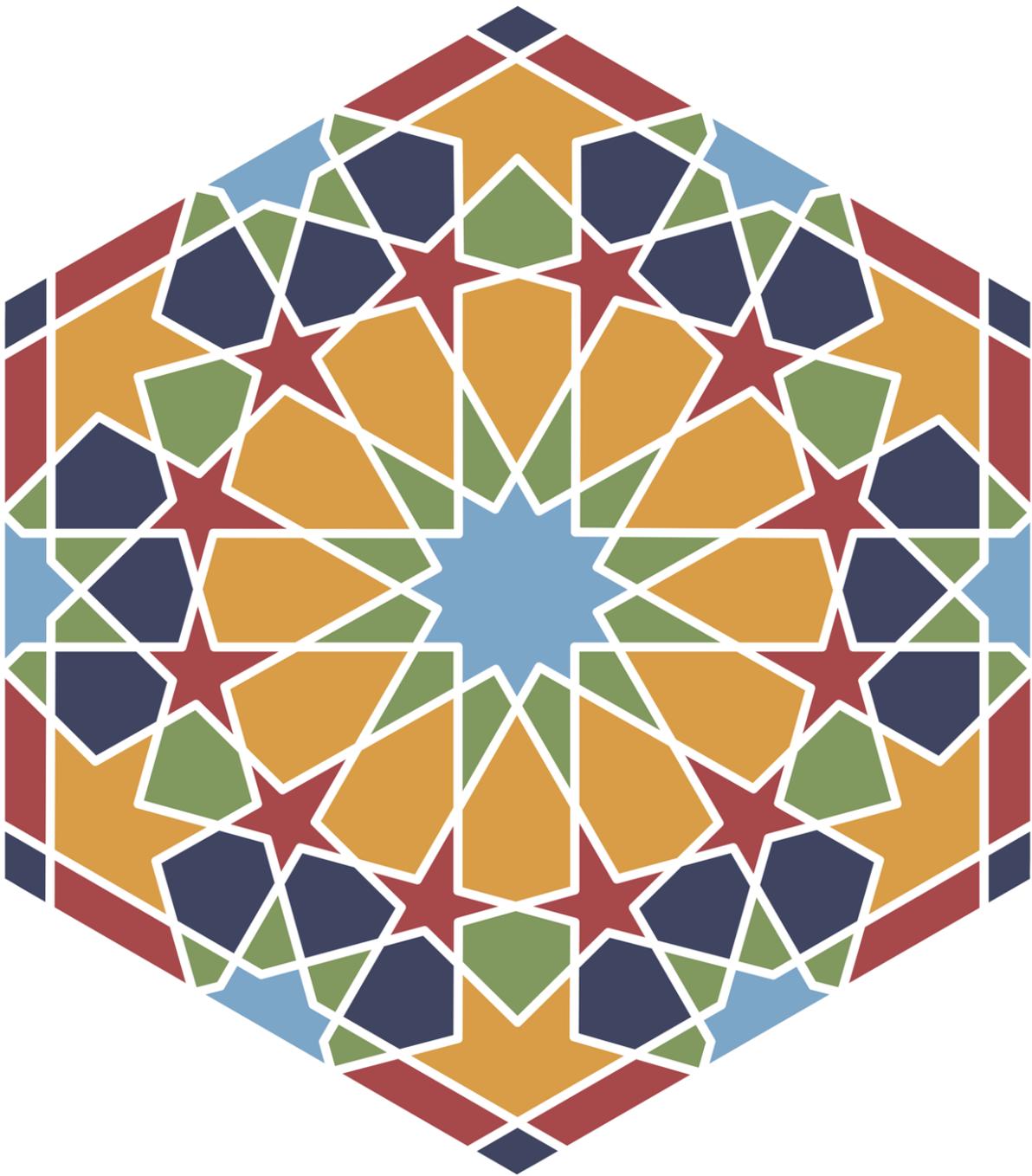


An Islamic perspective on some

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

A COLLECTION OF TALKS PRESENTED AT MCC RADIO PROGRAM



This booklet is produced by the Otago Muslim Chaplaincy Committee, whose members include Dr Najibullah Lafraie (Chair), Assoc Prof Dr Haizal Hussaini (Secretary), Dr Shakila Rizwan, and Dr Mohammed Rizwan.

You can listen to MCC live every other Friday at 11:00 am at Otago Access Radio 105.4 FM, Dunedin. You can also listen to the past episodes at <https://oar.org.nz/muslim-chaplaincy-conversation/>, or to the podcasts of the episodes wherever you get your podcasts. The producer of MCC is Dr Najib Lafraie, and it is hosted by Ms Arina Aizal.

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For any comments or questions, please write to muslimchaplaincy@otago.ac.nz

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The cover painting by Sister Chloe Inga

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Introduction

This booklet is a collection of talks presented by Dr Najib Lafraie at Muslim Chaplaincy Conversation (MCC) radio program from its onset in October 2020 to the end of 2021. MCC is produced by the Otago Muslim Chaplaincy every fortnight and broadcast on Otago Access Radio. Otago Muslim Chaplaincy was established in April 2019 to provide pastoral care and spiritual support to Muslim students and staff at the Otago University and Polytechnic. The Muslim chaplains provide the same support as other chaplains, but with a reference to the teachings of Islam. “Muslim chaplaincy” is a coinage introduced in the USA in the second half of the 20th century. The first Muslim chaplaincy in New Zealand was established in Auckland University of Technology in 2009, and the Otago Muslim Chaplaincy is the second one in the country. Otago Muslim Chaplains are members of, and responsible to, the Otago Muslim Chaplaincy Committee (OMCC), which is an independent body but functions under the auspices of al Hikmah Trust—an Auckland based Islamic institution to which the AUT Muslim Chaplaincy is also associated.

The talks cover a range of various topics—not only religious, but also social, economic and political. They deal with issues of immediate concern to Muslims living in a Western country. Although approaching issues from an Islamic perspective, the talks have a “this worldly” focus. For example, regarding the significances of the five pillars of Islam, the talks do not consider their rewards in the Hereafter. They discuss, rather, their impact on our lives here and now. The table of contents is organised in the order that the talks were chronologically presented on the radio. As evident there, the earlier talks are shorter than the subsequent ones, because the time of the program was half an hour at the beginning.

The talks lack proper citation due to the nature of a radio talk. To give credit to the works used and quoted, a bibliography of the sources has been added at the end. It is in the order they appeared in the talks. The Appendix contains three notes contributed by the Muslim Chaplaincy to the Otago Tertiary Chaplaincy Facebook during the first covid lockdown in March and April 2020.

OMCC takes this opportunity to invite the Muslim students and staff at the University of Otago and at Otago Polytechnic to use the services of the Muslim Chaplaincy. A poster advertising it notes,

Do you feel homesick?

Do you feel lonely and depressed?

Do you need religious advice?

Are you nervous about exams?

Do you have marital problems?

The Muslim Chaplaincy is here to serve and help you.

Significance of knowledge in Islam

As we know from history, there has always been a dichotomy, and at times antagonism, between science and religion in the West. That has never been the case in the Muslim world. The reason is that Islam looks at man as a whole, not separating between his spiritual and material aspects. Islam is a “Deen”, a complete way of life. It is not only concerned with an individual’s relationship with his/her Creator, but also with themselves, their fellow human beings, with the society, with nature and environment, and with the universe as a whole.

In Islam worship is not limited to prayer, fasting, and charity. Any action with the intention of serving God is considered an act of worship. One of those acts of worship is seeking knowledge and increasing one’s understanding of God’s creation. The Noble Quran, Muslims’ holy book, states, “Say ‘How can those who know be equal to those who do not know?’ Only those who have understanding will take heed” (39:9). The Quran also calls on the Muslims over and over to pay close attention to the heavens above them and to various natural phenomena around them and to think, ponder, and reflect—which implies to discover their secrets and to observe God’s magnificence and creative work. It also asks people to travel around the world, study history of bygone eras, and learn lessons from them. In several instances it asks, “Why don’t you use your reason?”. There is a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that “Seeking knowledge is an obligation on every Muslim”. Another saying, with a weaker chain of transmission, states, “Seek knowledge even if in China” (which was considered the farthest place from Arabia at that time).

It is interesting to note that according to Islam, the capacity to learn knowledge is a defining characteristic of human beings. In the story of the creation of Adam, the Noble Quran states that God “taught Adam the names of all things” (Ch 2: 31). One English translator of the Quran comments on this verse that, “‘knowledge of all the names’ denotes here man’s faculty of logical definition and, thus, of conceptual thinking.” He goes on to say that the context of the verse makes it clear that “by ‘Adam’ the whole human race is meant”. The first verses of the Quran revealed to the Prophet Muhammad also notes God teaching man “what he did not know” (96:5).

It is worth to delve on the first verses revealed a bit more. They start with a command to the Prophet to “Read” and go on to say, “Read! In the name of your Lord and Sustainer who created: He created man from a germ cell. Read! Your Lord and Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who taught the use of pen, who taught man what he did not know” (96, verses 1-5). We can better appreciate the significance of this, and another early chapter of the Quran which states, “By the pen, by what they write ...” when we remember that Muhammad (pbuh) himself was illiterate and the society in which Islam originated was also mostly illiterate, only a handful people knew how to read and write.

It was thanks to the teachings of Islam that only a few centuries after its emergence, Muslims reached the heights of knowledge in medicine, astronomy, botany, optics, physics, mathematics, chemistry, and many other fields; and produced prominent religious scholars, philosophers and Sufi masters. Their aim in acquiring and producing knowledge was mainly to bring them closer to their Creator, to contribute to the advancement of righteous societies, and to benefit mankind.

Answering the questions, what happened subsequently and why the Muslims are in the predicament they are today, is beyond the scope of a short talk. What is important for the

Muslim youth is to remember the significance of knowledge in their religion and to be mindful of the ethical values in conducting their studies, trying to get closer to their Creator and to serve humanity.

Does Islam play a role in violence in Europe?

The news of the publication of derogatory cartoons in France and the Islamophobic comments by that country's President, as well as the violence taking place in reaction to them, has dominated the international media in recent weeks. It affects almost everyone in one way or another. It is especially disturbing and confusing for the Muslim youth. They face numerous questions, finding answers to them is not easy: Why is the Prophet who is described as "a mercy to the worlds" by the Quran (21:107) vilified? Why does the President of a country the national motto of which is "liberty, equality, fraternity" look down upon millions of its citizens and do not care hurting their, and hundreds of millions others', feelings? How can someone commit heinous crimes against civilians, innocent or "guilty" (as the teacher showing the cartoons in his class may be described), in the name of a religion whose Prophet prohibits harming non-combatants even during a war (and there are several authentic Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad on that)?

Answering these questions require in-depth historical and political analysis. What is certain, though, is that the events do not have anything to do with any religion, neither Islam, nor Christianity, nor any other religion. Let us take the case where the perpetrators, government authorities, and the media describe them religiously motivated, namely committing terrorism in the name of Islam. I already made a reference to the Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) prohibiting those going to wars from harming monks, women, old people, or any other non-combatant. Furthermore, Islam considers human life sacred and the Noble Quran refers to God's command in the Torah: "if anyone kills a person—unless in retribution for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if he kills all mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he saves the lives of all mankind" (5:32).

It is true that Islam, being a practical religion, allows war. The Noble Quran makes it clear, though, that it is only for self-defence: "... Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged, ..." (22:39). This is the first verse revealed regarding engaging in warfare. Another verse, revealed later, can be understood in two ways—both of which are complimentary to each other. Here are the two English translations of verse 190 of chapter 2: "AND FIGHT in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression—for, verily, God does not love aggressors" (Muhammad Asad); "Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits" (Muhammad Abdel Haleem). The Arabic word in question is "*ta'tadu*", which implies both aggression and transgression. The first understanding underscores the selfdefence nature of war in Islam, and the second one warns Muslims not to transgress the limits during the war.

There are some verses of the Quran that some misguided Muslims and some Islamophobes interpret as if war of aggression is allowed. Verse 5 of the 9th chapter is a clear example of that. Their understanding not only contradicts the clear instructions of the verses quoted above, as well as the overall values and standards of the Quran, but obviously take the verse out of context. Muhammad Asad, a translator of the Quran in English, notes in his commentary on the verse: "Read in conjunction with the two preceding verses, as well as with 2:190-194, the above verse

relates to warfare already in progress with people who have become guilty of a breach of treaty obligations and of aggression.”

So if the actions of those committing terrorism in the name of Islam run counter to the teachings of their religion, how do they justify their actions? It is interesting that they can hardly find any religious justification. When Osama bin Ladin was asked in an interview in 1998 how he could justify killing civilians, he did not resort to any religious argument. Instead, he stated, “American history does not distinguish between civilians and military, not even women and children. They are the ones who used the bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima.” In another interview in response to a similar question, he called the notion of “killing innocent civilians” as “a strange talk” and went on to say, “Who said that our children and civilians are not innocent and that shedding their blood is justified? ... Who said that our blood is not blood, but theirs is? Who made this pronouncement?”

Thus, if there is any “religious justification”, it is to avenge the blood of their religious brothers and sisters in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and so on. However, anyone with even very limited understanding of the Islamic teachings would realise that this “justification” cannot stand any grounds. Islamic fraternity is important, but not at the cost of violation of the clear instructions of the Quran and Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The Noble Quran also warns, “Do not let hatred of others lead you away from justice, but adhere to justice, for that is closer to awareness of God” (5:8).

Unfortunately those who commit heinous crimes in the name of Islam do not have any real understanding of their religion. They fall prey to the rhetoric of groups such as ISIS who use religion for their political aims. Why do they fall prey? Sociological and psychological studies show that it is a combination of political grievances, racism and discrimination they encounter, marginalisation, lack of proper education, poverty and unemployment, and several other factors that contribute to their radicalisation. Publication of derogatory cartoons and Islamophobic remarks by politicians for political gains certainly fans the flames for the already vulnerable lost souls.

Significance of the five pillars of Islam

As noted in an earlier talk, worship in Islam is not limited to certain ritual performances but include wide variety of actions done to do good and to serve God. There is a Saying of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that “Faith has sixty to seventy branches, the best of which is to declare there is no deity worthy of worship but the One and Only God, the least of which is to remove something harmful from the road, and modesty is a branch of faith.” So even removing something harmful from the road is an act of worship

Nonetheless, Islam considers certain acts of worship as the cornerstone of belief, and they are called the five pillars of Islam. In this talk, and some future ones, I will discuss the significance of these acts of worship. I choose this topic because our Muslim youth are usually told they are supposed to perform these for they are religious requirement and because God will reward them in the Hereafter. We are rarely told what difference they make in our practical life now in this world.

Before I discuss the significance of the first pillars, it is important to point out that once a person accepts Islam, he/she does not have any choice but to do what they are commanded to and avoid what are forbidden. But we also know that God Almighty does not need anything from us. As the Noble Quran puts it, “O people, it is you who stand in need of God—God needs nothing and is worthy of all praise” (35:15). So when He commands us to do or not to do something, it for our own good. This is why we need to ponder about the significance of acts of worship to discover their relevance to our daily life.

Now, the first pillar of Islam, according to a Saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), is to testify that “There is no god (deity worthy of worship) but God (the One and Only), and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” Thus, this declaration of faith consists of two parts, and each needs separate analysis. As for the first part, according to Islam, to worship—that is, “to feel an adoring reverence or regard for [someone or something]”—is innate in human nature. This aptitude is granted so that humans find their way towards worshiping their Creator. (A reference to this is found in 7:172 of the Noble Quran.) When we don’t worship the One and Only God, that natural inclination takes us towards focusing that feeling of “adoring reverence” to false gods. In the past they used to be forces of nature such as the sun, the moon, and the stars; or idols made of stone or wood or clay or gold. Today they can include money, power, popularity, movie stars, sport stars, social media influencers, politicians, etc. So when we say and firmly believe that there is nothing worthy of worship but the One and Only God, we free ourselves of those false gods; our lives find a meaning, and our hearts find tranquillity (Q 13:28). That firm belief will also give us the courage to resist against falsehood; to change it if we can; and to detest it at the least.

As to the second part of the testimony to faith, “Muhammad is the Messenger of God”, it is complementary to the first part. Certainly sincere worship of the One and Only God can lead to salvation and prosperity—as several Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad indicate. But how can we put that into practice without God’s guidance? Man’s intelligence and science are not enough for finding the way. Long time ago Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian thinker and writer, said: “Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important to us, ‘what shall we do and how shall we live.’” Today more and more scientists and philosophers come to agree with that statement—not that science is meaningless, because it has great values, but that it cannot show us the way. So if science cannot provide the answer, it should come from somewhere else—and religion seems to be the only source.

The Noble Quran refers to God Almighty spreading out the earth (which is global) like a carpet, making roads and channels therein for us to find our way, and sending down rain to give life to a land that is dead (43:9-11)—the implication being that if God is so concerned about man’s material wellbeing, how can He be uninterested in his spiritual wellbeing and not showing him the way for the best possible life in this world and in the Hereafter. That is the reason why, as Muslims believe, God sent guidance and messengers throughout the ages. Those messages, though, were firstly for specific times and places, and secondly were altered and distorted. That process continued until God appointed Muhammad (pbuh) as the last Messenger. The message he received, the Quran, is for all mankind and will be preserved in its original and genuine form for all the times to come. The Quran itself notes this in 15:9; and historical analyses of the Quran show that it is truly the case. Whenever there are excesses and distortions—and there certainly have been many—Muslims can return to the original teachings and correct themselves. Thus, to talk about the significance of the second part of the declaration of faith is to talk about

the significance of all the Islamic teachings. When we say Muhammad is the Messenger of God, it means we base our practical life on the Message he brought and consider him as a teacher and a role model.

Significance of the five pillars of Islam: Prayer—part I

Last episode I started a series of talks on the significance of the five pillars of Islam and spoke about the significance of the first pillar, which is a declaration of faith: belief in One and Only God and Prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh). This talk and the one in the next episode will be on the significance of the second pillar, namely prayer. Prayer, *salah* in Arabic, is considered the most important act of worship in Islam. Muslims pray five times a day. For each prayer there is a certain time range, based on the position of the sun. The dawn prayer can be offered any time after the first light appears on the horizon until before sunrise. The second and the third prayers are the early and late afternoon prayers. The time for the fourth prayer ranges from the sunset until the darkness prevails, and then it is the time for the fifth prayer—which can be offered until late at night.

Prayer as a whole has great spiritual, psychological, moral, social and physical significances. I will talk about these in the next episode. Here I want to quote from a book the view of an old Arab on why he and other Muslims pray the way they do, because it focuses on the significance of various rituals within the prayer. The book is *The Road to Mecca* by Muhammad Asad. A bit of background is necessary for those who do not know the author. Muhammad Asad was born as Leopold Weiss to an Austrian Jewish family in the early 20th century. As a young journalist, he went to Palestine in the early 1920s. There he got interested in Palestinians' way of life and in Islam. After studying Islam and traveling around the Muslim world for several years, he accepted Islam in 1926 and subsequently became a great Islamic scholar. He has written several books on Islam and has translated the Noble Quran into English, with brief but excellent commentary. *The Road to Mecca* is the story of his life until the mid 1930s.

When Leopold Weiss first reached Palestine, he lived in his uncle's house inside the Old City of Jerusalem. Behind the house was a large yard which belonged to an old man called *hajji*. From the window of the house, the young European could see the *hajji* praying together with the donkey and camel drivers who used his yard: "Several times a day he assembled them for prayer and, if it was not raining too hard, they prayed in the open: all the men in a single, long row and he as their *imam* in front of them. They were like soldiers in the precision of their movements—they would bow together in the direction of Mecca, rise again, and then kneel down and touch the ground with their foreheads; they seemed to follow the inaudible words of their leader, who between the prostrations stood barefoot on his prayer carpet, eyes closed, arms folded over his chest, soundlessly moving his lips and obviously lost in deep absorption: you could see that he was praying with his whole soul.

"It somehow disturbed me to see so real a prayer combined with almost mechanical body movement, and one day I asked the *hajji*, who understood a little English:

"Do you really believe that God expects you to show Him your respect by repeated bowing and kneeling and prostration? Might it not be better only to look into oneself and to pray to Him in the stillness of one's heart? Why all these movements of your body?"

The young journalist was afraid he had offended the old man, but the *hajji* smiled and replied (as Muhammad Asad clarifies, this is how he remembered, not necessarily the exact words of *hajji*):

“How else then should we worship God? Did He not create both, soul and body together? And this being so, should man not pray with his body as well as with his soul? Listen, I will tell you why we Muslims pray as we pray. We turn towards the Kaaba, God’s holy temple in Mecca, knowing that the faces of all Muslims, wherever they may be, are turned to it in prayer, and that we are like one body, with Him as the centre of our thoughts. First we stand upright and recite from the Holy Koran, remembering that it is His Word, given to man that he may be upright and steadfast in life. Then we say, ‘God is the Greatest,’ reminding ourselves that no one deserves to be worshiped but Him; and bow down deep because we honour Him above all, and praise His power and glory. Thereafter we prostrate ourselves on our foreheads because we feel that we are but dust and nothingness before Him, and that He is our Creator and Sustainer on high. Then we lift our faces from the ground and remain sitting, praying that He forgive us our sins and bestow His grace upon us, and guide us aright, and give us health and sustenance. Then we again prostrate ourselves on the ground and touch the dust with our foreheads before the might and the glory of the One. After that, we remain sitting and pray that He bless the Prophet Muhammad who brought His message to us, just as He blessed the earlier Prophets; and that He bless us as well, and all those who follow the right guidance; and we ask Him to give us of the good of this world and of the good of the world to come. In the end we turn our heads to the right and to the left, saying, ‘Peace and grace of God be upon you’—and thus greet all who are righteous, wherever they may be.

