

Good News

...And give good news to those who do good (to others) - HQ22:37

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Interfaith – Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

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Fundamental Interfaith Principles in Islam:

I was asked to speak about Islam from an interfaith perspective and specifically Islam's connection to Judaism and Christianity. So, to start, Muslims don't consider Islam to be a 'new' religion *per se*. Rather, they view Islam as the *end point* in a long line of religious traditions all coming from the same source. Just as Christians understand Christianity to be a continuation or fulfilment of Jewish traditions and prophecies, so too do Muslims believe Islam is a continuation or fulfilment of Judaic/Christian prophecies

and a completion of a divine plan of guidance from God to humanity. Muslims view the religions preceding it originating from the same source. And it requires that the holy figures of those faith traditions to be respected and regarded as role models for humanity. As such, the fundamentals of Islam are based on the recognition of certain core principles that offer a paradigm for facilitating interfaith understanding and dialogue. And, in particular, there are three such core principles that I would like to focus on.

Unity of Humanity:

The first is that all people, regardless of race, nationality, colour, gender, are equal and are created from the same essence.

The Holy Quran declares:

Mankind is a single nation -
(2:213)

Inherent in this principle, is the understanding that there is no group of people that is superior than any other

simply because of the land from which they originate or because of their genetic makeup.

- **Unity in Diversity:**

The Holy Quran teaches:

And of His (i.e. God's) signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and **the diversity of your tongues (languages) and colours (races)**. (30:22)

O mankind, surely We have created you from a male and a female, and made you tribes and families **that you may know each other**. (49:13)

The diversity in humanity is not something that is supposed to divide us, but rather something to be cherished, as it provides the opportunity to learn from one another and benefit from each other's unique experiences and perspectives.

One God for all Mankind:

The second core principle is that, just as all of humanity is one, so too is God – the Creator of all that exists. So, according to Islam, there is only **One God** of all people. People may refer to God using different names or may pray to God based on different understandings of what God entails, but ultimately there is one Supreme Being that is not only the Creator of this world (and the entire universe) but also the Nourisher and Sustainer of all

creation. And this principle is advanced in the very first verse of the Holy Quran. It states:

All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the Worlds - (1:1)

The word translated as 'Lord' is from the Arabic word **Rabb**. *Rabb* is literally defined as:

'The fostering of a thing in such a manner as to make it attain one condition after another until it reaches its goal of completion.'

So, in addition to supporting the law of evolution working in the universe, this verse states that everything is being regulated by God, from lower to higher stages of progression. And this fostering of God's creation extends to ALL people (and in fact all worlds and everything that exists within them). The result being, no people are neglected from God's stewardship.

Spiritual Guidance Provided to All:

And the third core principle is the **Universality of Divine Favours** (i.e. all people have been blessed with spiritual guidance from God). According to Islam, just as God has provided all that is necessary for our physical development (the sun, the air, water, vegetation, etc.), so too does He provide for *all* people's spiritual development. This guidance for one's spiritual development is provided in the form of the raising of prophets and

messengers throughout the ages. Prophets served two primary functions:

- 1) To deliver a divine message to the people to whom they were sent;
- 2) To serve as role models for how to live a life in accordance with that divine message.

This institution of prophethood according to Islam is based on the understanding that prophets were sent to *all* people on earth and were not limited to any particular group as reflected in these verses:

There is not a people but a warner has gone among them - (35:24)

For every nation there is a messenger - (10:47)

Islam thus teaches that all people were equally blessed with God's guidance. The Holy Quran makes specific mention of many Israelite prophets, for example in this verse it states:

We believe in God and (in) that which has been revealed to us, and (in) that which was revealed to **Abraham**, and **Ishmael** and **Isaac** and **Jacob** and the tribes, and (in) that which was given to **Moses** and **Jesus**, and (in) that which was given to the prophets from their Lord, **we do not make any distinction between any of them** and to Him (God) do we submit. - (2:136)

In addition to Israelite prophets, the Holy Quran makes specific mention of *Hud* and *Salih* of Arabia, *Luqman* of Ethiopia, a contemporary of Moses (generally known as *Khidzr*) of Sudan, and *Dhu-l-Qarnain* of Persia. According to the Holy Quran not all of the prophets have been specifically named in scripture:

And (We sent) messengers We have mentioned to thee before and messengers We have not mentioned to thee. - (4:164).

