

THE ELEMENTS OF

# Islam



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## Book Description

**NOTE:** This book has also been published under the title, “*The Thoughtful Guide to Islam*”.

At a time when communities increasingly tend to view each other with suspicion, *The Elements of Islam* cuts through the morass of misunderstanding and misinformation to give a true and timely overview of the universality and light of the prophetic message of Islam.

The *Elements of Islam* explains:

- The unifying path of Islam
- The history and development of Islam as a religion
- The distinction between original Islam and the traditions of Muslims
- The life that Muslims lead today
- The future of Islam

## About the Author

Acknowledged as a master of self-knowledge and a spiritual philosopher, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's role as a teacher grew naturally out of his own quest for self-fulfillment.

He travelled extensively on a spiritual quest which led to his eventual rediscovery of the pure and original Islamic heritage of his birth, and the discovery of the truth that reconciles the past with the present, the East with the West, the worldly with the spiritual – a link between the ancient wisdom teachings and our present time.

A descendant of five generations of well-known and revered spiritual leaders, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri has taught students throughout the world for over 30 years.

He is a gifted exponent of how the self relates to the soul, humankind's link with the Divine, and how consciousness can be groomed to reflect our higher nature.

The unifying scope of his perspective emphasizes practical, actionable knowledge that leads to self-transformation, and provides a natural bridge between seemingly different Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality, as well as offering a common ground of higher knowledge for various religions, sects and secular outlooks.

He is a prolific author of more than thirty books relating to the universal principles of Islam, the Qur'an, and its core purpose of enlightenment.

## **Editorial Review**

"Anything that slows down the approaching confrontation between Muslims and the rest of the world has to be well worth...(it). This concise explanation of Islam is about as timely as any book can be. I would suggest that this book ought to be read, and re-read, not only by so-called Christians, but by many Muslims, too."

**\_\_ The Guardian U.K.**



## **Acknowledgements**

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Encouragement and help also came from many friends and well-wishers. I offer my thanks to them all.

## Foreword

Human beings are the veil of God, and Muslims are the veil of Islam. This book tries to lift the veil without prejudice, condemnation or bitterness.

Islam – submission – is easy. Witnessing and affirming that there is only One God is a reality accessible to everyone. This truth is encapsulated in the first phrase of the Muslim creed: ‘I witness that there is no god but God.’ The translation of the complementary second half of this testimony of belief that ‘Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah’, is harder to decode. This is because through time its misapplication has clouded over its transformational dynamism.

The reader is strongly urged to read this book more than once and with patience, for not until he or she has imbibed all the tessellating parts touched upon in this brief introduction to the reality of Islam will it be possible to break through the distraction of form to arrive at the transformation of meaning.

## Introduction



Surely the [true] religion with Allah is Islam. (Qur'an 3:19)

The purpose of this book is to provide a brief, simple and factual account of Islam and Muslims at a time when cultural, racial, religious and other prejudices are prevalent throughout the world. Many of these prejudices, suspicions and fears are disguised behind subtle and civilized veneers; but in a world that is shrinking because of easy communication and travel, bridges between the people of Islam and those who are suspicious or fearful of it must be built.

If we look at the events of the recent past, we notice that since the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the dismantling of Communism, the world has been heading towards greater confrontation between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures. I hope this book will cut through what is at present a morass of misunderstanding, misinformation and confrontation so as to reach a deeper and truer understanding. Better understanding can only benefit humankind and lead to greater harmony.

This book gives an overview of the origin, meaning and universality of the prophetic message of Islam. In order to understand Islam, however, one must also understand something of the history of the Muslim peoples. Unless a clear distinction is made between original Islam and the behavior of Muslims, the current confusion could become magnified into greater and more dangerous controversy and confrontation. A necessarily brief history is therefore also outlined.

Islam is the culmination of all the faiths emanating from the Fertile Crescent. The prophetically revealed knowledge connected all aspects of life, the material and the metaphysical. Though the advent of the Muhammadi message (that is, the revelation of the Qur'an through Muhammad) was the seal of all previous prophetic messages, it was not the beginning of Islam. Islam – that

transactional state of joyful surrender to Allah – had been prescribed from the dawn of humankind, symbolized by the entry of Adam into the world of duality.

