

## **The Wider Picture: Creation from a Muslim Perspective**

God is one – creator – sustainer – creation is in harmony through obeying God’s will – the natural God-given way of life – free will – we are the servants of God and the stewards of creation – guidance – accountability – revelation sent in Books and in creation – a chain of Prophets from Adam onward – all guidance essentially the same – Qur’an is the criterion – role of Prophets – a code by which to live – a sense of the closeness of God – the practices of Islam

Everyone sees things from a particular angle. If we think of a football game, the supporters of the losing side often tell the story of the match differently from the winners. The same would be true if we think about an event in history like a war. The victors always seem to write the history books. If we don’t know how the other person sees something, then it is easy to misunderstand.

The same is true when looking at a religion. Jews and Christians grow from the same roots but read their histories in different ways. Each religion has its own way of seeing the world; its own story to tell. When we grasp the big picture, we can make sense of the details. Most people in the West know very little about Islam. Probably they have heard that there was a prophet called Muhammad. A few may have heard about a holy book called the Koran (or Qur’an, as it normally is spelled now). Apart from that, most of what we know about Islam and Muslims is what we hear on the news. We have no framework to make sense of it. To build such a framework, we need a starting point. The Muslim starting point goes back before the creation of the world, before time began.

Before the world was created, God always existed because God has no beginning and no end. God is beyond our created universe. God is outside time and outside space. God created time like everything else. There is no place that we can say, “God is there.” To sum this up, we say that God is transcendent, meaning beyond everything that is created. This does not mean that “God is very old” or that “God lives in a place a long way away.” God is beyond all that. It means also beyond our

understanding and beyond our ability to speak accurately about God. Our language, our understanding, our ability to imagine simply does not stretch far enough to be able to handle the transcendent world of God. Even to call it a world is wrong. God is beyond everything.

The fundamental understanding of Islam is that God is one and unlike any created thing or being (Q. 112:1-4). God alone exists without the need for anything else. God was never created. God always simply existed. God cannot be divided up into parts nor can any created thing or person share in the being of God. The English word "God" is used for this one supreme being, and similar words occur in a variety of languages. In Arabic, God is Allah, meaning simply "the one and only God." This Arabic word for God is used by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians as well as by Muslims worldwide. Just as the English word "God" with a capital G cannot have a plural, so in Arabic Allah has no plural form. This defends the absolute uniqueness of God.

God chose to create by a free act of the will. God did not need to do it but chose to create. God simply creates by a word of command. God says, "be' and it is!" God is the creator of everything that exists and all is dependent on God (Q. 2:255, 36:81-82, 54:50). God is perfect, and a perfect being cannot create imperfection; therefore the whole of the creation was created in a state of perfection. Or better to say, it was as perfect as it could be (Q. 32:7, 39:5). God exists outside time and space but the creation is within time and space. This means that everything that is created had a beginning and so must grow older and eventually cease to exist. From the very moment that we are born, we are getting older and will in the end die. Every created thing is limited also by space. I am here and not there. Therefore, to be created in time and space carries with it certain limitations. The creation can only be the best of all possible worlds.

God is the sustainer of the whole universe (Q. 11:6). God did not create it and then cease to be involved. Without the ongoing, sustaining presence and interest of God, the whole of creation would cease to be any more. Nothing can exist without being in a relationship with the creator (Q. 2:255).

Christians may be asking: What about Adam and Eve, the fall, and original sin? The Qur'an speaks of the existence of Adam and Eve as the first two human beings and of their error of judgment in thinking that something evil was good. This led to their being cast out from Paradise. Eventually they repented and were reconciled to God. Christians maintain that this shattered the perfection of creation in a way that could not be fully repaired. This led to the development of

the doctrine of Original Sin to speak about this fundamental flaw in creation. From the Muslim perspective, God can do anything and so is capable of restoring the creation to the state of perfection that was lost. When Adam and Eve repented and sought God's mercy, they were forgiven and returned to a state of harmony with God (Q. 2:30-39).

