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June 19, 2014

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RELIGION

Which 'Islam'? Exploring the Word's Many Meanings

People often ask me what Islam says about this or what Islam says about that. I usually ask them what they mean by "Islam." Not many people have anything more than a vague idea of what this word can designate, not to speak of the diverse meanings that have been attributed to it throughout history.

It is fairly obvious that people think from within their own limitations. The more general a concept, the wider their diversity of understanding. Notions like "God" are notoriously up for grabs, as are words like "religion" or the names of the specific religions. There are as many "Christianities" as there are people who think and talk about it. So also is the case for "Islam." Both Muslims and non-Muslims constantly use the word with their own agendas in mind and with little or no reference to its meaning in the Quran, the founding scripture, or in the later tradition.

Most people have heard that "Islam" means literally to submit, surrender, turn oneself over. They might also have heard that it comes from the same root as *salām*, which means peace, lack of strife, absence of conflict. "The Peace" (*al-salām*) is one of God's Quranic names. By turning oneself over to the true peace that is God, one can escape the strife, conflict, war, and disharmony that are characteristic of everything other than God.

When we talk about peace in the world or in our lives, we mean achieving some sort of harmony among conflicting and contrasting forces. Such forces necessarily influence all that is specific and limited, not least the human self. God alone is free of outside influence, which is to say that he alone is true peace. Everything else is pushed and shoved from various directions, so, if we want to achieve peace, we need to make continual adjustments. This holds true whether we are talking about peace of mind, or peace in society, or peace among nations.

The Quran uses the word *islām* and derivatives like *muslim* (one who has the quality of *islām*) about 80 times. A small number of these instances can plausibly be interpreted as designations for the religion that the Quran and the Prophet were in the process of establishing. Historians have pointed out that the word came to be employed as a common designation for the religion only gradually, a process that has intensified enormously in modern times. Early on, for example, it was common to speak simply of *al-dīn*, "the religion."

Over the course of history, the historical phenomenon that we call Islam has produced many local forms. What ties them together is not any institutional setup or priestly class, but rather focus on the Quran and the Prophet as the sources for teachings and practices and the relative uniformity of ritual observances. Thus the daily prayers performed in Nigeria are practically the same as those performed in Beijing.

When we talk about the Quran, we should keep in mind that Muslims have always read the book as God's word, his self-expression, his own explanation of who he is and what he expects from people. We should also remember that it is characteristic of the Quran and of pre-modern Islamic thought generally to begin with God and to deal with the world only in terms of what is known about God.

The most basic thing that is known about God is that he is one, despite the multiplicity of his names, whether in the Quran or in other scriptures. When the Quran calls him by names like Alive, Aware, Desiring, Powerful, Speaking, Generous, Just, Merciful, Loving, Vengeful, or Forgiving, it is understood that the names differ in keeping with the manner in which the One God relates to the infinite diversity of created reality. What we call "reality" is in fact the sum total of phenomena that display God's names and attributes.

Once we begin with this notion of God as the source of all other reality, it is easy to understand why the Quran sometimes uses the word *islām* to designate the compulsory, universal submission of everything in the universe: "Submitted to Him is everything in the heavens and the earth" (3:83). This submission has nothing to do with free will. It is rather a fact of existence that all of us face in our everyday lives.

Whatever "freedom" may be, it is enormously circumscribed by the actual reality of lived experience. Many scientists, including many social scientists, have gone so far as to say that freedom is an illusion -- in other words, there can be no such thing as "voluntary" submission. We submit to the way things are whether we want to or not. This is precisely what the word *islām* designates in its most basic Quranic meaning, with the proviso that hidden behind "the way things are" is the One, Merciful God.

If the word *islām* in the Quran designated only the compulsory submission of everything to its Creator, most of the book would

be empty words, because its teachings presuppose human freedom. It addresses the instinctive human recognition that we need guidance, "education" if you prefer. We do not on our own have the resources to understand the way things are or to live in harmony with ourselves, others, and the world at large. Scripture generally and the Quran specifically address people as (relatively) free beings with the ability to make choices that have profound repercussions on their own lives, their societies, and their posthumous becoming.

In short, the second and most common Quranic meaning of the word *islām* is voluntary submission to the guidance of God. This guidance comes in the form of revelation to "prophets," who are defined as those whom God appoints to convey his instructions to human beings. Through them God tells people how to live up to their humanity and how to achieve ultimate fulfillment and happiness. If this guidance is to have any effect on people's lives, they must accept it freely. As the Quran puts it, "There is no coercion in the religion" (2:256).

The first prophet and the first voluntary *muslim* was Adam, the father of the human race -- this is an important point on which the Islamic understanding of human nature diverges from that of Christianity. The Quran speaks of Adam, Abraham, and other Biblical prophets, as well as the apostles of Jesus, as *muslims*, that is, people who voluntarily surrendered themselves to God's guidance and who happily followed his instructions. Notice, by the way, that they were *muslims* in two senses: They were compulsory *muslims* like everything else in the universe, and they were voluntary *muslims* inasmuch as they accepted their role as creatures of God placed in the world for specific reasons.

One way to understand these specific reasons is to recall Rumi's tale of the Ocean and the fish thrown up on dry land. All fish -- not to mention the dry land itself -- are compulsory *muslims*. Some fish are also voluntary *muslims*, because they have understood that they are fish and they have submitted to the guidance of the Ocean in order to flip and flop their way home.

For more on the meanings of "islām/Islam," see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, The Vision of Islam.