The rapid spread of Islam and its subsequent power and acceptance by hundreds of nations and millions of people from the extreme north-east of Asia to all of Africa and to parts of Europe, is a phenomenon that has often defied the objective analysis and understanding but which proves that people have been and still are prepared to hear the final Islamic reminder. That viability remains a factor in our present world, where so-called rational and materialistic/structuralist approaches are unable to bridge the widening gaps and conflicts within the human race.

During the past few years a plethora of books on Islam has appeared in the supermarkets of mass communication in the West. Many of these have been written to make sense of current affairs and the acceleration of events that are increasingly bringing Islam and the behavior of Muslims into the media spotlight.

Most Western writers on Islam and Muslims are alien to the path of Islam. They have not experienced its transformative element and as a result most of their writings remain somewhat academic and remote, often hailing from an inherent (and therefore unquestioned) attitude of superiority. If a writer is alien to the Islamic transformative process then it follows that most of his observations and commentary on Islam or on Muslim behavior and culture will be generally superficial despite appearing to reflect depth in their analysis. For example, in discussing the Qur'an, there is an unmistakable difference between trying to understand it, absorb it and be transformed by it, and reviewing it in the same way as any other book might be critically appraised. The Qur'an was never a book but a revelation. It is the inscribed 'tablet' that connects the physical worlds with that of the unseen and the divine dimension beyond time and space.

The Qur'an and the prophetic teachings transcend structuralist approaches for they are based on faith, trust and transformation wrought by following the path of submission. In studying Islam and Muslims the Orientalists and others representing European interests have been motivated by academic, practical, material, political or economic aims. They have therefore concentrated on

cultural and behavioral patterns, focusing on the differences between Muslim peoples, rather than on the unifying foundation that is Islam.

The first chapter of this book is essentially an introductory overview. I have tried to follow the chronology of the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires and to fill in a brief background on Arab tribalism and the model of life in Medina in order to enable the reader to move forward into an understanding of the history of Muslims.

Before starting on the history and development of the religion, however, it is necessary to give a brief introduction to what the unific path of Islam is and what it encompasses. In the second chapter, therefore, I have tried to show the basic foundation and purpose of creation. Using the Islamic teaching of the Qur'an and the prophetic way of Muhammad, we find that total interconnection between knowledge of the self and the human metaphysical dilemma of life, death and the purpose of existence totally mirrored in the world at large.

Chapter 3 describes the creed of Islam, its ritual practices, its outer bounds and laws, as well as the related commandments. It was these that subsequently came to be called the Pillars of the Faith. How the fundamental, pristine and simple teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet developed into a full theological and legalistic jurisprudence that was codified in numerous schools of thought is outlined in the fourth chapter.

Though the fifth chapter on the history of the Muslims is comparatively longer than the others it is very condensed. I have attempted to cover a broad and complex subject in a simplified and abbreviated fashion in order to show how the behavior of Muslims naturally reflected changes from age to age and also occasionally deviated from the original Islamic code of conduct. This information provides a necessary, if turgid, historical backdrop without which it would be impossible to understand the Muslim world today.

In Chapter 6 I have tried to illustrate some aspects of Muslim culture, social and economic life. I have consciously avoided dwelling on the great artistic, scientific and scholastic contributions Muslims have made to global culture because such information is easily available. I have

however touched on a few points that may help to answer some questions (and raise more) that arise out of current events concerning Muslims.

The epilogue highlights certain factors and important points which need to be borne in mind if we are to move into a future where the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim is to improve, and where there is improved cross-fertilization between Western cultures and the rising tide of Islam.

## Chapter 1: The Rise of Islam



It is said that there are as many ways to God as there are human beings. From the rise of human consciousness in the creation of Adam there have been people who have transcended the normal levels of consciousness. These people were the great men of wisdom in the Far East, the Rishis of India and the Prophets and Messengers of the Middle East, Egypt and elsewhere.

It is a natural part of human life to seek the answers to the questions of existence, the meaning behind all change and experience in this life, the meaning of death and what lies beyond. As far back as nine thousand years ago before history came to be recorded, and even before man settled down into agricultural communities, metaphysical insights were already being codified and institutionalized into religions in many parts of the world, especially in the Middle East. Once the immediate physical needs of man have been satisfied, the question arises as to what lies beyond the visible world. This question is the basis of the quest for God or, to put it another way, for the very source and essence of creation.

