

THE ESSENCE OF ISLAM

**ALLAH, THE QURAN, THE FIVE PILLARS,
AND THE RIGHTEOUS LIVING**

FAROOQ MIRZA

The translation and explanation of the Quran
The first-ever rendition of the Quran according
to specific topics and the subject matter
A new paradigm in understanding the Quran.

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DEDICATION

The seven-volume book series about the Quran is dedicated to the memory of Muhammad Asad, whose work, “*The Message of the Qur’an*,” was the first-ever attempt at an idiomatic, explanatory rendition of the Quranic message in English. In my opinion, it is the best translation and commentary on the Holy Quran.

Muhammad Asad was born Leopold Weiss in July 1900 in Lviv, now Ukraine. He was the descendant of a long line of rabbis, a line broken by his father, who became a barrister. Asad himself received a thorough religious education that would qualify him to keep alive the family’s religious tradition. He left Europe for the Middle East in 1922 for what was supposed to be a short visit to an uncle in Jerusalem. There, he came to know the Arabs and was struck by how Islam infused their everyday lives with existential meaning, spiritual strength, and inner peace. Weiss then became, at the remarkably young age of twenty-two, a correspondent for *The Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of the most prestigious newspapers in Germany and across Europe. As a journalist, he traveled extensively, mingled with ordinary people, held discussions with Muslim intellectuals, and met heads of states in Palestine, Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Back in Berlin from the Middle East, a few years later, Weiss underwent an electrifying spiritual epiphany—reminiscent of the experiences of some of the earliest Muslims—that changed his mind and his life. “Out of the Quran spoke a voice greater than the voice of Muhammad,” Weiss said. Thus, it was that Weiss became a Muslim. He converted in Berlin before the head of a small Muslim community in the city. He took the names Muhammad to honor the Prophet and Asad—meaning “lion”—a reminder of his given name, Leopold, which is derived from the Latin word for lion.

Asad spent some six years in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where he studied Arabic, the Quran, and the “Hadith”—the

traditions of the Prophet and Islamic history. He mastered the Arabic language not only through academic study but also by living with a tribe that spoke the Arabic dialect of the Holy Quran. At the age of eighty, after seventeen years of effort, he completed his life's dream and for which he felt all his life had been an apprenticeship: a translation and exegesis, or "tafsir," of the Quran in English: *The Message of The Qur'an*.

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PREFACE

A NEW PARADIGM IN UNDERSTANDING THE QURAN

Of all the major religions, Islam is perhaps the most misunderstood religion today, not only by non-Muslims but also by Muslims. There are 1.6 billion Muslims today; most are non-Arab. Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims, followed by India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Then there are Sunnis and Shiites at war. A non-Muslim observing all this from the outside will be confused as to who is right or wrong. And what is real Islam, after all? The answer is the Holy Quran.

The earthly cornerstone of the Islamic faith is the Quran, which transmitted divine eloquence through the human instrument of Prophet Muhammad. The Quran is a continuation of God's revelation from the Old Testament prophets to Jesus and finally to Muhammad, the Last Prophet. It has not been added to, edited, or altered since it came out fourteen centuries ago. All of Islam's principles and rules stem from the Quran and the examples of the Prophet Muhammad.

QURAN—A LITERAL WORD OF GOD

Theologically, the Quran means the word of God. Any quotation from the Quran can be introduced with "Saith God." It is, therefore, the primary religious document for Islam and a source of unimpeachable authority for all matters of doctrine, practice, and law. All Muslims, regardless of their sectarian leanings, agree that the Quran is the infallible word of God. The word "**Al-Quran**" is derived from the verb "Qaraa"—"he read" or "recited"—and is to

be understood as “the reading par excellence.” When the noun Quran appears without the definite article “al,” it usually has its primary meaning of “recitation” or “discourse” and may be rendered accordingly.

TRADITIONAL ARRANGEMENT

The Quran is a unique book, and unlike most other books, it does not have a beginning, middle, or end. It is not arranged according to different topics or subject matter. The traditional Quran is arranged according to the inner requirements of its message and not in the chronological order in which the individual passages were revealed.

The seemingly abrupt transition from subject to subject is also in accordance with the Quranic principle of deliberately interweaving moral exhortation with practical legislation. This is as per the teaching that man’s life—spiritual, physical, individual, and social—is one integral whole and therefore requires simultaneous consideration of all its aspects if the concept of the good life is to be realized. The traditional format of the Quran resembles the raw data collected in the earlier part of the research project. Raw data needs to be processed, organized, analyzed, and formatted to make it presentable. The role of **Tafsir**, or exegesis of the Quran, is verse-by-verse and sometimes word-by-word explanation or interpretation of the text.

Randomness of the subject matter: The Quran, in its original format, is a difficult book to understand. Thomas Carlyle, a renowned Orientalist, described the Quran as “a wearisome, confused, jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite [sic];—insupportable stupidity, in short!” Carlyle was by no means an Islamophobe. His essay “The Hero as Prophet” was a rare objective analysis of Muhammad’s life. What Carlyle meant was that there is

a discussion of varying subjects within the same chapter, which seems disconnected and may cause confusion and misunderstanding, especially for those unfamiliar with the uniqueness of the Quran. Due to the randomness of the subject matter, the Quran is vulnerable to misinterpretation.

THE QURAN IS ONE INTEGRAL WHOLE

Will they not, then, try to understand this Quran? Had it been issued from any but God, they would surely have found many an inner contradiction! (4:82)

To understand the Quranic message, one must be careful not to have a hasty approach or draw impulsive conclusions from isolated verses or sentences taken out of context. One should allow the whole Quran to be revealed to one's mind before attempting to interpret single aspects of its message. Organizing Quranic verses according to the subject matter is based on the central idea that the Quran is one integral whole, and conclusions should not be drawn from isolated verses. The core message of the Quran is very consistent, despite the randomness of the discussed topics.

THE REVERENCE PAID TO THE QURAN

Because it is considered the “ipsissima verba” of God, Muslims everywhere pay extraordinary reverence to it. The handling and use of the text are conducted in a way appropriate to its sacred character. Care is taken not to lay the Quran on the ground or never to allow it to meet an unclean substance. An old-fashioned Muslim goes through the ritual of ablution before he opens the book. The religious value of the Quran is also illustrated by the lavish devotion paid to present the text in the most beautiful possible form. Hundreds of thousands of handsomely illuminated and embellished Qurans are bound in the finest examples of the Eastern bookmaker's

art. Verses from the Quran in elegant and complex calligraphy are the favored form of decoration on the facades of mosques, religious schools, tombs, and other public buildings throughout the Islamic world.

THE QURAN: THE LITERARY MASTERPIECE

While Christian Bible Societies have been busy translating God's word into every known tongue, Muslims have turned their primary efforts to teaching people the language in which God spoke for all times with incomparable force and directness.

The beauty of Arabic of the Quran: Reverence for the Quran also appears in the refusal of traditional Muslim scholars to sanction its translation into other languages. The rhetoric and rhythm of the Arabic of the Quran are so characteristic, powerful, and highly emotive that any version whatsoever is bound to be a poor copy of the glittering splendor of the original. The verses usually, but not always, represent rhetorical units terminated and connected by a rhyming word.

The majestic melody of the Quran: The function of rhyme in the Quran is completely different from the function of rhyme in poetry. Interposed between leisurely periods, there may be sudden outbursts of sharp rhetoric or shaped lyric. Using the language of music, each "surah" (chapter) is a rhapsody composed of whole or fragmentary leitmotifs. The analogy is reinforced by the subtle variations in the rhythmical flow of the discourse. This inimitable symphony's sound has moved billions to tears and ecstasy. When Arabs heard the majestic melody of the Quran, they thought it was spell-binding sorcery.

THE SURAH AND AYAH

There are 114 surahs or chapters in the Quran. Each verse of the surah is called an “ayah.” When referring to a particular Quranic passage, a colon and the verse number follow the surah’s number: e.g., 3:28 denotes Surah 3, Ayah 28. Without the aid of any computer, every word in the Quran (77,934), every letter (323,621), and every verse (6,236) has been counted. The Quranic verses can be divided in three different ways:

- (1) Meccan and Medinan,
- (2) Clear and allegorical,
- (3) Context and reason behind the specific revelation.

PART 1
THE FOUNDATION OF ISLAM
Allah (The God) and The Quran

Allah ('The God)
THE SOLE FOSTERER AND SUSTAINER
OF ALL CREATIONS

AL-FATIHAH

The introductory surah called “Surah Al-Fatihah” from the Quran illustrates some of God’s attributes. This surah is repeated several times during each daily prayer. The surah Al-Fatihah contains, in a condensed form, all the fundamental principles laid down in the Quran, for example, the principle of God's oneness and uniqueness of His being, the originator and fosterer of the universe, and the fount of all life-giving grace. God is the only power that can guide, help, and call us to the righteous path in this world. Finally, there is a need for voluntary self-surrender by man to the will of the Supreme Being and, thus, for worshipping Him alone. The rest of this volume will illustrate and expand on various concepts described in Al-Fatihah.

In the name of Allah, the most gracious (Rahman), Dispenser of grace (Rahim). All praise is due to Allah alone, the Sustainer of all worlds. The Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace Lord of the Day of Judgment! Thee alone do we worship, and unto Thee alone do we turn for aid. Guide us the straight way. The way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings. Not of those who have been condemned [by Thee], nor of those who go astray! (1:1-7)

VERSE-BY-VERSE EXPLANATION OF AL-FATIHAH

In the name of Allah, the most gracious (Rahman), Dispenser of grace (Rahim). (1:1)

The lesson of God’s mercy proclaimed by the Quran has been institutionalized by the Muslim practice of beginning important

matters, such as letters, public speeches, lectures, and articles, with the phrase “In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the dispenser of grace.” The invocation occurs at the beginning of every surah except Surah 9. It is an integral part of “Al-Fatihah or The Opening” and is numbered as verse 1. In all other instances, this invocation precedes the surah as such, and it is not counted among its verses.

Both the divine epithets **Rahman** and **Rahim** are derived from the noun “Rahmah,” which signifies mercy, compassion, love, and, more comprehensively, grace. The term “Rahman” (Most Gracious) encapsulates the quality of abounding grace inherent in, and inseparable from, the concept of God’s being. “Rahim” expresses the manifestation of that grace in, and its effect upon, His creation. In other words, Rahim represents an aspect of His activity.

All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all worlds. (1:2)

The Arabic expression “**Rabb**”—rendered as Sustainer—embraces a vast complex of meanings not easily expressed by a single term in another language. It comprises the claim of possessing anything, having authority over it, rearing, sustaining, and fostering it from inception to completion. Preceded by the definite article al, ‘Rabb’ is applied exclusively to God in the Quran. This is the sole fosterer and sustainer of all creations, the ultimate source of authority. The term “worlds” denotes all categories of existence, physical and spiritual.

Lord of the Judgment Day! (1:4)

The term “Day of Judgment” represents the principle of life after death, man’s ultimate responsibility, and the consequences of man’s actions and behavior in the hereafter.

Guide us on the straightway (1:6)

Why the straight path? One meaning is obvious; a straight path is not devious—neither crooked nor corrupt. However, the phrase

contains another meaning that speaks to something more distinctive about Islam. The straight path is straightforward, direct, and explicit. Compared with other religions, Islam spells out the way of life it proposes; it pinpoints it, nailing it down through explicit injunctions. The consequence is a definiteness about this religion that gives it a flavor all its own. Muslims know where they stand. He knows who he is and who God is. He knows what his obligations are, and if he transgresses them, he knows what to do about it. Islam has clarity, order, and precision that sharply contrasts the shifting, relative, uncertain, at-sea quality of much of modern life.

[Know that] God invites [man] unto the abode of peace and guides him that wills [to be guided] onto a straightway. (10:25)

The expression Salam is rendered here as “peace.” The term “abode of peace” denotes not only the condition of ultimate happiness in the hereafter—alluded to in the allegory of paradise but also the spiritual condition of a true believer in this world. Namely, a state of inner security of peace with God, with one’s natural environment, and within oneself.

The way of those upon whom Thou bestowed Thy blessings. Not of those who have been condemned [by Thee], nor of those who go astray! (1:7)

Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings by vouchsafing them prophetic guidance and enabling them to avail themselves thereof. The concept of guidance through God’s message bearers is evident about “those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings.” Flowing from it is the principle of continuity of all true religions (implied in the allusion to people who have lived—and erred—in the past).

Regarding the two categories of people following a wrong course, some of the greatest Islamic thinkers (e.g., Al-Ghazali and

Muhammad Abduh) held that the people described as having incurred God's condemnation—that is, having deprived themselves of His grace—are those who have become fully cognizant of God's message, understood it, and have rejected it. Those who go astray are meant to be people to whom the truth has either not reached or come in a garbled and corrupt form that it is difficult for them to recognize it as the truth.

AL-FATIHAH: THE SEVEN MOST OFTEN-REPEATED VERSES

Indeed, We have bestowed upon you seven of the often repeated [verses], and [have thus revealed to you] this sublime Quran. (15:87)

The revelation of the divine writ is destined to serve as a moral guide for the man who cannot yet discern the meaning and purpose of God's creation.

SYMBOLIC DESCRIPTION OF GOD'S EXISTENCE AND ACTIVITY

In the Holy Quran, we can find many symbolic expressions referring to evidence of God's activity. Due to the limitations of language—which, in turn, arise from the inborn limitations of the human mind—this activity can only be circumscribed and never described. Hence, expressions such as God's wrath or condemnation, His pleasure at virtuous deeds or love for His creatures, His being oblivious of a sinner who was heedless of Him, or asking a sinner on Resurrection Day about his wrongdoing, etc. All such verbal “translations” of God's activity into human terminology are inevitable if we are expected to conform to ethical principles revealed to us by human language. Still, there can be no

greater mistake than to assume that these “translations” could enable us to define the indefinable.

The idea of God’s existence and activity can only be conveyed to us, at best, through vague metaphors. When the Quran speaks of Him as “in the heavens” or “established on His throne” (al-arsh), we cannot take these phrases in their literal senses since they would imply God is limited in space. Such a limitation would contradict the concept of an infinite being. We know that the “heavens” and the “throne” and God being established on them are but linguistic vehicles meant to convey an idea outside of all human experience—the idea of God’s almighty and absolute sway over all that exists. Similarly, whenever He is described as “all-seeing,” “all-hearing,” or “all-aware,” these descriptions have nothing to do with physical seeing or hearing. But they specify, in terms understandable to man, God's eternal presence in all that is or happens.

THE ORIGIN OF THE UNIVERSE FROM THE BIG BANG

THE NATURAL LAW OF EVOLUTION

The common questions are, “Where did we come from?” and “Where are we going?” The following chapters (2-5) examine the concept of evolution from the big bang to the origin and evolution of life on Earth. Matter and ideas evolve in space and time, and the law of evolution runs through all natural phenomena.

COSMIC EVOLUTION

An epoch event of unimaginable energy burst, the Big Bang shaped everything we know. The universe began after the Big Bang and continues as cosmic evolution resulting in the formation of galaxies, stars, and our solar system. On the planet Earth, cosmic evolution produced favorable conditions for life.

EVOLUTION OF LIFE

At first, life on earth was in a single cell (bacterial) stage. With time, there was a progression of complexity among animals, passing from invertebrates to marine vertebrates and finally to reptiles, mammals, and humans.

EVOLUTION OF MAN

Human beings also go through evolution from embryo to fetal development. After birth,

infants become toddlers, school-age children, young adults, old age, and death. The process of evolution does not stop at the end of life and continues on with the afterlife. Depending on a man's moral quality of life, he is punished or rewarded. The evolution of the human soul continues in heaven, whose nature is only known to our Maker.

But as for those who [by virtue of their past deeds] will have been blest with happiness, [they shall live] in paradise, therein to abide if the heavens and the earth endure—unless thy Sustainer wills it otherwise—as a gift unceasing. (11:108) In that [paradise], they shall have whatever they may desire—but there is yet more with Us. (50:35)

God wills to bestow upon them a yet greater reward, or He opens to man a new, yet higher stage of evolution.

We know that science is limited to physical phenomena, and it cannot entertain the role of the Divine in evolution. Science cannot explain how the Big Bang originated; conversely, religion alone cannot explain the evolutionary changes that occurred before and after life began. The origin of life on Earth is a complicated phenomenon, and the one-sided version of creationism or the spontaneous evolution of Darwinism cannot provide a satisfactory explanation. If one is willing to adopt a more holistic approach and include both spiritual and physical aspects of the origin of life, we can better understand where we came from and where we are going.

THE MANIFESTATION OF GOD'S UNITY

All matter and life, which exist in this universe, are interconnected through a manifestation of God's unity. The scientific study of evolution doesn't replace faith; it complements it, and exploring natural phenomena helps bring us closer to God's unity. As we shall see, there are many references in the Quran to creationism, where

God directly intervened to cause almost instant events, the likes of the Big Bang. When the long timeframe, like six eons, is mentioned, it indicates time spent on natural evolution.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The sky or the heaven: The sky or the heaven in the Quran often has the connotation of “universe” or, in the plural, “the heavens or cosmic systems,” where the stars, the solar systems (including our own), and the galaxies pursue their course.

The number seven: In Arabic, the number seven is synonymous with several, just as seventy or seven hundred often mean many or very many. Taken together with the accepted linguistic definition, the “**Seven Heavens**” may be explained as denoting the multiplicity of cosmic systems.

Yawm: The Arabic word “**Yawm**” denotes any period, whether extremely long (eon) or very short (moment). Its application to twenty-four hours is only one of its many connotations. In the cosmic sense in which it is used in the Quran, the plural “**Ayyam**” is best rendered as “eons.”

THE BIG BANG AND THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE

Are they who are bent on denying the truth not aware that the heavens and the earth were [once] one single entity, which We then parted asunder? And [that] We made from water every living thing? Will they not, then, [begin to] believe? (21:30) And it is We who have built the universe with [Our creative] power, and it is We who are steadily expanding it. (51:47)

According to almost all modern astrophysicists, all matter in the universe originated from one entity about 13.7 billion years ago, the

Big Bang Theory. The verse here is an unmistakable reference to the Big Bang and the unitary origin of the universe—metonymically described in the Quran as “the heavens and the earth.” There are no biblical references to the Big Bang, and the Quran has only one verse that mentions this epochal event.

Skeptics might dismiss the Big Bang verse as too vague. Verse 51:47 unambiguously declares that the universe is expanding, a stunning discovery made by Edwin Hubble in 1929. He observed that almost every galaxy was rushing away from Earth, and if the universe is constantly expanding, it must have had a beginning. Not every scientist was delighted by the idea that the universe was created by the Big Bang. To some, this suggested a Creator as well as creation which went against some scientific concepts.

There is an inherent difference between an artist, poet, or philosopher's creation and the creation attributed to God. The human creator produces his work out of already existing elements and does nothing more than combine those elements together in a new combination. God alone has the power to create in the true sense of the word—that is, to bring into being something that did not exist, either in its entirety or at a component level. The origin of the universe from the Big Bang is just one example of where the entire universe was created out of practically nothing.

THE FIRST CAUSE

Say: “He is the One God: God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All That Exists.” “He begets not, and neither is He begotten and there is nothing that could be compared with Him.” (112:1–4) He is the Originator of the heavens and the Earth, and when He wills a thing to be, He but says unto it, “Be”—and it is. (2:117) He has created the heavens and the earth according to [the inner] truth. Whenever He says, “Be,” His word comes

true. His will be dominion on the Day when the [resurrection] trumpet is blown. (6:73)

Everything that begins to exist must have a cause—if the universe began to exist, the universe must have a cause. The most persuasive argument for God's existence is the cosmological or “First Cause” argument. It starts with a premise that cannot be disputed that every effect has a cause. A “thing” cannot be without being caused, hence cause and effect. Although everything must be caused by something else, this regression in the chain of causation logically cannot extend backward into infinity. At some point, the chain

reaches back to something that was not dependent on anything else but independent, “being the uncaused” cause of all that exists.

God is the absolute Creator. His power is such that His mere command “Be” is sufficient to cause the Big Bang and, thus, the formation of the universe. In His supreme wisdom, He created all that exists according to His plan, which humans are not privy to, nor can we comprehend it.

Everything We have created in due measure and proportion, and Our ordaining [a thing and its coming into being] is but one [act], as the twinkling of an eye. (54:49–50)

The comparison with the twinkling of an eye is idiomatic, i.e., based on the human concept of something that is instantaneous.

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD THROUGH HIS CREATION

They say, “Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him from on high by his Sustainer?” Say: “God has the power to bestow any sign from on high.” Yet most human beings are unaware of this—although no beast walks on earth and no bird that flies on its two wings, which is not [God’s] creaturelike

***yourselves: no single thing We have neglected in Our decree.
(6:37–38)***

Mecca's pagans repeatedly demanded that Prophet Muhammad perform miracles to prove his prophethood. Why could Muhammad not perform miracles to demonstrate that he was God's messenger? If miraculous signs were sought, let them reflect on God's greatness rather than Muhammad's.

One needs only to open one's eyes. The heavenly bodies holding their swift, silent course in Heaven's vault, the incredible order of the universe, the rain that falls to relieve the parched earth, the palms that bend with golden fruit, the ships that glide across the seas laden with goodness for the man—can these be the handiwork of gods of stone? Teleology—a philosophical term—is the doctrine that there is evidence of purpose or design in the

universe. This indicates the existence of a Creator. In an age of credulity, the Prophet taught respect for the incontrovertible world order, which awakened Muslim science before Christians.

DOMINION OVER THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH

And unto God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. God can will

anything. Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the succession of night and day, there are indeed messages for all who are endowed with insight. (3:189–190)

SUSTAINER OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH

Say: “Who is the Sustainer of the heavens and the earth?” Say: “[It is] God.” Say: “[Why], then, do you take for

your protectors, instead of Him, such as have it not within their power to bring benefit to, or avert harm from, themselves? “Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or can the depths of darkness and the light be deemed equal?” Or do they [really] believe that there are, side by side with God, other divine powers that have created the like of what He creates? So that this act of creation appears similar [to His]? Say: “God is the Creator of all things, and He is the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.” (13:16)

THE MEANING AND THE PURPOSE OF GOD’S CREATIONS

[And] who remember God when they stand, sit, and when they lie down to sleep, and [thus] reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: “O, our Sustainer! Thou hast not created [aught of] this without meaning and purpose. Limitless art Thou in Thy glory! Keep us safe, then, from suffering through fire!” (3:191) And [thus it is:] We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without meaning and purpose. (38:27)

God has not created this otherwise than in accordance with the truth - i.e., to fulfill a definite purpose in consonance with His planning wisdom: implying that everything in the universe - whether existent or potential, concrete or abstract - is meaningful, and nothing is "accidental."

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with [an inner] truth. For in this [creation], there is a message indeed for all who believe [in Him]. (29:44)

The inner truth of God’s creation of the heavens and the earth is has a meaning and purpose known only to God. In other words, belief in the existence of meaning and purpose underlying the creation of the universe is a logical result of faith in God. Just as it is

impossible to imagine or define God's Being, the true nature of His creativeness and His plan of creation must remain beyond our grasp.

WHO CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH?

Thus, it is [with most people]: if you ask them, “Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?” They will surely answer, “God.” How perverted, then, are their minds! (29:61)

The people spoken of in the sequence acknowledge God's existence but have only a vague idea of what it implies. They presume they “believe in God” but nonetheless worship false values and alleged divine powers alongside Him—all of which amounts to “Shirk” and a virtual denial of His almightiness and uniqueness. They answer without thinking that God is the Creator of the heavens and the Earth, following a vague habit of thought, without realizing that cognition of God as the Ultimate Cause of all existence logically postulates one's complete surrender to Him and Him alone.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSE AFTER THE BIG BANG

Your Sustainer is God, who created heavens and the earth in six eons and is established on the throne of His almightiness. (7:54) We have indeed created the heavens and the earth, and all that is between them in six eons, and [that] no weariness could ever touch Us. (50:38) And He [it is who] decreed they became seven heavens in two eons and imparted unto each Heaven its function. And We adorned the skies nearest to the earth with lights and made them secure: such is the ordaining of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (41:12)

God is omnipotent, and therefore, the impossibility of God ever being “wearied” by the process of creation is mentioned.

The creation of the universe in six “days” should be understood in the context of God’s timelessness, not from the human perception of time. The “day” of which the Quran so often speaks has nothing to do with human time definitions. Instead, it alludes to an ultimate reality in which the concept of time has neither place nor meaning. In other words, a day, an eon, a thousand years, or fifty thousand years are alike to Him, having an apparent reality of time only within the created world and none with the Creator.

Most authorities believe the repeated mention of the “six eons” during which the universe was created has a purely allegorical import. It indicates that the universe did not exist eternally but had a definite beginning in time and required a certain time-lapse to evolve to its present condition.

The term “throne” or “seat of power” is used metaphorically in the Quran to express God’s absolute sway over all His creations. It is noteworthy that in all the seven instances where God is spoken of in the Quran as “established on the throne of His almightiness” (7:54, 10:3, 13:2, 20:5, 25:59, 32:4, and 57:4), this expression relates to a declaration of His having created the universe.

THE EVOLUTION OF OUR SOLAR SYSTEM

He [it is who] applied His design to the skies, which were [yet but] smoke [i.e., a gas]. He [it is who] said to them and the earth, “Come [into being], both of you, willingly or unwillingly!” To which both responded, “We do come in obedience.” (41:11)

The sky or the heaven in the Quran often has the connotation of “universe.” After the Big Bang, the universe existed in fundamental particles and molecular gas. At this stage, the universe consisted mostly of hydrogen and helium gas, which physicists regard as the

primal elements from which all material particles of the universe have evolved and are still evolving. From the primary particles and other forces, the earliest stars, quasars, galaxies, and later our solar system emerged. Some researchers call the development of all this physical structure over billions of years “cosmic evolution.”

Approximately nine billion years after the Big Bang halfway out on one spiral arm of the Milky Way galaxy, the Sun and the rest of our solar system were formed from a giant, rotating cloud of gas and dust known as the solar nebula. As gravity caused the nebula to collapse, it spun faster and flattened into a disk. Thus, the Sun emerged from a condensing molecular cloud. The infant solar system was chaotic, and the ever-growing fragments collided, shattered, and reassembled into ever-larger bodies. From this carnage, nine planets emerged. Soon the developing Sun accumulated so much mass that it ignited, becoming a full-fledged star, and the nine planets witnessed their first sunrise. Our solar system is estimated to be about 4.6 billion years old.

The meaning of God’s command to the skies and earth to “come” and their submission (to His power) is this: He willed their coming into being, and so they came to be as He willed them to be. This is the type of metaphor called “allegory.” It is an illustration of His Almighty power on all willed by Him and nothing else. The often-repeated Quranic statement reflects this: “When God wills a thing to be, He but says unto it, ‘Be’—and it is.”

HEAVENLY BODIES MOVING IN THEIR ORBITS

Indeed, We have created above you seven [celestial] orbits: and We are never unmindful of [any aspect of Our] creation. (23:17) And [it is He who] holds the celestial bodies [in their orbits], so that they may not fall upon the earth otherwise than by His leave? (22:65) Consider those [stars] that rise only to set and move [in their orbits] with steady motion, and float [through space] with

floating serene, and yet overtake [one another] with swift overtaking: and thus, they fulfill the [Creator's] behest! (79:1–5) And that it is He alone who sustains the brightest star. (53:49)

The celestial bodies, such as planets, are held on their courses by the God-willed laws of cosmic movement. Only at the Last Hour will there be a universal cosmic catastrophe. The “seven paths” signify the multiplicity of orbits of the visible planets or cosmic systems. The passage refers to stars, the sun, and the moon; their movements in space; and the harmony of those celestial bodies in their multiform orbits and graded speeds. All this is evidence of God’s planning and creativity. The brightest star refers to Sirius, which belongs to the constellation Canis Majoris. Because it is the brightest star in the heavens, it was widely worshiped in pre-Islamic Arabia. The implication is to worship the Creator of the brightest star, not the star itself.

SUN AND MOON FLOATING IN THEIR ORBITS

We have built above you the seven (several) firmaments and placed [therein the Sun] a lamp full of blazing splendor. (78:12–13) Consider the Sun and its radiant brightness, and the moon as it reflects the Sun! Consider the day as it reveals the world and the night as it veils it darkly! (91:1–4) [He is] the One who causes the dawn to break, and He has made the night [a source of] stillness. Sun and the moon run their appointed courses. [All] this is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (6:96) Hallowed is He who has set up great constellations in the skies and placed a [radiant] lamp and a light-giving moon. (25:61) [He is] the Sustainer of the two farthest points of sunrise, and the Sustainer of the two farthest points of sunset. Which of your Sustainer’s powers can you disavow? (55:17–18) He has made the Sun and the Moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a term set [by Him]. (39:5) [They have a sign in] the

Sun, it runs in an orbit of its own. [And] laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. And [in] the moon, for which We have determined phases [which it must traverse] until it becomes like an old date-stalk, dried-up and curved. [And], neither may the Sun overtake the moon, nor can the night usurp the time of day. Since all of them float through space [by Our laws]. (36:38–40)

The two farthest points refer to the extreme position of sunrise and sunset in summer and winter, including all the variations throughout the solar year during which the sun rises and sets. He is the Ultimate Cause of all orbital movements in the universe and hence, its Creator. According to the eminent philologist Al-Farra, who lived in the eighth century, “The meaning of the light-giving moon derives its light from the sun.” Anaxagoras was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher who was the first to discover that moonlight was derived from the sun.

JOHANNES KEPLER

Early in the seventeenth century, the German astronomer Johannes Kepler propounded laws that first described the orbits of the planets around the Sun. The English physicist Isaac Newton, an intellectual giant of his time, later explained the physical causes of Kepler’s laws. The Sun runs on its course without any rest, i.e., unceasingly. The moon traverses through different phases until it resembles the raceme of the date palm, which, when old and dry, becomes slender and curves like a crescent.

UNIVERSE HIDDEN FROM MAN

All praise is due to Allah, who has created the heavens and the earth and brought into being deep darkness as well as light. (6:1) Are they then unaware of how little sky and earth lies open before them, and how much is hidden from them? (34:9)

Only 4 percent of the universe is made up of ordinary observable matter. Luminous matter like stars, planets, and hot gases accounts for only 0.4 percent of the universe. Nonluminous components, like black holes and intergalactic gases, make up about 3.6 percent only. The rest is dark matter and dark energy. The phrase, “How little of the sky and earth lies open before them,” stresses the insignificance of knowledge attained by humans or accessible to them.

INSIGHT OF THE WONDERS OF UNIVERSE

In time, We shall make them fully understand Our messages [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it becomes clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. [Still,] is it not enough [for them to know] that thy Sustainer is the witness unto everything? (41:53)

It will become apparent to a man that this revelation is indeed the truth through the progressive widening of insight into the wonders of the universe, all of which point to the existence of a conscious Creator. He is almighty and all-seeing: a fundamental truth which should be enough to remind man of his responsibility before Him.

LIMITS OF UNDERSTANDING MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE

[Hallowed be] He who has created seven heavens in full harmony: no fault will you discover in the creation of the Most Gracious. And turn your vision [upon it] again: can you see any flaw? Yea, turn your vision [upon it] again and yet again: [and every time], your vision will fall back upon you, dazzled, and truly defeated. (67:3–4)[Do they believe] the hidden reality [of all that exists] is within their grasp, so they can write it down in time? (68:47)

This passage points to the arrogant belief that science can solve all problems. The solution to all mysteries of the universe is just around the corner, and man-centered science—epitomized by it being “written down”—can achieve self-sufficiency.

The fundamental idea is man’s inability ever to understand all the mysteries of the universe. There will be a widening of human insight into the wonders of the universe. However, with his earthbound knowledge, man will never encompass all the mysteries of the universe, and hence, his dependence relies on guidance through divine revelation.

Such statements that “we have solved the problem of the origin of the universe” and that “the Theory of Everything is at hand” are bogus claims under the garb of science. We cannot have a theory of everything because the limited human mind cannot know everything. Scientific methods are powerful but have limitations. Only God is omniscient, knowing all the final answers.

The term “al-Ghayb” represents the hidden reality, which is the earliest instance in the chronology of Quranic revelation.

POSSIBILITY OF EXISTENCE OF EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE?

Among His signs is the [very] creation of the heavens and the earth, and of all the living creatures which He has caused to multiply throughout them: and [since He has created them,] He has [also] the power to gather them [unto Himself] whenever He wills. (42:29) God is He who has created seven heavens and of the earth a similar number. Through all of them flows down from on high, unceasingly, His [creative] will, so you might know that God has the power to will anything, and God encompasses all things with His knowledge. (65:12)

Humans have pondered for millennia whether other inhabitable worlds exist. There may be countless Earth-like planets that simple statistical models predict to exist in our galaxy alone. If terrestrial planets are indeed as common as the statistics show, then the presence of life in some of them is not implausible. The verses given here vaguely imply the possibility of extraterrestrial life. All living creatures, both in the heavens and the earth, may imply that life exists throughout the cosmos. Seven in Arabic refers to several: He has also created several Earths, as He has created several heavens.

THE EVOLUTION OF EARTH

Say: “Would you indeed deny Him who has created the earth in two eons?” (41:9) He [it is who, after creating the earth], placed firm mountains on it, [towering] above its surface, and bestowed [so many] blessings on it. He equitably apportioned its means of subsistence to all who would seek it: [and all this He created] in four eons. (41:10) And He [it is who] decreed that they become seven heavens in two eons and imparted unto each heaven its function. And We adorned the skies nearest to the earth with lights and made them secure: such is the ordaining of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (41:12)

Our solar system (seven heavens) is estimated to be around 4.6 billion years old. God bestowed His blessing upon the Earth as per His divine justice and not according to the human concepts of “equity” or “need.” Almost all the authorities agree that “four eons of verse 10 include the ‘two’ mentioned in verse 9, hence, the interpolation of the words “and all this He created.” Together with the “two eons” of verse 12, the whole allegorical number comes up to six. The Earth is made secure from cosmic catastrophes due to Jupiter, which is thirteen times greater than the Earth and plays a protective role by capturing passing comets, which otherwise may smash into the Earth.

EARTH A GARDEN OF EDEN

He has spread its expanse and caused its waters to come out of it, and its pastures. [All this] as a means of livelihood for you and your animals. (79:29–33)

- Our earth is an example of creation through conscious planning. The earth's size, location, temperature, physics, and chemistry are all perfect for sustaining life, big and small, that lives here.
- Earth is not too close to the Sun, and our planet is situated in the Goldilocks Zone. The moderate temperature allows water to remain liquid, which is an essential precondition for life. The moon stabilizes the earth's polarity and thus regulates temperature.
- A strong magnetic field is generated by the rotation of the liquid iron core in the earth. The magnetic field shields us from powerful solar winds that stripped away most of the surface water and oxygen on Mars, where the magnetic field was lost a long time ago.
- The nitrogen and oxygen gases in its atmosphere protect the earth. These gases block ultraviolet and other shortwave radiation that otherwise sterilize the planet.
- Another key factor is its size. Mars is only half the size of Earth. Due to its much larger size, the earth has always remained warm and active.
- Continents drift about on a layer of molten rocks—a process known as plate tectonics—thrusting up mountains and pushing massive plates back into the interior. The dynamic turnover of the crust recycles carbon and keeps atmospheric carbon dioxide, the primary cause of global warming, at moderate levels. Due to a congenial environment, the earth is a cradle of life.

EARTH A CRADLE OF LIFE

And the earth have We spread out wide—and how well have We ordered it! (51:48) He is who has made the earth a cradle for you and has provided you ways [of livelihood] thereon so that you can follow the right path. (43:10) And [who] sends down waters from the sky: and by this means We bring forth various kinds of plants. Eat, [then, of this produce of the soil,] and pasture your cattle [thereon]. (20:53–54)

The “pasture” mentioned here connotes all herbal produce suitable for consumption by man or animal. Therefore, man ought to be grateful to God and always be conscious of Him being the Provider.

MAJESTIC MOUNTAINS

Have We not made the earth a resting-place [for you], and the mountains [its] pegs? (78:6–7) And have We not set on it proud, firm mountains and given you sweet water to drink? (77:27) And he has placed firm mountains on the earth lest it sway with you, rivers, and paths, so that you might find your way, as well as [various other] means of orientation: for [it is] by the stars that men find their way. (16:15–16)

The Earth has three layers: the crust, the mantle, and the core. Billions of years ago, the Earth started as a hot, dense ball of rock. The heaviest material, mostly iron and nickel, sank to the center of the Earth, forming a hot, dense metal core. The molten material that surrounded the earth’s core was the early mantle. Over millions of years, the mantle cooled and solidified from trapped water, and lava eruptions formed the outer layer, or the crust made of solid rock. Mountains also owe their “firmness” to the gradual balancing process of cooling and hardening. “Lest it sway with you” refers to the solidity of the Earth’s crust—in contrast with the unstable interior. Like icebergs or ships in the water, continents and their

mountains “float” on the denser mantle. It is a symbol of the firmness and relative equilibrium the surface of the Earth has gradually achieved during its geological history.

Mount Everest in the Himalayas, the world’s tallest mountain, rises 29,029 feet (8,848 meters), or 5.5 miles (8.8 km) above sea level. Mountains and peaks form where two continental plates collide. The Himalayas were formed when the larger Asian plate forced the Indian plate deep into the mantle, sinking it at least 155 miles (250 km) into the Earth, resembling a keel or root penetrating deeper into the mantle. It explains the Quranic metaphor of the mountains as pegs that anchor into Earth.

THE BEAUTY OF MANY HUES

And all the [beauty of] many hues—which He has created for you on earth. In this, behold, there is a message for people willing to take it to heart! (16:13) Art thou not aware that Allah sends down water from the skies, whereby We bring forth fruits of many hues. Just as in the mountains, there are streaks of white and red of various shades, [others] raven black. And [as] there are in men, crawling beasts, and in cattle too, many hues? Of all His servants, only those endowed with [innate] knowledge stand [truly] in awe of Allah: [for they alone comprehend that] verily, Allah is almighty, much-forgiving. (35:27–28)

The beauty of many hues is an evidence of God’s creative power. Those endowed with spiritual knowledge realize that the phenomena observed do not comprise the whole of reality, as there is a realm beyond the created being’s perception.

BOUNTY OF THE SEA

And He is who has made the sea subservient [to His laws], so that you can eat fresh meat from it, and take from it gems which you

may wear. And on that [sea], one visualizes ships plowing through the waves, so that you can [able to] go forth in quest of some of His bounty, and thus have the cause to be grateful [to Him]. (16:14) He has created for you all that is on earth and has applied His design to the heavens and fashioned them into seven heavens. (2:29) Consider the sky and its wondrous make, and the earth and its entire expanse! (91:5–6) Consider the vault [of Heaven] raised high! Consider the surf-swollen sea!

(52:5–6)

The reference to the earth, which literally reads as “that which has spread it out,” refers to the qualities responsible for the beauty and variety of its expanse. The immensity and wonderful configuration of the universe is evidence of a conscious Creator. Consider the wondrous attributes of the One responsible for the harmony and coherence of the visible cosmos, which is the meaning of the term “sama” (sky) in this context.

EARTH SUBSERVIENT TO MAN

Are you unaware that Allah has made Earth subservient to you all that is on it; and the ships that sail through the sea at His behest? Allah is most compassionate toward men, a dispenser of grace—knowing that it is He who gave you life, and cause you to die, and will bring you back to life: [but] bereft of all gratitude is man! (22:65–66)

THEISTIC EVOLUTION OF LIFE

EVOLUTION OF LIFE FROM WATER

We made from the water every living thing. Will they not [begin to] believe? (21:30) He has created the heavens and the earth in six eons, and [ever since He has willed to create life], the throne of His almightiness has rested upon the water. (11:7) It is Allah who has created all animals out of water. And [He has willed that] among them are crawl on their bellies, walk on two legs, and walk on four. Allah creates what He will, for Allah has the power to will anything. (24:45)

The animals created out of water denote every corporeal endowed with life and spontaneous movement. Therefore, in its broadest sense, it comprises the entire animal world, including man. The symbolic reference to “the throne of His almightiness resting upon the water” points to the God-willed evolution of all life out of the water. The whole sentence is expressed in the past tense obliquely, indicating the original, fundamental aspect of God creating life out of the water. The statement that God “made every living thing out of the water” expresses most concisely a truth currently universally accepted by science. The “how” of this process of origin of life from water is still a mystery, but fluid water is essential for all life on earth. Habitable environments must provide extended regions of liquid water, conditions favorable for the assembly of complex organic molecules, which allow life on earth to form independent and stable cellular structures.

CREATION VS. EVOLUTION

Throughout history, philosophers, religious thinkers, and scientists have attempted to explain the history of life on Earth. In 1859, Charles Darwin described the evolution of life as a process of natural selection in his book, *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection*. Darwin could not fully explain the mechanism that caused life forms to change from generation to generation.

Many religious fundamentalists are opposed to evolution, and they consider Darwin's ideas blasphemous because they contradicted the biblical version of creation. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the predominant view held in Europe was that God created every organism on Earth as it exists now.

During the Golden Age of Islam (see volume six), Muslim scientists, namely Ibn Kathir, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Arabi, and Ibn Sina, among other scholars, believed in some quasi-form of creation/evolution of life on Earth. Some of Darwin's critics, including Sir William Draper, called it the "Mohammedan Theory of Evolution," accusing Darwin of plagiarism. Today, many literal-minded Muslims believe God came down on Earth and molded Adam out of mud and then breathed His spirit into him, a notion that defies rational thinking. No statement in the Quran supports the concept that God created each species separately as it is.

FROM UNICELLULAR TO MULTICELLULAR ANIMALS

Cyanobacteria are the earliest living organisms, appearing as blue-green algae in the water, lived as early as 3.5 billion years ago. There is still no explanation of how the cyanobacteria bacteria came into existence. Life remained almost exclusively unicellular for the initial five-sixths of its history, and multicellular animals began to appear less than 600 million years ago. With time, there was a relay

of the highest complexity among animals, passing from invertebrates to marine vertebrates to reptiles, mammals, and humans. This is the only rational explanation of how all animals, including man, evolved from water.

EVOLUTION OF PLANT LIFE FROM WATER

All plant life evolved from algae, which originated in water and adapted itself on land eons ago. Green algae eventually evolved enough complexity to cover the land with vegetation, which we now call trees, shrubs, flowers, and grass. Without the evolution of algae, the half-million species of plants essential for life on Earth might not exist.

A central component of evolutionary theory is that all living organisms, from microscopic bacteria to plants, insects, birds, and mammals—including man—shared a common ancestor in the past. The common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees (the most closely related species to man) is believed to have lived six to seven million years ago. In comparison, an ancestor common to humans and reptiles lived three hundred million years ago. All nature is interconnected, and there is unity in all life forms since everything originates from one God.

No beast walks on Earth and no bird that flies on its two wings, which is not [God's] creature like yourselves: no single thing We have neglected in Our decree. (6:38)

Even today, many Muslims object to evolution because the thought of man's origin in common with animals is abhorrent to them. It diminishes man's status as a "supreme being" and implicitly justifies some men's amoral animal-like behavior. The Quran rejects such a negative view, declaring the animal kingdom as God's creation "like yourselves."

EVOLUTION OF MAN OUT OF WATER AND EARTH

MAN EVOLVED FROM DUST

Has there [not] been an endless span of time before man [appeared] [a time] when he was not yet a thing to be thought of. (76:1) [Remember] Allah creates [every one of] you out of the dust, and then He fashions you into either of the two sexes. (35:11) The Almighty, the Dispenser of Grace, who makes the most excellent for everything that He creates. He begins the creation of man out of clay. (32:6) Allah has caused you to grow out of the earth in [gradual] growth. (71:17) He brought you into being out of the earth and made you thrive thereon. (11:61) Verily, in the sight of Allah, the nature of Jesus is as the nature of Adam, whom He created out of dust, and then said unto him, “Be”—and he is. (3:59) And his friend answered him in their argument: “Wilt thou blaspheme against Him who has created thee out of dust.” And then out of a drop of sperm, and in the end has fashioned thee into a [complete] man? (18:37) And among His wonders is this; He creates you out of dust—and then, lo! You become human beings ranging far and wide. (30:20) O, men! If you are in doubt about the [truth of] resurrection, [remember that] verily, We have created [every one of] you out of dust. (22:5)

ROLE OF WATER IN EVOLUTION OF MAN

And He, it is who out of this [very] water has created man and has endowed him with [the consciousness of] descent and marriage—tie, for thy Sustainer is ever infinite in His power. (25:54) And now ask those [who deny the truth] to enlighten you: Were they

harder to create than all those [untold marvels] that We have created? For them, We have created out of [mere] clay commingled with water! Whereas you marvel, they [only] scoff; and when they are reminded [of the truth], they refuse to take it to heart. (37:11–13) And indeed, We have created man out of sounding clay, out of dark slime transmuted. (15:26)

Indeed, there has been an immensely lengthy (or endless) span of time when man appeared on Earth. In other words, the physical world existed long before the existence of man. From the Big Bang to the existence of man, it took billions of years of evolutionary time. “God has caused you to grow out of Earth” has a twofold meaning. Firstly, the human body is composed of the same organic and inorganic substances found on Earth. Secondly, man has been created from the primeval biological environment, out of which all living things evolved. See verse 21:30, in which the creation of “every living thing out of water” is mentioned, and verse 24:45 mentions the connection of the entire animal world, including man. “Clay commingled with water” refers to the admixture of water and clay into one mass so that the constituent parts are more or less homogeneous.

