

Islam: A Study by Abdul Karim

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"So many castes, so many creeds,
So many paths that wind and wind,
When just the art of being kind,
Is all this sad world needs".

THESE lines sum up the attitude, as regards religious requirements, of most earnest people; of men and women, who, outside their own reason and cultured consciences, can recognize no higher authority. To uphold kindly behaviour, an understanding helpfulness towards all, the denial of temporary pleasures for the larger good; in short, the identification of our narrower individualities with the Self of all, should be the sole and true function of religion. Its basis is the fundamental unity of all life, the visible universe being the manifestation of that One Life. Allah, Īshvara, God, we variously call *It*. In the words of the Qurān "He is the beginning and He is the end; He is the manifest and He is the unmanifest". Again: "In whatever direction you turn, there is present the face of Allah". "God alone abides". Although the highest religious thought has always thus stood for a loving association of all creatures, yet the mass of mankind have in practice largely employed religion as a tool of oppression, as a means to restricting the freedom of life, and for the purpose of emphasizing separateness, and of unreasonably exalting one community over another. As they all owe allegiance — conventional, it is true, but strongly sentimental—to one or other of the great religions, a sympathetic interpretation of their diverse creeds and scriptures, with a view to bringing out the underlying unity *in their common urge to a noble life*, divested of incrustations and non-essentials, should be of some help.

The present essay is an attempt in this direction in regard to Islām. When the construction of a building is taken in hand, a scaffolding is often found necessary; to protect a young sapling, a temporary support is useful; and in the seedling stage, a forest tree may be the better for a temporary over-head cover. Yet none of these excellent accessories are ever confounded in practice with the main, the essential objects. Useful at one stage, they are unwanted at another. This analogy is true equally of much that passes for religion in Islām, as in other faiths—much that cannot properly apply in all times and to all peoples.

What is Islām ? It is the form of faith which we owe to the great Prophet Muhammad. Some thirteen hundred years ago, a mighty Arab of noble birth felt an irresistible call to lead his people to the Light; and his inspired talks are gathered in the *Qurān*—the holy book of the Muslims. But remember that Islām does not profess to be new. "The same is in the scriptures of the ancients". It is a readaptation of the one ancient faith. The *Qurān* gives the assurance that " God did not send an Apostle but with the language of the people, so that he may explain to them clearly". The point had been reached in the world's history when the Arabic-speaking people needed spiritual helping. To quote the Holy Book: "And thus we have revealed to you an Arabic *Qurān* that you may warn the Mother City (Mecca) and those around it". "And if we had made it in a foreign tongue, they would certainly have said: "Why have not its communications been made clear ?" Let us pause and consider the tremendous significance of these verses. Had that

been better appreciated, there would not now be that exaggerated importance often attached to mere forms of belief, or modes of worship, which, though undoubtedly useful in the circumstances of their origin, are not, on that account, essential for all times and conditions. May not one rightly infer from these holy words that, beyond the fundamental truth of the one Divine Life, and its corollary of brotherly conduct, the Qurānic religion, in all its *details*, was only intended to apply to the *Arabic people*? To them alone, it was a treatise on the practice of life in all its branches as circumstance then demanded.

[Uncompromising though he was as a breaker of traditions which hamper progress, the Prophet never hesitated to impress into his service local institutions when useful, as temporary expedients in organizing the *Arabs* into a united nation. Thus the practice of kissing the black stone at Kaaba and the pilgrimage of the Haj — *essentially Arab institutions* — were retained not only as a means of promoting unity, but also *as sacred links with the past of that people*] In this connection, Mr. Syed Amir Ali has a quotation from Tirmizi, which is significant. According to it, the Prophet himself gave the assurance: "You are in an age in which if ye abandon one-tenth of what is ordered, ye will be ruined. After this a time will come when he, who will observe one-tenth of what is now ordered, will be redeemed". Did not Jalaluddin Rumi, the great Sage of Islām also say: " I take the marrow from the *Qurān* and throw the bones before dogs ?"

