

CHAPTER ONE

IS ISLAM SUITABLE FOR AMERICA?

In order to answer this question, we must examine:

- What is Islam and what are its basic principles?
- Is it applicable in America?
- What are the needs of American society?
- Will Islam help Americans?

What is Islam and what are its basic principles and goals?

Islam is one of the three Divine religions with a scripture: The Jews have the Torah given by God to Moses. The Christians have the New Testament written by the disciples and others who came later explaining the teachings of Jesus. And the Muslims have the Qur'an, given to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by divine inspiration. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in addition to the Qur'an, which Muslims consider God's own literal words, also received commands from God, which he transmitted orally. The prophet's sayings known as the Hadeeth is the second major source of knowledge and rulings in Islam after the Qur'an.

Muslims cannot live their lives by the Qur'an alone, for it only provides general guidelines and principles. Muslims rely extensively on the Prophet's tradition that explains in detail how Muslims understand and apply the Qur'an and how to live as Muslims. An example is Prayer which Muslims are commanded to do five times every day. The Qur'an gives the order to pray, but how to pray and the details and application of this ritual of worship is explained by the Sunnah (tradition of the

prophet). He said: (Pray as you see me pray). Prayer goes through three phases of standing up reciting the Qur'an; then bowing down; then prostration celebrating the name of God (Allah).

The Sunnah or tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was transmitted both orally and in written form from the time of the Prophet (PBUH) and after his death 632 after Christ. There are books that relate the prophet sayings. Most of his sayings have been authenticated, and those in doubt or false have been pointed out and rejected by Muslim scholars. We can feel very comfortable about the Sunnah since it has been subjected to rigorous scientific study and only what could be authenticated is accepted.

The Qur'an was collected in total at the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and before his death. It was safeguarded in written form as well as memorized in the hearts of men. At the time of the first Caliph Abu Bakr, the Qur'an was collected from both the written and oral sources and was written to be safeguarded. A second authentication was carried out at the time of the third righteous Caliph Othman, because the way the Qur'an was recited differed from one region to the next, and one Qur'an was followed by all. This version is what we have today as the Arabic Qur'an.

The Basic principles of Islam revolve around aspects of belief and rituals of worship, as well as proper behavior and good character.

BASIC ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES

- 1- Belief in God as the Creator, Who guides and provides and who controls our life and destiny
- 2- We are accountable to God (Allah) as we answer to Him for what we did in our life. This accountability will occur on the Day of Judgment, no one will be wronged and everything is taken into account. There is reward and punishment, but God is often-Forgiving, Most-Merciful
- 3- Belief in God's angels as His messengers to His chosen prophets, and as witnesses over mankind as well as performing other functions

- 4- Belief in Allah's divine Books that He sent down to guide mankind to His way including the Torah and the Qur'an
- 5- Belief in Allah's messengers as human beings of exalted character and behavior, chosen by God to deliver, explain and apply His message to their people, ending with the last messenger, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), sent to all mankind
- 6- Belief that Allah controls our fate and destiny, and He knows the future. Our job is to obey Him and be patient during adversity and grateful during good times, and work to improve our fate to another fate that God wills for us.

The Rituals Of Worship In Islam

- 1- Obligatory prayers five times every day and night.
- 2- Obligatory charity (Zakat) given by the rich to help the poor.
- 3- Fasting the month of Ramadan.
- 4- Performing Hajj (Pilgrimage) if we have the way and means to do so once in a life time.

Proper Behavior And Noble Character

The Qur'an refers to "Those who believe and do good deeds" to emphasize that our deeds must confirm our belief in God. Belief in Islam is not a theory, it must be applied in the way we live our life and interact with others. To help those who need our help and to refrain from wrong action and shameful deeds is part of our faith and confirms our understanding that we are accountable to God. The Qur'an encourages noble character and gives glad tidings to those who are patient, truthful, God-conscious and trustworthy. Our faith and our rituals of worship are intended to improve our character and behavior.

IS ISLAM APPLICABLE IN AMERICA?

The Qur'an tells us that Islam is the religion that Allah has chosen for mankind:

﴿ إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ ﴾ [آل عمران: ١٩].

"The religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will)"

(Al-Imran 3: 19)

The Qur'an also tells us that Allah has completed His favor on mankind and accepted Islam for them as the best religion, and that no other religion is accepted after Islam:

﴿ الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتَمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا ﴾

[المائدة: ٣]

"This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion"

(Al-Maeda 5: 3)

And:

﴿ وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾ ﴾

[آل عمران: ٨٥]

"If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good)"

(Al-Imran 3: 85)

The Qur'an also explains that Muhammad (PBUH) is Allah's last messenger: there will be no messengers or prophets after him, meaning that his message is the last divine message and revelation:

﴿ مَا كَانَ مُحَمَّدٌ أَبَا أَحَدٍ مِّن رِّجَالِكُمْ وَلَٰكِن رَّسُولَ اللَّهِ وَخَاتَمَ النَّبِيِّينَ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ

بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٤٠﴾ [الأحزاب: ٤٠]

"Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but (he is) the Messenger of Allah, and the Seal of the Prophets: and Allah has full knowledge of all things" (Al-Ahzab 33 : 40)

