

# COPEN

## Interpretations

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A newsletter about Islam from a progressive  
and sometimes interfaith perspective.

## The Power of 'Why'?

by Stephanie Roy [Ottawa, Canada]  
Editorial

I was told recently by a brother that regardless of my understanding of Islam, I should obey commandments of the Quran as interpreted by scholars without questioning. This is absolutely ridiculous!

Through the Qu'ran and through the life of Prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings be upon him) we are given examples of good behaviour based on proof and reason. What this brother asked me to do was to deny the gift that Islam has given me of giving reasons and purposes to actions and act without thinking. This is contrary to the teachings of Islam and contrary to what was promoted by Prophet Mohammad.

So when I was suggested the theme for this month, I was extremely excited. I was happy to provide my authors with the opportunity to answer their own questions on the "purpose" of things. Through curiosity, we are compelled to learn, and when we learn, I believe we are inevitably brought closer to The Creator, for whom the purpose of all things is known.

Brothers, sisters, with this edition of Open Interpretations, I invite you to ask yourself "why", to find purpose in your actions and to find purpose in yourself. May God grant you endless curiosity and may you find the answers you seek within His endless love.

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## The Purpose of God

by Delilah Tee [New York, NY, USA]

In this day and age, a lot of our collective decisions and actions are justified by religious rulings; hence, one of the most interesting phenomena is observing the role religion plays in people's daily lives. And by religion, I don't mean to suggest the different number of organized religions identified in the world today. What I mean by the concept of religion is the way the concept of God is identified, defined, sought, and understood for a group of people. For some, this distinction may sound one in the same, but according to the orthodox definition of religion, it is not. How I understand religion does not align to the common orthodox definition of religion because I've included the possibility of a group of people who define and understand God in a way that is not found in religious Scriptures. I've also suggested that groups of people, within these groups of people, may not agree on their concept of God, which is okay (and perhaps, even healthy).

As a Muslims growing up in a practicing Islamic household, my earliest memory of learning about God is the project I had to do on Prophet Adam. When I bought the white poster from the dollar store the day I came home from school, I laid out the poster on the living room carpet and spread all my markers on the floor. Although I can't really recall what I was specifically drawing on the board, I remember asking my father how to draw God. "Babo," I asked, "how do I draw God?" My father looked at me and said, "You can't draw God." Perplexed, I asked again, "well, if I can't draw her, what is her name?" In which my father replied, "God is neither a female nor male; God is not like us." I remember feeling so stunned by this idea, but also

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somewhat disappointed that I couldn't draw God in my project.

Now, my understanding of God is a very dynamic one. Sometimes, I use the Qur'an to discover and listen to God, but most of the time, I try to learn about God with my senses. If we can demonstrate how believing in the concept of God(s) is a critical pillar in maintaining a healthy and purposeful life through cognitive and biological research (in which many researchers have suggested for a number of years), then I'm sure that there is some spiritual truth regarding the purpose of believing in God(s). Although some might not find the concept of God convincing (in which I completely respect and tolerate), there are those who do, and it's definitely interesting to understand why.

Essentially, my purpose for believing in God surpasses the reason being that Qur'an tells me that I need to believe in God. I believe in God – or more appropriately, the purpose of God in my life – is to assist me in understanding who I am. And who I am isn't just composed of ideals like ethnicity, race, or culture, but more importantly, how I bear suffering; how I maintain good relations with my friends and foe, and specifically, how I view the world (and how my vision regarding the world can be replaced with a more prosperous vision when I intend on bettering it). So yes, I can't figure out the nature of this world

on my own, and so the purpose of God in my life is to assist me in learning about it.

Moreover, the purpose of God in my life is to elevate me in moral stature. But it isn't just Qur'an's dictations of modest dressing, behavior, and tone that elevate me in moral stature, it is being able to differentiate between who I am when I abide by these dictations and who I am when I don't that interests me. This distinction between recognizing who I am when I monitor and study my relationship with God and who I turn out to be when I don't is an essential part of the self actualization process I constantly observe.

More specifically, the purpose God has on my life is a very profound one, especially because most of what I know about God is through intellectual discussions and readings, and less with blind faith. Sometimes, in certain circumstances, I am unable to recall why it is that I believe in a God that I can neither smell nor see. Other times, when I am sitting alone in a long train ride towards home, having a conversation with God in my mind, I know that there is something intriguing about believing in a transcendental being one can neither touch nor see. But even though I can neither look nor touch my God, I am able to feel His presence. That, in itself, is the purpose of God: to make you feel.

*"God is neither a female nor male; God is not like us."*

## For the Sake of Allah

By Aymen Ben Cheikh [Tunis, Tunisia]

In Islam, many can do the same good action, but some will be rewarded and others will not. In making this choice, Allah is never unjust because He is The Just, but He takes into consideration the purpose of the action.

This takes us back to the main notion of Islam which is "al Ikhlas" or "The Sincerity" according to which every action, to be accepted by Allah, must be with the purpose of pleasing Him (for Allah's sake).

