

Beyond Rituals: Understanding Islam Through Its Core Principles and Values

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Introduction

A study by Texas A&M University (2016) found that media portrayals of Muslims as violent or extremist are linked to increased negative emotions and perceptions, particularly among individuals who rely on the media as their main source of information about Islam. These portrayals can significantly shape public understanding, often overshadowing the true essence of Islam. While many people are familiar with Islam as a religion, not many have delved into understanding what it truly is.

Perhaps, what is commonly associated with Islam is the worship of Allah, the wearing of hijab, and the adherence of Muslims to rules and regulations set by Islam. However, in reality, Islam is a faith that is built upon mercy, justice, and many other values and principles that guide moral and ethical living. These values are often overlooked due to widespread narratives that do not fully reflect the richness and diversity of Islamic teachings. This article seeks to go beyond a focus on rituals and regulations to present a more comprehensive understanding of Islam, centered on its core principles and values.

Key Theological Principles of Islam

Before we can understand the values of Islam, it is important to understand the key theological principles of Islam first. This is because these theological principles are the ones that drive Muslims to emulate Islamic values in their daily lives. These principles are observed in the following narration by Abū Hurayrah on the saying of Prophet Muhammad:

One day while the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) was sitting in the company of some people, (The angel) Gabriel came and asked, "What is faith?" Allah's Messenger (PBUH) replied, "Faith is to believe in Allah, His angels, (the) meeting with Him, His Apostles, and to believe in Resurrection." Then he further asked, "What is Islam?" Allah's Messenger (PBUH) replied, "To worship Allah Alone and none else, to offer prayers perfectly to pay the compulsory charity (Zakat) and to observe fasts during the month of Ramadan." Then he further asked, "What is Ihsan (perfection)?" Allah's Messenger (PBUH) replied, "To worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you cannot achieve this state of devotion then you must consider that He is looking at you." (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*: 50)

The aforementioned narration is significantly important as it serves as the premise of understanding the religion of Islam, which includes the six articles of Faith and the five pillars of Islam.

The Six Articles of Faith

The six articles of Faith refer to the foundational beliefs of Islam. To be a Muslim, one must have deep conviction of these articles. The articles are:

1. Belief in the existence and Oneness of Allah.
2. Belief in the existence of His angels.
3. Belief in His Scriptures, which include the Qur'an.
4. Belief in His Messengers and that Muhammad is the last of them.
5. Belief in the Judgement Day.
6. Belief in the *Qaḍā'* and *Qadr* (Divine Decree).

The idea of God or a higher being occupies a central place in religious thought and practice, yet it is not confined to a single religion. In order to make sense of the existence and uncertainty, humans have always expressed a need to believe in a higher power. However, the ways in which God is understood and worshipped can differ greatly in each religion. The term "God" is not universally applicable to all religions. While some religions, particularly the Abrahamic faiths, define the divine as a singular, personal, and transcendent being, others conceptualise ultimate reality as an impersonal force, a state of being, or the inherent nature of the cosmos. Here, we will discuss the God(s) of other religions before presenting the God of Islam to see the difference in understanding of God between Islam and other religions.

Among the world's oldest religions is Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrian sources classically framed a dualistic view of the world, where two forces are in constant conflict: the good creator, Ahura Mazda, and the evil spirit, Angra Mainyu (Kammer, 2022). This idea explains the problem of evil by showing that suffering comes from a different source, not from God himself. Ahura Mazda is seen as the creator and sustainer of the universe, but He does not have the power to completely stop evil (Kammer, 2022). Humans, therefore, are given free will to choose whether to follow good or evil.

On the other hand, Hinduism is a religion which comprises various beliefs, incorporating monism, dualism, and polytheism. Central to their belief is Brahman, the supreme existence of absolute reality (Flood, 1996). Brahman is an unchanging, eternal, and omnipresent spiritual core of the universe that transcends the dualism of existence and non-existence. As the ultimate reality, Brahman is considered as impersonal without any attributes or qualities. Meanwhile, Hindus also have personal Gods. This is evident in their belief in the veneration of the Trimurti which consists of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer (Flood, 1996). These deities embody various cosmic functions and are worshipped in diverse forms across different traditions.

