Introduction

‘This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.’ (Q:5:3)

‘Islam’ is an Arabic term meaning ‘submission’ and ‘peace’. Thus, it is through submission to the Will of God that one obtains peace of mind.

Islam is a monotheistic religion with an unequivocal belief in the singularity of God – Allah. Those who accept this religion and follow the teachings of Islam are called Muslims. Islam originated in Arabia and was revealed to Muhammad bin Abdullah. Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) was born in Mecca in 570 CE. He received revelation at the age of 40 in 610 CE and was then considered by his followers as the Prophet of Islam. He began to preach the message of monotheism and social justice in Mecca among his own tribe – the Quraysh – with little success, but after migrating to Medina with his followers, he was able to establish the first Islamic Community. This migration from Mecca to Medina is called hijra, from which the Islamic calendar begins. The first year commenced on June 16, 622 CE. Muhammad (Peace be upon Him) died in 632 CE and was buried in Medina after having successfully converted most of the Arab tribes of Arabia to Islam. After his death, during the reign of his four successors, Islam spread rapidly in the Middle East and North Africa.

Although Islam is a religion with a single revealed text, Muslims have understood and practised their faith in divergent ways. There are various dimensions to Islamic culture and civilisation, especially in the interpretation of the foundation text, law, theology and politics. The first disagreement was political in nature. As exists today, Muslims can be mainly recognised as Sunni and Shi’a. It is important to note that these terms did not exist during the life time of the Prophet. ‘People of tradition’ – Ahl al-Sunna – is a term originating from the fourth century of Islam, devised to describe those who have accurate understanding of Islam. The term ‘Shi’a’ – meaning group or faction – is applied to those who believe that after the death of the Prophet, the political and religious leadership of the Muslim community should have gone to Ali – the son-in-law of the Prophet – and his descendants, as a divine right. The movement initially appeared as a political tendency resulting from the conflict between the supporters of Ali and the Umayyad dynasty. Following the assassination of Ali, his supporters claimed that his leadership should go to Ali’s descendents. The conflict was exacerbated by the assassination
of Ali’s son, Hussein, in 671 CE at the hands of the Umayyad troops, an event that historically gave the movement the religious and political impetus it has today.

This division among Muslims has survived into the 21st century and has exerted an enduring impact on the development of Islamic thought. The Sunnites form the majority and recognise the legitimacy of the first four successors (Abu Bakr, Umer, Uthman and Ali) to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). By contrast, the minority who are the Shi’a, accept only Ali as the Prophet’s legitimate successor, and believe that this authority should remain with Ali’s descendants after Ali’s death. The Sunnis and the Shi’a are further divided into sub-groups.

The foundation texts in Islam

There are two foundation texts in Islam: the Qur’an and Hadith. Qur’an is an Arabic term literally meaning ‘recitation’. The Qur’an is the Holy Scripture of Muslims, containing God’s revelations to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) made over almost 23 years. As the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was illiterate, he dictated and organised revelations into their correct order via official scribes. This collection was compiled into one single book and verified through the process of checks against both memorised verses and written collections held by literate Muslims during the period of his first successor – Khalifa – Abu Bakr (632–634 CE). The Qur’an has 114 chapters (surah), some of which were revealed to the Prophet in Mecca and others in Medina. Each chapter is divided into verses (ayat), the shortest containing three verses, the longest containing 286. The second foundation text is Hadith (from the Arabic term meaning ‘narrative’ and ‘talk’). In its most common usage, ‘Hadith’ refers to the Prophetic Tradition, the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) passed down from one narrator to another. This chain of narration was called isnad. They were collected by Muslim scholars almost one century after the death of Muhammad (PBUH).

The Articles of Faith

There are some cardinal principles in Islam, which are known as the ‘pillars of Islam’ and ‘the articles of faith’.

1. Testimony of faith – Shehada. This states that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad (PBUH) is His Messenger. The pronouncing of this testimony is essentially what makes one a Muslim.

2. Prayer – Salat. There are five obligatory daily prayers: dawn prayer, midday prayer, afternoon prayer, evening prayer and night prayer. These can be performed individually or in congregation. Muslims pray in a mosque or Masjid – an Arabic term meaning ‘prostration’, as Muslims prostrate themselves (touch the ground with the forehead) in prayer to express submission to God.

