

Muslim and Non-Muslim Relations Reflections on Some Qur'anic Texts

Introduction

Humanity lives today in a “global village,” where no people or nation can live in isolation from and indifferent to what goes on elsewhere. Our world is so interdependent and so interrelated that peaceful dialogue has become an imperative. In spite of the general erosion of commitment to “religion,” however interpreted or misinterpreted, religion still plays a pivotal role in shaping people’s attitudes and influencing their behavior. In spite of serious instances of abuse of various religions by some of their claimed followers so as to justify or instigate acts of brutality and bloodshed, there are positive and helpful common themes in these religions. Therefore, peaceful and candid intra-faith and inter-faith dialogues are important tools in working for such goals. This paper is a humble contribution to that dialogue from one perspective within a major world religion that is the professed faith of nearly one fifth of the human race; one that is more misunderstood than any other faith, sometimes, even, by some of its followers.

This paper examines the nature and parameters of the normative relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is based mainly on an attempt to understand the Qur’an in *its own* textual and historical context. To do this, it is necessary to begin with the methodology and assumptions that underpin the paper.

Methodology

The basic methodology and assumptions of this paper are summed up as follows:

As a religious faith, normative Islam is not identical with the actions of its “followers.” Like other religions, followers or claimed followers are imperfect, fallible human beings. There are times when their actions conform, in various degrees, to the normative teachings of their faith. But there are also times when their actions are either independent of or even in violation of such normative teachings.

Outsiders may see these offending acts as part of the practice of faith. Sometimes, these acts are committed, falsely, in the name of faith. These claims are made as a result of ignorance, “sincere” misinterpretations, or even deliberate misrepresentations that are intended to provide sanction and authority for such acts. Examples of that include attempting to justify or explain the killing of innocent non-combatants by making out-of-context references to the Qur’an. Similarly, there are those who justify bombing abortion clinics or killing and dispossessing the Palestinian people by making selective or out-of-context references to the Bible. The history of various religious communities is replete with such aberrations, even as it is replete also with successful implementation of the norms of their faiths. Human successes or failures are not always identical with ideal norms.

To evaluate whether a given act or argument conforms to the normative teachings or not, there must be some criteria of such evaluations; how are these norms to be identified? In the case of Islam, there is no dispute about its primary sources: the Qur’an and authentic (or sound) Hadith (or [Sunnah](#)). The Qur’an, for Muslims, is God’s revelation to His Final Messenger to humankind, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). It is an imperative pillar of faith in Islam to accept the Qur’an as the verbatim word of God dictated to the Prophet by Gabriel (Jibreel), the Angel of Revelation.

Being revelation in meaning as well as exact wording, the Qur'an is regarded by Muslims as the highest and final authority in learning about Islam and its stances on various issues and queries. Hadith refer to the words, actions, and approvals of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) in matters relating to the teaching of the faith and its implementation. Hadith is similar to the Qur'an, being a form of revelation and, hence, a primary source of Islam. It is different, however, in the fact that it is a revelation in meaning only. The words of the spoken part of Hadith are the Prophet's, not God's.

Furthermore, the Qur'an is fully authentic as it has been meticulously preserved by being committed to memory by masses of people in addition to its preservation in writing from the very beginning. Hadith, on the other hand, may vary with respect to the degree of authenticity (soundness). As such, Hadith must be understood in the light of the Qur'an and interpreted in a way that does not contradict any established Qur'anic principle. On the other hand, Hadith also serve as elaborators, clarifiers, and explainers of the Qur'an. This means that the text of the Qur'an and relevant authentic Hadith on a given topic must be studied in an integrative manner.

Secondary sources of Islam include two generally agreed upon sources as well as debatable sources. The generally agreed upon sources are a consensus of the scholars on a given issue (*ijma`*), and analogical deduction (*qiyas*). Secondary sources are not revelatory, even though they are based on interpretations of revelatory sources. While *ijma`* and *qiyas* are more generally accepted, they are themselves dependent upon the primary sources for their authority and reasoning. Interpretations involve human judgment; they may vary and are fallible as well. This implies that a sound argument based on the Qur'an and Hadith cannot be rejected on the grounds that the opinion of a scholar is different from it or inconsistent with it. Errors of understanding and interpretations are possible and do occur. Yet errors cannot be attributed to Allah and His Revelation.

It should be noted, however, that some traditional scholarly opinions (*ijtihad*) may be rejected, not because of a methodological error, but because of the fact that such opinions were partly shaped by the special circumstances and historical setting of their times. Such circumstances may differ significantly from those in today's world. In all cases, opinions are to be judged by the primary sources, not the reverse. It may be helpful to note that there is no single person or authority in Islam whose interpretation of any debatable issue is seen or accepted as the only valid one, let alone being viewed on a par with the texts of the Qur'an and Hadith.

In interpreting the primary sources of Islam, a number of essential and universal rules must be observed. They include the following:

- The realization that the Qur'an has been preserved in the original language in which it was revealed (Arabic). In the process of translation into other languages, nuances of the original language may be lost or not fully communicated. Outright mistakes in translation do occur. Therefore, deep knowledge of the Arabic language is a must for any scholarly interpretation. It should be noted that certain terms used in the Qur'an carry differing meanings depending upon the context. For example, the term Ahl Al-Kitab or "People of the Book" is sometimes used to refer to Jews, other times to Christians, and in other instances to both. Likewise, the term *al-nas* is used sometimes to refer to all humankind, when the context deals with Allah as the Creator of humankind as in Surat An-Nisaa' 4:1, Al-Hujurat 49:13, and An-Nas 114:1-6. In Aal `Imran 3:173, however, when the same term *al-nas* is used, it obviously refers to a subset of humankind, not all. The same applies to terms like *Jews* or *Christians*. Such terms may refer only to some but not all Jews or Christians.

