

What is the Purpose of Life?

A Muslim Perspective

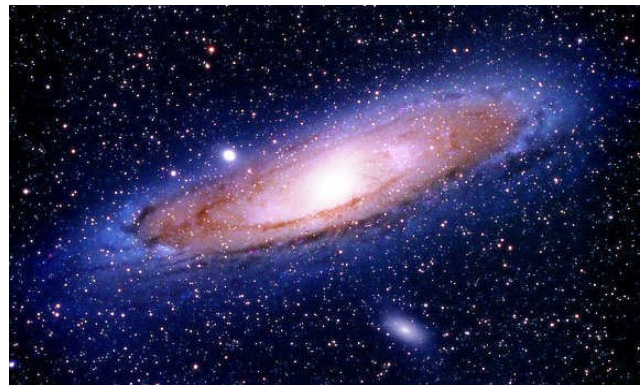
By Arshad Gamiet

Experience Islam Week
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Main Lecture Theatre
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Dear friends, I greet you with the greeting words of paradise, *As-salaamu 'alaykum, warahma tullaahi wabarakaatuh!* May the Peace and Mercy and Blessings of God, Allah, be with you!

These days, our busy lives have become so frenetic, many of us find no time for contemplation, for reflection, for taking in the Big Picture, and for asking the Big Questions. Our work, study, sport, recreation and family life keeps us constantly engaged in the detail. But we must occasionally step outside this routine. We

must reflect and ponder what might seem imponderable. We enjoy learning about the natural world, watching David Attenborough documentaries. We look at the world around us, from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, from spinning electrons in the realm of quantum physics to those spectacular galaxies viewed through the Hubble telescope. Where did all this come from? How did the cosmos begin? Where will it end, and most compelling of all



questions, why? Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? *What's* the point of *my* life? An individual human life, set out on the enormous canvas of space and time, appears to be so infinitesimally small and insignificant. What is my own place in the great cosmic scheme of things? What happens to me when I die? Is death just a big black hole, or is there some form of conscious existence after death? Is this really important? Do I care? Should I care? Or, should I just push these thoughts out of sight and get on with the laundry, do the shopping, or rush to complete those work deadlines that must be met?

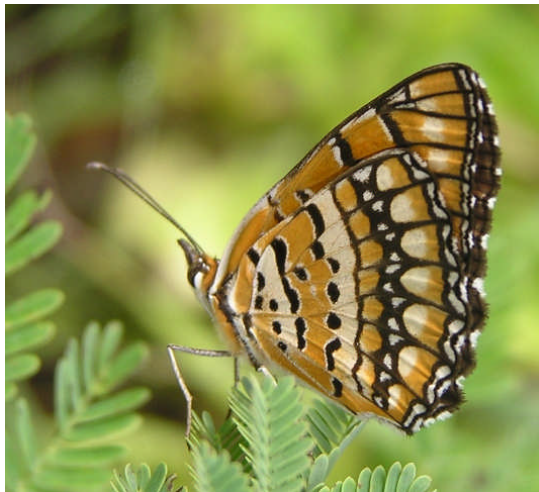
Now, we can bury those big questions under so many immediate priorities of daily life. But, like a nagging headache, they lurk in the back of our minds, and they resurface, time and again. Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life?

Science is very good at telling us *how* things work, but the *why* part is another matter. Programmes on science and astronomy, and David Attenborough's award winning natural history films tell us about the fragile, complex relationships that sustain life on our planet. But they don't tell us *why we're here*. That question belongs to the realm of philosophy and faith.

“Why” is probably the most difficult question to answer, if we rely entirely on our limited human resources. Here I have a pen and a watch. I know that someone made this pen, and its purpose is to write. Someone made this watch to tell the time. If the pen writes beautifully and the watch tells time accurately, then they fulfil the purpose for which they were made. But what about human beings? What about us?



What is the purpose of human life? Some people might well ask, does life have any purpose at all? Are we not simply the product of some chance encounter, a random collision of atoms and molecules? Did we not simply evolve from the primordial ooze, unaided by any higher intelligence, over aeons of time since the big bang 14 billion years ago? Surely there's no place for God in this equation! Some would argue, there's no *proof* that God exists! Life has no higher purpose, they say. These are all musings from ancient books of religion, with no relevance today!



