
Journal of Religious Culture

Journal für Religionskultur

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad
Institute for Irenics / Institut für Wissenschaftliche Irenik
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935- © E.Weber – E-mail: irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de

No. 91 (2007)

Some Reflections on Islamic View of Other Divine Religions within the Context of Inter-religious Dialogue

By

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A. Preliminary Remarks

Our earth, which is a tiny in the infinity of the universe, is getting to be a difficult place to live in. Environmental problems such as pollution and global warming on one side and various disagreements and wars in every corner of the world on the other side, make most of the people unhappy and cause suffering. Everybody living in this world regardless of his or her ethnicity or religion has got share of responsibility to make this earth a place to live in peace and tranquillity. Within this framework, the most important thing in the world is that people with different languages and religious denominations should understand each other better to achieve the goal of creating more secure and peaceful environment for humanity.

To make a contribution to this endeavour the Qur'anic guidelines which appear to open a sound way and strengthen the ground of a dialogue between celestial religions should be elucidated.

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The expression of “divine religions,” according to Muslim theologians, refers to the religions which have been based on divine revelation and conveyed by the messengers of God to the people. The Prophet Muhammad defines the various divine religions beginning from most ancient times to the last religion as Islam and Hanafiyyah and declares the fact that the core message brought by all the prophets sent to the different sections of mankind before him has been the same. In the Holy Qur`an, the Prophet Muhammad has been ordered to set his face to the religion a man of pure faith-God’s original upon which He originated mankind. (al-Shura, 43) The following verse also referred the religious tradition initiated by Abraham and named those who follow this tradition as Muslim:

“He has chosen you, and has laid on you no impediment in your religion, being the creed of your father Abraham; He named you Muslim.” (al-Haj, 78)

The Qur`an makes it clear that Islam is named of all religions acceptable to God when it says:

“The true religion with God is Islam.” (Al al-Imran, 19)

“Whoever desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him; in the next world he shall be among the losers” (Al-i Imran 85)

“Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion.” (al-Ma`idah,3)

In the hadiths of the Prophet, the term ‘al-deen’ is used in the same meaning as used in the Qur`an. The famous hadith referring that all the messengers are brothers possessing the same father signifies that all religions coming from divine origin have the common essential principles (see, al-Bukhari, al-Anbiya, 48; Muslim, al-Fadail, 145).

The Qur`an informs us of the intimate relation between its revelation and the previous revelations:

“God has laid down for you as your religion that he has already ordained to Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.” (al-Shura,13)

“Thus, it is that Noah declared that I was commanded to be among Muslims.” (Yunus, 73).

Abraham and Ishmael, when they were constructing the Ka`bah as a place of worship at Mecca, addressed to God in these words:

“Our Lord! Make us Muslim unto you and of our seed a nation of Muslim unto you (al-Baqarah, 128).

Jacob gave his sons this advice:

“...and die only as good Muslims” (al-Baqarah, 132). His sons assured him with their reply as follows: “We do worship your Lord, the unique God, the God of your fathers Abraham, Ishmael, Noah, and Isaac and we are good Muslims.” (al-Baqarah, 133)

When Moses was instructing his people, he said:

“Trust yourselves to God if you are true Muslims.” (Yunus, 85) The disciples of Jesus avowed: “We have believed and can be witness that we are Muslims.” (al-Ma’idah, 111)

When we look at legislative aspects of the celestial religions, it is seen that the main points and the fixed ideas of the former one have been exactly conserved in the new coming *shariah*, adding extra commands that Allah has opted. Thus the celestial religions are just like the mounting stages or the overlapping tiles in the construction of a building, in formation of the faith, morals and the order of the society. The duty of the last of these tiles is to complete the building and fill the missing part. This last tile at the same time is a kind of cornerstone that has strengthened the foundation of the building. In the Holy Qur`an, Allah has declared that he wanted to complete his blessing upon people and to perfect the commands of his religion with the last prophet and the book he has conveyed to the people (al-Ma’idah, 3). In the following narration, Muhammad compares his situation to the circumstances of the other prophets to whom Allah, the Almighty, has given the duty as:

“The case of the previous prophets is like this: a man builds a very nice building and makes a fine decoration, but leaves a tile missing on one corner of the building. People who visit the building are gaped and say: if this tile had not been missing! That tile is me, the last of the prophets” (al-Bukhari, Narratives, 18; Muslim, al-Fadail, 20, 23).