Meanwhile, the defining feature of Christian theology is the doctrine of the Trinity, in which the one God exists eternally as three distinct personas: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each fully divine but united in one essence. The Father is understood as the source and sustainer of all, the Son, Jesus Christ, as the incarnate who reveals God and accomplishes salvation, and the Holy Spirit as the divine presence that sanctifies and empowers believers. Believers are called to relate to the Father through the Son, in the power of the Spirit, emphasising the relational and personal nature of God (Fredericksen & Lindberg, 2025).

While each religion presents a distinctive understanding of the Divine, the Islamic doctrine of *tawhīd* offers a uniquely uncompromising monotheism. Islam's notion of *tawhīd* emphasises Allah's oneness and uniqueness. Allah has no partners, equals, or descendants, and all acts of worship are directed towards only Him. As the Qur'an mentions in *Sūrah al-Ikhlāṣ*:

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ

“Say, O Prophet, “He is Allah—One and Indivisible; Allah—the Sustainer needed by all. He has never had offspring, nor was He born. And there is none comparable to Him.” (The Qur'an, 112:1–4, Quran.com)

This verse emphasises Allah's oneness and transcendence, perfectly encapsulating the Islamic doctrine of *tawhīd*. *Tawhīd* maintains a strict monotheism that avoids conceptual contradictions, offering a clear and unambiguous knowledge of the divine (Abdullah, 2006). The relationship of the believer and the Creator in Islam is one without intermediaries. All creations are interconnected through their relationship to a singular, transcendent yet immanent Creator. Scholars have highlighted that *tawhīd* retains Allah's transcendence, emphasising His ultimate otherness, and His immanence, revealing His closeness and understanding of all aspects of creation. The Qur'an reveals Allah as the ultimate source of guidance, mercy, and justice, whose signs can be seen in both nature and human history (Al-Fārūqī, 1982). *Tawhīd* is both a religious term and a framework for comprehending reality, human purpose, and moral duty. As a result, it distinguishes Islam from other theological traditions while revealing the internal coherence and thoroughness of its concept of God.

Islam's concept of God, as expressed in *tawhīd*, is not only theological but also serves as the basis for practical faith. The foundation of faith is belief in Allah's unity, His ultimate will and His attributes, which guides Muslims to believe in angels, prophets, divine texts, and the Day of Judgement, as well as to understand the unseen and believe in divine decree. At the same time, this understanding informs the pillars of Islam, since worship, prayer, zakat (almsgiving), fasting, and pilgrimage are all manifestations of surrender to Allah's will. The Islamic understanding of God therefore establishes a

connection between belief and practice, illustrating that true faith integrates devotion and ethical action with knowledge of the Divine.

This knowledge of the Divine, however, is not limited to scripture or ritual practice, it also extends to the natural world, through which Allah introduces Himself to His creation. The word *āyāt* (signs) is frequently mentioned in the Qur'an to refer to God's presence shown through both His words and the natural world, highlighting a deep link between the spiritual and physical realms. Verses about the universe's expansion, the changing of day and night, the exact paths of stars and planets, and the water cycle show that the Qur'an encourages reflection and learning about the natural world. Early Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-Haytham understood these signs as signs of God's wisdom and as an invitation to pursue knowledge (Usmani, 2025). An example of these verses are mentioned in *Sūrah asy-Syams*:

وَالشَّمْسُ وَضُحَاهَا وَالْقَمَرُ إِذَا تَلَّهَا وَالنَّهَارِ إِذَا جَلَّلَهَا وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَاهَا وَالسَّمَاءِ وَمَا بَنَاهَا وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَاهَا وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا

By the sun and its brightness, and the moon as it follows it, and the day as it unveils it, and the night as it conceals it! And by heaven and 'the One' Who built it, and the earth and 'the One' Who spread it! And by the soul and 'the One' Who fashioned it.
(The Qur'an, 91:1-7, Quran.com)

Additionally, Muslims believe that God sent prophets throughout history to guide humanity. Like other religions, Islam holds its prophets in high regard, respecting their roles in delivering God's message and shaping the moral and spiritual foundations of human civilisation. Among these honoured figures is Prophet Adam, who is considered the first prophet. In the Qur'an, the name "Adam" was mentioned 25 times (Baeq, 2022, p. 35). This Adam shares similarities with the Adam mentioned in Genesis. Of course, there are differences in the story of Adam in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. However, just like Jews and Christians, Muslims also believe that Adam was the first human created by God (Mikulicová, 2014). This belief is based on the following verses in *Sūrah Al-Baqarah*:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَن يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