You know, when I consider the finely tuned laws of physics and biology that sustain life on our planet, the dozens of chemical and biological processes that are at work, right now, within my own body, keeping me comfortable, healthy and alive, unaided by my conscious will, I find it hard to believe it all began by chance. I find it so hard to believe that a completely random and chaotic beginning could produce so much order, so much beauty and balance without an Intelligent Creator behind it. The mathematical probability of creating so much order, design and harmony from an utterly chaotic and cataclysmic event, just boggles my mind. Sir Fred Hoyle, the noted astronomer who died some years

ago, gave this analogy. He said that if you believe the universe was created purely by chance, it's like saying, a tornado can tear its way through a junkyard, and as it passes, it leaves a complete Boeing 747 assembled and ready for take-off!

My friends, if anyone can believe that, they'll believe anything. For me, it seems much more rational and reasonable to believe that everything around us is the result of a conscious, deliberate act of creation, not simply a cosmic accident. This crucial argument is what separates believers, people of all faiths on one hand, from non-believers or atheists on the other.



In the final analysis, we have a choice: to believe or not to believe. And, as with every other choice we make in our lives, there are consequences. As long as we accept these consequences, we can believe whatever we like.

Let us now address the question: What is Islam's view on the Purpose of Life?

Are we here just because God was bored, so He created us for idle sport, or are we part of a purposeful creation?

The Holy Quran tells us, [in Sura Zariyaat, Ch 52:v56]

“I have not created Jinn and Mankind except that they should worship me.” [Sura Dhariyat 51:v56]

In another verse, Allah says that: *“Laqad karamna bani Aadam...”* “I have truly honoured the Children of Adam, giving them mastery over land and sea, and over a greater part of My creation...” [Sura 17:v70]

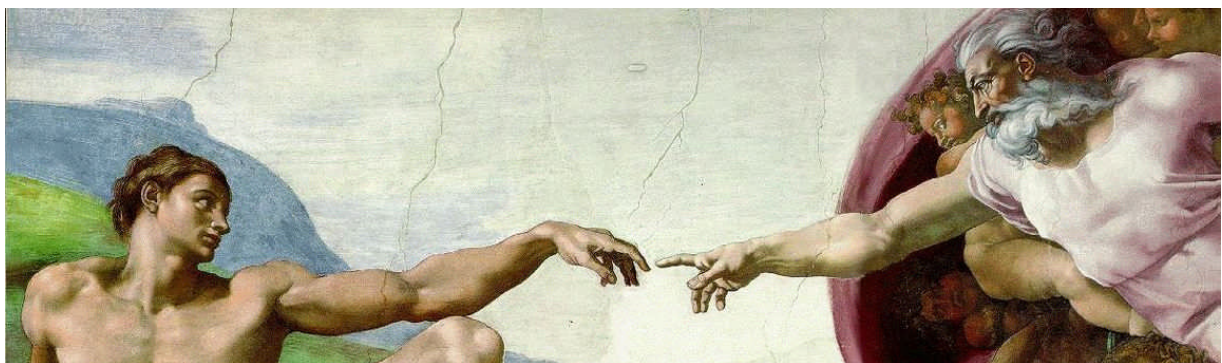
These 2 verses confirm that God created the world for our enjoyment, and He created us to thank Him, to worship Him. The word for faith, *Iman* in Arabic, also has a strong connotation of gratitude. The word *kafir* has connotes ingratitude, and describes one who denies God, who denies faith and therefore refuses to thank Him. In another place, Muslims recite in every prayer:

“Truly, my prayer, my sacrifice, my life and my death is for God, the Lord of all the worlds. I do not ascribe partners to Him, and I am the first of those who surrender their will to God.” [Sura 6:162]

At this point, it may be useful for me to explain the precise meaning of terms like Islam, Muslim, and Allah:

Islam is derived from Arabic root letters, ‘seen,’ ‘laam’ and ‘meem,’ equivalent to ‘S’ ‘L’ and ‘M’. Islam literally means ‘Peace’ and it also means ‘submission’ or ‘willing and joyous surrender’ of the human will, to Allah. ‘Allah’ is the Arabic word for ‘God’ in English. Christian Arabs also use the word Allah for God. A ‘Muslim’ is therefore one who submits the whimsical and capricious ego to what pleases Allah.

Muslims generally prefer to use the word Allah rather than God. One reason, I guess, is that words can often have very different associations. When we speak of God in English, some people might imagine a wise old man with a long white beard, reaching out so that His finger touches Adam’s finger. No doubt this mental image has been nurtured by Michelangelo’s famous fresco paintings on the Sistine chapel ceiling in Rome.



