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## What is a Muslim?

EVERY law court of Islam is bound to recognize as a Muslim in good standing, and hence as entitled to all privileges and rights appertaining thereto, and standing under all duties and obligations of Islamic law, every adult male and female who consciously and solemnly witnesses that “There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God.” Fulfillment of this simple definition of “Islamicity” is all that Islamic law requires in order to ascertain membership in the Muslim community. Once a person is put to the test, and he witnesses responsibly to the twin facts of God being the only God and Muhammad (ṢAAS)\* being His Prophet, no more can be legally required of him to prove his faith and, in consequence, all his rights and duties under Islamic law.

The reason why “Islamicity” is so simple to define, so simple to attain and so simple to establish, is that Islam is neither an ethnocentric nor a sacramental religion. One does not have to be born a Muslim; nor does one have to have any Muslim parent, guardian, family or people. Every person in the world may become a Muslim if he so chooses, by his personal decision alone. His initiation into Islam needs no partaking of any sacrament, no participation by any clergy and no

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\* (ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*: May the peace and blessings of God be upon him. Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.

confirmation by any organized body. As to “Islamicity,” therefore, all men are absolutely equal in that the house of Islam may be entered by all and everyone upon his satisfying the simplest of requirements. In the matter of men being Muslims or non-Muslims, there is no middle ground, no ambiguity, no complication.

Great as it may be in the eye of Islam for any person to make the decision to enter the faith, his entry constitutes no guarantee of personal justification in the eye of God. Since Islam has no sacraments, there is nothing the new initiate can do which, if his life were to terminate at its very moment, he would be assured of salvation. Augustine’s terrible case of the two newborn babies, the one going to Paradise because he received baptism and the other condemned to eternal fire because he did not, is not a problem for Islam. In Islam, justification in the eye of God is a function of man’s deeds or works, not of any sacrament of which he may have partaken. Is justification, on the other hand, a function of man’s personal faith? No, answers Islam. Faith is presupposed in the man’s entry into the community of Islam. But faith may be a mere statistical feature, a mark of social self-identification. It may and may not produce the works of virtue, the deeds of righteousness. Only the latter, therefore, constitutes justification.

On the scale of virtue and righteousness, men occupy varying positions. The scale itself is infinite; and there is no point at which a Muslim may carry his title to Paradise, as it were, in his pocket. Everyone strives and some strive more than others. Judgment by God of any man’s fate is not pre-empted by anything any individual can do, whether for or against salvation. For God may reject the greatest deeds because of lack of faith and seriousness on the part of their doer; and He may forgive the greatest sinner. Likewise, He is not determined to pass favorable judgment on anyone by virtue of his partaking in any “sacrament.” The Muslim is hence a person who, having joined the ranks of Islam by his solemn witnessing, is engaged in the pursuit of righteousness the rest of his life. The simple test of Islamicity provided by Islamic law, designed to make entry into Islam the easiest religious passage ever devised, is balanced by a salvation requisite, after entry, which is by nature infinite and hence never fully satisfied. Religious justification is thus the Muslim’s eternal hope, never his complacency, not even for a

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fleeting moment. The Muslim, therefore, is a person who, as his solemn witnessing has indicated, believes that only God is God and Muhammad is His Prophet. That only God is God makes of him at once the humblest and proudest creature. He is humble, and rubs his proud forehead against the ground in prostration, before God. God is to him, the One Creator, Provider, Ruler, Forgiver and Judge, the First Cause and the Final End of everything, the Ultimate Reality. He is the object of adoration and praise, of thanks and worship, the One Master to Whom all one's life is devoted in dedication and service. The Muslim is the proudest of people precisely because of this loyalty to God. Besides God, no thing and no man is worthy of his loyalty, of his service and work. The Muslim may not submit to any ruler, and much less to any tyrant, because his submission is all due to the One Master. Some Muslims indeed do submit to rulers and tyrants; but they do so at the cost of violating their very definition as Muslims. In this submission to God, the Muslim places himself on a par with the whole of mankind, which he regards as equally obliged to recognize the Creator of all. He is touched by a feeling of strongest brotherhood to any person so submitting himself to the divine Sovereign; for *vis-à-vis* the Creator, there is no perspective or category, no bond or definition, mightier and more proper than that of creatureliness. Here all human beings stand absolutely identical.

Equally, and on account of his acknowledgment of God alone as Master, the Muslim is a sort of revolutionary who champions the cause of human freedom against human masters everywhere. Nothing is more hateful to him than *shirk* or associating other beings with God. When a person sets up money, sex, power, or pleasure as his God besides God, it is indeed bad. But when a Caesar or a tyrant so sets himself up and demands absolute loyalty from the citizens – loyalty belonging exclusively to God – then rebellion against that ruler and his ultimate overthrow become for the Muslim a prime religious objective.

The Muslim believes that God has created man and the world not in sport, and certainly not in vain, but for a purpose. This purpose is that man may fulfill his ethical vocation; that he may do the good deeds. The scripture of Islam pictures the life of man *in* the world as a

free competition among men for doing the better, the nobler, the greater deeds. On this account, it called man “*khalīfah*” or vicegerent of God, i.e., he who acts and fulfills, on behalf of God. The world God created is one which fits this moral vocation of man, one in which man is efficacious, where the realization of goodness, truth and beauty is actually possible.

This purpose is what gives meaning to the Muslim’s life. And there can be no greater meaning than to serve as the actualizer of God’s will on earth, as the realizer of goodness and value in space and time. It is the source of his dignity and self-esteem. In fact, it does assign him a cosmic status to see himself, on a par with all other men, as the bridge through which the moral good must pass to be actualized on earth. Realization of the moral good requires that it be achieved in freedom, i.e., under conditions where it is equally possible for man to realize as well as to violate the moral imperative. Only the human being, of all creatures on earth, is so equipped.

To be a *khalīfah*, or vicegerent of God on earth, is no little burden. First, the task the position imposes is world-wide. Everything in creation is object of improvement. This means that the task involves the turning of every corner of the earth into all that it ought to be, namely, into a Paradise. Equally, it means that upon the Muslim falls the task of educating and transforming mankind, not only himself, his children, next of kin or compatriots, and to arrange for them the fulfillment by each of all his personal potential. All the problems of mankind are hence the Muslim’s problems. To accept them, to seek morally-worthy solutions of them and to work out these solutions in history, is the Muslim’s obligation and destiny – as well as his pride. Islam wants man to confront these problems head-on, and assures him that God will grant merit, and hence reward and felicity, in direct proportion to man’s commitment to the task, to his engagement in the job, to his success in achieving the divine purpose of creation – namely, the universal and highest good of all men, of all peoples, of all things. All of the Muslim’s life is to be lived in service to God; that is, in educating and disciplining himself, in discovering the laws of nature so as to make his usufruct of it possible and easy; and finally, in living and enabling every person and thing to live the divine pattern which is God’s will. The

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Muslim is he who interferes with every natural process so as to make it serve man's needs and fulfill his joys; who interferes with the life of everyone on earth so as to enable that person better to fulfill his potential, to realize to the full his noble destiny as God's vicegerent. Obviously, to live the life of Islam is to live dangerously. But it is also to live with the highest expectation, the greatest promise, the deepest joy of which man is capable.