

Understanding Islam

Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message

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Part Six: Islam and other faiths

There are more Muslims in the world today than there have been at any other time in human history and yet, fourteen hundred years after the death of Muhammad, they account for only around 20% of the world population. Through the expansion of Muslim families, the Muslim population is increasing and, in certain parts of the world, relatively significant numbers of people are coming to Islam for the first time, yet there is no sign that the whole of humankind is on the verge of mass conversion and so the relationship between Islam and other faiths is of ongoing importance.

It was ever thus! In the time of the Prophet Muhammad, Makka and Madina were multi-faith societies and other religions were present in neighbouring countries in all directions. During the early centuries of the Islamic Empire, Muslims were a minority of its citizens. Muslim rulers have always had to consider the status of their non-Muslim subjects throughout the centuries and in all territories. Even in those Muslim countries today that forbid public assembly for worship to non-Muslims, there are still hundreds of thousands of adherents of different faiths.

Back to the beginning

When God created the first human beings, they came from a single seed [Q. 7:189]; therefore we can speak of all human beings who have ever lived as belonging to the one human family [Q. 2:213]. God is not the god of one people, tribe, ethnic group or religion in Islamic understanding, but rather the one and only God, who created all human beings fundamentally equal [Q. 49:13], sharing the two great human dignities, to be the loving servant (*abd*) and the regent (*khalifa*) of God on earth. All human beings were created to worship, obey, serve and love God without exception. There is no room for a doctrine of election in Islam that says that God is concerned only with one group of people; God is the God of all humankind and has no favourites. For this reason, the Qur'an tells us that no people on earth has been left without guidance; at least one Prophet has been sent to all the peoples of the earth [Q. 10:47; 16:63]. The Hadith in which the Prophet speaks of 124,000 Prophets makes the point nicely; we know from the Qur'an of only twenty-five Prophets by name, which leaves 123,975 vacancies to be filled by Prophets who are unknown to us. Over the centuries, Muslim scholars have discussed whether the Buddha or Zoroaster, to name but two candidates, might have been true Prophets sent by God. This understanding of the oneness of humankind in the sight of God should set the attitude of Muslims who encounter new cultures and peoples. Instead of thinking that they live in total ignorance of God-given revelation, the attitude should rather be that God's Prophets have been at work in every community at some stage in their history and thus there

should be an openness to perceive the remnants of the earlier planting, even if people have moved a long way from their natural state (*din al-fitra*).

God alone knows the human heart and thus only God can sit in ultimate judgement on any human being [Q. 88:21-26]; it is not possible for anyone to say “you/they are going to hell.” Even Prophet Muhammad himself is sent only to deliver the message of the Qur'an as the ultimate guide to salvation and to warn people of the Day of Judgement and their duty to follow [Q. 33:45]. God is just and so the person who knows the guidance of the Qur'an and decides not to follow it is in a manifestly different situation to people who have never heard the message or even the name of Muhammad. For people who have heard the message of Islam from Muslims who were unjust or oppressors of human dignity or exploiters, we have to ask just how free they were to hear and respond to the true teaching of the Qur'an unclouded by the conduct of those who brought it. The best amongst humankind are those who are filled with God-consciousness (*taqwa*) and that is an inner disposition, which God alone can judge. Every human being will be held to account for their lives on the Day of Judgement and the just and merciful God will make the ultimate decision.

Until the coming of the Qur'an we can say that the earth was populated by peoples of various religions, some at least of which were capable of leading people on a godly path depending on how closely they followed the *shari'a* laid down by the Prophets who had been sent to them. The coming of the Final Message to the Last Messenger brought about a change in the condition of all people. Islam understands the Qur'an as the final revelation to be followed by all humankind and Muhammad to be the universal Messenger. The Qur'an speaks of itself as the criterion (*al-furqan*) by which all else is to be judged [Q. 3:4; 25:1] and thus Islam is the only currently existing Straight Path that leads to human fulfilment in this life and the reward of Paradise; that leaves open the possibility that there might be other less clearly defined and meandering paths that might guide people aright during such time as they have not had the chance to hear and respond to the pure message of the Qur'an. Millions of people on earth today still live in such circumstances. God guides to Islam whomsoever God wills [Q. 2:142]; that is for God to know and judge. For those on the Straight Path, their duty is clear: first, to follow it and second, to invite others to do the same.

