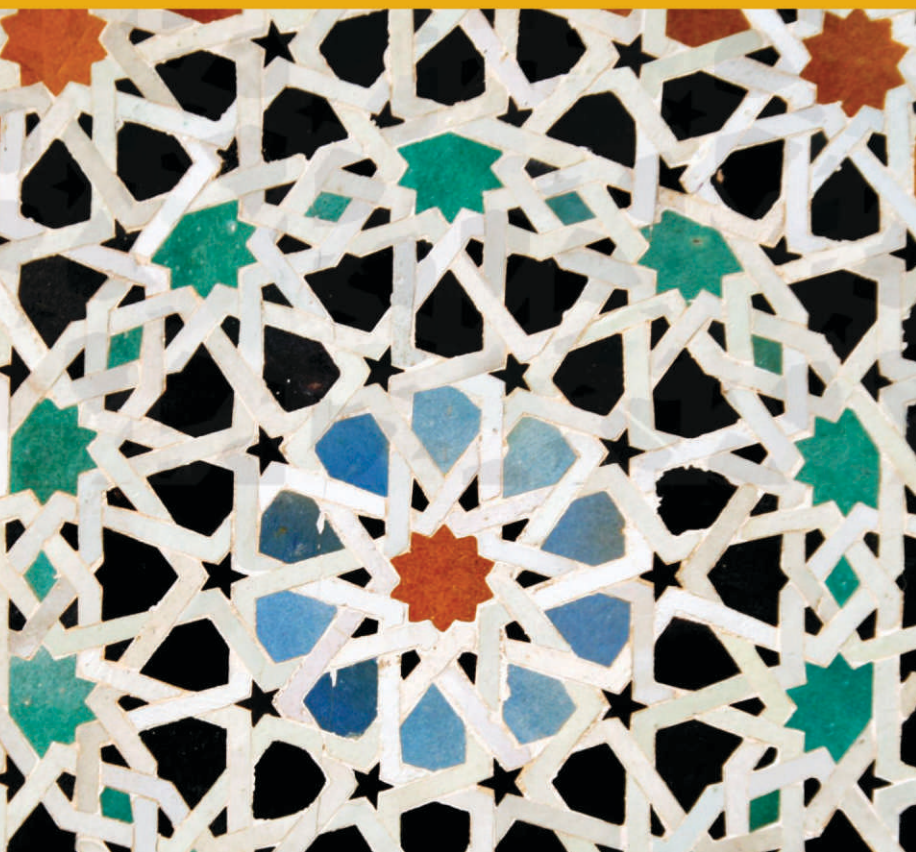


*Discover Islam*

# ISLAMIC ACTIVISM

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*In the name of Allah  
The Merciful, the Compassionate*

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# Islamic Activism

Addressing Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the Quran enjoins: “Therefore, bear up patiently as did the steadfast apostles before you. Bear up with patience and do not seek to hurry on their doom.” (46:35)

That is, showing restraint in adverse situations and refraining from negative reaction form the basic principles of Islamic activism. This means that, in unfavourable situations, no emotional move is made; rather, by avoiding the path of of reaction and retaliation, actions are planned on the basis of realism.

This principle can briefly be called positive activism. That is, without interfering with the prevailing state of affairs, one should try to discover opportunities as they occur and avail of them. To initiate one's actions by challenging the status quo amounts to choosing a negative starting point. On the other hand, maintaining the status quo and availing of all opportunities which present themselves amounts to taking a positive course of action. This method can briefly be called positive status quoism, for which a

complete scheme can be chalked out in the light of the *Seerah* (biography) of the Prophet.

## **1. Positive Status Quoism in Religious Affairs:**

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ received his first prophetic call in 610 A.D. in Makkah. This city was dominated by idolaters, who had placed in the Kabah 360 idols belonging to various Arabian tribes. The Kabah had, therefore, become a religious centre for all these tribes. The presence of these idols in the Kabah was totally against the beliefs of the Prophet, an upholder of monotheism in the true sense of the word. Yet rather than make efforts to upset the status quo in Makkah, he fully engaged himself in his task of spreading the word of God, availing of whatever opportunities were available—despite the presence of the idols.

