

MUSIC
A QUESTION OF
FAITH OR
DA'WAH?

By Yusuf Islam



MUSIC FAITH OR ? A QUESTION OF DA'WAH!

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I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, And Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him)

Regardless of all the other unnecessary controversies surrounding me at the moment, I was saddened to recently hear that some voices in the Muslim community have been criticising me because of various record companies re-releasing and advertising a DVD and other past music albums. They appear to be making it out to be a question of Faith; it seems they have not yet understood certain fundamental truths about these issues. So I decided to respond and pray for Allah's assistance to make the matter clear.

When I embraced Islam in 1977 I was still making records and performing. The chief Imam ¹ in the London Central Mosque encouraged me to continue my profession of composing and recording; at no time was there ever an ultimatum for me to have to choose between music or Islam. Nevertheless, there were lots of things about the music industry which contravened the Islamic way of life and I was new to the faith, so I simply decided myself to give up the music business. This helped me to concentrate fully on learning and practising Islam - the five pillars - and striving to get close to Allah through my knowledge and worship.

However, it is interesting to quote here part of the first interview I gave to a Muslim magazine back in 1980; when asked about my thoughts with regard to music I said, "I have suspended my activities in music for fear that they may divert me from the true path, but I will not be dogmatic in saying that I will never make music again. You can't say that without adding Insha Allah."²

For those who may not be aware of the basics of Islam, the things which make a person Muslim begin with his firm belief in the one and only God, Allah, and Muhammad as the last Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him). Next a Muslim must pray the five obligatory prayers every day; then he must give a portion of his wealth each year to the needy; he must fast the month of Ramadan; and finally he must try to make the pilgrimage to Makkah.

It is important to note that I first came to learn about Islam, not through any effort from any Muslim advocate (da'ee), but solely by the Divine Grace of Allah when I received the Qur'an in 1976 as a gift from my brother - al Hamdulillah - who was not even a Muslim at the time. It was then I realised the Qur'an was the Truth I had been seeking.

Sadly, today there are many Muslims who have not deeply studied the meanings of the Qur'an, and the majority take religion from birth as a cultural identity, not an educated choice. A large amount do not fulfil the five pillars of Islam, some do not even know how to pray!

Unfortunately, there are also many born Muslims who adopt an exclusive and sometimes even racist attitude; only a few have considered trying to invite others to the Religion. This is an extremely important point because, actually, it is well known that if the People of the Book, like Christians or Jews, learn Islam and become Muslims by Allah's Grace, they receive twice as much reward. Allah the Most High states in the Qur'an,

‘And when it (the Qur’an) is recited to them (the People of the Book) they say: We believe in it. Surely it is the Truth from our Lord. Even before it we were of those who surrendered (Muslim). These will be given their reward twice over, because they are steadfast and repel evil with good, and spend of that which we have provided for them. And when they hear vanity they say: To us our works and to you yours. Peace be unto you! We desire not the ignorant.’³

When I first began to learn about Islam it was the greatest moment of my life because it brought me the message of spiritual unity (tawheed). The message of One God resonated in my soul, and I suddenly could recognise it in every law and atom of this immeasurable universe - Subhanallah!

Often times, those who are guided to Islam from the People of the Book, be they Christians or Jews, immediately feel at home and consider themselves already Muslim (**‘Even before it we were of those who surrendered.’**). Indicating the universality and continuity of the message of Islam, consistent with the true teachings of previous Prophets and Revelations,

‘Say: We believe in what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed before us to Abraham and Ismail and Isaac and Jacob and the Tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and all the Prophets from their Lord, we make no distinction between any of them and to Him (Allah) we surrender.’⁴

Now going back to the subject of music - so long as it is within certain moral limits and does not divert a person from worship - it obviously doesn’t make people Kafirs (non-Believers). The truth is that most of those who buy my records as Cat Stevens are not Muslim, but many who listen to those old songs recognise that they represent the poetic inspiration of a seeker, someone thirsting for peace and trying to understand the unexplained mysteries of life. They were not just typical ‘Rock & Roll’. Indeed, most of my well known songs carried strong moral messages: ‘Peace Train’, ‘On the Road to Findout’ and ‘The Wind’, to mention a few.

