

EXPLORING THE UNIVERSALITY OF GOD'S RELIGION¹

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Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

1. Poets and philosophers have often envisioned there being only One Music Composer in whose Band we all play. But followers of some religions claim theirs is the *only* song, with other religions only “making noise.” Some passages in the sacred texts of the three Abrahamic faiths are cases in point. Being a Muslim dismayed by such “holier than thou” passages, I revisited the Qur’an and hadeeth to understand the Divine message objectively instead of emotionally.
2. This quest led to some exciting developments in Hawaii, with more exciting prospects ahead on the “generally-ignored” path.
3. There are three parts to this presentation: (1) Background information, based on my research; (2) Opportunity, based on the Qur’an; and (3) Next steps, based on a dream.
4. (1) BACKGROUND INFORMATION: MY RESEARCH FINDINGS
Let me begin by clarifying my academic credentials for this inquiry: None. I have no “academic training” in religion; neither do I speak Arabic. I am a natural scientist with Ph.D. in Soils – or “dirt.” This qualifies me as a “dirty old man” – but a thinking dirty old man, nevertheless.
5. Dismayed by how some Muslims malign Islam, I spent a decade researching the religion. For this, my three major information sources were: (1) Abdulah Yusuf Ali’s translation of the Qur’an; (2) ISL (Islamic Software Corporation’s) CD *Alim*; and (3) Ibn Ishaq’s book *Seerat Rasool Allah* (“Life of the Messenger of God”), written within 150 years of prophet Muhammad’s death.

The difference between Islamic preachings and some Muslim practices, led to my book: *Islam: A Religion of Peace?* released earlier this year.³
6. People ask: “So Saleem, is Islam *really* a religion of peace?” My answer: It depends upon which Qur’anic verses and hadeeth (prophet Muhammad’s purported sayings and

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³ Available on amazon.com.

actions) you follow, as blueprints for both war and peace exist in these sacred texts. Let me explain:

7. Similar to messengers before him (peace be upon all of them), Muhammad's preaching of equality, righteousness, and monotheism, was not liked by the elite in Mecca, his home town. In the thirteenth year of his prophethood, they finally decided to kill him. On the eve of this attempted murder, Divine guidance prompted him to leave for Medina, a city to which he had already been invited earlier by some citizens. There, he was given a rousing welcome.
8. We can divide the guidance Muhammad received into two parts: During the first 13 years (610-623 CE), when he lived in Mecca, largely as a fugitive seeking followers, it dealt with spirituality. During the next 10 years (623-632 CE), when he lived in Medina as statesman leading a nation, it also guided him on temporal issues such as crime and punishment and treatment of women and slaves. Regarding relations with non-Muslims, he was guided to use war or peace, depending upon the situation.
9. After a decade of intermittent wars, Arabia finally lay conquered by him. The final guidance the prophet received in 632 CE permitted Muslims to eat and intermarry with 'People of the Book.' We'll consider later who are 'People of the Book.'
10. But contemporary Muslims face a challenge: The Qur'an is not arranged chronologically. So, on what basis can they choose between war and peace? For example, verse 5.51 states "Do not trust Jews and Christians" and verse 5.5 permits Muslims to eat and intermarry with 'People of the Book' Most Muslims follow peace verses; but zealots choose war verses which support their pre-determined agenda.
11. Fortunately, there is a way out. The Qur'an clarifies that later guidance on any subject superseded earlier guidance (verse 2.106). And while the Qur'an is not arranged chronologically, Ibn Ishaq's book informs us that verse 5.51, cautioning Muhammad against sharing strategic secrets with those Medinites who had aligned themselves with his Meccan enemies, was revealed around 622 CE, shortly after Muhammad arrived in Medina. And verse 5.5 was revealed a decade later after all Arabia had been conquered and peace prevailed on all sides. It was part of the very last guidance the prophet received shortly before his death in 632 CE. Thus, verse 5.5 superseded verse 5.51. In other words, peace, replaced the earlier message of war.
12. Similarly, through other verses, we learn that gender equality replaced misogyny; forgiveness replaced punishment; and "similar as thee" replaced "holier than thou." Then Islam emerged as religion of peace, broad-mindedness, and progress.
13. (2) THE QUR'AN'S LESS TRAVELED PATH.
Let's now journey on the Qur'an's less-traveled path - which is easily by-passed as zealots zoom headlong, with engine on auto-pilot.

