

Exordium

THERE ARE MANY *phenomena* which are inspired by Islām or which claim its name. Given such a phenomenon, it may be in harmony with Islām in part, in totality, or not at all. It may be directly or indirectly connected with Islām; or it may share nothing with Islām except the name. In any case, these phenomena together constitute major forces in the unfolding of the World. This much is plain and clear.

Yet when taken together these phenomena serve as powerful veils to the *essence* of Islām. The sheer abundance of these phenomena is staggering: numerous religious trends including traditional intellectual, spiritual, and legal schools; many historical cultural, tribal, national, linguistic, and purely nominal manifestations; as well as modern ideological and so-called “fundamentalist” trends and movements. Most of the above traditions, trends, and movements appear to, at least in some respect, contradict or conflict with one another. Is Islām primarily a personal spiritual path? Is it fundamentally a cultural or even national affiliation? Is its essence primarily an ideological viz., socio-politico-economic agenda? And so forth.

In the effort to approach the essence of Islām two phenomena are clearly central: the person of the Prophet of Islām Muḥammad (Ṣ)^c and the Qurʾān. Objectively, there was an Arabic-speaking human being in sixth- and seventh-century Arabia named ‘Muḥammad’, who invited people to something he called ‘Islām’. Among the many words and expressions that rolled off of his tongue there was a particular subset flowing from a specific *stream of consciousness*. This quite specific subset of expressions and meanings constitutes *al-Qurʾān (the Recital)*. And in the depths of the consciousness of the Prophet there was certainly some meaning, some intention, some *vision*, corresponding to the expression ‘Islām’ as it rolled off of his tongue.

However else Islām may manifest itself or how others may try to manifest it or embody it, the Prophet of Islām certainly meant something by the term ‘Islām’ and also acted on that intention. And that specific stream of consciousness was declared by the Prophet and by the Qurʾān to be the very Word of a Supreme

^c The abbreviation ‘Ṣ’ stands for the invocation of *communion* which Muslims express upon nearly every mention of the name of the Prophet.

We choose to begin our discussions of the Qurʾān by using the expression ‘specific stream of consciousness’, a term sufficiently general to embrace the *phenomenon of revelation* without committing the non-Muslim reader to the objective *reality of revelation*. That is, the Qurʾān has an objective reality and manner of coming into existence regardless of one’s attitude to revelation.

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and Unique Being and as encapsulating the essence of Islām. The pursuit of the vision originating in his consciousness and underlying the word ‘Islām’ – and, ultimately, that which *moved* him in pursuit of that vision – made him one of the most influential persons of human history. Moreover, that pursuit made and continues to make Islām a most powerful living force, even as filtered through the myriad phenomena that explicitly or implicitly, rightly or wrongly, claim its name.

If nothing else, the question “What is Islām?” ultimately invites each of us – Muslim or non-Muslim, monotheist or pagan, theist or secular – to objectively approach the Prophet of Islām and the Qurʾān. We do not seek a “new” Islām. We do not seek a “traditional” Islām or an “orthodox” Islām; a “fundamentalist” Islām or a “radical” Islām; nor a “reform” Islām, “liberal” Islām, or a “pluralist” Islām. Rather:

- Regardless of what anyone may *want* Islām to be, its *essence* lies with the one who proclaimed its vision and message, and with the specific stream of consciousness he proclaimed as encapsulating that vision and message;
- The *value* of the Islāmic vision and message is a function of the value of the Prophet and *his* specific vision on the one hand, and of the Qurʾān on the other;
- The degree to which a given phenomenon is Islāmic is the degree to which that phenomenon accurately reflects the Prophet and his vision on the one hand, and the Qurʾān on the other.

These three statements about essence, value, and the meaning of ‘Islamic’ perhaps best encapsulate the most basic assumption upon which the present work is based.

