

The Religion of Abraham

Eid-ul-Adha Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 20 July 2021

وَإِذِ ابْتَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ رَبُّهُ بِكَلِمَاتٍ فَأَتَمَّهُنَّ ۗ قَالَ إِنِّي جَاعِلُكَ لِلنَّاسِ إِمَامًا ۗ قَالَ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي ۗ قَالَ لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٢٤﴾

“And when his Lord tried Abraham with certain commands he fulfilled them. He said: Surely I will make you a leader of people. (Abraham) said: And of my offspring? My covenant does not include the wrongdoers, said He.” — 2:124

مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُّسْلِمًا ۗ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٢٥﴾

“Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but he was (an) upright (man), one who submitted to Allah; and he was not of those who set up partners (with Allah).” — 3:67

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ دِينًا مِّمَّنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ وَاتَّبَعَ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا ۗ وَاتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ خَلِيلًا ﴿١٢٦﴾

“And who is better in religion than he who submits himself entirely to Allah while doing good (to others) and follows the faith of Abraham, the upright one? And Allah took Abraham for a friend.” — 4:125

ثُمَّ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ أَنْ اتَّبِعْ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا ۗ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

“Then We revealed to you [O Prophet]: Follow the faith of Abraham, the upright one; and he was not from among the idolaters.” — 16:123

The teachings of Islam always keep in view the broad interests of humanity, and are not concerned solely with the interests of Muslims. This is why the Holy Quran begins with the declaration: “Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the *Worlds*”. This is also why a fundamental of Islam such as the Pilgrimage, and the associated *‘Id-ul-Adhā*,

commemorates the mission of a prophet — Abraham — who is an important figure in other religions as well. If the Holy Prophet Muhammad had been self-seeking, and wanting to project his own fame, he would have constructed some memorial to his own achievements and required Muslims to visit and honour that monument. But he was concerned only with the glory of God, and therefore, under God’s guidance, he honoured the services of those earlier prophets who had sacrificed everything to proclaim the glory of God.

Abraham lived about 2000 years before Jesus, which is about 2500 years before the Holy Prophet Muhammad. Abraham’s life shows his great dedication to preaching the oneness of God. He argued about it and held debates with his people (21:52–67), with his king (2:258), with his father (19:42–49), and even argued within himself (6:76–79). This is all related in the Quran. But he did not only prove the oneness of God by argument and logic. He showed his devotion and attachment to God by being prepared to sacrifice his son, Ismail, when he thought, by mistake, that God had commanded him to sacrifice his son. Human sacrifice, especially of a young boy or virgin, was very common in the world in his time. In fact, it was being practised in India even two or three centuries ago. This is why it was Abraham’s *perception* that he was being asked to sacrifice Ismail. As we know, God stopped him and told him: “You have indeed fulfilled the vision” (37:105). He had already fulfilled the vision by settling his wife and son in the wilderness where, later, father and son would re-build the Kaba, a monument to belief in One God. To commemorate Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice, the sacrifice of a ram as a symbol was instituted. In Islam this institution was continued and maintained and it takes place on the occasion of *‘Id-ul-Adhā*.

The religion taught by Abraham was simple: You must believe that God is One, and worshipping Him means that you must sacrifice or give up some worldly desires, as and when required, in order to become a better person. Correspondingly, the monument he built, the Ka‘ba, is also a simple structure, compared to the great and elaborately adorned places of worship that we see around the world.

The Quran says about Abraham: “When his Lord said to him, Submit, he said: I submit myself to the Lord of the worlds” (2:131). But what was the nature of Abraham’s submission? Did it mean that he obeyed God in a mechanical way, without thinking? When Abraham thought that he had been instructed by Allah to sacrifice his son, he did not just immediately proceed with carrying out this order. Rather, he told his son about his dream, and asked him: “What do you think?” So Abraham was a man who pondered over the commandments of God, or what he perceived were commandments, and discussed them. The son, who was about 13 years old at the time, agreed that if it was God’s command then it must be carried out. But, as we all know, Allah then indicated to Abraham that this physical sacrifice was not required as Abraham had already carried out the real sacrifice by settling his wife and son in the desert.

Another instance is that, as with His other prophets, God promised to Abraham that the dead, the spiritually dead, would be raised to life through his teachings, even though it seemed impossible that it could happen. But Abraham said: “My Lord, *show me how* You give life to the dead.” God said: “Do you not believe?” Abraham replied: “Yes, but that *my heart may be at ease*” (2:260). Abraham believed God’s promise, but for the satisfaction of his heart he wanted God to show him how it would happen. God then explained to him *how* by means of the example of taming birds, so that they respond to your call instead of running away from it. So here is a prophet who is seeking satisfaction of his heart in regard to what he is being asked to believe, and asking questions to satisfy his mind, going beyond merely believing. And it is this approach which sets our Movement apart from most other Muslims.

