

# Understanding Islam: a Universalist Perspective

Is Islam relevant in the current day and age? This is a burning question in the hearts and minds of many Muslims, particularly amongst those in the Western diaspora. A heartening answer can be obtained by highlighting principles of the Quran which are both timeless and universally applicable. This approach is decidedly *Qurancentric*, a term which signifies the elevation of the Quran to its rightful status as primary, perhaps only source of Islamic guidance. In this approach, other “Islamic” bodies of work



including: 1) *hadith* (narrations attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (s)), 2) *fiqh* (rulings based on medieval interpretations of the Quran and *hadith*), and 3) Islamic history, are largely ignored (aside for some anecdotal and historical value) due to their: basis on hearsay, contradictory nature, centuries old biases against non-Muslims and women, and promotion of certain beliefs which are unjust, immoral, and/or irrational. *Qurancentricism* is conducive to developing a *universalist* approach, in that it allows one to: 1) expound core benevolent Islamic values which all civilized humans have aspired to throughout history, and 2) recognize, respect, and encourage the implementation of said principles in all societies, regardless of their religious makeup.

The Quran refers to Islam as *Deen*, which roughly translates as “way of life” or “system of governance.” This definition stands in stark contrast to that of “religion,” a set of dogmas and prescribed rituals established in pursuit of a spiritual “connection with God.” In this age of radical “Islamist” groups such as ISIL, an all-encompassing understanding of Islam may appear threatening to many. Such is the post stress trauma of so-called Islamist movements that many a traditionalist scholar, even relatively enlightened ones such as Mr. Javed Ghamidi, have proclaimed Islam to be a very personal set of purifying beliefs and absolutely nothing more. However, even a cursory reading of the Quran speaks to the contrary. What personal set of beliefs delineates the workings of contracts (2:283), collection of government taxes (9:11), war and peace (6:39, 8:61), and crime and punishment (33:60)? One can go on and on expounding the holistic nature of the *Deen* of Islam as described in the Quran. Then what differentiates this *Deen* understanding from the radical Islamist ones? Again, the answer lies in the *Qurancentric* approach. Once unshackled from the limitations of *fiqh*, *hadith*, and Islamic history, we are left with benevolent universal themes revealed to us by the One Creator representing Islam, such as: Human Rights, Justice, Law and Order, Egalitarianism, Equitable Distribution of Resources and Opportunity, Reason, Ethics, a Moral Code, Unchanging Natural Laws, and Humanitarian Service.

It is remarkable to note how these universal values, although emphasized far more in the Quran, have become supplanted by less prominent, secondary ones. The most damaging element of this usurpation has been the establishment (via *hadith* rather than Quranic injunction) of the five “pillars” of Islam: *Shahada* (declaration of faith), *Salat* (traditionally translated as ritual prayers), *Sawm* (abstinence), *Zakat* (obligatory alms, essentially a tax), and *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). (The full extent to which these five concepts have become misapplied or watered down in scope is a

discussion for another essay). Though *important* concepts, the five pillars fail to remedy many critical failings of men. For example, eschewing evil and enjoining right, standing for justice, *jihad* (internal and external struggle for the truth), the pursuit of knowledge, the use of reason, and avoiding blind following, though emphasized dozens of times more than *sawm* or *hajj* in the Quran, are missing altogether. So as for character building, the five pillars fall far short. Furthermore, it is revealing that not one of the Messengers of the Quran risked his life for the right to pray, fast, or lead a pilgrimage with his people (nor would a pharaoh or Nimrod be threatened by these ritual acts alone). Rather, every Messenger's common aim was the establishment of an egalitarian society via dynamic social and economic revolution. Indeed, if there is a true pillar of Islam, it is *the entire Quran* which espouses ideals all benevolent societies aspire to, while relating tales of the decline of civilizations which ran programs counter to these universal truths.

One exemplary case study supporting the universalist approach is the story of Prophet Moses (s), one of the most mentioned figures in the Quran. His story embodies recurrent Quranic themes such as the struggle of Good vs. Evil, Justice vs. Tyranny, Human Rights vs. Slavery, and Reason vs. Blind Following. The five traditional pillars are nowhere to be found as core principles in the Exodus story, nor are they translatable to the struggle of the Common Man throughout various eras and societies. In marked contrast, the aforementioned ideals are vibrant in all revolutions and rebellions throughout history, such as Prophet Muhammad's (s) mission, the American Revolution, the Women's Suffrage movement, the Civil Rights movement, the Independence of the Subcontinent, and so on. Furthermore, the astute researcher can readily see the Divine themes embodied in benevolent secular documents such as the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the American Constitution, and the UN Charter. Freedom of religion and expression (2:256), equality before the law (4:135), presumption of innocence (49:6), gender equity (4:32, 33:35), social safety nets (9:60), rule of law (33:60), and strong ethics (70:21-70:33) are not only hallmark values of the Quranic state, but of all advanced societies. Such a universalist understanding helps one to appreciate the eternal truths inherent in the Quran very effectively.

Critics of the universalist approach raise some objections. First, some feel it lacks in "spirituality." However, what could be more spiritual or God-connected than recognizing that *all that is good and harmonious* in the Universe emanates from the One God, while upholding His revealed values wherever we may be? Other critics feel that this approach deemphasizes the ritual in favor of humanistic values. Does not the Quran do the same here: "Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west...(2:177)" and here: "It is not their meat nor their blood, that reaches Allah: it is your righteousness that reaches Him..."(22:37). Indeed, many an "Islamic" nation's mosques are full while its citizens wander dilapidated streets with empty minds and stomachs. This is not Islam...as keenly articulated by Mufti Muhammad Abduh, the great rationalist and reformist 19th century Egyptian scholar: "*I went to the West and saw Islam, but no Muslims; I got back to the East and saw Muslims, but not Islam.*" In line with this fine observation, it is notable that the universalist approach opens a benevolent door for the salvation and eternal success of non-Muslims. Although the traditionalist mindset is geared toward a quasi Chosen People concept for Muslims (though this is soundly rejected by 49:13), a touchstone verse for universal grace dismisses such exclusivity:

2:62: "*Indeed, the believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabians—whoever [truly] believes in God and the Last Day and does good will have their reward with their Lord. And there will be no fear for*

*them, nor will they grieve.”*

Certainly such an understanding troubles many traditionalist Muslims, but we must be careful to avoid judging others. For the harshest judgment is reserved for those hypocritical societies and individuals that proclaim themselves ‘Muslim’ while crushing human rights and reason:

*4:145: “The hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the fire; no helper wilt thou find for them.”*

In conclusion, I encourage my fellow Muslims to explore a universalist understanding of Islam based on a *Qurancentric* approach. In stark contrast to the constraining belief system born of the traditionalist schools, this approach not only liberates the mind, body, and spirit from man-made systems, but also retools the mindset of Muslims to accept and embody Citizen-of-the-World values. Our children deserve better than the medieval musings of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ghazali to understand the relevance of Islam in today’s day and age. A universalist approach for understanding Islam, grounded in *Qurancentric* themes, is rational, humanist, versatile, and conducive to progressive values which are the need of the hour.

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## [Children of a Lesser Sharia](#)

I squirmed nervously in my chair at a recent interfaith conference as a dear colleague tackled the controversial topic: “Is Sharia compatible with the America Constitution?” Thankfully, he nimbly navigated the situation with declarations that sharia (Islamic law) melds with democratic, developed world values such as freedom of religion and expression (2:256), presumption of innocence (49:6), gender equity (4:32, 33:35), social safety nets (9:60), rule of law (33:60), and strong ethics (70:21-70:33). Indeed, the Quranic sharia is versatile, benevolent, and in tune with the laws of Western republics. However, there is another “lesser sharia”, as I call it, corrupted with non-Quranic, false traditions which promotes human rights violations and to a good extent is incompatible with civilized life. How did this divergence come to be?



