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"An Introduction to Islam"

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An Introduction to Islam*

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My talk was given out as 'Islam—An Introduction', and I was overawed when I read the announcement because it is a tremendous subject to deal with in just one lecture, so I must not waste any time. I would just say I think many of you are Muslims, but for those who are not I must give them the introduction promised them, and I must therefore begin by pointing out that Islam is based on the Qur^ʿān which is direct Revelation, like the Pentateuch (that is, the first five books of the Old Testament, which are known in Islam, as they are in Judaism, as the Torah) and the Psalms, whereas the rest of the Old Testament, the Book of Kings, the Book of Chronicles, are not Revelation at all. They are, one might say, sacred history composed by men, perhaps under inspiration. The same applies to the New Testament. In Christianity it is Christ himself—the Word made flesh—the Christians say, who holds the central place which is held in Islam by the Word made book, that is the Qur^ʿān, and instead of calling Islam 'Mohammedanism' as happened throughout the centuries until recently, it would have been reasonable to call it Qur^ʿānism, but there was no question of that because the Qur^ʿān itself says that God has chosen to name the religion Islam, which means submission to God.

The Qur^ʿān is the Book of God in more than one sense: it is *from* God, it is mainly *about* God, and above all it is of one substance *with* God, that is, it is not created. It is also, and has been called very often, the Book of Truth, and it is sometimes said that Islam is the religion of Truth, unlike Christianity which is the religion of Love. But, of course, there must always be the element 'Love' and there must always be the element 'Truth'. It is a question simply of emphasis between these two religions. One could also name the Qur^ʿān the Book of Mercy because Mercy is one of its main themes, and every chapter but one begins

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with the *Basmalah*, that is: *In the Name of God, the Infinitely Good, the Boundlessly Merciful*. But one could also, by extension, name the Qur^{ān} the Book of Paradise, because there is so much in the book about Paradise.

And since the time is short, I will now invite you to take a plunge, as it were, into Islam, by joining me in a point of view which, while being both un-Jewish and un-Christian, is essentially Islamic. I say 'essentially Islamic' because it is not typical of Muslims—it eludes the majority—but none the less the religion of Islam clearly offers it, whereas the Jew or Christian who adopts this point of view is compelled to step outside the framework of their religion. Now to explain this point of view, I must first say that the Qur^{ān} stresses the beauty of the Names of God, and it is generally said that they are ninety-nine in number, which must not be taken in any sense as a limitation. It is simply a symbolic number which must be taken as generally expressive of the Divine Infinitude. Now, one of these names is *al-Badi'*, which is difficult to translate but could be translated as 'The Marvelously Original'.

One of the features of the Qur^{ān} is that it impels us to take notice, to meditate on, to venerate what it calls 'the Signs of God'. The word is difficult to translate, but by 'Signs' we mean here Signs of God's work in the universe, i.e. outstanding things which take us back to God as their archetype, and among the great Signs of God are his religions—his different religions. Other Signs which the Qur^{ān} mentions—and this is something which we do not find in either the Jewish or the Christian books—are the marvels of nature, insisting that we take note of them and meditate upon them.

The element 'Miracle' is not lacking in Islam because the Prophet performed many miracles, but these were never allowed to take the centre of the stage as they do in both Judaism and Christianity. The great miracle is the Qur^{ān} itself, and also the world as it is, which men have come to take for granted. The Qur^{ān} asks: *Will they not behold the camels how they are created, and the firmament how it is raised aloft, and the mountains how they are established, and the earth how it is spread?* (LVIII:17–20). Now those verses are altogether typical of the Qur^{ān}, and you see what I mean by saying that you do not find such verses in general in the Old Testament, and not often in the Gospels, with the exception of the wonderful passage where Jesus says: 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They toil not,

neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.' That is a passage in the New Testament which every Muslim would take to spontaneously. But the Qur^{ān} is full of such passages.

But, apart from nature, among the great Signs are his Messengers and Prophets, and his religions. The Qur^{ān} continuously speaks of different Prophets and different religions.

