



# Stone and Star

*By Avidah Shashaani*

**W**OULD MOSES, JESUS, and Muhammad fight each other if they lived at the same time? If so, what would they fight over? If not, what do we need to understand about what they experienced and taught?

More wars have been waged, and are being waged, in the name of religion than we would like to acknowledge. If we take the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that have the same patriarch and are all monotheistic religions, should we not ask ourselves why they are fighting with such fervor?

Believers of every religion vary in their faith expressions—from the radicals to the mystics—depending on how deeply they experience the essence of what their religion teaches. Each group, let alone each individual, has a different perspective on the religion it practices. So, who really speaks for any religion? Which branch of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam is the “true and authentic” voice of the religion?

Many spiritual traditions have recounted the story of the elephant and the blind men to explain the diversity in our experience of the Divine. Rumi (1207–1273), the Islamic mystic, retold the story in his *Masnavi*. He said some Hindus brought an elephant into a dark room. Depending on where each person touched the elephant, they believed the elephant to be like a water spout (trunk), a fan (ear), a pillar (leg), and a throne (back).<sup>1</sup>

Rumi uses this story to tell us that, if we have the “complete experience” of God, we would not have different explanations or interpretations of God.

Studying deeply the life of the mystics, we see that they arrived at the “fullness” of their faith much like scientists in quest of a discovery. One group searches for God while the other wants to discover the laws of the universe. One’s realm of search is the heart/spirit while the other is the world of physical perceptions. Once the discovery is made, there is no dispute. Mystics validate each other’s discoveries through the laboratory of the heart and scientists do the same through their respective physical laboratories.

Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165–1240), one of the most celebrated Muslim mystics, has said,

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture  
for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,  
and a temple for idols and the pilgrim’s Ka’ba and the  
tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.  
I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s  
camels take, that is my religion and my faith.<sup>2</sup>

The mystics are driven to discover and experience for themselves what the promulgators of their faiths taught and the way they arrived at their intimate experience of God. If we look at the lives of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, we see that they did not arrive at their faith through scholarship or blind acceptance of what their societies taught, but through an urge to “know” the Truth. They spent long periods in spiritual retreats in order to receive inspiration and guidance. Once the guidance came, they gave up everything to serve humanity. We cannot deny their courage in the face of hardships, torments, and afflictions.

If we look with an unbiased lens at the heart of any religion, it is easily seen that they are giving us a manual to discover and be

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in harmony with our “heart/spiritual core”—that which is rooted in universal truths. There is not one religion that does not ask us to be charitable, truthful, just, and compassionate. Why is it, then, that we do not live in a more harmonious and equitable world?

The depth with which we are connected to our heart/spiritual core determines how we respond to situations that demand sacrifice and courage. This direct link to our heart/spiritual core is what I propose to be our conscience—the awareness of universal and unchangeable truths such as justice, integrity, love, and compassion. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) said, “One moment your life is a stone in you, and the next, a star.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, conscience becomes the trustee and engages in acts that are mutually beneficial and not detrimental to the well-being of others. This is the very foundation of what religion teaches. Those who live the very “heart” of their religion and for whom the edicts of faith are not mere rituals, arrive at and drink from the same river—the river of Oneness. A river may be called by a different name as it passes from one country to another, but it is the same river and has no boundary. A river doesn’t call itself by any name or abide by any boundary.

In 2005, the Fund for the Future of our Children launched the Children of Abraham Peace Essay Contest. We asked high school students to reflect deeply about the wisdom found in the Abrahamic traditions and apply that wisdom to an action project.

Year after year, these young people have demonstrated that it is possible to look with an unfiltered lens and an open mind at the underlying principles of these faiths and come away with a unifying and peaceful approach to what “the other” has said.

I am hopeful that young people will lead the way to a more peaceful coexistence. They have not yet developed a “self-interest” perspective in

judging “the other” and they understand the fragility of our planet. They do not want to burden it with needless conflicts and alienation. They listen to the voice of their conscience and have the courage to stand up for justice and serve the underserved of our planet. •