

## **What Is Religion?**

### **Is It Just a Set of Rules?**

### **Who Does It Speak to?**

#### **What Is Religion? Is There an Accurate and Universal Definition of Religion?**

Nowadays, religion is extensively criticized, and many doubts and questions about it are being raised all over the world in scientific centers, universities, and even theological seminaries. They ask questions like, what is religion, and what role does it play in human life? Why must one be religious, and does a human being become limited by accepting religion and its dos and don'ts?

There is much debate on the definition of religion and its functions, and thinkers around the world have given different answers to the question, 'What is religion?' Some emphasize the belief aspect of religion, claiming that religion means belief in the sacred and the acceptance of a series of sacred matters that must not be doubted or questioned. In response to the question 'What is religion?' some have defined religion from a psychological perspective. For example, Sigmund Freud<sup>1</sup> had a completely negative approach towards religion and tried hard to disregard its authenticity. He describes religion as a combination of emotions and instincts. He believes that the root of all human instincts is sexual desire. In a way, if this desire did not exist, humans would have no other instinct.

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<sup>1</sup>. An Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis

Sociologists also respond to the frequently asked question, 'What is religion?' They maintain that religion is a social phenomenon that evolved from the worship of stones, plants, animals, and other elements in the world to idolatry and finally to Godliness. They do not consider the relationship between religion and humans to be innate. According to Émile Durkheim,<sup>2</sup> religion is a manifestation of the power of society. He believed that society creates religion, and that society is God.

As mentioned, each Western thinker viewed religion from a distinctive perspective. In this article, we will discuss the meaning and truth of religion from the perspective of Islamic philosophy. We will see that the main audience of religion is our human or supra-rational faculty. As a result, if we have a correct understanding of our human dimension, we will realize the meaning and necessity of religion. Furthermore, if we feel constrained and restricted in respect to the rules and commandments of religion, it is because we have defined ourselves based on our lower dimensions of existence, which include the inanimate, vegetative, animal, and intellective ones. If we know that the main dimension of our existence is our supra-rational aspect, then none of the commandments of religion, such as *hijab*,<sup>3</sup> prayer, fasting, *khums*,<sup>4</sup> or other rules will be difficult for us; but rather, they will become enjoyable.

As human beings, we have both a material nature and a spiritual dimension known as *fitrah* or pure innate nature. Our material nature, often known as the natural, earthly, or non-human aspect, refers to our inanimate, vegetative, and animal

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<sup>2</sup>. A French sociologist

<sup>3</sup>. It refers to variety of head coverings conventionally worn by many Muslim women as an expression of faith.

<sup>4</sup>. The financial obligation that requires Muslims to pay a fifth of their savings from the income of the year that has just ended

faculties. We all share the material nature with other beings. For example, animals also have animal, vegetative, and inanimate dimensions.

*Fitrah* or the human dimension of our being distinguishes us from animals and gives us superiority. Our unique bliss also depends on our *fitrah*; in other words, we find meaning through *fitrah*. However, there is always a conflict between *fitrah* and the material nature within us, and the outcome of this conflict ultimately defines who we are.

## **H2 What Is the Truth and Mission of Religion?**

To answer the question 'What is religion?' according to Islamic philosophy, we can say the story of religion is that of the infinite human being who has been separated from his origin. Religion is a program designed to bring us closer to our true essence and the true Beloved of the human dimension of our being. Our growth is to let God's love dominate our material nature. If we cultivate this love in ourselves, the rulings of religion will be a source of honor for us rather than obligation, and we will use them for our growth. Nevertheless, those who lack this love keep objecting to religious commandments, as they see those rulings burdensome and against their comfort.

The primary mission of religion is to protect and cultivate our true self. If religion is seen as a method and ritual leading us to truth, it will also provide the best and most appropriate solutions for our intellectual, animal, vegetative, and inanimate dimensions. It is only then that all the dimensions of our existence will be cultivated, and we will not sacrifice any dimension while tending to other parts. As a result, any mystical method that separates us from the material nature and the

world, such as preventing us from marrying and taking advantage of natural blessings, is not the religion of truth. This is because while the greatest function of religion of truth is to respond to the supra-rational and eternal needs of humans and to educate them on this path, it also recognizes the needs of other existential faculties.

If the human being truly finds the answer to the question 'What is religion?' and believes in its truth, he will make fewer mistakes in his decisions, relationships, behaviors, and thoughts. However, if he does not understand this principle well, he will set goals and plans that are incompatible with the purpose of human creation. Such goals, even if they appear to be pure and sacred, prohibit him from achieving his ultimate goal. The key factor in our decisions, relationships, behaviors, and mindset is whether they align with the purpose of creation and help us fulfill it or not.

