

BEING MUSLIM

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

ASAD TARSIN

Foreword by Shaykh Hamza Yusuf

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CHAPTER 1

Starting Point

*... A light has now come to you from God,
and a Scripture making things clear,
with which God guides to the ways of peace
those who follow what pleases Him,
bringing them from darkneses out into light,
by His will, and guiding them to a straight path.*

QURAN 5:15-16

1. THE BEGINNING

In God's Name (*Bismillāh*);
Praise belongs to God (*Alḥamdulillāh*);
O God: Bless and Send Peace Upon Our Master, Muḥammad!
(*Allāhumma ṣalli wa sallim 'alā sayyidinā Muḥammad*)¹

The feeling of disorientation can be one of the greatest challenges to any new experience. It can lead to a distraction of energies, insecurity, unease, and confusion. If you are new to practicing and learning Islam, it can be a dizzying task to orient yourself to the landscape of the religion with all its concepts and terminology.

This book endeavors to bring together the elements of Islam that are most necessary for developing a basic understanding of the religion. It should serve as a starting point, and should give you most of what the average practicing Muslim would know. It is by no means comprehensive—it is not meant to give you all that you must know as a Muslim; but neither is it minimalistic—in some aspects, it gives you more than the bare minimum you need to know.

ADVICE FOR THE JOURNEY

Before you set out to learn and practice the material contained in this manual, some advice may prove helpful.

First, consciously think about your reasons for wanting to learn this material. Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ taught us the fundamental precept, “actions are [judged] according to intentions.” So it is essential that we examine our motivations for the things we do, especially before beginning such an important endeavor.

Also, keep in mind that you are in this for the long run, so pace yourself. Take things in gradually, internalize them at a pace that is appropriate for you, and do not feel that you need to figure it all out immediately. On the other hand, do not become complacent; use your enthusiasm to push yourself ever higher.

1. To begin in God's name is the best method to commence any act of importance. Connecting an act to God brings divine grace and blessings (*barakah*). After that, the optimal formula for beginning any discussion of Islam is to then praise God and send blessings upon His Beloved, the last prophet, Muḥammad ﷺ.

As you grow in your practice of Islam, try not to make too many changes too quickly. Some people adopt the religion and then, within a few short months, change their entire social circuit and even marry someone new—likely unwise! Adopting a new faith is a sign that you are growing, and thus changing, as a person. Growth is a gradual process, and you may grow into someone different from the person you were at the outset. It may be useful to keep this in mind as you contemplate life-altering decisions. Before proceeding, allow yourself the time and space to process your new experiences fully.

Set for yourself appropriate expectations and anticipate a challenge. You may be elated that you have been guided to God’s religion and are now committed to it. You may assume that the rest is easy. But know in advance that this is not the case! Growth is an intrinsically challenging and difficult process. You’ll have good days and bad ones. Be patient and perseverant, and rely on God to take care of the rest.

As you progress, process new things, and grow, always strive to keep God first and foremost in your life. It can sometimes be easy to mistake the means for the end. Remember that everything in this handbook (and the entire religion) is simply about developing a healthy relationship with God. Never forget the purpose of the things you do as you practice your religion. You may feel that certain acts are more rewarding than others, but stay focused on what God wants, not what you may feel at some point in time. Talk to Him, call upon Him for help, and keep Him the center of your journey as you move forward.

In your long journey, you will find much benefit and comfort in a good support group. If you do not have one yet, make some good Muslim friends who can support you as you progress. They do not have to replace your current friends, but they can support you in the shared experience of being a Muslim. Books, CDs, and websites can be informative, but good friends to support your growth are invaluable.

As you learn and grow, be sure not to erase who you are at your core. Islam doesn’t replace you with someone else; it enhances who you already are. Work towards becoming a devout Muslim who is still genuinely you. This will make you more sincere in your interaction with God and is absolutely necessary for sustained growth.

The simple advice given above won’t be the only kind you will need, but it may be helpful to hear it early in your development as a Muslim. As a general rule, it would be wise to look at the experiences of others and learn from them, to help make your transition into a new faith, and way of living, as smooth as possible.

