

# Islam the Natural Way

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About twelve years ago, I was asked to write a small book in fairly plain English, on *mu'amalat*, or Transactions and Relationships in Islam. I agreed, but after some thought, realised that it was difficult if not impossible to write about people's dealings with one another in any meaningful way, without first dealing with basic questions concerning the values and principles which govern or should govern human conduct. I felt the need to go back to first principles.

Let me take one example concerning business transactions. Is it sufficient for me say, to someone involved in trading, When you buy and sell, you must be honest, you must not give short measure and you must speak the truth. To this, the person may well retort: I am in business and want to conduct a successful trade - why should I speak the truth or why should I not give short measure or cut corners if I can get away with it? What is there to prevent me from doing so?

To take the matter further, how do you define a successful trade anyway? Is it one where you are concerned with maximising profits above everything else? Should you be bothered about the products you deal in? Do these products meet a genuine need or are they rubbish or perhaps something quite harmful but which is nicely packaged and slickly advertised? Does it matter that what you produce, promote or sell ruins people's lives? (Incidentally, one of my abiding memories of Margaret Thatcher is the one where she is promoting Scotch whisky vigorously to the Japanese, ostensibly to offset the value of Japanese exports to Britain. This reminds us also of the wars the British fought for the right to sell opium in China).

But coming back to you as a trader. What do you do if you make enormous profits? Do you hoard or get into an orgy of spending to gratify your own desires? Why shouldn't you? It's your money. You have earned it. Or should you just spare a little thought for others who live in poverty and squalor, and on whose pennies or labour your richness may well depend?

I should say in parentheses, that the notion that 'I make megabucks, therefore I am, I have arrived' or the notion that 'I shop, therefore I am' is now sadly rampant the world over with the dominance of secular, materialistic ways of thinking, in which actions have no intrinsic value and there is nothing beyond the here and now. Such ways of thinking and behaving are, to say the least, not sufficient or desirable as goals in life or as a basis for good and harmonious human relationships, based as they are on selfishness and greed. How can we turn such situations around?

It should not take us long to realise, from our example in business, that there is an interconnectedness and an interdependency that characterise human affairs. More than that, there is the question of the goals or ends that we seek to achieve and the means we reach or achieve those ends. And when we come to an Islamic framework, ends and means have or acquire a vaster dimension when we hear something like: 'Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, let him say something good or keep quiet.' Or, 'Whoever believes in God and the Last Day, let him treat his guest generously.' Or, 'He is not a Muslim who eats his fill, while his neighbour goes hungry.' These are typical sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and they point to rather more sublime goals and effective source of motivation for doing things than an ordinary business balance sheet as we know it.

In this context, one is reminded of the Prophet's wife, [A'ishah, going out to distribute the meat of a sheep to the needy in Madinah. When she came back, the noble Prophet asked her, 'Ma baqiya minha?' She understood this to mean, 'What is left of the sheep' and pointed to what she had remaining in her hand. But the Prophet's reply was: 'Rather what you have given away is what remains. The word *baqiya* means not only what is left but what is lasting and permanent, that is, in one's scale of good when the final accounting and reckoning takes place.

With this sort of train of thought, I eventually produced a book which I called, *Islam the Natural Way*. It is centred on the individual human being because the human being is created and comes into this world alone and will, as the Qur'an says, be raised up as a single entity - not as part of a group or a community - to account for his or her stay on this earth. It seeks to set you and me as individuals in context - in the context of Reality as a whole both those parts which are observable in which we now live and move and have our being but which is ultimately perishable, as well as the more important parts which are beyond human perception but which are nonetheless real and lasting.

The book seeks to treat of our varied needs as individuals - needs of the mind, of the body and of the self as a whole, and of the human being as *mukallaf* - imbued with purpose and entrusted with responsibility. Then in ever expanding circles it deals with our place within the social unit of the family, the neighbourhood, the wider community, and the universal Muslim *ummah*. It then deals with relationships

with those who have come to acquire a variety of beliefs and practices in a pluralistic world, global issues that confront us, and most importantly, our place beyond this world to the hereafter which, as the Qur'an emphasises, is not only possible, but desirable and necessary, and in which there is disgrace and pain on the one hand and happiness and pleasure on the other.