## **H2 How Are the Human Being and Religion Related?**

What is the human relationship with religion? This is one of the challenging questions we intend to answer from the perspective of Islamic philosophy. This perspective defines us as humans and considers the truth of our existence in connecting with Infinite Perfection, and it is the only answer capable of giving us inner peace and happiness. There is an existential and innate relationship between the human being and the religion of truth. This relationship is such that our existence as human beings is designed and built based on the religion of truth. In other words, humans are created based on religion, rather than religion being tailored for humans and their inherent qualities. As a result, there is no

incompatibility or inconsistency between humans and the religion of truth. That is why, many times, people with pure *fitrah* who have not encountered the commandments of religion are innately drawn to the practices and rules of religion.

All the five stages of human existence- sense perception, imagination, estimation, intellect, and the supra-rational faculty- find vitality and tranquility through something. Sense perception connects with sensory forms, imagination with imaginal forms, estimation with estimative forms, and intellect with intellectual forms to find peace. In fact, religion provides nourishment for and is the beloved of the human dimension of our existence. No one ever doubts the need for water, food, marriage, social relationships, a home, and a car. The need for religion is also the innate need of the human dimension of our existence, and denying it shows a lack of self-knowledge. If we do not harmonize with our *fitrah* and practice religion without it, we will not reach a correct understanding of its commandments. This is where our *fitrah* goes out like a candle. Whereas when our *fitrah* is active, we move towards the truth. Then we will find what we have lost, and we will accept the religion of truth with love, and nothing is difficult for us on this path.

## **H2 Who Is Religion Primarily Intended for?**

Religion is not for the natural aspects of our existence. If religion intended to address the animal or material dimension of our existence, then animals would also have their own prophet, religion, and holy book. We are no different from other animals in the animal dimension of our existence, hence we do not need religion in that aspect. Religion limits the animal dimension of our existence, preventing us from living freely and carefree like animals. This feeling shows how we see and

know ourselves. If we find ourselves at odds with religion, feeling no reason to adhere to its rules, or if our faith fails to bring us happiness and peace, it suggests that we may have misinterpreted our human essence. That is to say, only *fitrah* or the human dimension gives meaning to religion and makes it necessary.

We will always experience internal conflict unless we recognize which dimension of our existence religious commandments address. Religion's primary audience is our true self, not our earthly self that is a woman, man, employer, doctor, employee, father, mother, etc. Essentially, if our prayers, fasting, *dhikr*,<sup>5</sup> and *tasbih*<sup>6</sup> are rooted in true humanology, we will never suffer from obsession, nervous tension, insomnia, or the use of sedative pills. Therefore, if you see someone suffering from such problems despite their *dhikr*, supplication, and prayer, you must doubt their knowledge about their true self and about their status in the system of creation because acts of worship guided by true humanology cannot lead to such disorders.

Divine commandments and rulings are not like traffic regulations where, for example, the fine for running a red light is supposed to be fifty dollars this year and one hundred the next year. In fact, worldly laws have been created over time to control human beings and change according to circumstances. But divine commandments and rulings are exactly in accordance with our existential structure and the purpose of our creation. Since the system of our material nature and *fitrah* remain constant, so does God's religion; therefore, religious rulings and commandments apply to all people of all times.

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<sup>5</sup>. A form of Islamic worship in which phrases or prayers are repeatedly recited for remembrance of God

<sup>6</sup>. A form of *dhikr* that involves the glorification of God in Islam by saying "Subhan Allah"

Another question that arises in response to 'What is religion?' is why issues and rulings related to inanimate, vegetative, and animal aspects such as nutrition and growth are mentioned in religious commandments, despite the fact that religion's primary audience is our *fitrah* and human dimension. It also discusses details like the way of bathing and *taharat*,<sup>7</sup> the type and etiquettes of nutrition, how to communicate with others, guidelines for proper trading, travel, political and social issues, insights on establishing a government, and the like. If religion's audience is our human dimension, then why does it limit other aspects of our existence?

In response to this question, it must be said that these limitations allow us to finally establish balance among the different faculties of our soul and make the super-rational dimension of our existence rule over other dimensions. In fact, by limiting the animal dimension, religion helps our spiritual growth and creates balance in us.

It is true that religion is sent for the growth of our human dimension, but this does not mean that our animal dimension should be ignored. Instead, this is a fundamental aspect of religion, to the extent that if ablution and fasting are harmful to your health, you must avoid them. Furthermore, the necessity of exercise for mental and physical health as well as many instructions in the Islamic dietary system all emphasize the importance of the animal dimension in religion. However, the noteworthy point is that we must not focus solely on the flourishing of the animal dimension and neglect the spiritual aspect of our being. In fact, the goal of religion in satisfying the needs of our vegetative and animal dimensions is to ensure they are fully trained and controlled by the human dimension. That is because if our animal and vegetative dimensions are not trained and limited, we

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<sup>7</sup>. Cleanliness and purity

will have no opportunity for the flourishing of our *fitrah*. For example, one who is only concerned with earthly matters like lust, war, conflict, or their type of food will have no opportunity to nurture their spiritual dimension. People like Saddam,<sup>8</sup> Adolf Hitler, Lenin,<sup>9</sup> Stalin,<sup>10</sup> Yazid,<sup>11</sup> and Muawiya<sup>12</sup> only focused on their material aspect, such as wrath and lust, or their vegetative and animal aspects, and never cultivated the human dimension of their being.