DARK SLIME

The blue-green algae that sometimes appear as mats or scum on the surface of reservoirs and lakes during hot summer months are described as dark slime in the Holy Quran. It consists of some of the most primitive bacteria on Earth called cyanobacteria, which can tolerate extreme environments, from the hot springs to the tundra of the Arctic. The bacteria contain chlorophyll to manufacture their sugar as a fuel. To the naked eye, the layers of cyanobacteria appear as blue-green algae or dark slime floating on the water’s surface.

SOUNDING CLAY

While you marvel at God's creative powers, they, the deniers of the truth, reject God's unlimited power of creation due to their blind arrogance. The construction of the sentence shows that the sounding clay has evolved out of "dark, fetid mud" or "dark slime," both "altered" in its composition and "brought into shape," hence the rendering of this expression as "transmuted."

The term "sounding clay" adds a further dimension to the concept of man's evolution out of clay, dust, and water. In the Quran, the sounding clay "that emits a sound" when struck is used exclusively regarding the creation of man. It seems to contain an allusion to the matrix of man's physical body and the power of articulate speech, distinguishing a man from all other animal species, as well as to the brittleness of his existence (see the expression "like pottery" in verse 55:14). It points to the evolution of the human species, starting from cyanobacteria, the most primitive organisms living on Earth, gradually ascending to ever higher stages of development. "Through descent and marriage-tie" has enabled man to attribute spiritual value to, and derive strength from, his organic and social relationships.

HUMAN SOUL IS THE SPIRIT OF GOD

He (Allah) forms him in accordance with what he is meant to be and breathes into him His spirit. [Thus, O men], He endows you with hearing, sight, and feelings as well as minds: [yet] how seldom are you grateful! (32:7–9)

At a certain point in human evolution, God endowed man with soul and consciousness. The human mind reached the pinnacle of development, enabling man's abstract and moral thinking, unlike animals, who can only act on their instincts. With the development of speech, human beings became distinct from the animal kingdom.

God's "breathing His spirit into man" is a metaphor for the divine gift of life, consciousness, or of a "soul." Consequently, "the soul of every human being" has the spirit of God. The most important thing to note about the Muslim view of man is its appreciation of both the ultimacy and value of individuality. In Islam, individual identity is not only entirely real, but it is also good in principle. As expressed in the human soul, it is eternal, for once created, the soul lives forever. Value, virtue, goodness, and spiritual fulfillment come by expressing one's unique self or being different from anyone else, namely, the existential impossibility of one's ever attaining inner peace without an optimistic belief that man's life has meaning and purpose, either of which can be glimpsed through the revelations bestowed on those exceptionally gifted and receptive personalities, the prophets.

MIRACULOUS TRANSFORMATION FROM THE FERTILIZED OVUM

And on earth, there are signs [of Allah's existence, visible] to all who are endowed with inner certainty, just as [there are signs thereof] within yourselves, can you not, then, see? (51:20–21)

EMBRYONIC DEVELOPMENT

We have created [every one of] you out of dust, then out of a drop of sperm, then out of a germ-cell, then out of an embryonic lump complete (in itself) and yet incomplete, so that We might make [your origin] clear unto you. (22:5) Now indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, and then We cause him to remain as a drop of sperm in firm keeping [in the womb] and then We create a germ-cell out of the drop of sperm, and an embryonic lump out of the germ-cell, and We create within the embryonic lump bones, and We clothe the bones with flesh—and We bring [all] this into being as a new creation. Hallowed, therefore, is Allah, the best of

artisans! (23:12–16) Did We not create you out of a humble fluid, which We let remain in [the womb’s] firm keeping for a term pre-ordained? Thus, We have determined [the nature of man’s creation], and excellent indeed, is Our power to determine [what is to be]! (77:20–24) He creates you in your mother’s wombs, one act of creation after another, in threefold depths of darkness. (39:6)

The expression “embryonic lump complete (in itself) and yet incomplete” denotes the stage at which the embryonic lump has no individual life yet—when no soul has yet been breathed into it. “One act of creation after another” refers to successive stages of embryonic development. “Threefold depths of darkness” is an illusion of the womb’s darkness, the membrane enveloping the embryo, and its prenatal blindness. The process of humans coming into being (illustrated in 23:12–14) points to God’s creative activity and, hence, His existence.

MAN’S POSITIVE TRAITS

HUMBLE ORIGIN TO CONSCIOUS BEING

He creates man out of a [mere] drop of sperm, and lo! This same being shows himself endowed with the power to ponder and argue! (16:4)

The passage brings out man’s unique quality as a rational being—a condition that may lead him to great heights of accomplishment but may equally lead him utterly astray. From a mere drop of sperm, a particle of matter without consciousness, man becomes highly articulate, able to argue on his own for or against a proposition, courageously facing disputes and formulating his arguments—herein lies an indication of God’s creative power. However, due to the misuse of the same power, of developing ideas, man is prone to

become a contender against his Sustainer, refusing to acknowledge his Creator.

CONCEPTUAL THINKING

The Most Gracious has imparted this Quran [unto man]. He has created man: He has imparted articulate thought and speech. (55:1–4) And God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs knowing nothing—but He has endowed you with hearing, sight, and minds so that you might have a cause to be grateful. (16:78)

Both thought and speech comprise the faculty of making a thing or an idea apparent to the mind and the power to express this cognition clearly in spoken or written language, i.e., conceptual thinking.

BUILDING SHELTERS AND GARMENTS FOR PROTECTION

God has given you [the ability to build] your houses as places of rest and has given you [the skill to make] dwellings out of the skins of animals—easy for you to handle when you travel and when you camp. And [to make] furnishings and goods for the temporary use of their [rough] wool, soft, furry wool, and hair. And among the many objects of His creation, God has appointed you [various] means of protection. Thus, He has given you in the mountains places of shelter and has given you [the ability to make] garments to protect you from heat [and cold], as well as such garments as might protect you from your [mutual] violence. (16:80–81)

In Arabian usage, the “house” signifies not only a solid building but also a “tent”—in brief, every type of dwelling, whether permanent or temporary. The soft wool growing on the shoulders of camels (camelhair) is used in weaving fine clothes and sometimes also in Bedouin tents. The second mention of the term “garments” in this

verse is to be understood as “coats of mail” or “armor” used in wars and other instances of mutual violence.

USE OF IRON

We bestowed [upon you] from on high [the ability to use] iron, in which there is incredible power and [a source of] benefits for man. And [all this was given to you] so Allah could mark out those who would stand up for Him and His Apostle. (57:25)

God has endowed man with the ability to use the natural resources of his earthly environment. An outstanding symbol of this ability is man’s skill in making tools. The primary material for all toolmaking is iron—the one metal found abundantly on Earth that can be utilized for beneficial and destructive ends. Those who put God’s spiritual and material gifts to proper use can be described as “true believers.” The incredible power inherent in iron manifests itself, for example manufacturing weapons of war. It is to warn man of this danger that the Quran stresses—symbolically and metonymically—the potential evil of “iron” if it is wrongly used.

MASTERY OVER TRANSPORT

He [it is who] has provided for you all those ships and animals where you ride so that you might gain mastery over them. And whenever you have mastered them, you might remember your Sustainer’s blessings and say: “Limitless in His glory is He who has made [all] this subservient to our use—since [but for Him,] we would not have been able to attain to it. Hence, it is unto Him that we must always turn.” (43:12–14)

The collective entity (ships and animals) comprises all where you ride—all that you use or may use by way of transport.

USE OF SHIPS

And [it ought to be] a sign for them that We bear their offspring [over the seas] in laden ships, and [that] We create for them things of a similar type, on which they may embark [in their travels]. (36:41–42) And [that,] if such be Our will, We may cause them to drown, with none to respond to their cry for help: and [then] they cannot be saved, (36:44) unless it be by an act of mercy from Us and a grant of life for a [further span of] time. (36:43) The term “offspring” denotes humanity here, i.e., the recurring expression of “children of Adam.” The use of the ship and other man’s ingenuity refers to a direct manifestation of God’s creativeness.

MAN’S NEGATIVE TENDENCIES

Man, in general, is not living up to the promise of the exalted position in which God has placed him. Besides being ungrateful, he is impatient, fretful, stingy, greedy, violent, full of pride, and self-conceited. In rebelling against God, he thinks of himself as self-sufficient. He forgets his position and that all things afforded to him are by the grace of God.

MAN IS CREATED WEAK

Allah wants to lighten your burden, for man has been created weak. (4:28)

God wants to lighten your burden with His guidance and show you a way of life in which the conflict between the spirit and bodily urges can be harmonized and brought to full fruition. However, we must stand the test of our abilities to make the right choices and live according to the will of the one who placed us in this inherently favorable position vis-à-vis the rest of creation.

SPIRITUAL HEIGHTS OR IMMORALITY

Consider the human self and how it is formed according to what it is meant to be. And how it is imbued with moral failings and Allah's consciousness! To a blessed state shall indeed be attained he who causes this [self] to grow in purity, and truly lost, is he who buries it [in darkness]. (91:7–10) We create man in the best conformation and reduce him to the lowest of lows, excepting only those who attain faith and do good works, and their reward shall be unending! (95:4–6)

The fact that man is equally liable to rise to the highest spiritual heights and fall into utter immorality is an essential characteristic of human nature. Man's ability to act wrongly is simultaneous with his ability to act rightly. In other words, this inherent polarity of tendencies gives every "right" choice value and thus endows man with moral free will.

"Optimum conformation" is related to everything God creates is formed following what it is meant to be (see 91:7 and 87:2). This statement does not imply that all human beings have the best conformation concerning their bodily or mental endowments. In general, humans can make the best use of their inborn qualities and the environment to which they are exposed. The "reduction to the lowest of low" is a consequence of man's corruption of his original, positive disposition, a result of man's doings and omissions, performing good works, practicing moderation in every aspect of life, and avoiding evil acts. Such a person becomes a highly productive member of society and thus enters the final stage of excellence in conduct. One cannot be an ideal Muslim without being an ethical person.

MAN-CENTERED WORLDVIEW

[O men!] Are you more difficult to create than the heavens, which He has built? He has reared high its vault and formed it in accordance with what it was meant to be. (79:27–28) Greater indeed than the creation of man is the creation of the heavens and the earth. Yet most men do not understand [what this implies]. (40:57)

The purpose of the statement is a refutation of the blasphemous anthropocentric worldview that postulates man and not any Supreme Being as the center and ultimate reality of all life. Beautiful as is God's creation of myriad life forms on Earth, His supreme accomplishment lies in His creation of man. However, the creation is insignificant compared to the creation of this wonderful, vast, and unfathomable universe. By stressing that man is only a tiny, insignificant part of the universe, the Quran points out the absurdity of the man-centered worldview. Man came into being from lowly constituents like clay, mud, earth, blood clot, etc.—despite the wonder that from such humble beginnings, he has been raised to the highest status. Still, he is seldom grateful to his Creator.

FIDGETY DISPOSITION

The man is born with a restless disposition. [As a rule,] whenever misfortune touches him, he is filled with self-pity; and whenever prosperity comes to him, he selfishly withholds it [from others]. (70:19–21)

Man is endowed with inner restlessness, which may equally drive him to fruitful achievement or chronic discontent and frustration. The way man uses this God-willed endowment determines whether it has a positive or negative character. The subsequent two verses allude to the latter, i.e., lacking patience and lamenting over one's misfortune.

FAILURE TO USE INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL GIFTS

When they are told, “Beware of [Allah’s insight into] all that lies open before you and all hidden from you,” so you might be graced with His mercy [most men choose to remain deaf]. And no message of their Sustainer’s words ever reaches them without their turning away from it. (36:45–46) [But only too often,] man destroys himself: how stubbornly does he deny the truth! [Does man ever consider] out of what substance [Allah] creates him? Out of a drop of sperm, He creates him, and thereupon determines his nature, and makes it easy for him to go through life. In the end, He causes him to die and brings him to the grave; and then, if it is His will, He shall raise him again to life. No, but [man] has never yet fulfilled what He has enjoined upon him! (80:17–23)

What “lies open or hidden” refers to men’s conscious doings, as well as their unconscious or half-conscious motivations. Man’s nature is determined by organic functions, which man’s body and mind are to fulfill, and natural conditions to which he will need to adapt himself. Man is equipped with intellectual capabilities, enabling him to discern between good and evil and make fruitful use of earthly opportunities. However, man has failed to make adequate use of the intellectual and spiritual endowment. From the time of Adam to this time, no human being has ever been free of shortcomings. This is in tune with the Quranic doctrine that perfection is an attribute of God alone.

MAN’S UNGRATEFULNESS

Yea, indeed, [O men,] We have given you a [bountiful] place on earth and appointed thereon means of livelihood for you: [yet] how seldom are you grateful! (7:10) For [thus it is:] when an affliction befalls man, he cries out unto Us, whether he is lying on his side or sitting or standing. But as soon as We have freed him

of his affliction, he goes on as though he had never invoked Us to save him from the suffering that befell him! Thus, do their doings seem goodly unto those who waste their selves? (10:12) It is We who have created man out of a drop of sperm intermingled so that We might test him [in his later life]: and therefore, We made him a being endowed with hearing and sight. We have shown him the way: [and it rests with him to prove himself] grateful or ungrateful. (76:2–3)

The three metaphorical expressions (lying, sitting, and standing) are often used in the Quran to describe the various situations in which man may find himself. The calling unto God under the stress of misfortune describes the instinctive reaction of many people, although, in their conscious thinking, they refuse to believe in God. He wastes himself—destroys his spiritual potential—by following only his base impulses and failing to submit to any moral imperative. The phrase “goodly seem (to them) their doings” describes the unthinking complacency with which those who waste their own selves live their life. The picture of a man tending toward ingratitude and pride does not indicate that he is irredeemable. He can move from lower to higher states. God has not only endowed man with hearing and sight, i.e., with reason and the inherent ability to discern between right and wrong, good and evil (90:10), but He also actively guides him by the revelation bestowed on the prophets.

GOD CAN BRING NEW MANKIND IN YOUR STEAD

Unto Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth, and none is as worthy of trust as Allah. If He so wills, He can cause you, O mankind, to disappear and bring forth other beings [in your stead]: for Allah has indeed the power to do this. (4:132–133) He can, if He so wills, do away with you and bring forth a new mankind [in your stead]. (14:19)

GOD BLESSINGS FOR HUMANITY

YOU COULD NEVER COMPUTE GOD'S BLESSINGS

[Thus, it is:] thy Sustainer creates whatever He wills, and He chooses [for humanity] whatever is best for them. (28:68) But your Sustainer says: "Call unto Me, [and] I shall respond to you! Verily, they who are too proud to worship Me will enter hell, abased!" (40:60) He has made subservient to you, [as a gift] from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this, there are messages indeed for people who think! (45:13) Is, then, He Who creates comparable to any [being] that cannot create? Will you not bethink yourselves? (16:17) [Always] remember the blessings Allah has bestowed upon you and the solemn pledge by which He bound you to Himself when you said, "We have heard, and we pay heed." Hence, remain conscious of Allah, who has full knowledge of what is in the hearts [of men]. (5:7) And [always] does He give you something out of what you may ask of Him, and should you attempt to count Allah's blessings, you could never compute them. [And yet,] man is indeed most persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ingrate! (14:34)

God satisfies all of man's desires, provided His unfathomable wisdom regards its satisfaction as ultimately beneficial to the human being concerned. His "solemn pledge" means God's binding believer to Himself. God chooses what is best and most beneficial for humanity, for He knows better than man what is best for them. This explanation is consistent with man's responsibility for (and hence, relative freedom in) choosing between right and wrong side by side with the stress on God's unlimited creativity. God has made subservient to man all that is in the heavens and on Earth by

endowing man, alone among all living beings, with an imaginative mind and thus the ability to make conscious use of the nature surrounding him.

SUSTAINER OF ALL THAT EXISTS

His is all that is in the heavens, and all that is on earth; and most exalted, tremendous is He. (42:4) Such is Allah, your Sustainer, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity save Him. How perverted, then, are your minds! [For] thus it is perverted are the mind of those who knowingly reject Allah's message. It is Allah who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy and has formed you—and formed you so well—and provided for your sustenance out of the good things of life. Such is Allah, your Sustainer: hallowed, then, is Allah, the Sustainer of all the worlds! (40:62–64) The earth—We had spread it out wide and caused [life] of every type to grow on it in a balanced manner and provided thereon means of livelihood for you [O men] as well as for all [living beings] whose sustenance does not depend on you. For, no one exists that does not have its source with Us and nothing do We bestow from on high unless it is well-defined. (15:19–21)

Whether it's plants or animals that man does not tend to, nature provides for all living organisms. In its broader sense, all living beings, man included, are provided for by God and by Him alone. "A measure well-defined" refers to the necessities the function of anything or a phenomenon must have within that plan.

THE MIRACLES OF WATER, RAIN, AND THE WIND

And He, it is who has caused waters to come down from the sky. By this means, We have brought forth all living growth, and out

of this, We have brought verdure. (6:99) Are you unaware that Allah causes the clouds to move onward, then joins them together, and piles them up in masses, until you can see the rain come forth from their midst? And He sends down from the skies, by degrees, mountainous masses [of clouds] charged with hail, striking in addition to that whomever He wills and averting it from whomever He wills, [the while] the flash of His lightning well-nigh deprives [men of their] sight! (24:43) He sends forth the winds as a glad tidings of His coming grace. And [thus too] We cause pure water to descend from the skies. We may bring a dead land to life thereby and give drink thereof to many [beings] of Our creation, beasts as well as humans. And, indeed, many times We have repeated [all] this unto men so that they might take it to heart: but most men refuse to be anything but the ingrate. (25:48–50) Consider the winds, which scatter the dust far and wide, and those, which carry the burden [of heavy clouds], speed along with gentle ease, and those that apportion [the gift of life] at [Allah's] behest! (51:1–4) And from the wind-driven clouds, We send the water pouring in abundance, so that We might bring forth thereby grain, herbs, and gardens dense with foliage. (78:14–16) For among His wonders is this: He sends forth [His messages as He sends forth] the winds that bear glad tidings, so that He might give you a taste of His grace [through life-giving rains], and those ships might sail at His behest, and you might go about in a quest of some of His bounties, and you might have cause to be grateful. (30:46) It is Allah who sends forth the winds [of hope] that raise a cloud. Whereupon He spreads it over the skies as He wills and causes it to break up so that you visualize rain issues from within it: and as soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants—lo! They rejoice, even though a short while ago before it was sent down to them, they had abandoned all hope! [O man,] these signs of Allah's grace—how He gives life to the earth after it was lifeless! (30:48–50) Now, thy Sustainer is indeed limitless in His bounty unto men—but most of them are bereft of gratitude.

(27:73) And thus it is: if you ask them, “Who is it that sends down water from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it was lifeless?” They will surely answer, “Allah.” Say you: “[Since this is so,] all praise is due to Allah [alone]!” But most of them will not use their reason. (29:63)

The reference to “the winds” has a symbolic significance, namely spiritual life and hope. These verses include a description of different phases of the same phenomenon—the life-giving function of the combination of wind, clouds, and rain—pointing to the miraculous creation of life as such and, thus, to the existence of a conscious, purposeful Creator. “Many times, We have repeated” is a reference to the frequent, many-faceted reiteration in the Quran, as well as in earlier revelations. The evidence is unmistakably pointing to the existence of a Creator with overwhelming purpose in all observable nature.

CONSIDER THE SOURCE OF FOOD

We let loose the winds to fertilize [plants]. (15:22) Let the man then consider [the sources of] his food, [how it is] that We pour down water abundantly. We cleave the earth [with new growth], cleaving it asunder, and thereupon; We cause the grain to grow out of it, and vines and edible plants, and olive trees and date-palms, and gardens dense with foliage, fruits, and herbage, for you and your animals to enjoy. (80:24–31)

Fertilize plants by pollination and by bringing rain clouds—the implication is that man ought to be grateful for all this God-given bounty, but as a rule, it’s not.

TWO GREAT BODIES OF WATER

He is who has given freedom of movement to the two great bodies of water—the one sweet and thirst-quenching and the other salty

and bitter—and yet has been wrought between them, a barrier and a forbidding ban. (25:53)

The two main bodies or kinds of water—salty and sweet—exist side-by-side on Earth as if divided by an invisible barrier to remain distinct despite their continuous meeting and mingling in the oceans. The Frazer River Delta, meeting the ocean near Vancouver, is a good example of such a barrier. It is an indirect reminder of God’s creativeness inherent in the cyclic transformation of water: its evaporation from the salty seas, followed by a formation of clouds, and their condensation into rain and snow, which feed springs and rivers and its return to the seas.

BOUNTIES OF SEAS AND RIVERS

He is who has made the sea subservient [to His laws] so that you can eat fresh meat from it and take from it gems which you may wear. And on that [sea], one sees ships plowing through the waves so that you can [be able to] go forth in the quest of some of His bounty and have cause to be grateful [to Him]. (16:14) He has thus made the rivers subservient [to His laws, so that they be of use] to you. (14:32) Out of these two bodies of water [salty and sweet] come forth pearls, both great and small, which then of your Sustainer’s powers can you disavow? And His are the lofty ships that sail like [floating] mountains through the seas. Which of your Sustainer’s powers can you disavow? (55:22–25)

The reference to ships as “belonging to God” stresses the God-given nature of man’s intelligence and inventiveness—a reflection of God’s creative powers, which expresses itself in everything man can produce.

WONDERS OF THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

He has bestowed upon you four kinds of cattle of either sex. (39:6) It is Allah who [always works wonders for you: thus, He] provides for you [all manners of] livestock, so that you can ride and from some derive your food and find [yet other] benefits in them. Through them, you may attain the fulfillment of [many] genuine needs. And [thus] He displays His wonders before you: which, then, of Allah's wonders can you still deny? (40:79–81) And He creates cattle, and you derive warmth from them, and [various other] uses, and from them, you obtain food. You find beauty in them when you drive them home in the evenings and take them out to pasture in the mornings. And they carry your loads to [many] a place, which you would not reach without tremendous hardship to yourselves. Your Sustainer is Compassionate, Most Merciful! (16:5–7) And [it is He who creates] horses, mules, and asses for you to ride, as well as for [their] beauty, and He will yet create things of which [today] you have no knowledge. (16:8)

FOUR KINDS OF CATTLE

There are males and females of four kinds of cattle: sheep, goats, camels, and cows. The mention of cattle reminds man that God provides his sustenance, so man depends on Him. The camel was always an object of admiration due to its outstanding endurance, its many uses (riding, load bearing, and a source of milk, flesh, and fine wool), and its indispensability to people living amid deserts. The “other benefits” are both concrete (wool, skins, etc.) and intangible, including beauty, for example, Solomon’s reverence for God, who created the beauty of horses expressed in verses 38:31–33, or the all-time companionship of man and dog symbolized in the legend of the Men of the Cave in verses 18:18 and 22.

NEW DISCOVERIES IN ADVANCEMENT OF TRANSPORT

The Quranic statement that “He will yet create things of which you have no knowledge” is valid for any period—past, present, and future—of man’s history. This reference to God’s continuing creation comes immediately after mentioning primitive means of transport through domesticated animals. It relates to yet unknown new means of transportation, which God unceasingly creates through the instrumentality of the inventiveness with which He has endowed man’s mind. Each successive stage of human development bears witness to new, previously undreamt-of inventions in transport. In short, God provides the means of man’s subsistence wondrously by endowing him with the miracle of a creative intellect, which enables him to make fruitful use of so many natural phenomena.

PURE MILK

In the cattle [too], there is indeed a lesson for you. We give you to drink out of what is within their bellies, from between excretion and blood, pure milk palatable to drinkers. (16:66)

The milk precursors are formed from the blood supply of mammary glands. To produce one liter of milk, 500 liters of blood must pass through the udder. Hence, it is referred to as a substance excreted from the animal’s body and (its) lifeblood.

INSPIRATION FOR BEES

[Consider how] thy Sustainer has inspired the bee to build dwellings (hives) in the mountains, trees, and structures people may put up. Eat all manners of fruit and follow humbly the paths ordained by thy Sustainer. [And lo!] There are issues within these

[bees] a fluid of many hues, wherein man has health. In all this, there is a message indeed for people who think! (16:68–69)

Honeybees pollinate the crops we eat. They provide honey, which contains antioxidant substances that slow oxidation. It counters the toxic effects of free radicals, which can cause DNA damage, which can lead to age-related problems, such as arthritis, strokes, and cancer. The expression “He has inspired” brings out the excellent quality of the instinct, enabling the little insect to construct the geometrical masterpiece of a honeycomb out of perfectly proportioned hexagonal, prismatic wax cells—a structure built efficiently and therefore rational regarding space and material. Together with the subsequently mentioned transmutation in the bee’s body of plant juices into honey, this provides striking evidence of “God’s ways” manifested in all nature.

THE WONDERS OF PLANT LIFE

[Remember] it is Allah who has created the heavens and the earth and sends down water from the sky. Thereby brings forth [all manners] of fruits for your sustenance. (14:32) Allah is the one who cleaves the grain and the fruit kernel asunder. Bringing the living out of the dead, and He is the one who brings forth the dead out of that which is alive. This, then, is Allah, and yet, how perverted are your minds! (6:95)

TWO SEXES IN PLANTS

It is He who has spread the earth wide and placed on its firm mountains and running water and created thereon two sexes of every [kind of] plant. In all this, there are messages indeed for people who think! (13:3)

Christian Sprengel Konrad (1750–1816), a German botanist, discovered sex in plants. His studies of sex in plants led him to a

general theory of fertilization, which is accepted today. The phrase states there are two sexes to every type of plant—a statement that entirely follows the botanical science. Usually, the male and female organs of reproduction exist in the same flower of a particular plant, e.g., cotton. Alternatively, they are placed in different flowers of the same plant, e.g., in most Cucurbitaceae (and in some rare cases, e.g., the date palm) in distinct unisexual plants of the same species.

ALL PLANTS ALIKE AND YET SO DIFFERENT

We bring forth close-growing grain, and out of the spathe of the palm tree dates in thick clusters, gardens of vines, the olive tree, and the pomegranate. [All] so alike, and yet so different! Behold their fruit when it comes to fruition and ripens! Verily, in all this, there are messages indeed for people who will believe! (6:99)

THE MULTIFORMITY OF PLANT LIFE

He has spread the earth for all living beings, with fruit thereon, palm trees with sheathed clusters [of dates], grain growing tall on its stalks, and sweet-smelling plants. Which of your Sustainer's powers can you disavow? (55:10–13) And We send down water from the skies in accordance with a measure [set by Us], and then We cause it to lodge in the earth: but behold, We are most certainly able to withdraw this [blessing]! And by this [water], you have fruit abundant to eat, and a tree that issues from [the lands adjoining] Mount Sinai, yielding oil and relish for all to eat. (23:18–20) We bring forth grain, of which they may eat; and cause springs to gush [forth], so that they may eat of the fruit thereof, though it was not their hands who made it. Will they not be grateful? (36:33–35)

The bounty of plant life is alike in the basic principles of their lives and growth and yet distinct in physiology, appearance, and taste.

The “powers” (signified literally as “blessings” or “bounties”) bear not only on the bounties God bestows on His creation but also, more generally, on all manifestations of His creativeness and might. “Tree” refers to the olive tree, native to the lands around the eastern Mediterranean, where so many pre-Quranic prophets (here symbolized, with its sacred associations, by Mount Sinai) lived and preached.

NATURAL PHENOMENA TO COMPUTE TIME

He is who has made the sun a [source of] radiant light and the moon a light [reflected] and has determined its phases so that you might know how to compute the years and measure [time]. None of this has Allah created without [an inner] truth. He does spell out these messages to the people of [innate] knowledge. For, in the alternating of the night and day, and all that Allah has created in the heavens and on earth, there are messages for people conscious of Him! (10:5–6)

God, having made the natural phenomena “subservient” to man, is a metaphor for His enabling man to derive lasting benefit from them. God’s creations are per truth to fulfill a definite purpose and with His planning wisdom, implying that everything in the universe— whether existent or potential, concrete or abstract—is meaningful, and nothing is accidental.

RIVERS, PATHS, AND STARS TO GUIDE

And He has placed rivers and paths so that you might find your way, as well as [various other] means of orientation: for [it is] by the stars that men find their way. (16:15–16) He has set up the stars so that they could guide you amid the deep darkness of land and sea. Clearly, indeed, We have spelled out these messages to the people of [innate] knowledge! (6:97)

A NIGHT FOR REST AND DAY TO DISCOVER

And He has made the night and the day, and the sun and the moon, submissive [to His laws, so that they be of use] to you, and all the stars are subservient to His command; in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who use their reason! (16:12) Art thou not aware of thy Sustainer how He causes the shadow to lengthen [toward the night] when He had so willed, He could indeed have made it stand still? But then, We have made the sun its guide, and [after having caused it to lengthen,] We draw it in toward Ourselves with a gradual drawing-in. And He who makes the night a garment for you, and [your] sleep a rest, and cause every [new] day to be a resurrection. (25:45–47) Art thou not aware that it is Allah who makes the night grow longer by shortening the day, and makes the day grow longer by shortening the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a term set [by Him]—and that Allah is fully aware of all that you do? (31:29) It is Allah who has made the night for you so that you could rest therein, and the day, to make [you] see. Allah is indeed limitless in His bounty unto man—but most men are ungrateful (40:61) Say: “Have you ever considered [this]. If Allah had willed, there should always be a night, until the Day of the Resurrection. Is there any deity other than Allah that could bring you the light? Will you not, then, listen [to the truth]?” Say: “Have you ever considered [this]: If Allah had willed that there should always be daylight about you, without a break, until the Day of Resurrection—is there any deity other than Allah that could bring you [the darkness of] night, wherein you might rest? Will you not, then, grasp [the truth]?” [In other words, will you not recognize the miracle of planned and purposeful creation?] For it is out of the grace that He has made for you the night and the day. So, you might rest therein and seek to obtain [what you need] of His bounty. And [He gave you all this], so you might have reason to be grateful. (28:71–73) Thus, it is, because Allah [is almighty—the One who] makes the night grow longer by

shortening the day, and makes the day grow longer by reducing the night; and because Allah is all-hearing, all-seeing. (22:61)

REWARDS IN THIS LIFE AND AFTERLIFE

If one desires the rewards of this world, [let him remember that] with Allah are the rewards of [both] this world and the life to come, and Allah is indeed all-hearing, all- seeing. (4:134)

ISLAM'S ABSOLUTE MONOTHEISM (TAUHEED)

THE UNITY OF GOD

DEFINITION OF TERMS

THEISM

Belief in God is a natural feature of most religions included under the general term “theism.” The word “God” is derived from the Proto-Germanic pagan word “gott.” The Latin Deus, the Spanish Dios, and the French Dieu are all descendants of Zeus. The Aramaic (the language of Jesus) word for God was Alaha and the Hebrew Eloah. In Abrahamic monotheism, the words God, Dios, Alaha, Eloah, and Allah all refer to the same deity.

MONISM AND PANTHEISM

When people began to reflect upon the universe and its gods, they sought some unifying principle to explain it. A famous dialogue in the Indian Upanishads reduces the gods from 3,306 to one, and that one is Brahman, the holy power. With this unification came pantheism, the idea that everything is God and God is everything. Perhaps this is more accurately termed monism, the doctrine that only one reality exists. Hindu thinkers called it nondualism, meaning no duality or difference between the human and the divine. Hinduism’s prolific images are evidence and prove that this religion has never approached the worship of one God only.

DUALISM AND POLYTHEISM

In another direction, dualism was illustrated in the ancient Zoroastrianism in Iran, which postulated two principal spirits, good and evil. The followers of Zoroastrianism worship the God of good, not the evil spirit. Therefore, their religion is the early but adulterated form of monotheism, like the triune God of Christianity. Belief in many gods is polytheism, and these gods together are said to form a pantheon. However, within a pantheon, one God may be supreme, a “president of the immortals,” like Zeus in ancient Greek mythology, which in theory, dominates all others.

ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS

Those who deny the existence of any superhuman powers are called atheists, while agnostics hold that the existence of God cannot be known or be established with certainty. Most pre-Islamic Arabs practiced polytheism, and some were atheists and agnostics. A small minority was monotheists.

MONOTHEISM

Belief in one God alone is absolute monotheism, a hallmark of Judaism and Islam. Monotheism in different forms had been flourishing in Semitic and Iranian cultures centuries before Islam. The Scriptures and prophets of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity had a long-established presence in Irano-Semitic societies. Beyond their distinctive differences, all three religious traditions shared monotheistic faith, prophets, scriptures, belief in angels and devils, and a moral universe encompassing individual and communal accountability. Contrary to Indian religious notions of cyclical history, rebirth, and personal perfection, the Zoroastrian, Judaea-Christian, and Islamic traditions affirmed a sacred history

with a beginning and an end within which believers must follow God's will and realize their eternal destiny as the afterlife.

Your Allah is the One God. There is no deity save Him, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace. (2:163) Most surely, your God is One. The Sustainer of the heavens and the earth, and of all that is between them. The Sustainer of all the points of the sunrise! (37:4–5) And [always bear in mind], your Allah is the One and Only God; hence, surrender yourselves unto Him. (22:34) Allah—there is no deity save Him, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent Fount of All Being! (3:2) Allah [Himself] proffers evidence—and [so do] the angels and all who are endowed with knowledge— that there is no deity save Him, the Upholder of Equity, the Almighty, the Truly Wise. (3:18) Say [O Prophet]: “I am but a mortal man like all of you. It has been revealed unto me that your Allah is the One and Only God. Hence, whoever looks forward [with hope and awe] to meet his Sustainer [on Judgment Day], let him do righteous deeds, and let him not ascribe to anyone or anything a share in the worship due to his Sustainer!” (18:110) Say: “It has but been revealed unto me that your Allah is the One and Only God: will you, then, surrender yourselves unto Him?” But if they turn away, say: “I have equitably proclaimed this unto all of you alike.” (21:108–109)

The word “Allah” is a combination of the definite article “Al” (meaning “the”) with “Illah” (God). Allah means “the God,” a general term for God in the Quran in contrast to the Bible, where God has specific names such as Yahweh, Hashem, etc. The Christian Arabs of today have no other word for “God” other than Allah. Everything in Islam centers on the primal fact of a single God or Allah, which overshadows the entire universe with his power and grace. The indelible contribution of Islam was monotheism to the religion of man in its entirety.

The Holy Quran formulates its arguments for why human beings should believe and worship one God alone. The stress on the various

sunrise points brings out the variety of all created phenomena in contrast with the oneness and uniqueness of their Creator. God proffers evidence through the nature of His creation, which shows it has been brought into existence by a consciously planning Power. The expression “equitably proclaimed” refers to the fairness and clarity of the announcement to all human beings alike.

EVERYTHING HAS OPPOSITE EXCEPT GOD

Limitless in His glory is He who has created opposites in whatever the earth produces, and in men's own selves, and in that of which [as yet] they have no knowledge. (36:36) And in everything have We created opposites so that you might remember [that Allah alone is One]. (51:49) Consider the multiple and the One! Consider the night as it runs its course. Considering all these, could there be a [more] solemn evidence of the truth to anyone endowed with reason? (89:3-5) And [of Our sway over all that exists] they have a sign in the night. We withdraw from it the [light of] day—and lo! They are in darkness. (36:37) Consider the night as it veils [the earth] in darkness, and the day as it rises bright! Consider the creation of the male and the female! [O men,] you aim at most divergent ends! (92:1–4) And We have created you in pairs, and We have made your sleep [a symbol of] death, and made the night [its] cloak, and made the day [a symbol of] life. (78:8–11)

The mention of “which they have no knowledge” relates to things or phenomena not yet understood but potentially within man’s range of comprehension. The dichotomy characterizes man’s aims and motives, both good and bad, so the consequences of their doings are, of necessity, divergent. “Consider the multiple and the One” refers to the concept of the even number implying the existence of more than one of the same kind—as against this, the term “*Al-witr*”

primarily denotes that which is single or “One” and is one of the designations given to God.

To further the argument that there is only one God, the Quran points out the polarity, physical and spiritual, inherent in all creations, contrasting with the Creator’s oneness and uniqueness. Everything in creation has its complement, like high and low, right and left, front and back, past and future, etc., whereas God—and He alone—is unique, without anything that could be termed “opposite” or “similar” or “complementary.” The diversity of creation, as contrasted with the oneness and uniqueness of the Creator, is convincing evidence of the existence and unity of God.

Allah, is He save Whom, there is no deity. The Sovereign Supreme, the Holy, the One with whom all salvation rests, the Giver of Faith, Who determines what is true and false, the Almighty, the One who subdues wrong and restores right, the One to whom all greatness belongs! Utterly remote is Allah, in His limitless glory, from anything to which men may ascribe a share in His divinity! (59:23) Say: “All praise is due to Allah, and peace be upon those servants of His whom He chose [to be His message-bearers]!” Is not Allah far better than anything to which men [falsely] ascribe a share in His divinity? (27:59) He is the Ever-Living; there is no deity save Him: call, then, unto Him [alone], sincere in your faith in Him. (40:65) And so, they fall upon their faces, weeping, and [their consciousness of Allah’s grace] increase their humility. Say: “Invoke Allah or invoke the Most Gracious: by whichever name you invoke Him, [He is always the One]. (17:109) There is no deity save Him, the Sustainer, in bountiful almightiness enthroned! Hence, he who invokes, side by side with Allah, any other deity [a deity] for whose existence he has no evidence—shall but find his reckoning with his Sustainer: [and] such deniers of the truth will never attain a blissful state! (23:116–117)

“Is not God far better than anything,” including, by implication, not only deified beings or forces of nature but also false social and moral values to which custom and ancestral tradition have lent almost religious sanction? The term “Jabbar” (the One who subdues) combines the concepts of setting right or restoring (e.g., from a state of brokenness, ill-health, or misfortune) and of suppressing someone or something to one’s will. The epithet “Ar-Rahman,” applied exclusively to God, is rendered throughout as the Most Gracious—it has an intensive significance, denoting the unconditional, all-embracing quality and exercise of grace and mercy.

OUR GOD AND YOUR GOD IS ONE AND THE SAME

And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation, otherwise than in a most kindly manner—unless they are bent on evildoing. And Say: “We believe in that bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that bestowed upon you. For our Allah and your God is the same, and it is unto Him that We [all] surrender ourselves.” For it is, thus, that We have bestowed this divine writ from high upon you [O Muhammad]. And they to whom we have vouchsafed this divine writ believe in it—just as among those [followers of earlier revelation] some believe in it. (29:46–47) This [divine writ] consists of messages clear to the hearts of all who are gifted with [innate] knowledge, and none could knowingly reject Our messages except those who do wrong [to themselves]. (29:49)

Both Islam and Judaism share absolute monotheism. However, in the case of Christianity, if the term “Father” is used metaphorically for God, then the Muslims and Christians worship the same God, but the Muslims will reject Jesus and Holy Spirit as God.

I HAVE SURRENDERED MYSELF UNTO GOD

Thus, [O Prophet] if they argue with you, say, “I have surrendered my whole being unto Allah, and [so have] all who follow me!” And ask those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime, as well as all unlettered people, [who have no revealed scripture of their own] “Have you [too] surrendered yourselves unto Him?” And if they surrender themselves unto Him, they are on the right path. But if they turn away—your duty is no more than to deliver the message: for Allah sees all that is in [the hearts of] His creatures. (3:20)

WORSHIP OF ONE GOD AS THE ONLY TRUE RELIGION

Say: “O followers of earlier revelation! Come unto that tenet which you and we hold in common that we shall worship none but Allah, and we shall not ascribe divinity to anything besides Him, and we shall not take human beings for our lords beside Allah.” And if they turn away, then say: “Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves unto Him.” (3:64) For, if one goes in search of a religion other than self-surrender unto Allah, it will never be accepted from him, and in the life to come, he shall be among the lost. (3:85)

Tenets are what you and we hold in common (lit., a word equitable between you and us). The term “Kalimah,” which means “word” or “utterance,” is often used in the philosophical sense of proposition or tenet. We shall not take human beings for our lords lit., “that we shall not take one another for lords beside God.” Since the personal pronoun “we” applies to human beings, the expression “one another” necessarily bears the same connotation. The call is addressed not merely to the Christians, who attribute divinity to Jesus and certain aspects of divinity to their saints, but also to the

Jews, who assign a quasi-divine authority to Ezra and even to some of their eminent Talmudic scholars.

UNIQUENESS OF ISLAMIC ART

The Quran is the grand advocate of God's unity. The strength of the Arab's arms was to wax and wane. However, again and again, the Prophet's vision of a single God triumphed over people like the Mongols and the Turks, who subdued his followers in physical combat. Almost every page of the Quran cries with a burning zeal: *Your God is one God. There is no God, but He—the Living, the Eternal.* (2:158)

Culturally, this concern about not compromising God's unity and transcendence led to an absolute ban on any image or representation of God or Muhammad. Arab Muslims extended this ban to any representation in the art of the human form for fear that such statues and paintings could lead to idol worship. This attitude resulted in the use of calligraphy (Arabic script) and arabesque (geometric and floral design) as dominant forms in Islamic art.

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS VS. RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITIES

The uncompromising attitude of banning any image of Muhammad explains the violent protests when the Prophet's image is desecrated in a cartoon in the name of "freedom of expression." Such provocateurs are betting on a violent Muslim reaction that will make headlines around the world. This successful strategy to sell newspapers and books is shocking for a simple Muslim who grew up in a deeply religious society.

The sacredness of exalted prophetic and revered figures, including Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, to name a few, has been instilled

since childhood. The second article of the Muslim faith is belief in all the prophets (see Chapter “The Five Articles of Islamic Faith”).

To challenge those long-held sensibilities in a crude and insensitive manner is psychologically playing with fire. When the core of one’s being is attacked, mentally vulnerable individuals will become unglued.

The Islamic world will never accept the thesis of “unlimited freedom of expression,” where anyone can blaspheme and curse the name of any esteemed figure. Most people in the West would never resort to violence when Jesus’ name is publicly abused. It is extremely challenging for a Westerner who grew up in the secular tradition to understand Muslim reactions under similar circumstances. The “unlimited” freedom of the press will always clash with those who defend what they consider sacred, no matter what the cost. These two extreme positions violate the bedrock principle of the Quran, a call for moderation in every aspect of life. Also, the Quranic advice is to ignore blasphemers. Peaceful protest is all that is warranted.

Freedom of expression, as practiced in the West, is not absolute. The following are the common limitations or boundaries to freedom of speech: libel, slander, obscenity, child pornography, sedition, incitement, fighting words, classified information, copyright violation, trade secrets, food labeling, nondisclosure agreements, the right to privacy, dignity, the right to be forgotten, public security, and perjury. Many European countries have laws against anti-Semitism and denying holocaust in public. Justifications for such include the harm principle, proposed by John Stuart Mill in *“On Liberty.”* suggesting: “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.”

DESECRATION OF THE QURAN AND MUSLIM'S REACTION

Burning of the Quran is another form of hatred practiced by Islamophobes in Europe, the United States, India, etc. Desecration of the Quran or burning any book is despicable; however, the irony is that there are many Muslims who have never read the Quran in its entirety or tried to understand its message. Daily, many Muslims violate the moral standards of the Quran by lying, taking bribes and kickbacks, using drugs and alcohol, crimes of adultery and rape, etc. Oppression and violation of human rights are common in so-called Islamic societies. It is hypocritical that the same so-called Muslims who desecrate the Quran every day by violating every principle mentioned in that holy book go out in the streets to protest and defend the honor of Islam.

GOD IS INDEFINABLE

Muslims believe that God is the only true reality and sole source of all creation, and everything and every creature is just a derivative reality created out of the love and mercy of God.

DEFINING GOD EQUALS CONFINING GOD

There is nothing like unto Him, and He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing. (42:11) Therefore, “nothing that could be compared with Him.” (112:4) Limitless is Allah in His glory, above anything that men may devise by way of definition! Not thus, however, [behave] Allah’s true servants: neither you [blasphemers] nor the objects of your worship can cause anyone to fall prey to your temptation unless it is such as rushes toward the blazing fire [of his own accord]! (37:159–163) Limitless in His glory is Allah, enthroned in His awesome almightiness [far] above anything that men may devise by way of definition! (21:22) [Say]: “Our Sustainer is the Most Gracious, the One whose aid is ever to be sought against all your [attempts at] defining [Him]!” (21:112)

A definition is an act of being definite, distinct, or clearly outlined and implies the possibility of comparing or correlating an object with other objects. God, however, is unique. Taking this argument to the extreme, even calling God “one” implies definition. The Quranic reference to God is that of a Being who is indefinable, infinite in time and space, and utterly beyond any creature’s comprehension.

