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How Can the Universality of Religion Hold True Given Its Specific Time and Place?

The Secret to the Universality of Religion: Why Faith Transcends Geographical Boundaries

A fundamental question about religion is how it can be for all humans while it originated during a specific time and among a certain group of people. Does it imply that religion is merely a byproduct of a particular cultural environment rather than a universal message?

To address this, we must differentiate between the context in which a message appears and the scope of its validity. When a truth comes from a specific location, it does not mean its relevance is restricted to that area. Every scientific, moral, or spiritual message has to start somewhere. What determines a message's universality is not its birthplace, but how it connects with the fundamental truth of human existence.

If religion were just a set of customs, rituals, and societal norms, it could never become universal. However, if it connects to the existential truth of human beings, no matter where it comes from, it will be universal. So if a religion is true, it is aligned with the human fitrah (pure primordial nature), rather than the temporary conditions of a specific society.

Many doubts and detachment from religion in the modern world stem from a false imagination: Religion is solely the product of a specific time, people, or intellectual atmosphere. This perspective leads modern individuals to view religion as a collection of ancient teachings meant for past civilizations, lacking relevance to their needs in the modern world. The solution lies in

developing a deeper and more precise understanding of the relationship between religion and the human being.

Claiming that religion is for everyone prompts a crucial question: Who exactly does everyone include? Superficially, people vary drastically in language, culture, race, nationality, and lifestyle. How can a religion introduced in a specific time and place resonate with all people through all the different eras?

If a religion genuinely comes from the Creator of the universe, it must align with the structure of the soul and shared inclinations of all human beings.

How Does Religion Speak Beyond Borders and Cultures?

Saying religion is for everyone does not mean all individuals must live identically. It means there is a commonality among all people: We all are human beings. Regardless of cultural background, time, or the place we live in, we all have common innate needs: the needs of our fifth dimension, our human dimension, that we have discussed in details in previous courses of the Self-knowledge School. Different cultures and times only affect the way we understand a religion or administer it; they do not change its core message.

Viewing religion purely as a cultural product implies that when a culture changes, it becomes obsolete and is unable to address life's fundamental questions.

Asserting that religion is universal does not mean oversimplifying it or discarding rational thought. Instead, the deeper a religion is, the more apparent its connection to *fitrah* becomes.

Far from being a set of rigid rules, the religion of truth provides a precise and intelligent framework built upon the existential structure of the human being. Consequently, wherever humans exist, we can talk about religion. So questions regarding why a religion emerged in a certain region or used

a specific language are secondary. The central issue is whether it addresses people as human beings. If so, it transcends time and cultures, regardless of its origins.

In *Islam and Iran: A Historical Study of Mutual Services*, Morteza Mutahhari writes that “Islam had definitely outgrown its Arab background. It had become a multi-national, multi-lingual universal culture and faith and Iran played the leading role in this transformation”.¹

A common mistake in these discussions is assuming that religion and culture are either completely identical or entirely separate. Both perspectives are flawed. Equating the two means religion changes with culture, losing its enduring validity. Separating them completely reduces religion to abstract theories disconnected from real life.

In reality, religion interacts with culture without being confined by it. Religion provides life with direction and meaning, while culture dictates its outward form. Religion defines concepts like justice, goodness, responsibility, and spirituality; culture determines how this manifests daily. This distinction is vital for proving the universality of religion. If religion merely mirrored one culture, it could never expand beyond it. Yet, history shows that divine religions consistently cross linguistic, ethnic, and geographical boundaries, integrating into diverse cultures. This proves that religion is rooted in something much deeper than culture: *Fitrah*.

The bond between the human being and the religion of truth is internal and existential, not artificial or imposed from the outside. It reveals a truth already embedded in us.

Stating that there is a relationship between religion and our pure primordial nature does not mean everyone possesses a conscious, detailed knowledge of religious teachings. Instead, it highlights fundamental human tendencies that draw people toward the religion of truth, perfection, justice, goodness, and meaning, while pushing them away from limitations and deficiencies. Humans are not just biological entities; we continually seek the infinite and transcend our current states.

Therefore, the religion of truth perfectly matches human creation. The Holy Quran refers to this connection, saying: “So set your heart as a person of pure faith on this religion, the original nature endowed by Allah according to which He originated humankind”.² In other words, the holy Quran urges people to align themselves with the religion compatible with their *fitrah*. Based on what has been said, since religion addresses the innate human nature (*fitrah*), it is universal.

While this does not automatically validate every specific religion, it proves that the concept of the universality of religion is logical and defensible, provided it harmonizes with human pure primordial nature. Ultimately, universality is measured by its alignment with human truth, not just geographical spread.

Religion Aligns with *Fitrah*, Not Material Nature

To understand the universality of religion, we must not judge religion solely by immediate material desires. We must distinguish between material nature, driven by primary needs and instinct, and *fitrah*, which seeks truth, perfection, and God. Religion does not aim to destroy material nature but to regulate it, making it serve our innate human nature.

