

which Being could be divided into separate & sealed compartments, for such a compartment would at once fall back into nothingness. **Modern man has taken the road to death & destruction precisely because, in the study & treatment of the natural world, he has acted as though such divisions exist.**

The sacred rites of Islam, in particular the five daily prayers & the month of fasting, are intimately related to the cycles found in nature rather than to mechanical, manmade units of time. The times of prayer are determined by the breaking of dawn, the rising of the sun, its coming to the zenith, its mid-decline, sunset and the close of day. And although the calendar tells us when the month of Ramadan begins and ends, it is considered essential that the dates should be established by the physical sighting of the new moon, so that the lived experience takes precedence over all scientific calculations. A computer can establish not only the minute but the exact second at which the new moon will become visible in a given locality. However, this counts for nothing beside the actual sighting of that slim, luminous crescent on the horizon.

By holding to the principle of sighting, Muslims demonstrate their awareness that the signs of God are to be found in our experience of nature rather than in our thought processes.

Again & again the Quran reminds us of the fragility of all that exists. Yet the transience of all things – nothing endures, nothing is exempt from death – has a positive aspect, for it is precisely this fragility which makes the thin screen of existence transparent to what lies beyond it. Even on the simplest level, **no person would think of God if they did not know that they have to die.** There is a constant avoidance of the thought of death. We constantly evade any thought of our inward solitariness which no amount of socializing can entirely overcome. But through Islam, we aim for the ideal which is to perpetuate our consciousness of spiritual realities in the midst of our daily lives and ordinary business. “By Him in whose hand is my soul,” the Prophet Muhammad (p) said, “if you were to remain perpetually as you are in my presence or in your times of remembrance of Allah, then would the angels come to take you by the hand as you lie in your beds or as you go on your ways.”

The Prophet (p) was well known for his sayings & for his explanations of Islam. For simple people he had simple answers, which were nonetheless entirely adequate. A man who asked what were the essentials of Islam was told: “Say, I believe in Allah;

then keep to the straight path.” Another asked what were the essentials of the pious life. “Speak no evil of anyone!” was the answer. Asked about the nature of evil the Prophet replied: “Do not ask me about evil, but ask me about good;” and when he was asked what actions were most pleasing to God he said: “Prayer at its proper time, kindness to parents & struggling in God’s path.” A man asked how he could honour his dead mother & was advised: “Through water. Dig a well in her name & give water to the thirsty.” To others he said: “You will **not** enter Paradise until you believe, and you will **not** believe until you **love one another.**” And he warned a man, “Do **not** consider any act of kindness insignificant,” adding, “even meeting a Muslim with a cheerful face!” In the same vein he said: “**If anyone removes one of the anxieties of this world from someone, Allah will remove one of the anxieties of the Day of Resurrection from them.**” Did you remove an anxiety from a human?

The Islamic belief that God is the sole Legislator flows directly from the Muslim confession of faith, *La ilaha illallah*, which is interpreted as meaning that “there is no legislator but the Legislator.” The message embodied in the Quran – & the laws derived from it & from the Prophet’s Sunnah – bind the community together. No exterior pressure is required to make this binding effective. True sovereignty resides neither in the ruler nor in government nor in a statistical majority – it belongs to God.

And the Law, precisely because it is a reminder of the laws inherent in our own created nature, should **not in principle require the apparatus of the state, officials & policemen**, to make it effective. A shame it is to see many “mosques” are in the courts. Whatever place the contemporary Westerner may give to religion in his personal & social life, this is still only ‘a place’; it is seen as one element in the total structure of human life, but it is not itself that totality. For Islam, on the other hand, the social order is a part of the religion & cannot be separated from it.

Wherever it may find itself & however far it may wander, the human soul is at home only in Paradise. Elsewhere it is in exile. The nucleus within us which seeks Paradise & is at home there is not the outward personality busy with the affairs of this world & separated from its essence; it is the innermost essence of each being, the spirit, which longs for home-coming and which can never be satisfied until it arrives there.

