

# Quest For Islam

## Excerpts

“It is quite common for learned scholars and laymen alike to raise the question 'What is Islam?' and answer it with a sense of assurance and certainty, as if their answer is the only conceivable one. Such persons hardly suspect that this simplicity is superficial. The reason is that “*Islam*” is neither a logico-mathematical or a scientific concept that can be unambiguously defined, nor a physical object like a chair or table, or a biological organism like, a horse or a cow whose properties can be catalogued or described without any room for controversy. The question 'What is Islam?' is very close to the questions 'What is justice?' and 'What is beauty?' and answers to these questions can never be simple, since the nature of justice or beauty is not out there for our perceptual or intuitive inspection, but is chosen by us out of several competing meanings of the words 'beauty' and 'justice'. The concrete meaning of such abstract words is assimilated by the individual from his milieu, just as he assimilates the language, gestures, or morals of the group. But the individual remains unaware of the fact that his conception of beauty or justice or, for that matter, of Islam is only one particular model among other actual or possible models.”

*“The metaphysical or existential response is rooted in man's yearning to decipher the total meaning or significance of the universe as a whole, and to relate himself to it accordingly. Man yearns to grasp the depth-significance of the universe as a complex state of affairs, whose empirical structure is disclosed by science. Biology, for example, tells us about the nature of life and death, but not how to relate oneself, or what attitude to adopt towards life and death. Man could respond to the universe at the empirical, ethical, or other levels without its existential interpretation. But this would amount to ad hoc responses to ad hoc environmental stimuli, and man would not be able to give any inner justification for his different responses. Let us examine this point in some detail.”*

“Religious faith should not be confused with credulity or trust. A person, for example, may come to have 'faith' in any belief in the sense that he may be subjectively certain of its truth, and feel no need for testing his belief. Thus, a mother may have such strong faith in the integrity of her daughter or the intelligence of her son, that she may not be bothered by the adverse opinion of neighbors and teachers about her children. Since however, these beliefs are of a type that can be tested and proved, the refusal to test them cannot be accepted as reasonable. Unshakable faith in beliefs, which could be verified, is not justifiable. But faith in God or life after death is a different matter, since no argument or observation could clinch the issue. It is here that genuine faith touches its proper sphere, and can realize its full possibilities of growth and maturity.”

*“The history of culture shows that all fields of human culture, such as religion, art, philosophy, science, etc., interact and influence each other, so that the total culture of a group is an organic whole. Change in one sphere spills over into-all others. There is regional resistance to begin with. But in the course of time significant changes in any one sphere of human culture penetrate the total cultural gestalt. To give some illustrations, the invention of photography had its repercussions for painting, the scientific formulation of the theory of evolution profoundly altered philosophy and Christian theology, the industrial revolution led to social, moral, and economic revolutions, and the, advent of contraception is gradually influencing the norms of sexual morality. Religion, as a segment of the cultural gestalt, cannot escape transformation in this evolving universe.”*

“It may happen that while the basic worldview of a particular religion appeals to the believer, he is unable to agree with a particular point or norm of the tradition. Should he then reject the religious tradition, which nurtured him and in which his spiritual roots are embedded? It seems, in such a case self-authentication rather than rejection of the tradition is the proper response. This response presupposes religion in its mature form, that is, religion as surrender to an internal authority rather than to an external.”

*“The history of Western Europe after the First World War shows the inadequacy or falsity of the belief in pure scientific morality without any interpretative support or base. The Mono-dimensional fixation upon the peculiar methodology of the natural sciences, or, in other words, viewing scientific explanations as the only model of valid interpretation, generated a new variety of skepticism after the First World War. This variety embraces not merely particular religious beliefs, but all values as such. This total and all-embracing skepticism or nihilism saps the springs of all human endeavors, generating in man a total despair and a sense of futility or absurdity of life. The logical terminus of this attitude is the quest of death, which is judged as the only means of release from the tyranny of being aware of absurdity, but helpless to overcome it. In some cases this basic despair seeks to disguise itself in a total hedonism. The quest of pleasure and the quest of destruction are desperate attempts to overcome the growing and creeping crisis of the spirit through killing or numbing the body. The phenomena of drug addiction, alcoholism, 'sexualism', and even such apparently disconnected 'isms' such as extreme nationalism, religionism, scientism, 'artism', etc., are symptoms of an inner spiritual imbalance or 'ontological deficiency'. They all betray an inauthentic human existence clinging to either escape mechanisms or fragmented loyalties instead of loyalty to an integrated value system. This inauthentic existence turns man into an insecure and anxious being. This breeds suspicion, aggression, intolerance, etc. and also an inner resistance to the promptings of man's creative conscience. This condition may aptly be termed as a hardening of man's spiritual arteries. Neither the reiteration of traditional creeds nor their intellectual defense cures this malady. Only a dispassionate self-confrontation and more refined methods of philosophical analysis can liberate Western man from his unfortunate nihilism.*

*The Eastern man, whether Muslim or Hindu, has not yet fallen a victim to this nihilism. He is, however, inwardly uneasy and in need of firm support. Outwardly he may be serene and self-assured, but various field tensions do inwardly disturb him in proportion to his awareness of the contemporary conceptual framework. He is not fully aware of the need of field integration, but inner conceptual fermentation is unmistakably present.*

*The Muslim having a traditional or conservative approach to Islam would not concede this point. He would assert that the different sciences, both natural and social, do not have any bearing upon or relevance to the proper- understanding of Islam. This contention is true in the sense that the detailed theories and hypotheses of science are not relevant to the truth or falsity of fundamental religious beliefs and moral values, which remain unaffected and untouched by the modifications in our scientific theories or advances in factual knowledge. But the scientific perspective or worldview comprising such basic concepts as universal causation, uniformity of nature, evolution, relativity, etc., do profoundly affect our concrete understanding of such essentially religious concepts as creation, revelation, miracles, etc. It is true that religious faith is essentially a matter of an existential commitment rather than of a logical or scientific proof; it is also true that the scientific worldview cannot be established through deductive or inductive reasoning alone, but also needs an extra-rational ontological commitment. Nevertheless, the concrete interpretation of every worldview is inevitably molded by the thought system of the person. Since all social and natural sciences are nothing but critically organized thought systems, they are directly relevant to such concrete interpretations. To the extent that an individual refuses to enter into a dialogue with science, he is like a person who refuses to observe or perform a certain experiment, lest this may go against his established beliefs or attitudes.”*