## **H2 How Are the Purpose of our Creation and the Rules of Religion Related?**

All divine commandments and rulings are compatible with the structure of our existence and *fitrah*. All *halal*,<sup>13</sup> *haram*,<sup>14</sup> *mustahab*,<sup>15</sup> and *makruh*<sup>16</sup> actions are designed to cultivate our human aspect and help us reach the purpose of our creation. On this path, we must utilize anything or any action that is helpful, and set aside anything or any action that hinders our similarity to God, even if it appears sacred. Every *haram* and *makruh* action is an impediment to becoming like God, allowing sense perception, estimative, Imaginal, and intellective faculties to dominate our human dimension, just like spoiled food that disrupts our physical growth.

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<sup>8</sup>. Saddam Hussein: the president of Iraq (1979–2003)

<sup>9</sup>. Founder of the Russian Communist Party, leader of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and the first head of the Soviet state

<sup>10</sup>. A Soviet politician and revolutionary who led the Soviet Union from 1924 until his death in 1953

<sup>11</sup>. The second caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate, ruling from April 680 until his death in November 683

<sup>12</sup>. The founder and first caliph of the Umayyad Caliphate, ruling from 661 until his death

<sup>13</sup>. What is allowed under Islamic law

<sup>14</sup>. The opposite of *halal*, which means unlawful or prohibited

<sup>15</sup>. An Islamic term referring to an action or thing that is recommended and favored

<sup>16</sup>. Not forbidden by Islamic law but discouraged

From this point of view, every *halal* and *mustahab* action is the means of becoming more like God. For example, during the holy month of Ramadan, we limit our vegetative and animal nutrition by fasting, and this gives us time during the day to strengthen our human dimension by reading the Quran and praying. In other words, fasting brings material nature under the control of *fitrah*. If all our faculties are under the direction of *fitrah*, they will flourish, and the special purpose of creation, which is to achieve unlimited and infinite perfections, will be fulfilled.

Religion sees the animal dimension as a tool to serve one's spiritual self. When we do not know our true self, we define ourselves based on the animal aspect of our existence. This is why, even though we accept religion intellectually, we struggle with its rules and find them difficult to follow. In other words, we experience conflict when we give two different answers to the questions 'What is religion?' and 'Who am I?' Whereas the correct answer is a single statement: **"I am a human being, and religion is my life plan."**

If we find it difficult to obey religious commandments and become angry, it indicates that the animal dimension of our being is active and wants to dominate our *fitrah*. All religious commandments, including prayer, fasting, *khums*, *zakat*,<sup>17</sup> *hajj*,<sup>18</sup> *jihad*,<sup>19</sup> enjoining good and forbidding wrong, *tawalla* and *tabarra*<sup>20</sup> are difficult to follow. Nonetheless, their hardships are related to our animal dimension. None of divine commandments put pressure on our human dimension

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<sup>17</sup>. A charity that Allah obligates Muslims to pay yearly on their surplus money and some forms of property to the poor and needful

<sup>18</sup>. The pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, which every adult Muslim must make at least once in his or her lifetime

<sup>19</sup>. Striving in the way of Allah

<sup>20</sup>. *Tawalla* means to love the friends of Allah, those who desire the truth, righteous people, and the supporters of truth and justice; *tabarra* means to hate evildoers, oppressors, as well as enemies of Allah, His Prophet, and humanity.

or true self because they are perfectly compatible with our *fitrah*. When we give charity or deprive ourselves of food by fasting, we are in fact overcoming our animal dimension and strengthening our human dimension.

## **H2 What Are the Specific Signs of True Religiosity?**

The most important signs of religiosity are happiness and inner peace. Religion cannot bring happiness and peace when people are simply imitating or following religious rituals based on intellectual understanding. This form of religiosity has no effect on human growth, and it is like producing electricity in a factory, but minor issues prevent the electricity from reaching the city; since no light is produced, all efforts go to waste.

We do not get bored of eating different foods throughout our lives, but we get tired of praying because our prayers lack heartfelt sincerity and inner purity, and we are only stuck in going through the motions of prayer outwardly.

In this article, we first answered the question ‘What is religion?’ from the perspective of Western scholars. Then we explained the Islamic philosophical viewpoint on this question. We stated that the primary audience of religion is the supra-rational or human dimension of our being or *fitrah*, not the animal dimension. If we know our true self, we will understand that the religion of truth exists within us. In this case, it will not be difficult for us to follow God's religion because religion is compatible with our *fitrah*, not with our material nature!

What are your thoughts about the question ‘What is religion?’ Is religion a program that teaches us how to achieve bliss and absolute perfection? Or is it merely a series

of dos and don'ts that limit us? We welcome your feedback and questions regarding these topics.