



THE HOLY QUR'AN, THE ONE FAITH AND THE *MILLAH* (WAY) OF ABRAHAM

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Three expressions occur repeatedly in the Holy Qur'an to describe the One Faith: *din* (religion), Islam and the *millah* – or way – of Abraham.

1 – The One Faith. The Qur'anic verses that refer to the history and prophets of the One Faith and explain what it actually means include *Al Shura* verse 3: “He has established the same *din* (religion) as that which He enjoined upon Noah – that which We have sent by inspiration to thee – and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: namely, that ye should remain steadfast in the religion and make no divisions therein: to those that worship other things than Allah, hard is the [way] to which thou callest them. Allah chooses to Himself those whom He pleases, and guides to Himself those who turn [to Him]” and *Al Baqarah* 136: “Say ye: ‘We believe in Allah and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that

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given to all the prophets from their Lord: we make no distinction between one and another of them. And we bow to Allah in Islam.”

The first of these two verses tells us that the True Religion has been enjoined upon mankind by Allah, Glory be to Him, the Most High, while the second states that this entails belief in Allah. Both verses list the prophetic missions which confirm the One Faith, or explain that the call to embrace it has occurred again and again throughout human history, so that no-one can justifiably claim to have failed to understand it correctly or maintain that the message failed to reach him. Both verses contain injunctions against divisions or disagreements in understanding the religion or in giving allegiance to its prophets and those who promote it. Both verses also place Muhammad (PBUH)’s Mission in the context of the prophetic missions that preceded him – from Noah to Abraham and his descendants and from Moses and Jesus to the Last of the Prophets. Uniquely, the verse in *Al Shura* also refers to those who worship other than Allah and who find it difficult to accept the messages brought by the prophets; this difficulty is not due to any lack of clarity or shortcomings in the way the messages are conveyed, but because “the hearts are closed”.

Elsewhere, the Qur’an contains numerous other references to the injunction to embrace the One Faith and mentions that successive prophets have called upon people to do so over the ages. It also refers to the central role occupied by Abraham and explains that the call to follow the True Religion reached its zenith when the Messenger Muhammad (PBUH) revealed it in its final and complete version.

2 – Islam. Referring to the *din* (religion) as “Islam” – or “*al islam li wajhi’llah*” (“submission for Allah’s sake”) – is another way of describing the One Faith and the Oneness of the Creator and, in the clearest possible form, it encapsulates the missions and goals of all the prophets. Verse 19 of the Holy Qur’an’s *Aal ‘Imran* says: “Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam [submission to His Will],” while verse 85 of the same *Surah* (chapter) says: “If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted from him and in the Hereafter he will be among the losers”. This “loss” is due to the fact that a person who has not embraced the One Faith – i.e. Islam – has fallen into the error of either polytheism or



atheism. Such a person will be a “loser” on the Day of Reckoning because it is acceptance of the Oneness of the Creator that provides protection from punishment, and the blessing – or favour – bestowed by Islam is a belief in the One God. In *Al Ma'idah* verse 3, the Qur'an says: “This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed My favour upon you, and I have chosen for you Islam as your religion.” Islam is a “favour” because it is *the* religion, which means that it represents completion and the conferral of “absolute and total blessing”. Moreover, it was the term applied by Abraham (see the Holy Quran, *Al Hajj*, verse 78), though it had probably been forgotten by the time of the Prophet's Mission – a factor which led to heated debate among the People of the Book (and not only the People of the Book; the polytheists also contributed to the debate in no small way).

Essentially, the question posed by the debate was: “Why does the Qur'an use the same word to describe the new Mission as the word that was used to describe the missions of Jesus and Moses?” The Qur'an's response is that the prophets themselves applied this term. It was not actually a new term at all because it was basically “non-specific” (though later it came to be applied specifically to Islam). Rather than being just a name, a word and a locution, it was itself a definition of the “substance” or actual meaning of the concept: “*al islam li wajhi'llah*” (“submission for Allah's sake”). This meant that a Christian would be a Muslim if he accepted the Oneness of the Creator in all sincerity and the same would be true of a Jew. In other words, “Islam” was the bridge which led from conflict to concord. The Qur'an expresses this clearly, though the refusal of the majority of the People of the Book to accept the call to the One Faith turned Islam – in their eyes and later in the eyes of the Muslims themselves – into a third, and separate, religion.