In one report the Prophet Muhammad is recorded as saying that there have been 124,000 prophets in all.

Many Muslim scholars have argued that the founders of other faith traditions whose teachings resulted in scriptures being produced may be accepted as prophets of God as well. For instance, a popular American Muslim scholar, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, argues that Buddha, although not specifically named in the Quran, may be accepted as a prophet. So too can the argument be made that Krishna of the Hindu tradition may have been a prophet of God, or so too the legendary chiefs of the native American First Nations peoples, and so on.

The message revealed to the prophets, and which they in turn delivered to the people to whom they were sent, was essentially the same. And that was:

- 1) To believe in God (the Creator and Provider for all), and
- 2) To do good to your fellow man (what is commonly referred to as the ‘Golden Rule’).

All religions are founded upon this basic two-part formula. And the purpose of every religion is to provide guidance on how to develop spiritually – how to be a better person, a moral being, as opposed to simply living a materialistic life dictated by one’s selfish desires. This objective is characterized in Islam as attaining a true state of ‘peace’ – peace within oneself, among people and between oneself and God ... as is reflected in these verses:

O you who believe, enter into complete peace. - (2:208)

And God invites to the abode of peace. - (10:25)

The name of the religion, ‘Islam’, is rather unique in this regard. This faith is not named after a person that founded the religion or the place from which it originated, as is the case with most religions, but rather is derived from the Arabic root word *silim* which means ‘*peace*’. So the faith is actually titled after the objective to which religion aspires.

Reconciling the Differences:

But what about the differences among religions, beyond the basic foundation of belief in God and doing good to others? How do we account for the

differences then? Well, at least according to Islam, prophets were sent to specific nations and their teachings dealt with the conditions those particular people faced *at that time*.

So, naturally, there would be differences because different people faced different conditions throughout history. For instance, just because the Old Testament states: ‘*An eye for an eye*’ and the New Testament states: ‘*Turn the other cheek*’ doesn’t mean that one is right and the other is wrong, but rather that both these lessons have their legitimate place as they were appropriate under particular conditions at different times.

Now according to Islam, the response to wrongdoing by another is not limited to one type of action; rather the Quran states: ‘*Repel evil with what is best*’, which requires one to determine what would be most beneficial to achieve peace under the conditions he or she faces at the time. And this is what is meant by the Quran stating it is a ‘*Verifier of previous scriptures*.’ – it authenticates the validity of these previous messages and legitimates the application of the lessons contained in them when the conditions are appropriate.

Abraham, the Patriarch of Many Nations:

Another example of the view of Islam being a culmination of a long line of divine

messages to humanity and a verifier of previous messages, is Islam upholding the status of Abraham as the Patriarch and archetype of monotheistic faith. Abraham is repeatedly pointed out in the Quran as comprehending that the True, Supreme, All-Powerful, Perfect God is One, and that it is to this One God that man is to submit himself completely. And it is this Abrahamic model of faith that Islam endeavours to **re-establish** as is shown in these verses:

God speaks the truth; **so follow the religion of Abraham**, the upright one. And he (Abraham) was not one of the polytheists - (3:95).

And who is better in religion than he who submits himself entirely to God while doing good (to others) and **follows the faith of Abraham**, the upright one? And God took Abraham for a friend - (4:125).

As for me, my Lord has guided me to the right path — **a right religion, the faith of Abraham**, the upright one, and he (Abraham) was not of the polytheists - (6:161).

So, the God of Islam is the God of Abraham, the same God Jews and Christians worship. And this connection to Abraham is what binds Muslims, Christians and Jews.