I should perhaps explain that the word 'Messenger' translates into Arabic as *Rasul*, and that is the highest degree of Prophethood, that is, a founder of religion. The great Messengers are first of all, Adam—because, although the Islamic doctrine is exactly the same as regards the 'fall of man' as the Christian and Jewish doctrines, yet unlike Christianity the Qur^{ān} tells us that God forgave Adam and sent him the first religion, so that Adam is above all in Islam one of the great Divine Messengers who brought the first religion to mankind. Then there are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. Those are among the great Messengers, whereas the Prophets are David, Solomon, Aaron and Joseph, and there are many others mentioned in the Qur^{ān}. And those are at a lesser degree of greatness than the Messengers themselves. But these are the themes of the Qur^{ān}, and we are told to marvel at these Messengers and at the religions that they founded.

And we see here the function of Islam as the last religion being necessarily a summing-up. We are given in the Qur^{ān} a vast perspective, and not content with what it says about the various Messengers, and the various Prophets, it says in one verse: *We have sent Messengers before thee* (speaking to the Prophet); *about some of them we have told thee and about some we have not told thee* (xl:78). It says also: *For every community there is a Messenger* (x:47), and this was a necessity because if we read the Old Testament and then the New Testament we find practically nothing about other religions, and we wonder, what about the rest of the world? Were they left in darkness? The Qur^{ān} answers that very clearly. I was once asked by a Turkish lady, did I think that the Buddha was one of the Messengers that the Qur^{ān} refers to, who is not mentioned in the Qur^{ān}, and I said: 'Yes, I think we must conclude that', because Buddhism has dominated for over two thousand years the whole of the Far East, despite a certain amount of Christian and Islamic penetration, and God would not have allowed that if the Buddha had not been one of the Messengers. And if

he was not one of the Messengers, *who* was the Messenger that God sent, because the Qur^{ān} tells us that for every community a Messenger has been sent?

So, we are given here an immense vista which is, as I repeat, one of the aspects of Islam being the last religion of this cycle of time, and therefore something of a summing-up.

For those of you who are not Muslims—I must give you something about the structure of Islam, and I cannot do better I think than refer to that great occasion when the Archangel Gabriel appeared, not only to the Prophet, as he did frequently—for normally speaking the Prophet was the only one who could see him, he was invisible to everybody else—but on this occasion he appeared to everybody who happened to be with the Prophet at that time, and he asked the Prophet three questions. He actually asked him more than three questions, but I will deal only with three of them. ‘What is the surrender—that is, what is “*islam*”?’ And the Prophet replied: ‘That thou should testify that there is no God but God, and that Mohammed is his Messenger. That thou should perform the prayer, bestow the alms, fast Ramadan, and, if one can, make the pilgrimage to the Holy House’—that is, to Mecca. Then he said: ‘What is faith—“*iman*”?’ And the Prophet answered: ‘It is that thou should believe in God and his Angels and his Books and his Messenger, and the Last Day, and that thou should believe that no good or evil cometh but by His Providence’. And then the Angel asked: ‘What is excellence—“*ihsan*”?’ And the Prophet replied: ‘That thou shall worship God as if thou sawest Him, for if thou seest Him not, verily He sees thee.’ Now, ‘excellence’ is associated with mysticism, because that concentration demanded ‘that thou should worship God as if thou sawest Him’. That degree of concentration is something that cannot be demanded of a majority of people. These three questions are authoritative because after the Angel had left the Prophet asked one of his Companions: ‘Did you know who the questioner was?’ And he replied: ‘No.’ And he said: ‘It was Gabriel—he came to teach you your religion.’