A classification of religions

From the perspective of the Final Message, we can classify the religions of the world into five categories: those who worship something other than God, those who have no place for God in their ways of life, those who cannot identify the revelation that stands behind their religion, those who claim a revelation or prophet after the Qur'an and Muhammad, and the people identified as being the followers of earlier revelations.

No idol-worship

The Arabs in the time of Muhammad worshipped many idols of their own or their forefathers' making. This was the world into which the Qur'an was revealed and its earliest message was the worship of God alone and an end to idolatry. This became the criterion to judge if someone had become a Muslim or not; have they left behind the idol-worship that they inherited? There was no room for "multiple belonging" on this question. Some Muslim historians have indicated that some of the Arabs continued to hold on to their idols even after they had become outwardly Muslim and used to carry them to *salat* tucked under their arms or between their legs, and thus they would fall to the ground when Muslims were commanded to adopt a wide stance at prayer and raise their hands to their heads during worship. Such "hedging of one's bets" was unacceptable in the pure and absolute monotheism of Islam. Such practices amounted to associating partners with God (*shirk*) and this could not be tolerated.

The Qur'an is explicit in saying that *shirk* is the one sin that God will not forgive [Q. 4:48]. To divide God into parts is *shirk*. To say that one worships God plus anything else (the ancient gods of our people, a local holy person, a semi-divine person or to attribute divinity to any of God's creatures) is *shirk*. The first action of Muhammad when Makka became a Muslim city was to order that all the idols that surrounded the *ka'ba* should be destroyed so that there would be no more idol-worship. All forms of polytheism (the worship of many gods) and henotheism (the worship of a hierarchy of gods) are *shirk*. There are modern forms of *shirk* as well that are equally forbidden: e.g., to worship money, power, nationalism, racism, sexism or ideologies.

Any forms of religion that include carved, painted or imagined images have always been problematic for Muslims. Are they idols that are worshipped? The religions of India that use images (collectively grouped together as Hinduism) have raised such questions for Muslims. Some of their followers are adamant that they are monotheists, worshipping the one invisible God, and that such images are only representations of some aspects of God's many attributes. Other believers will speak of a multitude of gods that are worshipped. The reality in a particular case is not easy to discern and suspicions of *shirk* are raised concerning any image that appears to be worshipped. No blanket judgement can be given and at times, such as during the Mughal Empire, Muslims have accepted that some of the religions of India were monotheistic and indeed probably what remained of the teaching of the earlier Prophets that were sent there.

Judaism, like Islam, shuns all forms of images that can be associated with God but some forms of Christianity use statues, figures in glasswork and crucifixes (images of Jesus on the cross) as part of their worship. This usage needs to be clarified for Muslim eyes to show that such images are not worshipped but serve as a reminder to people to worship God alone. In Eastern Christianity, it is common to find icons that are understood to be "windows" that lead the believer to the worship of God but the way in which they are treated has caused questions to be raised in Muslim perception. It is for the theologians of such traditions to articulate the way in which they are

understood and used to clarify such practices for Muslims lest there should be any misunderstanding.

God is real and exists

Religion, in Muslim understanding, entails the worship of God, therefore a way of life or religion that has no place for God or that denies the existence of God or does not engage in talk of God is problematic. Can such be called a religion at all or should it rather be thought of as a philosophy of life? Atheistic philosophies, such as atheistic communism or secular humanism clearly come into this classification. Religions such as Buddhism, which in many of its forms is non-theistic, have also proved problematic. There are forms of Buddhism that understand themselves to be theistic but their concepts of the divine are some way from that which pertains in the Abrahamic religions.

