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THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY:

ISLAM FROM WITHIN

MUHAMMAD IQBAL

The massive movement of people of different nations, races, and religions to Europe has given rise to both economic and moral problems. 'Not least amongst these concerns is that which derives from the creation of substantial enclaves of Muslims in what were hitherto predominantly Christian societies. In most cases there is not only a difference of faith but there is, combined with it, a difference of race, often accompanied by colour', writes Edwin Barker.¹ This could be the reason that many and various studies on the religion of Islam and the Muslims are under way for better understanding of varying human experience. No matter where Muslims reside, the basic principles of Islam remain unchanged and the Muslim way of life soon becomes obvious. Here are some basic characteristics of the Muslim community, which may be of some use before embarking on a detailed study.

Faith and Principles

Belief. Islam² meaning literally 'submission to the Will of Allah' (the personal name for God) is, to Muslims³ (the followers of Islam), the sum total of certain beliefs and duties. As to the beliefs the Prophet Muhammad⁴ (may Allah bless him), the founder of Islam, himself explained to a questioner: 'Thou shalt believe in the one God,⁵ in His angelic messengers, in His revealed Books,⁶ in His Prophets,⁷ in the Day of Judgment, and discrimination of good and evil by God'. Duties are of three kinds; duties towards (a) Allah, (b) Self, and (c) Others, and are explained in the very opening verses of the Holy Qur'an (the Muslim's religious Book—the collection of Allah's revelations upon the Prophet Muhammad). 'This is the Scripture where there is no doubt, it is a guide to those who ward off (evil), who believe in the unseen, and establish worship and spend of that we have bestowed upon them'.⁸

What are we to say of Allah Who created us and bestowed the blessings of the world upon us? It is commonly acknowledged that we feel obliged to people who show any gesture of goodwill. To the Creator we must show our incessant gratitude and love by worshipping Him.

Salat, Zakat, and Hajj. *Salat* (prayers) are made obligatory⁹ for His remembrances¹⁰ and peace of one's soul from indecencies and evil.¹¹ Sharing of one's wealth with the poor is essentially a practical demonstration of love for His creatures and takes the form of *Zakat*, 'poor tax'—another obligatory duty of a Muslim. Similar obligation is *Hajj*—the pilgrimage to the Holy Places in Saudi Arabia. This divests the man of money and fosters better human relations.

Saum. Another of the duties is *Saum*, fasting, for the full lunar month of Ramadhan whereby the piety of soul is reaped by physical weakening of one's body.¹²

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The Prophet Muhammad spoke of Islam thus: 'Islam is founded on five things: To bear witness that there is none worthy of worship but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; to establish prayer; to pay the prescribed Charity; to fast during Ramadhan; and to perform the Pilgrimage to the Ka'aba, the House of Allah in Mecca, if one has means of doing so'. The details regarding the discharging of the purely devotional and religious duties of a Muslim to Allah referred to as the fundamental principles of Islam have been discussed elsewhere.¹³

Duties and Doctrines

The details about the duties towards 'Self' and 'Others' are mutually dependent, contained in the Holy Qur'an and explained in the *Hadith*, the collection of the temporal sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. *Ijma* (agreement) of the Muslim community as the basis of the discharging of minute aspects of duties is the next guide to Islamic activities. Failing to find the direct example in the Qur'an or the Hadith, the Qiyas (analogy) is applied to solve all new problems.

Islamic Jurisprudence. The interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadith by different schools of thought culminated into Islamic Jurisprudence. Four teachings Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali named after the founder jurists are acceptable to all Muslims throughout the world (1/7 to 1/6 of the world population). The schools of law do differ from one another on certain issues but it is based purely on the degree of devotion to the Islamic doctrines. Naturally enough this has given rise to different sects in Islam. Basically they all believe in the unity of Godhead,⁵ Allah the Rabb-al-Alameen¹⁴ (the Nourisher of the worlds), finality of the Prophethood¹⁵ on Muhammad and Allah's revelations¹⁶ upon mankind.

Developing of Umma. Besides the devotional teaching of Islam, the Qur'an has laid down in unambiguous terms that which is good and bad. Every human being is responsible for his or her actions alone.¹⁷ A Muslim believes in predestination but he does not divorce his free will in his actions either. For to lead a successful pious life the guidelines are there preserved in their original form in the Qur'an—the guidelines which the followers of the previous Prophets expected constantly. And excluding the first four rightly guided Caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali who ruled the *Umma* (the Muslim Community) for thirty years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (632 A.D.) religiously, the Islamic traditions and brotherhood were looked after better by the Saints of Islam like Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali¹⁸ (Iraq—*d.* 1111 A.D.), Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani (Persia—*d.* 561 A.D.), and Sheikh Ahmad Sarhindi (India—*d.* 1590 A.D.) than most of the political leaders. Haroon-al-Rashid (*d.* 809 A.D.), Umar-bin-Abdul Aziz (*d.* 720 A.D.), and Aurangzeb Alamgir (*d.* 1707 A.D.), and others were, of course, true Muslim rulers equipped with Islamic characteristics of courage, truthfulness, and kindness.