In those days the Kabah was the gathering point of the inhabitants of Makkah, and meetings were held there almost daily. The Prophet began to make use of these gatherings for the purposes of *da'wah*. On his visit to the Kabah, instead of interfering with the idols, he would go to the people and recite the verses of the Quran to them. This policy of avoiding the idols and availing of *da'wah* opportunities proved to be a wise one: many people, profoundly influenced by the holy Quran, embraced Islam, and this without

there having been any disruption of Makkah's peaceful atmosphere. This gave an added impetus to the Prophet's missionary endeavours.

## **2. Positive Status Quoism in Social Affairs:**

In Makkah, there was a public place known as Dar Al-Nadwah, which served as a political centre. This was dominated by the idolaters. When their opposition to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ intensified, they took a unanimous decision to boycott the Prophet, his family and his followers. When the boycott too failed to inflict any harm on his mission, his opponents issued a death warrant from this same Dar Al-Nadwa.

When the Prophet heard of this, although his situation was now extremely serious, he did not attempt either to revoke the decision of Dar al-Nadwa or to launch a protest campaign supported by his followers. On the contrary, what the Prophet did was quietly leave the city for Madinah, a town 300 miles away from Makkah. Even after reaching Madinah, he did not devote any time to planning counter moves, but gave his full attention to the task of *da'wah*. This was also an example of positive status quoism. In this way, the Prophet, by avoiding direct confrontation with the situation at hand, found another vast field in which to continue his peaceful activities.

### **3. Positive Status Quoism in Political Affairs:**

When the Prophet migrated to Madinah, after thirteen years of his prophethood, the existing society of Madinah was composed of three groups—Muslims, idolaters, and Jews. Accepting that social set-up as it was, the Prophet established a system based on plurality. The status of Madinah under this system was that of a city state, the Prophet being the head of state. Within this framework, other social groups were granted the right to lead their lives as they wished and resolve their issues in accordance with their respective religions and cultures.

This set-up provided another example of status quoism. It was by accepting the prevailing situation there, that the Prophet began his peaceful *da'wah* mission. The result was miraculous. The multicultural society of the first phase was gradually transformed into a unicultural society in the second phase.

### **4. Positive Status Quoism in Matters Relating to Prestige:**

Even after the Prophet's departure from Makkah—his homeland—for Madinah, the Makkans, unflagging in their enmity, decided to launch an armed onslaught against him. Apart from several

minor skirmishes, two major battles, Badr and Uhud, took place. These wars again disturbed the peaceful atmosphere required to carry out *da'wah* activities. Therefore the Prophet negotiated with the Makkans and, accepting all their demands unilaterally, entered into a

10-year no-war pact, known as the Hudaibiyyah treaty. This was yet another example of positive status quoism. By the terms of this treaty, the Prophet accepted the Makkan position exactly in accordance with their demands. By his acceding to their position, the Prophet was able to utilize all the opportunities for *da'wah* work offered by the situation. This resulted in what the Quran called an 'open victory.' (48:24)

## **5. Positive Status Quoism in Post Related Affairs:**

Throughout a significant part of his life, Muhammad ﷺ was a messenger of God as well as the head of state. After his death the question arose as to who should be chosen to fill the latter position. This issue was settled by following the guideline given by the Prophet: "The head of state will be selected from amongst the Quraysh."

Ostensibly, it was an unusual injunction, for, according to the teachings of Islam, all human beings are equal. None enjoys any superiority over

another. As such, this advice to select the leader from amongst the Quraysh was a form of discrimination. But it was realistic rather than discriminatory. This was another example of positive status quoism. In fact, over the centuries, in line with ancient traditions, the Quraysh had acquired the position of leadership in Arabia. A sudden change in this status quo would therefore have created insurmountable problems. That was why the Prophet advised the Muslims to accept the existing political system. As a result of this wise policy, Arab unity remained intact and the furtherance of the Islamic mission continued unhampered, even after the death of the Prophet.

## **6. Positive Status Quoism in State Affairs:**

Even after the demise of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, this practice of positive status quoism continued in the early phase of Islam. One outstanding example is the policy adopted by the religious scholars during the latter half of the Umayyad period and the entire Abbasid era. The political system had been corrupted during this period. Yet almost all the great Muslim scholars of those times (*ulama*, traditionists, jurists) avoided setting themselves on a collision course with those in authority. The religious scholars were thus saved from the backlash of the Muslim rulers; while

those who, opted for the course of confrontation with the rulers were removed from the scene.