14. Several Qur'anic verses declare God sent messengers to all people; that the message was always the same: "Worship God and shun evil;" and that all messengers had equal status.
15. And Muhammad clarified God sent 124,000 messengers the world over, with reformers to come every century to steer humanity back on the path from which it will de-rail often.
16. But the Qur'an names only 25 messengers, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. So, I wondered: who else could be among other messengers not named in the Qur'an?
17. I searched for them in the sacred texts of other religions, looking for holy men and women who preached monotheism and righteousness.
18. Here is a passage in one religion describing their Revered One: "He is the Omniscient Lord; He is not born; He does not die. Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, He dwells within the hearts of all. Though seated, He travels far. Though seated, He moves all things. Formless is He, though inhabiting form. In the midst of the fleeting, He abides forever. He is all-pervading, supreme."
19. Remarkably similar to God's description as eternal, omnipresent, omniscient and omniscient in the Qur'an, Bible and Torah, this describes *Brahm*, in the Hindu sacred text, *Upanishads*. So isn't Brahm synonymous with Allah, God, and Yahweh? And I was told Hindus worship idols!
20. Hinduism's unknown messenger is referred to as Rishi, or the learned and holy one.
21. Here is a passage in another religion describing the Reality worshiped: "He has no set form, but can manifest Himself in any form. Though we describe His attributes, yet He has no set attributes, but can manifest Himself in any and all excellent attributes. Being formless and without substance, He has always been and will always be. It is not a physical body that must be nourished; it is an eternal body whose substance is Wisdom. He has neither fear nor disease. He is eternally changeless. His body fills every corner of the Universe. It reaches everywhere; it exists forever regardless of whether we believe in Him or doubt His existence."
22. Again, remarkably similar to God's description in the Qur'an, Bible, Torah, and Upanishads, this describes *Amida Buddha*, or the Eternal Buddha, in the writings of the Tokyo-based Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai So, isn't Amida Buddha synonymous with Allah, Brahm, God, and Yahweh? And I was told Buddhists are "godless people!"
23. The revered messenger was Shakyamuni Buddha – not to be confused with the revered Reality, Amida Buddha.
24. I found similar messages in the sacred texts of other "organized religions" as well as of indigenous religions in Africa, America, Asia, Australia, Europe, and Polynesia; among highlanders and lowlanders; Eskimos and pygmies; forest dwellers and desert wanderers.

Thus, to me, all these holy men and women who brought the Reality's message, were among the 124,000 messengers that Muhammad mentioned.

25. I shared my reflections with some inter-faith folks in Hawaii. The *All Believers Network* was thus formed. It declares: "Let's unite on spiritual commonalities across religions instead of dividing on ritualistic differences."
26. Belnet board members follow these 18 religions: Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hawaiian Spirituality, Hinduism, Indigenous Religions, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Mormonism, Seicho-No-Ie, Sikhism, Subud, Sufism, Unitarian Universalism, Unity, and Zoroastrianism. We seek board members from other religions as well.
27. While Belnet board members realized it was the same Reality in all religions, how could we "prove" this when belief systems and rituals vary so significantly?
28. We developed an innovative solution: We conducted an internet based survey asking the question: "How do you perceive the Reality you revere?"
29. Majority of our 200 respondents following 12 religions indicated their Reality is all-knowing, all-hearing, all-seeing, answers our prayers, compassionate, eternal, formless, genderless, omnipresent and wise.
30. Here is a noteworthy point: This was true not only when the Reality is called Allah, God, or Yahweh, but also when the name is Brahm, Eternal Buddha, or Dao, Mother Earth, Spirit or Nameless. It was indeed most reassuring.
31. The question which arose in our minds then was: Are there as many Realities with identical characteristics as religions? Or is it the same Reality in all religions? We could only conclude it is the latter. Thus, followers of all these religions are "People of the Book."
32. I then realized the Qur'an was not against other religions, but against their followers who had strayed away from the original message. This also included those Muslims who resort to violence to settle political, religious and domestic disputes. I resolved to NOT take each Qur'anic passage literally, but consider it in the context of the Qur'an's overall ethos.
33. I also realized that God is "God" of all humans, with all having "equal opportunity" to receive His grace. I was so moved I joined Hindu prayer service in Honolulu.
34. (3) THE NEXT STEP.
And here is the most exciting part.
35. We are planning an international interfaith conference in Hawaii, in 2011, probably in Summer. This was endorsed by the Hawaii State legislature in 2008.