Who is a Muslim ? One who declares his faith in the Divine Unity and the messengership of Muhammad is a Muslim. The declaration is in the well-known form: "La-ilaha-illallah Muhammad-arrasulallah". Translated, it means: "There is none worthy of worship except Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger", Taking the first implication in this declaration and considering it in the light of the immanence of God in His world, it amounts to the obligation each of us has of worshipping, *i.e.*, identifying himself with that One Life in whatsoever manifestation, and of ceaselessly developing our understanding, so that in thought, in emotion and in action we conform to the Divine Will in evolution. It is the duty, truly, of increasing Self-realization. For is not the Muslim taught, in what is known as the "Kalme shashadat", to bear personal witness, by the truth realized in his own heart, to *the Divine Oneness without a second* ? It is a realization, be it noted, which has not remained the privilege of any chosen people or the property of any particular creed. While Mansur, the Muslim, met his martyrdom protesting "Anal-Haq", I am the Truth, the English poet Coleridge, in happier times, sang of the " One Universal breath, at once the soul of each and God of all ". And has not " Ekam advīyam Brahman," the exact equivalent of "Wahdahula sharikalahu", been proclaimed from time immemorial by the Upanishads?

Now the word "Islām" means endeavour, submission, harmony, peace. A Muslim therefore, far from standing out as a conflicting element in creation, should strenuously endeavour to identify himself with it, aim to glimpse the mighty purpose behind it; he should then undertake his own preparation — in itself a creative act — by weeding out the elements of discord in himself; and finally, he should find peace in the intuitive knowledge that, through *him*, that purpose, that plan, is. being fulfilled. "Yea, whoever submits himself to Allah and is the doer of good to others, he has his reward from his Lord, and there is no fear for him, nor shall he grieve." But be cautioned. Peace, as described here, is obviously not cessation from effort; quite the contrary. It is the result of a vision, though imperfect, of the Whole, the Eternal; it indicates a state of balance, the riddance of a sense of futility and meaningless suffering. It stands for efficiency multiplied a thousandfold and for purposefulness of life. We shall then have realized that, in truth, there is only One Will — the Divine Will — in the universe. And henceforth, we are "hand in action and heart with God". For then, in the beautiful words of the *Qurān*: " My prayer, my sacrifice, my life and death are all for Allah, the Sustainer of the Universe." (Innasalati was nuski wamahyaya wamamati lillahi rabbil-alamin.) " Because, Allah in very truth is the end of affairs."

Coining now to the second part of the Muslim article of faith, that Muhammad is God's Messenger, there can be no thinking man who will deny that the Prophet had a mighty mission, which he executed truly and well. An insistence on its belief, no doubt, had a special value in the mental and political conditions of the Prophet's times. For man's salvation, it was however not indispensable. A believer only in the unity of God, without reference to the Prophet's position, was yet a "Mumin", one who had reached safety. "God forbids the fire of hell to touch such a one", says a Hadis. "Whoever believe in Allah and the last day and do good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve", assures the *Qurān* also. A rare pearl from the Holy Book, which deserves to be better known and appreciated, is: "*It did not beseem God to have destroyed towns for wrong belief, while they were the doers of good*". The allusion is to national depravity depicted in the Hebrew scriptures, visited with divine wrath. Is not that positive proof that, in Islām, *creeds* are of less than minor importance, and *what counts is right conduct*? Consider again the Teacher's wise counsel: "Why wrangle over that which you know not. Try to excel in good works". Again, "The key to heaven (=happiness) is to testify to the truth of God (=the One Universal Love) and to do good". That is a point one cannot too strongly emphasize. That and the wonderful example of the Prophet's noble life should disarm the suspicion one associates generally with creeds and religions.

The Institutions. Of not fundamental importance then are the "institutions" of Islām. We find prescribed particular modes and times for prayer; fasting; compulsory alms; the pilgrimage of the Haj. Intended as a means "of nearness to God", of self-recollectedness and self-discipline and of promoting unity, they are magnificent for their purpose. But they are not the only means; for, says the *Qurān*, "to every nation we have appointed acts of devotion". [Muslim divines have tried, with results disastrous to the peace of the world, to narrow down the "Fellowship of Faiths" — "Peoples of the Book," as it is called in the *Qurān*—to a small group of men in Western Asia, composed of the Jews, Christians and Muslims — followers of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Such a conception, not only excludes great civilisations — India and China for instance—with their legacy of noble thought, but is entirely contrary to the spirit of the Holy Book: "And We did not send any apostles but with the language of the people"; "And We sent apostles we have not mentioned to you" "Nought is said to you but what was said indeed to the apostles before you." "The same is the scriptures of the ancients." Thus a cultured Hindu, far from remaining a stranger to the *Qurānic* Fellowship of faiths, is actually, in virtue of his belief in the One Divine Life, always a "Mumin"; and often, because of his appreciativeness of the Prophet, he is even a "Muslim". The "deva" hosts, whom he sometimes invokes, are not the equals of God but precisely the Angels in whom Muslim belief is compulsory!]