- The Qur'an explains itself. Since the Qur'an is not ordered by topic (like textbook chapters), it is necessary for a scholar to be thoroughly familiar with other texts in the Qur'an which deal with the same topic or relate directly to it. Failure to do so may lead to selectivity, which may distort the overall message of the Qur'an concerning that topic. In fact, other texts in the Qur'an may be highly significant in determining the true meaning of a given text.
- In addition to the overall Qur'anic context, consideration should be given to the section in which a particular verse occurs. One of the most common serious mistakes is to quote only a part of a verse or one verse in an interrelated section of a surah(chapter) in such a way as to change its meaning.
- Consideration of the occasion of revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*) of certain verses, if known and authentic, affects the interpretation of that verse.
- If there is an authentic hadith dealing with the same topic as the Qur'anic verse, the hadith takes precedence over mere opinion or speculation.
- Keep in mind that some Qur'anic verses were revealed to deal with certain historical challenges facing the emerging and besieged Muslim community affects interpretation. Some of these challenges may not be present today, and if they are, they may take a different form. Some verses revealed to deal with such situations should not be unnecessarily generalized. For example, referring to verse 5 in surah 9 without any regard to its historical context may give the misleading impression that the Qur'an condones the killing of all idolatrous people, rather than only those who committed or conspired with others to commit murder in violation of their treaties. A fuller explanation of this verse is discussed later in this paper.

- The few texts must be interpreted in the light of the many texts. For example, the Qur'an repeatedly affirms the freedom of conscience and rejects compulsion in religion. However, we encounter some verses in the Qur'an which allow fighting non-Muslims. To understand these later verses as permitting fighting against others because of their rejection of Islam or in order to force or coerce them to accept Islam is to disregard many Qur'anic texts that are inconsistent with that interpretation. The question then, is whether the permission to fight is because of their faith choice or because of their aggression and/or oppression, with religious choice being incidental, not the cause of fighting.

- Even an authoritative and authentic text of the primary sources of Islam may have more than one possible meaning (*mutashabih*) and must be interpreted in the light of the more definitive text (*muhkam*), not the reverse.

Any claim of *naskh* (abrogation, or more correctly supercession) must be carefully examined. The entire Qur'an is definitively authentic (*qat 'i al-thubut*). Any claim of *naskh* must be definitive, not based on mere opinion or speculation. It should be noted that earlier Muslims used the term *naskh* to refer also to *takhsees* or specifying and limiting the ruling than abrogating it.

This issue is of paramount importance, since the Muslim heritage includes writings that went into unreasonable excesses in their claims of *naskh*. While a few scholars claimed that hundreds of verses were abrogated, the great majority of scholars rejected these unsubstantiated claims. For example, Jalal Al-Din Al-Suyuti narrowed down the number of "abrogated" verses to 19. Other scholars, like Shah Waliyyullah Al-Dahlawi and Sobhi Al-Saleh, even narrowed them down to smaller numbers. The fact that there are legitimate disagreements about the number of abrogated verses in the Qur'an is itself an indication that some if not most of these claims are far from definitive, if not mistaken, based on strong evidence.

Guided by the above methodology, we move next to review the Qur'anic values and precepts, which represent the underpinning of Muslim/Non-Muslim relationships.

Qur'anic Foundations of Muslim/Non-Muslim Relations

It should be noted from the beginning that the very term *Islam* implies that peace is the basis and the norm of Muslim/non-Muslim relations. *Islam* is derived from the Arabic root S-L-M, whose generic meaning includes the concepts of peace and submission. From a spiritual perspective, Islam may be defined as attaining peace through submission to Allah or the state of peace in submission to Allah. Ample references in the Qur'an and Hadith reveal that this concept of peace embraces peace with God, inner peace as a result of that relationship with God, peace with humans, peace with the animal world, peace with vegetation, and peace with the ecological order.

For Muslims, this “generic Islam” has been the core of all prophetic teachings throughout human history. Key theological and eschatological Qur'anic terms are derived from the same Arabic root, S-L-M. One of God's names or attributes is As-Salam, meaning “the peace” or “the source of peace.” Paradise is called the home or abode of peace. As they enter Paradise, [angels](#) greet believers with the greeting “peace be with you,” the same greeting that will be exchanged between the dwellers of Paradise. It is also the standard greeting among Muslims worldwide. Peace also lies at the heart of the universally accepted five major objectives (maqasid) of Shari`ah (Islamic jurisprudence), to safeguard faith, life, mind, honor and property. Peaceful relationships among human beings include various circles such as family, community, society, and humanity at large. It includes relationships with fellow believers in Islam and with humanity at large. The focus of this section, however, is on the universal concepts and values underlying the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. They include the following:

- Faith in the One Universal God (Allah in Arabic): Islam is founded on the belief that there is only one God (Allah in Arabic), Who is the universal Creator, Sustainer, and Cherisher of all. Being the sole creator of all humankind precludes any notion of multiple, competing creators, each marshalling his creation against the other “gods” and their creation. Allah is One and is impartial toward His creation. He provides for all, including those who reject faith in Him or even those who defy Him. He cares for the well-being of all and gives them ample opportunity to repent to Him and end the state of separateness suffered by those who reject Him or are unmindful of Him. This belief implies that all humans are equal before Allah in terms of their humanity, irrespective of their particular beliefs. Only Allah is the ultimate judge of any person’s “theological correctness.” No human should be oppressed or mistreated by other fellow humans because of a perceived “theological incorrectness.”

- Unity and universality of the core teachings of all prophets: That core message is peace in submission to Allah, literally Islam. According to the Qur’an, a Muslim must accept, revere, and believe in all the prophets of Allah, without discrimination. They all represent one brotherhood of faith extending vertically to include many generations and horizontally to embrace all humanity. In the Qur’an we read [we (Muslims) make no distinction between any of His messengers (God’s messengers)] ([Al-Baqarah](#) 2:285). We read also [Behold, We have revealed to you (O Muhammad) as We revealed to Noah and all the prophets after him] ([Al-Nisaa’](#) 4:163). Still in another verse we read [In matters of faith, He (God) has ordained for you that which He had enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: steadfastly uphold the (true) faith and make no divisions therein] ([Ash-Shura](#) 42:13). These Qur’anic texts preclude the notion of narrow partisanship that may lead to hatred or even violence against communities who perceive themselves as followers of other prophets.

