

Is Islam Universal or Local?

Since the inception of Islam, its followers believed in the universality of their faith which embraces all peoples regardless of race, language, syncretic beliefs or cultural background. At first glance, this claim seems to be true. Modern Muslim missionaries (ad-du`at) have proclaimed Islam among all the nations of the world, following the footsteps of Christian missionaries. They called on the followers of other religions, pagans, and even cannibals to convert to Islam on the basis that Islam is the true revelation of God. The universality of Islam is found in its openness and flexibility in receiving any convert who utters the Confession of Faith "**There is no god but the God and Muhammad is the messenger of God,**" even if such confession were made under the threat of the sword as with the conversion of Abu Sufyan. Likewise

In their victorious campaigns, the Muslims encountered different cultures and religions. These they did not wipe out. Instead, they accommodated themselves to local situation as much as possible and accepted many elements found therein, weaving them into their law. The conquered peoples who accepted Islam were allowed to retain many of their own practices and were granted limited authority.

In this respect Islam is universal.

Moreover, the Qur'an indicates that Muhammad was sent as a mercy and messenger of God to all nations: "**We have sent thee not, but as a mercy to all creatures.**" Muslims believe that Muhammad is the only prophet who God has sent to convey His message to the entire world. Each of the prophets who preceded him was sent to his own people to reveal God's warnings, intentions, and will. Some Muslim writers argue that:

The Christianity of Jesus Christ was not meant to be a universal religion. Though as far as its fundamental message and teacher were concerned, the religion of Jesus was not different from Islam, yet it did not contain complete guidance for all aspects of human life and for all nations and ages. During the countless centuries of human history when the different races of mankind were living in more or less complete isolation and there were no quick means of communication between one nation and another, God was sending different prophets to the different peoples. Jesus was one of these national prophets. He was the Messiah of the Israelites.

This quotation is an accurate presentation of Muslims' opinion about Christ and His message. To them, He was a national prophet sent only to the Jews. Only Islam is universal and the final revelation to humanity.

In this context a second serious look at this claim unveils several discrepancies. The Qur'an states:

First, the Qur'anic text was revealed in Arabic. That is, the original language in which the Qur'an was dictated to Muhammad was Arabic. Muslims admit that Muhammad was just the instrument employed by God to receive the inspiration. The archangel Gabriel, the bearer of the inspiration, recited the Qur'anic verses to Muhammad as they were recorded in the "**Mother of the Book**" in Arabic. The Qur'an refers to this mysterious book in several places. Ten Qur'anic passages reiterate that the Qur'an, as divinely pronounced, was in Arabic:

We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an in order that you learn wisdom (chapter 12:2).

Thus have We revealed it to be a judgment of authority in Arabic...(chapter 13:37).

...While this [The Qur'an] is in eloquent Arabic tongue (chapter 16:103).

Thus have We sent this down -an Arabic Qur'an...(chapter 20:113).

Verily this is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds: Brought down by the Spirit of faith To thy heart that thou mayest be a Warner. In the perspicuous Arabic tongue (chapter 26:192-195).

It is an Arabic Qur'an without any crookedness (chapter 39:28).

A book, whereof the verses are explained in detail; an Arabic Qur'an for the people who understand (chapter 41:3).

Thus have We revealed to you an Arabic Qur'an that you may warn the Mother of Cities...(chapter 42:7).

Surely We made it an Arabic Qur'an that you may understand (chapter 43:3).

And before this, was the Book of Moses a Guide and Mercy; and this Book confirms (it) in the Arabic tongue to admonish the unjust and glad tidings to those who do right (chapter 46:12).

Muslims allege that the Qur'an was dictated word for word to Muhammad. Therefore, neither the style nor the language of the Qur'an are Muhammad's, but God's. This is the origin of the sacredness of the Qur'an, of its infallibility and inimitability.

What do we conclude from these verses?

