



# Islam and the Meaning of Life

Nazir Khan

*Yaqeen Institute, Canada*





Islam and Contemporary World Series | No. 1

**SERIES EDITORS**

Ahmet Alibašić, Ermin Sinanović, and Younus Mirza

**Disclaimer: The views, opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in these papers and articles are strictly those of the authors. The Center for Islam in the Contemporary World and the Center for Advanced Studies do not endorse any of the personal views of the authors on any platform.**

**Copyright © 2025.** Center for Islam in the Contemporary World and Center for Advanced Studies

Islam and Contemporary World Series | No.1



# Islam and the Meaning of Life

**Nazir Khan MD FRCPC**  
*McMaster University*



**August, 2025**



# Islam and the Meaning of Life

Nazir Khan MD FRCPC  
McMaster University

## Background and context

There is a popularly recounted story in which a taxi driver asked the famous British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) about the meaning of life, a simple question that he was apparently unable to answer.<sup>1</sup> This oft-mentioned tale is occasionally used to illustrate either philosophy's failure to address the most basic of questions or the driver's unreasonable expectation to receive a brief answer to such a profound question. More importantly, it illustrates that the question of life's meaning concerns everyone, from the ordinary person in the street to the professional philosopher or theologian. In fact, it is the single most important question any human being can ask because it determines the value and validity of all one's greatest choices and activities in life. It is a spiritual need of every human being to understand, "What makes my life worth living?" And yet despite this question's importance, "it is only in the last few decades

---

1 Julian Baggini, *What's it all about: philosophy and the meaning of life* (Oxford, OUP 2004), 1-2.



that analytic philosophers, in particular, have begun to pay any serious attention to the topic.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, one cannot pursue this question very far before realizing the need to assess the truth claims of various world religions and philosophical worldviews. As a person ought to only follow a particular worldview if it can provide a compelling answer to this question, it impacts the epistemology of religious belief. That is to say, a religion’s truth is tied to whether or not it can provide a coherent and compelling account of what life is all about.

**The question of life’s meaning concerns everyone, from the ordinary person in the street to the professional philosopher or theologian.**

The history of European colonialism has produced a Eurocentric bias in discourses on the meaning of life, often neglecting the perspectives of other cultures and civilizations. While some Eastern cultures or religions—such as Buddhism—have been more favorably received in the West, pervasive Islamophobic bias and orientalist frameworks have generally excluded Islamic perspectives from serious consideration. Meanwhile, there has been a growing dissatisfaction within Western civilization towards the answers provided by Christianity and a concomitant rise in atheism. The doctrines of the Trinity, Original Sin, and atonement are increasingly seen by many to raise more problems than answers. What meaning does life have if we carry the burden of a sin we did not commit, if God had to die free us from it, and if our salvation depends not on how we live but only on whether we accept His act of atonement for us? For many intellectuals, it is not hard to see why churches are struggling to retain an audience. But those leaving Christianity while abandoning religion altogether are hardly better off. Some people pursuing secularism fail to find a sat-

---

2 Joshua Lewis Thomas, “Meaningfulness as Sensefulness,” *Philosophia* 47 (2019): 1555–77.



isfactory answer and retreat instead to a nihilistic worldview (there is no meaning in life) or a relativistic worldview (the meaning of life is whatever you want it to be).

## **A religion's truth is tied to whether or not it can provide a coherent and compelling account of what life is all about.**

The German existentialist philosopher and atheist Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was convinced that life entailed only pointless suffering, going so far as to suggest that it would be better if we did not exist.<sup>3</sup> It is not only professional philosophers who have been troubled by the prospects of nihilism, for the existential suffering from the loss of meaning can be experienced by all people. Viktor Frankl (1905-97) spoke of the “existential vacuum” as a widespread 20th-century phenomenon, one due to the loss of tradition and instinct.<sup>4</sup> Some have also suggested that the modern era's intensification of violence has led more people to pursue the question of life's meaning:

One reason why the twentieth century brooded on the meaning of existence more agonizedly than most epochs may be because it held human life so appallingly cheap. It was by far the bloodiest epoch on historical record, with millions of unnecessary deaths. If life is so drastically devalued in practice, one might well expect its meaning to be questioned in theory.<sup>5</sup>

The personal toll of this loss of meaning has been considerable. Canadian psychologist John Vervaeke describes what he calls “the meaning crisis” as being responsible for “increases in anxiety disorders, depression, despair, and suicide rates,” precipitating a mental health crisis that

3 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as will and representation*, ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: CUP 2010), 1:350.

4 Viktor Frankl, *Man's search for meaning* (NY: Washington Square Press), 128.

5 Terry Eagleton, *Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.



is interwoven with concomitant political and environmental crises.<sup>6</sup> In Canada, the Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) program has planned to expand its eligibility criteria to include those whose sole diagnosis is a mental illness; however, this has been delayed in part due to expert testimony on the difficulty distinguishing between suicidality and “a reasoned wish to die.”<sup>7</sup> One might ask why must a reasoned wish to die be restricted to those with illness? Schopenhauer spoke of “the suicide of the healthy and cheerful man, who has entirely objective grounds for putting an end to his existence.”<sup>8</sup> It is not hard to envision a system in which such an event is facilitated, given the exponential intensification of the meaning crisis and existential vacuum in modern culture. This creates a sense of urgency in seeking the appropriate antidote in order to provide people with a compelling understanding of life to escape the malaise of nihilism.

**Canadian psychologist John Vervaeke describes what he calls “the meaning crisis” as being responsible for “increases in anxiety disorders, depression, despair, and suicide rates”.**

## Relevance to Muslims and the need for research

The foregoing background provides important context to revisiting this topic as Muslims and devoting resources to explicating the Islamic view of life’s meaning. Given the contemporary meaning crisis,

6 John Vervaeke, *Awakening from the Meaning Crisis*, 2019 lecture series. <https://www.meaningcrisis.co/the-introduction-to-the-meaning-crisis-series%E2%80%8B/>.

7 <https://www.parl.ca/documentviewer/en/44-1/AMAD/report-3/page-39>

8 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life* (Pennsylvania State University, 2005), 19. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/10741/10741-h/10741-h.htm>



Muslims should see themselves in a position to share with others Islam's perspective in this regard and how it frames their own journey in life. The meaning of life is certainly a topic of paramount importance in Islam and one of particular interest to Muslims. It often forms the foundation of conversations with those outside of Islam, to introduce them to the Islamic worldview. Thus, discussions on the life's purpose and meaning are frequently encountered in Muslim content directed at inviting others to Islam (*da'wah*).<sup>9</sup> On "TalkIslam, a popular Australian *da'wah* YouTube Channel that boasts almost 1 million subscribers, the number one most-watched video (over 8 million views) is entitled "The Meaning of Life" and contains a spoken word performance.<sup>10</sup> Perusing the comments on this video reveals numerous individuals testifying to their conversion to Islam after learning the purpose of life, many after watching the video. Visiting another YouTube Channel, "Islam On Demand," with approximately 230,000 subscribers, reveals that its most popular video is on the same subject, entitled "The Purpose of Life" and features a lecture by American Muslim convert Dr. Jeffrey Lang. A popular lecture on the same subject by American convert Khalid Yasin has garnered 1 million views.<sup>11</sup>

## Muslims should see themselves in a position to share with others Islam's perspective in this regard and how it frames their own journey in life.

9 Idris Tawfiq, <https://aboutislam.net/spirituality/purpose-life-ten-minutes/>. Yusuf Estes, What does Islam say about Life's purpose, <https://en.islamway.net/article/13975/what-does-islam-say-about-lifes-purpose>. Imam Mufti, <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/280/viewall/purpose-of-life-part-1>, 2006. Mostafa Malaeka, "What is the Purpose of Life," 2001. <https://www.islam-guide.com/purpose-of-life.htm> This website is the host of the widely circulated book *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam*. Interestingly, this article is not included in the book but is appended on the website as supplementary material.

