

Unity OF Faiths: An Islamic Perspective



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Abstract

Religion is only one--Islam, and prophets were to represent Islam to their peoples. The followers of some prophets, however, distorted the true religion. Hence Allah, through His final messenger, perfected and preserved Islam to be followed by the people until the Day of Judgment. Had Allah wanted, He could have made the people one community in terms of faith. However, to forcefully make human beings and jinn to obey His commandments was not in line with His divine scheme, based on which He has created this world. Unity of faiths through artificial efforts, therefore, is neither desired nor practical considering the divine scheme of life. On the other hand inter-faith harmony or respect for other people's faith is something highly valued and desired in the light of Islamic teachings rooted into Qur'an and sayings of the holy Prophet(PBUH). This article strongly argues that Islam doesn't believe in the unity of faiths or oneness of religions by mixing-up its principles with other religions, rather Islam through its bright principles and sublime character of last and the final messenger Muhammad (PBUH) advocates and promotes the inter-faith harmony, despites its firm claim for the trueness of its values. So many people in both the classical and modern world have been standing behind 'The Unity of Faiths' chorus. However, by observing the text of Islamic scripture, and the life of Muhammad (the epitome of Quran), it is in sharp contradictions with the set values of the last, final and perfect Ibrahamic faith---Islam. Also, it has been argued, that oneness of faiths is just a utopia to say the least. The article, therefore, suggests that Muslims should have an extra-respect for the faith of others but at the same time they are to practice, advocate, and promote Islamic values and do their best to make people stick to the values of Islam in a very polite, civilized and wise way.

Keywords: Unity, Faith, Religion, Interfaith, Islam

1. INTRODUCTION

The confused people, in the garb of logic say, that since all the religions are guiding to the same destination, therefore, they [religions] are to be treated equally true and acceptable. This narrative is mainly of those who lack clear-headedness in terms of understanding Islam. Majority of these people have been studying at Europe, indoctrinated there, knowing very little about the essence of Islamic teachings. This article is an attempt to explore the abovementioned version considering the true principles of Islam. The concept has been labeled differently throughout human history-- unity of religion/ oneness of religion, inter-faith harmony etc.

Islam, the final and perfect code of life for human beings, has nothing to take from other faiths, for it is sent down by the Creator, Who knows past, present and the future alike. And the principles of Islam are therefore, timeless---- relevant, applicable and updated for all the people and times to come. The concept [oneness of faiths] may

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therefore, work for those, who are confused and can't lead humanity considering their faith. In terms of Islam, however, mixing-up its principles with something man-made is neither needed nor desired.

Other so-called religions have even deviated from the lifestyle and principles of their Prophets. Hence, they have no authentic source to stick to. Islam on the other hand, has the uncorrupted sources to guide human beings forever i.e., Qur'an and authentic sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Muhammad's words and deeds are a must to be followed. For instance, Almighty Allah says that He swears in His Own-self that anybody wants to reach Him the way not endorsed by His prophet--Muhammad--would not get to Him (1)

Having such a firm claim, Islam is distinctive and its uniqueness is not something to be compromised on. Hence oneness of religions, has no remote connection with Islam to say the least.

Behind the oneness of religions chorus, there are two well-known objectives---- to construct common places of worshipping and to publish common religious books---- both are in stark contradiction to the set values of Islam. To put it more simply, Mosques, Churches and Synagogues etc. are to be considered and declared the same and the Qur'an, Gospel and Torah etc. are to be intermixed and published being a single book to guide human beings. (2)

