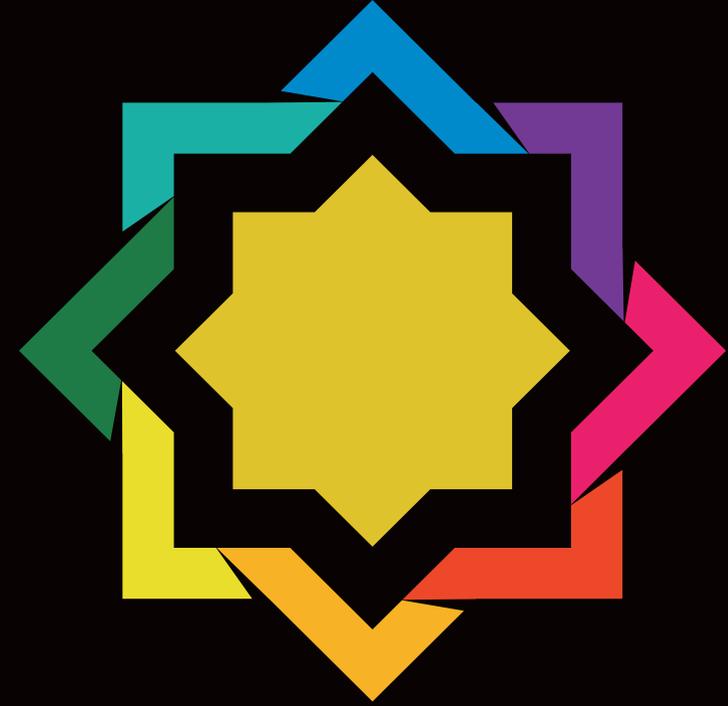


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Islam for the 21st century

One of the frequent questions asked in our day and age is whether any religion is relevant after what is commonly described as the post modernity age?

Islam however, is not a religion in the restrictive sense of the word; it is described as Deen by the Quran. Deen means a complete code of conduct or a comprehensive way of life. It includes rules for spiritual as well as mundane activities that constitute human life. Islam is the final divine message to humanity possessing a number of characteristics that none of the previous messages had. This, in itself, qualifies Islam as being the only universal and eternal way of life providing every living being, including the animals, with justice and inner peace.

The Quran proclaims:

And We have not sent you, [O Muhammed], except as a mercy to the worlds.[21:107]

Indeed, this Qur'an guides to that which is most suitable and gives good tidings to the believers who do righteous deeds that they will have a great reward.[17:9]

Islam is unique, magnificent in its essence and application, such that it can be viewed, assessed and implemented from multiple angles and scales. It is at once a sophisticated system and an incredibly simple one. Its details are multifarious and multifaceted requiring time and dedication, without limits, to learn in their entirety. And yet, it can also be explained in a single minute and can be understood without ambiguity by one and all.

Due to this uniqueness of Islam people can sometimes get bogged down by taking a very ritualistic approach to practising Islam, which can wrongly lead the non-Muslims watching them into believing

Islam to be just another ritualistic religion. As a result, some Muslims are more worried about the presence of E-numbers in their food than whether their earnings are lawful or unlawful! Others are more worried about the details of the outward actions during prayer such as how to move the hands and where to place them, than about the inner khushū‘ (humility, concentration) in their prayers.

Many young Muslims are more worried about bid‘ah or innovation than the unity of the Muslim community. Some who wish to study Belief, likewise, sadly spend disproportionate energy on technical details of how to treat the names and attributes of God, rather than understanding their meanings and the impact of these meanings on the person’s life.

Prioritising of this micro approach leads to many other disadvantages. It presents the Sharia and Islam as a collection of rituals that do not constitute a system capable of running large societies or building great civilisations. In fact, the story mentioned in the Quran of God’s command to Children of Isrā’īl to slaughter a cow is testimony to this sad state of affairs wherein people ignore the true essence of the command and get lost in miniature and ritualistic dogmas. Thus before we embark on explaining the relevance of Islam in the 21st century it is an imperative that the cultural and dogmatic practises of Muslims from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds are clearly separated from the crystal clear guidance enshrined in the last testament-The Quran and the life of the last Messenger Muhummed pbuh.

The Quran makes it clear that the role of Islam and Muslims is global and international by explaining the very purpose of Muslim community being to stand for truth and justice and be the leaders for this and a role model for other nations. The Quran wants the Muslims to be the best of nations in conduct so that they are a role model for the rest of the nations!

