

Meaning and Salient features of Islam

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Introduction:

'Islam' is an arabic language's word and Allah used it in the Quran. The old name of Islam was Deen-e-Hanif, which meant monotheist - believing in One and Only God. The word 'Islam' means submission and peace: submission to the One and Only God, and peace with His creatures. On the

vertical level (God-to-man relationship) Islam means submission, On the horizontal level (man-to-man relationship) it means peace. In its purest sense Islam is nothing but the act of devoutly loving God and being just and benevolent to His creatures. Allah is al-Salam, which is one of ~~His~~ His ninety nine most Beautiful names. It means that He is the source and originator of all peace. The very first verse of the Quran, "In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate", is an emblem of love, mercy and compassion. The same theme of love and mercy is continuously repeated in the Quran as this same verse is repeated in the Quran 114 times. It shows the significance of the Islamic concepts of God and religious values, such as mercy and compassion. The Quran refers to Islam as 'The paths of peace', "Subul al-Salam" (al-Maidah 5:16). It raises the banner of reconciliation, Sulh (an-Nisa 4:128) and states that God abhors disturbance of peace, fitnah (al-Baqarah 2:205). The ideal society according to Islam is 'Dar al-Salam' which means the abode of peace (Yunus 10:25).

Muslims believe in the absolute unity of God (Tauheed) and also in the associated belief in the Messengers, the Angels, the Revealed Books, the Last Day and the Predestination of Good and Evil as the starting

points of their ^{side} faith. The Islamic devotional system, consisting of 5 daily prayers, alms giving, fasting in the month of Ramadan and pilgrimage to Makkah not only vivifies one's devotion to God but also cultivates self-discipline, self-sacrifice, kindness, benevolence and self-accountability. In short, the Islamic devotional acts and its laws are all part of a comprehensive scheme of social rehabilitation, reformation and promotion of peaceful and harmonious co-existence.

Literal and Contextual meaning of Islam:

~~the~~ The word 'Islam' has been ~~deri~~ derived from the root of an arabic word سلم (سلم), which means "to surrender", or "to submit". Hence, the literal meaning of the word 'Islam' is peace, surrender and submission. Imam Raghīb al-Isfahani (d. 1108) in his *al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Quran* says: "Islam means entering into salam, and salam and silm both signify peace". One can achieve real peace of body and of mind only through submission and obedience to Allah. Such obedient way of life results in mental peace, stability in the life of an individual and harmony in the society and it also establishes real peace in worldwide human community.

Meaning of Islam in light of Shariah

All prophets of God preached the message of peace, submission and obedience, guiding mankind to the right path. But man not only veered away from the right path time and again, but also lost and distorted the code of guidance bequeathed to him. This necessitated the sending of other prophets by God for restoring the original message and steering man back to the right path. The last of these apostles was prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who presented God's guidance in its final shape and for all times to come. This guidance is called 'Islam'. Allah has prescribed a divine code of life for man and granted him freedom to follow this code or not. In Surah al-Kahf Allah says, "Whosoever wants, he should believe; and whosoever wants, he should disbelieve" (Al-Kahf 18:29). Those who follow which is revealed by God are considered Muslims (believers) and those who decline are termed as Kuffar (disbelievers). Furthermore, In Surah Baqarah Allah says, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Surah Baqarah 2:256). In Islam God gives us complete freedom to follow religion, hence the concept of the Day of Judgement. In

addition to this, Allah also says "in Surah Kafirun, "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion." [109:06]. Islam has been revealed for the guidance of mankind. The basic articles of Islamic faith are:

- i. Belief in Oneness of God (Tawhid)
- ii. Belief in prophets and the guidance they bequeathed (Risalat)
- iii. Belief in angels (Malaiikah)
- iv. Belief in books (Kutub)
- v. Belief in day of judgement (Akhirat)

For the proper development of human life, man needs two elements (i) the resources to maintain life and to fulfil the material needs of individual and the society, and (ii) knowledge of the principles of individual and social behaviour to enable man to fulfil himself and to maintain justice and tranquility in human life. To cater to the material needs of man, God has put all of nature's resources to his disposal. And to provide for a man's spiritual, social and cultural needs God has raised His prophets from among men and has revealed to them the complete code of life that will guide man's steps to the right path. This complete code of life is what is known as Islam.

