



# Faith-based perspectives on decision-making in health care: an Islamic Perspective

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# Outline

- Introduction to Islam
- Islamic Laws
- A Historical Interlude
- Islamic Ethics
- Important Practices
- Islam & Spirituality

# Introduction to Islam

- Islam - submission to the will of God
- Youngest of three major monotheistic (“Abrahamic”) religions
- Over 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide, including ~1 million Canadians
- One of the fastest growing religions in Western countries

# Introduction to Islam

- Principal beliefs in Islam
  - God is One, Unique, and Incomparable (Qur'an 112:1-4)
  - Prophethood (divine guidance to humanity)
    - from Adam to Muhammad\*
  - Day of Resurrection
    - afterlife (Heaven and Hell)

\* Peace be upon him

# Islamic Laws

- Laws (Shari'ah) derived from several sources
  - Holy Qur'an
  - *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad\*

\* Peace be upon him

# Islamic Laws

- Holy Qur'an
  - The holy book of Muslims
  - divinely revealed to Prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years
  - contains approximately 6,300 verses in 30 parts and 114 chapters
  - believed to be the unadulterated word of God as revealed to the Prophet; however, not all verses are to be interpreted literally (Qur'an 3:6)

# Islamic Laws

- Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad
  - Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 AD in Makkah, Saudi Arabia
  - Final prophetic messenger from God to humanity (began with Adam, included Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, and many others)
  - Began preaching Islam at age 40, died at age 63

# Islamic Laws

- Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad
  - Prophet Muhammad was the voice of the Qur'an and its main interpreter and teacher
  - Sunnah are recordings of his sayings, speeches, letters, and observed deeds/actions
  - Muslims consider the Prophet to be the ideal role model of the faith

