

Faith and Belief

by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah

The following is a slightly edited (grammatical) excerpt from Introduction to Islam - Chapter 4 "Faith and Belief" by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah

Men believe in all sorts of things - **in truth** (with all the relativity which this concept has), **in superstitions**, and sometimes even in what is based on misconceptions. Among other factors, beliefs can change with age and experience. But certain beliefs are shared in common by a whole group. In this context, the most important aspect is the idea of man regarding his own existence - when has he come . . . where does he go . . . who has created him . . . what is the object of his existence . . . and so on. Metaphysics will try to answer questions of mental anguish, but that is only a part of religion which is more comprehensive and answers all associated questions. The science which treats this is religion. Beliefs is purely a personal affair. But nevertheless, the history of the human species has known many an act of fratricidal violence and horror in this connection, of which even the beasts would be ashamed. The basic principle of Islam in this matter is the following verse of the Qur'an:

"There is no compulsion in religion; the right direction is henceforth distinct from error; and he who rejecteth the Devil and believeth in God hath grasped a firm handhold which will never break; God is Hearer, Knower." [Qur'an 2:256]

It is a charity and even a sacrifice to guide others and to struggle to dispel the ignorance of fellow-beings without compelling anybody to any belief whatsoever. Such is the attitude of Islam.

127. Man's knowledge and intelligence are in a process of continual evolution. The medical or mathematical knowledge of a Galen or of a Euclid scarcely suffices today even for the matriculation examination. University students require much more knowledge than that. In the field of religious dogma, primitive man was perhaps even incapable of the abstract notion of a transcendental God, whose worship would require neither symbols nor material representations. Even his language was incapable of translating sublime ideas without being forced to use terms which would not be very appropriate for abstract notions.

128. Islam lays a strong emphasis on the fact that man is composed simultaneously of two elements - body and soul - and that he shouldn't neglect either one of these for the sole profit of the other. To devote oneself exclusively to spiritual needs would be to aspire to become an angel (although God has created angels a separate beings). Whereas to dedicate oneself to purely material needs would be to be degraded to the condition of a beast, a plant, if not a devil (God has created for this purpose objects other than men). The aim of the creation of man with a dual capacity would remain unfulfilled if he does not maintain a harmonious equilibrium between the requirements of the body and those of the soul simultaneously.

129. Muslims owe their religious faith to Muhammad, the messenger of God. One day the Prophet Muhammad himself replied to a question as to what is Faith and said: **"Thou shalt believe in the One God, in His angelic messengers, in His revealed books, in His human messengers, in the Last Day (or Resurrection and final judgement) and in the determination of Good and evil by God."** On the same occasion, he explained as to what signifies submission to God in practice, and what is the best method of obedience. [see ch. 5 & 6 Introduction to Islam]

God

130. Muslims have nothing in common with atheists, polytheists, or those who associate others with the One God. The Arabic word for One God is *Allah*, Lord and Creator of the universe.

131. Even the simplest, primitive and uncultured man knows well that one cannot be the creator of one's own self and that there ought to be a Creator of us all, of the entire universe. Atheism and materialism does not respond to this logical need.

132. To believe in polytheism would entail the difficulty of the division of power between several gods, if not a civil war among them. One can easily see that everything

in the universe is interdependent. Man, for instance, requires the aid of plants, metals, animals and stars, just as each one of these objects needs another's help in some way or other. The division of Divine powers thus become impracticable.

133. In their praiseworthy solicitude, for not attributing evil to God, certain thinkers have thought of two different gods: a god of good and a god of evil. But the question is whether the two would act in mutual accord, or would there arise conflicts between them? In the first case, the duality becomes redundant and superfluous. And if the god of good consents to evil, then he would even become an accomplice in that evil, thus vitiating the very purpose of the duality. In the second case, one would have to admit that the god of evil would be more often victorious and obtain the upper hand. Should one believe then in a weakling, the god of good, as God? Moreover, evil is a relative thing. With regard to one, if something is evil, then the same thing becomes a good with regard to another person, and since absolute evil does not exist, there is no attribution of the evil to God.

