

MORE THAN ONE PATH?

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In the minds of many Muslims and non-Muslims the idea of salvation in Islam is quite simple: only Muslims have a chance of attaining paradise and anyone who does not profess to be a Muslim is destined for eternal doom. The ambition of this essay is to argue that from the Islamic point of view, non-Muslims do indeed have a chance of attaining God's mercy and being saved. This will be argued by taking a look at how the Qur'an accepts diversity, verses in the Qur'an regarding other faiths, along with an explanation and commentary on these verses from some of the most learned scholars on the Qur'an. Also, this essay will look at various Prophetic precedents in Islamic history on this issue.

“O humankind, God had created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous.”¹ Pluralism and diversity may at times seem lacking in religion. Especially in the Abrahamic traditions, religion may appear harsh and insular. With each respective religion claiming to present the right path, or ultimate truth, adherents of these faiths may simply believe that those outside their faith have no chance at achieving salvation. However, this essay looks to argue that Islam views the matter quite differently. According to the Islamic tradition, non-Muslims have a chance at attaining God's mercy and entering paradise. Unfortunately, in the minds of many Muslims the belief is that, indeed, if one does not utter the shahada² or believe in the prophethood of Muhammad, one is destined for eternal punishment. This view arises from either an austere and pessimistic view of the world, a superficial reading of Islamic holy texts, or a lack of understanding of the rich history and diversity in the Islamic tradition. The argument of this essay will be supported by looking at

¹ Qur'an 49:13.

² The Islamic testimony of faith which translates as: There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger.

how the Qur'an accepts diversity, verses in the Qur'an regarding other faiths along with an explanation and commentary of these verses from some of the most learned scholars on the Qur'an. Also, we will look at various Prophetic precedents in Islamic history on this issue.

Prior to beginning, it is important to mention that the title for this essay: *More Than One Path* is derived from the first chapter of the Qur'an which states, "Guide us unto the straight path."³ As the essay will argue, the Qur'an speaks of a straight path leading to God, however, it does not exclude the notion that there are other other means of reaching God.

The Qur'an not only accepts but even expects differences of beliefs and practices. The notion of forcing individuals to accept Islam is strictly condemned. One such verse in the Qur'an states, "And had thy Lord willed, all those who are on the earth would have believed all together. Wouldst thou compel men till they become believers."⁴ Another similar statement says, "Let there be no compulsion in religion."⁵ Before proceeding, it is imperative to understand that making someone accept Islam against their will is absolutely forbidden and the Qur'an explicitly makes this clear. That being said, these verses acknowledge that diversity is inevitable. One is to come to believe in God, or deny Him, by one's own free will. The blessing of belief itself is contingent of God's allowing His servants to know Him.⁶

With promulgating a general understanding of human diversity, the Qur'an further accepts the more specific notion of a plurality of religious beliefs and laws. Before examining the verses I would like to note that the Qur'an does clearly state that Islam is the divine truth and commands belief in Muhammad as the final Prophet in a long line of Prophet's sent to humankind over different periods of time. However, the argument is that it also does not exclude the possibility of other paths that lead to salvation.

The Qur'an is replete with passages addressing the notion of salvation.⁷ At times, the passages seem to be directly communicating with people of other faiths, while at times, God seems to be speaking to the early Muslim community. As a result, Islamic law itself endorses tolerance of non-Muslims.⁸ One such Qur'anic passage

³ Qur'an 1:5.

⁴ Qur'an 10:99.

⁵ Qur'an 2:256.

⁶ For more verses regarding diversity and tolerance in the Qur'an see 18:29, 10:99, 109:6, 29:46, and 49:13.

⁷ For more discussion on verses pertaining to tolerance in the Qur'an see Abou El Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, 15-22.

⁸ For tolerance in Islamic law see Kamali, *Shariah Law: Questions and Answers*, 195.

states, “Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans- whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve.”⁹ The first point to clarify is the term “Sabeans.” The famous jurist and historian, Al-Tabari (d. 310/923) comments specifically on this word claiming that the word “Sabeans” can be used to mean “to go from one religion to another.” Also, it could mean “to incline”, as in from one religion to another.¹⁰ According to other commentators the “Sabi” which is the root word of Sabeans could be: people who have no recognizable religion; according to some accounts, there were people who declared, “There is no god but God,” but had no rites or books or Prophet, people who worshipped angels and faced the qiblah (towards Mecca), reciting the Psalms, a group of the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) who left their religion, people who think they are following the religion of Noah, monotheists who believe in the effects of the planets, and hence are unbelievers.¹¹

Whoever affirms God, the truth in his signs, and believes in God’s ineffable qualities, thereafter, the differences in religious paths and the differences in titles attributed to God become secondary. It is appropriate to quote here a rather lengthy passage of the brilliant theologian and mystic Abu Hamid al- Ghazzali (d. 505/1111), in which he explicates this matter intelligibly:

Christians of Byzantium and the Turks (still outside the Islamic world at that time) would come under God’s Mercy. Those who know the teachings and virtues of the Prophet and yet still deny him deserve to be called disbelievers, but al-Ghazzali gives wide latitude in recognizing the obstacles to this knowledge. How could a Turk who had never heard of Muhammad be faulted? Moreover, why should a person who grows up hearing the Prophet Muhammad referred to as “the great liar” investigate his truth claims, since one would not expect the same from a Muslim who hears of someone accused of being a false Prophet? Hearing the name Muhammad means nothing if one learns only of the opposite of his true attributes. One could extend this reasoning to point out that one is unlikely to deem a religion good or desire to learn about it, if the only followers one meets are bad. Such mitigating circumstances, namely, that birthplace, upbringing, and social experience mediate one’s knowledge of religion, provide ample space for God’s Mercy to encompass those who believe in Him and in the Hereafter and act righteously.¹²

⁹ Qur’an 2:62 and 5:69.

¹⁰ Al-Tabari, *Tafsir al-Tabari: al-musammá Jami’ al-bayan fi ta’wil al-Qur’an*.

¹¹ Nasr, *The Study Quran*, 31.

¹² Al-Ghazali, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*.

The quote implies that one cannot be called to account for not adhering to the faith of Islam if all one ever received was false or negative information concerning the religion and although the paths may be different, the oneness lies in the origin.

Alongside various passages from the Qur'an, there are also many reports and incidents attributed to the Prophet Muhammad in which one can derive that God's mercy is not limited only to Muslims. One such report states that the funeral procession of a Jewish woman was passing in Medina when the Prophet was sitting with some of his companions. On seeing the procession, the Prophet stood up out of respect. Some of the Prophet's companions, thinking that perhaps there was some misunderstanding, told the Prophet that the deceased was Jewish. The Prophet responded: "Yes, but isn't she a soul?"¹³ In another report, upon hearing that the king of Ethiopia, Najashi or Negus, had died the Prophet performed ritual prayer on his soul with several of his companions. Najashi, who was a Christian, had helped several Muslims when they were being persecuted in the early days of Islam.¹⁴ Importantly, some of the companions were puzzled and inquired, how Muslims could pray over the soul of a Christian? In response the following Qur'anic revelation was revealed to the Prophet, "Among the People of the Book, there are those who believe in God. They believe in what has been revealed to you, and also in what has been revealed to them. They bow in humility before God, and they do not trade for paltry gain God's messages. Verily, those have their reward with God for God is swift in reckoning."¹⁵

The important concept to note from the above narrations is the honor and dignity that is being given to non-Muslims. One can derive that despite religious affiliation, the human being deserves a level of esteem and regard simply for being a human. Furthermore, one should conduct oneself with decency with regards to the sacrosanct, such as life. Unfortunately, in contemporary Islam, simply giving your condolence to the family of a deceased non-Muslim, let alone, actually attending the funeral, is frowned upon.

In conclusion, religious plurality and diversity is accepted within Islam and tolerance is not only encouraged, but mandatory. It is clear from the discourse of the Qur'an and from narrations of the Prophet's statements that, concerning matters of eschatology, one must refrain from having such narrow-mindedness. Of course, any individual can apply their pedantic imagination with hermeneutics, however, verses must be interpreted in light of its context, and when taking a closer look at

¹³Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning With God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age*, 408.

¹⁴ See Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 150-153.

¹⁵Qur'an 3:199.

primary sources regarding various Qur'anic passages, one finds a plethora of interpretations, most of which display logic and reasonableness.¹⁶

It is important to restate that the Qur'an does stress the prophethood of Muhammad and calls upon humans to accept him as such. The argument in this essay has been that the Qur'an acknowledges that there are different paths to God, and if one does not accept Muhammad as a Prophet for certain reasons, this individual is not immediately destined for hell. Rather, as long as certain other criteria, criteria known only to God, are fulfilled, there always remains the possibility of being the beneficiary of God's merciful grace.

Finally, the lack of understanding of many Muslims and non-Muslims regarding the richness and complexity of Islam has led many to elevate themselves to the role of divine judge and misinterpret God's book with their own whimsical desires. As the Qur'an say's, "Or is it that you say of God what you do not know."¹⁷ There is a famous Sufi saying which is appropriate to end with: "There are as many paths to God, as there are souls in this world." And God knows best.

¹⁶A hermeneutical model is concerned with three aspects of the text, in order to support its conclusions: 1. The context in which the text was written (in the case of the Qur'an, in which it was revealed); 2. The grammatical composition of the text (how it says what it says); and 3. The whole text, or world view. Often, differences of opinion can be traced to variations in emphasis between these three aspects. For more on hermeneutical methodology see Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 3.

¹⁷ Qur'an 2:80.

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