Abraham’s preparedness to sacrifice is also indicated in the following verse: “And when his Lord tried Abraham with certain commands he fulfilled them. He said: Surely I will make you a leader of people” (2:124). This shows that someone should only be appointed to be a leader when he has proved himself to be the best follower of the law, who follows the law even at the cost of suffering material loss. Then we read in this verse: “(Abraham) said: And of my offspring? My covenant does not include the wrongdoers, said He.” Allah told Abraham that his progeny, the later generations

descended from him, would only inherit spiritual leadership over mankind (i.e., be chosen bearers of revealed truth to the world) if they followed his teachings and their deeds were like his. Those of them who would be wrong-doers would not inherit the promise of being made leaders, the promise given to Abraham by God. This also shows that Islam rejects the granting of a privileged position to anyone on the basis of their birth and descent.

Long after the time of Abraham, Moses arose among his descendants, through whom God revealed the Israelite religious law, and the basis was laid of the beliefs and customs which define the Jewish religion. But the rules and regulations of that law became so detailed and elaborate that the followers of this law forgot its true purpose and aim, and they considered sticking to its observance only outwardly as being the object of life. Whenever they wanted to fulfil some low, material desire they would manipulate the law so that they could do whatever they liked but still appeared to be following the letter of the law, while breaking its spirit. We often see in this world wrong-doers sheltering behind the letter of the law, while violating its intent.

God then sent Jesus to revive the real spirit of the faith, and show how man could attain nearness to God. Jesus condemned following *only* the letter of the law. After him, his followers took this to the opposite extreme and declared that following the rules of the religious law was not necessary at all. You just had to believe that Jesus was the son of God who had come to die for mankind's sin and you were forgiven all your sins.

By the time that the Holy Prophet Muhammad appeared, the followers of Abraham, i.e. Jews and Christians, had drifted far from his teachings. In their own different ways, they had departed from belief in the oneness of God, deviated from the concept of submission to the One God, and lost the simplicity of religion taught by Abraham. The Jews believed in a national God who was always on their side, while the Christians believed that the old God, God the father, now had a partner and replacement in the form of God the Son. Instead of submission to God, they both invested their priests with Divine powers, powers of determining religion, and of

handing out forgiveness. Submission to God was replaced by submission to rules and to one's desires.

Religion was made into a very complicated matter. The Jews had made the **practice** of religion complicated by introducing rigid rules relating to small details. Christians had made **belief** very complicated by introducing useless theological discussions about how God could be one and also three at the same time, and to what extent Jesus was Divine and to what extent human.

So Islam, by instituting the *Hajj* and *'Id-ul-Adhā*, draws the attention of Jews and Christians to the simple religion of sincerity and devotion to God practised by Abraham, who was their own patriarch. This is the meaning of the verse: "Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but he was (an) upright (man), one who submitted to Allah; and he was not of those who set up partners (with Allah)." — 3:67. At the time of Abraham, the Jewish and Christian religions did not exist, and therefore Jews and Christians cannot deny that their great patriarch Abraham attained his exalted position near God without following either of these religions, i.e. without following the rules and regulations of Judaism, and without believing in Jesus having died for his sins.

This has also a lesson for Muslims, who have forgotten that religion is simple and should be followed with sincerity of the heart. We too ask questions about small details of religious practice and argue about them, and indulge in theoretical discussions about abstract matters which are of no practical benefit. We think that this is what is religion. However, the Quran tells us:

"And who is *better in religion* than he who submits himself entirely to Allah while doing good (to others) and follows the faith of Abraham, the upright one? And Allah took Abraham for a friend." — 4:125

The best religion, says the Quran here, is to follow the faith of Abraham, i.e. to submit yourself along with your desires entirely to God and do good to others, to follow a simple creed and to be sincere.

Finally, through the incident of the attempt of Abraham to sacrifice Ismail in accordance with his vision, Allah taught that:

- Sacrifice of life of someone is *not* that he should lose his life deliberately, but that he should *live* and devote his life to some higher purpose.
- God does *not* require any human being as a sacrifice, but he requires you to sacrifice the animal desires of your own selves, and that is symbolised by sacrificing an animal. And in case Muslims would think that Allah requires only the physical sacrifice of an animal, the Quran told them about those animals that: “Not their flesh, nor their blood, reaches Allah, but to Him is acceptable the observance of duty on your part” (22:37).
- If we show our *complete readiness and absolute willingness* to do something very difficult in Allah’s way, then Allah lifts its burden from us and makes it much easier for us to do it, just as Allah lifted the burden from Abraham of having to sacrifice his son and gave him the much easier task of sacrificing a lamb.

بَارِكْ اللَّهُ لَنَا وَكُم فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعْنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-