

*Muslims as followers of earlier prophets —  
How Islam brings religions together*

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by Mrs Fauqia Aziz

اشهد ان لا اله الا الله، وحده لا شريك له،  
واشهد ان محمداً عبده ورسوله

وَقَالُوا كُونُوا هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَى تَهْتَدُوا قُلْ بَلْ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٣٥﴾ قُولُوا  
أَمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَى  
وَعِيسَى وَمَا أُوتِيَ النَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ ۗ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿١٣٦﴾

“And they say: Be Jews or Christians, you will be on the right course.

Say to them: No, (we follow) the religion of Abraham, the upright one, and he was not of those who set up partners (with Allah).

Say to them: We believe in Allah and (in) what has been revealed to us, and (in) what was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and (in) what was given to Moses and Jesus, and (in) what was given to the prophets from their Lord, we make no distinction between any of them and to Him we submit.”  
(The Quran, 2:135–136)

It is stated in this passage of the Quran that the Jews claim for themselves, and likewise the Christians claim for themselves, that it is only by being a Jew or a Christian that a person is on the right path. In answer to this, the Quran does **not** say: It is only by being a Muslim that a person can be on the right path.

The reply given by the Quran is that being Jew or Christian implies acceptance of certain beliefs which were added after the basis of these religions had been established by Abraham. Later on, those additions led to further distortions. By the time of the coming of Islam, the attitude of the followers of these earlier religions amounted to setting up partners of God to be worshipped like only God should be worshipped.

Then this passage in the Quran describes what Muslims believe. They believe in God, they believe in the revelation which had now come to the Holy Prophet Muhammad, and they believe that what had been previously revealed to **every prophet** was also from God.

This verse mentions by name some of the Israelite prophets. But it also mentions, more generally, “what was given to the prophets from their Lord”, that is, the revelations given to prophets who appeared anywhere in the world.

A good question is: How can we believe in revelations of earlier prophets? After all, we say that these revelations and scriptures are not now preserved in their original forms, and even at the time when Islam came into the world they were not in their original forms. Moreover, even if they had been available in their original forms, we believe that they only addressed their own people and have nothing much to do with other nations of the world.

When the Quran says that Muslims believe in these earlier revelations, what it means is that Muslims believe in the things that are in common across all these revelations, even though those revelations are not exactly in their original forms now. The Quran takes those common points and develops them further. The existence and oneness of God is common to all revelations. If some teaching of an earlier prophet appears to go against this fundamental, we re-interpret that teaching. If necessary we reject it.

The Jews may believe that only their God is One God, and that other nations can have their own gods. But Islam extends this concept of oneness of God to say that there is only One God for all. The Christians may assign an exclusive status to Jesus, but that is obviously not a common point across all revelations of prophets. Islam argues on the basis of the common teachings of all revelations that Jesus was a mortal prophet like the other prophets, and they can all be called sons of God metaphorically. But none of them is the special beloved of God to the exclusion of all others. This is how we re-interpret.

So, according to the above verse, Muslims are followers of every prophet, because they are followers of the *whole group* of prophets taken together as one body.

Muslims don't make any single prophet into a **special case** or into an **exception to the rule**. This is the meaning of the statement: “we make no distinction between any of them”.

The verse ends with the following statement: “and to Him we submit”. The word for “submit” is *muslimūn*, the same word as ‘Muslim’. So this verse says that what makes us Muslims is that we believe in all the prophets and don't discriminate between them.

Let us look further into the words: “and to Him we submit”. This statement does not just say: “and we submit”. It says: “**and to God** we submit”. Therefore we are told to say to Jews and Christians (and to others as well) **not** that we are Muslims in name, but that we submit to God, and it is that action of submitting to God which makes us Muslims. We are not simply adding another name, ‘Muslim’, to the list of names like ‘Jew’ and ‘Christian’.

