

Interreligious Dialogue In The Qur'an: Interpretations Of Al-tabari And Sayyid Qutb

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Abstract

This paper seeks to discuss Qur'anic perspectives on "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*) with particular historic reference to the Jews and the Christians. This discussion is based on selected verses of the Qur'an as these have been interpreted by two prominent Muslim commentators of different eras. The two are al-Tabari (838-923), a classical commentator, and Syed Qutb (1903-1966), a modern commentator. Qur'anic teachings on "People of the Book" are important, because these greatly influence and shape inter-faith relations between Muslims and the followers of other religions, particularly the Jews and the Christians. The Qur'an is the main shaper of Muslim attitudes toward the Jews and the Christians in every era in Islamic history. But there are also non-religious factors peculiar to each era – political, cultural, and others – that influence Muslim attitudes toward the Jews and the Christians. That historical factors play a role in determining Muslim attitudes toward the Jews and the Christians is reflected in the commentaries of the two selected scholars. This paper also discusses the factors which may explain the current Muslim lukewarm response to inter-faith dialogue with the Jews and the Christians, especially with the former. It presents some of the outstanding obstacles to dialogue, the most important of which pertains to a misinterpretation of the Qur'anic idea of jihad not only among the Jews and the Christians but also among the Muslims. The paper then

makes several suggestions on how to improve the state of inter-faith dialogue among the three religious groups.

Introduction

Islam in Arabic (“*al-Islam*”) literally means “submission” or “surrender” to the will of God. The letters from which the word ‘Islam’ comes out, “*sin, lam* and *mim*” “*salima*” or “*al-silm*” (meaning saved or safety)¹ are very closely related to the ideas of peace (*al-salam*) (25:63) and safety (*al-salamah* or *al-amm*) (106:4). It was the will of God (*sunnatullah*) that He had created people in diverse racial and tribal groups to enable them to know one another (30:20-22). One of the ways in which people could work together and cooperate in terms of making peace is through “dialogue”² This idea is clearly found in the Qur’an when Allah calls on the Muslims to invite the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*), that is, Jews and Christians, to come together to the word that is common to them. So when Muslims initiated such a dialogue it means that they are responding to what is commanded by their religion and considered to be an act of worshipping Allah (*al-‘ibadah*).³

In this article, I will discuss some of the Qur’anic verses that relate to the People of the Book as these have been interpreted by öa

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- ¹ See Wehr, Hans. 1976. A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. Milton, J. (ed.). Third Edition New York; Spoken Language Services Inc., 424-426.
 - ² The word “dialogue” in Arabic is *a-hiwar* meaning seeking for peaceful solutions to human problems. If peace in society is an obligatory objective, then the means to the realization of the objective are also obligatory. According to a principle in *Usul al-Fiqh* (the Roots of Jurisprudence), “*ma lam yatimmu al-wajib illa bihi fahuwa wajibun*” (whatever without which the obligatory is not realizable, is itself obligatory). See al-Ghazzali, Abu .Hamid. *al-Mu.sta.sfa fi ‘ilm al-u.sul*, Qumm, Ma.tba‘ah al-Am-ir, vol. 1, 1342, p. 71.
 - ³ Muslims so far are generally not interested in promoting the idea of inter-religious dialogue, especially with Christians, because they are suspicious of their sincerity in having true dialogue. For discussions of the problems of dialogue, see for instance, Ayoub, Mahmoud. 1989 (January). ‘Roots of Muslim-Christian Conflicts.’ *Muslim World*, LXXIX, January, 25-45.

prominent classical Muslim commentator, al-Tabari (838-923)⁴ and Sayyid Qu.tb (1903-1966), a modern commentator. Such classical and modern interpretations are very important to be highlighted. It is important to highlight both classical and modern interpretations of these verses, because it would enable us to know the views of Muslim scholars ('*ulama*') in different eras toward people of other faiths. Through them we can understand the general Muslim attitudes toward other religions since the Muslim community is greatly influenced by the '*ulama*'. This article also tries to describe the factors that had discouraged inter-religious dialogue and which need to be addressed if dialogue were to be made possible.

Muslims must believe in all Prophets (3:84), including Moses and Jesus, and all the revealed books, including the Torah (*al-Taurah*) and Gospel (*al-Inj-il*), as having been sent by God. This belief was a major contributing factor to the Islamic tolerance in multi-religious communities in the past as clearly witnessed in the Islamic ruled cities of Damascus, Baghdad, and Cordova. The same belief had inspired such Muslim scholars as Ibn .Hazm (d. 1064), al-Shahrastani (d. 1153) and al-Baghdadi (d. 1017) to produce works of comparative religion. Muslim, Christian, and Jewish philosophers were known then to have intellectual discussion with each other and to have cooperated in scholarly works. Such scholarly attitudes came actually from the teachings of the Qur'an, which urge Muslims to communicate with others, especially with the People of the Book. Modern scholars are actually in a better position to bring about inter-religious understanding.

Nevertheless, suspicions and prejudices still remain in the minds of many Muslims as well as non-Muslims as a result of past historical encounters. It is not necessarily the teachings of religion that have brought about these suspicions and prejudices. Quite often, these have to do with issues of culture, politics, society, and economics that tend

⁴ Abu Ja'far Mu.hammad ibn Jar-ir al-.Tabari, born in Tabaristan of Persia, was a creative religious scholar and historian noted for his Qur'anic commentary entitled, "Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'w-il al-Qur'an" ("The Gathering of the Explanation of the Interpretation of Verses of the Qur'an").

to separate people of different faiths apart along religious lines. It is imperative that new efforts are taken in the pursuit of dialogue, while remaining oblivious of past inter-faith relationships. This is to make dialogue possible and successful.