“You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in God” [3:110]

This is what gives everlasting relevance to Islam, the command that Muslims have to be the epitome of upholding what is right for all and opposing what is wrong, without any discrimination of faith, colour, and creed or of nation!

The centrality of standing up for the truth and justice as the primary Quranic value system is displayed by the following verse:

“We sent Our Messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the Book and the Measure in order to establish justice among the people...” (Quran 57:25)

The phrase ‘Our Messengers’ in this verse demonstrates that justice has been the goal of all revelation and scriptures sent to humanity. The Quran further explains the quality that would make Islam relevant and in fact a requirement for all times to come by declaring the goal and purpose of those who adhere to it as:

“Believers! Be upright bearers of witness for God, and do not let the enmity of any people move you to deviate from justice. Act justly, that is nearer to God-fearing. And fear God. Surely God is well aware of what you do”.(5:8)

The Quran further commands:

“O’ Believers! Be upholders of justice, and bearers of witness to truth for the sake of God, even though it may either be against yourselves or against your parents and kinsmen, or the rich or the poor: for God is more concerned with their well-being than you are. Do not, then, follow your own desires lest you keep away from justice. If you twist or turn away from (the truth), know that God is well aware of all that you do” (4:135)

It is not enough for believers to uphold justice themselves: they are expected to be its standard-bearers. They are supposed not merely to practise justice in their own dealings but to strive for its triumph. They have to do all within their power to ensure that injustice is eradicated and replaced by equity and justice. A true believer is required to be the pillar supporting the establishment of right and justice.

The testimony of the believers should be solely for the sake of God. Their testimony should not be biased in favour of any of the parties concerned, they should not use any opportunity for personal aggrandizement, and they should not seek to please anyone but God. This quality and approach of Islamic principles of truth, justice and freedom for all makes Islam the most important requirement for all times to come. The Quran declared about the freedom of choice on faith:

“There is no compulsion in religion. The Right Way stands clearly distinguished from the wrong. Hence he who rejects the evil ones and believes in God has indeed taken hold of the firm, unbreakable handle. And God (Whom he has held for support) is All-Hearing, All-Knowing” (2:256)

Deen here signifies the belief about God and the entire system of life which rests upon it. The verse means that the system of Islam, embracing belief, morals and practical conduct cannot be imposed by compulsion. These are not things to which people can be yoked forcibly. Thus Islam upholds the right of individuals to choose or to refuse but at the same time it explains the consequences that come with such choices that we make.

Islam’s relevance today

Islam is relevant in the 21st century in the same manner it was in the 7th century. Human beings can form a system for life, however, such

endeavours will never be free of errors, inconsistencies, and will lack relevancy for all peoples at all times. The manmade system would be able to address specific problems in time, place, and for specific people under certain conditions. However, it will never be able to solve all the problems for all humanity at all times under every condition. All of this is due to the nature of human beings, who are limited in their abilities, being influenced by their own needs and surroundings. A system revealed from the Creator is free from all of these limitations. God states:

“Know you not that it is God to whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth And besides God you have neither any true friend nor any helper.” (21:107)

“And We have not sent you (Muhummed) except as a giver of glad tidings and a warner to all mankind, but most men know not.” (34:28)

“And (remember) the Day when we shall raise up from every nation a witness against them from amongst themselves. And we shall bring you (o Muhummed) as a witness against these. And We have sent down to you the Book as an exposition of everything, a guidance, a mercy, and glad tidings for those who have accepted the truth” (16:89)

Islam addresses Man as a human being with his inherent needs and wants. It views Man from a holistic perspective and addressed the needs of Man as the basis for its solution. In contrast to this all other systems and structures introduced by man are lopsided and concentrated on certain aspects of Man's needs while neglecting his other needs. For instance, in capitalism any commodity or service is considered beneficial and has to be produced as long as it satisfies a need for an individual in the society, including things like alcohol, drugs, prostitution. Capitalism views the producer or provider of such services as the one who contributes towards solving the economic problem. The problem is addressed by increasing

production and subsequently closing the gap between supply and demand. Increasing production to meet demand overlooks the impact of producing the material or providing certain services for society. While, in Islam certain commodities and services have no value because of their negative effect on the society.