1.1. Oneness/ Unity of Religions and Interfaith Harmony: Two Different Concepts

Islam strongly forbids from the unity of faiths by intermixing its principles with some other faiths. It [Islam] is unequivocal in its stance "Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion" (3). The Muslims have been instructed not to make the non-Muslims to be their heart-deep friends, if they are detrimental to their faith. The Muslims may, however, manage their daily businesses with the non-Muslims amicably. The Muslims are further guided to be distinctive in their outlook, deeds and even bodily characteristics from the non-Muslims. So much so that Allah's Prophet [PBUH] described that he was to make distinguishes among the people (4). This shows that Muhammad (PBUH) introduced a distinctive way of life to be followed by the people and that way would serve is a hallmark to differentiate them from others. This further validates that to intact its [Islam] uniqueness has always been and still is the approach compatible to the principles grounded in Quran and sayings of prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Abdul Majid, while interpreting the verse 16 of *Surh Arad*, says that the verse negates the views of the so-called enlightened and liberal minded who stand in support of oneness of religions and don't consider Islamic faith to be the only way to worldly success (5). Interpreting verse 208 of the "Chapter Cow" of the holy Quran, Darya Abadi further describes that being complete code of life, Islam, has guidance for each and every aspect of life. And hence, it [Islam] can't be restricted to few beliefs, worshipping and laws. It is therefore, illogical and unaccepted that its values and norms be amalgamated with other ideologies of life. Like, partly you believe in Islam and partly in other theories such as communism and Buddhism etc. The Muslims are bound to shape their outlooks and deeds purely considering Islamic principles. The only color the Muslims need to color themselves in is the color of Islam. (6). The Allah's order, in this regard is worth noting, as He says, "Believers! Enter wholly into Islam²²⁶ and do

not follow in the footsteps of Satan for he is your open enemy” (7). Maudodi described that God demands full obedience, unlike splitting up of human life into various compartments, some to be governed and guided by the Islamic beliefs, and some by other conflicting views (8).

1.1. 2. Religious Harmony OR Interfaith Dialogue

Islam holds all human beings in great respect and its [Islam] guiding principles emphasize its followers to internalize the concept of civility toward others, as the verse goes, “Truly, We have honored the children of Adam” (9). The Muslims are prohibited to distort and mutilate the body of a non-Muslim even during wars, and they have been forbidden to sit on the grave of a Muslim or non-Muslims--- all to show that respect must be given to all irrespective of their faith and creed. (10) Once, a funeral procession of a Jew was sighted by Muhammad (PBUH), and he stood in its honor. The companions asked astonishingly, was not that the coffin of a Jew? Muhammad (PBUH) answered that he [the Jew] too was a human being.

Quran—the major and authentic source of understanding Islam—says that nobody can be forced into accepting Islam. It is people’s free will to observe any belief, they consider true. The verse of Quran, in this regard explains that there is no coercion in *Deen*—Islam—guidance has been separated from the ignorance. The one who disbelieves in false gods i.e., *Taghut* and believes in Allah has grasped the handhold having no break in it. And Allah is all Hearing and all Knowing (11). Islam guides its followers not to be disrespectful, even in the least degree towards other faiths as the following verse shows:

And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge. Thus We [Allah] have made pleasing to every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return, and He will inform them about what they used to do (12).

Interfaith Dialogue (IFD) which may result in the religious harmony has always been in line with the Islamic perspective. IFD refers to the positive, constructive, academic and intellectual debate between the followers of various religions and different spiritual and humanistic group at both individual and institutional level. It is an effective attempt to create harmony and understanding between the followers of different faiths and not to synergy the beliefs into one (13). Islamic perspective has always been supporting this approach. For instance, Quran says:

Say, "O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you - that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah." But if they turn away, then say, "Bear witness that we are Muslims [submitting to Him]." (14).

While arguing with people of the book, the Muslims are guided not to be obstinate and harsh in their words, showing any antagonism on their part toward the non-Muslims. Rather, they [Muslims] are to be very cool and calm and the epitomes of reasonableness and civility. The verse, for instance, indicates:

And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say, "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. And our God and your God is one; and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him." (15)

Maudoodi explains the verse as:

That is, the discussion should be conducted rationally, in a civilized and decent language, so that the ideas of the other person may be reformed. The preacher's main aim should be to appeal to the addressee's heart, convey the truth to him and bring him to the right path. He should not fight like a wrestler whose only object is to defeat his opponent. He should rather conduct himself like a physician who is ever cautious not to cause the patient's ailment to worsen by any of his own mistakes, and tries to cure him with the least possible trouble (16)

An Egyptian scholar by the name of Yusuf Qurzawi, however, explained that it's not forbidden for Muslims to take benefits from the knowledge and things which apparently belong to non-Muslims. Until and unless the knowledge and things or a partial system [which may benefit a Muslim society] is in contrasts with the set principles of Islam (17).