The Qur'anic Calls for Dialogue

Many verses in the Qur'an call for interaction and discussion between the people so that they could live together on the planet earth. This is the way to establish "peace" (*al-salam*), "security" (*al-amn*), and "justice" (*al-'adl*) (16:92). In Islam, these societal goals also refer to the divine attributes upon which model people should work together and cooperate in their collective lives. Muslims are commanded to convey these messages not just among themselves but also to the rest of the world. Such emphasis can be found mentioned in the Qur'an where God asks Muslims to invite others to His path (*sab-ili rabbika*) with wisdom (*al-hikmah*), and with "good admonition" (*al-maw'izah al-hasanah*) as well as to debate with them in the best possible way (16:125). Though inter-religious dialogue is not explicitly mentioned in the verse, it is generally understood that such dialogue needs to be conducted in the way the Qur'an has described, namely with wisdom, good admonition, and good debate in order to make it rationally and freely accepted by the people.

The term "dialogue" is popularly understood to mean inviting people to come together with respect and open-mindedness for exchanging ideas. In dialogues, participants should not condemn the beliefs of their religious counterparts, but rather to obtain more information about them. They should try to find points of agreement on prospective areas of cooperation that their religions have in common. Dialogue then means "a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow."⁵ "Change" means moving from being in hostility to be friendly.

In general, many Qur'anic verses regarding the People of the Book could be interpreted broadly because there are words of both

⁵ Swidler, Leonard. 1983 (Winter). "The Dialogue Decalogue". *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. 20:1.

condemnation and praise over some of their actions and beliefs in the past. We need to look at the verses in their totality with a full understanding of the circumstances of their revelation, which, of course, are very important to be taken into account in any authentic interpretation of the Qur'an. Verses with apparent condemnation of the People of the Book should be interpreted without contradicting the general principles of Islam.

Interpretations Regarding Qur'anic Calls to Dialogue

Among the relevant verses on the People of the Book is the following:

(1) "Say: O People of the Book, come to a word which is fair between us and you; namely that we worship none but God, that we associate nothing with Him, that we do not take one another as Lords apart from God; if they turned back, say: we bear witness that we are Muslims (submitters)" (3:64).

Regarding this verse, al-Tabari explained in his *Tafsir* that God is inviting believers in the Torah and Gospel to a common principle (*kalimatın sawa'*) between them and the Muslims. "Common principle," according to him, means justice (*'adl*) which is the declaration of belief in One God on the basis of the three commonly-held principles:

- (1) The declaration of the oneness of God;
- (2) The rejection of associating partners with God;
- (3) The disqualification of human beings to become Lords (*arbaban*) equal to God in having the power to issue commands.⁶

In case the People of the Book reject these principles, the Muslims are told by God to declare their true identity as "Muslims" as explicitly

⁶ Al-Tabar-i, *Jami' al-Bayan*. Shakir, Ma.hmud Mu.hammad and Shakir, A.hmad Muhammad, eds. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif. vol. 6, n.d., 483-489.

mentioned in the above cited verse.⁷ The belief in One God means that the three principles mentioned should be accepted as a foundation for reaching better understanding and mutual respect between Muslims and the People of the Torah and the Bible. The acceptance of “our God is the One,” and of God as the Creator of the universe provides the most fundamental basis of mutual understanding among the People of the Book. But as for the Muslims, as the People of the Qur’an, God reminds them of their responsibility as Muslims. They should know that the rejection of the three principles by the Jews and the Christians would not change what the truth or falsehood is. They are free to accept or to reject the truth about God. As the Qur’an emphasizes, “Say: the Truth is from your Lord. Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it)” (18:29).

In interpreting the verse, al-Tabari explained the causes of its revelation (*asbab al-nuzul*). He cited many narrators who claimed that the verse was revealed to the Prophet regarding the Jews of the Children of Israel living around Medina. The Prophet had called on these Jews to believe and worship one God, but they refused to do so. There was also the claim that the verse was revealed during the arrival of the delegation of Najran Christians (*Na.sara Najran*) in Medina. On the basis of these traditional reports, al-Tabari concluded that the People of the Book were definitely “the People of the Torah and Gospel who were Jews and Christians”.⁸

Al-Tabari did not mention whether the Qur’anic call to the People of the Book to worship one God means that they have to become Muslims, as many people are inclined to think. But I think that God made the call just to make them realize that they had to come to some common points of agreement with the Muslims; after all, God told His Prophet, “Thou art not one to manage (men’s) affairs” (138:22). The Qur’an made a specific address to the People of the Book because of their important position in Medina on which the city’s stability partly depends.⁹ This shows that Islam was interested in solving the problems of people living in multi-religious communities, as was the case in

⁷ Al-Tabari. *Jami’ al-Bayan*. p. 483.

⁸ Al-Tabari. *Jami’ al-Bayan*., p. 484.

⁹ Ayoub, Mahmoud. *Islam*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, p. 4.,

Medina, by spreading the message of peace, justice, and safety to all. This message is to be conveyed to the people through an invitation to dialogue as clearly indicated by the Arabic word "*ta'ala*."

The above cited Qur'anic verses clearly showed that Islam is not a religion of hostility or enmity. It offered peace to the Jews and Christians, although the Qur'an has described the former as hostile to the believers (5:82). The offer of peace is based on the common agreement between them on the unity of God. It also signals the importance of truth beyond "personal or partisan interests."

In his commentary *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*, Sayyid Qutb interpreted the same verses by saying that the declaration of the three principles should serve as the basis of a common commitment to mutual understanding between the Muslims and the People of the Book. The command to believe in and worship one God, says he, was emphasized in the sacred books. God's command takes into account the various tendencies in human nature. People usually did not like to see someone among them made a lord with divine qualities and powers such as to the power to determine the lawful and the unlawful or what is good and what is bad for men. God told human beings to be His servants and not to act as if they are Lords. But there are men who are arrogant with their power, such as the Pharaoh (*Fir'aun*) who declared himself as god, "*ana rabbukum al-a'la*" (I am your Lord, Most high) (79:24).