Whenever we accept a situation, we are submitting and connecting our system of knowledge to the knowledge of that particular situation. When we come to understand a reality of physical nature, that very understanding contains a submission to that reality. Similarly, as we learn to understand our own nature, we submit to that understanding, until a time comes when we can survey the entire vista of understanding through total submission. The rise of Islam is therefore equated with the rise of Adam, for all the Prophets and Messengers arrived at their knowledge through submission to Reality, which is Islam – submission to the will of God. All Prophets and Messengers therefore, were transformed through Islam.

Islam as realized in time relates to the completion of this awakening. The path of transacting in order to maintain and experience the totality of the knowledge that is Islam was crystallized with the Seal of the Prophets and Messengers some fourteen hundred years ago, through the agency of the last great Prophet, Muhammad. By the 'Seal of the Prophets' we recognize the completion of the prophetic teachings and paths that had been appearing in numerous waves for thousands of years before. His prophethood represents the completion of the universality of the prophetic light and knowledge. While Adam and all the Prophets were Prophets of Islam, from Muhammad's time onwards anyone could have access to that complete system for awakening to the highest spiritual state without superstition or cultural veils of habit.

Although the final historical Islamic phenomenon occurred some fourteen hundred years ago, Islam actually arose with the awakening of the Adamic consciousness to the meaning of life, death, the return journey and other facets of the unseen. While Adam and all the Prophets were Prophets of Islam, the collective prophetic consciousness reached its completion with Muhammad (whose name means 'most praiseworthy' or 'admirable').

The Qur'an says: 'We make no distinction between any of the Messengers and Prophets (i.e. in the eyes of God)' (3:84). All the Prophets of Islam shared between them the knowledge of God but advocated different outer rules and regulations for the well-being of human transaction in society. The optimum outer bounds and basic laws of conduct were thus universalized for all human beings and for all time by the last of the Prophets, Muhammad.

The rise of Islam in the revelation of the Qur'an and the prophetic conduct (called *Sunnah*) superseded all previously revealed laws for they are appropriate to every age and society. By combining the inner knowledge of and awakening to the divine purpose with the outer laws, which are general yet include specific instructions for transaction, conduct and worship, the 'package' was complete.

Initially this complete version of Islam was adopted by the Arab tribes of western Arabia and within a few decades had swept into the eastern Byzantine and Sassanian Empires. Wherever Islam was embraced its impact was to refine, purify and modify the existing culture, creating a



certain common harmonious pattern, yet without imposing cultural uniformity. Outer differences were sustained by a unique foundation of faith and submission to a mighty, compassionate and everlasting Creator.

## **The World in the Seventh Century**

The historical landscape in which the last message of Islam arose was made up of four major empires. Around the middle of the seventh century CE the civilized or ‘ruled’ world consisted of the Byzantine Empire with its center in Constantinople, the Sassanian with its center in Ctesiphon (present-day Baghdad), the Hindu Empire in north India, and the Chinese Empire. Movement, change and dynamism seemed to be centered around the eastern shores of the Mediterranean where decades of warfare, commerce and other interaction took place between the worlds of Roman Christianity, the Sassanians and other Christian and Jewish communities in East Africa and other parts of the Arabian peninsula.

The Roman Empire, which had officially embraced Christianity from the early fourth century, had the New Testament written in Greek, thereby remolding Hellenistic art, philosophy, science and law into a Christian format. Byzantine rule from Constantinople emerged as a Hellenistic – Christian hybrid quite different from the original Christianity emanating from the Fertile Crescent. Constantinople had replaced Rome as the center of the Roman Empire because it was closer geographically to the central axis of communication and economic exchange. Greek was the Empire’s language of high culture, while Latin was used for law; and Gregory the Great, the Pope of Rome, was subject to imperial rule from Constantinople.

Everyday life differed greatly from place to place between cities and the rural parts of the Empire. A few communities (such as the Nestorians) were still living and following an early Christian or gnostically oriented way of life, whereas the majority had become hedonistic and worldly. Several communities in North Africa and elsewhere within the Empire held on to a unitarian system of belief under Roman rule. The peak of Roman Christian orthodoxy, power and culture was reached during the reign of Justinian (527–565).

