

How Does Islam Differ from other Faiths?

(part 1 of 2)



Simplicity, Rationality and Practicality

Islam is a religion without any mythology. Its teachings are simple and intelligible. It is free from superstitions and irrational beliefs. The oneness of God, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the concept of life after death are the basic articles of its faith. They are based on reason and sound logic. All of the teachings of Islam flow from those basic beliefs and are simple and straightforward. There is no hierarchy of priests, no farfetched abstractions, no complicated rites or rituals.

Everybody may approach the Quran directly and translate its dictates into practice. Islam awakens in man the faculty of reason and exhorts him to use his intellect. It enjoins him to see things in the light of reality. The Quran advises him to seek knowledge and invoke God to expand his awareness:

Say ‘O, my Lord! Advance me in knowledge. (Quran 20: 114)

God also says:

“Are those who know equal with those who know not? But only men of understanding will pay heed.” (Quran 39: 9)

It is reported that the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said that:

“He who leaves his home in search of knowledge (walks) in the path of God.”
(*At-Tirmidhi*)

and that,

“Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim.” (*Ibn Majah and al-Bayhaqi*)

This is how Islam brings man out of the world of superstition and darkness and initiates him into the world of knowledge and light.

Again, Islam is a practical religion and does not allow indulgence in empty and futile theorizing. It says that faith is not a mere profession of beliefs, but rather that it is the very mainspring of life. Righteous conduct must follow belief in God. Religion is something to be practiced and not an object of mere lip service. The Quran says:

“Those who believe and act righteously, joy is for them, and a blissful home to return to.” (Quran 13: 29)

The Prophet is also reported to have said:

“God does not accept belief if it is not expressed in deeds, and does not accept deeds if they do not conform to belief.” (*At-Tabarani*)

Thus Islam’s simplicity, rationality and practicality are what characterize Islam as a unique and true religion.

Unity of Matter and Spirit

A unique feature of Islam is that it does not divide life into watertight compartments of matter and spirit. It stands not for denial of life but for the fulfillment of life. Islam does not believe in asceticism. It does not ask man to avoid material things. It holds that spiritual elevation is to be achieved by living piously in the rough and tumble of life, not by renouncing the world. The Quran advises us to pray as follows:

“Our Lord! Give us something fine in this world as well as something fine in the Hereafter.” (Quran 2:201)

But in making use of life luxuries, Islam advises man to be moderate and keep away from extravagance, God says:

“...and eat and drink and be not extravagant; surely He does not love the extravagant.” (Quran 7:31)

On this aspect of moderation, the Prophet said:

“Observe fasting and break it (at the proper time) and stand in prayer and devotion (in the night) and have sleep, for your body has its right over you, and your eyes have rights over you, and your wife has a claim upon you, and the person who pays a visit to you has a claim upon you.”

Thus, Islam does not admit any separation between “material” and “moral,” “mundane” and “spiritual” life, and enjoins man to devote all of his energies to the reconstruction of life on healthy moral foundations. It teaches him that moral and material powers must be welded together and that spiritual salvation can be achieved by using material resources for the good of man in the service of just ends and not by living a life of asceticism or by running away from the challenges of life.

The world has suffered at the hands of the one-sidedness of many other religions and ideologies. Some have laid emphasis on the spiritual side of life but have ignored its material and mundane aspects. They have looked upon the world as an illusion, a deception, and a trap. On the other hand, materialistic ideologies have totally ignored the spiritual and moral side of life and have dismissed it as fictitious and imaginary. Both of these attitudes have resulted in disaster, for they have robbed mankind of peace, contentment, and tranquility.

Even today, the imbalance is manifested in one or the other direction. The French scientist Dr. De Brogbi rightly says:

“The danger inherent in too intense a material civilization is to that civilization itself; it is the disequilibria which would result if a parallel development of the spiritual life were to fail to provide the needed balance.”

Christianity erred on one extreme, whereas modern western civilization, in both of its variants of secular capitalistic democracy and Marxist socialism has erred on the other. According to Lord Snell:

“We have built a nobly-proportioned outer structure, but we have neglected the essential requirement of an inner order; we have carefully designed, decorated and made clean the outside of the cup; but the inside was full of extortion and excess; we used our increased knowledge and power to administer to the comforts of the body, but we left the spirit impoverished.”