Among human beings the practice of associating God with man-made deities is more rampant than the practice of appointing oneself as Lord. Thus, it is common to find a person worshipping another with extraordinary qualities or powers. This is as true today with modern men as with people of ancient times. According to Sayyid Qutb, even now in an age of widespread unbelief in God, many human beings are creating new forms of idol worship.¹⁰

Sayyid Qutb's idea of associating God with other deities is explained through the concepts of divine nature (*uluhiyyah*) and divine

¹⁰ Sayyid Qutb, 1967/1387. *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*. Beirut: Dar I'hya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, vol. 4, pp

lordship “*rububiyyah*”.¹¹ The concepts of *uluhiyyah* and *rububiyyah* are central to the Islamic doctrine of divine unity (*al-tawhid*). These concepts are understood as different and distinct in Muslims religious life. God refers to those people as ignorant who when asked, “Who has created the heavens and the earth and subjected the sun and the moon,” they will simply say, “God” (29:60), whereas they are not believers at all since they do not accept God as object of worship. Such people, referred to as the pagans by the Qur’an, acknowledge God’s lordship over the universe but not His Nature and Reality worthy of worship by man. As for Muslims they must accept both aspects of the Divine Reality.

According to Sayyid Qutb, Muslims, Christians and Jews whose sacred books were originally revealed by one and the same God could have a strong basis for building a mutual understanding in the importance of religion in human lives. Their respective religions teach not only the idea of God as the Creator of the universe but also the idea of God as the sole object of worship by man. The three religious groups emphasize both doctrines of *uluhiyyah* and *rububiyyah* but not so the pagans. As pointed out by Sayyid Qutb, the pagans accept the idea of *al-rububiyyah* in the sense of acknowledging God as the Creator of the universe but they seem to be convinced that God has no role in human life. Having created the world God is believed to have no longer any role to play in determining human life.

Sayyid Qutb was very much concerned with the ancient human practices of “associating God with something else” (*shirk*), which he contended are also rampant among the people of the modern world.¹² The idols which many modern people associate with God may be different from the ancient ones. But the modern worship of materialism in its various forms such as money may be classified as a kind of associating partners with God similar to the *shirk* of the pagan Arabs

¹¹ Sayyid Qutb. *Fi zilal al-Qur’an*, p. 601. See also Ibrahim, Salah ‘Abd al-‘Al-im. 1982. *Al-‘aqidah fi dau’ al-Qur’an al-Kar-im*. Cairo: Maktabah al-Azhar, p. 88 and p. 90.

¹² Cf. Ayoub, Mahmoud, ‘The roots of Muslim-Christian conflicts,’ p. 44.

as mentioned in the Qur'an. Syed Qutb further argued that the developed Western countries were prepared to advance and protect their economic and political interests worldwide, which were essentially materialistic, to the point of even invading the lands of other people.

With common beliefs about God, cooperation is possible in the sphere of religion between Islam and the people of the Book. In Sayyid Qutb's view, the people of the Book's rejection of associating God with partners is the same as recognizing that "the absolute One God" as maintained by Islam. Religious cooperation between Muslims and the people of the Book has even the chance of success on the ground that people naturally like to live peacefully and in harmony and that religion provides the necessary teachings to lead such a peaceful life. Their common religious beliefs can unite them in the fight against a common enemy, namely extreme materialism that tried to corrupt the world with its imposing materialistic values and its rejection of spiritual values enhancing morality, nobility, justice, and other virtues strongly emphasized in religious teachings. These are some of the major areas in which people of different religious faiths can work together.

Another Qur'anic verse commented upon by al-Tabari and Sayyid Qutb which we wish discuss is the following:

(2) "And do not debate with the People of the Book except with the best manner unless those of them who do wrong (zalamu). Say (to them): we believe in what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to you; our God and your God is One, and to Him we are submitting."
(29:46)

Regarding God's command to the Muslims to debate with the People of the Book in the best way, al-Tabari explained that it applies only to the People of the Book who do not do wrongdoings (*al-zulm*). Muslims are not expected to give the same treatment to those among the people of the Book who do wrong or are unjust to them. For al-Tabari, their wrongdoings (*al-zulm*) include refusal to pay the

jizyah (poll-tax).¹³ *Jizyah* should be paid by non-Muslims living in Islamic-ruled lands (*Dar al-Islam*) in return for exemption from military service and for the various societal services provided. As for the Muslims, it is mandatory for them to pay the religious tax known as *al-zakah*.

God prohibited Muslims from debating with the people of the Book except in the best manner, because the latter also had a strong foundation to claim the truth. Without a friendly and decent manner the interaction between the two sides would not succeed. This shows that Islam has called for debates among the people of the Book in the best manner, and this approach is surely in line with human freedom of speech and expression. Only tyrants would never allow people to enjoy such freedom. If we were to close the gates of debates and discussions on issues affecting society, then people would be under pressure to adopt violent means to solve their problems. Violence would only lead to the shedding of blood and even to prolonged conflicts and wars that produce nothing but mass destruction to human lives and properties.

Both al-Tabari and Sayyid Qutb contend that "the best manner" of debate is to be shown only to those of the People of the Book who believe in the One God and in all divinely revealed books. Moreover, they do not commit aggression or cruelty against Muslims and do not do injustice in the form of corrupting (*tahrif*) the contents of their divine books as well as inclining to associating partners with God (*al-shirk*).¹⁴ Going back to the verse, the Qur'an appears to have provided conditions for Muslim dialogue with the people of the Book. Islam actually has the right to place some conditions on this dialogue, namely the right to call them to go back to their common nature, "*fi-trah*," the belief in the oneness of God. This is because the goal of the debate was to seek mutual understanding between two different religious groups having the same belief in one God.

With such common religious beliefs agreement among them was

¹³ Ayoub, Mahmoud. 'The roots of Muslim-Christian conflicts.

¹⁴ Sayyid Qutb. *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*. vol. 6, p. 149.

supposed to be easily reached. The way Islam dealt with others is not based on material and worldly interests but, rather, on spiritual considerations on the basis of man's relations with God. Although the people of the Book generally rejected the divine call made through the Qur'an and its claim that they have changed God's words (*yuharrifuna alkalima min mawadi'ih*), the Qur'an still confers on them the status of the "People of the Book." From the view of the Qur'an, let the texts speak for themselves. Allah is the best to know the real situation. The Qur'anic claim of the corruption of previous scriptural texts is a historical matter which should not be a hindrance to seeking a dialogue with the people of the book. Indeed, their scriptural texts never bothered the earlier Muslims scholars in their search for relations with the Jews and the Christians. These texts served additionally to the Qur'an as the basis of the model of relations and brotherhood between the Muslims and the Jews and the Christians.