The struggle between the Romans and the Sassanians had been going on since Alexander the Great's conquest in the fourth century, and the early decades of the seventh century marked the obvious decline and weakening of both these old empires as a result of their continuous war and confrontation. In 629 the True Cross was restored to Jerusalem, symbolizing the triumph of Christianity over the Zoroastrian Empire, the Jews and deviants from the established creed.

The Zoroastrian Sassanian Empire had harbored considerable numbers of Christians. Its written language was Pahlavi (an Indo-Iranian language) though Aramaic was also widely used. The relationships between these varied peoples and their contacts with the Indians and Chinese developed mainly along the trade routes criss-crossing the land from east to west, and occasionally north to south, by a mercantile class bringing goods and cultural influences from the Nile to the Oxus. It was the same commercial class of people playing these routes that later helped spread the new spiritual awakening of Islam.

The religious and cultural beliefs prevalent in India and China at that time were variations on Hindu and Buddhist teachings respectively. Their spiritual beliefs emphasized mastering the self and understanding existence through adherence to a code of non-violence, deep meditation and enlightenment. The Indic cultures focused particularly upon personal salvation with secondary importance given to rule and outer law. In contrast to this, the Hellenistic thinkers and the Christians who adopted Hellenism, explored the external nature of outer phenomena and the moral nature of the individual.

## **Arabs and Arabia**

The Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by Arabic-speaking Bedouin tribes living a nomadic life. They criss-crossed various settlements in valleys and oases, concentrating on areas near the western coast of the Red Sea and along the trade routes between Yemen and Damascus. The word 'Arab' originally meant nomadic Bedouin and only later came to include all those who spoke the language or absorbed Arab culture.

Life in Arabia was tribal, punctuated by frequent inter-tribe and inter-tribe warfare as well as raids on trade caravans and settlements. The nomadic code of conduct was based on tribal loyalty, pride in ancestry and a great deal of personal independence. Tribal leadership was not necessarily directly inherited, but to a great extent earned by general consensus and acknowledgement of the leader's qualities. Each tribe was sovereign unto itself. Social stability was based on loyalty to the tribe rather than on any political form. Any attack therefore on any member of the group was regarded as an attack on the whole group, resulting in tribal animosities that were sometimes carried into urban life. The Arab sense of tribal or clannish belonging, pride in genealogy, love of independence, and defiance of outside authority have remained their predominant characteristics to this day.

For the sake of simplicity, the distinction between northern and southern tribes is a useful one. The northern tribes of `Adnan included the major tribes that inhabited the Gezira, the western and central parts of Arabia as well as most of those in southern Iraq. Parts of the southern or Yemeni tribes of Qahtan had spread into Syria and Iraq under the names of *Kalb* and *Kindah*. Much of the later in-fighting between the Arab Muslims in Andalusia can be understood if one bears in mind the nature of tribal allegiance. Numerous rulers in Andalusia and elsewhere often used ancestry and blood ties to justify rulership.

Many Arabian tribes were involved in commerce between the Mediterranean and the southern seas, carrying goods and safeguarding them between the commercial centers of Damascus and the southern port of Mocha (Aden). Others made their living by raiding caravans or settlements, or by leading a pastoral life, herding camels, sheep and goats. The herdsmen were constantly on the move between the infrequent wells, springs and oases. This kind of existence was only possible because of the domesticated camel which combined ease of mobility with the ability to endure harsh conditions. In addition to being a great beast of burden, the camel could be milked and its hair and dung used.

Camel nomadism was only possible because of a highly specialized form of social organization in which the honor of the individual was held uppermost. Generosity was considered the highest virtue. The social prestige of a Bedouin was directly proportionate to his dependence on animals:

the greater their number and size, the greater his potential for mobility and therefore his esteem. Able to travel long distances through the desert, the camel freed the Bedouins from agrarian controls and gave them mastery over desert and oasis. Even those who eventually settled in agricultural oases or commercial towns tended to perpetuate the same principles of social organization, maintaining their camels nearby, still cherishing their heritage as free wanderers, or at the very least, as pastoralists.

The language of these Arabs who dominated the Arabian Peninsula was, of course, Arabic, the Semitic cousin of Aramaic. The earliest Arab inscriptions which date back to the fourth century CE were mostly written in the Aramaic script, Arabic script evolving later. Poetry was the most striking feature of Arab creative expression, for, being truly portable, the human voice declaiming poems was the ultimate nomadic form of artistic activity. Their powers of memory were therefore well exercised and developed, an important point to note given the nature of the later revelation of the Qur'an.

