

# The Coming Universal Religion

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It has become commonplace for Moslems who recoil in horror from the Isil-Daesh atrocities to insist that Islam is a ‘religion of peace’. Even a British Prime minister has described it as such in the British House of Commons. No doubt they all earnestly desire it to be so. But if ‘peace’ means being ready to allow space for beliefs contrary to one’s own to be expressed and flourish, then this is difficult to reconcile with the ferocious diatribe in the opening chapters of the Koran against the ‘unbelievers’ – meaning principally Jews and Christians – who, it is alleged, have ‘monstrously corrupted’ God’s message as revealed by their own apostles from Abraham to Moses and Jesus.

The entire Koran is conceived primarily as an indictment of what Mohammad and his followers saw as a scandalous vitiation and debasement of God’s revelations in the Jewish Torah and the Christian Gospel. The Jews are accused of hypocritically professing allegiance to the all-embracing Abrahamic faith while at the same time trying to make it serve their own ends and ‘debaring others from the path of God’. They ‘disclaim’ responsibility for executing Jesus while actually ‘wanting him to be killed’. In addition, they engage in ‘usury although they were forbidden it’, and ‘cheat others of their possessions’ (4:158). As far as Christians are concerned, they are guilty of sacrilegiously proclaiming Jesus to be the ‘Son of God’ and of having fabricated the absurd doctrine of the Trinity, which violates the principle of monotheistic faith.

But the main underlying charge laid against both Jews and Christians is that they have turned God’s message into something very close to a tribal ideology, designed to serve their own sectional interests. The Jews see themselves as God’s favourite nation and

a cut above the rest, and the Christian world, while ostensibly preaching the message of universal love and brotherhood, has become inextricably entangled with the beliefs and traditions of Greco-Roman civilisation, and is trying in effect to foist western values on the rest of humanity.

As against such ‘monstrous’ distortions of the faith the message of the Koran is that one should submit unconditionally to one God, who, it is claimed, stands above everything and everyone, and punishes or rewards Jew or Gentile alike. It is blasphemous to think of such a God as furthering any sectional interests or being susceptible to being swayed by offerings or entreaties. God cannot be attributed any human-

like characteristics, and any attempt to portray him, or explain his actions, in human terms is an act of sacrilegious idolatry, and by far the worst sin one can commit.

Nevertheless, God, it seems, has some very specific things to say about how humans should conduct their lives. These are all listed in the Koran, which is said to be a verbatim account of what he, God, had revealed to Mohammad in a dream through the Angel Gabriel, and – as one is being menacingly told in the very first sentence – is a ‘book not to be doubted’ (2:1). Those

who refuse to accept, or deliberately go against, God’s ‘revelations’ as set out in the Koran will be punished most severely, for God is ‘mighty and capable of revenge’ (3:4). Admittedly God is also ‘compassionate and merciful’, but his mercy and compassion, it seems, extends only to those who are prepared to repent and submit to his will. The unbelievers who decline to do so will become ‘the fuel of Hell’. This in particular applies to Jews and Christians, who are the ‘vildest of creatures’ (98:1). They are ‘servants of Satan’ and the duty of all believers is to be ‘ruthless’ to them, while being ‘merciful to one another’ (48:29)



*"They got me for crimes against gender equality. I was helping to rescue people from a sinking ship and stupidly shouted 'women first'."*

Note that ‘being ruthless’ here is meant literally, not just as a figure of speech. ‘Believers’ – God, through his prophet, tells the faithful – ‘make war on the infidels who dwell around you. Deal firmly with them. Know that God is with the righteous’ (9:121). This is an essential part of the message, and is a duty no-one can shirk. For ‘...if you do not go to war, he [God] will punish you sternly, and will replace you by other men’ (9:37). Appealing to conscience is not an option. One should put aside any qualms one might have about killing recalcitrant unbelievers. Nor should one hesitate to lay down one’s own life in defence of the faith. True believers, one is being told, ‘will fight for the cause of God, they will slay and be slain [*italics added*]. Such is the true promise which He [God] has made them in the Torah, the Gospel and the Koran’ (9:111). One should accept this unconditionally and act accordingly, for ‘idolatry is more grievous than bloodshed’ (2:189; 2:216).