To proceed, it might perhaps be useful if I were to dwell a little on each word in the title of this book, *Islam the Natural Way*. Why Islam? Why 'the'? Why 'Natural'? Why 'Way'?

### **The Meaning of Islam**

The word Islam is the verbal noun of *aslama* meaning 'he submitted'. Islam, though related to the word *salaam* or peace, really means submission, submission to God alone and not to any creature, object or system, nor to your own whims and passions - (your *hawa*, to use the Qur'anic term) - if these take you along a path of conflict or disobedience to God and depravity. In Islam, you do not bend your back before any creature. There is no obedience due to a creature which involves the disobedience of the Creator. All this is beautifully summed up in the four most powerful and liberating words you can ever utter: *La ilaha illa Allah* - there is no god, no one worthy of being worshipped except Allah, the One God, the Creator and Sustainer of all the worlds. Everything, that is created, every creature in the heavens and on earth, submits willy nilly to the Creator and is the laws fashioned by the Creator and is therefore muslim. The sun is a muslim, the moon is a muslim. Every fish in the sea, every bird in the sky, every human being is a muslim.

God or the Creator is not a figment of man's imagination. He is not some idea invented by people as they left a primitive stage of existence and proceeded to a higher, more sophisticated way of explaining the universe as so many books on the history of religions will tell you. When a human being realises who is his Creator, through the process of his God-endowed reason and other God-inspired means, and when he submits consciously to the laws of his Creator, he becomes a Muslim in the active, dynamic sense of the word. Islam in this sense, takes its name, as one of the great men and thinkers of our time, Alia Izetbegovic says, not from its laws or its prohibitions, but from a moment of cognition on the part of the conscious human being. From this moment on, you can face anything.

Islam as a system and a way of life is thus not named after an individual (like Christianity or Confucianism is), a tribe (as Judaism is) or a place (like Hinduism). It is not Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern. It is universal. It does not describe itself as a form of social relationships (like socialism or communism) although it deals with social relationships. It is not limited by material terms and purely earth-bound systems like secularism and capitalism. It is not a stultifying and short-

sighted humanism and it condemns both hedonism as a deception on the one hand, and monasticism which calls for withdrawal from the world. Islam is not a prey to time-bound notions like primitive and medieval and modern and the current, widespread fallacy that whatever is not modern and up-to-date, is of no value. Such a notion gives everything a very short shelf life and renders everything obsolete and worthless.

The word Islam is beautiful. It expresses something pure and unadulterated. It connects you with Adam and Hawa, with the Prophets and the righteous men and women throughout history. It also reminds us of people throughout history who have betrayed their nature and their trust and end up as losers, even if they were rich and powerful. The word Islam describes and fits so wonderfully and perfectly the relationship that exists between creatures like you and me who are dependent, in need, limited (who have no cause to, but often feel proud and arrogant) and the Creator Who is all-Powerful and all-Knowing, Wise, Just and Loving.

### **Islam as 'a Way'**

The title of the book describes Islam as a Way. As such, Islam is really the means to an end. Our submission and obedience to God is a means of attaining *falah* - ultimate success, felicity, and happiness which comes with seeking the pleasure of God and a place in Paradise as opposed to ultimate humiliation and deserving the wrath of God through arrogance, disobedience and rebellion. All the virtues that we uphold like truth and justice, all the exercises that we perform like *salah* and *saum* and other acts of worship are all means to an end. They are all part of the way of Islam or submission.

This is also described in the Qur'an as the Straight Way. We know that the shortest distance between two points is a Straight line. Islam as the Straight Way offers us a straight and direct way to our goal of Paradise - without deviation, without priests and intermediaries, without the need for experimentation and trial and error. Experimentation may be fine and necessary in the technological world but ravaging when applied to ethics and morality. Think of the ravages of sexual promiscuity and immorality for example.