The key word here is "harmony." God creates the world in a state of harmony (Q. 32:7, 95:4). That harmony exists between every individual created thing and God. If everything is in harmony with God, then the whole of creation must be in harmony within itself. Each human being, for example, is created in a state of harmony with God, with all humankind and with every other element in creation. Now, harmony between the creator and the creation is not a partnership of equals. Who knows best how the creation should run? Surely the creator who designed it and brought it into being. Therefore, harmony with God requires that every element of creation knows its place and obeys the will of God. So all creation, including every human being, is called to be the obedient servant of God. Only then can there be true harmony or peace.

This idea of fundamental harmony with God and within the creation is contained in the word *islam*. Arabic is a language built up on three-letter roots. Words are made by adding to these three letters. Every word built on the same root is part of one family and shares a set of common meanings. Take, for example, the Arabic root S L M. From this we can make three words all belonging to the same family: *islam*, *muslim*, and *salam*.

s l m  
is lam  
mus li m  
salam

See the way in which the root letters appear in each word? The word *islam* means that state of perfect harmony that exists between God and the whole of creation, and within creation itself, which is the way that God created it. It contains also the idea of submission, because this harmony can come about only when everything submits to the will of God and acts according to the plan of the creator. This will lead to the state of absolute peace, which can come about only when everything is in harmony and obedience to God.

The word *muslim* describes something in the state of *islam*. In this way, we can say that God created everything in the state of *islam*, that

is, God created everything *muslim*. This goes right back to the dawn of creation itself. The planets, sun, and stars all were created *muslim*. Mountains, rivers, and minerals all are *muslim*. Trees, plants, flowers, and vegetables are *muslim*, and so are animals, birds, and fish. The natural condition of the whole of creation is to be in a state of potential perfect harmony with God and with everything else, that is to be *muslim* (Q. 17:44, 24:41). In the same way, every human being is created *muslim* and we are most completely at peace when we submit to the will of God in all things (Q. 57:1, 64:1). This brings us to the third of our words made from the same root: *salam*. This word is used in the traditional Arabic greeting between Muslims: *salam alaykum*. This is normally translated “Peace be with you,” but it really means “may you come ever more completely into that state of perfect harmony and peace with God that is meant by *islam*.” When people finally reach heaven, one of the names for which is Dar al-Salam (The Land of Peace), this will be the greeting that they will use there (Q. 33:44).

When the disciples of Jesus asked him to teach them to pray, he taught them the words of what today is called the Lord’s Prayer. This contains the line, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.” This leads Christians to speak about the kingdom (or reign) of God. In the reign of God, the will of God will be obeyed by every element of creation. It is worth thinking about this in relation to the definition of *islam* in the last paragraph.

When human beings are living this way of life, which is in total harmony with God, that is, *islam*, they are said to be following the *din al-fitra* (the natural God-given way of life) (Q. 30:30). The human being is now living like a flower or a bird in the sky, fully and completely the way that God intended. The difference between a human being and a flower or a bird is that we have received the revelation from God in the form of Books of guidance. We have thus been called to live an ethical life following the revealed will of God. It is in this way that we come to a state of harmony with God, and, as we can rationally comprehend and morally implement the divine will, we can bring out the full potential harmony that is latent in all creation.

When a mountain, tree, or dog is in its natural state, it is *muslim*, but it has no choice in the matter. That is how it was created and that is how it is. Human beings are different. We are the pinnacle of creation. What makes us unique is that we are able to receive direct revelation from God and that we are given the gift of free will with which to put it into practice. This means that we are free to submit to the will of God and thus find perfect harmony and peace. The opposite is also true. Part of God’s plan in giving us free will is that we also have the

ability to rebel against God's will. This is sin. Why then should God give us free will? Consider the different values of these two acts. First, if I program my bedside tea-maker to make tea in the morning, I hardly feel the need to reward it when it does the job for which it was made. Second, if I rise ten minutes before my wife and creep downstairs to make her tea, then I stand likely to receive a reward for an act of thoughtfulness and love. Only a free being can act out of love, compassion, and overriding concern for the other, and therefore the value of a free act is different from one that is programmed. Only a human being can choose to become the servant of God in everything, to live a life of obedience to the divine will, a life of ethical service to God, and freely to rely totally on the mercy of God. This is the duty and the dignity of human beings, and this is why God gave human beings free will.