Sharia is an Arabic word meaning “path to be followed” or “path to the watering hole”. Within two centuries of the death of Prophet Muhammad (S), the source of Islamic law became not only the Quran but also false histories and hundreds of thousands of supposed actions and sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad. During that time period, 5 prominent imams, Abu Hanifa, Malik, Shafi’i, Hanbal, and Jafar, came to represent separate Islamic jurisprudence schools based on their

interpretations of the corrupted sharia with rulings on topics as diverse as crime, marriage, trade, prayers, sexual intercourse, personal hygiene, etc. Hence, the lesser sharia and its various interpretations became codified as they are today. The supermajority of modern day religionists idolize these ancient imams. Challenge or reform of the ancient rulings is shunned by almost all scholars, deemed blasphemous by some.

The average Muslim is either blissfully unaware or in denial that human rights violations such as blasphemy and apostasy laws, child marriage, stoning, and gender oppression stem from the rulings of these ancient jurists. It is their lesser sharia which made it haram (forbidden) to pluck a stringed instrument and yet introduced the barbarity of stoning into Islamic law. Perhaps no other example of the corrupted sharia is as glaring as this: the Quran makes it possible for adulterers to be forgiven (25:68-71), marry (24:3), and there is no death penalty, but the lesser sharia prescribes stoning for sexual transgression! The Benevolent God of the Quran prescribes no worldly punishment for blasphemy or apostasy, but paranoid imams and caliphs could not stand dissidents, and hence tailored the lesser sharia to deliver death upon them. Muslim women under the lesser sharia must cover head to toe, but if the same woman is sexually assaulted, must produce four witnesses to the crime(!). Some corruption is rather comical: the lesser sharia forbids the playing of chess, deriving the ruling from supposed declarations of Prophet Muhammad. But it is well established by historians that Muslims were introduced to the game almost two centuries after his death.

It is understandable that critics may have reservations about beliefs based solely on the Quran as well. For example, polygamy may give pause to many. But does the Quran really make four wives some kind of norm? Certainly, no benevolent Supreme Being would assign four mothers-in-law to any one man.

*4:3: "If you (society) fear that you shall not be able to do justice with orphans, (as may happen in times of war), in order to accommodate widows and orphans, men of sound finances and character shall be encouraged to marry these widows; two, three, and four (4:127)."*

The verse addressing polygamy is meant for times of post-war societal upheaval to help widows and orphaned children. Most modern societies have welfare systems that can support the disadvantaged, obviating the need for multiple marriage. Another common objection against Quranic Law is the hand amputation of thieves (5:38). But, in the Quran, the word for "hand" (yadd) also means "ability" and "cut" (qata) can mean "to disable" or "to bind" (26:49). Hence, jailing the thief is the punishment, unless he/she repents and makes amends (5:39).

In conclusion, the Quranic sharia flows well with the laws of the developed world. In contrast, much of the lesser sharia is contaminated with oppressive traditions and is not suitable for 7th century or 21st century life, for Western life or on any inhabitable planet for that matter. I assure my non-Muslim friends that in no way are Western Muslim citizens interested in passing laws of the lesser sharia into action here. And that is where the hypocrisy is self-evident. The same elephant in the room that the majority of Muslims and their traditionalist scholars do not want for themselves or their children, but refuse to challenge, continues to trample human rights all over the world. Hence, when a Bengali blogger is stabbed to death for blasphemy, when a 9 yr old is traumatized by her middle aged groom, or when a poor lady is stoned to death in Afghanistan, it is not only the perpetrators but the silent Muslim majority and enabling imams that are equally to blame. These Children of a Lesser Sharia must arise from their slumber and reclaim the Soul of Islam.

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## Was Solomon Superman?: There is no basis for demonology in the Quran

4:51: "Are you not aware of those who after receiving their share of the Book (Qur'an) believe in Jibt (the supernatural)..."

A recent spate of lectures on the supernatural in major Pakistani universities is quite the assault on Reason. The speakers have drawn packed houses on paranormal topics such as jinns, black magic, and glimpses into the afterlife. Pervez Hoodbhoy, in a recent Dawn article, ([Jinns Invade Campuses](#)) was correct to lambast these universities as "sheep farms" full of "intellectually lazy professors" who want to breed a legion of submissive students. Indeed, such topics are best left for fireside chats and movie nights and have no place in institutions of higher learning. But, one burning question does remain: is there any basis for the paranormal in the Quran?



First of all, to understand supposed paranormal events and creatures mentioned in the Quran, one should carefully review the story of Prophets David and his successor son, Prophet Solomon, to whom much Islamic and para-Islamic literature link with the supernatural. What at face value appear to be paranormal phenomena dissolve into the mundane when examined in the light of History, the Bible, Archaeology, and good old-fashioned Common Sense.

\*Note: that the Children of Israel never before or since the time of prophet-kings David and Solomon (10th century BCE?) achieved such majestic power. Perhaps that is why the Quran describes the happenings of this period in rather poetic language:

\*For example, we are told that David and Solomon had control over metals:

34:10: "...and we made iron soft (for David)" and 34:12: "We made a fountain of copper flow for Solomon."

It is notable that the Iron Age began in the Mediterranean shortly before the time of David's reign and the "fountain of copper" is a reference to a vast mining complex mentioned in the Bible tended to by Solomon's vassals, the Edomites. Archaeologists only recently discovered the famed Solomon's mines and confirmed this Biblical and Quranic history. Nothing supernatural here...

\*But the Quran does mention that Solomon had control over the wind, does it not?

21:81: "And unto Solomon [We made subservient] the stormy wind, so that it sped at his behest..."

Is this verse anything but a parallel account to the one mentioned in the Bible, II Chronicles 9:21: Solomon's people sailed to Egypt, and even India and "every three years they returned bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks"?

Solomon's alliance with King Hiram of the Phoenicians, sailors par excellence of the ancient world, gave Solomon access to superior sailing technology at a time when rowing power was the standard.

\*Did not David and Solomon have control of the mountains and speak to animals?



34:10: "O you mountains! establish with (David) the glory of God and so were commanded the at-Taer (often mistranslated as "the birds"...)"

The "mountains" referenced here are most likely the savage mountain tribe mentioned in the Bible called the Amorites, (Amos 2:9) "as tall as cedars, and strong as oaks" subdued by Prophet David.

It is interesting to note that "taer" can mean a "bird" or "fierce horse" in Classical Arabic. Indeed, the Bible 1 Kings, 4:26 describes Solomon's fierce cavalry, composed of 12,000 horses. Nor does the Quran claim that the ability to communicate with this cavalry was some supernatural gift limited to Solomon alone:

27:16: "Solomon says: "O you people! WE have been taught the speech of at-Taer (the cavalry tribe)."

\*What about Solomon speaking to ants?

27:18: "They came upon the valley of An-Naml, The Valley of Ants. An "ant" exclaimed: "O you "ants"! Get into your dwellings, lest Solomon and his hosts crush us."

These "ants" were actually people, identified by ibn Kathir in his Quran exposition as the tribesmen of An-Naml, located in Syria, who felt Solomon's powerful army would overrun them. Their queen who pleaded for their safety was Namlat. Their descendants, the An-Namlis, are crawling all over Facebook to this day.

\*Did not Solomon control demons (jinn), and did his corpse not continue to preside over them for decades?

34:14, 38:34 (paraphrase): When We decreed death for him (Solomon), nothing showed his death to the jinn until a lowly creature ate away at his staff...and just a mere body was left in Solomon's place.

The Bible tells us that Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was the incompetent successor, the "lowly creature" who was as good as a "mere body" on the throne that ate away at Solomon's power base (the word "asa", often translated as "staff", refers to a five-fingered grip, symbolizing a power base, in Classical Arabic). Due to his incompetence, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel split from the kingdom under his rule.