36. Our theme will be *One Reality, One Humanity, Converging Paths*. Hawaiian spirituality will permeate our meeting as Australian spirituality does here. Actually, it is the same universal Spirituality everywhere.
37. We'll build upon the laudable efforts of the Parliament and other interfaith movements and use ethical commonalities, the 'Golden Rule,' and sacred music and dance as the foundation for our deliberations.
38. In the "One Reality" section, we'll share results of our followup survey on perceptions of the Reality in various religions. We'll appreciate your help in refining our questionnaire. Speakers will respond from their religion's perspective.
39. We'll also discuss research results underscoring our connectedness through that omnipresent energy permeating the universe; we'll also underscore that the powers of meditation and healing, and of mind and touch transcending religious boundaries.
40. Some might object to our interpretations. I believe we have an excellent opportunity to move forward from the usual stereotyping of other religions. Let us distinguish between guidance on spiritual matters of eternal applicability, and that on temporal matters of limited applicability. All religions have different but wonderful ways to try to reach the Reality. Let us celebrate all.
41. The agenda for the "One Humanity" and "Converging Paths" are being developed. Topics may include the common human aspirations and prayers at birth, marriage and death; power of visual and performing arts; and grassroots initiatives bringing people together in worship of the Reality.
42. We'll discuss whether the various ways of praying – standing, sitting, kneeling, and prostrating; and through icons, rosary, chanting, and whirling – are converging paths. The Qur'an declares: "To every people have we appointed rites and ceremonies which they must follow. Let them then not dispute with you on the matter . ." (22:67). And, I should stress, neither should Muslims dispute with others
43. We also hope to develop plans for conferences and other follow-up activities to revere the Reality collectively – especially in geographic regions currently torn by religious conflicts.
44. We'll have a narrowly-focused agenda, with breakout sessions also discussing the same issues. Thus, we hope to keep all participants on the same page throughout the meeting.
45. Some pre-conference activities are being considered. Please join us in planning, co-sponsoring and organizing these events – in Hawaii and elsewhere.
46. Finally, ladies and gentlemen, let us pause and reflect: if there is universality in God's religion, then are not all religions equally valid? If so, don't the significant variations in

rituals reflect the wonderfully varied cultures enriching our planet? Let us travel on all beautiful paths leading to the same Destination.

47. Through this approach, I believe there is no danger of “diluting” our respective religions; on the contrary, we will strengthen them by honoring *our* Reality through *other* beloved paths! Each religion brings forth an ethos and a rich cultural context in which it was revealed. We should honor and respect all – and also underscore the spiritual harmony transcending all.

48. Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve found exploring the universality of God’s religion an exciting and fulfilling experience; a journey on the path envisioned by poets and philosophers. Hopefully, so will you. While I believe some temporal and “exclusionary” Qur’anic passages, revealed to guide Muhammad to respond to serious challenges he faced earlier were superseded by other – and inclusionary – passages, I believe the spiritual message through all ages – from Adam through all succeeding messengers -- has always been the same. Thus, let us celebrate the universality of God’s religion. Thank you!