It is well to remember that the Sikh, the Brahmo and the Aryan religions in India, as also Unitarian Christianity, are in parts revitalizations of the older faiths by Muhammad's teachings.]

"It is not righteousness that you turn your face to the east or the west, but that you believe in Allah "and practise, of course, the noble virtues. An anecdote from the Prophet's life will bear this out. Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, one evening arrived late at the mosque for prayers, a thing unusual with him. It then became known that a decrepit *non-Muslim* was the cause. Ali, who had an instinctive sympathy and respect for physical weakness, and old age, would not permit himself, in the pride of manhood, to pass the non-Muslim in the street. The Prophet was struck with this act of humanity, and praised it as above a thousand devotional prayers.

Brotherhood. Before the advent of Islām, we meet in history only with philosophic conceptions of

brotherhood, denied largely in every-day practice. For the first time, the world was given an actual demonstration of it—of true democracy—by the Founder of Islām and his followers.

May we not then justifiably ascribe the secret of that marvellous culture, that advance in science, philosophy and art, which we associate with the early Muslims to this: that, under the Prophet's courageous guidance, they attained the freedom of mind and emotion which enabled them, as a nation, to tear from their eyes — what was a nightmare of ages — that veil of blinding traditions, superstitions and prejudices, which had so long barred the recognition of our common humanity, under differences of colour, customs and language? Says the *Qurān* in sweet reasonableness: "To every one have we given a law and a way, and if God had pleased, He would have made you all one people; . . . wherefore, press forward in good deeds." Again: "All people are a single nation". "Let not one people laugh at another people. Perchance these others may be better than they". Because we in India have ignored this salutary advice, we are now experiencing deplorable setbacks in all walks of life.

Animal Sacrifices. True, the *Qurān* authorized animal sacrifices. The substitution of animal in place of human victims was a necessary step in weaning a people from practices sanctified by age-long traditions. The non-essentialness of these is, nevertheless, clearly hinted at in the *Qurān*. "Neither the flesh nor the blood of these — the victims — reaches Allah. What reaches Him is that you keep yourself pure." Yet while they lasted, they were made to symbolize the continual sacrifice we are called upon to make of our lower self, with its mere desires of the flesh, to the nobler aspirations of the Spirit.

Actions and Their Reactions, a Future Life. Much stress is placed in the *Qurān* on the belief in a future life. This was natural, seeing that ordinary men needed some spur to just and unselfish conduct — the nature of that future remaining undefined except symbolically. But one thing is made clear, that what we now sow, we shall there reap. Says the *Qurān*: "Whatever of misfortune troubles one, it is the result of one's own doing". "The atom of good you did, that you will see; the atom of evil you wrought, that also you will meet." "So this day no soul shall be dealt with unjustly in the least, and you shall not be requited with aught but that which you did." The *Qurān* describes the life of this world as "sport and play" compared to the real life which is to come. This, to my mind, has more than one significance. In the first place, it points to the high destiny of the growing soul; secondly, it is a demand for the service of the highest ideal alone; lastly, the Eternal, underlying the mutable, is emphasized. Those who accept Reincarnation as a reasonable hypothesis of a future may perhaps find support in the following verses, though, to my mind, such a hypothesis is not of great practical importance: " He begins creation, then He reproduces it, that He may recompense with justice those who believe and do good". "As we originated the first creation, so we shall reproduce it." " He creates you in the wombs of your mothers, a creation after creation". "From it we created you, and into it we shall send you back, and from it we shall raise you a second time".

Those, who oppose "Reincarnation" on the authority of the *Qurān* may object: "It is written that the soul of man, dying out of its body and soon becoming aware of the deficiencies of its earth-life, longs to go back with a view to rectify it. It is then definitely told that it cannot." The answer is: Although the soul cannot immediately return to earth to function in its erstwhile but now rapidly disintegrating body, what is there to prevent it from being reborn, with a new body, more in accord with its past achievements and future work, say five hundred years hence, having in the meantime assimilated its recent experiences?