134. Monotheism alone, pure and unmixed, can satisfy reason. God is One, though He is capable of doing all sorts of things. Hence the multiplicity of His attributes. God is not only the creator, but also the master of all. He rules over the Heavens and the earth and nothing moves without His knowledge and His permission. The Prophet Muhammad has said that God has ninety-nine "most beautiful names" for ninety-nine principal attributes: i.e., He is the creator, the essence of the existence of all, wise, just, merciful, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, determinant of everything, to Whom belongs life, death, resurrection, etc., etc.

135. It follows then that the conception of God differs according to individual -- a philosopher does not envisage it in the same manner as a man in the street. The Prophet Muhammad admired the fervour of the faith of simple folk, and often gave the example of "the faith of an old woman." That is, unshakable and full of sincere conviction. The beautiful little story of the elephant and a group of blind men is well known . . . They had never before heard of an elephant, so on its arrival each of them approached the strange animal. One laid his hand on its trunk, another on its ear, a third on its leg, a fourth on its tail, another on its tusks, etc. Upon their return, each one exchanged impressions and described the elephant in his own manner and personal experience. For example, that it was like a column, like a wing, something hard like stone, or soft and slender. Everyone

was right, yet none had found the whole truth which lay beyond his perceptive ability. If we replace the blind men of this parable by searchers of the Invisible God, we can easily realize the relative veracity of individual experiences. As certain mystics of early Islam have observed, "there is a truth about God known to the man in the street, another known to the initiated, yet another to the inspired prophets, and lastly the one known to God Himself." In the exposé given above, on the authority of the Prophet of Islam, there is enough elasticity in order to satisfy the needs of different categories of men - learned as well as ignorant, intelligent as well as simple, poets, artists, jurists, mystics, theologians and the rest. The point of view and the angle of vision may differ according to the individual, yet the object of vision remains constant.

136. Muslim savants have constructed their entire system on a juridical basis, where rights and duties are correlative. God has given us the organs and faculties which we possess, and every gift implies a particular obligation. To worship God, to be thankful to Him, to obey Him, to shun all that does not suit His universal Divinity - all these constitute the individual duties of each person, for which each person shall be personally responsible.

The Angels

137. God being invisible and beyond all physical perception, it was necessary to have some means of contact between man and God, otherwise it would not be possible to follow the Divine will. God is the creator not only of our bodies, but also of all our faculties, which are diverse and each capable of development. It is He Who has given us intuition, moral conscience, and means to guide us in the right path. The human spirit is capable of both good and evil inspirations. Among the common folk it is possible that good people receive sometimes evil inspirations (temptations) and bad people good inspirations. Inspirations can come from someone other than God also, such as evil suggestions which come from the Devil. It is the grace of God which enables our reason to distinguish between that which is celestial and worthy of following, and that which is diabolic and fit to be shunned.

138. There are several ways to establish contact or communication between man and God. The best would have been incarnation, but Islam has rejected it. It would be too degrading for a transcendent God to become man, to eat, drink, be tortured by His own creatures, and even

be put to death. However close a man may approach God in his journey towards Him, even in his highest ascension, man remains man and is very much remote from God. Man may annihilate himself, like the mystics, and efface his personality completely in order to act according to the will of God, but still - and let us repeat that - man remains man and subject to all his weaknesses, and God is above all these insufficiencies.

139. Among other means of communication between man and God which are at the disposal of man, perhaps the feeblest is a dream. According to the Prophet, good dreams are suggested by God and guide man in the right direction.

140. Another means is *ilqa* (literally, throwing something towards someone), a kind of auto-suggestion or intuition, of presentiment of solutions in case of impasses or insoluble or difficult problems.

141. There is also the *ilham*, which may be translated as 'Divine inspiration. Things are suggested to the heart (mind) of a man whose soul is sufficiently developed in the virtues of justice, charity, disinterestedness, and benevolence to others. The saints of all epochs in all countries have enjoyed this grace. When someone devotes one's self to God and tries to forget one's self, there are moments *of very short duration* when the state of the presence of God flashes like lightning, in which one understands without effort that which no other effort would have succeeded in making him aware. The human spirit, or his heart as the ancients said, is thus enlightened. Then there is a sentiment of conviction, contentment and realization of truth. It is God Who guides him and controls him and his thoughts as well as his actions. Even the prophets, *the human messengers of God*, get this kind of direction, among others. Nevertheless, there remains the possibility of error of judgement or of comprehension on the part of man. The mystics affirm that sometimes even the most pious of men are led astray by their imperceptible ego, not being able to distinguish base inspirations that come as a Divine trial.