"Remember when your Lord said to the angels, "I am going to place a successive human authority on earth." They asked Allah, "Will You place in it someone who will spread corruption there and shed blood while we glorify Your praises and proclaim Your holiness?" Allah responded, "I know what you do not know." He taught Adam the names of all things, then He presented them to the angels and said, "Tell Me the names of these, if what you say is true?" (The Qur'an, 2:30-31, Quran.com)

Muslims also believe that Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet and messenger of God. He was born in Makkah in 570 CE, during a time of widespread idolatry and social injustice. Known for his honesty and good character, he was called the Trustworthy by his people. At the age of 40, he received the first revelation from Allah through the Angel Jibrīl (Gabriel), marking the beginning of his Prophethood and the gradual revelation of the Qur'an.

For 23 years, Prophet Muhammad preached the message of Islam; 13 years in Mecca and 10 years in Medina. Despite facing strong opposition, he called people to worship one God and promoted values like justice, compassion, and equality. He passed away in 632 CE at the age of 63, leaving behind a complete and timeless way of life that continues to guide Muslims today.

The Pillars of Islam

On the other hand, the pillars of Islam are the fundamental practices of the religion. These practices are obligatory to every Muslim. The five pillars of Islam are:

1. **Shahādah (Profession of Faith):** This profession must consist of the testimony that Allah is the One true God and that He is not associated with any partners, and that Muhammad is His messenger.
2. **Ṣalāh (Prayer):** This refers to the five central obligatory prayers that Muslims must perform each day. The Qur'an teaches that prayer has been "enjoined on the believers at fixed times" (Qur'an 4:103), which means that each prayer has its own specific timing. It can be performed alone and in congregation. Prayer is the core tenet a true Muslim should observe and guard in their lives.
3. **Zakat (Almsgiving):** Zakat is an obligatory form of charity. Muslims who meet the financial criteria must give zakat to eight groups of people — the poor, the needy, administrators of zakat, reconciliation of hearts, freeing captives, debtors, those in God's path, and wayfarers.
4. **Ṣawm (Fasting):** Fasting means to abstain from food, drink, sexual intercourse, and other pleasures from dawn until sunset with the intention of worship. Fasting is obligatory in the month of Ramadan. It also shows solidarity and fosters a sense of empathy in Muslims for the needy.
5. **Hajj (Pilgrimage):** Muslims are obligated to travel to Mecca for the pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. It is usually done in the 12th month of the Islamic lunar calendar. However, this obligation is compulsory only on those who have the physical and financial ability to perform the pilgrimage.

How do the Principles Shape Islamic Values?

The key principles above shape Islamic values in several aspects. These aspects include their relationship with God and their relationship with people (*Ḥabl min Allah wa Ḥabl min al-nās*), their sense of purpose, their community unity, and their personal development.

Firstly, relationship with God and relationship with people are important aspects of a Muslim's life. Through the five pillars of Islam, Muslims worship and strengthen their relationship with God. At the same time, these obligatory acts of worship can also show kindness, fairness, and service to others. Both of these dimensions are inseparable in one's daily life.

Secondly, these key principles give Muslims a sense of purpose in life. Muslims believe that the purpose of life is to worship God. As such, they will ensure that they do their best to do what is commanded of them to seek His pleasure. Additionally, Muslims believe that life is a test and a preparation for the Hereafter. Their faith encourages them to strive for excellence, do good deeds, and live responsibly. It was mentioned in the Qur'an that mankind is created to worship God:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ

“And I created not the jinn and mankind except that they should worship Me (Alone).”
(The Qur'an, 51:56, Quran.com)

The Qur'an also mentioned that humans are being tested in this life to find the ones who are the best in his deeds:

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا

“Who has created life and death so that He may try which of you is best in deed.” (The Qur'an, 67:2, Quran.com)

Thirdly, the key principles of Islam promote community unity. For example, collective practices, such as Friday and congregational prayers, strengthen bonds between Muslims. Congregational prayers create a shared experience that goes beyond individual differences. This shared experience helps to overcome social, cultural, and economic barriers and promotes a sense of equality and brotherhood. It brings Muslims together in a collective act of worship. Aside from that, the communal aspect of

congregational prayers creates a sense of belonging to a larger community, reinforcing the idea of a unified Muslim body. The unity of the Muslims is very important as mentioned in the Qur'an:

وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَا تَنَازَعُوا فَتَفْشَلُوا وَتَذْهَبَ رِيحُكُمْ وَأَصْبِرُوا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

“Obey Allah and His Messenger and do not dispute with one another, or you would be discouraged and weakened. Persevere! Surely Allah is with those who persevere.” (The Qur'an, 8:46, Quran.com)

Lastly, the key principles guide Muslims to develop good character, discipline, and resilience through different acts. For instance, praying five times a day requires discipline and resilience, especially since each prayer has a specific timing to adhere to. Zakat and fasting foster good character as they encourage empathy and compassion for those in need.

Although Islam is sometimes misrepresented as promoting violence, its teachings strongly oppose such actions. The Qur'an forbids transgression:

وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ

“Fight in the cause of Allah only against those who wage war against you, but do not exceed the limits. Allah does not like transgressors.” (The Qur'an, 2:190, Quran.com)

Imam al-Ghazali mentioned in his book, *Al-Mustasfā*, that the purpose of a ruling was to safeguard humanity's faith, life, intellect, lineage, and wealth (Sandisi, 2020), showing that preserving peace is a core objective. Prophet Muhammad also prohibited harm to civilians and non-combatants during conflict (*Sunan Abū Dāwūd*: 2614). Furthermore, the common Muslim greeting, “*Assalāmu'alaykum*” (peace be upon you), reflects Islam's emphasis on peace and kindness in daily life (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*: 54). These principles affirm that violence contradicts the core values of Islam.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that Islam is far more than the perceived image often portrayed in the media. The six articles of Faith present the key beliefs in Islam, which are the belief in the existence and oneness of Allah, the existence of His angels, His Scriptures, His Messengers, the Judgement Day, and the *Qaḍā'* and *Qadr* (Divine Decree). This article has further expanded on *tawḥīd* and explained that Islam is a religion of absolute monotheism. Additionally, the six articles of Faith shape Muslims' daily lives by nurturing absolute faith in God and guiding acts of worship, such as the profession of faith, prayer, fasting, zakat, and pilgrimage, which are the five pillars of Islam.

All these key theological principles of Islam instill many good values in Muslims. These values include having a good relationship with God and with other people, having a sense of purpose in life, developing community unity, and developing good character, discipline, and resilience. As a result, Muslims are inspired to be among those who are best in deed by emulating these values in their daily lives.

Ultimately, Islam is a religion built on submission and reliance on God, expressed through compassion, dignity, and ethical living. At its heart, Islam seeks to guide believers towards a life of balance and purpose, where worship, moral courage, and mercy are not only for individual character, but for the collective well-being of society as well. This shows that violence and transgression do not have a place in Islam.

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About The Article

This article was written in collaboration with local asatizah as part of their capstone project from the Postgraduate Certificate in Islam in Contemporary Societies programme (PCICS) in 2025.

About Harmony Centre Singapore

The Harmony Centre was officially opened by Singapore's then Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on 7 October 2006. The Centre is an initiative by The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) to promote better understanding of Muslim life and culture as a response to the post-September 11 era. It addresses queries and misconceptions about Islam and the Singaporean Muslim community.

In partnership with Singapore's Ministry of Education, the Centre has become a learning hub under the national education scheme, welcoming over 76,000 visitors to date. It serves as a meeting point for various faith communities, fostering dialogue and understanding through diverse educational programmes. Notable initiatives include Faith in the Heartlands (F.A.I.T.H), the Building Bridges Series, as well as the Abdul Aleem Siddiqui Memorial Lectures. The Centre also facilitates discussions between youth and faith leaders on religious and contemporary issues, nurturing cross-community friendships and cultivating appreciation for diverse beliefs and practices.

The Centre's efforts are particularly significant in Singapore's multi-religious context, where it plays a crucial role in maintaining social harmony. By providing a platform for open dialogue and education, this approach aligns with Singapore's commitment to religious harmony, making the Harmony Centre a vital institution in the nation's ongoing efforts to maintain social cohesion in an increasingly complex global environment. It has also been consulted globally on its interfaith model and shares its experiences regularly to international visitors. The Centre's philosophy is rooted in the belief that there is a positive role of religion in societies, and that faith can contribute to human flourishing.