The Goal of Man. The Holy Book does throw considerable light on man's goal: "Verily from Allah we come, and to Him is our return". "O man, surely you must strive to attain to your Lord — a hard striving until you meet Him" . A promised union for the finite with the Infinite. This is the destined goal of *all*. For are we not told: "There is no one in heaven or earth but will come to the beneficent God as a servant ?" The divine call goes forth: "Enter among My servants and enter into My paradise." In the meanwhile, we have the assurance that "All make obeisance to Allah only, "that is to say, are working, unconsciously more than consciously, in the direction pointed by His Will, which is the only ultimate and real will in the Universe — a conception magnificent in range and with far-reaching consequences. The just man's reward, we are further assured, is that he finds himself in the "seat of truth on the right hand of God", who, be it remembered, is Himself the Truth — a state of conscious merging of the human in the Divine — the true Nirvana — the "Abode of Peace to which Allah invites" — the "paradise extensive as the heavens and the earth", where "darkness has no place in the sunshine" of expanded consciousness. "On that day, you will see the faithful men and the faithful *women*, their lights running before them." (Note especially the women and the lights which are theirs and not somebody else's.) They stand, in short, Self-realized.

As says Jalaluddin Rumi: "Once you have known whose shadow you are, dead or alive, you are free". Not a matter of creeds !

Our Relation with Animals. The *Qurān* is very emphatic on the subject of our relation with the lower animals. "There is no beast on earth nor bird which flies with its two wings, but they are a people like you, and to the Lord shall they return". "All God's creatures are one family", says a Hadis. "There are rewards", also assures the Prophet, "for benefiting every animal having a moist liver". The result is that, even to this day, there is not a single Muslim, ever so benighted, who will not prepare to kill an animal by first tenderly offering it a drink.

Idolatry. The idolatry that is condemned in Islām in the strongest terms is the exaltation of our separate personal existence, with its narrowness and its yielding to fleeting pleasures. A spiritual segregation in *space*, as in *time*, is what is here disapproved: " Woe be to the idolators, who give not the appointed alms and believe not in the life to come". Besides, idolatry in Arabia at the Prophet's advent, had taken very objectionable forms. In despair, does the *Qurān* ask: "Have you seen him who takes his low desires as a God worthy of worship?"

"Allah is the Truth and that which they call upon is falsehood". Apparently, idols were set up to concretize cruelty and sensuality, and as instruments of greed. Images served, not as symbols of the all-pervasiveness of the Divine Life, but hypocritically to perpetuate mental bondage and to exploit ignorance and superstition. This circumstance was undoubtedly the basis for that discrimination made between the gods of Kaba, which suffered relentless destruction at the hands of the Prophet and the religion of the Christians of Najran, to which was extended the "security of God", their icons and crosses being expressly protected, while there yet remained the possibility of their helping one man forward.

Henceforth, not tradition but free thought, not miracles but a reverent appreciation of the vastness and orderliness of Nature were to be the basis of one's faith: "There is no altering of Allah's creation; (in other words, the laws of Nature remain immutable); that is right religion". This, coupled with the sudden release that Islām effected from fetishism and from the distracting worship of spirits (Jins), which had so long

obscured their vision of the One Reality, amounted literally to a new birth to the Arab races; these, with their minds and emotions thus freed and nascent, started on their amazing career, which has enriched the world with its inspiring and beautiful monuments. Incidentally, this fact of history is also pregnant with a great lesson for the moment: that, for us too, if we dare to break away from the prejudices, and the superstitions that now hamper our mutual association and joint progress, there waits a career which is destined similarly to startle the world.

War and Peace. The correct position of Islām in regard to conversions and to War and Peace should be obvious from the following Qurānic verses:

(1) "There is no compulsion in religion".

(2) "Call to the way of Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation and have disputations with them in the best manner."

(3) "Conquer evil with good."

(4) "And fight for the religion of God against those who fight against you, but transgress not by being the first to attack if they attack you, slay them; but if they desist, let there be no hostility."

(5) "And fight with them until there is no more persecution."

(6) "If the enemy incline to peace, then do you incline to it also, and trust in Allah."

(7) "Let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably. Act equitably; that is piety."

Is it right to persist in the face of this evidence, that Islām is a religion of the sword ? Defence of homesteads, of places of worship and the freedom of conscience alone were proper causes for "Islāmic" wars.

Is it not unfair then to confound the political ambitions of men, which led to wars, with their religious duties?

The Muslim Law. The Muslim Law stands to this day as one of the most perfect codes of civil law so far evolved. It gave woman a right and a status, which no other law had so far given her. Sons and relatives, all, have a just share in the property of deceased persons. Bequests to the needy and the orphans are not forgotten.