The Qur'anic calls to the Muslims to debate the people of the Book (*jadilhum*) in the best way mean that the message of Islam can be brought to people who also possess the books of God. This also means that Islam respects their religions, leaving them free to make their choice in accordance with the verse "There is compulsion in religion" (*la ikrah fi'l-din*). In addition, even though the Qur'an condemned the People of the Book for their rejection of its invitation to come to Islam and for corrupting the words of God, God left them free to believe or to reject it, as stated clearly in the Qur'an (18:29).

Actually God has the absolute right to judge the faiths of human beings since He gave man a thinking ability. Everybody is responsible for his or her understanding. Right or wrong is ultimately decided by God, and it is not our business to judge someone else concerning his or her own faith. "Let them have their own belief in the sense that they have the right to choose and to defend it. They will have to be much more knowledgeable about their choice and they will be responsible for it."¹⁵

Yet another verse is the following:

¹⁵ Hamzah, Abu Bakar. 1990. *Pengislaman Dalam Konteks Masyarakat Berbagai Agama (Islamization in the Context of Multi-Religious Societies)*. Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, p. 16.

(3) “The food of those who were given the Book is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them and the chaste women among the believers and the chaste women among the People of the Book (are lawful for you to marry).” (5:5).

This verse shows how close the relationship was between Muslims and the People of the Book in the community as they naturally communicated and were involved in trade and business with each other. According to al-Tabari, it was clear that “the food” (*ta'am*) referred to here was the meat of animals slaughtered by Jews and Christians who had the Torah (*al-Taurat*) and the Bible (*al-Injil*) respectively. Their food can be lawfully eaten by Muslims. Al-Tabari, however, took a different view of the meat of animals slaughtered by those without a sacred Book, such as the pagan Arabs (*mushrik-i al-'Arab*) and the idol worshippers (*'abadah al-awthan wa al-a.snam*). He maintained their meat could not be eaten lawfully by Muslims.¹⁶

In the case of Sayyid Qutb, he interpreted the verse by asserting that Islam not only gave non-Muslims the freedom to practice their religions but also permitted Muslims to enjoy their social relations and commitments with the non-Muslims living in their community. He pointed to the practices found in “*Dar al-Islam*” (Islamic State) where people of different faiths are working together to establish a tolerant and loving society (*al-samahah wa'l-mahabbah*). For example, Muslims could eat meat slaughtered by Jews and Christians and even could get marry with their women. Sayyid Qutb also remarked that only Islam had this great tolerance for even in Christianity, he argued, a Catholic would worry about getting married with a Protestant or a Marionette and others.¹⁷

This tolerance is fully stressed in Islam within its message as a

¹⁶ Al-Tabar-i. *Jami' al-Bayan*, pp. 572-573. Al-Tabari also argued that the slaughter made by converts to the People of the Book is unlawful to Muslims. This seems to relate Jews and Christians to the particular historical situation of the time.

¹⁷ Sayyid Qutb. *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*, pp. 600-601. See also Muhammad al-Rawi, *al-Da'wah al-Islamiyyah Da'wah al-'alamiyyah*, n.p., *Dar al-Qaumiyyah*, n.d., p. 463.

mercy to the world. Islam undoubtedly encourages humankind to cooperate on the basis of justice and a peaceful life (*ta'ayush al-silmi*). Therefore, Muslims are required to be open-minded and free to communicate with others wherever they may be, since the whole earth belongs to Allah. Muslims need to be perceived as easily accommodative as friends and neighbors. Muslims could be found today living almost everywhere in the world holding fast to their faith and religious identity. As of now there are millions of Muslims living in Western countries with their own culture, and they quickly adjusted themselves to the new environment they live in. Fortunately, the Western authorities have generally allowed them to enjoy their life without experiencing any overt religious discrimination.¹⁸

Practically speaking, this is also a prospective attitude of Islam, and Muslims have to treat and communicate with others in a friendly way in this highly globalized world. Since food and marriage are the basic needs of human beings Islam has provided guidance on these matters in different social situations. Sayyid Qutb discussed the Islamic views and practices in matters of food and marriage in the context of the so-called "*Dar al-Islam*," (Abode of Islam).¹⁹ But the Islamic guidance in question is applicable in non-Muslim majority societies as well. Muslims and Jews and Christians can enjoy social and cultural relationships wherever they may happen to live together.

Another verse relevant to the Muslim relationship with the people of the Book reads:

(4) *"And there are among the People of the Book those*

¹⁸ A Survey indicates that there are more than eight million Muslims right now living in USA and many more living in the United Kingdom, France and Germany.

¹⁹ The concept of "*Dar al-Islam*" remains a point of contention among scholars who find difficult to determine it religiously and politically especially in the context of modern times. If there is a "*Dar al-Islam*" then its opposite would be "*Dar al-kufr*". Some argue that the concept in practical terms has something to do with the prevalence of a powerful and strong Islamic situation. At the moment there are 55 Muslim majority countries which are members of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference).

who believe in God and in what has been revealed to you and what has been revealed to them, bowing in humility to God; they will not sell the signs of God with a cheap price. They will get their rewards in their God and God is swift in calculating.” (3:199).

This verse apparently praises some of the People of the Book who accept Mu.hammad as the seal of the Prophets (*khatam al-nabiyy-in*).²⁰ It tells us that Jews or Christians who believe in Muhammad could remain as the people of the Book. If they had recognized the prophecy of Muhammad then many problems concerning their relations with Muslims might have been solved long ago.²¹ I think Jews and Christians today need to follow this remarkable approach in recognizing the prophethood of Mu.hammad while maintaining their status as people of the Book. Most importantly, by doing so, they do not automatically become Muslims. Yet, as far as the Qur'an is concerned, they are still considered to be obedient to God's commandment. The Qur'an's criticism of the Jews and Christians is directed at their denial of the attributes of Mu.hammad, which it sees as a form of change and corruption of their revealed books.²² They are not supposed to change and corrupt the contents of their sacred books for worldly considerations. They should have been much more concerned with God rather than with their own pleasures.²³ In the Qur'an we find many descriptions of the types of people who are inclined to change the original words of God for their own selfish ends resulting in God's anger.