10 "The Meaning of life," Sept. 15, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7d16CpWp-ok>

11 "Khalid Yasin - The Purpose of Life," Nov. 3, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zor1et-rT8c>



Evidently, this is a topic of tremendous interest. It may be somewhat surprising, therefore, to note the scarcity or perhaps even non-existence of dedicated academic papers or books produced by Muslims on the subject. While this subject is invariably encountered in Muslim scholarly writings on numerous theological and ethical topics, it seldom receives a dedicated examination in its own right. One might suggest that such works are unnecessary, for it may simply be the case that Islam's answer is so elegantly concise that it can be captured effectively in a blog post, a sound bite, or a viral video clip. After all, the Qur'an tells us clearly that human beings were created to worship Allah (Qur'an 51:56). But what are the implications of this pronouncement, and how do they inform our worldview as a whole? While Islam's view may be concisely summarized, it does not diminish the value or importance of pursuing academic work.

**It may be somewhat surprising, therefore, to note the scarcity or perhaps even non-existence of dedicated academic papers or books produced by Muslims on the subject.**

First of all, there are a number of important derivative questions that are related to the broader topic of meaning of life that are being asked by Muslims today. Paying close attention to these questions can enable Muslim thinkers to present convincing solutions from within the Islamic worldview. Some of the most important subsidiary questions, based upon this author's engagement with such topics in the community are as follows:

1. Theological questions: Why does God ask us to worship Him? What is in it for Him? Does He need our worship?
2. The "problem of evil" questions: Why does evil exist? What is the wisdom behind suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people, even when they are devout Muslims? Why does God not



prevent the oppression of Muslims around the world? Why does it seem like those who don't believe in God are more successful and content?

3. Spiritual isolation: How can I find purpose in life when I feel lost or disconnected from God? What if God does not love me? What is the point of prayer if it feels meaningless and repetitive?

### **How can I find purpose in life when I feel lost or disconnected from God?**

Another three categories of questions which are also relevant (though less frequently asked in comparison to the preceding) include the following:

4. Salvation: What happens to non-Muslims in the afterlife? Why would God create disbelievers only to punish them? Why did God not make us all believers and place us all directly into heaven? Is it better to be a good person or a good Muslim? Can non-Muslims be more ethical than Muslims?
5. Fate and free will: What is the purpose of my life if God already knows what I will do?
6. Islamic law: What is the point of adhering to a detailed code of ritual acts of worship and norms of conduct? What is the relevance of Islamic legal rulings to our lives? Why does God ask us to follow these rules? What is the purpose of the particular Islamic laws pertaining to the individual, the family, and society?

Important references related to some of these topics are listed in the annotated bibliography at the end of this paper. In order to maintain this essay's focus and conciseness, not all of them can be explored in detail here. I have therefore decided to examine the initial set of questions (1-3) and leave the remaining questions (4-6) for future research and discussion.



As with all aspects of Islam's teachings, the more extensively they are studied, the more insights one may glean and acquire a higher resolution explanation of certain principles. For example, what does worship entail? Is it just prayer and recitation, or does it include all aspects of our relationship with the Divine? When one undertakes a comprehensive study of Islam's teachings on the meaning of life, one can better articulate the cohesive nature of its worldview. Why does God tell us to pray, fast, and give charity, and prohibit alcohol and *riba* (interest)? What does God want humanity to achieve by following Islam's rulings related to spiritual purification, family life, commerce, social affairs, governance, and personal and collective worship?

Muslims need to learn, study, and draw upon Islamic civilization's rich heritage of scholarship. Tomes of wisdom have accumulated from centuries of reflections upon the Qur'an's verses and the Prophet's hadith, deriving innumerable lessons relevant to articulating an expansive understanding of life's meaning. It is also useful to examine this topic in the Islamic tradition to understand how it relates to scholarly discussions in theology (*'aqīda*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), religious aims (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*), exegesis (*tafsīr*), spirituality (*tazkiyya/taṣawwuf*), and so on. Among these vast scholarly disciplines, one must identify the relevant elements for constructing a comprehensive perspective of Islam's viewpoint.

### **Muslim theologians have explained the concepts of worship (*'ibādah*) and servitude (*'ubudiyyah*)**

When it comes to Islamic theology for instance, Muslim theologians have explained the concepts of worship (*'ibādah*) and servitude (*'ubudiyyah*), as well as their implications for understanding life's meaning. For instance, in his explanation of God's wisdom in removing



Adam and Eve from Paradise and placing them and their descendants on Earth, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d.751/1350) writes:

God (Glory be to Him) originated the creation to worship Him, and that is the ultimate objective [of their existence]. The Exalted said, *I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me* (Qur'an 51:56). It is well known that the perfect [manifestations of] servitude (‘*ubdiyyah*) required from humanity cannot occur in the eternal blissful Paradise, but can only occur in an abode of trial and tribulation. The eternal abode is one of enjoyment and bliss, and not one of tribulation, trial or obligation.<sup>12</sup>

Theological doctrines and beliefs can be connected to the meaning-of-life experiences. For example, Ibn al-Qayyim cites the Qur’anic passage describing the purpose of our existence to make a point about the Divine Wisdom behind our presence in a world characterized by human suffering: Our life here is purposeful because servitude and worship can only be perfected through trials and tribulations. This understanding gives meaning to our experiences. All of the pillars of faith (*arkān al-īmān*) can also be analyzed from the perspective of how they inform our sense of meaning in life.

### **Our life here is purposeful because servitude and worship can only be perfected through trials and tribulations.**

Similarly, examining Islam’s legislative aspect in jurisprudential works reveals its connection to the meaning of life we derive in theology. Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d.790/1388) connects the fact that we have been created to worship God with following His prescribed law that is established for attaining beneficial outcomes (*maṣāliḥ*):

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *On Divine Wisdom and the problem of evil*, trans. Tallal Zeni (UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2017), 8, with modifications. Cf. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Miftāḥ dār al-sa’ādah wa manshūr wilāyat al-‘ilm wa al-irādah* (Riyadh: Dār ‘Aṭā’āt al-‘Ilm, 2019), 1:12.



The Lawgiver's intent (*qaṣd al-shārīʿ*) for the responsible individual (*mu-kallaf*) is that their intention in action (*qaṣduhu fī al-ʿamal*) aligns with the Lawgiver's purpose in legislation (*muwāfiqan li qaṣdihi fī al-tashrīʿ*). The proof of this is evident from the establishment of the Shariʿah, which is designed for the universal and comprehensive benefits of humanity (*li-maṣāliḥ al-ʿibād*). It is required of the responsible individual to act in accordance with this intent in their deeds and not to aim for anything contrary to what the Lawgiver intended.

Moreover, the responsible individual is created for the worship of Allah (*wa li-an al-mukallaf khuliqa li-ʿibādat Allāh*), which involves acting in line with the intent behind the Shariʿah's establishment—this constitutes true worship, leading to rewards in both this world and the hereafter.<sup>13</sup>

We also find that Islamic law contains overarching values that tie back to life's meaning as a journey to worship our Creator and cultivate the ethical virtues that bring us closer to Him. In his work on Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), Ibn al-Qayyim writes:

The Shariʿah is founded upon wisdom and the well-being of humanity in this life and the next. It is in its entirety justice, compassion (*raḥmah*), prosperity, and wisdom, and therefore anything which deviates from justice to injustice, from compassion to its opposite, from welfare to harm, or from wisdom to nonsense is not part of the Shariʿah, even if it is included therein by dint of misinterpretation.<sup>14</sup>

Examining the realm of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) is also valuable to understanding how the Qur'an provides the necessary conceptual framework for attaining moral virtue. Egyptian Qur'anic scholar Muḥammad ʿAbdullāh Darrāz (1894-1958) dedicated a work to examining how the Qur'an grounds an ethical system and identified five important elements of the Qur'anic discourse: obligation (*ilzām*),

13 Al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt* (Al-Khubar, Saudi Arabia: Dār ibn ʿAffān, 1997), 23–24.

14 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Iʿlām al-muwaqqiʿīn* (Dammam, Saudi Arabia: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 2002), 4:337.



accountability (*mas'ūliyyah*), sanction (*jazā'*), proper intention (*niyyah*), and effort (*juhd*). He eloquently pointed out, “How can one possibly conceive of a moral rule without an obligation? Is this not a contradiction in terms?”<sup>15</sup> Without understanding that our moral duties are obligated upon us by God, there is no basis for true ethical conduct and moral sacrifice. Without this prerequisite, one’s idea of morality is reduced to conformity with arbitrary rules set by existing power structures and social conventions.