Additionally, the tool through which Capitalism guarantees the acquisition of products or services is money. So, whoever does not possess the price of something would be deprived of it. In Islam, the well being of the individual and society at large is considered and thus one would acquire things needed either through the mechanism of price or through other mechanisms, such as Zakah (charity) or through the State's treasury.

The other most important aspect of Islam that keeps it relevant for all times is the fact that the Quran gave humanity a broader structure of fundamental principles that guarantee truth, justice, morality and dignity for all, whilst leaving the research and discoveries of new tools and requirements to man. Islam prescribed or specified a system for all aspects of life while leaving the technical and scientific aspects to Man. Islam left Man to pursue the most efficient technique available for its needs and development. One example of this is the incident when the Prophet pbuh in the battle of Badr chose a location for the Muslim army to encamp. One of the companions asked the Prophet

"Is this the location that God has ordered you to choose or is it a tactical decision?"

When the Prophet pbuh said that it is a tactical decision, the companion directed the Prophet's attention towards a strategically better location and the Prophet pbuh accepted that with good success. In another example, the people inquired from the Prophet pbuh on the method of pollinating date trees. So he told the people to leave it up to the wind. When this method did not work and people complained to the Prophet about it, the Prophet replied

“You know better in your daily mundane affairs (referring to the know how’s of life)”.

Islam encouraged mankind to cultivate agricultural land but left it up to Man to find and use the most efficient techniques and tools available in cultivating and enhancing the quality of vegetation and fruits.

Method of deriving injunctions from Quran

This is what makes Islamic way of life transcend all constrains of time and place. The nature of the text of both Qur'an and Sunnah (life and sayings of Prophet) possess the following characteristics that give them relevancy:

1) The text is viewed as a legal text, enabling the Mujtahid (The Jurist) to derive rules for other issues not mentioned in the text based upon a valid methodology. If the text was viewed in the way the church viewed the bible (as a holy text), the scope of the text would be literal. As an example in (65:6), God says:

“...then if they give suck to the children for you, give them their due payment...” [65: 6]

The verse mentions that monetary compensation should be paid for breastfeeding. However, from the text the following rules or principles can be derived:

Compensation is extended to any hired employee. Also, the wage has to be defined in the contract and employees should receive their wage without any delay upon fulfilling contractual obligations.

2) The text sometimes comes in the form of general guidelines while at other times provides details. As an example in (4:29), God says:

“O you who believe! Eat not up the property among yourselves unjustly except it be as trade amongst you, by mutual consent...”

The verse specifies that any form of trade should be conducted upon mutual agreement. So the verse left the type of trade unrestricted. There are certain transactions excluded from the unrestricted description of trade even if it is done with mutual agreements such as transactions involving interest (Riba).

Even the verses addressing some issues in detail such as inheritance leave room for exploration of more ideas in new circumstances and this process is called Ijtihad (Is a technical term of Islamic law that describes the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah).

3) The text in many cases provides an Illah (Purpose behind or the reason) enabling the Mujtahid to extract rules for others cases sharing the same Illah (reasoning). As an example in (62:9), God says:

“O you who believe, when the call is proclaimed for the prayer on Friday, come to the remembrance of God and leave trade. That is better for you if you did but know.”

The verse prohibits trading when the call to prayer is proclaimed. Since the illah is the distraction from prayers, then any routine activity preventing one from the Friday prayer is forbidden. It is important to note that there are specific guidelines for recognizing the illah mentioned in the text explicitly or implicitly.

4) The text in some cases would include specific phrases, making the text relevant for all times. God says in (16:8):

“And (He has created) horses, mules, and donkeys, for you to ride as an adornment. And He creates things of which you have no knowledge.”

Although the verse listed some animals as being lawful to use as a means for transportation and as objects for adornment, the meaning of the verse is comprehensive and includes any means of

transportation that could be developed as is clear from the last part of the verse.

The above mentioned points give Islam the potential and capacity to address and solve any problem at all times. Through Ijtihad, the Mujtahid is able to relate the text to the issue at hand. Ijtihad is defined as exerting one's utmost effort to extract rules from its legislative sources. From this definition, it is clear that humans would be able to extract rules for new problems in any society and at any given time in the history of mankind.

