



Core-7

MAKING SENSE OF ISLAM BY TAREK ELGAWHARY

Core-1: What is Islam?

There is no way that this short essay will thoroughly explain what Islam is. This is not my aim. What I would like to do, however, is present a framework that will always be in the background throughout the *Making Sense of Islam* platform by which we can understand the entirety of our faith. This framework is

taken from the famous hadith known as the Hadith of Gabriel. It can be found in the collection of Bukhari and Muslim and is easily found in Imam Nawawi's "Forty Hadith Collection." The entire text of the hadith is as follows:

“Umar ibn Khattab said: ‘As we sat one day with the Messenger of God[†], a man with pure white clothing and jet black hair came to us, without a trace of traveling upon him, though none of us knew him. He sat down before the Prophet bracing his knees against his, and resting his hands on his legs and said:

‘Muhammad, tell me about Islam.’ The Messenger of God said: ‘Islam is to testify there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and to perform the prayers, give alms, fast Ramadan, and perform the pilgrimage to the House if you find a way.’

He said: ‘You have spoken the truth,’ and we were surprised that he should ask and then confirm the answer.

Then he said: ‘Tell me about true faith (Iman),’ and the Prophet answered: ‘It is to believe in God, His angels, His inspired Books, His messengers, the Last Day, and in destiny, its good and evil’. ‘You have spoken the truth.’

He said, ‘Now tell me about the perfection of faith (Ihsan),’ and the Prophet answered: ‘It is to worship God as if you see Him, and if you see Him not, He nevertheless sees you.’ ‘Tell me of the Hour,’ said the visitor, and he was told: ‘The one questioned knows no more about it than the questioner.’ ‘Then tell me of its portents,’ he said, and the Prophet replied: ‘That the slave women shall give birth to her mistress, and you shall see barefoot, naked, penniless shepherds vying in constructing high buildings.’ Then the visitor left. I waited a while, and the Prophet said to me, ‘Do you know, ‘Umar, who was the questioner?’ and I replied, ‘God and His messenger know best.’ He said, ‘It was Gabriel, who came to you to teach you your religion.’”

[†] It is customary for Muslims to say, ‘God bless him and give him peace’ after mentioning the Prophet’s name. As this can become cumbersome in written format, it is enough to state it once in writing, even though it continues to be mentioned orally.

In this text, the Prophet outlined four critical aspects of our tradition:

Orthopraxy

(the *'islam'* in Gabriel's question)



Orthodoxy

(the *'iman'* in Gabriel's question)



Spiritual Excellence

(the *'ihsān'* in Gabriel's question)



Eschatology

(the *'signs of the Final Hour'*
in Gabriel's question)

In the final statement of the hadith, Prophet Muhammad turned to the Companions and said, *“That was Gabriel who came to teach you your religion.”* Therefore, these four aspects collectively make up the tradition of Islam. Each represents a critical aspect of how faith is expressed, embodied, and practiced.

Accordingly, our forefathers (and mothers) took it upon themselves to take each aspect and spell out their nuances in meticulous detail. The scholars of the law developed the Sharī’a in both its branches (furū’) and principles (usūl) forming the interpretive Sunni legal tradition. The scholars of ‘aqīda developed Islam’s theological apparatus (to which matters of eschatology were subsumed as an essential part of matters of belief) and developed both Ash’arī and Māturīdī schools of theology. Other scholars took up the mantle of spiritual practice to develop the science and discipline of Sufism, which proliferated into the thousands

of Sufi Orders throughout Islamic history. This colossal body of thought and practice in its entirety is Islam.

It is important to remember and frequently restate this since the Prophet indicated these aspects are needed to make up the entirety of our religion. One without the other will not do. Rather, all are needed to form a complete, comprehensive, and beautiful faith. However, this has unfortunately not always been the case. Throughout our long and storied history there have been periods during which some of these aspects have come under attack ushering in periods of dark and lamentable ignorance. It is during these periods that heroes were born, rising against the conflict and defending the Sunna of the Prophet in all its aspects. It is these heroes I look to for inspiration.

Core-2: Centrality of the Prophet

The testimony of faith in Islam summarizes the entirety of its message into two simple, yet profound statements: belief in God and belief in His messenger Muhammad. From the personal to the scholarly, everything in the Islamic tradition is related to one of these two statements in some way or another. It is either based on something that God said, ordered,

or informed; likewise for His messenger. In this sense, the closer one relates to these two, the higher the probability that a given act or belief will become accepted into the broad folds of orthodoxy. My focus in this essay is on the second part of the testimony of faith, "Muhammad is the messenger of God."

