

CONCEPT AND MEANING

Basic Concepts of Islam

In Arabic "Islam" literally means submission but when the term is used in a religious context it means submission to Allah alone. Accordingly, a Muslim is one who submits to the Divine injunctions and does not deviate from them. *or one who surrenders his wills to the will of Almighty Allah.*

Inherent Islam

We all know that there are two types of Divine injunctions: one is inherent and the other is voluntary.

Inherent injunctions are those which are unavoidable. It is impossible for anyone to defy them. All creatures are so made that they are bound to submit to these injunctions and they are by birth deprived of any discretion of choosing between submission or defiance of inherent injunctions. For instance, the sun has been ordered to rise and act at an appointed time. It has to stay away at a fixed distance from the earth and provide light and warmth to it. The sun has to follow these injunctions and it is not in its power to defy them. Similar is the case of the air which sustains things which are alive. Likewise, water is ordered to slake thirst, fire is ordered to burn, man is ordered to speak with his tongue, hear with his ears and smell with his nose and all of them are bound to obey these injunctions meticulously. These are inherent injunctions and are usually known as physical laws or laws of nature.

All such injunctions of Allah which we are not bound to obey because of any inherent compulsion are optional injunctions. We have

a choice to obey or disobey these injunctions. For instance, man is enjoined to worship one God but he is not bound to do so because this injunction is not irresistible in its nature. Instead, he has been given the discretion to worship either one God or add a thousand others with Him or be an atheist altogether. Such injunctions are also called injunctions of Shari'ah or the laws of Shari'ah.

Both these types of injunctions are Divine in equal degree. Since the submission to Allah is Islam, adherence to each of these laws will amount to Islam. It is something quite obvious.

As there is nothing in the universe, right from lifeless objects to men and angels, which does not submit to its Creator or is not subject to the inherent or optional injunctions, the question of Islam or being a Muslim is not restricted to man alone but covers the entire universe. Thus Islam does not remain the religion of any special category of creatures and becomes the religion of all without any exception. It means that Islam is the religion of such things also which have been denied the qualities of will and discretion and are subject to physical laws. As these objects meticulously adhere to the laws enjoined upon them, they are not only Muslims, but perfectly so. The Sun is a Muslim as it faithfully follows the rules it has been subjected to. It revolves, generates heat and light, rises and sets under a regular system. The Moon and the stars are Muslims because they never violate the laws framed for them. The air is Muslim because it blows, tends the clouds, nourishes the plants and provides life to the living beings in the manner prescribed for it. The water is Muslim as it provides fertility to the land, helps plants to grow, satiates thirst and evaporates when heated as this is the duty assigned to it by its Creator.

The fact that the religion of all such objects which do not possess the qualities of will and discretion is Islam, and they are all Muslims, is not based on mere reason or presumption but is founded on these explicit verses of the Holy Qur'an. It says,

Seek they other than the religion of Allah when unto Him submitteth whosoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly. (3: 3).

These words prove that all things be they in the heavens or on earth, except those men and the jinns who defy the true religion, submit to Allah and their religion is Islam.

Here is another verse of the Qur'an which refers to the same fact in different words:

The seven heavens and the earth and all that therein praise Him, and there is not a thing but hymneth His praise; but ye understand not their praise (17: 44).

In another verses of the Qur'an it is said:

Hast thou not seen that unto Allah payeth adoration whosoever is in the heavens and whosoever is in the earth, and the sun, and the moon and the stars, and the hills, and the trees, and the beasts and many of mankind (22: 18).

These verses make it obvious that it is not one or two particular categories of creatures who praise and glorify Allah but everything, the sky, the earth, the moon, the sun, the stars, the planets, the air and the water, the trees and the plants, the birds and the beasts, men and the jinns, in short every creature from atom to the sun, big or small, animate or inanimate, wise or unwise praises Allah and submits to Him. The least possible meaning of this submission is that all these things adhere to and comply with the Divine injunctions enjoined upon them and bear witness to His being and attributes.

These verses make it abundantly clear that the religion of all such creatures who are devoid of the faculties of will and power is also Islam. But since the injunctions enjoined upon them are of the nature of physical laws their Islam is inherent or inborn rather than optional in character. As such they will be called born Muslims.