Religion is based on revelation

As we have seen, God has sent guidance and Prophets to all the peoples of the earth but some of those peoples have lost touch with their original revelations and can give no account of them in their religious systems. Many of the ancient traditional religions of different parts of the world would fall into this classification. Some peoples have maintained a real sense of the transcendent and the life of the spirit but other practices have been included over the millennia. Religions that worship the forces or phenomena of nature, such as the sun or other heavenly bodies, trees, rivers or natural objects, have always proved problematic. Some have kept elements that are in accordance with the guidance of the Qur'an, such as a profound sense of the interconnectedness of the whole of creation and human responsibilities towards it, but others have practices, such as human sacrifices, that are clearly contrary to divine guidance. Some of the ideas that have been grouped into modern practices associated with movements such as the New Age cause concern for Muslims as to their origins. The question will always be: Where is the revelation on which such practices are based? Religion, in Islamic understanding, is revealed and not constructed by human beings. The Qur'an does not accept the defence that "these are the ancient traditions of the ancestors" [Q. 31:21; 2:170]. Similarly anything that could be described as "ancestor worship" is forbidden as *shirk*.

Muhammad and the Qur'an are the last

The finality of the Qur'an as the last revelation is central to Islam and thus any religion that claims to have a subsequent revelation is unacceptable in Islamic understanding. The Book of Mormon (1822) given to Joseph Smith (1805-1844), for example, could not be accepted by Muslims as a genuine revelation from God. Similarly, the finality and universality of Muhammad is absolute in Muslim understanding, therefore claims to be a later prophet cannot be accepted. The understanding of the Baha'is that Baha'u'llah (1817-1892) was the divinely-sent prophet of a new world order has not been accepted by Muslims. Divergence of understanding about the status of Ghulam

Ahmad of Qadian (d.1908), whether he was a minor prophet (plus various other claims) or a reviver of the faith of Islam, has led to the Ahmadiyya being declared outside the fold of Islam by Muslim scholars.

The Sikhs are self-confessed monotheists, the followers of ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak (b.1469) to Guru Gobind Singh (d.1708), and thereafter the guruship passed to the book of writings, the Guru Granth Sahib. The status of the Gurus in relation to prophethood and of the book in relation to revelation has been problematic for Muslims since the 16th century. Muslims could not accept the Gurus as Prophets or the Guru Granth Sahib as a revealed scripture.

The followers of earlier revelations

The Qur'an makes explicit the respect for people who follow earlier revelations in the case of four groups: Jews, Christians, Magians and Sabeans [Q. 2:62; 5:69; 22:17]. They are all called in the Qur'an *Ahl al-Kitab* or People of the Book. This is confirmation that they received at least one Prophet sent by God who brought revealed guidance that enabled him to establish a *shari'a*. The Qur'an is also explicit in saying that the People of the Book worship the same, one and only God, as Muslims [Q. 29:46].

The Sabeans have generally been associated by Muslim scholars with the Mandaeans, who are today a small religious group found in parts of Iraq and Iran. Their history is obscure but their religious books tell of a supreme being, whom they call the Lord of Greatness, and a line of messengers, one of whom was John and who is associated with the Prophet Yahya, who is called by Christians, John the Baptist, which ties in with their principal religious rite, that of frequent baptism for purification. One of their important scriptures is called the Book of John. They use a form of Aramaic in both writings and worship. There is stress on living a moral life and on the life hereafter. Scholarly opinion, working on their writings and practices, links them with Judaism and the "Baptisers" who followed John the Baptist, although their origins may pre-date him as a baptism of purification was not something new in his time.

The Magians have generally been associated with the Zoroastrians, the followers of the Persian Prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster in the West), whose dates are uncertain but today is generally reckoned to have lived in the 12th century before the Common Era. He taught the worship of the Wise Lord (Ahura Mazda) and some of his writings have been assembled to form part of a body of scripture. He is understood by Zoroastrians to be the bearer of the great revelation. The Zoroastrian religion became the official religion of the Persian Empires in the centuries before the rise of Islam and thus cast an influence from Egypt to the Punjab in India. In the 10th century CE, some Zoroastrians left Iran for India, where they are known as the Parsees (coming from Persia). In the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew mentions the Magi as coming from the east to pay their respects to the infant Jesus; it is likely that this is a reference to the Magians/Zoroastrians, who were noted for their study of the heavenly bodies.

The final two groups, the Jews and the Christians will be discussed in more detail in Part 7 of Bearers of the Final Message.