2. ISLAM IN CONTEXT

To more fully understand the message of Islam, it is helpful to appreciate its place within the greater human story. In this way, you will understand the bigger picture and keep it in mind as you navigate new ideas and concepts. It is also important to understand the general layout of the religion, and so we will examine an outline of Islam provided by the founder himself, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

THE HUMAN STORY

To start at the beginning: At a time before time, every human soul ever created was gathered before God. During that existence, which is detailed in the Quran, God asked us all, “Am I not your Lord?” To which every last one of us responded, “Oh yes! We bear witness.”² In the Islamic understanding, each of us has this knowledge on some subconscious level.

Through this Grand Covenant, each of us sealed our moral responsibility to acknowledge the Lordship of God. Throughout our lives here on Earth, we have the challenge of living according to this acknowledgement. In fact, this is one of the implications of the Two Testimonies of faith. The first part, “There is nothing worthy of worship except God,” is a reaffirmation of our bearing witness to God’s Lordship over us at a time before our time here. The second testimony, “Muhammad is the messenger of God,” is a statement that God’s lordship over us necessitates that we live in line with His will. It is as if to say, “We remember the covenant we made before life here, and we still honor it, and we will live our lives according to it.”

After testifying to God’s Lordship over us, we as a species were charged with the weighty responsibility of being His delegates in the world. We are responsible for setting its affairs right, ensuring justice and security, and acting so as to make the conditions of society conducive to knowing and worshipping God.

Then, God created the first humans, the vessels of the souls that were gathered before Him. Tempted by Satan, Adam and Eve both disobeyed God, but when they realized what they had done, they repented, and God accept-

2. The complete verse reads: And when your Lord brought the descendants of the children of Adam from their loins, and made them testify about themselves: ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Oh, yes! We bear witness.’ Lest you should say, on the day of resurrection, ‘We were heedless of this!’ (Quran 7:172)

ed their repentance. Still, He decreed that they and all of their offspring were to be expelled from the Garden down to Earth to live their destined worldly lives. Along with this exile came God's promise to send us guidance so that we may again find our way back to Paradise.

God then sent a succession of prophets and messengers, reminding people of their covenant before creation and their duty to God. Each was sent to a particular people, sometimes with a message particular to them, but always with a core message to surrender to the Lord of all creation, the One, the Almighty. Most people were selfish and resistant, while a number believed in and followed God's prophets. With the passage of time, sustaining the authenticity of the message became more and more difficult. People began to alter the scriptures brought by the messengers of God. The ideas of men were sold as truths from God, and yet still, each time, God renewed His guidance to us to help us find our way home to the Garden.

The divine guidance that God sent through these messengers concluded and culminated in the most eminent of His messengers, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. He came not to replace previous versions of the message, but to perfect and complete them. Each of God's prophets taught the same essential truths, but only the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ survived unaltered over history. This protection from distortion, along with the universality of its teachings, is what makes Islam the religion of God for all people everywhere.

THE DIMENSIONS OF THE RELIGION

To better understand the final message from God to humanity, we will examine a concise yet comprehensive summary of the religion by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. These words were spoken at one of the most famous and significant historical events in Islam, on a day when the messenger of God ﷺ was sitting with some of his closest companions (*Ṣaḥābah*).³ The story is narrated by 'Umar رضي الله عنه who tells us the following:

One day, while we were sitting with the messenger of God, there appeared before us a man whose clothes were exceedingly white and whose hair was exceedingly black; no signs of journeying were to be

3. A companion (sing. *Ṣaḥābī*, pl. *Ṣaḥābah*) is a person who met the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, believed in his message, never apostated during his lifetime, and died as a believer. A follower (*tābi'i*) is a believer who met a companion of the Prophet. The companions are the best generation of believers overall, while the followers are the second best generation.

seen on him, and none of us knew him. He walked up and sat down by the Prophet. Resting his knees against his and placing the palms of his hands on his thighs, he said, "O Muhammad, tell me about *islām*".⁴

The messenger of God said: "*Islām* is to testify that there is nothing worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God, to perform the prayers, to pay the purifying alms, to fast in Ramadan, and to make the pilgrimage to the Sacred House if you are able to do so."