Acknowledging that Muhammad is the messenger of God is essential to the structure of Islam's intellectual tradition. The entire corpus of the Prophet's sayings and actions (*hadīth* and *sunna* respectively) have been catalogued, studied, and criticized since the early generations of Muslim scholars to decipher what exactly he said, how he led his life, and most importantly, what is the right way (read orthopraxy) to lead one's own life. This immense importance placed on the Prophet of Islam both scholarly and personally is the cause of a great deal of literature. We find early compilations of his collected sayings, like the *Muwatta'* of Imam Mālik (d. 179/795), which served as both manuals of hadith, but, and more importantly, proof texts for rulings of a given legal school. These progressed through generations of commentaries, glosses, and meta-glosses that increased the utility of these works. Legal debates flourished with entire legal schools becoming established and branching out into legal methodology (*usūl al-fiqh*) and legal responsa (*iftā'*). However, the hadith literature is not only legal in nature, there is a personal aspect to it as well. The hadith literature sought to capture the entirety of the Prophet's

life, not just his legal proclamations. In this regard there are many personal matters related to the Prophet, such as his exalted traits (*manāqib*), his greatness (*fadā'il*), his personal traits (*shamāil*), and the exalted traits of his family and companions. Therefore, the literature concerned with the Prophet from the early generations up until the modern period is a mix of scholarly undertakings as well as devotional writings. As time progressed, the later took on a life of their own with works such as Qadi 'Iyyād's (d. 544/1149) acclaimed *al-Shifā'* in which the specific aim is to focus on the Prophet as a person of admiration and veneration. This is what is meant by the centrality of the Prophet.

I made reference above, and elsewhere in these essays, to the Islamic intellectual tradition. It is important to understand that this tradition is not simply culled from ancient books, but rather, and more significantly, transmitted from person to person through chains of transmission. Every verse of the Quran, every hadith of the Prophet, and every scholarly discipline is passed from generation to generation through these chains of transmission. Abdullah Bin Mubarak (d. 181/797)

said, “chains of transmission are from this religion, and were it not for these chains of transmission, anyone could say whatever they wanted.” Since these links all go back to the Prophet, and since what is being transmitted is religion, the premise of authority first lies on the reliability of the transmitter of information, and secondly on the veracity of the statement. Those passing our tradition generation from to generation are, in a way, passing along part of the identity of the Prophet himself, and his significance is central to the entirety of the faith. The fact is that without the Prophet there would be no Islam; without the Prophet we would have no way of knowing our Creator or how to worship Him.

We often refer to this centrality as the sunna of the Prophet. However, I find the usage of this term amongst contemporary Muslims to be unfortunately basic and frequently off-putting to their co-religionists. The sunna is much more than articles of clothing and specific supplications (although these are indeed part of it

and important). As a matter of fact, if one were to look at the entirety of the corpus of hadith statistically, only a few thousand out of nearly 100,000 hadith deal with matters of the Sharī‘a. The vast majority of the hadith, and therefore the vast majority of the sunna, is about moral conduct and social interactions. The true and complete sunna, therefore, is to embody as much as possible the state of the Prophet: his traits, his etiquette, his mercy, and his compassion. Added to this is the fact that the Prophet is for us a beautiful and excellent example (Quran 33:21). He is therefore not only central to Islam in regards to its intellectual and scholarly edifice; he is central to our personal lives as a source of devotion and excellence.

Core-3: The Two Rules of Three

I am often asked about Islam's expression and practice in contemporary life. Questions range from the typical to the truly unique, but perhaps the number one most frequently asked question is: "who should I listen to and follow?" This question speaks to our current condition and emerges from the great deal of confusion and contradiction that exists in the space of religious discourse amongst Muslims. Traditionally, Islam sees that without

some sort of criteria, anyone could or would say whatever they want. That is to say that when this criterion is lacking, everyone who speaks will no doubt find at least one person to listen to him or her. The fact that today we have powerful tools of communication means that one of the by-products of this technology is that various sects of Islam can have equal communicating powers.

I could go on and on about the source of this problem, however I am much more interested in solutions. One potential solution would be to make a list of who to listen to and who not to. Through my various years of study, travel, conversations, meetings, and projects, etc., I realized that it is more important and easier to have criteria by which to vet people and information one receives, rather than make a list. I call these *The Two Rules of Three*.

Rule #1

There is a difference between:

1. The texts of Islam: Quranic verse, hadith, or statements of a particular scholar.
2. The understanding and meaning of this particular text. [in its linguistic, historical context, etc.]
3. Applying this text to the here and now.