In Sayyid Qu.tb's view, some of the People of the Book showed

²⁰ See Watt, W. Montgomery. 1962. Muhammad at Medina London: Oxford University Press, p. 317

²¹ Durand, Khalid. 1987. 'Interreligious dialogue and the Islamic "Origin Sin"'. Swidler, Leonard, ed. Muslims in Dialogue. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, p. 52. See Islamochristiana, Roma, No. 13 (1987), p. 138.

²² It seems that some Jews and Christians recognized that Mu.hammad was a prophet of God. He was the anticipated Prophet in their books, bearing the name "A.hmad". See 'Ali, Abdullah Yusuf. 1409 AH. The Holy Qur'an. Maryland: Amana Corporation, pp. 931 and 999

²³ Sayyid Qutb, Fi zilal al-Qur'an pp. 499-500.

positive attitudes toward the Prophet and the Qur'an that are characteristic of the believers²⁴ such as humility (*khushu'*) and not selling the teachings of God at a cheap price. But some of them had negative attitudes such as corrupting the sacred books, concealing God's teachings, having little shame before God, bragging, and so on.²⁵

In this context, al-Tabari tells us that the verse had been revealed to the Prophet to answer criticisms the hypocrites (*al-munafiqun*) had made on him for his prayer to God asking for His forgiveness for the Emperor al-Najashi upon learning of the latter's death. The hypocrites reportedly accused the Prophet of praying for someone not in his religion. The verse came down in purpose to explain that there was nothing wrong in praying for him because among the People of the Book were those who believed in God and in what was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad as well as to their prophets. (5:68). It seems here that al-Najashi believed in the prophethood of Muhammad as did some of the Jews and Christians.²⁶ There is no indication of how the Prophet did his prayer. Perhaps the prayer was "just a *du'a*" not *salat*" on the remains" as is the normal Muslim practice in treating their dead.

The verses we have cited and discussed appear to be supportive of the idea of inter-religious dialogue, the main principles of which are to "come (*ta'alauf*) to a common word (*kalimatun sawa'*) between them and "debating (*mujadalah*) with them in the best way". This is enough a guideline for Muslims to carry out the task of dialogue. No doubt some of the people of the Book became enemies of Islam, broke their oaths, and were determined at expelling the Messenger of God. All of these despicable acts were condemned by God in the Qur'an.(9:13). Generally speaking, however, the Qur'an encourages good relations between Muslims and people of the Book. What more, among them, are those whom the Qur'an praises for their true beliefs and positive attitudes toward all the books revealed by God.²⁷ So the

²⁴ Sayyid Qutb. *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*. p. 199

²⁵ Sayyid Qutb. *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*. p. 149

²⁶ Al-Tabari. *Jami' al-Bayan*. pp. 496-497.

²⁷ Ayoub, Mahmud. *Islam*. p. 4.30 Ayoub, Mahmud. *Islam*. p.25

Qur'an often uses the phrase "some among them" to describe those who are true believers, whom God loves, and who do not go astray.

Muslim-Christian Relationship

Relationships between Muslims and Christians are different from those with the Jews, as the Qur'an seems to indicate. In a verse, after describing the Jews as being the strongest in hostility to the believers, the Qur'an refers to the Christians as the nearest in affection to the Muslims: "...and you will find the nearest in affection to the believers are those who say: 'we are Christians' (*Na.sara*), because there are priests and monks among them, and because they are not arrogant." And when they listen to what was sent down to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears as they recognize the truth. They say: "O our Lord we believe. Count us among the witnesses." (5:82-83).

Nevertheless, there are verses calling on the Muslims to fight against the People of the Book, including Christians, unless they paid *jizya* (poll tax). These verses imply war, not peace, and, therefore, appear to contradict verses appealing to peace between them. We may explain the seeming contradiction by arguing that all the verses related to the people of the Book need to be read in their totality. In order to get the real attitude of Islam toward the people of the Book in general, we need to also refer to the verse "there is no compulsion in religion." Verses appealing to war should be understood in their proper context, namely the call to the defense of Islam from external attacks, and not to wage war to force conversion to Islam. It is true, however, that people of the Book living in *dar al-Islam* (Islamic-ruled land) have to pay *jizyah* to the Muslim rulers for services provided to them by the state. Political considerations aside, as emphasized by Mahmoud Ayoub, the Qur'an provides a sound basis for Muslim attitudes toward Christians and Christianity. The Qur'an also recognized Christianity as essentially a true faith and Christians as a legitimate faith-community, but social, political, and economic factors also influenced Muslim attitudes toward them.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid., p. 149

Since the Qur'an considers Christians as "the nearest in affection to Muslims," there is good ground for the two groups to cooperate and work together. That, compared to the Jews, the Christians are deemed closer to the Muslims, was based on the criteria of spirituality and moral behavior such as being devoted to God, tolerant, and not arrogant. God in the Qur'an praised the Christians for such spiritual and moral traits which make them close to Muslims, who are commanded to be submissive to God in sincere devotion and humility.

Generally speaking, if Muslims and Christians, as the two largest religious groups in the world, can cooperate, then peace in the world can be better assured. Christians who represent the United States of America, England, France and many other countries could help determine the stability of the world if they were to work together with Muslims who represent all the countries in the Middle East (except Israel) and many more in Asia, including Malaysia and Indonesia. The two religions together could lay a strong foundation for global peace, stability and justice. God said in the Qur'an, "...and cooperate with regard to goodness and piety and do not cooperate with regard to sins and enmity and hostility."

