

Islam's Approach to and Relationship with Other Religions

If we scrutinize the word "Islam" in its Qur'anic sense, it leaves no room for uncertainty regarding the relationship between Islam and other heavenly religions. Islam, in this context, does not denote a particular religion; rather, it serves as a unifying term that harmonizes all religions proclaimed by the prophets and embraced by their respective followers. This is exemplified when we observe Noah addressing his people, saying, "And I have been commanded to be of the Muslims [who have surrendered unto Him]" (10:72). It is also evident when Jacob advises his sons: "So do not die except while you are Muslims [who have surrendered unto Him]" (2:132), and when Jacob's sons affirm their belief: "We will worship your God and the God of your fathers, Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac - one God. And we are Muslims [in submission] to Him" (2:133). Moses, too, stresses the importance of faith and devotion: "And Moses said, 'O my people, if you have believed in Allah, then rely upon Him, if you should be Muslims [in submission to Him]" (10:84). Similarly, the disciples declare, "We are supporters for Allah. We have believed in Allah and testify that we are Muslims [submitting to Him]" (3:52), and a group of those who were given the Scripture, upon hearing the Qur'an recited, affirm, "We have believed in it; indeed, it is the truth from our Lord. Indeed we were, [even] before it, Muslims [submitting to Allah]" (28:53).

On the whole, the term "Islam" functions as a broad and encompassing construct mentioned throughout the Qur'an by the prophets and their followers from ancient times until the era of Prophet Muhammad. Subsequently, it consolidates all these issues into one, addressing it towards the people of Muhammad and clarifying that a new faith is not laid for them, but rather the same faith followed by the prophets who came before them: "In matters of faith, He has laid down for you [people] the commandment that He gave Noah, which We have revealed to you [Muhammad] and which We enjoined on Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus- uphold the faith and do not divide factions within it" (42:13). Furthermore, the Qur'an proceeds to outline the biographies of the prophets and their followers, uniting them as a cohesive group and emphasizing their collective shared belief in one Allah and adherence to a unified set of laws (Sharia): "[Prophets], this is your community, and I am your Lord, so serve Me" (21:92).

What is this common religion called Islam, which is the religion of all prophets and messengers? Anyone who reads the Qur'an will understand the essence of this religion: it is to wholeheartedly submit to Allah, the Lord of all worlds, without any trace of polytheism. It involves having unwavering faith in everything that Allah has revealed, regardless of the language, time, or location. It entails accepting His authority without any defiance and rejecting any personal, sectarian, or racial biases when distinguishing between different books or messengers within His divine message. Thus, the Qur'an reads, "Though all they were ordered to do was worship Allah alone, sincerely devoting their religion to Him" (98:5), and also asserts "We believe in Allah and it was sent down to us and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we devote ourselves to Him" (2:136).

Given the understanding of Islam in its Qur'anic sense as described in this paper, it is not suitable to question the connection between Islam and other heavenly religions. There can be no inquiry about the relationship between a thing and itself; there is only unity without division or duality.

In public perception, however, the term "Islam" implies the set of laws and teachings introduced by Muhammad, or those derived from what he said. Similarly, the term "Judaism" or "Mosaic Law" pertains to the laws established by Moses and the principles derived from them, and the term "Christianity" encompasses the teachings of Jesus and their subsequent developments.

The current inquiry delves into the public perception of the term "Islam", specifically examining the connections between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. To address this question, it is necessary to divide this paper into two parts:

The first section explores the relationship between Muhammadan teachings (Sharia) and the previous heavenly teachings in their original forms, i.e. before evolution due to time and human intervention.

The second section examines the relationship between Muhammadan teachings and the previous heavenly teachings following an extended period of evolution and development.

In the first section, the Qur'an teaches us that every messenger sent and every book revealed affirms what came before it: the Gospel confirms and supports the Torah; and the Qur'an confirms and supports the Gospel, the Torah, and all the books revealed before it (5:46-48). Allah has taken a covenant from every prophet that when a confirming messenger comes to them, they must believe in him and support him (3:81).

