in a logical way, my house will not fit together. It's the same with a set of ideas or a theological model; there has to be a framework so that everything interrelates with everything else. This we call a paradigm. Let's try to draw out a paradigm of Islam as Sunni Muslims see it. The various elements are shown as sign-posts showing how they link together from God to Paradise.

A Sunni Paradigm of Islam



God

God is the starting point for everything according to Islam. God alone existed before the whole of creation. God had no beginning and will have no end. God is eternal. God is unique; there is nothing like God. God is one and cannot be divided into parts. This absolute oneness and uniqueness of God is emphasised by the Arabic word Allah. The word Allah, like God with a capital G, has no plural form. Allah is not the god of a particular group of people or the god of a particular religion. Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians use the same name to speak of the one and only Allah. Allah is not the biggest or most powerful god; God is the only God there is. God cannot be limited by space; there is nowhere that we can say "God is" and nowhere that we can say "God is not". All the power that exists comes from and belongs to God; God is all-powerful. Nothing is hidden from or beyond the knowledge of God;

God is all-knowing. There is no other eternal being in addition to God; everything that exists is created by God. God is not a manufacturer, turning something into something else; rather God is the creator of all that exists. Therefore everything is in a relationship with God and only exists because God wills it and sustains it in being. There is no time with God; no past or future tense. God exists in a timeless present tense. So we can say from God's perspective that "God is creating the world." Created things have a beginning and an end; so we can say that every created thing is coming from God, sustained in being by God and also is in the process of returning to God. Our created world will cease to exist, but God exists in eternity and after death we will enter into another dimension close to God. We will return to this idea at the end of our paradigm.

Our earthly languages belong to this world; they are created. This means that they are limited like everything else except God. Whenever we try to speak about God, using our languages and our philosophies, we are working in the created realm. We cannot speak of God as God really is, but our earthly languages are all that we have to talk about God or to "do theology." The things that we say about God, our clever theologies, are only the best attempts that we can make to speak about God, however inadequate they are. Similarly, when God speaks to human beings, God has to use human language with all its limitations because this is what we understand. This is what God does in the revealed scriptures like the Qur'an. The Qur'an speaks of God in the singular and also uses the plural form "we" but this does not imply any plurality in God; it is rather like in English "the royal we". Similarly the Qur'an uses the male pronoun of God: "he". This does not imply that God is male; God is neither male nor female, God is above all gender.

Islam draws its language for speaking about God from the revealed Qur'an. Many names are used there for God; each of these gives us a glimpse into some quality of God. The qualities or names of God are beyond number, although Muslim scholars have searched out the names for God used in the Qur'an and sayings of Muhammad and drawn up the famous Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God. Each gives us a glimpse into what God is like but we can never know the fullness of that quality in God. We can say that God is All-merciful but we cannot understand what the nature of God's mercy is like. We take our human concept of mercy and then say "God is the ultimate mercy", but we cannot imagine the quality of God's mercy. We call this the language of analogy. We take a concept or category that we can grasp and use it to speak about something that lies beyond our ability to comprehend, because God's mercy is beyond all our concepts or categories. The same is true of all the names or qualities of God that we use; they are the best that our human language can manage to speak about the ultimate, unknowable God.

This absolute oneness of God is summed up in the Arabic term *tawhid*. God is one and utterly unique; unlike any created or uncreated thing. This unique "otherness" of God means that God is totally transcendent. God is beyond our world, beyond our concepts and categories, beyond our language; it is beyond our ability to comprehend the essence of God. There is no understanding of incarnation in the Islamic system;

that would be to bring God down to our created level. Islam forbids all drawings or images of God as they would limit God in some way. God is interested and engaged with human beings. The Qur'an tells us that God is closer to us than our jugular vein [Q. 5:16]. Yet God remains "other" and requires of human beings our worship, obedience, service and love.

