

## Why is the Muslim a Muslim?

THAT God is sole Creator and Master of the world, that He is the First Cause and Final End, that man is His servant, that human service is the kneading and molding of the world and of man into what it and he ought to be, and that such work is possible and upon its completion depends man's felicity and bliss – all this is Islam's view of reality. This view is not without grounds and justification; nor is it devoid of problems.

The first striking characteristic of Islam is that its view is wholly positive. It seems to prescribe the doing of the good, and trusts that the moral imperatives can and would be obeyed. But isn't man by nature inclined to do the opposite, to do evil? Isn't his nature to sin, defy God and disobey the moral commandments? Isn't he a "fallen" creature in need of ransom and salvation before he can be expected to do the good?

That man is by nature inclined to sin, defy God and disobey Him is certainly true, answers Islam. But it is equally true that man's nature is also to obey God, to do the good and act ethically. The two are possible for him, and he inclines to the one as much as he does to the other. The fact that he can do evil when he does the good, and can do the good when he does evil, adds a new dimension to his worth or

## *Why is the Muslim a Muslim?*

unworth when he does either. If he were compelled, i.e., without freedom, to follow a single course, his action would be neither moral nor immoral, though it might have realized a material value or disvalue. No man is hopelessly bound to one or the other course of action; and if he were, no one in his senses would consider him morally responsible.

Man, therefore, is no more “fallen” than he is “saved.” Because he is not “fallen,” he stands in no need for a savior; and because he is not “saved,” he stands in need to do the good works and do them ethically, which alone would earn him the desired “salvation.” Indeed, “salvation” is an improper term, since one must be in a necessary predicament beyond the hope of ever pulling himself out of it, to need “salvation.” That is precisely what man does not need. Man is not impotent ethically; nor is he a helpless puppet capable of neither good nor evil. He is capable of both. To “save” himself by his deeds and works is his pride and glory. To miss his chance and pass all the opportunities by, is pitiable neglect; to miss the calling deliberately and to do evil is to earn punishment, to deserve damnation.

Islam teaches that man is born innocent, and remains so until he makes himself guilty by his own deed. It does not believe in “original sin;” and its scripture interprets Adam’s disobedience as his own personal misdeed; a misdeed for which he repented and which God had forgiven.

Rather than demoralize man by declaring him born with necessary, inescapable sin, Islam reassures him, that God Who does not work in vain has created him fitted for the job of vicegerent. He has given him his eyes and ears, his senses of touch and taste and smell, his discerning heart and mind, his imagination and memory, all to the end of discovering and understanding the divine pattern in creation. He has built him as He did, with grasping fingers, hurrying feet, springing muscles and supporting bones, to the end that he may manufacture, grasp or produce what he needs. He placed him on an earth receptive to his efficacy, where he can get things done. Finally, He gave him mastery over the whole of creation, for He made everything subservient to man. Even the sun, the moon and the millions of far away stars were created expressly for his benefit. Instead of being damned before he walks on earth, Islam teaches that man is blessed with all these

“perfections,” with life and mastery over all things, and is hence all the more expected to fulfill the divine will in his life.

Islam denies therefore that God had to ransom man by means of oblation and sacrifice. Such view, it holds, does violence to both God and man, compromising the transcendence of the former and the moral status of the latter. It regards Jesus as God’s prophet, sent to teach identically the same message as all other prophets and to reform the Jews who had gone astray from the same teaching delivered to them by those prophets. It holds the Christians, not Jesus, accountable for what is being taught in his name. But it reassures them that they are essentially in the right, especially when they call men to worship God and to serve Him by doing the good works. Moreover, Islam explains their “mistake” as due to the loss of the authentic texts of revelation. Profiting from their experience, Islam preserved the absolute integrity and authenticity of its own revealed text, explaining that God Himself has sent it down, and He alone is its guardian and keeper.

