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## **UNDERSTANDING ISLAM**

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, Reza Mansoor, a Hartford doctor, became concerned about widespread misunderstanding of Islam, a religion practiced by a billion people world wide but little understood in too many homes in Connecticut.

Dr. Mansoor asked Muslim scholars from greater Hartford to join him in writing on five topics: the "pillars" of the religion, the true status of Muslim women, the real meaning of jihad, the Islamic view of justice and how Islam intersects with society.

Here are those essays.

### **The Five Pillars for Muslims**

by Reza Mansoor and Imam Mohamed El-Moctar Haidara

After the carnage of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the hate crimes that followed, it became clear that there was a need for the Muslim community to define itself, and for non-Muslims to understand true Islam and not the sensationalistic version that attributes to terrorists the appendage "Islamic".

There is absolutely no place for terrorism in Islam and there is no excuse for terror.

The word "Islam" means peace. Muslims greet each other with the greeting of peace: "Salaam". They believe that peace is achieved through submission to the will of God (Allah) and acceptance that there is none worthy of being worshiped but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God. (In Islam, after the name of a prophet, we always ask God to send His peace and blessings on them. For space reasons, the Courant has asked us to forgo that practice here.)

But how can a phrase bring peace? That is answered in the Koran – God's divine revelation to mankind: "Truly it is in the remembrance of God that the soul finds peace." (13:28). This is borne out today. With the loss of spirituality, society is seeing an epidemic of psycho-social disorders.

Muslims remember God by five pillars on which our guidance is based:

1. Acceptance that there is none worthy of being worshiped but God and that Muhammad is his messenger.
2. Five daily prayers
3. Charity (at least 2.5 percent of one's annual income)
4. Fasting from dawn till dusk, daily during the month of Ramadan

5. Pilgrimage to the symbolic house of God, the Ka'aba (built by the prophets Abraham and his son Ishmael in Mecca) once in a lifetime

It is the remembrance of God through these pillars that helps keep us on the right path.

Most important among the pillars is the first because we remember this phrase in everything we do. Whatever we do, we do it to the best of our ability because we consider it an act of worship. A mother taking care of her children, a physician taking care of patients or even the natural acts of life such as eating and sleeping are acts of worship when done with God in mind.

Islam is not a new religion. We believe that thousands of prophets were sent as guides to mankind, among them Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad – all great men invited to worship one God, to do good and forbid evil. We believe that some prophets were sent to a distinct people for their guidance: Moses, for example, was sent to the Jews and Muhammad, as the last prophet, was sent with a message to all mankind. Many of these prophets were given books of guidance. The Koran mentions that David, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad were given divine revelations in the form of books. The Koran says: "O followers of earlier revelation! Our messenger has come to you bringing clarity after a break of messengers. This lest you might claim, 'We never received any announcer of good news and a warner.' God has power over all things."

We obtain guidance through two sources, first through God's revealed message, the Koran. This divine message was brought to Muhammad by the same angel, Gabriel, who brought the message to other prophets. The other source is the authentic teachings and traditions of the prophet Muhammad, the Sunnah. The Koran was written and memorized in the lifetime of the prophet and was sent as a guidance to all mankind not just to Muslims. As the Koran says: "We haven't sent you (Muhammad) but as a mercy to all creatures" (21:107).

We believe that the life of this world is a very short trial. We are born free of sin and we reap the rewards of what we do through a God-given freedom to choose good from bad. After we die, there is a day of account, when the righteous are rewarded with paradise. The prophet relates that God says: "I have prepared for my righteous servants what no eye has ever seen, nor any ear heard, nor any human being ever conceived of". Those who are granted entrance into paradise are called upon: "O soul at rest, come back to your Lord well pleased and well-pleasing to Him. Enter among my servants. Enter my paradise." (89:27-28)

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## **Women in Islam: The Facts**

By Noora Brown and Diahara Diarra

After the recent terrorist attacks, a woman dressed in long-sleeved loose-fitting clothes and with a head scarf (hijab) stirs up strong emotions. The status of women in Islam is one of the most popular topics in the news media and with that comes the false charge that Muslims are hateful toward women.

It is important that we, two Muslim women, clarify the status of women in Islam.