The Qur'an further explains that prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was sent to all mankind:

﴿ قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ جَمِيعًا الَّذِي لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ

وَالْأَرْضِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ الَّذِي يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَكَلِمَاتِهِ وَاتَّبِعُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٥٨﴾ [الأعراف: ١٥٨]

Say: "O men! I am sent unto you all, as the Messenger of Allah, to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: there is no god but He: it is He that giveth both life and death. So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in Allah and His Words: follow him that (so) ye may be guided"

(Al-Ara'f 7 : 158)

If these concepts are correct:

- The Qur'an is the last divine revelation
- That there will be no more messengers after prophet Muhammad (PBUH)
- That Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was sent as a universal messenger to all mankind

Then it follows that the religion of Islam must be applicable in all societies and at all times till the Day of Judgment. Therefore Islam is applicable in America.

But can we apply Islam in a Western society in the same way that Islam is applied and understood in an Eastern society with different culture and tradition? We will answer this question in a later chapter

THE NEEDS OF AMERICAN SOCIETY

What characterized America and made it strong is the freedom it affords its citizens. This freedom is expressed in many areas: freedom to work hard and to achieve results. This allowed individuals to reach their goals and make great contributions in the form of companies, institutions etc. The freedom to give in charity established foundations that help many worthy causes. The freedom to worship God in the way that each person sees fit and not subject to the state. The freedom to express one's

opinion and enjoys democracy subject to the rule of law. The freedom from tyranny, whether it is government or church or the majority not allowing minorities to exercise their rights. All these aspects of freedom allowed creativity and productivity, not available any where else in the world.

In addition America and the American dream attracted individuals from all over the world to come, live, work and share in this opportunity. This diversity and the ability to assimilate in American society and be accepted allowed infusion of many talents and intellectuals which enriched the society and made America a vibrant active society. Those immigrants were “hungry” and willing to work hard to prove themselves in order to achieve results and be accepted in main stream American society. Surely there were prejudices, but they could be overcome, and the majority was ready to accept “foreigners”.

In this struggle to work and be productive and excel in a society that valued money and power, material things become emphasized if not glorified. To be rich and powerful is what people aspired to. This drive blunted spirituality and gradually religion and its morals and values became less important.

Fewer people went to church, and if they did it was a form of ritual. Religious teachings did not really reach their conscience, nor affected their thinking or changed their priorities. Pictures and stories of football or basketball players or movie stars or singers making millions, in contrast to teachers struggling to make ends meet reflect what society values. If becoming rich and famous is more important than teaching our children or college students, then there is something wrong in our value system and priorities.

America has always been proud of the freedom it affords its individual citizens. Since September 11, this personal freedom has been curtailed and government has been given too much authority at the expense of personal freedom in the pretext of defending and protecting our national security. Executive powers grew too much unchecked by congress and so far the courts have been rather mute on the subject preferring not to interfere. To be able to wiretap and spy on Americans was unthinkable in a country that pride itself on valuing freedom, but this practice is

common nowadays. This trend is quite disturbing especially because very few people seem to care or complain.

So what America needs is to return to the concept of small government and safeguarding personal freedom. Also calls to limit immigration will in the long term hurt America since it will kill what allowed the country to be vital and diverse. It is the steady flow of Immigrants with their new ideas and desire to work hard and prove them that has ignited communities all across America.

Another disturbing trend has been the view of the present government of pre-emptive strike and the willingness to go to war with no solid foundation or clear rationale. A typical example is the war in Iraq, which has proven costly and a war that cannot be won in a political sense. It has created more enemies than friends and has tainted the image of America not just in the Middle East but all over the world. The idea of bringing democracy and trying to enforce our own system of values on other countries with different history and culture is naïve and ill conceived.

ISLAM CAN PROVIDE ANSWERS

The answer depends on whether Muslims understand their religion in a progressive way and present Islamic solutions that suit the time, or whether they are rigid in their understanding and application of Islamic guidelines and principles.

If Muslims understand that what is important is the basic principles and spirit of the religion, and that the application of these guidelines much change to suit the times and respond to different environments, then clear critical thinking can come up with possible answers to current problems. But if Muslims are stuck on the literal text and are not willing to adapt these principles to changing times, then their answer is old fashioned and not practical and will be of no help or value.

Islam addresses both mind and heart, both our material needs and our spiritual needs. It provides a balanced system that deals with our dual composition as human beings: body and soul. It does not ask more than

we can bear as human beings, but it refuses to degenerate to conform to our vain desires. It does not ask us to be like angels, but at the same time appeals to what is good in our nature and reaches our conscience.

Such an approach has been lacking in the two other divine religions: Judaism and Christianity. Judaism appealed more to human needs and mind. Christianity appealed more to human spirit. Islam presents a more balanced approach, as the Qur'an describes: a just and middle of the road system:

﴿ وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا ﴾ [البقرة: ١٤٣]

"Thus have We made of you an Ummat justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves" (Al-Baqara 2 : 143)

We will discuss later on how can Islam provide practical answers to current problems like poverty, crime, drugs and the decline in morals.