

The Foundations of the Religion

Introduction

If I am ever asked about what makes Islam different from any other religion, I will always answer that Islam is the religion of the sound mind; there is no contradiction between the Islamic faith and sound reasoning. This means that the core religious beliefs and methodology of knowing the religious judgment on human actions can be defended by reason alone, without referring to scriptures. It also means that there is nothing in the teachings in the religion that contradicts sound reasoning, although not everything in the religion can be known by reason alone (such as knowing how and when to pray).

In other words, Islam is not founded on mysticism, or on the “take it or leave it, this is faith, not logic” approach one finds in other religions. There is no separation of logic and faith in Islam.

When the scholars of Islam spoke of the knowledge of foundations ('uṣūl in Arabic,) they meant either the foundations of the religion (the Islamic belief) or the foundations of fiqh (rules of the religion), sometimes both. The foundations of the religion are the Islamic beliefs. The foundations differ from the branches (furuu^ʿ), which are the detailed questions pertaining to the religion’s judgment on the actions of humans (i.e. fiqh).

Sound reason, the foundations of the religion, the foundations of fiqh and the branches of fiqh are connected as follows: First, it is by sound reason we know that God exists, is one, without a partner or an equal, and is attributed only with attributes of perfection. Second, it is by sound reason that a prophetic miracle becomes known as an irrefutable proof of prophethood. Third, it is by sound reason we can establish that Prophet Muhammad had miracles and other prophetic attributes. For these three reasons, the scholars all agreed that nothing in the scriptures is interpreted in a way that contradicts sound reasoning or sensory reality (such as square is different from round, 2 is different from 3); if this was not so, then it would be a denial of the faith itself. After all, if one denied certain knowledge of such facts, then one is denying certain knowledge of the Creator's existence, prophethood and historical events.

Fourth, it is by sound reason we can establish how to extract the judgments of the branches of fiqh from textual evidence; a scientific methodology for knowing these branches (i.e. what the judgment is on a particular human action). After all, it is by reason we can determine what a strong proof is and what is not.

This article is dedicated to explaining these four points, but before that we need to explain the concept of sound reasoning.

Sound reasoning: the ability to know right from wrong, or to know what must be, can be and cannot be

No religious community is anywhere near as meticulous and fair minded as the Muslims with regards to the evidences of the correctness of their beliefs and practices. Muslims recognize different levels of probability regarding the validity of their texts, and other types of evidence. These can be viewed as:

1. Must be true

2. Most likely true
3. Likely true
4. Maybe true
5. Improbable
6. Impossible

This ranking is actually fundamental to any science, because these are the natural categories in which the sound mind views things. In the same manner, the acceptance of these categories is fundamental in Islamic scholarship, because denying the first and sixth leads to denying the human ability to achieve certainty at all, and thereby the ability to believe.

The opposite of sound reasoning is sophistry, or extreme relativism, where a person claims to doubt everything, even sometimes his or her own existence. Since they thereby doubt the existence of proofs, arguing with them is a useless activity. Instead, they are handled by putting them in a situation where they are forced to admit the certain existence of sensory reality. An example of how this can be done, is saying to them, “I will not discuss anything with you until you admit that you are certain that we are speaking to one another.” A slightly harsher way is to throw some cold water in their face, and when they complain say, “you mean the water you are not certain exists thrown in the face you are not certain exists by a person you are not certain exists?”

How to categorize a claim as either certain or possible

Explaining what constitutes certainty is of fundamental importance, because this is the means by which belief and reason come together; a unique attribute of Islam. The fundamental beliefs of Muslims are all coupled with certainty in terms of their evidences, and from those the remaining beliefs and practices flow.

Certainty is of two kinds: knowing by plain reason that a claim must be true or that it is impossible. All other claims are considered possible, unless there is material evidence of otherwise. Here is an explanation of what is meant by “must be”, “impossible” and “possible”:

Must be: These are claims that sound reasoning cannot deny because their opposites are absurd. For example $1+1=2$ must be true, because claiming otherwise would be absurd (in the case of natural numbers). It does not apply to scientific theories such as $e=mc^2$, because it is conceivable that they could be proven wrong.