The system of belief in most of the Arabian peoples was in one form or another pagan, with varying degrees of influence from the Christian and Jewish communities that lived both within Arabia and in the lands to the north and south.

In the mountainous southern Arabian Peninsula the dominant culture and religion of the Yemen was Christian, with smaller numbers of Jews and pagans present. The Abyssinian culture which derived from Yemen had over time developed its own flavor and it is because of these historical ties between Yemen and Ethiopia that Abyssinian Christianity prevailed in the horn of Africa.

The small town of Mecca was the most important trading center in the west of the peninsula because it sat at the junction of the two major routes: one north-south connecting Syria and the Mediterranean to Yemen and the lands beyond the Indian Ocean, the other east-west from Iraq and Iran to Africa and the Mediterranean. It had been a prominent and prestigious town since ancient times.

Arab paganism focused on worship at the cubic structure of the Ka`bah, known as the House of God, and originally built by the Prophet Abraham. This institutionalized religion brought about a certain measure of solidarity among the Arabs and a focal point for identification with their numerous deities, most of which were associated with natural objects, stones and stars. Sacred tokens of all clans were gathered in the Ka`bah, and the ritual of circling around it and touching the Black Stone lodged into one corner was a time-revered practice. Superstition, however, abounded, as did an enormous variety of beliefs and methods of worship. Some people even went around the Ka`bah naked, while at times the sacred water of the well of Zam-Zam was polluted as much by neglect as by lawlessness, incivility and the low level of hygiene. Since this major ritual was not exclusive to any one faith, many Christians, Jews and Sabaeans also sent offerings and performed the rituals. Though it was not unusual for each tribe to adopt a favorite deity, Allah was regarded by all Arabians as the Highest or Creator God.

### **Muhammad in Mecca**

It was into this background that the final prophetic message of Islam was revealed. Within less than half a century it sparked off the most rapidly growing religious revitalization and civilization, embracing numerous peoples from remote areas with diverse cultural backgrounds. The wave of Islam swept eastwards into Iran and the Fertile Crescent as well as westwards into the land of the Byzantines and North Africa.

Muhammad was born in AD 570 into the clan of Hashim (Banu Hashim) of the tribe of Quraysh, who at that time was the most powerful and prestigious tribe in Mecca. Some generations before Muhammad's birth, the Quraysh had taken over the guardianship of the Shrine of the Ka`bah and the springs at Mecca, and had since ruled through clan council. It was the scion of his clan, his grandfather `Abd ul-Muttalib, who became Muhammad's guardian when he was orphaned.

By the time Muhammad turned twenty, he had already participated in several long trade voyages as well as a few tribal expeditions and wars. His impeccable conduct had earned him an outstanding reputation for uprightness, honesty and nobility. These qualities attracted Khadijah, a wealthy lady from a prominent Meccan family, who was fifteen years his senior. Muhammad married her at the age of twenty-five, and this union was most significant in the support, solace and companionship they shared, particularly in the early days of his prophethood. Although Muhammad was not a vocal rebel against his community's social and institutional life, throughout his youth he clearly dissociated himself from the pagan rites and customs of the Quraysh. He had no spiritual or other formal education and no background in the Judaic and Christian traditions. He had, however, spent much time meditating for long periods in a mountain cave outside Mecca, called Hira.

His final spiritual awakening and call to prophethood occurred when he was about forty. The event of the full revelation was as dramatic and sudden as it was transformative. The human frame is too frail to absorb the shock of the infinite unveiled Light of Reality, so for the next twenty-three years of his life the revealed message of the Qur'an descended upon the Prophet through the angelic medium of Gabriel. There is no doubt that neither the occasion nor the content of the revealed message was under Muhammad's conscious control. The sequence of the revelation followed an organic pattern dictated by the occasion, but Muhammad already knew the form of the whole Qur'an, which he clarified after it was fully revealed before his death.

The particular night that the Qur'an descended upon the Prophet's heart is described as the 'Night of Power' (*Laylat al-qadr*; 97:1-5), symbolizing the full descent of the Book of Knowledge in contrast to the years it took for it to be outwardly manifested.