So obeying certain religious commands might feel difficult to someone accustomed to unchecked desires. This difficulty does not indicate a flaw in religion; rather, it suggests the individual has strayed from their pure primordial nature. As people align more closely with their pure primordial nature, they find religious commands logical, fitting, and even easy. It is the place where this verse of the Quran becomes clear: "Allah intends ease for you, not hardship."³ In fact, the easiness of religion does not mean abandoning religious obligations, but it reflects harmony with the right path to human self-growth.

Therefore, the universality of religion does not mean that everyone accepts it immediately and without any resistance. It means religion aligns with the human truth, even if habits, desires, prejudices, or corrupt cultures hinder understanding that harmony.

The Human Being: The Truth Beyond Historical and Ethnic Identities

Religion is for all because its primary audience is the human being themselves not a specific race or class. Beyond historical and social attachments, there is a deep truth within the human being. Ethnicity, language, and geography are merely circumstantial aspects of life, not the whole truth within us.

Since true faith targets this deeper existential layer, i.e., the truth within the human being, it cannot be restricted to a specific ethnicity. Emergence of a religion in a specific place simply marks its historical starting point, not an inherent limitation. Just as a rational or moral truth can be articulated in a specific time without being confined to it, religion can begin within history while its scope extends far beyond it.

This universal scope is precisely what is observed in the historical development of Islam. For instance, Morteza Motahhari argues that Islam succeeded in overcoming ethnic and national prejudice, as shown by the way religious communities often followed scholars from other backgrounds, and by the many jurists who rejected racial distinctions in matters like marriage. Although he notes a few exceptions, Motahhari's main point is that religious teachings and examples from the history of Islam promoted a broader sense of human equality over tribal or national prejudice⁴.

Humans are not just beings who have biological and social drives; we yearn deep down for absolute perfection, love truth, and seek our ultimate purpose. Thus, a religion aligned with this existential structure is inherently global and timeless.

The Relationship between Religion and Culture

Misconception often arises when we mix the essence of religion with its cultural expressions. Any religion must utilize language, symbols, and historical contexts. However, this necessity does not reduce religion to mere culture.

Religion manifests within a culture but does not dissolve into it. We must distinguish between the enduring, innate core of a religion and its evolving historical practices. The core addresses human truth, our connection to God, life's ultimate purpose, value system and our self-growth. Conversely, its linguistic expressions and societal manifestations may adapt over time.

Ignoring this distinction leads to viewing religion as purely historical or mistakenly treating all historical practices as unchangeable core tenets. It is while the universality of religion is defensible because of its connection to our pure primordial nature, not from maintaining identical historical practices everywhere.

The Innate Human Nature and the Hierarchy of Love

Universality of religion extends beyond intellect; it involves human affection and attachment. We are not just under the influence of our theoretical intellect. It is the hierarchy of love that determines our path in life. In other words, we are driven by what we love and value most.

Since humans naturally love truth and perfection, the religion of truth must guide and regulate this hierarchy of love. Thus, this religion is not a burden on our shoulders, but acts like a compass

helping us prioritize our beloveds and break free from mundane attachments. Divine teachings about prioritizing the Creator, the Prophet (Peace be upon him and his family) and striving in the way of Allah (*jihad*) over worldly desires aim to realign the human heart with its innate nature. Living contrary to this innate structure and favoring fleeting attachments cause the human being stray from the right path. Conversely, aligning our love with truth clarifies our relationship with religion. Thus, religion is universal because the human heart is inherently designed to connect with truth beyond limited, worldly attachments.

Why Is Universal Acceptance Rare?

If religion is truly aligned with innate human nature and is universal, why does it lack uniform acceptance? Universality of a message does not guarantee being accepted by everyone. Many profound human truths are universal, yet people fail to uphold them.

Fitrah can be buried under poor upbringing, personal interests, cultural habits, ego attachments, negligence, or even unjust historical events. Having a pure primordial nature is different from living according to it. While religion is meant for everyone, people encounter it under vastly different circumstances and respond uniquely.

This raises a question regarding those lacking direct access to these teachings, introducing complex discussions about divine justice, varying degrees of responsibility, and ultimate judgment. Defending the universality of religion does not dismiss these complexities.

To accept that religion is meant for all, we do not need to prove it had a simultaneous global presence. We only need to show that it connects to the shared truth of all human beings, a concept traditionally understood as our pure primordial nature.

On this basis, religion is universal because it addresses what we have in common: seeking truth, perfection, God, and needing to regulate hierarchy of love and our lifestyle properly. This is not because religion appeared everywhere at once. Its localized origin is merely a historical starting point for a message as expansive as humanity itself. A limited geographical beginning does not equate to a localized truth. When a religion harmonizes with innate human nature, we can fully understand how it can emerge from a specific history while speaking to all human beings.

References

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- ¹. Morteza Mutahhari. "Islam and Iran: A Historical Study of Mutual Services, Part 2." Translated by Wahid Akhtar. *Al-Tawhid*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1989. *Al-Islam.org*, www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol6-n2/islam-and-iran-historical-study-mutual-services-part-2-murtada-mutahhari. Accessed 1 June 2026, p. 9.
 - ². Quran, 30:30
 - ³. Quran, 2:185
 - ⁴. Mutahhari, pp. 18-19.