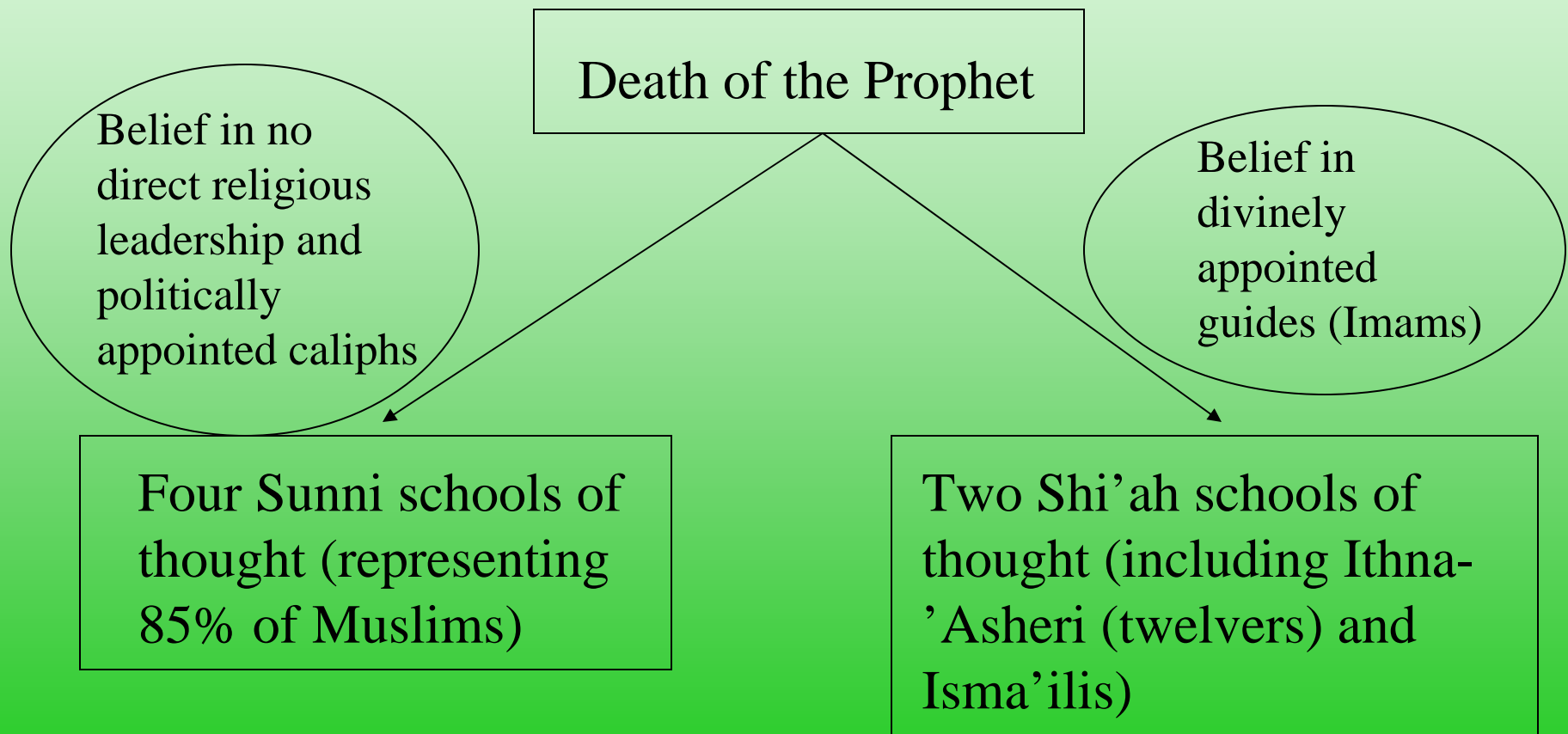
# Islamic Laws

- Laws (Shari'ah) derived from several sources
    - Holy Qur'an
    - Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad
- } *Primary*
- Ijmaa' (consensus of early scholars)
  - 'Aql (reasoning of jurists)

# A Historical Interlude

- Islam is not a monolithic faith; numerous sects and schools of thought (*madhhab*)
- While most sects share basic principles and acts of worship, there are some important differences that may have relevance to ethical decision-making and rituals of worship
- Local cultural factors also exert influence
- Major sectarian division occurred after death of the Prophet regarding issue of successorship

# A Historical Interlude



# Islamic Ethics

- Key principles
  - Sanctity of life
  - Specific duties & rights with respect to illness
  - Suffering can be good or bad
  - Family unit is basic building block of society
  - Food and water are basic human needs, not medical treatments

# Sanctity of Life

*“...he who slays any one (man)...it shall be as though he as slain mankind as a whole; and he who saves a human life, it shall be as though he has saved mankind as a whole...” (Qur’an 5:32)*

# Sanctity of Life

- Over-riding principle superceded in rare circumstances only
- God is the Arbiter of the beginning and end of life
- Every moment of life is precious, whether conscious or unconscious, and an opportunity to worship Him
- Our bodies are a trust from God and must be cherished, looked after, and returned to Him

# Sanctity of Life

- Life begins at fertilization (although some sects require implantation)
- Soul enters foetus at 4 months and 10 days based on sayings of Prophet Muhammad
- Life ends when God removes soul from body
- Prolonging life takes precedence over preserving quality of life, but not at any cost

# Sanctity of Life: Implications

- Birth control is permissible as long as:
  - A) process not harmful to mother
  - B) occurs prior to fertilization (or implantation, depending on sect)
  - C) reversible
- Abortion is not permissible generally, except to save life of mother; some scholars have allowed abortion in cases of severe congenital anomalies or in case of rape but only before ensoulment
- Suicide and active euthanasia are not permissible

# Duties, Rights, & Illness

- It is our duty to prevent illness, seek out treatment for illness, preserve life, and prolong life
- God has created a treatment for every illness (Sahih Al-Bukhari 71, chapter 1)
- Duties and rights linked to each other, with emphasis on duties

# Duties & Rights

- Patient
  - duty to take care of health (prevention) and prevent illness
  - duty to seek out treatment for illness and to accept treatments that prolong/preserve life
  - duty to follow orders of physician
  - right to be seen by a physician and receive advice

# Duties & Rights

- Physician
  - duty to see patients
  - duty to properly diagnose and treat illness
    - implications for proper education/training
  - right to receive compensation for treatment
  - a great honour to teach knowledge/skills to future physicians

# Duties & Rights: Implications

- Patients should seek out experts when sick and follow their advice; tremendous respect and privilege is given to physicians
- Should not refuse treatment if there is reasonable likelihood of prolonging life but experimental therapies are not mandated
- Limited consideration of costs or suffering associated with treatment in writings/rulings of most Islamic scholars to date

# Duties & Rights: Implications

- Preventive care included in this framework (e.g. vaccines, cancer screening, etc.)
- Need to obtain, receive, and undergo treatment can supercede other Islamic laws
  - e.g. hijab, dietary restrictions (esp. alcohol or other ingredients in medications), fasting

# Are there limits to aggressive end-of-life care?

- Life is precious regardless of perceived level of awareness or quality of life
- Thus the general rule is to continue treatment if there is a chance of prolonging life
- This includes ICU care (e.g. intubation and mechanical ventilation), dialysis, etc.