Islam: The Perfect Balance

Islam effects perfect balance between all areas of life and activity. It starts with the individual maintaining a balance between the requirements of body and soul, reason and spirit and in no case allows one side to dominate the other. It does not suppress the human instincts in order to make the soul ascend the higher planes, nor does it allow man, in his efforts to fulfil his bodily desires, to stoop down to the low level of animalism and hedonism. On the contrary, it makes them both meet on a single higher plane, doing away with all the internal psychological conflicts that threaten the human soul or set a part of it against the other parts.

In the social sphere, it proceeds to achieve equilibrium between the needs of the individual and those of the community. It does not allow an individual to transgress against other individuals, or against the community. Nor does it allow the community to commit transgression against individuals. It also does not approve of one class or group of people to enslave another class or group of people. Islam exercises a beneficent constraint on all these mutually opposed forces, prevents them from coming into collision with one another, and harnesses them all to co-operate for the general good of humankind as a whole.

It must always be kept in mind that Islam has an altogether independent existence of its own as a social philosophy and an economic system. Some of its outward manifestations may on the surface appear to resemble those of Capitalism or Socialism, but in fact, it is far from being the one or the other. It retains all the good characteristics of these systems, yet is free from their shortcomings and perversions. It does not extol individualism to that loathsome extent from which modern Capitalism sprang and institutionalized that concept of individual freedom, where man is allowed to exploit other individuals and the community only to serve his personal gain. Islam guarantees personal freedom and provides opportunities for individual enterprise, but not at the cost of society or ideals of social justice.

The reaction to Capitalism appeared in the form of Socialism. It idolizes the social basis to an extent that the individual is reduced to an insignificant part of the social machine with no existence of his own. Therefore, the community alone enjoys freedom as well as power, the individual has no right to question its authority or demand his rights. Islam is an exquisite blend between these two extremes of social order, guaranteeing all of their good and averting all of their shortcomings.

Islam presented its scheme of social reform much before any of the social movements of our times. It guaranteed the basic needs of man – food, housing and sexual satisfaction – about 1500 years ago. The Prophet pbuh said:

“Whosoever acts as a public officer for us (i.e. the Islamic government) and has no wife, he shall have a wife; if he has no house, he shall be given a house to live in; if he has no servant, he shall have one; and if he has no animal (a conveyance), he shall be provided with one. Anyone who takes more than this has exaggerated (i.e. taken more than he deserves)” [Ahmad]

This is a revolutionary step that Islam has guaranteed and makes it relevant in all societies and for all times to come. This declaration adds some more to the fundamental rights that revolutionaries of our own time are craving for, without necessitating any inter-class hatred, bloody revolutions, and without rejecting all those human elements in life that do not fall under the above three heads: food, housing and family.

Another very relevant aspect of Islam for our era which is rife with numerous prejudices of race, colour and nationalities, is its tolerance. Considering the existing state of affairs in the contemporary world, humankind cannot reasonably afford to turn its back upon Islam or reject its system of life. Humankind is still afflicted with the most savage and odious forms of racial prejudices.

Islam freed humanity from all racial prejudices. It did not content itself with the presentation of a beautiful vision of equality alone, but it achieved in practice an unprecedented state of equality between all people, black, white or brown etc, declaring that none enjoyed any superiority over the others except in virtue and piety.

It not only freed the black from slavery, but also fully recognized their rights to aspire even to the highest seat of authority in the Islamic State. They could become the heads of the Islamic State. The Prophet pbuh said: *“Listen and obey even if a black slave be appointed as your superior, so long as he should enforce amongst you the Law of God”*

How can the world of today ignore the message of Islam, stricken as it is with the evils of imperialism and tyranny with all their barbarous attributes? Islam alone can help humankind shake off these chains. It is opposed to imperialism and all forms of exploitation. Islam not only opposes these oppressive structures and systems but has a better alternative to offer to the mankind, which they are invited to choose willingly and without any coercion or use of force.

Sociologists and psychologists such as Weber, Durkheim and Freud after studying empirical evidences could never reach solid consensus on what the human problems were. During their respective times they concluded these problems were many- ranging from fear, earning of wealth, procreation, survival and worship etc. Some of these problems are instincts that we know already exist whilst others are still to be found and require incorporation into the body of study when discovered. This was their attempt at looking at the reality of humans in order to define the human problem.

The human nature and therefore its problems have not changed, the Quran declares:

“You will not find in the creation of God any alteration” (35: 43).