“It was thus that our Prophet used to pray and taught his followers to pray for all time, so that they might willingly surrender themselves to God—which is what *Islam* means—and so be at peace with Him and with their own destiny.”

Significance of the five pillars of Islam: Prayer—part II

Last episode I shared the views of an old Muslim on the significance of various rituals within the prayer. Today’s talk is on the spiritual, psychological, moral, social and physical significances of prayer as a whole. At the outset I must admit, though, that the topic is very vast and what I can do is just to scratch the surface.

The most important significance of prayer is its spiritual aspect. As noted in earlier talks, human beings are instinctively inclined to adore great beings and to aspire to lofty goals. “The greatest being and the loftiest goal of all is God.” So, through prayer we fulfill our basic need and express our love and devotion to our Creator, the Supreme, the Absolute. Through prayer we try to elevate ourselves and get closer to God. There is a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh): “Prayer is the *mi’raj* of a believer.” As we know, *Mi’raj* is the ascension of Muhammad (pbuh) to the heavens, to a point beyond which even the archangel Gabriel could not go. Thus, the Prophet is telling us that through prayer we can get closer to God even compared to the angels. Of course, not all our prayers are like that, but that should be the goal. We may approach that goal to some extent by remembering a Saying of the Prophet on *Ihsaan* (perfection), that is, “to worship God as if you see Him, because if you do not see him, certainly He sees you!”

The other spiritual significance of prayer is that praying five times a day constantly turns our attention from the mundane to the spiritual heights. We human beings are prone to be forgetful and neglect the spiritual aspect of ourselves. It is especially so in today's society where there are so many distractions all around us—from social media to television, cinemas, sporting matches, dramatized theatrical politics, and constant urges of consumerism. But a Muslim takes break from these at least five times a day by remembering and praising God and reading from the Noble Quran. As God Almighty says, “Verily, I am God, there is no deity but me. Hence, worship Me alone, and be constant in prayer, so that you remember Me” (20:14).

As for the psychological significances of prayer, the most important one is meditation and concentration; which will bring about a state of relaxation, tranquillity of heart, peace of mind, and removal of anxiety. Again, not all our prayers reach that level of concentration, but that should be the aim. We should remember that God Almighty in the Noble Quran does not tell us about the details of our positions during prayer or the number of units in each prayer. These are important, and they were set by the Prophet (pbuh). The Noble Quran focuses on what are more important: not being sluggish or lazy during prayer, being mindful of what we say, being constant in prayer, being humble, and—most importantly—remembering God: “truly it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace/tranquillity” (13:28).

The other psychological significance of prayer is that it strengthens our willpower and teaches us patience, perseverance, and steadfastness. When the time for late evening prayer begins around 11:30 at night and you have to finish the dawn prayer by 5:00 or quarter past five in the morning—as is the case in Dunedin nowadays—it is not easy to stay that late and get up that early. Doing so certainly requires willpower and perseverance. And the more one does that, the more he/she gets used to it.

The need to say the five daily-prayers at specific times also teaches and habituates punctuality as well as order, regularity and discipline.

The moral significance of prayer is that it conditions us to avoid indecencies and immoralities. A practicing Muslim is always between two prayers: after just finishing one, he/she looks forward to the next. Thus, they constantly remember God and are mindful to avoid what they are forbidden from. The Noble Quran considers this as one of the functions of prayer: “Indeed prayer restrains outrageous and unacceptable behaviour. And remembering God is greater. God knows all that you do” (29:45).

The social significance of prayer relates to congregation prayer. Prayer can be offered individually, but the Prophet (pbuh) has emphasised that offering it in congregation is much more rewarding. That is why in Muslim majority counties, there is a mosque in each neighbourhood where the residents gather five times a day. And then we have the early afternoon Friday Prayer, offering of which in congregation is obligatory on Muslim men. (Women can attend the Friday Prayer, but as a concession, it not obligatory on them.) Seeing each other up to five times a day, or at least once in a week, increases social bond and brotherly/sisterly love. It enhances the sense of belonging and community, which is considered a human need and the lack of which is a great source of anxiety and stress. Furthermore, all Muslims, from various backgrounds, standing shoulder to shoulder and performing all the rituals together, demonstrates and inculcates the social value of equality.

Even political lessons can be deduced from the way the congregation prayer is offered, but time limitation does not allow explicating it.

As for the physical significances of prayer, one aspect of it relate to the prerequisite of cleanliness. A praying person must perform ablution before the prayer, and their clothes and the place where prayer is performed must be free from impurities. Minor ablution involves washing or rinsing of the mouth, the nose, the hands, the face, and the feet; and major ablution involves washing the whole body, that is, taking a bath. All this means maintaining regular cleanliness; and we are all well-aware of the importance of cleanliness for good health.

The other physical significance of prayer relates to movements to various body postures during the prayer, which are standing, bowing, prostrating, and sitting on the legs. Scientific studies recently done on the health benefits of these body movements show that “almost all the muscles of the body and joints are exercised during [prayer].” Thus, it has all the health benefits of regular exercise. More specifically, the body movements during the prayer “enhance general muscular fitness;” “improve equilibrium, balance, and joint flexibility as well as maintain lower limb performance.”

With all these significances and benefits—and much more—no wonder that Islam puts so much emphasis on prayer!

Significance of the five pillars of Islam: Zakat

In continuation of our series on the significances of the five pillars of Islam, today I’ll talk about the significance of Zakat, the third pillar. Before discussing its spiritual, psychological and socioeconomic significances, it is important to note that in the Noble Quran “zakat” is usually paired together with “salat” or prayer, the second pillar of Islam. In one count, they have been mentioned together in over 25 places. This fact is another evidence that Islam is not an individual or personal religion, concerned only with an individual’s relations with their Creator. Rather, it is a social religion that tries to create righteous societies; in this case, societies whose members join each other in freeing human beings from slavery to their basic needs and giving them the opportunity to fulfil their purpose of life—i.e., serving God and actualising the great potentialities bestowed on them by their Creator.

Zakat literally means purification and growth, and in religious sense it means sharing the wealth that God Almighty has granted someone with their fellow human beings—thus, purifying themselves and their wealth and growing spiritually. Like all religions, Islam greatly emphasises giving charity. It goes a step further, though, by making it compulsory and institutionalising it, rather than leaving it to individuals’ good will. If someone has wealth above their immediate needs, and a year passes and they do not use it, then they have to give a certain percentage of it to those members of the society who need it or use it for some public welfare project. There are different rulings for livestock and agricultural products, and it is two and half percent for savings and gold and silver. The categories where the zakat fund can be used is also specified in the Noble Quran (9:60).

Now, to the main topic, the significances of zakat:

1. Spiritual: A Muslim pays zakat first and foremost for the sake of God—because of his/her devotion to Him. It is in human nature to have a strong love for wealth and material belongings. When they give away what they love for the sake of God, they prove to themselves that they love God more—that is, God’s love is the supreme value for them. This will bring them closer to God and lead to their spiritual growth.

It is interesting to note that the Holy Quran encourages the believers to pay their charities in secrete: “If you give charity openly, it is good, but if you keep it secret and give to the needy in private, that is better for you ...” (2:271). This is so because in this case no other motive can be involved but the love of God.

Zakat, like other charities, is also an expression of thanks and gratitude to God for the bounties He has provided us. Being grateful does not mean just saying “thanks” by lips. It should be shown by action, i.e., sharing God’s bounties with His servants and doing good to the society.

2. Psychological significance: The Noble Quran reminds us over and over of our love of wealth and material wellbeing: “... he [human] is truly excessive in his love of wealth” (100:8). “Say, ‘If you possessed the treasure-houses of my Lord’s bounty, you hold them back in your fear of spending [too much]: man is ever niggardly’” (17:100). This love for material wealth is a main cause why humans deviate from the right path and reject the truth when they are invited to: “You are obsessed by greed for more and more until you go down to your graves” (102:1-2). “Whenever We sent a messenger before you [Muhammad] to warn a township, those corrupted by wealth said ... ‘We saw our fathers follow this tradition; we are only following in their footsteps’” (43:23). Hence, Islam condemns the excessive love of material wealth. However, it does not try to kill the human instinct for it. Instead, it tries to bring it under their control and inculcate generosity. Imam Ghazali, a great Islamic scholar, observes: “The stigma of niggardliness is removed by the practice of giving away, since the love of a thing is overcome by compelling oneself to stay away from it until abstention becomes habitual.” Thus, giving zakat heals the disease of stinginess.

Related to the above is the fact that by giving zakat only and only for the sake of God, without expecting any worldly return, a Muslim can bring their selfish desires under control and make selflessness part of their habit. Moreover, it will not only make the recipient happy, but the giver too. An article summarising the psychological impacts of helping others notes, “Scientific studies show that helping others boosts happiness. It increases life satisfaction, provides a sense of meaning, increases feelings of competence, improves our mood and reduces stress... Kindness towards others is the glue which connects individual happiness with wider community and society wellbeing. Giving to others helps us connect with people and meets one of our basic human needs—relatedness.”

3. Socioeconomic significances of zakat: The Noble Quran considers paying zakat—and charity in general—a characteristic of a believing Muslim. This means that it encourages Muslims to work to the extent that their savings exceed a certain limit and they are liable to pay zakat; otherwise they will be lacking a characteristic of a believer. Therefore, zakat will contribute to the creation of work ethic in a society.

More importantly, zakat will enhance brotherly love and mutual concern among members of a society. It will remove the need and distress of those who are unable to work and do not have families to support them. It will lead to circulation of wealth and greater economic equality, and eliminate misery and poverty. This is not merely an ideal. From history we know that it became a reality. At the time of the Righteous Caliphs—who ruled immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)—the Islamic state took care of all the basic needs of its members by zakat fund. At the time of Omar ibn Abdul Aziz—a Muslim ruler of the early 8th century—the Muslim society became so prosperous that in its whole vast land they could not find a poor person to accept zakat. Furthermore, since the Noble Quran includes “the wayfarer” among the recipients of zakat, zakat encourages Muslims to travel around, to meet other people, to learn other languages and cultures—further increasing the social bond among Muslims.

To conclude, zakat is a unique Islamic institution which has greatly contributed to Muslims’ spiritual growth, as well as to their psychological and socioeconomic wellbeing.

Significance of the five pillars of Islam: Fasting

So far in these series, I have talked about the significances of *shahada* (proclamation of faith), *salat* (prayer), and zakat (prescribed alms). Today’s talk is on the significance of *siyam* (fasting), the fourth pillar of Islam. According to the Noble Quran, fasting is not unique to Islam: “O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of God” (2:183). Thus, all the followers of God-given religions practice—or should practice—fasting in one way or another. The ways they do it, though, would be different. In Islam, fasting involves abstaining from eating, drinking and sexual activity from dawn to dusk for 29 or 30 days during the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Like all religious obligations, it becomes compulsory when an individual reaches the age of puberty. If a person is sick, travelling, or have other excuses (such as monthly period, pregnancy, and breast feeding in case of women); they are exempted from fasting, but need to make up for it later.

Now, about the significances of fasting:

1. Spiritual significances: Fasting during Ramadan provides Muslims a great opportunity for spiritual experience—and as noted in the Quranic verse quoted above, *taqwa* (“Godconsciousness”) is one of the main reasons why it is prescribed. Eating, drinking and sexual desire are the three basic human needs and drives. Any moment that an individual stops these drives for the sake of God, their faith strengthens and they move a step closer to their Creator. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has said, “When Ramadan comes, the doors of Paradise are opened and the doors of Hell are shut up, and the devils are put in chain.” What is special about fasting is that, unlike other acts of worship in which other motivations may interfere, it is done only and only for the sake of God. A person may pray out of habit; they may pay zakat due to social pressure; or they may go to *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Makkah) to visit new places. However, no habit

or social pressure can stop a fasting person to go to a secluded corner, far away from other people, and quickly satisfy a basic need. Thus, by maintaining their fast hour after hour for twelve or fifteen or eighteen hours (depending on where and what time of the year Ramadan comes), the person proves their sincere love of God and grow spiritually.

2. Psychological significances: As the Noble Quran tells us, God created humans from clay and breathed in them from His Spirit (38: 71-72). What it means is that He has given us qualities which differentiate us from the animal. Intelligence is one such quality, by which we can distinguish between right and wrong. The other quality is willpower, by which we can choose the right and follow it. Like most other qualities, willpower in humans is a potentiality—which means if they use their willpower it will grow stronger; but if they give themselves up to their natural desires and social forces, the willpower remains dormant and inactive. The subtitle of an article on a bestselling book on willpower in a British newspaper (*The Guardian*) reads, “Willpower is a mental muscle that you can train. Those who do so are more likely to lead happy and successful lives.” Like prayer, fasting is an exercise for developing the willpower, but a much greater exercise, because we intentionally do things against our natural desires. It not only strengthens our willpower, but also demonstrates to us the capabilities we possess. Fasting for long hours, especially in hot climates, seems almost impossible. Once we do it, though, we realise it is not beyond our ability to undertake difficult tasks and undergo necessary hardships. By the same token, fasting teaches self-control and patience.
3. Social significances: The pangs of hunger felt during fasting make us realise how a hungry person feels. That will contribute to greater empathy for those in hardship and encourage us to be more generous. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has also commended being more charitable during fasting and practiced it himself. One of his companions is quoted as saying, “The Prophet (pbuh) was the most generous of people, and he was most generous during Ramadan.” Being charitable and sharing God’s bounties with fellow members of the society will contribute to greater social cohesion and brotherly/sisterly love. The Prophet has also warned Muslims against practicing social ills, which are generally forbidden, especially during fasting: “Fasting does not just mean giving up food and drink, rather fasting means giving up idle speech and obscene conduct. If anyone insults you or treats you in an ignorant manner, then say, ‘I am fasting, I am fasting.’” Based on this and his other statements, Muslims scholars are of the view that lying, backbiting, talebearing, harming people and similar acts damage one’s fasting.

Ramadan also provides an opportunity for greater social interaction among Muslims. In Muslim majority countries, many Muslims go to the mosque for early evening prayer, break the fast with fellow worshippers, then go home for dinner. Muslims in Western countries have developed the tradition of communal *ifter*, which includes not only breaking the fast together, but also having the meal together. In Dunedin, every Ramadan evening more than 300 brothers and sisters come to the mosque and share the food, cooked by groups of volunteers, paid by donations from community members. During Ramadan, there is also an additional prayer after the late evening prayer, called *tarawih*, for which Muslims congregate in the mosques—another occasion for social interaction.

4. Economic significance: The economic benefits of fasting can be realised if Muslims do not defeat the purpose of fasting by spending more on food during the fasting month—as it is, unfortunately, the case in many Muslim societies. Omitting one meal per day, the lunch, conserves the precious food supplied. It may seem meagre at an individual level, but would be substantial at the global level. Suppose every fasting person conserves just 200 grams of rice or wheat every day they fast. And if only one-third of the two billion Muslims qualify for fasting, that will mean daily saving of over 133 million kilograms of rice or wheat, or about four million tons in a month!

5. Physical significances: Research on what is called “intermittent fasting”, which includes the way Muslims fast, has multiplied in recent years. An article summarising the “evidence-based” health benefits of intermittent fasting includes the following benefits: 1) It changes functions of cells, genes and hormones—thus, facilitating fat burning, muscular gain, and removal of waste materials from cells; as well as resulting in “beneficial changes in several genes and molecules related to longevity and protection against disease.” 2) It can help to lose weight and belly fat. 3) It can reduce insulin resistance, lowering the risk of type-2 diabetes. 4) It can reduce oxidative stress and inflammation in the body. 5) It may be beneficial for heart health by improving “numerous different risk factors, including blood pressure, total and LDL cholesterol, blood triglycerides, inflammatory markers and blood sugar levels.” [It say “may be” because most of these are based on animal studies, and further studies in humans are required.] 6) It induces various cellular repair processes. 7) It may help prevent cancer. [The same reason for “may” as before.] 8) It is good for brain, not only because its reduction of oxidative stress, inflammation, blood sugar levels, and insulin resistance helps the brain; but also possibly helping to grow new nerve cell and protection against brain damage. 9) It may help prevent Alzheimer disease. [Again the need for more human studies.] 10) It may increase the life span. In one study, “rats that fasted every other day lived 83% longer than rats who weren’t fasted.”

At the end, it should be noted that fasting in Islam is not limited to the month of Ramadan. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) fasted not only on certain days of religious significance, but regularly at least twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. I found it very interesting that when the author of a popular book on “5+2 diet”—which means eating freely on five day of the week, and taking limited calories on the other two days—was asked by a Radio NZ journalist which days of the week he recommends to fast, his answer was something to the effect that Muhammad used to fast on Mondays and Thursdays; if it was good for him, it is good for me!

Significance of the five pillars of Islam: Hajj—part I

I had thought today would be the last of the series that I began a while ago on the significances of the five pillars of Islam. However, preparing for the talk I realised it was difficult to summarise the significances of Hajj, or pilgrimage to Makkah, in one session. Thus, today I’ll talk only about the spiritual significances of Hajj, leaving its psychological, social, and intellectual significances for the next episode, *Insha-Allah* (God-willing). First, though, a brief introduction to Hajj, which is obligatory on the adult Muslims who can afford it at least once in their life time.

Hajj rites, which take place annually during the eleventh month of the Islamic lunar calendar in Makkah and nearby places, involve entering the state of *ihram* (which requires not only putting on special clothing but also abstention from certain actions); *tawaf* or circuiting around *Ka'bah*; *sa'ay* or walking or running between *Safa* and *Marwa*, two hilltops in the vicinity of *Ka'bah*; staying in *Mina*, which is about 10 kilometres from Makkah; going for one day to *Arafat*, about 20 kilometres from Makkah; spending the night in *Muzdalefa*, a place between *Arafat* and *Mina*; throwing pebbles to symbols of Satan in *Mina*; and finally sacrificing an animal in *Mina* and getting out of the state of *Ihram* by trimming or shaving one's hair. Most of the rites are performed as a commemoration of Ibrahim/Abraham (pbuh), his wife Hajar/Hagar, and their son Ismael/Ishmael, as will be explained later.

Now on the spiritual significances of Hajj: Hajj is a manifestation of a Muslim's complete submission to the will of their Creator. Going Hajj, we give up money and wealth to prepare for the trip. We accept the hardship and discomfort of travelling long distances. We accept separation from our family members and loved ones. When we put on *Ihram*, we give up all the material things that distinguish us from our fellow pilgrims. When we say the *Talbiyya* (*labaika alhumma labaik*—"I respond to Your call O Allah"), which is repeated over and over during Hajj, we feel ourselves in the presence of God and at His service. Then when we stand in *Maqam* (Station of) *Ibrahim*, a small square stone near *Ka'bah* associated with Ibrahim, we identify ourselves with him who was, according to the Quran, "the first of Muslims"—the model and symbol of those who submit themselves to God truly and totally. In Makkah we remember his submission when he left his wife and his only son in a dry, empty desert only because God had told him to do so. We also remember Hajar who also submitted herself to God's order and Abraham's action. But her submission did not mean resignation and inaction. While submitting herself, she made *sa'ay*—effort, endeavour, strive—by running between two hilltops of *Safa* and *Marwa*. Then in *Mina*, we remember Abraham's greatest submission when he put the knife on the throat of his beloved son to sacrifice him because he thought that was God's will. And we remember Ismael's willingly accepting death in the way of God. Submission cannot be higher than that. These memories make us also submit ourselves to God and join the sea of human beings in performing certain ritual only and only because God wants us to do so. Through this submission we attain peace, another meaning of Islam. We reach the highest possible level of peace of mind, where we forget about everything else and all our attention is focused on the remembrance of God. This is probably the reason why, unlike other Islamic rituals, there is no separation between men and women in performing Hajj rituals. We also see the highest demonstration of peace, meaning lack of war and conflict, when we see over two million people—all colours, all nationalities, all social strata, all ages, and all sexes—living together under harsh physical conditions, still smiling at each other and loving each other. Thus, Hajj becomes the complete manifestation of Islam: submission to God and reaching genuine peace through it.

Hajj also reminds us of the Hereafter. When we put on the *ihram*—which consists of two pieces of unsewn white cloth for men, and any simple, usually white, clothes for women—we remember death, when our body will be shrouded with similar white cloth. Then when we stand near *Ka'bah* or in *Arafat* with two million other Muslims wearing white shrouds or simple clothing, we remember the day of Resurrection—a "Day when people will be like scattered moths" (Q 101:4), when we will be standing in front of the Almighty waiting for our books of judgment.