If all prophets have conveyed one and the same message, whence come all the religions of history? Islam answers, there can be no difference in the message since their source is one, namely God, and since in their creatureliness, that is *vis-à-vis* God, all men are alike. Revelation through the prophets constitutes a fiduciary fund of truth for every people, since God had made His will known to every people in their own language. Variations of space and time, acculturation by alien influences and the whims and passions of men did the rest. The result was the religions of history, none of which has preserved the original text of its revelation. In their pristine purity, the revelations were one and the same and contained the same principles of religion and ethics. If they differed at all, they did so in the concrete prescriptions they imposed as implementive of those essential principles. They were one in their “what,” but many in their “how.” The former is their core and essence and is universal and eternal; the latter is accidental and is relative to the circumstances of history, to the peculiarities of the specific people to whom it was sent.

Paralleling the eternal “what” is a built-in capacity in every human being to recognize God and grasp His will as the good and ought of morality. This is not merely man’s endowment with the senses and

## *Why is the Muslim a Muslim?*

reason we have mentioned earlier. Besides all these, there is a sixth sense, which all men share in common, a genuine *sensus communis*, which enables them all to perceive God. Awareness of the holy is innate to man. There is no man without religion, and no religion without the holy. If men saw the holy in different forms, that is due to their upbringing, their legacies of culture and religion. In its pure form, the *sensus numinis* in every man makes him aware of God, the Holy One, and of His will as the moral imperative. It is hence for more than one reason that God holds all men equally responsible before Him.

Conversely, man ought to regard and treat all other men as his equals. In acting morally, i.e., in fulfilling the divine will, man should aim at the whole of humanity. Certainly considerations of nearness and strategy impose upon him to start his good “works” at home, beginning with himself. But granted these necessities, he cannot discriminate between the human creatures of God. Whether as subjects of moral action, or as objects of moral action by others, all men are equal because they are all equally creaturely, their creatureliness being the ground of their obligation to serve God. Universalism is God-given as well as God-enjoined.

Within the Semitic family of nations in which Islam was born, the Jews have admirably preserved the revealed teaching that God is transcendent and One. However, Islam charged them with misunderstanding divine transcendence when they thought of God as related to themselves in a way other than He is related to all other creatures. Their teaching of a doctrine of divine election which put them ahead of all men in receiving God’s favors, Islam found objectionable. They held themselves to be God’s children and elect regardless of their deeds. In so doing they were the object of Islam’s castigation and chastisement. Islam regarded itself as the religion of Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David as each of them conveyed the revealed message in its pure and unadulterated form. In consequence, the Muslim identified himself with the Jews as worshipper and servant of one and the same transcendent God and regarded his own religious doctrine as Judaism purged of all ethno-centrism and especially, of the doctrines of election and of the “remnant.” As far as Jewish law and ethics are concerned, Islam confirmed the revelation of Jesus insofar as it

removed the yoke of literalism and legalism which the Jewish tradition had spun around the Law of Moses, and revoked the laws which the rabbis had added to it.

Religious authority, Islam held, belongs only to God. As tyrants are condemned and men are enjoined to shake off their tyranny, the road to God should be an open and free highway, admission to which has only one requisite, namely creatureliness. Away, therefore, Islam taught, with priesthood and all its orders and men. The tasks of teaching the truth, of guiding the young and counseling the erring, will last as long as man. But they constitute universal duties equally incumbent on all men. Prestige in the discharge of these tasks belongs to whomsoever has acquired the most and highest learning which is itself accessible to all. The ages-long occupation of priests as intermediaries between God and man has in Islam come to an end. God is the Forgiver, Punisher, Judge and Master, not the priest. He does not delegate these functions to any creature because that would violate His transcendence and role as sole governor and judge of men. He is close, near, fully responsive to every man's prayer. His mercy and care for mankind, along with His omnipotence, demand that all men address themselves directly to Him. God needs no bureaucracy.

