

Multiple Meanings of commonly-used terms of Islam

Does a non-Muslim “revert to Islam” when he becomes a Muslim?

by Zahid Aziz¹

We will look here at some commonly used terms of Islam and compare their generally understood meanings with their usage by the Holy Quran.

In the first place there are the words *Islam* and *Muslim*. Their common usage, as well as in the Quran of course, is to refer to the religion of Islam that we know, with its structure of beliefs and practices, and to refer to its followers. But these words are also applied in three other senses:

1. the Islam of the natural world,
2. the Islam of previous prophets,
3. the Islam or being Muslim of a child at birth.

As to the first sense, we read in the Quran:

“Seek they, then, other than Allah’s religion? And to Him submits whoever [or whatever] is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him they will be returned.” — 3 : 83

This tells us that everything that exists submits (*aslama*) to Allah, the word for ‘submit’ here being the same as is applied to the act of being a Muslim. Elsewhere (22 : 18) it is said more specifically that the sun and the moon and the stars, and the mountains and the trees, and the animals, all bow down to Allah. The meaning is clearly that everything in nature obeys and follows implicitly the laws made for it by God. The sun and the moon do not function by their will or choice. An earthquake is not an evil deed committed by the earth to kill people, for which the earth can be held to account.

We are also taught by the Quran that the forces of nature are not controlled by competing, rival gods. It is not the case, for example, that there is a god who brings out sunshine and he is fighting against another god who obscures the sun by bringing clouds forward and causing rain. The whole of nature constitutes one system and framework, whose parts work with and complement each other.

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'Islam' of previous prophets

It is a common Muslim belief that prophets who appeared before the Holy Prophet Muhammad also taught and followed 'Islam', and were all thus 'Muslims'. A little thought shows that these prophets could **not** have followed or acted on the structure of Islam as we know it today, because even the Holy Prophet Muhammad and his earliest companions only followed the present-day practices of Islam after these were revealed by God during the Holy Prophet's mission. Prophets of the past could not have prayed *fajr, zuhr, asr, maghrib* and *'isha* in the present-day form and manner, nor fasted for 30 days in Ramadan, when even the earliest Muslims themselves did not do so until Allah so commanded through the Holy Prophet. When it is said that previous prophets were 'Muslims' and 'Islam' was their religion, what is meant are the four points below.

1. They all taught submission and obedience to the One God. They did not teach worship of other beings and things. None of them claimed to be God or a part of Godhead, unlike what the followers of some of them later came to believe.
2. They did not violate any command from God or commit acts of wrongdoing, unlike some of the deeds ascribed to them, surprisingly, by their own later followers.
3. They attained the high moral qualities and closeness to God that a Muslim has as his goal.
4. They followed the same *principles* for spiritual purification and advancement that Islam teaches, for example, prayer, charity, fasting. The details of the ways in which they put these principles into practice were no doubt different from the forms that were established through the Holy Prophet Muhammad.

'Islam' of a child at birth

It is said that according to Hadith every child that is born is born in the "true nature" or the "nature of Islam", but later its parents give it their own religion, making him a Jew, a Christian etc. What is meant by the 'Islam' of a child at birth is that it follows its natural, God-given instincts without conscious effort. It is not capable of holding some wrong belief or deviating from the path which God has placed in its nature to follow. It is not sinful by nature; on the contrary, its natural inclination is to do good. A child at birth does not hold the defining beliefs of any religion. A child who dies in infancy is, in God's judgment, innocent of holding some wrong belief or having acted upon it. The fact that the hadith referred to above occurs in Bukhari in the book

relating to funerals shows that it relates to the children of non-Muslims who die in infancy.

This hadith is taken by many, especially in recent years, to mean that when adult non-Muslims embrace Islam they “revert” to the religion they had at birth. Hence in the past twenty years or so the practice or fashion has developed of calling such people, not as converts to Islam, but as “reverts”. This hadith does not say that if someone embraces Islam after reaching adulthood he reverts to his spiritual state at birth. The Islam followed *unconsciously* by an infant, as also by the whole of nature, which do *not* have the capacity to disobey God, is not the same as the Islam acted upon by adults through their thinking and understanding, and making a conscious, hard effort to submit to God.