2. THE WORLD STARTED FROM ONENESS OF FAITH

It is pertinent to note that there was only one religion, when human beings and jinn were placed on this earth, and that Era may rightly be called the era of unity of faith. All Messengers of Allah, right from the Adam to Muhammad (PBUH), were the representative of Islam. As Muhammad (PBUH) disclosed that "كان دين الانبياء لا اله الا الله" (18) i.e., all prophets were to represent the oneness of Allah. And Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) being seal of the prophets perfected that Religion (Islam) as Allah says, "Today, I have perfected your religion for you, and have completed My blessing upon you, and chosen Islam as Dīn (religion and a way of life) for you" (19). Therefore, Allah's prophet [Muhammad] had to declare:

Say, [O Muhammad], "O mankind, indeed I am the Messenger of Allah to you all, [from Him] to whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. There is no deity except Him; He gives life and causes death." So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered prophet, who believes in Allah and His words, and follow him that you may be guided (20)

To sum up, it may be said that all people were the follower of one and true **RELIGION**---Islam, but with the passage of time they were overwhelmed by their evil desires and went astray to stick to various ways of life. So, it's not religion, which have been different, rather it's people who have been divided into various creeds----in the beginning all people were one community---Muslims--- but then they deviated.

3. Islam Is The Only Way Of Life

The last and final revelation, descended upon the last and final Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), has revoked all previous religions. Though, religion has been one (Islam) but the followers of Islam once deviated coined different names for their distorted religions i.e., Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism etc. The claim of the Jews and Christians, when they said that Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) was either Jew or Christian, was, therefore, rectified by Allah in the Quran as: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was one inclining toward truth, a Muslim [submitting to Allah]. And he was not of the polytheists" (21). This shows that the only way of Allah is Islam and nothing else. The verse for example, further clarifies:

Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam. And those who were given the Scripture did not differ except after knowledge had come to them - out of jealous animosity between them. And whoever disbelieves in the verses of Allah, then indeed, Allah is swift in [taking] account(22).

Also, the efforts of those who stick to other religions will come to naught on the Day of Judgment, as Quran discloses, “And whoever desires other than Islam as religion - never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers (23).

4. OTHER REVEALED BOOKS AND ISLAM

It is a part of Islamic faith to believe in all the prophets and revealed books. Among the books considered to be revealed, the four mentioned by name in the Quran are the Tawrat (Torah or the Law) revealed to Musa (Moses), the Zabur (Psalms) revealed to Dawud (David), the Injil (the Gospel) revealed to Isa (Jesus), and the Quran revealed to Muhammad (PBUH). It is a must for a Muslim to declare his faith in all the revealed books. As Quran describes, “Whoever disbelieves in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day has certainly gone far astray” (24). The Quran endorses that all the previous revealed books were revealed by Allah, as the verse further clarifies,

And We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together, and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ (25).

In the above verse Quran has been named as *Muhaimen*, means the book to safeguard the objectives of previous revealed books. (26).

4.1. Previous Revealed Books were Corrupted by the Followers

Then, for their breach of the covenant, We cast them away from Our mercy and caused their hearts to harden. (And now they are in such a state that) they pervert the words from their context and thus distort their meaning, and have forgotten a good portion of the teaching they were imparted, and regarding all except a few of them you continue to learn that they committed acts of treachery. Pardon them, then, and overlook their deeds. Surely Allah loves those who do good deeds (27).

They even replaced Allah’s revealed words by their handwritten words, as Quran endorses: “Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands and then say, “This is from Allah, to purchase with it a little price! Woe to them for what their hands have written and woe to them for that they earn thereby” (28)

5. UNITY OF FAITH: ARGUMENTS

The following arguments are often cited in the support of UNITY OF FAITH discourse.