Priesthood fulfills the function of administering the sacraments. Sacrament, however, is precisely what Islam, like Judaism before it, denies and condemns. A sacrament is a celebration through which man's prayer is addressed to God, and an aspect of God's power which is channeled back to man, through the mediation of a priest. Islam holds both avenues to be false: man's prayer reaches to God without need for intermediaries; and no aspect whatever of God's power or divinity is channeled anywhere without threat to divine transcendence. God's power and sanctity are solely God's. They are not dispensed to any creature because Creator and creature are two absolutely disparate kinds of being which never fuse into each other. Perhaps one can say that life as a whole is one sacrament insofar as God is the source of life, and man's life is a song of praise to God, a discharge of His commandment, a sort of "return" to Him. But even that is the end of sacrament in the meaning of fragmentation and diffusion of divinity. Doing away with the priesthood obviates the sacrament of

## *Why is the Muslim a Muslim?*

ordination, and doing away with the sacraments obviates the need for priests. Without original sin, there is no need for baptism; and with God being in direct control of human affairs, worshippers, thank-givers, confessors and supplicants can all address themselves directly to the divine Presence.

It is God who indeed is the Master, the sole Master. He alone is the Judge, and He knows all since nothing escapes His Mastery. It is not in any man's hand to dispense His power. Judgment of a man's whole life, or of any of his deeds, is God's prerogative, not man's. And it is the consummating conclusion of human life when, on the Day of Judgment, every man is meted out the exact reward or punishment he has earned in his life. In the view of Islam, the "other world" or the "other kingdom" has no other meaning than this consummation. It is not another world, another space-time, designed to supplant this world, this space-time, and to make up for us all the deficiencies and shortcomings of this world. Inheriting the view from Zoroastrianism, Judaism maintained that in the other world, the absolute good would be realized which was lost forever in this world, and which would never be realized in this world. Such is based upon the view that the Kingdom of David was itself the Kingdom of God, and that God would send a messiah to restore it cataclysmically at the end of time. Following in the same path, Christianity went one step further by indicating this world and all time as hopelessly fallen and depraved, and hence utterly impossible to be a realm where the absolute good might be realized. It projected the other world as an idealized substitute, where nothing but sweetness, joy and bliss would befall the "saved." Islam rejected both views as demoralizing to man's faith in himself, in this world. Reasserting the essential innocence and goodness of both man and the world, Islam taught not only that the realization of the absolute is possible in this world but that to bring it about here and now is precisely the duty of every man and woman. It warned mankind that there is no world other than this; that there is no space-time other than this; that all man's duties and hopes are to be fulfilled in this world – if they are to be fulfilled at all.

This world, the Muslim believes, is the realm of God, the Kingdom wherein utopia is possible of actualization if man performs his duty and

responds to the divine call with obedience. God wishes for man to do the good deeds, and the good deeds do actually transform this world into the ideal; that this was from the beginning the whole purpose of creation, rather than the fall or defeat of that original purpose. The other world, Islam holds, is not “another” world, an alternative to this world, but merely a consummation of judgment passed on whether or not we willed to transform this world and succeeded in so doing. It would be totally different from, and hence “other” than, this world, not because our present frustrations and deprivations will be satisfied, but because it will be transcendent, i.e., beyond this space and this time. It is not, however, a “world;” it has no dimension; and it is not a replica of this world with its sorrows turned into joys. It is Paradise or Hell in the sense of reward or punishment, a consummation of reward and punishment meted out in judgment.

Only such a view, Islam holds, is consistent with loyalty to this world. Without it, this world would become merely a bridge or passage on which we are transients, advised neither to tarry nor to build but quickly to get to the other shore. This is denial of this world. Islam, on the other hand, is world-affirming, stressing this as the only world. We either succeed or fail in it, doing the right or the wrong. Being free and responsible, everything we do in this world counts for us or against us. On the Day of Judgment, which will also be the termination of this world, we would be given what we have deserved, blessedness or damnation. Piety and morality, that is, obedience to God, should be our choice in this world for a double reason: they do bring us happiness and acknowledge utopia in this world; they also and at the same time promise us blessedness on the Day of Judgment, for they are indeed obedience to God. That is why Islam, Muslims hold, achieves for man two happinesses: happiness here and happiness in the hereafter. (Qur’an 2:201)