In Islam, women are considered different but equal. In reward and punishment, men and women are considered equal and their work, faith and deeds are equally valued. As God reveals in the Koran: "Lo! I suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost. You proceed one from another" (3:195).

However, to understand the status of women in Islam better, we must go back to the beginning of creation and the story of Adam. The Koran refutes the idea of Eve as a temptress and clearly holds Adam and Eve equally responsible for their act of disobedience.

The history of Islam is full of great women. One of the greatest is Mary, the mother of Jesus, about whom the Koran dedicates a whole chapter. Women's position and honor is best described in the Koran in the chapter dedicated to "The Women": "O mankind! Reverence your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created of like nature his mate and from them twain scattered countless men and women. Reverence God through Whom you demand your mutual rights, and reverence the wombs that bore you" (4:1). This is a strong injunction to respect women, the mothers of each of us.

A saying of the prophet Muhammad similarly recognizes the honor of women and entitles her to three-fourths of the love and kindness of a child, one fourth being reserved for the father. In another statement honoring motherhood, the prophet said: "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers."

One of the pagan Arab practices at the time of Prophet Muhammad was female infanticide. The Koran forbade this practice and warned those who practiced such crimes that they would be held to account. "When the souls are sorted out and the female infant buried alive is asked for what crime she was killed ... verily this is no less than a message to all the worlds".

According to Islamic law, a woman cannot be forced to marry someone without her consent. As a woman's right to decide about her marriage is recognized, so is her right to end an unhappy marriage. It is a wife's right that her husband provide her with food, shelter and clothing. Women in Islam have the right to their own wealth, real estate, and inheritance, rights that western civilization granted to their women several centuries later.

Furthermore, Prophet Muhammad is instructed in the Koran: "O Prophet, when believing women come to you to take the oath of fealty ... receive their oath of fealty" (60:12). This establishes the right of women to select their leader and publicly

declare so. Contrast this to the women's suffrage movement. Women got the right to vote in America as late as the 1920's!

Women likewise have the right to a professional career. The prophet's wife was a business-woman who married him because he was such a trustworthy worker of hers. Women may work in most professions. The most honored of these, however, is as a mother, training future generations of Muslims.

One of the most controversial characteristics of a Muslim woman is her dress. It is often misconstrued as a symbol of subjugation, oppression or militancy. It is none of these. It is an act of faith, but more than that, it is a means of freedom from society's enslaving beauty standards, freedom from sexual objectification and an avenue to social integrity and self esteem. As women, we believe that equality with men is truly achieved only when women are judged on their wits instead of their looks. Judgment of her physical person is to play no role whatsoever in social interaction.

Islam places too great a value on the status of women to allow them to be manipulated as a marketing tool.

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## **Jihad in Aid of the Oppressed**

by Reza Mansoor

Jihad literally means "to strive". It means striving to do one's best for self-improvement and self-purification. Once you become a Muslim, you are held to the highest standard of responsibility in standing up for what is right.

The Koran instructs: "O you who believe, stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to God, even as against yourselves, your parents or your kin and whether it be against rich or poor ... and if you distort justice or decline to do justice, verily God is well acquainted with all that you do." This requires a constant review of what we do as individuals and as a society, to be impartial and stand up for what is right.

When Prophet Muhammad and a few of his early followers received the message of Islam, they were tortured and evicted from their homes, and many of them were killed. The early Muslims were terrified. They were commissioned to establish peace, to enjoin right and forbid wrong, to support the oppressed and emancipate the subjugated. But how could they do it when they were oppressed and subjugated themselves? It was at this time that the following was revealed: "To those against whom war is made, permission is given to fight, because they are wronged and verily God is most powerful for their aid; they are those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right, for no cause except that they say, 'Our Lord is God'" (2:238-240). Clearly this verse allows fighting only in self-defense.

With all their hardships, the Muslims of Arabia had a message to deliver to mankind, a contribution to make to humanity and a formula of salvation to offer. The Koran says: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching and argue in the most gracious manner" (16:125). This was the same instruction that all prophets were sent with, to preach the worship of one God, the doing of good and the forbidding of evil. But it entails actively giving that message, for which so many prophets, including Jesus, had suffered in the past.