Another night of note which is regarded as a significant experience in the Prophet's life was the 'Night of Ascent' (*Laylat al-mi'raj*; 17:1), in which the Prophet actually experienced a heavenward journey that included a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Natural physical limitations were overcome and the soul's journey to its Lord took place. This event is symbolically reflected in the transportation of the believer's soul during his or her daily prayers.

Muhammad's mission and the message of the Qur'an presented a great challenge to the Meccans. This challenge remains as forceful to this day. Those who accepted his message during the first years were very few. In addition to his loyal wife, Khadijah, his cousin, `Ali Ibn Abi Talib, and Zayd Ibn Harithah (both youths living in his own household) stood behind him. Abu Bakr, a well-known Meccan merchant, and a handful of others soon followed, together with a number of youths, slaves and other tribeless people.

The rest of Muhammad's tribe soon became hostile to him and his mission for it challenged their existing idolatry and pagan social practices. His teachings threatened to undermine the entire way of life of the Arab peoples. His call to submit, adore, worship and fear the One and Only God and to abandon all other false worldly bases of security and power were too much to bear for these clannish pagans. Arab nomadic society was, after all, founded upon ancestral tradition and depended on the exercise of strength and cunning for its survival.

The Qur'anic revelation during this period was mostly related to the knowledge of God, self-purification and abandonment, and submission to the infinite and all-encompassing Reality. The Meccan revelations emphasized human salvation, awakening to mankind's divine origin, fear of God and the Last Judgment.

The increasing hostilities waged against the Muslims and the Prophet in Mecca resulted in the migration of some seventy of his followers to the friendly protection of the neighboring Christian King of Abyssinia, Soon afterwards, and as a result of friendly invitations for him to migrate to the nearby town of Yathrib, Muhammad departed secretly from Mecca under cover of night accompanied by his closest companion Abu Bakr. His cousin, (and by now son-in-law) `Ali, was left behind that night to sleep in the Prophet's bed so as to foil the plot of a band of Quraysh who had been intending to murder him while he slept. Within days the Prophet and his followers were installed in their new base and thus began the new phase of his life and mission, establishing a spiritually guided community.

## **Living Islam: The Medina Model**

On 24th September CE 622 the Prophet entered Yathrib, a city predominantly inhabited by two Arab tribes and a community of Jews. This migration (*Hijrah*) later became the starting point for the Muslim lunar calendar.

Yathrib became the home of the first living community of Muslims. Islam is a *Din*, a life-transaction. The first place this action began to unfold was subsequently called Medina, for this name is derived from the word meaning to civilize or refine, implying that civilization takes root where the *Din* is practiced.

In Medina the Prophet established and led the new community. He was naturally selected as the divinely inspired ‘philosopher-king’ who had transcended the limitations of Self and Ego and had thereby become the perfect interspace between the material world and the world beyond time and space.

The early years were marked by numerous defensive battles to ward off the attacks of the Quraysh and other tribes. Although Muhammad taught his community to defend themselves and fight in the way of God, he also constantly reminded them of the necessity for inner purification and self-abandonment in order to reflect the attributes of Divine Mercy.

Throughout his time in Medina Muhammad led the life of an ordinary man, acting as father, husband and member of the community, yet he was distinguished above all mankind by receiving the inspirational Message directly from the Divine Source. He lived in the moment without reference to the disturbances and injuries of the past, and without fear of the future, except for what pleased God and met with His approval and will.

By the eighth year in Medina the community had begun to outgrow its physical boundaries and started to expand as new converts joined them during their pilgrimages to Mecca. Soon afterwards the Meccans capitulated and gave in to the swelling wave of Islam. The idols in the Ka`bah were destroyed and the mercy of Islam encompassed all those who entered it in peace.



During the last two years of the Prophet's life thousands of tribal Arabs, Jews and others, embraced Islam, either out of conviction or convenience. Among those who did so at the last hour were some of Muhammad's fiercest enemies who in later decades reverted to some of their pagan tribal habits.

It is estimated that between the years 7 and 10 after *Hijrah* (AH) the number of Muslims grew from tens of thousands to over two hundred thousand. Many of the new adherents had very little time or opportunity (and sometimes even lacked the inclination) to learn about this total system of life-transaction. By the tenth year AH large numbers of warring tribes, from the north and south, from Yemen and Syria, Persians, rich, poor, black, white, meek and mighty, were all sheltered and absorbed by Islam.