So, these three questions and the answers given are of fundamental importance, and I should mention again, in connection with the immense vista of Islam, that the Qur^{ān} gives that creed in one verse that the Believers *believe in God and his Angels, his Books, and his Messengers. [They say] we make no distinction between his Messengers* (II.285). And it is the characteristic of Islam that you will find a

tremendous veneration for all the Prophets, and above all for the Messengers. In Christianity you do not find that, and you do not find that in Judaism because there is not so much mention of the Prophets. But, in Islam, you find a very great veneration and love for Prophets such as Aaron, for example, who means practically nothing to the average Christian. David and Solomon are counted as Prophets in Islam: in Judaism they are Kings of Israel, they are not counted as Prophets. And of course Zachariah and John the Baptist are among the Prophets who are venerated in Islam.

Another point that I would like to mention in connection with the immensity of the perspective which is not only in space but also in time, is that one of the conditions of Islam, you remember, is the pilgrimage to the Holy House, if one can do that. Now the pilgrimage to the Kaaba—that is, the cubical house which is the centre of the Islamic world and towards which the prayer is made when you perform the pilgrimage—is an Abrahamic rite which is taken into Islam, and it is an amazing experience to make the pilgrimage, and for almost every Muslim, when they do that, they have the impression (and I have heard people say this) that this is not the Islam that they know. It is something quite outside everyone's experience until they make it. And when one goes to Mecca on the pilgrimage one has the impression that one is back in the time of Abraham, and when you see the people in their pilgrim dress going backwards and forwards between the two hills, as Hagar did when she was looking for water, while Ishmael was lying in the sand, for whom God made a spring of water spout up from the sand which is named the Well of Zamzam, near which Abraham and Ishmael built, by the order of God, the Kaaba—as I say, you are back in the far past, and this rite is a pre-Mosaic rite. Judaism only came into existence with the Revelation on Mount Sinai to Moses. The Qur^{ān} insists that Abraham was neither a Christian nor a Jew. He was a Hanif, that means an orthodox worshipper, and the nearest of people to Abraham are the Muslims. And parallel to this dimension of Islam—the pilgrimage going right back into far antiquity—is the fact that the Arabic language itself is wonderfully archaic. It is much more archaic than the Hebrew of Moses, which is another Semitic language, of course.

Now, as the last Revelation, the Qur^{ān} gives answers to various things which are relevant to the age in which we live, and it gives answers to questions which have been raised only in recent times

about other religions. I referred to Solomon just now, and you probably know that in the Old Testament, in the Book of Kings, or Chronicles—which are not Revelation (they are sacred history written down by men)—Solomon is given a bad report. It is a very peculiar state of affairs, because on the one hand Solomon is known throughout the world as the personification of wisdom, ‘as wise as Solomon’—one finds that statement in every European language, I think. And, in Jewish mysticism, he is known as the father of the Kabbala, but none the less, the Book of Kings says: ‘And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord and he was not as his father, David.’ But the Qur^{ān} re-establishes Solomon as a great Prophet without any reservations whatsoever. So, in Islam, Solomon is venerated as among the greatest of Prophets.

Another point: it is only today that the question is disputed, by people who can really be called ‘heretics’ from a Christian point of view, of the Virgin birth of Jesus. No Muslim will accept anything other than the Virgin birth of Jesus—it is in the Qur^{ān}, and there is no doubt in the mind of any Muslim about that. But, today, some Christians (so-called) are beginning to question that point. And even the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin is in the Qur^{ān}, because whilst she was still in her mother’s womb her mother dedicated her to God, and took refuge for her from Satan. And the Prophet himself said: ‘Satan toucheth every son of Adam the day his mother beareth him, save only Mary and her son.’ And that is an example of what certain verses in the Qur^{ān} makes absolutely clear.