The prophets are required to show mutual recognition and acknowledgement of each other. The believers must accept and respect all revealed books and all messengers of God without distinction between them. To show preference among the revelations of God is to be guilty of a mortal sin which destroys the very basis of Muslim belief:

“Those who disbelieve in God and His Messengers and desire to make division between God and His Messengers, and say: ‘We believe in part and disbelieve in part’, desiring to take between this and that a way- those in truth are the unbelievers; and We have preferred for the unbelievers a humbling chastisement. And those who believe in God and His Messengers and make no division between any of them, those-we shall surely give them their wages; God is All-forgiving, All compassionate.” (al-Nisa, 150-152).

B. Fundamental Mission of all Messengers.

As afore mentioned, the Qur`an says that all prophets have brought the same essential message to their people. For example the verses from 84- to 91 of *Surah al-An’am* and from 23 to 53 of *Surah al-Mu’minun* speak of a continuous theme of concurrence and brotherhood of all prophets sent to the different section of mankind and the unity of the essential message brought by them. There are many verses that can be added to these verses which elucidate this subject in the same way. The fundamental mission of the all messengers of God has been to teach true belief about one God and performance of the righteous deeds. This common message appears to have been conveyed by all prophets to the people throughout history beginning from Noah, Abraham to the last

Prophet Muhammad. The Qur`an invites the Jews and the Christians to act in accordance with the essence of this message:

“Say: O people of the Book! Come to a common agreement between us and you, that we shall worship none but Allah, that we shall assign no partner to Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords other than Allah. If then they turn back, say ye: ‘Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims’.” (Al-Imran, 64)

Seen from this viewpoint it becomes obvious that all religions have a message of universal brotherhood and fellowship of all men in worship of one God in practice of a moral behaviour. But in form and body all divine religions appear in a particular mode and a specific tradition.

C. The Qur`an prohibits the Religious Groupism

The verses 111 and 112 of Surah Baqara criticize the Jews and the Christians because of that they have claimed the exclusive possession of the True Guidance and salvation within their own particular communities and declares clearly that whoever surrenders himself to God and performs good will have no cause to fear or grief:

“And they say: ‘None shall enter paradise except that be Jews or Christians.’ Such are their fancies. Say: ‘Produce your proof if you speak truly. Nay, but whosoever submits his will to God, being a good doer, his wage is with his lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.’”

Another verse puts the Qur`anic approach in this regard in very clear way:

“They say: ‘Become Jews or Christians if You would be guided (to salvation)’. Say thou: ‘Nay! (I would rather) the Religion of Abraham, a man of pure faith and he has no idolater’.” (Al- Baqarah, 135)

It is noteworthy that in contrast to the groupism of the Jews and Christians who rather would like to limit salvation within their particular religious groups, the Qur`an refers to the religious tradition initiated by Abraham. It can be said Abraham’s Semitic tradition is the common factor transcending the factionalism of Jews and Christians and later of Islam also. Qur`an insists on the acceptance of the religious principles which was established first by Abraham and preached later by all prophets to the people, namely surrendering to One God and performance of the righteous deeds, as the necessary condition to attain the favour of God and salvation. This is the essential religion of Islam. This is pure Islam. The salvation and grace of God depends on this minimum qualification. The Qur`an repeatedly invites the people of the Book to concede this common point.

The following verse also clearly highlights the above mentioned outlook of the Qur`an:

“Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Christians, and those Sabaeans, who believe in God and Last Day and work righteousness- their wage awaits them with their Lord and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow” (al-Baqarah, 62).

D. The Freedom of Faith is Central Issue in Qur`an

The Qur`an leaves it to the initiative of the human being to believe or not following the explanation of the right and the true path and conveying its message to the humanity.

Islam never compels the people to believe or convert. Allah has warned the Prophet by verses as:

“Say the truth from your Lord. Now whosoever will, may believe and whosoever will, may disbelieve” (al- Kahf, 29).

“If your Lord so willed, He could have made mankind one nation, yet they do not cease to differ.” (Hud, 118)

“If it had been your Lord’s will, all who are in the world have believed altogether. Will you, then, force the people to become believers?” (Yunus, 99)

“There is no compulsion in religion.” (al-Baqarah, 256)

“O Muhammad! Invite to the path of your Lord with wisdom and kindly exhortation.” (al-Nahl 125)

“Therefore remind, for you are one to remind; You are not all a warder over them.” (al-Ghashiyah, 21-22)

“To you belongs your religion, and to me mine.” (al-Kafirun, 6).

Islam has prohibited intervening the beliefs and worships of the non-Muslims. Islam has undertaken the responsibility to conserve the customs, the life styles, the property and the honour of the non-Muslims, and has assured them to have the right to avoid from the overall rights the Muslim community has been granted. In this regard we should remind the exemplary behaviour of the Prophet that he has permitted the Christians of Najran to worship in his Mosque in accordance with their faith.¹

Furthermore the motto of “what is on behalf us, is on behalf of them as well; and what is against our profit is against theirs as well” has put the aspect of the freedom and rights that the non Muslims have been endowed with.