Kalam Allah

The *kalam Allah* is the speech or word of God. This is the principal means by which God acts upon the creation. When God wills something, God says "be" and it is [Q. 40:68]. It was through the *kalam Allah* that the creation came into being; therefore it must have existed before the creation. The scholars of Islam debated as to whether the *kalam Allah* was eternal or created. If one says that it is eternal then there is a danger of claiming two eternal beings: God and the *kalam Allah*. If one says that it was created, then the question is raised of God being mute before its creation and it being fixed in time. To resolve this, the scholars refer to the *kalam Allah* as uncreated.

This uncreated *kalam Allah* is and always was with God. It is not God, but it is not other than God; the speech cannot be separated from the speaker, but it is not the speaker. As the *kalam Allah* is transcendent like God it cannot be limited to any human language. God is above such things. However, the *kalam Allah* needs to enter into our human world if it is to guide human beings on how they should live a life that pleases God.

Wahy/tanzil

When God sends revelation to the created world through the *kalam Allah* the two Arabic terms *wahy* and *tanzil* are used. Both can be translated as revelation and this is made clear by the literal meaning of *tanzil* which is "to send down." This term is usually used for revelation sent down to human beings, the prophets, but the Qur'an also speaks of the bee receiving *wahy* from God, so it can be seen as imprinting the natural order in other beings also [Q. 16:68]. When God sends revelation to human beings, it must be clothed in a human language that the people to whom it was sent can understand. Revelation originates with God and is sent down to the earth at God's command; thus we can say that God is in control of the entire process of revelation until words emerge from the mouth of the prophet in human speech. Authorship rests with God and not with the one who receives and conveys it to the world. This control by God includes the putting together of the message in the language into which it comes. Revelation is a literal, verbal process in Islam; the message is from God and the words that are selected to convey it are under God's command also.

Scriptures

A scripture is the body of guidance that God has sent to the earth to a human prophet in an earthly language through the process of revelation of the *kalam Allah*. We think of the term now as a written deposit of this guidance in the form of a book, but

revelation existed before writing and so we need to broaden out the term to include the oral guidance that was sent down to earlier prophets. Human beings have always been in need of guidance from God, so the first scripture was sent to Adam, who was the first prophet. All the peoples of the earth have received guidance from God sent through a messenger [Q. 10:47]. All have been guided in the way that they should worship God [Q. 22:67]. The source of all this guidance is God and the vehicle for conveying it is the *kalam Allah*. All human beings belong to the one human family; therefore the essence of the guidance must always have been the same. The Qur'an names five scriptures that were sent to earlier prophets, but there were hundreds of scriptures, the names of which are unknown to us.

The last in this series of revelations is the Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be universal and for all time and all people after it was revealed to Muhammad. Earlier scriptures were lost or to some extent corrupted by their followers, so God will preserve the Qur'an from corruption for all time [Q. 15:9]. Thus we can say that God's greatest enduring gift to humankind is the final book of guidance, the Qur'an.

Rasul

The scriptures were sent to prophets in the languages that they used. At least one prophet has been sent to each of the peoples of the earth [Q. 16:36]. Some people received many prophets, for example, the Qur'an names twenty-one prophets who are mentioned also in the Bible. Two Arabic terms are used for prophets: *rasul* and *nabi*. A *rasul* was a prophet who was sent with a scripture; sometimes this term is translated into English as messenger. A *nabi* is a prophet sent to call people back to and to reinforce the message of an earlier *rasul*. Five prophets are recorded as having been sent with a scripture in the Qur'an: Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad, but there were many others whose names are not known. The Qur'an does not give us the number of prophets who were sent, but Muhammad spoke of 124,000 prophets.

The prophets were people of the highest order but they were not divine beings; Muhammad said of himself repeatedly that he was the servant of God. This is a common way for the Qur'an to speak of the prophets: Job [Q. 38:41], David [Q. 38:30], Jesus [Q. 43:59] and Muhammad [Q. 17:1]. The prophets were preserved from sin by God so that they could live an exemplary life for the sake of their followers. They were to put the message that they received into practice and thus lay down a pattern for people to imitate. The Qur'an says of Muhammad that he is "a beautiful pattern of conduct" for humankind [Q. 33:21].