The remembrance of death and the idea of submission, mentioned earlier, will have great spiritual impact on us and will draw us closer to our Creator. This spiritual experience reaches its climax during circuit around Ka'bah,. All our lives we have faced towards this simple building at least five times a day, and now it is within our reach! We also remember that it is the first House of Worship, built by Ibrahim and Ismael, and it is called *baytullah* (the House of God). Thus, we not only circuit it, but also try to reach it and kiss it. And when we put our faces on the wall of Ka'bah or our lips on the Black Stone, tear flows from our eyes; and we see hundreds of thousands of others experiencing the same spiritual felicity. Then cooling our thirst and heat by the water of Zamzam and feeling the most serene we ever did. (Zamzam is the name of the well near Ka'bah, which Muslims believe miraculously started flowing when Hajar and Ismael were left alone.) Then running between *Safa* and *Marwa* and going to Mina, always glorifying the Almighty and praying to Him. Then when we stand in Arafat under *Jabal al-Rahmah* "The Mount of Mercy": just a drop in the ocean of mankind but forgetting everything around us—even the burning sun—and just feeling the Mercy of God showering us. Then we lie down in Muzdalifa—the earth being our bed and the sky our cover. We try to sleep because the Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have slept there, but our hearts celebrates the praise of God and our souls fly towards Him. And then back to Mina, stoning the symbols of Satan and doing sacrifice: thanking God that blessed us with this great opportunity and hoping our Hajj is *mabroor*—accepted. And then the last *tawaf* (circuit) of Ka'bah and feeling the pain of separation while leaving.

Afterwards our heart will always long to reach there again, and the memory of our great spiritual experience will remain with us to the end of our life—an experience that we will never be able to fully express in words.

Significance of the five pillars of Islam: Hajj—part II

Last episode I talked about the spiritual significances of Hajj, the fifth pillar of Islam. Today's talk, which is the last on the series that I began some time ago, is on the moral and psychological, social, and intellectual significances of Hajj. First, though, a brief reminder of last episode's talk: Hajj is a commemoration of the total and unconditional submission of the Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh), his wife Hajar, and their son Ismael to the Will of God. By remembering them and their selfless actions, we also try to imitate and completely submit ourselves to our Creator by performing certain rituals. Through this submission, we achieve peace of mind and peace with our fellow pilgrims. Shrouded in white cloth or simple clothes, and lost in a sea of humanity, we remember death and resurrection, when we have to answer for what we did in this world. That takes us to another spiritual high. This spiritual experience reaches its climax when we are near Ka'bah, which has been at the centre of all our ritual prayers throughout our lives. Putting our faces on the door or the wall of "the House of God", and seeking forgiveness for all our transgressions, we enter a spiritual state not describable in words, traces of which will remain with us all our lives.

Moral and psychological significances: Hajj has long lasting psychological impact too. The memory of the tranquillity and peace of mind that we feel in Hajj will always remain with us. We might not be able to experience the same feeling again, but we know how it is and will try to reach it to some extent in our ritual prayer and *Dhikr* (which literally means remembrance or reminder, and in Islamic tradition means repeating over and over the attributes of God

Almighty). Hajj is also a tremendous experience that forcefully inculcates values of oneness of mankind, brotherly love, caring, kindness, and equality of all human beings regardless of their race, colour, nationality language, social strata, age, and sex. An evidence of this is Malik Shahbaz, or Malcom X—a great leader of African American Muslim community and human rights activist—who changed his racist ideology against the Whites only after going to Hajj. In his autobiography he writes, “Everything about this pilgrimage atmosphere accented the Oneness of Man under the One God. ... There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experience in America had led me to believe never could exist between the whites and nonwhites. ...”

Social significance: This takes us to the social significance of Hajj. Hajj is one of the greatest annual assemblies of mankind. Over three million Muslims from every corner of the world gather at the same time in Makkah or Mina or Arafat. Their minds and souls are most of the time towards God, but they go through their spiritual experience in the company of each other. This is again an evidence of Islam being a social religion and a religion of action. Its followers do not undergo their highest spiritual experience in solitude sitting at a corner in a monastery or under the shade of forest trees. They do it in the company of hundreds of thousands of others while walking or running under the burning sun. Hajj is a manifestation of genuine equality of mankind. It is only in Hajj that all the discriminations and artificial distinctions among mankind are eliminated and all the pilgrims become one. It should be noted that Hajj was performed before Islam too, but there were discriminations. Ayesha, the wife of the Prophet (May Allah be pleased with her), reports, “The Quraish [the noble tribe of Makkah] and its allies used to stay in al-Muzdalifa and the rest of the Arabs would stand at Arafat. When Islam came, Allah commanded His Prophet to stand at Arafat and then proceed from there. This is because Allah’s saying that ‘then depart wherefrom people depart’ (Q 2:199).” Unfortunately in modern times again some distinctions have crept in, but hopefully it is an transient phenomenon.

Hajj is also a demonstration of the equality of all sexes. Usually there is segregation between men and women in Islamic societies to preserve decency and moral quality. It does not mean, though, that one sex is better than the other. When men and women are standing before God undergoing the highest spiritual experience, there is no segregation. All circuit the Ka’abah together, run between Safa and Marwa together, and do the rituals in Mina and Arafat together.

Hajj being a manifestation of peace needs reiteration. It is not only peace of mind within individuals, but also peace with their bodies. The pilgrims cannot cut their nails, their hair, or harshly scratch their bodies. It is not only peace and brotherly love among millions of pilgrims, but also peace with nature and environment.. The pilgrims cannot hunt, kill or hurt any living being—except for harmful insects—or cut plants and trees.

Intellectual significances: The great assembly of Hajj provides Muslims the opportunity to learn about each other’s cultures; languages; social, economic, and political problems; and general conditions. This may be less important today compared to the past, but learning through the Internet or social media cannot replace the significance of meeting someone and learning first hand. In the past, Hajj was also the occasion when Muslims learned about scientific developments in different corners of their vast territory and spread the new discoveries and inventions to other areas. Moreover, Hajj encourages travelling and mobility. Many of the great Muslim scholars of the past went to the centres of Islamic studies after their Hajj trips. Ibn

Battuta, a 14th century Moroccan scholar, jurist and explorer whose memories still exists, originally started his famous journey for going to Hajj, and then continued the trip for several decades, going to the furthest parts of the Muslim world. Hajj may play a similar role in the future when the artificial borders and barriers of passport and visa are eliminated.

To summarise, Hajj is Muslims' highest spiritual experience, which is achieved in action and in the company of other Muslims. It is one of the greatest annual assemblies of mankind, demonstrating and inculcating the values of oneness of humanity, its unity, its equality; and generating brotherly love. Its impact can be life changing and its effects are certainly long lasting.

Does God intentionally lead people away from Himself?

Last week I received an email from a Christian friend who was puzzled by what he had read in a book by a Muslim scholar: "Whomsoever Allah guides, none can lead astray; and whomsoever Allah leads astray, none can guide." The friend asked a question, "Why would Allah intentionally lead people away from Himself, and close the door on their return?" A quick Internet search shows that such questions concern many Muslims too. Thus, I want to share an expanded version of my response to my Christian friend in this talk.

The statement quoted from the author is based on a verse of the Noble Quran (35:8). His understanding—or at least the way he puts it—though, does not conform to the understanding of many other Muslim scholars. Muhammad Abdel Haleem translates the above verse as "... God *leaves* whoever He wills to astray and guides whoever He will" (emphasis mine). This is the general understanding of the majority of Muslim scholars in the light of the overall teachings of the Noble Quran. The verse is equally open to another understanding (Muhammad Asad): "... God lets go astray *him that wills [to go astray]*, just as He guides him that wills [to be guided]" (emphasis again mine—meaning that it is man who wills to go astray). In commentary to a similar verse elsewhere (14:4), Muhammad Asad writes, "... All Quranic references to God's 'letting man go astray' must be understood against the background of 2:2627—'none does He cause go astray save the iniquitous, who break their bond with God' ... that is to say, man's going astray is a consequence of his own attitudes and inclinations and not a result of an arbitrary 'predestination' in the popular sense of the word." He goes on to note the classical scholars' stressing free choice.

So certainly Almighty God does not wish anyone to go astray. That's why He has sent guidance. But God has also willed for humans to have limited free will, and thus we are responsible for our choices.

As for "[God] clos[ing] the door on [wrong doers'] return", the door of repentance is never closed until we are on death bed. The Noble Quran is very clear on that. Verse 53 of Chapter 39 states: "... O you servants of Mine who have transgressed against your own selves! Despair not of God's mercy: behold, God forgives all sins—for, verily, He alone is much forgiving, a dispenser of grace." Another verse (6:54) states, "... Your Lord has willed upon Himself the law of grace and mercy." Interesting, based on these and similar verses, some Muslim theologians (for example the 14th century scholar Ibn Qayyem) believe that while paradise is eternal, hell will finally come to an end. This seems to be similar to the view of Rev John

Wesley the founder of Methodism, that the friend mentions in his email. According to him, Rev Wesley “claimed that ALL can be saved and that it is God's desire that ALL be saved.”

The friend also writes that, “Some theologies within Christianity which emphasise predestination (Calvinistic theologies) believe that some people are destined to be condemned by God, regardless of what they do. John Wesley strongly opposed this teaching.” The question of free will and predestination has been hotly debated among Muslims as well. One of the early theological schools among Muslims was what is called “Qadariya”. They emphasised humans possessing free will and that the exercise of that free will makes them responsible for their actions. Their problem was that they attributed everything to humans’ free choice and took God’s Will completely out of equation. In contrast to this, there was another early theological school called “Jabriya”. They believed in predestination and completely denied human free will. Over time, several other theological schools emerged with positions between these two extremes. Today’s general consensus among followers of all of them seems to be belief in both Divine Decree and limited free will.

Divine Decree means Almighty God determining everything that happens, good and bad. This negates dualism, namely there being a god of good and a god of evil. How the Divine Decree works is beyond human comprehension. What the Noble Quran tells us is that God has created the universe with a purpose: “We have not created heaven and earth and all that is between them without meaning and purpose” (38:27). What is the overall purpose of their creation? The Quran does not tell us, again perhaps because it is beyond our comprehension. There is a famous quote from Stephen Hawking, the British atheist theoretical physicist and cosmologist, on the question why the universe exists: “If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God” (*A brief History of Time*). And it is clear that it is impossible for limited beings, humans, to know “the mind” of what is by definition limitless, Almighty God. But the Holy Quran does tell us the purpose of human creation: “And [tell them that] I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me” (51:56). In his commentary to this verse, Muhammad Asad writes, “Thus, the innermost purpose of the creation of all rational beings is their cognition (*ma’rifah*) of the existence of God and, hence, their conscious willingness to conform their own existence to whatever they may perceive of His will and plan: and it is this twofold concept of cognition and willingness that gives the deepest meaning to what the Quran describes as ‘worship’ (*‘ibadah*).”

So here the notion of free will comes into play. It is the possession of free will that distinguishes humans not only from animals but also from angels. In the story of the creation of Adam, the first man and the symbol of humanity, the Quran tells us that God asked the angels to prostrate to Adam, and they did so (2:34). What it means is that by worshiping God, while having the option of not doing so—which the angels lack—humans can reach a state higher than angels. In contrast, by misusing the free will, humans can be reduced to what the Quran calls “the lowest of the low” (95:5). As Muhammad Asad puts it, “... by the act of his conscious self-surrender to the all-pervading Creative Will, [the worshipper] may hope to come closer to an understanding of the Will and, thus, closer to God Himself.”

In brief, the very fact that God Almighty sent Messengers and those Messengers suffered so much to guide people to the right path shows that God wants humans to use their free will to get closer to Him. Thus, He will never “intentionally lead people away from Himself”.

The problem of evil and the parable of Moses and the Wiseman

The “problem of evil” has occupied the minds of philosophers and religious thinkers for over two thousand years. In a nutshell, the problem poses the question, given God being Omnipotent (almighty or infinite in power) on the one hand and Most Merciful and Most Beneficent on the other, how can we justify the existence of evil and suffering in the world. Various responses have been offered from other religions’ viewpoint, which we cannot go into details in a short talk. Suffice to say that, Muslims find some of them very strange, for example, dualism—or the existence of a god of good and a god of evil; or God withdrawing from the affairs of the world after its creation.

Searching the Noble Quran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), we can find several responses to the problem. Here I share the one concerning the nature of evil. What appears as evil or suffering to us may be due to our narrow short-sighted human viewpoint. If we had deeper knowledge and insight, our view may change. This is beautifully illustrated in the parable of Moses and the Wiseman in Sura (chapter) 18, *al Kahf* or the Cave, verses 60 to 82.

The Noble Quran starts the parable with Moses and his young servant setting out on a journey to find the Wiseman. A tradition from the Prophet (pbuh) gives the reason for the search: “Moses was asked if he knew anyone more knowledgeable than himself, and he replied ‘No!’. A Divine Inspiration came telling him that there was a servant of God more knowledgeable. Moses asked how to find him, and some direction was given” (paraphrased). After some search Moses finds the Wiseman and asks him, “‘May I follow you so that you can teach me some of the right guidance you have been taught?’ The man said, ‘You will not be able to bear with me patiently. How can you be patient with matters beyond your knowledge?’”(18: 66-68) I think this verse, “How can you be patient with matters beyond your knowledge?” is the core of the whole parable. We human beings have a tendency to be hasty and impatient. We pass moral judgment quickly based on what we think we know—even if that knowledge is very myopic. What we see as “evil” might be something good and beneficial, as we see in the parable.

The Wiseman allows Moses to accompany him with the condition that he does not ask any questions. They travel together until they board a boat and the Wiseman makes a hole in it. Moses finds it strange and asks if he wants to drown the passengers. The Wiseman says, “Did I not tell you that you will never bear with me patiently?” Moses apologises for his forgetfulness, and they continue their trip. “Then, when they met a young boy and the man killed him, Moses said, ‘How could you kill an innocent person? He has not killed anyone! What a terrible thing to do!’” The Wiseman reminds Moses of his promise. He apologises again and tells him to banish him from his company if he queries again. Then they reach a town and ask its inhabitants for food, but they refuse hospitality. Despite that, the Wiseman repairs a wall there that is at the point of falling down. Moses seems to remember his promise this time, and does not question the Wiseman’s action. He cannot manage to remain silent, though, and suggests, “If you had wishes you could have taken some payment for doing that.” The Wiseman tells him that was the end of their journey together, and explains his actions, which Moses had found strange and abhorring:

“The boat belonged to some needy people who made their living from the sea and I damaged it because I knew that coming after them was a king who was seizing every [serviceable] boat by force. The young boy had parents who were people of faith, and so, fearing he would trouble them through wickedness and disbelief, we wished that their Lord should give them another child—purer and more compassionate—in his place. The wall belongs to two young orphans in the town and there was buried treasure beneath it belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man, so your Lord intended them to reach maturity and then dig up their treasure as a mercy from your Lord. I did not do [these things] of my own accord: these are the explanations for those things you could not bear with patience” (18: 79-82).

Thus, what seemed as acts of evil to Moses from his narrow short-sighted human view had wisdom behind them and were in fact good and beneficial. The Wiseman did not do them of his “own accord”. He did them because God Almighty had allowed him to see what is normally beyond human perception (*al-ghayb*). The explanations for making a hole in the boat and repairing the wall make perfect sense to us. The one for killing the young boy, though, raises more questions. I think this is meant to tell us that there are even deeper insights than what the Wiseman was allowed to have a glimpse of.

In brief, one Islamic response to the “problem of evil” is that what seems “evil” to us might in fact be something positive and beneficial. We need to put our trust in God and pray to Him to grant us patience to deal with our short-sightedness and discontentment.

Islam’s view on Pandemic and vaccination

We’ve all heard of anti-vaccine movements, which have ironically grown at the age of coronavirus. A report by a team of experts last October (2020) noted that, “social media accounts held by so-called anti-vaxxers have increased their following by at least 7.8 million people since 2019.” It also mentioned that, “31 million people follow anti-vaccine groups on Facebook, with 17 million people subscribing to similar accounts on YouTube.” Of course there can be some legitimate concerns about the safety of vaccines, but research shows a variety of other reasons for the opposition—religious belief being one of them. What is Islam’s position on vaccination? Before answering this question, we need to know Islam’s view on health and illness in general and on pandemic in particular.

Muslim thinkers consider health as an equilibrium in human beings’ entire existential dimensions, and illness is caused by a disturbance in that equilibrium. Thus, “health is a state of physical, psychological, spiritual, and social well-being and is considered the greatest blessing God has given humankind.” According to a hadith (Saying) of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), “Pray God for forgiveness and sound well-being. No blessing other than faith is better than well-being.” The Prophet is also reported to have said, “Taking proper care of one’s health is the right of the body.” It was thanks to such an emphasis that the Prophet put on taking care of one’s health, and also the Noble Quran’s instructions to Muslims to ponder and think about various natural phenomena, that Muslims achieved great heights in medicine a few centuries after the death of the Prophet. Another hadith of the Prophet, though, may have played the most crucial role: “Seek medical treatment. For God has not created a disease without creating a cure for it.” So if the Almighty has created a cure for any disease that exists, it is Muslims duty not only to seek treatment when available, but also to try to find a treatment if it is not already

there. That was why Muslim physicians discovered many healing substances by careful observation and empirical experiments. They also made great conceptual contributions to medicine, to the extent that Ibn Sina's (Avicenna) book, *al Qanun (The Canon of Medicine)*, compiled in 1025, was used as a textbook in Europe until the 18th century.

The Prophet (pbuh) had specific instructions on pandemics as well: "When you hear about outbreak of plague in any area, do not enter there; and when it has broken in a land where you are, then do not run away from it [and spread it elsewhere]." In history books, an interesting story is narrated in regard to this hadith. When Caliph Omar heard of the outbreak of a pandemic in Syrian in 638 CE, he set out to go there and personally inspect the measures adopted to deal with it. A few kilometres from his capital, Medina, he met a group of Muslim army commanders returning from Syria to report to him. Some were in favour of his visit to Syria and some were against it. When Abdul Rahman Ibn Auf, a great Companion of the Prophet, mentioned that he had heard the above hadith from the Prophet, which Omar had not heard, Omar decided to cancel his trip and return to Medina. On that, another commander who was in favour of his visit said, "O Leader of the Believers! Why are you running away from God's Decree?" Omar replied, "I'm running from God's Decree to God's Decree!"

This has great implications for Muslims at the age of corona. Yes, the outbreak of coronavirus *is* according to Divine Decree. It may have been His Decree for the virus to jump from animals to humans if certain conditions were met—or alternatively, for the scientists to get infected if they tried to experiment with the virus in a lab and were not careful enough in handling it—and, in either case, for the infection to quickly spread in close proximity. But it is also His Decree that if we adopt certain safety measures—quarantine, hand washing, physical distancing, wearing mask—we can remain unaffected.

The same principle applies to vaccination. It is Divine Decree for vaccines to protect against deadly diseases. Inoculation against smallpox was used in Muslim lands long before it was practiced in Europe. It is a well-established fact that it was Lady Mary Montagu, the wife of the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, who popularised inoculation in Europe. She observed its effectiveness first-hand in Istanbul, wrote a series of letters on it, and introduced smallpox inoculation after returning to London in the early 1720s.

Thus, Muslims have never had a problem with vaccination in principle. However, there has been some opposition to vaccination in some parts of the Muslim world on various grounds. The use of pork products in some vaccines has been one reason. Majority of Muslim scholars, though, reject that view. They argue that firstly processing a substance changes its nature. Hence, the gelatine derived from pork products and used in vaccines is exactly the same as that derived from other halal animals. Secondly, Islam allows even the consumption of forbidden items in cases of dire necessity. Therefore, the use of any vaccine for preventing deadly diseases is permissible.

The other source of opposition to vaccination has been the suspicion that Western powers may use it for nefarious purposes. As an article in the British newspaper *the Guardian* in February this year notes, "Political scepticism is endemic in the Muslim world, and it isn't always unjustified. At least one conspiracy theory involving the vaccination of Muslims was certainly real: the 2011 operation to locate and kill Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad started with a CIA intelligence-gathering operation disguised as an inoculation drive." A video alleging to show a PowerPoint presentation by Bill Gates to Pentagon officials has been widely circulating

among Muslims in the past several years. In the video, the presenter argues—and shows fMRI brain scans and other data to support his arguments—that there is a certain gene that contributes to people becoming “religious fanatics”; and that they have developed a vaccine that “would turn a fanatic into a normal person ... and ... that would have major effects in the Middle East.” The video has been described as a hoax, and Bill Gates has denied being the presenter. Regardless whether true or false, the video has had its impact to raise misgivings and distrust.

Despite such suspicions, Muslims around the world have welcomed the development of coronavirus vaccine. Given the devastation the disease has caused, some have gone a step further and have argued that vaccination against Covid-19 is not only permissible but a religious obligation. Recently, this view was expressed by a Muslim infectious disease specialist in an article published online by Interfaith America. The verse of the Quran that the writer quotes to support her argument is taken out of context. Nonetheless, she seems to be on the right track. Several months earlier (December 2020), the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America, which includes prominent Islamic scholars from around the world, issued a *fatwa* (religious verdict) voicing a similar view. They based their premise, among other things, on preservation of life being the highest objective of *sharia* (Islamic law). While dealing with various issues, they also noted that: “The permissibility of taking medicine to repel an existing disease or prevent an expected one is a matter of consensus among the people of knowledge. The point of contention is whether it is obligatory or not. ... [O]ne of the cases where taking medicine is obligatory is when the disease may harm others. This may apply to the case of COVID-19, which is extremely contagious.”

In brief, there is no doubt that Islam permits the use of vaccination to prevent diseases. Furthermore, a strong case can be made for vaccination to be obligatory in certain situations.

Is the Palestinian Israeli conflict religious?