An objective approach to answer our question, “What is Islām?”, through the Prophet of Islām and the Qurʾān is not always easy. It calls for a *cognizance* and *recognition* of these two central phenomena. Although perfect knowledge of either is unlikely if not impossible, we can at least be hopeful that an attitude of objectivity will help us progress to increasingly accurate *reflections* of the essences of those two phenomena. By ‘an attitude of objectivity’ we mean the attitude that says that there is something to be

For example: Scientists generally study nature with the attitude that, even if we never find a perfect explanation of it and its laws, we can ever-increasingly *approach* it if we try hard enough. Nature and its laws are not mere whims of scientists but rather they are *objective* in some appropriate sense.



found that is not merely a function of our own whims and desires, and that it is possible to approach that something. With respect to Islām this means that there actually *is* an Islām to search for in the vision, message, and intentions of its Prophet. And even if we never reach the *essence* we can be hopeful of finding an accurate *reflection* that allows us to answer with some precision the question: “What is Islām?”

The remarks on the following pages are meant to be general, hopefully embracing and capturing some of the big picture of Islām. There are many books and studies on particular aspects of Islām, mostly focusing on some particular subset of perspectives, aspects, or phenomena deriving from or relating to Islām proper. In this work we attempt to not only present a fresh perspective that hopefully accurately and comprehensively reflects some rays of the essence of Islām, but also provide a *meta-structure* in which to situate themes which may focus on a particular set of Islām-related phenomena.

For example: Some works focus on the spirituality of Islām and/or spiritual traditions that *in some sense* – that is, more, less, or allegedly – derive from the original phenomenon of Islām viz., the Prophet and the Qurʾān. Others may focus on legal and social phenomena. In this work we cannot hope to capture the fine details of spiritual or legal phenomena that derive in some sense from the original phenomenon. What we *do* hope to capture – in a hopefully accurate reflection of the original phenomenon – is something of the relationship between the two. Through the representation of these kinds of relationships we hope that our meta-structure gives readers a means to place in proper context more specific works on Islām and the phenomena that in some sense derive from it. In addition, we hope that this meta-structure serves to help the reader evaluate the scope and focus of other works with respect to the big picture of Islām in its entirety. That is, a reader of a book on the vast topic of Islāmic social law should realize where social law fits in the larger meta-structure. And a reader of a book on Muslim spirituality should be aware of the place of spirituality in the more general meta-structure. This way one may avoid the extremes – if not sophistry and demagoguery – all too common among many writers on Islām who attempt to, for example, reduce it to only spirituality or to only social law, or who try to expunge one or the other from it.



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We mentioned earlier that approaching the essence of Islām ultimately demands approaching the twin phenomena of the Qurʾān and of the Prophet. For our approach to have any chance of success a number of things must be kept in mind, two in particular:



1 Consider the two poles of a magnet. The north pole is not the south pole, but the two are *coupled* as aspects of a larger phenomenon, namely, that of a *magnetic field*.

- 1 The Qurʾān and the Prophet stand together in a truly *coupled* relationship. This point can hardly be overemphasized. To understand the Prophet one must study the Qurʾān; to comprehend the Qurʾān recourse to the Prophet is indispensable. Indeed, they constitute *one* phenomenon in a sense. To *decouple* the phenomenon of the Prophet from that of the Qurʾān or vice versa is to commit one of the worst follies as far as approaching the essence of Islām is concerned.

After all, whatever the Qurʾān really is, it originally came to humanity *through* the Prophet and *his* consciousness, not anyone else's. He did not merely sit in a bed and dictate it to others. He began putting it into practice from the first onset of its streaming through his consciousness until he passed away. The initial onset of this stream of consciousness immediately and in the first instance addressed the Prophet himself, not anyone else. The Prophet pointed to the Qurʾān as the basis of his personal behavior and his interactions with those around him. And he explained the meanings and applications of the Qurʾān to those around him. At the same time, the Qurʾān is the most *definitive* testimony we have today to the original phenomenon and essence of Islām. Its words still ring with us long after the passing of the individual through whose consciousness it streamed. It remains alive and present in a way that can *immediately* be touched, felt, and evaluated.