Muslims have no such imagery to associate with Allah. He is infinitely beyond anything we can imagine. And, although we cannot actually see Him with our eyes, we know that He sees us. He says He is closer to us than our jugular veins. No vision can grasp Him, yet His grasp is over all vision. We know Allah by the *Asmaa' Ul Husna*, the 99 Beautiful Names in the Holy Quran.



But, I digress. God, Allah created you and me, and every other creature, to worship Him. What exactly do we mean by 'worship?' Here again, words and meanings are important. To some people, worship is a private affair, reserved for synagogues on Saturday or Churches and temples on Sunday. That's it.

Worship in Islam is a wider concept that has formal and informal dimensions. Formal worship is regular prayer, 5 times a day, fasting, charity and pilgrimage to Mecca. Informal worship is any good deed, however small, that is done purely out of love and gratitude to Allah. There must be no ulterior motive, no eagerness to make an impression, no vanity, no desire to massage the ego. Sincerity is the key. In one narration of Prophet Muhammad *sws*, God, Allah, describes three people whose good deeds will take them to hellfire: A martyr who sought martyrdom to impress people, a scholar who sought knowledge to be admired by people and a philanthropist who gave generously so that people could say, "there goes a generous man." All three incurred Divine displeasure because they lacked sincerity. They were massaging their egos. They did good deeds for the wrong reasons. If we want to earn Allah's good pleasure, our actions must be absolutely selfless and sincere.

This relationship between us, our creator and the natural world, our biosphere, is a crucial one. Sheikh Abdul Hakim Murad, a Cambridge scholar, uses a good analogy. He describes Allah as the generous Landlord who gives us the keys to His property. He wants us to enjoy the property on one condition: that we acknowledge who owns it, and that we treat all the other tenants with courtesy and respect. And for rent, He only wants us to say, thank you. That's all. It really is as simple as that. Yet, for some people, saying thank you to God seems to be the most difficult thing to do.

Islam teaches that we human beings are not evil or sinful by nature, but we are forgetful. And it is to this basically good but forgetful and infinitely distractible creature that the Holy Quran, Allah's revealed Word, is addressed.



Indeed, the Arabic word for humankind is *insaan*, which also implies forgetfulness. The human personality comprises a physical body, a mind and a spirit, a *ruuh*, in Arabic. This is the breath of Allah that was inspired into us a few weeks before we were born. The body is made of physical matter, or 'sounding clay, like pottery; mud, moulded into shape' as the Quran describes it. The soul, the *ruuh*, is from another dimension. It is timeless and space-less. It was created before time and space began, and it will exist after we die. The soul travels along with this body through the 70, 80 90 or so years until our physical death. Then the body decomposes into its constituent elements, the carbon, magnesium, calcium, the organic matter, the gases and liquids

that return to the earth whence it came. We “push up the daisies,” as the saying goes. When we die, our soul leaves the body and flies like a celestial bird through the heavenly spheres to its Lord. We come into this world with nothing and we leave it with nothing except for the record of our deeds, good and bad.

Just like this pen was made to write, beautifully, and this watch was made to tell the time, accurately, so we human beings were made for worship. It’s in our nature. We’re designed for worship. It’s hard wired into our personality, etched into the silicon chips of the human soul. But because we’re basically so forgetful and distractible, we worship all manner of gods. For some of us it’s football, for others it’s shopping, ‘retail therapy’ is the euphemism. But seriously, we’re trying to fill a god-shaped gap, a spiritual vacuum in our lives.

Am I a body attached to a soul or a soul attached to a body? Which part of me is more important? Without a soul I am no different to the wild beasts that roam the earth: eating, sleeping, mating and raising the next generation of my species. My soul makes me truly human as it connects me with time-space and eternity. It longs to be reunited with its Maker. The poet Jalaluddin Rumi asks if you know why the reed flute sings such a mournful and melancholic tune. It’s because it longs to return to the reed bed from which it was separated. This is an allegory of the human soul, longing for Allah, yearning to return to its origins.

Inna lil-laahi wa inna ilayhir raaji oon, says the Holy Quran. “From Allah do we come and to Him is our return.” We all came from the same origins and our destiny is to return there when we die. But will our return be a joyous one, eagerly anticipating that meeting with our generous Landlord? Or will we go kicking and screaming, full of regrets, having wasted our lives in forgetfulness and sin? The choice my dear friends, is ours. The consequences of that choice are inescapable.