Social Teachings of Islam

As a multi-religious society such as that seen in the U.K. (1.5 million Muslims, C.O.I. 1968) it is useful to know about the Mosques, the Victorian terrace houses converted into institutes of worship where regular prayers

are said, but it is better still to find out more about Muslims as a social and cultural community. The upholding of the duties is obligatory. Failing to do so amounts to committing a sin which is forgivable by Allah only if the offended individual concerned pardons the offender—such a great stress is laid on honest social intercourse in Islam.

Man and woman relations. Unless one is invalid, marriage is obligatory to all Muslim men and women. Poverty and celibacy^{19, 20} are no excuse. A woman cannot marry a non-Muslim. A man may marry a Christian or Jew but no one else.²¹ The careful selection of a would-be-wife is essential for further growth and building up of the character of the offspring.²² Polygamy²³ is allowed but the terms are so difficult²⁴ to maintain fairly that the jurists recommend only monogamy.

Marriage is regarded as a social contract between a man and a woman. The latter is fully entitled to fix the terms of the marriage and above all the dowry²⁵ which remains her sole possession. Marriage may be annulled²⁶ at the request of either party although divorce is not encouraged.

The parents hold a unique and superior position in the family. They must be respected (unless they profess polytheism²⁷—a sickness in Islam). The idea of birth control on grounds of poverty is denounced and much stress is laid on chastity. Free mixing²⁸ of men and women (except near relations) is not allowed, to lessen the risk of promiscuity. In ladies' dress habits they should disguise their bodies rather than emphasise them, and the same goes for the menfolk.

When death approaches, it is insisted that a will should be made in the presence of witnesses. Something must be bequeathed to parents and near relations.²⁹ Female children receive half the male's share, a fact which has received much criticism. Economic opportunities for women as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers are immense and social protections numerous. In the final analysis women are, in fact, better off financially than men. To maintain the family is the sole responsibility of the man. 'For women have rights over men similar to those of men over women', says the Qur'an.³⁰ Muslim women had the right to their own property ever since the birth of Islam.

Universal Brotherhood. Whatever the sociologist's definition of the term race may be, in very easy language it is taken to mean a group of individuals with the same blood, language, living in the same geographical conditions and inter related. Division into races as mentioned in the Qur'an³¹ has been for no other reason than to reveal the diversified nature of God's creation and make us see that despite all our differences, in the eyes of God we are equal. Only in goodness, piety, and generosity may we rise in supremacy. Islam offers equal opportunity to acquire all these character traits without any regard for colour, race, sex or inheritance. The Prophet Muhammad's famous Farewell Address is still preserved as the best fourteen centuries old human rights code for modern man. In the Address it was mentioned that no Arab was superior to a non-Arab except on the grounds of piety, thus obliterating distinction on the basis of race.

The narrations on racial equality were not just words with little action. They were, in fact, often put into practice in the form of five fundamental principles of Islam. Muslims pray together in the Mosque five times a day,

gather in thousands at Mecca every year, utter the common formula, give away *Zakat*, and stop idle talk, slandering, and backbiting whilst fasting in order to maintain a common bondage to God and a brotherhood between people of all races.

Charity. Charity, other than the regular *Zakat*, i.e., almsgiving to the needy, poor, debtors, and wayfarers,³² is considered to have the same status as the saying of prayers. Charities, however small, like the feeding of the hungry, or digging a well for the poor, if given generously and anonymously, can win the friendship of God. Charity not given freely or given in order to enhance one's own prestige may earn God's displeasure. 'Charity begins at home' is very applicable to Islamic principles but a Muslim does not forget that a needful neighbour may deserve more than close relatives. Borrowing and lending of money without interest is recommended in the Qur'an. Relaxation of the time limit on a debt owed by a poor debtor or even forgiveness³³ of debt is regarded with great affection by God. Contentment over whatever materials one has and cutting short of one's ambitions is common practice among devoted Muslims. Mutual business transactions must be conducted under officially witnessed contracts. Gambling³⁴ is strictly forbidden, as it is the art of getting something without having worked for it and often depriving those who legally possess it.

Salutations. A Muslim greets his friends with the words: Assalam-o-Alaikum (peace be on you) which brings the response Wa-Alaikum-Salam (and peace be on you) without exception. When paying a visit to someone's house one should knock at the door first. If the door is open a coughing noise should bring someone to the door. Invitations to meals from relations, friends, even Christians³⁵ and Jews are always to be accepted. But what is forbidden is idle gossip and staying too long after the meals. Visiting the sick, offering condolences to bereaved families, showing affection to orphans are actions which are highly rewarded. The duties we owe to orphans are discussed in the Qur'an at great length.