This policy of non-interference in the political system left scholars free to produce that great treasure known as the library of Islam. It is a historical fact that almost the entire classical Islamic literature was prepared during this period. The development of the Arabic language, its grammar, its calligraphy, the exegesis of the Quran, the collection and editing of the *hadith*, the formulation of civil and religious laws (*fiqh*), the preparation of the literature of *kalam* (theology), etc.— all were developed during this period.

It is a fact that had the Muslim scholars and ulama of the age risen against a political system which they held to be corrupt, all this precious literature would never have come into existence, and the major part of the *hadith*, which enjoys the status of the second source in Islam, would not have been safely transferred to succeeding generations. The age of the press had not yet dawned, and the sole repositories of all Islam's spiritual riches were the memories of the surviving scholars. Had these scholars engaged themselves in political confrontations with the rulers, all the treasures of Islamic thought and practice would have been buried along with them.

In social matters, positive status quoism is thus an unalterable policy of Islam. It was by opting for this policy that the Prophet and his companions forged the great history of Islam which heralded a new era in all the religious and secular fields of human civilization.

## Unlimited Scope of Patience

When Prophet Muhammad ﷺ began his mission of tawhid (unity of God) in ancient Makkah, there existed as usual a status quo. The Quraysh had assumed the leadership of the town, and according to their beliefs, they had established an idolatrous system. Now the question arose as to how Prophet Muhammad ﷺ should begin his work. It appeared that the status quo under the hegemony of the Quraysh would have to be abolished and only then would the path be cleared for Prophet's mission. At that juncture, certain basic guidance was revealed to the Prophet. God declared in the Quran:

Surely with every hardship there is ease; with every hardship there is surely ease. (94:5-6)

This means that although the status quo in Makkah appeared to be an obstacle, by the very law of nature,

opportunities for the furtherance of his aims, opportunities also existed side by side. Therefore, any attempt to change the status quo was not to be made in the first stage itself. Without disturbing the prevailing situation, such opportunities as were available in other fields were to be utilized to promote the Islamic mission.

The method Islam prescribes for the achievement of our goals, and the model example we find in the life of the Prophet, can be described in brief as a method based on patience. That is, remaining in harmony with the status quo and launching one's struggle in the sphere of the possible. In this respect, it may be called positive status quoism.

### **1. An Obstacle Turned Into a Stepping Stone:**

When Prophet Muhammad ﷺ began his mission in Makkah, hundreds of idols had been placed in the most sacred mosque. The Kabah, which was built as a centre of monotheism, had virtually become a centre of *shirk* (polytheism). At that time the method adopted by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ provides a perfect example of positive status quoism.

What Prophet Muhammad ﷺ did was to refrain completely from interfering with the idols and idol worship. Instead, letting things remain as they

were, the Prophet began to communicate the call of monotheism to the people who used to visit the Kabah daily, it being a central place. The Prophet availed of these large gatherings by going there every day and reading out to them passages from the Quran. In this way Islam began to spread gradually in the country.

## **2. Avoidance of Protest Gradually Changes the Status Quo:**

The Prophet lived in Makkah for thirteen years after he received his prophethood. During this period, a group of people embraced Islam, but the majority continued to be diametrically opposed to it.

At that time in Makkah, Dar-al-Nadwa was its political centre. The Makkan leaders held meetings here and decided unanimously to boycott Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. When they failed to apply a brake even with this method, they decided to assassinate him. At that time, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ did not launch a campaign to capture Dar-al-Nadwa, the centre of his opposition. The Prophet did not even commence hostilities against these Makkan leaders. There was no fight to the finish. Instead what he did once again was to accept the status quo and quietly leave that place for Madinah, which became the centre of his activities. As history tells us, extraordinary

results were produced through this superb and far-sighted strategy.

### **3. Internal Harmony Results in External Expansion:**

At that time in Madinah, three religious groups existed—Muslims, Idolators and Jews. Here too Prophet Muhammad ﷺ did not directly confront the status quo. Instead, he issued a charter which is known as Sahifa-al-Madinah in the history of Islam. In this situation he adopted almost the same kind of policy as that known as non-interference in modern times. He declared that every religious group would enjoy full freedom in religious and cultural matters, and that the systems in Madinah will be run on the basis of the policy of mutual respect.