Regarding the description “revert” for one who embraces Islam, there seems to be no basis for it in the Quran or Hadith. The Quran tells people to believe, to submit to God, to follow the revelation and the Holy Prophet, etc. Nowhere does it use any term for embracing Islam which can be translated as “reverting”. In Hadith, there are reports of the Holy Prophet inviting people to Islam, and reports by his companions on how they came to be Muslims, but in none do we find any mention of anyone being asked to “revert” to Islam or anyone speaking of himself as having “reverted” to Islam. In histories of the early spread of Islam, people such as Khadija, Abu Bakr, Umar and Ali are not spoken of as reverting to Islam but as accepting Islam.

We also find that in the Quran and Hadith if any word can be represented in English as “reverting” it is usually applied to reverting *to unbelief after accepting Islam*. In Mohsin Khan’s English translation of Bukhari there are hadith reports such as one stating that a believer “hates to revert to disbelief ” and another in which the Holy Prophet tells Muslims: “Do not revert to disbelief after me...”

This wrong impression that a person accepting Islam is reverting to his true birth religion leads to two untenable and patently false conclusions. Firstly, it means that a non-Muslim who embraces Islam has become one who submits to God perfectly in each and every respect, instinctively and intuitively, without even the slightest thought occurring to him of disobeying God, for this is the Islam of the new born child! Secondly, it means that those who were born to Muslim parents remain in the same state of Islam in which they were born, even after becoming adults, since the hadith report says that it is when the parents are non-Muslim that they go on to make the child depart from its natural religion of birth. This is obviously absurd. There are, no doubt, Muslim parents who set a bad example to their children, as a result of which the children grow up to be delinquents following an immoral or even

criminal path. It would be the height of stupidity to say that, just because these parents did not turn their children into non-Muslims, therefore the children remained adhering to the state of Islam in which they were born!

On the question of the religion of birth, it may be added that according to Islamic law a child born to non-Muslim parents, however small in age it might be, is not a Muslim in terms of the practical law of Islam but belongs to its parents' religious community. Thus if it dies in infancy, Muslims do not hold the Islamic funeral service for it. And if it grows up and follows its parents' religion, it is not regarded as an apostate from its Islam of birth.

Term *umma*

In popular usage the word *umma*, with which non-Muslims are also familiar, seems to be applied to the Muslim community. Some people may know that followers of any prophet may be called his *umma*. But in the Quran the word *umma* is used to mean a group, in the broadest sense. We read:

“And there is no animal in the earth, nor a bird that flies on its two wings, but they are communities (*umam-un*) like yourselves.” — 6:38

Within Muslims too there can be groups, and such a group can be called an *umma*, as in:

“And from among you there should be a party (*umma*) who invite to good and enjoin the right and forbid the wrong.” — 3:104

In another verse the whole of mankind is called one *umma*:

“Mankind is a single nation (*umma*). So Allah raised prophets as bearers of good news and as warners, and He revealed with them the Book with truth...” — 2:213

It is interesting to note that in *all* of the 18 or so English translations of the Quran, old and new, that I have checked, the first sentence in the above verse is translated in the *past tense*. For example:

- “Mankind was one single nation” — Abdullah Yusuf Ali
- “Mankind were one community” — Pickthall
- “All mankind were once one single community” — Asad
- “Mankind was [once] one nation” — Irving

- “Mankind was a single community” — Abdel Haleem’s recent 2004 translation
- The same is the case in the Qadiani *Jama’at* translations, both English and Urdu.

It seems to be only Maulana Muhammad Ali who has translated it in the *present tense*, having done so in both the 1917 and the revised 1951 editions of his English translation as well as in the Urdu translation *Bayan-ul-Quran*. (Of course, the so-called Shakir translation also renders these words in the same way as the Maulana, as it is a plagiarized work.)

The reason for translating it in the past tense is due to the occurrence of the word *kanā* at the beginning of the verse. But as Maulana Muhammad Ali has fully explained in his first footnote on that verse, the word *kanā* “does not necessarily refer to the past, but is often used in the Holy Quran to convey the idea of a general truth”. Those translators who also provide some commentary say that this verse conveys that mankind was, in the very beginning, one community in religious views, but then they began to differ and so Allah raised prophets among them to settle these differences. Some of these translators claim that the words *then they began to differ* are implied after “All mankind were once one single community”.