It is a firm Muslim belief that only the Arabic Qur'an is entitled to be called Qur'an. Any translation of the Qur'an is regarded not as the Qur'an but as the interpretation of the Qur'an, the paraphrasing of the Qur'an, or the meaning of the Qur'an. Officially the Qur'an should be recited in Arabic. The translation is just a means to help non-Arabs understand the meaning of the Qur'an.

Second, it is incumbent on every true Muslim to read the Qur'an in Arabic regardless of his original mother tongue. Thus every Muslim is expected to learn the Arabic language and to pray in Arabic during the official five times of daily prayers; otherwise his prayers are not acceptable to God. The call for prayer, the 'takbir' (God is greater), and the citations from the Qur'an during the time of prayer should all be in Arabic. Muslim preachers may deliver their sermons in their native languages on Friday services.

Third, the faithful Muslim must not commit any verbal or ritual error while praying. If he does, he has to repeat the prayers from the start with all accompanying rites. If he is the leader of the congregation (the Imam) and makes a mistake and the congregation follow him, he will be accountable for their deviation.

Fourth, all Muslims who participate in the annual Islamic pilgrimage (al-Hajj) perform preordained rituals in accordance with the Arabic Islamic traditions. Most of these traditions and rites belong to the pre-Islamic period (al-Jahiliyat) with the exception of a few minor changes Muhammad instituted to fit the practices of the new faith. Actually, as Gibb states, the pilgrimage to Mecca with all the pre-Islamic borrowed rituals, was regulated in Medina:

The traditional days in Dhu'l-Hijja (the twelfth month) and the traditional ceremonies of going in circuit round the Kaaba, running between the two small eminences of Safa and Marwa in the vicinity, assembling on the ninth day of the month at the hill of 'Arafat (some twelve miles east of Mecca), offering sacrifices of sheep and camels at Mina on the way back to Mecca—all these are retained and prescribed in the Koran. Other traditional usages, including the kissing of the Black Stone set in one of the corners of the Kaaba and the stoning of the pillars representing the devil in the vicinity of Mina, though not mentioned explicitly, were observed by Muhammad in his pilgrimages, and so were incorporated into Muslim rites.

There is a wealth of information about the rituals of al-Hajj in such books as al-Asnam (the Idols) and Akhbar of Macca (the Chronicles of Mecca).

Thus, non-Arab Muslims in every walk of life, as they perform this important pillar of Islam, find themselves absorbed into the ancient Arabic environment which, in most cases, has nothing to do with their own culture or national traditions. In other words, Islamic practices and preordained religious rituals associated with Arab culture and tradition are foreign to non-Arab Muslims. In many ways Arthur J. Arberry was right when he indicated that Islam is fundamentally an Arabic religion reflecting the seventh century culture of Arabia.

In his book *The Historical Roots of Islamic Law*, Khalil Ibrahim examines thoroughly the impact of the various aspects of the religious, social, and legal components of the Arabic pre-Islamic life on the Islamic Law. Chapter one is highly recommended as it strongly relates to the discussion.

Fifth, it is evident from the Qur'anic texts that Muhammad's mission was limited to his own people. In chapter 6:92 we read:

And this is a Book which We have revealed, blessed, verifying (the revelation) which came before it: that you may warn the Mother of Cities (Mecca) and all around her...

Or, as we see in chapter 42:7:

Thus have We revealed to you an Arabic Qur'an that you may warn the Mother of Cities and all around her...

It is obvious that these two verses affirm that Muhammad's message was targeting the inhabitants of the Arab Peninsula. He was sent with an Arabic Qur'an to warn the people of Mecca and the area around her. That was his main mission. Other verses indicated "**God did confer a favor on the believers when He raised from among them an Apostle from among themselves...**" (chapter 3: 164). Some Muslims quote chapter 34: 28 "**And We have not sent you but to all men as a bearer of good news and a Warner...**" as evidence that Muhammad was the only prophet sent to all of humanity. They disregard the above mentioned verses that conclusively prove that Muhammad's message was intended to be as a warning to the people of Mecca and the Arab of the Peninsula. Later, after Muhammad had become the sole ruler of Arabia, he sought to impose Islam on other countries.