3. Fasting – Sawm. Fasting is an annual religious observance during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Ramadan. It is the month in which the Qur’an was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Q:2:185). It consists of not taking food, drinking, having sexual intercourse or committing any ethically bad act from the beginning of dawn to sunset. Those who are sick or weak, nursing mothers and menstruating women, and travellers are exempted from fasting. However, missed days have to be made up when one is in a position to do so.

**THINKING PROMPT**

Consider some of the adjustments that Muslim school students might have to make in the month of Ramadan.

4. **Zekat** is a 2.5 per cent wealth tax prescribed in the Qur’an for Muslims who possess enough means to contribute to the welfare of the needy and poor in the community.
5. Pilgrimage – *Hajj*. Pilgrimage is a once in a lifetime obligation for every Muslim with means to visit the holiest place – *Ka'ba* – in the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia during the 12th month of the Islamic calendar, the month of *Hajj*. *Ka'ba* – the literal meaning of the Arabic term is ‘cube’ – more specifically refers to the most sacred place for Muslims, located within the Grand Mosque in the centre of Mecca. It is a cubic building built by the Prophet Abraham and his son Isma'il as the first known structure built for the worship of one God in accordance with divine revelation. Muslims all over the world direct their prayer towards the *Ka'ba*.

In addition to these five pillars of faith, Muslims also believe in:

1. **The unity of God (al-tawhid)**
   Muslims believe in One God who is perceived only in absolute terms, as the Divine and Everlasting, without beginning or end, Ever present, All knowing, All seeing, All hearing Creator who is absolutely independent and self sufficient, absolutely singular, not in need of and without partners: ‘Say He is Allah, the One. The self-sufficient master, Whom all creatures need. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him’ (Q:112:1–4). In Islam, God is described and known by His ‘Beautiful Names’ such as the Merciful, the Truth and the Compassionate.

2. **The existence of angels**
   Muslims believe in the existence of angels who are special creatures created from light, absolutely obedient to God, worshipping Him and acting by His command.

3. **The unity of revelation**
   Muslims believe that through human history, God has sent revelation through His messengers to human society. All revealed texts are considered to be from God and to contain the truth about creation, guiding the human race towards spiritual salvation.

4. **The unity of the prophethood**
   Muslims believe that all prophets were sent by God and should be venerated and Muhammad (PBUH) was the last prophet and the seal of the prophethood: ‘Say ye: We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord: we make no difference between one and another of them: and we submit to Allah’ (Q:2:136).

5. **Belief in the Day of Judgment**
   Muslims believe in the resurrection and the Day of Judgement when all human beings will be brought back to life, judged by God and punished, forgiven or rewarded. Those who give their life for a just cause in the name of God are immediately resurrected and go to heaven.

**The concept of Islamic ethics**

Ethics is a consistent dimension of Islam and gives an insight not only into the nature of Islam but also its purpose, as illustrated by the following encounter in the Prophet's life. When asked by his compatriots in Mecca – who did not see any need for the existence of Islam – what was the reason for his mission, the Prophet replied, 'I was sent to perfect the noble traits of ethics'. The Qur'an unequivocally establishes the real value of human character. ‘The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct’ (Q:49:13). Muslims subscribe to the concept of behavioural modelling, which means emulating the behaviour of the Prophet as he was designated in the Qur'an as ‘the most beautiful example’.

The Islamic concept of ethics is based on (a) the relationship to God (b) the relationship with other human beings and (c) the relationship to the natural environment. Islamic ethics are expressed through good behaviour and good works based on truth and goodwill. The ethical aspect of Islam is a necessary requirement for as perfect as possible a life carried out for human and God's pleasure. In Islam there is no differentiation between ethics and law – what is ethical is lawful and what is lawful is ethical.
Human nature and good and evil

In Islam, human beings are seen as created and born in a state of purity which presumes an absence of evil and presence of the state of goodness. Being complex creatures, human beings are perceived to be subject to weakness that affects the nature and kind of choices we make.

Purity is seen as a positive aspect of human nature, which suggests the existence of natural virtue to allow for harmony and positive endeavour in human life. The paradigm of the creation of the first human being (Adam) provides a basis for understanding this view and the further struggle of humans against weakness and temptation to commit sin. The natural state of purity at the time of birth is by no means permanent. With the onset of maturity, actions undertaken by human beings have a direct affect on personal character.