- Universal human dignity: The Qur'an gives various reasons why each human being must be honored and dignified on account of being human and irrespective of his or her chosen beliefs. Such honor is symbolized by the way the Qur'an describes Allah's creation of the human in the best of molds and commanding the angels to bow down in respect to Adam.

The Qur'an describes the human as the trustee of Allah on earth. Allah created everything on earth and in the heavens for the benefit of the human race. Sanctity of human life is affirmed in the Qur'an [Nor take life, which God has made sacred, except for just cause] (Al-Israa' 17:33). The Qur'an confirms God's revelation to previous prophets that [If anyone slays a human being, unless it be (punishment) for murder, or for spreading mischief on earth, it shall be as though he had slain all humankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all humankind] (Al-Ma'idah 5:32). Beyond sanctity of life, in the Qur'an we read [Indeed, We (God) have conferred dignity on the children of Adam] (Al-Israa' 17:70). It is noted that this verse is inclusive of all humans, irrespective of their religion or even their belief in God.

Rejection of belief in God will surely have consequences in the afterlife. However, it is up to God to determine these consequences. Such future determination has no bearing on the respect of the humanity of every person in this life. After all, the human is a free agent, and as such, each is individually responsible before God for his or her beliefs and moral choices. A person can be held accountable in this life only if such a moral choice infringes on the rights of individuals or society, such as the commission of crimes or acts of aggression. In other words, no human is entitled to dehumanize or punish another on the sole ground that the later is following a different religion or no religion at all. This value implies that peaceful co-existence among followers of all religions and respecting their humanity is not only possible, but also mandated in the Qur'an.

Universal justice: The Arabic term for justice is *adl*, meaning “to be in a state of equilibrium, to be balanced.” That balance is inherent in the cosmic order and ecology as much as it is inherent in spiritual and ethical values. The Qur’an warns against disturbing that balance. Within that broad context, we can examine the concept of justice as it relates to human relationships based on Islam’s primary sources. Briefly, that concept has the following characteristics:

Justice is not mere “political correctness” or something to be pursued exclusively, for worldly gain. For the believer, it is a divine command.

Justice is at the heart of prophetic teachings.

Justice is a universal concept that should be observed without nepotism, even with the “enemy”:

[O you who believe! Stand out for justice, as witnesses to Allah, and even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor.] (An-Nisaa’ 4:134)

[O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety and fear Allah, for Allah is well acquainted with all that you do.] (Al-Ma’idah 5:8)

The above concept of universal justice relates to peace in at least two ways:

1. It is inconceivable to secure genuine lasting peace without justice. In fact, doing justice is a prerequisite to peace.
2. To harm, persecute, or fight against any person on account of his or her religious convictions is one of the worst forms of injustice, which is condemned in the primary sources of Islam.

Universal human brotherhood: Addressing the entire human race, the Qur’an states,

[O humankind! We (Allah) have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous (or Allah-conscious) of you. Surely, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.] (Al-Hujurat 49:13)

It must be noted that this verse does not address Muslims exclusively, but begins with the inclusive address “O humankind,” an address that embraces all. It reminds humanity that they belong to one family with the same set of parents, albeit a diverse family. This is a reminder that diversity in unity and unity within diversity are possible. Humanity is like a bouquet of flowers in which each flower is beautiful in its own right, yet, the combination of all flowers and the rich diversity of their colors is more beautiful. This sweeping statement in the Qur’an about broad human brotherhood is a profound basis for peace for and among all.

Acceptance of plurality in human societies: While the notion of plurality may appear to be a relatively new concept, it is not new to those who are familiar with the Qur’an. The Qur’an is quite explicit in reminding all that if God willed, He would have made of all mankind one nation (Al-Ma’idah 5:48; Hud 11:118). Likewise, the Qur’an states that had it been God’s will, He would have made all people believers (Yunus 10:99).

This means that forcing people to believe in God runs against His decree of free will, which includes the fact that some will reject Him. The ultimate reward or punishment for accepting or rejecting belief in God is deferred until the Day of Judgment. This value inculcates the attitude of being non-judgmental and accepting of people as they are, human beings entitled to choose and who are answerable to their Creator. Acceptance of plurality does not mean accepting the plurality of ultimate truths, nor does it preclude sharing one’s faith with others and even inviting them to it. Plurality means peaceful coexistence with those who hold differing beliefs and convictions.

Prohibition of compulsion in faith: Sharing or propagating faith is not the same as compulsion in religion. The Qur'an makes it a duty on believers to communicate the message of Islam to fellow humans and to be witnesses to humankind.

[And thus We (Allah) made of you (O Muslims) a justly balanced community that you might bear witness (to the truth) to humankind and the Apostle might bear witness over you.] (Al-Baqarah 2:143)

Being witnesses for Allah includes both witnessing through righteous deeds and sharing what one believes is the truth, which is beneficial to humankind. Some communities use the term *conversion* to designate that later form of witnessing. The Qur'anic term for such sharing is *da'wah*, which means, literally, "invitation." The term itself means that the invitee has every right to accept or reject that "invitation." Compulsion, threats, bribery, deception, manipulation, and exploitation of the invitee's vulnerability (such as hunger or illness) are inconsistent with the notion of "invitation."

The Qur'an gives guidance on how to invite others to Islam. Invitation should be with wisdom and in the most gracious way.