\*What of the jinn, who were they?

Surprisingly, the Bible describes them well, too:

The Bible states in 1 Kings 5-6: "70000 laborers, 80000 stone cutters in the mountains" worked for Solomon and built his Temple, and the Quran references these conquered people as "jinn" accomplishing the same tasks (34:12-13).

As stated in the past by notable scholars such as Muhammad Abdu, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, and G.A. Parvez, "jinn" in actuality are not demons, but rather those normally not seen in the city, "hidden" (jinn from "jannah", "hidden") from view of the city dwellers: nomads, outsiders, rural people. They are described as "fiery" in temperament (15:27). The Quranic term, "ins" can mean "mankind" or be limited to "civilized man" depending on context, just as "men" can mean "men" or "men and women", depending on context. Hence, when "ins" and "jinn" are paired in a sentence, the correct translation would be something to the effect:

7:179: "Our Law has committed to Hell numerous people, rural (jinn) and urban (ins); they are living the life of hell..."

Three verses in particular must be examined closely regarding the "composition" of jinn and ins:

55:15: "Khulaq-al-jaanna mim-maarij-im-min naar," or "the uncivilized (the jinn) he created with a smokeless fire," meaning with a "fiery" temperament.

and also see its parallel verse:

21:37: "Khulaq-al-insaanu min 'ajal," or "mankind is created from haste", meaning with a "hasty" temperament.

Hence, neither of these two verses reflects a physical, but rather an emotional constituency.

The following verse references origin of life of ALL mankind and describes a physical composition:

15:26: "And, indeed, We created mankind from sounding clay, out of dark inorganic matter."

It is notable that the Quran by and large attaches human qualities to the jinn: they dive in the sea (21:82), serve in armies (27:17), will be punished in fire (7:38), can be chained (38:38), make forts,



sculptures, images (34:12-13), listened to the Quran in Mecca, became Muslim and taught Islam to their people (46:29), dabble in astrology (72:8), etc.

The few verses about jinn that appear to be supernatural are best understood as either figures of speech or metaphor for the uncivilized part of our nature (what Freud deemed, the "id"), which promotes selfish or evil actions. The Quran does state, as Science has shown, that nomadic, uncivilized people (jinn) predated the civilized ones (15:27). Early communal living with law and order began only after 10,000 BC, in the period known as the Neolithic Era. The tendency for man to fall into selfish temptations, misguided by his uncivilized urges, is described in the extended allegory of Adam and the "jinn", Iblis (from "bilas", meaning "regret"). (The allegory is announced in 2:26, three verses before Adam is mentioned: "Behold, Allah does not shy away from citing any kind of allegory, even of an insect. Since the believers exercise reason they know that it is the Truth from their Lord...")

It is understandable that most readers may take pause at this interpretation. However, one must accept that the mind-numbing beliefs that jinn are invisible creatures which possess people, shape-shift, eat bones and dung, cause a host of ailments, live in holes, ruins, and graveyards, etc. are all decidedly not of the Quran. These myths were amalgamated into Islamic traditions from pagan books of fiction about Solomon written from the 1st to the 10th century CE, the most tasteless and influential of which was the [Testament of Solomon](#) (readily available online).

In conclusion, the Quran muses:

4:51: "Are you not aware of those who after receiving their share of the Book (Qur'an) believe in Jibt (the supernatural)..."

and sternly warns against scholars and priests who exploit the gullible masses:

9:34: "A great many religious leaders and scholars devour the wealth of mankind in falsehood, and debar them from the Path of Allah..."

Such is the state of our bright people being fooled by charlatans doing the rounds in otherwise prestigious universities. Time to put the jinn back in the bottle...

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**Islamophobia: Nothing to Fear...or is there?**



This week, a Facebook group called Global Rally for Humanity put out a call for anti-Muslim demonstrations “in every country at every mosque.” Some plan to use “open carry laws” in some American states to bring weapons. Granted, the average participant IQ at such rallies is about 89, and these proceedings could readily be dismissed as gatherings of village idiots. However, recently anti-Muslim views have been expressed by otherwise intelligent public figures (with much fanfare) such as Donald Trump and Dr. Ben Carson, who recently stated he would not want a “Muslim in the White House”.



Is there any validity to the concerns of these Islamophobes? Is Islam incompatible with the American way of life? No...with a small caveat.

First of all, please note that the 3 to 7 million Muslims in America are a more integrated community than in any other non-Muslim majority country in the world. A 2011 Pew Research Center study cited in the Christian Monitor ([Christian Science Monitor](#)) revealed that American Muslim values mirror that of the average American:

- Though they tend to be younger, less likely to divorce, and more conservative regarding homosexuality,
- 55% of Muslims are married, as is 54% of the general US population.
- 20%, like 17% of all Americans, are self-employed or own small businesses.
- 58% of Muslims versus 62% of the general population watch TV
- 90% of Muslims agree that women should be able to work outside the home vs 97%
- 68% feel gender makes no difference in political leaders vs 72%

American Muslims by-and-large are law-abiding, tax-paying citizens. When a tragic school shooting, a domestic murder-suicide, or a large financial scam occurs, the rate of Muslim involvement barely registers a blip. The fear of increasing terrorist attacks after Sept. 11, 2001 is quickly diffused by review of the facts: nearly twice as many (48) people have been killed by white supremacists, antigovernment fanatics and other non-Muslim extremists than by radical Muslims (26): (reference: [NY Times](#)). The rates of other social ills, such as teenage pregnancy, drugs, high school dropouts, etc. are also considerably lower in the American Muslim population.

So then what is wanting for the American Muslim to be accepted as a “true” American? This foreignness was thrust upon us by geopolitical events beyond our control, that began half a world way at the turn of this century...but it is our cross to bear nonetheless. Here are some ideas to help diffuse American Islamophobia:

- **Set an example with your demeanor and ethics.** Over two-thirds of Americans have an unfavorable view of Muslims, but once they get to know a Muslim personally, that number drops by over half!
- **Stand for the rights of others.** Look beyond your community and stand for the rights of all the wronged and oppressed. The most vocal supporters of American Muslims are often Jewish groups and the NAACP. Be seen standing with and for them when the fight is right. Indeed, the Quran refers to even non-Muslims who stand for law and order and a just economic system as

“Brothers in Deen (the Way of Life)” (see: [Malaysian Insider](#)).