Consequently, the Prophet found an opportunity to consolidate his mission without unnecessarily setting himself on a collision course. Even after he had left his homeland, the Makkans did not leave him alone. They continued their hostile activities against him. Many big and small battles took place as a result.

Again the Prophet followed the same policy of refraining from interfering with the status quo. By accepting the superior position of the Makkans he entered into a peace treaty with them, which is

known as the Hudaibiyya Peace Treaty. In this, he acknowledged the established position of the Makkans and made a truce with the condition that no war would take place between the two parties for a period of ten years. The Hudaibiyya Peace Treaty was a successful example of positive status quoism. Consequently, the Prophet, by accepting the prevalent situation in Arabia, secured full opportunities for peaceful *da'wah* struggle and this opened the door for a “clear victory” in the words of the Quran (48:24). The principle of Islamic activism has been briefly alluded to in the Quran:

Therefore bear up patiently as did the steadfast Prophets before you. Bear up with patience and do not seek to hurry on their doom. (46:35).

According to this verse, there were in any given situation two ways of launching a campaign,— the patient and the impatient.

The latter is that of emotional while the former is that of considered response. The impatient person launches himself on a collision course at the very outset making the continuance of the struggle impossible. On the contrary, one who follows the patient method, and avoids any confrontation with the status quo, is free to make full use of any opportunities which come his way. This method

leads to sure success without creating any new problems in society.

In short, there is unlimited scope for both individuals and groups who adopt the patient method as a matter of permanent policy in all their affairs. In this lies the secret of all great successes. This course of positive status quoism ensures that all our powers and potential will be completely focussed on the accomplishment of long term constructive plans, rather than being unnecessarily wasted in any non-productive or even self-destructive activity against the status quo.

Moreover, if you are one of those who wish to work for Islam or struggle for the revival of the Muslim *Ummah*, then treading the path of patience and adhering to the principle of positive status quoism is strictly obligatory on you. Firstly as we have shown earlier, it has been highly recommended in the Quran, and secondly, it was by the application of this same method that Islam secured an unopposed victory over all its enemies, bringing into existence, as a result, the ideal Muslim society of the early period of Islam.

## Preservation, Updating, Da'wah

Addressing Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, God Almighty has declared: We have sent you forth as a mercy to all mankind. (21:107). Similarly, the Quran states:

Blessed be He who has revealed *Al-Furqan* (the criterion), that is, the Quran, to His servant, so that he may be a warner to all mankind. (25:1)

In another chapter the Quran says: “We have sent you forth to all mankind, so that you may give them good news and warn them.” (34:28)

These passages in the Quran tell us that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was sent for all humanity and for all present and future generations. He was appointed by God Almighty to give a divine lead to all mankind, and this process has to be continued, generation after generation, till the last day of the world. During his lifetime he fulfilled this duty directly and, after his death, this task has to be continued indirectly through his *Ummah*. The task to be performed by later generations has been divided, basically, into three categories:

- (a) Process of Preservation,

- (b) Process of Updating,
- (c) Process of *da'wah*

The goal of the first process is to keep the book brought by the Prophet intact in its original form, generation after generation. There must be no human interpolations and none of its parts should be destroyed.

The first major step in the process of preservation was undertaken, after the passing away of the Prophet, during the life of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr Siddiq. At that time tens of thousands of the companions of the Prophet had learnt the complete Quran by heart. It was thus completely preserved in human memory.

But as far as the writing of the Quran was concerned, it existed only in fragments on different kinds of writing materials. The first Caliphs, therefore, engaged scholars of the Quran from amongst the companions to prepare a single volume of the Quran. By employing the double checking system, that is, the Quran as memorized was checked with the Quran in its written form and the Quran in written form was checked with the Quran preserved in human memory. Thus the first Caliph prepared the first bound volume of the Quran, which served as the standard copy. All the later copies of the Quran were made from this original volume.

Thus, the Quran was preserved by following the double method—writing and memorizing, generation after generation, until it reached the age of the printing press, whereupon any possibility of human interpolation in the text was ruled out.