He said, "You have spoken rightly." And we were amazed at him asking him and saying that he had spoken rightly. He then said, "Then tell me about *imān*."

He replied, "It is to believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in divine decree, both the good and the evil thereof."

He said, "You have spoken rightly." He then said, "Then tell me about *iḥsān*."

The Prophet said, "It is to worship God as though you are seeing Him, for even if you cannot see Him, He indeed sees you."

He said, "Then tell me about the Hour."⁵

The Prophet replied, "The one questioned about it knows no better than the questioner."

He then said, "Then tell me about its signs."

He replied, "That the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress and that you will see the barefooted, naked, destitute herdsmen competing in constructing lofty buildings."

Then [the man] left and I stayed behind for a time. Then [the messenger of God] said, "O 'Umar, do you know who the questioner was?"

I said, "God and His messenger know best."

He said, "He was Gabriel (Jibrīl), who came to you to teach you your religion."

With four questions, the Archangel Gabriel (Jibrīl) عليه السلام brought forth a summary of the foundational elements of the religion from God's final prophet to humanity. The religion, we learn, is comprised of three elements: *islām*, *imān*, and *iḥsān*. The fourth aspect mentioned, namely the signs of the Hour, provides us with the understanding that there is a downward trend

4. For the purposes of the discussion presented, the Arabic terms have been retained and not translated, because their definition is the purpose of the dialogue and follows shortly thereafter.

5. The Last Day and the Hour are other names for the Day of Judgment.

of the human story, and thus of the believing community as well. There are many such statements from Prophet Muhammad ﷺ which indicate the moral decline of the latter days, and the consequent need for believers to hold more tightly to their principles, values, and beliefs, despite increased difficulty in doing so.

These three elements are called the **dimensions of Islam**. The first of the three dimensions discussed was *islām*, which is presented as a sub-category within the religion itself, Islam. In Arabic, the word *islām* means “to surrender” or “to submit.” We see from the definition laid out by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that it is the dimension of our religion involving the external actions of our bodies, acts of surrender. To state the Testimony of Faith,⁶ to pray, to fast, to pay alms, and to make pilgrimage are all acts we perform through the medium of our bodies. These are called the **Five Pillars of Islam**. We understand from them that actions of external conformity, which include ritual worship and more, are absolutely indispensable to a complete characterization of the religion.

Next, we heard about *imān*. In Arabic, *imān* means “to believe.” Prophet Muhammad ﷺ starts his definition by using that phrase exactly: “It is to believe....” What follows is a series of beliefs that a person must affirm in order for their faith to be complete. Unlike the dimension of *islām*, these are not acts, but convictions of the mind which settle in the heart. We thus learn that the affirmation of realities as they truly exist is also essential to the characterization of the religion of Islam.

Lastly, we learn about *ihsān*. The word in Arabic means “to make beautiful or good.” We are told that *ihsān* involves the internal constitution of a believer’s heart—his or her spiritual state. This is the basis of your relationship with God Almighty. Here, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ defines this dimension by telling us its result. So, to attain a particular spiritual constitution, that of complete awareness of and reverence for God ﷻ, is an indispensable component of the religion, the one that gives it purpose.

Each of these components speaks to an aspect of human experience. The first is action—of the body; the second is belief—of the mind; and the third is purity—of the soul. And so Islam is a religion that speaks to every element of our humanity. Only when all three of these dimensions—faith, conduct, and character—are fulfilled simultaneously and harmoniously is the religion truly being practiced. To neglect any one of these will lead to imbalance and misplaced emphasis, a sure path to misguided religiosity. For example, to neglect the affirmation of our beliefs would make Islam

6. Scholars explain that stating the Testimony of Faith (Shahādah) is a precondition to the other four pillars.

a kind of cultural tradition void of its main purpose. To neglect the external conformity to God’s commands leads to an abstract religion guided by personal whims, with no arena within which to prove faith through application. And lastly, a neglect of the spiritual leads to a version of the religion that, void of reverence and love of God ﷻ, becomes rigid, cold, and legalistic. It is thus only with the complete surrender of our minds, bodies, and spirits to God ﷻ that the complete vision of Islam can be realized.