Islam places a responsibility on human beings to develop their character in order to be able to rationally attain the state of purity. ‘Indeed who purifies himself succeeds and indeed, who corrupts himself fails.’ (Q:91:9–10)

Development of the individual ‘self’ is dependent on the realisation and execution of religious duties and obligations. Conformity with ethical religious life is the only way to achieve proximity to God and maintain the purity of one’s own nature. Evil does not originate in human nature but is caused externally by contact with the material world and initiated by Satan: ‘He (Satan) commands you only what is evil and sinful, and that you should say against Allah what you know not’ (Q:2:169). Good and evil represent two opposing modes of the ethical life. Goodness or virtue, which is based on the religious teachings of Islam has the propensity to achieve harmony and spiritual integration. By contrast, evil leads to the decline of religious values, disintegration and corruption of human nature.

The place of reason in Islam

Islam is based on revelation. However, reason is used to understand that revelation. The Qur’an calls the human race to learn and seek knowledge. The Muslim scholars of the early and mediaeval periods of Islamic history employed reasoning for interpreting the foundation texts and the religious law. This intellectual activity was called *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* is defined in a number of ways:

- exerting oneself to the utmost degree to understand through disciplined judgement;
- the interpretation of one competent to understand the Islamic law;
- systematic original thinking or independent opinion on questions of Islamic law.

During the first two and a half centuries of Islam, Muslim thinkers exercised *ijtihad* freely and expressed legal opinions on various religious matters, which were crystallised into five schools of law. Four of these schools, such as the Hanbal, the Maliki, the Hanafi and the Shafi’i, are followed by the Sunni Muslims and the Ja’fari school by the Shi’ites. Reasoning by analogy (*qiyas*) was also utilised as one of the secondary sources of Islamic law. It was used in the absence of an explicit ruling in the Qur’an and Hadith, and allowed a jurist to resolve a legal problem by way of referring to a similar problem dealt with in the above sources.

**THINKING PROMPT**

What philosophies, social or religious traditions have a concept of authority similar to that of Islam?

The concept of authority in Islam

‘O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those of you who are in authority if you differ in anything amongst yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is better and more suitable for final determination.’ (Q:4:5–9)

During the period of revelation, the concept of authority was quite straightforward and easy to determine. While the revelation was in progress, God was a more immediate and accessible authority
as revelation would, in part, deal with the immediate situation and circumstances of Muslims in their own time. The Prophet, whose authority stemmed from being the person to whom the message was revealed, was also able to, in an inspired way, put his imprint on Islam and therefore satisfy the immediate as well as long-term needs of Muslims. The speech of the Prophet was understood to be complementary to the speech of God in the Qur’an, as well as able to stand on its own, in so far that the development of codified Islamic jurisprudence in the post-prophetic, post-revelation period, relied heavily for its formulation on the speech of the Prophet and his actions.

The post-revelation period represented the loss of immediacy in gaining answers for religious inquiry and the responsibility for finding answers was left to each individual Muslim with reliance on those companions of the prophet who had more knowledge and information on the issue at hand. However, the first reference points of authority were always the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition – Sunna. Religious knowledge became part of the marketplace of information where Muslims sought answers they needed from those whom they thought were able to offer advice.

After the death of the Prophet, Muslims immediately selected a person to succeed him as leader – Khalifa – it was never assumed that the Khalifa would have answers to all questions or be infallible. The early Khalifas used to make public appeals for people to come forward with information about the Prophetic tradition when specific issues arose and about which the Khalifa had no information.

The Khalifa was perceived to be an exceptional member of the community, though not as spiritually endowed as the Prophet.

The Shi’a understanding of the succession of the Prophet and leadership of Muslims developed into a school of thought that maintains that leadership of the Muslim community should have gone to Ali – the son-in-law of the prophet – and his descendants as a divine right rather than to the three Khalifas who preceeded Ali. The Shi’a concept of leadership is called Imamate rather than Khalifate, from the Arabic word Imam – meaning leader. In Sunni understanding of leadership, the term imam is used for the one who would lead other Muslims in prayer or be a leading Islamic scholar. The Shi’a concept of Imam is of an enlightened being without sin whose doctrinal pronouncements are infallible and who bestows true knowledge on humanity.

In practice, ultimate authority is with God through the Qur’an, and with the Prophet through the Hadith, and in the case of Shi’a, with the Imam.