**Without understanding that our moral duties are obligated upon us by God, there is no basis for true ethical conduct and moral sacrifice.**

In addition to surveying the vast disciplines of Islamic sciences, there is also value in engaging with contemporary philosophical literature. By discussing perspectives of those outside the Muslim community, Muslims can ensure they are providing answers to the questions people are in fact asking about life’s purpose and demonstrating where existing answers are deficient or insufficient. Reading widely from non-Muslim sources both helps highlight the acuity and extent of the meaning crisis, as illustrated in the opening of this essay, and also helps unpack some of the ideologies that confront Muslims today. For example, what is the nature of nihilism and why has it rapidly risen in modern times as an ideology? What do relativism and postmodernism suggest about the meaning of life and the nature of “grand narratives”?

**Reading widely from non-Muslim sources both helps highlight the acuity and extent of the meaning crisis.**

---

15 Muḥammad ‘Abdullāh Darrāz, *The Moral World of the Qur’an* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 13.



Investigating deeper into Islam's viewpoint may also enrich our understanding of the Qur'an. There is a vast array of Qur'anic vocabulary that is important and relevant to this discourse including *tawḥīd* (monotheism), *taqwa* (awe of God), *ʿibādah* (worship), *hidāyah* (guidance), *khilāfah* (vicegerency), *īmān* (faith), *islām* (submission [to God]), and so on. Each one of these terms could justifiably be mentioned as a single word response to the question, "What is the meaning of life?" Therefore, a detailed study of such terms and their lexical implications and textual connections is beneficial. How did Muslim scholars conceptualize them? Where do they show up in the Islamic tradition? How can human beings pursue these terms as objectives?

In what follows, I will provide my own approach to synthesizing Islam's approach to the meaning of life.

## Overview of Islamic teachings on the meaning of life

God says, "Do you think that We created you without any purpose and that you would not return to Us? Exalted is Allah, the True Sovereign; there is none worthy of worship except Him, Lord of the Noble Throne" (23:115–16). Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī (d.375/983) writes, "It means He is elevated and magnified beyond having created anything

### Islam rejects nihilism by affirming that our lives have purpose.

in vain; rather, He created everything for a destined purpose (*li-amr kāʾin*)."<sup>16</sup> In this verse, Islam rejects nihilism by affirming that our lives

<sup>16</sup> Al-Samarqandī, *Baḥr al-ʿUlūm* (Beirut: DKI 1993), 2:423.



have purpose. This is also what we mean when we talk about “the meaning of life.” Philosopher Harry Eugene Blocker (1937-2013) writes:

[T]he logical root of meaning can be traced to the sense of purpose and a system of purposeful relations. When people speak of the meaningfulness of things, they are usually talking either about (a) the purposive way things seem to hang together or (b) the purpose which this system has as a whole. Correspondingly, meaninglessness can mean either (a) the breakdown of this system or (b) the realization that the purpose for the system as a whole is a human projection having no foundation in reality.<sup>17</sup>

There is also an interesting relation to the idea of linguistic meaning. Joshua Lewis Thomas observes that just as meaning in linguistics conveys the *sense* of a word, meaningfulness is a matter of having answers that *make sense* in addressing the salient questions of something’s origin, impact, purpose, and story. A meaning-framework allows one to process the constant stream of sensory information that flows into one’s consciousness in order to interpret and understand existence and the world.<sup>18</sup> When someone makes an uninterpretable sound like a shriek, it is meaningless, mere noise that serves no purpose and has no intention behind its production. If the universe is the unintended consequence of haphazard particle interactions or fluctuations in a quantum field, then it ultimately exists without rhyme or reason. Therefore, it is easy to see why the atheistic materialistic worldview collapses into nihilism.

When one asks “Why did God create us?” this question may be interpreted in two ways, one relating to divine action and one relating to human action. The first interpretation asks about the divinely intended objective (*gharaḍ*) behind God’s action of creating the human being, a question related to a debate between schools of philosophical theology concerning whether or not God’s actions have teleological purposes. Aside from this scholastic debate, all Muslims affirm that God is free

17 H. G. Blocker, *The Meaning of Meaninglessness* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 33–40.

18 Thomas, “Meaningfulness as Sensefulness.”



## Human beings can appreciate divine wisdom when examining the moral purposes God has assigned for them.

of need and that His actions are not causally determined by anything external to Him, although they are certainly characterized by divine wisdom.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, God does not *need* our worship; rather, He *deserves* it and worshipping Him benefits *us*.<sup>20</sup> This leads us to focus on the human side of the issue. The second interpretation of this question asks what is the divinely assigned purpose or goal (*maqṣad*) that human beings are asked to fulfill in their lives. Islamic scholarly discourse has identified ways in which the Islamic teachings are linked back to overarching goals (*maqāṣid*). There are nuances to how the Islamic tradition saw the relationship between these two questions. Most importantly, human beings can appreciate divine wisdom when examining the moral purposes God has assigned for them.

## Three dimensions of life's meaning

Irrespective of their cultural or religious background, human inquiries into life's meaning coalesce around three clusters of big questions—intellectual, moral, and spiritual—that may be framed as follows: “What

19 Those interested in this debate may consult the following references: Al-Bāqillānī, *Tamhīd al-Awā'il wa-Talkhīṣ al-Dalā'il*, ed. 'Imād al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḥaydar (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1407/1987), 50; Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-fatāwā* (Madina: Mujaḥmā' al-Malik Fahd, 2004), 8:81–158; Tallal Zeni, *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Divine Wisdom and the Problem of Evil* (London: Islamic Texts Society, 2017), 72–87; al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-tawhīd*, ed. Fathalla Kholeif (Alexandria: Dār al-Jāmi'āt al-Miṣriyya, 1970), 96–101.

20 Mohammed Elshinawy, “Why does God ask people to worship Him?” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, December 26, 2017. <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/why-does-god-ask-people-to-worship-him>



## Human inquiries into life's meaning coalesce around three clusters of big questions—intellectual, moral, and spiritual.

makes my life worth living?" (*spiritual*), "How do I live a good life?" (*moral*), and "What is worth knowing?" (*intellectual*). We can also examine these not merely as questions but as choices or opportunities for growth. Intellectual growth occurs through the choice to reflect, study, ponder, explore, discover, and learn about reality. Although there is no empirically determined reason why the world should be comprehensible or open to our explanations, it is and thus there is a vast amount that we can learn. But why do we have this ability and what is it for? Which way of life can provide that answer? Likewise, when it comes to moral growth, the human being also has special opportunities through becoming more compassionate, generous, just, honest, and loving in our interactions with others. Again, despite the lack of any clear empirical reason why we should develop these traits, the opportunity to do so is undeniable. Lastly, the opportunity for spiritual growth entails finding a true sense of purpose and meaning, an aspect of life that remains entirely inexplicable to materialist and nihilist perspectives.

Pursuing truth means searching for the answers that make sense of these fundamental questions. Every human being intuitively prefers a system of belief and value that can yield meaningful answers, as opposed to incoherent and meaningless ones, to such questions. Ultimately, the human being is confronted with a basic choice between meaningfulness or meaninglessness. Materialists view existence as nothing more than interactions of a vast soup of purposeless particles. Thus, moral values, thoughts, and ideas must be nothing more than the delusions of collections of particles that consider themselves conscious beings individuated (i.e., distinct) from the rest of the material world, but are ultimately just part of the same particle soup. Ac-



ording to them, anything that is thought to have meaning is, at its very root and essence, ultimately meaningless. But even a self-proclaimed nihilist cannot escape meaning; the declaration that life is meaningless is a claim about the truth, and therefore an assertion of meaning. Hence, meaning is inescapable.