In other words, there can be no ‘fraternisation’ with non-Moslems. Indeed the Holy Book explicitly warns believers against making friends with infidels. ‘Believers do not make friends with those who are enemies of Mine [God’s] and yours.’ (60:1). As to who the main enemies are, here the finger once again is being pointed at the same old bogeys. ‘Take neither the Jews nor the Christians for your friends’ – the faithful are told. ‘They are friends with one another. Whoever of you seeks their friendship shall become one of their number’ (5:51) – and joining their ranks is virtually the same as apostasy, which is a ‘treason’ punishable by death.

At the same time, God’s munificence in rewarding the faithful knows no bounds. Whereas unbelievers will fry in Hell, the believers in afterlife will dwell in ‘high Pavilions’ in gardens ‘watered by running streams’, with abundant fruit and drink, surrounded by ‘bashful, dark-eyed virgins, as chaste as the sheltered eggs of ostriches’ (37:48). Indeed, says the Holy Book, the ‘dark-eyed houris’ will be ‘theirs’ as a ‘guerdon for their deeds’ (56:6) – which suggests all manner of alarming possibilities. Significantly there is no mention what rewards, if any, await the female devotees of the faith, apart, that is, from being able to enjoy wearing expensive jewellery. Which, perhaps, is not all that surprising, considering that the Koran declares men to have a ‘status above women’ (2:226) and generally as being ‘superior’ to them (4:34).

But the bashful, dark-eyed virgins seem to be just an added bonus, for God demands unconditional submission, not just compliance in exchange for reward. This includes a commitment to restore the Abrahamic faith to its original purity and wage war against all those who have perverted its message.

When Mohammad came on the scene endless religious squabbles and rampant factionalism were convulsing the Judeo-Christian world. There were long standing theological disputes about predestination, the nature of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, among many others, which invariably spilled out into the political sphere and frequently led to bloodshed. Faced with such a situation Mohammad saw himself as a reformer with a mission to defend God’s original message from what he saw as ‘evil misrepresentations’ at the hands of both Jews and Christians. Not unlike Martin Luther, who nine centuries later tried to rescue ‘the true core’ of the Christian doctrine from the idolatrous clatter of the Roman church, so Mohammad too tried to wrench the genuine Abrahamic faith from what he saw as the clutches of the heretics. The only problem was that – as often happens in similar circumstances – his initial reformatory motivation soon escalated into a fanatical zeal, which was murderous in intent and brooked no dissent.

At the same time, Mohammad was anxious for Islam to be seen as the only genuinely ‘universal’ religion. Both Judaism and Greco-Roman Christianity, as he saw it, had become too insular to be able to carry God’s message successfully to everyone, or, for that matter, to incorporate into their teachings the customs and social norms which in other cultures had existed for centuries. The Jews and the Christians, he was saying, had used the traditional Biblical message merely to further their own sectional interests, and had turned what ought to be a universal faith into a parochial idolatry. Such a heresy, he thought, was serious enough – and threatening enough – to justify taking up arms in order to uproot it.

All this is like the stance which the mediaeval Christian church took against the non-Christian world, including the world of Islam. It too waged a war against the unbelievers in the name of the ‘catholic’, ie ‘universal’, faith. Nevertheless there is an important difference. For whereas the proselytising Christian *ecclesia militans* has gradually become less strident, for the established Church was taught a severe political lesson during the Age of Enlightenment. The French revolution laid the foundations of the modern secular state; Islam still seems to be a long way off from our own rationalist awakening.

(All quotations are taken from the translation of the Koran by N J Dawood, 1999.)

*Edo Pivčević’s latest book Man is a Rational Animal has just been published in America.*