AN INTERPRETATION OF THE FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS 
AND SOME OF THE INSTITUTIONS OF ISLAM

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Introduction

The basis and foundation of religions are certain fundamental beliefs on which the entire structure of religious life and thought rests. It is the basic system of belief in a religion which sustains religious consciousness and keeps the community together through various stages of its history. Without basic beliefs and fundamental postulates no religion can survive in different phases of internal and external strains and stresses. In revealed religions the system of beliefs is derived from the revealed Books of God communicated through the Prophets who are the recipients of revelations. Outside the Abrahamic family of religions the fundamental beliefs are enunciated by the Founders of those religions. The first community of believers who receive the message directly from the Prophets or the Founders of religions accept the basic tenets and postulates as such in their straightforward literal meanings and without indulging themselves in their elaborate conceptual definitions, meanings or implications and without asking why and how. After the disappearance of the prophetic authority and because of the expansion of the community and its exposure to different creeds, thoughts and cultures the following generations require explanations and interpretations of the articles of faith and the basic institutions of their religion. It is from this point that the second and more crucial phase in the history and development of religion begins. Islam too had the same process in its development.

The first phase of Islam which begins with the beginning of the revelation and ends with the death of the Prophet can, therefore, be called as the Qur’ānic or the Prophetic period. In this period of twenty-

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three years, the articles of faith and the religious institutions enunciated by the Qur'ān and exemplified by the Prophet were taken, by the first generation in their literal meaning and devotional spirit with emphasis on practice and not on their elaborate conceptual definitions and implications. But within two decades after the death of the Prophet, due to the rapid conquests of the Sasanid and Byzantine empires, the Muslim community came in direct contact with different races, creeds, cultures and religio-philosophical systems. This initiated the need for the leaders of the community, the Companions and Successors of the Prophet, to explain the fundamentals of their faith to the Muslims. The need for reassertion and restatement of the Qur'ānic teachings of the faith and beliefs was felt even greater when the caliphal seat was shifted from Medina to the city of Kufa in Iraq during the Caliphate of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the fourth caliph, in the year 35/656.

Iraq was already, before Islam, a battle-ground of various creeds, ideas and theories which came from different directions. Hellenism, Hellenized Christianity, Gnosticism, Manichaean dualism and Buddhistic elements were present there. Kufa, being located not far from the border of Iraq and Iran, soon after its foundation started becoming a melting point of various races and cultures. Strong influences emanating from the neighbouring Nestorian seat of learning at Junde Shapur, was another factor to raise questions in the minds of the people about their faith. Moreover, there were in Kufa, even as early as the days of 'Ali, some of the Zoroastrians, Manichaeans, Gnostics, dualists and the Christians, thus creating a situation where the Muslims, especially the new converts, had to be taught their religion in greater detail.

It is against this background that we should consider 'Ali's discourses and sermons which he delivered during his shortlived and turmoiled period of caliphate in Kufa to explain and elucidate the fundamental beliefs of Islam and to reassert and strengthen the faith of the community, still in its infancy.

There is hardly any need to discuss in any detail, 'Ali's authoritative position in early Islam to speak on such subjects. Suffice it to say that he was not only the closest member of the Prophet's family but from his childhood also he was brought up by the Prophet, the recipient of Divine revelation, and thus 'Ali and Islam grew together and he became an embodiment of the teachings of the Qur'ān and the Summa of the Prophet. He has unanimously been recognized as the best qualified person to speak for Islam, its principles and ideals, its theories and practices, its thoughts and concepts and to interpret its fundamental beliefs and