Muslims are not permitted to allow themselves to become or remain passive victims of injustice or aggression. It is not natural that people should accept humiliation and so God commands: "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you and do not transgress limits (nor begin hostility): for God loves not transgressors ... and fight them until there is no more persecution or oppression and there prevails justice and faith in God; but if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression: (2:190-193). Once again an injunction to fight in self-defense and to establish justice – the same justice that NATO troops fought to establish when there was ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. A Muslim is required not only to give assistance to victims of tyranny, whatever faith they may profess, but also to stop the one who is committing it. The Prophet said: "The greatest Jihad is saying a word of truth to a tyrant".

Historically there is overwhelming evidence that Islam was not spread by the sword. God makes it very clear in the Koran, that even the Prophet was limited to conveying the message of Islam. The results were in the hands of God. God will open the hearts of those who seek the truth in sincerity. Further, the Koran unambiguously states that there is no compulsion in religion: "Let there be no compulsion in religion; truth stands out clear from error" (2:56). As DeLacy O'Leary in his 1923 book "Islam at the Crossroads" points out: "The legend of fanatical Muslims sweeping through the world forcing Islam at the point of the sword upon conquered races is one of the most fantastically absurd myths that historians have ever repeated."

Indeed, Muslims ruled India for a thousand years. If they wanted they had the power to convert every non-Muslim to Islam. Yet more than seventy percent of the population of India is non-Muslim. Under Muslim rule in Spain, Jewish theological studies flourished. Jewish scholars agree that this was their golden age in their freedom to practice their religion. Indonesian has the largest number of Muslims of any country, but no Muslim army ever went to Indonesia. Similarly, Malaysia has a majority of Muslims, yet no Muslim army went there. The inhabitants of these South Asian islands converted to Islam in awe at the system of justice that Islam established.

Indeed Islam has spread even when Muslims have lived under great oppression. In the thirteenth century, pagan Mongols conquered most of the central Muslim lands, but within a few generations, most of the Mongols had themselves become Muslims. Today Islam is the fastest growing religion in America and Europe. Men and women learning the truth of this religion are embracing it freely.

Islam came to bring justice to the world and the best justification for the concept of jihad is the prayer of the oppressed: “Our Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors and raise for us from Thee one who will help (4:75). This is truly what jihad is and even the hardest hearted will accept that this is a noble cause.

## **Islam Requires Justice for All**

by Ingrid Mattson

In the past few weeks since the horrible criminal acts of terrorism that shocked the world, we have heard consistent pleas for unity among Americans. What does this mean? What does it mean to be an American?

Ibn Khaldun, the great Arab medieval philosopher, identified group solidarity as one of the most important foundations of any society. Group solidarity entails when individuals feel united by shared features or shared values.

The most oppressive societies unite under shared race, status, or ethnicity. In such societies, large sectors of the population are marginalized, abused and denied rights enjoyed by the dominant group.

In other societies, group solidarity coalesces around common values. Certainly American identity requires a strong connection by birth or immigration with the land that is the United States of America. One of these values is justice.

More than 1400 years ago, there existed a society plagued by the worst kinds of group solidarity. Rich oppressed the poor, strong tribes plundered and humiliated the weak tribes and men subjected women to all sorts of abuse. In that corrupt and bleak place God send a Prophet with a message: “O humankind, We have created you from one male and one female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may come to know one another. Verily the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you” (49:13).

It was not easy for the tribes of seventh century Arabia to set aside their pride and embrace righteousness. Indeed it is a struggle for people throughout the ages to deny their inclination to favor their own group and consistently enjoin truthfulness, fidelity, kindness, mercy and justice for all.

Islam requires justice; this means that Muslims throughout the world have to be as determined as all Americans to see that the terrorists pay for the crimes. Unfortunately we have seen in news reports that small groups of Muslims in Pakistan and elsewhere seem to have fallen back on the worst kind of group solidarity in defending Muslim criminals. It is also unfortunate that some Americans have retreated to the worst kind of group solidarity and have carried out criminal assaults on immigrants and others.

Justice is ensuring that no person is punished for a crime of another. Group solidarity, unless it is firmly founded on sound values, can be one of the greatest obstacles to the pursuit of justice. A story from early Islamic history demonstrates this point.

Shortly after the Prophet Muhammad brought the message of Islam to the feuding tribes of Arabia he was able to found a small community united by the profession of a creed and a value system that was Islam. Most members of the community were sincere Muslims striving to live righteous lives but there were also some deceptive, dishonest people among them.