- **Be involved in community centers.** Volunteer time as coach, tutor, physician, etc. in non-Muslim organizations. Let non-Muslims and their children look up to you as a role model.
- **Be openly charitable.** Donate to non-Muslim causes...publicly. There is a common misconception that the Quran denounces non-anonymous charity. This is not the case:2:271: *“If you give charity in public, it is worthwhile (for it may persuade others), but if you hide and deliver it to the poor in secret, that is better for you”* (Quran As It Explains Itself, by Dr. Shabbir Ahmed). What American Muslim would not be proud of a “Muhammad Ahmed Library” or “Fatima Hussain Women’s Shelter”?! That is the kind of PR we need.
- **Know your neighbor.** Socialize with your neighbors regularly and visit them when they are ill. Islam would not have spread if kindness was restricted to fellow Muslims.
- **Celebrate diversity.** Unfortunately, many American Muslims, like Muslims the world over, confuse Arab culture with “Islamic” culture. (Some of the “Islamic” getup donned by Muslims is as *sunnah* (tradition) of Prophet Muhammad (S) as it is that of his most bitter Arab enemies!). If there is a culture in Islam, it is *diversity*:49:13: *“O Mankind! Behold, We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another...”* One can easily stay within the general bounds of modesty as described in the Quran, yet dress...very much like the average American. Why try to stand apart unnecessarily?
- **Support the Reformation of Muslim Thought.** Sam Harris, celebrated atheist and Islamophobe, recently tweeted, *“Of course I know there are moderate Muslims. The problem is that there is no theological basis for their views.”* Unfortunately, Mr. Harris has a point. What non-Muslims fear most about Islam along with terrorism is *sharia law*. There is absolutely no denying that the generally accepted legal interpretation of Islam in circulation today supports child marriage, polygamy, stoning, blasphemy laws, and other troublesome practices. Every non-Muslim and Muslim is justified in being phobic of these violations. What sane person would want these beliefs enacted on their families? I covered these non-Quranic beliefs at length in a recent essay entitled, “No Comment: m.o. of the Passive Muslim majority” (see [No Comment](#)). Let’s discuss reformist interpretation briefly:**Polygamy:** the verse that grants permission for polygamy is only meant for times of societal upheaval to help widows and their orphaned children:4:3: *“If you (society) fear that you shall not be able to do justice with orphans, (as may happen in times of war), in order to accommodate widows and orphans, men of sound finances and character shall be encouraged to marry these widows; two, three, and four (4:127).”***Child Marriage:** Under the influence of a supposedly authentic tradition, the majority of Islamic jurists refuse to denounce this heinous practice. All the while the annual toll of emotional trauma, injuries, and deaths of young Muslim girls continues to mount. The Quranic marriageable age is sufficient age to sign a legal contract, ability to consent, and to handle finances (4:6, 4:19, 4:21).**Blasphemy Laws:** Every single one of the four ancient Sunni schools of thought (*madhab*) prescribe death for blasphemy. The Quran has no such punishment but instead advises patience and tolerance under adverse circumstances.**Stoning:** The Quran *nowhere* mentions a death penalty for moral crimes. Regardless, every single one of the four Sunni schools of thought prescribes stoning for adultery.

*What we have to fear even more than right wing Islamophobes is our own apathy.*

Who will promote reformist interpretations and challenge this sharia developed by ancient religious

“authorities” which has been responsible for the oppression of millions over the past millennium and tarnishes Muslims the world over? It won't be modern day traditional scholars. At a major international forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies held in April 2015, the most prominent American Islamic scholar had this to say:

*“(Killing for leaving Islam) was to protect the religion ... but it is no longer the mentality for the age we live in, so when you look at the universal principle of Islam it is to attract people towards religion. However, he said, in the current age applying apostasy law will cause more people to leave religion than to join it so it has an opposite effect.” (UAE Summit)*

There you have it. Is turning the Prophet (S) into a role model for ISIS and a disgrace to our children by attributing atrocities to Him considered reformation? Why not denounce the traditions behind these atrocities as false? Does not the Quran firmly declare, “there is no compulsion in religion?” Instead of challenging them, prominent American scholars do the rounds in convention circuits celebrating the ancient religious authorities as “Champions of Islam.”

So it falls upon us my fellow American Muslims. What we have to fear even more than right wing Islamophobes is our own apathy. If you want to be truly respected and integrated in America, use your God-given Reason and American freedoms to stand up for Pluralism, Human Rights, Justice, and Reform. That is what being American is all about...that is what being Muslim is all about!

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## [Does the Quran Promote an Endless Cycle of Poverty?](#)

Salaam to all,



Ramadan ended not too long ago. We Muslims were promised showers of rewards and blessings throughout the whole month for various recitations and rituals by our clergy. Eid-ul-Fitr came to pass and none of these promises came to fruition. Some would argue that the state of the Muslim World actually worsened. Then came Eid-ul-Adha. Millions of slaughtered animals to feed the growing hundreds of millions of poor Muslims worldwide for a few days. Is this the purpose of Islam...to feed an endless cycle of poverty?

CHARITY CAN NEVER END POVERTY. Charity (sadaqat) is deemed noble in the Quran, but it is

simply a band-aid that can not begin to address the underlying cause of poverty and hunger: lack of circulation of wealth and opportunities. The Quran in no way promotes a society in which the poor have access to good food a few days a year and live off the scraps of the middle and upper class for the rest of the year. Witness the developed world, where even the “poorest” class have access to meat at any time and will not die of hunger. They also have welfare safety nets and chances of upward mobility. Compare this to the “Muslim World” with 50% plus poverty rates, hundreds of billions in charity programs, and only a worsening situation. Is this the failing system the Quran promotes? No!

The Quranic solution to poverty is Zakat, a mandatory contribution (tax) collected by the Prophet (S) CENTRALLY to His government from Muslim and non-Muslim citizens (9:5, 9:11) alike and then the funds were circulated to benefit all of society by building INFRASTRUCTURE and WELFARE SYSTEMS. The only possible agent that can replace this function now is a just government...not the multiple mosques scattered throughout all Muslim cities. Current welfare taxes (which many are dishonest to pay in the Muslim World) are the only modern equivalent of Zakat.

The current economic systems of the Muslim World are essentially feudal, with huge disparities of wealth distribution. And this system plays into the hands of dictators and the corrupt elite who have zero interest in providing opportunities or upward mobility to the poor. Rather they would give token amounts in dignity destroying charity. The priest class is happy to enable the system by blessing the funds deposited at the mosque...“build a house in Paradise.” What about this world?!

The Quran promises worldly “Paradise” also to those who establish just systems on earth and the early Muslims realized this vision for centuries: success in THIS WORLD and THE HEREAFTER!

2:25: “And convey happy news to those who have chosen to be graced with belief, and have done acts of service to humanity. Plush gardens with rivulets flowing underneath! When they are provided with the delicious fruit of their deeds therein, they will say, “This is the provision we were given before (on Earth).”

To understand the Quranic concepts of Zakat, Sadaqat, and Jizya...please read my brief essay:

[see Malaysian Insider article](#)

\*Action Plan: wherever you reside in the world. pay your taxes, fund empowering charity programs for the disadvantaged, vote for leaders who will be honest custodians of the national treasury, and be generous with your surplus.

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**[Why did God create Evil? and other existential questions](#)**

WHY DOES GOD CREATE EVIL? WHY DID GOD PUT US TO A TEST? If Free Will can lead us to trouble, then why did He grant this to us? Why did we not have a choice in the matter? Why did humankind have to leave Heaven only to find their way back? These are existential questions that trouble inquisitive minds. Let's explore them one by one.



### 1) The Creation of Evil:

God does not create evil. He is no more responsible for our evil than a parent who has given a normal child all the best upbringing but then the child falls into a life of crime regardless.

4:79: "Allah never creates evil. Things and events have good and evil aspects. When you act according to the Law of Allah the results are pleasant, and when you act against the Law the results are unpleasant (42:30). So whatever good happens to you is from Allah, and whatever evil happens to you is from yourself. We have sent you as a Messenger to mankind and Allah is Sufficient as Witness." (Quran as it Explains Itself, by Dr. Shabbir Ahmed)

### 2) Are we predestined?

No. We are not predestined but are born with a potential (taqdeer).

25:2: "He is the One Who creates all things in precise design and gives them the potential (taqdeer) to become what they are meant to be."

Qadar or Taqdeer (in the original Quraish dialect Arabic of Prophet Muhammad (S)) denote the potential of all things appointed by God. And man determines his own destiny by following those laws.

### 3) Was Man really in Paradise before being expelled?

There are many verses referring to ideal societies as "Paradise" on Earth, and Hell is sometimes used as a metaphor for earthly "hellish" societies:

2:25: "And convey happy news to those who have chosen to be graced with belief, and have done acts of service to humanity. Plush gardens with rivulets flowing underneath! When they are provided with the delicious fruit of their deeds therein, they will say, "This is the provision we were given before (on Earth)."

6:6: "We had established them on earth more firmly than you, and We gave them plenty of blessings of the heavens and the earth, abundant showers from the sky and rivers flowing beneath them..."

9:49: "Of them is he who says, "Grant me leave, and draw me not into trial." Have they not fallen into trial already? In fact, Hell is all around the disbelievers."