Impossible: These are claims that sound reasoning concludes to be absurd, such as the claim that $1+1=3$, or that a part of a whole can be larger than the whole, or that there is a square circle. Another example of something impossible would be for a camel to enter through a needles eye, without a change in the size or shape of either party.

Impossible claims refer to things that cannot ever be; they are mere verbal absurdities without a sound meaning. They are usually contradictions of terms (such as the idea of a perfectly round square) or meaning (such as the idea of $1+1=3$ using natural numbers). Impossible things do not include claims that are naturally impossible, such as pigs flying or rivers flowing up a mountain. These are things that are known to be impossible only by knowing how the world works, and cannot be said to be impossible by reasoning alone.

Possible: possible means possible according to reason alone. It does not mean possible according to the normal course of events. This category includes all normal events, but also things that are naturally impossible, such as the examples of rivers flowing up mountains or pigs flying mentioned earlier. If something happens that is naturally impossible then this is an extraordinary event, such as feeding hundreds of people with one piece of bread, curing a leper by touching him, wakening the dead, walking on water, etc. I.e. events that are naturally impossible are possible, but completely extraordinary. This shows the highly open minded attitude learned Muslims have towards claims regarding worldly events, i.e. towards science.

Accepting these categories for sound reasoning is absolutely fundamental. Denying them implies denying the religion as a whole, because it means denying the possibility of knowing with certainty that Allah exists, that the Quran is an un-perverted book and a miracle, and that Prophet Muhammad was Allah's prophet and messenger. To claim that one only achieves knowledge through the revealed text is absurd, and a form of sophistry, because one must first establish that the text itself is reliable, and this can only be done through sound reasoning.

These categories are firmly established by the Quran, where the rhetorical question 'afalaa taqiluun meaning, "Don't You realize the truth?" or the like, is repeated throughout. This question is an appeal to be sound minded.

Proving with certainty that God exists using common sense

Islam orders Muslims to believe in the fundamental creed of Islam without a fragment of doubt. At the same time, Allah (God, the Creator of this world) has stated in the Quran that He does not order someone to do something he is unable to do. Allah also named Himself Aṭh-Ṭhaahir, which means, "The One Who's Existence is Obvious by Proofs." It is clear then, that these fundamental beliefs can all be proven correct with certainty.

The basic Islamic belief belongs to the must be category of claims. This belief is that there is only one Creator and that he has no partner, part or equal in His attributes. A simple way to show this to be true is to first establish that this world needs a Creator to exist.

It is clear that this world is an incredibly organized place. Take for example the human cell and how it develops and is coordinated with the rest of the body, or the incredible precision of the solar system and the earth's atmosphere. Sound reasoning tells us that these are not random events, and if they are not random, then they are organized, and organization requires someone's specification and power to give specifications and realize them without exception.

To illustrate why this is true, let us say for example that you had left a room extremely messy, with clothes thrown on the floor, furniture upside down, and so on. Later you came back to the room and found it tidy and neat. Would you accept that this neatness came about without someone or something having done the work of tidying?

We conclude then that this world must have a Creator that is attributed with will and power. Don't you see that if you leave a few trees standing by the riverside they will never become a raft if left alone? Or, that a ship will never sail straight to its destination in a hurricane without something steering it? If this is true for these simple events, then it is obviously true that someone controls the events of this universe, and that He is attributed with will, knowledge and power.

Proving with certainty that God is clear of imperfection, such as having a partner, using common sense.