142. The highest degree of contact, the surest and the most infallible means of communication between man and his Creator, is called *wahy* by the Prophet Muhammad. This is not an ordinary inspiration, but a veritable revelation made to man from God - a celestial communication. Man is matter, but on the contrary, God is even above the spirit and therefore beyond all possibility of direct physical contact with man (Qur'an

6/103). God is omnipresent [ever present] and, as the Qur'an says *'hearer to man than his jugular vein'* [50:15]. Yet no physical contact is possible. Therefore it is a *malak* (lit. a messenger), that is, a celestial message-bearer (commonly translated as 'angel') who serves as an intermediary, or the channel of the transmission of the God's message to His human agent or messenger (i.e., the prophet). None except a prophet receives such a revelation through the intermediary of a celestial messenger. It ought to be remembered that, in Islam, prophet does not mean one who makes prophecies and predictions, but only an envoy of God, a bearer of Divine message intended for his people. As to the angel, it does not enter in the scope of our studies here to discuss whether it is a spiritual being, distinct from the material beings in the universe, or something else.

143. According to the Qur'an, the celestial messenger who brought revelations to the Prophet is called Jibril (Jibrail, Gabriel), which etymologically means 'the power of God.' The Qur'an cites also Mikal (Mikail, Michael) without indicating his functions. The functionary in charge of hell is named Malik (lit. 'master' or 'owner'). It also speaks of other angels without name and without attributes, all of whom execute the orders of the Lord. The Islamic belief is that Jibril, also described in the Qur'an as "trustworthy spirit" (*al-ruh al-amin*), stands above all. In the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, as distinct from the Qur'an, we read that this celestial messenger, Jibril, did not always appear in the same form to the Prophet. The Prophet saw him sometimes like a being suspended in the air, sometimes in the shape of a man, sometimes like a being having wings, etc. In a narration preserved by Ibn Hanbal (1, 53 or No. 374), it is reported that one day in the presence of many people, an unknown person came and put some questions to the Prophet Muhammad, and then went away. Several days afterwards, the Prophet told his companions: **I am persuaded to believe that the person who put to me questions on that day was none other than Gabriel, who had come to teach you your religion; and never was I so tardy in recognizing him.**" It was so because he had come to examine the Prophet and not to communicate to him some message from God.

144. The way in which the revelation used to come could be deduced from the following reports in which the Prophet himself or his onlookers have described it: **"Sometimes it came to me like the beating sound of the bell - and this is the hardest experience for me - and when that ceases, I retain well engraved in my**