However, works of Christian missionaries pose a great challenge to Muslims in their countries. Muslim-led governments seem not to allow Christian missionary activities among Muslim communities. Christians could only carry out their missionary works among themselves, such as in churches. Whatever freedom Christians enjoy in Muslim-majority countries does not include the freedom to spread their religious teachings to the Muslims. This limiting of Christian freedom has been made with the view of safeguarding the position of Islam as the religion of the majority. The issue of apostasy is also relevant here since Muslims are not permitted to convert to other religions. Otherwise, according to the Islamic Law, they will be subjected to drastic punishment which is mandatory death. This is based on the prophetic hadith narrated by Mu'az ibn Jabal, which states that "whoever changes his religion, kill him." Concerning this issue, we argue that while Islam maintains there is no compulsion in religion it is also strict on safeguarding cohesion within its own flock. Religion should not become like a "supermarket" where one can go in and out freely.

If someone is not certain about the faith of Islam and does not wish to be stuck in it in a state of uncertainty, then it would be better for him or her to be outside of the religion.

Muslim-Jewish Relationship

Generally speaking, the status of the Jews as the people of the Book is similar to that of the Christians. As stated before, the Qur'an has both praised and condemned them depending on the moral attitudes and behaviors they have exhibited. The Prophet, through the covenant of Medina, had given the Jews full freedom and equality with the Muslims as long as they supported the state and did not enter into any alliance against it. Condemnation came upon them only in the wake of their rejection of the prophethood of Muhammad and the sacredness of the Qur'an.

According to the Qur'an, the Jews and the pagans (*mushrikin*) showed the greatest enmity and hostility against the believers. (5:82). The Jews have killed prophets (5:70), and they altered (*baddalu*) and corrupted (*harrapu*) the divine words. The Jews were also condemned for their failure to uphold the Torah (5:70)²⁹ and for having moral complacency (5:20). Then there was the excessive legalism and authoritarianism shown by the Rabbis (9:31; 3:50). Condemnation of the Jews was also as a result of their tampering with the texts of revelation by displacing words from their original places (4:46; 5:14). Despite all these unbecoming behaviors, the Qur'an never condemned them in *toto* as God said, "...but God cursed them for their unbelief; but few of them will believe" (4:46). In fact, in any community, there will always be the righteous and the unrighteous as stated in the Qur'an (3:113-114). The righteous invite praise, while the unrighteous blame and criticism. So, the Qur'anic condemnation is over disbelief and immoral behavior irrespective of the religious community.

The Qur'anic condemnation of the Jews is about specific matters and not to be understood as a total rejection of them, for as the Qur'an says, "... among them are those who believed in God, the day of judgment and did the righteous....(5:68). What it could mean is that

²⁹ Al-Tabari, *op. cit.*, pp. 496-497

besides believing in the three things mentioned in this verse the Jews have also changed and corrupted the contents of the Torah. These changes did not benefit them at all and angered God.

From the point of view of contemporary Muslim-Jewish relations, however, allegations by Jewish scholars that Muhammad authored the Qur'an could only pose problems to the relationship. Such attitudes toward Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an only discourage Muslims from dealing with the Jews. S. D. Goitein, for instance, mentioned many times that the Qur'an was the creation of Muhammad. He claimed that Islamic beliefs in the One God, divine mercy, and so on, were all actually borrowed from Israel.³⁰ But from the Islamic view, it could simply be argued that if there are similarities between the Qur'an, the Bible and the Torah it is because they have come from the same God. Muslims believe that the Qur'an was the last to be revealed by God, perfecting the previous messages (Qur'an 5:5) to humanity.that

The idea of the Qur'an as the "creation" of Muhammad has no scriptural basis and therefore unacceptable. It is nothing more than a claim made by some Jewish scholars. As for the despicable acts of "changing" and "corrupting" (*taghy-ir wa ta.hr-if*) God's messages, these are mentioned in the Qur'an.³¹

Apart from the attacks on the Prophet and the Qur'an in the writings of Jewish scholars, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict posed another problem to Muslim-Jewish relations. Any attempt at encouraging religious dialogue between the Muslims and the Jew has to deal with these problems. In the Muslim world, the Jewish image is hardly separable from that of the State of Israel. The Jews are labeled by Muslims as illegal occupiers of the land of Palestine. As a result of this, Muslim countries until today remain generally reluctant to have dialogues with the Jews. But if that were the case, the attending problems to the Muslim-Jewish relations are not so much religious as political in nature. Perhaps all things considered, Muslim-Christians

³⁰ Goitein, S. D. *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages*. New York: Schocken Books, n.d., pp. 58-59

³¹ See the view of Muhammad Abd al-Ra'uf in al-Faruqi, Ismail R., ed. 1991. *Triologue of the Abrahamic Faiths*. Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, pp. 28-29.

relations appear to promise better understanding and co-operations between them.

The problems of inter-religious dialogue

In order to make dialogues between Muslims and the people of the Book successful we need to identify the obstructive problems in the light of Qur'anic teachings. The relevant verses show that God wants the people of the Book to explain for their corruption of divine messages and irrational behavior. Some of these verses are the following.

- (1) "O People of the Book! Why do you dispute about Abraham when both the Torah and the Bible were not revealed till after him? Have you then no sense?" (3:65)
- (2) "O People of the Book! Why do you reject the signs of God when you know that you yourselves bear witness (to their truth)? O People of the Book! Why do you mix the truth with the falsehood, and knowingly hide the truth?" (3:70-71)
- (3) Say (O Muhammad): "O People of the Book! Why do you reject the signs of God when He is witness to all that you do? Say (O Muhammad): "O People of the Book! Why do you prohibit believers from the path of God and seek to make it crooked when you yourselves are witnesses? And God is not unmindful of all that you do." (3:98-99).

The verses mentioned above demonstrated the attitudes of the People of the Book toward their own revealed traditions as well as the new revelation given to Prophet Muhammad. They were condemned for their rejection of prophets sent to them, for not admitting the Truth, and also for not accepting the message of Islam.