Maulana Muhammad Ali’s explanation is not only in tune with modern world conditions, when mankind is more and more becoming a single nation from many aspects, but it is also much simpler and does not require the assumption of any implied extra words. As he writes so pithily in his second footnote on this verse:

“A universal law of Divine Revelation has been disclosed in these words. As all people are a single nation, God, too, has been revealing Himself to all. This Law of Divine Revelation has, we are told, found expression through prophets, to every one of whom a revealed Book was given to show them the right way.”

This simple, clear interpretation also does not require trying to contrive explanations of how and in what way mankind was “once”, in the distant past, a single community, as other commentators need to do. It is, and always has been, a single nation in that the laws of God, His favours and punishments, apply equally to all mankind. Just this one interpretation by Maulana Muhammad Ali, out of all the translators of the Quran, old and new, Muslim and non-Muslim, shows the truth of the prophecy made by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to the effect that no person

would produce a translation and commentary of the Quran like one produced by him or by a follower of his who would be his “branch”.

Term *harām*

In common usage this is applied to something which is so bad that it is forbidden. Yet the same term is applied in the Quran in the sense of sacred, holy and inviolable, to the great mosque at Makka known as *al-masjid al-harām*. Even when used in the sense of something forbidden, we read the following two verses in the Quran, each of which begins with the same words “forbidden to you” (*hurrimat ‘alaikum*):

“Forbidden to you are your mothers, and your daughters, and your sisters...”

— 4 : 23

“Forbidden to you is that which dies of itself, and blood, and flesh of swine, and that on which any other name than that of Allah has been invoked...” —

5 : 3

Everyone knows that what is forbidden about your mothers, daughters and sisters is marriage with them. It is most certainly not meant, nor has any Muslim ever taken it to mean, that there is something so bad and harmful about mothers, daughters, sisters etc. that they should be avoided in every way possible! It is a certain act with them that is forbidden. Similarly, in the second verse it is the eating or drinking of those things that is forbidden. Blood, for example, cannot be considered as bad or harmful in itself. I need hardly say that not only does it support our lives, it also supports the lives of the very animals whose meat we eat. Without blood those animals would not survive and there would be no meat for us to eat! So what is obviously meant here by “forbidden” is that it is forbidden for us to consume blood as a food or drink.

It is universally known that Islam does not allow the drinking of alcohol. In recent years, the same alcohol has been used as fuel for cars, on its own or mixed with the traditional gasoline, Brazil being particularly known for this use of alcohol as fuel for vehicles. Should Muslims consider such a use of alcohol as forbidden for them which does not in any way involve any human being drinking it?

Term *hadith*

In common use the word *hadith* refers to a saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad found in certain well-known compilations such as Bukhari. Everyone knows that the Quran and Hadith are two entirely separate sources, clearly distinguishable from one

another. Yet we find in the Quran that the word *hadith* is used in a broad sense as meaning any announcement, story, or narration, as in:

“And has the story (*hadith*) of Moses come to you?” — 20:9

The Quran itself is called *hadith*, as in the following verses:

“Then maybe you will kill yourself with grief, sorrowing after them, if they believe not in this announcement (*hadith*).” — 18:6

“Allah has revealed the best announcement (*hadith*), a Book ...” — 39:23

“So leave Me alone with him who rejects this announcement (*hadith*).” — 68:44

Conclusion

We draw two conclusions from this discussion. Firstly, terms that we commonly use in Islam can have a different, broader meaning when they occur in the Quran. For example, the words ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim’ in the Quran are often used for the general concept of submitting to God, rather than referring to the religion of Islam with its detail and structure as established through the Holy Prophet Muhammad. Ignorance of this point leads people to misunderstand the Quran. Secondly, many of the Islamic terms we commonly use in their well-known senses (for example, *hadith* or *sharia*) only came to be so used after the times of the early Muslim generations. It is, therefore, permissible for Muslims, long after the time of early Islam, to coin and use terms to express Islamic concepts which were not used before in Islam. Take, for example, the terms *zill* and *buruz* (‘reflection’ or ‘image’) devised by the Sufi scholars of Islam to express how a true follower of the Holy Prophet Muhammad reflects his master’s qualities. These terms, no doubt, are not in the Quran or in Hadith. But nor is the term *sharia* used in the Quran or Hadith to mean the body of Islamic law. Nonetheless these terms express Islamic concepts and are therefore, in both cases, useful and allowable.

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