

Core Curriculum

1 God, Religion and Islam: An Introduction

1.1 **The Problem of Evil, Suffering and Pain**

INTRODUCTION

Bismillāhir Rahmānir Rahīm, As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh. Peace be upon you brothers and sisters.

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The greatest spiritual crisis that humans will ever face is the problem of evil and suffering. The question goes like this, if God is all good, why does He permit evil and suffering? Why doesn't He stop it? After all, if He loves His creation, He would protect them just like a mother protects her children.

In this lesson, we look at two aspects of the problem of evil in this world. The first is the intellectual problem of evil and suffering. The second is the emotional problem

of evil and suffering. On the latter, we will give some pointers on how to deal with suffering in the modern world.

BODY OF TEXT

Answering the Intellectual Problem of Evil

The intellectual problem of evil sees God and evil as mutually incompatible. If God is all-good and all-loving, then He would naturally want to alleviate suffering from us and get rid of evil. Since there is great suffering and evil in the world, then God is either

1. powerless to do anything about suffering and evil
2. or careless and callous about His creation
3. or He does not exist

Obviously none of these options are good as they do not help the case for any monotheistic conception of God. Since God is the creator of the universe, it is impossible that He be powerless. Many people see God as All-Loving and All-Good which means that He would or should stop evil if He did indeed exist. Since evil still persists, many atheists will say that this is proof that God, or at least the Abrahamic understanding of God, does not exist.

This is a rather simplistic depiction of the intellectual problem of evil since there is another way of looking at the problem of God and evil that is logically sound.

Yes, God is All-Good and All-Loving, and as the creator of the universe, He is also All-Powerful. So why does He allow evil to exist?

A popular answer that theologians give is the following: God brought us unto this earth in order to test us. If God interferes in every single instance of evil in this world, then what is the point of free will and testing? It is by being tested on this earth that we grow spiritually. With constant divine intervention, we as individuals cannot grow spiritually.

The second answer is that God has morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil to exist. This means that our knowledge and awareness of things is very limited. God sees things from eternity and knows all possible outcomes. He allows evil to exist to the extent that it will have a positive effect in the world or the afterlife or both. We

may not be able to see the good of it as of now, but on the “macroscale” of things it does lead to an ultimate good no matter how bad it seems in the short-term.

This last part thus requires some honesty and humility. We can't predict with 100% accuracy what will happen five minutes from now, how can we ever make a judgment on the effects of evil acts throughout the span of human history in this world and the Hereafter?

The Emotional Problem of Evil

The emotional problem of evil is about people's dislike or even hatred of God who permits suffering in the world. People lose their loved ones, their health, their jobs or see society around them fall apart where much of it is due to evil acts such as murder or illnesses and disease brought about by war. They are angry that God doesn't do anything about it.

Remember that often enough, this kind of attitude stems from a subtle and hidden assumption that there is no afterlife. The person expressing such anger may outwardly believe in the Hereafter and God's Final Judgment, but deep down inside he or she isn't really certain about it.

From an Islamic perspective, and indeed from an Abrahamic perspective, God has the last word on the Day of Judgment. Our lives here are limited, and those of us who live in the 21st century will notice that time goes by super-fast. Know that you will soon die and on your deathbed, you will forget most of the evil and suffering that came your way.

This world, as we said earlier, is a world where God tests our free will. If we didn't have free will, we couldn't be truly good. In order to be truly good and reach union with God, one must be able to choose good over evil. For God to get rid of evil in the world, which is the result of human intentions, he would need to get rid of our free will. But if he did this, he would also take our ability to truly love and do good.

For Allah, this isn't worth the price. Why should Allah sacrifice our potential for infinite greatness and good for the sake of some evil people? And it's not like they're going to get away with it, they will be accountable for every single thing they do in their lives whether it is a small lie or or a big thing like murder.

But what about those who suffered from evil? According to Islam, God will reward those who suffered from evil on the Day of Judgment. He will do this on multiple levels. First, their suffering will be a means for having their sins forgiven. Second, they will get extra rewards in heaven.

Third, there are some forms of evil that may cause long term psychological pain for its victims. On the Day of Judgment, God will make some people forget the horrible things they suffered in this world in order to fill them with inner peace. It will be as if none of it ever happened.

Finally, remember that suffering is our best teacher. We learn more from suffering than from our happy days. Our happy and comfortable days tend to make us heedless, whereas suffering wakes us up and makes us realize that nothing in this world is dependable. We can only depend on God.

Until Next Time, Thank you for watching. As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh

1.2 **God, Allah and Religion**

INTRODUCTION

Bismillāhir Rahmānir Rahīm, As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh. Peace be upon you brothers and sisters.

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God, Allah, what is the difference? For people who come from non-Muslim backgrounds, these two beings often sound like they are two different Gods.

This, however, is not correct. Allah just means God in Arabic.