The writer of this perceptive understanding of Islam, Gai Eaton, arrived at that home in Paradise in 2010. Throughout his sixty years as a Muslim, he wrote & taught & lectured about his chosen religion all across

the world. He showed Westerners in particular that their values were compatible with Islamic ones & a good friend, & herself a convert, Kristiane Backer, paid tribute to his life and work by penning a moving eulogy to Eaton.

She said that Eaton discovered that if we were to go one step towards God that he comes ten steps towards us; and that all we needed to do was to take that first step. **He lived life according to God’s will, she wrote, though he found that it required hard work & much patience.** We all will find that living Islam is hard work. Islam’s hub is prayer & God explains in no uncertain terms that “**Seek Allah’s help with patient perseverance & prayer. It is indeed hard except for those who are humble.**” (2:45)

For Eaton, Islam was adab. He often quoted the Prophet Muhammad (p) on this principle of Islam & Eaton himself wrote about it in the epilogue to his autobiography: “The principle of adab is at the heart of Islam. It signifies in the first place good manners towards God including gratitude for the gift of life, for the food that nourishes us, for the light of day & for the air we breathe. Secondly we must show good manners in all our dealings with our fellows, even our enemies, respecting the dignity of the human condition. But this is not all. The animal creation also is to be treated with courtesy & compassion (as the Prophet (p) demonstrated on several occasions). No tree or plant which feeds man or beast is to be abused. **The environment as such is sacred.**”

Eaton was never one to accept conventions or fashionable ideologies, political or otherwise only because the majority adhered to it but urged us to question them using our reason. His focus was not on dogma – although he was an orthodox Muslim – but on good character, virtuous behaviour & the spiritual life. His emphasis was not on the outer shell but the inner heart of religion: God-consciousness; being mindful of God in every situation and in everything we do.

Backer wrote that a few months before he died, Eaton explained to her that we come closer to God through the ways He has offered to us; that Islam is one such rope of God, a mercy from God. If we hold on to this rope, follow the Quran & are mindful of God, we are safe, no matter what happens because we have our grip. He told her that death carries everyone in the stream of Divine mercy, and that our faith & our spiritual practice are the rope with which we grasp His mercy. This is why faith is all important. **Are you playing Russian roulette with your FAITH?** No, it’s a serious question. Are you? **Are you???**

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Islam

The Light: Illuminating

The Truth: The essentials of Islam are clear & simple, and are easy to grasp. As the **Final Revelation** of God’s guidance to mankind, Islam presents a stark confrontation: **We stand naked before our Maker, without any intermediary & with nothing to blur the immediacy of this encounter.** The rules governing our personal & social life have been set out with a clarity which leaves no room for misunderstanding; and, when all is said & done, the Divine Mercy compensates for our human weaknesses & failings.

Islam is the religion of mercy but it is also, and above all, the religion of truth, and truth is pitiless in that it cannot be other than it is.

There is no way in which black can become white so as to appease the grief of a human soul. Not even God, for all His Omnipotence, can choose to make an error into truth. The

relationship between truth & mercy is therefore the most complex relationship in the whole theatre of creation, and even beyond this theatre, in the principles which govern it. The keys to understanding the world lie within our own being & experience.

This is particularly true of Islam, a religion which treats **the distinction between belief & unbelief as the most fundamental of all possible distinctions.** Believing &

understanding complement & support one another in Islam; and every aspect of human life, every thought & every action, is shaped & evaluated in the light of the basic article of faith (unity of God). Remove this essential linchpin & the whole structure falls apart. For

the Muslim, their worship & manner of dealing with bodily functions, search for holiness & everyday life, work & play are all **parts of an indivisible whole.** It is a **single key** that unlocks the **single door** that opens on to the integrated & tightly knit world of the Muslim. That key is the affirmation of the Divine Unity & of all that follows from it, for **Islam is the religion of ALL or nothing.**

Islam is the religion of ALL or nothing. This insightful yet simply put understanding of Islam comes from a convert, Charles Le Gai Eaton, a Swiss who was educated at Kings College, Cambridge, UK, and who was a Christian until his conversion in 1951. He came to Islam through intellectual conviction & within the framework of a belief in the transcendent unity of all the revealed religions. In Eaton's book, "Islam and the Destiny of Man", he writes that the religion does **not** change the Western or European Muslim's **identity**, but changes his **direction**. The ancestral voices familiar to him, says Eaton, are not silenced, but he finds himself distanced from them.