Far from imagining God, we can only realize what God is not— not limited in either time or space, not male or female, not definable in terms of comparison, and not comprised within any category of

human thought. Any attempt to define Him or His “attributes” is a logical impossibility and a sin from an ethical point of view. The fact is that God’s essence is beyond human comprehension, and the “attributes” of God mentioned in the Quran do not circumscribe His reality but, rather, the perceptible effect of His activity on and within the universe created by Him. Only God’s grace can save man from the blasphemous attempts—prompted by his inborn weakness—to bring God closer to human understanding by humanly conceived definitions of Him who is transcendent, infinite, and unfathomable.

GOD IS NOT A PERSON, NEITHER MALE NOR FEMALE

Many Western critics of the Quran frequently point to the allegedly “incoherent” references to God. In the same phrase, God is represented as He, We, or I, with the corresponding pronoun changes ranging from His, Ours, My, Him to Us or Me. These changes are not accidental and not even what one might describe as a “poetic license.” It is a deliberate linguistic device that stresses that God is not a person and cannot be circumscribed by the pronouns applicable to finite beings. God has no gender. The use of “He” for God, in translation, represents an inadequacy of the human languages to describe God as gender-neutral.

GOD IS INCOMPARABLE: PARABLE OF MASTER AND SLAVE

Hence, do not coin any similitude for Allah! Allah knows [all], whereas you have no [real] knowledge. Allah propounds [to you] the parable of [two men], a man enslaved, unable to do anything of his own accord and a [free] man upon whom We have bestowed goodly sustenance [as a gift] from Ourselves. He can spend thereof [at will, both] secretly and openly. Can these [two] be

deemed equal? All praise is due to Allah [alone]: but most of them do not understand it. (16:74–75) He propounds a parable drawn from your own life. Would you [agree to] have some of those whom your right hands possess as [full-fledged] partners in whatever We may have bestowed upon you as sustenance? So that you [and they] would have equal shares in it, and you would fear [to use it without consulting] them, just as you might fear [the more powerful of] your equals? Thus, clearly, do We spell out these messages to people who use their reason. (30:28)

The phrase “whom your right hands possess” means slaves or persons otherwise subject to one’s authority. The question given in the verse is, of course, rhetorical and must be answered in the negative. But if so (as the implied argument goes), a human master would not willingly accept his slaves as full-fledged partners—even though master and slave are equal due to the humanness common to both. How can man regard any created beings or things as identical to God, their absolute Lord and Master, and beyond comparison with anything that could ever exist?

A similitude is a likening or comparison in the form of a simile, parable, or allegory. It would be blasphemy to regard anyone or anything as comparable with God or to attempt to define Him in any terms whatsoever because the apparent answer to the parable is that they cannot. The implication is that these two kinds of men cannot be deemed equal. How could any created being, with its intrinsic, utter dependence on other created people, be considered to possess powers comparable with those of God, who is almighty, limitless, inconceivable, the self-sufficient fount of all that exists? (This argument is continued and further elaborated in the subsequent parable.)

PARABLE OF A MENTALLY CHALLENGED AND WISE MAN

Allah propounds [to you] the parable of two [other] men— one of them unable to speak or to do anything of his own accord, and a sheer burden on his master. Whichever task the latter directs him; he accomplishes no good. Can such a one be considered the equal of [a wise man] who enjoins the doing of what is right, and he follows a straight way. (16:76)

A person who is unable to speak properly due to intellectual weakness, in contrast to a wise and righteous man with the strength and authority to advise a moral way of living upon others. In the first parable, the main issue is the contrast between freedom and bondage. The second parable describes the antithesis of incompetence on the one hand and wisdom, justice, and competence on the other hand. In both parables, the implication remains the same.

GOD ALONE IS PERFECT, AND ALL PRAISE IS DUE TO GOD

THE DECLARATION OF GOD’S PERFECTION (AL- IKHLAS)

Say: “He is the One God:” Allah the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of all that exists. “He begets not, and neither is He begotten, and there is nothing that could be compared with Him.” (112:1–4)

As reported in many authentic traditions, the Prophet himself described the 112th Surah “Al-Ikhlās” as “equivalent to one-third of the whole Holy Quran.” It was revealed in the early part of the Mecca period. The term “As-Samad” occurs only once in the Holy Quran and is applied to God alone. It comprises the concepts of Primary Cause and eternal, independent Being, combined with the idea that everything existing or conceivable goes back to Him as its source. Therefore, it depends on Him for its beginning and continued existence. God is unique in every respect, and absolutely nothing can be compared with Him. The quality of His Being is beyond human comprehension or imagination, which also explains why any attempt to depict God by figurative representations or even abstract symbols must be qualified as a blasphemous denial of the truth. The “attributes of perfection” is a term reserved in the Quran for God alone. It is blasphemy to apply God’s attributes to other beings or objects or to attempt to define God in anthropomorphic terms, like father or son. God is free of the imperfection inherent in the concept of begetting a child as an extension of one’s being. This statement refutes the Christian doctrine of Jesus as the Son of God and stresses the logical impossibility of connecting such a concept with God.

Absolute perfection is a quality that belongs to God alone. It relates to a state of completeness or absolute wholeness. Perfection involves freedom from faults, defects, or shortcomings. His knowledge, words, and ways are all perfect. God alone is self-sufficient, and all in heaven and earth belong to Him. Since He is “limitless in His glory”—i.e., complete in His excellence and utterly opposite to all imperfection—inherent in need of, or a desire for, progeny, which logically precludes the possibility of His having a “son.”

ATTRIBUTES OF PERFECTION

Allah’s [only] are the attributes of perfection; invoke Him, then, by these, and stand aloof from all who distort the meaning of His attributes. They shall be requited for all that they did! (7:180) His [alone] is the attribute of perfection. All that is in the heavens and on earth extols His limitless glory, for He alone is almighty, truly wise! (59:24)

GOD’S PERFECTION PRECLUDES PROGENY

In their ignorance, they have invented for Him, sons and daughters! Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything that men may devise by definition. The Originator of the heavens and the earth! How could it be that He should have a child without ever having a mate for Him—since it is He who has created everything, and He alone knows everything? (6:100–101) His are all the attributes of perfection. And say: “All praise is due to Allah, who begets no offspring, and has no partner in His dominion, and has no weakness, and therefore, no need of any aid”—and [thus] extol His limitless greatness. (17:110–111)

The pre-Islamic Arabs regarded the angels as God’s daughters, and they applied the same designation to their goddesses. The Christians

view Jesus as the Son of God, with all imperfections from incompleteness implied in the concept of having progeny.

ALL PRAISE IS DUE TO GOD

Allah is unfathomable [in His wisdom], all-aware. Unto Him belongs all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth; and Allah—He alone—is self-sufficient, the One to whom all praise is due. (22:63–64) Unto Him belongs all [beings] in the heavens and on earth, and those with Him are never too proud to worship Him and never grow weary [thereof]. They extol His limitless glory by night and by day, never flagging [therein]. (21:19– 20) Thus, all praise is due to Allah. Sustainer of the heavens and the earth: the Sustainer of all the worlds! And His solely is all majesty in the heavens and on earth; and He alone is almighty, truly wise! (45:36–37)

He is Allah, save whom there is no deity. Unto Him, all praise is due at the beginning and end of time. (28:70) All that is in the heavens and on earth extols Allah's limitless glory: for He alone is almighty, truly wise! His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. (57:1–2) [All forces of nature praise Allah and say:] "Among us, too, there is none but has a place assigned to it [by Him], and we too are ranged [before Him in worship], and we as well extol His limitless glory!" (37:164–166) Thus, it is [with most people] if you ask them, "Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?" They will surely answer "Allah." Say: "[Then you ought to know that] all praise is due to Allah!" Most of them do not know [what this implies]. Unto Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Allah alone is self-sufficient, the One to whom all praise is due! (31:25–26)

“Those who are with Him” refers to the angels and possibly all human beings who are truly and completely God-conscious and dedicated to Him. In either case, their “being with Him” symbolizes their spiritual eminence and place of honor in God’s sight and does not bear any spatial connotation of nearness because God is limitless in space and time. The metaphorical saying “all forces of nature praise God” is in tune with many other Quranic passages in which even inanimate objects praise God. For example, the seven heavens extol His limitless glory and the earth, and all they contain, or the mountains to join David in extolling His glory.

DAVID AND THE MOUNTAINS EXTOLL GOD’S GLORY

And We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise, the birds: for We can do [all things]. (21:79) And [thus], indeed, did We grace David with Our favor: “O mountains! Sing with him the praise of Allah! And [likewise] you birds!” (34:10)

ANGELS AND GOD-CONSCIOUS MEN PRAISE GOD

They who bear [within themselves the knowledge of] the throne of [God’s] almightiness, as well as all who are near it, extol their Sustainer’s limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and ask forgiveness for all [others] who have attained faith. (40:7)

The angels bearing the throne of almightiness, carrying it, and surrounding it, or “being near it,” are a metaphor for them being mindful of it and acting accordingly. Either that or it’s a metonym for their closeness to the Lord being instrumental in the realization of His will. As regards the beings said to be close to the throne of God’s almightiness, it’s the symbolic image of “the angels

surrounding the throne of [God's] almightiness" on the Day of Judgment (39:75). It applies here to angels and all human beings who are conscious of the tremendous implications of God's almightiness and hence feel morally responsible for translating this consciousness into the reality of their own and fellow beings' lives.

GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL (OMNIPOTENT)

GOD ALONE IS TRULY TREMENDOUS AND EXALTED

Hallowed be He in whose hand all dominion rests since He has the power to will anything. (67:1) All that is in the heavens and on earth extol the limitless glory of Allah, the Sovereign Supreme, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise! (62:1) Allah, there is no deity except Him, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent Fount of All Being. Neither slumber overtakes Him nor sleep. His is all that is in the heavens, and all that is on earth. His eternal power overspreads, the heavens and the earth, and their upholding weary Him not. And He alone is truly exalted, tremendous. (2:255) [Know,] then, [that] Allah is sublimely exalted. The Ultimate Sovereign, the Ultimate Truth. (20:114) The Great One, the One far above anything that is or ever could be! (13:9)

The overwhelming sense of God's sovereignty and power is epitomized in the declaration "God is most great" (Allahu Akbar), which has served as a preface to the call to prayer and as the traditional battle cry of Muslim warriors throughout Islamic history. God has absolute sway over all that exists, lit., "His seat of power." Some commentators interpret this as "His sovereignty" or "His dominion," while others take it as "His knowledge" or God's majesty and indescribable, eternal glory.

God's attribute, "Al-Malik" (ultimate sovereign), denotes His absolute sway over all that exists. The noun "Al-Haqq" (the truth) is used as a designation of God; it signifies the Truth in the absolute, intrinsic sense, eternally and immutably existing beyond the ephemeral, changing phenomena of His creation. "The Great One"

refers to God's attribute al-muta al, which occurs in the Holy Quran only in this one instance, denoting His infinite exaltedness above anything existing or potential—above anything that human definitions could circumscribe.

POWER TO WILL ANYTHING

Say: "O Allah, Lord of all dominion! Thou grant dominion unto whom Thou wilt and take away dominion from whom Thou wilt, and Thou exalt whom Thou wilt and abase whom Thou wilt. In Thy hand, there is all good. Thou hast the power to will anything. Thou bring forth the living out of dead and dead out of which is alive. And Thou grants sustenance unto whom Thou wilt, beyond all reckoning." (3:26–27) It is He who grants life and deals death, and when He wills a thing to be, He but says unto it, "Be"—and it is. (40:68)

Have then, they [who deny the truth] never considered any of the things Allah has created—[how] their shadows turn right and left, prostrating themselves before Allah and utterly submissive [to His will]? For, before Allah prostrates itself, all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth—every beast that moves, and the angels, [even] these do not bear themselves with false pride. They fear their Sustainer high above them and do whatever they are bidden to do. (16:48–50)

MASTER OF FORTUNE

It is He alone who causes [you] to laugh and weep, and that it is He alone who deal death and grants life. (53:43–44) It is He alone who frees from want and causes to possess. (53:48) And if Allah should touch you with misfortune, none could remove it, but He. If He should touch you with good fortune—none could turn away His bounty: He causes it to alight upon whomever He wills of His

servants. (10:107) It is He who has the power to will anything, for He alone holds sway over His creatures, and He alone is truly wise, all-aware. (6:17–18)

POWER OVER LIFE AND DEATH

His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and deals death, and He has the power to will anything. (57:2) Allah causes all human beings to die at the time of their [bodily] death. And [causes to be as dead], those who have not yet died during their sleep. Thus, He withholds [from life] those upon whom He decreed death and lets the others go free for a term set [by Him]. In [all] this, there are messages indeed for people who think! (39:42)

It is a reminder of God's almightiness, especially His exclusive power to create and withdraw life. The traditional likening of sleep to death is because the body appears without consciousness, partially and temporarily during sleep, and permanently in death.

SUFFERING AND DISCORD

Say: "It is He alone who has the power to let loose upon you suffering from above or beneath your feet, and to confound you with mutual discord and let you taste the fear of one another." Many facets We give to these messages so that they can understand the truth. And yet, all your people have given the lie, although it is the truth. Say [then]: "I am not responsible for your conduct. Every tiding [from Allah] has a term set for its fulfillment, and in time, you will know [the truth]." (6:65–67)

The inevitable consequences of society's departure from spiritual truths result in mutual discord, violence against another, inner disintegration, fear, and tyranny. "Your people" were the

nonbelieving compatriots of the Prophet and, by implication, all who deny the truth.

RISE AND FALL OF NATIONS

He destroyed the ancient [tribes of] Ad and Thamud, leaving no trace [of them], as well as the people of Noah before them. [Since] They all had been most willful in their evildoing and most overweening—just as He thrust into perdition those cities overthrown and covered them from sight forever. About which, then, of thy Sustainer’s powers, can you [still] remain in doubt? (53:50–55)

For the story of the tribe of Ad and Thamud, see volume three of this Quran series. “Those cities” are a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of Lot’s people. The last sentence in verse is a rhetorical question addressed to the agnostics.

CONTROL OVER CALAMITIES

No calamity can ever befall the earth, nor yourselves, unless it is [laid down] in Our decree before We bring it into being. All this is easy for Allah. (57:22)

Calamities can only befall the earth or humanity or any of you individually when God decrees an event and brings it into being. This includes natural and human-made catastrophes and individuals suffering through illness, moral or material deprivation, etc.

OMNIPOTENT CAUSATION

It is He who displays before you the lightning, to give rise to [both] fear and hope and calls heavy clouds into being; and the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and [so do] the angels,

in awe of Him. He [it is who] lets loose the thunderbolts and strikes with them whom He wills. And yet, they stubbornly argue about Allah, notwithstanding [all evidence] that He alone has the power to contrive whatever His unfathomable wisdom wills! (13:12–13)

In the Holy Quran, dense clouds or the hope of rain frequently symbolize faith and spiritual life, emphasizing His transcendental existence or the quality of His Being. The expression “*shadid al-mihal*” occurs only in this one place and signifies power in contriving, in a manner hidden from man, wherein wisdom lies.

BLESSING OF RAIN

Are you unaware that it's Allah who sends down water from the skies? After that, the earth becomes green. Allah is unfathomable [in His wisdom], all-aware (22:63)

FLIGHT OF BIRDS

Have they [who deny the truth] never considered the birds, enabled [by Allah] to fly in midair, with none but Allah holding them aloft? In this, there are messages indeed for people who will believe. (16:79) Have they then never beheld the birds above them, spreading their wings and drawing them in? None but the Most Gracious upholds them, for He keeps all things in His sight. (67:19)

GOD THE ONLY PROTECTOR

Indeed, Allah's alone is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He [alone] grants life and deals death, and none besides Allah could protect you or bring you succor. (9:116) Say: “Who is it that saves you from the dark dangers of land and sea [when]

you call unto Him humbly, and in the secrecy of your hearts, ‘If He will but save us from this [distress], we shall most certainly be among the grateful’?” Say: “Allah [alone] can save you from this and every distress—and still, you ascribe divinity to other powers beside Him!” (6:63–64)

COULD THERE BE ANY DIVINE POWER BESIDES GOD?

Who is it that responds to the distressed when he calls out to Him, and who removes the ill [that caused the distress], and has made you inherit the earth? How seldom do you keep this in mind! Who is it that guides you amid the deep darkness of land and sea and sends forth the winds as a glad tidings of His coming grace? Could there be any divine power besides Allah? Sublimely exalted is Allah above anything to which men may ascribe a share in His divinity! (27:62–63)

God caused a man to inherit the earth by endowing him with specific faculties and abilities—an implicit denial of man’s claim that he is independent and master of his fate.

THE PARABLE OF THE STORM AT SEA

Are you not aware of how the ships speed through the sea in Allah’s favor so that He might show you some of His wonders? Herein, there are messages indeed for all who are wholly patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to Allah]. For [thus it is with most men:] when the waves engulf them like shadows [of death], they call unto Allah, sincere [at that moment] in their faith in Him alone. But as soon as He has brought them safely ashore, some stop halfway [between belief and unbelief]. Yet none could knowingly reject Our messages unless he is deceitful, ingrate. (31:31–32)

The parable of a storm at sea is a metaphor for any danger that may beset a man in life. Once safe ashore, they begin to ascribe to imaginary powers a share in His divinity.

PROTECTION FROM CATASTROPHES

Can you ever feel secure? He who is in heaven will not cause the earth to swallow you when it begins to quake? Or can you always feel safe and sound? He who is in heaven will not let loose against you a deadly storm wind. After that, you would know how [true] My warning was? And indeed, [many of] those who lived aforetime did give the lie [to My warnings]. How awesome was My rejection [of them]! [And] is there any, besides the Most Gracious, that could be a shield for you and succor you [against danger]? They who deny this truth are but lost in self-delusion! Or is there any that could provide you with sustenance if He should withhold His provision [from you]? They [who are bent on denying the truth] stubbornly persist in their disdain [of Allah's messages] and their headlong flight [from Him]! But then, he goes along with his face close to the ground, better guided than he who walks upright on a straightway? Say: "[Allah] He who has brought you [all] into being, and has endowed you with hearing, sight, and hearts: [yet] how seldom are you grateful!" (67:16–23)

The expression “who is in heaven” is purely metaphorical since God is limitless in space and time. Its use here stresses the unfathomable quality of His existence and power, which penetrates. It reveals itself in every aspect of His cosmic creativeness, symbolized in “heaven.” The personal pronoun in “My rejection of them” relates to people of all times who are reminded of what happened to deniers of the truth in earlier times. “Face close to the ground” or prone upon his face refers to only seeing what is immediately beneath his feet. He is utterly unaware of the direction in which his path is taking him. This metaphor of spiritual obtuseness prevents a person

from caring for anything beyond his immediate concerns. Thus, it makes him resemble an earthworm that goes along prone upon its face. Hearing, sight, and heart refers to the faculty of feeling and rational thinking.

PROTECTION IN THE AFTERLIFE

The evildoers shall have none to protect them and none to succor them [on judgment day]. Did they, perchance, [think they could] choose protectors other than Him? But Allah only is the protector [of all that exists], since it is He alone who brings the dead to life, and He alone who has the power to will anything. (42:8–9)

GOD IS ALL-KNOWING (OMNISCIENT)

KEYS TO AL-GHAYB

Allah is He save Whom there is no deity: the One who knows all that is beyond the reach of a created being's perception, as well as all that a creature's senses or mind can witness: He, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace. (59:22) Say: "None in the heavens or on earth knows the hidden reality [of everything that exists: none knows it] save God." (27:65) For, with Him are the keys to the things beyond the reach of a created being's perception, none knows them but Him. (6:59)

The hidden reality relates to the "how" of God's Being, the ultimate cause underlying the visual aspects of the universe and the meaning and purpose inherent in its creation.

HE CREATED ALL AND KNOWS ALL

He knows all that lies open before men and all hidden from them, whereas they cannot attain His knowledge, save that He wills [them to attain]. (2:255) How could it be that He who has created [all] should not know [all]? (67:14)

"What lies open before men" is the exact antithesis of "Al-Ghayb" (that is beyond the reach of a created being's perception). Thus, it circumscribes those aspects of reality that a created being can sensually or conceptually grasp.

NOT A LEAF FALLS, BUT GOD KNOWS IT

And He knows all that is on land and in the sea. And not a leaf falls, but He knows it. There is no grain in the earth's deep darkness, or anything living or dead, but is recorded in [His] clear decree. (6:59)

GOD IS CLOSER TO MAN'S NECK VEIN

Now, it is We who have created man, and We know his innermost self-whispers. We are closer to him than his neck-vein. [And so,] whenever the two demands [of his nature] come face to face, contending from the right and the left, not even a word he can utter, but there is a watcher with him, ever-present. (50:16–18)

The reference to “watchers ever-present” can be understood as the two angels charged with recording man’s doings, sitting at his right and left. However, God is all-seeing and all-knowing, and He does not need the help of the angels. “The two demands” are within man’s nature: his primal, instinctive urges and desires, both sensual and non-sensual, on the one hand, and his reason, both intuitive and reflective, on the other. The “sitting at right or left” is a metaphor for the conflicting nature of forces, striving for predominance within every human being. “Watcher with him, the ever-present” is his conscience.

SECRETS OF HEARTS

He is with you wherever you may be, and Allah sees all that you do. (57:4) He knows all there is in the heavens and on earth. He knows all that you keep a secret, as well as all that you bring into the open. He has full knowledge of what is in the hearts [of men]. (64:4) And [know, O men, that] whether you keep your beliefs secret or state them openly, He has full knowledge of all that is in

[your] hearts. (67:13) Thy Sustainer knows all that their hearts conceal, as well as all that they bring into the open. Nothing [so deeply] hidden in the heavens or on earth, recorded in [His] clear decree. (27:74–75)

He knows why one person believes in Him, and another rejects this. He considers man's innermost motivations, abilities, and inabilities.

HIDING FROM GOD

Oh, they [who are bent on denying the truth] are enshrouding their hearts to hide from Him. Oh, [even] when they cover themselves with their garments [unable to see or hear]. He knows all that they keep a secret, as well as all that they bring into the open. He has full knowledge of what is in the hearts [of men]. (11:5)

“Hiding from God” is a metaphor for unwillingness to listen to the truth that emanates from Him. The statement that they “enshroud their hearts” refers to them allowing their hearts and minds to remain wrapped in prejudices, thus making them impervious to spiritual perception.

GOD IS WITNESS TO EVERYTHING

It is all alike [to Him], whether you conceal his thought or bring it into the open. And whether he seeks to hide [his evil deeds] under the cover of night or walks [boldly] in the light of day, [imagining] he has hosts of helpers—both such as can be perceived by him and hidden from him—that could preserve him from whatever Allah may have willed. (13:10–11)

Alike are, in God's knowledge, deeds done secretly or openly. He who hides in the darkness of night can never elude God's will. He who walks [boldly] in the light of the day surrounded by hosts of

helpers, that is, guards and aides—meant to protect him—[for] those guards of his cannot save him from [the will of] God.

He knows the [secret thoughts of men] and what is yet more hidden [within him]. (20:7)

God knows all the unspoken thoughts or ideas, whether expressed in actual words or just conceived within the mind.

NOT AN ATOM'S WEIGHT ESCAPES HIS KNOWLEDGE

And in whatever condition you may find yourself, [O Prophet]. Whatever discourse of this [divine writ] you may be reciting, and whatever work you [all, O men,] may do — [remember that] We are your witness [from the moment] when you enter upon it. For, not even an atom's weight [of whatever there is] on earth or in heaven escapes thy Sustainer's knowledge, and neither is there anything smaller than that nor larger but is recorded in [His] clear decree. (10:61) He knows all that enters the earth and all that comes out of it. And all that descends from the skies, and all that ascends to them. (34:2)

The reference to the Prophet and his recitation of the Holy Quran in the singular form of address stresses the supreme importance of divine revelation in the context of human life. The ascent is toward the heavens of men's longings, hopes, and ambitions. The descent is divine inspiration into the minds of men and, thus, a revival of faith and thought.

SECRETS OF A WOMB

No fruit bursts forth from its calyx, and no female ever conceives nor gives birth, save with His knowledge. (41:47) Allah knows what every female bear [in her womb], and by how much the

womb may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase [the average period]. For with Him, everything is [created] in accordance with its scope and purpose. (13:8) He shapes you in the wombs as He wills. (3:6)

The “falling short” may refer to a shortening of the usual gestation period or a falling short of the completion of pregnancy, i.e., a miscarriage or an abortive fetus. The “increase,” conversely, may mean either the completion of gestation or its more-than-average length. God knows what every female bears in her womb relates to the sex of the unborn embryo and the number of offspring involved in one pregnancy. As the sequence shows, this reference to the mysteries of gestation, fully known only to God, is meant to bring out the idea that He knows not only what is in the wombs but also the innermost disposition of every human being and the direction in which that human being will develop. Everything is created with a particular purpose, the necessities of its existence, and the role it is destined to play within God’s creation plan.

NOTHING IS HIDDEN FROM GOD

“O my dear son,” [continued Luqman], “if there be but the weight of a mustard-seed, and though it is [hidden] in a rock, or the skies, or in the earth, Allah will bring it to light, for Allah is unfathomable [in His wisdom], all-aware.” (31:16)

Luqman was a legendary figure in ancient Arabian tradition as a symbol of the sage who disdained worldly honors or benefits and strived for inner perfection. For this reason, the Holy Quran uses this mythical figure as a vehicle for some of its warnings. In verse given, Luqman is counseling his son.

LIMITED KNOWLEDGE OF MESSAGE BEARERS

[In His almightiness,] Allah chooses message-bearers from among the angels as well as from among men. But Allah [alone] is all-hearing, all-seeing: [whereas their knowledge is limited], He knows all that lies open before them and all hidden from them—for all things go back to Allah [as their source]. (22:75–77)

The prophets and angels are created with no share in His omniscience and, hence, no claim to worship.

PREDICTION OF VICTORY FOR BYZANTINES

Defeated have been the Byzantines in the lands close-by; yet it is they who, despite this, their defeat, shall be victorious within a few years: [for] with Allah rests all power of decision, first and last. (30:2–4)

This is an unequivocal prediction of events still shrouded in the mists of the future. The defeats and victories spoken in verses 30:2–4 relate to the last phases of the centuries-long struggle between the Byzantine (Christian) and Persian Empires. During the early years of the seventh century, the Persians conquered parts of Syria and Anatolia, “the lands close-by,” i.e., near the heartland of the Byzantine Empire. In 613, they took Damascus and, in 614, Jerusalem; Egypt fell to them in 615–16, and simultaneously, they laid siege to Constantinople. At the time of the revelation of this surah (615 or 616 AD), the destruction of the Byzantine Empire seemed imminent. The few Muslims around the Prophet were despondent when they heard the news of the utter rout of the Byzantines, who were the Trinitarian Christians.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

The pagan Quraysh, however, sympathized with the Persians, who, they believed, would vindicate their opposition to the One-God idea. When the Prophet enunciated the Quran verses given before, predicting a Byzantine victory “within a few years,” the Quraysh received this prophecy with derision. The “a few years” denotes any number between three and ten, and, as it happened, in 622—i.e., six or seven years after the Quranic prediction—the tide turned in favor of the Byzantines. During that year, Emperor Heraclius defeated the Persians at Issus, south of the Taurus Mountains, and later drove them out of Asia Minor. By 624, he carried the war into Persian territory and thus put the enemy on the defensive. At the beginning of December 626, the Byzantines routed the Persian armies. In 628, the Persian Emperor died, and succession difficulties led to the complete collapse of the Persian Empire in a few years.

PREDICTION OF VICTORY FOR THE MUSLIMS

And on that day will the believers [too, have cause to] rejoice in Allah’s succor: [for] He gives succor to whomever He wills since He alone is almighty, a dispenser of grace. [This is] Allah’s promise. Never does Allah fail to fulfill His promise—but most people know [it] not. (30:4–6)

The Quran predicted the Battle of Badr that occurred eight or nine years later when the small Muslim army decisively defeated a much superior force of pagan Quraysh. The expression “on that day,” in this context, means “at the same time.” Although the Battle of Badr began and ended one day, the victories of Heraclius over the Persians took some years to materialize.

GOD OF LIGHT AND ETERNAL HOPE

THE PARABLE OF GOD'S LIGHT

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche containing a lamp. The lamp is [enclosed] in glass, the glass [shining] like a radiant star. [A lamp] lit from a blessed tree—an olive tree neither of the East nor the West. The oil of which [is so bright it] would well-nigh give Light [of itself] even though the fire had not touched it: Light upon Light! Allah guides on to His Light, whom that wills [to be guided], and [to this end] Allah propounds parables unto men since Allah [alone] has full knowledge of all things. (24:35)

GOD IS THE LIGHT

God propounds parables for certain truths because their complexity can only be conveyed to man indirectly by parables or allegories. “God is the Light” is not meant to express His reality—inconceivable to any created being and, therefore, inexpressible in any human language. Light is another word for knowledge, as it illuminates the reality around us. God is the Light of the heavens, and the earth alludes to the illumination that He is the Ultimate Truth and a guide bestowed upon those willing to be guided. “The parable of His Light” is a niche with a lamp. The “lamp” is the revelation God grants to His prophets, and a “niche” or a recess is the heart of a believer. A glass encircles the lamp, shining like a “radiant star,” kindled by the Light emanating from the Ultimate Truth.

THE BLESSED TREE

A blessed tree refers to the organic continuity of all divine revelations, starting like a tree from one “root” or proposition. The statement of God’s existence and uniqueness grows steadily throughout man’s spiritual history, branching out into various religious experiences, thus endlessly widening the range of man’s perception of the truth. The “olive tree” is characteristic of the East of the Mediterranean, where most prophetic precursors of the Holy Quran originated. Since all true revelations flow from the Infinite Being, it is “neither of the East nor the West,” especially the revelation of the Holy Quran, which is universal in its goal. The following sentence: “The oil of which is so bright it would well-nigh give the light of itself, even though the fire had not touched it,” alludes to the Quranic message, which proceeds from God and gives endless light or “Light upon Light” to disperse darkness even though the fire has not touched it. Its inner consistency, truth, and wisdom ought to be self-evident to anyone who approaches it in light of his reason and without prejudice. This may be the approximate meaning of “the parable of God’s Light,” and only God has full knowledge of all things.

GOD RESPONDS TO ALL CALLS

And if My servants ask you about Me—behold, I am near; I respond to the call of him who calls, whenever he calls unto Me. Let them, then, respond unto Me and believe in Me so that they could follow the right way. (2:186)

PROVIDER OF SUSTENANCE

Say: “Am I to take for my master anyone but Allah, the Originator of the heavens and the earth when He gives nourishment, and Himself needs none?” (6:14) Whatever grace Allah opens to man;

none can withhold it; and whatever He withholds; none can henceforth release for He alone is almighty, truly wise. O, men! Call to mind the blessings which Allah has bestowed upon you! Is there any creator, other than Allah, that could provide for your sustenance out of heaven and earth? (35:2-3) He has made the earth easy to live upon: go about, then, in all its regions, and partake of the sustenance, which He provides: but [always bear in mind] unto Him, you shall be resurrected. (67:15) And who is it that provides you with sustenance out of heaven and earth? Could there be any divine power besides Allah? Say: “[If you think so,] produce your evidence—if you truly believe in your claim!” (27:64)

The term “sustenance” (Rizq) has both a physical and spiritual connotation, hence the phrase “out of heaven and earth.” Most people who profess a belief in a multiplicity of divine powers, or even the possibility of the one God’s incarnation in a created being, do so blindly, sometimes only under the influence of inherited cultural traditions and habits of thought, not out of a reasoned conviction.

BLESSING BOTH INWARD AND OUTWARD

Are you unaware that Allah has made subservient to you in the heavens and all that is on earth and has lavished upon you His blessings, both outward and inward? And yet, among men, many argue about Allah. Without having any knowledge [of Him], without any guidance, and without any light-giving revelation. (31:20)

Blessings, both outward and inward, refer to both visible and invisible benefits, as well as physical, intellectual, and spiritual endowments.

ALL LIVING CREATURES DEPEND ON GOD

There is no living creature on earth, but it depends on Allah's sustenance. (11:6) And how many a living creature are there that takes no thought of its sustenance; [the while] Allah provides for it as [He provides] for you— since He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing? (29:60) On Him depends all creatures in the heavens and on earth; [and] daily He manifests Himself in yet another [wondrous] way. (55:29–30)

All creatures depend on Him for their safety and sustenance, and they take no thought of their sustenance and do not store up provisions. And hence, God knows what is best and, from the viewpoint of His unfathomable plan, necessary for each living being. God is perfect and always good in all ways toward all beings.

WORLD OF JOY

Due to God's grace, the world of the Quran, despite its dire warnings to the unrighteous, is a world of joy. There is eternal hope and confidence in ultimate justice, helping along the way, and pardon for the contrite. Standing beneath God's gracious skies, a Muslim can, at any moment, lift his heart directly into the divine presence to receive both strength and guidance for the living of his days. He has such access to the divine because nothing stands between man and God. Is He not closer than the vein of thy neck?

GOD'S GUIDANCE, MERCY, AND GRACE

GOD'S GUIDANCE IS THE ONLY GUIDANCE

Say: "Shall we invoke, instead of Allah, something that can neither benefit us nor harm us, and [thus] turn around on our heels after Allah has guided us aright, like one whom Satan has enticed into blundering after earthly lusts. The while his companions, trying to guide him, call out unto him [from afar], 'Come thou to us!'" Say: "Allah's guidance is the only guidance. We have been bidden to surrender ourselves unto the Sustainer of all the worlds, and to be constant in prayer and conscious of Him: for it is He unto whom you all shall be gathered." (6:71–72)

Say: "Does any of those beings to whom you ascribe a share in Allah's divinity guide to the truth?" Say: "It is Allah [alone] who guides unto the truth. Which, then, is more worthy of being followed—He who guides to the truth or he who cannot find the right way unless he is guided? What, then, is amiss with you and your judgment?" (10:35)

The concept of "finding the right way" cannot apply to lifeless idols and idolatrous images. This passage relates to animate beings—dead or alive—to whom a share in God's divinity is falsely attributed. For example, saintly personalities, prophets, or angels are blasphemously endowed with some or all of God's qualities, sometimes even to the extent that they are regarded as a manifestation or incarnation of God on earth. As for the act of God's guidance, it is displayed primarily in the power of conscious reasoning and intuitive insight with which He has graced man, enabling him to follow the divine laws of right conduct.

DIVINE GUIDANCE A SOURCE OF GRACE

And if We so willed, We could certainly take away whatever We have revealed unto you, and in that [state of need], you would find none to plead on your behalf before Us. [You are spared] only by thy Sustainer's grace: His favor toward you is great indeed! (17:86-87)

The “taking away” of revelation denotes its alienation from the hearts of men and its disappearance in a written form.

THE PROPHET AS AN EXAMPLE OF MERCY

[O Prophet,] We have sent you as [evidence of Our] grace toward all the worlds. (21:107)

LAW OF GRACE AND MERCY

Say: “Unto whom belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth?” Say: “Unto Allah, who has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy.” (6:12) “And ordain Thou for us what is good in this world as well as in the life to come: behold, unto Thee have we turned in repentance!” [Allah] answered: “With My chastisement do I afflict whom I will—but My grace overspreads everything: and so, I shall confer it on those who are conscious of Me and spend in charity, and who believe in Our messages.” (7:156) Know that Allah is severe in retribution and that Allah is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (5:98)

The God of the Quran is omnibenevolent. However, a strong emphasis on God’s mercy should not conjure up a permissive deity. God’s mercy exists in dialectical tension with His justice, tempered by mercy toward the repentant sinner. Regarding His grace and mercy (Rahmah), none of the other divine attributes have been similarly described. The Prophet further stressed this exceptional

quality of God's grace and mercy: God says of Himself, "My grace and mercy outstrip My wrath."

GOD'S MERCY FOR REPENTANT SINNERS

The bestowal from on high of this divine writ issues from Allah Almighty, the All-Knowing, forgiving sins and accepting repentance, severe in retribution, limitless in His bounty. (40:2–3) And when those who believe in Our messages come unto thee, say: "Peace be upon you. Your Sustainer has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy—so that if any of you does an evil deed out of ignorance, and after that repents and lives righteously, He shall be [found] much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace." (6:54) [O believer,] say: "O my Sustainer! Grant [me] forgiveness and bestow Thy mercy [upon me]; for Thou art the truest bestower of mercy!" (23:118) He alone is truly forgiving, truly a dispenser of grace. (10:107) And He alone is truly forgiving. All-Embracing in His love, in sublime almightiness, enthroned a sovereign doer of whatever He wills. (85:14–16)

THE CHASTISEMENT FOR RECALCITRANT SINNERS

Tell my servants that I—I alone—am truly forgiving, a true dispenser of grace, and [also] that the suffering I shall impose [on sinners] will indeed be suffering most grievous. (15:49–50)

The statement relating to God's forgiveness and grace contains a threefold emphasis—expressed by the repetition of the personal pronoun pertaining to God and the definite article "al" before each of the two participial adjectives. But there is no such stress in the mention of His chastisement of rebellious sinners. God's mercy should not be confused with permissiveness, and recalcitrant sinners will face punishment.

MERCY VS. PUNISHMENT ON THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

He will assuredly gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection, [the coming of], which is beyond all doubt. Those who have squandered their selves—it is they who refuse to believe [in Him]. Although His is all that dwells in the night and the day, and He alone is all-hearing, all- knowing. Say: “I am bidden to be foremost among those who surrender themselves unto Allah, and not among those who ascribe, divinity to anything besides Him.” Say: “I would dread, were I [thus] to rebel against my Sustainer, the suffering [which would befall me] on that awesome Day [of Judgment].” Upon him who shall be spared on that Day, He will indeed have bestowed His grace: and this will be a manifest triumph. (6:13–16)

The Holy Quran underscores God’s tremendous power and majesty and the Day of Judgment, while the other verses of the Quran reveal a forgiving and just judge. Opening the Quran to its initial chapter, one reads, “In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate,” which denotes the idea of not only forgiveness and graciousness but also of bounteous mercy that sustains, protects, and rewards people. Each of its chapters begins with this appellation, reminding the believer of God. God’s mercy permeates the entire life and milieu of the believer. It is reflected in nature, which serves as the theater for the human realization of God’s will in history and creation. It reaches its zenith in God’s merciful gift to humankind, His revelation. The Quran is teeming with references to the many wonders of nature that God’s mercy provides. The loving God of the Quran is the God of light and hope, the ultimate protector, and His guidance is the only guidance. This is in sharp contrast to the God of the Old Testament, described as “jealous” and “a great God, mighty and terrible.” God’s dealing with his creatures reflects His mercy, and His benevolence is supremely manifest in His revelations to humankind through the prophets, culminating in the

final revelation of the Quran. The sending of Muhammad was a sign of God's mercy. Since God is

all-knowing, His guidance flows from His unfathomable wisdom.

MANY PATHS TO TRANSCENDENT GOD

HUMAN VISION CANNOT ENCOMPASS GOD

No human vision can encompass Him, whereas He encompasses all human vision, for He alone is unfathomable, all-aware. (6:103)

TRANSCENDENCE VS. IMMANENCE

God's transcendence implies He is independent of the physical universe and time. This contrasts with immanence, where a god is said to be fully present in the physical world and thus accessible to creatures in various ways. Islam negates the notion of immanence, as God does not exist as part of the created universe, which is finite and perishable, while God is infinite and eternal. God is always omnipresent in all places but distinct from it. While God is concerned about humanity, knows people intimately, and can act in history, He is and remains transcendent, and no vision can grasp Him. Transcendence implies transcending the universe or material existence beyond the limits of all possible experience and comprehension. The Quran objects to Christian theology, where transcendent, Almighty and holy God becomes immanent primarily in the god-man Jesus Christ.

UNFATHOMABLE AND ALL-AWARE

***Verily, Allah is unfathomable [in His wisdom], all-aware. (22:63)
And bear in mind all that is recited in your homes of Allah's messages and [His] wisdom: for Allha is unfathomable [in His wisdom], all-aware. (33:34)***

The term “Latif” (unfathomable) denotes something extremely subtle in quality and, therefore, intangible and incomprehensible. The expression means that He alone is unfathomable, implying that this quality of His is unique and absolute. Whenever this term occurs in the Quran concerning God in conjunction with “all-aware,” it is used to express the idea of His inaccessibility to human perception, imagination, or comprehension, as contrasted with His all-awareness. Since the human mind is finite, it doesn’t have the capacity to understand the infinite.

GOD IS INFINITE AND ETERNAL

He is the First and the Last, and the Outward and the Inward, and He has full knowledge of everything. (57:3) Allah’s is the east and the west: wherever you turn, there is Allah’s countenance. Allah is infinite, all-knowing. (2:115) Allah—there is no deity except Him, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent Fount of All Being! (3:2) All that lives on earth or in the heavens is bound to pass away: but forever will abide thy Sustainer’s Self, full of majesty and glory. Which of your Sustainer’s powers can you disavow? (55:26–28) Everything is bound to perish, save His [eternal] Self. With Him rests all judgment, and unto Him shall you all be brought back. (28:86) We alone shall remain after the earth, and all who live on it have passed away, and [when] unto Us all will have been brought back. (19:40)

His Being is eternal, without anything preceding His existence, and without anything outlasting its infinity, an interpretation given by the Holy Prophet himself. He is the transcendental cause of all that exists—the often-repeated Quranic phrase, “all things go back to God as their source,” or He is closer to everything than anything else could ever be.

Time itself—a concept beyond man’s understanding—is God’s creation. In other words, a day, an eon, a thousand years, or a

millennia are alike to Him, having an apparent reality only within the created world and none with the Creator.

MULTIPLE WAYS OF ASCENT TO GOD

God unto whom there are many ways of ascent. (70:3)

He of the many ascents is a metonymical phrase implying that there are many ways a man can “ascend” to a comprehension of God’s existence and thus to spiritual nearness to Him. Therefore, it is up to each human being to avail himself of the ways leading toward Him.

PRIMORDIAL COVENANT WITH HUMANITY

Whenever thy Sustainer brings forth their offspring from the loins of the children of Adam, He [thus] calls upon them to bear witness about themselves: “Am I not your Sustainer?” To which they answer: “Yea, indeed, we bear witness to it!” [Of this We remind you,] lest you say on the Day of Resurrection, “We were unaware of this;” or lest you say, “It was but our forefathers who, in times gone by, began to ascribe divinity to other beings besides Allah; and we were but their late offspring. Wilt Thou, then, destroy us for the doings of those inventors of falsehoods? And thus, clearly, do We spell out these messages, and [We do it] so that they [who have sinned] might return [unto Us].” (7:172–4)

According to the Holy Quran, the ability to perceive the existence of the Supreme Power is inborn in human nature due to the primordial covenant made between God and man, to which man must continue to be responsible. God has created humanity with a natural disposition to know the truth. This intuitive cognition—which may or may not be subsequently blurred by self-indulgence or adverse environmental influences—makes every sane human being bear witness about himself before God.

There is a famous saying of the Prophet: “Every child is born in this natural disposition; it is only his parents who later turn him into a ‘Jew,’ a ‘Christian,’ or a ‘Magian.’” These three religions, best known to the contemporaries of the Prophet, are thus contrasted with the natural disposition, which, by definition, consists of man’s instinctive cognition of God and self-surrender (Islam) to Him. The term “parents” in this hadith has a wider meaning of social influences or environment.

KNOWING GOD THROUGH EARLIER REVELATIONS

Indeed, We have enjoined those who were granted revelation before your time and upon yourselves to remain conscious of Allah. And if you deny Him—Unto God belongs all that is in the heavens, and all that is on earth, and God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised. (4:131) They unto whom We have vouchsafed revelation aforetime, knew this as they know their children, yet those [of them] who have squandered their selves—it is they who refuse to believe. (6:20)

The truth of God’s transcendental uniqueness and oneness is stressed in all authentic scriptures.

FAITH AND REASON

In the heavens and on earth, there are indeed messages for all willing to believe. And in your nature, and in [that of] all the animals, which He scatters [over the earth], there are messages for people who are endowed with inner certainty. In the succession of night and day, and in the means of subsistence which Allah sends down from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it was lifeless, and in the change of the winds, [in all this], there are messages for people who use their reason. These

messages of Allah We do convey unto you, setting forth the truth. In what other tiding, if not in Allah's messages, will they then believe? (45:3–6)

God is evident as well as hidden. His existence manifests in the effects of His activity, and in contrast, He is not perceptible to our senses. There are visible signs of a consciously creative Power conveying a spiritual message to man. The intricate structure of human and animal bodies and the life-preserving instincts with which all living creatures have been endowed make it virtually impossible to assume that all this has developed “by accident.” Suppose we consider a creative purpose underlies this development. In that case, we must conclude that a conscious Power has willed it, creating all-natural phenomena “in accordance with an inner truth” (see verse 10:5). The rain has the symbolic connotation of physical and spiritual grace often attached to it in the Holy Quran.