Palestine, and especially al Quds or Jerusalem, lies at the heart of world’s three major religions—and is sacred to all of them: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Jews consider it their “Promised Land” and the place where Solomon built their First Temple. For Christians, Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem, was brought to Jerusalem as a child, lived there most of his life and preached. For Muslims, al Quds is the first direction of their regular prayers (*qibla*) and significant for the Prophet Muhammad’s (pbuh) Night Journey. Two footnotes are needed for clarification. Firstly, Muslims used to pray in the direction of Jerusalem, before the Divine Command to face Makkah, because they felt more affinity to the Christians and Jews than to the polytheists of Makkah. Secondly, the Night Journey, according to Muslims’ belief, had two parts: the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was miraculously taken from Makkah to al Quds (Masjid-ul-Aqsa), and from there he ascended into the heavens to speak to the Almighty.

The significance of Palestine for these three religions, however, does not mean that religion lies at the heart of today’s conflict. A look at the history of communal relations between Muslims and Jews in Palestine makes this point abundantly clear. Jerusalem was conquered by the Muslims in about 637 CE. After a siege of four months, the Byzantine ruler of Jerusalem offered to surrender, but only if the Caliph Omar himself came there. Omar travelled all the way from his capital Medina and signed a pact known as *al-‘Uhdah al-‘Umariyyah* (Omar’s Assurances). In that he guaranteed the safety of the inhabitants of the city, their properties and

their places of worship in exchange for their agreement to pay the prescribed tax. There were no Jews in the city at that time, because the Byzantine Empire had banned them from living there. It was under Muslims' rule that, "For the first time, after almost 500 years of oppressive Roman rule, Jews were once again allowed to live inside Jerusalem."

During the Middle Ages, Jews in Palestine lived in peace and security and contributed to the development of arts and sciences, like the Jews elsewhere in the Muslim world. As Bernard Lewis, a British Jewish historian, states, "With few exceptions, whatever was creative and significant in Jewish life, happened in Islamic lands". The peaceful life of the inhabitants of Palestine was disturbed towards the end of the 11th/beginning of the 12th centuries with the arrival of European Crusaders. The massacres committed by the Crusaders were not limited to the Muslims, but included the Jews as well—and even the local Christians, whose religious practices seemed different to the Europeans. That continued until Salahuddin Ayyubi (Saladin) liberated the city and most of Palestine in the 1180s and established his just and magnanimous rule. Mostly peaceful and harmonious life of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Palestine continued under the Ayyubids, Mamluks, and Ottomans until the dawn of the 20th century. The Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent—who also welcomed the Jews who were escaping inquisitions in Spain—even tried to discover the Western Wall, or "the Wailing Wall", which is sacred to the Jews, allowed them to worship there, and built an oratory for them.

What happened in the late 19th/early 20th centuries, and gained momentum in the 1920s and 1930s, is the root cause of all the problems today, that is, the creation of the Zionist movement and increasing migration of European Jews to Palestine. It had nothing to do with Islam and the Muslims, but was a result of European antisemitism. Jews in Europe had been subjected to antisemitic discrimination and persecution for many centuries. When it resurfaced, after some lull, in the last decades of the 19th century, a group of Jewish intellectuals held the First Zionist Congress and established the World Zionist Organisation in 1897. They advocated migration of the Jews from Europe to Palestine and the formation a "homeland" there. Interestingly, for various reasons, the majority of the Jews did not support the Zionists' cause until they faced the atrocities committed by the Nazis. Nonetheless, as a result of the Zionist propaganda and encouragement, Jewish migration to Palestine, which had begun in the 1880s, increased to some extent in the first two decades of the 20th century. It was the occupation of Palestine by Britain after WWI, the British Mandate there, and their promise for the support of the establishment of "a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine in the Balfour Declaration in 1917 which led to substantial increase in Jewish migration in the 1920s. And the rise of Nazism in Germany turned that small stream into a flooded river in the 1930s and 1940s.

With the increase in the number of Jewish migrants, and also because of the paramilitary activities of the Zionist militias, the harmonious communal relations between the Jews and the Muslim/Christian Palestinians slowly turned into animosity. As the social science research has shown, when a conflict begins as a result of political or economic factors, soon religion becomes a rallying point. It is so because religion provides "the easiest and most prominently accessible tool for mass mobilization and identity differentiation." In case of Palestine, and elsewhere in the Muslim world, Islam's strong opposition to aggression and oppression, and its encouragement to resist against them, is an added reason why Islam plays an important role in the resistance movements. That has been the case from the first anti-Mandate/anti-migration

rebellion of the mid 1930s to the two Intifadas of the late 20th/early 21st centuries. It is also the case with Hamas' resistance against occupation and atrocities today.

Hamas has been described as a “terrorist” group on the one hand, and as a creation of Israel and its accomplice on the other. The latter charge arises from the origins of Hamas. It is true that the Israeli authorities turned a blind eye when Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmad Yaseen registered his humanitarian organisation in the late 1970s—a charity which transformed into Hamas a decade later. Israel may have even tacitly supported Sheikh Ahmad Yaseen's organisation for seeing it as a counterbalance to the PLO, the Palestinian secular organisation which was prominent at that time. But nothing can be further from the truth than concluding from this that Hamas was an Israeli creation and it commits acts of terrorism on Israeli behalf to provide them justifications for the atrocities they inflict on Palestinians. This is, unfortunately, what some pro-Palestinian secular intellectuals imply in videos that are widely circulating. They demonstrate a complete disregard to all that Hamas has been doing in its almost quarter a century of existence. It includes organising two intifadas, winning an election, losing many prominent leaders to Israeli assassinations (including the elderly Sheikh Ahmad Yaseen), and the enormous social services they have provided in Gaza.

As for Hamas being a terrorist group, again it is false—although Hamas does commit some acts that can be called “terrorism”. The reason why Hamas cannot be considered a terrorist organisation is that firstly its military wing (Martyr Izz ad-Din al Qassam Brigade) is only a small part of Hamas, whose bulk of activities are focused on politics and social services. Secondly, the reason for the establishment of al Qassam Brigade in 1992 was legitimate selfdefence against the Israeli security forces. It never targeted civilian Israelis (which can be called terrorism) until the Hebron massacre (February 1994), in which 25 worshippers were massacred by a Jewish settler in Ibrahim mosque during the dawn prayer. Even after that, in May 1994, Hamas offered mutual “armistice” in which civilians would be removed from the arena of the struggle—an offer rejected by the Israeli army. After that Hamas also started targeting the civilians. Its rocket attacks on Israeli cities can also be considered as acts of terrorism, because they are indiscriminate and hurt the non-combatant. BUT we should not forget that Hamas' terrorism is small scale “retail terrorism” (coined by the Jewish intellectual Noam Chomsky), which is in response to the “wholesale terrorism” or “state terrorism” committed by the Israeli state.

In brief, despite religion becoming a rallying point, the more than twelve and half centuries of overwhelmingly peaceful and harmonious communal relations among the Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Palestine make it very clear that the root cause of the last one century's strife is not religion. On the other hand, the onset of the conflict after the formation of the Zionist movement and migration of the Jews because of European antisemitism—followed by the creation of the state of Israel and its continuous brutal occupation—demonstrates where the problem lies. Thus, the poor Palestinians have been paying for the sins of other people.

Spiritual wellbeing in Islam

As a Muslim Chaplain, in the past couple of months I have been invited to several discussions about spiritual wellbeing. This shows that the significance of spirituality in contributing to overall health and well-being of individuals is being recognised by public health officials,

educationalists and others. What surprised me when I first attended such a discussion was the view that spirituality is important not only to religious people but also to agnostics, and even to the atheists. As we will see later, Islam's focus in spirituality is on individual's relationship with God. So, it was interesting to learn that there is "secular spirituality" too, which is defined as "one's relationship with the self, others, nature, and whatever else one considers to be the ultimate." The aim of secular spirituality is not to get closer to the Almighty, but to live happily and to help others. What is common between the secular and religious spirituality, though, is the search for meaning. As a scholar defines it, "spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred."

As noted above, in Islam spirituality means establishing closer relations with God Almighty. A contemporary Muslim scholar defines spirituality as, "the presence of a relationship with Allah that affects the individual's self-worth, sense of meaning, and connectedness with others." According to the Noble Quran (15: 28-29), God created human beings from clay and breathed in them from His Spirit. Clay represents our material composition and all that go with it. These we share with other living beings and need them for our survival on earth. The Spirit of God in us is what makes us special. Islam aims to establish a balance between humans' material and spiritual aspects, but emphasises that the focus should be on spiritual growth. All acts of worship in Islam aim—among other things—to make Muslims *muttaqi*, God-conscious. Despite this, there has been a trend among Muslims from the very early days that try to chart a certain course for elevating the godly spirit, adorning oneself with Divine attributes, and moving closer and closer to the Divine (with the clear realisation that one can never reach there). It is called *Irfan* or *Tasawwuf*, and has been translated in English as "Islamic mysticism". That can be the subject of a separate talk. In this talk, I'll discuss how Islam's general teachings contribute to spiritual well-being.

But what is spiritual wellbeing? It is difficult to find a consensus on the definition of the term. According to one view, "Spiritual wellbeing is a deeply personal dimension of wellbeing, and can mean something different to everyone." An article written for the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* has the following definition: "Spiritual well-being is the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community, and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness." By its reference to God, this is obviously a religious definition. Another definition that can apply to "secular spirituality" too will be: "Spiritual health is achieved when you feel at peace with life. It is when you are able to find hope and comfort in even the hardest of times. It can help to support you as you experience life completely." This view conforms to Islam's view on spiritual wellbeing too. Of course the term is a modern one and has not been used in the main Islamic texts or by classical Islamic scholars. But the Noble Quran considers peace and tranquillity of heart as a consequence of spiritual focus (13: 28). Based on this, some Iranian researchers deem spiritual wellbeing as "*qalb-e Saleem*" (which means sound, pure, or wholesome heart), and explain that it refers to "a state of tremendous tranquillity, happiness, peace of mind; and enjoying security, trust and love" (my translation from Farsi).

How does Islam contribute to spiritual wellbeing? Muslim researchers have studied this question in recent decades and have done some empirical work. Based on some of their writings, the following are some of the ways that Islam contributes to Muslims' spiritual and psychological wellbeing:

1. Acts of worship: As noted above, and also discussed in some earlier talks on the significances of the five pillars of Islam, one of the main aims of various acts of worship such as prayer, fasting, zakat and hajj is to make the Muslims God-conscious. Only when God is the focus of our attention, we can spiritually and psychologically benefit from other teachings of Islam.

2. Submission to God and attachment to Him: In earlier talks, I also mentioned that Islam means to surrender and submit oneself wholeheartedly to the Creator. Submission and God consciousness mean deep attachment to God. As a research paper notes, “In general, data has indicated that attachment security is linked with better coping abilities, well-being, positive mental health, and superior relationship functioning.” Numerous verses of the Quran refer to this theme. For example, “It is those who have faith and do not obscure their faith with wrong doing, it is they who will be secure, and it is they who are rightly guided” (6: 182); or “Say, ‘My prayers and devotions, my living and my dying, are all for God, Lord of the Worlds; He has no partners. This is what I am commanded, and I am the first to devote myself to Him’” (6: 162-63). The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said, “God shall say on the day of resurrection: ‘Where are those who have loved each other for the sake of My Majesty? Today I shall shelter them in My shade, on a day when there is no shade but My shade.’” Moreover, according to a Saying of the Prophet, God has 99 “beautiful names” or attributes; and each name “has a specific effect in regulating divine relations with people.” Some of the attributes related to attachment are: *Al-Mu'min*—The Preserver and bestower of security; *AlMujib*—The Responsive; *Ar-Razzaq*—The Ever-provider; *Al-Hafeez*—the Protector; *Al-Mani'e*—The Shielder; and *As-Samad*—The Everlasting Refuge.

3. Reliance on God: The Noble Quran and the Sayings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) encourage Muslims over and over to put their trust in God and to rely on Him in all circumstances. For example, the Quran tells the Prophet, “Put your trust in the Almighty, the Merciful, who sees you when you stand up [in prayer] and sees your movements among those who prostrate” (26: 217-19); or “Put your trust in God, He suffices as a guardian” (33:3). It also tells the Muslims, “So put your trust in God [and rely on Him] alone if you are indeed believers” (5:23); or “God will find a way out for those who are mindful of Him, and will provide for them from an unexpected source; God will be enough for those who put their trust in Him” (65: 2-3). The Quran also mentions numerous stories of the earlier messengers, how they relied on the Almighty, and how He helped them in dire situations. Furthermore, among the “beautiful names of God” (or His attributes) that the Quran mentions there are several that refer to Him as being dependable and trustworthy. As for Saying of the Prophet: “If you were to rely upon Allah with reliance due to him, he would provide for you just as he provides for the birds. They go out in the morning with empty stomachs and return full in the evening.” Of course this does not condone inaction on the part of Muslims, because the birds do make an effort to find food. Moreover, according to another Hadith, when the Prophet saw a Bedouin leave his camel untied because he relied on God, he told him, “Tie your camel first, then put you trust in God.”

4. Patience and perseverance: *Sabr*, or patience and perseverance, is among the highest values and virtues in Islam. Some scholars consider it as one of the two parts of faith, the other being *shukr*, or gratitude. It teaches Muslims to remain spiritually steadfast,

not to lose hope and continue doing good no matter what adversities they face. There are numerous references to *sabr* in the Quran. Examples include, “You who believe, seek help through steadfastness and prayer, for God is with the steadfast” (2: 153); “We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops. But [Prophet] give good news to those who patiently persevere” (2: 155-56); “You who believe, persevere in patience and constancy: vie in such perseverance; strengthen each other; always be mindful of God; so that you may prosper” (3:200). The Noble Quran also tell the stories of past messengers, how much difficulty and adversity they faced fulfilling their missions, how patient and steadfast they were, and how God rewarded their perseverance both in this world and in the Hereafter. There are also many Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) encouraging Muslims to be patient and steadfast. Three examples may suffice: “No one had ever been given anything better than *ṣabr*”; “Never a believer is stricken with a discomfort, an illness, an anxiety, a grief or mental worry or even the pricking of a thorn but Allah will expiate his sins on account of his patience”; “Wondrous is the affair of the believer, for there is good for him in every matter—and this is not the case with anyone except the believer. If he is happy, then he thanks Allah and thus there is good for him. If he is harmed, then he shows patience and thus there is good for him.”

5. Belief in Divine Decree: Belief in *Qadar*, or Divine Decree, is an article of faith in Islam. I have talked about this in one of the earlier talks. Just briefly: when a person believes that whatever happens is with God’s knowledge and with His permission, they bear it with patience and look forward to their reward either in this world, or the Hereafter, or both. Moreover, they are certain that, as the Noble Quran say, “You may dislike something although it is good for you, or you may like something although it is bad for you: God knows and you do not know” (2: 216).
6. Belief in Day of Judgment: Belief in the Day of Judgment is also among the six articles of faith in Islam. Ibn Hazm, an eleventh century Islamic scholar, was of the view that if someone does not believe in the Hereafter, they will always be in a state of loss and overwhelmed by anxiety and grief. He argued that everything in this world is temporary; all our ambitions are taken away from us in the end either by failure or death. “There is no escape from these two ends except in striving towards God [and believing in the Hereafter]. In this case, a person achieves happiness in this life and for eternity.”
7. Other dimensions of spiritual wellbeing: In this talk I have focused only on the relationship with God Almighty. This is only one of the dimensions of spiritual wellbeing model that scholars have developed. In addition to the relations with the Transcendental, the spiritual wellbeing model includes relations with oneself, with others or society, and with nature or environment. These can probably be the subject of another talk in the future.

Spiritual wellbeing in Islam—part II

My last episode’s talk on spiritual wellbeing in Islam was focused on an individual’s relationship with God. As I mentioned towards the end, that relationship is only in one domain, out of four, identified by scholars: “Spiritual health is a dynamic state of being, reflected in the

quality of relationships that people have in up to four domains of spiritual well-being: Personal domain where a person intra-relates with self; Communal domain, with in-depth inter-personal relationships; Environmental domain, connecting with nature; Transcendental domain, relating to some-thing or some-One beyond the human level.” Interestingly, in addition to relationship with God, Islam has a lot to say about relationships in other domains as well. The Australian scholars who have developed the four domain model, which is widely used around the world today, identify 20 measures for assessment of spiritual wellbeing, five items in each domain. In this talk, I use those measures to see what the Noble Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) say on those other relationships; but due to time limitation, I’ll discuss three measures in each domain.

1. Personal domain: The measures for this domain discussed below are: self-identity, self-awareness, and meaning in life.
 - Self-identity: The Arab society before Islam was a tribal society with very strong tribal bonds. Islam did not try to erase the tribal identity, but substantially downplayed it. Islam emphasises the common origin of humans on the one hand and the faith-based identity of the Muslims on the other. The Quran tells us, “O Mankind, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God’s sight, the most honoured of you are those most mindful of Him” (49: 13). As for the “Muslim” identity, since the word means those who surrender themselves to the Will of their Creator, the followers of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) share this identity with all true and sincere followers of other religion. The Noble Quran makes this clear when—referring to “the faith of your forefather Abraham”—it tells us, “God has called you Muslims—both in the past and in this [message] ...” (22: 78). At a more specific level, the followers of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) form a global *Ummah*, or nation, and the Quran tells them they are each other’s brothers [and sisters] (49: 10).
 - Self-awareness: Self-awareness seems to be innate in humans, and everyone’s self-awareness would be unique. But the pertinent questions are who we think we are, what we want to accomplish, and what our values are. Islam provides guidance in answering these questions. The Quran and the traditions of the Prophet tell us that we are God’s creation, and He has honoured us “and favoured [us] specially above many of those [He has] created” (the Quran, 17: 70). We are here on earth to serve a purpose (to be discussed next). This life is a test, and in the judgment that comes belief in One and Only God and doing good to fellow human beings (repeated together over 70 times in the Quran and also in many Saying of the Prophet) will be the most important criteria. Thus, the Quran says, “Seek the life to come by means of what God has granted you, but do not neglect your rightful share in this world. Do good as God has done good to you” (24: 77).
 - Meaning of life: Life finds its meaning in serving a purpose. God Almighty tells us in the Quran, “I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me” (51: 56). In one of my earlier talks I quoted from Muhammad Asad’s commentary on this verse: “Thus, the innermost purpose of the creation of all rational beings is their cognition (*ma’rifah*) of the existence of God and, hence, their conscious willingness to conform their own existence to whatever they may perceive of His will and plan: and it is this twofold concept of cognition and willingness that gives the deepest meaning to what the Quran describes as ‘worship’ (*‘ibadah*).” The concept of

“worship” is understood by some other Muslim scholars to also include efforts towards actualising the potentialities that God Almighty has granted humans—spiritual, psychological, intellectual, and physical.

2. Communal domain: The measures for this domain discussed below are love others, forgive others, and kindness to others. However, before doing that, it is important to note Islam’s greatest means for developing communal bond among Muslims, that is, the congregation prayer at the mosque. Five daily prayers can be offered individually or in congregation, but the Prophet (pbuh) has emphasised that congregational prayer in the mosque is much more rewarding. That is why there is a mosque in every neighbourhood in Muslim majority countries, and the residents of the locality see each other several times a day every day, learning how everyone is doing and developing brotherly/sisterly bonds. Then we have the Friday early afternoon prayer that must be in congregation, bringing the residents of several neighbourhoods together once a week, with similar effect at a larger scale.
 - Love others: One of the “beautiful names”, attributes, of God is *al Wadud*, the Most Loving. So true love comes from God, and Muslims are encouraged to love each other for the sake of God. The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said, “Whoever would love to taste the flavour of faith, let him love a person only for the sake of Allah Almighty.” He also said, “None of you will believe until you love for your brother what you love for yourself.” Commenting on this Saying of the Prophet, Imam al-Nawawi—a 13th century Hadith scholar—notes, “It is better to interpret brotherhood in general terms, such that it includes the disbeliever as well as the Muslim.” The Noble Quran praises the love some Companions of the Prophet showed towards others (56: 9), thus encouraging Muslims to follow those role models.
 - Forgive others: The Noble Quran considers forgiving others as a characteristic of believers (3: 134), and there are tens of verses of the Quran urging Muslims to forgiveness. Examples include: “Show forgiveness, command what is right, and turn away from the ignorant” (7: 199). “Let them pardon and overlook. Would you not love for Allah to forgive you? Allah is Most Forgiving and Most Merciful” (24: 22). “Tell the believers to forgive those who do not fear God’s days [of punishment]—He will recompense people for what they have done” (45: 14). There are also many Sayings of the Prophet (pbuh) to the same effect. He told one of his Companions, “Reconcile with whoever cuts you off, give to whoever deprives you, and pardon whoever wrongs you.” He is also reported to have said, “Be merciful to others and you will receive mercy. Forgive others and Allah will forgive you.” “... No one forgives except that Allah increases his honour. ...”
 - Kindness to others: Islam considers kindness too as a characteristic of a believer. The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said, “Kindness is a mark of faith, and whoever is not kind has no faith.” The Noble Quran confirms this when it criticises those who perform outward acts of worship which do not affect their behaviour towards others: “Have you considered the person who denied the Judgement? It is he who pushes aside the orphan and does not urge to feed the needy. So woe to those who pray but are heedless of their prayer; those who are all show and forbid common kindness” (107: 1-7). The Quran and Sayings of

the Prophet also exhort Muslims to be kind to their parents, spouses, children, neighbours, the poor, and others—Muslim and non-Muslim.