## **In Islam, the spiritual, moral, and intellectual domains are perfectly aligned and connected.**

In Islam, the spiritual, moral, and intellectual domains are perfectly aligned and connected. The Qur'anic scholar Imam al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d.431/1040) notes that the Qur'an teaches that human beings have been created for three lofty aims: devotion to God (‘*ibādah*, 51:56), serving as custodians on Earth to establish justice (*khalīfah*, 27:62), and cultivating the earth and building civilization (‘*imārat al-arḍ*, 11:61).<sup>21</sup> These divinely appointed goals render our human endeavors meaningful and praiseworthy. If we contemplate them further, we can appreciate how they are tied to the three dimensions of life's questions we analyzed earlier. ‘*ibādah* encompasses life's spiritual dimension, includes our entire relationship with God (analyzed further below), and entails our journey of purification of the soul (striving to pursue divine pleasure in every domain of life). The moral dimension is encompassed in our task as God's vicegerents (*khalīfah*), a term that signifies a sense of ethical responsibility in ensuring that the rights of all creation are upheld on Earth. Al-Shāṭibī connects this to establishing the *maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah* (objectives of the Islamic law), which seek to secure beneficial outcomes (*maṣāliḥ*) for humanity. He writes:

Furthermore, it has been established that the Lawgiver's intent is to preserve the essential necessities (*ḍarūriyyāt*) and what pertains to them, such as needs (*ḥājjiyyāt*) and enhancements (*taḥsīniyyāt*).<sup>22</sup> This aligns

21 Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Dharī‘ah ilā makārim al-Sharī‘ah* (Beirut: DKI, 1980), 31–32.

22 These terms signify different levels of priority among the goals in Islamic law.



precisely with what the servant is tasked with, implying that their actions must be purposefully directed towards this goal; otherwise, they are not truly preserving it, since actions are judged by intentions.

The essence of this is for the individual to act as Allah's vicegerent (*khali-fat Allah*) in establishing these benefits (*maṣāliḥ*) to the best of their ability and capacity, starting with their own self, then their family, and then everyone whose interests are connected to them. This is why the Prophet, peace be upon him, said, "All of you are shepherds and each of you is responsible for his flock."

In the Holy Qur'an, it says: "Believe in Allah and His Messenger, and spend out of that in which He has made you successors" (Qur'an: 57:7).

This is also reflected in His saying: "I am placing a vicegerent on earth" (Qur'an 2:30), and "He will make you successors in the land to see how you will do" (Qur'an 7:129), and "It is He who has made you successors upon the earth and raised some of you above others in degrees to test you through what He has given you" (Qur'an 6:165).

The concept of vicegerency (*khilāfah*) is both general and specific, as explained in the hadith: "The leader is a shepherd, the man is a shepherd over his household, and the woman is a shepherd over her husband's house and his child; so all of you are shepherds and each of you is responsible for his flock." These examples illustrate that the ruling is universally applicable, covering every individual entrusted with responsibility, whether general or specific. Hence, the required action is for the individual to stand in the place of the one who appointed them, executing His laws and objectives (*maqāṣid*) as intended. This is clear and evident."<sup>23</sup>

The preceding spiritual and moral dimensions cover a vast scope of Islamic teachings. However, the intellectual dimension is vital, despite being less frequently discussed, as it is captured in the idea of building and developing Earth. Our intellectual faculties are not best used in manufacturing the weapons that obliterate human beings or technologies

23 Al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt*, 24–26.



## The intellectual dimension is vital, despite being less frequently discussed, as it is captured in the idea of building and developing Earth.

that ravage Earth's natural resources, nor even in devising novel idle pastimes and distractions. Instead, they are best directed toward discerning truths and constructing the instruments and programs that serve humanity's collective betterment. The intellectual and rational dimension of the Islamic teachings is connected with how one knows it is the truth (i.e., the epistemology of religious belief). Ibn Taymiyyah (d.728/1328) explains that Islam combines beneficial knowledge and righteous deeds, as well as spiritual purity (*zakā'*) and intellectual clarity (*dhakā'*); this is the meaning of Islam being the path of truth and guidance.<sup>24</sup>

The Qur'anic vocabulary of knowledge (*'ilm*), piety (*taqwā*), and righteousness (*birr*) also exemplify the intellectual, spiritual, and moral dimensions, respectively. The Qur'an teaches us a tremendous amount about these different but nevertheless interconnected attributes that we are meant to acquire. After describing many features of the natural world, the Qur'an tells us that those who have knowledge are the ones who truly fear Him, thus connecting the intellectual and spiritual domains:

Do you not see that God sends down rain from the sky, and We produce thereby fruits of varying colours? And in the mountains are tracts, white and red of varying shades and [some] intensely black. And among people and moving creatures and grazing livestock are various colors similarly. Only those reverently fear God, from among His servants, who have true knowledge (*al-'ulamā'*, i.e. those with *'ilm*). Indeed, God is Exalted in Might and Forgiving. (Qur'an 35:27-28)

---

24 Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masiḥ* (Riyadh: Dār al-Āṣimah, 1999), 3:102-3.



## The moral journey also overlaps with the spiritual and intellectual dimensions.

The moral journey also overlaps with the spiritual and intellectual dimensions. When the Qur'an talks about *birr* (righteousness), it includes not only our ethical conduct towards others but also our theological doctrines, which are part of our spiritual path to God and rational worldview:

Righteousness (*birr*) is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask [for help], and for freeing slaves; [and who] establishes prayer and gives zakah; [those who] fulfill their promise when they promise; and [those who] are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who have *taqwā*. (Qur'an 2:177)

Thus, viewed in another way, all of these dimensions are overlapping. Our intellectual faculties help us in our moral and spiritual duties, and our moral duties are ultimately part of our spiritual devotion to God.

## The all-encompassing paradigm behind the Islamic worldview is that of *tawḥīd* (monotheism).

The all-encompassing paradigm behind the Islamic worldview is that of *tawḥīd* (monotheism). Through its application of *tawḥīd*, Islam successfully incorporates the three domains into an understanding that renders life meaningful. Our intellectual journey becomes one of discerning God's signs in nature and scripture. Our spiritual journey becomes one of sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) in our worship of God alone, conversing with Him in our supplications and developing our love and reverence



for Him in our acts of worship. Our moral journey becomes one of inculcating within ourselves the qualities that make us His beloved. The Islamic tradition eloquently describes this latter concept of emulating certain qualities. In several passages, Ibn al-Qayyim spells out the link between the divine attributes and human virtue: just as God is Most Merciful, He loves those who show mercy, is Most Knowledgeable, and loves those with knowledge and similarly those with beauty, generosity, and so forth.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in the Islamic worldview, *tawhīd* serves as a conceptual anchor—a necessary grounding and scaffolding for all meaningful conceptions about life.

## What do we mean by worship?

**As Syed Naquib al-Attas explains, one’s “whole ethical life is one continuous ‘*ibādah* (worship), for Islam itself is a complete way of life.”**

As seen earlier, many authorities have explained the purpose of life by citing the Qur’anic verse that human beings were created to worship Allah. While many think of worship only in terms of the ritual acts like prayer (*ṣalāh*) or fasting (*ṣiyām*), the Islamic understanding is actually far broader. As Syed Naquib al-Attas explains, one’s “whole ethical life is one continuous ‘*ibādah* (worship), for Islam itself is a complete way of life.”<sup>26</sup> When asked about ‘*ibādah*, Imam Ibn Taymiyyah replied:

‘*ibādah* is a comprehensive term for everything that Allah loves and is pleased with, including both inward and outward speech and actions. It

---

25 Ibn al-Qayyim, ‘*Uddat al-Ṣābirin* (Riyadh: Dār ‘Aṭā’āt al-‘Ilm, 2019), 1:544; *Wābil al-ṣayyib* (Riyadh: Dār ‘Aṭā’āt al-‘Ilm, 2019), 1:78; *Ṭarīq al-Hijratayn* (Riyadh: Dār ‘Aṭā’āt al-‘Ilm, 2019), 1:273.

