In this article, the terms “accidental” and “essential” are first presented and defined. Then religion’s traits and teachings are divided into essential and accidental traits and teachings. The accidentals are those that could have been other than they are, unlike the essentials. The difference between our categorization of the accidental and the essential and other classifications, such as shell and kernel, law and path, and the like that have some history of their own, is subsequently explored. A number of important questions are raised at the same time to allow the reader to gain a deeper understanding of accidentals and their delicate relationship to essence. The discussion of religion’s accidental traits and teachings then begins in earnest: Islam’s first accidental trait is the Arabic language, which could have been replaced by another language. The second accidental is the Arabs’ culture. The third accidental consists of the terms, concepts, theories and propositions used by the Prophet. The fourth accidental consists of the historical events that entered into the Qur’an and the Sunna. The questions posed by believers and opponents and the answers to them form the fifth accidental. The sixth embraces the precepts of fiqh and Islamic law. The seventh accidental consists of the fabrications, inventions and distortions introduced into religion by its opponents. The eighth accidental consists of the abilities and understanding of the people addressed by religion. Finally, conclusions are drawn and it is suggested in brief that Islam (and any other religion for that matter) is a religion by virtue of its essentials, not its accidentals. And being a Muslim demands belief and commitment to the essentials.

Relationship Between the Essential and the Accidental

First. Consider the three proverbs below, current in Persian, English and Arabic usage:

a. Taking cumin to Kerman.
b. Taking coal to Newcastle.
c. Taking dates to Basra.
The underlying purport or spirit (or essence) of the three proverbs is one and the same. But this single spirit has donned three different outer garments. The garments have the cut and colour of the cultures, geographies and languages of the peoples who tailored them. But the spirit is universal and belongs to no particular land. We take this spirit to be the proverb’s essential core, and that garment, its accidental outer layer.

The simple, yet important rules governing the essential and the accidental and the relationship between the two can be enumerated as follows:

1. The above proverb’s force and identity lies in its unchanging core and underlying message, not in its varied outer layer and initial sense.
2. Accidental outer layers are subject to a multitude of factors and conditions and appear in countless shapes and sizes; there are no logical boundaries or limits to the way in which they may manifest themselves.
3. There is no such thing as a naked essence or spirit; essences invariably present themselves in some outer garment or form.
4. The defining characteristic of an accidental is that “it could have been other than it is”.
5. Although essences never occur without accidentals, confusing the rules that govern them leads to a host of fallacies; therefore, their theoretical distinction from accidentals is an absolute rational imperative.
6. When we want to transfer an essence from one culture to another, we have to engage in something akin to translation. That is to say, we must dress the essence in the garment of the new culture, otherwise it will lead to misunderstandings and a distortion of the essence. A mere mechanical transfer would be futile and unwise. “Taking coal to Newcastle” would not convey anything to Persian speakers, unless it was rendered as “taking cumin to Kerman” or unless the Persian speakers became so acquainted with the culture and geography of the people who speak of taking coal to Newcastle as to be able to extract the essence from the accidental themselves and grasp its cultural sense.
7. Accidentals have local and temporal—not universal and historical—authenticity.