3. Environmental domain: There are over a thousand verses of the Quran with references to nature and environment. I cannot do justice to the topic by discussing it in a few minutes. Here I present only one verse of the Quran talking about natural phenomena, with the hope that I have a separate talk on the subject sometime in the future: “Indeed in the creation of the heavens and earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the ships that sails seas with goods for people; in the water that God sends down from the sky to give life to the earth when it has been barren, scattering all kinds of creatures over it; in the changing of the winds and clouds that run all their appointed course between the sky and earth: in all these there are signs for those who use their minds” (2: 164).

In brief, Islam provides guidance to Muslims in their relationships to themselves, to others, to nature, and to God—guidance by which they can achieve spiritual wellbeing and experience “a state of tremendous tranquillity, happiness, and peace of mind; and enjoy security, trust and love.”

Islam, Nature and spiritual wellbeing

In my talk last episode, I briefly discussed the four-domain model of spiritual wellbeing developed by some Australian scholars. One of those domains is the environmental domain, which entails the relationship with nature. The measures proposed by the scholars for the assessment of this domain include connection to nature, having awe at nature, feeling oneness with nature, seeing magic in nature, and being in harmony with nature. Like what I did last episode for the personal and communal domains, I tried to find out how the Noble Quran and the Sayings of the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) guide Muslims in their relationship with nature in each area of assessment. What I discovered was that firstly there are very few Saying of the Prophet on the topic compared to the vast number of the verses of the Quran; and secondly, it is difficult to label the relevant verses of the Quran into some neat categories. The Noble Quran calls the natural phenomena as “*ayaat*” or signs—the same word used for the verses of the Quran—and asks Muslims to ponder and reflect on them. Thus, following the guidance of the Quran will lead—at the same time—to connection to nature, seeing the magical creative work in them, and being in awe of their marvellousness. Muslims also feel oneness with nature and in harmony with it because of the concept of *tawheed*, which means Oneness of God and oneness of His creation.

Studying the natural phenomena in the Quran, one is amazed not only by the large number of the verses referring to them, but also by their vast scope—ranging from the heavens and universe as a whole to an ant and a fly. Here I try to present some examples, but I should note that this is in no way exhaustive.

1. The heavens: The Noble Quran turns our attention to the immensity of the universe over and over and asks us to ponder over its beauty, delicate balance and the perfect laws operating it. For example, “AND IT IS We who have built the universe with [Our creative] power; and, verily, it is We who are steadily expanding it” (51: 47). “[Hallowed be] He who has created seven heavens in full harmony with one another: no fault will you see in the creation of the Most Gracious. And turn your vision [upon

it] once more: can you see any flaw? Yea, turn your vision [upon it] again and yet again: [and every time] your vision will fall back upon you, dazzled and truly defeated” (67: 3-4). “There truly are signs in the creation of the heavens and earth, and in the alternation of night and day for those with understanding, who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down, who reflect on the creation of the heavens and earth [saying]: ‘Our Lord! You have not created all this without purpose ...’” (3: 190-191). There are also numerous verses referring to the sun, moon, and stars—and the set courses they follow.

2. The atmosphere: The Arabic word translated as “heavens” is *samawaat*, which is the plural of *samaa*. According to scholars, the latter refers to whatever is high above us. Thus, it can mean the heavens and universe as well as the atmosphere. From the context, it is clear that in several instances the Noble Quran turns our attention to the atmosphere. For example, “It is God who has raised the skies without any supports that you could see” (13: 2 and 31: 10). Or, “... We have set up the sky as a canopy well-secured” (21: 32). And as we know, in addition to other important functions, the atmosphere protects the earth from harmful solar rays and burns down the smaller objects falling on earth.

3. The earth, mountains, oceans: The Noble Quran asks, “Which is harder to create: you people or the sky that He built, raising it high and perfecting it, giving darkness to its night and bringing out its morning brightness; and the earth too, He spread out, bringing waters and pastures out of it; and setting firm mountains [in it] for your animals to enjoy” (79: 27-33). It also says, “... do they not see ... how the earth is spread out” (88: 20). And elsewhere we read, “And We spread out the earth—how well We smoothed it out!” (51: 48) We can appreciate the significance of this “spreading out” more when we remember that the earth is spherical. Thus, indeed, how marvellous it is to live on a globe and see everything smooth and spread out! The Quran also says, “He has made firm mountains stand on the earth, to prevent it shaking under you, and rivers and paths so that you may find your way” (16: 15). Furthermore, it asks, “HAVE WE NOT made the earth a resting-place [for you], and the mountains [its] pegs [to keep it stable]” (78: 6-7). One wonders how the mountain plays the role of peg for the earth and how it helps in keeping it stable! (And as we know, the geologists have found the answer to this question.) The Quran also turns our attention to different marvellous colours in the mountains: “Have you not seen ... that there are in mountains layers of white and red of various hues, and jet black!” (35: 27) There are numerous references to the ocean in the Quran too. For example, “It is He who made the sea of benefit to you: you eat fresh fish from it and bring out jewellery to wear; you see the ships cutting through its waves so that you may go in search of His bounty and give thanks” (16: 14). It also turns out attention to the fact that, “He [God] released two bodies of water. They meet, yet there is a barrier between them they do not cross” (55: 19-20, also 35: 12). Another interesting passage not only reminds us of the marvels of the ocean but also of our own attitude and forgetfulness: “It is He who enables you to travel on land and sea, when you are sailing on ships and rejoicing in the favouring winds, a storm arrives: waves come at those on board from all sides and they feel there is no scape. Then they pray to God, professing sincere devotion to Him, [saying] ‘If You save us from this we shall be truly thankful.’ Yet no sooner does He save them than, back on land, they behave outrageously against all that is right” (10: 22-23).

4. The wind, clouds, rain: Formation of clouds, the wind carrying them to different lands, and the rain pouring down from them are some of the natural phenomena frequently referred to in the Quran. For example, “It is God who sends the winds, bringing good news of his coming grace, and when they have gathered up the heavy clouds, We drive them to a dead land where We cause rain to fall, bringing out all kinds of crops, just as We shall bring out the dead. Will you not reflect? (7: 57). And another beautiful passage describes cloud formation, resulting in rain: “Do you not see that God causes the clouds to move onward, then joins them together, then piles them up in masses until you see rain pour from their midst? He [also] sends hail down from [such] mountains in the sky, pouring it on whoever He wishes and diverting it from whoever He wishes—the flash of its lightning almost snatches sight away—there truly is a lesson in [all] this for those who have eyes to see” (24: 43-44). According to the Quran, “The seven heavens and the earth and everyone in them glorify Him [God]. There is not a single thing that does not celebrate His praise, though you do not understand their praise” (17: 44). Another verse considers the sound of thunder in praise of God too: “It is He who shows you the lightning, inspiring fear and hope; He builds up the clouds heavy with rain; the thunder sounds His praises, as do the angels in awe of Him; He sends thunderbolts to strike whoever He will” (13: 12-13).

5. The trees, flowers, fruits, vegetables: In many passages in the Quran, the rainfall is associated with the growth of various vegetations: “Do they not see ... how We send blessed water down from the sky and grow with it gardens, the harvest grain, and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, as a provision for everyone?” (50: 9-11) And another verse mentions the same theme, but also what happens later on: “Have you not considered that God sends water from the sky, guides it along to form springs in the earth, and then, with it, brings forth vegetation of various colours, which later withers, turns yellow before your eyes, and is crumbled to dust at His command? There is truly a reminder in this for those who have understanding” (30: 21). The Quran also turns our attention to the miracle of plant growing out of soil: “Let man consider the food he eats! We pour down abundant water and cause the soil to split open. We make grain grow, and vines, fresh vegetation, olive trees, date palms, luscious gardens, fruits, and fodder: all for you and your livestock to enjoy” (80: 24-32). And another example referring to another marvellous phenomenon: “There are, in the land, neighbouring plots; gardens of vineyards, cornfields, palm trees in clusters or otherwise, all watered with the same water, yet We make the yield of some better than others: there truly are signs in this for the people who reason” (13: 4). And one more example of tens of such interesting verses: “It is He who sends down water from the sky. With it We produce the shoots of each plant, then bring greenery from it, and from that We bring out grains, one riding on the other in close-packed rows. From the date palm come clusters of lowhanging dates, and there are gardens of vines, olives, and pomegranates, alike yet different. Watch their fruits as the grow and ripen! In all this there are signs for those who would believe” (6: 99).

6. Animals, birds, fish, insects: The Noble Quran tell us, “And it is God who has created all living creatures out of water; some of them crawl on their bellies, some walk on two legs, and some on four. God creates whatever He wills; God has the power over everything” (24: 45). Many different types of animals have been mentioned in the Quran, usually turning our attention to their wonderful characteristics and the benefits

we get from them. For example, “Do they not see the birds above them spreading and closing their wings? It is only the Most Gracious who holds them up” (67: 19). About the honey bee we read, “And your Lord inspired the bee, saying, ‘Build yourselves houses in the mountains and trees and what people construct. Then feed on all kinds of fruits and follow the ways made easy for you by your Lord. From their bellies comes a drink of different colours in which there is healing for people. There truly is a sign in this for those who think” (16: 68-69). And about domesticated animals it says, “In livestock, too, you have a lesson—We give you a drink from the content of their bellies, between waste matter and blood, pure milk, sweet to drink” (16: 66). But of course they are not used only for milk. Thus, elsewhere we read: “And livestock—He created them too. You derive warmth and other benefits from them: you get food from them; you find beauty in them when you bring them home to rest and when you drive them out to pasture. They carry your loads to lands you yourselves could not reach without great hardship—truly your Lord is kind and merciful. [And it is He who creates] horses, mules and donkeys for you to ride and use for show, and He will yet create things of which [today] you have no knowledge” (16: 5-8).

And since I mentioned the fly at the beginning of my talk, I quote the relevant passage, which is a challenge to disbelievers, and end my talk: “O people, here is an illustration, so listen carefully: those you call besides God could not, even if they combined all their forces, create a fly; and if the fly took something away from them, they will not be able to retrieve it. How feeble are the petitioners and how feeble are those they petition! They have no grasp of God’s true measure: God is truly most strong and mighty” (22: 73-74).

In brief, as the Prophet (pbuh) has said, “God is beautiful and loves beauty.” He has made the nature beautiful and has blessed us with the ability to enjoy that beauty, which contributes to our wellbeing. But the Quran teaches us to look deeper and see the creative hand of the Creator in nature; thus, remembering God. And as the Quran notes, “truly it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace” (13: 28).

Islamic New Year and the significance of *Hijra* (Migration)

In a few days, Muslims will welcome the year 1443 in Islamic lunar calendar. Unlike the celebration of the Gregorian New Year in the West and the celebration of *Naw roz*—which is the first day of the Islamic solar calendar—in Afghanistan, Iran, and neighbouring countries; the celebration of the Islamic lunar new year is a very low key event. The most that is done is to have the first day of the new year as official holiday and to commemorate the significance of the occasion that marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar—that is, the *hijra* or migration of Muslims from Makkah to Medina.

The significance of *hijra* can be seen in the fact that it was chosen over several other important events in the life of the nascent Muslim community, including the birth and death of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the beginning of his mission. It was Omar (may Allah be pleased with him), the second Righteous Caliph, who saw the need for the Muslims to have their own calendar and decided on *hijra* as its origin after consulting other Companions of the Prophet. Before I discuss the significances of *hijra* as we see them today, which may or may not have weighed in Omar’s decision, it is important to provide a brief background.

Muhammad (pbuh) received his mission from God Almighty at the age of 40. After he started preaching and inviting people to Islam, i.e., giving up idol worship and surrendering themselves to the Will of their Creator, the One and Only God, his teachings threatened the vested interests of the Makkah elite, who relied on income from Arab tribes coming for pilgrimage of their idols in Kaaba. Only a few of them accepted Islam, and the bulk of the Messenger's new followers were from the lower strata of the society. Ridicule and abuse of the Muslims had started from the beginning, but the persecution intensified once the number of Muslims kept growing. It got worse after the death of the Prophet's uncle Abu Talib, who was a tribal chief and had provided protection to his nephew and his followers. Muslims suffered extreme hardships, but they persevered.

Yathrib was a city located about 350 kilometres north of Makkah. The two main Arab tribes there were Aws and Khazraj, who lived in constant animosity. There were also some Jewish tribes who sided with one or the other from time to time. The Arabs had heard from the Jews of the coming of a new Apostle. That is why when some of them went for pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Makkah and heard Muhammad (pbuh) speaking as a new Messenger, they took him seriously and listened to him carefully. His message attracted them and they accepted Islam. The next year more Arabs from Yathrib came to Makkah and pledged allegiance to Muhammad. That encouraged the Prophet (pbuh) to advise his follower to migrate to Yathrib. Earlier he had sent a group of about 100 Muslims to Abyssinia (Ethiopia)—known as the first *hijra* (migration). After most of the Muslims had left for Yathrib, the Messenger and his closest friend and companion, Abu Bakr, also secretly departed Makkah; and—after some ordeal—were able to safely reach Yathrib, which thereafter became known as Medina-tun-Nabi (the City of the Prophet), or Medina in short. The date of that blessed *hijra* (migration) is calculated to be around 24 September, 622 of the Common Era.

Hijra was a big milestone for the Muslims because for the first time they were able to not only practice their religion freely, but also fully. This is the first significance of *hijra*. In Makkah the Muslims were forced to offer their congregation prayer secretly in secluded places or in private house. In Medina, the Prophet (pbuh) built a mosque soon after his arrival, assigned one of his Companions as *mu'zen* to call for prayer, and the Muslims would gather there regularly five times a day. Furthermore, in Makkah the teachings of the Noble Quran and the Prophet (pbuh) focused on developing the character of the individual Muslims. It was in Medina that Muslims found the opportunity to practice Islam as a *deen*, a way of life. Thus, the focus shifted to the social, economic, and political teachings.

The other significance of *hijra* was that it gave the Muslims a new identity. As noted in some previous talks, the Arab society before Islam was a tribal society and every individual identified with their ancestral tribe. By leaving their tribes, as well as all their possessions and friend, behind and joining others on the basis of faith and worldview, not tribal association, the identity of the Makkan Muslims experienced a revolutionary change. The formation of new identity was facilitated by the Prophet (pbuh) establishing bonds of brotherhood between individual *muhajiroon* (migrants) and *ansaar* (the helpers), the latter sharing all their belongings with the former. The Noble Quran praises both groups in several places, including the following verses: “The poor emigrants who were driven from their homes and possessions, who seek God's favour and approval, those who help God and His Messenger—these are the ones who are true [in faith]. Those who were already firmly established in their homes [in Medina], and firmly rooted in their faith show love for those who migrated to them for refuge and harbour no

resentment in their hearts for what has been given to them. They give them preference over themselves, even if they too are poor: those who are saved from their own souls' greed are truly successful" (59: 8-9).

Soon after migration to Medina, the Prophet (pbuh) concluded a treaty among the inhabitants of the city, known as the Charter (or Covenant, or Constitution) of Medina (*mithaq al Medina* in Arabic). One of its clauses reads, "They [the Muslims and their allies] shall constitute a separate Ummah (community, political unit) as distinguished from all the people." This also underscores the new identity of the Muslims. The Charter has other significances too. It established an alliance among the Muslim migrants from Makkah, the eight Medina Arab tribes and the eight tribes of the Jews there. It specified the relationships among them, as well as the rights and duties of the citizens—including freedom of worship. More importantly, it established Muhammad (pbuh) as the leader the new Islamic governance.

Thus, *hijra* is the beginning of the Islamic governance. It was established by the Prophet (pbuh) and developed further during the rule of the four Righteous Caliphs. It is the ideal type of government for many Muslims today. The exemplary leadership that the Prophet and his close Companions provided was probably unique in world history. (That's probably why an American scholar, in his list of 100 most influential persons in human history, named Muhammad (pbuh) as the first and Omar as the fiftieth.) The society they ruled was also unique in terms of the values it promoted, that is, equality, sense of community and brotherhood, social justice and equity, cooperation, harmony, and transparency. That was the secret of its rapid expansion. By the time of the Prophet's death, the Islamic governance included almost all of Arabia. By the time that Omar decided on the beginning of the Islamic calendar—17 years after *hijra*—Muslims had almost completely decimated the Persian Empire and had brought large territories in the Byzantine Empire under their control.

In brief, the arrival of the New Islamic year reminds the Muslims of *hijra* of the early Muslims—the weakness and hardship they suffered before it and the strength they gained and the heights they reached after it. Thus, it gives them hope that the present predicament they are in will not last for ever. There is hope, and as the Noble Quran states (94: 5-6): "And behold! With every hardship comes ease: verily with every hardship comes ease!"

Ashura, Karbala, and differences between Sunni and Shai

We are in the month of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. The 10th of Muharram is called *Ashura*, and it has special significances for the Muslims. There are narrations attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that it is the day when Noah's Ark landed on *Judi* Mountain (or Ararat, as called in the bible), and also the day in which Moses and the Children of Israel (the Jews) were rescued from their enemies in Egypt. The Muslims used to fast on the 10th of Muharram when in Makkah, before the fasting during the month of Ramadan was prescribed; and the Prophet (pbuh) strongly recommended voluntarily fasting on that day in Medina.

Ashura is also important for the Muslims because Hussain ibn Ali (may Allah be pleased with them), the beloved grandson of the Prophet, was wrongly martyred on that day in Karbala, located in today's Iraq, in 61 after *hijra* (680 CE). That event solidified the emergence of the

Shia branch of Islam, the roots of which had appeared just after the death of the Prophet (pbuh). In this talk, first I will briefly describe the events leading to the martyrdom of Hussain and what happened in Karbala and then about the differences between the two main branches of Islam, Sunnis and Shias.

After the martyrdom of Ali, the fourth Righteous Caliph, Mu'awiya, who was the governor of the Greater Syria, came to power. Despite being one of the Companions of the Prophet, he went against the tradition of the other four great Companions who had ruled before him and nominated his son, Yazid, as his successor—thus turning the governance system into a monarchy. Not only the act of nominating his son was an affront, but it was made worse by the fact that Yazid was an impious person who violated the teachings of Islam and spent most of his time in “drinking, dancing, hunting, and keeping pet animals such as dogs and monkeys”. Thus, it was natural that his nomination would face opposition from the Muslim community. By using various tactics, Mu'awiya was able to earn allegiance for Yazid in various cities. Some prominent Companions of the Prophet (pbuh), including his grandson Hussain, however, refused to give allegiance and took refuge in Makkah. When Yazid assumed power after the death of his father, the pressure on Hussain and others to assent was intensified.

Two factors made Hussain leave the sanctuary of Makkah for Kufa, a city in Iraq. He got reports that assassins had been sent to kill him during hajj in Makkah. Moreover, he received letters from Kufa pledging support and inviting him to move there. To ascertain the authenticity of those letters, Hussain sent his cousin to Kufa. When thousands of Kufans pledged allegiance to Hussain, his cousin assured him of their support, and Hussain left Makkah. On his way to Kufa, though, he learned of the appointment of a new governor for Kufa and the martyrdom of his cousin at the order of the new governor. Despite that, Hussain and his family and associates proceeded until they were besieged by the army of Yazid's governor in the Karbala desert, without access to water.

Hussain and his associates were asked again to pledge allegiance to Yazid. They refused, though, and preferred martyrdom to submission to unjust rule. The battle lines were drawn. Around 70 tired, thirsty and lightly armed—but fiercely determined and courageous—companions of Hussain against thousands of Yazid's well-armed soldiers—ironically, most of them from Kufa! The battle lasted from the morning of Ashura to the evening. Hussain's camp fought bravely until the last of them were martyred. Only women and children, including Hussain's sister and sons and daughters, survived. They were taken to Yazid, who put them in prison first, and released them after a year or so.

The tragic martyrdom of Hussain was shocking to all Muslims. It was specially devastating to the “Shia of Ali”. “Shia” in Arabic means faction or party, and “*Shia-ul-Ali*” was a group of the followers Ali, the son in law and cousin of the Prophet, who believed that the leadership of the Muslim community belonged to the family of the Prophet. They interpreted some Sayings of the Prophet (pbuh) to the effect that he had nominated Ali as his successor, and maintained that Ali was unjustly denied that position after the death of the Prophet. This was despite the fact that Ali had pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr, the first Righteous Caliph—albeit after some delay—as well as to the two other Righteous Caliphs. This is how Shia Islam began.

I am often asked about the differences between Sunni and Shia not only by non-Muslims, but also by Muslims who are not well-versed in the history of their religion. Here I would like to

share the answer that I give, which is based on my academic studies and life long association with both Sunnis and Shias. At the outset, though, I must note that I was raised in Sunni tradition and I follow that persuasion. Nonetheless, I will try to be as objective as possible.

Looking at the emergence of the Shia branch, I see the differences between the two more political than religious. As noted, it was the difference of opinion on the succession of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) which prepared the ground for its emergence, and the martyrdom of Hussain which solidified it. This political divide has found its way into theology as well. Shias believe in all the articles of faith that Sunnis believe, but they add one extra. They believe in the Unity and Oneness of God; in God's angels; in Divine Books, including the Noble Quran (which is one and the same for all the Muslims); in the Messengers sent by God, including the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as the last prophet; in the Last Day (or the Day of Judgment); and in Divine Decree. What they add to the above is *Imamat*, or leadership, belonging to the Prophet Muhammad's descendants. (As a footnote I should add that what I am talking about concerns the majority of Shias. There are some smaller sects who have some strange views, not approved by the majority Shias either.)