3 – The millah (way) of Abraham. From the very first *Surahs* revealed in Makkah, Abraham, the Father of the Prophets, is mentioned on numerous occasions in the Holy Qur'an. Sometimes (as in *Al Shura* and *Aal 'Imran*) he is referred to in connection with the other prophets and their missions; indeed, he is a primary source of the call to monotheism ordained by Allah from the time of Adam and Noah. In *Al Baqarah*, verses 125-132, his name occurs in connection with the building of the Ka'aba as



a Holy House and a place for the propagation of the Divine Monotheistic Mission - a role it came to occupy in that barren land, where it prospered on account of that Divine Mission from the time of Abraham, and from where Ishmael (PBUH) later carried the Message to Palestine, and from where his descendant – Muhammad – conveyed it to the world.

However, when Abraham is mentioned in the Qur'an on his own, his name appears in connection with his "*millah*" ("way") – that is to say, the religion he believed in as well as the path he followed: "Allah has told the truth. So follow the *millah* (way) of Abraham, being 'truly pious' [Arabic: *hanif*]." (*Al 'Imran* 95).

The term "*millah*" occurs on numerous occasions in the Qur'an and always in connection with Abraham. For example: "And who turns away from the *millah* of Abraham apart from the one who debases his soul with folly?" (*Al Baqarah* verse 130). And while the word *hanif* is found occasionally in connection with the One Faith, as in: "And set thy face towards the Faith observing true piety [Arabic *hanif*], and never in any wise be of the polytheists" (*Yunus* verse 105), it usually occurs within the context of the *millah* of Abraham, such as in "...and follows the *millah* of Abraham, the 'truly pious' (*hanif*)" (*Al Nisa'* verse 125) and "So We have taught thee the inspired [message]: 'Follow the *millah* of Abraham, the truly pious (*hanif*)'" (*Al Nahl* verse 123). In addition to the term "*hanif*" we also frequently come across the word "*qayyim*" – that is, "following the way that is straight," which is another feature of the *millah* of Abraham – as in "a way that is straight, the *millah* of Abraham" (*Al An'am* verse 161).

According to the commentators, "*hanif*" is a word of non-Arabic origin which has been given various interpretations. However, the fact that it is associated with *qayyim* means that in the Qur'an it has the sense of something that is straight, not slanting or crooked. Hence when the word "*hunafa*" (plural of *hanif*) was applied to a certain category of people during the Time of Ignorance before Islam, it meant that they had remained true to the *millah* of Abraham.

If "*millah*" means "way" - as in "The Jews and Christians will never be satisfied with thee unless thou follow their way" (*Al Baqarah* verse 120), then



the religion and *millah* that is “*hanif*” and “*qayyim*” is the “straight” *millah*, which is unlike the other “ways”. The link between Abraham, the True Faith, the Right Way and Islam is expressed unequivocally in the Holy Qur’an: “... It is the *millah* of your father Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims before...” (Al Hajj 78).

Thus the word “Islam” is applied as an Abrahamic term to mean the Right or Straight Path: “Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was *hanif* and a Muslim, and he was not of the polytheists” (Aal ‘Imran verse 67). It was Abraham (PBUH) who established the True Path and called upon the people to follow the *hanif* religion. Or, to put it another way, he was the first Muslim. When the Holy Qur’an calls the Final Divine Mission Islam, it is bringing mankind back to the religion of Abraham – the man who established the first mission to propagate the worship of the One God.