We have used the word Way to describe Islam and not Religion for example, because the word religion in English often conjures up something essentially other-worldly and even obscurantist. In the European tradition, religion is often pitted against reason - that is why we have the attempt by the Pope in his encyclical last week to harmonise faith and reason. The attempt is futile and quite impossible given such central beliefs in Christianity as an anthropomorphic God - God turned man in the person of Jesus (peace be on him), or the doctrine of original sin or of papal infallibility.

The adjective 'religious' is also applied in English usage in a somewhat dodgy sense. If a person is described as religious, it often implies that he may be pious but that he has no practical sense or concerns and may even be a simpleton. [A'ishah once described Umar as one of the most pious persons she knew. When he spoke, he made his voice heard, when he walked he walked briskly and when he beat, his beating caused pain.

The word religion in English usage is often pitted not only against reason, but against science and against politics. The system of Islam has no such dichotomies and so we use the word religion very guardedly in relation to Islam. Instead of the term religion, we sometimes use the term 'worldview' in the text of Islam the Natural Way as a more all-embracing term. Here we may note that the Qur'anic word *din* is often translated as religion but has the sense of true religion as in the verse *Inna- d dina `ind-Allahi-l islam - Indeed the only true religion or life-transaction in the sight of God is Islam.*

### **Islam as 'a Natural Way'**

Now we come to the word Natural which we have used to describe 'Way'. I will ask you to banish from your minds some of the uses in English of the word Natural which do not fit here. We know for example that the word natural is sometimes used to describe nudist communities who live in an uninhibited manner. The word Nature with a capital N is also sometimes imbued with creative powers in English. The word Natural in the title is used as coming from the Arabic word *fitrah* which comes from the verb *fatara*, which means to split or to bring something into existence from the beginning and imbue it with its essential characteristics. (There are several verbs used in the Qur'an to convey the idea of creation but each has a specific connotation of its own.) The verb *fatara* and its noun *fitrah* occur in of *Surah Ar-Rum* Verse 30 of the Qur'an and a translation of this is given at the front of *Islam the Natural Way*:

*And so, set your face [face here is used as a metonym for your whole being- thus, surrender your whole being] steadfastly towards the one ever-true faith, turning away from all that is false in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into human beings: for, not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created - this is the purpose of the one ever-true faith; but most people know it not.*

The term *fitrah* rendered as 'natural disposition', refers to the human being's inborn, intuitive ability to discern between right and wrong, true and false, and thus, to sense God's existence and oneness. In this connection there is the well-known saying of the noble Prophet, peace be on him, recorded by *Bukhari* and *Muslim*: 'Every child is born in this natural disposition; it is only his parents that later turn

him into a Jew, a Christian or a Magian.' These three religious formulations are thus contrasted with the 'natural disposition' which, by definition, consists in the human being's instinctive cognition of God and self-surrender (or Islam) to Him. The term 'parents' has here the wider meaning of 'social influences' or 'environment'.

The challenge for a thinking person is thus to examine critically the inherited beliefs and practices of his parents and the influences of his environment. If these are found to be at odds with what is naturally sound and reasonable, then he has the duty to give them up. We should not do things simply because we found our fathers and forefathers doing them, and the Qur'an often chides people for doing so. This is the challenge which Islam requires us all to take up. And this is well and powerfully stated in the *du[ā]* or supplication: 'Our Sustainer, make us see the Truth as truth and bless us (with the strength) to follow it and make us see what is false as false and bless us (with the strength) to keep away from it.'

The *hadith* about each child being born in a state of *fitrah* contains much that could inform the current debate about nature and nurture and the origin of evil and criminal tendencies. It also deals with the question of responsibility and accountability.

The last part of the Qur'anic verse quoted above on *fitrah* is a succinct description of the purpose of the religion of Islam: not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created - this is the purpose of the one ever-true faith. Later, we shall see by looking briefly at some of the key terms in Islam - like *taqwa*, *tazkiyah*, *tawbah* - how Islam sets about the process of combating corrupting influences and ensuring proper growth and self development.