There are some other differences of opinion between Shias and Sunnis concerning *Imamat* as well. For example, the Shais consider the Imams *ma'soom* or infallible, which the Sunnis do not agree with. The Sunnis also reject, and find it difficult to understand, the concept of *ghiyaba* or Occultation. This view is held by the largest group of Shias, the Twelve-Imamers. They believe that their last Imam went into occultation in his childhood; he is alive on earth, hiding; and he will come out at the end of time to establish justice and peace.

In regard to what the Sunnis call "the Five Pillars of Islam", again they are basically the same in both branches with minor differences. Shias' *shahada*, or proclamation of faith, asserts the Oneness of God and the Prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh), but add that "Ali is *Wali* (custodian) of God"—again related to the leadership. The five daily prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and performing Hajj are the same for both Sunnis and Shias—with minor differences in details in a way similar to the differences among various schools of law of the Sunni tradition. For example, both Sunnis and Shias consider praying five times a day obligatory. Some schools of Sunnis, however, allow joining the early afternoon with late afternoon or the early evening with late evening prayers under certain conditions, e.g., traveling or bad weather. For the Shias, though, they can join those particular prayers in case of any necessity. As for the obligatory charity (which is called *zakat* in the Sunni tradition), since *zakat* was initially paid to the Islamic governance and the Shias did not consider that government legitimate, they opted for an alternative called *khums* (one-fifth). The concept of *khums* exists in Sunni tradition too. For them, it is the payment of one-fifth of the war booty and the earnings from mineral resources to the government. The Shias consider the payment of *khums* (20%) obligatory on all profits, to be paid to the Imam or his representative—the clergy—and consider the payment of *zakat* as voluntary.

As for other areas of Islamic jurisprudence, again there are great similarities and some minor differences among the Sunni schools of jurisprudence and Shia schools of jurisprudence. Most of the differences are similar to the differences among the Sunnis themselves and the Shias themselves, with one exception. That exception relates to the issue of *mut'ah* or temporary marriage. According to the Sunni tradition, temporary marriage was practice in Arabia before Islam, and initially the Prophet (pbuh) did not object. He did ban it, though, later on. According

to a report in Sahih Bukhari, the Prophet (pbuh) “forbade the Mut'a and the eating of donkeymeat” in year 6 after hijra (628 CE). The Shias do not accept this Hadith as authentic and argue that it was Omar, the Second Righteous Caliph, who banned temporary marriage.

In brief, there are some differences between Shia and Sunni, but they are not on the fundamentals of faith. The division started political, continued to be used for political purposes, and is still promoted on the bases of politics by nation states who consider themselves the leader of one branch or the other. The collective memory that the division has built for both Sunnis and Shias, unfortunately makes the gap seem unbridgeable sometimes—which it certainly is not. The problem is made worse by the extremists on both sides: those Shias who curse the great Companions of the Prophet (pbuh) for (in their view) usurping the rights of Ali, and those Sunnis who consider Shias deviant and ignore the martyrdom of the Prophet's beloved grandson in Karbala on Ashura because the Shias mourn that event.

Taliban victory in Afghanistan: a light at the end of the tunnel Or another dark chapter

Afghanistan has been at the grip of war and instability for the past 43 years, ever since the Afghan communists launched their coup in April 1978, followed by the Soviet invasion at the Christmas eve of 1979. The removal of the Taliban government by the US and its allies after the 9/11 terrorist attacks raised the hopes that finally Afghans will be able to enjoy peace and security. The expectation was that the US forces remove the Taliban government, dismantle al Qaeda, and then leave the country. That was hoped to be followed by the arrival of international assistance to support the newly formed Afghan government and to alleviate the general population's suffering. Unfortunately it did not happen that way. The international aid did come; but what trickled down after the donor contractors, sub-contractors, and corrupt officials took the lion's share benefited only a small segment of the society. The miseries of the majority continued and the socioeconomic inequality reached unprecedented heights. As for the American and NATO troops, they overstayed their welcome, and their numbers kept rising. The “mistakes” they made and the atrocities they committed gave a new lease of life to the Taliban. The Taliban who seemed almost completely annihilated in 2002 re-emerged as a fighting force and a liberation movement by 2005 and 2006. Instead of dealing with the roots of the problem, the American response was to increase the number of troops—reaching 140,000 in 2011 and 2012. I wrote an opinion piece for the International Herald Tribune in September 2006. The title they chose for my article sums up my views and arguments: “The way out is to get out”! Imagine the thousands of lives and billions of dollars that would have been saved if the withdrawal of foreign troops had happened 15 years ago!

Thus, President Biden's decision to leave Afghanistan was only an acknowledgement of the inevitable. But the way it took place was a disgrace, probably worse than what had happened in Vietnam some four and half decades earlier. After evacuating their largest military base, the Bagram Airfield, “by shutting off the electricity and slipping away in the [dark of the] night without notifying the base's Afghan commander, who discovered the Americans' departure more than two hours after they left”, about 5,000 US troops were deployed at Kabul airport to assist with the evacuation of civilian foreigners and the Afghans who had helped the foreign forces. By this time the Taliban had entered Kabul, and the panic-stricken Afghans rushed to the airport, encouraged by the rumours that the Americans would take away anyone who could

get inside the airport. Those rumours were not completely baseless. I know of more than a dozen people who managed to get out without meeting any of the criteria that were set for evacuation. The number may reach thousands. Of course their rush created problems for the people whose lives were really in danger. We all saw on our tv screens the mayhem and the beatings that took place outside the airport. They were blamed on the Taliban. But according to an eyewitness, it was the way that the Americans “organised” (if we can use that word) the evacuation that contributed to the chaos, and it was the CIA trained Afghan special forces (who had formed a buffer between the Taliban and the Foreign troops) who did most of the beating. The suicide attack that happened near the airport gate—killing 13 American soldiers, in addition to more than 150 Afghans—can be seen as a parting gift of Afghanistan to the US. A few days later, the Americans delivered their own parting gift, in the form of a drone attack which killed 10 civilians, including six children.

How could the Taliban reach Kabul two weeks before the completion of the withdrawal of the foreign troops? It is an important topic that needs detailed analysis—beyond the scope of a short talk. Suffice it to say that the corruption of the American supported government and the prevailing insecurity around the country were two major factors. Taliban victory again raised the hopes for an end to war and instability and return of normal, peaceful life in Afghanistan. Of course the memories of the Taliban rule in the second half of the 1990s cast a dark shadow over their future. But the hope was (and to some extent still is) that they have learned from their past mistakes and have changed their behaviour. The rhetoric of their spokesmen and the promises they made were very encouraging. Their behaviour has changed to some extent as well. For example, I was pleasantly surprised to see the Taliban not only allowing the Ashura commemorations to take place, but some of their leaders participating in those ceremonies.

There have been a lot of negative reports about the Taliban in the Western media and a lot of positive reports in the Arab media. Both seem somewhat exaggerated to me. The westerners mourn the demise of what they consider as women’s rights and human rights. That’s why the media here focus on the concerns and stories related to those issues, mostly without confirming their authenticity. It is true that some excesses have taken place and some atrocities have been committed, but not to the extent that we are told. It is also true that the Taliban have curtailed the license to immorality that was issued by the previous government, and they have imposed some strict rules on dress code and gender segregation. Seen from the western lens, they are harsh and uncalled for. For majority of Afghans—including women—though, they are either welcomed or of lesser concern. Their main concern is, after being able to feed their family, their safety, security and dignity. The Taliban have said the women can return to their past jobs once the conditions allow—and some female doctors, journalists, and airport police officers are already at work. They have also allowed a high level of freedom of speech. The public and private TVs have stopped what the Taliban—and probably majority Afghans—see as morally corrupting programs, but they are operating, and sometimes broadcasting reports critical of the Taliban.

As for the Arab media, I sympathise with them celebrating the end of occupation in Afghanistan and the removal of the corrupt and morally corrupting government. However, the Taliban have not done much to get out of the dark shadow of the 1990s. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, there are credible reports of Taliban beating reporters and women, and killing military personnel of the previous regime. Secondly, to me, after reaching Kabul and making the right noises, there were two tests for the Taliban, in both of which they have failed so far. The first test was how

they would deal with the issue of Panjshir, the only province that was out of their control when they captured Kabul. Panjshir has a special place in Afghan history for putting stiff resistance—under the famous commander Ahmad Shah Masoud—against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s and against the Taliban rule in the 1990s. Ahmad Shah Masoud’s son Ahmad Masoud, together with some of his father’s aides, took shelter in Panjshir after the fall of Kabul. They announced that they did not want war; but because of what the Taliban had done in the past, they could not trust the Taliban. They wanted to talk to the Taliban to gain some reassurances. After two rounds of talks, however, the Taliban launched an attack from several directions and were able to brutally crush the resistance. Ahmad Masoud and his supporters withdrew to the mountains and called for “national uprising”. The Taliban attack faced strong criticism from the Afghan *ulama*, religious scholars, some of them staunch supporters of the Taliban. Earlier they had offered their mediation, reminding both parties of the verse of the Noble Quran (49: 9), “If two groups of the believers fight, you [believers] should try to reconcile them ...” Unfortunately the Taliban did not take the offer, preferring the use of force, with the excuse that the negotiations had failed. The *ulama*’s response was that “you could talk to the *kafirs*, nonbelievers (namely, the Americans) for two years. Couldn’t you allow the talks with your Muslim brothers to go on even for two months?”

The other test to me was the shape of the Taliban’s government. Their spokesmen had promised over and over the formation of an “inclusive government”. However, when it was announced, it was anything but inclusive. No one expected, nor would have they welcomed, the inclusion of members of the former government. But the expectation was that the future government would include non-Taliban personalities with clean record and expertise in various fields, and that it would include members of various Afghan ethnic groups in a balanced manner. The new ministers, though, were all Taliban members, all men, and the vast majority of them belonging to only one ethnic group. Neither women nor some ethnic groups and religious minorities have any presence there. The Taliban have said that this is a caretaker government, to be replaced by a permanent government in a few months. So we need to wait and see what form that government would have.

In brief, the Taliban victory can be a light at the end of the long tunnel of war and suffering in Afghanistan. That depends on the Taliban learning from their past mistakes, genuinely changing their harsh policies, and not insisting on monopolising power. If not, either the “national uprising” will grow and Afghanistan will witness another “civil war”; or—in case of the Taliban crushing the opposition—the country will experience the type of peace the Taliban had provided in the 1990s—described by a scholar as “peace of grave”. Both of these cases will mean opening of another dark chapter in Afghanistan.

Islam and interfaith relations

Islam is one of the few religions in world history that recognised religious pluralism from its inception and advocated harmonious relations and dialogue with others. In this talk, I will first briefly discuss how and why Islam advocates religious diversity, and then look into what the Noble Quran says about interfaith relations and how the Prophet (pbuh) and his great Companions dealt with followers of other religions.

Islam believes that all true religions come from the One and Only God, the Creator of the universe. He sent messengers throughout history to guide the people to the right path—the path of success and salvation in this world and in the Hereafter. Thus, all religions are the same in their essence, that is, calling people to sincerely dedicate themselves to the worship of their Creator and to do good to fellow human beings. Or, as the Noble Quran puts it, “all they were ordered to do was worship God alone, sincerely devoting their religion to Him as people of true faith, keep up the prayer, and pay regular charity, for that is the true religion” (98: 5). The Quran acknowledges the fact that the original messages sent to other messengers were not kept intact, and it criticises the distortions introduced in some of them. Nonetheless, it grants the religions known to, and present in, Arabia at that time—namely, Judaism and Christianity—the status of *ahlalul kitab* “the people of the book”, with distinctive religious identity. This notion of “people of the book” was extended by Muslim scholars to Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism when Islam expanded to Iran and India. Although the followers of those religions seemed to worship fire or idols, similar to the pagans of Makkah, the Islamic scholars based their ruling on them having sacred scriptures and following certain moral codes. And the same would be the case for other similar religions.

It should also be noted that the Noble Quran considers the diversity found in the universe, in nature, and in human societies as part of God’s plan. There are numerous verses referring to such phenomena, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this talk. I want to quote just one verse regarding religious diversity (5: 48): “We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. *If God had so willed, He would have made you one community*, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matter you differed about”.

As noted earlier, Islam advocates harmonious relations among people of various faiths. When the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) migrated from Makkah to Medina, he concluded a treaty among the migrants and the inhabitants of the city, including the Jewish tribes there. In the treaty, known as *Mithaq al Medina*—the Covenant or Charter or Constitution of Medina—the eight Jewish tribes are recognised as part of the city’s community but with separate religious identity. The Covenant states that “for the Jews their religion and for the Muslims theirs”. It forbids Muslims and non-Muslims from doing wrong or committing treachery, and provides all “the protection of God”. As a scholarly article puts it, “The charter aimed to protect the lives and properties of Medina’s inhabitants, fight against hostilities and injustice irrespective of religious or tribal affiliation, and ensure religious freedom. Muslims and Jews lived side by side in harmony.” The provisions of the Covenant were reinforced by the Prophet (pbuh) continuously reminding his Companions of their obligation towards non-Muslims. He is reported to have said, “He who is unjust to a *dhimmi* [a non-Muslim living under the Islamic governance] or belittles him or imposes anything upon him beyond his ability or takes something from him without his permission, I will be the witness against him in the Day of Judgment”.

The Prophet (pbuh) made covenants with Christians too. Several such covenants have been noted by scholars. The first, and the most authenticated one, is the Covenant with the Christians of Najran. In year 10 after *hijra*, a 60 member delegation of Christians of Najran, a city in southern Arabia, visited Medina, among them 45 religious scholars, including a bishop. The Prophet provided hospitality to them, and allowed them to pray in his mosque. The delegation entered into a religious debate with the Prophet. Both sides failed to convince the other.

Nonetheless, they signed a peace agreement at the end of their talks. The Prophet (pbuh) guaranteed their religious freedom and prohibited interference in their religious practices. The treaty stated, inter alia, “Najran has the protection of God and the pledges of Muhammad, the Prophet, to protect their lives, faith, land, property. ... They need not change anything of their past customs. No right of theirs or their religion shall be altered.” In return, the Christians agreed to pay a moderate tax to the Islamic governance. The treaty was binding not only at the time of the Prophet (pbuh), but on the generations to come as well. It is noted in the text of the agreement, and also the Prophet is reported to have said, "The Muslims must not abandon the Christians, neglect them, and leave them without help and assistance; since I have made this pact with them on behalf of Allah."

The tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was followed by his great Companions. In one of earlier talks I mentioned *al-Uhdah al-Umariyyah* (Omar's Assurances) given to the Christian inhabitants of Jerusalem at the time of its conquest by the Second Righteous Caliph Omar. It granted them “an assurance of safety for themselves, for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and healthy of the city and for all the rituals which belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited by Muslims and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted.” Omar's governor of Damascus also made an agreement among the Muslims, Christians and Jews of the region guarantying religious freedom and peace and security for all. Moreover, the fourth Righteous Caliph, Ali, granted a covenant to another group of Christians, this time to the Armenians who had opted for an alliance with the Muslims because they were under pressure from the Byzantines to conform to a doctrine that the Armenians considered heretical. Ali granted them religious freedom as well as protection of their lives and properties. It also stated, “by virtue of this Covenant, there shall be perpetual peace and tranquillity between Christians and Muslims.”

The tradition of the Prophet and his Companions was based on the teachings of the Quran. The Noble Quran considers peaceful coexistence and harmonious relations of Muslims with others as the norm: “God does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes. God loves the just” (60:8). It also teaches the Muslims to observe all Islam's ethical principles in their relations to non-Muslims. It criticises those Jews who commit fraud against others by arguing that, “We are under no obligation towards the gentiles.” The Quran goes on to say, “They tell a lie against God and they know it” (3: 75).

It should also be noted that the Quran not only recognises the Jews and Christians as “the people of the book” but also tells us that those of them who follow the true teachings of their religions will achieve salvation in the Hereafter. There are several verses referring to that, including the following: “The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians [a lesser known monotheistic religious community]—all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good—will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve” (2: 62). Some Muslim scholars consider this, and similar verses, abrogated—a view that can easily be refuted by references to the overall teachings of the Quran as well as to the Sayings of the Prophet. On that basis, Muhammad Asad, a great 20th century scholar of Islam argues in his commentary on this verse, “The above passage—which recurs in the Qur'an several times—lays down a fundamental doctrine of Islam. With a breadth of vision unparalleled in any other religious faith, the idea of ‘salvation’ is here made conditional upon three elements only: belief in God, belief in the Day of Judgment, and righteous action in life.”

The Noble Quran also encourages Muslims to enter into a dialogue with the people of other faiths. It tells them, for example, “Say, ‘People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others besides God as lords.’ If they turn away, say, ‘Witness our devotion to Him’” (3: 64). It teaches them to be kind and just in their approach; for example, “... argue with them in the most courteous way,...” (16: 125); or, “[Believers], argue only in the best way with the People of the Book, except for those of them who act unjustly. Say, ‘We believe in what was revealed to us and what was revealed to you; our God and your God is one [and the same]; we are devoted to Him’” (29:46).

In brief, Islam recognised religious pluralism from the very beginning. The Noble Quran calls for interfaith dialogue and the Prophet (pbuh) practiced it. Although the Quran acknowledges differences among different religions, in its call it invites their followers to focus on what is common among them. By doing this, they can not only reach harmonious relations but also form a united front against what all religions consider evil: injustice, oppression, exploitation, destruction of the environment, and immorality.

The consumerism trap and Islam’s response

I begin this talk with a quote: “There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects. Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men, but rather on a rising statistical curve - with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages.” This is how a French philosopher and sociologist begins his early 1970s book on *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Remember this is before the age of personal computer, cell phone, the Internet, and social media. If that was the situation some 50 years ago, imagine what it has become now! The affluence mentioned in the quote has not spread around the world, but the consumer culture has been exported to most parts of the globe, turning them into consumer societies. In this talk, first I will describe what consumerism and consumer society are, and then Islam’s view on the issue.

Interestingly, a historian writing on the Ottoman Empire argues that “the Ottomans led one of the world’s earliest consumer revolutions” in the early 16th century when they introduced the Yemeni coffee to the rest of the world and “spurred capitalist consumerism through their invention of the coffeehouse.” This may be true, but the type of consumerism promoted by the coffeehouse is very different from the one the French philosopher talks about. The consumerism he refers to has been defined as “the lure of material goods” and entails the belief that happiness requires acquiring goods and services in an ever increasing amount. A British sociologist defines consumerism as “a set of beliefs and values, integral but not exclusive to the system of capitalist globalization, intended to make people believe that human worth is best ensured and happiness is best achieved in terms of our consumption and possessions.” Thus, in a consumer culture being a consumer becomes the main marker of identity. Consuming and possessing more go hand in hand with fashion and brand names. It is not just enough to have plenty of clothes and gadgets, but they need to be of certain brands! The manufacturers design the products in a way to have a limited life span and to make repairing them almost impossible.

Thus, we are forced to replace what we bought only a few years ago, even if we do not fall in the trap of swapping our perfectly fine items with the latest versions that have some additional features. Moreover, in a consumer society, “Many of the activities of everyday life are dominated by the consumption of goods and experiences in a variety of sites such as malls, city centers, department stores, theme parks, tourist resorts, heritage centers which offer a range of simulations, spectacular spaces, and sign play.”

The consumerism mentioned above emerged in Europe and the US towards the end of the 19th century, when the use of new technologies led to overproduction without enough people to buy them. That made the capitalists resort to various tactics to convince the people to buy goods even if they did not need them. Thus, we have the birth of modern marketing, a task of which is to generate “a new ideology of pleasure and leisure” in order to achieve the above aim. Advertisement plays an important role in this. Modern advertising emerged in the second half of the 19th century and new techniques were introduced in the 1920s. According to a scholar, “The importance of advertising is not that it invariably succeeds in its immediate purpose, ...but simply that it surrounds people with images of the good life in which happiness depends on consumption. The ubiquity of such images [and ‘ubiquity’ means ‘the state or capacity of being everywhere, especially at the same time] leaves little space for competing conceptions of the good life.” Other contributing factors to consumerism were the invention of department store in Britain in the mid 19th century and of the shopping mall in the US in the early 20th century. The media representation of wealthy life styles, especially on tv, also plays an important role in that. The invention of credit card in the US in the 1940s took consumerism to new heights. Now people could easily purchase goods and services not only beyond their needs but also beyond their means, with the hope that they pay for it in the future—a hope that is rarely realised. In the US the total consumer debt in 2020 reached close to 15 trillion (15 thousand billion) dollars, and the average individual debt was over \$92,700.