[Invite (all humankind) to the path of your Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation and argue with them in the most kindly manner, for, indeed, your Lord knows best as to who strays from His path, and best who are the right-guided.] (An-Nahl 16:125)

In numerous verses in the Qur'an, compulsion in religion is forbidden:

[There shall be no coercion in matters of faith.] (Al-Baqarah 2:256)

[And so (O Prophet), exhort them; your task is only to exhort. You cannot compel them (to believe). As for one who turns away, being bent on denying the truth, him or her will God cause the greatest suffering (in the life to come). For verily, unto Us will be their return, and verily, it is for Us to call them to account.] (Al-Ghashiyah 88:21-26)

[Had your Lord so willed, all those who live on earth would surely have attained faith, will you then compel people, against their will, to believe?] (Yunus 10:99)

The Qur'an does not prescribe any punishment for rejecting the "invitation" to accept Islam.

[But if they turn away (from accepting Allah's message, then know that) We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your duty is only to convey (the message).] (Ash-Shura 42:48)

- Universal mercy: The essence of Islam and its Prophet's mission is summed up in the following verse:

[And (thus, O Muhammad), We have not sent you, but as mercy to all the worlds.] (Al-Anbiyaa' 21:107)

To remove any particularization of this mercy, the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) explained that mercy is not being merciful to one's companions but merciful to all. He also explained, "He who is not merciful to others, will not be treated mercifully." It is obvious that Muslims are not the only dwellers of the earth. Hence the command to be merciful applies to all. In fact, mercy applies as well to animals and other creatures of Allah. A logical fruit of this attitude of mercy is to love humankind as persons and fellow honored creatures of Allah, while dissociating oneself from their erroneous beliefs or even rejection of Allah. This love finds its greatest form by loving good and guidance for them. This does not mean loving their wrongdoing or their rejection of faith in Allah. It is the love of their guidance and well being in this life and in the life to come.

- Universal peaceful coexistence: The basic rule governing the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is that of peaceful coexistence, justice and compassion. The following two verses are key verses that embody that general rule:

[As for such (non-Muslims) who do not fight you on account of (your) faith, or drive you forth from your homelands, God does not forbid you to show them kindness (also love and respect) and to deal with them with equity, for God loves those who act equitably. God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards such as fight against you because of (your) faith and drive you forth from your homelands or aid (others) in driving you forth. As for those from among you who turn towards them for alliance, it is they who are wrongdoers.] (Al-Mumtahanah 60:8-9)

This verse makes it a Muslim's duty to treat peacefully coexisting persons with equity (*qist*) and *birr*. The term *birr* and its derivatives are the same expressions used in the Qur'an and Hadith to refer to one's relationship with his or her parents. Such a relationship is more than kindness, since it includes also love and respect. Many English translations of the Qur'an have translated this Qur'anic term as kindness, a translation that falls short of the richer meaning of the original Arabic term. To ameliorate this problem, the bracketed statement (also love and respect) was added above. The term *qist* has been translated as "justice." Justice, however, is closest to another Arabic word *'adl*. This word, however, refers to giving the other his or her rights, no less and no more. Other scholars argue that the Qur'anic term *qist* means "going beyond justice by giving more than what is due to others."

- Peaceful dialogue, especially with the People of the Book: All of the above nine principles apply to all non-Muslims. The Qur'an accords the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) a special position. The very term to designate them distinguishes them from others such as idolatrous Arabs (Al-Bayyinah 98:1). It is a complimentary title as it acknowledges that, like Muslims, their faiths are based on revealed books or scriptures. In its family and dietary laws, the Qur'an gives a special consideration to the People of the Book. For example, a Muslim male may marry a believing Jewish or Christian woman (Al-Ma'idah 5:5). The Qur'an exhorts Muslims to engage in peaceful dialogue with Jews and Christians:

[Say (O Muslims), O People of the Book! Come to a common term which we and you hold in common: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall not ascribe divinity to none beside Him, and that we shall not take human beings for our lord beside Allah, and if they turn away, then say: bear witness that we submit ourselves unto Him.] (Aal `Imran 3:64)

It may be noted that "turning away" from this invitation is not presented as a punishable offense in this life, and that the consequence of rejection is to simply testify Muslims' submission to Allah. Another verse in the Qur'an encourages peaceful dialogue and invites all to build upon the common ground between Muslims and the People of the Book. The Qur'an instructs Muslims:

[And do not argue with the People of Book except in a most kindly manner, except for those of them who are bent on evildoing, and say: "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which has come down to you; our Lord and yours is One and it is to Him that we (all) submit ourselves."] (Al-`Ankabut 29:46)

Not only do Muslims, Christians, and Jews share belief in the One God and divine revelation, they also share belief in human responsibility, consequences of good and evil deeds, moral teachings, and other values such as love, peace, and justice.

It may be concluded that the ten values and principles above represent a solid foundation for a peaceful relationship and coexistence with all, irrespective of their religious choices. It may be noted, however, that genuine and lasting peace must to be protected and safeguarded against those who try to destroy it. Genuine peace does not necessarily mean the total absence of use of force or even war as a lesser evil and as a last resort. The main question is when and how. This is the focus of the next section of this paper.

Jihad Is Not “Holy War”

The foregoing discussion provides ample evidence that the normative relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is that of peace, justice, mercy, and mutual respect. Some may ask, however, how building and mainstreaming peace can be reconciled with the concept of “holy war.”

The Qur’anic Arabic term *jihad* has been commonly mistranslated as “holy war.” The Qur’an was revealed in Arabic, not in English. The Arabic equivalent of the English expression “holy war” is *harb muqadasah*, an expression that is not found anywhere in the Qur’an or in the authentic sayings of the Prophet of Islam (peace and blessings be upon him). Even when the Qur’an speaks about defensive war, it never glorifies it or calls it “holy”; rather, it is described as something which is inherently hated (Al-Baqarah 2:216-217). However, as a last resort, it may be better than doing nothing in the face of aggression or oppression.

Furthermore, the term *holy war* means, lexically, a fight on behalf of one religion against the other(s). There is no verse in the Qur’an that condones fighting any peaceful non-Muslim on the sole ground that he or she is a non-Muslim. The Qur’an prohibits compulsion in religion (Al-Baqarah 2:256) and even allows one form of interfaith marriage. For example, a Muslim male may marry a Jewish or Christian woman (Al-Ma’idah 5:5).