However, because we are also created as complex beings with a searching intelligence we ask far-reaching questions about the nature of reality. This is in itself a divine gift, though it is not without its dangers. It has certain rights, including the right to receive answers to the questions which arise but, in every sense, these questions are posed by God Himself so that He may answer them and thereby enrich our understanding.

Since the Quran addresses itself specifically to "those who think" and those who "meditate" and, in effect, commands us to make full use of our mental faculties, Muslims are obliged to deepen & develop the intellectual bases of their faith. They have no excuse for relying on **unthinking obedience & emotional fervour**.

The followers of Islam are required to hold fast to the human norm, fitrah, which is the dignity & integrity of being human. It could even be said that the primary aim of Islam is to persuade man to be truly man at every level of his being, and woman to be truly woman at every level of her being. The perfect Muslim, standing upright in the presence of his Maker, at once proud & submissive, free from all illusions & from any bias in dealing with fellow humans, exemplifies fitrah. This Muslim is both perfect master & perfect servant.

Eaton, coming to Islam from Christianity, observes in his book that whereas the Christian is forever reaching out towards the distant goal with a longing that can be both noble and tragic, the Muslim does not seek to go elsewhere for everything is here and everything is now.

It is precisely in the light of this perspective of a return to the norm and to the basic essentials that Islam presents itself as the embodiment of all that

came before. Islam puts the final brick in place through the divine Revelation and, for this very reason, we find its truths confirmed in other religions.

The Word of God, projected into human language, does not necessarily dot every 'I' & cross every 't', **nor does it exempt us** from spiritual, intellectual & imaginative effort. Those who insist that no opinion is acceptable unless supported by a relevant quotation from the Quran (or at least from an approved hadith) think that they are protecting the purity of the faith, **but they are in fact limiting the universality of Islam and, in the long run, reducing it to the status of one cult among others**.

Two particular sayings of the Prophet (p) are significant in this context. "God has created nothing more noble than intelligence," he said, "and His wrath is on him who despises it." Here intelligence might be defined as the capacity to perceive and assimilate the truth on every level: on the one hand distinguishing between the Absolute and the relative, and on the other, perceiving that two and two make four.

The Prophet (p) said: "God is beautiful & He loves beauty." This relates closely to the concept of fitrah, for the human norm is one of beauty of spirit, beauty of soul, beauty of comportment & the beauty of those things with which we choose to surround ourselves such as our home, dress, utensils. Anger, condemned, in the Quran & hadith on moral grounds, is condemned also because it disfigures the human countenance. An ugly building is unIslamic, however functional it may be, as is everything cheap & tawdry. The true & the beautiful, therefore, belong to this final faith in a very special way. Stupidity & ugliness have no place in it.

Islam takes man as he is and, on that basis, teaches him his duties & guides him to his goal. It is able to do so because it rejects the dogma that human nature is corrupted in its very substance. Man can be weak, foolish and forgetful, but his centre is uncorrupt & he does not need a miracle to save him.

Islam teaches that creation flows from the divine Mercy, and that all its joys & all its beauties bear eloquent witness to this. But creation can be both an outwardly & inwardly force. The world may be seen as a road which leads away from the light of heaven or as one that leads towards it for it has been said, and not only by Muslims, that everything in the world – every object, every energy, every event – has two faces, the one light & the other dark: one turned towards God & inseparably related to its origin, the other turned towards nothingness & fatally condemned to disintegration.