In this lesson, we will briefly introduce you to the concept of God in Islam.

BODY OF TEXT

Say, "He is Allah , [who is] One, Allah , the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, Nor is there to Him any equivalent." (Chapter 112, verses 1 to 4 of the Holy Qur’an)

God, or Allah in Islam is the creator of the universe. He is not just a creator like an engineer who makes a car, no, He is what brought all being into existence.

Whether the whole of existence has a beginning or is eternal, He is the one who sustains it and is the ultimate explanation as to why anything exists at all.

Unlike the God of deism, Allah is not a callous God. He is the all-Compassionate, the All-Merciful, the All-Forgiving and the All-Loving.

Out of His love and compassion He created humanity and all life in the world.

According to Islam, God did not create humankind out of play, but created it so that it might find spiritual perfection. He created us human beings so that as freely willing agents, we may purify our souls and become compassionate, merciful, loving and wise beings in a way that is analogous to the source of these wonderful attributes, namely God Himself.

In order to do this, Allah sends down His special revelation in the form of religion to guide humankind to spiritual perfection. Revelation comes in the form of constitutive instructions on how to lead the good life and cleans our hearts from spiritual impurities such as pride, anger, hatred and jealousy among other things, and therefore lead our hearts to be filled with the living light of God. With the light of God in our hearts, we become wise, insightful, patient, forgiving and loving like God Himself.

In this sense, we see that the default position of God is that we enter heaven, unless we use our free will for the sake of evil and destroy our souls. But even then, the God of Islam still wishes redemption for evil doers and will do what He can to give them excuses and forgive them on the Day of Judgment.

For those who betray themselves and their souls, there is a punishment. Yet as J.R.R Tolkien once said, God's punishment is also His reward. This is because suffering is our greatest teacher; it is a process of pain that opens the doors of our perceptions and ability to selflessly love others.

It not only shows our hearts our wrongs, but it also creates room in our hardened hearts for compassion, a compassion that partakes in and feels the suffering of others. In this compassion for the pain of others is where divine love is born in the heart once again and hence why Allah's punishment is also His reward.

This is the God of Islam, Allah.

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Introduction to Islam

INTRODUCTION & BODY OF TEXT TOGETHER

Bismillāhir Rahmānir Rahīm, As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh. Peace be upon you brothers and sisters.

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Islam began in the 7th century Mecca which is located in modern day Saudi Arabia. It is the second largest religion in the world. As articulated by its sacred text the Qur’an, it is God’s final religion on earth. Islam was revealed by God’s last Prophet on earth, Muhammad the son of Abdullah (s).

Islam is an Abrahamic religion, meaning that it is a monotheistic religion that accepts most of the Old Testament and New Testament Prophets, including Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus among other Prophets sent by God to earth.

Islam also believes in the Devil, in angels, including the Archangels Gabriel and Michael, as well as the Day of Judgment. Like Christianity, Islam deems charity to be mandatory. Withholding help and charity is an immoral and sinful act according to it.

However, unlike Christianity, it rejects the concept of the Trinity and upholds God as absolutely one. Jesus (as) according to Islam was only a divinely guided Prophet and not God Himself.

Islam is the fastest growing religion on earth and it has over 1.5 billion followers.

The ultimate sacred text for the Muslims is the Qur’an. The Qur’an was originally revealed in Arabic and is believed to be the literal word of God that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (s) and expressed verbatim by him to the Muslim community.

According to the Qur’anic narrative, Islam does not see itself as a new religion. It sees itself as the culmination of thousands upon thousands of generations of Prophetic messages which began at the time of the Prophet Adam (as), unto the Prophets Abraham, Moses, and Jesus among others, and ending with the Prophet Muhammad (s).

The Qur’an is the only divinely revealed sacred text to explicitly and unequivocally claim that it is God’s last religion on earth. But why is this the case? Why can’t we have more religions?

One answer is that as previous divinely revealed religions outlined guiding principles for humankind, Islam simply completed these principles to the extent that no more was needed. Everything humans need for salvation can be found in Islam in its completest form.

This is easy to observe. Islam is a large synthesis of both an orthopraxy and an orthodoxy, meaning that both “right action” and “right belief” culminate under one religion. In this sense, on some level, it is like a perfected fusion of both Judaism and Christianity.

As such, it addresses everything in our lives, from aspects of ritual purity, foods we can eat and can’t eat, social laws as well as issues of theological doctrine, such as the nature of God’s attributes. It also lays down social principles that act as blueprints for both honorable living in this world and salvation in the next.

So to recap, since Islam contains everything needed for divine guidance until the Day of Judgment, there is no longer a need for another religion.

But what does Islam exactly mean?

Islam is an Arabic word. It means to serve or submit, and a Muslim is someone who serves and submits to God. Islam and Muslim are verbal nouns, in other words, they don’t just denote a state of belief, but a state of being, a state of action. Outward submission is only a small part of the story.