Towards the end of the tenth year AH the Prophet performed the first complete Islamic pilgrimage, the rituals and formalities of which are followed to this day. On his return from Mecca to Medina he proclaimed that `Ali was his heir and successor at Ghadir Khum. This proclamation, however, was interpreted by different factions in different ways, such as to mean `Ali was the spiritual inheritor rather than the political heir. This event was a major turning point in the history of the Muslims, for from it grew the division between Shi`as and Sunnis (see Chapters [Four](#) and [Five](#)).

After the Prophet's return to Medina from Hajj he fell ill, and after a few days of fever his soul departed on the 13th of Rabi` al-Awwal (the third month of the Muslim calendar year).

As we have already seen, the nature of the Qur'anic message in Mecca was to do with faith, belief, trust in and submission to Allah, selflessly, generously living this life in preparation for the next. In the Medina phase, however, the revealed message and prophetic actions dealt mostly with matters of community, family and social life, trade, war, law and all the other regulatory foundations required for a civilized society. It was in Medina that most of the acts of worship and the ordinances governing social order were revealed. The revelations and prophetic teachings during this period later gave rise to the development of Islamic theology and jurisprudence, and all the other scholarship of a formalized religion.

It was in Medina that the Qur'an showed clearly that Islam is not simply a matter of individual enlightenment and obedience to God; but includes a foundation for a wholesome community in which all Muslims are bound to each other through honorable and accountable conduct. Indeed, it is only under these circumstances that individual awakening can be enhanced and supported.

The Qur'an describes the life of the community in Medina as the most perfect that has been brought into existence: 'And the believers, men and women, are friends of one another; they enjoin the good and forbid evil ...' (9:71). The ultimate good is worship and knowledge of Allah, and the worst evil is selfishness, ignorance and the pretension of having no need of Allah.

The Medina model is a way of life in harmony with all creation and its Creator. Its fabric is woven of a life-transaction that unifies the constant personal struggle towards inner purification with awareness of outer change and the ever-present tendencies of the ego-self. Its social fibers are composed of deep courtesy and responsibility towards others. The model of Medina symbolizes the practice ground for self-awakening, the social expression and living achievement of true Islam.

The life of Medina followed the spiritual enlightenment of Mecca. The communal aspects of our lives follow those of personal awakening. When the inner reality has been discovered then the outer law and courtesy will be established as a natural consequence. Mecca relates to perfecting inner ecology, while Medina relates to interacting with the outer environment. Mecca was the unveiling of the microcosm, Medina was the living macrocosm.

### **The Way of Muhammad: The Perfect Model**

This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed my favor to you and chosen for you Islam as a religion. (Qur'an 5:3)

The natural development of the self-awakened is to move from the discovery of the Divine Light within oneself – serving others with humility, selflessness and love – to the Creational Source

that is behind all creational manifestation. After the retreat into the cave of awakening comes the return to society. After having been illuminated and having tamed the lower animalistic tendencies, one can only re-connect with the natural creation, the highest manifestation of which is humankind.

The life of the Prophet and his experiences encompass a rich source of teaching for those who want to follow in the prophetic footsteps, for he underwent practically every possible human experience as he fulfilled the roles of teacher, immigrant, merchant, head of the household, political and social leader, military commander, judge, ruler and, throughout, the Seal of the Prophets. His nobility, humanity, magnanimity, courage, forgiveness, steadfastness, understanding and total devotion to Allah, the Most Glorious, were expressed in such diverse situations common to the collective experience of mankind. His behavior and conduct, the *Sunnah*, became the ideal standard to be followed and from it the adjective *Sunni* is derived. In this sense every Muslim aspires to be a *Sunni*, that is, he or she aims to follow the Prophet's way.

His love for children and his loving conduct towards his daughter Fatima and his wives, as well as his care for orphans and the needy were all glowing examples for his contemporaries and also for latter-day Muslims. He was always spontaneous, accessible, selflessly devoted to serving God's creation cheerfully and with no worldly expectation. His inner joy and tranquility radiated while he exerted outer effort and struggle to uplift humanity towards fulfilling its highest potential. His sincerity to the cause of unveiling the truth, his total reliability and other virtuous characteristics revealed themselves even in the most adverse of circumstances.