THE QURAN

THE BEGINNING OF REVELATION OF THE QURAN

RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

The mission of Muhammad as a prophet can be properly understood in the context of the religious and socioeconomic conditions of pre-Islamic Arabia. With a few exceptions, pre-Islamic Arabs practiced paganism and idol worship. However, the knowledge of monotheistic faiths of Judaism and Christianity was not uncommon. Each tribe had its idols and temples. The priests and hierophants attached to these temples received rich offerings from the devotees. And often, there arose sanguinary conflicts between the followers of rival temples. Besides special idols located in the temples, each family had household pennants, which exacted rigorous observations. Arabs also worshiped animals and plants—the gazelle, the horse, the camel, and the palm tree—and inorganic matter like pieces of rock, stones, etc.

There were, however, fifteen years of preparation and spiritual communion after his marriage before Muhammad's ministry was to begin. In a town teeming with commercial speculators and in a

masculine world where almost every Arab participated in armed combat, the early career of Muhammad appears comparatively uneventful. In a climate where men grow old prematurely, he was quickly past the age of adventure and ambition. Suddenly, when Muhammad was about forty years old, he had an overwhelming, mystical experience.

THE GERM CELL (SURAH 96)

Read in the name of your Sustainer, who has created— created man out of a germ cell! Read—for your Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who has taught [man] the use of the pen—taught man what he did not know! (96:1–5)

The first five verses of the ninety-sixth chapter (Al-Alaq, the germ cell) represent the beginning of the revelation of the Quran. All authorities agree that the first five verses were revealed in the last third of Ramadan (corresponding to July or August 610 of the Christian era). There was a huge barren rock on the outskirts of Mecca known as Mount Hira. In this rock was a cave that Muhammad, who needed deep solitude, began to frequent. He used to withdraw into the seclusion of the cave of Mount Hira, and there, he applied himself to ardent devotions consisting of long vigils and prayers. While peering into the mysteries of good and evil, he could not accept the crudeness, superstition, and fratricide accepted as normal. This great fiery heart, seething, simmering like a furnace of thoughts, was reaching out to God. His vigils often lasted the entire night.

During one of his vigils in Mount Hira, one night, the Angel of Revelation, Archangel Gabriel, suddenly appeared to him and said, “Read!” Muhammad initially presumed he was expected to read the actual script, which, being unlettered, was difficult for him to do. He answered, “I cannot read”—whereupon, in his own words, the angel “seized me and pressed me so strongly until all strength went out of me.” The same sequence of events was repeated twice. The third time, the angel seized Muhammad and said, “Read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created—created man out of a germ cell! Read—for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One . . .” So, Muhammad understood, in the sudden illumination, that he was called upon to “read,” that is, to receive and understand God’s message to man.

HUMBLE ORIGIN VS. MAN'S VAST POTENTIAL

The first revelation alludes to man's embryonic evolution out of a germ cell or fertilized female ovum, thus contrasting the

primitiveness and simplicity of his biological origins with his vast intellectual and spiritual potential—a contrast that points to the existence of design and a purpose underlying the creation of life. The past tense in which the verb appears in these verses indicates that the act of divine creation has been and is continuously repeated.

PATH OF ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

The “pen” is a symbol for the art of writing, or, more specifically, for all knowledge recorded by writing, and this explains the symbolic summons “Read” at the beginning of verses 1 and 3. Man's unique ability to transmit his thoughts, experiences, and insights from person to person, from generation to generation, and from one cultural environment to another endow all human knowledge with a cumulative character.

Man is “taught by God,” who creates him as a biological entity and implants in him the will and ability to acquire knowledge. God teaching man also signifies the act of His revealing, through the prophets, spiritual truths and moral standards, which cannot be unequivocally established through human experience and reasoning alone.

EXPRESSION OF CONFUSION AND DISBELIEF

Arousing from his trance, Muhammad felt the words he had heard were branded on his soul. After this supernatural experience, Muhammad hastened home to his wife and said, “O Khadijah! He of whom one would not have believed it (meaning himself) has

become either a soothsayer or one possessed—mad.” Muhammad told her what he had seen. She said, “Rejoice, O dear husband, and be a good cheer. He, in whose hand is Khadijah’s life, is my witness that you will be the Prophet of these people.”

HIATUS PERIOD

After the Prophet’s earliest revelation—consisting of the first five verses of Surah 96 (The Germ Cell)—a period elapsed during which he received no revelation at all. One can imagine the spiritual anguish, the mental doubts, and the waves of misgivings that followed in the wake of this experience. Was the voice God’s? Would it come again? Above all, what would it require? It was a time of the deepest distress for the Prophet. The absence of revelation almost led him to believe that his earlier experience in the cave of Mount Hira was an illusion. It was only due to the moral support of his wife, Khadijah and her resolute faith in his prophetic mission that he did not entirely lose hope. Like Isaiah (6:1–13) and other great prophets of the Hebrew scripture before him, Muhammad was overwhelmed by his experience of the Holy Angel. His struggle to understand that experience was without the benefit of the religious context of the biblical prophets. It is to Muhammad’s credit that he subjected his initial encounter with the divine to scrutiny. Soon, from this mountain cave was to sound the greatest phrase of the Arabic language, the deep, electrifying cry that was to rally people and explode their powers to the limits of the known world: “La Ilaha Illallah!” (There is no God but Allah!)

Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881), in his essay “The Hero as Prophet.”

said, “The great Mystery of Existence glared in upon him, with its terror, with its splendors; no hearsays could hide that unspeakable fact, ‘Here am I!’ Such sincerity has, in truth, something divine. The word of such a man is a voice direct from Nature’s own Heart. Men

do and must listen to that as to nothing else; all else is wind in comparison.”

THE PHENOMENON OF DIVINE REVELATION

The Prophet said, “His veil is light. If he removed the veil, the splendor of His countenance would consume His creation.” If God is visible as the sun, no one can deny Him, and thus, freedom of choice between accepting or rejecting Him will be taken away from humanity. God conveyed His will or guidance through a series of prophets. Therefore, throughout history, human beings could not only know that there is a God but also understand what He desires and commands for His creatures.

THREE MODES OF CONVEYING DIVINE REVELATIONS

It is not given to a mortal man Allah should speak unto him, otherwise than through sudden inspiration, [holy inspiration]. Or [by a voice] from behind a veil, [as Allah spoke to Moses]. Or by sending a messenger [Gabriel] to reveal, by His leave, whatever He wills [to reveal]: for He is exalted, wise. And thus, too, [O Muhammad] We have revealed to you a life-giving message, [coming] at Our behest. [Before this message came unto you,] you did not know what revelation is or what faith [implies]. But [now] We have caused this [message] to be light, whereby We guide whom We will of Our servants: and [on the strength thereof] you too shall guide [men] onto the straightway—the way that leads to Allah, to whom all in the heavens and all on earth belongs. Allah is the beginning and end of all things! (42:51–53)

Prophet Muhammad received divine revelations in several ways:

- 1 When asked how the divine inspiration is revealed to him, he replied, “Sometimes it is revealed like the reverberating

of a bell; this form of inspiration is the hardest of all, and then this stage passes off after I have grasped what is inspired.”

- 2 “Sometimes the angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me, and I grasp whatever he says.”
- 3 According to the Prophet’s wife, Aisha, sometimes the commencement of the divine inspiration to the Prophet was pleasant dreams, which came true like bright daylight.
- 4 The revelations were painful to the Prophet, who once said, “Never once did I receive a revelation without thinking that my soul had been torn away from me.” In the early days, the impact was so frightening that his body would shake, and he would often sweat profusely, even on a cool day.

QURAN REVEALED BY THE HOLY INSPIRATION

They will ask you about [the nature of] divine inspiration. Say: “This inspiration [comes] at my Sustainer’s behest; and [you cannot understand its nature, O men, since] you have been granted little of [real] knowledge.” (17:85)

ANGELS DESCEND WITH DIVINE INSPIRATION

Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted above anything to which men may ascribe a share in His divinity! He causes the angels to descend with this divine inspiration, [bestowed] at His behest upon whomever He wills of His servants: “Warn [all human beings] there is no deity save Me: be, therefore, conscious of Me!” (16:1–2) Say: “Holy inspiration has brought it down from thy Sustainer by stages, setting forth the truth, so it might give firmness to those who have attained to faith, and provide guidance and a glad tidings unto all who have surrendered themselves to

Allah.” (16:102) Now, this [divine writ] has indeed been bestowed from on high by the Sustainer of all worlds. The faithful divine inspiration has alighted with it from on high upon your heart, [O Muhammad]. (26:192–194) The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months: in hosts descend in it the angels, bearing divine inspiration by their Sustainer’s leave; from all [evil] that may happen, does it make secure, until the rise of dawn. (97:3–5)

The earliest instance in which the term “Ruh” was used is 97:4. The term “Ruh” (spirit, soul, or breath of life) is often used in the Quran in the sense of divine inspiration. The expression “the faithful or trustworthy spirit” is a designation of Gabriel, the Angel of Revelation. By virtue of his purely spiritual, functional nature, he is incapable of sinning and cannot, therefore, be anything other than utterly devoted to the trust reposed in him by God. Inspiration gives life to hearts dead in their ignorance and has in religion the same function as a soul does in a body.

As in the three other places in which the expression “Ruh Al-Qudus” occurs (2:87, 2:53, and 5:110), it is here too as “holy inspiration,” a term that is a Quranic synonym for “divine revelation.” However, a literal rendering—“spirit of holiness”—is also possible if one applies this term to the angel who communicates God’s revelations to the prophets.

We vouchsafed unto Jesus, the son of Mary, all evidence of the truth and strengthened him with holy inspiration. (2:87) Lo, Allah will say: “O Jesus, son of Mary! Remember the blessings which I bestowed upon thee and thy mother— how I strengthened thee with holy inspiration.” (5:110) [As for the true believers], it is they in whose hearts He has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with inspiration from Himself. (58:22)

This rendering of ruh Al-Qudus (“the spirit of holiness”) is based on the recurring use in the Quran of the term “Ruh” in the sense of “divine inspiration.” It is also recorded that the Prophet invoked the

blessing of the ruh Al-Qudus on his companion, the poet Hassan ibn Thabit (Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Daud, and Tirmidhi), just as the Quran speaks of all believers as “strengthened by inspiration (Ruh) from Him.”

RECEIVING DIVINE WRIT SLOWLY

Move not thy tongue in haste, [repeating the words of the revelation] for, behold, it is for Us to gather it [in thy heart] and cause it to be read [as it ought to be read]. Thus, when We recite it, follow thou its wording [with all thy mind]: and then, behold, it will be for Us to make its meaning clear. (75:16–19)

The passages are addressed to the Prophet, who is said to have been afraid he might forget some of the revealed words unless he repeated them at the very moment of revelation. The wider import is that it applies to every believer who reads, listens, or studies the Quran. The present passage lays stress to imbibe the divine writ slowly, patiently, to give full thought to the meaning of every word and phrase. This is to avoid the kind of haste that induces the person who reads, recites, or listens to it to remain satisfied with the mere beautiful sound of the Quranic language without understanding or even paying adequate attention to its message.

REAL MIRACLES ARE EXERCISE IN FUTILITY

And nothing has prevented Us from sending [this message, like the earlier ones] with miraculous signs [in its wake], save [Our knowledge] that the people of olden times [only too often] gave them the lie. (17:59) Now they swear by Allah with their most solemn oaths that if a miracle were shown to them, they would indeed believe in this [divine writ]. Say: “Miracles are in the power of Allah alone.” And for all you know, even if one should be shown to them, they would not believe so long as We keep their

hearts and their eyes turned [away from the truth], even as they did not believe in it in the first instance: and [so] We shall leave them in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. (6:109–110)

QURAN: MUHAMMAD'S ONLY STANDING MIRACLE

This highly elliptic sentence has a fundamental bearing on the purpose of the Holy Quran as a whole. The Holy Quran stresses that the Prophet Muhammad, the last and greatest of God's apostles, was not empowered to perform miracles like those with which the earlier prophets had reinforced their verbal messages. His only miracle was and is the Holy Quran itself. The message is perfect in its clarity and ethical comprehensiveness, destined forever for all stages of human development. It is addressed not merely to the feelings but also to the minds of men, open to everyone, whatever his race or social environment, and bound to remain unchanged forever.

The earlier prophets appealed to their communities, as their teachings were limited by the cultural and intellectual conditions of that community and time. Since the people to whom they addressed themselves had not yet reached the level of sufficient maturity in thinking, those prophets needed symbolic portents or miracles to make the concerned people realize the inner truth of their mission. However, such miracles too often led to new, grave misconceptions. Sometimes miracles did not convince nonbelievers. A case in point was when Jesus performed many miracles, and in the end, he only had a handful of followers. A degree of maturity was achieved due to earlier Judeo-Christian religious development, which enabled understanding of the message of the Holy Quran without miraculous demonstrations.

Muhammad was unschooled to the extent that he could barely write his name. He could not have produced a book embodying all

wisdom and theology essential to human life. It is also grammatically perfect and without poetic equality. The Prophet said, “Ask you a greater miracle than this, O unbelieving people! Than to have your vulgar tongue chosen as the language of that incomparable book, one piece of which puts to shame all your golden poesy and suspended songs?” So great was Prophet Muhammad’s regard for it that he considered it the only miracle God worked through him—his “standing miracle” as he called it.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE QURANIC TEXT

ORAL TRADITION

The angel Gabriel revealed the Holy Quran to the Prophet Muhammad beginning in 610 and ending with his death in 632 CE. The Prophet passed the Holy Quran orally to his followers, who learned it by heart. The oral tradition has remained central to how Muslims approach their sacred text, whose name means “the recitation” in Arabic. The first step in the art of reciting the Holy Quran is to memorize the text.

MEMORIZING THE QURAN

Consider this Quran endowed with all that one ought to remember! (38:1) We made this Quran easy to remember. Who is willing to take it to heart? (54:32) Thus then, [O Prophet,] have We made this [divine writ] easy to understand, in thine own [human] tongue so that men might take it to heart. (44:58)

One may ask: How is it possible to memorize the Holy Quran, which is about four-fifths of the New Testament? It may surprise the skeptics that many school-age children routinely memorize the Holy Quran. The Holy Quran is the most often memorized book in the world. Even today, one of the highest acts of piety for Muslims is to memorize the entire Holy Quran and recite it during the Holy month of Ramadan and on other occasions. One who memorizes the sacred text is called a “Hafiz.” In the Islamic world, there are schools to teach the Holy Quran to children. So great is the merit of memorizing it that even in non-Arab countries, thousands labor to

commit the sacred sounds to memory, though they may not comprehend the significance of the words at all. The rhymes and rhythms of the Arabic dialect of the Holy Quran help memorize its verses, and the divine words are inscribed in the hearts of the believers.

The art of Recitation: The Holy Quran is recited out loud in daily congregational prayers and throughout the month of Ramadan. Today's qiraat (recitation) was transmitted through generations of reciters with uninterrupted chains of transmission tracing back to the Prophet. In a formal reading, the Holy Quran is chanted (tajwid) and developed into science and art. With chanting, the beauty of the Quranic style, the charm of its cadence, the music of its rhyme, and the sequence of its rhythm are heightened. Most, if not all, of that artistic merit and emotional appeal are lost in translation. For an English-speaking, non-Arab, a translation and exegesis, or "Tafsir," of the Holy Quran by a reputable authority like Muhammad Asad is the easiest way to understand the Holy Quran.

THE MULTIFORM ORIGIN OF THE QURAN

Arabic, like any major language, is spoken in different dialects. The Holy Quran was revealed to the Prophet in the Arabian dialect of the Quraysh. During the Medina period, the Islamic empire expanded, and it meant encountering various Arabian dialects, and to some of them, the Quraysh vernacular proved difficult. Teaching the Holy Quran to these tribesmen was necessary. However, asking them to abandon their native dialects must have been difficult, just as it will be challenging to speak in a perfect American accent for a South Indian man. Therefore, some verses were recited in diverse 'modes of recitation'.

AHRUF

The term seven *ahruf* refers to “dialectical variation” in the sense that language has multiple “sides.” It refers to several different readings of the Holy Quran. Number seven in Arabic is understood as “several.”

1. To teach the Holy Quran following people’s dialects, the Prophet said, “This Holy Quran has been revealed to be recited in several different dialects, so recite it whichever way is easier for you.”
2. It relates to additional explanatory words or word substitutions. Some of these differences are subtle but add nuance to their meaning, complementing one another in some instances.
3. This unique feature of the Holy Quran multiplies its eloquence and aesthetic appeal. The diverse modes of recitation of the Holy Quran are unique among books.

DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN UMAR AND HISHAM

In the famous incident, Umar ibn al-Khattab and Hisham ibn Hakim disagreed in their recitation of Surah Al-Furqan. Umar narrates, “I heard Hisham ibn Hakim recite Surah Al-Furqan differently. So, I took him to Allah’s Messenger and said, “O Messenger of Allah, I heard this individual reciting Surah Al-Furqan in a way you did not teach me.” The Prophet replied, “O Hisham, recite!” So, he recited it the same way I had heard him recite it. Allah’s Messenger said, “It was revealed to be recited this way.” Then Allah’s Messenger said, “Recite, O Umar!” So, I recited it as he had taught me. Allah’s Messenger said, “It was revealed to be recited this way.”

These multiple readings were not considered a problem and were well-known phenomena to the Prophet’s contemporaries. It was historically recorded in books of qiraat and classical tafsir

(commentary on the Holy Quran) and, occasionally, in works of jurisprudence.

NUMBER OF WORDS AFFECTED

There are approximately 703 places where a different reading is listed. The total number of words in the Holy Quran (about 77,934) equals 0.9% of words with an alternative reading. In other words, 99.1 percent of the Quranic words are immutable. The term variant is a misnomer, as it indicates a form of something that differs from the standard. There is no singular fixed original Quranic text, but the original itself is multiform.

THE QURAN IN THE WRITTEN FORM

Upon receiving any revelation, the Prophet habitually recited the latest verses to all the men in his company. He also repeated them to the women in separate gatherings. The Quranic Verses were recorded by scribes from the earliest stages of Islam.

During the Medina period, approximately sixty-five companions functioned as scribes for the Prophet. Upon the descent of divine revelations, the Prophet routinely called for one of his scribes to write down the latest verses. After writing down the verses, his companions would read them aloud to the Prophet to check for any mistakes. The entire Holy Quran was written down during the Prophet's lifetime. The scribes used parchments, wooden planks, palm leaves, and pieces of bones where sacred scripture was preserved. He did not bind all the surahs together into one master volume.

STANDARDIZATION OF THE QURAN

After the Prophet's death, his followers felt the need to produce a standardized written version of the Holy Quran. Gathering all the revelations from both written and oral sources took some time, and it was not until around 650, during the reign of the third caliph Uthman, that scholars completed the work.

Role of Abu Bakr: During the reign of the first caliph, Abu Bakr, the Holy Quran was compiled into a master volume. The task was given to Zaid bin Thabit, who supervised the committee in compiling the Holy Quran into a book. Zaid had memorized the Holy Quran and scribed much of it directly from the Prophet. They collected all the material from all over Medina, where the verses under the Prophet's supervision were written down. Spurred on by the zeal of its organizers, this project blossomed into a genuine community effort. The material was collected, collated, and then checked for accuracy against the recollections of the *huffuz* (those who have memorized the Holy Quran). The pages compiled during the time of Caliph Abu Bakr were known as a *mushaf*. This word means a manuscript bound between two covers as a single volume on the paper. Once complete, the compiled Holy Quran was placed in the state archives under the custodianship of Abu Bakr. Before his death, Umar, the second caliph, entrusted the compiled Holy Quran to his daughter Hafsa, who was also the widow of the Prophet Muhammad.

UTHMAN'S CONTRIBUTION

During the lifetime of the Prophet, the variable ways of reciting the Holy Quran did not pose any serious problems. He was there to resolve any controversy. After his death and Islam's rapid expansion, these different Holy Quran readings began to cause confusion and conflict. During the conquest of Azerbaijan and

Armenia, Muslim soldiers from other tribes spoke different dialects, and the resultant differences in pronunciation caused conflict within the community.

Hudhaifa bin al-Yaman traveled from Azerbaijan to meet Uthman to convince him to take hold of the Ummah before they clashed over the book following the example of Christians and Jews.

After this contentious issue was brought to his attention, the third caliph, Uthman, proceeded

to unify the text based on the original *Qurayshi* dialect. There are two narrations of how Uthman proceeded with this task.

1. Uthman sent Hafsa a message, “Send us the compiled manuscript so that we may make copies.” Hafsa sent it to Uthman, who ordered Zaid bin Thabit and three men of Quraysh to make duplicate copies. In the case of disagreement with Zaid bin Thabit (a resident of Medina), the caliph instructed him to write the Holy Quran in the dialect of the Quraysh as the Holy Quran was revealed in their tongue.

2. A lesser-known narration suggests that he first authorized the compilation of an independent manuscript using primary sources before comparing this with the manuscript possessed by Hafsa. With the companions’ agreement, the initial allowance of language flexibility was reduced by Caliph Uthman’s decision to unify the community on one textual skeleton based on the original Qurayshi dialect. The duplicate copies were distributed throughout the many provinces of the Islamic state. With the task complete, Uthman ordered all fragments of the Holy Quran to be burned, as they were no longer needed.

The existence of total unity in the Quranic text for fourteen centuries proves Uthman’s foresight and wisdom. The unparalleled success in gathering a single text of the Holy Quran was accepted by all Muslims, regardless of their sectarian leanings. Unlike the

New Testament, which presents four different versions of the earthly ministry of Jesus, Uthman's timely decision prevented a theological split among Muslims. Perhaps this is one of the most outstanding achievements in Islamic history.

ADDITION OF DOTS AND DIACRITICS MARKS

During the early days of Islam, Arabic scripts had neither dots nor diacritics. A word without either of these typographical features has multiple meanings. Anyone familiar with Arabic can read and understand texts without vowels or diacritics. This is because they would be aware of certain words and how they are pronounced, and if not, they would infer them from context. This is why vowels and diacritical points are mainly used in sensitive text where a slight variation can completely change the meaning of a word. These dots were placed over or under a letter to clarify the Quranic text further. Dots were also added at the end of each verse and the beginning and end of the surah.

Later, the vowel signs were added for the benefit of non-Arabic speakers. A native speaker can understand a word from its context even when these marks are absent. For a detailed discussion, see *The History of the Quranic Text* by Muhammad Mustafa Al-Azami.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE QURANIC MESSAGE

BRING ALL HUMANITY OUT OF DEPTH OF
DARKNESS

“Say [O Prophet]: ‘O humanity! Verily, I am an apostle of Allah to all of you [sent by Him] unto to whom the dominion over the heavens and the earth belongs! (7:158) A divine writ [is this—a revelation] which We have bestowed upon you from on high so that you might bring forth all humanity, by their Sustainer’s leave, out of the depths of darkness into the light. Onto the way, which leads to the Almighty. The One to whom all praise is due—to Allah, unto whom all in the heavens and all on earth belongs. (14:1–2) This [message] is no less than a reminder to all humanity—to every one of you who wills to walk a straightway. But you cannot will it unless Allah, the Sustainer of all the worlds, wills [to show you that way]. (81:27–29)

Faith is a gift from God and no one can make anybody believe or instill faith in the hearts of men. The revelation of God’s word to man is destined to lead him “out of the depths of darkness into the light” by messages expressed in the language of the people to whom it was originally addressed. All earlier instances of the divine writ were meant only for the people, thus addressed by their prophet. The message of the Holy Quran is universal and not restricted to the Arabs alone. The universality of the Quranic revelation arises from three factors.

1. It appeals to all humanity irrespective of descent, race, or cultural environment.

2. Like all religions, there is also a supernatural realm to deal with, but the Holy Quran's emphasis is on appeals to man's reason.
3. The Holy Quran's wording has remained unchanged since the intervention of the third caliph, Uthman, fourteen centuries ago. It is because the Holy Quran is so widely recorded and forever remains per the divine promise, ***"It is We who shall truly guard it [against all corruption]."*** (15:9)

It is through these three factors that the Holy Quran represents the final stage of all divine revelations. The Prophet through whom it has been conveyed to humanity is stated to have been the last (in Quranic terminology, "the seal") of all prophets.

[And know, O believers, that] Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men but Allah's Apostle and the seal of all Prophets. And Allah has indeed full knowledge of everything. (33:40)

REASONING AND BELIEF IN GOD

And why should you not believe in Allah, knowing that the Apostle calls you to believe in [Him who is] your Sustainer, and [seeing that] He has taken a pledge from you? [Why should you not believe in Him] if you can believe [in anything]? It is He who bestows from on high clear messages unto His servant, and to lead you out of the deep darkness into the light: for Allah is most compassionate toward you, a dispenser of grace. (57:8–9) And [say:] "Limitless is Allah in His glory, and I am not one of those who ascribe divinity to anything besides Him!" And [even] before your time, We never sent [as Our apostles] any but [mortal] men, whom We inspired, [and whom We always chose] from among the people of the [very] communities [to whom the message was to be brought]. They [who reject this divine writ] have never journeyed

about the earth and beheld what happened in the end to those [deniers of the truth] who lived before them? (12:109)

God's "taking a pledge" from man is a metonymic allusion to the faculty of reason with which He has endowed man. And this ought to enable every sane person to grasp the evidence of God's existence by observing the effects of His creativity in all nature and by paying heed to the teachings of His prophets. If you can believe in anything based on sound evidence, then why not believe in God?

LIGHT-GIVING SYMBOL

The two kinds of man may be likened to the blind and deaf and the seeing and hearing. Can these two be deemed alike in [their] nature? Will you not, then, keep this in mind? (11:24) We have established the night and the day as two symbols. And thereupon, We have effaced the symbol of night and set up [in its place] the light-giving symbol of the day. So that you might seek to obtain your Sustainer's bounty and be aware of the passing years and reckoning [that is bound to come]. For, most clearly, We have spelled out everything! (17:12)

The two kinds of men are the believers and those who reject the divine writ. The expression "two symbols" refers—as the subsequent clause shows—to the night or spiritual darkness, and the light-giving symbol is the message of the Holy Quran, which is meant to lead man out of spiritual ignorance and error into the light of faith and reason. "The passing years" denotes the years of a person's life, which he counts. It implies here a call to spiritual self-criticism, given the transient nature of one's worldly life. The Holy Quran has most clearly spelled out everything that man may need in the domain of ethics and religion.

MESSAGES FOR THE SPIRITUALLY GIFTED

So, We propound these parables unto the man: but none can grasp their innermost meaning, save those who [of Us] is aware. (29:43) This [divine writ] consists of messages clear to the hearts of all who are gifted with [innate knowledge—and none could knowingly reject Our messages unless it is such as would do wrong [to themselves]. (29:49)

Awareness of the existence of God is a prerequisite for a full understanding of the Quranic parables (and, by implication, allegories). The term “ilm” (innate knowledge) has here the connotation of intuitive, spiritual perception. This divine writ is lit., self-evident in the breasts of those given (innate) knowledge.

GUIDANCE AND GOOD NEWS

This Divine Writ—let there be no doubt that it is [meant] a guidance for all the Allah-conscious who believe in [the existence of] that beyond human perception. (2:2–3) [A divine writ] unerringly straight, meant to warn [the godless] of severe punishment from Him, and to give the believers who do good works the glad tiding that theirs shall be a goodly reward—[a state of bliss] in which they shall dwell beyond the count of time. Will they not try to understand this Quran? (18:2–3)

RESTRAINING FROM EVIL

Consider these [messages] ranged in serried ranks and restraining [from evil] by a call to restraint and conveying [to all the world] a reminder. (37:1–3)

The messages of the Holy Quran deal with various subjects; some speak of the evidence of God’s oneness or the evidence of His

omniscience, omnipotence, and wisdom, and some set forth the evidence of the truth of prophetic revelation or resurrection. While some deal with man's duties and laws, others are dedicated to the teaching of high moral principles. These messages are arranged in accordance with a coherent system, above all need of change or alteration, so that they resemble beings or things standing "in serried ranks."

QURAN: AN ADMONITION

All this is an admonition: whoever, then, so wills, may find a way to his Sustainer. But you cannot will it unless Allah wills [to show you that way]: for Allah is indeed all-seeing, wise. He admits to His grace, everyone who wills [to be admitted]; but as for the evildoers—for them has He readied grievous suffering [in the life to come]. (76:29–31)

QURAN: A REMINDER, LOFTY AND PURE

Nay, Verily, these [messages] are but a reminder: and so, whoever is willing may remember Him in [the light of His] revelations blessed with dignity, lofty and pure, [borne] by the hands of messengers noble and most virtuous. (80:11–16) Say [O Prophet]: “No reward whatever do I ask of you for this [message]; and I am not one of those who claim to be what they are not. This [divine writ] is no less than a reminder to all the worlds—and you will most certainly grasp its purport after a lapse of time!” (38:86–88)

"I am not one of those" who pretends to be more than he is, and it indicates the Prophet's disclaimer of any supernatural status. The Holy Quran is described here, as in many other places, as "a reminder" because it is meant to bring man's instinctive—though sometimes hazy or unconscious—realization of God's existence into the full light of consciousness. God has willed to show you the

right way by the positive instincts implanted in you. Through the revelations which He has bestowed on His prophets, the right way is open to everyone willing to avail himself of God's universal guidance.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD

Hallowed is He who, from on high step by step, has bestowed upon His servant the standard by which to discern the true from the false so that to the entire world, it might be a warning. (25:1) This [divine writ] is indeed a word that cuts between truth and falsehood and is no idle tale. They [who refuse to accept it] devise many false arguments [to disprove its truth], but I shall bring all their scheming to naught. Let then, the deniers of the truth have their will: let them have their will for a little while! (86:13–17) And say: “The truth has now come [to light], and falsehood has withered away: for all falsehood is bound to wither away!” (17:81) Consider these [messages] that spread [the truth] far and wide, thus separating [right and wrong] with all clarity, and then giving forth a reminder, [promising] freedom from blame or [offering] a warning! (77:3–6)

The term “al-furqan” (the distinction between truth and falsehood) denotes the Holy Quran, as well as the phenomenon of divine revelation as such. This divine writ is a decisive word or word of the distinction between the true and the false. In this case, it's a belief in the continuation of life after death or a denial of its possibility. The deniers of the truth may devise many an artful scheme. God shall yet devise a more subtle scheme to bring theirs to failure, showing what leads to freedom from blame—in other words, the principles of right conduct—and what is ethically reprehensible and, therefore, to be avoided.

TRUTH WILL WITHER FALSEHOOD

Say: “My Sustainer hurls the truth [against all that is false]—He who fully knows all the things beyond the reach of a created being’s perception!” Say: “The truth has now come [to light, and falsehood is bound to wither away]. For, falsehood cannot bring forth anything new, nor can it bring back [what has passed away].” (34:48–49)

Contrary to the creativeness inherent in every true idea, falsehood—being an illusion—cannot create anything or revive any values that may have been alive in the past.

QURAN FULL OF WISDOM

And [originating as it does] in the source, with Us, of all revelations, it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom. (43:4) These are the messages of the divine writ, full of wisdom. Do people deem it strange that We should have inspired a man from their midst [with this Our message]: “Warn all mankind and give to those who have attained to faith the glad tiding that in their Sustainer’s sight they surpass all others in that they are genuinely sincere.” (10:1–2) O Thou human being! Consider this Holy Quran full of wisdom. You are indeed one of Allah’s message-bearers. Pursuing a straightway by [virtue of] what is bestowed from on high by the Almighty, Dispenser of Grace. So that you may warn people whose forefathers were not warned and who, therefore, are unaware [of the meaning of right and wrong]. (36:1–6)

With Him is the source of all revelations. The term “mother” often has the idiomatic connotation of “origin” or “source.” The term “Hakim”—when qualifying an animated being may be translated as “wise”—has here the connotation of a means of imparting wisdom. The wisdom apparent in the Holy Quran serves as evidence of the fact that you are an apostle of God.

Say: “Were I to go astray, I would but go astray [due to my own self, and] to the hurt of myself. But if I am on the right path, it is but by virtue of what my Sustainer reveals unto me: for, verily, He is all-hearing, ever near!” (34:50)

Those who have attained faith have precedence of truthfulness, denoting a concord between what a person conceives in his mind or feels and what he expresses by word, deed, or attitude—in other words, complete sincerity. In the wider sense of this expression, the “forefathers” may be a metonym for a community’s cultural past. Hence, the reference to those “forefathers” not being “warned” (i.e., against evil) alludes to the defectiveness of the ethical heritage of people who have become estranged from true moral values.

DIVINE WRIT A NATURAL PHENOMENON

I call to witness the revolving stars, the planets that run their course and set, and the night as it darkly falls, and the morning as it softly breathes. This [divine writ] is indeed the [inspired] word of a noble Apostle, with strength endowed, secure with Him, who in almightiness is enthroned [the word] of one to be heeded and worthy of trust! (81:15–21)

By calling to witness certain natural phenomena, which are familiar to man because of their permanent recurrence, attention is drawn to what we call “laws of nature” that are observable elements of God’s plan of creation—a plan in which His revelations play a decisive role. By implication, the divine writ granted to Muhammad is as intrinsically “natural” as any other phenomenon, concrete or abstract, in the realm of God’s creation. The throne of almightiness signifies God’s absolute sovereignty and almightiness.

QURAN ON AN IMPERISHABLE TABLET

This [divine writ which they reject] is a discourse sublime, upon an imperishable tablet [inscribed]. (85:21–22)

The description of the Holy Quran on a well-guarded tablet is found only in this one instance. Although some commentators understand it as an actual “heavenly tablet” upon which the Holy Quran has been inscribed since all eternity, to many others, the phrase has always had a metaphorical meaning: an allusion to the imperishable quality of this divine writ. The phrase “upon a well-guarded tablet” relates to God’s promise that the Holy Quran would never be corrupted and would remain free of all arbitrary additions, diminutions, and textual changes.

TEN PRINCIPLES BEHIND INTERPRETING THE QURAN

(1) PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S EXPLANATION

In the measure that We reveal this Quran unto you, [O Prophet,] We explain it to you in the best possible way, seeing that before this, you were indeed among those unaware [of what revelation is]. (12:3)

The rendering “We explain it,” i.e., the Holy Quran in the best possible way, refers to the self-explanatory nature of the divine writ. Prophet Muhammad serves as a human instrument in bearing divine revelations and as the model or ideal that all believers should emulate. If he clarified or elaborated the scriptural text, then that explanation is considered final because who could have known the Holy Quran better than him? He was the “living Holy Quran”—the witness whose behavior and words reveal God’s will.

(2) CLEAR MESSAGES AND ALLEGORY

A divine writ [is this], with messages made clear in and by themselves, and distinctly spelled out—[bestowed upon you] out of the grace of One who is wise, all-aware, so that you may worship none, but Allah. (11:2) He has bestowed upon you from on high this divine writ, containing messages clear in and by themselves, and these are the essence of the divine writ—as well as others that are allegorical. (3:7)

The understanding of the two types of verses, namely, clear and allegorical, is regarded as a key to understanding and interpreting the Holy Quran. Without a proper grasp of what is implied by the

term “allegorical” or “symbolic,” much of the Holy Quran is liable to be grossly misunderstood.

AYAT MUHKAMAT

The “ayat muhkamat” are the messages clear in themselves. These are ordinances or statements that are self-evident (zahir) by their wording. These verses are described as the “essence of the divine writ” (umm al-Kitab) because they comprise the fundamental principles underlying its message and its ethical and social teachings.

AYAT MUTASHABIHAT

The “ayat mutashabihat” or allegorical verses may be defined as those passages of the Holy Quran expressed figuratively, with a meaning metaphorically implied but not directly, in so many words, stated. It is only based on these enunciated principles that the Holy Quran can correctly interpret.

LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Linguistic expressions in any language are divided into two classes: literal and figurative. Words in literal expressions denote what they mean according to common or dictionary usage. Words in figurative expressions do not represent real things but convey additional layers of meaning through symbolism. The “symbol” is one thing used or considered to represent another. All words are symbols or entities that can stand for other entities. Metaphor and simile are the two best-known figures of speech. A common definition of a “metaphor” is a comparison between two things that are not alike and replaces the word with another word, for example: “He broke my heart.” Your heart isn’t literally broken; you’re just feeling hurt

and depressed. A “simile” is a metaphor that also uses the word “like” or “as” in it. For example, She cried like a baby. He was as busy as a bee.

A “metonym” is a word, name, or expression used as a substitute for something else closely associated with it. For example, Washington is a metonym for the federal government of the United States.

ARBITRARY INTERPRETATION OF ALLEGORICAL PASSAGES

Now, those whose hearts are given to swerving from the truth go after that part of the divine writ, which has been expressed in allegory. Seeking out [what is bound to create] confusion and seeking to arrive at its final meaning [in an arbitrary manner], but none save Allah knows its final meaning. Hence, those deeply rooted in knowledge say: “We believe in it; the whole [of the divine writ] is from our Sustainer—albeit none takes this to heart. Save those who are endowed with insight. O our Sustainer! Let not our hearts swerve from the truth after Thou hast guided us; and bestow upon us the gift of Thy grace: Thou art the [true] Giver of Gifts.” (3:7–8)

These verses primarily refer to the interpretation of allegorical passages, which deal with metaphysical subjects such as God’s attributes, the ultimate meaning of life, time, and eternity, the resurrection of the dead, and the Day of Judgment, paradise, hell, angels, etc. However, many Quranic passages do not deal with metaphysical subjects and yet are, undoubtedly, allegorical in intent and expression. The “confusion” referred to is a consequence of interpreting allegorical passages in an “arbitrary manner.”

ALLEGORY

One cannot arrive at a correct understanding of the passage without paying due attention to the nature and function of the allegory as such. An allegory is a figurative mode of representing a meaning other than the literal in which people, things, and happenings have hidden or symbolic meanings. A true allegory is always meant to express figuratively something that, because of its complexity, cannot be adequately expressed in clear terms or propositions. Because of this complexity, it can only be grasped intuitively, as a general mental image, and not as a clear and comprehensive description. This seems to be the meaning of the phrase “none save God knows its final meaning.” Except for the Prophet Muhammad, no one can claim they have a monopoly in understanding the Holy Quran, and only God knows its final meaning.

PARABLE OF GOOD AND CORRUPT WORD

A parable is a short fictitious story or allegory by which moral or spiritual lessons are conveyed. The term “mathal,” which is usually rendered as “parable,” primarily denotes a “likeness,” that is, of one thing to another. Sometimes, it is used in a wider sense as a synonym for the quality, intrinsic attribute, or nature of a thing—its state or condition. In many passages of the Holy Quran, the term “parable” is used immediately or shortly after a description of men’s conditions in the hereafter. It is meant to remind us that all such depictions are related to human imagination.

GOOD WORD

Are you not aware of how Allah sets forth the parable of a good word? [It is] like a good tree, firmly rooted, [reaching out] with its branches toward the sky, always yielding its fruit by its Sustainer’s leave. (14:24–25) [Thus], Allah grants firmness to those who have

attained faith through the word that is unshakably true in the life of this world and in the life to come. (14:27) [And] tell [those of] My servants who have attained faith that they should be constant in prayer and spend [in Our way], secretly and openly, out of what We provide them in sustenance before there comes a Day when there will be no bargaining, nor mutual befriending. (14:31)

In its wider meaning, the term “Kalimah” (“word”) denotes any conceptual statement or proposition. Thus, a “good word” circumscribes any proposition (or idea) intrinsically true and—because it implies a call to what is good in the moral sense—is ultimately beneficent and enduring. Since a call to moral righteousness is the innermost purpose of every one of God’s messages, the term “good word” applies to them as well. The term “firmness” is the unshakable truth of the word or concept, thus connecting it with the preceding parable of the “good word” and the “good tree.” The word that is unshakably true is the concept that there are no deities save God and that Muhammad is His Apostle, which is an interpretation given by the Prophet himself. The expression “selling and buying” or “bargaining” denotes here the metaphorical giving and taking of the ransom, which, as the Holy Quran repeatedly stresses, will be inadmissible on the Day of Judgment. Similarly, the “mutual befriending” expresses the impossibility of “ransom” through the intercession on Judgment Day, for “now, indeed, you have come unto Us in a lonely state, even as We created you in the first instance.” (6:94)

PARABLES ARE MEANT TO MAKE MEN PONDER

And [thus it is that] Allah propounds parables unto men so that they might be thinking themselves [of the truth]. (14:25) Thus, indeed, have We propounded unto men all kinds of parables in this Quran so that they might be reflecting themselves? (39:27) Had we bestowed this Quran from high up on a mountain, you

would indeed behold it humbling itself, breaking asunder for awe of Allah. And [all] such parables We propound unto men so that they could [learn to] think. (59:21)

It is in contrast with those who, by remaining oblivious of God and all moral imperatives, are spiritually as dead as an inert mountain.

THE MESSAGE BEHIND THE PARABLE OF A GNAT

Allah does not disdain to propound a parable of a gnat or of something [even] less than that. Now, as for those who have attained faith, they know that it is the truth of their Sustainer. Whereas those bent on denying the truth say, “What could Allah mean by this parable?” (2:26)

It is a parable of a gnat or of something even less than that, i.e., relates to the quality of smallness stressed here—as one would say, “Such-and-such a person is the lowest of people and even more than that.” Also, verse 29:41 mentions the parable of the spider, and in 22:73, there is the parable of the fly. The parable of a gnat is an example of those who deny the truth, distorting the meanings behind parables. They question why God uses such lowly insects as examples in His parables. Instead of perceiving and understanding the messages behind these parables, they only consider how insignificant these creatures are, thus missing the whole point.

3) QURAN CONSISTENT WITHIN ITSELF

Do not approach the Quran in haste, before it has been revealed unto you in full, but [always] say: “O my Sustainer, cause me to grow in knowledge!” (20:114)

Since the Holy Quran is the word of God, all its parts—phrases, sentences, verses, and surahs—form an integral, coordinated whole.

One must not jump to a conclusion from isolated verses taken out of context.

I call to witness the coming down in parts [of this Quran], and this is indeed a most solemn affirmation if you but knew it! It is a truly noble discourse, [conveyed unto man] in a well-guarded divine writ which none but the pure [of heart] can touch, a revelation from the Sustainer of all the worlds! Would you, now, look down with disdain on a tiding like this and make it your daily bread [as it were] to call the truth a lie? (56:75–82)

STEP-BY-STEP REVELATION

As a guide to the truth, We have bestowed this [revelation] from on high; with this [very] truth has it come down [to you, O Prophet]. For We have sent thee, but as a herald of glad tidings and a warner, [bearing] a discourse which We have gradually unfolded, so you might read it out to humanity in stages, considering that We have bestowed it from high step by step, as [one] revelation. (17:105–106) Consider these [messages] sent forth in waves and then storming on with the tempest's force! (77:1–2)

WHY STEP-BY-STEP REVELATION?

Now, they who are bent on denying the truth ask, "Why has not the Quran been bestowed on him from on high in one revelation?" [It has been revealed] in this manner, so that We might strengthen your heart thereby. For We have so arranged its component parts that they form one consistent whole—and [that] they [who deny the truth] might never taunt you with any misleading half-truth without Our conveying to you the [full] truth and [providing you] with the best explanation. (25:32–33)

The Bible also comes as a step-by-step revelation, as God revealed different things to various prophets at different times.

TO STRENGTHEN THE FAITH

According to the opponents of Islam, the gradual, step-by-step revelation of the Holy Quran indicates that it was composed by Muhammad to suit his changing personal and political fortunes. The most important reason is that it is bound to strengthen the faith of every thinking believer. And herein lies, according to the Holy Quran itself, the rationale for its slow, gradual revelation. Your opponents can never taunt you of “deceptive half-truths,” which imply all manners of seemingly plausible objections meant to throw doubt on Muhammad’s claim to prophethood and, hence, on the God-inspired character of the Quranic message.

DIVINE WRIT CONSISTENT AND FREE OF CONTRADICTIONS

All praise is due to Allah, who has bestowed this divine writ from high upon His servant and has not allowed any deviousness to obscure its meaning. (18:1) Allah bestows from on high the best of all teachings in the form of a divine writ entirely consistent within itself, repeating each statement [of the truth] in various forms [a divine writ], whereat shiver the skins of all who of their Sustainer stand in awe. [But] in the end, their skins and hearts soften at the remembrance of [the grace of] Allah. (39:23) [We have revealed it] as a discourse in the Arabic tongue, free of all the deviousness, so that they might become conscious of Allah. (39:27-28)

These verses establish the direct, unambiguous character of the Holy Quran and stress its freedom from all obscurities and internal contradictions. It should convince them that it has not been

“composed by Muhammad” (an accusation frequently leveled against him not only by his contemporaries but also nonbelievers of later times) but could only have originated from a supra-human source.