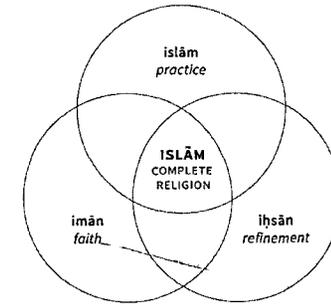


Figure 1: The Three Dimensions of Islam

ISLAM: SURRENDER TO GOD

From the above narration (*hadīth*) and from the Quran, we can develop a more complete understanding of the term *islām*. It has meanings on various levels, and by appreciating them we can gain a deeper understanding of the concept itself.

On the grandest scale, all created beings are in a state of surrender (*islām*) to God by the very nature of our dependence upon Him and subjugation to His will. We can only do whatever God allows us to do. A second use refers to voluntary submission: deliberately living in accordance with God’s will. In this sense, Islam has existed from the beginning of the human story and has been the message of all of God’s prophets. All of them ultimately called for submission to God and were themselves in a state of submission, and thus could be called *muslims*.⁷ The third use, the one which most know

7. The term “*muslim*” means “one who surrenders.” It is the title of those who follow the religion of Islam brought by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (i.e. Muslims), but more generally can

best, refers to the religion brought by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the seventh century CE. Those who follow the religion of Islam, the final form of the ultimate submission taught by all prophets, are properly called Muslims: We are not named after a person, ethnicity, or region, but after our chosen relationship with God. Lastly, as a sub-category of the final religion of Islam, *islām* is the dimension of surrender to God through devotional practices, as discussed above. These general and specific meanings of the word *islām* enhance our understanding of submission to God and His final religion.

THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

It was part of God's divine wisdom that His final message to all of creation would be revealed to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in seventh century Arabia. This has many implications, and for these reasons and more, the historical events and circumstances surrounding the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ are a necessary and inseparable context for understanding revelation.

Perhaps the most central and permanent of these implications is the revealing of the Quran, God's word, in the Arabic language.⁸ For believers, Arabic is thus the sacred language of Islam: It alone is to be used for ritual worship, such as the recitation of the Quran and the daily prayers. However, for other activities, such as supplication (*du'ā'*), reading translations of the Quran, sermons, or study of Islam, any language may be used. Many scholars of Islam believe that, since the Quran is in Arabic, to understand aspects of the Arabic language may even provide insights into the realities of the world as God ﷻ created it.

To develop a basic understanding of how we can gain profound insights from Arabic itself, it would help to examine the root-word system of the language. In Arabic, words are derived from root bases. With rare exceptions, these root words are made up of three letters. The arrangement and alteration of the letters of a root word follow specific patterns that tell you something about the intended meaning of any word based on it. You can derive many insights from studying the root-word relationships among

indicate those who followed the message sent by God throughout history and surrendered to Him. So, in the Islamic view, those who followed Prophets Jesus ('Isā), Moses (Mūsā), Noah (Nūh) ﷺ and others, were *muslims*.

8. There are translations of the meaning of the Quran, but only the original Arabic revealed text can be considered the Quran proper. Translations of its meaning can be used to enhance one's understanding and develop a deeper relationship with the Book, but only the original is used for devotional purposes. Although this close relationship to the religion applies to the Arabic language, it does not apply to all other things Arabic, such as the culture, dress, or food.

words that otherwise seem unassociated. All this may seem abstract at first, but it will become clearer as you learn some basic vocabulary.

Throughout this handbook, Arabic terms that you should eventually learn will be transliterated in parenthesis after the English translation. This is to help you understand the concepts and learn the words. When such a word is used for the first time in a paragraph, a reminder of the Arabic equivalent will follow, even if the term has already been introduced.

A standard Arabic transliteration key is provided at the beginning of this book to aid you in pronouncing the Arabic terms.