26 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 59.



encompasses prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage, truthful speech, fulfilling trusts, being kind to parents, maintaining family ties, honoring agreements, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong. It also includes striving against disbelievers and hypocrites, being kind to neighbors, orphans, the needy, travelers, slaves, and animals, as well as supplication, remembrance, recitation of the Qur'an, and similar acts of worship.

Additionally, love of Allah and His Messenger, fear of Allah, turning to Him in repentance, sincerity in religion, patience with His decree, gratitude for His blessings, contentment with His judgment, reliance on Him, hope in His mercy, and fear of His punishment—all of these are acts of worshipping Allah.

This is because worship of Allah is the beloved aim for which all of creation was created, as Allah said: "And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me." And it is for this purpose that all the prophets were sent.<sup>27</sup>

Viewed through this lens, worship is as broad as life itself. Any seemingly small action becomes an act of worship when connected to our broader mission and vision in life of serving God and striving for moral virtue. By performing one's daily activities with the intention of pleasing God and striving to follow His guidance, a person becomes a perpetual worshiper of God. Every goal is meaningful insofar as it leads toward fulfilling the purpose for which we were created by God. In fact, any goal that is altogether divorced from the servitude of God will fail to hold any real value.

### **Worship combines ultimate love with complete submission. Love is the foundation of a believer's relationship with God.**

Worship combines ultimate love with complete submission. Love is the foundation of a believer's relationship with God. Ibn al-Qayyim

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' al-fatāwā*, 10:149–50.



explains, "If you love someone but are not submissive and humble toward him, you are not his worshiper, and if you are submissive toward someone without love, you are not his worshiper. You worship someone if you are loving as well as submissive."<sup>28</sup> Every occurrence and experience reminds the believer of his/her Lord and intensifies his/her love for Him. Thus, there are important states of worship for the heart to engage in: patience, gratitude, trusting in Allah's decree, love of Allah, and so forth.

Worship of Allah can also be categorized in Islamic jurisprudence into obligatory and voluntary deeds. This is important, as the diversity of voluntary deeds demonstrates how Islam's understanding of the meaning of life may become personalized for the individual. Prophet Muhammad said:

Indeed, Allah has said, "Whoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, I have indeed declared war against him. My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more beloved to Me than the duties I have made obligatory upon him, and My servant continues to draw closer to Me with voluntary deeds (*nawāfil*) until I love him. Then, when I love him, I become his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. If he asks of Me, I will surely give to him; and if he seeks My protection, I will surely protect him. I do not hesitate in doing anything as I hesitate in [taking the life of] a believer, for he hates death, and I hate to disappoint him."<sup>29</sup>

One can choose to perform numerous types and categories of voluntary deeds based upon his/her personality. The Prophet's companions were not clones; each one excelled in different areas. Some of them distinguished themselves by their unique scholarship and teaching (e.g., Ibn 'Abbās, 'Ā'ishah, Zayd ibn Thābit), others through their intense devotion in voluntary prayers and fasting (e.g., 'Abdullāh ibn 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ, al-Juwayriyyah, Abū al-Dardā'). Some stood out for their charity

28 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ranks of the seekers*, 1:206.

29 *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, #6502.



## The Prophet's companions were not clones; each one excelled in different areas.

and philanthropy (e.g., ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf, Zaynab bint Khuzaymah), while others excelled in their courage in standing up for justice (e.g., Ṣafīyyah bint ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb), among many other diverse qualities of virtue. This concept can be described as “spiritual personality types.”<sup>30</sup> Imam Mālik (d.179/795) was once asked why he was busy in circles of knowledge rather than simply isolating himself in voluntary prayer. He replied by explaining this diversity:

Certainly, Allah has divided good actions like he has divided His providence (*rizq*). It may be that voluntary prayer has been facilitated for a person, but voluntary fasting has not. Another person may have a tendency for voluntary charity (*ṣadaqah*) but not voluntary fasting, and some are granted ease in *jihād* (a just struggle in the cause of God) and not in voluntary prayers. And I am pleased with what Allah has facilitated for me (the pursuit of knowledge). I do not think what I am focused on is of less value than what you are focused on. Rather, I hope that we are both upon goodness and righteousness.<sup>31</sup>

The great Andalusian hadith scholar Imam Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d.463/1071) links the above statement with the fact that Jannah has multiple gates for different acts of worship, as the following hadith informs us:

Narrated by Abu Hurayra, the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, said, “Whoever spends a pair (of anything) in the way of Allah will be called from the gates of Paradise, ‘O servant of Allah, this is good.’ Whoever is among the people of prayer will be called from the gate of prayer, whoever is among the people of *jihād* will be called from the gate of

30 Zohair Abdul-Rahman and Nazir Khan, “Souls Assorted: An Islamic Theory of Spiritual Personality,” Yaqeen Institute, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/souls-assorted-an-islamic-theory-of-spiritual-personality>

31 See Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd limā fi al-Muwattā min al-ma‘ānī wa-l-asānīd* (London: Furqan Institute, 2017), 5:202 and Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istidhkār* (Beirut: DKI, 2000), 5:146.



*jihād*, whoever is among the people of charity will be called from the gate of charity, and whoever is among the people of fasting will be called from the gate of Rayyān.”

Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq asked, “O Messenger of Allah, is it necessary that one be called only from one of these gates? Is it possible that one may be called from all of them?” The Prophet replied, “Yes, and I hope that you will be among them.”<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, such diversity is accommodated in the very architecture of Jannah itself. In other words, it is cosmologically grounded. There

### **Diversity is accommodated in the very architecture of Jannah itself. In other words, it is cosmologically grounded.**

are multiple entrances into Jannah. Imam Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah (d.541/1147) explains this regarding why the plural “ways” is used in the verse “And as for those who strive for Our sake, We will surely guide them to Our ways, for indeed, Allah is with those who do good” (29:69). He writes:

And “the ways” (*subul*) here could mean the paths of Paradise and its routes, or it could mean the multiplicity of deeds and the illuminated beliefs leading to Paradise. Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī said: *Jihād* in this verse does not mean only fighting the enemy, but it is also supporting the religion, refuting the falsifiers, countering the oppressors, and greatly emphasizing enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil. It includes struggling against oneself in obedience to Allah, exalted and glorious, which is the greater *jihād*.<sup>33</sup>

This multiplicity of voluntary actions must be built upon the foundations of the obligatory actions according to Islamic theology.

32 Mālik, *Muwattā*, #1009; *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, #3666. See Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd*, 5:201–02.

33 Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz*, 4:326.



Therefore, for the individual seeking life's meaning, part of the question is not only why did God create humanity, but, specifically, why did God create *me*. What am I meant to achieve during my life? What are the unique talents and opportunities God has given me that I can pursue in order to best serve my Creator and fulfill my responsibilities in this world? This makes the question of Islam's meaning of life tied to the individual's journey of self-discovery and self-actualization as a servant of God. Through investigating Islamic teachings in greater depth, one can now appreciate how new avenues of further exploration can be opened. When one asks "What is the purpose of life?" and answers, "to worship God," one is in fact opening the door to exploring and reflecting upon all of the ways in which that worship can be actualized in his/her personal journey.

## Islam and human suffering

The problem of evil is an age-old philosophical question that has been widely discussed by thinkers belonging to every culture and epoch. It is of tremendous importance because everyone experiences adversity to varying degrees and must come to terms with it. In a survey of roughly 800 individuals in the field of philosophy, both theists and atheists ranked this problem as the strongest argument against theism.<sup>34</sup>

**The problem of evil is an age-old philosophical question that has been widely discussed by thinkers belonging to every culture and epoch.**

---

34 Helen De Cruz, "How do philosophers evaluate natural theological arguments? An experimental philosophical investigation." In Helen De Cruz & Ryan Nichols (eds.), *Advances in Religion, Cognitive Science, and Experimental Philosophy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 119-42.