Hence, the story of Adam (from "Udema", a creature capable of living in a community) and his spouse and their giving in to Iblis/Satan (evil/selfish desires), and being expelled from "Paradise" is best understood as an allegory of the first civilized community of humans who fell into selfish sectarianism and divided like branches of a tree. They hence lost their "Paradise" or Ideal Society, likely sometime in the Neolithic (early civilized man) Era. The Quran clearly indicates that Adam and his wife were part of an entire community:

2:38: "We said, "ALL (an entire community, not just two people) of you have degraded yourselves from your Paradise (ideal society)."

4) Why was humankind not asked permission or given a choice before being created?

Did you ever ask your parents why they gave birth to you? No. He need not get our permission but does give us some of the reason for our existence: to realize our potential. Please read on.

5) The Gifts (and burdens) of Free Will and Reason:

Unlike any other creature, humans have free will and the capacity to reason:

15:29: "And when I have perfected him in due proportion and breathed into him something of My Energy, bow before him." (That something will be the gift of free will, the ability to make decisions (76:3))."

Free Will and Reason can lead to good and bad consequences depending on how we use them. There are two allegories in the Quran, one showing the good, the other the bad side. Please note that the Quran, which is the highest standard of Classical Arabic language, is rich with symbolism, allegories, and metaphors. Note also that Reason is the key to understanding which verse is allegorical and which verse is literal.

2:26: "Behold, Allah does not shy away from citing any kind of allegory, even of an insect. Since the believers exercise reason, they know that it is the Truth from their Lord. On the other hand, those who have chosen to disbelieve, try to ridicule by saying, "What could Allah mean to teach by this similitude?" Thus His Law of guidance lets go astray many and shows the Way to many. (But note) He never lets go astray except those who drift away from Reason."

a) The first allegory (appearing only 3 verses after 2:26) demonstrates the great potential humankind has due to Free Will and Reason:

2:30-1: "He announced His Plan to the angels (the entities that are responsible for all "invisible" natural laws including death, recording deeds, gravity, internuclear forces, aerodynamics, etc.), "Behold, I am about to place a creation in the earth that will inherit it." They exclaimed, "Will you place on it such creation as will cause disorder therein and shed blood! Whereas we strive to establish Your glory in the Universe and make it manifest that You Lord are Impeccable!" He

answered, "Behold, I know that which you know not. Then Allah endowed mankind with the capacity to attain knowledge (that the angels would never have). Then He showed the angels certain things and said to them, "Tell me if you have the capacity to learn about things in the Universe, in case what you say is true." (That this new creation is but vain).

b) The second allegory, in 33:72, warns of the dangers of Free Will. This verse confuses many since it is taken literally. But note, it is allegorical and contrasts the IMMENSE heavens, earth, and mountains, (which obviously never had free will, reason, or a choice) with the TINY humans who often rebel against Divine Laws by exercising their Free Will negatively.

33:72: "Verily, We did offer the trust of compliance to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains and they, being fearful, breach not what is entrusted upon them. Yet man, with his free will, is the only one who breaches this trust of compliance. For, verily, he wrongs himself without knowing it."

6) Why does God test us?

When a math teacher puts an exam before you, you are actually TESTING YOURSELVES to see your progress.

67:2: "He has created death and life to let you go through diverse circumstances, and thus distinguish for yourselves who would do better. He is Almighty, the Absolver of imperfections."

29:2: "Do people think that they will be left (at ease) simply because they say, "We believe", and will not be put to a test?"

2:155: "(Adversity is a great barometer of the strength of personality.) Fear, hunger, loss of wealth, loss of life and devastation of crops are examples of adversities that let you test your mettle. Our Law will let you try yourselves with such tribulations. Hence, give glad tidings to those who remain proactively steadfast."

7) What is the Meaning of Life?

To realize our potential as individuals and communities on this Earth...and the Hereafter.

38:27: "We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in vain - without meaning and purpose. Such is the assumption of those who disbelieve. (10:4), (11:7), (45:22), (53:31). Woe from the Fire to those who deny the Truth!"

45:22: "God has created the heavens and earth with a definite purpose, and in order that every 'self' may be compensated for what it has earned. And no injustice will be done to them."

84:19: "That you will traverse higher and higher from one plane to another. (Civilizations will keep advancing in sciences, and individuals will always have a chance to grow in goodness. Furthermore, evolution of the 'Self' will carry on in the life to come)."

For me not knowing the purpose of life beyond realizing our potential as individuals and communities, does not nullify all the other Guidance of the Quran. If there is a higher purpose, I will be fine to wait to discover it later or in Hereafter. Let's just try to get there in good shape. Otherwise we face a barrier of stagnation called "Jahannum" where we will have all the answers but benefit no



more from them.

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## An Open Letter to a Traditionalist Muslim Friend



AN OPEN LETTER TO A TRADITIONALIST FRIEND describing Quran-based reform:

The following is my communication with a friend which you guys may find useful in understanding the Qurancentric viewpoint of reform.

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Salaam,

I am sending this email summarizing and clarifying my points as promised. Your open-mindedness and willingness to research is very refreshing.

1) Background:

My father, Dr. Shabbir Ahmed (Florida) is a learned man (call him scholar if you wish) of Classical Urdu, Persian, Iqbaliyat, and Quranic Arabic who has written 50+ books about Pakistan and Islamic Reform. Mashallah, he was one of the first prominent back-to-Quran reformers in America some 25 years ago. His "Criminals of Islam" created a stir worldwide in the 1990s, bluntly identifying many ancient imams/scholars as violators of Human Rights and his "Quran as It Explains Itself" exposition/translation of the Quran is free from all superstitions and oppressive rendition and it appeals to reason and humanity (you can download at [http://www.ourbeacon.com/wordpress/?page\\_id=21](http://www.ourbeacon.com/wordpress/?page_id=21)).

We are absolutely NON-SECTARIAN and come from a long-line of reformist thinkers ancient and

modern such as Jamaluddin Afghani, Mufti Muhammad Abduh, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Fazil Deeniyat, Fazil Deeniyat, Dr Ghulam Jeelani Barq, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, Allama Muhammad Asad, GA Parvez, Dr Maurice Bucaille, Allama Inayatullah Mashriqi, Allama Aslam Jairajpuri, Imam Raghieb Isfahani, Khateeb Baghdadi, Allama Shibli, Syed Sulaiman Nadawi, and other ijtehad-minded (independent thought) and Quran-first scholars who recognized false hadith and histories as the root cause of the Decline and Fall of Muslims.

## 2) Current State of the Muslim World and its Cause

The Quran repeatedly identifies human rights violations as the cause of destruction for all doomed societies. Non-Quranic beliefs from “sahih” hadith, such as death for apostasy and blasphemy, intolerance, Arabic dress code and appearance, child marriage, sex slavery, gender oppression, stoning for adultery, and superstition have all been part and parcel of the Muslim World for over 1000 years with varying degrees of expression in society. These false beliefs were entrenched by corrupt imams, kings, and the rich to control minds and hearts starting 1200 years ago. Sometimes, if the environment is depraved enough, these “sahih” hadith based beliefs become fully manifest as a hellish theocracy...witness Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, etc.

Now, you correctly stated that the hadith did not create ISIS or the Taliban. True. But, those extremists have their ideology informed not by Hitler’s Mein Kampf or Marx’s Communist Manifesto, but by Bukhari and company’s “sahih” hadith books. Identify the problem and clean it up. I published a 800 word brief essay describing just a handful of “sahih” hadith none of us would want to suffer through: [The Hadith Must be Re-examined](#).