It may be argued, from a religious perspective, that the expression *holy war* is a contradiction in terms, as there is nothing “holy” about war and its results—bloodshed, destruction and human suffering. It may be a lesser evil in some instances, but it may not be holy in itself. It may be useful to discuss the meaning of jihad in both its literal and religious meanings.

Jihad is an Arabic term derived from the root J-H-D, which means, literally, “to strive or exert effort.” It is the same root from which the legal term *ijtihad* is derived, as *ijtihad* refers to the exertion of intellectual effort by scholars so as to come up with an informed religious opinion on a new issue or problem. The term *jihad* and similar terms derived from the same root are used in the Qur’an and Hadith.

First, it is used in the context of prayers, doing righteous deeds, and self-purification; inward *jihad* or struggle against evil inclinations within oneself (Al-Hajj 22:77-78; and Al-`Ankabut 29:4-7).

Second, it is used in the context of social *jihad*, or striving for truth, justice, and goodness in one’s relationship with other humans. Examples of this usage include the payment of charity to the needy (Al-Hujurat 49:15) and striving to persuade those who reject God’s message by referring to the arguments presented in the Qur’an (Al-Furqan 25:52).

Third, it is used in the context of the battlefield, which is often called, more specifically, *qital*, which means “fighting.” That later form, the combative *jihad*, is allowed in the Qur’an for legitimate self-defense in the face of unprovoked aggression or in resisting severe oppression on religious or other grounds. In fact, the first verses in the Qur’an that allowed self-defense were not revealed until the early Muslim community had endured more than 13 years of suffering and aggression at the hands of the idolatrous Arabs. The wording of these verses is revealing:

[Permission (to fight) is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged, and verily, God has indeed the power to aid them. Those who have been driven from their homelands in defiance of right for no other reason than their saying, ‘Our Lord is Allah.’] (Al-Hajj 22:39-40)

The key verses in the Qur’an concerning the justification of resorting to combative jihad are the following:

[And fight in God’s cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression, for, verily, Allah does not love the aggressors. And slay them wherever you may come upon them, and drive them away from wherever they drove you away, for oppression is even worse than killing. And fight not against them near the Sacred Mosque until they fight against you first, but if they fight against you, slay them: such is the recompense of the rejecters of truth. But if they desist (from aggression), behold, Allah is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful. And fight against them until there is no more oppression and religion belongs to God (i.e. until people can worship Allah without fear of persecution), but if they desist, then all hostility shall cease, except against those who commit injustice.] (Al-Baqarah 2:190-194)

It is obvious from these key verses that the only two justifications of the combative-type of jihad are to stop aggression and severe oppression. The condition for ceasing hostilities is not acceptance of Islam, but halt to aggression and oppression.

Like the above verses, there are a few verses in the Qur’an which sanction fighting. These verses, however, when understood in their textual and historical context deal with war situations and should not be generalized. The description of the aggressors or oppressors as rejecters of faith or idolatrous people does not mean that they are to be fought against on account of being non-Muslims. Historically, these aggressors happened to be non-Muslims. In fact, the Qur’an allows fighting against fellow Muslims if they are aggressors and other means of restoring peace and justice have failed (Al-Hujurat 49:8-9). The issue is allowing fighting in the presence of aggression, not difference of religion.

No single verse in the Qur'an, when placed in its proper textual and historical context, permits fighting others on the basis of their faith, ethnicity, or nationality. To do so contradicts several established values and principles discussed in the previous section. Combative jihad is not only restricted in terms of what may or may not justify it; it is also strictly regulated. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) taught us how to behave on the battlefield. As a "hated act," war should not be resorted to if other peaceful and just means may stop aggression or oppression. Intentions must be pure and no selfish personal or nationalistic agenda should be the driving force. There must be a declaration of war by a legitimate authority after due consultation. No non-combatants should be hurt. All must refrain from looting and unnecessary destruction. Prisoners of war and the injured must be treated humanely.

It should be noted that in the long history of Muslim people, there were times when such conditions and rules were adhered to and other times where there were violations to differing degrees. There have also been some misinterpretations of the concept by some scholars, possibly influenced at least in part, by the circumstances of the time in which they lived. The fact remains, however, that Islamic teachings should not be driven either by what some Muslims did in the past or are doing today or by misinterpretations from the past or present.

This paper would not be complete without addressing some commonly misunderstood often misrepresented quotes from the Qur'an. These are dealt with in the next section.

Common Questions and Objections

1. How do you explain verses in the Qur'an that encourage killing non-Muslims wherever they are found (9:5) and others that allow fighting against Jews, Christians, and other neighboring non-Muslims (9:29, 123)?

Answer: To begin with, the verse (9:5) has nothing to do with the People of the Book (Jews and Christians), who are distinguished from other non-Muslims. The Qur'anic text (98:1) makes a clear distinction between the People of the Book or Ahl Al-Kitab and the idolatrous people, al-mushrikeen, the term used in 9:5.

Furthermore, all these and similar verses have been sometimes misconstrued and taken out of their textual and historical context. They have been taken out of their textual context by ignoring the verses before and after the quoted ones, as well as ignoring other verses in the Qur'an which relate to the same issues and thus shed light on their true meanings. They have also been taken out of the historical context that could explain why they were revealed and how they should be applied.