For us, as Muslims and the followers of the Final Mission, the link between Islam, the One Faith and the *millah* of Abraham (PBUH) has several implications:

- The periods between Noah (PBUH) and Abraham and the prophets that were descended from him represent a progression from the “belief” stage to the “historical” stage – or from “genesis to mankind and universalism”, as determined by Allah’s Will and Wisdom, Glory be to Him. During the time from Adam to Noah it was the One Faith, while from Abraham to Muhammad it was the One Faith represented by the One *Hanif* Way, and human societies united in sharing a single belief in the Oneness of the Creator, high moral principles and the principle of enjoining right thinking and right conduct and forbidding that which was evil.
- The religion and *millah* of Abraham was the same as that of Islam – the Divine Path followed by all the prophets and messengers in their missions: “And strive in the cause of Allah as ye ought to strive. He has chosen you and has imposed no difficulties upon you in religion; it is the *millah* of your father Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims before...” (Al Hajj 78) The illusion of “difficulties” here arises



from controversy over two issues – the relationship between the One Faith and the *millah* of Abraham; and Islam's relationship with the One Faith and Abraham (PBUH). The Qur'an points out that following Islam is the same as following both the One Faith and the *millah* of Abraham.

- There is a parallel between Abraham's "historical" and "missionary" lineages. While the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is a descendant of Abraham through Ishmael (PBUH), not all "Muslims" are blood descendants of Abraham and Ishmael, which means that "descent" in this sense is a spiritual concept with other religious and cultural connotations. This is also the view of Orthodox and Catholic Christians (rather than the Evangelical sects, who see descent through the line of Jacob - i.e. Israel - the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham as being of major importance), which means Abraham was the "father" of every follower of the One Faith. According to the second half of *Al Hajj* 78: "...It is He who has named you Muslims before and in this [revelation], so that the Messenger may be a witness for you and you may be witnesses for mankind. So establish *Salat* (regular Prayer), give *Zakat* (regular charity) and hold fast to Allah. He is your Protector – the Best to protect and the Best to help." The Messenger bore testimony to the people's acceptance of the Abrahamic Mission, and the fact that he was a witness to their acceptance of the Faith, the Message and the *millah* means that he assumed responsibility for conveying those blessings to mankind throughout the world.
- Finally, the building of the Ka'aba also establishes the same intimate connection between Abraham and Muhammad's Mission. The Holy Qur'an tells us the history of how the *millah* of Abraham was established in the land of the Arabs when the Father of the Prophets set about constructing the Ka'aba and appointed his son to take over responsibility for the task. It shows how the Ka'aba played a role in promoting worship of the One God, how it became the point towards which people turn in Prayer and how it brought prosperity to the wastes of that sacred land, so that the Message spread out from it until it reached all the corners of the earth, just as it was spread from Jerusalem through Jesus (PBUH).

Abraham (PBUH) entrusted his sons to continue with the Blessed Mission: “O my sons! Allah hath chosen the Faith for you. Then do not die except as Muslims” (*Al Baqarah* verse 132). Then the Qur’an instructed Muhammad (PBUH), his descendant through lineage and the follower of his religion, to convey this Message: “Say: ‘Verily my Lord hath guided me to a Way that is straight – a religion of right, the Way (*millah*) chosen by Abraham, the truly pious (*hanif*), and he was not of the polytheists” (*Al An’am* 161). This “religion of right” was a “reminder” and a responsibility entrusted to the Prophet and his people so that they could spread its blessings to mankind, just as it was when it was entrusted to Abraham’s family: “The [Qur’an] is indeed a Reminder for thee and for thy people; and ye shall be questioned [about it]” (*Al Zuhhruf* 44). Those who were chosen (“Allah chose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham and the family of ‘Imran above all people” (*Aal ‘Imran* verse 33) were chosen for their lineage; more than that, though, they were tested to see if they were able to assume responsibility for the task entrusted to them: “And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled; [Allah] said: ‘I will make thee a leader for the people.’ He said: ‘And also [leaders] from my offspring?’ [Allah] said: ‘My covenant does not include the wrongdoers’” (*Al Baqarah* verse 124). A wrongdoer – in this sense – would be a person who has wronged himself by failing to follow the *millah* of his father, while wronging others by failing to fulfil the mission and – consequently – by failing to spread the message or set a good example for others to follow.