1. Religions have caused a lot of bloodshed throughout human history. For instance, Marks (29) said that to have peace in the world, religion needs to be eliminated.

2. ‘Unity in Diversity’ approach was introduced, to argue that since all religions ultimately guide to the same destination, so why not to develop unity in diversity—one religion—this concept was given the name ‘Oneness of Reality’ by some people (30)

5.1. Counter Arguments

1. The comparative study of religions show that there are fundamental differences found in religions regarding God, Messengers, Revelations, Angels, Life hereafter, and Divine values of life.

2. People will become stagnant in their thinking if they are convinced that all religions are true. They would become then blind followers of their respective creeds. Having different faiths may force one into investigating about the rightness and wrongness of religions and getting them to the true religion, provided one is serious in their investigation. Moreover, people will be very confused if they are forced into believing the trueness of all the religions alike. The Quran for instance, says that Allah didn't create two hearts in a single person's heart (31). The heart is the center of love and a person can't have love at the same time for contradictory faiths of life. For instance, in Hinduism, even the reproductive organs are being worshiped (32). Christians believe in trinity, while the Jews have so many gods (33), while Islam is purely monotheistic religion.

3. Declaring religion to be solely responsible for bloodshed in the world is not a fair judgment. Behind both the World Wars, the dominant factors were racisms and extortionists designs. Also, wars have been fought between the followers of the same religions resulting in massacres. The World Wars, for instance, were fought between the followers of the same religion (Christianity). In Afghanistan, after Russia's departure, the Muslims are infighting until now. In Pakistan the militant groups are fighting against Pak Army---both are the followers of Islam. So, blaming religions for the bloodshed is just a skin-deep analysis.

4. Through 'Oneness of religions' Muslims are deprived of their very precious assets (Islam). The disbelievers have always been wishing this as the Quran says "They wish you would disbelieve as they disbelieved so you would be alike" (34). The Muslims are even guided not to fall prey to the plots of the disbelievers. One of their plots has been to make the believers stayed away from the set norms of Islam. As the verse says, "And judge, [O Muhammad], between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations and beware of them, lest they tempt you away from some of what Allah has revealed to you" (35).

The commentators on Quran have been explaining that the one and only God created human beings that people are begotten from one father and mother and that one sun is lighting the whole universe, that one reproductive system is resulting in the creation of each and every individual and the food and its digestive system is one and the same. All this shows that there must be one creator and one system of life for all the human beings (36).

6. MUSLIMS' OUTLOOK ON OTHER FAITHS

How to deal with the non-Muslims has been defined clearly by Quran which speaks volume, i.e., oneness or unity of faith, is not something to be achieved through compromises and cosmetic means. The verse, for instance, narrates that "And indeed this, your religion, is one religion, and I am your Lord, so fear Me" (37). Abdul Qadir (38) has explained this verse that people were corrected at the hands of their respective prophets. The people then considered that they had different commandments from their Lord to follow; hence Allah corrected them through Muhammad (PBUH). And now there is only one religion. Also one of the sayings of Muhammad (PBUH) is worth noting, which goes that by Allah, in Whose hand is Muhammad's life, anybody, whether Jew or Christian, knowing about him[Muhammad], and died without being faith in him[Muhammad], would enter into Hell fire (39).

Quran further reinforces that “And upon Allah is the direction of the [right] way, and among the various paths are those deviating. And if He willed, He could have guided you all”(40). So much so that Muhammad (PBUH) prohibited *Abdula-Ibne-Salam* to follow Torah by saying that two *Deens*—ways of life—cannot be combined into one person’s life (41).