All of these verses, without exception, if studied carefully, address aggression and oppression committed against Muslims at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), whether by idolatrous Arabs, some of the Jewish tribes in Madinah, or by some Christians. Most, however, apply to the Makkans and other idolatrous Arabs aggressors. Some of the antagonists tortured, and in certain cases killed, Muslims because of their faith, for example the killing of Sumayyah and her husband Yasir. Some killed the memorizers of the Qur'an who were simply on their way to preach its message of Allah's Oneness in a peaceful manner. Some of them killed the messengers sent by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), which is equivalent in today's international law to killing the ambassador of another country—an act of war. Some of them gathered armies, like the Christians in Tabuk, in order to attack Muslims. Some of them wrote letters to their local governors to go and kill the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) unless he recanted his claim of prophethood, as was the case with the Emperor of Persia. Some betrayed peace treaties and killed unsuspecting peaceful people without provocation, contrary to agreements, such as the breaking of the Treaty of Hudaibiyah by the Makkans. The issue here is not religion, but rather injustice, oppression, and aggression.

- There are many verses in the Qur'an stating that those who coexist peacefully with Muslims are entitled to justice, compassion, and respect, irrespective of their religion (60:8-9) as long as they are peaceful with Muslims.

- If it were true that the Qur'an instructs that any non-Muslim should be killed because of his or her religion, then what would explain the fact that religious minorities through 1,400 years of Muslim history not only survived, but also thrived and found freedom to practice their faiths under Muslim rule? Clearly, Muslims as a people were not perfect, yet there were times when they had enough power to eliminate almost all non-Muslims under their rule. The historical record shows that they did not abuse this power. The restraint they showed seems to be influenced in the first place by the Qur'anic injunctions against coercion in religion.

- The Qur'an allows a Muslim man to get married to a Christian or Jewish woman. If it were true that the Qur'an demands killing non-Muslims, how could it permit a Muslim man to marry such women? Marriage is the closest human relationship and is described in the Qur'an as a relationship characterized by peace, love, and compassion (30:21), not murder because of theological differences.

2. Is Islam imperialistic? Are there verses in the Qur'an stating that Islam is the religion of truth, and therefore it must prevail over all other religions? (9:33, 48:28 and 61:9)

Answer: True Islam, practiced according to its original sources, the Qur'an and Sunnah, is not imperialistic at all. Some Muslim rulers throughout history may have deviated from its teachings in some degree or the other. Their actions, however, are not to be equated with normative Islam. Some jurists even gave opinions that seemed to have justified these actions. Such interpretations may have been influenced by the kind of world in which they lived, which is vastly different from ours today. None of these scholars claimed infallibility or finality of their interpretations. Yet, whether such interpretations were valid for their times and specific circumstances or whether they were contrary to the overall text and spirit of Islam, the fact remains that interpretation of the primary sources of Islam is an endeavor which is not frozen in time. Historically, those who espoused such arguments may have erred in understanding some parts of the Qur'an. They may have failed to understand how those parts fit into the total picture of the teachings of the Qur'an teachings on the relationship between Muslims and others.

- History bears testimony that Islam spread much faster during the periods of peace, not war. Even in periods when Muslims did not “prevail” economically, socially, militarily, or politically, Islam continued to spread. The same phenomenon can be seen in our time, which is a time of great suffering and persecution of Muslims in many parts of the world. Even some of those who attacked Islam and Muslims and committed horrible massacres of Muslims, such as the Mongols and the Crusaders, ultimately accepted Islam themselves. It is rather interesting to see the conqueror accepting the faith of the conquered rather than the reverse.

Clear historical and geographical facts show that Islam has spread more by peaceful means than by force. A look at the map of the Muslim world today shows that the bulk of Muslims live in countries where there was no fighting, not even defensive fighting. An example is Indonesia, with nearly 200 million Muslims. Thomas Arnold, a former Christian missionary in India, in his famous book *Preaching of Islam*, indicated that while there have been certain periods where Muslim rulers have diverted from this tolerance, it was the fault of the rulers and not attributed to Islamic teachings. He concludes that the two primary reasons for the spread of Islam all over the world were the merchants and the Sufis (mystics), two groups of people who went out, worked with humanity, and gently invited others to the path of Allah.

- If it were true that Islam allows use of force to convert people, then how did religious minorities thrive in regions under Muslim rule? It is also worth asking why did the Qur'an and Sunnah explicitly dictate regulations and rights for the protection of non-Muslim minorities living under the rule of Islam, if other religions are to be eliminated so that Islam may "prevail." The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) even said that if a Muslim hurts a dhimmi or covenanted person (a non-Muslim living under the rule of Islam) or commits any injustice to him, then on the Day of Judgment, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) will be the advocate on behalf of the non-Muslim against the Muslim.

- What is the sense of these prescriptions and advice if those people had to accept Islam or be killed? Why does the Qur'an repeatedly speak about peaceful dialogue with non-Muslims (Al-Ankabut 29:46) if they have to be killed in the first place? If indeed Islam insists on the use of force for conversion, then why did people, when no longer under Muslim rule, not revert back to their previous faiths?

- It is true that three verses in the Qur'an (At-Tawbah 9:33, Al-Fath 48:28, and As-Saff 61:9) state that Allah sent forth His Messenger (Muhammad) with the message of guidance and the religion of truth, so that it may "prevail" over all religions. What does *prevail* mean in this context? Must we limit our understanding of the word *prevail* to the narrow context of military or political power? There have been many tyrannical empires throughout history that prevailed economically, politically, or militarily at one time or another. Their dominance was impermanent. This is a very superficial and temporary type of prevailing. Real prevailing is the prevailing of the truth and belief in the One True God and all that that implies. In fact, a better translation of the original Qur'anic Arabic term *li-yuzhirahu* is "to proclaim it," rather than "to make it prevail." This was the translation adopted by Abullah Yusuf Ali.

3. Doesn't the Qur'an state that Muslims should never take Jews and Christians for friends?

Answer: This is an incorrect translation in the first place. The Qur'an does not tell Muslims not to take Jews and Christians as friends. The word used in the Qur'an is *awliyaa'*, which means "overlords" or "protectors," not mere friends. If we look at the verses that deal with this injunction, we will notice that they always refer to negative situations. For example, in Al-Ma'idah 5:57-58, the context refers to those who mock you as Muslims when you call for Prayers. Would any sane person of any religion take as their defender one who mocks them in this way? It is not appropriate to view these verses in isolation, since there are many verses that teach how peaceful relationships should be developed with non-Muslims.