Rule #2

There is a difference between:

1. Understanding the text (in the way outlined above).
2. Understanding the current contemporary moment.
3. The application of one to two.

Islam's primary texts are addressed to us and accordingly we do our best to understand and implement them. Yet, while this may be simple to state, the very act of implementation carries its own set of rules and complexities. This stems from the fact that our primary texts come from the Divine (even the hadith as they are Divinely inspired) and therefore can be thought of as absolute. However, our current moment, our here and now, is the exact opposite. It is temporal, fleeting, and therefore partial. Simply put, connecting the absolute to the partial requires skill, finesse, and a lot of practice.

One of the by-products of this reality is that since the temporal is constantly in motion, and since the absolute is fixed and non-changing, the absolute will express itself differently in the here and now. The Maliki jurist Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarafi (d.684/1285) articulated this by explaining how the rulings of the Sharī'a change as place, people, time, circumstances change. The Sharī'a, therefore, is dynamic and not static. Well, large parts of it are dynamic anyway. This is not because Islam needs to change to keep up with the times. Rather, the way the absolute is brought into the current moment simply means that the absolute can and will express differently. Islam as such does not change; rather it is our implementation of it that can and does.

While the theoretical discussion above is important to grasp, the actual act of linking the text to the moment requires years of study and training. Volumes could be dedicated to this subject and are, and many have dedicated large parts of their lives to learning and mastering this craft. Even if this is a highly skilled aspect of the Islamic sciences, we can at least appreciate its complexity and therefore identify when someone clearly cannot.

Core-4: Muslim Personalities

We all have people we like to listen to: a favorite preacher, a beautiful reciter, a scholar, a mufti, a shaykh, etc. These form the various sources we take our religious and spiritual advice from. This is natural, and I would go as far as to say equally true

of other faith traditions. The challenge for Islam specifically is that we often times do not differentiate the types of expertise and personalities we encounter. This essay is meant to address this.

There is a difference between the following “Muslim” personalities:



1. Scholar

Spends most of their time in an area of specialty and expertise.



2. Preacher

Motivates you, like a coach, and does not necessarily have deep insight or knowledge of particulars, but typically has enough basic understanding of Islam.



3. Worshiper

The pious amongst us whose dominant feature is worship and acts of devotion. We tend to refer to these people as the saints amongst us.

The above three are not the same or equal. If you want guidance and insight on a particular issue, you need a scholar. The scholar's job is to be an expert in one or more fields and to achieve a level of mastery that very few in the community have. They are best in class in these fields and are able to advance the field academically generation to generation. To accomplish this the scholar must dedicate the majority of their time to their field of expertise. This means that they might not be as in-the-know with social trends and current happenings. Of course they know enough of this for their specific field, but they are more like an ivory tower professor. I write this not to be disparaging, but simply to state a fact. We admire them, and we desperately need our scholars, but in areas of their expertise and scholarship.

Since the scholars might not be much in the know and somewhat removed from the day-to-day, if you are feeling down and need motivation, you might not turn to them for this. Rather, you would turn to a preacher. The preacher in a way is the opposite of the scholar. They have a cursory knowledge of Islam, but they spend

most of their time in pastoral care to their community. They are very much plugged in, can relate best to people's circumstances, and most importantly know the limits of their knowledge and when to reach out to an expert if needed.

Then there are those amongst us who are pious to a point that we are simply in awe at them and seek to emulate them as much as we can in our personal devotional practices. These saints do not teach us necessarily with lessons, writings, fatwas, or lectures. Rather, their instruction is through their spiritual states. As a matter of fact, they might not know a lot nor could they offer personal advice, but they sure can show us through example how the light of Islam can shine through a person. They show us how to love the Prophet and how to love the people of the Quran.

Often times these personalities are assumed to be the same, and indeed these qualities might be within the same person, but typically one of these traits is more dominant than the others. Therefore, and the purpose of this essay, it is important

to be clear that these personalities offer different, but important, qualities of Islam. The danger is taking the wrong thing from the wrong person. For example, and this is actually what motivated me to write this essay in the first place, many people assume that their local preacher is a scholar and seek to take authoritative information from them. If the preacher does not themselves know their limits, they further this danger by passing on their cursory knowledge as authoritative. One can take this example and extrapolate dozens and dozens more based on it.

There are a lot of voices out there speaking to Muslims and offering them interpretations of Islam for their implementation. The distinction between these personalities must be kept front and center, both for the people who assume these roles and more importantly for those listening

to them. In organizational work we usually urge people to “stay in their lanes.” For some reason, and this is definitely a modern occurrence, Muslim personalities do not stay in their own lanes. To this the Prophet taught us that knowledge is lost by the passing of scholars until the community will take “the ignorant as their leaders and the ignorant will pass scholarly judgments, wronging themselves and wronging the community” (Bukhari and Muslim). Let this serve as a warning and reminder for us.