The question is intimately connected to our understanding of the meaning and purpose of life itself. The Greek philosopher Epicurus (d.270 BCE) is most famously associated with formulating the problem of evil, and it is no coincidence that he also espoused hedonism (the aim of human life is pleasure). If the only point of existence is to maximize bodily pleasure, then suffering will undoubtedly seem pointless. Consequently, Epicurus appears incapable of fathoming that God could decree the existence of suffering to allow opportunities for human spiritual and moral growth, in line with the very aims of creation.

### **The existence of violence, injustice, and falsehood allow people to exert themselves in striving for peace, justice, and truth.**

God tells us, “He created death and life in order to test you as to which of you is best in deed” (67:2). Viewing life as a trial enables us to recognize that God tests each of us in different ways. Both prosperity and adversity serve to inculcate the attributes of gratitude, patience, humility, reliance on God, and other spiritual virtues. Moreover, suffering provides an opportunity to cultivate moral virtue through our concern for the wellbeing of others. There could be no opportunity for mercy if the world contained no suffering. Likewise, the existence of violence, injustice, and falsehood allow people to exert themselves in striving for peace, justice, and truth. The Islamic tradition contains considerable literature exploring this topic and the responses offered.<sup>35</sup> Imam

35 Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Safaruk Chowdhury, *Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2021). See also the following articles from Yaqeen Institute: Suleiman Hani, “The Problem of Evil: A Multifaceted Islamic Solution,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, April 20, 2020, <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/the-problem-of-evil-a-multifaceted-islamic-solution>; Mohammed Elshinawy, “Why Do People Suffer? God’s Existence & the Problem of Evil,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, July 2, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/why-do-people-suffer-gods-existence-the-problem-of-evil>; Tallal Zeni, “The Divine Wisdom in Allowing Evil to Exist: Perspectives from Ibn al-Qayyim,” Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, December 6, 2018, <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/the-divine-wisdom-in-allowing-evil-to-exist-perspectives-from-ibn-al-qayyim>



Ibn al-Qayyim explains that were there no challenges or adversaries, the true nature of worship and devotion would never come to light, for these entail placing one's spiritual and moral duty above the most intense personal needs by sacrificing one's time, wealth, and life for virtue and going against the crowd for a higher truth. Without these struggles, the depth of one's moral and spiritual commitment would never truly show.<sup>36</sup> This is also tied to free will, for our choices can have moral value only if they are freely chosen.

**Lang observes that the angels' initial objection precisely captures the sentiment expressed in the problem of evil, and the response to the angels in the narrative is equally intriguing.**

Echoing the theme of suffering as necessary for spiritual growth, Lang writes, "This idea of the necessity of suffering, adversity, and struggle to prompt our quest for moral-spiritual evolution, as well as our need to remember life's ultimate purpose in difficult times, recurs throughout the Qur'an."<sup>37</sup> Lang has written extensively on his reflections on the Qur'anic approach to the problem of evil and how it informed his journey to embrace the Islamic message concerning life's purpose. One of the key elements in his account is the centrality of the Qur'an's first story: the creation of Adam as a *khalifah* on Earth. Unlike the Christian narrative, this event is not intended as a punishment nor a fall from grace. Moreover, Lang observes that the angels' initial objection precisely captures the sentiment expressed in the problem of evil, and the response to the angels in the narrative is equally intriguing. He writes:

The angels' objection stressed only one side of human character: mankind's ability to do great violence and wrong. Yet the angels were blinded,

36 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Tarīq al-hijratayn* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2019), 255.

37 Jeffrey Lang, *Struggling to Surrender: The Story of a Modern Day Muslim* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1994), 56.



as was I, to the other side of human nature. Indeed some humans could do terrible wrong, but others could do tremendous good. Some individuals were capable of great self-sacrifice, of the noblest acts of justice, of the most generous displays of charity, warmth, and kindness. Some persons could show the greatest mercy and compassion to their fellow man. Yet I, like the angels, did not consider this. For too long I had seen only the dark side of human beings. While it is true that some of us can be terribly destructive, others can be tremendously kind and good, and we all know of great exemplars of both tendencies.<sup>38</sup>

The other crucial element in Lang's presentation is the role of the divine names. He writes:

Each time we show genuine kindness to others, we experience something of the infinite kindness that originates in the Benevolent. Each time we pardon another's offense, we experience something of the infinite forgiveness that comes from the Forgiving. Each time we stand up for the rights of the oppressed, we experience something of the infinite guardianship that the Protector provides. Every time we are honest, we experience something of the Truth that has the Truthful as its source. In these ways we become the instruments by which others experience God's being. His mercy, compassion, kindness, peace, and so on, flow through us to those around us and we become instruments in this divine dispensation. Thus we have the potential to know God on a level more profound than we can know any man or woman, because His attributes can affect others through our deeds, and we experience something of His infinite goodness as our own. This makes us capable of attaining a level of intimacy with God that no human relationship can approximate.<sup>39</sup>

In this regard, Lang in fact is echoing a theme that is deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition concerning the concept of emulating the divine attributes, as discussed above with reference to Ibn al-Qayyim's writings. Moreover, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111), wrote a book on the

---

38 Jeffrey Lang, *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2004), 31.

39 See also Jeffrey Lang, *Even Angels Ask: A Journey to Islam in America* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1997), 47.



concept of God in which he included a chapter entitled, “Explaining that the perfection and salvation of the worshiper is in emulating the Divine qualities of God and embodying their meanings to the extent that is humanly conceivable.”<sup>40</sup> In this paradigm, the entire purpose of suffering and life itself is ultimately to cultivate the virtues that allow us to know God directly through our lived experiences. This perspective is reminiscent of the interpretation of Qur’an 51:56 offered by the early Qur’anic exegete Mujāhid ibn Jabr (d.102/722): “I did not create humans and Jinn except to worship Me” effectively means “to know Me” (*illā li ya‘rifūnī*).<sup>41</sup>

**The entire purpose of suffering and life itself is ultimately to cultivate the virtues that allow us to know God directly through our lived experiences.**

This Qur’anic perspective on the broader question of human suffering can then be personalized to questions that indicate feelings of spiritual isolation. Individuals who experience traumatic life events may find it particularly difficult to process their spiritual significance and may ask, “Why is this happening to me? Does God hate me?” In a recent work, Najwa Awad and Sarah Sultan—both Muslim mental health therapists—offer a Qur’anic perspective on reconciling trauma with faith. They frame their model through the Qur’anic chapter *al-Duḥā*. They write:

What fascinated us, as professionals in this field, was the amount of clinical research we’ve stumbled upon in the course of writing this book that is consistent with the method that Allah ﷻ used to comfort Muhammad ﷺ at a traumatic time in his life. While we believe that Allah ﷻ is capable of

40 A. Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Maqṣad al-asnā fi sharh asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Muhammad ‘Uthmān al-Khisht (Cairo, Egypt: Maktabat al-Qur’an, 1984), 45.

41 Aḥmad al-‘Umrānī, *Mawsū‘at madrasat Makkah fi al-tafsīr* (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2010), 5:792.



changing one's psychological state at will, perhaps the inference that even the best of humans is vulnerable to life's traumatic events was meant to provide us with a sense of comfort that we're not alone in facing life's darkest challenges.<sup>42</sup>

This chapter counsels the Prophet during a particularly difficult time in his life: a prolonged pause in revelation during which the Quraysh increased their efforts to humiliate him. When this chapter was revealed, God reassures him with a series of verses that emphasize attachment ("Your Lord has not forsaken you"), perspective-changing ("and the Hereafter is better for you than the first life"), addressing cognitions ("Did He not find you an orphan and give you refuge, and find you lost and guide you?"), the importance of behavioral changes that reinforce positive cognitions ("so as for the orphan do not oppress him and as for the beggar do not repel him"), and, finally, cultivating gratitude ("and make mention of the favor of your Lord").<sup>43</sup>

**The inference that even the best of humans is vulnerable to life's traumatic events was meant to provide us with a sense of comfort that we're not alone in facing life's darkest challenges.**

## Conclusion

The meaning of life is a question which strikes at the very core of the human being's search for truth. Nihilistic gestures of dismissal will fail to keep the question at bay and relativistic answers will continue to fall short of offering any useful insights. Moreover, the true answer to

---

42 Najwa Awad and Sarah Sultan, *Your Lord Has Not Forsaken You: Addressing the Impact of Trauma on Faith* (Leicestershire: Kube 2023), 28–29.