Now about Islam’s view on consumerism, first it should be noted that the Noble Quran condemns the human tendency to have more and more, be it material goods, power, prestige, etc: “YOU ARE OBSESSED by greed for more and more until you go down to your graves. No, in time you will come to know! No indeed! In the end you will come to know. No indeed! If only you know for certain, you will most certainly see Hellfire” (102: 1-6). But this does not mean that Islam does not allow enjoyment of the good things of life. The Noble Quran is clear that there is nothing wrong per se in utilising the available goods and services: “Say [Prophet], ‘Who has forbidden the adornment and the nourishment God has provided for His servants?’ Say, ‘They are [allowed] for those who believe during the life of this world: they will be theirs alone on the Day of Resurrection.’” (7: 32). And another verse advises, “Seek the life to come by means of what God has granted you, but do not neglect your rightful share in this world” (28: 77). Both these verses, while allowing the enjoyment of goods and services, put limitation to it; namely, the real goal should be seeking the life to come—not just the enjoyment in this life. A Muslim couple specialising in marketing (both of whom studied at Otago University and now teach at universities in the Gulf) have developed a model according to which Muslim consumers see the goods and services as blessings from God and return their enjoyment with acts of worship. For the secular consumer, though, “When G&S are first received they can affect the receiver synergistically, this transforms the blessings from simply G&S to something more meaningful to the consumer (an extension of the self, a vehicle for conspicuous consumption, a status marker etc). In this way, it is as if the consumer is joined to, or merged with, the good or service through its communicated positioning the ‘brand personality’ or the other sign aspects of the good or service that the consumer wants to reflect.”

Seeing goods and services as blessings from God, and seeking the life to come through them, require Muslims to be always vigilant not only that they do not become a marker of their identity, but also that enjoying them does not violate Islamic teachings. The most important consideration is making sure that utilising the goods and services is in accordance with the Islamic ethical principles and does not breach rulings of Islamic law. Avoidance of purchasing goods and services based on debt with interest, which is forbidden in Islam, is a clear example. Being mindful of our social responsibilities is another example. The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said, “One who spends the night with a full stomach while his neighbour is hungry, has not believed in me. One who spends the night clothed, while his neighbour has no clothes, has not believed in me.” Thus, how can we enjoy things that are not essential while others in our community suffer hardship? Making sure that the goods and services we use are not only *halal* (lawful) but also *tayyeb* (pure, wholesome)—both of which have been emphasised in the Quran and hadith—is also important. Animals raised in factory farms or ill-treated may be technically “*halal*” but they are certainly not *tayyeb*. The same would apply to the products manufactured by forced labour, child labour, or other exploitative conditions.

Another important consideration in regard to the use of goods and services is wastefulness. Moderation in all aspects of life has been emphasised in the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet. The Noble Quran also warns over and over about wastefulness and notes that, “God does not like extravagant people” (7: 31). And another verse states, “those who squander are brothers of Satan, and Satan is most ungrateful to his Lord” (17: 27). The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) also warned against wastefulness, to the extent that he advised his Companions, “Do not waste [water] even if performing ablution on the bank of a fast flowing large river.” In contrast to what Islam teaches, the wastefulness associated with today’s consumerism is staggering! It is not only the amount of trash that is generated, often consisting of perfectly fine goods or edible food, but also the amount of precious natural resources used for their production. Thus, “most of the waste generation in a consumer society occurs during the extraction, processing, or manufacturing stages—these impacts are normally hidden from consumers.” And the author gives the example of making a quarter-pound beef burger requiring 600 gallons of water or producing a computer chip generating 4,500 times its weight in waste!

In brief, in today’s world we all live in consumer societies; and the consumer culture is so pervasive that there is no escape from it. A Muslim can minimise its negative impacts—which are huge—by always remembering their purpose of life, seeing the goods and services available to them as blessings from God, and making sure that in their production as well as utilisation ethical principles and rulings of Islamic law are observed. *و من الله التوفيق* May Allah grant us the ability to do that!

Is celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday forbidden?

There is a general consensus among Muslims that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was born on a Monday in the month of Rabi al-Awwal (the third month of the Arabic lunar calendar) of the year known as the Year of the Elephant in Arabia (570/571 CE). However, there are differences of opinion on the exact date, the majority considering it to be the 12th of the month. Whether to celebrate the Prophet’s birthday has become an issue of controversy in recent years. In this talk, first I will describe the status of the Prophet (pbuh) among Muslims, which is the basis of celebration for many Muslims; then I will briefly discuss why some Islamic scholars consider

the celebration to be forbidden; and finally I will present the views of some other prominent trustworthy Islamic scholars who allow its celebration/commemoration.

All Muslims agree on the high status of the Prophet (pbuh). Holding him in high esteem is based on the teachings of the Noble Quran and his own Sayings and personal character. It is true that the Quran emphasises Muhammad (pbuh) being a human being. For example, in a chapter that has been recommended to be read at least once a week (on Friday), the Prophet is told, ‘Say, I am only a human being, like you, to whom it has been revealed that your God is One’” (18: 110). Or, in response to the physical miracles that the disbelievers asked the Prophet to produce, God Almighty tells him, “Say, ‘Glory be to my Lord! Am I anything but a mortal, a messenger?’” (19: 93). At the same time, God Almighty tells Muhammad (pbuh), “We have sent you [O Prophet] only as a mercy for the whole world” (21: 107). Another verse instructs Muslims, “God and His angels bless the Prophet so, you who believe, bless him too and give him greetings of peace” (33: 56). The Noble Quran conditions God’s love for the Muslims on following the Prophet, “Say, ‘If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins’” (3: 31). It also notes that, “So it is those who believe in him [the Prophet], honour and help him, and who follow the light which has been sent down with him, who will succeed” (7: 157). And yet another verse tells the Muslims, “Whoever obeys the Messenger obeys God” (4: 80).

The teachings of the Quran are reflected in the Sayings of the Prophet as well. He warned the Muslims, “Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians praised the son of Mary, for I am only a servant. So, call me the Servant of Allah and His Messenger.” But he also told his Companions, “None of you will have faith till he loves me more than his father, his children and all mankind.” He instructed Muslims to say the following supplication after hearing the call to prayer (*adhan*): “O Allah Lord of this most perfect call and the prayer that is about to be established, grant our master Muhammad the right of intercession and the favour of nearness [to You] and exalt him to a position of glory that you have promised him.” It is also reported that when his Companions took the oath of allegiance, they will pledge to listen to him and obey; and the Prophet will add “As much as you are able to”.

Muslims also love and honour the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) for his noble character. This is confirmed by the Quran, which describes him as possessing *Khuluqin azeem* “a strong character” or “the highest noble character”. The Quran also informs Muslims, “Indeed in the Messenger of God there is an excellent model for those of you who put your hope in God and the Last Day and remember Him often” (33: 21). The Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have said, “‘May the mercy of Allah be on my deputies.’ When he was asked, ‘Who are your deputies?’, he replied, ‘Those who practice my Sunnah [tradition, conduct of life] and teach it to others.’” Ayesha, the Prophet’s wife, was asked about his character, and she replied, “have you not read the Quran?” Then, she added: “Verily, the character of the Prophet of Allah was the Quran.” This means that the Prophet (pbuh) exemplified the teachings of the Noble Quran and the values and ethical principles emphasised there. They include honesty and truthfulness, sincerity, fairness and justice, kindness and compassion, modesty and humility, patience and perseverance, courage, generosity, forgiveness, and—more importantly—love of God and total devotion to Him.

So why do some Muslims oppose the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday despite holding him in a very high esteem? Their main reason is that it is a *bid’ah*, a blameworthy innovation. They

note that the Prophet's birthday was neither celebrated during his own lifetime, nor by his Companions after his death. They quote an authentic Saying of the Prophet (pbuh) that "whoever inaugurates/introduces something in this affairs of ours that is not from it, it is rejected." In their view, God Almighty completed Islam during the life of the Prophet, as the Quran states, "Today I have perfected your religion for you, completed my blessings upon you, and chosen as your religion *islam* [total devotion to God]" (5: 3). So anything not done by the Prophet (pbuh) and his Companions is a blameworthy innovation. And regarding *bid'ah*, they quote another Saying of the Prophet, "Every novel matter is an innovation, and every innovation is a form of misguidance, and every misguidance is in the Hellfire." There are some other minor objections too, but presenting all of them and the responses offered by those who favour its celebration is beyond the scope of this talk.

Despite the opposition of some Muslims, including some renowned Islamic scholars, millions of Muslims have celebrated the birthday of the Prophet (pbuh) in different parts of the Muslim world for many centuries, and continue to do so today. It is true that in some of those celebrations, unfortunately practices contrary to the teachings of Islam have been introduced. For example, wasting large sums of money in decorating houses, streets and mosques with bright lights and other ornaments; people marching in large processions in carnival-like atmosphere; free intermingling of males and females; narrating fabricated and false tales about the Prophet (pbuh) and other great Muslim personalities; and finally smearing those who choose not to celebrate the occasion. It was probably due to such practices that originally some great Islamic scholars opposed its celebration altogether. According to many other scholars, though, that is a step too far. While strongly opposing any action that violates the rulings of Islamic law and Islam's ethical principles, they see no harm in properly celebrating the occasion, and argue that it is actually a pious act because the participants show their love and reverence to the Prophet (pbuh).

Various books and articles have been written on the subject and *fetwas* (religious verdicts) have been issued. Discussing all the responses to the objections raised against the celebration of the Prophet's birthday is again not within the scope of this talk. Here I will just present some of their salient points:

1. Not every *bid'ah* is blameworthy. As we will see later, the supporters of the celebration of the Prophet's birthday argue that it is not a *bid'ah* (innovation). Nonetheless, it is important to remember that there is a difference of opinion among scholars on the definition of *bid'ah* itself. While almost everyone takes the Hadith which contains the statement "Every innovation is misguidance" to be authentic, many argue that it is "general in its wording and qualified in its import (aam makhsus)." According to a reliable source, "This is the view of the majority of the imams, such as Ibn Hajar, alQadhi Abu Bakr Ibn al-Arabi, al-Jurjaani, Ibn Abd al-Salaam, Ibn Rajab, and Abu Shaama and his student al-Nawawi, and many others." Therefore, there can be blameworthy innovation and praiseworthy innovation: "if a new act is subsumed under something deemed good in the Sacred Law it too is considered good, and if it is subsumed under something deemed bad in the Sacred Law it too is considered bad" The proponents of this view point to the Second Righteous Caliph, Omar, using *bid'ah* in a positive sense when he stated regarding an act done by some Companions, "What an excellent *bid'ah* (innovation) this is!" They also note the authentic Saying of the Prophet (pbuh), "Whosoever introduces a good *sunnah* [practice] within Islam that is

followed after him shall have its reward and the reward of whoever practices it ...; and he who introduces a bad *sunnah* in Islam that is followed shall have its sin and the sin of whoever practices it...” The word “*sunnah*” here cannot refer to the tradition and practice of the Prophet (pbuh), because firstly, it refers to both good and bad *sunnah*, and secondly it is said about the action of one of the Companions done in the presence of the Prophet (pbuh). Examples of praiseworthy innovations include the study of grammar to better understand the Noble Quran, codifying the science of legal theory (*usoul al-fiqh*), and building religious schools and hostels—none of which was done during the time of the Prophet (pbuh).

2. Celebration of the Prophet’s birthday is not an innovation because the Prophet (pbuh) commemorated such occasions. There is an authentic Hadith in Sahih Muslim that “Allah’s Messenger (pbuh) was asked about fasting on Monday, whereupon he said: ‘It is (the day) when I was born and revelation was sent down to me.’” Thus, fasting on Monday, strongly recommended by the Prophet (pbuh) and done by himself and his Companions, is a weekly celebration of his birth. Even if we didn’t have this Hadith, there is another authentic Hadith on Ashura (10th of the month of Muharram) which shows that there is no harm in celebrating historical occasions. The Prophet (pbuh) recommended fasting on that day too, because it was the day in which Moses and his people were saved, Pharaoh was drowned, and Moses used to fast to show his gratitude to God Almighty. One can also point out to the significance of *Laylatul Qadr* (the Night of Destiny/Glory/Power) emphasised both in the Noble Quran and in the Sayings of the Prophet (pbuh). Since it is the night when the Quran was first revealed, marking the night as a special occasion is in fact celebration of Noble Quran’s revelation—in addition to what the Quran tells us about the Night.
3. Celebration of the Prophet’s birthday is not an innovation because “Celebrating Islamic occasions is a way to remind people of the great bounties Allah has showered on them, and this is not only permissible, but also recommendable and praiseworthy.” This is the position of Sheikh Yusuf al Qaradawi who, in a religious verdict, maintains that such celebrations are “not absolutely [*bid’ah*]”. He notes several verses of the Quran in which the Muslims are told to remember when or how God Almighty favoured them on different occasions (for example, 33: 9-10, 5: 11, 8: 30). Therefore, according to him, “there is nothing wrong in making use of such an occasion as the Prophet’s birthday to remember and remind people of the great personality of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), his honourable biography, and his true message that has been revealed to him by Allah Almighty as a mercy for the worlds. How can this be considered a *bid’ah*?”
4. Proper celebration of Prophet’s birthday is not introducing something new to the religion, neither is it done to complete the religion. This is evident from what was mentioned above. Moreover, “coming together with others for the sake of goodness and remembrance and permissible actions and nothing more, and without considering it a prescribed religious practice in the Sacred Law, constitutes at the very minimum a permissible undertaking, and there is no legal proof to justify forbidding it.”

In brief, it is important to remember that celebration of the Prophet’s birthday is one of those issues on which there is no consensus among Muslim scholars. While some prominent Islamic

scholars consider it *makroh* (frowned upon) or *haram* (forbidden) many other prominent Islamic scholars either do not see any harm in properly observing it or consider it praiseworthy. The latter includes Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, Ibn Hajar al Asqalaani, Jalaluddin al-Suyuti, and Shah Wali Ullah Dhelvi from classical scholars; and Dr Ali Gomaa and other scholars in Egyptian *darul Iftah* (the centre for issuing religious verdicts) as well as Sheikh Yusuf al Qaradawi from contemporary scholars. It is up to the lay Muslims to do their research and follow the path they find preferable. May Allah guide us to the right path! Ameen!

In what form will we be resurrected?

Contrary to what the title may suggest, the purpose of this talk is not to engage in a theological discussion of the Afterlife. The aim is, rather, to highlight the amazing nature of the Noble Quran and to encourage the listeners to study it carefully and ponder about the meaning and significance of its verses.

The Quran has been the subject of deep study and contemplation for over 1,400 years. Countless commentaries in various languages have been written—many (especially in Arabic) still extant. They are immense sources of knowledge and indispensable for understanding the meaning of the Quran. It is amazing, though, that one still comes across some passages the significance of which seems to have eluded some great minds. Verses 57 to 74 of the 56th chapter, *Al Waq'e'a* (the Event) is a good example of that. In this talk, first I will present an English translation of the passage, then note what many of the commentators say about it, and finally I will discuss a possible significance which seems to have rarely been noted, at least in the commentaries I consulted. For the sake of discussion, I divide the passage into three parts:

- I. “It is We who created you: will you not believe? Have you ever considered [the seed] you emit? Do you create it yourselves or are We the Creator?”
- II. “We ordained death to be among you. Nothing can stop Us from changing your Forms and creating you in a way unknown to you. You certainly know how you were first created: will you not reflect?”
- III. “Consider the seeds you sow in the ground— is it you who make them grow or We? If We wished, We could turn your harvest into chaff and leave you to wail, [saying,] ‘We are burdened with debt, we are bereft.’ Consider the water you drink— was it you who brought it down from the rain-cloud or We? If We wanted, We could make it bitter: will you not be thankful? Consider the fire you kindle— is it you who make the wood for it grow or We? We made it a reminder, and useful to those who kindle it. So glorify the name of your Lord, the Supreme.”

In the study of the commentaries and the later discussion, I want to focus on two issues: the meaning and significance of part II, and the interrelationship among the first, second, and third parts.

1. On the meaning of part II: Many commentators understand the meaning of the verses in part II as translated above. Many others, though, present a slightly different meaning. The Arabic plural noun “*amthalakum*” mentioned there has two singulars, “*mithl*”—which means similar—and “*mathal*”—which means form. Thus, those who take it to

be the plural of the former, understand the meaning of the verse to be, “nothing can stop us from replacing you by others like yourselves.” (And there are some verses which state that if God wants, He can do away with some people and replace them with others.) As for the part on “creating you in a way unknown to you”, many just stop by presenting the obvious meaning. Many others, while mentioning the obvious meaning, go ahead and present some speculations. Being transfigured into apes and pigs as a punishment is one example of that, and beautifying the believers with white faces and uglifying the disbelievers with black faces is another example. There are also some other odd speculations about that, but I do not want to go into those details.

2. On the interrelationship of the verses: Very few commentators find interrelationship among the three parts. Of those who do, one commentator sees the whole passage reminding us of God’s bounties. The bounty of creation is mentioned first, because the three others are based on that. Then comes what provides nourishment, namely the grain; followed by water, which mixed with grain flour gives us the dough; and finally the fire, which turns the dough into bread. Another commentator sees the first few verses of part three—about the growth of grain from seeds—as confirmation of what is stated in part II, namely resurrection. Another commentator, writing in English, has the following to say about the interrelationship of the three parts of the passage: “Having appealed to our own nature within us, He [God] appeals now to the external nature around us, which should be evidence to us (1) of His loving care for us, and (2) of its being due to causes other than those which we produce and control. Three examples are given: (1) the seed which we sow in the soil; it is God’s processes in nature, which make it grow; (2) the water which we drink; it is God’s processes in nature, that send it down from the clouds as rain, and distribute it through springs and rivers; (3) the fire which we strike; it is again a proof of God’s Plan and Wisdom in nature.”

Of course, some of what is said above are valuable. However, what is missing from most of the commentaries is another possible interrelationship among the three parts of the passage that seems more pertinent. The first part turns our attention to the miracle of our creation. As Sayyed Qutb puts it in his commentary: “the story of this single cell, from the moment it is deposited until it becomes a full-fledged human being, surpasses all imagination. The human mind would never have believed it, except for the fact that it occurs with all people as witnesses.”

The second part turns our attention to our end, death, which is (again in Sayed Qutb’s words,) “in no way less miraculous and amazing” than the beginning. Then we have the statement which may be at the heart of the whole passage: “Nothing can stop Us from changing your Forms and creating you in a way unknown to you.” In what form we will be resurrected, and whether it will be physical or spiritual have been the subject of debate among philosophers and theologians for thousands of years. Despite this clear statement of the Noble Quran that our form of resurrection is beyond our human comprehension, many Islamic scholars have also engaged in a similar debate. Many believe it to be physical, some believe it to be spiritual, and many others believe that it is both physical and spiritual. Of course all base their reasonings on the verses of the Quran and the Saying of the Prophet (pbuh). It seems, though, that in many cases they take the verses that may be *mutashbeaat* (allegorical) as *muhkamaat* (definite in meaning) (and the distinction between the two is noted in the Quran, 3: 7). Returning to the passage, in order to give us an idea how we can be the same and different after resurrection, it goes on to say, “You

certainly know how you were first created: will you not reflect?” Are we the same as the sperm and ovum that we come from? Yes, we are, because that is our origin. But no, we are not, because we can clearly see how different we are from those “lowly” material!

Part three gives us three more examples to reflect. First we have the example of plants growing from their seeds, which is in a way similar to the human body growing from its seed. If you bring someone who have lived all their life in a big city, never seeing how plants grow, and show them a large tree and a seed, telling them that the tree with its huge trunk, branches, leaves, and fruits all come from that tiny seed, would they not think you are crazy? The same would be the case of the person who has never seen the rain. Would they believe the water that we so much rely upon is the same as that moving object high in the sky? And then we have the example of the fire coming from the tree. Are the light and the heat produced by the fire the same as the tree? Again the answer will be both yes and no.

What is more amazing about the last example is that it is in a way different from the other two examples in the third part as well as the example in part II. Our bodies, various plants, and the water no matter how different they are from their origins, they all share one constant element: they are all different form of the matter, “the substance of which any physical objects is made”. In the case of tree and fire, though, part of the matter changes into energy, which according to physics is another form of matter but different from it! That makes understanding the form of our resurrection even further beyond our comprehension.

In brief, in a short passage the Noble Quran eloquently tells us about our beginning and end, emphasising the inevitability of resurrection, while giving us examples of how and why its form is beyond our comprehension. This succinct passage seems to be a response to countless debates and speculations going on for thousands of years. It also remind us of a Hadith of the Prophet (pbuh), “Allah said, ‘I have prepared for my righteous servants what no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard, and human heart (mind) cannot imagine.’” Thus, we should do as we are told at the end of the passage: “So glorify the name of your Lord, the Supreme.”

A Muslim perspective on Christmas

Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ (pbuh). Muslims view Jesus’ birth as a miraculous, unique and immensely important event. However, they do not celebrate it, as many Christians do. In this talk, first I will discuss what the Noble Quran says about the birth of Jesus, then I will note Jesus’ status in Islam, and finally I will present the reasons why Muslims do not celebrate Christmas despite holding Jesus in high esteem.

According to the Islamic tradition, Jesus was born to Virgin Mary. The Noble Quran does not talk about Mary’s husband, probably to underscore the miraculous nature of Jesus’ birth. In response to those who question the birth of a child without a father, it reminds us of the case of Adam, who was created without a father and *a mother* (3: 59). The story of Jesus’ birth is mentioned in several places in the Noble Quran, and it is in particular beautifully told in some detail in a chapter named after Jesus’ mother, “Mary”. Here I quote part of the passage: “Mention in the Scripture the story of Mary. She withdrew from her family to a place east and secluded herself away; We sent Our Spirit to appear before her in the form of a normal human.