In their interpretations of these verses, al-Tabari and Sayyid Qutb tell of the various kinds of acts the Jews and the Christians had done to the point of inviting God's anger. This may be understood from the questions God had thrown at them in these verses. In a way, God through His last prophet had initiated dialogue with them. To see their response to His questions it is enough to see their treatment of the Prophet. They were generally hostile to the Prophet. As for the Prophet,

he made an accord with the People of the Book in Medina giving them freedom to worship, guaranteeing that “no bishop is to be removed from his bishopric, no monk from his monastery and no priest from his priesthood. None of their customs was to be changed.”³² Historical facts show that non-Muslims were never forced to convert to Islam; instead they were given full freedom to practice their religions. Even in later times non-Muslims enjoyed this kind of freedom under the Muslim rulers; any discrimination that had happened was not the result of their religious affiliation, but rather because of political considerations. The fact that some Muslims themselves had also suffered at the hands of these rulers proves that the discrimination is not religious but political. Generally speaking, Muslim-led governments have always allowed the Christians to build their churches with even material support from them.

During the modern period, however, Muslims were generally not supportive of the idea of inter-religious dialogue. They looked at the Christians, especially the missionaries, as collaborators with the European imperial powers in the colonization and occupation of Muslim lands or states.³³ With the end of colonial rule, more and more Muslims migrate to the West. In the view of many Muslims, there was discrimination against the Muslim minorities in Europe. Hence, for them, the Christian commitment to true dialogue with the Muslims is questionable.

There is also the Western Christian perception of Islam that colors Christian-Muslim relations and that needs to be addressed. One of these perceptions pertains to the Islamic idea of *jihad* which has frightened Christians and other non-Muslims. Muslims need to address this issue. *Jihad* has been misunderstood by non-Muslims and also some non-Muslims to mean a struggle to establish Islamic rule over

³² Wismar, Adolph L. 1927. *A Study in Tolerance*. New York Columbia University Press, p. 55

³³ See Swidler, Leonard, ed. *Muslims in Dialogue*. pp. v-x. Dr. Swidler mentioned also the difficulties in finding Muslim religious scholars who were willing to enter openly into dialogue with critical-thinking non-Muslim religious scholars. However, in the last decade, such kinds of Muslim scholars have begun to appear.

the whole world. It is also said to be a Muslim obligation to “kill” unbelievers or non-Muslims who refuse to embrace Islam. *Jihad* is portrayed as a holy war against the unbelievers. It is important to note, however, that the works of some Muslims scholars advocating such a kind of *jihad* were often written under the dictation of negative conditions specific to their own times.³⁴ For example, during the colonial period, many Muslims experienced brutality at the hands of Western rulers and then at the hands of Muslim rulers in the post-colonial period. They view fighting against the tyranny of these non-religious rulers as being in conformity with the Qur’an’s command to the believers to perform *jihad*.

According to Sayyid Qu.tb, *jihad* is not a struggle to force people to convert to Islam, but rather to free them from oppression, irrespective of their religious affiliation. *Jihad* is also aimed at protecting the Muslim community and its youths from being lured away from their faith. Therefore, Christians should not fear Islamic rules under which they were free to perform their worship.³⁵

Jihad also implies for Muslims the defense of their faith and their safety from their enemies. It is clear that God only commanded Muslims to fight those who are killing or expelling them from their lands or their homes (*akhrajukum min diyarikum*) (60:9)³⁶, and not to fight those who did not do so. God has even commanded the Muslims to treat the non-Muslims well and establish justice for them as long as they do not expel them from their homes (*an taburruhum wa tuqsitu ilaihim*) (60:8-9). This is one of the principles Islam has laid down for peaceful

³⁴ Troll, Christian W. 1987. ‘Qur’anic view of other religions.’ Islam and Modern Age, Pakistan, Feb. 1987, p. 13. Troll refers to the writings of Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), the revered founder of Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin), who defined Jihad as “the slaying of the unbelievers”. Troll argues that Muslim Egyptians of the time were suffering from colonial enslavement, and this fact might have influenced al-Banna’s attitude.

³⁵ Ayoub, Mahmoud. Islam. p. 32.

³⁶ I think the Bosnian Muslims, for example, have the right to defend themselves from the Serbian “ethnic cleansing.” They were defending their homes from enemies who have attacked them in the name of effacing Islam from the western world.

social and international relations.³⁷

The concept of *al-jizyah* as an integral part of the *dhimmah* agreements between non-Muslims and the Muslim-ruled state in which they live is yet another problematic issue for non-Muslims. The Qur'an refers to *al-jizyah* as follows: "fight against such of them who have been given the scripture until they pay the tribute (*al-jizyah*) readily, being brought low." (9:29) Some jurists (*fuqaha'*) maintain that the *jizyah* had been imposed on the non-Muslims either as a badge of humiliation for their unbelief or in return for the protection given to them by the Muslims and also for their freedom to stay in a Muslim land (*Dar al-Islam*).³⁸

The word in the Qur'an that has been interpreted to mean "humiliating" is "*saghirin*" (literally meaning: people becoming small). The word, however, has many meanings. Al-Tabari thought that the word probably means "they were humiliated people" (*adhila' maqhurun*) or "they were standing up when paying the *jizyah* while the receiver was sitting." Anyhow, the non-Muslims were known to be not happy (becoming "small or in low position") paying the *jizyah*.³⁹ Al-Tabari mentions many views regarding the verse and it is, therefore, unfair to choose only the view that equates non-Muslim payment of the *jizyah* with "humiliation." I am inclined to the view that the verse simply means the people of the Book "feeling unhappy" over the *jizyah* just like any taxpayer grumbling when he has to pay a bill.

According to Sayyid Qu.tb, the verse prescribing an imposition of *jizyah* on the people of the Book provides a foundation for peace agreements (*'uhud au muhadanah*) between them and the Muslims.⁴⁰ Sayyid Qu.tb stressed the practicality of the regulations Islam had introduced in dealing with the people of the Book. He saw that they had two alternatives: to convert to Islam or to pay the *jizyah*. Nevertheless, he emphasized that they must not be forced to convert to Islam since God says clearly "there is no compulsion in religion."

³⁷ Sayyid Qu.tb, *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*, v. 10, pp. 169-17, v. 5, pp. 64-66. See also Ahmad, Ziauddin. *The Concept of Jizya in Early Islam*, p. 293.

³⁸ Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, v. 14, p. 200.

³⁹ Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, p. 200.

⁴⁰ Sayyid Qu.tb, *Fi zilal al-Qur'an*, v. 10, pp. 169-170.