*I listen to the wind, to the wind of my soul,
Where I end up? Well I think only God really knows⁵*

It’s true that I have gradually softened my objections to the use of music and songs over the years, and there are good reasons. Since the genocide against Bosnia in 1992, I learnt how important motivational songs are in keeping people’s spirits high during times of great calamity. One of the things that changed me greatly was listening to the cassettes coming out of the Balkans at that time; these were rich and highly motivating songs (*nasheeds*), inspiring the Bosnians with the religious spirit of faith and sacrifice.⁶

In addition, from the letters we’ve received in our office over the years, it’s clear that my songs have actually helped many people; some even on the very verge of suicide have been influenced to see life in a positive light again, Allah says, **‘Whoever saves the life of one human being it is as if he has saved the whole of humanity’.**⁷ Also, if listening to music and songs invalidated Islam, then most of the Muslims during the Abbasid Khilafat and the golden age of Islamic Spain would be considered non-Muslim, God forbid!

Interestingly, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the ‘Ulema have recently decided that the songs I sang as Cat Stevens provides a good example for the youth, to show that there are positive aspects to some music and art.⁸ Maybe the ‘Ulema in other countries should take a closer look at what’s happening to their youth, before the gulf between them becomes irreparable and too wide to bridge. We must be able to provide an Islamic alternative.

I truly believe that we don’t have to go beyond the generous paradigms of Islam for our solutions. If

we turn our attention to the Sunnah (example) of the blessed Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, there are evidences for the allowance of listening to inoffensive words and songs of non-Muslims. Yes, it's true. Once the Prophet was listening to the poetry of a non-Muslim, Umayyah bin Sault, after listening to around a hundred couplets of the poem, the Prophet, peace be upon him said, "He (Umayyah) was close to accepting Islam."⁹

In another example we know of a famous Hadith in Al Bukhari where songs of *Jahiliyyah* (society of ignorance) were being played in the presence of the blessed Prophet, peace be upon him, and he did not object: Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) reported the occasion when her father came to the house while the Prophet was resting; two small Ansari girls were singing a famous battle song about the Tribes of 'Aus and Khazraj, commemorating the Day of Bu'ath, which took place before Islam came to Yathrib. Her father was shocked and protested, "Musical instruments of Satan in the house of Allah's Messenger!" But Allah's Messenger said, "O Abu Bakr! There is an 'Eid for every nation and this is our 'Eid."¹⁰

The issue of music within Islam is an ongoing debate amongst Muslim scholars; some argue that it is totally Haram (prohibited) and others argue that its allowance depends on the song's conformity to Islamic values and norms. Whilst I agree that some songs and musical influences are haram, this judgement does not apply to every singer or every single note and crotchet played.

We must distinguish: for example, what is the message in the words of the song? What is the moral context and environment where the songs are being played? What is the time it is happening? Who is delivering the song? How is it delivered? And importantly, what is the intention? Some scholars say that as long as it conforms to moral norms and doesn't divert a person from his or her duties in worshipping Allah Most High, then it has its place in the culture of Islam.

Different opinions about music indicate that it is not to be taken as a question of faith ('Aqidah), but is simply a matter of understanding (fiqh)

Different opinions about music indicate that it is not to be taken as a question of faith ('*Aqidah*), but is simply a matter of understanding (*fiqh*). And after having studied this subject for more than twenty five years, I can say that it is certainly not as black and white as some have tried to make us believe. I used to be doubtful about the issue but now realise that many of the Hadith used to support its banning are either weak, unclear, or they do not balance with other specific Hadith showing its allowability. The actual word 'music' was never recorded in the original sayings of the Prophet and can not be found in the preserved 'Arabic language of the Qur'an - and Allah surely knows best.

Of course this subject of Music can not be dealt with here, it is too deep to go into,¹¹ but it suffices to say that at this time, while the world is so full of death and darkness, and God is openly disbelieved by so many, there is an overwhelming argument for leaving behind such minor debates and concentrating on major concerns, like Da'wah - calling people to the worship of the One True God (Allah). This takes highest priority.