4) DOCTRINE OF ABROGATION

The abrogation doctrine originated due to some Holy Quran commentators’ inability to reconcile one Quranic passage with another. The difficulty was overcome by declaring that one of the verses was “abrogated.” This arbitrary procedure explains why there is no unanimity between the upholders of this “doctrine of abrogation” to which and how many Holy Quran verses have been affected by it. There is no tradition where the Prophet declared an abrogated verse of the Holy Quran. Besides the Holy Quran, there is no higher authority than the Prophet. The “abrogation” of any Holy Quran verse would have amounted to an open declaration that the verse was “false,” implying God is fallible.

For behold, it is a sublime divine writ. No falsehood can ever attain it openly, and neither stealthily, [since it is] bestowed from on high by Truly wise One, always to be praised. (41:41–42) And convey [to the world] whatever has been revealed to you by your Sustainer’s writ. Nothing could alter His words, and you can find no refuge other than with Him. (18:27)

This is one of the Quranic passages that form the basis for the absolute rejection of the doctrine of “abrogation.” On these verses, among others, the great Holy Quran commentator Abu Muslim al-Isfahani based his rejection of the so-called doctrine of abrogation. As Abu Muslim points out, this would contradict the statement that “no falsehood can ever attain to it.”

Neither those from among the followers of earlier revelation who are bent on denying the truth nor those who ascribe divinity to other beings besides Allah would like to see any good ever

bestowed upon you from on high by your Sustainer, but Allah singles out for His grace whom He wills—for Allah is limitless in His great bounty. Any message We annul or consign to oblivion We replace with a better or a similar one. Dost thou not know that Allah has the power to do anything? (2:105–106) Now that We replace one message with another—Allah is fully aware of what He bestows from on high step by step. (16:101)

The principle in this passage—relating to the substitution of the biblical dispensation by the Holy Quran—has led to an erroneous interpretation by many Muslim theologians. It was an intellectual exercise by some Islamic theologians, and there was no malicious intent to pervert the message of the Holy Quran. “Any good ever bestowed upon you” refers to the Quranic revelation—the highest good.

Ayah: The restricted meaning of the word “ayah” denotes a **verse** of the Holy Quran. The broader definition of “ayah” is a message (because every one of these verses contains a message). Applying the restricted meaning of the word ayah, some scholars conclude from the passage that God’s command abrogated certain verses of the Holy Quran.

Message: Firstly, the term “ayah” should be understood correctly as a “message.” Secondly, the preceding verse states the unwillingness of the Jews and the Christians to admit that revelation could have been bestowed on any community but their own. Read in this context: “Any message which We annul or consign to oblivion” refers to the Bible. “We replace with a better or a similar one” refers to the Holy Quran. Therefore, abrogation relates to the earlier divine messages from the Bible and not to any part of the Holy Quran itself.

The gradual revelation (step by step) corresponds to God’s plan, according to which He has gradually unfolded His will to man, substituting one dispensation for another in the measure of

humanity's intellectual and social development, bringing it to its culmination in the message of the Holy Quran.

The Evolutionary View of Abrogation: According to this theory, the Holy Quran revealed at Medina, containing many verses relating to war, somehow trumped the earlier, more peaceful Meccan revelations. There is no mention in the Holy Quran or the Prophet's sayings supporting the evolutionary theory of abrogation. Secondly, Medinan surahs contain many verses with a Pluralistic message—for example, 2:62, 4:162, 5:69, 5:82, etc.

The purpose is to declare Islam a violent and aggressive religion, the root cause of terrorism worldwide, and a deliberate perversion of the Holy Quran. In short, the “doctrine of abrogation” has no basis and must be rejected.

CORRUPT WORD

And the parable of a corrupt word is a corrupt tree, torn up [from its roots] onto the face of the earth, wholly unable to endure. (14:26) Are you not aware of those who have preferred a denial of the truth to Allah's blessings, and [thereby] invited their people to alight in that abode of utter desolation—hell—which they [themselves] will have to endure? And how vile a state to settle in! They claimed there are powers that could rival Allah, so they strayed from His path. Say: “Enjoy yourselves [in this world], but the fire will be your journey's end!” (14:28–30)

The “corrupt word” applies to the opposite of what a divine message aims at: to every idea intrinsically false or morally evil and therefore spiritually harmful. The corrupt word has no permanence whatsoever and is transient in its effect. However, it has its original impact on the minds of people who fall prey to it. It is an allusion to the relationship between the arrogant leaders of thought and their weak followers who have exchanged God's blessings for a denial

of the truth. The expression “God’s blessings” refers here to the messages revealed through His apostles.

5) ETHICAL TEACHINGS UNDERLYING HISTORICAL EVENTS

And [remember] out of all the accounts relating to the [earlier] apostles, We convey to you [only] that wherewith, We [aim to] make firm your heart. For through these [accounts] come the truth to you, as well as a warning and reminder to all believers. (11:120) Thus, We do relate to you some stories of what happened in the past. And [therefore] We have vouchsafed unto you, out of Our grace, a reminder. (20:99)

Since the purpose underlying every Quranic narrative is the illustration of certain fundamental truths, the description is often condensed and elliptic, omitting all that has no direct bearing on the point or points that the Holy Quran means to bring out. The term “reminder” refers to the unceasing guidance God offers to man through His revelations.

The Holy Quran is not historical but an ethical document. No part of the Holy Quran should be viewed from a purely historical point of view. All its references to past events must be regarded as illustrations of the human condition and not as an end in themselves. Hence, the consideration of the historical occasion on which a particular verse was revealed must never be allowed to obscure the underlying purpose of that verse and its inner relevance to the ethical teaching that the Holy Quran, taken as a whole, propounds. The Holy Quran does not give us a continuous narrative for chronicled narrative; it is never its purpose. Whenever the Holy Quran refers to past events—whether recorded in the Bible or alive in Arabian tradition—it does so exclusively to bring out moral lessons and elements relevant to ethical teachings.

6) FAITH AND REASONING

These are messages of a revelation, clear in itself and showing the truth. We have bestowed it from on high as a discourse in the Arabic tongue so that you can encompass it with your reason. (12:1–2) Give, then, this glad tidings to [those of] My servants who listen [closely] to all that is said and follow the best of it. [for] It is they whom God has graced with His guidance, and it is they who are [truly] endowed with insight! (39:17–18)

CONSCIOUS INSIGHT

Say [O Prophet]: “This is my way: Resting upon conscious insight accessible to reason, I am calling [you all] unto Allah—I, and they who follow me.” And [do they not know that] to those who are conscious of Allah, the life in the hereafter is indeed better [than this world]? Will they not, then, use their reason? (12:108–109)

Those “endowed with insight” are people who examine a religious proposition in its broadest sense in light of their reason. They accept what their mind finds valid or possible and reject all that does not measure up to the test of reason. The verse expresses praise and commendation for following the evidence supplied by one’s reason and reaching one’s conclusions by the results of critical examination and logical inference.

“Conscious insight” signifies the faculty of understanding based on evidence accessible to the intellect. Thus, the “call to God” enunciated by the Prophet is described here as the result of a conscious insight available to, and verifiable by, man’s reason. The statement embodies the Quranic approach to all questions of faith, ethics, and morality. It is echoed many times in expressions like “so that you might use your reason,” “will you not, then, use your reason?” or “so that they might understand the truth,” or “so that you might contemplate.” Finally, the often-repeated declaration is

that the message of the Holy Quran is meant specifically for people who think. This is an answer to the objection often raised by unbelievers that a mortal like themselves could not have been entrusted with God's message to man. The Holy Quran differs fundamentally from all other sacred scriptures for its emphasis on reason as one of the valid ways to faith. Feeling alone can never provide a sufficient basis for faith. It insists on the inseparability of the spiritual and physical spheres of human existence. The man's daily actions and behavior, however mundane, are inseparable from his spiritual life and destiny. The Holy Quran emphasizes a predominantly rational approach to all religious questions. Spiritual teachings and practical legislation go hand in hand in the Holy Quran.

The absence of any division of reality into "physical" and "spiritual" compartments makes it difficult for people brought up in other religious traditions, where there is a predominant emphasis on the "supernatural" element inherent in every true religious experience. It perplexes those familiar with identifying "religious experience" with a thrill of numinous awe before hidden things and beyond all intellectual comprehension. He is suddenly confronted by the claim of the Holy Quran to be guidance not only toward the spiritual excellence of the hereafter but also the good life—spiritual, physical, and social—attainable in this world. In short, the Quranic thesis is that all life, being God-given, is unity. The problems of the flesh, mind, sex, economics, individual righteousness, and social equity are intimately connected with the hopes that man may legitimately entertain his life after death.

REJECTION OF BLIND FAITH

They say, "We found our forefathers agreed on what to believe—and it is in their footsteps that we find our guidance!" And thus, it is whenever We send a warner to any community before your

time. Those of its people who had lost themselves entirely in pursuit of pleasures would always say, “We found our forefathers agreed on what to believe—and it is but in their footsteps that we follow!” [Whereupon each prophet] would say, “Why, even though I bring you guidance better than that which you found your forefathers believing in?” [To which] the others would reply, “We deny there is any truth in [what you claim to be] your messages!” (43:22–24)

Commenting on this passage, Razi says: “Had there been in the Holy Quran nothing but these verses, they would have sufficed to show the falsity of the principle postulating a Muslim’s blind, unquestioning adoption of another person’s religious opinions. God has made it obvious in these verses that those deniers of the truth had not arrived at their convictions by reason—and not on the clear authority of a revealed text, but solely by blindly adopting the opinions of their forebearers and predecessors. And all this God has mentioned in terms of blame and sharp disparagement.

DAILY WONDERS OF GOD AND APPEAL TO MAN’S REASON

In the creation of the heavens and the earth and the succession of night and day. And in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man. And in the waters which Allah sends down from the sky, giving life to the earth after it was lifeless, and causing all manners of living creatures to multiply thereon. And in the change of the winds and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth. [In all this], there are messages indeed for people who use their reason. (2:164) [O men! Pay heed to Allah’s messages,] for it is He who has endowed you with hearing, sight, and minds, [yet] how seldom are you grateful! And He has caused you to multiply on the earth, and unto Him, you shall be gathered. And He grants life and deals death, and to Him

is due to the alternation of night and day. Will you not, then, use your reason? (23:78–80)

These passages appeal to “those who use their reason” to observe the everyday wonders of nature, including the evidence of man’s ingenuity (“the ships that speed through the sea”), as so many indications of a conscious, creative power pervading the universe.

RAIN AND RESURRECTION

He [it is who] brings forth the living out of that which is dead and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive and gives life to the earth after it was lifeless. Even thus, will you be brought forth [from death to life.] (30:19) And among His wonders is this: He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to [both] fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been dead. In this, there are messages indeed for people who use their reason! (30:24)

The hope of rain is an often-recurring Quranic symbol of faith and spiritual life. The Holy

Quran uses ordinary daily events, such as life-giving rain, to explain the mystery of resurrection.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES

The doctrine of exception to the rules is grounded in Islamic thought to deal with complex human affairs and the fact that change is the only constant in life. The early Muslim community was constantly in crisis. Besides persecution and physical violence, Muslims faced social, economic, and psychological warfare. Exceptional times call for extraordinary measures. Even during peaceful times, the social behavior of man is so complex that simplistic black-and-white answers may not be enough, and solutions may lie in many shades

of gray. The only rule in life is that there is always an exception to the rule. In science, the term “outlier” is used to describe things and phenomena outside the typical experience.

Examples: There are very few dogmas and absolutes in Islam, such as “God is one” and “Muhammad is the last prophet.” There are rules, and then there are sometimes exceptions to the rules. For example, worship five times a day is mandatory, but prayer can be shortened or omitted during war. Monogamy is a rule, and polygamy is an exception. Marriage is a rule, and divorce is an exception. Fasting is mandatory during Ramadan, except if a person is ill. The killing of a human being is a cardinal sin, except in a defensive war. Every non-disabled Muslim must participate in a defensive war, except scholars. Drinking alcohol is not allowed, except if it is part of the medicine. Pork is not allowed except under conditions of starvation. Keeping an oath is a rule; however, under certain circumstances, the breaking of the oath is permitted. Idol worship is the only unforgivable sin, except for Christians who worship Jesus out of love. Angels do not have free will except Satan. God, the creator, has established laws of nature, and a miracle is, by definition, a breach of natural law and, therefore, an exception to the rule.

DUALISTIC VS. DIALECTICAL THINKING

The principle of exception to the rule should not be confused with amoral relativistic thinking, where everything goes, because the Holy Quran defines where an exception to the rule applies. The Holy Quran elevates primitive human thinking in dualistic terms (right or wrong, black or white). Sometimes, there is more than one right way of thinking. In the higher form of dialectical thinking, one sees merit in different viewpoints and multiple solutions to a problem.

7) THE UNIQUENESS OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

We have bestowed from on high this [divine writ]. A discourse in the Arabic tongue and has given many facets to all manner of warnings. So that men might remain conscious of Us or that it leads to a new awareness in them. (20:113) And never have We sent forth any apostle other- wise than [with a message] in his own people's tongue, so that he might make [the truth] clear unto them. But Allah lets go astray him that wills [to go astray] and guides him that wills [to be guided]—for He alone is almighty, truly wise. (14:4) We have bestowed from on high this [divine writ] as an ordinance in the Arabic tongue. And indeed, if you should defer to men's likes and dislikes after all the [divine] knowledge that has come unto thee, you would have none to protect thee from Allah, and none to shield thee [from Him]. (13:37)

This divine writ comes with all manners of warnings so that they might remain God-conscious or create a remembrance of God. The Holy Quran is revealed in the Arabic tongue to enable the Arabian Prophet to propound it to the people of his immediate environment and, through them, to the whole world. Every one of God's prophets was entrusted with a message "in his own people's tongue so that he could make [the truth] clear unto them."

"If you defer to men's likes and dislikes" refers to thus compromising with those who, while accepting some fundamental verities of the Holy Quran, are unwilling to accept the whole of it.

Arabic is the only Semitic tongue that has remained uninterruptedly alive for thousands of years. Since every word is a framework of symbols expressing its people's distinct sense of life values and their particular way of conveying their perception of reality, the language of the Arabs must differ widely from anything to which the Western mind is accustomed. The difference between the Arabic idiom and any European idiom is not merely a matter of its syntactic cast and the mode in which it conveys ideas. Nor is it exclusively

due to the well-known extreme flexibility of Arabic grammar, due to its peculiar system of verbal roots and the numerous stem-forms derived from these roots, nor even to the extraordinary richness of the Arabic vocabulary. It is a difference of spirit and life sense. The Arabic of the Holy Quran is a language that reached its full maturity in Arabia fourteen centuries ago. To grasp its essence correctly, one must feel and hear this language as the Arabs felt and heard it at the time when the Holy Quran was revealed and to understand the meaning they gave to the phonetic symbols in which it is expressed.

ELLIPTICISM

Ellipsis is the omission from speech or writing of a word or words that are superfluous or understood from contextual clues. Arabic is the language of the people of Arabia, who are endowed with peculiar quick-wittedness, which the desert and its feel of wide, timeless expanses bestow upon its children. It is the language of people whose mental images, flowing without effort from association to association, succeed in rapid progression. They often vault elliptically over intermediate—as if “self-understood”—sequences of thought toward the idea that they aim to conceive or express. This ellipticism (called “ijaz” by Arab philologists) is an integral characteristic of the Arabic idiom and, therefore, of the language of the Holy Quran, so much so that it is impossible to understand its method and inner purport without being able to reproduce within oneself, instinctively, something of the same quality of elliptical, associative thought.

Now, the ability of elliptic mode of thinking comes to the Arabs almost automatically, by process of mental osmosis, from their early childhood—not so, however, the non-Arabs who become acquainted with Arabic only at a mature age due to conscious effort through study, for what they acquire is but a ready-made, outer structure devoid of that intangible quality of ellipticism, which

gives to the Arabic idiom its inner life and reality. Today, in addition to philological learning, an intuitive “feel” of the language can only be acquired from the Bedouins of the Arabian Peninsula, and particularly those of Central and Eastern Arabia. Their dialect has remained very close to the idiom of the Prophet’s time and has preserved all its intrinsic characteristics. None of the scholars who have previously translated the Holy Quran into European languages have ever fulfilled this prerequisite. The passage below is the most outstanding example of the elliptic mode of expression (ijaz) found in the Holy Quran.

[For thus it always happens, We seal the doom of all who deny the truth and give the lie to Our messages]. And thereupon, We save Our apostles and those who have attained faith. (10:103)

The lengthy interpolation at the beginning of this verse is necessitated by the fact that the adverbial conjunction “thereupon” does not relate to the immediately preceding passage but to a theme repeatedly occurring in the Holy Quran, namely, the experiences of the earlier prophets with their recalcitrant communities—the doom of those who gave lies in their messages. In every case, there is a divine deliverance of the prophet concerned and of those who followed him.

8) PROPER USE OF RELIGIOUS TERMS ISLAM AND MUSLIM

One must be careful of rendering the religious terms used in the Holy Quran in the same sense as the people who first heard it from the lips of the Prophet himself. For instance, when his contemporaries listened to the words Islam and Muslim, they understood them as denoting man’s “self-surrender to God” and “one who surrenders himself to God,” without limiting these terms to any specific community or denomination. For example, in 3:67, where Abraham is spoken of as having “surrendered himself unto God” (kana musliman), or in 3:52, where the disciples of Jesus say,

“Bear thou witness that we have surrendered ourselves unto God” (bi-anna muslimun) In Arabic, this original meaning has remained unimpaired, and no Arab scholar has ever become oblivious of the broad connotation of these terms.

Not so, however, the non-Arabs of our day, believer and non-believer alike: to them, Islam and Muslim usually bear a restricted, historically circumscribed significance and apply exclusively to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad.

KUFR AND KAFIR

The terms “kufr” (denial of the truth) and “kafir” (one who denies the truth) have become, in the conventional translations of the Holy Quran, unwarrantably simplified into “unbelief” and “unbeliever” or “Infidel,” respectively, and have thus been deprived of the wide spiritual meaning that the Holy Quran gives to these terms.

KITAB

The conventional rendering of the word “kitab” is applied to the Holy Quran as a “book.” When the Holy Quran was being revealed, those who listened to it did not conceive it as a “book.” It was compiled into one only some decades after the Prophet’s death. The noun kitab is derived from the verb “kataba” (“he wrote” or tropically, “he ordained”), as a “divine writ” or a “revelation.”

THE FOLLOWERS OF EARLIER REVELATIONS

The same holds true regarding the Quranic use of this term in its connotation of earlier revealed scriptures, for the Holy Quran often stresses that those earlier instances of divine writ have been largely altered over time and that the extant holy “books” do not represent the original revelations. Consequently, the translation of it as

“people of the book” is not meaningful, and the term should be rendered as “followers of earlier revelation.”

UMMAH

Ummah means nation, people, or generation. It is used for a group of people who are related by a common creed or geographical or natural affinity, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. The word “Ummah,” initially used, included the entire community of Medina (Muslims, Jews, Hypocrites, and pagans of Medina). Now, the Ummah constitutes only a community of Muslims.

9) DIFFERENCES OF OPINIONS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE QURAN

The great thinkers of our past, in their commentaries, approached the Holy Quran with their reason. They sought to explain the purpose of each Quranic statement in light of their superb knowledge of the Arabic language and of the Prophet’s teachings forthcoming from his Sunnah. The store of general knowledge available and historical and cultural experiences were also included in their commentaries. Hence, it was only natural that how commentators understood a particular Quranic statement or expression differed occasionally and sometimes very incisively from the meaning attributed to it by this or their predecessors. Still, they did this without any animosity, fully aware of the element of relativity inherent in all human reasoning and each other’s integrity. None of the truly original, classical Holy Quran commentators made any claim to “finality” concerning their interpretations. It cannot be stressed enough that without the work of those incomparably eminent scholars of past centuries, no modern translation of the Holy Quran could be undertaken with any hope of success.

And they were also fully aware of the Prophet’s profound saying,

“The differences of opinion among the learned men of my community are an outcome of divine grace.” It implies that critical thinking and differences of opinion are the basis of all progress in human thought and, therefore, the most potent factor in man’s acquisition of knowledge.

10) TRANSLATION ALONE INSUFFICIENT TO UNDERSTAND THE QURAN

There is probably no other book, except for the Bible, that has been much read, meditated, and commented on. Even Arabs need an explanation of the text of the Holy Quran for proper understanding. It is to meet their needs that massive commentaries of the Holy Quran have been published throughout the last fourteen centuries. The best-known and most widely used tafsir is that of the classical author al-Tabari (died AD 923), a work of considerable length and enormous erudition that reports the opinions of the Prophet and his companions about each phrase of the text. Other respected and often-used commentaries are those by al-Baydawi (died 1292), al-Zamakhshari (died 1144), and Razi (died 1228).

QURAN: A LIVING DOCUMENT

The Holy Quran is a living document that needs to be reinterpreted in light of new knowledge. The Holy Quran is rarely a direct declaration. Although the core principles remain the same, many topics in the Holy Quran tend to be deliberately delphic, allowing varying interpretations with changing times. Nuances and subtleties are interwoven into the language allowed in the broad-based and flexible Islamic doctrines and laws relevant throughout the ages. If it had been written upon a stone, in black-and-white terms (metaphorically speaking), it would have been surely outdated by now. Because of its flexibility, the vibrant message of the Holy Quran is timeless. Only a few years ago, the verses about the origin of the universe (21:30 and 51:47) would have been

incomprehensible. It is only through science that we now have a better understanding of these verses (see Chapter “The Origin of the Universe from the Big Bang.”) Because of advancements in human knowledge, some verses of the Holy Quran need to be reexamined and reinterpreted for a much better understanding. Translation of the Holy Quran does not include cross-references, causing serious misconceptions and gaps in understanding.

THE CONTEXT OF REVELATIONS

Many passages of the Holy Quran were revealed in response to crises or an incident. One must be familiar with the background or context of revelations. The Holy Quran assumes that its audience already knows the stories and context of which it speaks. However, with the passage of millennia, the stories and various events must be restated. For most of the Holy Quran, the exact occasions and contexts of revelation were not preserved in the historical record. However, if the original context of the revelation of a particular verse of the Holy Quran is accessible, it will help the reader understand the issues that confronted Prophet Muhammad and the nascent Muslim community.

MULTI-LAYERS OF MEANING

The nuances and subtleties of the Arabic language cannot be translated into English. Some passages of the Holy Quran may have layers of meaning, and translation alone cannot reveal the depth of its concepts. According to Ismaili leader Aga Khan, the Holy Quran, “rich in par- able and allegory, metaphor and symbols, has been an inexhaustible wellspring of inspiration, lending itself to a wide spectrum of interpretations. This freedom of interpretation is a generosity which the Holy Quran confers upon all believers.”

The remarkable diversity of belief and interpretation has characterized Islam over the centuries. Many devout Muslims took different approaches to the same (Quranic) verse. There is today no central authority that can determine what a given passage in the Holy Quran means for all believers. The requirements of the Holy Quran are open to interpretation within Islamic society. There are no intermediaries within Islam. One's relationship with Allah is not diverted, directed, or mandated by any other individual. Every Muslim has a direct relationship with God.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE QURAN

Never has another book, except the Bible, supplied to so many, and over so long, a comprehensive answer to the question: How shall I behave to achieve a good life in this world and happiness in the life to come? Some individual Muslims may have misread this answer, and some have departed from the spirit of its message. The fact remains to all who believe in it that the Holy Quran represents the final manifestation of God's grace to man, the ultimate wisdom, and the beauty of expression: in short, the true word of God. However, no one can claim to have exhausted the meaning of all the Quranic verses.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

Few people in history were as susceptible to the influence of the word, spoken or written, as the Arabs. It was only in the field of verbal expression that pre-Islamic Arabians distinguished themselves. The extent to which their language achieved sophistication was out of proportion to the development of their political, social, and economic institutions. Linguistic development culminated in a rhythmical, usually metrical, composition known as rhymed prose or poetry. The ability to create such a form was the only cultural asset of the Bedouins because early Arabians neither created nor promoted art other than linguistics. Medieval Arabs continued in that tradition. The beauty of a woman declares an adage of theirs: "lies in her face; the beauty of man, the eloquence of his tongue." Arab songs, now as then, can have a magical power over their audience. The pre-Islamic Arabs could recite lengthy stories in poetry from their memories because writing was not yet widely available. It was in this context that the literary miracle of

the Holy Quran was delivered to the people with strong oral traditions. The Holy Quran is meant to be listened to, and the written Holy Quran, especially the translation, loses all its charm and emotional appeal.

The literary influence of the Holy Quran has been incalculable. The classical Arabic of the Holy Quran is the enduring standard of excellence in speech. The first prose book in Arabic set the style for future products. It kept the language uniform. So, whereas today, a Moroccan uses a dialect different from an Iraqi, all write in the same style.

HISTORICAL IMPACT

Early in the seventh century, unnoticed by the rest of the world, a religious movement was born in interior Arabia. Within an amazingly short time—little more than twenty years—it gathered momentum and absorbed the unruly tribesmen of the peninsula. Spilling out from Arabia, it rapidly extended political sway over the surrounding regions, consolidated its hold in the years that followed, and in the third century of its existence, developed a most brilliant and creative culture. Its advent changed the course of history and enriched the human heritage by the creation of an illustrious civilization. It continues today to be the spiritual anchor and guide of a significant portion of humanity.

UNITING ARABIA

A new nation was born from the motley of unruly Arabian tribes that had never united. No other sacred scripture has ever had such a profound impact on the lives of the people who first heard its message and on the entire course of civilization. It shook Arabia and made a nation out of its perennially warring tribes. Within a few

decades, it spread its worldview far beyond the confines of Arabia and produced the first ideological society known to man.

ESTABLISHING ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION

Within a brief span of mortal life, Muhammad had established a religion, which in vast areas superseded Christianity and Judaism. Viewed as a whole, however, Islam unveils before us one of the most remarkable panoramas in history. By the time a century had passed, his followers had conquered Armenia, Persia, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, and Spain, and crossed the Pyrenees into France. A century after Muhammad's death, the region stretched from the Bay of Biscay to the Indus and the frontiers of China, from the Aral Sea to the upper Nile. But for their defeat by Charles Martel at the Battle of Tours in 732 AD, the entire Western world would today be Muslim.

MORAL REVIVAL

In his book *The Religions of Man*, Huston Smith writes, "Looking at the difference between pre-and post-Islamic Arabia, we are forced to ask whether history has ever witnessed a comparable ethical advance among so many people in such short time." Within a half-century, there was affected a near-miraculous change in the moral climate.

ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE AND LITERATURE

Islamic civilization holds the distinction of being, from the mid-eighth century to the end of the twelfth century, unmatched in its brilliance and unsurpassed in its literary, scientific, and philosophical output. Through its insistence on consciousness and knowledge, it engendered a spirit of intellectual curiosity and

independent inquiry among its followers, ultimately resulting in that splendid era of learning and research, which distinguished the world of Islam at the height of its cultural vigor. The march of Muslim ideas led to the development of a fabulous culture—the rise of literature, science, math, medicine, art, and architecture; the glory of Baghdad and Damascus; and the splendor of Spain under the Moors.

THE REVIVAL OF WESTERN CULTURE

The culture fostered by the Holy Quran penetrated in countless ways and byways into the mind of medieval Europe. It gave rise to the revival of Western culture, which we call the Renaissance. Thus, with time, it gave birth to the “age of science” we are now living in. During the long centuries of Europe’s Dark Ages, Muslim philosophers and scientists kept the lamp of learning bright, ready to rekindle the Western mind when it roused from its sleep. All this was, in the final analysis, brought about by the message of the Holy Quran. It was brought about through the medium of the people it inspired and to whom it provided a basis for all their ethical values and direction for all their worldly endeavors.

PART 2
ARTICLES OF FAITH (IMAN) AND FIVE
PILLARS (DUTIES)

THE FIVE ARTICLES OF ISLAMIC FAITH (IMAN)

ORTHODOXY

Religions are generally defined by one of three things: belief, practice, or both. These are the concepts of orthodoxy (belief in a doctrine) and orthopraxy (emphasis on practice or action). The focus is on practice in Islam, but that has not precluded the importance of faith or belief. There are five articles or core of faith in Islam.

1. Belief in one God (tawhid). See Chapter “The Unity of God.”
2. Belief in all the prophets, including the biblical prophets. See volumes two and three.
3. Belief in all the revealed scripture, including the Old and New Testament and the Holy Quran.
4. Angels. See volume seven for details.
5. The Afterlife and Day of Judgment. See volume seven for details.

O you who have attained faith! Hold fast to your (1) belief in Allah and (2) His Apostle, and in (3) the divine writ He has bestowed from high upon His Apostle, step by step, as well as in the revelation, which He sent down aforetime. For he who denies Allah, His (4) angels, His revelations, His apostles, and the (5) Last Day has indeed gone far astray. (4:136) The Apostle and the believers with him believe in what has been bestowed upon him

from on high by his Sustainer. They all believe in (1) Allah, and His (2) angels, and His (3) revelations, and His (4) apostles, making no distinction between His apostles, and they say: "We have heard, and we pay heed. Grant us Thy forgiveness, O our Sustainer, for with (5) Thee is all journeys' end! (2:285)

AN EVER-TRUE FAITH—THE WAY OF ABRAHAM

And who could be of better faith than he who surrenders his whole being unto Allah and is a doer of good withal, and follows the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, seeing that Allah exalted Abraham with His love? (4:125) Say: "My Sustainer has guided me onto a straight way through an ever-true faith. The way of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him." Say: "My prayer, and [all] my acts of worship, and my living and my dying are for Allah [alone], the Sustainer of all the worlds, in whose divinity none has a share. For thus have I been bidden—and I shall [always] be foremost among those who surrender themselves unto Him." Say: "Am I, then, to seek a sustainer other than Allah when He is the Sustainer of all things?" (6:161–164) Thus, do not invoke, side by side with Allah, anything that can neither benefit thee nor harm thee: for, behold, if thou do it, thou wilt surely be among the evildoers! (10:105–106) Hence, [O man,] set thy face steadfastly toward the [true] faith, turning away from all that is false, and be not among those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Allah. (10:106) They who are bent on evildoing follow their desires without any knowledge [of the truth]. And who could guide those whom Allah has [thus] let go astray, and who [thereupon] have none to succor them? And so, set your face steadfastly toward the [one ever true] faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition Allah has instilled in man. Do not allow any change to corrupt what Allah

has thus created—this is the [purpose of the one] ever-true faith, but most people know it not. (30:29–30)

Islam is not a new religion, and the way of Abraham is the basis of the Islamic faith. Abraham is designated “your forefather” because he was an ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad, and this passage is addressed to his followers. He was the prototype (and thus, the spiritual forefather) of all who consciously “surrender themselves to God.” The term “Muslim” signifies “one who surrenders himself to God.” Correspondingly, Islam denotes “self-surrender to God.” These terms are applied in the Holy Quran to all who believe in One God and affirm this belief by accepting revealed messages unequivocally. The Holy Quran represents the final and universal message; the believers are called upon to follow the guidance of its Apostle and set an example for humanity.

The phrase “they who are bent on evildoing” relates to those who deliberately ascribe divinity or divine powers to anyone besides God, thus yielding to a desire for divine or semi-divine “mediators” between themselves and God. Such a desire offends against the concept of God’s omniscience and omnipresence, as it shows that the person concerned does not believe in Him and, therefore, does not have the least knowledge of the truth. For those who persist in sinning, God does not compel them to repent. This act of God is depicted in the Holy Quran as “causing one to err” and “causing one to go astray.

The expression “hanif” means one who is upright, “he inclined toward a right state or tendency and away from sin and falsehood.” In pre-Islamic times, this term had a monotheistic connotation. The term “natural disposition” connotes man’s intuitive ability to discern between right and wrong, true and false, and, thus, to sense God’s existence and oneness.

FAITH THROUGH DIVINE INSPIRATION

Is then—he who was dead [in spirit] and whom We thereupon gave life, and for whom We set up a light whereby he might see his way among men—[is then he] like one [who is lost] in darkness deep, out of which he cannot emerge? (6:122)

BEAUTIFYING HEART THROUGH FAITH

Allah has caused [your] faith to be dear to you and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you all denial of the truth, all iniquity, and all rebellion [against what is good]. Such indeed are they who follow the right course through Allah's bounty and favor, and Allah is all-knowing, truly wise. (49:7–8) [As for the true believers,] it is they in whose hearts He has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with inspiration from Himself, and whom [in time] He will admit into gardens through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Well-pleased is Allah with them, and well-pleased are they with Him. They are Allah's partisans: Oh, it is they, the partisans of Allah, who shall attain a blessed state! (58:22)

The expression “he who was dead” is metaphorical, and it refers to people who become spiritually alive through faith and eventually pursue their way through life unerringly.

THE MUSLIM GREETING OF PEACE

When those who believe in Our messages come unto you, say, “Peace be upon you.” (6:54)

The peace referred to in the expression has become the standard form of Muslim greeting—it has a spiritual connotation comprising ethical soundness, security from all evil, and, therefore, freedom from all moral conflict and disquiet. In Arabic, the way of greeting

is As-Salaam-Alaikum (peace be upon you), and the standard response is Wa-Alaikum-Salaam (and unto you peace).

NO HARDSHIP PERTAINING TO ISLAM

[Allah] has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains] to religion, [and to follow] the creed of your forefather Abraham. (22:78)

The absence of any hardship in the religion of Islam is due to several factors. (1) It is free of complicated dogmas or mystical propositions, which might make the Quranic doctrine easier to understand. (2) It avoids all complicated rituals or taboo systems that would impose undue restrictions on man's everyday life. It rejects all self-mortification and exaggerated asceticism. (3) It fully considers "man has been created weak." (4:28)

GOD DOES NOT OVERBURDEN HUMAN BEINGS

And [withal] We do not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear for with Us is a record that speaks the truth [about what men do and can do], and none shall be wronged. (23:62) Allah does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear. In his favor shall be whatever good he does, and against him whatever evil he does. "O our Sustainer! Take us not to task if we forget or unwittingly do wrong! O our Sustainer! Lay not upon us a burden such as Thou didst lay upon those who lived before us! O our Sustainer! Make us not bear burdens which we have no strength to bear! And efface Thou our sins, and grant us forgiveness, and bestow Thy mercy upon us! Thou art our Lord Supreme: succor us, then, against people who deny the truth!" (2:286)

"Lay not upon us a burden" is a reference to the heavy burden of rituals imposed by the Law of Moses upon the children of Israel, as

well as the world renunciation recommended by Jesus to his followers.

BELIEF IN ALL APOSTLES

THE SECOND ARTICLE OF FAITH

THE DOCTRINE OF CONTINUITY OF DIVINE REVELATIONS

The religion of the Holy Quran is better understood in the context of the great monotheistic faiths preceding it, which, according to Muslim belief, culminate and achieve their final formulation in the teachings of Islam. The religion of the Holy Quran is a continuation of Judaism and Christianity, with Muhammad being the last Prophet. In short, without Judaism or Christianity, there would have been no Islam.

The Holy Quran teaches us that God sent messengers to all people on the face of the Earth. Islamic traditions say there were 124,000 such prophets, a symbolic figure suggesting a significant number. No community or civilization has been without prophetic guidance. The Holy Quran naturally singles out apostles familiar to the Arabs. When God communicates with a human being, that person is a Prophet by definition. The following is the list of all the Prophets mentioned in the Holy Quran:

1. Adam, 2. Idris (Enoch), 3. Nuh (Noah), 4. Hud (Eber), 5. Salih (Salah), 6. Ibrahim (Abraham), 7. Lut (Lot), 8. Ismail (Ishmael), 9. Ishaq (Isaac), 10. Yaqub (Jacob), 11. Yusuf (Joseph), 12. Ayub (Job), 13. Shuayb (Jethro), 14. Musa (Moses), 15. Harun (Aaron), 16. Daud (David), 17. Sulayman (Solomon), 18. Yunus (Jonah), 19. Ilyas (Elijah), 20. Al-yasa (Elisha), 21. Zakariya (Zechariah), 22. Yahya (John), 23. Isa

(Jesus), 24. Muhammad.

Moses is mentioned 135 times, Abraham 67 times, Jesus 25 times, and the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned only 6 times in the Holy Quran. If Muhammad was the author of the Holy Quran, he surely would have mentioned himself more than other prophets.

PROPHETS FROM THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

We have inspired you [O Prophet] just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him. We inspired Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants, including Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom. And [We inspired other] apostles whom We have mentioned to you before, as well as apostles whom We have not mentioned to you; and as Allah spoke His word unto Moses. [We sent all these] apostles as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, so that men might have no excuse before Allah after [the coming of] these apostles: and Allah is indeed almighty, wise. (4:163–165)

PROPHETS FROM THE HOUSE OF ABRAHAM

We bestowed upon him [Abraham] Isaac and Jacob, and We guided each of them as We had guided Noah aforetime. And out of his offspring, [We bestowed prophethood upon] David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses, and Aaron. For thus, We do reward the doers of good. And [upon] Zachariah, John, Jesus, and Elijah. Each of them was righteous, and [upon] Ishmael, Elisha, Jonah, and Lot. And every one of them We did favor above other people. [We exalted] some of their forefathers, their offspring, and their brethren. We elected them [all] and guided them onto a straightway. Such is Allah's guidance: He guides, in addition to that, whomever He wills of His servants. It was to them that We

vouchsafed revelation, sound judgment, and prophethood. (6:84–90)

Although Lot was not a direct descendant of Abraham, he was his brother's son. He is mentioned here because he followed Abraham from his earliest youth as a son following his father. In ancient Arabian usage, a paternal uncle is often described as a father and, conversely, a nephew as a "son."

CONTINUATION OF DIVINE REVELATIONS TO MUHAMMAD

Thou art nothing but a warner. Verily, We have sent thee with the truth as a bearer of glad tidings and a warner. There was never any community, but a Warner has [lived and] passed away in its midst. (35:23–24) [And know, O believers, that] Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men, but Allah's Apostle and the Seal of all Prophets. (33:40) Some of these apostles have We endowed more highly than others. Among them were those spoken to by Allah [Himself], and some He has raised yet higher. (2:253)

All the apostles were true bearers of God's messages, and from a human perspective, there is no distinction between them. It is God's prerogative that some of them have been endowed more highly than others.

Those who deny Allah and His apostles by distinguishing between [belief in] Allah and [belief in] His apostles, and who say, "We believe in the one, but we deny the other," and want to pursue a path in-between. It is they, they who truly deny the truth, and for them, We have readied shameful suffering. But as for those who believe in Allah and His apostles and make no distinction between them—[in the point of being Allah's message-bearers], He will grant their rewards [in full]. And Allah is indeed much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (4:150–152)

Those who want to pursue a path in between believe in some and deny others, or believe in God but reject His apostles. In Islam, the rejection of any of God's apostles is almost as grave a sin as a denial of God Himself.

THE THIRD ARTICLE OF FAITH [TORAH, PSALMS, NEW TESTAMENT, AND THE QURAN]

WHY ARE JEWS THE CHOSEN PEOPLE?

The first divinely inspired law, the Torah, inaugurated a new phase in mankind's religious history. God chose the children of Israel as "forerunners in faith." Arabs, for the most part, were idol worshipers, and it took millennia for them to revert to the monotheism of Abraham. Therefore, Jews are chosen not because the exalted Prophet Abraham was their ancestor or superior of their race but because they were the forerunners of monotheism in a definite form.

DIVINE ORIGIN OF TORAH

It was Our will to bestow Our favor upon those [people] who were deemed [so] utterly low (Israelites) in the land (of Egypt) and to make them forerunners in faith and heirs [to Pharaoh's glory]. (28:5) We vouchsafed unto Moses [Our] revelation as a means of insight for men, and as guidance and grace so that they might bethink themselves [of Us]. (28:43) It is We who bestowed from on high the Torah, where there was guidance and light. The prophets surrendered themselves unto Allah on its strength, delivering judgment to those who followed the Jewish faith. So did the [early] men of Allah and the rabbis, some of Allah's writ

entrusted to their care, and they [all] bore witness to its truth. Therefore, [O children of Israel,] hold not men in awe, but stand in awe of Me, and do not barter away My messages for a trifling gain. They who do not judge in accordance with what Allah has bestowed from on high are, indeed, deniers of the truth! (5:44) And yet, before this, there was the revelation of Moses, a guide and a [sign of Allah's] grace. This [Quran] is a divine writ confirming the truth [of the Torah] in the Arabic tongue, to warn those bent on evildoing, and [to bring] a glad tiding to the doers of good. For all who say, "Our Sustainer is Allah," and thereafter stand firm [in their faith]—no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. It is they who are destined for paradise, therein to abide as a reward for all that they have done. (46:12–14) Indeed, [already] unto the children of Israel did We vouchsafe revelation, wisdom, and prophethood. We provided them sustenance out of the good things of life and favored them above all other people [of their time]. And We gave them clear indications of the purpose [of faith]. After all this knowledge vouchsafed to them, they began to hold divergent views out of mutual jealousy [but] thy Sustainer will judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all where they differ. (45:16–17)

DIVINE ORIGIN OF THE QURAN, GOSPEL, AND TORAH

Step by step has He bestowed upon you from on high this divine writ (Quran), setting forth the truth which confirms whatever there remains [of earlier revelations]: for it is He who has bestowed from on high the Torah and the Gospel aforetime, as a guidance unto humankind, and it is He who has bestowed [upon man] the standard by which to discern the true from the false. (3:3–4)

WHY DOES THE QURAN DIFFER FROM THE BIBLE?

DIVERSITY OF LAWS

Unto every one of you, We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if Allah had so willed, He could surely have made you all one community: but [He willed it otherwise] to test you by what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto Allah, you all must return, and then He will make you truly understand all that you differ. (5:48)

DIFFERENT WAYS OF WORSHIP

Unto every community, We have appointed [different] ways of worship, which they ought to observe. Hence, [O believer,] do not let those [who follow ways other than yours] draw you into disputes on this score but summon [them all] unto thy Sustainer for, you are indeed on the right way. And if they [try to] argue with you, say [only]: “Allah knows best what you are doing.” [For, indeed,] Allah will judge between you [all] on Resurrection Day regarding all on which you differ. Do you not know that Allah knows all that occurs in heaven and on earth? All this is in [Allah’s] record: [to know] all this is easy for Allah. (22:67–70)

DIVERGENT VIEWS AND THE QURANIC EXPLANATION

And upon you [too] have We bestowed from on high this divine writ for no other reason than that you might make clear unto them all [questions of faith] on which they have come to hold divergent views, and [thus offer] guidance and grace unto people who will believe. (16:64)

Behold, this Quran explains to the children of Israel most [of that] where they hold divergent views, and it is a guidance and grace unto all who believe [in it]. [O believer,] thy Sustainer will judge between them in His wisdom—for He alone is almighty, all-knowing. Hence, place your trust in God [alone]—for, behold, that in which you believe is truth self-evident. (27:76–77) And indeed [O Muhammad], We did vouchsafe revelation unto Moses [as well]: so be not in doubt of [you] having met with the same [truth in the revelation vouchsafed to you]. And [just as] We caused that [earlier revelation] to be a guidance for the children of Israel, and [as] We raised among them leaders who, so long as they bore themselves with patience and had sure faith in Our messages, guided [their people] in accordance with Our behest—[so, too, shall it be with the divine writ revealed unto you, O Muhammad]. (32:23–24) And We caused Jesus, the son of Mary, to follow in the footsteps of those [earlier prophets], confirming the truth of whatever remained of the Torah. We vouchsafed unto him the Gospel, wherein there was guidance and light, confirming the truth of whatever remained of the Torah, and as a guidance and admonition unto the Allah-conscious. Let, then, the followers of the Gospel judge in accordance with what Allah has revealed therein: for they who do not judge in the light of what Allah has bestowed from on high—it is they, they who are truly iniquitous! (5:46–47) Muhammad is Allah’s Apostle, and those who are [truly] with him are firm and unyielding toward all deniers of the truth, [yet] full of mercy toward one another. Thou canst see them bowing down, prostrating themselves [in prayer], seeking favor with Allah and [His] goodly acceptance: their marks are on their faces, traced by prostration. This is their parable in the Torah and their parable in the Gospel: [they are] like a seed that brings forth its shoot, and then He strengthens it, so it grows stout, and [in the end] stands firm upon its stem, delighting the sowers. Thus, will Allah cause the believers to grow in strength so that He can confound the deniers of the truth through them? [But] unto such

of them as may [yet] attain faith and do righteous deeds, Allah has promised forgiveness and a reward supreme. (48:29)

HOUSES OF WORSHIP (MOSQUES, CHURCHES, AND SYNAGOGUES)

Hence, who could be more wicked than those who bar the mention of Allah's name from [any of] His houses of worship and strive for their ruin, [although] they have no right to enter them save in fear [of Allah]? For them, there is disgrace in this world and awesome suffering in the life to come. (2:114) Those driven from their homelands are against all rights for no other reason than their saying: "Our Sustainer is Allah!" For, if Allah had not enabled people to defend themselves, [all] monasteries, churches, synagogues, mosques—in [all], which Allah's name is abundantly extolled—would surely have been destroyed [before now]. (22:40) And if Allah had not enabled people to defend themselves, corruption would surely overwhelm the earth. (2:251)

Angels: The fourth article of faith (for details, see volume seven)

THE FIFTH ARTICLE OF FAITH: BELIEF IN JUDGMENT DAY

DETERRENT TO SINS

God designated man as His vicegerent and bestowed the gift of free will. The belief in man's freedom and responsibility leads directly to Islam's doctrine of the afterlife and resurrection. Besides, the thought of standing in front of God on Judgment Day to be held responsible for one's actions may even act as a deterrent to sins.

ACCEPTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Belief in Judgment Day, or the afterlife in general, is a fundamental requirement for man's salvation because it indicates acceptance of self-responsibility for one's actions. For Muslims, life on earth is the seedbed of an eternal future. Each soul will be held accountable for his actions and how well he has observed God's laws. It will be followed by a day of reckoning, which is foreshadowed in the most awesome terms. In the end, all will be returned to God for the final judgment. Depending on how it fares in this accounting, the soul will then be repaired either to Heaven or Hell. (For judgment day details, see volume 7.)

CREED OF ISLAM: THE FIRST PILLAR

THE INTRODUCTION TO THE FIVE PILLARS

Just as the five articles represent the core of faith, the five pillars are the core of good works or duties. It is meant to instill spiritual discipline and God-consciousness or “*Taqwa*,” the bedrock principle of the Islamic way of life. The practice of five pillars is only a starting point toward life’s ultimate destination. The five pillars promote many beneficial social behaviors:

Self-discipline: the five daily prayers performed at set times of the day induce self-discipline.

Delayed gratification: For the common good, religion asks us to tolerate many things we don’t like. Resisting the immediate temptation and to wait for a greater reward later are all examples of self-control.

Control of base desires: Denial of food, water, and sex during fasting helps control the base desires.

Compassion: Fasting sensitizes compassion for the poor and hungry. Only those who have been hungry can know what hunger means.

A balance between here and hereafter: Muslims are encouraged to establish a balance between living this life to its fullest (i.e., seeking family, wealth, position, and other such worldly pursuits) and remembering that whatever this life offers is temporary.

Observing the five pillars of Islam keeps one’s life in perspective and strengthens the spiritual aspect of the life of believers. To achieve this balance, one must partake in what this life offers but

not indulge in. With the oft-repeated call to moderation in every aspect of life, the Holy Quran encourages believers not to emphasize the physical and material aspects of their lives too much. Still, it also postulates that man's urges and desires relating to this "life of the flesh" are God-willed and, therefore, legitimate. The result of the genuine practice of Islam's five pillars is pursuing a life of complete moral responsibility.

ORTHOPRAXY/ORTHODOXY

[But] on the day when thy Sustainer's [final] portents appear, believing will be of no avail to any human being who did not believe before, or who, while believing, did no good works. (6:158)

Both faith and good works are intertwined as righteous acts that demonstrate commitment and faithfulness. Faith without good deeds is without merit, and vice versa. In Islam, true orthodoxy is active, not passive. Orthodoxy, or right belief, if rightly believed, should produce orthopraxy or right action. In other words, orthodoxy and orthopraxy are not mutually exclusive but two sides of the same coin—one dependent upon the other for both to be true. There are obligatory and voluntary beneficial works Muslims are urged to perform.

CREED OF ISLAM: THE FIRST PILLAR

The first pillar is not an actual deed but a reiteration of the first two articles of faith: There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His (Last) Prophet.

The wording of the first pillar summarizes the basis of Islam. Every religion contains convictions that orient its adherents' lives in some way. In some religions, these premises are assumed; in most religions, they are condensed and articulated in some creed. The creed of Islam wastes no words. Brief, simple, and explicit, it

consists of a single sentence. The musical formula (*la ilaha illa Allah Muhammadun rasulu Allah*) is “there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God.” This formula does not occur as such in the Holy Quran. They are repeated in the daily muezzin’s call to prayer and on innumerable other occasions. The second dogma in Islam’s creed is Muhammad, the messenger of God, which speaks simultaneously to the Muslim’s belief in the authenticity of Muhammad and the validity of the book he transmitted. The two dogmas of God’s oneness and Muhammad’s messengers constitute the confession of faith or “*shahada*.” At least once during his lifetime, a Muslim must say this creed with full understanding and heartfelt conviction in its truth. The mere pronouncement of the *shahada* is an act of piety and, therefore, almost constantly on believers’ lips. Practicing Muslims repeat it many times each day, but at least once during one’s lifetime is mandatory. Such is the importance of this profession that if a non-Muslim accepts and reproduces it, he becomes at least nominally a Muslim—but he should then perform the remaining duties described under the five pillars of Islam.

PRAYER: THE SECOND PILLAR

GRATITUDE WE OWE TO GOD

God is gracious and powerful; it is incumbent that man be grateful to Him and worship Him. Gratitude is the inner recognition that man is dependent on God for his creation and preservation, and worship is the formal expression of this dependence.

WORSHIP (IBADAH)

The innermost purpose of the creation of all rational beings is their cognition of the reality of God and, hence, their conscious willingness to conform their existence to whatever they may perceive of His will and plan. This twofold concept of cognition and desire to do God's will gives the most profound meaning to what the Holy Quran describes as "worship" (ibadah). The spiritual call does not arise from any supposed need of the Creator, who is self-sufficient and infinite in His power. It is designed as an instrument for the inner development of the worshiper, who, by the act of his conscious self-surrender to the all-pervading Creative Will, may hope to come closer to an understanding of God Himself. There is an innate longing of the human spirit to pour forth love and gratitude toward the Creator and to submit to the will of God as rightfully sovereign over life.

HUMBLE YOURSELF IN PRAYERS

Call unto your Sustainer humbly and in the secrecy of your hearts. Verily, He loves not those who transgress the bounds of what is right. Hence, do not spread corruption on earth after it has been

so well-ordered. And call unto Him with fear and longing. Allah's grace is ever near unto the doers of good! (7:55–56) Truly, to a blessed state shall attain the believers: those who humble themselves in their prayer, and who turn away from all that is frivolous, and who are intent on inner purity. (23:1–4) And who guard their prayers [against all worldly intent]. (23:9)

Prayer also keeps man's life in perspective. Humans tend to place them in the center of their universe. By humbling in prayers, their life stays within a proper perspective. On the Day of Judgment, man will have to answer before God for what he did during his life in this world, for it is in prayer that man faces God spiritually during his earthly life and reminds himself of his responsibility toward the Creator.

EVERYTHING SUBMITS TO GOD

And before Allah prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all [things and beings] in the heavens and on earth, as do their shadows in the mornings and the evenings. Say: "Who is the Sustainer of the heavens and the earth?" Say: "[It is] Allah." Say: "[Why,] then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, such as have it not within their power to bring benefit to, or avert harm from, themselves?" Say: "Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or can the depths of darkness and the light be deemed equal?" (13:15–16)

The expression "prostrates themselves" is a metonym for complete submission to His will, that is, to the natural laws decreed by Him concerning everything that exists. Those who submit to God are the angels and believers, while the deniers of the truth, who are not willing to submit to Him, are nevertheless, without being conscious of it, subject to His will. The reference to "shadows" relates to conscious beings and other physical objects, whether animate or inanimate. The varying lengths of the shadow projected by any

material object depend on the sun's position in relation to the Earth. Since the earth's rotation around the sun is—as everything else in the universe—an outcome of God's creative will, the greater length of a shadow in the morning and evening and its contraction toward noon visibly express the shadow's subjection to Him.

ALL CREATURES EXTOL GOD'S GLORY

Are you unaware that Allah's limitless glory all [creatures] in the heavens and on earth praise, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each [of them] knows how to pray unto Him and glorify Him, and Allah has full knowledge of all they do. Allah's is dominion over the heavens and the earth, and with Allah is all journeys' end. (24:41–42)

INVISIBLE BEINGS AND MEN CREATED TO WORSHIP GOD

And [tell them that] I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end, other than that they may [know and] worship Me. [But withal] no sustenance do I ever demand of them, nor do I demand they feed Me: for Allah Himself is the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of all might, the Eternal! (51:56–58)

For a full discussion of the term “jinn” (invisible beings), see the chapter titled “Al-ghayb” in volume seven. This term also includes the angels since they are beings or forces concealed from man's senses.

ALL TRUE INVOCATION DUE TO GOD ALONE

Unto Him [alone] is due all prayer aiming at the Ultimate Truth [al-haqq]. The [other beings or powers] whom men invoke instead of Allah cannot respond to them in any way. [So that he who

invokes them is] but like one who stretches his open hands toward water [hoping] it will reach his mouth, the while it never reaches him. Hence, the prayer of those who deny the truth amounts to no more than losing oneself in grievous error. (13:14)

The term “al-haqq” (the Truth) is one of the Quranic attributes of God, signifying the Ultimate Reality or Primal Cause of all that exists. Therefore, the prayer should be directed toward Him, who is the Ultimate Reality. The sequence states that the invocation of any other being, power, or principle is wrong and futile, and to Him alone is due all true invocation.

THE ACT OF PRAYER A GOOD DEED

“[Do you deem yourself equal to] one who devoutly worships [Allah] throughout the night, prostrates himself or stands [in prayer], ever mindful of the life to come, and hopes for his Sustainer’s grace?” Say: “Can they who know and they who do not know be deemed equal?” [But] only those who are endowed with insight keep this in mind! Say: “[Thus speaks God:] ‘O you servants of Mine who have attained faith! Be aware of your Sustainer! Ultimate good awaits those who persevere in doing good in this world.’” (39:9–10)

RESTRAINT FROM EVIL

Convey [unto others] whatever of this divine writ has been revealed unto you, and be constant in prayer: for, behold, prayer restrains [man] from loathsome deeds and from all that runs counter to reason, and remembrance of Allah is indeed the highest [good]. And Allah knows all that you do. (29:45)

ATTAINING PURITY

Hence, you can [truly] warn only those who stand in awe of their Sustainer, although He is beyond their perception and constant in prayer, and [know that] whoever grows in purity, attains purity but for the benefit of his self, and [that] with Allah is all journeys' end. (35:18)

The meaning is that only those “who believe in the existence of that beyond human perception” can benefit from the “warning” inherent in the preceding statement.

TRUE AND SINCERE

And say [in your prayer]: “O my Sustainer! Cause me to enter [upon whatever I may do] in a manner true and sincere and cause me to leave [it] in a manner true and sincere, and grant me, out of Thy grace, sustaining strength!” (17:80)

PROTECTION FROM HELLFIRE

Those who consciously turn toward Allah in prayer [and] who incessantly persevere in their prayer. (70:22–23) And who remember their Sustainer far into the night, prostrating themselves and standing. And who prays: “O our Sustainer, avert from us the suffering of hell—for, the suffering caused by it is bound to be a torment dire: how evil an abode and a station!” (25:64–66)

This does not relate to the mere ritual of prayer but to the attitude of the mind and the spiritual need underlying it. Man's restless disposition, if rightly used, leads him toward conscious spiritual growth, as well as freedom from all self-pity and selfishness.

PEACE IN PARADISE

O, you who have attained faith! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Sustainer [alone], and do good so that you might achieve a blessed state! (22:77) O you who have attained faith! Remember Allah with unceasing remembrance and extol His limitless glory from morning to evening. [At all times] it is He who bestows His blessings upon you, with His angels [echoing Him], so that He might take you out of the depths of darkness into the light. And indeed, a dispenser of grace is He to the believers. On the day they meet Him, they will be welcomed with the greeting, “Peace,” and He will have a most excellent reward for them. (33:41–44)

FAKING FAITH AND RITUALS

Woe, then, unto those praying ones whose hearts from their prayer are remote. Those who want only to be recognized and praised. (107:4–6) And when they rise to pray, they rise reluctantly, only to be seen and praised by men, remembering Allah, but seldom, wavering between this and that, [true] neither to these nor those. (4:142–143) Say: “Do you, perchance [want to] inform Allah of [the nature of] your faith—although Allah knows all that is in the heavens and on earth? Indeed, Allah has full knowledge of everything!” (49:16) The hypocrites shall be in the lowest depth of the fire, and you will find none who could succor them. (4:145)

These verses are about the half-hearted followers of Islam of all times. They pretend to be honest, pious Muslims, following all the five pillars of Islam. In real life, some are guilty of spreading corruption on earth.

WHY DOES GOD SOMETIMES NOT ANSWER PRAYERS?

As it is, man [often] prays for detrimental things, as if he were praying for something that is good; for man is prone to be hasty [in his judgments]. (17:11) Say: “There is no comparison between the bad things and the good things, even though many of the adverse things may please you greatly. Be, then, conscious of Allah, O you who are endowed with insight so that you might attain a blessed state!” (5:100) “It may well be that you hate a thing the while it is suitable for you, and it may well be that you love a thing the while it is bad for you: and Allah knows, whereas you do not know.” (2:216)

GOD DOES NOT NEED YOUR PRAYERS

Bid your people to pray and persevere therein [but remember], We do not ask you to provide sustenance [for Us]. It is We who provide sustenance for you. And the future belongs to the Allah-conscious. (20:132)

God has enjoined prayer upon men for their benefit alone, as He is sublimely exalted above any need for benefits. In other words, prayer must not be conceived as a tribute to a jealous God—as the Old Testament frequently describes Him—but solely as a spiritual benefit for the person who prays.

THE DIRECTION OF PRAYER (QIBLAH)

The weak-minded among the people will say, “What has turned them away from the direction of prayer which they have hitherto observed?” Say: “Allah’s is the east and the west. He guides whom He wills onto a straight way.” It is only to the end that We might make a clear distinction between those who follow the Apostle and

those who turn about on their heels that We have appointed [for this community] the direction of prayer which you [O Prophet] have formerly observed, for this was indeed a severe test for all but those whom Allah has guided aright. But Allah will surely not lose sight of your faith—for Allah is most compassionate toward man, a dispenser of grace. We have noticed you [O Prophet] often turn your face toward heaven [for guidance], and now We shall indeed make you turn in prayer in a direction which will fulfill your desire. Turn then, your face toward the Inviolable House of Worship, and wherever you may be, turn your faces toward it [in prayer]. (2:142–144)

KABAH AND JERUSALEM AS QIBLAH DURING THE MECCAN PERIOD

The passage refers to the Jews of Medina (the weak-minded), who must have felt gratified when they saw the Muslims praying toward their holy city and were displeased by the “abandonment” of Jerusalem as a direction of prayer. Before his call to prophethood and during the early Meccan period of his ministry, the Prophet—and his community with him—used to turn in prayer toward the Kabah. It was not prompted by any specific revelation but because the Kabah, although filled with various idols to which the pre-Islamic Arabs paid homage, was always considered the first temple ever dedicated to One God. Since he was aware of the sanctity of Jerusalem—the other holy center of the Unitarian faith—the Prophet prayed, as a rule, before the southern wall of the Kabah, toward the north, to face both the Kabah and Jerusalem. After the exodus to Medina, approximately 200 miles north of Mecca, he continued to pray northward, with only Jerusalem as his direction of prayer. About sixteen months after his arrival at Medina, however, he received a revelation (2:142–150), which definitively established the Kabah as the Qiblah of the followers of the Holy Quran. By turning away from Jerusalem to Kabah, which had no

connection with Judaism and Christianity, Muslims tacitly demonstrated they were reverting to the original pure monotheism of Abraham, who had lived before the revelation of either the Torah or the Gospel.

The “hard test” consisted of the fact that the Muslims had become accustomed to praying toward Jerusalem since their exodus to Medina. Now, they were called upon to turn in their prayers toward the Kabah, which the pagan Quraysh still used as a shrine dedicated to worshiping their many idols. As against this, the Holy Quran states that true believers would not find it difficult to adopt the Kabah again as their Qiblah: they would instinctively realize the divine wisdom underlying this commandment, which established Abraham’s Temple as a symbol of God’s oneness and a focal point of Islam’s ideological unity.

KABAH WAS ABRAHAM’S QIBLAH

Those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime know well that this [commandment] comes in truth from their Sustainer, and Allah is not unaware of what they do. And yet, even if you were to place all evidence [of its being revealed commandment] before those who have been vouchsafed earlier revelation, they would not follow your direction of prayer; and neither may you follow their direction of prayer, nor even do they follow one another’s direction. And if you follow their errant views with all the knowledge that has come unto you, you would surely be among the evildoers. They unto whom We have vouchsafed revelation aforetime know it as they know their children: but some of them knowingly suppress the truth—the truth from thy Sustainer! (2:144–147)

The verses refer to “knowingly suppress the truth” that the Kabah was Abraham’s Qiblah, as well as the biblical prophecies relating to Ishmael as the progenitor of a great nation (Genesis XXI, 13 and

18) from whom a prophet “like unto Moses” would one day arise, for it was through Ishmael’s descendant, the Arabian Prophet, that the commandment relating to the Qiblah was revealed.

EVERY COMMUNITY HAS ITS DIRECTION OF PRAYER

Be not, then, among the doubters: for every community faces a direction of its own, of which He is the focal point. Vie, therefore, in doing good works. Wherever you may be, Allah will gather you all unto Himself, for Allah has the power to will anything. (2:147–148)

This verse refers to the various religious communities and their different modes of “turning toward God” in worship. The statement that “every community faces a direction of its own” in its endeavor to express its submission to God implies, firstly, that man’s desire to approach God in prayer has taken different forms, for example, Abraham’s choice of the Kabah as his Qiblah, the Jewish concentration on Jerusalem, the eastward orientation of the early Christian churches, and the Quranic commandment relating to the Kabah. Secondly, the direction of prayer—whatever its symbolic significance maybe—does not represent the essence of faith as such. For as the Holy Quran says,

“True piety does not consist in turning your faces toward the east or the west” (2:177), and Allah’s is the east and the west: and wherever you turn, there is Allah’s countenance. Behold, Allah is infinite, all-knowing. (2:115)

Consequently, the revelation, which established the Kabah as the Qiblah of the Muslims, should not be a matter of contention for people of other faiths or a cause of their disbelief in the truth of the Quranic revelation as such.

Thus, from wherever you may come forth, turn your face [in prayer] toward the Inviolable House of Worship—for this [commandment] comes in truth from thy Sustainer, and Allah is not unaware of what you do. Hence, turn your face [in prayer] toward the Inviolable House of Worship, and wherever you may be, turn your faces toward it so that people should not argue against you unless they are bent upon wrongdoing. And hold not them in awe, but stand in awe of Me, and [obey Me], so that I might bestow upon you the full measure of My blessings, and that you might follow the right path. We have sent you an apostle from among yourselves to convey Our messages, and to cause you to grow in purity, and to impart unto you revelation and wisdom, and to teach you that which you knew not. So, remember Me, and I shall remember you, and be grateful unto Me, and deny Me not. (2:149–152)

The Holy Quran repeatedly stresses that Muslims are the followers of Abraham. This claim, however, might have been open to objection so long as they prayed in a direction other than Abraham's Qiblah, the Kabah. The establishment of the latter as the Qiblah of the followers of the Holy Quran would invalidate any such argument and would leave it only to "those who are bent upon wrongdoing" (here, distorting the truth) to challenge the message of the Holy Quran on these grounds.

WHERE SHOULD THE MUSLIMS PRAY?

The answer is anywhere. It is one of the glories of Islam that its temple is not made with hands and that its ceremonies can be performed anywhere on God's earth or under his heaven. Every corner of God's earth is equally pure; the faithful are encouraged to spread their prayer rugs wherever they find themselves at the appointed hour.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

In the houses [of worship], which Allah has allowed being raised so that His name be remembered in them. There [are such as] extol His limitless glory at morn and evening—people whom neither [worldly] commerce nor striving after gain can divert from the remembrance of Allah, and from constancy in prayer, and from the charity. (24:36–37)

The verse implies, as the sequence shows that only some fulfill the spiritual purpose of those houses of worship and not all. Some people want to congregate in them out of habit. “Buying and selling” is a metonym for anything that might bring worldly gain.

WHEN TO PRAY?

THE FIVE DAILY PRAYERS

Ritual Islamic prayer is prescribed five times daily:

- Fajr—the dawn prayer before sunrise (two rakaat).
- Zuhr—the early afternoon prayer after the sun passes its highest (four rakaat).
- Asr—the late afternoon prayer (four rakaat).
- Maghrib—just after sunset prayer (three rakaat).
- Isha—the night prayer (four rakaat).

Extol, then, Allah’s limitless glory when you enter upon the evening hours (Maghrib) and when you rise in the morning. (Fajr) And [seeing that] unto Him is due all praise in the heavens and on earth, [glorify Him] in the afternoon as well, (Asr) and when you enter upon the hour of noon. (Zuhr) (30:17–18)

EXTOL GOD'S LIMITLESS GLORY IN MORNING AND EVENING

Bear in mind thy Sustainer's name at morn and evening, and during some of the night, and prostrate yourself before Allah, and extol His limitless glory throughout the long night. (76:25–26) And extol thy Sustainer's limitless glory and praise whenever thou risest up, (Fajr) and extol His glory at night, (Isha) (17:80) And at the time when the stars retreat. (Fajr) (52:49) Extol thy Sustainer's limitless glory and praise Him before the rising of the sun (Fajr) and before its setting; (Maghrib) and extol His glory too, during some of the hours of the night as well as during the hours of the day, so that you might attain happiness. (20:130)

CONSTANT IN PRAYER

Be constant in [thy] prayer from the time when the sun has passed its zenith (Zuhr) until the darkness of night, and [be ever mindful of its] recitation at dawn: for, behold, the recitation [of prayer] at dawn is indeed witnessed [by all that is holy]. (17:78)

WHEN SHOULD A MUSLIM PRAY?

Under the usual conditions, the fivefold regular pattern should be maintained: upon rising at dawn (Fajr), in the afternoon shortly after the sun passes its zenith (Zuhr), in the middle of the afternoon (Asr), the “evening hours” that indicate the prayers immediately after sunset (Maghrib), and after the night has fully set in (Isha). These injunctions circumscribe all the obligatory prayers without specifying either their form or the exact times of their performance, both of which are laid down in the Sunnah (authenticated sayings and the practice) of the Prophet. The five obligatory prayers are a minimum requirement. One should remember God at all times of one's wakeful life. Ideally, every microsecond of man's life should

also be lifted to God in gratitude. We repeatedly fall away from this grateful attitude.

Although parts of the Holy Quran should be recited in every prayer, the early morning prayer is singled out for the “recitation (Holy Quran) at dawn” because the Prophet, under divine inspiration, used to lengthen his recitation while praying at that time, thus stressing the special significance of this prayer. Dawn prayer is “witnessed” by the angels of the night and those of day. The worshiper’s inner perception heightens at the time when the darkness and stillness of night give way to the life-giving light of day so that prayer becomes a means of attaining deeper insight into the realm of spiritual truths and, thus, of achieving communion with all that is holy.

MIDMOST PRAYER

Be ever mindful of prayers and praying in the most excellent way and stand before Allah in devout obedience. (2:238)

It is generally assumed this points to the mid-afternoon (Asr) prayer, although some authorities believe it denotes the prayer at dawn (Fajr). It may also mean the noblest of prayer—that is, a prayer from the fullness of the heart, with the whole mind turned toward God, inspired by the awe of Him and reflecting upon His word.

SUPEREROGATORY PRAYER

Rise from your sleep and pray during part of the night [as well], as a free offering from you, and thy Sustainer may well raise you to a glorious station [in the life to come]. (17:79)

The extra prayer during part of the night is in addition to the five obligatory prayers. Hence, the verse is not an injunction but a

recommendation, although the Prophet himself always spent the greater part of the night in prayer.

GOOD DEEDS DRIVE AWAY EVIL DEEDS

Be constant in praying at the beginning and end of the day, as well as during the early watches of the night, for good deeds drive away evil deeds. This is a reminder to all who bear [Allah] in mind. (11:114–115)

OBLIGATORY CONGREGATIONAL PRAYER ON FRIDAY

O you who have attained faith! When the call to prayer is sounded on the day of congregation, hasten to the remembrance of Allah, and leave all worldly commerce: this is for your benefit if you but knew it. And when the prayer is ended, disperse freely on earth, and seek to obtain [something] of Allah's bounty; but remember Allah often, so that you might attain a blissful state! (62:9–10)

While in Islam, no day of the week is as sharply set apart from others as the Sabbath for the Jews or Sunday for the Christians, Friday almost approximates a holy day. Formality is not a pronounced feature of Islam, but the closest Muslims come to formal service of worship is when they gather on Fridays for noon prayers, a collective recital of the Holy Quran. These gatherings are usually in mosques, and visitors to Muslim lands testify that one of the most impressive sights in the religions of man occurs when, in a dimly lighted mosque, hundreds of men stand shoulder to shoulder and then kneel and prostrate themselves toward Mecca. Congregational prayer on Friday at noon is obligatory. Nevertheless, Friday is not a day of compulsory rest in Islamic Law. After the prayer services, you may devote yourself to worldly pursuits.

[It does happen] when people become aware of [an occasion for] worldly gain [trade or a bargain] or a passing delight, they rush headlong toward it and leave you standing [and preaching]. Say: “That which is with Allah is far better than all passing delight and all gain! And Allah is the best of providers!” (62:11)

This alludes to a historical incident when, on hearing that a long-expected trade caravan had come from Syria, most of the congregation came out of the mosque during the Prophet’s Friday sermon. In a wider, timeless sense, the verse contains an allusion to an all-too-human weakness against which even true believers are not always immune—the tendency to overlook religious obligations for the sake of a transitory, worldly advantage.

MODIFICATION OF PRAYER

Under normal conditions, the fivefold daily pattern of prayers should be maintained. This schedule is not mandatory. During the war, traveling, and illness, prayer can be modified according to the gravity of the situation.

SHORTENING OR COMBINING OF PRAYER

Be ever mindful of prayers, and of praying in the most excellent way, and stand before Allah in devout obedience. But if you are in danger, [pray] walking or riding, and when you are again secure, bear Allah in mind—since it is He who taught you what you did not previously know. (2:239) When you go forth [to war] on earth, you will incur no sin by shortening your prayers if you have reason to fear that those who are bent on denying the truth suddenly fall upon you. For those who deny the truth are your open foes. (4:101)

Under any dangerous situation, for instance, in war, where remaining for any length of time at one place would only increase

the peril, the obligatory prayers may be offered in any way feasible, even without consideration of the Qiblah, or may be shortened and combined (the noon prayer with the afternoon and the sunset prayer with the late evening). While the Prophet's Sunnah authorized the extension of this permission to peaceful travel, the Holy Quran mentions it only in connection with war situations, and this justifies the interpolation in the opening sentence by the words "to war."

PRAYING IN SHIFTS

Thus, when you are among the believers and about to lead them in prayer, let [only] part of them stand up with you, retaining their arms. Then, after they have finished their prayer, let them provide you with cover, while another group, who have not yet prayed, shall come forward and pray with you, fully prepared for danger and retaining their arms. [For] those who are bent on denying the truth would love to see you oblivious to your arms and equipment so that they might fall upon you in a surprise attack. But it shall not be wrong for you to lay down your arms [while you pray] if rain troubles you or you are ill, but [always] be fully prepared against danger. And when you have finished your prayer, remember Allah—standing, sitting, and lying down; and when you are again secure, observe your prayers [fully]. For all believers, prayer is indeed a sacred duty linked to particular times [of the day]. (4:102–103)

The "you" in the first sentence refers primarily to the Prophet and implicitly to the leader of every group of believers at war with those who deny the truth. The congregation praying in shifts is called "salat al-khawf" (prayer in danger). If their weapons are damaged by exposure to unfavorable weather conditions, the warriors are exempted from the obligation to keep their arms with them while praying. This exemption applies only to soldiers overseeing

particularly sensitive weapons or to individual cases of illness and other unforeseen emergencies.

EXEMPTIONS FROM PRAYER

O you who have attained faith! Do not attempt to pray while you are in a state of drunkenness, [but wait] until you know what you are saying, or [you are] in a state requiring total ablution until you have bathed. (4:43)

A state when you require ablution or a bath is after sexual intercourse. Some commentators assume the ordinance of prohibition to pray while in a state of drunkenness represented the first stage of the total prohibition of intoxicants and thus abrogated later by the promulgation of the law of total abstinence from all intoxicants (5:90). The doctrine of abrogation is entirely untenable. There is no warrant whatsoever for verse 5:90 as a first step, which has become redundant after total prohibition was ordained. It is, of course, true that the Holy Quran always forbids the use of intoxicants, not merely at the time of prayer. But since “man has been created weak” (4:28), his lapse from virtue is always a possibility. It is to prevent him from adding the sin of praying while in a state of drunkenness to the sin of using intoxicants as such that the verse given here was promulgated. Moreover, the expression “while you are in a state of drunkenness” does not apply exclusively to alcoholic intoxication since the term “sukr,” in its broader connotation, signifies any state of mental disequilibrium, which prevents a man from full use of his intellectual faculties due to alcohol and other drugs.

It can also apply to a temporary clouding of the intellect from any condition in which normal judgment is confused or suspended. And because the Holy Quran insists consciousness is an indispensable element in every act of worship, prayer is permitted only when a

man fully possesses his mental faculties and knows what he is saying.

HOW TO PRAY?

CALL TO PRAYER (ADHAN)

A muezzin is responsible for calling to prayer five times a day. After hearing adhan, believers begin to gather in the mosque for worship. Any hour of the day or night, somewhere from a minaret, a muezzin will be calling to prayer. The wordings of adhan do not occur as such in the Holy Quran. Read the words listed as follows:

- God is Most Great.
- I testify there is no God but Allah.
- I testify Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah.
- Rise to Prayer.
- Rise to Salvation.
- God is Great.
- There is no God but Allah.

ABLUTION (WUDU) BEFORE PRAYER

O you who have attained faith! When you are about to pray, wash your face, and your hands and arms up to the elbows, and pass your [wet] hands lightly over your head, and [wash] your feet up to the ankles. And if you are in a state that requires total ablution, purify yourselves. (5:6)

Before saying prayers, it is necessary to wash with water those parts of the body that generally remain exposed. The worshiper's clothes and body must be clean. He washes his hands thrice, rinses his mouth thrice, rinses his nostrils thrice, and washes his face thrice. Then he washes his right arm to the elbow thrice and then repeats the same for the left arm, runs moistened hands over the head once, washes his right foot up to the ankle thrice, and repeats the same for the left foot.

TAYAMMUM (EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE)

But if you are ill, or are traveling, or have simply satisfied a want of nature, or have cohabited with a woman, and cannot find water—then resort to pure dust, passing therewith lightly over your face and your hands. Allah does not want to impose any hardship on you but wants to make you pure and to bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings so that you might have cause to be grateful. (5:6)

The symbolic ablution, called tayammum, consists of touching the earth, or anything supposed to contain dust, with the palms of one's hands and then passing them lightly over the face and hands. Whenever water is not within reach, the tayammum takes the place of both the total ablution after sexual intercourse (bath) and the partial ablution before prayers (wudu).

As to how the Muslims pray, the Holy Quran mentions almost nothing in terms of specifics. The Prophet's teachings and practices, however, have crystallized into traditions that, in accordance with Islam's explicitness on almost every point, move to structure the void.

DECLARATION OF INTENTION TO PRAY

Standing erect, the believer says he intends to offer this prayer or Salah (Fajr, Zuhr, Asr, Maghrib, or Isha). With hands open on either side of his face and his thumbs touching the lobes of his ears, he recites, “Allah Akbar” (God is most great).

THE CONTENT OF MUSLIM PRAYER

Still standing, he recites in a whispering voice the opening surah of the Holy Quran (Al-Fatihah).

And [pray unto Him, yet] be not too loud in thy prayer nor speak it in too low a voice but follow a way in-between. (17:110)

The content of Muslim prayer has two grand themes: the expression of praise and gratitude and supplication (to ask for humbly and earnestly) on the other. There is a Muslim saying that every time a bird drinks a drop of water, it lifts its eyes in gratitude toward heaven. “All who are in the heavens and the earth celebrate His praises, and the birds, too, spreading out their wings; each knows its prayer and its praise.” The prayer must always be recited in Arabic, the language of the Holy Quran. The first surah of the Holy Quran, Al-Fatihah, is always recited first. See Chapter 1 for the explanation of Al-Fatihah, also known as “The opening of the Divine writ,” “Essence of the Divine writ,” “The surah of praise,” and “The foundation of the Holy Quran,” and it is known by several other names. This surah has been formulated as a prayer to be continuously repeated and reflected upon by the believer. The daily prayers will be incomplete without the recitation of Al-Fatihah.

Bismillah Ir Rahma Nir Rahim (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace)

Alhamdu Lil-Lahi Rab-Bil Alamin (All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds)

Ar-Rahma-Nir Rahim (The Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace)

Maliki Yau-Mid-Din (Master of the Day of Judgment)

Iyya-Ka Nabudu Wa-Iyyaka Nastain (Thee alone do we worship and Thee alone we turn to for aid).

Ihdi-Nas-Sira-Tal Mustaqim (Guide us on the straight path)

Sira Tal-Ladhina An-Amta Alahim (The way of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings)

Ghair-Il Maghdubi Alahim (Not of those who have been condemned [by Thee])

Walad-Da-Lin (Amin) (Nor of those who go astray!) After reciting surah al-Fatihah, it is followed by other optional selections. The most recited is the 112th surah al-Ikhlās (the declaration of God's perfection). As reported in a great number of authentic traditions, the Prophet described this surah as "equivalent to one-third of the whole Holy Quran."

Bismillah Ir Rahma Nir Rahim (In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace).

Qul Hu-Wal-Laho Ahad (Say: Allah is one and the only God)

Alla-Hus-Samad (God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of all that exists)

Lam Yalid Walam Yulad (He begets not, and neither is He begotten)

Walam Yakul-Lahu Kufu-Wan Ahad (And there is nothing that could be compared with Him)

Allah Akbar Bowing from his hips and placing his hands on his knees, he says thrice:

Subhana Rabbi-Yalazim (Glory to my Lord the Great) (repeat three times) While returning to an upright position, he says:

Sami Alla Huliman Hamidah Rab-Bana Lakal Hamad (Allah has heard all who praise Him. Our Lord praise be to Thee.)

Allah Akbar

Gliding gently to his knees, he prostrates and places his hands and his face on the ground and repeats these words three times:

Subhana Rab-Bi-Yal Aala (Glory to my Lord, the Most High) (repeat three times)

Allah Akbar

He rises to his knees, sits on his heels, and again returns his hands and his face to the ground in a second prostration, saying:

Allah Akbar

And again, he repeats these words three times:

Subhana Rab-Bi-Yal Aala (Glory to my Lord, the Most High)

The climax of the prayer is the prostration in which the worshiper kneels on the ground and touches it with his forehead. In this way, he acknowledges the might and majesty of God and his own dependence on Him as a slave. The act of prostration counters the arrogance and self-sufficiency growing apace in Mecca. The postures of their bodies would reeducate the Muslims to lay aside their pride and selfishness and recall that before God, they are nothing. This completes one rakaat of salah. The second rakaat is said in the same way, except that after the second prostration, he sits back and silently says these words:

Atta Hiyatu Lilahi Wasala Watu Watayibatu

(All prayers and worship through words, action, and sanctity are for Allah alone.)

Assalamu Alaika Ayuha N-Nabiyu Wa Rahmatul Lahi Wabarakatu

(Peace be upon you, O Prophet, and mercy of Allah and His blessing.)

Assalamu Alayna Wa Ala Ibadila His-Salaihin

(Peace be on us and on those who are righteous servants of Allah.)

Ashadu Ala Ilaha Ila Lahu

(I bear witness to the fact that there is no deity but Allah.)

Waas Hadu Anna Muhammadan Abduhu Wa Rasulah

(I bear witness to the fact that Muhammad is His servant and Apostle.)

In the three rakaat (Maghrib) or four rakaat (Zhur, Asr, and Isha) Salah, the believer stands up for the remaining rakaat, whereas if it is two rakaat (Fajr) Salah, he keeps sitting and recite Darud (blessing for the Prophet) in these words:

Alla Humma Salliala Muhammad Wa Ala Aali Muhammad

(O Allah, exalt Muhammad and the family of Muhammad.)

Kama Salayata Ala Ibrahima Wa Aali Ibrahima

(As Thou did exalt Ibrahim and his family, i.e., the Jews and Arabs.)

In-Naka Hamidum Majid

(Thou art the Praised, the Glorious.)

At this point, the worshiper asks God for all the prosperity of this worldly life and the life to come. He terminates his prayer by turning his face to the right and to the left, saying this salutation for the worshiper sitting on each side:

Assalamu Alaikum Wa Rahmatu Allah

(Peace and mercy of Allah be on you.)

The entire routine is designed to give form to the prayer while allowing ample scope for the most heartfelt outpouring of devotion before the Almighty Presence.

CHARITY: THE THIRD PILLAR

Inequality of wealth distribution is a fact of life in every society. Islam is not concerned with this theoretical problem. Instead, it turns to the practical question of what should be done about the situation. Its answer is simple. Those who have much should help lift the burden of those who are less fortunate through charity, the third pillar of Islam. The charity can be zakah/obligatory tax or sadaqah/ voluntary charity. It is a principle twentieth-century democracy has adopted in its concept of the welfare state.

UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH

Are they then unaware that it is Allah who grants abundant sustenance or gives it in scant measure unto whomever He wills? In this, there are messages indeed for people who will believe! (30:37) Thy Sustainer grants abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure, unto whomever He wills: fully aware is He of [the needs of] His creatures and sees them all. (17:30) It is We who distribute their livelihoods in the life of this world and raise some of them by degrees above others, to the end that they might avail themselves of one another's help. [So, too, it is We who bestow gifts of the spirit upon whomever We will]: and this thy Sustainer's grace is better than all [the worldly wealth] that they may amass. (43:32)

Material things are important in life, but some people have more than others. Why? Out of His unfathomable wisdom, God grants abundant sustenance to some people and makes them trustees of His blessings.

WEALTH AS A TRUST FROM GOD

Believe in Allah and His Apostle, and spend on others for whom He has made you trustees. Those who have attained faith and who spend freely [in Allah's cause] shall have a great reward. (57:7) Why should you not spend freely in the cause of Allah, knowing that Allah's [alone] is the

heritage of the heavens and the earth? (57:10)

All man's possessions are held in trust from God since everything in the heavens and on earth belongs to Him, whereas man is allowed only its usufruct.

ZAKAH OR OBLIGATORY TAX

Zakah is an obligatory tax incumbent on every Muslim in Islamic law. The ethical importance of "spending on others" is frequently stressed in the Holy Quran and is embodied in the concept of zakah or purifying dues. Its purpose is:

1. To purify a Muslim's possessions from the blemish of greed and selfishness.
2. The proceeds of this tax will be utilized in what the Holy Quran describes as "the cause of God," i.e., for the community's welfare.
3. The Holy Quran urges Muslims to give charity, and it will atone for some of their evil acts (2:271).
4. The Holy Quran employs zakah as the main instrument for distributing wealth and turning the flow of wealth toward the poor.

SADAQAH

God's law also limits the accumulation of wealth through voluntary charity or sadaqah. The term "sadaqat" (sing. sadaqah) is rendered here as "offerings given for the sake of God." It comprises everything that a believer freely gives to another person out of love or compassion, any charitable gifts above and beyond the obligatory tax or zakah. The voluntary distribution of wealth is consistent with the general concept of freedom of action in Islam. Besides zakah and sadaqah, laws of inheritance are another mode of circulating wealth in the community.

TWO CARDINAL DEMANDS: GOD'S ONENESS AND CHARITY

Say thou, [O Prophet]: "I am but a mortal like you. It has been revealed to me that your Allah is One Allah. Go, then, straight toward Him and seek His forgiveness!" And woe unto those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, [and] those who do not spend in charity. For it is they, they who [thus] deny the truth of the life to come! [But] they who have attained faith and do good works shall have a reward unending! (41:6–8)

Belief in God's oneness and charity toward one's fellow men are two cardinal demands of Islam. Conversely, a deliberate offense against either of these two demands amounts to a denial of man's responsibility before God and, by implication, of a continuation of life in the hereafter. The Holy Quran reminds believers that their faith in God cannot be considered complete without awareness of the material needs of their fellow beings.

RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH CHARITY

[O you believers] you shall never attain true righteousness unless you spend on others out of what you cherish yourselves; whatever you spend—Allah has full knowledge thereof. (3:92) True piety does not consist in turning your faces toward the east or the west - but truly pious is he who believes in Allah, and the Last Day; and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets, and spends his substance - however much he himself may cherish it - upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and the beggars, and for the freeing of human beings from bondage; and is constant in prayer, and renders the purifying dues; and [truly pious are] they who keep their promises whenever they promise, and are patient in misfortune and hardship and in time of peril: it is they that have proved themselves true, and it is they, they who are conscious of Allah. (2:177) Spend on others out of what We have provided you as sustenance before there comes a time when death approaches you, and he then says, “O my Sustainer! If Thou grant me a delay for a while, so I could give charity and be among the righteous!” But never does Allah grant a delay to a human being when his term has come, and Allah is fully aware of all that you do. (63:10–11)

PRAYER AND CHARITY

These are messages of the divine writ, full of wisdom, providing guidance and grace unto the doers of good who are constant in prayer and dispense charity. It is they; they are in their innermost, certain of the life to come! It is they who follow the guidance [that comes to them] from their Sustainer, and it is they, they who shall attain a blessed state! (31:2–5)

HOW MUCH TO GIVE IN CHARITY?

The Poor Due is Islam's basic device for institutionalizing regard for others. The Holy Quran does not specify any minimum or maximum amount of zakah to be given. Prophet Muhammad instituted the distribution of wealth in the seventh century by prescribing a graduated tax on the haves to relieve the condition of the have-nots. The figure he set for the minimum amount of zakah was 2.5 percent, which provides the annual distribution of what one possesses to the poor. It appears modest until we discover it refers not only to income but also to holdings. Poorer people owe nothing, but those in the middle-and upper-income brackets must annually distribute among the poor one-fortieth of the value of all they possess. The proceeds of this tax will be spent mainly, but not exclusively, on the poor.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TITHE AND ZAKAH

It's not strictly comparable to the tithe of Judaism and Christianity, which is directed more to the maintenance of religious institutions than to the direct relief of human needs.

MODERATION IN GIVING CHARITY

They will ask you what they should spend [in Allah's cause]. Say: "Whatever you can spare." In this way, Allah clarifies His messages to you so that you can reflect on this world and the life to come. (2:219-220) Whenever they spend on others, they are neither wasteful nor miserly, but [remember that] there is always a just mean between those [two extremes]. (25:67) And neither allow your hand to remain shackled to your neck, nor stretch it forth to the utmost limit [of your capacity], lest you find yourself blamed [by your dependents], or even destitute. (17:29) Your Sustainer is fully aware of what is in your heart. If you are

righteous, [He will forgive you your errors], for He is much forgiving to those who turn unto Him again and again. And give his due to near of kin, the needy, the wayfarer, but do not squander [your substance] senselessly. The squanderers are of the ilk of Satan—as Satan has indeed proved most ungrateful to his Sustainer. (17:25–27)

“Hands remain shackled to your neck” is a metaphor signifying miserliness and unwillingness to help others. “His due” refers to the loving consideration for one’s relatives; those in a state of want are included in the subsequent mention of the needy.

MODERATION IN GIVING CHARITY

It is a call to generosity and, simultaneously, to moderation. These passages illustrate the supreme realism of the Holy Quran, which considers human nature, with all its God-willed complexity and inner contradictions, and does not, therefore, postulate an impossible ideal as a norm of human behavior. God does not want to deprive the believers of the rightful enjoyment of this world, and he expects them to sacrifice only a small part of their possessions in His cause.

For example, in the New Testament, a wealthy individual asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said: *You know the commandment: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.*

“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Jesus said: *One thing you lack, go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.* At this, the man’s face fell. He went away sad because he had

great wealth. Such a high demand to forgo his entire wealth led to his moral failings, although he was righteous for following the law.

The life of this world is but a play and a passing delight: but if you believe [in Allah] and are conscious of Him, He will grant you your deserts. And withal, He does not demand of you (to sacrifice in His cause all) your possessions: [for,] if He were to demand of you all of them, and urge you, you would cling [to them], and so He would [but] bring out your moral failings. (47:36–37)

SPEAK KINDLY IF UNABLE TO GIVE CHARITY

And if you [must] turn aside from those [that are in want because you are] seeking to obtain thy Sustainer's grace and hoping for it, at least speak unto them with gentle speech. (17:28)

If you are in need and therefore unable to help others, speak kindly to them.