Thus, within the context of the Qur'anic text, the phrase 'all men' does not imply 'all the people of the world' as Muslims want us to believe. It is a general phrase to mean the people of a particular land, in this case it was the Arab of the Peninsula. In contrast, Jesus in His great commission to the church: "**Go and teach all nations**" emphasized the word nations as opposed to nation to dispel any doubt or misinterpretation of His intention. Perhaps the most striking example of the symbolic fulfillments of this commandment is the remarkable event of the Day of Pentecost when the apostles started '**to speak with other tongues**' (Acts 2:4) and '**the multitude...were confounded because every man heard them speak in his tongue**' (5). Moreover, Jesus specified in detail their mission and the mission of the church through the course of history when He said:

...And ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8).

This declaration makes it clear that Jesus came to this earth to save the entire world. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus adds '**...And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the time,**' which implies that the commission entrusted to the church is forever. Even the Qur'an itself attests to the universality of the Bible when it states in chapter 3:3:

It is He Who sent down to thee in truth the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the Criterion (of judgment between right or wrong).

It is evident from this verse that the Qur'an acknowledges the universality of the Bible, especially the message of the Gospel. It is a guide to mankind. This befits the mission of Christ and personality. His redemptive death on the cross encompasses all mankind.

Sixth, what is the "Mother of the Book" or what is the "Preserved Tablet?" '**Nay, this is a Glorious Qur'an (inscribed) in a Tablet Preserved**' (chapter 85:21-22). Was the Qur'an inscribed in the Mother of the book in Arabic? Was it preserved in the dialect of the tribe of Quraysh from eternity? If this is the case, then how can the Qur'an hold universal relevance? How can Islam be universal when it culturally, traditionally, and linguistically embodies the Arab traits and values? Some critics may argue that Christians make a similar claim when they say that Christianity is a universal religion even though the Old Testament was written in ancient Hebrew language and the New Testament in Aramaic and Greek.

This is true, but Christians never claimed that the Bible was dictated word for word, nor that the prophets were mere robots through which the revelation was channeled. God had undoubtedly revealed His thoughts, will and decrees to the prophets but He utilized their stylistic talents of expression and the language of the time to convey His messages to His people. Through His Spirit, He also guided the prophets to choose the right words and terminology in order to manifest His intentions in the best and most proper words. Christians also never alleged that the Bible was inscribed from eternity in a "Mother of the Book" or on a "Preserved Tablet." That would create a very complicated problem as in the case of abrogation in Islam. Such a concept is foreign to Christianity and does not fit to be ascribed to God.

Seventh, contrary to the general Islamic belief that Muhammad was the only prophet who was sent as a mercy to the world, the Qur'an demonstrates that all the prophets and the scriptures are mercy to the world. In his commentary on verse 17 of chapter 11 (**'Doth teach, as did the book of Moses before it- a guide and a mercy'**). A.Y. Ali explains:

"Guide" the Arabic word here is imam, a leader, one that directs to the true path. Such a direction is an instance of the Mercy and Goodness of God to man. The Qur'an and the Apostle Muhammad are also called, each, a Guide and Mercy, and so are these epithets applicable to previous Books and Apostles.

When the archangel Gabriel told Mary that she was to conceive Jesus in a miraculous way, he also conveyed to her that God "will make him a sign to men and Mercy from us." So being a 'mercy to the world' was not a privilege bestowed only on Muhammad in the Qur'an, but Jesus, in particular, enjoyed that same privilege and, moreover, He became a sign to men.