Another thing I should mention is this. There is an acute anticipation in the Qur^{ān} of various errors—various modern errors. For example, it is impossible for a Muslim—or it should be impossible—to believe in ‘progress’, for example human progress. Well, I was brought up on ‘progress’ when I was young. All the teachers in my school believed that the First World War was the war to end all wars, and that the earth would now progress, and would go on progressing, and that it had progressed. A sign of this progress was all the modern inventions. Now the Qur^{ān} is quite explicit that the passage of time always produces the contrary of progress. The Prophet said, for example: ‘No time cometh upon you that is not followed by a worse.’ He said also: ‘The best of my people are my generation; then, those that come after them, and then those that come after those.’ And there are many other passages in the Qur’an, and in the sayings of the

Prophet, which express the same idea. There is a verse in the Qur^{ān}: *A long time passed over them so that their hearts were hardened* (LVII:16). The inevitable result of the passage of time is the hardening of hearts. This is not, of course—it cannot possibly be taken as—pessimism, it is just realism. But, at the same time, God is always setting things right when they go wrong, and the Prophet said that God will send, at the end of every hundred years, a ‘renewer’ who will renew his religion, but that doesn’t mean that the flow of decadence is stopped. It means that a certain rectification is made, but the flow goes on to the end of time, until the end of the cycle, when God will intervene again. All general betterment is made, according to Islam, by Divine intervention, against the process of descent which is the fatal characteristic of the human race.

Now the other great error of modern times is, of course, the belief in evolution. That is beginning to be questioned by scientists, but here again, the Bible is absolutely explicit, but people in the West have ceased to take the Bible altogether seriously, whereas every Muslim takes the story of the creation of Adam in perfect rectitude, as the Qur^{ān} says, as something which is absolutely to be believed in, and it is impossible to believe in the idea that man is descended from anything else—man was created last of all, in the most perfect rectitude. *Then we cast him down to be the lowest of the low* (xcv: 4–5), because man has become, according to the Qur^{ān}, worse than the animals. The worst of mankind are further astray than the animals, who are, at least, innocent.

To go back to the question of other religions, one thing that the Muslim cannot help noticing (this goes back to the Divine Name—*al-Badi*—the ‘Marvellously Original’): the difference between the great Messengers and the religions they founded is something overwhelming. Let us consider, simply, the difference between the two last religions, the extraordinary complementarity between a religion founded by a man with no earthly father—as the Qur^{ān} speaks of the Word of God whom He cast into Mary, and the Spirit of God (iv:171)—Jesus who stands above the world, scarcely entering into the world, and performs miracle upon miracle, some of outstanding magnitude; and, on the other hand, a religion founded by a man who was plunged as deeply as possible into this world as regards human experiences, having been orphaned of a father before birth and of his mother at the age of six, but blessed with a loving grandfather and uncle; for many

years husband of one wife fifteen years older than himself; and then for many years a husband of many wives, some much younger, and all younger than himself; and in the world a man who was shepherd, merchant, then exile, Prophet, king, general—all roles he performed to perfection. And on these two complementary perfections the two religions in question still live and draw their sustenance, one might say.

One could take other religions also, and compare them, but these religions are among the great Signs of God that the Qur^{ān} insists that we should take into account and meditate on, and that we should take nothing for granted. That is one of the themes of Islam, that one must not take anything for granted. One's hearing, one's sight, one's speech, is something for which one must be profoundly thankful, whereas these things man has come to take for granted. And this is one aspect of the primordially of Islam, as the last religion Islam claims to be, and this wonderment recalls the wonderment of the first men who were created on earth who took nothing for granted, and who saw the marvels of creation and marvelled at them spontaneously. And that is another of the messages of the Qur^{ān}.

Now I think that I have probably said enough. There may be questions that some of you would like to ask, but I would just end with a quotation about the Qur^{ān} from what is probably the best general book ever written in the twentieth century about Islam, which is called *Understanding Islam*. It is by Frithjof Schuon; speaking of the verses of the Qur^{ān}, he says that

they are not merely sentences which transmit thoughts, but are in a way, beings, powers or talismans; the soul of the Muslim is, as it were, woven of sacred formulae; in these he works, in these he rests, in these he lives and in these he dies.

That is something that must be understood if one is to understand Islam: the tremendous importance of the Qur^{ān}ic verses, out of which it is no exaggeration to say, the soul of the Muslim is woven.