The above argument is used by anyone that believes in the existence of a Creator, such as Christians and Jews. However, accepting this proof leads to other necessary conclusions as follows:

1. The one that has the power to create this incredible cosmos cannot be attributed with any weaknesses. This is clear, because the world we see around us shows us that His power, knowledge and will are absolutely unlimited. After all, He created all this from non-existence. I.e. the claim that He sleeps or gets sleepy is impossible. Such a claim is simply a failure to conceive existence beyond material existence, and drawing analogies between the Creator and the created. It is also a failure to realize the amazing detail and complexity of creation, which brings one to the natural conclusion that its Creator cannot be subject to any limits. This is what Muslims mean when they say “subhāan-Allah”, i.e. Allah is clear of non-befitting attributes, i.e. flaws or weaknesses.
2. It must be true that the Creator does not have a partner. This is because having a partner indicates need; the need for help, the need to overpower or the need to make concessions. Having a need is a weakness, and the Creator must be free from that. I.e. it is impossible for Him to have a partner.
3. Since we said that this world must have a Creator (because it requires specification) then it must be true that the Creator does not have attributes that require specification, such as composition of parts, physical dimension or location, limits, boundaries, beginnings or ends, weaknesses, movement, gender, etc. In other words, He must be clear of temporal, physical or spatial attributes; attributes which the question “how?” apply to. This is because being in need of specification is a tremendous weakness in need of a Creator.
4. Only the Creator deserves to be worshiped. This is clear because He does not have a partner or a part, as established above, so everything else that exists must be merely a creation and completely submitted to the power of the Creator.

Anyone that is fair minded will admit this. However, because of the atheist and agnostic propaganda people are exposed to, it is appropriate to present a more detailed proof as follows.

A mathematical proof that Allah exists and does not resemble His creation, supported by the reasoning of Prophet Ibrahim

Islam is greater than those religions that are taken on faith alone; as the scholars have shown in their answers to pagans and atheists throughout history. The proof of God's existence is of a mathematical kind, however, rather than experimental. One such proof is:

Premise a - We exist here today.

Premise b - Before we existed there were a series of events, one after another, leading up to our existence today. (The passing of such series of events is what we call time, and measure in minutes, days, weeks and years.)

If one accepts these two premises, then one must also accept that this series of events must have a beginning. This must be, because if someone claims that an eternal amount of events had to be concluded before his existence, then he is saying that eternity came to an end, which is a contradiction in terms. It is like someone saying "this car will only get to its destination after its wheels have spun infinitely many times." Would the car ever get to its destination if this was the condition for its arrival?

Another way to illustrate this contradiction is that those who claim that the world has no beginning are in fact saying that it is a prerequisite for tomorrow to arrive that an infinite number of events first take place. This is impossible, because infinity cannot end.

In addition, since this series of events *must* have a beginning, i.e. it must be true that it has a beginning, then we must also conclude that before this beginning there were no series of events (i.e. anything with a beginning). If someone claimed otherwise, then they would end up with the same contradiction (saying that infinity came to an end). Moreover there must be a Creator that gave the series of events existence - since it was nonexistent before. It is now clear why Muslims say that Allah must exist (Waajib al-Wujud).

Moreover, since it is impossible for there to be any events before the existence of this series (otherwise one would end up with the same contradiction in terms), then it must be that the Creator is not attributed with events, i.e. with any attribute or action that has a beginning.

Finally, since all created attributes have a beginning, then it must be true that the Creator does not resemble His creation.

The last point above can also be known by saying that since God's existence must be, then it cannot also be merely possible (since "must be" and "possible" are incompatible meanings – something cannot be both a must and a possibility at the same time). Therefore, He must be clear of any attribute that belongs to the possible category of things. For example, weakness, limits, boundaries and needs are attributes that may or may not have existence; their existence depends on them being created; their existence is a possibility, not a must. They need a Creator to specify their limits. We know that we need a Creator, because we know that our own attributes need specification. We know they need specification because they have limits, and limits must be specified. For example, if you pointed at a table in a room and said, "Who made it in that shape?" and someone answered, "No one, it is just there like that eternally!" would you accept this? Of course not, because we know anything limited needs someone to specify it.