## 3) Current Imams

You are right to state that not all traditionalist imams should be labeled the same. But, the proof is in the pudding when you have the most popular AMERICAN “authorities” stating the following:

a) One prominent scholar justifying sex slavery of women POWs, not considering that returning them to their homes is a possibility: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9cDJTVbQEc> and defending death for apostasy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpyyXcogAPg>

b) A popular “shaykh” justifying death for blasphemy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoFbbIgAcbk> and his website declares all the ancient scholars “Champions of Islam” regardless of their perverse beliefs.

c) Another imam who is claiming to exorcise demons in Memphis, TN! All the while charging fees for it and collecting all sorts of donations [in this video](#).

d) they all promote the Arab dress code and appearance as some sort of “Islamic” costume

e) Worst of all, all of them to varying degrees block and speak against true reform of entrenched false traditions that destroy Human Rights and Reason. Their views may evolve with time, but in the meanwhile they are acting like Foolish Friends of Islam. It is no wonder the Quran warns:

9:34: “O You who have chosen to be graced with belief! A great many

religious leaders, rabbis, priests, monks, mullahs, yogis, and mystics devour the wealth of mankind

in falsehood, and debar them from the Path of Allah. All those who hoard up gold and silver and spend it not in the Cause of Allah, to them give tidings (O Prophet) of a painful doom.”

#### 4) Zakat and Sadaqa:

Another damaging aspect of the clergy, especially in “Muslim” countries is that they divert money into mosque expansions, madrassa classes, etc. Whereas these funds could be used to fund dedicated charity programs and small business empowerment programs, micro-loans, etc. They have no right to call their collections “zakat”, which was the money collected into ONE Central Treasury in the time of the Prophet (S) and used to build infrastructure, security, education, welfare, everything needed to allow citizens to “grow” (“zaku”, “growth”) to their potential. No imam can circulate wealth to fulfill these societal needs. It is a government function. The income and welfare taxes we pay are the only equivalent of Zakat now. (Note: hadith limit Zakat to 2.5%, but not the versatile Quran)

Above and beyond the duty of Zakat (the tax) is all that is surplus of our needs which the Quran tells us should be kept moderate. That giving is called “sadaqat” or charity as defined in 9:60.

Note, that Western Republics have efficient tax bases (30-60%) that circulate wealth effectively to provide Welfare and Equal Opportunity, hence the need for charity to survive is minimal in the West, whereas in “Muslim” countries the tax base is corrupted by irresponsible citizens and thief politicians. All the while the thousands of masjids are rife with “zakat” and “saqada” funds. The citizens feel they have fulfilled “God’s Right” (by depositing funds at the mosque) which is more important to them than honestly paying taxes to the government or funding empowerment programs. Charity never can eliminate poverty, only central funds invested into education, jobs and infrastructure backed by welfare safety nets produce lasting results. That is the wisdom of the Quranic Zakat.

For reference on original purpose of Zakat, Saqadat and the supposed tax on non-Muslims called Jizya, see my 800 word brief published essay: [The Quran Calls for Coexistence](#).

#### 5) Human Rights, God’s Rights, and the supposed 5 Pillars

The Quran in no way distinguishes Rights of God from Human Rights. Here is a telling verse that directly tells us that God’s Right is equal to the Rights of Man:

6:141: He it is Who creates Bounties for you, such as gardens that are cultivated, greens that are wild, palm trees of various kinds, crops in diversity, olives and pomegranates, fruits that are similar and diverse. Enjoy them, but give Him His Right. Render the poor what is their Divine Right, on the day of the harvest. Do not waste the Bounty of Allah. He does not love the wasteful.

This false dichotomy between God’s Right and Human Rights was created over a millennium ago so that the clergy could introduce concepts into Islam to exercise mind-numbing control while destroying human rights. The biggest such fabricated concept is the 5 pillars of Islam. As Ghamidi sahab pointed out at his seminar, and many reformers are aware, Shahada, Ritual Prayers, 2.5% charity, Fasting, Hajj are nowhere listed as the central tenets or “pillars of Islam” in the Quran, but were established via Bukhari hadith. These ritual actions are mentioned in the Quran (not as pillars), but what about more important societal concepts stressed repeatedly throughout the Quran, such

as: Justice, Ethics, Jihad (internal and external), Human Rights, Reason, Understanding the Quran, Fighting Oppression and Upholding the Good.

Indeed, if there is a “pillar” of Islam, it is the ENTIRE QURAN which even our most intelligent Muslims do not wish to comprehend. Why should they, when they have been nurtured to believe that if they do these rituals they are good Muslims...end of story. Even ISIS and Taliban are better at those rituals than we are. Are they good Muslims? Who will challenge an oppressive interpretation if the right to Reason and to stand for Justice is blurred by the shadow of the 5 pillars? This is the millennium old system created by corrupt imams and paranoid caliphs bearing bitter fruit to this day.

6) Is it not good enough to just be a good person, not hurt people, and just do the ritual stuff? Reform is difficult...

I wrote an essay entitled, “No Comment” (<http://quranaissance.com/no-comment/>) last year and I was told it brought some people to tears. In it, I described the silence of the passive Muslim majority in the face of terrible Human Rights violations occurring in the name of Islam the world over. I quoted this verse:

81:8-9: “And when the little girl that was buried alive is made to ask for what crime she was slain.”

In my understanding, that little girl represents all the oppressed who ever lived. They will testify against all the oppressors and also all of those who stood silently by with “no comment”. My conscience is clear that for all my imperfections, I will not have to face these victims in the Hereafter. As people with resources, intelligence, and freedom of expression, it is our duty to do our part against this injustice.

7) The Impact of Reform

I am happy that after 4 years, there are several dozen people in Orlando that have adopted reformist thinking at least partially by my efforts and well over a hundred in my estimation that have begun to at least think. Beyond Orlando, the back to Quran reform movement has millions of supporters worldwide gathering momentum. There was a time that I would advise you to be discreet with this communication. Not so any more. I do not fear defamation or even worse any longer. Please share as you wish.

8) You asked. “Is Music Haram?”

Rest assured that Music is not forbidden in the Quran. The hadith are all over the place for and against music. That is why they can never achieve the stature of the Quran which states:

4:82: “Will they not then, try to understand this Qur’an? If it were from other than Allah they would surely have found in it much contradiction.”

Traditionalists refer to verse 31:6 to ban music, claiming “frivolous narrations” refers to music and poetry:

31:6: “But among men there is many a one that prefers “frivolous narrations” (LAHWAL HADITH), so as to lead [those] without knowledge astray from the path of God, and to turn it to ridicule. For

such there is shameful suffering in store.”

But “lahwal hadith” are not a reference to music! But, rather senseless narrations of any kind, such as this one:

“The Prophet said, ‘If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him!’” (Sahih Bukhari Vol 4, Book 52, No. 260).

Music IS mentioned favorably in the Quran but the traditional translations hide the reference:

Surah 34:13 “They worked for (Solomon) as he desired, making (JIFANIN KALJAWAB) forts, statues, sculptures, paintings, music instruments, images, pools, and boilers well-dug into the ground.”  
JIFANIN KALJAWAB = Any work of utility or enjoyment and entertainment; Jiff: stringed music instrument

Surah 30:15: “As for those who attained belief and fulfilled the needs of others, they will be made happy in a meadow of delight listening to beautiful music.” (Hibr = delightful music, in the original Quraish Arabic dialect of the Prophet (S)).

Forbidding things not made unlawful is a serious offense!

7:32: “Say, “Who has forbidden the beauty and nice things Allah has brought forth for His servants, and the pure clean things of your choice?”

5:87: “O You who have chosen to be graced with belief! Do not deprive yourselves of the good things of life that Allah has made Lawful to you. But commit no excesses.

Salaam and Regards...see you at the concert!