Truth

‘That is because Allah, He is the Truth.’ (Q:31:30)

The concept of truth in Islam is defined as something that exists, is real and constant. In practice, the concept of truth is twofold, as in ‘the truth’ and ‘a truth’. The Qur’an uses the term ‘the truth’ exclusively in relation to God. This is held by commentators of the Qur’an to denote the reality of the existence of God with all of His divine attributes and qualities. ‘Real’ and ‘reality’ are the terms used by the commentators to most closely define the meaning of ‘the truth’ when attributed to God. Truth as in ‘a truth’ connotes truthfulness in speech, be it everyday speech or testimony or judicial statements. ‘A truth’ is also deemed to mean ‘right’, as in human rights or rights to free speech or rightful possession.

Sufis – Islamic mystics – have a concept of ‘personal truth’ denoting those things that are necessary to the maintenance and continuity of spiritual life. These are in contrast with things that persons desire or want but are not necessary for the existence of spiritual life.

Sufis make a distinction between ‘the reality or ultimate reality’ and ‘a reality’, or between absolute and temporal reality. God is consequently regarded as ‘The Reality’ that encompasses all other realities and that is understood to be ‘The Reality of the Existence’ of God.

The origins and purpose of human life

The Islamic standpoint on the origin of life is that it was created by God out of nothing through divine decree: ‘The Originator of the heavens and the earth when He decrees a matter, He only says to it: “Be!” and it is’ (Q:40:68).
The universe and life in it were created for a reason according to the Divine Plan. The purposefulness of the universe in general implies the purposefulness of its constituent components. In relation to human beings, the purpose would primarily be one of worship and service of God. 'I created the Jinn and human kind to worship (serve) Me.' (Q:51:56) The concept of worship in Islam subsumes a wide range of activities ranging from praying to performing heart surgery. The underlying criterion for what worship would be, is if it is a particular activity is undertaken with God in mind. What distinguishes human beings from mere physical existence, according to Islam, is that the human being has been given a soul and intellect. The Qur’anic story of creation speaks of God ‘teaching’ Adam concepts rather than simply planting it into his brain. This defines the human being as being capable of comprehension and learning, and presents knowledge as the most important element of human makeup enabling us to search for our origins, find our place in the present and contemplate our life’s path.

Society

'O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other.' (Q:49:13)

In Islam the concept of society is based on social justice and human rights. It sees society as being organic in nature, citing the common origin of human kind. Tribal and national differentiations are presented to be a cause for common understanding and mutual fulfilment rather than hostility and exploitation. Historically, the Muslim concept of society was based on legalising tribal, national and religious relationships in the form of treaties and constitutions. One of the first social acts of the Prophet after his migration and settlement in Medina was to formulate the relationship among Muslim migrant refugees from Mecca, the Arab tribes of Medina and the Jewish tribes of Medina delineating individual and collective rights and obligations.

Medina, hence, became a constitutional city state. Religious and property rights were guaranteed for all and the judicial system enabled pluralism by establishing that the Jewish community’s issues were dealt with on the basis of the Hebrew Scriptures. This practice subsequently became embodied in the Abbasid Caliphate State justice system where Christian bishops and patriarchs were entrusted with dispensing justice for Christian communities in accordance with Christian legal principles.

Throughout Islamic history, beginning with the Prophet, religious communities, be it the Christians of Jerusalem or monks of Sinai, were guaranteed full private and public expression of religion. The State, Arab or Turkish Ottoman, contributed to the building, upkeep and repair of Christian and Jewish places of worship.

In his final speech at the pilgrimage to Mecca, the Prophet strongly underlined human equality and brotherhood, declaring that an Arab was not better than a non-Arab and that a non-Arab was not better than an Arab, that a white person was not better than a black person and that a black person was not better than a white person. Furthermore, he underlined the universality of human brotherhood by stating that humanity emanated from one person: Adam.

It can be said that Islam does not subscribe to the concept of race or exalt any individual or group over another on the basis of origin, as the human being is understood to be very lowly in origin. Differences in physical appearance and spoken languages are presented as signs of God-negating discrimination and racist attitudes influencing human behaviour.