She said, ‘I seek the Lord of Mercy’s protection against you: if you have any fear of Him [do not approach]!’ But he said, ‘I am but a messenger from your Lord, [come] to announce to you the gift of pure son.’ She said, ‘how can I have a son when no man has touched me? I have not been unchaste.’ And he said, ‘This is what your Lord said, “It is easy for Me—We shall make him a sign to all people, a blessing from Us.”’ And so it was ordained: she conceived him. She withdrew to a distant place and, when the pains of childbirth drove her to [cling to] the trunk of a palm tree, she exclaimed, ‘I wish I had been dead and forgotten long before all this!’ But a voice cried to her from below, ‘Do not worry: your Lord has provided a stream at your feet and, if you shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you, it will deliver fresh ripe dates for you; so eat, drink, be glad, and say to anyone you may see: “I have vowed to the Lord of Mercy to abstain from conversation, and I will not talk to anyone today”’” (19: 16-26). And the passage goes on to say how Mary’s people accused her of being unchaste and how the baby Jesus miraculously spoke to defend her.

Jesus’ unique and miraculous birth was a sign of him being the chosen one to guide his people to the right path. It marked a new phase in human history. Judaism had become too obsessed with minute details of law, losing sight of the spiritual significance of religion. Thus, Jesus is quoted to have said, “I have brought you wisdom; I have come to clear up some of your differences for you. Be mindful of God [فاتقوا الله be God-conscious/pious] and obey me: God is my Lord and your Lord. Serve Him: this is the straight path” (43: 63). He is also quoted to have said, “I have come to confirm the truth of the Torah which preceded me, and to make some things lawful to you which used to be forbidden. I have come to you as a sign from your Lord. Be mindful of God” (3: 50). To convince the people of the truth of his claim, God allowed Jesus to perform miracles. The Quran mentions some of his miracles in his own words, “I have come to you with a sign from your Lord: I will make the shape of a bird for you out of clay, then breathe into it and, with God’s permission, it will become a real bird; I will heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life with God’s permission; I will tell you what you may eat and what you may store up in your houses. There truly is a sign for you in this, if you are believers” (3: 49).

Jesus (pbuh) seems to have a unique position in the Noble Quran. He is not only described as a Messenger of God; but like Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), also as a Mercy from God (19: 21); and unlike other messengers, he is described as God’s Word (3: 45, 4: 171), “a spirit from Him” (4: 171), and as a sign from God (21: 91, 23: 50)). Muslims respect, love, and revere Jesus. They do not associate any divinity to him, though. The Noble Quran notes, “Those who say, ‘God is the Messiah, son of Mary,’ have defied the truth. The Messiah himself said, ‘Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord.’ If anyone associates others with God, God will forbid him from Garden, and Hell will be his home” (5: 72). This is based on the Quranic doctrine which states, “Say, ‘He is God the One and Only, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. And no one is comparable to Him’” (chapter 112).

Now about the celebration of Christmas, in Muslim Majority countries where large groups of local Christian live—like Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt—some Muslims do join their Christian neighbours in its celebration. Other than that, only here and there we may find small groups of Muslims who do not mind celebrating Christmas. Overwhelming majority of Muslims, though, do not celebrate it. Various reasons can be noted. As I mentioned in one of my earlier talks, some Muslims are against the celebration of any occasion that was not celebrated at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), even his own birthday. Furthermore, they refer to a Hadith

(Saying) of the Prophet Muhammad which notes that the two Islamic Eids (the festivities taking place at the end of the fasting month and on the occasion of the pilgrimage to Makkah) have replaced all past religious celebrations for the Muslims.

However, as I also noted in that talk, there are millions of Muslims who do celebrate/commemorate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Why do these Muslims not celebrate Christmas? The main reason is that celebration of Christmas never became part of the Islamic tradition. Neither the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), nor his Companions or subsequent Muslim generations celebrated it. Along with Jesus, Muslims believe in prophethood of more than two dozen others whose names are mentioned in the Noble Quran. It is neither practical to celebrate the birthday of each and every of them, nor are the dates of their birthdays known. The latter is also true in case of Jesus (pbuh). Although the majority of Christians consider his birthday to be on 25th of December, and some give different dates in January, there is a hot debate among historians and researchers about the authenticity of that. The bible is silent on his birthday, and there is nothing about it in the sources in the first two centuries after his birth. According to an Australian scholar of early Christianity and Anglican priest, "Finally, in about 200 C.E., a Christian teacher in Egypt makes reference to the date Jesus was born. According to Clement of Alexandria, several different days had been proposed by various Christian groups. Surprising as it may seem, Clement doesn't mention December 25 at all. ... [The dates he mentions are March 21; April 15, 20, 21; and May 20.] The earliest mention of December 25 as Jesus' birthday comes from a mid-fourth-century Roman almanac that lists the death dates of various Christian bishops and martyrs."

There is an additional reason for the Muslims in the west for not celebrating Christmas. That relates to the popular theory among historians regarding the pagan origins of the date and some customs associated with Christmas—and Islam's strong opposition to paganism and its teachings to the Muslims to stay far away from pagan practices or suspected pagan practices. As an American historian puts it, "Christmas is really about bringing out your inner pagan. ... In ancient Rome there was a feast called Saturnalia that celebrated the solstice. What is the solstice? It's the day that the sun starts coming back, the days start getting longer. And most of the traditions that we have that relate to Christmas relate to the solstice, which was celebrated in ancient Rome on December 25." And he notes that gift giving, candle lighting, singing, and decorating houses were all associated with that pagan tradition. The Australian scholar and priest I mentioned above finds it problematic to say that the Christians chose December 25 as Jesus' birthday with the intention to win over the pagans' favour. Nonetheless, he confirms that "The Romans had their mid-winter Saturnalia festival in late December; barbarian peoples of northern and western Europe kept holidays at similar times. To top it off, in 274 C.E., the Roman emperor Aurelian established a feast of the birth of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun), on December 25."

Despite not celebrating Christmas, it behoves Muslims in the west to be courteous to their Christian friends and neighbours—and in case of converts, to their family members and relatives—on that occasion. We should remember the Quranic injunction to deal with the people of other faiths "kindly and justly" (60: 8). We should also remember the kind treatment the Christian delegation visiting Medina received from the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). There is nothing wrong in wishing our Christian friends happy holidays and in sharing the joyous occasion with them. We can even attend Christmas parties, but making clear that our participation is for the happiness of our family/friend, and not a celebration of the occasion.

Exchanging gifts is a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Thus, there is nothing wrong in giving and receiving gifts—although we should do it in that spirit and be mindful of the prevailing consumerism that has “hijacked” Christmas and many other religious and nonreligious celebrations.

In brief, the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus (pbuh) is a unique and special occasion for Muslims. Despite this, most Muslims do not celebrate Christmas for various reasons. That does not mean, though, that they cannot share the joy of their Christian friends and family members.

Monotheism, the original religion of humankind

In one of my earlier talks I stated that according to Islam, God Almighty sent messengers throughout history to guide the people to the right path—and that is the path of worshipping the One and Only God and doing good to fellow human beings. This means that Islam views monotheism as the original religion of humankind. This view, however, goes against what students are taught at Western educational institutions, namely, the anthropological evolutionary theory of religion. As the name indicates, this theory is related to, and emerged shortly after, Darwin’s famous theory of evolution. According to Edward Taylor, a pioneer of this theory (writing in the 1880s), animism—which means “the belief that Nature is animated, that is, has a soul”—was the original religion of the primitive societies; from that developed polytheism, and then finally monotheism. Over time, various versions of this theory have been offered, but they all consider monotheism at the end of a long line of progression. What is rarely mentioned in our secular scholarly circles is the fact that from the very beginning, the evolutionary theory of religion was rejected by other scholars who found belief in one high God (i.e. monotheism) in some of the most “primitive” societies and ancient texts.

In this talk, first I will discuss what Islam, particularly the Noble Quran, says about the origins of religion and the process of revelation, then I will briefly introduce the two pioneer scholars on the view that monotheism is the original religion, and then present their and some other scholars’ evidence on the subject.

According to Islam, God Almighty sent Messengers to humankind from the very beginning. Although some Muslim scholars consider the story of Adam in the Quran symbolic, many others see Adam as the first man created and as the first Prophet. Then God sent Messengers to all communities descendant from Adam and Eve: “Every community is sent a messenger” (10: 47). “We have sent you [Muhammad] with the Truth as a bearer of the good news and as a warner—every community has been sent a warner, ... messengers came to them with clear signs, scriptures, and enlightening revelation. ...” (35: 24-25). And the messages sent were in the local languages: “We have never sent a messenger who did not use his own people’s language to make the message clear for them” (14: 4). The purpose of sending the messengers was to guide people to the right path: “all they were ordered to do was worship God alone, sincerely devoting their religion to Him as people of true faith, keep up the prayer, and pay regular charity, for that is the true religion” (98: 5). This sincere devotion to God is called “*islam*” in Arabic (literally meaning submission, self-surrender) and is the name of any religion in the past in general, and the name of the religion brought by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in particular. The Quran says, “Strive hard for God as is His due: He has chosen you and placed no hardship in your religion, the faith of your forefather Abraham. God has called

you Muslims [devoted to God/surrendered to God]—both in the past and in this [message]” (22: 78).

God sent messengers not only to communities who had not received the message before, but also to those who had distorted the previous messages. Several verses of the Noble Quran refer to this distortion; for example, “Some of them [the people who received the message before] are uneducated, and know the Scripture only through wishful thinking. They rely on guesswork. So woe to those who write something down with their own hands and then claim, ‘This is from God,’ in order to make some small gain.” (2: 78-79) Other verses talk about the learned hiding some parts of the revelation (2: 159, 174; 3: 91; 5: 13) and/or “distort[ing] the meaning of the [revealed] words, taking them out of their context” (5: 13) as well as the laymen taking their scholars, the Prophets, and the angels for worship (9: 31, 3: 80).

All the messages that came were the same in their essence but different in details of law, depending on the conditions of time and society. That process continued until the time of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), when humanity had reached a level of advancement that God’s message could easily spread around to other societies in a few decades, and also it could be kept intact in its original form. The Quran we have today was compiled soon after the death of the Prophet (pbuh) and became the standard text at the time of the third Righteous Caliph, Uthman. It has been transmitted both in written form and verbally by those who memorise it. The earliest Quranic fragments found, radiocarbon dating showing to belong to the time of the Prophet or a few decades after his death, confirms the truth of what God Almighty has promised in the Quran: “Indeed We have sent the Quran Ourselves, and We Ourselves will guard it” (19: 9). Thus, God’s final message inviting humanity to monotheism, the original religion of humankind, will be with us, without any change and distortion, to the end of time!

The two pioneer scholars who found monotheism to be the original religion both lived and worked in the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries—almost the same time when the anthropological evolutionary theory of religion was being promoted. They accused those adhering to the theory of ignoring facts on the ground contrary to their views. Andrew Lang was a Scottish scholar whose work focussed on anthropological research. He was a student of Edward Taylor, but strongly disagreed with many of his teacher’s views. From his study of “primitive” tribes Lang concludes, “there are two chief sources of religion, (1) the belief, how attained we know not, in a powerful, moral, eternal, omniscient Father and Judge of men; (2) the belief in a human afterlife.” The other scholar, Wilhelm Schmidt, was a German-Austrian Catholic priest, linguist and ethnologist. According to a commentator, the fact that he was a priest was unfortunate, because his perfectly fine scholarly work was dismissed for having religious bias! (And the same is never said about those who adhere to secularism!) From his study of Australian aborigines and other indigenous peoples, Schmidt came to support Lang’s thesis of original monotheism. According to Schmidt, “the supreme being is found among all peoples of the earliest culture circle. While variation is found in devotion to, and nature of this being, his importance in these cultures is unmistakable.” In his ethnological study, “Schmidt applied the cultural-historical method of the Vienna School, where the traits of cultures placed them in the chronology of history. Schmidt demonstrated that the least developed cultures (which are expected to be most similar to the earliest human cultures) worship one god who shares many attributes with the God of the Bible.” Thus, he concluded that “at the beginning man believed in one powerful and creative God only. Later on, owing to historical circumstances, man neglected and even forgot this unique God,

becoming involved in more and more complicated beliefs in a multitude of gods and goddesses, ghosts, mythical ancestors, and so on”—which is not very different from what Islam tells us.

What is the evidence offered by Lang, Schmidt, and others on original monotheism?

1. Australian aborigines: The Australian aborigines, who were cut from the rest of the people tens of thousands years ago, are considered some of the most “primitive” people of the world. Various Australian tribes such as Narrinyeri, Maraura, Wurunjerri, Wotjobaluck, and Kurnai all believe in a supreme being to which each gives a different name. They all believe in Him to have created everything, have given laws, and have taught humans rituals and things good and useful. “The Kurnai refer to their god Mungnan-ngaur (meaning Our Father) as one who destroyed the earth by water but hence ascended to the sky where he remains. Mungnan is immortal.”
2. New Guinea: The Kapauku people of New Guinea believe in *Ugatame* who is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. He is the creator of all things and determines all events.
3. Native Americans: The Cherokee are one of the indigenous peoples of the Southeastern woodlands of North America. "The Cherokee revere the Great Spirit Unetlanvhi ("Creator"), who presides over all things and created the Earth. The Unetlanvhi is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient."(Footnote: the quotes are mostly from a PhD thesis in 2020, the book *In the Beginning God* published in 2012 and entries at Wikipedia.)

The Algonquian, who traditionally lived in Great Lakes area, are one of the most populous and widespread group of the First People in North America. Lakota are another native American tribe who lived in the areas of today’s North and South Dakota. The Algonquian believe in Gitche Manitou and the Lakota in Wakan Tanka. Both these terms are translated as “Great Spirit” or “Great Mystery”. Gitche Manitou is the Creator of all things and the Giver of Life. Wakan Tanka is believed to be omnipresent and is the creator of earth.

4. Africans: The Kikuyu people of eastern Africa believe in Ngai, a single supreme god. “He created the first Gĩkũyũ communities, and provided them with all the resources necessary for life: land, rain, plants, and animals. Ngai cannot be seen but is manifested in the sun, moon, stars, comets and meteors, thunder and lightning, rain, rainbows, and in the great fig trees (Mugumo).” Although their religion has some animistic features for “making offerings” to others than Ngai, interestingly the use of the word meaning “worship” is reserved only for Ngai.

The Dinka people of South Sudan traditionally believed, and many still do, in one God, which they call Nhialic. “Nhialic is a supreme creator god who dwells in the skies. Nhialic is referred to as male, although he does not have physical manifestations. Nhialic created the first humans as well as the universe and everything in it. In Dinka people's daily lives, natural phenomena that appear from the sky, such as rain and thunder, are considered a sign of Nhialic's presence on earth.”

The Himba people of Namibia worship Mukuru who is “the Supreme Creator (God) of the Himba and Herero people of Namibia. The deceased ancestors of the Himba and Herero are subservient to him, acting as intermediaries. However, while the ancestors are believed to bless or curse, Mukuru is believed to only bless.”

The traditional religion of the Igbo people of Nigeria is known as Odinani. Their supreme deity is called Chukwu, which means "great spirit". “Chukwu created the world and everything in it and is associated with all things on Earth. ... [E]verything on earth, heaven and the rest of the spiritual world is under his control.”

The Cushitic speaking peoples of Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea) traditionally believed, and some still do, in Waaqa. “Waaqa is the supreme being and is omniscient, omni-benevolent and omnipotent. He is also just and loving. This supreme being is addressed through a variety of names in the different regions and many believe that the term Waaqa means 'the God with many names'. ... Waaqa is the origin of everything, is mysterious and he is the one that cannot be interfered with.”

5. Ancient China: The religion of the ancient Chinese was also monotheistic, going as far back as the Shang Dynasty at the 2nd millennium before the Common Era (more than 3500 years ago), and possibly even earlier than that. The Shang Dynasty adopted their name from the deity they worshiped, Shang Di. “Shang Di is the creator of the universe and the supreme ruler of it. The emperor served according to the mandate of heaven or the will of the lord on high; thus, the emperor served at the pleasure of Shang Di. ... Shang Di was considered ... to be eternal, and as having no beginning or end.” Moreover, “Shang Di governed weather, climate, and the success or failure of crops. He ordained the victors of war, the rise and fall of cities, and the welfare of human beings. Thus, Shang Di was viewed as transcendent in that he was above heaven and earth, but also immanent in that he controlled the affairs of humans.”
6. Ancient Iran: Zoroastrianism is also a very old religion. It is named after the founder of the religion, Zoroaster. Because of the symbolic significance of fire for the Zoroastrians, sometimes they were considered as “fire-worshippers”. Other times they are described as “dualists” because of their belief in moral dualism—“a conflict between good and evil in which human beings have both the freedom to choose and the responsibility to bear the consequences of their choices.” However, the original text of the religion, Avesta, teaches monotheism: belief in “one universal, transcendent, all-good, and uncreated supreme creator deity, Ahura Mazda, or the ‘Wise Lord’.” Ahura Mazda cannot be fully understood by humanity. Thus, Zoroaster’s teachings focus on God’s six attributes: “Vohu Mana, the Good Mind; Asha, the divine law of righteousness, justice, and truth; Kshathra, the majesty and power of good dominion; Armaity, Ahura Mazda’s love and benevolent devotion; Haurvatat, well-being and perfection; and Ameratat, immortality.”
7. Ancient India: Hinduism, undoubtedly one of the oldest religion in the world, is a good example of how monotheism turned into polytheism. The Hindus are said to worship 33 million gods. However, the original texts of Hinduism, the *vidas*, teach monotheism. A key concept found in those texts is “Brahman”, which “connotes the highest universal principle, the ultimate reality in the universe.” In other words, “It is the pervasive, genderless, infinite, eternal truth and bliss which does not change, yet is the cause of

all changes.” The texts also tell us, “There is none to compare with Him. There is no parallel to Him, whose glory, verily, is great.” They also note, “Reality is One. The sages speak of it in many ways.”

In brief, there is ample evidence to support Islam’s assertion that monotheism is the original religion of humankind. However, the secular bias makes many scholars ignore that evidence and come up with theories that are mostly based on guesswork. This is true not only in case of the 19th century evolutionary theory of religion but also of the more popular recent theories of evolution of religion. As the Noble Quran mentions in a different context, “most of them follow nothing but assumptions, but assumptions can be of no value at all against the Truth: God is well aware of what they do” (10:36).

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Appendix: Words of Encouragement

During the first lockdown due to coronavirus, the Otago Tertiary Chaplaincy Facebook published a section called “Words of Encouragement”. The Muslim Chaplaincy made the following contributions:

Gratitude

“Every breath inhaled prolongs life, and when exhaled refreshes the soul. Therefore, each breath confers two blessings and for each blessing a thank is due” (Saadi Shirazi, 13th century Persian poet).

Every minute we inhale and exhale tens of time. It is so simple and routine that we are rarely mindful of it. It is only when we hear someone having difficulty breathing or learn that there are people who need very expensive machines (ventilators) to breathe for them, that we realize what a blessing breathing is!

If we open our eyes, we realise we are surrounded with countless blessings. It is always important to be mindful of them and give thanks. Research has shown that gratitude is the most significant factor in happiness.

It is especially important at times of crisis to remember the blessings bestowed on us. We all certainly face a lot of difficulties at the present, but for each and every one of us there are tens of things that we need to be thankful for—not least the ability to breathe smoothly.

Let us all take a minute, contemplate God’s blessings, be grateful, and remember “This shall also pass”!

Embracing Uncertainty

As human beings we crave certainty, especially over our own lives and our own future. Our daily routine, the plans we make for our days or weeks or months, and the knowledge of what our life holds, are all ways that make us feel secure and give us a sense of control.

The certainty that we feel is an illusion, though; and it gives us a false sense of control and safety. Reality is filled with uncertainty and it is only how we respond to uncertainty that determines our emotional outcome. The person who accepts uncertainty knows that they are not in absolute control and does not stress over what is out of their control. The one who avoids uncertainty and desires control will find uncertainty everywhere and will be in a constant state of worry, anxiety, and stress.

In everyday life, and especially in this unprecedented time when our daily routine has been disrupted, we must reflect on the uncertainties of life and place our reliance on the only absolute constant in all of the universes: God.

God reminds us in the Quran that He alone has certainty and control over all things (31:34, e.g.). The Quran also tells us, “And never say of anything, ‘Indeed, I’ll do that tomorrow;’ without adding, ‘If God wills’” (18:23-24).

That means, plan; but embrace the uncertainty of your planning!

Wakeup call

“Corruption has flourished on the land and sea as a result of people’s actions, and He will make them taste the consequences of some of their actions so that they may turn back” (The Quran, 30:41).

Coronavirus is a plague, a disease, but it is only doing what a virus was created to do. It obeys the command of its Creator. It has certainly wreaked havoc on world health and economy. Looked more closely, though, it seems to serve some positive purposes too.

Mother earth is no longer plundered to feed our unending appetite. Pollution has dropped staggeringly and people can once again breathe. Families have more time together, circuitbreaking the rat-race of capitalism. As if woken from a daydream, suddenly we realise what’s truly of value and importance.

As Timothy Winter, an Islamic scholar, notes in his recent [reflections](#), “seen from world’s perspective,” it is as though human beings are a parasite, killing our planetary host. We are not doing what human beings are meant to be doing: to be custodians and caretakers of the earth. We were supposed to be the chosen ones, above all creation, those to whom even the angels prostrated. Yet, we seem to have betrayed that trust.

So let us ask ourselves, have we—in our arrogance and obsession with material goods and “progress”—lost sight of what is really important for a sustainable and prosperous life on earth and for our spiritual salvation?

May we use this lockdown to ponder on our priorities in life! And may this virus be humanity’s much needed cure from arrogance and greed!