Al-Insan al-Kamil

The term *al-insan al-kamil* or "the perfect human being" has various depths of meaning. Its gnostic dimensions are developed by mystics like Ibn Arabi (d.1240) to speak of a pre-existence of Muhammad, who is the being of light around which all creation is orientated. Here we will confine ourselves to the understanding of Muhammad as the being in which all the qualities of God are made manifest. It is as

though Muhammad, a human being of the highest spiritual qualities, is a mirror so polished by his devotion to God that the names or the qualities of God reflect from him as light does from a mirror. When people look at Muhammad, they see the highest perfection of humanity that is possible in this earthly life. It is as though the light of the Qur'an so filled and purified his whole being that he shone with its message. Muhammad is seen by Muslims as the archetype of what it is to be human.

Muslims are those who follow the guidance of the Qur'an as it was received and exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad. His wife Ayesha is reported to have spoken of him as "the living Qur'an". To read the Qur'an is to know the character of Muhammad and to observe the character and actions of Muhammad is to see the Qur'an lived out. We can say then that the goal of Muslim spirituality is the imitation of Muhammad. Through worship, service, obedience and love of God, each human being has the capacity to polish the mirror of their own soul to reflect, as far as God wills, the qualities of God. To do this, careful attention must be paid to following Muhammad's example in all things.

Sunna

To follow Muhammad's example is to follow his *sunna* or customary practice. This leads Muslims to pay great attention to his *sira* or biographies so that they may know how he lived out the message. Everything that Muhammad said, taught, did and the things of which he approved is of value in living a life like his. These elements have been collected in the authentic Hadith or Traditions traced back to the Prophet through his companions. Because Muhammad is the sinless infallible interpreter of the Qur'an through the light of inspiration given to him by God, to imitate him in all these aspects is to implement the teachings of the Qur'an itself. This is the path to human perfection in this life and to live close to God in Paradise in the life hereafter.

Shari'a

It is a fundamental duty of prophets sent with a new scripture to establish a way of life or path that others may follow; this is the Shari'a. Over the centuries, the scholars of Islam have built on the foundations of the Qur'an and *sunna* to establish in detail the rulings of the Shari'a so that Muslims may implement them in their daily living. The whole of human life is to be brought under this guidance, so the Shari'a is a comprehensive moral code of living. As human society, knowledge and consciousness evolve, new circumstances emerge to which the scholars must apply the principles of Qur'an and *sunna* to guide the Muslim community on the Straight Path to human perfection.

Practice

Islam is not a system that requires only the assent of saying "I believe." God commands action; putting the belief into practice by living according to the divine commands and keeping away from those things that God has forbidden. This is a

gradual conversion of life to bring every aspect of human living under God's direction. This is the imitation of Muhammad in daily living. The Qur'an tells us that God created human beings for no other reason than that we should worship God [Q. 51:56]. On many occasions, the message is repeated that men and women should worship God alone [Q. 71:3] and that nothing other than God is worthy of our worship [Q. 17:22-23]. This was the message of the earlier prophets too; for example, Jesus [Q. 4:172]. The statement is contained in the opening chapter of the Qur'an, which Muslims recite at every time of formal prayer [Q. 1:5]. To worship God means to obey God's commands in every aspect of daily life and avoid those things forbidden by God. The practice of Islam requires that men and women serve God; the first duty of a Muslim is to be the *abd* or servant of God. It includes serving oneself by not taking in forbidden substances like alcohol [Q. 5:90] and ultimately not taking one's own life, because it is God alone who gives life and death [Q. 57:2]. Service extends to one's family, neighbours, humanity, society and indeed all creation; the second duty of a Muslim is to be the *khalifa* or regent of God on earth cherishing the creation [Q. 2:30]. The motive behind all worship, obedience and service is the love of God, as is shown in the famous saying of the eighth century woman mystic, Rabi'a of Basra:

O God, if I obey you out of fear of hell, send me there as I am unworthy of you.