This begs the question: Isn't it a fundamental aspect of complete concurrence among the heavenly books that the later books essentially serve as renewals and reminders of the earlier ones, without altering their meanings or changing their rulings? How, then, can it be said that they are in complete agreement when they involve modification or adjustment? And if the essence of total harmony among the books is that the later ones do not change anything from the earlier ones, is that truly the case?

In truth, the reality is not that. The Gospel came with the amendment of some of the Torah's rulings; Jesus announced that he came to make lawful to the Children of Israel some of what was forbidden to them (3:50). Likewise, the Qur'an came with amendments of some of the rulings of the Gospel and the Torah; Muhammad announced that he came to enjoin upon people what is right, forbid them from what is wrong, and relieve them of the burdens and shackles that were upon them (7:157).

However, these amendments and modifications are not rejections of the earlier scriptures nor denials of the wisdom behind the rulings in their respective eras; rather, they are adjustments made at appropriate and predetermined times. As an analogy, consider three doctors attending to a child at different stages of his life: one prescribes a diet limited to milk during the child's infancy, the second recommends a diet consisting of milk and light starchy foods in the following stage, and the third permits a full, robust diet of solid foods in the subsequent stage.

Undoubtedly, each doctor implicitly acknowledges the success of his predecessor in treating the child at the state in which they were presented. Of course, there are universal health guidelines regarding hygiene, ventilation, heating, and the like that remain unchanged regardless of age, and these principles are not altered or replaced over time.

Correspondingly, all heavenly laws are characterized by truth and justice in their entirety, both in their general principles and their details. Each of these laws confirms and complements the others from beginning to end. However, this affirmation occurs in two ways. First is the recognition of the old with permission for its continuation and perpetuation, and second is the confirmation of its validity within the boundaries of its past circumstances. This is because heavenly laws consist of two types of legislation:

Firstly, there is eternal legislation, which remains unchanged across regions and contexts. For example, the Nine Commandments serve as timeless reminders.¹ If people from a previous divine law happened to forget this type of legislation, subsequent laws would reiterate and reinforce its content as a reminder. This ensures the preservation and affirmation of the original principles.

Secondly, temporal or sunset legislation is enacted for a limited time then ceases at a designated time. Consequently, new legislation is introduced and tailored to suit the evolving circumstances. This interpretation aligns with Allah saying "We do not abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten except that We bring forth [one] better than it or similar to it" (2:106).

Were it not for the inclusion of both these types of legislation within divine law, the necessary elements for societal welfare would not converge within it. These elements are continuity, which connects the present of humanity to its past, and innovation or renewal, which prepares the present for progress and advancement towards a better and more complete future.

When we carefully examine the progression of divine legislation through the three scriptures, we find both of these elements clearly present; we find that each new scripture preserves the fixed foundations laid by the previous scripture, and then adds to it what Allah wills to add. The Torah, for instance, focuses on establishing fundamental ethical principles such as "thou shalt not kill" and "thou shalt not steal," emphasizing rights, justice, and equality. The Gospel confirmed these ethical principles and expanded upon them with complementary teachings like "do not show off in your good deeds" and "do good to those who wrong you," emphasizing tolerance, mercy, generosity, beauty, and goodness.

Finally, the Qur'an came and confirmed both principles in a unified framework: "Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct" (16:90). Islam evaluates each value according to its degree on the scale of ethical values and distinguishes between the preferred and the virtuous. For example, the Qur'an states "the retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation- his reward is [due] from Allah" (42:40), as well as that "if you punish [an enemy, O believers], punish with an equivalent of that with which you were harmed. But if you are patient- it is better for those who are patient" (16:126). We see the addition of newer chapters in which the laws of etiquette are formulated and proper methods of noble conduct in high society are outlined for greetings, seeking permission, sitting in gatherings, addressing others, and more, as we find in the chapters of Al- Nur (Light), Al-Hujurat (The Private Rooms), and Al-Mujadalah (The Dispute).