.....

Muslims are warned, in their Sacred Book, that none shall enter *Al-Jannah*, God’s garden, i.e. Paradise, except those with a sound heart: *Qalbun saleem*. It has nothing to do with our wealth, our lineage, geographic, racial or cultural origins. Even all our good deeds are no guarantee. They could have been driven by selfish or unworthy motives. Only a sound heart will do. That’s the purpose of life, to purify the heart. I refer of course, not to the physical pump that drives our circulatory system, but the spiritual heart, the locus of our personality that drives our passions, our emotions and desires. Prophet Muhammad sws described this effort as the greater *jihad*, the greater struggle, to purify and refine the spiritual heart. The lesser jihad, he said, is that of military self defence.



I was in Makka 2 years ago, one of 4 million pilgrims, all dressed in the same white linen robes of the Hajj. No one could distinguish rich from poor, high born or humble; President, poet and peasant all looked the same, just as Allah sees us, without our designer clothes, without our trappings of status and authority. It was like a dress rehearsal for the day of judgement. Then a young may came up to me and asked an

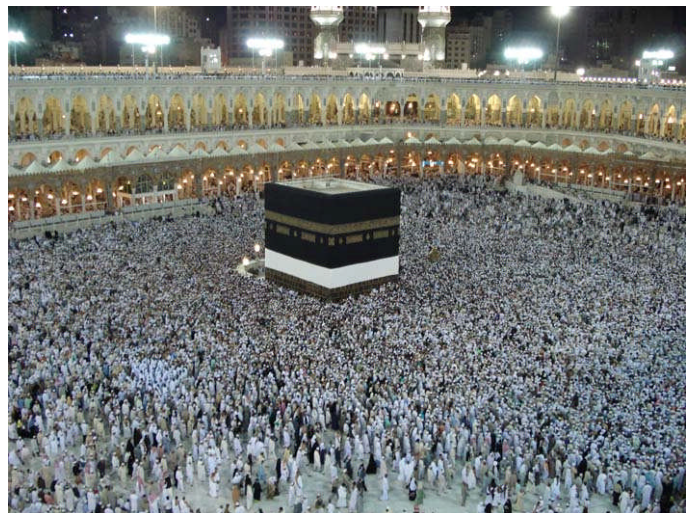
intriguing question: “What can you give Allah that He doesn’t already have?” I was bemused....stumped. What could I give the Lord of all creation that He doesn’t already have? After a while, the cheeky young man gave me the answer: “a pure, unblemished heart, like a polished mirror, so that when we die, Allah will look into our hearts, and He will see His own reflection.” The young man was quoting Jalaluddin Rumi, and Rumi was inspired by the Quran.

I love the way Sufi poetry can convey such deep spiritual truths so directly, and with such an economy of words. Rumi, I am told, is the most widely read poet in the USA. He lived over 700 years ago, in Afghanistan. Strange, how they love his poetry and yet they’re bombing his country back to the Stone Age!

So, my dear friends, there we have it. This is the purpose of life, according to Islam: We must worship our Maker. We do this by remembering Him constantly, through words and actions that bring benefit to others, always seeking to tame our lower desires, and seeking only the good pleasure of Allah. This is a lifelong struggle to polish the heart so that we can return it to its rightful owner in factory perfect condition.

.....[only continue this part if there’s time!].....

There’s an interesting verse in the Holy Quran that describes the creation of the human soul. Just imagine for a moment, if we could press a giant ‘pause’ button to put time and space on hold, and then fast rewind, back beyond the dawn of history, before the age of dinosaurs, rewind far back to the moment of the Big Bang 14 billion years ago, beyond the point when time and space began. The Quran tells us that before the creation of physical time and space, Allah created the *ruuh*, the soul of every human being that ever was and will ever be. Imagine, your soul and my soul, and



the soul of every human being from Adam and Eve till the last baby born on the day of Judgement, all were created together, at once! Then Allah addressed the assembled gathering of billions of human souls and asked them: “Am I not your Lord?” *Alasta bi Rabbikum?* And they all replied, in one, thunderous voice: “Yes, indeed you are our Lord. We will have no excuse, on the Day of Judgement, to say that we were unaware of this.” [Sura Ar’af 7:172]

My friends, this is known as the Covenant of Alast, the covenant that every human soul has taken, that they will worship no one but Allah, The One God, as their Lord and Master. This is a profoundly important verse, because it implies that every one of us knows, deep down within the innermost recesses of the heart, our soul knows where it belongs. The human soul knows its master. It longs to see, to recognise and acknowledge, and ultimately to return for a rapturous reunion with its Lord. Our mind, conditioned by our environment, has still to catch up with where the soul yearns to be.