The goal of Islam as a divinely revealed religion is not only to elicit outward conformity with God’s will, but its ultimate aim is to have the human heart submit to God in an act of devotion and love. In this act of total servitude and emptying of one’s soul of anything other than God, the heart finds inner peace, tranquility and joy. This inner transformation according to Islam is the beginning of heaven. It begins on this earth and finds its peak in the next life.

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1.4 **What is “Religion” and What’s the Point of it Anyways?**

INTRODUCTION & BODY OF TEXT

Bismillāhir Rahmānir Rahīm, As-salāmu ‘Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh. Peace be upon you brothers and sisters.

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At first glance, we all think we know what religion is. Religion is often defined as a system of thought organized around the belief of a supernatural entity, usually some form of god or gods and a series of rituals and social regulations that stem from this belief.

Religion in this sense can be in many different forms. For one, there is animism where totems and magic rituals form a central part of its worldview concerning the supernatural and the natural.

Then there are other forms of polytheism which posit the existence of many gods who perform tasks specific to them, such as controlling the rain, love or fertility.

Then you have monotheistic religions that believe in one creator God and that there is no deity aside this God. Among these religions we find Judaism, Christianity, Islam etc.

Then you have other earth based religions that do not make a distinction between natural and supernatural, such as shamanistic religions among some ancient Central Asians and Native Americans.

So, what purpose do all these religions serve? There have been plenty of answers to this question. Some, like Karl Marx, have said that religion serves to distract people from their economic problems and class struggles and by making them think positively of their situation and accept their oppression. Others like Sigmund Freud argue that religion is the product of some psycho-social illness.

Other early 20th century sociologists like Emile Durkheim argue that the purpose of religion is to create social cohesion and solidarity. In other words, it is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things that ultimately function to unite society under a single morality which Durkheim called a "Church."

Others like Clifford Geertz saw religion as a system of symbols intended to create strong emotions in people through the formulation of a general order of existence.

Now as you can see, it isn't really clear what religion means, nor is there an agreement as to

what its purpose is, at least in current academic Western debates. Something we think so simple is actually quite complex. Even explanations of why “religion” is failing is full of disagreements.

Some say that an increasing globalization and exchange of ideas means that people aren't so sure about their religious beliefs anymore. Others blame materialism, and others blame secularism as a political system that has stripped the public consciousness of religion where direct encounters with religion are no longer allowed or discouraged in public places.

They argue that naturally, humans will attach themselves to whatever they are exposed to the most. Since in schools, in the media and other public arenas religion is largely absent, people will naturally grow heedless and disinterested in it.

So what does Islam say about all of this? Well, we will look into Islam's understanding of the meaning and function of religion in our next lesson. But here we will give you a brief overview before we go.

Talal Asad, the most prominent anthropologists in Western academia today, argues that the term “religion” - as a conceptual term in English - is a modern creation, and more specifically, the creation of the modern nation state and a direct by-product of secularism.

For secularism to target, isolate and relegate “religion” to the private sphere, it must first define what it is and thus put it into its neat little box; but the problem of defining also leads to an essentializations and generalization of what “religion” is. In order to create a category called religion, you must semantically shape the term so that it serves your power, but by doing so, you allow some definitions and disallow others. Defining what is “religion” therefore becomes a play of power by the nation state.

As such, Asad opts for defining religion as a constitutive activity in the world. This definition is seen as fair and is quite similar to how Islam defines “religion.” The Arabic word for religion is *dīn* (deen) which is originally taken from the old Persian word *dā'inah*, meaning a way of life.

Dīn is therefore a way of life that is guided by one ultimate purpose and concern, whatever it may be. A person's *dīn* may be polytheism, or it can be nationalism, or finance and money, whatever it is, it is a cognitive state and a system of knowing and desiring that guides and

determines all of one's ways of looking at and acting in the world and all the various commitments and ways of organizing that come as a result of it.

From this Islamic perspective, religion is not failing, it is always there. Even atheism is a way of life and hence a dīn. What is failing is a religion which primarily sees itself as being guided and determined by God. The relationship with God is what is being lost, but this way of approaching life whilst ignoring or denying God is still a way of life and hence a dīn.

Please tune in to our next lesson for a larger discussion on the matter.

Until Next Time, Thank you for watching. As-salāmu 'Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh.

1.5 **A Brief Introduction to the Prophet Muhammad (s), the Prophet of Islam**

INTRODUCTION & BODY OF TEXT

Bismillāhir Rahmānir Rahīm, As-salāmu 'Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh. Peace be upon you brothers and sisters.

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The Prophet Muhammad (s) was born around the year 570 A.D in the city of Mecca.

Mecca is in the Arabian Peninsula. The land the Prophet was born in was largely a desert land. The most valuable commodity was fertile land and access to water through wells.

