

Published on Al-Islam.org (https://www.al-islam.org)

Home > Inquiries about Islam > Freedom of Discussion in Islam

Freedom of Discussion in Islam

Wilson: Some religions discourage the questioning attitude in regard to the soundness of their teachings. They advise their followers to follow their instructions without examination. They demand faith and prohibit acquaintance with any other faith because it may lead to doubt. What is the attitude of Islam towards questioning its teaching and comparing its principles with those of other faiths?

Chirri: Islam is very liberal in this matter. It may demand from a person to believe in certain principles but, at the same time, it advises him to try to base his belief on evidence. It sets him free to raise any question and does not condemn him when he doubts, if his doubt is followed by an intensive effort to find the truth. If any other religion advises him to avoid discussing principles other than its own and makes him fear provoking the anger of God by doing so, Islam makes one feel secure from God's anger if he pursues his search for the truth.

As a matter of fact, Islam never advises one to avoid discussion that may lead to a new knowledge and a new discovery of a truth. Be not afraid, Islam advises, to discuss any religious principle, whether it is Islamic or non–Islamic. Never worry or fear God's anger because He is the God of truth, He never condemns a person for seeking truth. On the contrary, the more one seeks the truth and conducts intensive research, the more he deserves the Divine reward from the Islamic point of view.

The most rewarding and meritorious attitude, in the eyes of Islam, is to approach religious issues with the spirit of a scientist who welcomes any evidence that may prove or disprove his theory (or a theory to which he may subscribe).

Wilson: Does Islam have any specific rule or advice concerning religious research?

Chirri: There are certain rules contained in the Holy Qur'an to be followed in religious research for the safety of any conclusion that may be reached.

1. Never embrace a doctrine when evidence stands against it, nor should one follow a principle without evidence.

If God wants a person to believe in a principle, He should make it clear and evident. He is the Most Fair

and Just. He knows that belief is not a voluntary thing; that is, it is not up to the individual. A person is not able to believe or disbelieve anything he chooses. The human body is at one's command but not the mind. I can obey a command that tells me to move my hand up or down, to walk or sit, even if such a command does not seem to be wise. But I am not able to obey a command, for example, that tells me to believe that two and two are five, or that three are one, or that fire is cold, or that snow is hot.

Our human knowledge comes from direct or indirect evidence, and it does not follow our own whim and will. An acceptable religious belief must be based on knowledge. When God wants me to know something, He should make such a knowledge possible by making its evidence available. Should He demand from me to believe something while evidence is standing against it, He would be asking me to do the impossible. This contradicts His justice.

Islam never condemns an individual when he does not believe in a principle because of lack of evidence; on the contrary, Islam blames a person when he follows a principle while groping in the dark without illuminating evidence, or when such a principle is not in accordance with the truth. Following a principle against evidence, or with lack of evidence, is like a judgement of a court against a defendant without any evidence. Such an attitude is not to be praised. From the Holy Qur'an:

"And follow not that of which thou hast no knowledge. Surely the hearing and sight and the heart, all of these will be asked about it." 17:36

2. Never accept popularity at face value.

A religious researcher should not take the popularity of a religious doctrine in his society as an evidence of its truth. Many popular ideas have been proved wrong. At one time, it was believed that the earth is flat and that the sun revolves around the earth. People believed this for thousands of years, but now we know that neither of these ideas is true.

Furthermore, what is popular in one society may be unpopular in another. The opposite is also true. If popularity is a sign of soundness, all those popular ideas which contradict each other would be true, but truth never contradicts itself.

When the first prophet came to proclaim the concept of one God, his message was not popular in any society because the people of the world were either pagans or non-believers. The unpopularity of such a Divine message did not prevent that message from being true. As a matter of fact, all the prophets came to their societies with unpopular messages. Their aim was to correct the popular wrong and replace it with the unpopular truth. From the Qur'an:

"And if thou obey most of the inhabitants of the earth, they will mislead thee far from the way of God: They follow naught but an opinion, and they do but quess." 6:116

3. Inherited religious principles should be examined.

Islam advises every adult to examine the religion which he inherited. Inherited religion, like any other religion, is subject to proof. One may rely on the judgement of his parents as long as he is a child and not capable of making his own decisions. When he becomes an adult, his religion becomes his own responsibility. Respect and honor towards parents is one of the Islamic commandments, but that does not mean accepting their opinions in important matters such as religion when their opinion is wrong.

As a matter of fact, when parents adhere to a wrong religious principle and demand from their children to follow them, they should not be obeyed because such action would be contrary to the will of God; that is, if a person obeys his parents when they are wrong, he disobeys God. From the Holy Qur'an:

"And we have enjoined on man concerning parents.... saying: 'Give thanks to Me and to thy parents. To Me is the eventual coming. And if they strive with thee to make thee associate with Me that of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not, and keep kindly company with them in this world. ' " 31: 14–15

Islam commands the individual to examine its own teaching as well as any other teaching. By doing so, one may be able to value Islam more than ever before.

4. Doubters are not excused.

When a person is not committed to any religion and doubts the whole religious concept, he should not be satisfied with his doubt. It is his duty to protect himself and his vital interests in this world from any harm and damage. Similarly, he has the same responsibility and duty in protecting his spiritual interest from being damaged. His serious inquiry about what may have a bearing on his spiritual life is as important as his inquiry about what may have a bearing on his physical life. In order for a person to carry out his responsibility and to fulfill his obligation, it is necessary for him to inquire, and inquire seriously, about his religious doubts.

There may be many accessible facts in the doubted area; therefore, he has to try to find them. When he conducts his research and exhausts all his means and fails to find the truth, he would be excused in the eyes of God. God asks the individual only to do what is possible for him to do. From the Qur'an:

"God does not impose on a soul a duty but to the extent of its ability." 2:286

5. When you conduct a religious research, let no one make decisions for you. Do not rely on the judgement of any other person, even if he is sincere and highly intellectual.

There are sincere and intellectual teachers in every faith. If a person allows them to make religious decisions for him, he will be lost because these teachers will undoubtedly contradict each other. If he relies on the judgement of teachers of only one faith, disregarding the teachers of other faiths, he will be biased. A sincere and highly intellectual teacher can be wrong, and one is not excused if he follows the judgement of this teacher. One's religion is his responsibility and after he makes his extensive inquiry, he

is the sole judge to reach conclusions and form opinions. From the Qur'an:

"And no bearer will bear other's burden " 35: 18, 53:38

Thus, we can see from these five Qur'anic verses that Islam is not afraid of being questioned or analyzed. Only those who fear failure forbid free discussion of their religious principles and avoid examination by researchers.

Source URL:

https://www.al-islam.org/inquiries-about-islam-shaykh-muhammad-jawad-chirri/freedom-discussion-islam#comment-0