Voluntary or Terminological Islam

Let us consider the case of creatures who are endowed with freedom of will and choice. They are so constituted that in certain matters they are helpless, like the former category of creatures, while in others' they are not. In such cases, they enjoy a birth-right of following a course of their own choice. For instance, there are the Divine injunctions enjoining man to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, speak with his tongue. Then there are other Divine injunctions enjoining him to see, hear and say certain things and refrain from others. Man is bound to comply with the former as he has no choice but to obey them. He is compelled to act in accordance with the Divine injunctions. But in the case of the latter, he has no such compulsion. Obedience of these injunctions is a matter of his own choice and liking. He is free to obey or deviate from them. Since within the framework of physical laws, the submission of every individual is characterised as inherent Islam, in other spheres, where man is free to exercise his discretion, his submission to the Divine injunctions will be regarded voluntary Islam. But in the context of religion this term is used without the qualifying words "inherent" or "voluntary". Instead, the terms used for this purpose are "Divine injunctions" and "Islam." The reason for the adoption of these terms is obvious. For such creatures as are subject to both the types of Divine injunctions, physical laws remain of little importance for submission and what really matter are the voluntary injunctions. This is why in day to day conversation the terms "Divine injunctions" and "Islam" are used in place of voluntary injunctions.

This fact also necessitated that the term "Muslim" should not be used for those who do not submit to the Divine injunctions. Although, even in that position, they will still be submitting to the physical laws, and to that extent they will be Muslims. As in the absence of voluntary Islam, inherent Islam becomes meaningless, and it carries no weight. In terms of religion a person is called Muslim only when he proceeds farther than the inherent injunctions and

submits himself voluntarily to the optional injunctions.

Islam and Man

As mentioned earlier man is also one of such creatures as are endowed with the faculty of will and choice. He is not only one of them but even distinguished among them. That is why he has also been given Divine injunctions (*Tashri'i* injunctions). The Holy Qur'an says that when the first man was sent to live on this earth, Allah decreed:

But verily there cometh unto you from Me a guidance and whoso follows My guidance, there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve. But they who disbelieve, and deny our revelations, such are rightful owners of the Fire (2: 38-39).

In this decree the sending of the Guidance, that is, Divine injunctions, is conditioned with the word "If". In fact it is not a condition but majesty of style and what it really means here is that My injunctions will come to you and you shall have to follow them.

What really happened is elucidated in the following verse of the Holy Qur'an:

And there is not a nation but a warner hath passed among them (35: 24)

لَا يَخْلُقُ إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ

Both these verses explicitly state that the life of man on this earth and the coming of the Divine injunctions began simultaneously and this world has never been without a religion and a Divine law (*Shari'ah*) and there has not been a nation who was kept uninformed and deprived of the Divine guidance. Man, being a creature of will and choice necessitated it.

The Religion of Every Nation was Islam

As all the codes of Divine injunctions which have come to Man from the day of the creation to this day, were sent by Allah, submission to

because by virtue of their origin and reality all these Divine Codes (Shari'ah) were Islam and their followers were Muslims. But the actual position is otherwise. It is quite the contrary. In the special terminology of the Qur'an, Islam is the name of that religion which it presents itself and which was revealed to the last of the Prophets Muhammad *s.a.w*². Similarly the name of title "Muslim" is also reserved for the followers of this last religion. Thus, when the Qur'an uses the word Al-Islam, it does not do it in its ordinary sense but refers specifically to this one religion and its code of injunctions. For example:

This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favour unto you, and have chosen for you as religion Al-Islam (5:3).

Lo! Religion with Allah (is) Islam (the Surrender to His will and guidance (3:19).

In these verses the word Al-Islam explicitly denotes the one religion which was revealed by the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad *s.a.w*.

As far as the name "Muslim" is concerned its case is even more clear. The Qur'an says:

He hath named you Muslims of old time and in this (Scripture) (22: 78).