Attitude to the Holy Prophet. The Prophet Muhammed was a perfect example of human behaviour, an exalted standard of character of mercy,³⁶ kindness, forgiveness,³⁷ and love. The Qur'an lays down for us rules of behaviour³⁸ such as respect, obedience, blessing, and love in the remembrance of him. No Muslim will tolerate anybody uttering words of disgrace,³⁹ doubt, and ambiguity as to the character of the Prophet or his teaching. The stories about the Prophet's companions tell of their sacrifice and love for their illustrious leader. This he deserved for he had delivered the barbaric Arabs from their sinful lives and left the universal teachings of the Qur'an for future generations.

Crimes and Punishment. Just as in the Mosaic law life was to be taken for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal so also the Qur'an enacts. Recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto in degree. But whoever exceeds the limits shall be in great trouble, for God does not love transgressors nor does He love the unjust.⁴⁰ Moreover, God loves those who forgive and forgives those who repent of evil which was done in ignorance.

Murder is, in fact, the greatest heinous crime⁴¹ and is subject to the law of equality. However, the brother of the murdered person may remit⁴² the

murder providing reasonable compensation is made to the bereaved family. Killing by mistake demands compensation, but this is subject to the wishes of the family of the deceased who may freely forgive the offender. Theft, highway robbery, adultery, and slander⁴³ are controlled by grave punishment.

Jihad. *Jihad*, meaning contending,⁴⁴ and striving against Satanic forces whether within or without oneself, is a holy war to combat hypocrisy. Fighting the enemies of Islam in the battlefield is recommended only if Muslims feel they are oppressed⁴⁵ or their religious freedom⁴⁶ is endangered. Those who succumb to double dealing should also be treated as enemies. However, there is no compulsion to accept Islam after defeat.⁴⁷ Non-Muslims should be treated as friends. Judicious division of war booty, good treatment to prisoners of war, and respect for treaties are ordered.

Jihad also appertains when one fights against the bad habits of drinking and other admonitions such as the eating of pork,⁴⁸ uncleanness, and hatred.

Islam insists on the leading of a practical well-balanced life showing no oppression to anyone and no cowardice when oppressed. The Prophet Muhammad took to the sword only when he and his followers had no other option but to fight to uphold their beliefs. This resulted in their great political achievements. When towards the end of his life Mecca was conquered, he broke the idols in the Kaaba but did not sack a single employee and forgave them all. Many a story of his humility and love for mankind are on record.

Education in Islam. Amidst the Muslim community one's educational fulfilment, it is believed, means the merging of one's will, with the Divine Will. Religion is very much an intrinsic part of the Muslim approach to life. The impact of industry is already helping to change some of their attitudes but Muslim educationists believe that religious ideals must still be sought. Children must, therefore, be equipped with the rudiments of religion for spiritual contentment and the reconciliation of inner conflict between material, political and moral values. This, in fact, is being done in the Mosque and at home. With regard to religious or cultural education in State schools Professor Kenneth Little of Edinburgh University says, 'There should be taught something about other peoples and the way they live but it would be dangerous to show them only the bizarre and the picturesque aspect of other cultures. These more obvious aspects of other cultures must be related to the total culture, and this cannot be done except with students of 5th and 6th form level'.

It is already a fact that many Muslim children in British State schools, especially girls, have been known to ask for exclusion from the Christianity-centred assembly, hesitate to change for P.E., and are reluctant to take part in swimming and music and movement. They pay regular visits to the Mosque, abstain from eating pork, and unritually killed meat, and absent themselves from school when they celebrate their festive days (Eid-al-Fitr which marks the end of the month of Ramadhan and Eid-al-Dha which remembers the near sacrifice of Ishmael). English children are quite unaware of these events.

Such are the traditions founded by the Prophet Muhammad and upheld

by his followers throughout the ages, which have characterised uniformity of the Muslim Community. Islamic brotherhood between people of different races developed a uniform Muslim culture. The serious view of life which follows from strict religious practices and the ideals of moral and physical courage is another characteristic of the Muslim community. These characteristics make the Muslim community distinct from all other communities. The effective assimilation of the surrounding culture by the community will take place only gradually and in the light of Islamic observances.

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NOTES

(Except where noted, all references are to the *Qur'an*, translated by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthal—Allen and Unwin.)

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| 5. 112: 1-4. | 27. 29: 8 and 31: 15. |
| 6. 3: 84. | 28. 24: 31. |
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| 10. 13: 28. | 32. 2: 215. |
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