For Jews, Abraham gave rise to a nation of Hebrews, which means people

“on the other side”, as Abraham was born in Mesopotamia (what is today Iraq) but moved to Haran (the region in northern Syria and southern Turkey). And it is there that God made a covenant with Abraham. And Jews believe that they inherited this covenant through Abraham’s son, Isaac:

Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will name him Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an eternal covenant to his descendants after him. - (Genesis 17:19)

For Christians, ancestry through Abraham is also important, as the Gospels trace the genealogy of Jesus to Abraham. But, the connection to Abraham is somewhat redefined according to Christian theology, as I understand it. And that is that Jesus is understood as the true descendant of Abraham and that belief or faith in Jesus (regardless of one’s physical ancestry) makes one an heir of Abraham’s family. The Bible states:

If you be Christ’s, then you are the seed of Abraham - (Romans 9:6).

For Muslims, as with Jews and Christians, a direct physical relationship with Abraham is present in Islamic traditions. This physical connection is through Abraham’s firstborn, Ishmael. Just as the Israelite nation descended from Isaac, the Arab peoples descended from Ishmael. This is how Muslims trace

Prophet Muhammad's physical ancestry to Abraham, through the Ishmaelite lineage. And the covenant between God and Abraham is accepted in Islam. However, according to Islam, the covenant extended to both of Abraham's sons, Isaac and Ishmael:

And I will give unto thee, and to **thy seed** after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.
- (Gen. 17:8)

And as for **Ishmael** I have heard thee; Behold I have blessed him and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.- (Gen. 17:20)

And, like in Christianity, the connection to Abraham according to Islam is extended beyond ancestral relations. According to Islam, it is the following of the *faith of Abraham* – the faith of submission to the One Supreme Being, the Creator and Provider and Nourisher of all creation – that makes one an “heir” of Abraham.

Jesus, the Messiah:

Although Jews, Christians and Muslims trace their roots to a common source and, as such, are referred to as Abrahamic faiths, they differ in their understanding of

the significance of Abraham in their faith traditions. Similarly, Jews, Christians and Muslims differ in their understanding of Jesus. Like Christians, Muslims accept Jesus to be the ‘Messiah’.

Muslims understand the term ‘Messiah’ to mean ‘the one who instills the spirit in the faith.’ However, Muslims don't accept the notion that Jesus was divine or a part of God. Rather, according to Islam, Jesus was a prophet of God and, like all prophets, was human. Not only is Jesus revered in Islam as a great prophet of God and the Messiah, but also his mother Mary is praised as being an exceptionally spiritual person. In fact the Quran points to Mary as an example of a ‘true believer.’ And, interestingly, she is referenced more times in the Holy Quran than she is even in the Gospels, and an entire chapter is actually named after her.

Muslims believe that the ‘good news’ Jesus shared with the Israelites were the foretelling of the coming of the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims believe that when Jesus spoke of the coming of another after him – using terms like ‘the comforter’ or ‘the spirit of truth’ he was prophesying the appearance of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

Just as Jesus is considered by Christians to be a fulfilment of Judaic prophecies, Muslims consider Prophet

Muhammad as a fulfilment of Judaic/Christian prophecies.

Conclusion

Despite there being differences in understanding among the different faith traditions, the Quran is very clear that freedom of religious belief is a fundamental human right that must be protected. In contrast to what we see being practiced in some parts of the world today by some who claim to be Muslims, the Quran emphatically states:

There is no compulsion in religion
- (2:256)

Everyone has the right to believe in the manner they deem appropriate. The Holy Quran goes so far as to state that it is a duty for Muslims to protect and defend the houses of worship of people of all faiths because, regardless of the particular faith tradition, people go to these centres to remember God, as is reflected in this verse:

And if God did not repel some people by others, **cloisters, and churches, and synagogues, and mosques in which God's name is much remembered**, would have been pulled down. And surely God will help him who helps Him. - (22:40)

In a nutshell this is what Islam teaches about interfaith relations. Thank you.



We strongly condemn all forms of human rights abuses; the wanton abuse of the environment and the rest of God's creation. We especially condemn, from the top of our voices, the ruthless killings of all innocent parties in the name of Religion or State!

The Good News

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