Though the term Islam means to 'surrender to the will of God,' it is also a proper name of the faith of Muslims. In more than one place the Qur'an alludes to this fact when it says: **'Surely the (true) religion with Allah is Al-Islam'** (chapter 3: 119); or **'And whoever desires a religion other than Al-Islam, it shall not be accepted from him'** (85). Another verse in the Qur'an indicates: **'This day have I perfected for you your religion and completed My favor on you and chosen for you Al-Islam as a religion'** (5:3). Moreover in a verse in which God predetermined the destiny of people, the Qur'an explains: **'Those whom Allah willeth to guide, He opens their breast to Al-Islam'** (6:125).

The Qur'anic emphasis on Islam as the only true religion of God Who does not accept any other religion implies that Christianity and Judaism are not functional anymore. Islam has replaced them as the final word of God and the perfect revelation for the welfare of humanity. This concept has dominated the attitudes and the minds of Muslims through the course of history, inciting them to propagate Islam as the only acceptable religion of God. Caesar Farah summarizes Muhammad's mission as:

Foreordained on two accounts: First, to set straight the tenets of the scriptures, and second, to bring the true scripture to the Arabs, descendants of Abraham, the first Muslim but who were not aware of Allah's commands to their forefather.

One of the verses Muslims often quote to prove the superiority of the Qur'an is chapter 5:48 **"And we have revealed to you the Book with the truth, verifying what is before it of the Book and a guardian over it..."** In his commentary Ali explains:

After the corruption of the older revelations, the Qur'an comes with a twofold purpose: (1) to confirm the true and original message, and (2) to guard it or act as check to its interpretation.

Such an interpretation led Muslims to believe that the Qur'an is the standard by which all former revelations should be measured. It reflects the absolute truth, corrects the corruption of the Bible and presents the world with the final revelation of God. Thus, the entire human race should acknowledge Islam as the only religion acceptable to God. This sense of superiority charged Muslims with the energy to persist in carrying out their commission and even to penetrate the Christian fronts as they did when they constructed their grand mosque in the city of Rome.

Footnotes:

1. Ibn Hisham, The Life of Muhammad; trans. By A, Gullaum Oxford University Press; NY; 9th ed., 1990, p.549.
2. Al-Masih, Abd; Holy War in Islam, (Villach, Austria; Light of Life; n.d.), p.51-52
3. Qur'an, chapter 21: 107. Refer also to chapters 4:79; 158; and 34:28.
4. Ibid., chapter 6:36
5. Aziz-us-Samad, Ulfat, Islam and Christianity; (Karachi, Pakistan; Ashraf pub., 1974); p.73. The reader may wonder if the "means of communication" in Arabia were better during the time of Muhammad than they were during the era of the Roman Empire.
6. Ibid., chapters 3:7; 13:39; and 43:4
7. Muslim; Shaikh Muslim; trans. A, H, Siddiqi; 7th ed.; (New Delhi, Kitab, 1987); vol. II; pp.578-700
8. Gibb, H. A. R.; Mohammedanism; 2nd ed.; (London, Oxford University Press, 1970); p.44.
9. Ibn Al-kalbi; Al-Asnam; Ed. Ahmad Zaki; (Al-Dar al -Qawmiya Lit-tiba'ati Wannashr, 1965); p.7.
10. Al'azraqi; Akhbar of Macca; (Cairo; Tab`at Al-Majidiya); Vol. 1:73, 114, 116, &317.
11. Arberry, Arthur J.; Religion in the Middle East; (London, Cambridge University press; 1969); vol ii., p.3.
12. Ibrahim, Khalil; The Historical Roots of the Islamic Law (Arabic); (Cairo, Sinai Publication, 1990).
13. Refer also to chapters 2: 151; 14:4; 16:36; and 62:1-2.
14. This issue will be discussed in a later chapter.
15. Ali, A.Y.; The Holy Qur'an; (Lahore, Ashraf Printing Press, 1983). Refer also to chapter 6:154 and 157.
16. Qur'an, chapter 19:21.
17. Farah, E. Caesar; Islam; 4th ed; (New York-London, Baron's. 1987); p.106.
18. Ali; The Holy Qur'an; commentary on verse 5:48.