Islam seeks to establish equilibrium between these two aspects of life - the material and the spiritual. It says that everything in the world is for man, but man was created to serve a higher purpose: the establishment of a moral and just order that will fulfill the will of God. Its teachings cater for the spiritual as well as the temporal needs of man. Islam enjoins man to purify his soul and to reform his daily life - both individual and collective - and to establish the supremacy of right over might and of virtue over vice. Thus Islam stands for the middle path and the goal of producing a moral man in the service of a just society.

Islam, a Complete Way of Life

Islam is not a religion in the common and distorted sense, for it does not confine its scope to one's private life. It is a complete way of life and is present in every field of human existence. Islam provides guidance for all aspects of life - individual and social, material and moral, economic and political, legal and cultural, and national and international. The Quran enjoins man to embrace Islam without any reservation and to follow God's guidance in all areas of life.

In fact, it was an unfortunate day when the scope of religion was confined to the private life of man and its social and cultural role was reduced to naught, as has happened in this century. No other factor, perhaps, has been more important in causing the decline of religion in the modern age than its retreat into the realm of private life. In the words of a modern philosopher: "Religion asks us to separate things of God from those of Caesar. Such a judicial separation between the two means the degrading of both the secular and the sacred ... That religion is worth little if the conscience of its followers is not disturbed when war clouds are hanging over us all and industrial conflicts are threatening social peace. Religion has weakened man's social conscience and moral sensitivity by separating the things of God from those of Caesar."

Islam totally denounces this concept of religion and clearly states that its objectives are the purification of the soul and the reform and reconstruction of society. As we read in the Quran:

"We verily sent Our messengers with clear proofs, and revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance, that mankind may observe right measure; and He revealed iron, wherein is mighty power and (many) uses for mankind, and that God may know him who helpeth Him and His messengers, though unseen. Lo! God is Strong, Almighty."
(Quran 57: 25)

God also says:

"The decision rests with God only, Who hath commanded you that ye worship none save Him. This is the right religion, but most men know not." (Quran 12: 40)

Thus even a cursory study of the teachings of Islam shows that it is an all-embracing way of life and does not leave out any field of human existence to become a playground for the forces of evil.

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Balance between the Individual and Society

Another unique feature of Islam is that it establishes a balance between individualism and collectivism. It believes in the individual personality of man and holds everyone personally accountable to God. The Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, says:

“Everyone of you is a guardian, and responsible for what is in his custody. The ruler is a guardian of his subjects and responsible for them; a husband is a guardian of his family and is responsible for it; a lady is a guardian of her husband’s house and is responsible for it, and a servant is a guardian of his master’s property and is responsible for it.”

I heard that from God’s Apostle and I think that the Prophet also said, **“A man is a guardian of his father’s property and is responsible for it, so all of you are guardians and responsible for your wards and things under your care.”** (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

Islam also guarantees the fundamental rights of the individual and does not permit anyone to tamper with them. It makes the proper development of the personality of man one of the prime objectives of its educational policy. It does not subscribe to the view that man must lose his individuality in society or in the state.

In Islam, all men are equal, regardless of color, language, race, or nationality. It addresses itself to the conscience of humanity and banishes all false barriers of race, status, and wealth. There can be no denying the fact that such barriers have always existed and continue to exist today in the so-called enlightened age. Islam removes all of these impediments and proclaims the ideal of the whole of humanity being one family of God.

Islam is international in its outlook and approach and does not admit barriers and distinctions based on color, clan, blood, or territory, as was the case before the advent of Muhammad. Unfortunately, these prejudices remain rampant in different forms even in this modern age. Islam wants to unite the entire human race under one banner. To a world torn by national rivalries and feuds, it presents a message of life and hope and of a glorious future.

The historian, A. J. Toynbee, has some interesting observations to make in this respect. In *Civilization on Trial*, he writes: “Two conspicuous sources of danger - one psychological and the other material - in the present relations of this cosmopolitan proletariat, i.e., [westernized humanity] with the dominant element in our modern Western society are race consciousness and alcohol; and in the struggle with each of these evils the Islamic spirit has a service to render which might prove, if it were accepted, to be of high moral and social value.

The extinction of race consciousness between Muslims is one of the outstanding moral achievements of Islam, and in the contemporary world there is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue ... It is conceivable that the spirit of Islam might be the timely reinforcement which would decide this issue in favor of tolerance and peace.

As for the evil of alcohol, it is at its worst among primitive populations in tropical regions which have been 'opened up' by Western enterprise. The fact remains that even the most statesmanlike preventive measures imposed by external authority are incapable of liberating a community from a social vice unless a desire for liberation and a will to carry this desire into voluntary action on its own part are awakened in the hearts of the people concerned. Now Western administrators, at any rate those of 'Anglo-Saxon' origin, are spiritually isolated from their 'native' wards by the physical 'color bar' which their race-consciousness sets up; the conversion of the natives' souls is a task to which their competence can hardly be expected to extend; and it is at this point that Islam may have a part to play.