These words are quite clear in their meanings. They say in very decisive tone that all such people who accepted the faith of any prophet were Muslims. However, this honour is reserved only for the believers of the ultimate religion that besides being a Muslim in spirit, they also bear the name of Muslims. Excepting the believers of the last of the Prophets Muhammad *s.a.w*., no other community of

² Abbreviation for *Sallallahu 'alaihi wassalm* meaning 'Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him'. This salutation is invoked by the believers each time the Prophet's name is mentioned.

believers was named Muslim. If any community had ever been named Muslim, the saying "He hath named you Muslim", would be altogether unnecessary. Because if all the believers were Muslims by name, there was no need to specify any particular community as Muslim. Thus, whenever the Qur'an calls any other community of believers as Muslims (as it does quite frequently) what is meant is the spirit behind the word. We better say, Islam was their attribute and not their name or title.

Reason for Distinction

It can be asked why this distinction has been made after all? When the religions brought by the other Prophets were sent by Allah in the same way as the one brought by the Holy Prophet Muhammad *s.a.w.*, and their followers were as much obedient to Allah as the followers of this ultimate religion, why the name of this religion alone is Islam and why are only its followers called Muslims? If actually all the religions were similar to Islam, and the followers of all other religions were Muslim, why were all them not named Islam and Muslim respectively? It was not done without reason. This allotment of name conforms to the universally accepted and vital principle in vogue for denomination which enjoins that if a particular quality is found in many persons, then he alone deserves to be called after the name and title of that quality who possesses it in the highest degree. If a quality becomes the name of someone, it is a proof of the fact that in him that quality has attained a level of perfection, although it may also be found in others in a lesser degree. In this respect he would be like the Sun before whom the stars pale in significance. For example truthfulness is a quality bestowed upon a multitude of men but the word "Truthful" is a title reserved for Abu Bakr (*r.a.*³). It does not mean at all that it was he alone who attained the state of "truthfulness" and all other companions of the Holy Prophet *s.a.w.*

³ *Radiallahu 'anhu, 'anha, 'anhuma or 'anhum* (May Allah be pleased with him, her, the two of them, or them, as the case may be). Salutations reserved for the companions of the Prophet

lacked this quality. Indeed there were some among them about whom the Holy Prophet *s.a.w.* said that if the Prophethood had not come to a close, they would have been Prophets. In short, it can be said with confidence that in this pious group of his companions, there were not one or two but innumerable truthful persons. This being the position, the unique honour of the title of the "Truthful" was conferred upon Abu Bakr (*r.a.*), evidently for the sole reason that in degree of truthfulness he excelled all others. The pages of history, biographies of the Holy Prophet *s.a.w.* and the traditions bear abundant witness to this effect. The case of the religion revealed by the Holy Prophet Muhammad *s.a.w.* and other Prophets (*a.s.*) may be considered on the above-mentioned criterion. It will be agreed that even though in spirit all religions were similar to Islam, the religion which came in the form of the Qur'an and was brought by the last of the prophets alone deserves the title of Islam because in Islamic attribute it excels all other religions. In comparison to others, it decidedly occupies a much elevated position. Every religion, other than Islam, was such that its code of injunctions was brief and limited, was addressed to a small group of people and the duration of its enforcement was also short. But the case of Islam is quite different. Its code of injunctions is comprehensive and universal, is addressed to the entire humanity and the period of its enforcement is unending. It is meant for the whole world. Its inherent character is consonant with the natural conditions and instincts of humanity. Its teachings constitute an accomplished and perfect way of life. In this religion is perfected the Divine gift and guidance which began from the times of Adam *a.s.* It was, therefore, eminently fair that Islam should have been the name of the last and the most universal and highly accomplished religion.

For similar reasons, the followers of the Prophet Muhammad *s.a.w.* were given the name and title of "Muslims". In their Muslim character they were far more accomplished than the others. They were the flag-bearers of a religion which had no parallel in comprehensiveness, vastness and nobility of objectives. They were assigned the responsibility of carrying on, till the Day of Resu-

rection, the message of Allah to each and every nation. They were commissioned to bear witness to Islam throughout the world. They are enjoined not to take a moments rest until this righteous religion is spread in every nook and corner of the world.

No other nation was ever assigned such a heavy responsibility. This is why they are called "the best of the peoples" and the name of "Muslims" is also reserved for them.

These details make it clear that although inherently the whole universe is Muslim and all such peoples who followed a Divine religion were Muslims and every religion sent by Allah was Islam, still when the words Islam and Muslim are used, "Islam" denotes the religion brought by the Prophet Muhammad *s.a.w.* and "Muslim" stands for him who professes this religion and follows it.