4 – Islam and the Common Abrahamic Family. The Holy Qur’an points out repeatedly – from the first *Surah* revealed in Makkah to the last Madinan *Surah* – that Abraham was a follower of the “way of true piety” (*millah hanifiyyah*) and the One “straight” (*qayyim*) Religion, and that the People of the Book – that is, the Jews and the Christians – share a common spiritual descent with him. Originally the Prophet (PBUH) envisaged co-operation with other followers of the One Faith as being – ideally – “assimilation” into Islam (since Islam was the complete and true version of the One Faith). However, if this were not possible for some reason or another, it would still be possible, and indeed desirable, for interfaith co-operation and mutual support to exist since the different Abrahamic



faiths shared so much in common: “Say: ‘O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we adopt not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than Allah.’ If they then turn back, say: ‘Bear witness that we [at least] are Muslims [bowing to Allah’s Will]’” (*Qur’an: Aal ‘Imran, verse 64*). (“Adopting lords and patrons other than Allah” would include the categories of creedal perversion as well as claims of “religious seniority” within the Abrahamic faith community and within religion in general.)

When the People of the Book failed to respond positively, the option that remained was co-operation and mutual support. Sometimes this was successful; at other times it failed. After the death of the Messenger of Allah, both sides bore responsibility for this situation. When there was co-operation, it did not take place out of conviction, but because of the power of Islam and the fact that the Muslims involved Jewish and Christian scholars and scientists in every aspect of their civilization and culture; Andalusia and Baghdad are striking examples of this. When co-operation failed, this was not due solely to the fact that the People of the Book were unconvinced by the Muslims’ Abrahamic credentials; certain measures – unpalatable to the Christian community and taken by the ruling authorities of the Islamic state – were also another contributing factor. In addition, the Crusades had a highly damaging long-term effect on relations.

This does not mean that relations – whether good or bad – were dependent solely upon these external factors; scholars of the three religions were in no way ignorant of each other’s creeds, and sometimes they were extremely well informed about them. However, the main preoccupation of each side was how to rebut the other side’s ideas and discredit their beliefs and practices. Thus knowledge did not liberate (as Christ maintained), since “liberation” was at odds with its possessor’s interests.

While the relationship between church and state began to undergo a transformation in Europe during the modern era and Orientalist studies became significantly more widespread, this did not lead to a recognition

of Islam's Abrahamic roots. Up to the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Islam was not recognized as a religion that could provide the path to Salvation. And although the Protestant churches had been ready to engage in dialogue and cultural exchanges with Muslims since the 1950s, their theologians proved even less willing than their Catholic counterparts to extend that recognition. Meanwhile, Jewish theologians, who had had a more positive attitude to Islam in the Middle Ages, totally rejected any kind of recognition; this was largely due to the poisonous state of Jewish-Muslim relations after the Zionists seized control of Palestine in 1948.

Today, as we look back on over half a century of dialogue with Western Christianity, we find that, although it has only yielded modest results, it has led to recognition of one sort or another, as well as frank and honest exchanges and a degree of mutual co-operation. Even so, when you meet Western Christians today they expect you to condemn certain positions or views before you can start talking to them. These days they categorise us as either "moderates" or "extremists," and as far as they are concerned recognition is conditional upon our belonging to the "moderate camp" in the sense that they understand the term. Otherwise they will not recognize us. This attitude casts doubt upon their willingness to recognize our religion at all; at the same time, however, they recognize Judaism despite their fundamental differences with several of its tenets – differences which are in fact greater than their creedal differences with Islam.

However, while it may be incumbent upon Christians and Jews to recognize Islam and accept that they share a common belief with Muslims, it is also incumbent upon Muslims to "reawaken" their awareness of their own Abrahamic roots, to recognize what this means and to understand its practical implications for everyday life. Islam has long been a religion with its own particular rituals, values and behavioural characteristics. And since it is "the complete religion," Muslims ought to be more aware of its roots and show more willingness to act in concert with others. It is these two factors which can generate true tolerance, broad-mindedness and magnanimity and save Islam from extremism and bigotry, at one end of the scale, or capitulation at the other.