### **Islam as 'the Natural Way'**

Finally, we come to the not insignificant word 'the' in *Islam the Natural Way*. To start with, notice we do not say 'a' natural way. This would necessarily open up the possibility, or the actuality, of other valid or authentic ways by which people can fulfil God's purpose. There is, in fact, the widely held belief or assumption that there are several paths or religions which partake of the truth and promote good and are, therefore, valid and authentic and lead to the same goal. An analogy used in this regard is to say, all roads lead to the square. Some like those in the perennialist tradition, Fritz Hoff Schoun and his disciples, would perhaps say that each path or religion is equally valid in its own right. A recent series of books called *Visions of Reality*, in which *The Vision of Islam* was the second book, is based on the approach that each religion or worldview is viewed as 'equally profound and adequate unto itself'. This approach, of course, has become the politically correct way of regarding religions in many inter-faith councils, on ecumenical platforms and on agreed syllabuses for the teaching of religious education.

One danger of this approach is that it can easily lead to a hotchpotch of ideas and to eventual confusion. While recognising that there are elements of good in various religious formulations, there is no way that a pantheistic religion, or a religion with an anthropomorphic God, or a religion with a profusion of idols can sit comfortably with the religion based on pure monotheism. What often passes for religion is often nothing but paganism and represents a huge injustice (*zulmun [azim]*) to the One Creator and Sustainer of all the worlds.

This of course does not mean that we should not respect people's right to hold the beliefs that they do; nor does it mean that we should, in a spirit of arrogance, keep aloof from others. Our duty is humbly and with wisdom to call people to the worship of their Creator and Sustainer and to acknowledge that there must be a clear separation between the Creator and the created and that whatever is created should never be worshipped.

Having gone through each word in the title, I do not think that I am now expected to take you through the various chapters of *Islam the Natural Way* and show how each part coheres with the rest. We would be here for a long time indeed.

### **ESSENTIAL Qur'anic terms**

Earlier, I did refer briefly to some of the problems we have in giving a true picture of what Islam is, by using English words such as religion, faith and nature. What I would like to do here is to dwell briefly on some Qur'anic terms which relate to our subject and which hopefully will give us a more coherent, internally consistent, way of viewing Islam.

#### ***Fitrah***

We have already mentioned the word *fitrah* which refers to a person's natural state. It is a pure state which is free from sin. A person, however, is given the propensity to guard this pure state or corrupt it (see *Surah ash-Shams*). He is born with the capacity to recognise what is right and what is wrong. A definition of sin by the noble Prophet is that which disturbs the heart or conscience and you feel uncomfortable about it, even though people pronounce in its favour. For example, you should naturally feel comfortable telling the truth and uncomfortable when telling a lie.

#### ***Taqwa***

We come next to the word *taqwa* which is a key Islamic concept and repeated often in the Qur'an and is often translated as fear of God, piety or God-consciousness. Basically however, it means to be careful of not overstepping the limits, falling into

wrong-doing and sullyng or corrupting your pure original state. In this context, the well-known verse of the Qur'an (13: 11) - *Indeed God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves* - refers to a change from the good to the bad, and not from the bad to the good as is often assumed.

*Taqwa* thus has this negative connotation of being careful and wary and can best be understood in the context of preserving our originally pure state. Some of the key disciplines in Islam, like fasting, have been prescribed in order to develop a person's *taqwa*. A person with a strong sense of *taqwa* will do business and all his life's transactions in a particular way. You can see that a society with a preponderance of such people would not or should not suffer from high levels of fraud and crime and would not need massive police forces, informers and whistleblowers.

### ***Tawbah***

If however a person does overstep the limits and fall into wrong-doing, he needs to repent. The word for repentance in Arabic is *tawbah*, which comes from *taba* meaning to return - that is to try to return to God and your originally pure state, and engage in the process of purification. Purification or *tazkiyah* is an important part of the mission of the Prophets and of Islam. It is accomplished by constant remembrance (*dhikr*) of God, doing good works - *al-[amal as-salih*, prayer and supplication (*du[a'*). *Tazkiyah* implies both going back to your original pure state and growing in strength of character.