Yet its language and context is still inextricably tied to the Prophet, whom it addresses even today whenever anyone recites it. "**Read! In the name of your Lord and Cherisher who created...**" [96:1],[Ⓒ] it says to the Prophet, many hundreds of years after it was recited for the first time as, perhaps, the very first phrase of the Qurʾān itself. The Qurʾān and the Prophet are in many ways as coupled now as ever before. And the essence of Islām is as wrapped up with one of them as the other;

[Ⓒ] [96:1]: In referring to the Qurʾān, the first numeral – in this case '96' – refers to the number of the quoted *sūrah* (*phase* or very loosely *chapter*) of the Qurʾān; the second numeral – in this case '1' – refers to the number of the quoted *āyah* (*sign* or very loosely *verse*) of the mentioned *sūrah*.

- 2 The pre-Classical Arabic of these twin phenomena is both ancient and subtle. One must place oneself as much as possible in the place of an Arabic ear hearing the Qur^ʿān or the Prophet for the first time. A certain *phenomenological* as well as *linguistic* sensitivity is needed to tease out and translate the basic connotations of these ancient expressions into modern written or spoken English. We will come across numerous instances where a one-to-one translation of expressions from Arabic to English is simply impossible. Moreover, the semantics of the Arabic language and its syntactic structure carry connotations which are nearly impossible to translate into English. Even further, the language of the Prophet and the Qur^ʿān does not *merely* parrot pre-Classical Arabic. It pushes the language into new territory, employing expressions in fresh and subtle ways beyond the conventions used by and the connotations expressed by the average or above-average Arab bedouin or city-dweller. Yet with phenomenological sensitivity we can hopefully approach accurate and precise reflections of the basic meanings and intentions of the relevant expressions and sentences spoken by the Prophet and the Qur^ʿān.

For the purpose of approaching the essence of Islām, the Arabic text of the Qur^ʿān is fortunately quite standard and stable. For approaching the Prophet the Qur^ʿān is a most important source as well. But the Prophet spoke many things that spring from and speak to the essence of Islām, words that do not flow through that specific stream of consciousness as did the Qur^ʿān. The Prophet performed numerous actions that express the essence of Islām, and not all of these are recorded in the Qur^ʿān. Thus we must approach the voluminous resources of the *Ḥadīth* or *Tradition* literature, which includes biographical and historical details as well as the guidance of the Prophet on virtually every aspect of the Islāmic vision that he promulgated. Unlike the Qur^ʿān, the *Ḥadīth* literature is not nearly as standardized. Rather, one must employ some consistent, reasonable, methodology for determining for any given tradition whether it is an accurate representation of either the teaching of the Prophet or of something that he did.

The *Ḥadīth* literature takes us to the Prophet through the medium of those who were around him, namely his *Companions* (*Aṣḥāb*) and his *Family* (*Ahlu āl-Bayt*). These two groups

By 'phenomenological sensitivity' to Arabic we refer in part to a *direct experience* and *placing in context* of Arabic words and expressions, bracketing them from their later classical and post-classical uses.

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are not mutually exclusive. For example: The Prophet's cousin and son-in-law ʿAli was both a distinguished companion and a member of the Family. Virtually everything we know about the Prophet and the origins of the Qurʾān comes through these two sources, the Companions and the Family.



In approaching the essence of Islām through the Qurʾān and the Prophet, there is another very important consideration, namely, the *historical context* of these two phenomena. The nature of pre-Islāmic Arabia, the relationship of the Prophet to his family and the larger tribe from whence it sprang, and the trials, tribulations, and triumphs he underwent during the twenty-three years of the streaming of the Qurʾān are each relevant to a fuller appreciation of what Islām is. The Ḥadīth literature is of course the main source for an analysis and presentation of this context. We will provide glimpses of this throughout the body of this work. Of course, doing complete justice to the historical context vis-à-vis the essence of Islām would require a separate work.

Our objective in this work is to present the essence of Islām as much as possible in a *trans-historical* manner. That is, we hold that the essence of Islām *transcends* its historical context, though the historical context is useful for *approaching* that essence. We will make as many necessary references to that context as needed for our purposes. We intend to provide some more extended references to historical matters in a future augmentation to this book.

