



Frequently Asked Questions on Islam and the Muslims: Part 1

This is a series aimed at creating a thorough understanding of the essential teachings that underlie Islam, mainly for non-Muslims, in a brief, yet concise manner.

1. Can you explain terms Allah, Islam, Muslim, Ibadah, Tawhid, Shirk?

Understanding these terms actually facilitates a proper appreciation of the essence of Islaam.

The word Allah, consists of two parts, “al” which is the definite article in Arabic and “ilah” which means an object to which subservience, love, reverence, and obedience is shown. Being a combination of the two particles, “Allah” signifies the one to whom absolute love, reverence, and obedience is to be shown – as opposed to others, whether humans, jinns, angels, stones, trees, or whatever – all of which have been taken as objects of worship by people throughout the ages. “Allah” is the same supreme deity that is believed in by the major religions of today, and is not some unique Arab deity. Anything that is worshipped or given unconditional obedience, or is the control centre of emotions such as love, fear, hope, reliance and other actions of the heart, is termed an “ilah”. In other words there can exist many deities, both abstract and concrete. Examples of such deities include idols, trees, stones, talismans, money, power, one’s wife, children or parents, and so on.

Islam, comes from the root “aslama” which means to submit, and it signifies “istislaam” which is the state of wilful submission and compliance.

Islam is a term that represents the general way of life embodied in submission to the will of Allah as preached by the Prophets, conveyed in the Scriptures revealed to them, the last and final of them being Mohammad (peace be upon him) – whose arrival the Jews and Christians learned in the Tawrah were expecting (hence their migration at that time to Yathrib, now known as Madinah)¹. The basis of Islam is singling out Allah with all forms of worship, whether those of the heart, tongue or limbs. This is known as Tawhid, or Monotheism. Built upon that is a way of life that is an embodiment of justice, equity, universal brotherhood, and peace.

A “Muslim” is one who submits himself to Allah and abides by His commands and prohibitions, whose state and condition is characterised by “Islam”.

Ibadah is a term that translates as “worship”. It is important to note that worship in Islam is not restricted to outward rituals only. It’s basis is in the heart and is signified by the

¹ This issue will be covered in a later part in this series, inshaa’allah.

following essential states or conditions of the heart: mahabbah (love), khawf (fear), and rajaa' (hope). These three actions of the heart form the basis of every human's actions. Every human action is traced back to one of these or a combination of these (and other) states of the heart. Hence, in Islam, the core of worship lies in the actions of the heart. Built upon that are the statements of the tongue and the actions of the limbs. The actions of the limbs include ritual acts of worship such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, as well as social aspects, such as the obligatory charity known as zakah, and general behavioural and character-based actions, such as removing harmful things from the floor, or wishing for other's what one wishes for himself, and other such affairs, which facilitate day to day life in society and which help to maintain the communal aspects of life. Additionally, there are the social dealings between the people and the various rulings concerning them, such as marriage, death, inheritance, social disputes and so on – and abiding by these rulings and referring to them, is also an aspect of worship. In short, Ibadah is a term that represents both the inward and outward actions, and includes the concepts of obedience, reverence, devotion, gratitude and many other praiseworthy states and conditions.

Tawhid, is actually the message of all of the Prophets, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad. Tawhid consists of three aspects:

- a) to believe that Allah is the sole creator, owner and regulator of the universe and whatever exists besides Him
- b) to believe in the Names and Attributes of Allah and
- c) to single Him out in ones Ibadah (i.e. with its comprehensive meaning as outlined above).

The essence of Tawhid is to free humankind from the worship of men (and other created objects) by men and to direct them to the worship of the Lord of all men – this being the foundation for the unity of all humankind. It calls for the freedom from enslavement to the created things to enslavement to the creator of all things.

Shirk (literally “associationism”) is the opposite of Tawhid and represents the setting up of equals, rivals, or partners with Allah, either in His creatorship, or ownership or regulation of the universe, or in His Names and Attributes, or in worship of him, in other words, in any of the three aspects of Tawhid explained above. Examples of this would include grave or saint-worship, or worshipping trees, stones, or the natural elements, or claiming that anyone from the creation, knows the unseen independently, or can create, or give life, or take life, or sustain and provide, just like the Creator, Allah.

The Qur'an teaches that in Tawheed lies the freedom from the subjugation and enslavement to created things whether worthless idols, money, mere humans, prophets raised to the level of gods, or abstract notions such as worldly status, fame and power. The Qur'an also outlines the calls of all of the Prophets, from Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and all previous – and all of them called to this same fundamental precept that is “Tawhid”.