- Coming back to the question of marriage, which is more intimate, the marital relationship or friendship? According to the Qur'an (Al-Ma'idah 5:5), a Muslim man can marry a Jewish or Christian woman. As a wife, her Muslim husband has obligations to her. As revealed in Surah 30, Ar-Rum, (The Romans), verse 22, he should dwell with her in peace and treat her with love and compassion. Does it make sense that a Muslim would be permitted to marry a non-Muslim, but not befriend her?

4. Why does the Qur'an refer to Jews and Christians as *kuffar* or infidels? What kind of respect and tolerance is that?

Answer: Again, here is a big mistake with translation, one that is sometimes committed by Muslims, too. If you look at the English dictionary meaning of infidel, it means someone who does not have a faith or does not believe in Allah. Does the Qur'an say that the Jews and Christians do not believe in Allah? No. Surah 29, Al-`Ankabut, verse 46, says that the God of Christians, Jews, and Muslims is one and the same. The word infidel is an inaccurate translation of the word *kafir* in this case.

The term *kafir*, referring to a person, or *kufr*, referring to an act, is used in the Qur'an in a variety of contextual meanings. This is why I hesitate to use even the terms *non-believer* or *disbeliever* for the translation, as it is not clear from these English terms what is the object of unbelief or disbelief: God? a particular prophet? others? I would prefer the term *non-Muslim*, as it applies to various categories of *kufr*, whether it refers to knowingly rejecting the message of Islam (disbelief) or being a non-Muslim due to the lack of awareness of the authentic message of Islam (unbelief). Following are examples of the varied contextual uses of the term *kufr* in the Qur'an:

- *Kufr* is sometimes used in a positive sense. A good believer can also be a *kafir*. How? The Qur'an says "*Faman yakfur bil taghoot wayu'mim billah.*" (whoever rejects *taghut* and believes in Allah) (Al-Baqarah 2:56). Anyone who believes in one thing is a *kafir* (rejecter) of its opposite.
- *Kufr* can be used in a neutral or benign sense, as the origin of *kufr* in the Arabic language means "to cover up." So the farmer who is putting a seed in the ground and covering it up is performing *kufr*. Spiritually, deliberate deviation from the true and authentic prophets is a form of "cover-up" of truth.

- The word *kufr* can also be applied to a Muslim when he is doing something wrong, but not necessarily something that would place him or her outside the state of belief in Islam. For example, a Muslim who is able to go for [Hajj](#) but does not go, without denying the need to go, would be committing an act of *kufr* in a sense of ungratefulness to Allah (3:96-97).
- *Kufr* is used in Qur'an as the opposite of *shukr*, "to be grateful" (31:12).
- *Kafir* is used in the Qur'an, not only to refer to Jews or Christians, but also those who rejected the prophets and denied the existence of God. It has been used to refer to the people of Noah and the people of Abraham. It has also been used to refer to those who denied prophethood and rejected the existence of Allah altogether, which obviously is not the case with Christians and Jews.
- It can be used in a more serious sense, but with a variety of meanings. It refers to the rejection of Islam. It describes one who knows the truth, but rejects it out of pride or vanity. This is someone who knows the truth in his or her heart and deliberately rejects it. Nonetheless, we cannot assess this. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) gave Muslims very clear instructions after one incident when people assumed to know why someone professed belief in Islam. He asked them whether they had opened up his heart, did they know whether what was in his heart was sincere. The bottom line is that we have to leave it to Allah; only Allah knows the sincerity of a particular person's acceptance. Allah is All-Knowing, and He is the only Judge of all of us.

5. Why does the Qur'an speak approvingly of the persecution of Jews in Madinah? Doesn't that betray an element of anti-Semitism or anti-Jewishness, and why does the Qur'an describe Jews and idolatrous people as the most inimical to the believers (Al-Ma'idah 5:85)? Isn't that confirmed by the Prophet's "massacre and persecution" of the Jews of Madinah?

Answer: It is incorrect to say that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was anti-Semitic because he was actually of Semitic heritage himself, as a descendant of Prophet Abraham through his first son Prophet Ishmael. The Western public is accustomed to understanding “anti-Semitism” as referring only to the Jewish people. Many Arabs, including Palestinians, are Semitic people, yet no one speaks about “anti-Semitism” against them in the brutal and nearly genocidal ways in which they are treated by the Israeli government and military, a matter which is objected to by many decent humans, including many Jews.

- How could the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) be anti-Jewish when the Qur'an mentions the name of Moses (peace and blessings be upon him) and other Israelite prophets in terms of great praise? The Qur'an describes the original Torah that was revealed to Moses (peace and blessings be upon him) as giving light and guidance, and the Qur'an demands respect for the rights of all peacefully coexisting people, including Jews.

- Criticism in the Qur'an is not about Judaism or Christianity. The criticism in the Qur'an is aimed at distortion and wrong actions committed by Christians, Jews, as well as some Muslims; it does not criticize the pristine message revealed by Allah to Moses (peace and blessings be upon him) and Jesus (peace and blessings be upon him). Just as the Biblical text includes criticism of believers, whether followers of Moses (peace and blessings be upon him) or Jesus (peace and blessings be upon him), the Qur'an also cites wrong actions of Muslims and other groups. Furthermore, criticism is not meant for the sake of criticism, but rather to warn Muslims in particular against repeating the same mistakes in the future.

- What is clear, historically, about Prophet Muhammad's dealings with the Jewish tribes in and around Madinah is that as soon as he migrated to Madinah, he established the constitution of Madinah or *sahifa*. As Dr. Hamidullah described it, it was the first multicultural, multi-religious constitution in the world. It gave everyone equal rights, including the Jews. It conferred legal autonomy and the right to practice one's own religion freely, and it required a commitment to defend the city of Madinah against external aggression. None can accuse the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) of breaking this agreement. Even non-Muslim scholars such as Montgomery Watts never mention that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) betrayed his agreements. In fact, other parties committed acts that were contrary to the agreements on more than one occasion. Whatever penalty was applied, however, it was only applied to the specific group of people who committed the offense, not to all. If it was applied to all, one might suspect group bias, such as anti-Semitism, but it was only to the offending tribe.