In these recently and rapidly 'opened up' tropical territories, the Western civilization has produced an economic and political plenum and, in the same breath, a social and spiritual void.

Here, then, in the foreground of the future, we can remark two valuable influences which Islam may exert upon the cosmopolitan proletariat of a Western society that has cast its net around the world and embraced the whole of mankind; while in the more distant future we may speculate on the possible contributions of Islam to some new manifestation of religion."

Permanence and Change

The elements of permanence and change coexist in human society and culture and are bound to remain so. Different ideologies and cultural systems have erred in leaning heavily towards one or other of these ends of the equation. Too much emphasis on permanence makes the system rigid and robs it of flexibility and progress, while a lack of permanent values and unchanging elements generate moral relativism, shapelessness, and anarchy.

What is needed is a balance between the two – a system that could simultaneously cater for the demands of permanence and change. An American judge, Mr. Justice Cardozo, rightly says that "the greatest need of our time is a philosophy that will mediate between conflicting claims of stability and progress and supply a principle of growth." Islam presents an ideology, which satisfies the demands of stability as well as of change.

Deeper reflection reveals that life has within it elements of permanence and change - it is neither so rigid and inflexible that it cannot admit of any change even

in matters of detail, nor it is so flexible and fluid that even its distinctive traits have no permanent character of their own. This becomes clear from observing the process of physiological change in the human body, for every tissue of the body changes a number of times in one's lifetime even though the person remains the same. A tree's leaves, flowers, and fruits change but its character remains unchanged. It is a law of life that elements of permanence and change must co-exist in a harmonious equation.

Only such a system of life that can provide for both these elements can meet all of the cravings of human nature and all of the needs of human society. The basic problems of life remain the same in all ages and climes, but the ways and means to solve them as well as the techniques of handling the phenomenon undergo change with the passage of time. Islam brings to focus a new perspective on this problem and tries to solve it in a realistic way.

The Quran and the Sunnah contain the eternal guidance given by the Lord of the universe. This guidance comes from God, who is free from the limitations of space and time and, as such, the principles of individual and social behavior revealed by Him are based on reality and are eternal. But God has revealed only broad principles and has endowed man with the freedom to apply them in every age in the way suited to the spirit and conditions of that age. It is through ijihad (intellectual effort to arrive at the truth) that people of every age try to implement and apply the divine guidance to the problems of their times. Thus the basic guidance is of a permanent nature, while the method of its application can change in accordance with the peculiar needs of every age. That is why Islam always remains as fresh and modern as tomorrow's morn.

Complete Record of Teachings Preserved

Last, but not least, is the fact that the teachings of Islam have been preserved in their original form. As a result, God's guidance is available without adulteration of any kind. The Quran is the revealed book and word of God, which has been in existence for the last fourteen hundred years. It is still available in its original form. Detailed accounts of the life of the Prophet and of his teachings are available in their pristine purity. There has not been even one change made in this unique historic record. The sayings and the entire record of the life of the Prophet have been handed down to us with unprecedented precision and authenticity in works of the Hadith and the Sirah (the Prophet's Biography). Even a number of non-Muslim critics admit this eloquent fact.

These are some of the unique features of Islam that establish its credentials as the religion of man the religion of today and the religion of tomorrow. These aspects have appealed to millions of people in the past and the present and have made them affirm that Islam is the religion of truth and the right path for mankind. There is no doubt that these aspects will continue to appeal to even

more people in the future. Men with pure hearts and sincere longing for truth will always continue to say:

“I affirm that there is none worthy of worship except God, that He is One, sharing His authority with no one, and I affirm that Muhammad is His Servant and His Prophet.”

Here, we'd like to conclude with the following words that George Bernard Shaw is reported to have said:

I have always held the religion of Muhammad in high estimation because of its wonderful vitality. It is the only religion, which appears to me to possess that assimilating capacity to the changing phases of existence, which can make itself appeal to every age. I have studied him - the wonderful man - and in my opinion far from being an Antichrist, he must be called the Savior of Humanity. I believe that if a man like him were to assume the dictatorship of the modern world, he would succeed in solving its problems in a way that would bring it much needed peace and happiness. I have prophesied about the faith of Muhammad that it would be acceptable to the Europe of tomorrow as it is beginning to be acceptable to the Europe of today.