Of the most important cultural practices of the time was the recital of poetry. The Arabs of Mecca were largely divided into tribes. The tribes played some positive roles in that they were social safety nets for vulnerable members of the community. They often acted as safety nets for the children of the tribe who were orphaned and for women who were widowed or divorced.

The Prophet Muhammad (s) was from the Tribe of Quraysh and the clan of Banu Hashim.

The Arabs, and particularly the Meccans, were plagued with troubles as well. Tribal wars were rampant not only because tribal conflicts were often resolved through violence, but because war was also culturally glorified. People simply loved war.

Although a select group of women found financial success and social status, most women, especially those of the lower ranking classes of women did not fare well. For one, women were often inherited from father to son. This meant that a boy's stepmother would become his wife after his father's death.

Having daughters was a big no no. Many men were poor and could not afford to raise many children. As a result, they often killed their daughters by burying them alive in order to make room for sons. Daughters were not just less preferable, but they were a burden as well.

Slave women fared the worst. Slave women were forced into prostitution by their masters and were subjugated to starvation and brutal beatings. Male slaves did not do well either; they were often raped, beaten and only given junk to eat.

Most of the Arabs of Mecca were polytheists. They worshiped over three hundred different gods and idols. Most of them did not believe in the Afterlife and did not believe that Allah, the creator of the universe, was involved in the lives of people.

There were, however, a small group of people who were not polytheists and idol worshipers. These were Hanifs, a group of monotheists that followed the religion of Abraham, the father of the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

This is the background that the Prophet Muhammad (s) was born into. Like that small group of people, the Prophet Muhammad (s) was also a Hanif. He traced his family back to Ishmael or Ismā'īl as it is said in Arabic.

The Prophet Muhammad (s) found himself orphaned at a very young age. His father had passed away before he was born and his mother passed away a few years later while he was still a child.

As tribal custom usually had it, the Prophet Muhammad (s) was adopted by his grandparents, and after they passed away, he was adopted by his paternal uncle Abu Talib (as) who

eventually became one of the staunchest supporters of his prophethood.

The Prophet Muhammad (s), even before his first encounter with the Angel Gabriel (as), was a very spiritual man. From a young age, he rejected all forms of idolatry. As a young man, he was always truthful which is why he was called al-Amīn, meaning the truthful one. People trusted his honesty as well as his modesty and wisdom.

The Prophet (s) would spend many nights meditating in the cave of Hira. It is on such a night when he was forty years old that he was visited by the angel Gabriel (as) in which he was given revelation by God in the shape of the Qur'an, the holy scripture of Islam.

At this moment, the Prophet Muhammad (s) officially began his career as a Prophet (s) and spread the message of Allah to the masses.

The Prophet's (s) message was essentially the Qur'an. The Qur'an was the verbatim word of God.

The Qur'an was to become a book divided into a 114 chapters with over 6000 verses. As a divine book of guidance, it sought not only to correct people's theological beliefs, but it also provided a social commentary in order to rectify Meccan and indeed global moral corruption.

It began by dismissing the power of idols, whether they were physical in the form of statues, or the more sinister ones found in the minds of men and women, namely the worship of the self and desires called hawa in Arabic.

The message, although for all of humankind, taught the Meccans that there was only one single deity in all of existence and that was God, the creator of the universe. Allah was not distant; He was closer to us than even our jugular vein. He was the sustainer of all of existence and was intimate in the guidance of all of humanity.

He cared for the wellbeing and salvation of humanity and sent Prophets to guide humankind via angels. The Prophets of Islam, included, among others, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Joseph and Jesus.

The Qur'an accepted previous scriptures such as the Torah, the Gospels, and so on and so

forth; however, it did express reservations in so far as some of their texts may have changed over time. As such, the Qur'an offered a corrective over these changes.

The Qur'an frowned upon the Arab love of war. It forbade incest with stepmothers as well as the prostitution of female slaves. Islam made it mandatory that slaves be treated as human beings and be given the same food as their masters were given.

The Qur'an expressed horror at the practice of killing female children. It not only forbade it, but it also subverted Arab gender discourse by seeing female children as equally valuable as male children.

As such, the Qur'an taught that a Muslim, that is, a follower of the religion of Islam, was to put all his or her trust in God and God alone. A Muslim was to be peaceful, disdain war, choose justice even if it meant going against one's own tribe.

Being a Muslim meant that a person had to be modest, hygienic, educated, compassionate and treat all humans, including women, as equal creations of God. Women, orphans, animals and the environment were no longer to be abused but cherished as masterpieces of God.

In short, being a Muslim was to be reborn in the image of God and fulfilling one's destiny as God's vicegerent on earth.

Until Next Time, Thank you for watching. As-salāmu 'Alaykum wa rahmatullāhi wa barakātuh