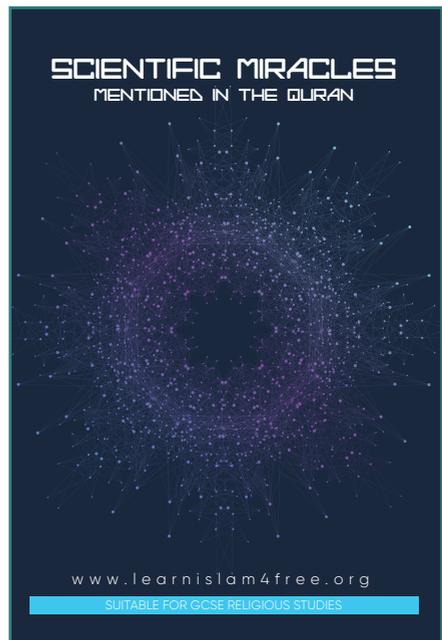
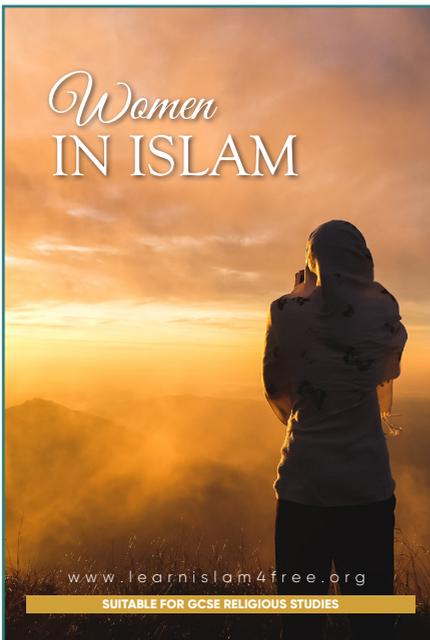
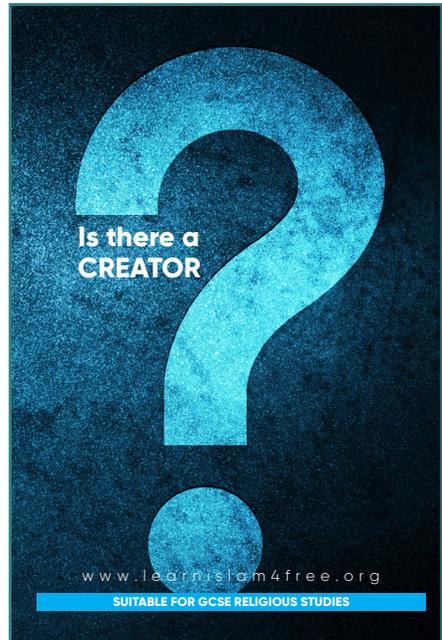
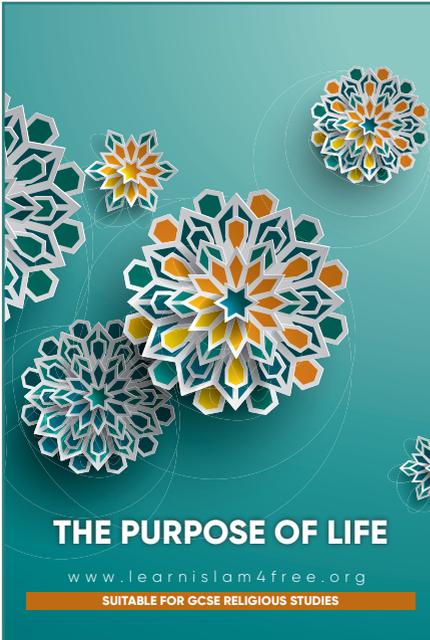
And indeed the Messenger Muhammed pbuh said,

“The son of Adam has no better right than that he would have a house wherein he may live and a piece of cloth whereby he may hide his nakedness and a piece of bread and some water” (Tirmidhi)

Definitely the world is radically different from the one that Islam emerged and progressed in, the lifestyles of people are different to those of a century ago. However, what has not changed is the nature of the problems that humanity faces. They are the same problems that have existed from the very creation of humanity, life and the universe. Man still is struggling to solve his problems and he is no better off today then he was centuries ago.

Islam provides the solution to human problems in our century. An unbiased look at Islam makes it easy to deduce that Islamic legislation came to solve the problems that humans will encounter in the course of their lives. The Sharia in no way is merely a list of do’s and don’ts but a clear set of comprehensive, fundamental and permanent values that can solve all ills of mankind!

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