The role of each human being in God's plan is summed up in two words. The first of these is *'abd*, the human being as the slave or loving servant of God. We can see how central this is in Islamic thinking as the man's name that we often hear, Abdallah, means the Servant of God. The servant is the one who obeys the master's will and lives it in practice. This leads to the second concept of *khalifa*. This means to be the Regent of God upon the earth (Q. 2:30). The regent is the one who is given all power and authority under God. Every human being is called to the high dignity of being *khalifa* and thus is called to tend the whole of creation, to cherish it, and to bring it into a state of perfection. The Qur'an tells us that God created human beings for the sole purpose that we would worship God (Q. 51:56).

The Islamic understanding of creation is that it is dynamic and not static. Once something is created in time, it never stands still. It is like walking against the flow on a moving walkway; one needs to keep moving just to keep one's place. Standing still means that one goes backward. So, even though God created the best of all possible worlds, it needs to be tended in order to maintain that state and to develop its full potential. This is the role of every human being.

Human beings have always been in a relationship with the rest of creation. We have formed artificial lakes to provide water supplies and generate electricity. Every rose that grows in our gardens is the result of generations of breeders striving to bring out the full potential of the perfection of roses. All our breeds of dogs have been bred for specific purposes by human beings. Similarly with all our domestic animals, they are far from the original forms of cows or sheep centuries ago. This is all part of human beings acting as *khalifa* on the earth. This should mean that ecology, care for the environment, is a natural part of

being human, of being the Regent of God upon the earth (Q. 31:20). We are not at liberty to pollute or abuse the earth for our own selfish ends. That would be rebellion against God's will, and that is sin.

If someone is sent as the regent of a higher authority, as the servant of a master, that person is not free to do as he or she pleases. The regent always receives guidance on how to act from the higher authority and will be held to account for the way in which she or he has discharged her or his duty of obeying God in all things. Notice here that all human beings are called to be *khalifa*. This is not just something for rulers or the rich. It applies equally to all men and women. This is the dignity and duty of being human. Not surprisingly then, God will hold all human beings to account at the end of their lives for the way in which they have discharged this duty to be the Regent of God on earth (Q. 2:48, 6:21-31, 22:17, 99:7-8). Depending on this, judgment will be eternal reward in heaven or punishment in hell.

To send a servant without guidance and then to hold that person to account would be fundamentally unjust. When God sends guidance to the earth, we call that revelation (Q. 3:73, 7:203, 16:64). In an Islamic understanding, guidance comes from God in two forms. The first is in the form of Books or Scriptures that have been sent by God to explain how human life should be lived. The second is in the form of the creation itself, which is full of the signs of God. By exploring the handiwork of the creator, we come to an understanding of how the creator intended that everything should be organized. We are used to thinking of the religious scholar or theologian as someone who serves or worships God by seeking to understand the revealed books. The scientist too, who seeks to understand the workings of creation, is likewise serving or worshipping God by so doing. All exploration of the revelation of God is an act of worship.

According to this model, both the Books revealed by God and the created order revealed by God have their origins in the same source, namely God. This means that ultimately they must agree. In this way, there is no tension between religion and science in Islam. Both have their source in God and ultimately must agree. If it appears that science and religion do not agree, then we either are not understanding our Books properly or we have more work to do on our science so that we understand the creation better. Again and again in the Qur'an, we read that we should use our heads to puzzle things out, to reason and question, so that we more perfectly understand the world around us "in which there are signs from God" (Q. 6:98-99,105).

Now, if every human being stands in need of this guidance from God, then guidance must have come right from the very beginning of

human life on earth (Q. 2:30). God is the source of all revelation, and without it we would not be able to know the will of God and obey it. Revelation is an essential element in God's plan. Through revelation we are lifted up into an ethical state of living a moral life. Through revelation we are able to know the path that human beings should follow. In the Islamic system, morality, the way of life that pleases God, is revealed. It is the duty of the human being to listen to revelation and obey it. From the beginning, human beings were created with a predisposition to acknowledge the Lordship of God (Q. 7:172). Now, we are all called to serve God through obedience and love. As one well-known statement of God related by Muhammad (*hadith qudsi*) puts it:

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

Adam and Eve, as the first human beings, needed guidance from God. Thus Adam was the first human being to receive revelation from God; he was the first Prophet of the *islamic* way of life. But guidance is needed by every human being, and so the Qur'an tells us that revelation has been sent to every people on earth so that none are left without a Prophet to help them live an *islamic* way of life (Q. 25:51, 35:24).