In this verse we are told to say that we are those who submit to God by accepting all the revelations that came from Him. In responding to those who call themselves Jews or Christians, and claim that that is the best, the Quran does **not** respond to say that being Muslim is the best. Instead, the Quran describes what a person should believe and do.

Another interesting point is this. A person cannot be a Jew and a Christian at the same time! This is because the key beliefs of Jews and Christians are opposite to each other. Jews believe that observing the religious law and ritual is most important. Christians consider it as of no importance whatsoever, but regard belief in Jesus dying for mankind's sins as the most important doctrine. Jews reject Jesus as an imposter, and Christians believe him to be higher than a mortal and the son of God. So in that way no person can be both a Jew and a Christian at the same time. But you will be surprised to learn that a Muslim can be a Jew and a Christian at the same time! This is because: (1) he believes in the things which Jews and Christians have in common, and (2) he accepts the right beliefs from both of them. He respects the laws of Moses and at the same time he honours and glorifies Jesus.

We may say that when the Holy Prophet Muhammad appeared, religions were like scattered stones lying on the ground, forming no pattern. He picked them up and arranged them into a building, placing each stone in its proper place. But this building needed a corner-stone, without which it would collapse. It was the new, broad and universal teachings revealed to the Prophet Muhammad which were placed as the corner-stone to complete this building.

The verse quoted at the start of my talk is in the middle of the second chapter of the Holy Quran. Belief in all prophets and their revelations is also mentioned **right at the beginning and right at the end of this chapter**. It is stated in the beginning of this chapter, in verses 2 to 5:

ذٰلِكَ اَنْكِتَبُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيْهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِيْنَ ﴿٢﴾ الَّذِيْنَ يُؤْمِنُوْنَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيْمُوْنَ الصَّلٰوةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنٰهُمْ يُنْفِقُوْنَ ﴿٣﴾ وَالَّذِيْنَ يُؤْمِنُوْنَ بِمَا اُنزِلَ اِلَيْكَ وَمَا اُنزِلَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ وَبِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُوْنَ ﴿٤﴾ اُولٰٓئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدًى مِّنْ رَّبِّهِمْ ۗ وَاُولٰٓئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُوْنَ ﴿٥﴾

“This Book, in which there is no doubt, is a guide to those who keep their duty, who believe in the Unseen and keep up prayer and spend (on good works) out of what We have given them, **and who believe in what has been revealed to you (O Prophet**

**Muhammad) and what was revealed before you**, and of the Hereafter they are sure. These are on a right course from their Lord and these it is that are successful.”

Here, at the beginning of the Quran, Muslims are required to believe in the revelations of the Prophet Muhammad and those of all earlier prophets. It is one of the essential requirements for a person if he wishes to become ‘one who keeps his duty’, that is, a *muttaqī* or righteous person, and if he is to be rightly-guided and to attain spiritual success. Without fulfilling this requirement, he or she cannot achieve this status.

The second from last verse of this chapter 2, that is verse 285, states:

أَمِنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ كُلٌّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ لَا نُفَرِّقُ  
بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْ رُسُلِهِ

“The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, and (so do) the believers. They all believe in Allah and His angels and His Books and His messengers. We make no distinction between any of His messengers.” (2:285)

Here the same beliefs are expressed in different words. Firstly, this verse shows that the Prophet Muhammad is himself a Muslim, because he believes in what all Muslims are required to believe in. His function is not only to convey and preach the doctrines and practices of Islam to his followers, but also to believe in the same and to act upon them. In this verse, the followers of the prophet are called “the believers” (*mu’minūn*). Belief in messengers is mentioned in this verse in addition to belief in their revelations.

Comparing these three sets of verses from chapter 2, we see that they are all mentioning the same things in different ways:

- Verses 2 to 5 mention what is required of **righteous people, the *muttaqīn***,
- Verses 135 to 136 mention what is required of **Muslims, the *muslimūn***,
- Verse 285 mentions what is required of **believers, the *mu’minūn***.