### ***Iman***

A key word in religious discourse is faith. The corresponding word in Arabic is *Iman* but this signifies faith in God based on knowledge and leads to certainty rather than nagging doubt. *Iman* is not synonymous with blind or irrational faith. Whoever has faith in God based on knowledge is said in the Qur'an to have grasped the surest support.

### ***[ilm***

The word for knowledge and science in Arabic is the same \_ *[ilm*. The word for a scholar and a scientist is also the same \_ *[alim*. Only the ones with true knowledge among the servants of God truly fear Him, according to the Qur'anic verse 35: 28.

Firm *iman* in God and the Last Day also has its manifestations in a virtuous, caring and compassionate society, as we saw in some of the sayings of the Prophet mentioned at the beginning.



## ***Kufr***

The opposite of *iman* is *kufr* which has the twin meaning of deliberately rejecting God and right guidance and also of being ungrateful to the Creator for all His grace. The basic meaning of *kufr*, however, is to cover up or smother the naturally good state with which we are created. The word *kafir* is used for a tiller of the soil, one who covers up a seed. *Kufr*, by its nature, leads to a dysfunctional person and to corruption and disorder, and aggression and conflict in society.

These are just a few examples to show how important it is to study Islam using its own terms. We run the risk of misunderstandings and even distortions, however unwittingly, by applying linguistic tools and concepts from other traditions. A proper study of Islam requires knowledge of the language of the Qur'an in order to get a precise, consistent and rich appreciation of this *din al-fitrah*.

## **FEATURES OF Islam As A message and a method**

So far, we have merely been putting down some markers or pointers which hopefully would help us in our study and practice of Islam. Since we are concerned here with only giving an overview as it were, I think it may be useful to look at some features of Islam which commend it both as a message and a method for achieving our goals in life.

### **Islam is based on firm foundations**

The first feature of Islam that I would like to highlight is that it is based on firm foundations and is not subject to constant changes and arbitrary rules, based on the views of a majority in a parliament or any group of people at any given time. The Qur'an, which has been preserved intact, and the *Sunnah*, of the Prophet, peace be on him, which has been meticulously recorded even from during his lifetime, is a guarantee against going astray as the noble Prophet has emphasized. These are the essential foundations on which the *Shari'ah* or the Legal and Moral Code of Islam is built and which give Islam its practical as well as its intellectually and morally satisfying dimensions.

### **Islam is comprehensive**

The second feature is that Islam is comprehensive; holistic. It does not ignore any facet of reality. It caters for all aspects of people's needs in a harmonious and balanced way. It does not require people to eliminate or suppress their legitimate needs and desires.

It does not require those entrusted with the leadership of the community to be celibate and make it illegal for them to marry and have children. It does not require any group of its adherents to lead a monastic life, cut off from the rest of the world. It does not say keep out of the sphere of politics and leave religion to God. It does not shy away from preserving order in society by dealing appropriately and effectively with crime and criminals. Punishment in Islam fits the crime and is a sort of atonement and there is no stigma thereafter. Islam does not say that it is only for a chosen group of people and that the rest of mankind are forever outside its pale.

It does not limit its vision to this world, but sees the Hereafter, logically and reasonably, as a possible, necessary and desirable part of Reality. Without the requirement of responsibility and accountability associated with the Hereafter, life in this world will be filled with countless loose ends and be devoid of meaning and purpose.

### **Islam is reasonable and logical**

The third feature of Islam is that, while given the finite nature of human reason, it is reasonable and logical. It does not require people to believe in anything blindly or in anything that is palpably irrational and demeaning like God becoming man. I came across a pamphlet a couple of weeks ago which said: 'I desire in joining this Union to declare my faith in Jesus Christ as my Saviour, my Lord and God.' This is part of the membership declaration of the evangelical student body here in Oxford - the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union. It is sad to see not only a body of students, teachers and even professors tied to such a notion but a whole 'civilization' being built on such a myth as God incarnate. Belief in propositions that are patently false give religion as such a bad name and must be held responsible for people turning away from religion as such and for the rampant growth of atheism, secularism and crass materialism in the world.