By definition there is only one God and all human beings are equally called to be the servants of God upon earth; we are all one family (Q. 7:189). This means that all the guidance sent by God on how to live human life was *in essence* the same (Q. 6:92, 17:107-109). God would not guide one group of people to live in one way and another group to live in essentially a different way. All peoples, wherever they live on earth and whenever human life began in that place, have received essentially the same guidance on how to live according to God's plan for creation. This should affect the way in which people react when they "discover" a new civilization. Often when Europeans went out to discover the world, they thought that it was their task to bring civilization and religion to those people because it was not there beforehand. According to this Islamic model, exactly the opposite is the case. Whenever a new civilization is "discovered," we should be aware that God has been there before us and that those people have received revelation from God (Q. 10:47, 16:36). This ought to bring about a sense of deep respect rather than a feeling of supremacy.

How then are we to judge what remains from the original revelation sent by God and what has been added or lost down through the centuries? From a Muslim perspective, the Qur'an is the final revelation sent by God that has been preserved intact from the time of Muhammad (Q. 41:42). This was not a new revelation but *in essence* the same as all that had gone before (Q. 2:41, 3:81, 5:48, 16:36, 41:43, 43:45). The Qur'an serves as the benchmark or the criterion by which all other earlier revelations are to be judged (Q. 25:11, 86:13). When a new people are encountered, their way of life can be measured against the Qur'an. Those things that agree with the message of the Qur'an, such as a profound respect for the natural order in creation, are a cause for rejoicing, because Muslims believe this new community is guided by the revelation sent to them. Those things that go against the fundamental revelation of the Qur'an, like human sacrifices, for example, can be seen not to have come from God. Wherever such practices came from, if they are contrary to the guidance in the Qur'an, they did not come from God but must be the result of human misunderstanding or rebellion against the will of God. In this way, the Qur'an can be seen coming to confirm earlier revelations but also to correct contemporary errors and practices based on them, given that the Qur'an is always to be regarded as the preferred text. Similarly the example of Muhammad, based on the Qur'an, acts as a universal model for a life lived in submission to God.

If every people on earth has been sent revelation through a Prophet, how many Prophets were there? What were their names? What were the Books that were sent to them? We don't know all the answers to these questions. The criterion is the Qur'an that was sent to the Prophet Muhammad. Whatever disagrees essentially with the Qur'an and whatever example is contrary to the example of Muhammad are not from God. The Qur'an tells us the names of twenty-five Prophets of God and names five Books that were sent. Of these we can be sure, but this is not an exhaustive list. There were other Prophets and other Books whose names are not known to us (Q. 40:78). Every Book sent by God must be respected by Muslims as a revelation from God. Similarly, every Prophet sent by God must be respected, and his or her example is an example of a godly life that could be followed. The problem for a Muslim is that those earlier Books are no longer intact in such a way that we can rely on them entirely. The lives and teachings of those Prophets have not been preserved like the life and teaching of Muhammad and so cannot be relied on in the same way. However, the principle is clear. Every earlier Book and Prophet must be respected, but the criteria of authenticity are the Qur'an and Muhammad (Q. 2:285, 4:150-152).

For Jews and Christians especially, this has a profound message. Of the twenty-five Prophets named in the Qur'an, twenty-one are biblical figures. A Muslim is required to believe that Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, among others, were Prophets sent by God to teach essentially the same message as Muhammad and the Qur'an. Islam never sees itself as a new religion revealed to Muhammad in the Qur'an in the seventh century of the Common Era. Islam is part of that ongoing revelation from God that goes right back to Adam and Eve and encompasses every human being who has ever lived. The Qur'an is a restatement of the essentially identical revelation, which is there to reinforce and clarify earlier revelations. To the extent that earlier revelations have been lost or misunderstood, the Qur'an comes to correct those errors and restate the revelation of *islam*.