I know this will probably surprise some of you, but every person in this hall was actually born a Muslim. According to Prophet Muhammad sws, in an authentic narration, he said that every human being is born in a natural state, a state of *fitra*. In Arabic, *fitra* is the primordial norm of our species, free from original sin, innocent and in a state of submission to its Lord. Only our parents raise us as Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, or without any faith tradition. But originally, as we rolled off the production line, we were all Muslims. Something to tease the mind a bit, I guess!

Islam teaches its followers how to reconcile the opposing demands of body, mind and soul. When the divergent elements of the human personality are brought into alignment, then we have a complete, well balanced human being. Much of the social disorder we see around us today has to do with a mis-alignment of our personalities. Our modern culture of individualism has elevated selfishness into a lifestyle choice. The ego is king. Discover yourself; be yourself, you owe it to yourself, so the ads tell us, those hidden persuaders that whisper into our hearts. We've neglected the soul, and we've indulged the body and the mind, massaging and inflating our selfish ego. We're damaging other people's lives and damaging our planet in the process. Islam says that the purpose of our life on earth is to reverse that self-destructive process. We need to find peace and harmony within ourselves so that we can radiate that peace and harmony into our families, our neighbourhoods and the world at large. It all begins right here, within our individual human hearts, purified and polished.

In our forgetfulness and distraction, we seem to pursue one isolated pleasurable experience after another. Our lives become fragmented and atomised. We've lost coherence and integrity, not only in politics and world affairs, but in our communities and in our family life, right down to our individual personality. Body, mind and soul tug in different directions. We sorely need to heal ourselves, but our senses are our bombarded with a relentless torrent of distractive and seductive messages from the mass media.

Islam tells us that all the material benefits of this life should be the by-products of worship, not the main agenda. When we serve others, help the needy, stand up for the oppressed, speak out against injustice, we do all this in a sense of love and gratitude to Allah. If, in the process we advance our professional career, and we manage to gain some creature comforts along the way, we must accept these as gifts from God. These are the by-products or serving Him. But sometimes we forget Him, we forget the main agenda, and we worship the gifts, the by-products.



The 5 daily prayers are designed to help us resist this tendency to forget our priorities. In prayer, we engage with our Creator in a very personal and intimate way. For a few precious minutes we are totally disconnected from 'worldly' concerns. We strengthen our *Taqwa* or 'Allah awareness'. We also quietly sing Allah's praises in the form of *Zikr*, informal

remembrance of the Divine, while we do things that are mentally undemanding, like walking, driving or washing the dishes. Keeping Allah consciously in our hearts helps us to avoid falling into errant ways. Sliding from forgetfulness we can easily become rebellious; commit sin and do so shamelessly, with impunity and arrogance. It's a very slippery slope from mere forgetfulness to consummate wickedness and evil. Worship keeps us focussed on who we are and what we're here for. We are Allah's ambassadors, vice-regents, and we are here to serve His creatures with love, justice and mercy.

Above my desk in my study I have some inspirational quotes. One asks simply: "Were you really born for *this*?" it's a way of constantly reminding me, forgetful and distractible as I am, that I have to keep priorities in mind.

Like the pen and the watch, we have to fulfil the purpose that we were created for. Worshipping Allah, formally and informally, is not something we can do well in isolation. The Persian poet, Sa'di wrote, speaking about the purpose of life, seeking the good pleasure of Allah: "The Way is not prayer beads and holy robes, but service to others." A Muslim cannot fulfil the purpose of his or her life in seclusion. In some faith traditions, you have to withdraw from mainstream society into monasteries and temples; you have to isolate yourself physically in order to advance spiritually. Although short periods of seclusion for contemplation is approved and even recommended, Islam is opposed to monasticism and self-denial as a lifestyle choice. Muslims are urged to grow spiritually while we're in the hustle and bustle, the mainstream of life. We have to engage with people, helping them, out of love and gratitude to our Generous Landlord



"Fa bi ayyi aalaa-i-Rabbi huma tukath thibaa!"