43 *Ibid.*, *Your Lord Has Not Forsaken You*, 29–42.



this question will continue to elude those absorbed in the modern engines of hedonistic distractions and rampant consumerism. Meanwhile, many who do seek answers to this question overlook the Islamic tradition. As we have seen, the Islamic worldview offers a cogent elaboration of life's purpose through its foundational concept of *tawhīd* (monotheism). It links spiritual, intellectual, and moral growth in an elegant and compelling synthesis. In Islam, the purpose of life is to strive to come closer to God, remaining steadfast in our devotion to Him through all the tribulations of life, and fulfilling the ethical responsibilities with which He has entrusted us. This is what renders our suffering and sacrifice meaningful and gives weight to every virtuous deed, whether small or large.

**The Islamic worldview offers a cogent elaboration of life's purpose through its foundational concept of *tawhīd* (monotheism). It links spiritual, intellectual, and moral growth in an elegant and compelling synthesis.**

Given the existing trends in society and popular culture, the meaning of life is likely to remain one of humanity's foremost topics. Therefore, it will continue to warrant dedicated intellectual resources from Muslim scholars that bring the relevant Islamic teachings into conversation with contemporary philosophical challenges.



# Annotated bibliography

## *Beginner*

In this section I have selected very concise works that contain some material that directly addresses Islam's view on life's meaning. These accessible works can serve as suitable introductions to the subject for both non-Muslims and Muslims.

Muhammad, H.R.H. Prince Ghazi Bin. *A Thinking Person's Guide to Islam: The Essence of Islam in Twelve Verses from the Quran*. London: White Thread Press, 2017.

This very short and concise book provides an accessible overview of Islam's teachings and basic message. Chapter 4 addresses "Why did God create people?" and connects it with some of Islam's important values. The author is a Jordanian professor of philosophy and graduate of al-Azhar University.

Hamid, Abdul Wahid. *Islam the Natural Way*. Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1996.

A basic introduction to the Islamic worldview, it opens with defining a worldview. It also identifies where we come from and our purpose in life according to Islam's teachings.

Awad, Najwa and Sarah Sultan. *Your Lord Has Not Forsaken You: Addressing the Impact of Trauma on Faith*. Leicestershire: Kube, 2023.

This work effectively addresses the personal dimension of life's meaning, particularly as it relates to the feelings of spiritual isolation that can result from negative life experiences.

Tzortzis, Hamza Andreas. *The Divine Reality: God, Islam and the Mirage of Atheism*. Hong Kong: Lion Rock Publishing, 2020.



In chapter 2 of this comprehensive critique of atheism from an Islamic perspective, the author addresses atheism's nihilistic element. Chapter 11 deals with the problem of evil and Islam's response.

## **Intermediate**

No intermediate or advanced work is exclusively dedicated to a systematic examination of Islam's answer to the meaning of life. However, certain related topics are very important to understand for researchers exploring this subject. In this section, I have selected some classical and contemporary works that provide a more detailed analysis of some of them. Although the analysis is quite detailed, the discussion remains accessible.

Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Claude Field. Martino Fine Books, 2017.

Al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111) is one of the most widely read authors in Islamic history. This work, written in Persian for a lay audience, simplifies some of the themes from his magnum opus *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* and focuses on knowledge of the self, God, this worldly life, and the hereafter.

Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya on the Invocation of God: Al-Wabil al-Sayyib*, trans. M. Youssef Slitine and M. Abdurrahman Fitzgerald. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2000.

The extensive writings of Ibn al-Qayyim (d.751/1350) serve as a bridge among theology, ethics, and spirituality and provide ample material for discussing the Islamic worldview's impact on various dimensions of life. In this work of what may be termed "spiritual psychology," the author focuses on the concept of remembrance of God, describes its broader significance to life, and examines how our thoughts transform our perceptions and actions.



Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī, *In Pursuit of Virtue (al-Akhlāq wa'l-Siyar)*, trans. Muhammad Abū Laylah. London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1990.

In his analysis of this work, Muhammad Abū Laylah discusses Ibn Ḥazm's (d.456/1064) views of ethics and personality traits from an Islamic perspective to provide a useful impression of how Islam's worldview informs moral self-development. While he draws on reflections from scripture, Ibn Ḥazm also provides personal reflections from his experience and observations of human behavior.

Khan, Nazir. *The Straight Path: How Sūrat al-Fātiḥah addresses modern ideologies*. Leicestershire: Kube, 2025.

This book provides an overview of the Islamic worldview through the lens of the Qur'an's opening chapter. Through a commentary on each verse, it develops a critique of ten dominant ideologies of modernity and contrasts each one with Islam's ethical vision for humanity.

Zarabozo, Jamaal al-Din M. *Purification of the Soul: Concept, Process and Means*. Denver: Al-Basheer Publications & Translations, 2002.

This comprehensive book examines how each of Islam's five pillars and six articles of faith relate to the soul's purification. Drawing upon abundant citations from the Qur'an and Hadith, the author explains how this goal is an overarching aim of the religion and related to its meaning for life.

Lang, Jeffrey. *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help*. Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2004.

A major aspect of addressing life's meaning is answering the question of human suffering. The author, a professor of mathematics and former atheist, provides an excellent demonstration of just how much information one can extract by engaging closely with the Qur'anic text itself by being a very careful and inquisitive reader. In the first—and highly recommended—section, Lang presents his intellectual



journey as a conversation with its verses, exploring how they present the meaning of life and the purpose behind human suffering. The subsequent sections attempt to answer questions that are sources of religious doubts for Muslims, but are not sufficiently versed in the relevant disciplines of Islamic scholarship.

Ponders, Yusuf. *Islam and Nihilism: My Poison and My Cure*. London: Sapience Publishing, 2023.

This work provides a detailed discussion on the contemporary rise in nihilism within society, analyzing some of its underlying causes, and offering a Muslim response. There is also discussion on the connection between nihilism and the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). The author also responds to common arguments typically raised by atheists.

## Advanced

In this section, I have selected works that help researchers see how philosophical engagement with the Islamic worldview can enrich our dialogue with others as well as strengthen our own tradition's understanding of the answers. Each thinker comes from a different philosophical and intellectual background, but demonstrates important insights. This section is labeled "Advanced" because it mostly benefits those readers with prior familiarity with some of the philosophical themes in Western thought (eg. secularism, liberalism, materialism, atheism) and a robust training in the Islamic tradition.

Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*. Skudai, Johor, Malaysia: Penerbit UTM Press, 2014.

The author provides an intriguing exposition of the Islamic worldview by focusing on the significance of certain Islamic vocabulary



to explain how Islam's understanding of that differs from that of the Western tradition.

Draz, Muhammad Abdullah. *The Moral World of the Quran*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

This modern-era Qur'anic scholar and philosopher identifies how the Qur'anic worldview lays the foundations for ethical thought and conduct. When examining how Islam addresses the meaning of life, the goal of humanity achieving moral virtue typically arises. However, the question that needs to be examined systematically is how the Qur'an provides an optimal framework for achieving moral virtue in contradistinction to other philosophies of morality. This work provides a valuable starting point for researchers exploring this aspect.

Izetbegović, Alija. *Islam between East and West*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1989.

This book provides a wide-ranging philosophical exploration of several themes relevant to the meaning of life, including the topic of human origins, the nature of the human being as both a physical and a spiritual being, human suffering, free will, morality, atheism, and a perspective on Islam's uniqueness in addressing the human condition. The author writes, "Submission to God is the only human and dignified way out of the unsolvable senselessness of life, a way out without revolt, despair, nihilism, or suicide" (p.291).

Jackson, Sherman A. *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

This book addresses the problem of evil, which is deeply linked to the question of life's meaning, through a fairly detailed engagement with the various schools of Islamic theology. It therefore provides a useful frame of reference for students seeking to delve deeper into the classical-era theological works and bring them into conversation with questions of the modern era.