And these verses, taken together, state clearly that it is **not possible** to become righteous, or Muslims, or believers in Islam, without believing in all the prophets and the revelations before the Holy Prophet Muhammad. And we must believe in all of them equally.

It is interesting to observe that these verses describe what beliefs are required from those who are Muslims, who are believers, who are righteous ones, and who are on the right path from their Lord and spiritually successful. But the law of Pakistan and the rulings

of the so-called Ulama (scholars of Islam) don't consider these definitions to be sufficient to make a person a Muslim and believer in Islam. They declare many such people to be non-Muslims who believe and do what these verses require!

Now I close by reading two extracts.

The first is from the end of the book *Muhammad in World Scriptures* by Maulana Abdul Haq Vidyarthi, volume 1. While reading this extract to you, I will pause at certain points to add read a brief note of explanation that I have added:

“Islam is an inter-religious anthology, a hyphen connecting religions, a long bridge to meet all the Sages of the world, a thesaurus of all sacred scriptures, an ample junction where trains come from East, West, North and South, and passengers from the four quarters of the earth meet together.

There is a great Restaurant Hall and in it is a table, spread with rich food sent down from heaven at the request of the disciples and the prayer of Jesus himself.<sup>1</sup>

Here is the menu:

Indian dishes full of Vedic *Dal Bhat*, seasoned with Swastika Yoghurt,<sup>2</sup>

Chinese Buddhist chicken roasted in Dhammapada fat,<sup>3</sup>

clean meat for the Jews, seasoned with garlic and onions in olive oil,

for Zoroastrians rice-pudding with cow's milk.<sup>4</sup>

There are dishes of Mush, flavoured from the Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead.<sup>5</sup>

Enter into this Peace Lodge (that is, Islam) at the magnificent Junction for all the travellers of this world. There is no restriction upon Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, Israelite, non-Israelite, black or white, high-caste or low-caste.

All are cordially invited and pleasantly served, and a greeting of peace (*as-salamu 'alaikum*) to all, peace with Almighty God, and peace with humans, the religion of all the Sages of the world, and the religion of humanity.”

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> *Note:* This refers to the prayer of Jesus for food for his followers, as mentioned in the Quran, 5:114.

<sup>2</sup> *Note:* Swastika is a sacred symbol of Hinduism.

<sup>3</sup> *Note:* Dhammapada is a collection of Buddha's sayings.

<sup>4</sup> *Note:* it is said that Zoroaster was born after his father drank cow's milk, which then passed into his mother.

<sup>5</sup> *Note:* Mushrooms are called 'the food of the gods' in this ancient scripture.

Please remember that when the earlier religions mentioned food (for example, “our daily bread” in Christianity) they really meant spiritual food which guides man to the right path. The above analogy of a restaurant menu illustrates that the Prophet Muhammad provided for followers of every religion the spiritual food they were looking forward to.

The second extract is from *The Islamic Review*, July 1914 issue. It contains a brief item headed *Who is Muslim?*, which is as follows:

“He is an Israelite in following the Ten Commandments of God and the law of retribution with its legitimate bounds. He is a follower of Christ, doing away with all the ritual of the Pharisees, and denouncing their hypocritical observances. He observes the Law of Mercy promulgated on the Mount of Olives (by Jesus) when it leads to reclamation. His object is reformation through mercy or retribution as the case may be. He is an Arya-Hindu in breaking images, and a Sanaton-dharmi [Hindu] in paying respect to all the godly men of any nation and creed, who have been called Avatars — incarnation of God. He is Buddhist in preaching Nirvana, i.e., self-effacement as the key of salvation. He is Unitarian to establish the unity of God. In short, he embraces, through the Quran, every beauty in every religion, and turns his face from what has been added to the religion of God by man — and this is Islam!”

In the end let us all pray that followers of each of the religions of the world recognize and verify the good points of every other religion, and find that these are contained and summed up in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

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