Core-5: Dīn vs. Tadayyun

We typically think of religion as a private, personal matter. We find ourselves turning to the Almighty in our times of need as well as our times of happiness. We journey to develop a personal and spiritual connection with our Maker to increase our fortitude and emotional wellbeing. This is completely normal and natural, and perhaps the way the

vast majority of us experience religion. This is what I refer to as tadayyun or religiosity. The way we all interact with religion and the relationship we develop with our faith is essentially a personal expression, largely based on our own emotions and feelings. There is no right or wrong, only that it is.

However, it is easy to forget that religion is also a discipline of study and craft to be learned like any other sophisticated body of study. To take a deep dive into the primary texts (the Quran and Hadith) to unlock the infinite levels of meaning and interpretation takes not only years and years of study and practice, it also takes the learning of other auxiliary disciplines and sciences. This is what I refer to as dīn, or the study of religion. It is through this process that religious authority is established and passed from generation to generation.

I make this distinction because Muslims today often times confuse and mix the two and this is not only dangerous, it often leads to disastrous outcomes. One's personal experience of religion, while important and valid individually, should not be considered authoritative for the wider community. A simpler way of stating this is just because someone prays a lot, fasts a lot, and reads Quran a lot does not make them a scholar of the religion

and able to dish out fatwas to the congregation.

These distinctions, I should state, are not binary. Of course in real life these two can be present in the same person and anyone who has set out on the long journey of study can attest that developing a level of religiosity is an important component of Sharia studies and expected of a scholar. However, the more rare of the two is the study and discipline of religion. Due to its complexity and nuances, it is natural that experts of Islam are less than those practicing Islam. Yet, since religion is a personal matter for most of us most of the time, there seems to be an instinct to assume the person who experiences Islam in a profound way must also be able to speak to matters of Islam authoritatively. The danger here is that personal experiences and emotions, while powerful for us individually, in no way provide authoritative interpretations of Islam's primary sources.

This is not, unfortunately, a new problem. From the time of the early khawārij, there have been those from our community who tried to leverage their religiosity to lead the community this way or that. Of significant note, most of the leaders of this extremist fringe were and are ascetic in their approach to Islam. This has always added to their “street cred” to help dilute the weak minded into following them. On the Making Sense of Islam platform, my focus is on the study of religion.

Core-6: Values and Principles

I believe it is important to be clear about one's values in promoting a product, especially an educational product. Everything I seek to do on the Making Sense of Islam platform is related to one or more of the following four values and principles.

1. Defense of the Sunna

As I discuss in the essay on the centrality of the Prophet, his Sunna is a quintessential aspect of our faith. To defend the Sunna is to defend the very heart of Islam; its rhyme and reason, its *raison d'être*, its soul. Unlike the Quran, however, the Sunna is expansive and varied in its content. Not all hadith are graded the same, some are even forgeries. This has led some to make the lamentable claim that the Sunna cannot be relied upon, or that the Sunna is the source of the backwardness of the Muslim community, etc. This represents one extreme. Those who have a limited understanding of the Sunna represent the other extreme. They employ their edited version of the Sunna as a blunt instrument to cause harm and friction throughout the Muslim community. As a result countless of Muslims have been harmed, even forced out of their faith due to a faulty understanding of how the Prophet lived his life and taught his Companions.

To defend the Sunna is to restore a balanced understanding to the entirety of the Prophetic model. It is to look beyond the exterior and

understand the true heart of how Islam was revealed and how we were meant to implement it.

2. The Discerning Mind

One of the challenges the Muslim community faces today is the lack of ability to discern and differentiate. Rather than see nuances and variety, we commonly see a monolithic bloc. When this happens, we collapse complex issues into a dangerous homogenous black and white interpretation. The reality is that this is to be expected from non-experts. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this. The real damage is when this is taken across the *din/tadayyin* barrier (see Core-5 article). When this occurs a new heterodoxy is born, substituting our orthodoxy and thus sinking the standards of our community lower and lower. So, rather than look at a bookcase and simply see a bunch of books, it is important on this platform that we take the time to read each and every title, to bunch them together by subject, by author, and by theme. Developing the discerning mind allows us to see the beauty in the plurality of Islam. It also allows us to apply this discernment

and distinction in understanding our own reality. Things are rarely black and white, and there is much to celebrate in our vast diversity.