Some religions posit man's corruption through

sin, and assume that his natural inclination will be to choose the dark face. Islam, being realistic, cannot take an entirely opposite point of view, but it bases its perspective on the assumption that, rightly guided & controlled, man is capable of choosing the light one and of perceiving the Face of God.

The Muslim is inclined to believe that man has something more important to do than to engage in a wrestling match with temptation, which is a distraction from his principal business, the constant awareness of God. Since he also believes what the Quran tells him about human weakness, he thinks it is unlikely that men & women will resist temptation when it is offered. Islam therefore takes measures to remove occasions for temptation, hence the rule concerning the modesty of feminine dress.

It is precisely because Islam accepts our natural instincts & weaknesses that it is obliged to punish those who stray beyond the limits established by the Law. The requirements of social & psychological equilibrium, and the need to protect women & children are the motives that determine this Law, and, since the whole social structure is anchored in the family, any infringements threaten society as a whole. As a civilization & a way of life Islam stands or falls in terms of the delicate balance that is maintained between order & liberty, and as is also maintained between society & the individual.

Standing shoulder to shoulder in straight lines in the communal prayer, Muslims form a single block, an indivisible army of God in which the individual is merged into the sacred community; and yet one man praying alone in the desert, isolated from all others, represents in himself the fullness of the community & exercises the divine authority on earth. The rest might have died, yet Islam is present where he is present. The same may be said of those who follow the example of the Prophet (p) in rising to pray in the still hours of the night; the world sleeps, but the Ummah is awake & stands before its Lord. Even in the midst of the community, the individual recognizes no ultimate authority, spiritual or temporal, but that of God.

In this, as in all the particular characteristics and points of emphasis which distinguish Islam from other religions, the essential confession of faith – *La ilaha illa Laa* – determines every element in an integrated pattern. The principle of Unity is reflected in the single individual, complete in himself & conforming to the human norm, as it is in the community united in prayer & in obedience to the Law.

From fear of idolatry, and from fear of distracting the Muslim's attention from the single object of his

worship, the Islamic perspective cannot tolerate any notion that implies, even remotely, the possibility of incarnation. God does not become man, as in other belief systems, since He does **not "become"** in any sense of the word. He is, and always was & always will be. But He communicates to us something of what He is. The Prophet (p) said: "Whosoever has seen me has seen the Truth."

By the words insha'a Allah, "God willing", the Muslim recognizes his total dependence upon the divine Will and acknowledges that he can make no firm plans nor commit himself irrevocably to any course, **since he is not the master of his own destiny**. This & other such phrases, punctuating every conversation, are like little flags that are pinned on a wall-map along the route we take between birth and death. They add an extra dimension to its otherwise flat surface.

The Muslim does not feel dwarfed by the immensities of nature because they know themselves to be the viceregent of God standing upright in the midst of these immensities. Though small in stature, we see the stars; **they do not see us**. We hold them within our consciousness & measure them in accordance with our knowledge. We master them in their courses. **Immensity cannot know itself**; only in human consciousness can such a concept exist. In this sense, Man is the eye of God and is therefore the measure of all things, and they, far from being alien, exist within our awareness of them and are therefore like extensions of our being.

Since the basic theme of Islam is the oneness of God & the unity of His creation, it is obvious that the terms derived from this root are at the heart of the religion. This principle of tawhid is demonstrated by the unity of the very substance of the universe, from the farthest galaxies to our own bodies and everything we handle. Whatever may be perceived or surmised about the inner structure of matter, its ultimate nature is a mystery known only to 'the Knower of the unseen & the apparent.'

What can be clearly seen is that the entire natural world is a single fabric of innumerable threads, and that the lives of all the creatures in it depend, directly or indirectly, upon the light of the sun and the outpouring of water, just as all depend, from one moment to the next, upon the divine Light and the outpouring of grace.

Being is one, and all that has being participates in this oneness. There is no way in