# Are there limits to aggressive end-of-life care?

- Reversible conditions that are not part of dying process should be treated to prolong life (*e.g. developing pneumonia; in contrast to progressive respiratory failure from untreatable lung cancer*)
- CPR/DNR issues – CPR encouraged if the active health issues are potentially reversible conditions as opposed to progression of terminal disease (see above)

# Are there limits to aggressive end-of-life care?

- Shi'ah jurists have considered withholding and withdrawing to be morally different; this has significant implications for mechanical ventilation in ICU
- Sunni jurists have generally allowed withdrawing of care if there is no hope of recovery but some differences of opinion exist
- Sunni jurists have almost unanimously accepted brain death as a criterion for death and withdrawal of care, whereas most Shi'ah jurists have not accepted brain death to date as valid

# Suffering

- Suffering may be a trial/test from God
- Suffering may expiate sins
- Suffering may not necessarily be bad, although physicians should try to relieve suffering

# Suffering

- Suffering may be a trial/test from God
  - All human beings will be tried with loss of health, wealth, and/or family
  - *“Oh you who believe, seek help in patience and prayer; surely God is with the patient... Surely We will try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of property and lives and fruits; yet give good tidings to the patient who, when they are visited by an affliction, say, ‘Surely we belong to God, and to Him we shall return’; upon those rest blessings and mercy from their Lord, and those – they are the truly guided.”* (Qur’an 2:155-156)
  - Story of Prophet Ayyub (Job)

# Suffering

- Suffering may expiate sins
  - All sins that are not forgiven by God will be accounted for; punishments can occur in this life, in *barzakh* (somewhat akin to Purgatory), or after the Day of Resurrection
  - *“No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he received from a thorn, but that God expiates some of his sins for that.”* Prophet Muhammad, Sahih Al-Bukhari, hadith #545

# Suffering

- Suffering is not necessarily bad, although physicians should try to relieve suffering
  - supplications from the Qur'an invoking God as the Reliever of Suffering
  - *“Is not He Who answers the distressed one when he calls Him, and removes the distress...”* (Qur'an 27:62)
  - numerous sayings of the Prophet attest to the importance of aiding those in distress/difficulty
- Suffering from God is different than suffering at the hands of human beings; latter should be avoided or minimized at all times

# Suffering: Implications

- Some Muslim patients (and/or family members) may (incorrectly) view their illness as indicative of spiritual weakness or punishment from God
- Most Muslim patients will turn to the Qur'an and supplications for assistance in times of suffering; many will welcome local religious authorities and family members to pray with/for them
- Muslim patients are rarely uncomfortable with aiming for symptom relief with medical therapies

# Suffering: Implications

- A minority of Muslims adopt a fatalistic attitude towards illness; instead, Islam teaches them to take the opportunity to establish a new covenant with God
- Some Muslims may not want to treat pain aggressively in order to minimize decreases in conscious awareness and/or be able to repent more effectively

# Role of Families

- The family is the basic building block of Islamic society
- Autonomy is less emphasized and families are involved in most aspects of decision making/planning as well as providing support to sick members
- In many cultures, Muslim women will defer decision-making to male relative (husband, father, or brother) – not a religious requirement, however

# Role of Families: Implications

- A male family member often expects to be involved in all aspects of health care for a woman; occasionally tricky when dealing with sensitive issues
  - Important to establish decision-maker up front
- Surrogate parenthood not allowed in Islam although in vitro fertilization allowed as long as genetic parents are married and the birth parents

# Nutrition & Hydration

- Sacred duty to provide nutrition and hydration to all people, regardless of age, illness, ethnicity, religion, etc. (Qur'an 90:12-18)
- Nutrition and hydration considered basic care rather than medical treatment per se

Alibhai SMH. J Religious Ethics 2008; 36(1):37

# Nutrition & Hydration: Implications

- Most families will insist on oral fluids and/or intravenous or subcutaneous hydration until death, unless fluid replacement is harmful to life
- Many families will request feeding tubes (nasogastric or percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy) for patients with no oral intake