E. Islam is pro-Dialogue with non-Muslims

There are guidelines in the Qur`an and the Sunnah which speak of strengthening and cementing relationship between Muslim and non-Muslims. In arranging the relations of Muslims with non-Muslims, Islam offers the principles of peace against peace, mercy, goodwill and fairness. The foundation of this is referred in the Qur`an in the following verses:

¹ Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirah al Nabawiyyah*, Qahirah, 1955, vol.I, pp. 575-585

“And if they incline to peace, incline also to it, and trust in Allah. Assuredly, He is the hearer, and Knower.” (al-Anfal 61)

“So if they keep away from you and wage not war against you and offer you peace, Allah allows you no way against them.” (al-Nisa, 90)

“Allah does not forbid you to be kind and equitable to those who have made war on your religion nor driven you from your homes. For Allah loves those who are just. Allah only forbids you with regard to those who fight you for your faith and derive you out of your homes and support others in deriving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances) that do wrong.” (al-Mumtahinah, 8, 9).

The best example of such treatment can be seen in the lifetime of the prophet. In the early days of Islam, Muslims had to migrate from their place of birth because of the persecution at the hands of non-Muslim Meccan pagans. Qutaillah bint abd al Uzza, the mother of Asma, the wife of Abu Bakr, did not migrate from Mecca to Medina nor did she except the religion of Islam. After the treaty of Hudaibiah, when Meccans visited Medina, Quataillah came to Medina to see her daughter. Asma first refused to see her mother because she was a non-Muslim. When she asked the Prophet whether or not she could see her non-Muslim mother, the Prophet asked her to visit her and treat her kindly.²

The Muslim jurists derive from this incident the conclusion that the fundamental rights of non-Muslims in an Islamic state are of two kinds: First is their protection from all external threats and the second is their protection from all internal tyranny and persecution. The first kind of protection is the same as in the case of Muslims. The head of state and those in authority are bound to look after the interest of all citizens using all the force at their command. Al Qarafi, the famous Maliki scholar, indicates Ibn Hazm to say as follows:

“If enemies at war come to our country aiming at certain Dhimmi, it is essential for us that we come out to fight them with all our might and weapons since he is under the protection of Allah and His messenger. If we did anything less than this, it means we have failed in our agreement for protection.”³

As suggested in their faith, Muslims, throughout the history, have acted tolerant towards the other believers and have attached the greatest care to non-Muslims' rights and laws, certainly within the limits assigned by the religion. Through its friendly approach to the other religions and through its calling the Christians and Jews as the people of Book, Islam has proved to be committed to the phenomenon of dialogue, a concept that has been uttered on different occasions since the very beginning of its consideration.

However not called with the name as called today, the concept of dialogue may certainly go back to the very first days of Islam. It can obviously be argued that Islam is not an adamant religion. Throughout ages, Islam has achieved to be a shelter over various nations and religions. Islam has granted the freedom of faith to the people of Book who lived under the reign of Muslims, and has assured their securities. The best examples can

² see al-Bukhari, *al-Sahih*, Hadith 3:789.

³ Quoted by Abdurrahman I. Doi, *Shariah The Islamic Law*, London, p. 429.

be found in Ottoman period. It can be said that this is the general mode of behaviour of Muslim societies though certain applications against the spirit of Islam within this framework have been observed in different periods of Muslim history. These malpractices should rather be ascribed to the faults of Muslims themselves than Islam itself. I personally deem attempts for dialogue among the believers who have a common ground from the point of tradition of Abraham fruitful and necessary. By nature it is humane and moral behaviour. Every human being might avail himself of a real dialogue saved from evil thought. Through this way, at least the mistakes and negative acts seen in the past among religions will not be repeated. Contrary to some people have thought, this dialogue does not mean that religious people shall abandon their basic claims, nor an attempt to unite the religions. All of these appear to be impossible.

Dialogue should tend to humane and moral behaviour to search for the ways to cohabit in differences, to cease the bloodshed on earth because of religious consideration, to soothe the grieved and to work for the survival of human being.

Eventually, regardless of the bias and prejudice and through the employment of priority of the common points and the messages of the religions; this is the only way to have a more viable world and to prepare a brand new future, saved from disasters, for the future of the generations, Islamic world should share the beauties of Islam with the world and with those of the whole religions. The only way to create a more viable world and to live in peace is neither to upbraid the customs and the beliefs of others nor to imitate them by leaving one's own values and beliefs aside. All members of religions should keep their individuality and personality.

To conclude, neither that nor the other, we have no remedy except developing a dialogue freed from any interest, getting to know and understand each other well and fostering a mutual respect.