

A Thinking Person's
GUIDE to ISLAM

The Essence of Islam in 12 Verses from the Qur'an

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Foreword by H.M. King Abdullah II ibn Al-Hussein



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About the Author



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Introduction



Muslims nowadays are constantly having to explain what Islam is not. A tiny minority of Muslims have fundamentally misunderstood Islam and are grossly misrepresenting it. Because of their actions, very few non-Muslims understand the real difference between Islam as it has always been and as it is in the Qur'an, and the distorted perversions of Islam today. What follows is an attempt to positively say what Islam actually is — and always was — as well as what it is not.

Over 12 chapters, 12 verses from the Qur'an are taken as a starting point for 12 critical issues. There are Arabic calligraphy drawings of each of these verses (available for free at www.FreeIslamicCalligraphy.com), and these are displayed at the centre of the book to give a small but concrete foretaste of the visual and emotional impact that each verse has on Muslims. These 12 verses are generally not the best-known verses in the Qur'an. There are a lot of books that concentrate on the more famous verses of the Qur'an. Perhaps by focusing on verses that are not so well known, the issues can be discussed in a fresh light. And of course, every single verse in the Qur'an is authoritative and authentic.

This book is written in stand-alone chapters, so that people can read whatever interests them in whatever order they like. That is actually how many people read books nowadays. These chapters are generally quite short with the exception of the chapters on the Qur'an and the *shari'ah* (which have to tackle a lot of misunderstandings). There is also a freestanding annex on the first two years of ISIS (aka 'ISIL' or 'IS' or 'Daesh') which is quite extensive and written for people with an interest in politics or current affairs. There are clearly many other things that could have been mentioned, but that would make the book too long. Although the book

touches on some important and perhaps complex ideas, the language is not complicated, and there are quite deliberately no footnotes, endnotes or bibliography. There are a lot of quotes from the Qur'an (presented in italics) and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ—and a number from poetry; this is quite usual in Islamic writings. As Aristotle said (*Poetics*, 1451 b1): '[Great] Poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths whereas history gives particular facts'.

The book is intended only as an educated primer on Islam—a brief guide to the religion, its outlook and its counterfeits—for anyone willing to think about it a little bit. Unwillingness to think about things is what Muslims who misunderstand Islam, and non-Muslims who distort it, have in common. That is why the book is called *A Thinking Person's Guide to Islam*.

Chapter 4

WHY DID GOD CREATE PEOPLE?

Except those on whom your Lord has mercy; and for this He created them. . . . (Hud, 11:119)



Why did God create people? That is the next great question. It contains the secret of existence. As we saw earlier, God created people *out of* His Mercy. Did He create them *for* His Mercy as well?

We mentioned that almost every chapter in the Qur'an begins with the phrase: *In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful* ('*Bism Illah al-Rahman al-Rahim*'). What is the difference between the Divine Name '*the Compassionate*' ('*Al-Rahman*'), and the Divine Name '*the Merciful*' ('*Al-Rahim*')? Some Islamic scholars have said that '*the Compassionate*' refers to God as He is in Himself. They say that '*the Merciful*' refers to God as He is towards people and living things. This implies that God created people and living things so that He would be '*the Merciful*' towards them.

The verse cited above seems to say the same thing. Together with the verse before it, it says:

Had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind one community, but they continue to differ, | except those on whom your Lord has mercy; and for this He created them. . . . (Hud, 11:118–119)

Islamic scholars say that the word '*this*' refers to '*mercy*'. That was the

opinion of the Prophet's ﷺ cousin Ibn 'Abbas ﷺ. In other words, God created people for His Mercy.

This corresponds with God's words elsewhere in the Qur'an: *And I did not create the jinn and mankind except that they may worship Me* (*Al-Dhariyat*, 51:56). Referring to this verse, Ibn 'Abbas ﷺ said: 'Worshipping God' means 'knowing Him'. 'Worshipping God', however, is more inclusive than 'knowing God' because it includes those with blind faith but little knowledge of God. It also means that God created us to love Him: how can anyone worship God without loving Him? Or for that matter, how can anyone know God without loving Him? And loving God means also being loved by Him. God promises: . . . *God will assuredly bring a people whom He loves and who love Him . . .* (*Al-Ma'idah*, 5:54).