¹ We say the Nine Commandments instead of the Ten Commandments because the Tenth Commandment in the Torah, which is the prohibition of work on Saturday, was a local and temporary legislation; this timing was clarified by Jesus and Muhammad, peace be upon them.

This example demonstrates how the divine scriptures build upon one another, preserving the good of the past and incorporating the best of the new. There are many other examples, but the scope of this discussion does not allow for them. Likewise, the divine laws functioned as gradual advancements and fundamental components assembled within the framework of religion, morality, and social policy. The final constituent's objective was twofold: to finalize the structure and address any remaining deficiencies, while also serving as a crucial cornerstone that provided stability to the structure's corners.

Allah's proclamation regarding His Seal of Prophets, "He brought the truth and confirmed the earlier messengers" (37:37), rings true. Furthermore, He depicted the final day of prophethood as a culmination of grace and fulfillment of religion, saying "This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you" (5:3). The Prophet Muhammad described the divine scriptures best, stating, "The similitude between myself and other prophets before me is like that of a man who has built a house excellently and beautifully, except for a single brick's place in a corner. People go around it and marvel at its beauty but say: 'Would that this brick be put in its place!' So I am that brick, and I am the last of the Prophets" (Bukhari, Book of Virtues, Chapter of the Seal of the Prophets). It is indeed a wise policy drawn by the hand of divine providence to educate humanity in a gradual manner devoid of sudden leaps, gaps, halts, regressions, or contradictions; instead, it fosters cooperation, stability, growth, fulfillment, and prosperity.

Moving now to the second stage of inquiry, our focus shifts to examining the relationship between Muhammadian Sharia and preceding divine laws, acknowledging that these antecedent religions have experienced discernible evolution and modification over time. As noted in the previous phase, the Qur'an transcends mere confirmation of the previous scriptures; it also acts as a "trustworthy guardian" over them (5:48). This guardianship involves not only preserving the truths and goodness contained in the previous scriptures, but also safeguarding them from unjust additions and bringing forth hidden truths. Thus, it was the Qur'an's mission to refute additions to them and to challenge those who claim their existence in those books: "Say, 'So bring the Torah and recite it, if you should be truthful'" (3:93). It was also its mission to illuminate truths which may have been obscured: "O People of the Scripture, there has come to you Our Messenger making clear to you much of what you used to conceal of the Scripture" (5:15).

In essence, the relationship between Islam and the revealed religions is, in its initial form, a relationship of complete affirmation and entire support; in its second form, it is a developed relationship that affirms what remains of the original parts of such religions and corrects what has befallen them of heresies and foreign additions. This characteristic of fairness and insight, which the Islamic creed embodies, requires every Muslim to neither accept nor deny blindly, but to always issue judgments based on insight and evidence. This feature is not limited to its position on the revealed religions; it extends to include every opinion, creed, law, and religion. Even polytheistic religions are analyzed and detailed by the Qur'an, maintaining the parts that entail truth, goodness, and the righteous Sunnah, while rejecting those elements characterized by falsehood, evil, and heresy.

So far, this is the stance of Islam towards other religions from a theoretical perspective. What remains is to investigate its stance from a practical perspective: Does it adopt a stance of silence

about them and ignore them, content with the existing situation? Or does it take the position of a warrior, who will not rest until he has cleansed the earth of it and its people?

Few Western writers agree with the first view. One of them is Gautier, who wrote in his book *Morals and Customs of the Muslims* that the Muslim is selfish and that Islam encourages this selfishness. Gautier added that the Muslim does not care if others are well-advised or misguided, happy or unhappy, or destined for heaven or hell. On the other hand, most writers agree with the second view. In their view, Islam wants to impose itself by the sword; they believe the Qur'an commands the Muslim to strike the neck of the disbeliever if he meets him.