This is what Ibrahim (peace be upon him) meant when he said about the star in the sky "I don't like those who go away." (Suurah 6, 76-78) Going away is an event and an obvious sign that the star is a creation; it needs someone to specify its time, and it makes blatantly obvious its possibility of non-existence. He also said about the sun, "this is bigger!" He was pointing out to his people that what is attributed with a limit (size needs a limit) is an event (something that has a beginning), because it needs someone to specify its size, like anything else with a size.

Therefore, Allah is not attributed with limits, since He is not created. We know from the above, by mathematical precision and necessity, that Allah exists and does not resemble His creation. This is the Muslim creed, and what all prophets taught.

Now that we have shown with certainty that the Creator exists, is one without a partner, and that He is clear of created attributes, we will move on to the next fundamental part of the creed. Namely that Muhammad is God's Prophet and Messenger.

Proving with certainty that Muhammad is God's Prophet and Messenger

First, when we say that Muhammad is God's Prophet and Messenger, we mean that he received a revelation from God ordering him to teach the true belief (Islam), and to bring changes in the rules and laws of previous messengers. Muslims believe that Jesus, Moses, John, Abraham and the other prophets were prophets of Islam. Their belief was the same, but the laws and rules they brought were sometimes different. This is because the needs of human kind have differed through the ages.

Second, nobody denies the historical existence of Prophet Muhammad, so there is no need to discuss this.

Third, as for the proof of his prophethood, this is done, like with all other prophets, by claiming prophethood while showing a miracle. By "miracle" Muslims mean an extraordinary event that nobody opposing the claim can imitate.

If a person shows a clear miracle while claiming prophethood, and at the same time this person is known to never lie and to be of exceptional moral character and beauty, then the sound minded conclude that this person has God's support in his claim. In other words, he must be a prophet.

Before becoming a Prophet, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was known among his people as being sincere and trustworthy from the day he was born, as was admitted even by his adversaries. He was greatly loved for this. Never telling a lie is an essential characteristic of any prophet, before and after prophethood. That is why the king of Ethiopia at the time believed Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. He heard from the Arabs that he was known never to have lied, and this king knew that if such a man claimed prophethood, then he could only be a prophet.

As for his miracles, they are many, but the most obvious is the Qur'aan itself. The Qur'aan has been preserved to the last letter, without any perversions or alterations for some 1400 years. This in itself is a miracle, because no other book has been preserved in this way in human history, as Prophet Muhammad ﷺ affirmed it would. Allāh said in the Qur'aan (Al-Ĥijr, 9)

"إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ"

Meaning: "Allāh has revealed this remembrance that is the Qur'aan, and He protects it."

This is a miracle then, because this confirmation of preservation associated with the Prophet ﷺ, stated in the Qur'aan, matches this already extraordinary preservation of 1400 years.

Added to this preservation is the fact that the Qur'aan challenges anybody who opposes Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ claim to prophethood, to compose a Suurah like any of its 114 Suurahs. Allāh said (Al-Baqarah, 23):

"وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِثْلِهِ"

Meaning: "If you are in doubt about what Allaah has revealed to the Prophet ﷺ, then bring a Suurah like any of its Suurahs in eloquence, if you can, but you will not be able."

This challenge came despite the fact that the shortest Suurah in the Qur'aan can be written on a single line on a piece of paper (Al-Kawthar, 1-3):

"إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكَوْثَرَ ﴿١﴾ فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَأَنْحَرِ ﴿٢﴾ إِنَّ شَانِئَكَ هُوَ الْأَبْتَرُ ﴿٣﴾"

Yet, nobody succeeded in meeting this challenge among the Arabs, despite the Arabs pride in eloquence at the time, and the widespread occurrence of poetry competitions between tribes and individuals. In fact, nobody during these 1400 years has met this challenge. Moreover, if the challenge had been met during his time, then Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ would have lost his support. Add to that the fact that Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ was unlettered and never took part in composing any poetry.