memory all that it has said; but sometimes the angel appears to me in the shape of a human being and speaks to me and I retain what he says" (Bukhari). In the transmission of Ibn Hanbal, this same report reads: **"I hear the beating sounds and thereupon I keep silent; there is not an occasion of the revelation to me when I do not fear that my soul will depart."** His Companions relate their observations, "whenever a revelation came to him, a sort of rest (immobility) captured him." (Ibn Hanbal) Or, "whenever the revelation came to the messenger of God, he was overwhelmed and remained in this state a while as if he was intoxicated." (Ibn Sa'd) Or, "the revelation came to him in the coldest day, and when it ceased, the front of the Prophet perspired with (sweat falling as) pearls." (Bukhari) Or, "once when the moment (of revelation) arrived, he bent his head inside (a garment?), and lo, the face of the messenger of God had become red, and he snored; later the state vanished" (Bukhari). Or, "whenever the revelation came, he suffered therefrom and his face darkened." (Ibn Sa'd) Or, "when the revelation came to him, we heard near him like the humming sound of bees." (Ibn Hanbal and Abu Hu-aim) Or, "the Prophet suffered great pain when the revelation came to him, and he used to move his lips." (Bukhari) Another series of reports say that he then felt the weight of a great load, and said, "I saw the Prophet while he was on his camel when a revelation came to him. The camel began to foam with rage and twist its legs to the point that I feared that they would break with a crack. In fact sometimes the camel sat down, but sometimes it would obstinately try to stand, with legs planted like pegs all through the time of revelation, and this lasted until the state (of revelation) vanished, and sweat would fall from him like pearls." (Ibn Sa'd) Or, "the load almost broke the leg of the camel with a crack" (Ibn Hanbal). Zaid Ibn Thabit reports his personal experience of a certain day in the following words: "His leg lay on my thigh and weighed so heavy that I feared that my femur would break with a crack" (Bukhari). In another version, there is this addition: "... had it not been for the Prophet of God, I would have pushed a cry and taken away my leg." Other reports say: "The revelation came to him once while he was standing on the pulpit of the Mosque and he remained immobile." (Ibn Hanbal) Or, "he was holding a loaf of meat (during his meal) when a revelation came to him, and when the state ceased, the loaf was still in his hand" (Ibn Hanbal). At such an occasion, the Prophet sometimes lay on his back, sometimes the inmates even covered his face in respect with a piece of cloth, as the circumstance may be. Yet he never lost his consciousness nor control of his self. In the early times of the mission, he used to

repeat aloud, during the course of the revelation, what was revealed to him, but while still at Mecca, he abandoned this habit of simultaneous repeating, but remained silent until the end of the state of revelation, and then he communicated the message of God to his secretaries to note (as is mentioned in the Qur'an 75/16): **"Stir not thy tongue herewith to hasten it; upon Us the putting together and the reading thereof."** **And again (20/114): "And hasten not with the Qur'an ere its revelation hath been perfected unto thee and say: my Lord, increase me in knowledge."** And when the Prophet returned to his normal state, he used to dictate to his scribes the portion of the Qur'an which had just been received by him, in order to publish it amongst the Muslims and to multiply the copies. In his *al-Mab'ath wa'l-Maghazi* (MS of Fes), Ibn Ishaq reports: "Whenever part of the Qur'an was revealed to the Messenger of God, he first recited it among men, and then among women."

The Revealed Books

145. It is the duty of man to obey God, being the Lord of the earth as well as of heavens, more so because, in His mercy, He sent His messengers for the benefit of man. God is the sovereign and the source of all law, spiritual as well as temporal. We have just spoken of the revelations and communications of the will of God to man. It is the collection and compilation of these revelations which constitute the Revealed Books.

146. The formula of the creed enunciated by the Prophet Muhammad, speaks of the **Books** - not merely of the **Book** - which would refer to the Qur'an only. This tolerance is characteristic of his teaching. The Qur'an speaks of it in numerous passages. For instance (2/285): **"Each one (of the Muslims) believeth in God and His angels and His books and His messengers,"** and says **"We make no distinction between any of His messengers."** Again (35/24) it declares: **"...and there is not a nation but a warner hath passed among them."** **And yet again (4/164, 40/78): "Verily We sent messengers before thee (O Muhammad), among them those of whom We have told thee, and some of them We have not told thee about."** The Qur'an names and recognized the scrolls of Abraham, the Torah of Moses, the Psalter of David and the Gospel of Jesus as the books revealed by God.

147. It is true that there is no trace today of the scrolls of Abraham. One knows the sad story of the Torah of Moses and how it was destroyed by Pagans several times. The same fate befell the Psalter. As for Jesus, he

had not had the time to compile or dictate what he preached. It was his disciples and their successors who gleaned his utterances and transmitted them to posterity in a number of recensions [a critical revision of the text] , of which at least 70 recensions of the Gospels are known, and with the exception of four, all are declared by the Church to be apocryphal. Be that as it may, the dogma for every Muslim is to believe not only in the Qur'an, but also in the collections of the Divine revelations of pre-Islamic epochs. The Prophet of Islam did not mention Buddha nor Zoroaster nor the founders of Indian Brahminism, so Muslims are not authorized to affirm categorically the Divine character, for instance, of Avesta or of the Hindu Vedas. Nonetheless they cannot formally reject either the possibility of the Vedas and Avesta having been originally based on Divine revelations, nor having suffered a fate similar to that of the Pentateuch of Moses. The same is true in connection with what appertains to China, Greece and other lands.