In fact, neither of the two groups reach the truth in their perception of the stance of Islam. Islam is not passive nor introverted as the minority claimed; the call to truth and goodness is an integral part of Islam. Furthermore, the activity involved in this call is a continuous duty in every time and place— God commands his prophet to convey his words, and to exert his efforts in this message: “but strive against them (by preaching) with the utmost endeavor with it” (25:52). The Qur'an incites the believers to this call: “And who is better in speech than one who invites Allah?” (41:33). In fact, it makes salvation dependent on these callers: “And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful” (3:104). “Indeed, mankind is in loss, save those who believe and do good works, and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to endurance” (103:2-3).

Islam is not, however, as most people claim, violent or bloodthirsty. It is not its goal to impose itself on people by force so that it is the only world religion. The Prophet of Islam was the first to know that any attempt to impose a single world religion is futile, and opposes the nature of existence, thereby resisting the will of the Creator: “And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ.” (11:118). “And most of the people, although you strive [for it], are not believers” (12:103). “And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed- all of them entirely. Then, [O Muḥammad], would you compel the people in order that they become believers?” (10:99). “Indeed, [O Muḥammad], you do not guide whom you like, but Allah guides whom He wills. And He is most knowing of the [rightly] guided” (28:56). The Qur'an enshrined the principle of freedom of belief, as articulated in the verse: “There is no compulsion in religion” (2:256). From this, the Qur'an derived its approach and methodology of invitation, advocating for an invitation based on reasoning and counsel, delivered with gentleness and kindness: “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction” (16:125).

Based on the understanding that Islam requires more from us— after fulfilling the duty of advising and guiding— it doesn't content us with this passive practical stance, which refrains from compelling people to embrace it; rather, it propels us to honor the humanity of non-Muslims. Do you see more noble than that golden commandment that the Qur'an recommends to us in dealing with paganism, which is the farthest religion from Islam, let alone the religions that bind us with the ties of heavenly revelation? Read in Surah At-Tawbah: “And if anyone of the Mushrikûn (polytheists, idolaters, pagans) seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the Word of Allah, and then escort him to where he can be secure.”

Clearly, it does not suffice for us to protect these polytheists, shelter them, and guarantee them security in our neighborhoods; nor does it suffice for us to guide them to the truth or show them the path of goodness. Instead, it commands us to ensure their protection and care in their transfer until they reach the place where they are safe from all danger. Do you see, then, a rule more just, more merciful, and more keen on the unity and cohesion of the nation than the Islamic rule? It does not merely guarantee for non-Muslims in Islamic lands freedom of belief, benefits, and the protection of their persons, properties, and dignities. Instead, it grants them the same freedom and protection, as well as the same justice and mercy, as it does for Muslims in terms of rights: "They have what we have, and they owe what we owe."

Is there, then, a wider horizon, a broader heart, a more generous spirit, and an approach closer to achieving international peace and peaceful coexistence between nations, than that Qur'anic call? It does more than define the relationship between Islamic nations and those that do not believe in Islam in terms of reciprocity: "And if they incline to peace, then incline to it [also]" (8:61); "So if they remove themselves from you and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah has not made for you a cause [for fighting] against them" (4:90). Moreover, it commands Muslims to adopt a position of mercy, righteousness, justice, and fairness towards non-Muslims: "Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly" (60:8).

This is not all that can be said to define the noble human position that Islam adopts practically toward those who are not its followers. For the sake of brevity, let us focus on one sentiment: Islam does not hesitate for a moment to extend its hand to engage with the followers of every sect and school in order to cooperate in establishing justice, spreading security, preserving blood from being shed, and protecting sanctities from being violated, even under conditions that seem to be somewhat unjust. The exemplary conduct of our Prophet, peace be upon him, serves as a beacon in this regard, particularly when he said at Hudaibiyah that "by Allah, if Quraish were to invite me to a plan that promotes family ties and upholds sanctity, I would grant it to them." This embodies the principle of global cooperation for peace, as decreed by the Prophet of Islam, the Messenger of Peace.