EIGHT CATEGORIES ELIGIBLE FOR ZAKAH

The offerings given for the sake of Allah are [meant] only for (1) the poor, (2) the needy, (3) those in charge thereof, (4) those whose hearts are to be won over, (5) for the freeing of human beings from bondage, (6) [for] those who are over-burdened with debts, (7) [for every struggle] in Allah's cause, and (8) [for] the wayfarer: [this is] an ordinance from Allah—and Allah is all-knowing, wise. (9:60)

To whom among the poor should charity be given? This, too, is characteristically prescribed in the Holy Quran. The eight categories circumscribe all the purposes for which zakah funds may be expended. The officials are entrusted with the collection and administration of zakah funds. “Those whose hearts are to be won over” apparently means such non-Muslims as are close to

understanding and perhaps accepting Islam. Every effort should be made for their conversion, either directly or indirectly (through the widest possible propagation of the teachings of Islam). The expression “for the freeing of human beings from bondage” relates both to the ransoming of prisoners of war and to the freeing of slaves. The people are “overburdened with debts” contracted in good faith, which they are subsequently unable to redeem through no fault of their own. The expression “in God’s cause” embraces every type of struggle in righteous causes, both in war and in peace, including expenditure for the propagation of Islam and all charitable purposes. The “wayfarer” is any person far from his home, such as a political exile or refugee.

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

They will ask you what they should spend on others. Say: “Whatever of your wealth you spend shall [first] be for your parents, near of kin, the orphans, the needy, the wayfarer; and whatever good you do, Allah has full knowledge thereof.” (2:215) Hence, gives his due to the near of kin, the needy, and the wayfarer. This is best for all who seek Allah’s countenance. For it is they, they that shall attain to a happy state! Whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking Allah’s countenance, [will be blessed by Him] for it is they, they that shall have their recompense multiplied! (30:38–39)

CARE FOR THE NEEDY AND HANDICAPPED

O you who have attained faith! When you are told, “Make room for one another in your collective life,” do make room: [and in return,] Allah will make room for you [in His grace]. And whenever you are told, “Rise up [for a good deed],” do rise up. (58:11)

The “making room for one another” implies the mutual providing of opportunities for a decent life to all—and especially to the needy or disabled—community members. This verse indicates that if one widens the means of happiness and well-being of God’s creatures, God will widen for him all that is good in this life and in the hereafter. Whenever you are called upon to do a good deed, respond to this call.

CHARITY FOR THOSE DEVOTED ENTIRELY TO FAITH

[And give] to [such of] the needy, who, being wholly wrapped in Allah’s cause, are unable to go about the earth [in search of livelihood]. He who is unaware [of their condition] might conclude they are wealthy because they abstain [from begging]; [but] you can recognize them by their special mark: they do not beg of men with importunity. And whatever good you may spend [on them], Allah knows it all. Those who spend their possessions [for the sake of Allah] by night and by day, secretly and openly, shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (2:273–274)

Give charity to those who have devoted themselves entirely to working in the cause of the faith, whether by spreading, elucidating, or defending it physically or intellectually—or to any of the selfless pursuits extolled in God’s message, like search for knowledge, work for the betterment of man’s lot, etc. Finally, those who have suffered personal or material hurt in such pursuits are subsequently unable to fend for themselves.

OFFER CHARITY WHEN CONSULTING PROPHET’S TEACHING

O you who have attained faith! Whenever you [intend to] consult the Apostle, offer something in charity on your consultation: this will be for your benefit and more conducive to your [inner] purity. Yet if you cannot do so, [know that] Allah is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (58:12) Do you, perchance, fear lest [you may be sinning if] you cannot offer up anything in charity on your consultation [with the Apostle]? But if you fail to do it [for lack of opportunity], and Allah turns unto you in His mercy, remain but constant in prayer, and render [no more than] the purifying dues, (Zakah) and [thus] pay heed unto Allah, and His Apostle: for Allah is fully aware of all that you do. (58:13)

The reference to a “consultation with the Apostle” applies to his person, his contemporaries, and his teachings in general and to believers of all times and environments. In other words, every believer is encouraged to offer something in charity—whether it be material alms to a needy person, the imparting of knowledge to those who may need enlightenment or even a mere word of kindness to a weak human being. “If you do not find” anyone on whom to bestow charity at that moment or have—for whatever reason—no opportunity to exercise it, God is forgiving. It does not constitute a sin if you cannot do more by charity due to insufficient opportunity.

DO NOT DENY CHARITY TO NON-MUSLIMS.

It is not for you [O Prophet] to make people follow the right path since Allah [alone] guides whom He wills. And whatever good you may spend on others is for your good, if you spend only out of a longing for Allah’s countenance: for, whatever good you may spend will be repaid unto you in full, and you shall not be wronged. (2:272)

CHARITY AND RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

This verse establishes the principle that discrimination based upon religion is not allowed in Islam. In the early days after he migrated to Medina, the Prophet—faced by the extreme poverty prevalent among his community—advised his companions “to bestow charity only on the followers of Islam”—a view immediately corrected by the revelation of verse 2:272. The Prophet explicitly enjoined his followers to disburse charities to all who needed them, regardless of the person’s faith. The verse lays down an injunction binding upon all Muslims that the charity—or the threat to withhold it—must never become a means of attracting unbelievers to Islam. Faith, to be valid, must be an outcome of inner conviction and free choice.

REWARDS FOR GIVING CHARITY

Verily, those who have attained faith and do good works, and are constant in prayer, and dispense charity—they shall have their reward with their Sustainer, and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (2:277) For it is neither your riches nor your children that can bring you nearer to Us. Only he who attains faith and does what is right and just [comes near unto Us], and it is [such as] these whom multiple recompenses await for all that they have done. It is they who shall dwell secure in the mansions [of paradise]—whereas all who strive against Our messages, seeking to defeat their purpose, shall be given over to suffering. (34:37–38) O you who have attained faith! Spend [in Our way] out of what We have granted you as sustenance before there comes a Day [the Day of Judgment] when there will be no bargaining, and no friendship, and no intercession. (2:254) Thus, as for him who gives [to others] and is conscious of Allah and believes in the truth of the [ultimate] good, for him shall We make easy the path toward ultimate ease. (92:5–7) He that spends his

possessions [on others] so that he could grow in purity—not as payment for favors received, but only out of a longing for the countenance of his Sustainer, the All-Highest, and such, indeed, shall in time be well-pleased. (92:17–21)

OFFERING GOD, A LOAN

Who is it that will offer Allah a good loan, which He will amply repay? For, such [as do so] shall have a noble reward. (57:11) As for the men and women who accept the truth as true [and who give in charity] and who [thus] offer Allah a goodly loan, they will be amply repaid and shall have a noble reward [in the life to come]. For, they who have attained faith in Allah and His Apostle—it is they, they who uphold the truth, and they who bear witness [thereto] before Allah: [by their readiness for any sacrifice.] [and so] they shall have their reward and their light! (57:18–19)

“Offer up to God a goodly loan” refers to all that a man may do selflessly for the sake of God alone. “The truth of the ultimate good” means moral values independent of time and social circumstance and, hence, in the absolute validity of what may be described as the moral imperative. The “spending in God’s way” relates here to every type of sacrifice in God’s cause, not merely to the spending of one’s possessions.

CHARITY IN SECRET IS BETTER

Whatever you may spend on others or vow [to spend], Allah knows it, and those who do wrong [by withholding charity] shall have none to succor them. If you do deeds of charity openly, it is well, but if you bestow it upon the needy in secret, it will be even better for you, and it will atone for some of your evil deeds. And Allah is aware of all that you do. (2:270–271)

Psychological altruism maintains that humans have an inherent capacity to show benevolence to others. However, if an action appears selfless, like donating to charity, there may still be a selfish reason, such as experiencing power over others. This is called

psychological egoism, where self-oriented interests motivate human actions. By giving charity in secret, the Holy Quran appeals to instinctive human benevolence and true altruism.

MISUSE OF CHARITY

Allah does not love any of those who, out of self-conceit, act in a boastful manner—those who are miserly [with Allah’s bounty] and bid others be stingy! And he who turns his back [on this truth ought to know that], Allah alone is self-sufficient, the One to whom all praise is due! (57:23– 24) Have you, then, ever considered him who turns away [from remembering Us, and cares for no more than the life of this world], and gives so little [of himself for the good of his soul], and so grudgingly? (53:33–34)

WHEN BELIEVERS ARE STINGY

[O believers,] it is you who are called upon to spend freely in Allah’s cause, but [even] among you are such as turn out to be stingy! And yet, he who acts stingily [in Allah’s cause] is but stingy toward his self, for Allah is indeed self-sufficient, whereas you stand in need [of Him]. If you turn away [from Him], He will cause other people to take your place, and they will not be the likes of you! (47:38)

CHARITY FOR THE SAKE OF SELF-GLORY

[Allah does not love] those who spend their possessions on others [only] to be noticed and praised by men, while they believe neither

in Allah nor in the Last Day; and he who has Satan for a soulmate, how evil a soulmate has him! (4:38) Say: “You may spend [anything], willingly or unwillingly, [pretending that you do it for the sake of Allah]. It shall never be accepted from you—for you are people bent on iniquity!” For only this prevents their spending from being accepted by them; they are bent on refusing to acknowledge Allah and His Apostle, and never pray without reluctance, and never spend [on righteous causes] without resentment. Let not, then, their worldly goods or [the happiness which they may derive from] their children excite your admiration. Allah but wants to chastise them by these means in this worldly life and [to cause] their souls to depart while they are [still] denying the truth. (9:53–55)

Many hypocrites are ready to contribute financially to “worthy causes,” not for the sake of moral considerations but only to be seen and praised by men. What prevents their spending from being accepted is their refusal to acknowledge God or his apostle. When they participate in acts of worship, they do it only for the sake of outward conformity, not out of inner conviction.

PARABLE OF SPROUTING GRAIN

The parable of those who spend their possessions for the sake of Allah is grain, out of which grow seven ears, in every ear a hundred grains: for Allah grants manifold increase unto whom He wills; and Allah is infinite, all-knowing. (2:261)

CHARITABLE DEED FOLLOWED BY HURT

They who spend their possessions for the sake of Allah and do not after that mar their spending by stressing their benevolence and hurting [the feelings of the needy] shall have their reward with their Sustainer, and no fear need they have, and neither shall they

grieve. A kindly word and the veiling of another's want [or forgiveness] is better than a charitable deed followed by hurt, and Allah is self-sufficient, forbearing (2:262–63)

PARABLE OF SMOOTH ROCK

O you who have attained to faith! Do not deprive your charitable deeds of all worth by stressing your own benevolence and hurting [the feelings of the needy], as does He spends his wealth only to be seen and praised by men and does not believe in Allah and the Last Day: for his parable is a smooth rock with [a little] earth upon it—and then a rainstorm smites it and leaves it plain and bare. Such as these shall have no gain whatsoever from all their [good] works, for Allah does not guide people who refuse to acknowledge the truth. (2:264)

PARABLE OF GARDEN WITH FERTILE GROUND

The parable of those who spend their possessions out of a longing to please Allah and out of their inner certainty is a garden on high, fertile ground. A rainstorm smites it, and thereupon it brings forth its fruit twofold, and if no rainstorm smites it, soft rain [falls upon it]. (2:265)

DO NOT GIVE INFERIOR THINGS IN CHARITY

O you who have attained faith! Spend on others out of the good things you may have acquired and out of that which We bring forth for you from the earth. Choose not for your spending the terrible things which you yourselves would not accept without averting your eyes in disdain. And know that Allah is self-sufficient, ever to be praised. (2:267)

RESENTMENT ON DENIAL OF CHARITY

Among them [hypocrites of Medina] are such as find fault with you [O Prophet] concerning [the distribution of] the offerings given for the sake of Allah. If they are given something thereof, they are well pleased. If they are not given anything thereof, they are consumed with anger. And yet, [it would be but for their benefit] if they were to content themselves with what Allah has given them, and [caused] His Apostle [to give them], and would say, “Allah is enough for us! Allah will give us [whatever He wills] out of His bounty, and [will cause] His Apostle [to give us too], unto Allah alone do we turn with hope!” (9:58–59)

FALSE PROMISE TO GIVE CHARITY

And among them are such as vows unto Allah, “If He grants us [something] out of His bounty, we shall most certainly spend in charity, and shall most certainly be among the righteous!” But soon He has given them [aught] out of His bounty, they cling to it close-fisted and turn away in their obstinacy [from all that they have vowed]. Whereupon He causes hypocrisy to take root in their hearts, [therein to remain] until the Day on which they shall meet Him— because they have failed to fulfill the vow they had made unto Allah, and because they were lying. Do they not know that Allah knows [all] their hidden thoughts and secret confabulations? (9:75–78)

SCOFFING AT BELIEVERS WHO GAVE CHARITY

[It is hypocrites] who find fault with the believers who give for the sake of Allah more than they are duty-bound to provide, and those who find nothing [to give] beyond [the meager fruits of] their toil.

And hypocrites who scoff at them [all]. Allah will cause their scoffing to rebound, and grievous suffering awaits them. (9:79)

The Holy Quran states that excessive love of worldly possessions leads to the attitude of mind described as “hypocrisy.” There are many authentic traditions the hypocrites at Medina used to deride the offerings, which the believers brought to the Prophet (as head of the community and the state) in response to the Quranic ordinance that they should “give for the sake of God.” For instance, “when a man brought an ample offering,” the hypocrites would say he only wants to be noticed and praised by men. When a man brought an offering of a small measure (of dates or grain), they would say, “God does not need such an offering.” Verse 9:79, however, does not merely refer to these historical incidents but also illustrates the mentality of the hypocrite whose own insincerity colors his view of all other people.

AVARICIOUSNESS OF MAN

Say: “If you were to own all the treasure-houses of my Sustainer’s bounty, you would still try to hold on [to them] tightly for fear of spending [too much]. For man has always been avaricious [whereas Allah is limitless in His bounty].” (17:100)

Since man is, by his nature, dependent on material possessions, he instinctively tries to hold on to them. God, however, is self-sufficient, and His bestowal of bounty is limitless.

LET YOUR GOD FEED THE HUNGRY

Thus, when they are told, “Spend on others out of what Allah has provided you as sustenance.” Those who are bent on denying the truth say unto those who believe, “Shall we feed anyone whom, if [your] Allah had so willed, He could have fed [Himself]? You are but lost in error!” (36:47) [O, men, consider all that you do and

fail to do]: you are not generous toward the orphan, you do not urge one another to feed the needy, you devour the inheritance [of others] and consume greedily, and you love wealth with boundless love! (89:17–20)

DENYING ASSISTANCE TO FELLOW MAN

In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the dispenser of grace: Have you ever considered [the type of man] who gives the lie to all moral law? This [sort of man] thrusts the orphan away and feels no urge to feed the needy. Woe, then, unto those praying ones whose hearts from their prayer are remote—those who want only to be recognized and praised, and, withal, deny all assistance [to their fellowmen]! (107:1–7)

The 107th surah, al-maun (assistance), was revealed in the early years of the Prophet's mission. It is derived from the word "al-maun," occurring in the last verse. Those who deny there is any objective validity in religion as such, and thus, in the concept of the moral law, these kinds of men also deny assistance to the needy. The term "al-maun" includes the many small items needed for daily use, as well as the occasional acts of kindness that help one's fellow men with such items. In its wider sense, it denotes aid or assistance in any difficulty.

USE OF FORCE TO EXTRACT ZAKAH

Any Muslim who does not pay zakah out of greed commits a grave sin but is not considered an unbeliever. Zakah is an aspect of faith, but its non-fulfillment does not take a person out of the faith. Such a person is liable to punishment and zakah is taken from him by force. Abu Bakr, the first caliph, said: "By Allah, if they deny paying out a young goat, less than a year old, which they used to pay to Allah's messenger, I will fight them for it." Use of force is

justified for non-payment of zakah, for it negatively impacts the welfare of the poor.

In Islamic countries, zakah donations should be collected by private nonprofit organizations. The taxpayers should be required to submit proof of annual zakah donation with their tax return to the government. When the state collects zakah directly, usually, money is wasted in a large bureaucratic setup.

FASTING: THE FOURTH PILLAR

O you who have attained faith! Fasting is ordained for you as it was ordained for those before you so that you might remain conscious of Allah, [fasting] during a certain number of days? (2:183)

The fourth pillar of Islam is the observance of fasting during the twenty-nine or thirty days of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. From daybreak to the setting of the sun, neither food nor drink passes their lips; after sundown, they may partake in moderation. Sexual intercourse is also prohibited during fasting. At the end of Ramadan, the festival of Id Al-Fitr commences. The three-day celebration starts on the first day of Shawwal, the month that follows Ramadan immediately. Fitr means “breaking the fast.”

As the Holy Quran points out, fasting has been widely practiced in all times of man’s religious history. The extreme rigor and long duration of Islamic fasting—which is incumbent on every healthy adult, man, or woman—fulfill the general aim of spiritual purification.

Being a month in a lunar calendar, Ramadan rotates around the year. When it falls in the winter, its demands are not excessive. However, when it falls during the scorching summers, remaining active during the long days without a drop of water is an ordeal. Why, then, does the Holy Quran require it?

COMMEMORATE TWO PRINCIPAL OCCASIONS

It was the month of Ramadan, the Quran was [first] bestowed from on high as guidance to man, and a self-evident proof of

guidance, and the standard to discern the true from the false. Hence, whoever of you lives to see this month shall fast throughout it. He that is ill or on a journey [shall fast instead for the same] number of other days. Allah wills that you shall have ease and does not will you to suffer hardship, but [He desires] that you complete the number [of days required], and that you extol Allah for His having guided you aright, and that you render your thanks [unto Him]. (2:185)

During the holy month of Ramadan, the Prophet received his initial commission as a Messenger of God and thirteen years later made his historic exodus from Mecca to Medina. It was to commemorate these two momentous occasions that able-bodied Muslims were not involved in crises like war or unavoidable journey fast during Ramadan. Those who cannot fast for any of the reasons given here shall fast instead for the same number of other days and feed a needy person if they can afford it.

“And whoever does better than he is bound to do”—by voluntarily feeding more than one needy person or feeding the needy for more than the number of days required by the ordinance given here. It is more probable that “doing better than one is bound to do” refers, in this context, to supererogatory fasting (such as the Prophet sometimes undertook) apart from the obligatory one during the month of Ramadan.

FOOD, DRINK, AND MARITAL RELATIONS ALLOWED AFTER FASTING

It is lawful for you to go in unto your wives during the night preceding the [day's] fast; they are as a garment for you, and you are as a garment for them. Allah knows that you would have deprived yourselves of this right, so He has turned unto you in His mercy and removed this hardship from you. Now, then, you may lie with them skin to skin and avail yourselves of what Allah has

ordained for you. Eat and drink until you can discern the white streak of dawn against the blackness of night, and then resume fasting until nightfall. (2:187)

THE EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

But do not lie with them skin to skin when you are about to abide in meditation (itikaf) in houses of worship. These are the bounds set by Allah. Do not, then, offend against them— [for] it is thus that Allah clarifies His messages unto mankind so that they could remain conscious of Him. (2:187)

The early Muslims were under the impression that all sexual intercourse should be avoided, even at night during the month of Ramadan. Verse 2:187 removed this misconception due to obvious stress on the God-willed nature of sexual life. The “black line” signifies the blackness of night, and the expression “the two lines” or “streaks” denotes day and night. It was the practice of the Prophet to spend several days and nights during Ramadan— and occasionally also at other times—in the mosque, devoting himself to prayer and meditation to the exclusion of all worldly activities, including sex. Since he advised his followers to do this from time to time, seclusion in a mosque for meditation, called “itikaf,” has become a recognized—though optional—mode of devotion among Muslims, especially during the last ten days of Ramadan. During itikaf, sexual relations are not allowed with your spouse.

LUNAR CALENDAR TO OBSERVE FASTING AND HAJJ

They will ask you about the new moons. Say: “They indicate the periods for [various doings of] mankind, including the pilgrimage.” (2:189)

The reference to lunar months arises from the observance of several religious obligations instituted by Islam—like the fast of Ramadan or the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is based on the lunar calendar. The months rotate through the seasons of a solar year. This fixation on the lunar calendar results in a continuous variation of the seasonal circumstances in which those religious observances are performed.

For example, there is increased hardship of fasting during hot summers with longer days than in winter.

FOUR SACRED MONTHS

Numbers of months, in the sight of Allah, are twelve months, [laid down] in Allah's decree on the day when He created the heavens and the earth. Out of these, four are sacred: this is the ever-true law [of Allah]. Do not, then, sin against yourselves regarding these [months]. (9:36)

The months spoken of here are lunar, progressively rotating through the seasons of the solar year. The twelve months in the Muslim calendar are as follows:

- 1 Muharram (sacred)
- 2 Safar
- 3 Rabi-ul-Awwal
- 4 Rabi-ul-Akhir
- 5 Jamadi-ul-Awwal
- 6 Jamadi-ul-Akhir
- 7 Rajab (sacred)
- 8 Shaban

9 Ramadan

10 Shawwal

11 Dhul-Qadah (sacred)

12 Dhul Hijja (sacred)

Since reckoning by the easily observable lunar months is more natural than by the arbitrarily fixed months of the solar year, it is described in this passage as “the ever-true law of God.” The four “sacred months” during which warfare was considered blasphemous in pre-Islamic Arabia are Muharram, Rajab, Dhul-Qadah, and Dhul Hijja. How were these four months chosen to be sacred? It is unknown. The purpose was to promote peace in a chronically violent society, a view later confirmed by Islam. In the Islamic era, Ramadan is the most sacred month when Muslims fast from sunup to sundown.

UNWARRANTED INTERCALATION

The intercalation [of months] is another instance of [their] refusal to acknowledge the truth—[a means] by those bent on denying the truth are led astray. They declare this [intercalation] permissible in one year and forbidden in [another] year, to conform [outwardly] to numbers of months Allah has hallowed: and thus, they make allowable what Allah has forbidden. Goodly appears unto them the evil of their doings since Allah does not grace people who refuse to acknowledge the truth. (9:37)

The pre-Islamic Arabs arbitrarily added a thirteenth month in the third, sixth, and eighth years of every eight years to make the lunar calendar stationary, thus roughly corresponding to the solar year—their endeavor to prevent certain disadvantages to their trade caused by the seasonal rotation of the lunar months. The Holy Quran describes this practice as an additional instance of disbelief because

it contradicts God's declared will regarding the observance of the lunar calendar with respect to various religious duties, such as fasting and Hajj. An acceptance of this unwarranted intercalation by the Muslims would have tied the Mecca pilgrimage and the fast of Ramadan to fixed seasons. They would have made the performance of these religious duties permanently too exacting or too easy. In either case, the believers would have been offending against the spiritual purpose underlying these duties—which is the meaning of the words “do not sin against yourselves concerning these months.” Through the intercalation, they kept the number of months to twelve in most years. But by divorcing the four “sacred months” from their proper lunar context, they profaned and perverted the natural law.

ADVANTAGES OF FASTING

1. Fasting makes one think, as every Jew who has watched through the long fasts of Yom Kippur will testify.
2. Fasting teaches self-discipline. Those who can endure its demands will have less difficulty controlling their appetites and sexual desires at other times.
3. Fasting underscores man's dependence upon God. Man, says the Holy Quran, is as frail as the rose petal. However, he assumes airs and pretensions, and fasting reminds him vividly of his essential frailty and dependence.
4. Finally, fasting sensitizes compassion. Only those who have been hungry can know what hunger means. If a man has himself fasted for thirty days within the year, he will listen more carefully when someone approaches him in need.

RISKS OF FASTING

People who fast commonly experience dehydration, largely because their body is not getting any fluid from food. It is recommended Muslims consume plenty of water before fasting and after breaking the fast.

WHEN CAN FASTING BE DEFERRED?

But whoever of you is ill or on a journey, [shall fast instead for the same] number of other days, and [in such cases] it is incumbent upon those who can afford it to sacrifice by feeding a needy person. And whoever does better than he is bound to do does good unto himself thereby, for fasting is to do good unto yourselves—if you but knew it. (2:184)

Those underweight, under eighteen, pregnant women, and individuals recovering from surgery or suffering from acute or chronic illness, like diabetes, should avoid fasting.

HAJJ

THE FIFTH PILLAR

Before embarking on Hajj, please familiarize yourself with the practical aspects of Hajj. There are many Hajj manuals available for this purpose. These manuals cover many prayers at different occasions during Hajj and many more details.

ISLAM’S FIFTH PILLAR is a five-day religious pilgrimage to Mecca and nearby holy sites in Saudi Arabia. Muslims—and only Muslims—are allowed to visit Mecca to carry out one of the most sacred duties of their lives, the pilgrimage, known in Arabic as the Hajj.

Hajj takes place once a year, in the month of Dhul-Hijjah, the twelfth month in the Islamic lunar calendar. Once during one’s lifetime, every Muslim who is physically and financially able to do so is expected to travel to Mecca, where God’s climactic revelation was first disclosed to Prophet Muhammad.

All the elements of Islam—the sacrifice, the prayer, the individual connection to God, the equality between races and nationalities—come together when the pilgrims perform Hajj. Approximately 3–4 million believers perform Hajj annually, one of the greatest gatherings of human beings on earth.

GOD CONSCIOUSNESS

The pilgrimage’s basic purpose is to heighten the pilgrim’s devotion to God and His revealed will. They might experience increased consciousness of God through facing the first Temple ever dedicated to Him. The first call to make the Hajj came thousands of

years ago when the Prophet Abraham and his firstborn son, Ishmael, built the Kabah to worship one God. Mecca was the place for sacred annual rites for Arabian tribes centuries before the advent of Islam.

BROTHERHOOD OF ISLAM

The fellowship of Islam becomes a palpable reality during Hajj, which has some beneficial side effects. It raises and renews awareness of being part of a brotherhood, embracing all believers, and a reminder of equality among people. Pilgrimage brings together Muslims from various countries, demonstrating their loyalty that transcends those to the warring kingdoms of man. Pilgrims become acquainted with the many social and political problems that confront the geographically diverse communities and better understand one another.

The performance of Hajj is a commemoration of Abraham's struggle in the cause of monotheism, the patience in adversity exhibited by Hagar and Ishmael under the impossible conditions when they were abandoned in the middle of a barren valley, which we now call Mecca and the human sacrifice of Abraham's son.

1. ABRAHAM'S STRUGGLE FOR MONOTHEISM AND HIS SOJOURN TO EGYPT

Abraham was forced to leave Iraq for Palestine because he worshiped one God and opposed idol worship in his homeland. There is no Quranic description of these events, so we must rely on the Old Testament version of this aspect of Abraham's story. When Abraham arrived in Palestine, there was a famine in the land, and he went to Egypt to sojourn there. As they were about to enter Egypt, Abraham said to his wife, Sarah, according to the Bible: "When the Egyptians see you are a beautiful woman, they will say 'this is his wife'. Then they will kill me, but let you live." Abraham

pretended Sarah was his sister and, hence, unmarried. (In reality, Sarah was Abraham's half-sister).

The Pharaoh married Sarah, and the Lord afflicted the Pharaoh and his house with great plagues, although Abraham and Sarah were guilty of deception due to fear. When the Pharaoh found out that Sarah was married, he returned Sarah to Abraham and gave him many gifts. Abraham became rich in cattle, silver, and gold. The Pharaoh also gave Abraham a slave girl, Hagar (Genesis 13:10-20). Abraham then returned to Palestine. Since Sarah was childless, she took Hagar and gave her to Abraham as a wife. Sarah mistreated Hagar so that she fled, and while Hagar was on the run, an angel appeared to her. She returned home and soon bore a son named Ishmael.

BIBLICAL ACCOUNT OF ABANDONMENT OF HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

And the angel of the Lord said unto her [Hagar], behold, thou art with a child, and shall bear a son and shall call his name Ishmael. (Gen 16:11) And Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, cast out this bondwoman and her son, for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son. And the thing was grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. And Allah said unto Abraham: Let it not be grievous in thy sight, in all that, Sarah hath said to thee, hearken to her voice. And Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a bottle of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder and the child, and sent her away. She departed and wandered through the wilderness of Beersheba. And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went and sat her down over against him a good way off. Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him and lifted her voice and wept.

And Allah heard the voice of the lad, and the angel of Allah called to Hagar out of Heaven and said unto her, what aileth thee, Hagar? Fear not, for Allah hath heard the voice of the lad. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in your hand, for I will make him a great nation. And Allah opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She filled the bottle with water and gave the lad a drink. And Allah was with the lad, and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer.” (Gen 21:9–20)

ARABIAN ACCOUNT OF ABANDONMENT OF ISHMAEL AND HAGAR

There is no mention of the events regarding Ishmael’s birth in the Holy Quran. Arabic account of the expulsion of Ishmael and his mother was based on Hadith and popular Arabian legend, narrated by Ibn Abbas, the uncle of the Prophet. In the Biblical version, Ishmael was a teenager when he and his mother were expelled by order of Sarah. In the Arabic version, Hagar and Ishmael were expelled when he was an infant and still suckling.

When Abraham had differences with his wife (from her jealousy of Hagar), he took Ishmael and his mother and went away. Abraham brought Hagar and his son Ishmael while she suckled him to a barren valley. So, he made them sit under the tree and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates and a small waterskin and set out homeward. Hagar followed him, saying: “O Abraham! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything else to enjoy?” She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him: “Has Allah ordered you to do so?” He said: “Yes.” She then said: “Then He will not neglect us.” While Abraham proceeded onward and, on reaching far enough where Hagar could not see him, raised both hands and invoked God, saying the following prayers according to the Holy Quran:

And [remember the time] when Abraham spoke [thus]: “O my Sustainer! Make this land secure and preserve my children and me from ever worshipping idols—for, verily, O my Sustainer, these [false objects of worship] have led many people astray! “Hence, [only] he who follows me [in this my faith] is truly of me; and as for him who disobeys me— Thou art, verily, much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace! (14:35-36) And, lo, Abraham prayed: “O my Sustainer! Make this land secure and grant its people fruitful sustenance—such of them as believe in Allah and the Last Day.” [Allah] answered: “And whoever shall deny the truth, him will I let enjoy for a short while—but in the end, I shall drive him to suffer through fire: and how vile a journey’s end!” (2:126)

Abraham’s prayer: “O my Sustainer! Make this land secure and grant its people fruitful sustenance,” is answered in one of the largest reserves of oil in the world found in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Ishmael’s mother went on suckling Ishmael and drinking from the water (she had). When the water was gone, she and her child became thirsty. She was glancing at him (Ishmael), tossing in agony. She left him, for she could not endure watching the dying child. The hillock of As-Safa was the nearest to her. She climbed to the top and started looking at the valley, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from As Safa, and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley like a person in distress and urgency. She wandered between Safa and Marwa seven times, seeking any help. During the Hajj ceremony, pilgrims are expected to walk briskly, just like Hagar did, to find some help.

THE WELL OF ZAMZAM

When she reached Al Marwa (for the last time), she heard a voice and asked herself to be quiet and attentively listened. She heard the voice again and said: “O, whoever you may be! You have made me listen to your voice; have you got something to help me?” And

behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zamzam, digging the earth with his heel [or his wing] until water flowed from that place. She started to make something like a basin around it, using her hands to fill her waterskin with water.

BIRTH OF THE CITY OF MECCA

Hagar settled near the spring, now called the Well of Zamzam. It may have been that spring that soon induced a wandering group of Bedouin families belonging to the South Arabian (Qahtani) tribe of Jurhum to settle there. Ishmael married a girl of this tribe and became the progenitor of the Arabianized tribes. Thus, their descent from a Hebrew father and a Qahtani mother. The history of Mecca began with Abraham's firstborn son and the progenitor of the "northern" group of Arab tribes, and thus of the Prophet Muhammad, who descended in the direct line through the tribe of Quraysh from Ishmael.

3. THE HUMAN SACRIFICE OF ABRAHAM'S SON THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT

"And Allah said, take now thy son, your only son Isaac, whom thou love, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of." (Gen 22:2)

THE QURANIC VERSION

[Abraham prayed]: "O my Sustainer! Bestow upon me the gift of [a son, who shall be] one of the righteous!" Whereupon We gave him the glad tidings of a boy-child gentle [like himself]? And [one Day,] when [the child] became old enough to share in his [father's] endeavors, the latter said: "O my dear son! I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice you. Consider, then, what would be your view?" [Abraham's son] answered: "O my father! Do as

you are bidden. You will find me, if Allah so wills, among those who are patient in adversity!” But as soon as the two had surrendered themselves to [what they believed] the will of Allah, and [Abraham] had laid him down on his face, We called out to him: “O Abraham and you have already fulfilled [the purpose of] that dream-vision!” Thus, We do reward the doers of good, for all this was indeed a trial, clear in itself. And We ransomed him with tremendous sacrifice and left him thus to be remembered among later generations. “Peace be upon Abraham!” Thus, We reward the doers of good—for he was truly one of our believing servants. (37:100–111)

There is no mention of either Ishmael or Isaac in the verses above. According to ancient Arabian traditions, Ishmael was the only son because Isaac, the younger brother, perhaps was not yet born. Therefore, these events happened in Mecca and not in Palestine. The “tremendous sacrifice” spoken of here is celebrated by sacrificing an animal in connection with the pilgrimage to Mecca (al-hajj) and throughout the Islamic world yearly by countless believers. It commemorates the experience of Abraham and Ishmael and constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam. There is no such commemoration among the followers of the Bible. Arguably, it points to Ishmael and not Isaac. Yet if Isaac was offered as a sacrifice, Muslims would still celebrate this event with the same enthusiasm because both were prophets of God, according to the Holy Quran.

ABRAHAM’S DREAM

However, in the Holy Quran, Abraham only had a dream vision in which he sees himself sacrificing his son, and not a direct command from God as in the Bible. When Ishmael reached an age where he could understand and share his father’s faith and aims, Abraham confided in him about his dream of sacrificing his son. The moral

significance of Abraham's dream vision was its test of his readiness to sacrifice what was dearest to him in life, his son, at God's behest. By sending a sacrificial ram at the last moment, God rescued Ishmael from Abraham's misapprehension.

BUILDING OF THE KABAH

The narration of Ibn Abbas continued: "Once more Abraham thought of visiting his family he had left at Mecca, and he told his wife (Sarah) of his decision. He went and found Ishmael behind the Zamzam well, mending his arrows. He said: 'O Ishmael, your Lord has ordered me to build a house for Him'. Ishmael said: 'Obey the order of your Lord'. Abraham said: 'Allah has also ordered me that you should help me therein'. Ishmael said: 'Then I will do so'." When the building became too high for Abraham to lift more stones, he stood upon the stone of Al Maqam (station of Abraham) and kept on handing Ishmael the rocks. The Temple (al-Bayt)—"House of Worship"—is the Kabah in Mecca. In other places, the Holy Quran speaks of it as "the Ancient Temple" (al-Bayt al-Atiq) and "the Inviolable House of Worship" (al-masjid al-haram).

THE KABAH, THE FIRST SYMBOL OF GOD'S ONENESS

The first Temple ever set up for mankind was indeed the one at Bakkah, rich in blessing and [source of] guidance to all the worlds, full of clear messages. [It is] the place where Abraham once stood, and whoever enters it finds inner peace. Hence, a pilgrimage to the Temple is a duty owed to Allah by all people who can undertake it. As for those who deny the truth, Allah does not need anything in all worlds. (3:96-97) O, our Sustainer! I have settled some of my offspring in a valley with no arable land, close to Thy sanctified Temple. So that, O our Sustainer, they might devote themselves to prayer. Cause Thou, therefore, people's

hearts to incline toward them, and grant them fruitful sustenance, so that they might have cause to be grateful. (14:37)

Bakkah is an older name for Mecca (which, correctly transliterated, would be spelled Makkah). In old Arabic dialects, the labial consonants “b” and “m,” being phonetically close, are occasionally interchangeable. “Full of clear messages” in the above verse relates to God’s oneness and uniqueness (symbolized by the Kabah). Abraham and Ishmael built the Kabah as the first temple ever dedicated to One God. Abraham paid many visits to Mecca to visit his second family. This is by no means improbable for a camel-riding Bedouin (as Abraham undoubtedly was), a twenty or thirty-day journey. Abraham’s prayer, “People’s hearts to incline toward them,” is answered when 3–4 million Muslims attend the Hajj yearly.

While Abraham and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the Temple, [they prayed]: “O our Sustainer! Thou accept this from us, for Thou alone art all-hearing, all-knowing! O our Sustainer! Make us surrender ourselves to Thee and make out of our offspring a community that shall surrender itself to Thee. Show us our ways of worship, and accept our repentance, for Thou alone art the Acceptor of Repentance, the Dispenser of Grace!” “O, our Sustainer! Raise up from the midst of our offspring an apostle from among themselves, who shall convey to them Thy messages, and impart to them a revelation as well as wisdom, and cause them to grow in purity, for Thou alone art almighty, truly wise!” (2:127–129) And who, unless he is weak of mind, would want to abandon Abraham’s creed, knowing that We have indeed raised him high in this world and that in the life to come, he shall be among the righteous. When his Sustainer said to him, “Surrender yourself unto Me!” He answered, “I have surrendered myself to [Thee,] the Sustainer of all the worlds. (2:130–131)

The Kabah is much older than the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. The Kabah was associated with Abraham's memory even in the pre-Islamic era. Abraham's personality had always been in the foreground of Arabian thought. The noun "Kabah" denotes any cubical building, and the unpretentious three-dimensional form was deliberately chosen. It represents man's humility and awe before God, whose glory is beyond anything that man could conceive through architectural beauty. The Kabah has been instituted as the direction of prayer (Qiblah) for all Muslims. Its establishment as the Qiblah does not imply any break with Abrahamic tradition. On the contrary, it reestablishes the direct contact with that patriarch and the brotherhood of all believers who, wherever they may be, turn their faces in prayer toward this one focal point.

THE DUTY OF PILGRIMAGE

Today, the specific rituals carried out by Muslims date back to the Prophet Muhammad's farewell pilgrimage in 632 AD.

Hence, [O Muhammad,] you proclaim to all people the [duty of] pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every [kind of] fast mount, coming from every far-away point [on earth] so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them. (22:27–28)

"Fast mount" is an expression that denotes a camel, horse, or (any fast conveyance) that has become lean on a long and fatiguing journey.

KABAH AS A SANCTUARY

And lo! We made the Temple a goal that people might repair again and again and a sanctuary. Take then, the place where Abraham once stood as your place of prayer. And thus, We did command Abraham and Ishmael: "Purify My Temple for those who will

walk around it and those who will abide near it in meditation, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves [in prayer] (2:125)

The word “amn” (lit., “safety”) denotes, in this context, a “sanctuary” for all living beings.

REQUISITE CONDITIONS FOR HAJJ

ABSTAIN FROM LEWD SPEECH, WICKED CONDUCT, AND QUARRELING

The pilgrimage shall take place in the month appointed for it. And whoever undertakes the pilgrimage in those [months] shall, while on pilgrimage, abstain from lewd speech, from all wicked conduct, and from quarreling; and whatever good you may do, Allah is aware of it. And make provision for yourselves—but the best of all provisions is Allah-consciousness: remain, then, conscious of Me, O you who are endowed with insight! (2:197-198)

Hajj occurs in the 12th month of the Islamic lunar calendar, called Dhul Hijjah, between the eighth and 13th days of the month.

TOTAL PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE

Pilgrims are expected to perform Hajj in complete peace, self-denial, and submission to God. Violence in any form is strictly prohibited. Even the cutting of the hair, shaving, and trimming of nails are not allowed. There should not be any fighting, rudeness, or even arguments during the Hajj. These evils are condemned under all circumstances, but the severity of these sins increases during Hajj. Killing and hunting of animals is not allowed, in accordance with the theme of nonviolence. Certain deeds lawful at other times, like marital relations, are prohibited.

THE SEQUENCE OF PERFORMANCE OF HAJJ

Today, the specific rituals carried out by Muslims date back to the Prophet Muhammad's farewell pilgrimage in 632 AD.

NO DISTINCTIONS OF RANK AND HIERARCHY

Before starting your journey, clip your nails, remove pubic and armpit hair, and trim your mustache.

Miqat Lines: The boundary lines of forbidden areas are called miqat lines. Upon reaching the boundary of Mecca, pilgrims take a bath and remove their usual clothes, which tend to carry clear indications of their social status.

EIGHTH OF DHUL-HIJJAH

Ihram: On the eighth of Dhul-Hijjah, pilgrims enter ihram. No pilgrim can go beyond Miqat lines without "ihram," a costume worn by all male pilgrims, consisting of one piece of white cotton around the waist and hips and another over the shoulder. All distinctions of rank and hierarchy are removed. Prince and pauper stand before God in their collective humanity.

Women pilgrims do not put on ihram and can perform the pilgrimage in their ordinary clothes, preferably white. They perform Hajj side by side with men and are not segregated to some obscure corner, a common and un-Islamic practice in practically all mosques throughout the Islamic world. Men must not cover their heads, and women must not cover their faces. Although women must cover their hair with a scarf, the face veil, known as a niqab, and the burka, the garment that covers them from head to toe with only a mesh-like panel through which to view, are not allowed during Hajj.

These are the only garments the pilgrim will wear during Hajj. The face veil, burka, niqab, and segregation of women are cultural practices of Byzantines and Persians adopted by later Muslims and have nothing to do with Islam. Pilgrims submerge their individualities into a community of equals before God, with no barrier of race, sex, class, or social status separating one person from another.

DECLARATION OF INTENTION (TALBIYA)

On entering the state of ihram, the pilgrims declare their intention to perform the pilgrimage with these words: “**Allah Humma Labbaika umrah.**” Then prayer is offered, and the pilgrims raise their voices in the tradition of Prophet Muhammad. These words are often recited again and again during pilgrimage till you reach Kabbah:

Labbaika, Allah hummah, labbaik (Here am I, O Allah. Here am I in Your presence). La shari kala labbaik (You have no partner, here I am). In nal hamada wal niamata lak (Surely all praise and grace are for You). Wal mulka la sharika lak (And the Kingdom is Yours, You have no partners).

CIRCUMAMBULATION (TAWAF) OF THE KABAH (8TH OF DHUL HIJJA)

On reaching Mecca, pilgrims visit the Grand Mosque, at the center of which stands the Kabah. When they enter the building, they recite the following words: “O Allah. You are peace, and peace comes from you. So, greet us, O Allah, with peace.” Tawaf, or going around the Kabah, is the pilgrim’s first act upon reaching Mecca and the last act before leaving. The pilgrims go straight to the Black Stone. Tawaf begins from the Black Stone (Hajr-i-Aswad) or its

corner. The pilgrims march counterclockwise around the Kabah seven times, starting and finishing each round at the corner of the Black Stone, saying, “Allahu Akbar.” The pilgrims then approached the station of Ibrahim (Muqam-i-Ibrahim), where Abraham and Ishmael prayed and offered prayer. Pilgrims then drink water from the wells of Zemzem.

SAI (HASTENING) AS-SAFA AND AL-MARWA SYMBOL OF FAITH

As-Safa and Al-Marwa are among the symbols set up by Allah. Thus, no wrong does he who, having come to the Temple on pilgrimage or on a pious visit, strides to and fro between these two. If one does better than he is bound to do— Allah is responsive to gratitude, all-knowing. (2:158)

Distraught with thirst and fear for her child’s life, Hagar ran to and fro between the two rocks and fervently prayed to God for succor. Finally, her reliance on God and her patience were rewarded by the discovery of a spring existing to this day, the Well of Zamzam, that saved the two from death through thirst. In remembrance of Hagar’s extreme trial and her trust in God, As-Safa and Al-Marwa were regarded, even in pre-Islamic times, as symbols of faith and patience in adversity. The pilgrims are expected to walk seven times between these two hillocks at a brisk pace. A marble hallway now connects the distance between As-Safa and Al-Marwa for pilgrims.

In pre-Islamic times, certain idols had been standing there. Some of the early Muslims were reluctant to perform a rite, which appeared to be associated with recent idolatry. The above verse reassured them by pointing out that this symbolic act of remembrance was much older than the idolatry practiced by the pagan Quraysh.

UMRAH, HAJJ, AND INTERRUPTED PILGRIMAGE

After the completion of ceremonies at Safa and Marwa, whether pilgrims come out of ihram or not depends on whether the person intends to do umrah, interrupted pilgrimage, or the Hajj.

UMRAH (MINOR PILGRIMAGE OR PIOUS VISIT)

Any Muslim who visits the Kabah any time of the year, other than the month of Dhul Hijja, performs Umrah, also known as a minor pilgrimage or pious visit. The pilgrims must walk seven times around the Kabah and seven times between As-Safa and Al-Marwa. After completing the ceremonies, a pilgrim performing Umrah may shave his head or have a haircut and then come out of the state of Ihram. It takes about 3 to 6 hours to perform all rituals of Umrah.

