**Faith traditions**

BY J A N E A L A M K H A K I 2021-11-26

THIS article is aimed at creating deeper awareness about an inclusive view of divine guidance, often described as the transcendent unity of religions. I have dealt with this subject broadly in one of my recent articles but this time, I wish to reflect on how the Holy Quran treats the multiplicity of faith traditions. I invite the readers to renect on the selected verses with an open mind as, this is a road less travelled, but one definitely worth travelling.

A near universal statement in the Quran is that God sent numerous prophets, messengers and inspired sages with or without divine books to nations and communities of the past. The principle of pluralism both in time and place is extended, affirming that each `ummah` or `milla` has a direction and path to which they turn. They, in their own ways, strive for good, preach the truth and justice and emphasise good human and divine relations.

The Quran regards this multiplicity of traditions simply as a divine act, and asks believers to submit to their Lord`s will.

This is reflected in two sophisticated verses which declare, `... if thy Lord willed, all who are in the earth would have believed together. Wouldst thou (Muhammad) compel men until they are believers? It is not for any soul to believe save by the permission of Allah. He hath set uncleanness upon those who have no sense` (10: 99-100). These verses make some key statements. A few of them are: First, if Allah willed, He would have created all as one uniformed community looking exactly the same way. But He did not; He made the people diverse in terms of, say, language, colour, culture, belief.

Second, as some interpret it, the Prophet (PBUH) is being asked if he would disapprove of those who would not believe in His message. Then comes the ultimate decision af ter which no argument remains.

Allah says, remember, no soul can submit to His message until there is God`s will (tawfig).

Third, the revelation asks the Prophet: would you force them to believe you? The answer is no. In fact, God does not want His Messenger to pressurise anyone as the Quran clearly tells him that he is not a `wakil` over them (10: 108; 6:107) to make sure they do believe.

Fourth, those who do not reflect on this (the fact of the matter or the mystery of God), and still make a hue and cry on the question of why people do not believe in the message that has been conveyed by the Prophet, are looked down upon.

Fifth, these verses give legitimacy to thediversity of religions and their acceptance as part of the divine scheme of things. The clearguidancetothe Prophetinthe Quran is to invite people to the right path but to allow them to accept it or reject it; in other words, no compulsion is encouraged. Why? Because, as Sachedina in The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism rightly says, `The moment religion is coerced, it breeds hypocrisy.` Surah al-Kafirun amply demonstrates this spirit saying, `To you be your Way, and to me mine`.

Let us take another verse which further enforces the message of the essential unity of religions: `For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community [ummah]. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So, vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ` (5: 48). The verse is so self-explanatory that it does not need any elaboration.A still stronger message about the harmony of faith traditions comes from yet another verse which says, `Did not Allah check one set of people by means of another there would surely have been pulled downmonasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of Allah is commemorated in abundant measure` (22:40). The key point here is that many people cannot stand different worship places, but God, in His infinite mercy, wants to protect them from zealots. Does not the verse reflect a more sympathetic attitude towards the worship places of different communities, not just Muslims? The Quran gives us a universal message relating to the unity of guidance by making a strong statement of the universality of the divine message: `But thou art truly a warner and to every people a guide` (13:7) and `...there never was a people, without a warner having lived among them (in the past)` (35:24). So, God`s messengers gave guidance according to the contextual problems, cultures, languages and ways of life. While admittedly they might look different in their exoteric form, in essence, they resonate with a shared message.  The writer is an educationist with an interest in the study of religion and philosophy.