The Prophet. The noblest gift of Islām to the world is its Prophet. Never were strength and courage of the

highest order wedded to the tenderest compassion as in him. Undoubtedly the most effective of world's known personalities, he organised the widest intellectual revolt in recorded history against the tyranny of customs and dark superstitions. His appeal was directly to nature and reason. Friends and foes alike recognized his sincerity and greatness. Here is his wife's testimony: "Thou speakest the truth, returnest not evil for evil, keepest faith, art of good life and kind to thy relations and friends, neither art thou a babbler in the market places." The utmost his enemy could say of him is: "Muhammad, I do not say you are a liar, but whatever you preach is untrue". He is known as the "Al-amin", the trustworthy. I referred elsewhere to the high value he placed on considerateness to an old non-Muslim. "The worst man", according to him, "is the one whose harsh language goes so far as to estrange people from associating with him". "Do you love God?" he used to say, "then love His creatures" — including, of course, all mankind, regardless of their condition, colour or creed. Founder and Ruler of a mighty Commonwealth, his life was the embodiment of uttermost simplicity and self-effacement. Here are a few of his teachings — evidences of his wonderful humanity and his great humility of spirit: "To smile in your brother's face is charity". "Adhere to those who forsake you; speak the truth to your own heart; do good to every one that does ill to you". "Look after the widows; he is not of us who is not affectionate to his children and reveres not the old . . . He is the most favoured of God from whom the greatest good cometh to His creatures . . . All God's creatures are one family . . . Seek for God's good will in that of the poor . . .". "I do not know the unseen". "I am not an angel". "I am only a man like you". His brotherhood was not a matter of sermons alone, but included the sharing of manual labour with his fellow-citizens. It even extended to slaves, to help to purchase whose freedom and to clothe and feed whom equally with himself was the master's duty. Purity was restored to domestic life by restricting the practice of polygamy and by raising the status of women and exalting Motherhood. "Woman has like rights with those of men"; "Woman is the sovereign of your house"; "Paradise is at the feet of the mother", are some of his well-known sayings. It is on record that the Prophet used to show respect to his married daughter whenever she visited him, by rising from his seat. All this in an age when woman was despised and considered as of little consequence! He was as tactful as he was brave and firm and full of the kindest humour. His was an intelligent tolerance in matters of religion. "What wilt thou force men to believe, when belief can come only from God?" — the indwelling Spirit of course. Non-Muslims — those of them who did not actively oppose his mission — found in him a strong and faithful protector. Though he was forced into war by his enemies, he always said that the great "Jihad" was the one waged against one's own lower nature. Accustomed as we now are to communal warfare, it would surprise us to know that there were occasions, when Muslims were actually enjoined by the Prophet to help in the rebuilding of non-Muslim places of worship, and when even mosque and home were offered for non-Muslim use. "The ink of the scholar is holier than the blood of the martyr", is another of his sayings, which go to prove that, he valued man's intellectual and moral progress far above religious enthusiasm. He has been called "the Mercy for the worlds", a name which any servant of humanity would rightly deserve, but certainly none better than the great Prophet of Islām, in view of his glorious achievements and nobleness of spirit.

Conclusion. In the foregoing paragraphs, I have drawn up a very sketchy view of Islām, as I have learnt to love it, and as I wish it to be recognized.

It has many points of contact with the secret beliefs of the Sufis; though none perhaps with those conventional observances which pass under the name of the Muslim religion in this country. Mansur, Jalaluddin Rumi, Akbar, Dara Shiko, and Kabir — only to mention a few — are the types it bred. Khaja Hasan Nizami, one of the acknowledged leaders of Sufism in India, confessed to me not long ago that he counted hundreds of disciples from among the Hindus, and that in his system, conversions had no place.

To bridge the gulf between our "episodal" personalities and the larger Self of Man is the true function of religion. Except in the initial stages, no outside authority, whether of books or of teachers, "can very largely help. A perfect freedom of judgement, unhampered by traditions however hoary; a purity of emotions; an intelligence keenly; - alive — these alone can remain our safest companions in life's great quest. Our "professional" faiths, on the other hand, are not only a denial of faith in anything synthetic, but are the deification of mass ignorance, mass superstitions, and mass prejudices; of customs and traditions imbibed from childhood, which because of the bonds of sentiment, are made to take the place of reason. The Prophet is said to have once remarked that "every child which is born conforms to the right Religion; then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a Magian" — to which we might now add — a Hindu or a Muhammadan. Human understanding, when freed from the burden of externally imposed "beliefs" and superstitions, will become nascent; and like the freshly liberated atoms of oxygen, will go forth to rejuvenate the world. That is my reading of Islāmic history.