- Furthermore, the punishment was always proportionate to the offense that was committed. Uncovering a Muslim woman was different from conspiring to kill the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), and such actions were handled in different ways. The ultimate betrayal occurred during the Battle of the Trench, when a group of Jews from Madinah contacted the enemy, unilaterally renounced the constitution of Madinah, and helped the enemy during war against the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and Madinah. In modern times, this is referred to as high treason at the time of war.

- Referring to this incident, many say the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) massacred the tribe of Banu Quraizhah, but this is a distortion of the historical facts. In fact, it was not a sentence by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). The people of Banu Quraizhah chose their own arbitrator and former ally (Sa`d), who determined their punishment according to the law of the Torah, which specifies killing for treason. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) simply agreed with his sentence, but it was not the sentence of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) in the first place. A scholarly article by W. N. Arafat questions the exaggerated estimate of the number of fighting men who were punished, which is found even in some biographies about the Prophet's life, like that of Ibn Ishaq. His argument is compelling and well researched.

- The main question is whether 5:85 speaks of all Jews and at all times or to those who were hostile to Muslims and betrayed them contrary to their treaty. Given both the textual and historical contexts, it refers only to those who adopted an attitude or initiated enmity, if not outright aggression, against Muslims, not to a whole religious group.

Conclusion

We certainly live in a world where individuals, groups, and governments commit various forms of violence and terror. Such violence is committed in the name of ideology—narrow forms of nationalism and religion. Counteracting violence with more devastating violence enhances that vicious cycle. Huge resources have been devoted to fighting violence, usually by equal or even worse violent means. Little attention has been paid to finding out the root causes of violence, such as gross injustice and dehumanization of others. A fraction of these resources, coupled with a sense of honor, justice, and human equality would deal with most violence in a more constructive way. While religion has been abused to justify senseless and unnecessary violence, it can be constructively invoked to stem the tide of violence. The common values of revealed religions, in particular, can contribute immensely in that endeavor. It is the duty of religious clergy and religious scholars to clarify these values and clarify misinterpretations of scriptures, not only to others, but also for their own religious communities. Intrafaith dialogue is as much needed as interfaith dialogue. I hope that this humble contribution may be a step in that direction.

Thank you and may the peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be with you.

- It is sometimes argued that more people were killed “in the name of God” than any other name. That statement should be corrected to read “killed falsely in the name of God.” Many millions perished in the name of other secular ideologies or other worldly reasons. The problem in my view is that people have a tendency to justify their evil deeds by religious or any other means. If ideology is convenient, it is invoked, and if religion (any religion) is convenient, it is also invoked.
- This verse deals with a historical incident when some Makkan tribes were preparing to attack the Muslim community at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). These tribes were referred to as “Al-Nas,” which literally means humankind. Yet, in the present context, it definitely refers only to a subset of humankind and not all.

- There are different meanings of muhkam and mutashabih. The terms are used here to mean definitive versus probable meaning.
- See Al-Saleh, Sobhi, Mabaahith fi ` Ulum Al-Qur'an, Dar Al- ` ilm Lilmalayeen, Beirut, 14th ed., 1982, pp. 272-274. Also Al-Judai', Abdullah Bin Yusuf, Al-Muqaddimaat Al-Asaasiyyah fi Ulum Al-Qur'an, Mu'assasat Al-Rayyan, Beirut, 2001, pp. 215-217.
- Numerous references in the Qur'an and Sunnah deal with kindness to animals, preservation of vegetation, and wise use of resources. In one instance, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) described Mount [Uhud](#) as a "mountain that loves us and we love it."
- See for example, Qur'an: Al-Hashr 59:23; Al-An` am 6:127; Ar-Ra` d 13:26; Yunus 10:10.
- The term Allah is the identical term used by Arab Christians to refer to God. It appears in the Arabic Bible and is strikingly similar to the Aramaic term for God Alaha.
- The Qur'an does criticize wrong beliefs (like worshiping idols or humans) as it criticizes wrongdoing irrespective of religious affiliation. Muslims understand that as part of God's right to clarify truth in His last and final revealed book. Muslims were not free from criticism and correction either.
- While Muslims are instructed to avoid boasting about one prophet versus the other, Allah did place some prophets in more prominent position than others. See for example, Qur'an: Al-Israa' 17:55; Al-Baqarah 2:253; Al-Israa' 17:21.
- Qur'an, At-Tin 95:4.
- Qur'an, Al-Baqarah 2:43.
- Qur'an Al-Baqarah 2:30.
- Qur'an, Luqman 31:20.

- The Hans Wehr's Arabic-English Dictionary.
- Qur'an, Ar-Rahman 55:5-9.
- Qur'an, Al-A`raf 7:28; Al-An`am 6:90.
- Qur'an, Al-Hadid 57:25.
- Narrated by At-Tabarani, quoted in Al-Ghazali, Muhammad, Khuluq Al-Muslim, Dar Al-Bayan, Kuwait, 1970, p. 254.
- Sahih [Al-Bukhari](#), trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Maktabat Al-Riyadh Al-Hadithah, Riyadh, 1982, Vol. 8, Hadith no. 42, pp. 26-27.
- See for example, Ibid, Vol. 4, Hadith no. 689, p. 456.
- Arnold, Thomas W., Preaching of Islam, London, 1935.
- Arafat, W. N., "New Light on the Story of Banu Quraiza and the Jews of Madinah," Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Britain and Ireland, 1976, pp. 100-107. Available also at: www.haqq.com/au/~salam/misc/qurayza.html.

**Parts of this paper have been presented under different titles. It has not been published before in this form.*

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