### **Islam has a high moral and ethical code**

The fourth feature is that Islam has a high moral and ethical code. It does not promote anything that is immoral or obscene. Anything it declares forbidden is so because it is harmful for the individual and society. This can be applied to the many major social evils which are being vigorously promoted even by so-called enlightened governments and which are destroying the fabric of societies throughout the world. Adultery and fornication, abortion, homosexuality, alcohol manufacturing, sale and consumption, gambling, tobacco, economies and life-styles based on usury or interest - these are eating away at the vitals of society. There is hardly an individual or a family that is untouched by these evils. Islam tackles these

problems from their roots. Its solutions and its methods are thus truly radical. The method is summed up by [A'ishah who said that the Arabs before Islam were steeped in adultery and alcohol consumption. But the Prophet, peace be on him, did not start by telling them don't commit adultery or don't drink alcohol. By God, if he had, they would never have stopped. Instead, he first called them to belief in God and in His wisdom and justice. And they stopped.

The number of things forbidden in Islam are few. The basic principle in Islam is that everything is allowed unless it is prohibited and not the other way around. This makes for a great amount of freedom and the flowering of human creativity and responsibility without shackles at every turn.

### **Justice is central to Islam**

A fifth feature is that justice is central to Islam. The opposite is also true: If something is unjust, tyrannical or barbaric - it can't be Islamic. [*Adl* is one of the words used in the Qur'an for justice, and it also connotes equilibrium and balance and putting everything in its rightful place. [*adl* signifies order and harmony - harmony with other human beings, with the environment and the rest of creation. The opposite of [*adl* is *zulm* which connotes injustice, evil and tyranny and leads to disorder and corruption. *Zulm* means, denying what is due to God or to any part of creation. This is why, for example, *shirk* or associating others with God, is great injustice in the Qur'an.

### **Conclusion**

These are just some of the features of Islam which we have mentioned in a very cursory fashion. One major problem in trying to get a correct appreciation of Islam, particularly at this time in world affairs, is that things are not always or usually as clear-cut as they should be. There are no practical models that we can look to and say this is what an Islamic society should be. Moreover, in the world in which we live, what is bad and ugly, harmful and destructive is often portrayed as wonderful and exciting, glamorous and even highly desirable. (The worldwide lottery craze, for example). People gravitate towards these fashions, tendencies and trends in a sort of moth-like fascination. And we know what happens to moths that go for brightness but are not careful about heat.

On the other hand, what is good and beautiful and beneficial for the individual and the society is often portrayed as dull and boring and repulsive, something to be scoffed at and ridiculed and even to be combated and smashed. (Consider the virtue of chastity, for example).

This confusion and disorder, this topsy turvy state of affairs is not something new. We find such attitudes and trends described in the Qur'an. It describes people who make lawful what God has prohibited, and the evil of their deeds seem beautiful in their own eyes (9: 37).

At the same time, such people seek to portray the good as something inherently warped or flawed. The Qur'an describes evil doers (the *zalimun*) as those who turn others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked, and who refuse to acknowledge the truth of the life to come. So-called Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon.

Following on from all the above, I would like to say to you, as people on the path of knowledge and ideas, that you have the duty to try to reverse these trends through your scholarship and your academic and professional output. You have the urgent and massive task ahead to define and articulate the Islamic worldview and the challenges facing humanity in various fields in a beautiful and cogent manner, with a view to changing individual lives as well as moulding or creating institutions in society that would promote what is virtuous and true and discourage what is vicious and false, ugly and destructive.

'O Allah, guide us and guide [others] through us, make guidance easy for us and make us sources of access to good and barriers against evil.'

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