In other words, God created us to worship Him and to love Him, so that He could be merciful to us and love us. For love—as discussed in Chapter 3—is a special kind of mercy. Indeed, over the course of Islamic history, countless Muslims have loved God beyond words. And countless others have tried to express their love with words such as Abu Firas al-Hamadani's (d. 357/968) poem (although it was not originally addressed to God):

If You be sweet, let life run bitterly;
 If You be pleased, let men be wroth with me;
 If all things are well between me and Thee,
 Let all between me and the world ruins be.
 If I have love from Thee, all is easy
 All things on the earth, are just earth to me.

Other scholars say that the word '*this*' (in *Hud*, 11:119, as cited above) refers to the word '*differ*'. In other words, that God created people to be free to '*differ*'. That is to say then that God created people to be free. Now spiritual freedom is freedom from the ego and its desires, not freedom to follow the ego and its desires. But spiritual freedom also requires freedom to make a moral choice, and that means freedom to make the wrong choice.

Both opinions are true. That is the opinion of the majority of Islamic scholars. God created people *for* His Mercy (and Love). That is our purpose in life, and that is the *secret of existence*. But God also created people free. They are free even to reject His Mercy (and Love). They are free to

Chapter 9

WHAT IS WORLDLY LIFE?

Bear in mind that the life of this world is merely play, diversion, adornment, mutual boasting and rivalry in wealth and children. It is like plants that spring up after the rain: their growth at first delights the sowers, but then they wither away, and you see them turn yellow; then they become chaff. And in the next life there is severe punishment, and forgiveness from God—and Beatitude. The life of this world is only the pleasure of delusion. (Al-Hadid, 57:20)



Worldly life is the exact opposite of the life of the heart. This is because the heart is ‘inner’, and worldly life is ‘outer’: obviously, ‘inwardness’ and ‘outwardness’ are opposites. By ‘worldly life’ we do not mean ‘life in the world’—which is obviously immeasurably precious, and which includes the life ‘of the heart’—but life *of* the world: life that is too *worldly*. In the verse cited above, God warns of the futility of worldly life, and defines it as having five (progressively worse) levels: (1) *play*; (2) *diversion*; (3) *adornment*; (4) *mutual boasting*; and (5) *rivalry in wealth and children*. These can be understood as follows:

1. ‘Play’ is necessary, natural and neutral. It is how children learn, and

how adults relax. But when it interferes with something important and serious, it can become an obstacle.

2. 'Diversion' is a momentary lapse in focus and concentration; it is a kind of unintended dereliction of duty.

3. 'Adornment' implies a misplaced passion for something: loving something you should not really be loving or loving something for a wrong or superficial reason. In other words, it implies a 'lust' for external beauty and for worldly life at the expense of loving internal beauty (which is virtue and goodness of heart). Elsewhere in the Qur'an, God says:

Adorned for mankind is love of lusts—of women, children, stored-up heaps of gold and silver, horses of mark, cattle, and tillage. That is the pleasure of the life of this world; but God—with Him is the most excellent abode. (Aal Imran, 3:14)

4. If 'adornment' means misplaced passion, 'mutual boasting' means misplaced pride. Whereas passion is love for something external, pride is love for something internal. Passion— as just discussed—is good to the extent that its object is good, and bad to the extent that its object is bad. The same is true for pride. When pride is love for the heart and inwardness, it becomes dignity. When, on the other hand, it is love for the ego, it becomes egoism. This kind of pride is at the root of all sin and even all nastiness. In the Qur'an, it is what caused Satan to fall from grace by refusing to bow to Adam ﷺ. Satan says to God: . . . *I am better than him. You created me from fire, and You created him from clay (Sad, 38:76)*. So pride is worse than passion because whereas passion merely runs away from the heart, pride is the ego actually rising up to oppose the heart.

5. '*Rivalry in wealth and children*': 'wealth and children' here can be taken to include all worldly goods. 'Rivalry' (the Arabic word '*takathur*' translated as 'rivalry' here also indicates 'greed' and 'wanting to acquire ever more') in this context does not mean 'healthy competition'. It means greed, jealousy, ill will, hatred and finally, aggression. It is the evil fruit of pride, and it eventually leads to all kinds of violence.

So in this one verse, we have a remarkable description of the entire gamut of what worldliness means (psychologically speaking), starting with the relatively innocent and ending with the completely corrupt. It explains why worldly life is seen as negative and futile in so many passages