Fawad

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## [#ISLAM: Explaining Islam to Teens and Tweens](#)

The Universe is submitted to a set of scientific laws:  
Islam



Starting in the “tween” years (age 11-12), children can be quite inquisitive about many things, including our belief system. So what is the best approach to take for explaining Islam to them? I suggest the rational one. After all, the Quran claims that it is a Message grounded in Reason which educated people understand best:

*12:108: “Say, ‘This is my way, resting my call upon insight accessible to reason, I am calling you all to God...”*

*3:190-1: “In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day, there are signs for men and women of understanding who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down, who reflect on the creation of the heavens and earth: ‘Our Lord! You have not created all this without purpose...”*

*29:43: “And so We cite examples for mankind, but the ones of knowledge will make best use of their intellect.”*

Now keep in mind the sobering reality that by 6th grade, your child will know more Science and History than you. The good news is that you can use the child’s insight to your advantage by explaining Islam using concepts from their school curriculum. In this way, you will connect the Message with their minds and hearts. You will shortly see that so rational is the Quran that no leaps of imagination are required to make these connections.

First of all, explain Islam to your child as “Deen”, not simply religion. The closest translation of Deen in English is “way of life” or “system of governance”. Secondly, note that according to the Quran, all of Creation has been submitted (except humankind, which has a choice) to a system of Divine Laws called “Islam” since the Universe began:

*24:41: “Do you not realize that Allah, He it is Whom all beings in the heavens and the earth glorify, and the birds, with their wings outspread, as they fly in columns. All of them know their salat (mission) and tasbeeh (strife). Allah is Aware of what they do to fulfill His Plan.”*

*55:5-7: “The sun and moon run by mathematical design, the stars and trees do sajdah (submit) to Him, and the sky has He raised high and He has kept perfect balance.”*

\*Take careful note of these terms salat, tasbeeh, and sajdah. Usually considered religious functions, here in these verses referring to Nature, they have obviously been used figuratively. Salat means “following closely” or “connection”, tasbeeh is related to the word sabh, and means “to swim with great strides” or “to strive”, and sajdah means to “adore” or “submit”. Hence, all of Nature is connected to, striving in, and submitting to a set of Divine Laws known as Islam (Submission). And that is why the Universe runs in such harmony.

With this understanding in mind, your child will appreciate all scientific laws of Physics, Biology, Chemistry, etc. as God’s purposeful handiwork. He will also realize a dynamic circulation of resources to wherever there is need in diverse processes such as the water cycle and food chain.

But, the question still remains, “Why?” Why the need for this balance and circulation of resources in the Universe? The following verse after 55:7 gives us the answer:

*55:8: “(He has kept perfect Universal balance) So that you, too, never violate balance (justice) in*

*your lives."*

Based on this verse, it seems that God has created the Universe as an immense demonstration project showing us how to achieve harmony: by establishing a just, balanced system similar to the one He has created in Nature. Ever since humankind became civilized, this basic message of Islam has been delivered repeatedly in various books, until its final codification in the Quran. This Message can be understood as establishing Justice at different levels listed below (along with relevant recurrent themes of the Quran):

1) Personal Level: all good actions, beliefs, and certain rituals promote the nafs (personality) and all actions and beliefs that degrade the personality (such as ascribing partners to God: whether idols, other people, or even one's ego [45:23]) are an injustice and degradation of one's nafs (3:135, 7:23, etc.).

2) Societal Level: a balanced society promotes and upholds interpersonal justice (ethics), such as fair business practices, responsibility, and courtesy. Such a society enjoins the good and forbids the bad.

3) State Level: just governments establish rule of law, uphold human rights, and promote circulation of resources by providing equal opportunity and welfare systems.

\*Note: as your child studies History in parallel with the Quran, he will realize that those nations and individuals which best upheld these values succeeded, whereas those who opposed these values suffered the consequences.

In summary, this approach should provide a framework for explaining Islam to your child in a manner which not only connects rationally, but also stimulates a positive relationship dynamic. It requires that you take a deep interest in their school curriculum as well as read the Quran regularly with them. Emphasizing understanding is the key. (Note: although Arabic is important, regular Quranic discussion in a language which your child understands is crucial). It is best to start this journey with them when the learning curve is still exponential...but remember, it's never too late to review the basics!

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**"The Dignity of Adam", a Quran-based inspirational**



In the Name of God, the Most Beneficent, Most Merciful



One of the most memorable stories of my high school days is from T.H. White's "The Once and Future King". In it, a badger explains to the future King Arthur why Man has supremacy over all creation:

As God was completing His creation, He gave the entire Animal Kingdom a chance to choose tools for themselves. The Eagle chose wings and talons to fly and snatch its prey. The Lion chose sharp teeth and claws to rule the land. The Fish chose fins to swim about freely. The Badger chose garden forks as its hands to explore the earth. Finally, only Adam was left to make a choice. After deep reflection, he requested, "Please God, leave me with my feeble hands so that I can make whatever I need for myself." His request was granted, and soon enough Adam became master over all creation.

A similar allegory is in the Holy Quran in 2:30-2:31:

When God announced his plan to place Man as viceroy on Earth, the angels, anxiously proclaimed, "Will you place on it a creation that will cause disorder and shed blood (with his Free Will)?! Whereas we strive to establish Your glory in the Universe (in total submission)."

Then God overruled the angels' concerns and showed them that Adam had the capacity to learn. The Quran refers to this potential (17:70) as the Dignity of Adam.

Unfortunately, the world is wired such that we adults forget that learning is not restricted to schooling. At what time in our busy working lives do we relegate this capacity to learn, this Dignity, to our children, retaining precious little for ourselves? It's as if we diverge from the path of Adam onto that of eagles, lions, and badgers. Perhaps every few years you youngsters should celebrate the endeavors of learning that we adults undertake, on this very stage. What an honorable event that would be. But, most certainly I digress...

With that I congratulate you, Dear Graduate on your well-deserved and hard-earned graduation party. Please keep learning, teaching, and sharing with us for years to come. And let this celebration serve as a reminder that learning is not a phase in life but rather the meaning of life itself. It is the Dignity of Adam.

Congratulations and God bless you,

## The Reformation of Muslim Thought: is Javed Ghamidi's Al-Mawrid the Answer?

Last week, I had the privilege of attending Pakistani scholar Javed Ghamidi's Q&A event in Orlando, FL. Many Muslim "moderates" see his organization, Al-Mawrid as a lighthouse in these Muslim Dark Ages. I have prepared an analysis of the event and my humble opinion regarding Mr. Ghamidi's approach to Islamic Thought. Let me begin by stating other scholars should take note of this gentleman's pleasant demeanor. Mr. Ghamidi is as humble and lighthearted as he is a powerhouse of Islamic knowledge. A local masjid boycott and armed guards at the event served as stark reminders of the times. Thankfully, the session proceeded without incident. This is an open letter and will be shared with Al-Mawrid and the event organizers. I have cited my father, Dr. Shabbir Ahmed's works in this essay for supportive position. He is a non-sectarian reformist scholar and exponent of the Quran based in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