### **Contribution of Muhaddithin (Scholars of *Hadith*)**

In addition to this, a huge number of eminent Muslim scholars arose among the first few generations of Islam to prepare a totally authentic and unparalleled historical record generally known as *Hadith*, *Sirah* and *Maghazi*. Within a surprisingly short period of time, they produced a vast and systematic body of literature that contains almost each word uttered by the Prophet, every action done by him, anything approved of or disapproved of by him, including other chronological details about his companions and the succeeding generations. This literature, as a whole, is rightly considered to be the second basic source of Islam after the Quran. The authentic part of *Hadith* literature coupled with the Quran, provides an all-inclusive text of Islamic ideology. Thus, by both the sources having been committed to writing, the original version of Islam has been so perfectly and permanently preserved, that until the coming of doomsday, anybody can at any time confirm how Islamic teachings were revealed from God, and

then how they were explained and practised by the Prophet and his companions.

## **Religious Institutions**

Right from the days of the companions of the Prophet up till the present times the majority of Muslims, both rulers and ruled, have shown the greatest of interest in and concern about imparting a theoretical as well as a practical knowledge of Islam to their offspring. For the purpose of learning how to practise Islam in day-to-day life in accordance with the prophetic role model, numerous institutions came into existence. The religious schools of the traditional type was called a *Madrasa*, while the spiritual training centre was called a *Takya*. Starting in the remote past and continuing right up to the present day, a tremendous network of such religious institutions has proliferated all over the Muslim world, and in recent times has been marked with renewed vigour and vitality. Without doubt these institutions have been successful in at least one of their fundamental objectives, that is, to preserve and transmit the practical form or applied aspect of Islam from generation to generation. In the present century, the same purpose has also been achieved by a number of other religious organizations and movements. The movement of Tabligh may be cited here as an example.

## Updating

The second point in this connection is the process of updating. The religion handed down by the Prophet remains one and the same. However, since the situations in human society are subject to change, it becomes essential that the original religion (*al-din*) could be reapplied to changing sets of circumstances. For instance, the *Shariah* permitted the touching of leather socks with wet hands for purification instead of the normal washing of feet during ablution. Now when socks made of artificial fibres came to be used, the question arose as to whether doing *masah* (rubbing with water) was lawful or not. Then it became necessary to re-apply the old injunction to the new situation; after the exercise of *ijtihad*, permission was given to do *masah* on these socks.

In every age the necessity arises of re-applying divine injunctions. And this has happened in modern times on a large scale. In ancient times, war was a means of settling conflicts, but with the invention of the latest deadly weapons, war today serves no positive purpose. Now power lies in peace alone. Such is the state of affairs that the commands of war in Islam require a reapplication. In days gone by, kingship, whereby the ruler unilaterally possessed absolute power, was the order of the day. Now it is the age of democracy, which is another name for the politics of power-sharing.

Changed situations in every age demand that efforts be made towards adaptation of the injunctions of Islam to meet new exigencies. This is the way that the Islamic *Shariah* continues to be updated. This task of updating is performed through *ijtihad*, a process which, in any community, requires creative thinking. And the essential condition for creative thinking lies in people having full freedom of expression, including that of criticism. This is why Islam has accorded such freedom to everyone, and only in an atmosphere in which everything and everyone is open to criticism that creativity is developed. Creative minds alone can perform the task of *ijtihad* at the highest level. Where there is no such open intellectual atmosphere, the process of mental development will come to a halt and that of updating as well.

### **Updating: Reapplication of *Shariah***

According to the Quran, there are two major parts of Islam—religion (*din*) and the law (*Shariah*). *Din* or *al-din* is basic and absolute, always remaining the same, without the slightest change. It is obligatory for all believers, whatever the circumstances, and entails belief in the One God, and the worship of Him alone. The *Shariah*, on the other hand, may differ, depending upon times and places.

On the subject of *al-din* the Quran has this to say: He has ordained for you the same *din* which He enjoined on Nuh (Noah) and which We have revealed to you and which we enjoined on Ibrahim (Abraham) and Isa (Jesus) (saying): Observe this *din* and be not divided therein. (42:13).