O God, if I obey you out of hope of the reward of heaven, deny it to me as I am unworthy of you.

But, O God, if I obey you out of pure love for you alone, then hide not your face, for you are a loving God.

Putting the guidance of God into practice is central to Islam. Even if one does not fully understand, one should obey the divine commands in the knowledge that God knows best what is good for humankind. It may be that our human knowledge has not yet expanded sufficiently to understand why something is good for us. There are people, like the desert Arabs mentioned in the Qur'an, who have not yet been guided to faith but who have submitted their lives in obedience to God by following the way of Islam; the reward for their sincere works will not be lost [Q. 49:14-17].

Jihad

Every human being is born in a natural state of harmony with God. There is no fundamental flaw in human nature. Before human beings were sent to the earth, God made a covenant with them. God asked, "Am I not your Lord?" And they replied, "Yes indeed!" [Q. 7:172]. However, we are all born into time and so we have a tendency to drift away from God unless we discipline our will to bring it into line with the ethical will of God. We have a tendency to be forgetful. The society into which we are born and other people around us have a tendency to make us forget our divine vocation. The *Shaytan*, Satan, has set himself the task of tempting human beings to rebel against God [Q. 15:34-43].

Human beings have been given the freedom to choose to do good or bad deeds. During our lives, God will test us to see who will remain firm and who will turn away

[Q. 47:31]. Men and women are engaged in a life-long struggle between obedience and rebellion. This life-long struggle or *jihad* is a necessary consequence of human freedom. Every day, indeed every minute, can be filled with the choice to obey God or to consider that we know better than God and thus to rebel.

Human beings do not exist in isolation but in communities and societies. Part of our *jihad* is to implement the divine guidance in the societies in which we live. We are to promote the good in society and oppose the evil [Q. 9:71]. Thus Islam is a political or communal system also; every aspect of our common life must be brought under God's guidance.

Taqwa and sabr

The two key ethical virtues that human beings are to cultivate are *taqwa* and *sabr*. *Taqwa* we can translate as God-consciousness: to be aware of God in every fibre of my being and at every moment, to know that I am the creature of God, that I have been given the dignity and duty freely to worship, obey, serve and love God, that I will be accountable to God on the Day of Judgement, that even though I cannot now see God, God is always aware of what I do. If I am truly aware that I stand always in the presence of God, then I will be filled with awe; I will in a sense "fear God" on account of God's infinite goodness. With the virtue of *taqwa*, I will seek to walk always on the path of God's guidance. If I am full of *taqwa*, then there is no room for temptation or forgetfulness to enter into my life and I will do righteous deeds. This is the virtue of *taqwa* [Q. 2:177].

Life is a struggle and the path can run uphill, therefore the second key ethical virtue is *sabr* or patience [Q. 90:12-18]. There are things that are not easy to change or to bear; these must be endured patiently as the struggle continues [Q. 3:200]. It may be that we cannot see the fruits of worship, obedience, service and love in this life and the tests and temptations may be severe, but there is also the life after death in which our rewards lie with God [Q. 2:155-157].

Ihsan

A life filled with God-consciousness and patience will lead the believer into a state of *ihsan*: to live constantly in the awareness of the presence of God. This is the goal of life on earth. It entails drawing ever closer to God until one is taken into a "divine embrace" as explained in one saying of God given to Muhammad to convey to humankind (*Hadith Qudsi*):

My servant keeps on coming closer to me through performing good deeds beyond what are commanded, until I love him. When I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, I am the sight with which he sees, I am the hands with which he holds and I am the feet with which he walks.

Paradise

At the end of this life, people pass through the doorway of death into the next life, in which the Muslim hopes to experience closeness to God in the heavenly realm called Paradise. There are different ways to talk about this. The Qur'an speaks of a beautiful garden in which the occupants will live near to God [Q. 5:119] and will find there all that their hearts desire [Q. 41:30-32]. Some scholars of the mystical tradition have spoken of a union with God in which the human soul is absorbed into the divine soul (*fana*).