Alibhai SMH. J Religious Ethics 2008; 36(1):37

# Other Issues

- Cannot force people to do things against their wishes
  - “*There is no compulsion in religion...*” (Qur’an 2:256)
- Truth-telling/disclosure is very important
- Islam and Muslim scholars have no intrinsic opposition to living wills/advance directives

# Other Issues

- Although there is no formal clergy/church in Islam, local Imams or religious scholars/prayer leaders can be very helpful to patients, families, and health care team
- However, not all local scholars are knowledgeable on health matters
- Sunni sects are more heterogeneous and informal in terms of religious scholarship; Shi'ahs have a more formal system and specific jurist (*mujtahid*) (e.g. Ayatullah Seestani) to clarify rules

# Important Practices

- Prayers
- Fasting
- Hijab
- Dietary laws
- Cleanliness
- Death rituals

# Important Practices



- Prayers
  - Muslims pray (at least) 5 times a day during specific time intervals
  - preceded by ritual ablutions usually requiring clean (flowing) water
  - exceptions to ablutions made for physically weak/ill patients but not prayers
  - sand/earth may be requested for ablutions if water not available/feasible/safe
  - turn and face the Ka'ba in Mecca (~NE from most parts of Canada)

# Important Practices

- Fasting
  - during month of Ramadan, adult Muslims fast from dawn to sunset for 30 days
  - no food, water, sex, smoking, etc. during fast
  - exceptions made for pregnant/breastfeeding mothers, elderly, sick persons
  - may have implications for meal times and taking medications
  - some patients hesitant to not fast despite physician advice; consider involving local Imam

# Important Practices

- Hijab
  - modesty of dress and behaviour; for both men and women (although differences in dress code)
  - men and women prefer to be examined by same sex clinician
  - casual touch by individuals of opposite sex considered inappropriate and immodest
  - many women cover body except face and hands

# Important Practices

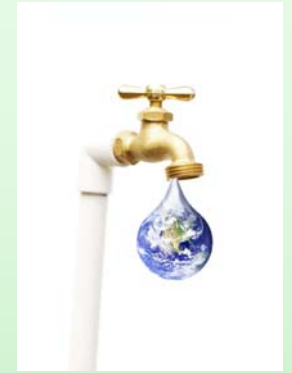
- Hijab
  - overridden by health concerns, availability, and expertise
  - best to have family member or same-sex clinician if opposite sex physician examining patient
  - may avoid direct eye contact with opposite sex clinicians; sign of modesty, not disrespect
  - often do not shake hands with opposite sex

# Important Practices



- Dietary laws
  - closest to Jewish laws
  - meat must be ritually slaughtered in special way (called *Halal*)
  - certain forms of seafood not allowed; sect-dependent
  - alcohol, porcine products not allowed
  - non-Halal animal products not allowed; some will accept kosher products if halal not available

# Important Practices



- Cleanliness
  - Islam encourages cleanliness at all times from physical perspective and links it to spiritual cleanliness
  - coming into contact with urine, faeces, or blood makes one spiritually unclean and unable to touch the Holy Qur'an or pray until clean
  - hence Muslim patients with ostomies, incontinence, or open wounds, especially if unable to clean themselves, become distressed

# Important Practices

- Cleanliness
  - to become clean, body fluids must be removed with clean (running) water; alcohol-based cleaners/wipes or gels not accepted by most
  - Muslim health care workers have not generally had problems with alcohol-based hand-wipes and disinfectants
  - Ceremonial baths recommended/required in specific circumstances (e.g. Friday, end of menses)



"His last words were. 'What can it do. kill me?'"

# Death Rituals

- Strong belief in a Day of Judgement/Resurrection and afterlife
- At time of death soul exits body with assistance from the Angel of Death; this process can be painful for unfaithful Muslims
- Death is the beginning of a journey towards meeting the Creator
- Until the body is buried, the soul will hover around the body and can see/hear people around the body but not interact with them

# Death Rituals

- Family members/friends will try to make transition as comfortable as possible
- Not recommended for body to be left alone; loved ones stay with person at time of death, reciting various verses and chapters from Holy Qur'an
- Whenever possible, body positioned such that on back with feet facing the Holy Ka'ba (direction of prayers)