On the other hand, there is another verse of the Quran which tells us that the *shariat* given to different prophets were not always identical. The Quran states:

We have ordained a law (*Shariah*) and a path for each of you. And had God so willed He would have made you all a single community, but He wanted to try you by what He had given you. Vie with each other then in good works, for to God you shall all return and he will resolve for you your differences. (5:48)

The *Shariah*, or external structure of the commands of Islam, and the *minhaj*, or method varied from prophet to prophet, but only in a partial, not a total sense. It should be borne in mind also that such differences as these were related not to individual prophets but to the changed situations. The different circumstances of the times each prophet lived in were taken into account in the commands they were given in terms of the *Shariah* and *minhaj*. These variations were based on the

practical wisdom rather than related to the person of a particular prophet. That is why this principle of *Shariah* is valid even today.

The principle of the change in situations governing partial and temporal alterations in the *Shariah* and *minhaj* is duly adopted. While in the past this change was carried out through the Prophet, modifications are now arrived at through *ijtihad* and carried into effect by the Islamic scholars.

That task in reality is not synonymous with bringing about a change in the *Shariah* but it is only a reapplication of the *Shariah* in terms of altered circumstances. The task of effecting such reapplication, which was undertaken in the past, will in like manner, continue to be carried out in the future. It is this process of continual adjustment which helps to keep Islam permanently updated.

### ***Da'wah***

The third requirement for this continuation of the Prophetic mission is *da'wah* work. That is, to communicate the message of the Prophet to all people in all ages.

Though this *da'wah* work is carried out by human beings, it is, in fact, a divine task. That is why the

Quran has called it *nusrat* of God i.e., helping the Almighty (3:52).

According to the Quran, *da'wah* work means to make oneself *nasih* and *amin*, that is, an honest and sincere well-wisher of all. (7:68)

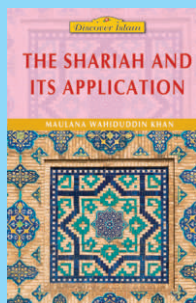
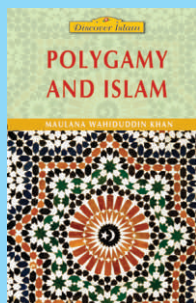
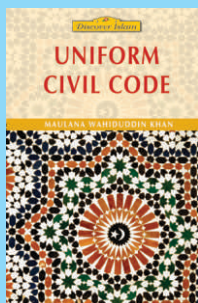
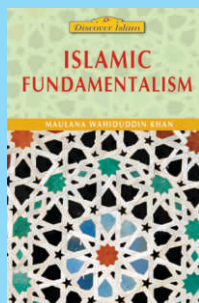
In short, it is to become wholly honest in relation to God and to feel and evince total goodwill towards all of one's fellow men. *Da'wah* work can be properly performed only by meeting this standard. One important condition for the performance of *da'wah* work is patience. This virtue was exemplified by the conduct of the early *da'is*: "We will exercise patience regardless of the harm inflicted upon us." (Quran, 14:12)

This verse of the Quran tells us of the character of the *da'i*. The *da'i* in relation to the *mad'u* adopts the attitude of patience unilaterally. He continues his process of *da'wah* work in a peaceful manner despite provocation from the other party. This is an extremely essential condition. If the *da'i* is provoked by the behaviour of the *madu*, the normal atmosphere between *da'i* and *mad'u* will be disturbed,—and the whole process of *da'wah* work will be ruined. It goes without saying that a conducive atmosphere is necessary for the successful carrying out of *da'wah* action.

The most important aspect of this *da'wah* work is that through it God's message continues to be communicated to people in every age. Another aspect, no less important, is that people from different spheres continue to enter the fold of Islam. It is like the introduction of new blood into the believer. In this way the Muslim community saves itself from the natural process of degeneration. This is the only way of keeping the Muslim community revitalized at all times. On the other hand, the more the true message of Islam spreads through the *da'wah* process around the globe, the more its textual, ideological and practical preservation is ensured, and the more Islam gains from the enlightenment and genius of freshly initiated minds—a factor which will keep its teachings updated for the generations to come.

## *Discover Islam*

In this series, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan presents the fundamental teachings of Islam in a simple way. The series provides the general reader with an accurate and comprehensive picture of Islam the true religion of submission to God.



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