In addition, the Qur'aan contains many statements about things the Prophet ﷺ could not have known through ordinary means, such as the description of what would happen to the breathing of a person if lifted up into the atmosphere (Al-An'aam, 125):

"فَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَهْدِيَهُ يَشْرَحْ صَدْرَهُ لِلْإِسْلَامِ وَمَنْ يُرِدْ أَنْ يُضِلَّهُ يَجْعَلْ صَدْرَهُ ضَيِّقًا حَرَجًا كَأَنَّمَا يَصْعَدُ فِي السَّمَاءِ"

Meaning: "Whoever Allah has willed to guide, He will open his heart to accept Islam, and whoever He has willed misguidance for, He will make his chest tight and narrow, as if he is ascending up in the sky."

Another example was that once when the Prophet ﷺ and his army were stuck in the desert without water, he filled empty jars with water by putting his hands in them. The water was eventually enough for an army of 1500 people to drink and wash.

Remember that these events happened in broad daylight in front of masses of people, and that these things were related to the next generation without interruption until this day. These are not stories found in books with unknown authors, or tales of single individuals in the darkness of history. Rather, when the Prophet ﷺ performed his last pilgrimage he had more than 100,000 people with him and was the established ruler of the Arabian Peninsula. He was there when the Islamic civilization was founded and it has only grown since.

Now that we have established the creed of Islam as correct with certainty, what about the various rules and stories in the Islamic religion?

The Rational Approach to Islamic Texts

Since we have already established that Muhammad was a Prophet and Messenger of Allāh ﷺ, then all we have to do regarding the other teachings of Islam is to show that something was actually taught by the Prophet ﷺ. These teachings are of 4 main sources:

1. The Quran.
2. Collections of statements about what the Prophet ﷺ said, did or did not do in different circumstances. This is called ḥadiith.
3. Collections of the sayings of scholars to establish what they all agreed upon.
4. Analogy in the absence of clear proofs from the 3 above sources. This is in rules and laws of the religion only.

I will only discuss the first two sources, since the third and fourth are beyond the scope of this article.

Before discussing the two sources it should be known that both Quran and ḥadiith is related from person to person in chains of narrators that extend from the Prophet ﷺ to those who relate them today. For example, if you go to a properly qualified scholar today, he can tell you what his chains of narrators are for the Quran or ḥadiiths all the way to the Prophet ﷺ. He would say I was taught this by so and so, who was taught by so and so, etc. These chains are called chains of narrators.

As for the Quran, it has already been established that the Quran has been completely preserved. Masses of people memorized Quran around the Prophet. These masses taught other masses and so on until today, and there is still only one Quran; whether you test someone who has memorized in Mecca or someone who lives in China or Argentina. It is naturally impossible that any of these masses in the various generations could have gotten together to agree to fabricate, insert or remove something. That is why a plain statement in the Quran is a plain proof.

As for ḥadiiths, these are ranked according to the probability of correctness, as I indicated at the beginning of this article. The highest-ranking ḥadiiths are the ones that have been related in the same manner as the Quran. Such ḥadiiths are automatically established as correct, without looking at who related them, because it would normally be impossible for them to be lies. These ḥadiiths would be comparable to the news we have received that there was a war in Iraq. There is no sound reason to doubt this because it has been related by so many different sources in a way that does not allow for a conspiracy to lie, or a mistake. This is unlike, for example, moon travel. This incident is entirely based on what NASA says as an organization, and there were military and political motives to lie, so a conspiracy is a real possibility. According to the Islamic manner of relating ḥadiith, the story of traveling to the moon is no more than possibly true. This is to illustrate how strict the science of ḥadiith is.