You may have noticed the careful way in which the words "Islam" and "Muslim" have been used until now. Capital-I Islam and capital-M Muslim can be used only to refer to that revelation that was contained in the Qur'an and exemplified in the teaching of Muhammad in the seventh century. As such, it is fixed in time, and one cannot speak of Islam and Muslims before this date. At the same time, *islam*, that is the never-changing way of life that has been revealed by God, has existed from the time of Adam and Eve. They were the first *muslims*, that is, those who lived according to the guidance given by God. In this way, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and all the earlier Prophets, were *muslims* too, exemplifying that perfect life of submission to the will of God.

The term Prophet, with a capital P, is used repeatedly in this book. This has a special meaning in Islam, which is different from the way in which the term is used by Jews and Christians. In Islamic usage, Prophets have three functions: first, to receive revelation from God and articulate it in their own society; second, perfectly to exemplify that revelation in their own lives and teachings; third, to lead a community of people to live according to that message. Let's take each of these in turn.

In an Islamic understanding, the Books of revelation were sent down by God and are not the product of human authors. The Prophets received the Books as a literal, verbal revelation from God (Q. 32:2, 41:2, 46:2, 55:1-2). God is the author of the Book and the Prophet the one who receives it and passes it on to others. This means that the Books are guaranteed to be free from error and from human weakness or misunderstanding in their reception.

The Prophets not only received the Books but also molded the whole of their lives around them. They exemplified the message that they had received (Q. 33:21,46). Two things flow from this. First, the

Prophets had to be human beings, nothing more and nothing less (Q. 6:50, 14:11, 25:7-8, 41:6). If they had been super-human in some way, then we would never know whether we ordinary mortals were capable of living out the message fully in our lives. If they were somehow less than human, for example if they did not have the gift of free will and so were not subject to the temptation to rebel, then they would be equally useless as exemplars for us. In this way, the life example of the Prophet is described as a model (Q. 33:21) and a guiding lamp (Q. 33:46). Second, the Prophets needed to be sinless in the way that they lived their lives (Q. 43:43). If sometimes they sinned and sometimes they obeyed God's will, then we never would know when to believe them. Their lives had to be sinless so that they could be an example in everything they said and did. It cannot be that they were incapable of sin—then they would not share our common humanity—but they were preserved from sin by God.

The message that was given to the Prophets was not for them alone (Q. 43:44). They were called to lead a community of people into a way of life that was in accordance with the will of God. Some of the Prophets were in positions of authority within their societies, and so they were able to establish a path or way of life that embodied the guidance from God. Others were sent to call people back to the way of life that had been established by earlier Prophets. It stands to reason that if the Prophets had the recipe for a fully human and perfectly happy way of life that will lead to fulfilment in this life and the reward of eternal life in heaven, then they would want to share it with others and encourage others to live by that guidance.

This model can be seen in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. He received the Qur'an from God as a literal, verbal revelation. He then modeled his whole life perfectly on the guidance that he had received and taught others to do the same (Q. 4:80). The things that Muhammad did, what he said and taught, and the things of which he approved become important for all subsequent generations. What he did—how he conducted his personal, family, business, and community life—can serve as a model to be followed. Everything that he said and taught, the way in which he dealt with questions or cases that were brought to him, acts as a source for implementing the revelation of the Qur'an in daily life. Muhammad was not born onto a blank page of history but into a society that already had established ways of doing things. This means that if he approved of some customary practice, it agreed with the guidance of God. Anything in the Arabian society of his time that was against God's guidance, he changed. The records of Muhammad's actions and teaching, and the things of

which he approved, are collected in the Hadith, or the Traditions of Muhammad. These form a crucial source for living a Muslim way of life. This way of life, based on the Qur'an and Hadith, was gradually drawn up into the Shari'a, which is a clearly drawn pathway through life and a complete code for living according to this guidance.

Let us take stock of the assistance provided by God for every human being to live as the Regent of God on earth. There is first the guidance that was given in the Books and in the signs contained in creation. There are the lives of the Prophets, human beings like us, who perfectly exemplify that guidance and act as role models (Q. 33:21). All that guidance has been drawn into codes of life to guide human beings on the straight path. What more is needed?

