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Chapter One

ISLAMIC CREED AND THEOLOGY

What Is This Book About?

Currently, there are many fine volumes that introduce the reader to the ritual and legal aspects of Islam.¹ However, it is difficult to find any introductory book on the Islamic concepts of belief and faith. This may be due to fact that most Muslim scholars agree that Islam is predominantly a practical religion whose goal is to respond to God's call through correct conduct and good deeds. Historically, the religious law of Islam (the *Shari'a*),² or, more accurately, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*),³ has been the focus of Muslim scholarship rather than theology (*kalām*). This is because the need for Islamic legal opinions to guide

1 See, for example, William Shepard's *Introducing Islam*, 2nd ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2014 and Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood's *Teach Yourself Islam*, 3rd ed., Chicago: McGraw-Hill, 2006.

2 *Shari'a* is a far broader concept than law as it is generally perceived in the English language, since it includes not only penal, state, inheritance, commercial and family law, but also covers doctrines, manners and ethics, rituals and worship; each of these aspects has an impact in this world as well in the next world. Thus, *Shari'a* is of paramount importance for both the physical and the metaphysical worlds.

3 The term *fiqh* literally means 'understanding', and in the early period of Islam meant understanding or knowledge of all aspects of Islam. As late as the period of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), the great jurist used the term *fiqh* to designate the tenets of faith in his book *al-Fiqh al-akbar* (The Greater Understanding). As Imran Nyazee has suggested, this implies that the term *al-fiqh al-aṣghar* was used to signify the jurisprudential aspect of the *Shari'a*, such as the rights and obligatory acts pertaining to purity, worship and ritual, family, inheritance, commercial and penal laws. Later on in Muslim history, the term *fiqh* was restricted to only the corpus of law; in other words, jurisprudence. For further details, please see Imran Nyazee, *Theories of Islamic Law*, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1991, pp. 20–26.

Muslim behaviour in all aspects of a person's life has largely superseded the need for a theoretical study of the Muslim belief system. However, although belief may appear peripheral in Muslim intellectual history in comparison to Islamic jurisprudence, it nevertheless constitutes the essential basis of all Islamic thought.

What then are the central beliefs that underpin all of the different dimensions of Islam? As this book will explain, the Muslim creed (*ʿaqīda*) consists of six articles of faith. They are the belief in God, His angels, His scriptures, His messengers, the Hereafter and the divine decree. This book is intended to introduce Muslim and non-Muslim readers alike to the articles of faith, and to survey the most important debates concerning them in Islamic theology, past and present. These key debates exemplify the range of opinions held by theologians over the centuries and demonstrate the unity as well as the diversity found within Islamic theology. Moreover, the present study is not only a concise introduction to what Muslims believe and practise, it also identifies the challenges facing Muslim beliefs today and explains why Islamic theology is so well placed to answer them.

Islam has two major denominations today and their adherents are referred to as Sunnis and Shi'is, respectively. According to the Pew Research Center estimates in 2012, Sunnis represent 87–90% of the 1.6 billion Muslims living worldwide, whereas Shi'is make up 10–13% of that total number.¹ The focus of this book is the creed and theology of Sunni Islam; however, it is safe to say that many Shi'is share the same basic creed with Sunni Muslims (with the exception of some important differences which will be discussed later on in more detail). It should also be said that, although this book has been written in line with the standards of academic scholarship, it is sympathetic towards Muslim belief in the twenty-first century and is intended to be a response to inaccurate assumptions about Islam in the western Judeo-Christian milieu.

¹ See the Pew Research Center's report, 'The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity', August 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity/executive-summary/>, accessed 17 May 2014.

Islam and the Six Articles of Faith

While Islam may be considered by many non-Muslims to be a young religion originating in seventh-century Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims themselves believe it to be the continuation of a universal primordial religion. In other words, for them, Islam is seen not as a religion that began with the revelation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet Muḥammad (may God bless him and grant him peace),¹ but rather as the last in a series of revealed forms of faith that began with the very first human beings (Adam and Eve) and has continued over time under various names.

In Arabic, the word *islām* derives from the consonantal root that consists of the three letters *s-l-m* and means both 'peace' and 'submission to the One God'. Muslim theologians have long noted the significance of this double meaning: specifically, when one submits to God, one finds peace. The term *muslim* is also derived from the same root as *islām* and signifies 'the person who submits to the One God'. There are two primary sources in Islam that guide Muslims in their quest for peace through submission. The first is the Qur'ān, which is recognised by Muslims to be the literal word of God. The second is the *Sunna* ('way of acting' or 'custom') of the Prophet Muḥammad, which is preserved in the *Hadīth* literature that records reports of the Prophet's words and deeds.