- **Ijtihad vs. Taqlid:** Mr. Ghamidi is a staunch proponent of *ijtihad* (independent thought). Ascribing to no traditional school of thought himself, he denounces blind following of traditional interpretations. He identified the role of the *Ulema* (scholars) as educated interpreters, not Messengers or final authorities. He criticized the majority of Muslims who often fall for false traditions masquerading as Islam. He stated emphatically that without debate, progress is stifled and sects are created.
- **Qurancentric not "Quranist":** It is obvious that Mr. Ghamidi upholds the Quran as the primary source of guidance, whereas many scholars who claim to do so allow false traditions to becloud Quranic teachings. He made it clear however, that contrary to misconceptions he respects all hadith that are in line with the Quran.
- **Reformation:** Mr. Ghamidi believes a Reformation of Muslim Thought is needed, not a Reformation of Islam. The Quran is indeed versatile enough for all times.
- **Reason and Science:** Mr. Ghamidi chided Muslims for placing undue emphasis on recitation, repetition, and rote memorization of the Quran at the expense of understanding and application. He is also a strong supporter of the Sciences provided that ethics are respected. He remarked that God's changeless Divine Laws underpin all Science and indiscriminately reward seeking minds, Muslim or non-Muslim alike.
- **Human Rights:** Mr. Ghamidi opposes many oppressive interpretations and false traditions that allow for blasphemy and apostasy laws and human rights violations committed under the name of Islam.
- **Arts and Aesthetics:** Mr. Ghamidi cited aesthetic sense as God's gift to mankind and considers clean expression of the Arts permissible by the Quran.
- **Superstitions and Trivial Pursuits:** "The more enlightened the people, the less jinn are seen in the village", quote of the night by Mr. Ghamidi. Though he gently censured the audience for trivial preoccupations, the beard and nail polish questions trickled in throughout the night. He identified the beard as a *cultural practice* of the Prophet (S) and even His enemies, and hence, not an Islamic requirement.
- **Predestination:** Mr. Ghamidi asserted that though one can not control all factors in life, as creatures of Free Will, we are fully answerable for our actions. Further expanding on this concept, I would add that "Taqdeer" and "Qadr", often mistranslated as "predestination", actually mean "potential" or "power" in the original Quranic Arabic (see footnote 1). For example, see 25:2: "He is the One Who creates all things in precise design and gives them the

potential (taqdeer) to become what they are meant to be.”

- **Pluralism:** Mr. Ghamidi believes in equal rights and responsibilities for non-Muslims in a Muslim country. Furthermore, he stated rightfully that charity should be given on basis of need, not religion. (I would like to point out that the Quran remarkably refers to non-Muslims as “Brothers in Deen”, provided they fulfill simple conditions in a Muslim state (please see my brief essay in footnote 2). He also denounced the division of the world into *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* as a toxic, non-Quranic innovation.
- **Decline and Fall:** Mr. Ghamidi cited two causes for the current state of Muslims: 1) lack of scientific endeavors and 2) decline in ethics. With due respect, I consider these two side effects rather than root causes of our Decline and Fall, which I propose are: 1) *Human Rights Violations*, which every destroyed nation mentioned in the Quran met its fate for (see footnote 3) and 2) *Blind Following* of false, oppressive traditions under the name of Islam. These missteps have Muslims suffering under the Divine Law of Failure for the past 500 years.
- **The “Pillars” of Islam:** Mr. Ghamidi mentioned in passing that the “pillars” concept is not from the Quran, though its five components (Shahada, Salat, Zakat, Hajj, Abstinence) are *certainly* important. I would agree with him on this. I must also ask the Reader: is the undue traditional emphasis on these five concepts not the cause of Muslims ignoring the equally important Quranic values of Reason, Justice, forbidding evil and enjoining good, Jihad (internal/external), etc.? Is the entire Quran not the Pillar of Islam? Why bother even to understand the Quran if we can carry out 5 rituals and wash our hands of this obligation?
- **Gender Equity:** Mr. Ghamidi expressed progressive views regarding women’s rights. However, I must respectfully disagree with his understanding that the Quran allows for polygamy if a society chooses to enact it (though he did state the default should be monogamy). In fact, the Quran restricts polygamy only to times of societal upheaval when the well-being of widows and orphans is at risk:

4:3: If you fear (that the society) shall not be able to do justice with orphans, in order to accommodate widows and orphans, men of sound finances and character shall be encouraged to marry these widows; two, three, and four (4:127). If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly, then you must not take additional wives, and may continue with what you already have (4:129). This will prevent injustice and financial hardship (see footnote 1).

(Note: these were the conditions in which the Prophet (S) and Companions took on multiple wives, when many Muslim men had been slain and there was a need to accommodate their widows and orphans.)

- **Scope and Purpose of Islam:** Mr. Ghamidi correctly pointed out that “spirituality” is a generic concept rather than Islamic and that the aim of the Quran is to positively develop the *nafs* (personality). He cited the traditional definition of *tazkiya-un-nafs* as “self-purification” and that the purpose of Islam and mission of its Messengers was to purify individuals. I would like to offer an alternative understanding. *Tazkiya* comes from the word *zaku*, meaning “to purify” or “growth”. Hence, *tazkiya-un-nafs* can be understood as “growth of the self” or “self-actualization” (just as *zakat* [also from *zaku*] circulates wealth to allow all individuals to self-actualize). The Purpose of Islam is *not simply to purify individuals*, but to create a society of Justice, Human Rights, Ethics, Equal Opportunity, and a Moral Code, in which every individual can self-actualize to their full potential. Deen is not defined as religion, but as a *way of life and governance*. Is it any wonder that every single Messenger was opposed so mightily by decadent rulers, the corrupt elite, and the priesthood (see footnote 3)? Their mission extended far beyond the personal level and shook the pillars of corrupt societies, and is well expressed here:

7:157: ...(The Messenger) enjoins upon them the Right, and forbids them the Wrong. He declares Lawful all good things, and declares Unlawful only the unclean things. He relieves people from the burdens they carried. He *breaks the shackles* that they used to wear, (of mental and physical slavery), and brings them from darkness to Light.

I understand that many colleagues will recoil at a Quranic understanding seeming to promote an “Islamic State”. But, note two points:

1) Current “Islamic” Republics and extremist groups are not following Quranic Islam, but rather an “Islam No. 2” beclouded by false, intolerant, oppressive traditions. That is why a Reformation of Muslim Thought is the need of the hour.

2) Living in a Western Republic, you do not have to do much to realize Islamic values at different levels: personal, societal, or governmental. Has the Light of Deen not been spreading imperceptibly throughout the world since the time of Adam as promised in the Quran?

9:32: They seek to extinguish Allah’s Light by their utterances (61:8). But Allah will not allow this to pass, for He has Willed to spread His Light in all its fullness even though the rejecters may detest it. He it is Who has sent His Messenger with Guidance and the True Deen (The System of Life), that He may cause it to prevail over all religions and systems of life.

Hence, we Muslims should not consider Western democracies as totally un-Islamic. Actually, these republics uphold Quranic principles such as freedom of religion and expression (2:256), equality before the law (4:135), presumption of innocence (49:6), gender equity (4:32, 33:35), social safety nets (9:60), rule of law (33:60), and strong ethics (70:21-70:33) better than our homelands. People naturally gravitate toward places that uphold Quranic values, just as the Prophet (S) moved to Medina from Mecca during the oppressive early years of His mission. (Certainly, there are shortcomings in the West in morality and foreign policy we should try to correct with our freedom of expression and voting rights.) As Mr. Ghamidi pointed out, God’s Divine Laws are changeless and will reward any who align with them, regardless of labels. Let the Reformation of Muslim Thought take hold right here: in a free, ethical society.

In conclusion, in an age when Islam is considered a system of blind following, superstitions, and human rights violations such as blasphemy laws, stoning, sex slavery, child marriage, and obliteration of the Arts, most Muslim organizations (even American-based) are either defensive about or even justifying these atrocious traditions. In contrast, Javed Ghamidi’s *Al-Mawrid* is brave enough to stand for Quran-based Human Rights and Reason. Let us return to the question at hand: is *Al-Mawrid* the Answer to the Reformation of Muslim Thought? In my educated opinion, it should be a part of it. We will continue to do our part. Please do your part and also support *Al-Mawrid* to your capacity.

**Note:** I have offered my humble, educated observations as a Student of the Quran. Feedback is welcome.

References (all searchable for free download on the internet):

1. The Quran as it Explains Itself, Quran translation by Dr. Shabbir Ahmed.
  2. “The Quran Calls for Coexistence not Clash”, *Malaysian Insider*, by Fawad Ahmed
  3. A History of Prophets, by Dr. Shabbir Ahmed
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