The Messengers of God (Prophets)

148. An angel brings the message of God to a chosen man, and it is this latter who is charged with its communication to the people. In Quranic terminology, this human agent of the message is differently called: *nabi* (prophet), *rasool* (messenger), *mursal* (envoy), *bashir* (announcer), *nadhir* (warner), etc.

149. Prophets are men of great piety and models of good behaviour, spiritual as well as temporal and social. Miracles are not necessary for them (although history attributes miracles to all of them and they themselves have always affirmed that it is not they but God who did that); it is their teaching alone which is the criterion of their veracity.

150. According to the Qur'an, there were certain prophets who had received the revelation of Divine Books, and there were others who did not receive new Books but had to follow the Books revealed to their predecessors. The Divine messages do not disagree on fundamental truths, such as the Oneness of God, the demand for doing good and abstaining from evil, etc., yet they may differ with regards to the rules of social conduct in accordance with the social evolution attained by a people. If God has sent successive prophets, then that is a proof that previous directions had been abrogated and replaced by new ones, and, except for these latter, certain of the old rules tacitly or explicitly retained.

151. Certain prophets were given the Divine mission of educating members of a single house (tribe or clan), or of a single race, or of a single region whereas others had vaster missions, embracing the entire humanity and extending over all time.

152. The Qur'an expressly mentions certain prophets such as: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, David, Moses, Salih, Hud, Jesus, John the Baptist, and Muhammad. But the Qur'an is explicit that there were also others before Muhammad, who was the seal and the last of the messengers of God.

The Eschatology

153. The Prophet Muhammad has also demanded belief in the doomsday. Man will be revived after his death, and God will judge him on the basis of his deeds during the life of this world, in order to reward his good actions and punish him for the evil ones. One day our universe will be destroyed by the order of God, and then, after a certain lapse of time, He Who had created us first would bring us back to life. Paradise as a reward and Hell as a punishment are but graphic terms to make us understand a state of things which is beyond all notions of our life in this world. The Qur'an (32:17) says, "***No soul knoweth what is kept hid from them - or joy as a reward for what they used to do.***" Again (9/72), "***God promiseth to the believers, men and women, Gardens underneath which rivulets flow, wherein they will abide - blessed dwellings in Gardens of Eden - and the pleasure of God is grander still; that is the supreme triumph.***" So this pleasure on His part is over and above even the Gardens of Eden. In yet another passage of the Qur'an (10/20) we read, "***For those who do good is what is the best, and more (thereto).***" Al-Bukhari, Muslim, etc. report that the Prophet used to refer to this verse, saying that after Paradise there would be the vision of God, the ultimate reward of the pious. As far as Paradise is concerned, an oft-quoted utterance of the Prophet Muhammad is, "***God says, 'I have prepared for My pious slaves things in Paradise, the like of which no eye has ever seen, nor ear ever heard, nor even human heart (mind) ever thought of.'***" As to what is beyond Paradise, Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi and other great sources record an important saying of the Prophet, "***When the people meriting Paradise will have entered it, God will tell them: 'Ask Me what else can I add to you.'*** People will wonder, having been honoured, given Paradise and saved from Hell, and will not know what to ask. Thereupon God will remove the veil, and nothing would be lovelier than