The Muslims are to respect other faiths, argue with the followers in the best way--- interfaith dialogue---- but at the same time they are to stick to their own beliefs and values firmly. The verse, “to you is your religion, and to me, my religion” (42), is the corner stone for a Muslim’s belief. This verse shows, as Maudoodi interprets that:

That is, my religion is entirely distinct and separate from your religion. I am not a worshipper of your gods and you are not worshippers of my God. I cannot worship your gods and you are not prepared to worship my God, Therefore, you and I can never follow and walk one and the same path together.(43)

Muslims are further instructed that they would do their best to invite the non-believers to Islam, however, if they [Muslim] are rejected, then they would declare their faith being Muslims, and would stay away from the faiths of the non-believers, as the verses say, “If these people deny you, say to them: I am responsible for my deeds and you are responsible for yours: you are not accountable for what I do, and I am not accountable for what you do”. (44). O Prophet, say: O mankind, if you are still in doubt concerning my faith, know that I do not worship those whom you worship beside Allah, but I worship that Allah alone, Who has the power to cause your death. (45). In Surah Ash-Shuara it was said: If they disobey you, tell them: I am not responsible for what you do. (verse 216).In Surah Saba it was said: Say to them: you will not be questioned for the errors we have committed, nor shall we be answerable for what you are doing. Say, our Lord will gather us together, and then He will judge between us rightly. (46). In Surah az-Zumar: Tell them plainly: O my people, do whatever you will, so shall I. Soon you shall come to know as to whom comes the disgraceful torment and who gets the enduring punishment (47).

The Muslims are often told to follow the life-style of Ibrahim (PBUH), who dissociated himself from the idolaters of his time, as the verse discloses:

There is indeed an excellent example for you in Abraham and his companions when they said to their people plainly: We have nothing to do with you and your gods, whom you worship beside God; we have renounced you and there has arisen between us and you enmity and hatred for ever, until you believe in Allah, the One. (48).

In short Muslims’ approaches are to be based on the Qur’anic verse as, O Prophet, say to them: I shall serve Allah alone, making my religion sincerely His. As for you, you may serve whomever you please beside Him (49).

8. CONSEQUENCES OF UNITY OF FAITHS FOR MUSLIMS

By analyzing the arguments, cited in support of UOF the following inferences are made.

1. Intermixing all the religions or considering all faiths to be true may result in the elimination of the criterion_ to judge right and wrong.
2. The principles of Quran regarding friendships and enmities with the non-Muslims will lose their relevance and become meaningless.

3. One of the important concepts of Islam i.e., JIHAD, will be something foreign, when all people are to be treated equally based on their common religion, then JIHAD against whom? While Allah's prophet have told us that JIHAD will continue till the Day of Judgment (50)
4. Inviting people towards Islam will become meaningless. Since, people will be considered as on one creed, and therefore, all the verses regarding inviting non-Muslims to the true path will become something impractical.
5. By making one religion as per modern approach, even the Jews and the Christians would get opportunities to incorporate their distorted portions of scriptures and then would propagate that even in the Islamic state without any restrictions, which is totally an un-Islamic approach.

9. CONCLUSION

To sum up the discussion above, it may be concluded that Islam is the only way of life for the Muslims. They are to stay away from inter-mingling the Islamic values with other values, no matter where the values come from. The only values, they [Muslims] could accommodate are those, which are not in contrast with the set principles of Islam.

The Muslims are however, required to be extra-respectful toward other faiths/religions. They may argue with them in the best way possible, not deviating from politeness and civility even in the least. This debate or inter-faith discussion would, however, be centered on, making the non-believers understanding about Islam, not to be shaped up by their views. The Muslims are prohibited to be insulting and derogatory toward non-Muslims' faiths. They may maintain their routine businesses with them, provided they [the Muslims] can observe their religious values.

Many religions are the creations of human minds. The Religion as per Qur'anic guidance has been and still is the one i.e., Islam. All prophets were the representatives of Islam--- they invited their respective communities to Islam only. Later on, due to ignorance, stubbornness, envy, misguidance and vested interests, they (the followers), distorted the true religion and coined different names for them such as Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism etc. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as the last and final Messenger of Allah, brought a perfect divine message to be followed by all and sundry till the Day of Judgment. Islam, therefore, considers them (non-Muslims) to be deviated communities, and hence, the Muslims are instructed to do all out efforts to bring them on the right track—Islam.

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