After having discovered Islam through a complex maze of different spiritual paths and religions, my commitment is to share this treasure of knowledge and understanding of tawheed with others; this I consider a *Fard* (obligation) upon me. That is why I am trying my best to reach out to people, who have many misconceptions about Islam,

'And invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching.'¹²

Many Muslims today are frustrated, they believe that nothing can be done except to withdraw and pray for Allah to change the situation, or they go to extremes. Of course, Allah the Almighty can change the situation in a second if He wishes, but we must also correct ourselves,

'Allah does not change the condition of a people till they change that which is with themselves, and (that is) because Allah is Hearer and Knower'.¹³

Whilst Muslims lands are in chaos, pounded by devastating military forces; and Islam is being dragged through the gutter by the media owing to the misdeeds of certain extreme groups, we must ask: where are united voices of the Ummah to right the picture and change the state of affairs? While the killing of souls is as acceptable as sweeping the streets; while blood gushes from the innocent victims of poverty and unjust aggression, surely there is something we can do? This should not push us to extremities either. Allah Most High says,

'Let there arise a nation who invite to goodness and enjoin what is morally correct and prevent what is objectionable. Such are they who are successful.'¹⁴

When the clear teachings of Islam - to believe in Allah and His Prophet, to pray and to give charity - are considered of secondary importance, what kind of Islam are some of us projecting?

Therefore, Da'wah, inviting mankind to belief (*Iman*) and worship of the One God, the True Lord and Creator of the Universe and reminding people of the Day of Judgement, this is the most fundamental issue in whatever time and space. Not performing our duty and ignoring the power of the media is one of the main reasons, I believe, for our failure as a Global Community in creating a more peaceful and just world.

Now, going back to those accusations against me and questions about my Iman, the conveyors of such rumours should earnestly seek Allah's forgiveness. Critics of my music and Da'wah should be aware that we are trying our best to show Muslims and non-Muslims the transcendent beauty and light of Islam, for this we must work within the media or our voices will never be heard.

The DVD release of my Concert in 1976 contains an extremely important interview where I explain why I left the music business. Thank God, many are seeing and hearing this side for the first time without the usual journalistic distortion. Additionally, my contribution to those charity concerts protesting against the war on Iraq and for victims of AIDS - particularly innocent children - were charitable acts which I wanted to perform on behalf of the Muslims, although I didn't necessarily agree with some of the un-bashful presentations from other artists.

In the end, the sayings of the Prophet, 'Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should either speak good or be silent'¹⁵ and, 'A Muslim is he from whose hand and tongue other Muslims feel safe',¹⁶ are enough to remind such accusers of the Islam we still need to understand and practice. Furthermore - though some may still wish to argue - the best answer I can give is in the words we read from the Qur'an,

'Do you argue with us, when Allah is our Lord and your Lord? To us are our deeds and to you are your deeds, and to Him we are sincere.'¹⁷

Wa as salamu 'alaykum

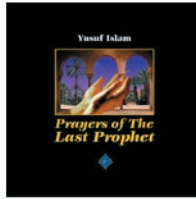
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- ¹ Dr Sayed Mutawalli Al Darsh (Rahmatullah 'alayhi)
² The Muslim, May - June 1980
³ Al Qasas (28) : 53-55
⁴ Ali 'Imran (3) : 84
⁵ The Wind, Cat Music Ltd
⁶ See my article, 'I Have No Cannons That Roar' at www.mountainoflight.com
⁷ Al Ma'idah (5) : 32
⁸ Associated French Press, 1 September 2004
⁹ Shama'il Tirmidhee, Hadith no. 238
¹⁰ Sahih al Bukhari 2:72
¹¹ For further details on the issue please go to: www.mountainoflight.com
¹² An-Nahl (16) : 125
¹³ Al Anfal (8) : 53
¹⁴ Ali 'Imran (3) : 104
¹⁵ Agreed (An Nawawi's 40 Hadith: no 15)
¹⁶ Agreed (Mishkat al Masabeeh: Chapter 1, 52)
¹⁷ Al Baqarah (2) : 139

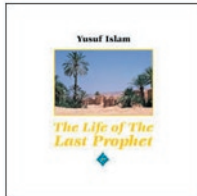
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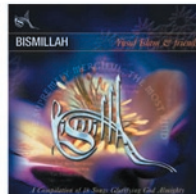
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