3. Against the Islamization of the Secular

While the concept of the secular means different things to different people, in my usage I understand it as a rejection of aspects of religion (and therefore the Divine) for other systems of thinking and other paradigms. In this regards, there have been many attempts to adopt some of these systems and paradigms as substitutes to Islamic ones and in so doing “Islamize” them to help garner support amongst Muslims. I find this extremely dangerous and I believe that this has caused major intellectual inhibition within Islam over the past 250 years.

These statements should not be interpreted as a type of xenophobic attitude to foreign ideas and systems of learning. Throughout history Muslims scholars of various disciplines have taken liberally from others to the benefit of the Islamic

sciences. I myself benefited from studying for nearly a decade of comparative religions. However, this was done openly and based on clear rules and first principles. The type of phenomenon that I am talking about is done covertly and with nefarious intentions. I stand opposed to this and try my best to make this clear throughout my work.

4. Against the secularization of Islam

The twin to number 3 above is to take Islam out of its original context of an original Arabic Divine revelation and apply a completely foreign interpretive paradigm to its primary sources. For the past 14 centuries Muslims have developed a distinct interpretive tradition, what we typically call Usūlī Islam. This first-principles tradition is based on a fine reading of Islam’s primary sources and coherent and consistent with it’s original content. This is what generates authority within Islam from generation to generation.

In the modern age, however, other attempts have been made and are

being made to develop a “secular” interpretive paradigm. Some seek to read the Quran, not as a book of revelation and guidance, but rather as a historical document. Others apply a neo-Marxist or post-modern paradigm to Islam’s primary sources. Yet others take liberal political philosophy and apply it to Islam to develop a modern-liberal Islamic political philosophy. The list goes on and on, and my point is that while these might occasionally produce interesting ideas, they are not ideas that come from Islam and therefore are not, strictly speaking, Islamic. The Making Sense of Islam platform seeks to make this clear and help visitors and students understand the dangers of such approaches.

Core-7: Complexity of the Modern World

Shaykh Ibrahim Bajuri was one of the great Egyptian jurists and theologians of the 19th century. He wrote extensively in various subjects and his commentaries are still studied today as standard texts at al-Azhar. I studied many of his works and continue to turn to these texts throughout my work. His career was capped with his appointment

as Shaykh al-Azhar, which he held until his death in 1860. I do not begin this essay by mentioning him because of his scholarship, however. I mention him since the day-to-day life he lived was, more or less, the same day-to-day life the Prophet and the Companions lived.

If you read his famous legal gloss, you will see how he seamlessly relates to the patterns of life that are found in the past. The type of clothes he wore, the types of food he ate, the types of transportation he used, the types of tools he used, etc., were a normal progression from those equivalents used by the earliest generations. But by the mid 19th century this was to change dramatically.

With Shaykh Bajuri's death in 1860 the residual of Europe's Industrial Revolution started impacting the heartland of the Muslim world. Ships were now constructed with steel, roads were being paved, and the printing press was, for the first time, mass-producing the Quran, hadith collections, and numerous other classics of the Muslim world. Most importantly, the daily living pattern of Muslims began to change. In traditional Islamic cultures the rhythm of the day revolved around the five daily prayers and Muslims set their daily clocks to them. For example, with the commencement of the noon prayer the clock was set to 12 every day. Therefore, when one came to read hadiths about arriving

to Friday prayer at the "first hour, the second hour, etc." it was easy to keep and understand them. If one were to analyze all these types of examples, one will notice that with the impact of the Industrial Revolution as well as the adoption of Western forms of living, a slow rupture in this contiguous way of life mentioned in the opening paragraph occurred. Another way of saying this is that a split between Islam as a religion and Islam as a civilization began to take place, a split between Islam as a system of religious practice and devotion (what I like to term tradition in the original usage of the word in the English language) and Islam as a *modus vivendi*.

There is a tendency by modern Muslims to interpret this as negative and some have even gone as far as to see this as a sort of war of attrition against Islam. While it is true that as Muslims there is much to lament in this turn of events over the past 250 years, I want to be clear that I do not subscribe to this and simply see this as a function of history and time. It does not necessarily have a value judgment in the sense that it could be positive or negative depending on the

impact we are considering. However, what is important and significant is that these changes from the middle of the 19th century until the present day have placed a great deal of stress on the Muslim mind and indeed created a lot of confusion on how to deal with and react to modernity. Most importantly, it has created a huge gap between Muslims and Islam; between our daily practice of our faith and how it is spelled out in our primary sources. One of the goals I have in the Making Sense of Islam platform is to help fill in this gap and connect Muslims to Islam as both a religion and a civilization.