Khalil, Mohammad Hassan. *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012

This important academic reference on the Islamic views on salvation discusses some of the varying opinions and relevant nuances of this topic.

Chowdhury, Safaruk. *Islamic Theology and the Problem of Evil*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2021.

This work of analytic theology presents various positions from within the Islamic tradition concerning the problem of evil, but also attempts to defend them using philosophical arguments that engage with modern scholarship in the philosophy of religion. The book includes a dedicated discussion of some non-typical topics, including disability, suffering in the afterlife, and animal suffering.

Eaton, Gai. *Islam and the Destiny of Man*. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2005.

This wide-ranging commentary on Islamic thought and the modern world contains some reflections on the meaning of life and the Islamic worldview. The author also discusses Islamic history and Islam in the modern world, particularly Europe. The eloquent prose is a highlight, and many descriptions of elements in Islamic thought will strike the reader as particularly poetic. However, readers should also note that there may be ideas presented that are in tension with traditionally constituted Islamic orthodoxy, including the author's perennialism.

## **Muslim cinema**

“Omar (سلسلة عمر الفاروق) with English Subtitles.” MBC, 2012. Co-produced by Qatar TV and directed by Hatem Ali.



This 30-episode historical drama series chronicles the life of the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. Historical details were verified by a team of esteemed scholars, among them Salmān al-‘Awdah, Akram Ḍiyā al-‘Umarī, ‘Alī al-Ṣallābī, and Yusuf al-Qaraḍāwī. Powerful scenes highlight how the early converts found meaning in life through Islam’s teachings. A particularly poignant example arises in the contrast depicted between Bilāl and Waḥshī, both initially slaves of the Quraysh in Makkah. The former finds true spiritual freedom through embracing Islam, in contrast to the latter’s continued psychological anguish despite attaining physical freedom. Available at <https://archive.org/details/MBC-Omar-Series>.

## **Non-Islamic sources**

This section is useful for Muslims to understand the prevailing answers to the question of life’s meaning in both popular culture and academic discourse in non-Muslim circles. Muslims need to bring their own tradition’s answers to conversations dealing with such questions.

## **Books**

Baggini, Julian. *What’s It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*. London: Granta Books, 2005.

This book provides a “deflationary” account of the meaning-of-life question, a popular approach in Western culture. In other words, the question is reduced to a matter of individual preference and relates to the ordinary activities that human beings choose to do in order to “determine” meaning for themselves. The book draws heavily on the ideas of the French existentialist philosopher and playwright Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80).

Eagleton, Terry. *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.



This book critiques some of the individualistic bias in Baggini's work, but approaches the question from another angle within the Western tradition drawing upon Aristotle's ethics and Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas of language. Eagleton argues that the meaning of life is happiness and love as a shared goal of peoples working together for the flourishing of civilization. Some of the limitations of this perspective are best seen by bringing it into conversation with al-Attas' discussion on happiness in the Islamic tradition versus the West.

Thagard, Paul. *The brain and the meaning of life*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

One of modern culture's most pervasive worldviews is scientism, which holds that science alone provides knowledge of the truth and therefore has replaced religion and philosophy. This book is useful insofar as it serves as an example of the philosophically shallow attempts to "answer" questions about the meaning of life from a purely scientific lens. According to the author, life is nothing beyond enjoying work, play, and love and exciting our neural circuits in the process.

## Lectures

Vervaeke, John. *Awakening from the Meaning Crisis*. YouTube series 2019. Transcripts available at <https://www.meaningcrisis.co/all-transcripts/>

In this 50-part lecture series, cognitive scientist John Vervaeke explores the contemporary "meaning crisis"—a pervasive sense of disconnection and nihilism in modern society. Drawing from cognitive science, philosophy, psychology, and religious studies, Vervaeke traces the historical evolution of meaning-making, examining periods such as the Axial Age, the Enlightenment, and modernity. He delves into concepts like "relevance realization," the four kinds of knowing (propositional, procedural, perspectival, and participatory), and the



role of wisdom and mindfulness in cultivating a meaningful life. This series offers several arguments that disarm much of the Western cultural apprehension around looking to religion for answers and even raises some considerations that will be familiar to those well-versed in the Islamic tradition. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLND-1JCRq8Vuh3f0P5qjrSdb5eC1ZfZwWJ>

Garfield, Jay. *Meaning of Life: Perspectives from the World's Great Intellectual Traditions*. The Teaching Company, LLC, 2011.

This thirty-six lecture series by an American professor of philosophy overviews perspectives ranging from Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Stoicism to thinkers from the European enlightenment. Despite being a very accessible overview and useful resource for developing comparative studies among different systems of thought, it is noteworthy that Islamic thought is absent despite representing the perspective of one quarter of the world's population.

## Cinema

These films provide excellent examples of how the meaning of life is frequently presented in Western culture and equated with ideas like pursuing material success or mundane pleasures.

*The Pursuit of Happyness*. Columbia Pictures, 2006. Directed by Gabriele Muccino.

A struggling salesman becomes homeless with his young son. The movie focuses on the importance of perseverance and hard work, with the protagonist eventually forming his own multimillion dollar company. This narrative repackages the fantasy of the American dream, that anyone can be rich and successful through hard work in America and that poverty is the result of bad choices. Not only does the film reduce success to materialistic terms, consistent with



the pervading ethos of Western culture, but it fails to acknowledge the broader structural factors that can impede or facilitate personal success. In short, it presents an overly simplistic and potentially misleading view of how one achieves success.

*Soul*. Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures, 2020. Directed by Pete Docter and Kemp Powers and produced by Dana Murray.

Produced by the cinema behemoths of Disney and Pixar, this movie is indicative of several dominant themes in Western popular culture concerning the meaning of life.

In this film, a middle school music teacher who aspires to become a professional jazz musician gets a chance to perform with a renowned jazz band but dies in an accident prior to that, at which point his soul enters the afterlife. Determined to return to his body to fulfill his dream, he returns to the world and discovers along the way that the “true meaning” of life is nothing more than the simple joys of life and helping others find their happiness.

The fundamental message oscillates between relativism (life is whatever you choose to enjoy in it) and nihilism (life has no ultimate or intended purpose). If life is just about securing the small pleasures, then is life no longer worth living for people suffering poverty, disease, and oppression? Does life come with no moral obligations to the One who granted us life and toward the rest of His creation? Such a morally inadequate and narcissistically self-obsessed narrative could only arise in a society of the privileged and affluent.



The crisis of meaning is one of the central philosophical and practical questions of our time. This crisis often manifests itself in the rise of nihilism (no meaning), hedonism (pleasure seeking), and - lately - of self-assisted suicide. In this paper, Dr. Nazir Khan engages in a rich discussion of the Islamic tradition and its views on the meaning of life. He discusses modern philosophers, like Russell, Schopenhauer, and Frankl, and circles back to the Qur'an and Muslim scholarship. Khan roots the argument in *tawhid* (Islamic monotheism), which grounds the human quest for meaning in servitude to God. The paper is a compelling account of Islam's vision of life that satisfies human need for spiritual, moral, and intellectual aspects of being.



**Nazir Khan** (MD, FRCPC) is a medical doctor, clinical neuroscientist, Islamic theologian, and specialist in Qur'anic sciences. He is an Associate Professor at McMaster University and a doctoral candidate in Islamic theology at the University of Nottingham. He memorized the whole Qur'an during his youth, has ijāzāt in all ten readings of the Qur'an through both major and minor routes of transmission, and has also received certifications in the six books of hadith as well as numerous works of Islamic theology. He has served as a volunteer Imam for many years. He is also a consultant for the Manitoba Islamic Association Fiqh Committee. Following medical school, he completed his residency in Diagnostic Radiology at the University of Manitoba and his fellowship in Neuroradiology at the University of Calgary with dual-board certification. His expertise in both medical sciences and Islamic theology uniquely positions him to address challenging contemporary questions regarding faith, reason, and science. He is a senior fellow at Yaqeen Institute and served as the founding president of Yaqeen Institute's branch in Canada.