gazing at the Lord." (In another version, instead of 'veil', 'hijab', 'the garb of grandeur' *Rida-al-Kibriya* is used.) In other words, the opportunity of contemplating God would be the highest and the real reward of the Believer, this for those who are capable of understanding and appreciating the abstract notion of the other World. It is in the light of this authoritative interpretation, one should read what the Qur'an and the Hadith unceasingly describe for the common man with regard to the joys of Paradise and the horrors of Hell (in terms which remind us of our surroundings in this world): there are gardens and rivulets or canals in Paradise, there are young and beautiful girls, there are carpets and luxurious garments, pearls, precious stones, fruits, wine, and all that man would desire. Similarly, in hell there is fire, there are serpents, boiling water and other tortures, there are parts that are extremely cold. And in spite of these sufferings, there will be no death to remove them. All this is easily explained when one thinks of the vast majority of men, of the common masses, to whom the Divine message is addressed. It is necessary to speak to everyone according to his capacity of understanding and of intelligence. One day, when the Prophet Muhammad was speaking to a company of the faithful about Paradise and its pleasures (including its flying horses), a Bedouin rose and put the question: "Will there be camels also?" The Prophet smiled and gently replied: **"There will be everything that one would desire"** (Ibn Hanbal and Tirmidhi). The Qur'an speaks of Paradise and Hell simply a means of persuading the average man to lead a just life and to march in the path of truth. It attaches no importance to details, whether they describe a place or a state of things. That should not interest us either for a Muslim believes in them without asking 'how?'

154. It goes without saying that Paradise will be eternal - once meriting it, there would be no question of being ejected from it. The Qur'an assures us (15/48): **"Pain will not touch them, and there is no expulsion from it."** Some would enter it forthwith, while others would suffer longer or shorter periods of detention in Hell before meriting Paradise. But the question is whether Hell is eternal for the unbelievers. The opinions of the Muslim theologians have differed on those points, although a great majority of them affirm on the basis of the Quranic verses (4/48, 4/116) that God may pardon every sin and every crime except disbelief in God, and that the punishment that would be meted out for this last sin would be eternal. Others opine that even the punishment of disbelief may one day be terminated by the grace of God. These theologians deduce their opinions also from certain verses of the Qur'an (11/107, 39/35, etc.). We

need not pursue further this discussion, but hope for God's unlimited mercy.

Predestination and Free Will

155. In his exposé, the Prophet Muhammad has lastly demanded the belief that the determination (*qadr*) of all good and evil is from God. Does this phrase signify that everything is predestined for man, or does the statement merely imply that the qualification of good and evil in a given act depends on God? In other words, nothing is good or evil in itself, but it is so only because God has declared it to be so and man has nothing to do but observe it.

156. In fact, here is a dilemma for the theologian. If we declare that man is responsible for his acts, it would be incompatible with the predestination of his acts. Similarly, if we declare that man is free in his acts, then this would imply that God has neither power over nor the knowledge of what man is going to do in his worldly life. The two alternatives create an embarrassment. One would like to attribute to God not only justice, but also omnipotence and omniscience. The Prophet Muhammad ridicules this discussion, which will ever remain inconclusive, and he has formally ordered his adherents not to engage in it, adding: **"People before you have been led astray by this discussion."** He recognizes for God, in all respect and reverence, the attribute of omnipotence - omniscience, and also affirms that man will be held responsible for his acts. He does not want to tie up one of these things with the other. In a way, he relegates this discussion to the level of the futility of knowing whether the hen came first or the egg..

157. Moreover, good and evil are relative terms. A tiger hunts a rabbit for food. What is good (sustenance) for one is evil (death) for the other. That is why the evil that seems to reach us is on account of our own nature, which merits or requires that "evil." That is also why it is for God to determine for whom a given act is good and for whom a given act is evil. Furthermore, it should be remembered that the conception of 'responsibility' is a this-worldly thing, whereas the 'Divine reward and punishment' belong to the other-worldly matters. We are shocked only when we relegate them both to the same level. To do so would be a fallacy.

158. Let us remember that it is this double belief in the omnipotence of God and the absolute individual responsibility of man which rouses a Muslim to action, even as it enables him to support easily an unavoidable

misfortune. Far from creating in him an immobility, it gives him a dynamism. We have to refer to the exploits of the early Muslims, who were the best practitioners of the teaching of the Prophet, in order to convince ourselves of the truth of this statement.

Conclusion

159. This is a résumé practically of all that a Muslim has to believe. The whole formula of the creed is succinctly summed up in these two expressions: "***There is no God if not God Himself, and Muhammad is the messenger and slave-servant of God.***" This would serve to remind us that Islam is not only a belief, but also a practice, spiritual as well as temporal. It is in fact a complete code of human life.