The religion of Islam may broadly be divided into three aspects: belief, practice and spirituality. This is the division between *īmān* (faith), *islām* (submission through actions)² and *iḥsān* (good conduct). In a very basic way it may be said that *īmān* deals with what Muslims believe, *islām* with what Muslims do and *iḥsān* with spiritual awareness of the Divine or excellence of conduct. These three terms are

¹ The Arabic phrase is *ṣallā Allāh 'alayhi wa-sallam*. In the Qur'ān, Muslims are asked to confer peace and blessings upon the Prophet whenever his name is mentioned (see Q.xxxiii.56).

² It is important to note here that the word *Islam* is used to describe the individual Muslim's response to God, as well as being the name of the religion itself.

never seen as entirely distinct from each other and their interrelationship is indicated in the Qur'ānic phrase, 'those who believe and do good deeds', which is often used to refer to believers. Muslim theologians have also continuously highlighted how the three terms are interrelated.

It is argued that the three terms are lexically different, but in legalistic terms *īmān* cannot be distinct from *islām* because they are inseparable; just like the inside and outside of a single object. One *ḥadīth* that is often quoted to explain this example is, 'Beware! There is a piece of flesh in the body; if it becomes good (reformed), the whole body becomes good but if it gets spoilt, the whole body gets spoilt and that is the heart.'¹ This has been interpreted to mean that the body is the *islām* aspect and the heart represents the *īmān* aspect. The third aspect, *iḥsān* is also closely connected to the other two parts as the spiritual feature: it brings the additional element of continuous awareness of God's presence to the Muslim's faith and practice.

A constructive way to elucidate the relationship between the practices required of all Muslims (*islām*), the six articles of faith (*īmān*) and spiritual awareness of the Divine (*iḥsān*) is to turn to the famous *Ḥadīth Jibrīl*, the Tradition of Gabriel. It is narrated that one day the Angel Gabriel appeared at a gathering attended by the Prophet Muḥammad disguised as a man with a handsome face and black hair, who wore a white robe. This visitor asked the Prophet to inform him about *islām*. The Prophet replied that *islām* is the declaration of faith (*shahāda*), meaning, bearing witness that there is no deity but God and that Muḥammad is his Messenger; performing the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*); paying charity (*zakāt*); observing the Ramaḍān fast (*ṣawm*) and making the pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajj*). These five deeds are known as the five pillars of Islam.² Gabriel affirmed that his answer was correct. Gabriel then asked the Prophet to tell him about faith (*īmān*).

¹ Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, II.45, <http://sunnah.com/bukhari/2/45>, accessed 22 February 2016. 'Allāh' has been changed to 'God' in all *ḥadīth* quotations for the sake of consistency.

² The five pillars of Islam are religious deeds that are obligatory for all Muslims.

The Prophet answered that faith is to believe in God, His angels, His Books, His prophets, the Day of Judgement¹ and the divine decree, both the good of it and the evil of it. Once again, Gabriel affirmed that the Prophet's answer was correct. Then followed the third question, in which Gabriel asked the Prophet about *ihsān*. The Prophet replied, 'That you worship God as if you are seeing Him, for though you do not see Him, He, verily, sees you.'² After that, the Angel Gabriel departed, and the Prophet informed his Companions that Gabriel had come to teach them their religion.

Muslims are expected to know that the three 'I's of *islām*, *imān* and *ihsān* are the three core aspects of their religion that work together virtually as one, and they are also expected to know the articles of faith, or 'creed' (*ʿaqīda*, pl. *ʿaqā'id*). Although the articles of faith were not set down in any authoritative document during the Prophet's lifetime, they were all encapsulated in the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth*. For instance, as mentioned already, the *ḥadīth* of Gabriel reports Muḥammad as saying, 'That you affirm your faith in God, in His angels, in His Books, in His Apostles, in the Day of Judgment, and you affirm your faith in the Divine Decree [both the good of it and the evil of it].'³ In the Qur'ān, the first five articles of faith are mentioned explicitly: '[I]t is righteousness—to believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers.'⁴ In

1 Different names are given to this article of faith. In addition to the Day of Judgement, another version of the same *ḥadīth* refers to the Resurrection; see, for example, Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, LXV.4777, <http://sunnah.com/urn/44550> and Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I.I, <http://sunnah.com/muslim/1/1>. Two alternatives are found in the Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī: the Last Day and the resurrection after death. See Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī, *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī*, New York: Zaytuna Institute, 2007, pp. 66–67 (article 84). In the present book, all of these terms are utilised to refer to this article of faith.

2 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, I.I, <http://sunnah.com/muslim/1/1>.

3 Ibid.

4 Q.11.177. All English translations of the Qur'ān are from Yusuf Ali, *The Translation of the Holy Qur'an*, USA: Amanah Publishers, 2005. This translation's archaic capitalization and punctuation have been modified to match modern conventions. 'Allah' has also been changed to 'God' in all quotations.