HAJJ

Perform the pilgrimage and the pious visit [to Mecca] in honor of Allah, and if you are held back, give instead whatever offering you can easily afford. (2:196)

The Mecca pilgrimage (Hajj) takes place once a year, in the month of Dhul-Hijjah. In Hajj, pilgrims walk seven times around the Kabah and seven times between As-Safa and Al-Marwa, just as when performing Umrah. They must also attend the gathering on the plain of Arafat on the 9th of Dhul-Hijja. Once the pilgrimage is undertaken, it must be completed. If one is held back or obliged to break his journey to Kabah, offering a sacrifice can make a symbolic completion.

INTERRUPTED PILGRIMAGE

If a pilgrim comes before the month of Dhul Hijjah, or even a few days before the pilgrimage, he may perform Umrah only and then come out of the state of Ihram. He can put on ihram again, along with other pilgrims, on the specified date, i.e., the 8th of Dhul Hijjah. This is called “Hajj at-tammattu” and consists of combining Umrah and the pilgrimage.

SACRIFICE ANIMAL OR FAST FOR TEN DAYS

If you are safe and secure, then he who takes advantage of a pious visit before the [time of] pilgrimage shall give whatever offering he can easily afford. Whereas he who cannot afford it shall fast for three days during the pilgrimage and for seven days after your return, that is, ten full [days]. All this relates to him, who does not live near the Inviolable House of Worship. And remain conscious of Allah and know that Allah is severe in retribution. (2:196)

The above verse relates to those pilgrims who arrived in Mecca before the Hajj season, performed Umrah, and stayed on for formal Hajj. For personal comfort, they decide to interrupt the state of pilgrimage by removing the ihram during the time intervening between the completion of an Umrah and the performance of the Hajj. The pilgrim who takes advantage of this facility is obliged to sacrifice an animal at the termination of the pilgrimage or fast for ten days. This applies only to those who do not permanently reside in Mecca, as the inhabitants of Mecca cannot remain permanently in the state of ihram and are exempted from this rule.

LEAVING MECCA TO MINA (8TH OF DHUL HIJJAH)

All pilgrims continue their journey on the 8th of Dhul Hijjah to Mina. It is located about three miles from Mecca. The pilgrims must reach Mina before noon, pray, sleep overnight in Mina, and offer Morning Prayer on the 9th of Dhul Hijja. Many pilgrims walk the three miles, but buses are also available. About 3–4 million people stay in Mina, which is transformed into a temporary tent city.

HALTING AT ARAFAT (A Symbolism of Resurrection and Judgment)

On the 9th of Dhul Hijjah, all pilgrims leave Mina after sunrise and reach Arafat by noon. The Arafat Plain is a valley surrounded by dry and barren mountains, and it is located six miles from Mina and nine miles from Mecca. Staying in the plain of Arafat is an essential part of the pilgrimage, and any pilgrim who fails to reach Arafat has not performed the pilgrimage. The gathering on the plain of Arafat constitutes the climax of the pilgrimage. The pilgrims must remain until sunset on that plain, below the hillock known as Jabal ar-Rahmah (the Mount of Grace)—a symbolic act meant to suggest the ultimate gathering on Resurrection Day when every soul will await God's judgment.

NIGHT AT MUZDALIFAH (Symbolism of Security of Quraysh)

When you surge downward in multitudes from Arafat, remember Allah at the holy place, and remember Him as the One who guided you after you had indeed been lost on your way. And surge onward together with the multitude of all the other people who surge onward and ask Allah to forgive you your sins: for Allah is much forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (2:198–199)

Immediately after sunset on the 9th of Dhul Hijjah, all pilgrims set out to Muzdalifah and stopped there for the night. Muzdalifah, the “holy place” referred to in verse above, is a narrow valley between two mountains. According to the legend, the invading armies of Abraha, the Abyssinian governor of Yemen, were destroyed so that Kabah and Quraysh remained secure.

GRANT US GOOD HERE AND IN HEREAFTER

And when you have performed your acts of worship, [continue to] bear Allah in mind, as you would bear your fathers in mind—with a yet keener remembrance! For there are people who [merely] pray: “O our Sustainer! Give us in this world”—and such shall not partake in the blessings of the life to come. But there are among them, such as pray, “O our Sustainer! Grant us good in this world and good in the life to come and keep us safe from suffering through the fire.” It is these that shall have their portion [of happiness] in return for what they have earned. And Allah is swift in reckoning. (2:200–202).

RETURN TO MINA (Symbolic Stoning of the Devil)

After the Morning Prayer on the 10th of Dhul Hijja, pilgrims leave Muzdalifah for Mina, throwing stones at three pillars, symbolizing the rejection of the devil.

THE DAY OF SACRIFICE SYMBOLIZES READINESS TO SACRIFICE FOR TRUTH

After the ceremony of throwing stones, pilgrims offer their sacrifice as a conscious, selfless offering in His name of something that one cherishes as necessary and valuable. All those who participate in the Hajj are expected—provided they can afford it—to sacrifice a

sheep, a goat, or the like and to distribute most of its flesh in charity. Pilgrims are permitted to eat the flesh of the animals they sacrificed, although feeding the poor is mandatory and the primary objective of the sacrifice. As well it commemorates Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his firstborn son. Lastly, it symbolizes each believer's readiness to sacrifice himself for the cause of truth.

FEED THE UNFORTUNATE POOR

They might extol the name of Allah on the days appointed [for sacrifice] over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them [to this end]. Eat, then, thereof, and feed the unfortunate poor. (22:28) All this [is ordained by Allah], and if one honors Allah's sacred commandments, it will rebound to his own benefit in his Sustainer's sight. And all [kinds of] cattle have been made lawful to you [for sacrifice and food], save what is mentioned to you [as forbidden] (22:30)

SHUN IDOLATROUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Shun, then, [all that Allah has forbidden and most of all] the loathsome evil of idolatrous beliefs and practices. Shun every word untrue, [inclining] toward Allah, [and] turning away from all that is false, [inclining] toward without ascribing divine qualities to aught beside Him. For he who ascribes divinity to aught but Allah is like one who is hurtling down from the skies—whereupon the birds carry him off, or the wind blows him away onto a far-off place. (22:30–31)

SACRIFICE SYMBOLIC FOR WORSHIP

[Thus, it is] unto every community [that has ever believed in Us] have We appointed [sacrifice as] an act of worship so that they

could extol the name of Allah over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them [to this end]. (22:34)

THE SACRIFICE OF CATTLE: A SYMBOL SET UP BY GOD

And as for the sacrifice of cattle, We have ordained it for you as one of the symbols set up by Allah, in which there is [much] good for you. Hence, extol the name of Allah over them when they are lined up [for sacrifice]. After they have fallen lifeless to the ground, eat of their flesh, and feed the poor who is contented with his lot [and does not beg], as well as him who is forced to beg. It is to this end We have made them [the sacrificial animal] subservient to your needs so that you might have reason to be grateful. [But bear in mind:] never does their flesh reach Allah, and neither does their blood: it is only your Allah-consciousness that reaches Him. To this end, We have made them subservient to your needs so that you might glorify Allah for all the guidance with which He has graced you. And you give this glad tiding unto the doers of good. Allah will ward off [all evil] from those who attain to faith [and] Allah does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude. (22:36–38)

ID AL-ADHA ON 10TH DHUL-HIJJAH

The Festival of Sacrifices (Id Al-Adha) begins on the 10th of the lunar month, Dhul-Hijja and continues for the next three days, marking the end of the pilgrimage. Id Al-Adha is celebrated throughout the Islamic world by sacrificing an animal for those who can afford it.

CUTTING OF HAIR

Do not shave your heads until the offering has been sacrificed, but he from among you who is ill or suffers from an ailment of the head shall redeem himself by fasting, or alms, or [any other] act of worship. (2:196)

TAWAF AL-IFADA IN MECCA

Thereafter, let them end their state of self-denial and fulfill the vows they [may] have made, and let them go [once again] around the Most Ancient Temple. (22:29)

After the sacrifice, pilgrims come out of the state of ihram and proceed to Mecca for “tawaf al-Ifada” on that day, and again go around the Kabah seven times, then walk between Safa and Marwa, and end the condition of self-denial incumbent on them during Hajj, thus completing the pilgrimage.

SYMBOLIC CHARACTER OF THE HAJJ

Allah has laid down the Kabah, the Inviolable Temple, as a symbol for all mankind. And [so, too] the sacred month [of pilgrimage] and the garlanded offerings [are symbols] meant to make you aware that Allah is aware of all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth, and that Allah has full knowledge of everything. (5:97)

- The stress on the symbolic character of Hajj is meant to draw attention to their spiritual meaning—the realization of God’s oneness and uniqueness, as symbolized by the Kabah, and the aim of all true God-consciousness.
- And so, to the sacred month [of pilgrimage] and the garlanded offerings are symbols.

- The wearing of Ihram symbolizes the equality of humanity. All distinctions of rank and hierarchy are removed; prince and pauper stand before God in their undivided humanity.
- As-Safa and Al-Marwa are symbols of faith and patience in adversity. In remembrance of Hagar's extreme trial and her trust in God, As-Safa and Al-Marwa had come to be regarded as symbols of faith and patience in adversity.
- Halting at Arafat is a symbolic act meant to recall the final meeting on Resurrection Day, when every soul will await God's judgment.
- Night at Muzdalifah symbolizes the security of Mecca and its inhabitants from foreign invaders such as Abraha, the Abyssinian governor of Yemen.
- Visit to Mina to throw stones at three pillars symbolizing the rejection of the devil.
- Sacrifice of cattle—a symbol set up by God

KABAH IS NOT AN OBJECT OF WORSHIP

For, when We assigned Abraham the site of this Temple, [Kabah] [We said unto him]: “Do not ascribe divinity to aught beside Me!” And “Purify My Temple for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it [in meditation] and will bow down and prostrate themselves [in prayer].” (22:26)

The symbolic nature of the rites of Hajj is to emphasize that Kabah is not an object of worship, and it is the symbolic house of God Who does not live there literally. It is holy only by being the first temple ever dedicated to the worship of One God by the great patriarch Abraham and his son Ishmael. Kissing the Blackstone does not

constitute worship. The essential meaning of this rite is well brought out by the late Iranian philosopher Ali Shariati:

As you circumambulate and move closer to the Kabah, you feel like a small stream merging with a vast river. Carried by a wave, you lose touch with the ground. Suddenly, you are floating, carried on by the flood. As you approach the center, the pressure of the crowd squeezes you so intensely that you are given a new life. You are now part of the people; you are now a man, alive and eternal. The Kabah is the world's sun whose face attracts you into its orbit. You have become part of this universal system. Circumambulating around Allah, you will soon forget yourself. You have been transformed into a particle, gradually melting and disappearing. This is absolute love at its peak.

GOD-CONSCIOUSNESS AND RIGHTEOUS WAY OF LIFE

CRITERIA OF GOD-CONSCIOUSNESS

This Divine Writ—let there be no doubt it is [meant] a guidance for all the Allah-conscious who (1) believe in [the existence of] beyond human perception (al-ghayb), (2) are constant in prayer, (3) spend on others out of what we provide them as sustenance, (4) believe in that bestowed from high upon you, [O Prophet] (5) and what was bestowed before your time: for it is they who in their innermost are certain of the life to come! It is they who follow the guidance [which comes] from their Sustainer, and it is they, they who shall attain a blessed state! (2:2–5)

“Spend on others” is mentioned here in one breath with God-consciousness and prayer because it is precisely in such selfless acts that true piety comes to its full fruition. The reference to “before your time” refers to the historical continuity of divine revelation before the Holy Quran, as described before under the Articles of Faith.

PIETY THROUGH GOD-CONSCIOUSNESS

Piety does not consist in your entering houses from the rear, [as it were], but truly pious is he who is conscious of Allah. Hence, enter houses through their doors and remain conscious of Allah so that you can attain a happy state. (2:189) [Truly pious are] they who keep their promises whenever they promise, and are patient in misfortune, hardship, and in time of peril: it is they that have

proved themselves true, and it is they, they who are conscious of Allah. (2:177)

The word “door” signifies a means of access to, or attainment of, a thing. The metaphor of “entering a house through its door” is often used in classical Arabic to denote a proper approach to a problem.

True piety does not consist of approaching questions of faith through the back door, as it were—that is, through mere observance of the forms and periods set for the performance of various religious duties. The religious rituals are important in themselves; they do not fulfill the real purpose unless every act is approached through its spiritual front door—that is, through God’s consciousness.

GOD IS NOT OF THE EAST OR THE WEST

True piety does not consist in turning your faces toward the east or the west—but truly pious is he who believes in Allah, and the Last Day, and the angels, revelations, and the prophets. (2:177)

The Holy Quran stresses the principle that mere compliance with outward forms does not fulfill the requirements of piety. The turning of one’s face in prayer in this or that direction is not enough, and purposeful actions must follow it. The term “revelation” has a generic significance: it refers to the fact of divine revelation as such. As regards belief in “angels,” it is postulated here because it is through these spiritual beings or forces that God reveals His will to the prophets and, thus, to mankind.

GOD’S GUIDANCE ONTO THE STRAIGHT PATH

[Know that] Allah invites [man] unto the abode of peace and guides him that wills [to be guided] onto a straightway. (10:25)

If a Muslim was asked to summarize the way his religion counsels man to live, he might answer that Islam teaches man to walk the straight path. The phrase comes from the opening surah of the Holy Quran itself, which is recited by every Muslim five times each day: “Guide us in the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast favored, not the path of those who incur Thine anger nor of those who go astray.”

Why the straight path? One meaning is obvious: a straight path is not devious, neither crooked nor corrupt. The phrase contains another meaning, however, which speaks to something distinctive in Islam. The straight path is straightforward, direct, and explicit. Compared with other religions, Islam spells out the way of life it proposes; it pinpoints it, nailing it down through explicit injunctions. The consequence is a definiteness about this religion that gives it a flavor all its own. A Muslim knows where he stands. He knows who he is and who God is. He knows what his obligations are, and if he transgresses them, he knows what to do about it. Islam has clarity, order, and precision, which is in sharp contrast to the shifting, relative, uncertain, at-sea quality of much of modern life.

The term “abode of peace” denotes not only the condition of ultimate happiness in the hereafter—alluded to in the symbol of paradise—but also the spiritual condition of a true believer in this world: namely, a state of inner security, of peace with God, with one’s natural environment, and within oneself.

MUTTAQI VS. HYPOCRITE

There is [also] a kind of man who is willing to sell his own self to please Allah, and Allah is most compassionate toward His servants. (2:207)

Muttaqi is someone who has become conscious of God and His all-presence. He desires to mold his existence in the context of this

awareness and guard himself against evil. Such a man would give up all his personal interests if compliance with God's will demands it.

Verily, the hypocrites shall be in the lowest depth of the fire, and thou wilt find none who could succor them. But excepted shall be they who repent, and live righteously, and hold fast unto Allah, and grow sincere in their faith in Allah alone: for there shall be one with the believers—and in time Allah will grant all believers a mighty reward. (4:145–146)

Though addressed to the hypocrites of Medina, these verses apply to half-hearted followers of Islam of all times. They pretend in public to follow all the five pillars of Islam. In real life, some are guilty of spreading corruption on earth. The attitude of some modern-day Muslims is that if they fasted, prayed, paid zakat, and went to Hajj (“Huquq-ullah”—God's rights), it did not matter how they treated people (Huququl-Ibad). Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The Prophet said the following:

In my community, the poor is he who appeared before God on the Day of Resurrection with his acts of prayer, fasting, and charity while he had abused someone, usurped the property, shed blood, or hit still another. Then his virtuous deeds were given over to each of his victims. When nothing was left of his good deeds to pay compensation, some sins of each wronged one were transferred to him, and he shall be cast into Hell.

GOOD DEEDS

THE FLIGHT OF TIME

In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the dispenser of grace. Consider the flight of time! Man is bound to lose himself unless he is of those who attain Faith, do good works, and enjoin upon one another the keeping to truth, and enjoin upon one another patience in adversity. (103:1–3)

In Islam, God-consciousness is the foundation of morality. It is a disposition that follows from belief in an all-powerful, omnipresent God who has commanded obedience. The feeling of indebtedness for existence fosters a sense of humility toward God and His creations.

Avoidance of evil: A God-conscious or “*muttaqui*” desires to mold his existence around the awareness of the divine and guard himself against evil. He is morally responsible and accountable to God. Such a believer lives his life ever mindful of eternal consequences that await on Judgment Day.

SAYINGS OF THE PROPHET REGARDING GOOD WORKS

When good deeds are counted tenfold: “God, exalted be He, says: ‘If a servant of mine [merely] desires to do a good deed, I shall count this [desire] as a virtuous deed, and if he does it, I shall count it tenfold. If he desires to commit an evil deed but does not commit it, I shall count this as a good deed, knowing that he refrained from it only for My sake’.” Some Christians are taught that even to think

of sin is a sin. It's hard to control what we think, but we can usually control what we do.

Intentions behind the action: The Prophet said, “The reward of deeds depends upon the

intentions, and every person will get the reward according to what he has intended.” For a Muslim, sin or virtue lies in deeds and intentions.

Actions integral part of Faith: The stress on the actions is an essential part of Faith and fundamental in the ethics of the Holy Quran. There is a frequent juxtaposition of the concepts of believing and doing good works and the condemnation of all who, while believing, do no good works. The Articles of Faith and its five pillars are the beginning of good deeds in Islam.

THE CIRCLE OF RIGHTEOUS DEEDS

At the individual level, righteous deeds involve the development of personal morality, and the circle of righteous deeds expands to help the family—neighbors, community, and, finally, humanity at large.

PERSONAL MORALITY

A “muttaqui” becomes conscious of personal morality and becomes humble, selfless, truthful, and compassionate. He strives for self-improvement and practices moderation in every action, avoiding extremes in all aspects of life.

COMPASSION

Those who have attained Faith and enjoin upon one another patience in adversity and compassion have achieved righteousness. (90:17–18)

The basis of true moral behavior is empathy and compassion.

HUMILITY

For, [true] servants of the Most Gracious are [only] they, who tread gently on the earth, and, whenever the foolish address them, reply with [words of] peace. (25:63) And [who], whenever they pass by [people engaged in] frivolity, pass on with dignity. (25:72)

They pass on with dignity whenever the foolish address them, intending to ridicule or argue against their beliefs.

KEEP PROMISES AND SPEAK ONLY THE TRUTH

Be true to every promise—for [on Judgment Day], you will be called to account for every promise you have made! (17:34) O you who have attained Faith! Remain conscious of Allah, and [always] speak with a will to bring out [only] what is just and true—[whereupon] He will cause your deeds to be virtuous and will forgive you your sins. (33:70–71)

The expression “a saying that hits the mark” means truthful, relevant, and to the point. It relates to speaking of others in a manner without all hidden meanings, insinuations, and frivolous suspicions, aiming at no more and no less than the truth.

ENCOURAGE GOOD AND FORBID EVIL

Allah is most powerful, almighty, [aware of] those who, [even] if We firmly establish them on earth, remain constant in prayer, give in charity, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, but with Allah rests the final outcome of all events. (22:40-41) [Pray thus] for We can let you witness [the fulfillment, even in this world, of] whatever We promise them! [But whatever they may say or do], repel the evil [which they commit] with something better. We are fully aware of what they attribute [to Us]. (23:95-96)

The ethical principle implied in the injunction is the same—evil must not be countered with another evil but instead repelled by an act of goodness.

PATIENCE IN ADVERSITY

You give the glad tiding [of Allah's acceptance] unto all who are humble—all whose hearts tremble with awe whenever Allah is mentioned, who patiently bear whatever ill befalls them, and are constant in prayer and spend on others out of what We provide them as sustenance. (22:34-35) Verily, what is with Allah is the best for you if you know it. All that is with you is bound to end, whereas that with Allah is everlasting. And most certainly shall We grant those who are patient in adversity their reward in accordance with the best they ever did. As for anyone—be it man or woman—who does righteous deeds and is a believer withal—him shall most certainly cause to live a worthy life. And most certainly shall We grant such as their reward, according to the best they ever did. (16:95-97)

No calamity can ever befall [man] unless it is by Allah's leave. Therefore, whoever believes in Allah guides his [own] heart

[toward this truth], and Allah has full knowledge of everything. (64:11)

The good or worthy life may relate to the life of this world as a true believer who always finds happiness in his God-consciousness. Or to the happiness that awaits him in hereafter, or to both. Guide your heart toward self-surrender to God's will, gratitude in times of ease, and patience in times of misfortune.

GRATEFULNESS A VIRTUE

Indeed, We granted this wisdom unto Luqman: “Be grateful unto Allah—for he who is grateful [unto Him] is but grateful for the good of his self. Whereas he who chooses to be ungrateful [ought to know that], Allah is self-sufficient, ever to be praised!” (31:12)

Luqman was a fabled ancient wise man who appears in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish traditions.

ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

The first Quranic Revelation started with the word “Read” (96:1), which is a reminder that the very foundation of the Islamic Faith is rooted in knowledge and scholarship. “*Ilm*,” the word for knowledge in Arabic, is featured more than any other word in the Holy Quran apart from “Allah,” or God.

Allah will exalt by [many] degrees those of you who have attained to Faith and, [above all] have been vouchsafed [true] knowledge, for Allah is fully aware of all that you do. (58:11)

SCHOLARS EXEMPTED FROM WAR

Not all believers should take the field [in times of war]. From within every group in their midst, some shall refrain from going

forth to war and shall devote themselves [instead] to acquiring a deeper knowledge of the Faith and [thus] teach their homecoming brethren so that these [too] might guard themselves against evil. (9:122)

Although this verse explicitly mentions religious knowledge, it positively affects every type of knowledge because the Holy Quran does not draw any dividing line between life's spiritual and worldly concerns. The Holy Quran calls upon the believer to observe all nature and discern God's creative activity in its manifold phenomena and laws. The Holy Quran itself is addressed to "those who think." Intellectual activity is a valid way to understand God's will better. Scholars must acquire a more profound knowledge of the Faith and God's works and impart it to their fellow believers in every branch of knowledge.

ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND DIVINE REVELATION

We shall teach you, and you will not forget [aught of what you are taught], save what Allah may will [you to forget]. For Allah [alone] knows all that is open to [man's] perception as well as all hidden [from it], and [thus] shall We make easy for you the path toward [ultimate] ease. (87:6–8)

These verses relate to humanity's cumulative acquisition of empirical and rational knowledge, handed down from generation to generation and from civilization to civilization. God may cause men to forget what becomes redundant by his new experiences and acquisition of broader knowledge. Yet all knowledge arrived at through our observation is limited in scope and does not suffice to give us insight into ultimate truths beyond human perception (al-ghayb). Since human knowledge must forever remain imperfect, man depends upon the aid of divine revelation, which shows us the path toward peace of the spirit.

ACQUIRING OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE PROPHET'S SAYINGS

The Quranic principle of acquiring knowledge has been emphasized in many well-authenticated sayings of the Prophet. For instance:

- The scholar's ink is more holy than the martyr's blood.
- The superiority of a learned man over a (mere) worshipper, i.e., one who merely prays, fasts, etc., is like the superiority of the full moon over all the stars.
- Go in quest of knowledge even unto China.
- Striving after knowledge is a sacred duty for every man and woman who has surrendered to God.
- Whoso honors the learned, honor me.
- Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.
- To spend more time learning is better than spending more time praying.
- That person who shall die while studying to revive the knowledge of religion will be only one degree inferior to the prophets.
- The pursuit of knowledge is a divine commandment for every Muslim.
- He who leaves his home in search of knowledge walks in the path of God.
- One hour's meditation on the work of the Creator is better than seventy years of prayer.

HELPING FAMILY

The circle of good deeds is not limited to the self but expands to help the family.

REVERE YOUR PARENTS

Now [among the best deeds which] We have enjoined upon man is goodness toward his parents. In pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth; her bearing him and his utter dependence on her took thirty months. (46:15) His mother bore him by bearing strain upon strain, and his utter dependence on her lasted two years: [hence, O man], be grateful toward Me and your parents, [and remember that] with Me is all journeys' end. (31:14)

Child nurture includes conception, gestation, birth, feeding, and weaning in infancy—a child's utter dependence on its mother. Thus, gratitude toward parents, who were instrumental in one's coming to life, goes with man's gratitude toward God, the ultimate cause and source of his existence.

GUIDING FAMILY

O you who have attained to Faith! Ward off from yourselves and those close to you against that fire [of the hereafter] whose fuel is human beings and stones. (66:6)

A person's responsibility is not confined to making efforts for his salvation. His responsibility includes helping "those who are close" to his family and becoming morally upright. The Prophet said: "Each of you is a shepherd and responsible for his herd. The ruler is accountable for his subjects; the man is a shepherd of his family and accountable to them, and the woman is a shepherd of her husband's house and children and is accountable concerning them."

HELPING COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBORS

The circle of virtuous deeds expands to neighbors and community.

Have We not shown him the two highways [of good and evil]? But he would not attempt to ascend the steep uphill road [toward salvation]. And what could make you conceive what it is, that steep uphill road? [It is] the freeing of one's neck [from the burden of slavery], or the feeding, upon a day of [one's own] hunger, of an orphan, near of kin, or a needy [stranger] lying in the dust. (90:10–16) Do good to your parents, near kin, orphans, the poor, the neighbor among your people, the neighbor who is a stranger, the friend by your side, the wayfarer, and those you rightfully possess. (4:36)

The expression “your people” refers to the community, not to one’s actual relatives. “The friend by your side” is one’s wife or husband. “Those whom you rightfully possess” refers to slaves.

TAKING GOOD CARE OF ORPHANS

And they will ask thee about [how to deal with] orphans. Say: “To improve their condition is best.” And if you share their life, [remember that] they are your brethren. Allah distinguishes between him who spoils things and him who improves. And had Allah so willed, He would indeed have imposed hardships on you, which you would not have been able to bear: [but,] behold, Allah is Almighty, wise! (2:220)

The implication is that if one shares the life of an orphan in his charge, one is permitted to benefit from such an association—for instance, through a business partnership—provided this does not damage the orphan’s interests in any way.

HELPING WIDOWS

The Prophet said, “The one who looks after a widow or a poor person is like a warrior fighting for God’s cause or like a person who fasts during the day and prays all night.”

LOVE THY NEIGHBORS

The Prophet often stressed a believer’s moral obligation toward his neighbors, whatever their Faith. He said: “Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, let him do good unto his neighbor. Gabriel continued to recommend me about treating the neighbors kindly and politely, so much so that I thought he would order me to make them my heirs.” Such mundane acts, including returning salutations or saying, “God have mercy on you,” when someone sneezes, accepting invitations, visiting the sick, following funerals, visiting a family member to preserve the bond of kinship, speaking kindly, and respecting parents, are considered virtuous deeds and recommended by the Prophet. Jesus said similar words, profound yet counterintuitive to our divisive human nature.

“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless anyone who curses you, do good to anyone who hates you, and pray for those who carry you away by force and persecute you, so that you may become sons of your Father who is in heaven, who causes His sun to shine upon the good and the wicked, and who pours down His rain upon the just and upon the unjust.” (Matt. 5:44–48) “You must love your neighbors as yourself.” (Mark 12:31)

HELPING HUMANITY

The circle of charitable deeds finally expands to all living creatures and humanity.

Allah enjoins justice, the doing of good, and generosity toward [one's] fellowmen. (16:90)

The circle of generosity is extended to all humanity. “Generosity toward [one's] fellowmen” refers to a relationship common to all human beings, the fellowship of man. This concept implies the fundamental ethical postulate to care for one another's material and spiritual welfare.

GUIDING OTHERS

Now, among those whom We have created, some people guide [others] in the way of the truth and act justly in its light. (7:181) Say [O Prophet]: “No reward do I ask of you for this [message] other than [that you should] love your fellowmen.” For if anyone gains [the merit of] a virtuous deed, We shall grant him an increase of good. Allah is much-forgiving, ever responsive to gratitude. (42:23)

HELP ENEMIES BECOME FRIENDS

But [since] good and evil cannot be equal, you repel [evil] with something better—and lo! He between whom and you were enmity [may then become] as though he had [always] been close [unto you], a true friend! Yet [to achieve] this is not given to anyone but those who are patient in adversity and endowed with the most excellent good fortune! (41:34–35)

STRIVE HARD IN GOD'S CAUSE

Strive strenuously in Allah's cause with all the striving due to Him. It is He who has elected you [to carry His message] and has laid no hardship on you in anything that pertains to religion [and made you follow] the creed of Abraham. He named you in bygone

times and this [divine writ]—“those who have surrendered themselves to Allah,” so that the Apostle might witness the truth before you and that you might bear witness to it before all humanity. Thus, pray constantly, render the purifying dues, and hold fast unto Allah. He is your Lord Supreme, and how excellent is this Lord Supreme and this Giver of Succor! (22:78)

CARE FOR ANIMALS

The Prophet urged humane treatment of animals in the following parable: He said, “A thirsty man came across a well, got down to it, drank water, and came out. Meanwhile, he noticed a dog licking mud due to excessive thirst. He went down the well again and watered the dog. God thanked him for that deed.” When asked if there was a reward for serving animals, the Prophet said, “Yes, there is a reward for serving any animate [living being]. If any Muslim plants any plant and a human being or an animal eats it, he will be rewarded as if he had given that much charity.”

GIFT OF LOVE THROUGH FAITH AND RIGHTEOUS DEEDS

Those who attain Faith and do righteous deeds will the Most Gracious endow them with love. Only to this end, We have made this [divine writ] easy to understand, in your tongue, [O Prophet,] so that you can convey thereby a glad tidings to the Allah-conscious and warn those given to [futile] contention. (19:96–97) The Allah-conscious will find themselves in [a paradise of] gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of a Sovereign who determines everything. (54:54–55)

God bestows His love on those who attain Faith, and He endows them with the ability to love His creation and cause them to be loved by their fellow men. This gift of love is inherent in the guidance

offered to man through divine revelation. Since man cannot understand the “word” of God, it has always been revealed in his human tongue and has always been expounded in concepts accessible to the human mind.

MODERATION AS A WAY OF LIFE

Thus, We have willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you. (2:143)

Any form of extreme behavior, such as excessive religiosity (asceticism), licentiousness, exulting in riches, hopelessness in adversity, wastefulness, miserly attitude, etc., falls outside the norm of moderation in Islam. Muslims are encouraged to establish a balance between living this life to its fullest (i.e., seeking family, wealth, position, and other such worldly pursuits) and remembering that whatever this life offers is temporary. To achieve this balance, one must partake, but not indulge in, what this life has to offer. With the

oft-repeated call to moderation in every aspect of life, the Holy Quran exhorts believers not to place too much emphasis on the physical and material aspects of their lives, but it also postulates that man's urges and desires relating to this "life of the flesh" are God-willed and, therefore, legitimate. The broad principle that guides the Islamic way of life can be summed up in an often-repeated call for moderation in all actions, including religion.

The expression "a community of the middle way" summarizes the Islamic attitude toward the problem of man's existence as such: a denial of the view that there is an inherent conflict between the spirit and the flesh and a bold affirmation of the natural, God-willed unity in this twofold aspect of human life. This balanced attitude, peculiar to Islam, directly flows from the concept of God's oneness and, hence, of the unity of purpose underlying all His creation. The

Muslim way of life should be an example to all mankind, just as the Apostle is an example to you.

ENJOY THE GOOD THINGS OF LIFE

Those who have attained faith and do righteous deeds incur no sin by partaking of whatever they may, so long as they are conscious of Allah, [truly] believe and do righteous deeds, and continue to be conscious of Allah and to believe, and grow ever more conscious of Allah, and persevere in doing good, for Allah loves the doers of good. (5:93)

This applies to eating and drinking, as well as metaphorically to partaking of anything desirable. “The good things of life” are what God has not prohibited, and therefore, the believers need not deny themselves. They grow ever more conscious of God, a sequence expressing growth and intensification.

SELF-MORTIFICATION AND EXAGGERATED ASCETICISM

In Christianity, “self-mortification” is called “mortification of the flesh” or the killing of a person’s desires through self-discipline. It ranges from self-denial—like not drinking alcohol or fasting—to hitting one’s own shoulders and back with a whip or strap.

Self-mortification is another extreme behavior, an attitude of denying all wholesome pleasures of life, characteristic of early Christianity but disapproved of in Islam.

“Monasticism” or monkhood is a religious way of life that involves renouncing worldly pursuits to fully devote oneself to spiritual work. Monastic life plays an important role in many Christian churches, especially in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Similar forms of religious life also exist in other faiths, most notably

in Buddhism, but also in Hinduism and Jainism. “Asceticism” is like monasticism, the manner of life, practices, or principles of an ascetic—the doctrine that a person can attain a high spiritual and moral state by practicing self-denial, self-mortification, and the like.

ASCETICISM FORBIDDEN IN ISLAM

O you who have attained to faith! Do not deprive yourselves of the good things of life, which Allah has made lawful to you, but do not transgress the bounds of what is right. Allah does not love those who transgress the bounds of what is right. Thus, partake of the lawful, good things which Allah grants you as sustenance, and be conscious of Allah, in whom you believe. (5:87–88) But as for monastic asceticism—We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for Allah’s good acceptance. (57:27)

Do not declare as forbidden all that is good and wholesome in life—the delightful things human beings desire and toward which their hearts incline. It refers to the self-mortification practiced by Christian priests and monks. The term “rahbaniyyah” (monastic asceticism) combines the concepts of monastic life with an exaggerated asceticism, often amounting to a denial of anything of value in the life of this world—they invented asceticism themselves, for We did not enjoin it upon them: We enjoined upon them only the seeking of God’s goodly acceptance.

GOODLY ENJOYMENT OF LIFE

[Say, O Prophet]: “I come unto you from Him [as] a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. Ask your Sustainer to forgive you your sins, and then turn toward Him in repentance. [Whereupon] He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life [in this world] until a term set [by Him is fulfilled], and [in the life to come] He will

bestow upon everyone possessed of merit [a full reward for] his merit.” (11:2–4)

This general call to repentance implies that no one is ever free of faults and temptations. The interpolation of the words “Say, O Prophet” is necessitated by the first-person construction of this sentence. The subsequent passage outlines both the “warning” and the “glad tidings” referred to in the verse and thus circumscribes elliptically the whole of the message entrusted to the Prophet. Since God, in His unfathomable wisdom, does not always grant worldly happiness and material benefits to everyone who believes in Him and lives righteously, it is only reasonable to assume that the good enjoyment of life in this world promised in the verse relates to the community of the believers, and not necessarily to individuals. In contrast to the partial and often only moral rewards and punishments in the life of this world, God will, in the life to come, bestow the full measure of His favors upon everyone who has acquired merit by virtue of his faith and his actions. See 3:185: “Only on the Day of Resurrection will you be requited in full for whatever you have done.”

NO HARDSHIP PERTAINING TO ISLAM

It is He who has elected you [to carry His message] and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion, [and made you follow] the creed of your forefather Abraham. (22:78)

The absence of any hardship in Islam stems from (1) avoiding complicated rituals or a system of taboos, which would impose undue restrictions on man’s everyday life, (2) rejecting all self-mortification and exaggerated asceticism, and (3) taking fully into account that “man has been created weak.” (4:28)

GOD DOES NOT OVERBURDEN HUMAN BEINGS

And [withal,] We do not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear. (23:62) “O our Sustainer! Lay not upon us a burden such as Thou didst lay upon those who lived before us! O our Sustainer! Make us not bear burdens, which we have no strength to bear!” (2:286)

“Lay not upon us a burden” refers to the heavy burden of rituals imposed by the Law of Moses upon “the children of Israel and to the world renunciation” recommended by some followers of Jesus.

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

WALKING MIRACLE

The odds of the existence of life on Earth are incredibly slim, considering the Earth went through numerous unlikely events before life could take hold. The Earth is the only planet where intelligent life exists. This means that even the very fact of our existence is a miracle in and of itself. The probability of you existing at all is 1 in 102,685,000 —yes, that’s a ten followed by 2,685,000 zeros! This means humans are the textbook definition of a miracle, and every life is sacred.

If life is so precious, what is the purpose of life? The answer must be that man’s life is much more than eating, sleeping, and procreation, something animals do very efficiently.

THE ROLE OF THE FIVE PILLARS

Instilling God-consciousness: God-consciousness, or “Taqwa,” is the bedrock principle of the Islamic way of life. The practice of the five pillars is only a starting point toward life’s ultimate destination. The five pillars promote many valuable social behaviors. For example, the five daily prayers at set times induce self-discipline, control of base desires, compassion, delayed gratification, and a balance between here and hereafter. The result of the genuine practice of Islam’s five pillars is pursuing a life of complete moral responsibility. Practicing the five pillars is only the first step and not an eventual goal in life. Some Muslims erroneously believe that religious rituals are an end in itself.

TWOFOLD CONCEPT OF WORSHIP

The traditional Muslim answer to the question of the purpose of human life is that man and Jinn was made for God's worship. The concept of worship is twofold: 1. Cognition of God's existence. 2. Conscious willingness to conform to God's will and plan.

PATH OF ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

Since our biological evolution is the foundation of our existence, we

continue to "evolve" during our lifetime by learning and growing. Each day, our purpose is to strive to be better than the day before and to continue this evolutionary process throughout our lifetime. The Holy Quran begins with the first word, "read." ***Read in the name of your Sustainer (96:1)*** repeated in verse 3: ***Read—for your Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who has taught [man] the use of the pen. (96:3-4)*** The "pen" symbolizes writing and recording knowledge. The term "read," or Iqra in Arabic, reminds us that the very foundation of the Islamic faith is rooted in knowledge. It serves as a reminder to seek enlightenment through education. The Arabic term "*ilm*" for knowledge is mentioned more often in the Holy Quran than in any other word except Allah. Through knowledge, we discover our hidden talents, a gift of God bestowed on every precious human life. If developed and used correctly, God-given talent helps achieve maximum human potential.

COPING WITH SUFFERING AND HARDSHIP

As we all know, this world is indeed "The House of Sorrows," and suffering is universal. There are few and widely spaced periods of

happiness in human life. Extended periods of sorrow or grief often overshadow man's existence. Everyone suffers from bitter hardships, even the good and innocent. These hardships sometimes cause the righteous to question God's transcendental justice. The difficulties of life may push those with weak faith to apostasy. There is always hope, no matter how bad things are. To lose hope is to deny God's power to change for a better future and end suffering.

LIFE IS A TEST

Be sure, We shall test you with fear, hunger, loss of goods, lives, and the fruits of your toil. (2:155)

Since we believe God knows everything, why should He test us? The test presupposes that man is not predestined to go to Paradise or Hell. The test we must undergo is not meant to add to God's knowledge. It is still necessary that all men and women be put to the test so that the true form of God's justice and mercy may emerge on the Day of Judgment.

THE ORIGIN OF HARDSHIP

No calamity can ever befall [man] unless it is by Allah's leave. Hence, whoever believes in Allah guides his [own] heart [toward this truth], and Allah has full knowledge of everything. (64:11)

Suffering and sin: The question arises: why does God make us suffer? A thought commonly goes through one's mind: is it a punishment for our sins? Under rare circumstances, God might punish corrupt communities, such as the people of Noah, Lot, Sodom, Gomorrah, the Israelites, etc. These examples are exceptions, and as a rule, God gives respite to all sinners to amend their ways. At an individual level, God grants respite, a chance to remedy the spiritual damage done by wrongful acts.

Now, if Allah were to take men [at once] to task for whatever [wrong] they commit [on Earth], He would not leave a single living creature upon its surface. However, He grants them respite for a term set [by Him]. (35:45)

LESSONS FROM SUFFERING

Hardships in life are a learning experience. We may gain insight from winning, but growth can come through difficulties. It allows us to examine our failures and what we learned from them. Hardships build character and perseverance. Each obstacle teaches something new.

Success can only be gained through perseverance and learning from experiences and failures. Every person fails; only some achieve everything they set out to achieve. Successful people exhibit the character to respond positively to failure. Some failures prove instrumental in altering a person's outlook, and their revised perspective leads to brilliant successes.

TEST THROUGH MISERY AND HAPPINESS

And, indeed, We sent Our messages unto people before thy time, [O Prophet], and visited them with misfortune and hardship so that they might humble themselves. Yet when the misfortune decreed by Us befell them, they did not humble themselves, but rather their hearts grew hard, for Satan had made all their doings seem good to them. Then, when they had forgotten all they were told to take to heart, We threw open to them the gates of all [good] things, [I.e., to test them by happiness after the test by misery] until - even as they were rejoicing in what was granted - We suddenly took them to task: and lo! they were broken in spirit. (6:42-44)

No calamity can ever befall the Earth, and neither yourselves, unless it is [laid down] in Our decree before We bring it into being.

Verily, all this* is easy for Allah. [Know this,] so that you may not despair over whatever [good] has escaped you nor exult [unduly] over whatever [good] has come to you. (57:22-23)

PATIENCE IN ADVERSITY

Who, when calamity befalls them, say, “Verily, unto Allah do we belong and, verily, unto Him, we shall return.” It is they upon whom their Sustainer’s blessings and grace are bestowed, and it is they, they, who are on the right path! (2:156-157) “O our Sustainer! Shower us with patience in adversity and make us die as men who have surrendered themselves unto Thee!” (7:125)

The shining example of Hagar and Ishmael: Hajj commemorates the patience in adversity exhibited by Hagar and Ishmael under the impossible conditions when they were abandoned in Mecca and the human sacrifice by Ishmael.

GOD’S MERCY IS DESTINED TO LIGHTEN EVERY SUFFERING

Consider the bright morning hours and the night when it grows still and dark. Your Sustainer has not forsaken you, nor does He scorn you. Indeed, the life to come will be better for you than this earlier part [of your life]! And, in time, will thy Sustainer grant you [what your heart desires], and you shall be well pleased. (93:1-5)

Though addressed to the Prophet, the verses above console every faithful man and woman suffering from the sorrows and bitter hardships that often afflict the good and the innocent. As morning always follows night, God’s mercy will lighten every sorrow in this world or hereafter. God has “willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy” (6:12 and 54).

INVOKE GOD ALONE FOR HELP

Say: “Can you see yourselves invoking anyone but Allah when Allah’s chastisement befalls you [in this world], or the Last Hour comes upon you? [Tell me this] if you men are truthful! Nay, but it is Him alone that you will invoke - whereupon He may, if He so wills, remove that [ill] which caused you to call Him. (6:40-41)

When facing difficulties and struggling through tough times, having a positive attitude and belief in God is imperative. He is always prepared to help. Therefore, we need to be patient and seek His help through prayers.

ENJOY GOOD THINGS

O children of Adam! Beautify yourselves for every act of worship, and eat and drink [freely], but do not waste: Allah does not love the wasteful! Say: “Who is there to forbid the beauty Allah has brought forth for His creatures and the good things from among the means of sustenance?” Say: “They are [lawful] in the life of this world to all who have attained faith—to be theirs alone on Resurrection Day.” Thus, clearly, do We spell out these messages unto people of [innate] knowledge! (7:31–32)

Beautify yourself with something that does not disgrace or render unseemly in the present world or what is to come. Thus, it signifies anything of beauty in the physical and moral connotations of the word. By declaring that all good and beautiful things of life—i.e., those that are not expressly prohibited—are lawful to the believers. The Holy Quran condemns, by implication, all forms of life-denying asceticism, world renunciation, and self-mortification. While believers and unbelievers share those good things, they will be denied to the latter in the hereafter.

FOREMOST IN CONDUCT

[Allah reminds you of your dependence on Him] to test you [and thus show] which of you is foremost in conduct. (11:7) Hallowed be He in whose hand all dominion rests since He can do anything. He who created death and life, so He might put you to the test [and thus show] which of you is most excellent in conduct. He will also [make you realize that] He alone is almighty, truly forgiving. (67:1–2)

The religion of Islam is transformational changes for good in the lives of its followers, leading to “best in conduct,” the eventual goal of Islam in this life. A good Muslim must be a good person.

Religion ideally serves several functions. It gives life meaning and purpose, reinforcing social unity and stability. It can act as an agent of social control, promote psychological and physical well-being, and motivate people to work for positive social change.

Disciplined life through religious practices is one way to achieve excellence in conduct. However, many great men in history were great humanitarians but were nonbelievers. According to the Holy Quran, the ability to perceive the existence of the Supreme Power is inborn in human nature due to the primordial covenant made between God and man. God has created humanity with a natural disposition to know the truth of right and wrong.

Since “death” has been created, it cannot be identical to nonexistence and must have a reality of its own. It implies the state of transition from this world to unimaginable existence in the hereafter.

There is a dark side of religion one should be aware of. Some Religious practices promote gender inequality and engender intolerance toward people whose faith differs from one’s own.

VIRTUOUS LIFE AND SALVATION IN THE HEREAFTER

But the foremost shall be [they who in life were] the foremost [in faith and good works]. They were always drawn close to Allah! In gardens of bliss [will they dwell]—many of those of olden times, but [only] a few of later times. (56:10–14)

The foremost among the righteous will be those who excelled in their faith and good works in their earthly life. They kept their covenant with God and man, refrained from doing evil, were truthful, apologetic, and contrite of heart, fed the needy and orphans, and some made the ultimate sacrifice in the cause of faith. The Prophet said, “Those who have excelled in good works (the foremost) shall enter paradise without accountability.”

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