Each human being needs to develop a deep sense of their closeness to God and a spiritual communion with God that can help them to make the right decisions in life and bring all this guidance into every fiber of their own daily living. At the end of the day, each and every human being is called to be the Regent of God, and all will be answerable directly to God for the way in which they have fulfilled their duty (Q. 6:94). This profound sense of the presence of God is summed up in the Islamic term *taqwa*, which can be translated as "God-consciousness" and carries with it aspects of the traditional "fear of the Lord" and a sense of protection before the awesomeness of God (a word from the same root is used in Arabic for "vaccination"). This does not just occur naturally but must be built up by living according to the guidance of God. This is where the practices of Islam come in.

Each of the principal practices of Islam is good for the human being and leads her or him into a deeper sense of *taqwa*. They lead the Muslim into an awareness of God through the way in which every element of life is lived. Everything that one does should be done in a spirit of *taqwa*, and everything should lead to a deeper awareness of oneself as the creature of God, called to be Abdallah, the Loving Servant of God, in everything.

These principal practices are summed up in what are generally called the "five pillars of Islam." We will look at these in much more detail later, but here we need to see how they contribute to this growing sense of *taqwa*.

The first of these pillars is *shahada*; this is the principal statement of belief in Islam. It reads: "I bear witness that there is no god (that is, nothing worthy of worship) save God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God." This calls for a constant examination that it is God alone who is worshipped and that nothing else is permitted to get in the way of perfect obedience to and worship of God. It is through the message

sent to Muhammad, the Qur'an, and the lived example of the Prophet that Muslims are able to know how to live such a God-centered life. In earlier generations, that is, before the coming of Muhammad, the equivalent of the *shahada* would have read: "There is no god save God; Abraham (or Moses or Jesus, etc.) is a Messenger of God."

The second pillar is that of *salat* or formal, liturgical prayer. These are the prayers required of all Muslims after the age of puberty five times each day, timed according to the passage of the sun. They build up *taqwa* by bringing the believer to listen once more to the guidance of the Qur'an when it is recited and then to respond by submitting all to God and seeking mercy and forgiveness. These formal prayers are supplemented by informal prayers called *du'a* (prayers of supplication) and *dhikr* (the remembrance of God in the heart). In this way, the believer is called to raise up the mind and heart to God continuously.

*Zakat* is the third pillar of Islam and is part of the whole social, welfare, and economic system of Islam. The foundation of this system is *sadaqa*, or bearing one another's burdens. This is a reminder that all we have is given by God's providence and must be used for the benefit of all humanity. The system includes important principles such as the prohibition of *riba*, or usury, and economic exploitation, and the importance of *infaq*, or the principle of the circulation of wealth. At the summit of this system comes *zakat* itself, which acts as a purification of wealth. Muslims are required to pass on two and a half percent of their surplus wealth each year to set categories of people who need it. This is in addition to charitable giving, in which one is encouraged to give generously according to one's means.

Fourth among the pillars of Islam is *sawm*, or fasting during the month of Ramadan. This practice requires that every adult Muslim not eat, drink, or have sexual relations during daylight hours for a month. It does not suggest that these things are bad, far from it, but they are among the most fundamental of human urges. If one can take control of these things for a month, then one has a good training in *taqwa*, to remember God in every aspect of life and live accordingly.

The final pillar of Islam is the *hajj*, the annual pilgrimage to Makka, which is compulsory for all Muslims once in their lifetimes, if they have sufficient wealth and good health. This draws the pilgrim back into the Abrahamic chain of revelation by remembering practices associated with the earlier Prophets. It emphasizes the oneness of all humanity and brings the believer face to face with their judgment, from which there is no escape.

This chapter set out to paint the wider picture of creation and the place of every human being within it according to the Muslim

perspective. We have seen that Islam sees itself as the last revelation in a series that goes back to Adam and spreads out to encompass all humanity. We have seen the need for revelation as guidance from God and for Prophets to receive and exemplify that guidance in every aspect of their lives. We have explored the Qur'an and Hadith of Muhammad as the sources for the Muslim way of life and concluded by touching on the key concept of *taqwa* in leading the individual into a life lived consciously in the presence of God. All these elements will be explored in much greater depth in forthcoming chapters, but now we should have the wider picture of how creation looks from a Muslim perspective.



Muslim children in the village of Sheik Yasin, Afghanistan. Photo: Linda Wiehl.