# Death Rituals

- After death, eyes should be closed, body should be appropriately shrouded, arms and legs straightened, and chin tied to keep mouth closed
- Rapid (ideally same-day) burial desired to free soul from body; most families will request body not be transferred to morgue
- After death, body's pain perception magnified a thousand-fold and felt by soul, hence careful and gentle handling required

# Death Rituals

- Prior to burial, ceremonial washing of body done at local mosque and special white cloth shroud used to wrap body
- Cremation not permissible
- Autopsy generally forbidden except if necessary for judicial investigation or if the life of another person can be saved (e.g. organ transplantation); sectarian differences exist as to strictness of likelihood of immediately saving life

# Death Rituals

- Special congregational prayers recited prior to burial
- Grieving and shedding tears welcomed/encouraged
- Mourning period is 3 days, during which visitors are recommended to bring food for grieving family and visit daily but for short visits
- Some families use this opportunity to donate to charity on behalf of the deceased and/or plant trees to provide blessings to the deceased

# Observance of Faith

- Few sectarian differences with respect to principles or major practices
- Significant differences in degree of observance of principles and practices of faith
- Cultural influences vary from region to region and recency of immigration

# Islam & Spirituality



- What is spirituality?

*“Spirituality refers to an individual’s or group’s relationship with the transcendent, however that may be construed. Spirituality is about the search for transcendent meaning.”*

(Sulmasy, 2002)

# Spirituality in Islam

- No directly equivalent word in 'Arabic
- However, concept of spirituality explicit in Islam, contrasted with the material world
- Qur'an speaks of 'seeking nearness to God' and 'being aware of one's duties and connection to God'
- 'God is closer to us than our jugular veins'
- Islam provides guidance in all aspects of human affairs

# Importance of Rituals

- Prescription of rituals/practices to facilitate nearness to God and attainment of gnostic awareness of God
- Common rituals/practices:
  - Prayers
  - Fasting
  - Giving to charity
- Of note, prayers and fasting are seen as therapeutic for patients with various illnesses

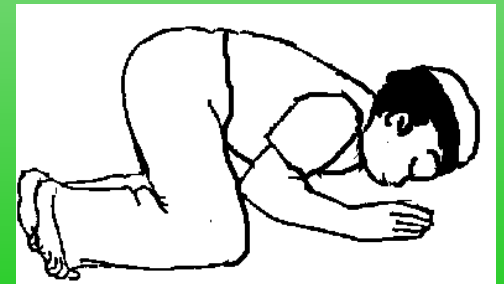
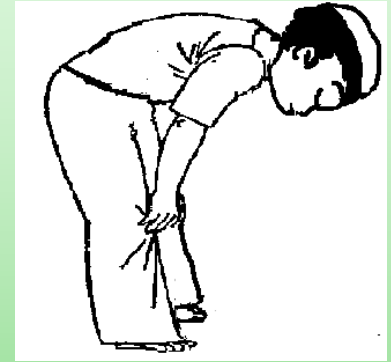
# Rituals & Spirituality

- All major rituals in Islam seen as having 3 components – physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual
- Prayers
  - 5 prayers per day, plus conditional prayers (specific dates, events, or conditions)
  - wordings of prayers enhance spirituality and connection with God
  - actions of prayers facilitate spiritual worship

# Rituals & Spirituality

- Prayers

- actions of prayers facilitate spiritual worship
- positions of genuflection and prostration in each unit of each prayer teach humility and submission to God's will
- wordings linked to positions; invoke God's mercy, praise God, ask for guidance, glorify God, seek forgiveness, etc.



# Rituals & Spirituality

- Fasting
  - physical actions of avoiding material pleasure (food, drink, etc.) help Muslims to focus on spiritual activities during the day
  - suppression of negative emotions
  - also create bond of awareness with less fortunate
  - recitation of Qur'an encouraged during day
  - visiting the sick also recommended, along with giving to charity

# Community & Spirituality

- Spirituality enhanced through participation in larger community
- Congregational prayers, breaking fasts together in Ramadan, Hajj (pilgrimage) bringing together 2-3 million pilgrims, etc.
- Religious taxes and giving to charity cement bond between material and spiritual worlds and between richer and poorer people

# Islamic vs Modern Secular Ethics

- *Beneficence* - major goal in Islam, with religious perspectives on “good”
- *Non-maleficence* - counterpart to beneficence, with focus on avoiding shortening life
- *Autonomy* - lesser goal/role in Islam
- *Justice* - of secondary importance, especially at the individual level

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