Salient features of Islam

(i) UNIQUE CONCEPT OF TAWHID:

Tawhid comes from the word wahid, which means one. It is the first part of Kalimah. Allah says in Surah Ikhlas: "Say: 'He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begets not, nor is He begotten; and there is none comparable to Him'." [112:01-04]. Tawhid is every muslim's core belief. All the other beliefs like faiths, worships, rituals and systems revolve around tawhid. In the book 'Sirah tun Nabi' by Allama Shibli he quotes the following ahadith:

(i) Tawhid is the first chapter of islamic syllabus.

(ii) Islam is like a fort and the gate of that fort is tawhid.

(ii) UNITY OF MATTER AND SPIRIT:

Another unique feature of Islam is that it does not divide life into watertight compartments of matter and spirit. It stands not for denial of life but for the fulfilment of life. Islam does not believe in asceticism. It does not ask man to avoid material things. The Quran advises us to pray as follows:

"Our lord! Give us something fine in this world as well as something fine in the Hereafter." (al-Baqarah 2:201).

The prophet (PBUH) said: "A muslim who lives in the midst of society and bears with patience the afflictions that come to him is better than

the one who shuns society and cannot bear any wrong done to him."

Thus, Islam teaches man that moral and material powers must be welded together and that spiritual salvation can be achieved by using material resources for the good of man in the service of just ends.

(iii) ISLAM PROMOTES HUMANITY:

Humans have natural positive instincts that bring them closer to humanity. These qualities should be present in a person without any distinction for instance, love, care, welfare, sympathy, kindness etc. A salient feature of Islam is that it promotes humanity. Prophet (PBUH) said, "the perfect among the believers are those who are best in character". In Surah Baqarah, verse 177, Allah says that the righteous are those who give charity out of their cherished wealth. Hence, promoting humanity.

(iv) ISLAM IS THE COMPLETE CODE OF LIFE:

Islam is not a religion in the common and distorted sense, for it does not confine its scope to one's private life. It is a complete way of life and it is present in every field of human existence. Islam provides us guidance for all aspects of individual as well as the social life, material and moral, economic and political, legal and

cultural, and national and international.

(V) UNIVERSALITY OF ISLAM:

The message of Islam is for the whole of human race. God, in Islam, is the God of all the world (Qur'an 1:1) and the prophet is a Messenger for the whole of mankind. In the words of the Qur'an:

"O People! I am but a Messenger from God to you all." [Al-Araaf 7:158].

Islam is international in its outlook and approach and does not admit barriers and distinctions based on color, clan, blood, or territory, as was the case before the advent of Muhammad.

(VI) COMPLETE RECORD OF TEACHINGS PRESERVED:

Last, but not the least, is the fact that the teachings of Islam have been preserved in their original form. Resultantly, God's guidance is available without adulteration of any kind. Qur'an, the revealed book and word of God, has been in existence for the last 1450 years. Yet, it is still available in its original form. There has not been even one change made in this unique historic record.

Critical Assessment

In his book The History of Civilization, Will

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Durant (1885-1981) considered the rise and fall of the Islamic civilization as a great event in history and maintained that during five centuries (700-1200 AD), Islam was the world precursor of power, discipline, and expansion of its realm, good manners, improvement of the standard of living, fair human laws, religious leniency, philosophy, etc. Additionally, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) in his 1936 ~~opus~~ opus *The Genuine Islam* is reported to have said: I have always held the religion of Muhammad in high estimation because of its wonderful vitality. It is the only religion which appears to me to possess that assimilating capacity to the changing phases of existence which can make itself appeal to every age.

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