Muhammad's way was the perfection of the prophetic way that began with the rise of consciousness in the Adamic model. The revealed Qur'an talks about all the Prophets and Messengers as having brought to their communities the one and only message of abandonment into God, living a godly way in this physical existence before returning to another phase of being.

The Qur'an acknowledges all the Prophets. From other traditions we are subsequently told that there were thousands of them (the figure of 124,000 is given), but of them only a few were

referred to in the Qur'an. In fact, there are far more references to the Prophets Moses and Jesus than to Muhammad. Though it makes no distinction between them, the Qur'an does highlight those that brought about crucial social change as those possessed of resolution (*ulu' al'azm*; 46:35), and these include Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad.

Muhammad is the culminating pinnacle of all the Prophets and Messengers. He embodies the completion of the collective prophetic consciousness that has come to mankind during the years of the final evolution and awakening of the higher consciousness within the human being. His message confirms all that went before and points out where distortion, misunderstanding and aberration have occurred. Thus his message supersedes all those previous to it in a way that leaves no space for any doubt or misunderstanding, except for those who actively seek it and wish to create confusion for themselves and others.

### **The Living Qur'an**

Although the Qur'an is a treasury of information, its real glory and miracle lie in its power to transform those who approach it with faith and the conviction that it is the revealed divine blueprint. It unveils itself and clarifies what appears to be obscure in some parts by other sections within it. The organic interrelationship of all its topics reflects reality in such a way that it defies a purely structuralist scholastic approach. As the manifestation of the highest godly attributes in human form, the Prophet was described as the 'Living Qur'an'. He considered all Prophets and Messengers his brothers. Indeed, he considered all mankind a single brotherhood, all men and women being equal in the eyes of the Creator, but those are most honored by the Creator who are most pious and sincere in their submission and abandonment.

The Qur'an reveals that all the Prophets are in Islam, each one of them moving along this path of awakening (22:78). The greatest patriarch and early Prophet of the Judaic-Christian-Islamic continuum, the Prophet Abraham, declared: 'I submit myself to the Lord of the worlds' (2:131), referring to his discovery of the way to arrival through submission. Most of

the Prophets of the Bani (tribe of) Israel who are mentioned in the Qur'an declare the same, as did Noah: 'I am commanded to be of those who submit' (10:72).

The Qur'an describes that the only way as far as Allah is concerned is Islam; any other path will not be accepted from man. This is to say that whoever does not enter the ultimate sanctuary through its door will be obstructed, because the ultimate sanctuary is based on the unity of the Creator, and as long as the seeker still sees himself, his method, his 'way' as important, he will not arrive at that final realization.

During his stay in Mecca, the Prophet only spoke about God and what He desires of His creation, what pleases Him and the ways that deflect and distract one from Him. During the thirteen years of the Meccan period, the prophetic message focused on self-enlightenment based on selfless action and reflection. The Qur'an confirms that when guidance comes from God or when God wishes to guide someone, his or her heart will be opened or their burdens will be lifted through this submission (6:125). So it is by faith and trust that there arises in the believer the natural state of active awareness and spontaneous purification which is the result of the path of submission, thereby unifying personal acts of worship and morality with that of communal responsibility.

Muhammad's way was that of love for and submission to the one and only Creator, and consideration for all creation. It was the way of being a guest in this short life in order to move into the higher realm of afterlife. The Muhammadi model of existence is based on the truth that human life is born out of a fusion between the spirit, which is from beyond time and space (for it is from the Divine Command), and physical matter resulting in the individual soul. This event comes about in order to complete the journey of the soul from its Creator via creation back to Creator. It is part of the process of the final awakening to the one and only Reality in existence.

True freedom comes through recognizing the transience of all physical experience. Since human beings cannot derive security from anything transient, they must seek the non-transient which lies only within the heart.

Heavens and earth do not contain Me but the heart of the believer contains Me. (Sacred Tradition)

The Muhammadi model shows us that this awakening occurs when the heart is purified and emptied of all idols like the Ka`bah, for it is the ultimate sanctuary. If there are false gods in it then there is no room for Allah. Only through purity of heart is that spontaneous awareness and intuition heightened and with that the human being becomes the interfacing locus between the seen and the unseen.

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