'And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colours, in that are signs to those of sound knowledge.' (Q:30:22)
Community

‘The believers are indeed brothers.’ (Q:49:10)

The Islamic concept of community is based on the idea of brotherhood, which is instrumental in the shaping of attitudes and understanding of the nature and meaning of the concept of community. These attitudes are evident in matters of faith as well as in matter of religious duties and obligation. In Prophetic tradition – Hadith – it states that, ‘None of you believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself’. This clearly defines the nature of brotherhood and makes the existence of belief conditional on attitude towards others; in this case, even in an abstract form of wishing well to the rest of the community.

The Islamic sense of community is based on equality of all of its members irrespective of national origins or skin colour. However, this concept of a closely-knit faith-based community does not prevent Muslims from living with members of other faiths or those who do not belong to any faith.

The individual

‘Your creation and your resurrection is as a single soul.’ (Q:31:28)

The Qur’an presents the concept of the individual as an honoured existence provided for by God and esteemed above other parts of God’s creation. ‘We have indeed honoured the children of Adam, spread them in the land and sea, provided them with good things and preferred them in esteem over many things that We have created.’ (Q:17:70) At the same time, man is advised that he is not the centre of the universe. ‘The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of mankind: yet, most of mankind does not “know”’. (Q:40:57)
The concept of the individual in Islam is based on a balance between personal freedom and social responsibility without creating a concept of a bland individual without defined personal characteristics or a concept of exaggerated individuality bereft of social responsibility. The relationship between God and the individual in Islam is defined through a personal as well as a communal contract or covenant.

Core values and principles
Islam is understood to be universally applicable to every person and every nation anywhere in the world. It is designed to facilitate enlightenment of human beings and to make the world a better place.

In the realm of belief and faith, the essential value is monotheism; the belief in the one and singular God. Legally and ethically it is justice and truth, emotionally it is love, socially it is tolerance.

Justice is practised in the minutiae of everyday life – in dealing with others, fulfilling obligations, treating people justly and dealing with the environment. Essentially, justice has to be applied to everything we do and to everyone, from the family to the wider society. It is essential in Islam that it is applied without prejudice: ‘O you who believe! Stand up firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even thought it be against yourselves, or your parents or your kin, whether (the case be of) a rich or poor, Allah is a Better Protector, to both (than you). So do not follow your desires to avoid justice and if you distort justice, then Allah is indeed informed of what you do’ (Q:4:135).

Truth is the essence of Islam and is presented as the quintessential reality whose absence invalidates and distorts reality and renders the intellect unsound: ‘After the truth, what else is there but error’ (Q:10:32).

Love holds a special place in Islam. It is mentioned in the Qur’an over a hundred times. It is the essence of human relationships as well as the key ingredient in the relationship of man with God. The presence of faith in one’s life is closely related to the presence of love toward others. Human closeness to the presence of God and His messenger is related to love: ‘Man is with those he
loves’ (Hadith). The nature of the relationship between God and the believers is characterised by love: ‘He loves them and they love Him’ (Q:5:54).

Tolerance: The Qur’an acknowledges the existence of the Divine Revelations prior to its own revelation and refers to the followers of those scriptures as, ‘People of the Book’; a term denoting respect and recognition. The Qur’an is clear and definite on the issue of enforcement of religion: ‘There is no compulsion in religion’ (Q:2:256).

The Islamic position on tolerance and freedom of religion is further exemplified in the Qur’anic chapter, ‘The Disbelievers’. ‘Say: O disbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, and you do not worship what I worship, I will not worship what you worship And you will not worship what I worship. To you your religion and to me mine’ (Q:109).

The Islamic way of dealing with those who are not Muslim is with justice and kindness: ‘Allah does not forbid you to be kind and just with those who did not fight against you regarding your religion or drove you out of your homes, Allah loves those who are just’ (Q:50:8).

Islam maintains that skin colours, languages, tribes and nations are created for human beings to know one another. They are not characteristics of superiority or inferiority.

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Glossary – Islam

**Jinn:** beings with freewill who are created from ‘smokeless fire’ (Q:15:26–27) living on earth in a world parallel to mankind. The Arabic word ‘Jinn’ means ‘hidden’ or ‘concealed’.

**Peace be upon Him:** it is the Muslim custom to say or write ‘Peace be upon Him’ when mentioning the name of any of the Messengers of God. It has been shortened in this text to PBUH.

**Sufism (sufi sect):** a sect within Islam. Sufism is a mystical sect, which believes in renunciation and undertaking severe self-discipline and adopting a harsh lifestyle. Their leaders shunned mere ritualism and profess the need for an inner drive within a person to realise god.