The next level for ḥadiiths is for those that were not related in the manner above. Rather, they were related by one or more individuals, who then related it on to others. These ḥadiiths may be related from masses to masses today, but at some stage they were not. These ḥadiiths can range from highly likely true to certainly untrue. Several factors are taken into consideration when ranking these, including:

1. What was said about the people in the chain of narrators? The existence of people accused of lying would weaken the chain tremendously, as would the existence of people with inaccurate memories, or a person with a known bias in a particular issue (if the ḥadiith is on that issue), or people who are not well known. Disqualified or weak narrators are also identified by analyzing what was related from a particular person, by comparing that to what else he related, or what others related in similar matters.
2. What was the level of understanding of the different narrators with regard to the religion in general and scholarship?
3. Is there evidence of interruption in the chain of narrators? I.e. Are there narrators missing or indications that two of them never met, or were unlikely to have met?
4. Are there weaknesses in the text of the ḥadiith? For example, does it narrow down the absolute meaning of a statement in the Quran or a ḥadiith that was related like the Quran? Is it in disagreement with well-known and established rules of the religion? How does the text agree with ḥadiiths related for the same or similar events? It is in answering these questions the truly great scholars, such as Abu Ḥaniifah and Al-Shaafi'iy, are separated from the crowd. It is also dealing with these issues that is the main concern of the foundations of fiqh and that caused the scholars to disagree, namely the topic of conflicting evidences.
5. Is there a claim in the text that belongs to the impossible category of claims (i.e. it is absurd)? If so, the ḥadiith is either interpreted as a figure of speech or rejected. This is because a ḥadiith that has an authentic and strong chain of narrators (but was not related in the manner of the Quran) only establishes a high likelihood of it being true, and a proof that shows high likelihood is much weaker than a proof that shows certainty (i.e. that something belongs to the must be or impossible category of claims).

All of the above factors are taken into consideration to rank a particular ḥadiith, and the work of ranking them is a highly scientific task. When establishing what the meaning of a ḥadiith is, one takes into consideration all the considerations of ranking. Moreover, they must be interpreted according to the most obvious meaning in Arabic unless there are other ḥadiiths or statements in the Quran that indicate otherwise. In other words, before claiming that a statement is figurative one must have a solid proof for why this is so. This is done by showing that the literal meaning is absurd or inconsistent with other related texts from the Quran or ḥadiith. This must be so, otherwise anybody could make any interpretation they desire and there would be no meaning in having a Prophet ﷺ sent.

In the end, and putting it simply, what is considered to be obligatory for Muslims to believe, are the things that are established with certainty. Moreover, if it is concluded that the Prophet ﷺ most likely prescribed something, then one must follow this, because it is improbable that he did not, and God ordered us to follow him. To illustrate, if a person that you trust at work came to you and said that the boss wants you to do so and so, do you ignore it, or do you naturally accept the task? Would it be reasonable to reject the command on the basis that it is not impossible for this to be wrong? Of course not. These rhetorical questions illustrate that accepting ḥadiiths with strong chains of narrators and a meaning that is free of inconsistencies (in view of the text of the Quran or other ḥadiiths, or established rules of scholarship) is only

reasonable and rejecting it would be unreasonable, and there is no doubt that it is better to be reasonable than unreasonable.

Figures of speech identified by sound reasoning in the Quran and Ĥadiith

To finalize this article, one particular issue needs to be discussed in more detail; when to identify literal meanings as absurd, and therefore interpreting them as figures of speech.

Identifying literal meanings that are absurd is of particular importance in matters of belief, so it deserves a more detailed discussion. It should first be pointed out that rejecting absurd meanings and understanding expressions as figures of speech is something natural that we all do constantly. To illustrate: A few years ago the telephone company AT&T had an advertising slogan saying, “reach out and touch someone.” What they meant here was not a physical touch, but simply pleasing another person by calling them. To interpret this slogan literally would be absurd and laughable. We know this through our knowledge of what a telephone is and what it is not.

In this same manner, among others, figurative speech is identified in the Quran and Ĥadiith; a learned Muslim knows what attributes are impossible for the Creator or a prophet to have. He knows thereby that expressions in the Quran whose literal meaning implies attributes that are physical, or have a beginning, or an end, or change, must not be taken literally. He knows that interpreting them literally would be absurd and an insult to the Creator, just like the sane person who heard the AT&T slogan knew its literal meaning to be absurd.