Both popular and specialized books on Islām in English tend to neglect the traditions narrated through the Family, a neglect we intend to balance in this work. From amongst the *early generations* of the Prophet's Family and his descendants, a number of particular figures stand out. Those figures were universally recognized by the extensive testimony of representatives of the different factions of the early Muslim community – including even some of the enemies of these figures – as honest narrators of traditions, masters of the Qurʾān, as well as true embodiments of the essence of Islām as taught by its Prophet and encapsulated in the Qurʾān. Given the serious divisions of the Muslim community such virtual unanimity is a welcome indicator that these individuals actually do reflect something of the original essence of Islām as transmitted to them from the Prophet through their

By 'early generations' we mean the generation of the Companions, their students the *Followers* (*Ṭabīʿīn*), and the students of the Followers.

family line. As an Arabic saying goes, “The people of the house know best what’s in the house.”

The famous compendia of Ḥadīth literature were compiled sometime after the gradual division of the community into two major *schools*. Despite the broad commonalities in content to be found across these collections, and regardless of the overall sincerity and honesty of their compilers, the actual selections of the compilers (and what they chose to *not* include) naturally reflect, in part, something of their allegiances. In this work we will benefit from the compendia collected by compilers of both schools. The particular scholastic allegiance of the compiler of a given compendium will not be a primary factor in *our* selection of any given tradition. Rather, each presented tradition will be selected on its own merit, based upon the determination that it accurately reflects something of the essence of Islām.

We shall see that Islām is essentially a form of activity. Based on the above considerations, this work considers the most general and fundamental dynamism that underlies the activity of Islām to be that of *walāyah*. As a corollary, this work considers the concept derived from *walāyah* as the best and most accurate mirror for the purpose of reflecting upon the mind something of the essence of Islām. Briefly, the word ‘*walāyah*’ expresses the concept “dynamic loving”. Through the concept of *walāyah*, virtually all of the ideas derived from the activity of Islām – be they cosmological, spiritual, or practical – can be reflected, understood, defined, and/or placed in the larger context of Islām as a whole. For example: Islām’s *monotheism* (*tawḥīd*), its rituals like *communion* (*ṣalāh*), and its laws like the prohibition of interest and usury; each turns out to be a special case of *walāyah*.

The concept of *walāyah* provides us a key to the basic unity of the various aspects of the essence of Islām, and how those aspects relate to one another. It provides a *benchmark* by means of which one can begin to evaluate of a given phenomenon whether or not it is really *Islāmic* at all. Perhaps more than any other concept derived from Islām, it provides a course upon which we can steer our way to approach and perhaps even reach the essence of Islām.



This extended essay is currently divided into two volumes:

These are the so-called “*Shi‘ī*” and “*Sunni*” schools. We will not get into the details of the differences between these two. Although each of these perspectives took about 250 years to crystallize into its present form, the origins of each trace back to the earliest days of Islām. We intend to explore this in a future work, perhaps an augmentation to this one.

The word ‘*walāyah*’ proper comes from the Qur’ān [18:44]: ***There! all walāyah belongs to Allāh the Real***; the verbal derivatives of that word can be found distributed throughout the entire book.

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- 1 *Islām, Sign and Creation* (which you are currently reading), hereafter abbreviated as *ISC*.
- 2 *Islām, Station and Process* (the sequel to this volume), hereafter abbreviated as *ISP*.

Together these two volumes constitute the first installments of what I call the *Islām-Dynamic Project*. The word ‘dynamic’ is chosen to mirror the active and receptive nature of Islām itself. Too often Islām is presented by Muslims and non-Muslims alike as a static or rigid structure of belief, ritual, and rules; or as a spiritual path divorced from practical life or vice versa. Yet the Qur^ʿān and the example of the Prophet demonstrate an emphatic commitment to movement and flow, to *dynamicity* in the development of the human being through each and every aspect of human life, cosmological, spiritual, and socio-politico-economic. All fit together dynamically in the progress of one’s journey to direct knowledge and love of one’s self, of creation, and ultimately direct knowledge and love God.

A NOTE ON THE SOURCES OF THE AHĀDĪTH USED IN THIS WORK: So as to maintain an easy-going flow in this essay, we have not overburdened this work with references for every *ḥadīth*. In the next planned installment of the Islām Dynamic Project we will provide a sourcebook, including the traditions and Qur^ʿānic references used in the first two installments, *ISC* and *ISP*.

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Dear reader: May you enjoy this journey across the ocean of Islām, carried by the ship of *walāyah*.