Let's take the example of a person who prays so that people will say that he is a good Muslim, or someone who helps the poor so that people will say he is generous, or someone who learns about Islam so that people will say he is wise; these people have done those actions for their own reputation and neglected Allah. They are hypocrites.

Hypocrites are those who are Muslim in appearance but who are not in their hearts. They

claim to be believers, but in their hearts, they despise. Allah considers them inferior to believers.

On this point, some “salaf” (the predecessors) say that sincerity is much more difficult than the action itself as it requires much effort to purify one’s heart to make Allah the goal of our actions. Prophet Mohammad taught us that the heart influences the entire body; it can in turn push mankind to do good or bad.

Sincerity can reach its peak by transforming daily tasks in religious acts. For example, people who do their work well, not by fear of being laid off but to follow the teachings of the Qu’ran and of Prophet Mohammad (sala alahu alayhi wa sallam) who said: “work is worship”. A person can also take good care of his parents, not for his own reputation but

because Allah says, in the Qu’ran: “Allah orders not to worship except Him and to treat one’s parents kindly. If one of them is alive and old or both are alive (and old), do not say “uff” to them and do not address them with harsh words. Be humble and compassionate and address them with nice and gentle words.”

Here is why I invite myself and you, brothers and sisters, to purify our hearts and to think of Allah in all of our actions, in order to make ourselves

### Translated from French into English.

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## The Purpose of Life

By Farouk A. Peru [London, UK]

It is inconceivable for a book with such a grandiose goal such as Quran to be lacking a stated purpose for its followers. However, due to an overtly religious image ascribed to it, the stated purpose for humankind is usually stated as ‘to worship Allah’. This conveys the idea that we were born for the purpose of filling up masjids and praying as much as possible for a God who demands prostrations. Islamic scholars would deny this of course and justifiably so since even in Traditional jurisprudence, ‘worship’ has a far wider connotation but this is the reality of the mindset on the ground. Muslims view ‘ibadah’ (worship) as the religious, ritualistic side of Islam. One can discern this from their language. Often times we hear people say ‘its time to do some worship as one is getting on in years’.

I do not believe this is our purpose as per the Quran. It is not that ritualistic worship has no place in the Quranic project but rather it is the means

*through which* we attain a particular state of being. That state of being then propels us into the project itself – which is to bring peace into the world.

The clear, unequivocal statement of Quran is that Allah did not create us except to worship Him (51/56). This verse of Quran has suffered the fate of many other verses which is to be quoted out of context. Even worse, this verse starts with an ‘and’ (as in ‘AND I have not created except ..’) which shows a direct link to the previous verse but when it is quoted, the ‘and’ is usually dropped. I find such treatment of Quran (by believers no less!) to be deplorable. If one reads from 51/52, it speaks about the coming of the messenger. 51/53-54 speaks about a negative response to the message and 51/55 speaks about fertilising or vivifying the message for it benefits the believers. Then we come to 51/56 which connects directly to the passage so far. Therefore, it is very evidenced that the ‘worship’ mentioned is

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about following the messenger and vivifying the message. This is what it means to 'worship' Allah – to follow the totality of the message for that is what we are created to do.

However, this doesn't mean that we are to become carbon copies of one another. Not at all. Quran acknowledges our individuality and sees us as bricks within a structure. Indeed, those who fight in Allah's way (to uphold truth and justice for all mankind, not for some jihadist power trip!) are seen as a well structured wall (61/4). Furthermore we are told that each of us have an expression which Allah himself turns us to (2/148) and so we are to strive towards the good. This again shows our individuality is an intricate part of the Quranic project. We do not need to become zombies or lose our indigenous cultures in order to become islamic at all.

The question may now arise – what unites us then if we are allowed to be individualistic? People do seek unity in a religion after all, if not uniformity itself. Once again, we can find our seemingly divergent purposes come together in a single purpose by simply looking at the context of 2/148 which was quoted above. If we read from 2/142-152, we would see that the divergent goals 2/148

mentions is under the auspices of 'masjid al-haram'. It should be said here that I do not believe this refers to the mosque in Makkah but rather a space in which God's laws are submitted to (the literal meaning of the term 'masjid') and this space is sanctified by God (the literal meaning of the word 'haram').

Therefore what unites us should be the struggle to build a space where we can adhere to Allah's laws and thereby attain sanctity.

*"It is not that ritualistic worship has no place in the Quranic project but rather it is the means through which we attain a particular state of being."*

Perhaps an example of this would help elucidate my proposition above. Let us take a more outlandish example. What if a person's talent was in arts and crafts? It wouldn't mean

that he or she would be outside the Quranic spectrum of purpose. Rather, he or she could channel those energies into spurring people on towards the Quranic goal of a sanctified space. Many artists and craftsmen do that even now, inspire people towards the good with their works.

Quran is a text which allows humankind to achieve self-actualisation without losing their personal identity. It really is the simple matter of reading it holistically and living your life within the parameters of a set of rules as well with an overarching goal.

Want to write for *Open Interpretations*? Contact us at

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