"Then which of the favours of your Lord will you deny?" [Sura 55]

In one of the most beautiful and poetic chapters, *Al Rahman*, "The Merciful," the Holy Quran repeats this refrain, again and again: "Which of the favours of your Lord will you deny?" Fasting from dawn till dusk every day for a whole month is meant to cultivate obedience, discipline and compassion, not a life of isolation and denial. We are always encouraged to engage with others, to live amongst people and to add to the collective wellbeing of society.

One of my own favourite *Hadith*, or sayings of Prophet Muhammad sws says that "A Muslim is he from whose tongue and hands other Muslims are safe. A Mu'min, a true Believer, is one in whom all of mankind has a sanctuary, a safe haven, for life and property."

So there you have it, my dear friends, in a simple, eloquent statement, setting out how we should live. Islam has a formula for success, individually and collectively.

A well known verse in the Quran says,

“Wal takum minkum ummatu-yad’oon ilal khairi way’muroona bil ma’roof; wayah hauna ‘anil munkar; wa ulaa ika humul muflihoon.”

“Let there arise out of you, a band of people who enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. Those will be the successful ones.”

Success in Islam has nothing to do with being part of a particular race or ethnic group, or simply confessing a set of beliefs. In another verse, we read:

“Kuntum khairan ummatin, ata’muroona bil ma’roof, watan hawna anil munkar, watu’minoona bil-Laah.”

“You are the best community sent to mankind. You enjoin what is right and you forbid what is wrong, and you believe in Allah.”

To become the best community, we must begin with ourselves, within our own hearts. The Quran tells us that Allah will never change the condition of a people until they change themselves, what is in their own hearts. We need to change our desires and our motivations, from what pleases the selfish ego to what pleases Allah and benefits other people. That’s the essence of our life’s purpose.

Islam teaches us to cultivate and nurture an inner space, a calm and serene state of the heart, so that we can deal with all of life’s problems. Everything is a gift from Allah. The great Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi says that “Suffering is a gift. In it is hidden mercy.” Prophet Muhammad sws said that Believers are very fortunate. They endure hardship, and it’s good for them. It teaches them patience and endurance. Then they enjoy relief from hardship, and that’s good for them. They can show their gratitude to Allah through generosity to others. So, in good times and hard times, true believers we can be winners, all the time.

Finally, a word about beauty: the aesthetic aspect of life. According to an authentic *Hadith* of Prophet Muhammad sws, “Allah is beautiful, and He loves beauty.” [Sahih Muslim]. These words have inspired many architects, craftsmen, artists, calligraphers and others engaged in the creative disciplines to lavish their time and talent on the most exquisite expressions of Islamic art and design. “Work is love made visible,” wrote the poet, Kahlil Gibran. Visit the Jameel Gallery in London’s V&A Museum. It has some priceless examples of Islamic Art. Here you can see a vase, a table, a lampshade or a rug, everyday items that could be found in an average Muslim home a few centuries ago. Today these same items get auctioned at Christies and Sotheby’s for hundreds of thousands of pounds.... Our ancestors routinely created things of immense beauty and value.



My dear friends let me sum up the key points about Islam's view of the purpose of life:

1. We are not here by some cosmic accident. There is a divine plan that underpins every aspect life.
2. We were created by God, by Allah, for a noble purpose. That purpose is to serve our generous Landlord, as his trustees, his agents on earth.
3. Our purpose in life is to manage our Landlord's property responsibly, to treat his other tenants, other people with courtesy and respect. We should also respect the plants, animals and our natural environment.
4. All our Landlord requires of us, is to say, "thank you." We Muslims do this often, at least 5 times a day. That's a minimum! Where prayer is concerned, light snacks taken regularly are far better than having a mighty feast occasionally!
5. Why is there so much suffering in this world? Because this life is not a paradise. It's a time for testing, for endurance and gratitude. The paradise bit comes later, hopefully after we've made a success of our earthly life. We must accept good times and hard times with patience, forbearance and serenity, just like our role models did, the Prophets of Allah.

In conclusion, I hope these rather hastily prepared notes will have illuminated the subject for you, and helped to de-mystify Islam just a wee bit. There's so much confusion and hysteria out there in the tabloid press and sensation hungry mass media. I'm really grateful that you've come here, and given up your time to hear a Muslim viewpoint on the purpose of life. I've also come here to learn from you, so I welcome your questions and comments.

Thank you for listening to me so patiently. *As-salaamu 'alaykum!* Peace be with you!

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