One day a man from the Muslims stole a suit of armor. When he realized that he was about to be caught, he hid the stolen goods in the house of a Jewish man. At that time small clans of Jews lived among the Muslims. When the authorities arrived the Jewish man denied that he had stolen the armor and pointed to the Muslim man as the real thief.

The initial reaction of some in the Muslim community was to side with the Muslim against the Jew. These Muslims had fallen back to their pre-Islamic ways of putting group identity above values. But when the case was brought to the Prophet Muhammad he examined the evidence impartially and pronounced the Muslim guilty and the Jew innocent. The Prophet taught his followers that shared values and righteous living, not identity cards, must form the foundation of society.

In connection with this incident God revealed the following verse to the prophet: "We have revealed to you the Book in truth that you may judge between people by that which God has shown you so do not be an advocate for those who betray their trust" (4:105).

Islamic justice requires that crimes are carefully and fully investigated, and that criminals are suitably punished. American justice requires the same thing. No one in America or any other country should believe that there is a conflict between the two systems of justice.

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## **The Objective is Peace**

by Ali and Fatma Antar

Islam is a complete code and way of life that provides guidance to humanity in all aspects of human endeavor. The Koran is God's revelation to humanity that is relevant to all people for all times and places.

The message of Islam came down to affirm and clarify not to delete the previous messages from the same God, the only God who created the universe. These messages were sent to humanity through God's messengers including the prophets

Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad; peace be upon them all. That is why Muslims talk about the Judaic-Christian-Islamic doctrine.

The objective of God's message is to bring peace to the individual. Material gains and progress cannot bring about comfort or contentment in this temporary life or happiness in the eternal life after death.

Individuals form families that are the nuclei of the society and the nation at large. Through the Koran, God's revelation, the individual and therefore society is responsible for living in peace (with oneself, family, society and God), through practicing justice and equality. Part of our responsibility is the need to care for the needy, orphans and the oppressed, to ensure equal opportunity for all. We are commanded to preserve and protect mutual rights and obligations, and to be free from exploitation of any individual or group. We must strive to be just in every action, caring not only for our spouses and children, but also for our parents, relatives and neighbors regardless of faith or background.

We are entrusted by God with the responsibility of maintaining a clean environment and paying heed to problems that affect the earth and its ecology. Therefore, harming the environment is forbidden in Islam. Resources of the universe are to be employed equitably by society, ensuring the maintenance of a perfect balance, not squandering our natural resources.

Men and women are commanded to acquire knowledge and use it constructively for the benefit of humanity. It is interesting to note that the first verse revealed in the Koran is: "Read in the name of the exalted Lord ... your Lord who taught mankind by the pen".

Finally we are entrusted by God with our bodies and wealth and therefore must utilize them wisely, not in vain.

There are some special responsibilities that God requires from us. It is worth noting that the Koran addresses not just Muslims, but all of humanity. Islam is called *Deen El-Fitra* which means the faith of nature – that is, these codes must conform with nature and vice versa. This does not mean changing one's basic spiritual nature.

The Koran also states: "Let there be no compulsion in religion". Muslims are taught to be tolerant and respectful toward others because all of us belong to one big family, the family of Prophet Adam (human beings). In addition Jews and Christians have a special relationship with Muslims. The Koran calls them "people of the book (Revelation)". Constructive dialogue is urged.

The news media have stereotyped Islam and Muslims by using the term "fundamentalists" to describe some Muslims who act violently and against the teaching of Islam – including those who attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11. Every Muslim is considered fundamentalist because each follows the fundamentals of Islam. The people who act violently - hijackers and those who harm innocent people – are not following Islam and should be called

“terrorists”. It would be the same as labeling the action of Timothy McVeigh as “Christian or the action of Dr. Baruch Goldstein in Hebron as “Jewish”.

Muslim Americans have the obligation to work with the rest of society and follow the law of the land. All of us must work together to be not only tolerant but also respectful of one another.

God says in the Koran: “If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but His plan is to test you in what He has given you. So strive in grace in all virtues. The return of all of you is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute” (5:51). This is the challenge that we are faced with as a humanity, and we must rise to this challenge.

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