Sayyid Qutb rejected allegations made by Orientalists that the Prophet changed his attitudes toward the people of the Book once he got in power (in Medina). He argued that whatever “changes” there had been pertain only to the ways the Prophet had dealt with them in accordance with the needs of particular situations as the Qur’an itself had emphasized. It was the people of the Book who changed their attitudes toward the Prophet and his new religion. The Jews, for example, launched their attacks on Islam when they felt its danger to them in Medina.⁴¹ We find many verses in the Qur’an telling of the ways in which the Jews had confronted the Prophet.

A counter Muslim view of *jizyah* is provided by Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, a scholar and former rector of the International Islamic University Malaysia. He argued that if Islam is what the classical jurists portrayed it to be, then it actually contradicted the message of the Prophet as a mercy to all the people (*rahmatan lil ‘alam-in*). In his view the verse containing the phrase “*wahum .saghirun*” had been interpreted in complete isolation from the preceding verses, whereas it should have been understood contextually.⁴² He disagrees partly with the classical interpretation, but he also tried to justify it by arguing that the classical jurists had worked and formed their opinions in an environment of armed hostility created by the pagans (*al-mushrikin*).

However, not all non-Muslim scholars see the payment of *jizyah* as a kind of humiliation on non-Muslims living under Islam. For instance, Adolph Wismar and Thomas Arnold share the view that *jizyah* was to be considered a special privilege given by Muslim rulers to their non-Muslim subjects as a token for their security and freedom.⁴³ On the other hand, a Christian Chinese Malaysian scholar, Hwa Yung argues that the *dhimma* system in which the *jizyah* was included cannot be regarded as an adequate safeguard for the religious freedom of minorities. He criticized the classical forms of Islamic law and asked Muslims to establish a new *ijtihad* in order to face the challenges of

⁴¹ Sayyid Qutb, *Fi zilal al-Qur’an*, pp. 171-173.

⁴² Abu Sulayman, Abdul Hameed. January 1988. ‘Al-dhimmah and related concepts in historical perspective.’ *Journal Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 9:1, p. 8.

⁴³ Cf. Wismar, Adolph L. 1927. *A study of Tolerance*. New York: Columbia University Press.

the modern world.⁴⁴

Regarding this dispute about the *jizyah*, we think that what the Muslim rulers in the past had done was simply trying to implement the teachings of the Qur'an as interpreted by the jurists (*al-fuqaha'*). The spirit of Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an is to bring justice to humankind through the divine Law which they believe is the most just of all laws. While the principles of the Law in the Qur'an are true and valid at all times, the particular laws promulgated at any particular time are subject to change with respect to time and place. Some of the laws introduced in the past may no longer be applicable today, but revealed Islamic Laws remain relevant at all times.

Many Muslim scholars are fully aware of this juridical concern. The idea of *ijtihad* as raised by Hwa Yung is very much in their mind since this is what Islam asks them to do. Regarding the past Muslim treatment of the people of the Book, the jurists then had justifications for their form of Islamic Law. As argued by Abu Sulayman, their legal opinions were shaped by the armed conflicts and animosities existing then between the Muslims and the non-Muslims (*al-mushrikun*).

Rather than referring to the views of the classical jurists on such matters, it would be better for us to look at the agreement between the Prophet and the Christians of Najran, and the constitutional agreement (*Sa.h-ifah al-Mad-inah*) between the Prophet and the Jewish tribes of Medina.⁴⁵ It is clear that under these agreements none of them had been discriminated against. This point deserves better consideration by us than the performance of Muslim rulers in history. In Abu Sulayman's view, the classical jurists had made a mistake when they just focused on the micro rather than the macro aspects of the Islamic social system.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the religious principles in the Qur'an are open to varying interpretations by qualified scholars of all times.⁴⁷ Scholars of each age are much more knowledgeable about

⁴⁴ Hwa Yung. 'Religious freedom and Muslim states.' *Transformation*, April/June, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Abu Sulayman, A. H. 'Al-dhimmah and related concepts in historical perspective.' p. 10.

⁴⁶ Abu Sulayman, A. H. 'Al-dhimmah and related concepts in historical perspective.' p. 10.

⁴⁷ Al-Faruqi, Ismail R. 'Muslim-Christian dialogue: Muslim perspective.' Swidler, Leonard ed., *Muslims in Dialogue*, p. 13.

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⁴⁷ Al-Faruqi, Ismail R. 'Muslim-Christian dialogue: Muslim perspective.' Swidler, Leonard ed., Muslims in Dialogue, p. 13.

scholarship among the Muslims, especially in the Muslim world.⁵⁰ Muslims should be well-prepared academically to master inter-religious dialogue so that they can present the real Islamic views on the subject. For us, inter-religious dialogue is basically a Qur'anic. According to Dr Swidler, Professor of Inter-religious Dialogue at Temple University, the United States, following Khomeini's successful revolution in 1979, Muslim scholars began to be concerned with the idea of inter-religious dialogue. Dialogues were also visible at the grass-roots level.⁵¹ Swidler, L., ed. *Muslims in Dialogue*, p. vi

At the same time, Khomeini's revolution has also inspired religious scholars in the West to promote dialogues seriously. They were curious to know "what the sort of Islam" had brought the Ayatollah to power, ruling in the name of Islam? The whole world tried to understand the Islamic phenomenon in Iran and in the process perhaps got impressed with the Islamic revolution led by the so called ulama' or religious scholars. Inter-religious dialogues had been around in the western world for several decades now and these seem to be dictated by their own needs. But now the Muslim world is also in need of dialogues with others. This is especially true in the multi-religious countries such as Malaysia.

Conclusion

Islam through the Qur'an appears to be calling for inter-religious dialogue, especially between Muslims and the People of the Book. God has praised those among the latter who are faithful to Him, following the teachings contained in His books, and believing in all His Prophets without making any distinction between them. Muslim scholars such as al-Tabari and Sayyid Qutb shared the view that Muslims and the people of the Book basically believed in one God. The fact that they have many points of agreement between them could pave the way for their cooperation in the realization of peace, security, and justice.

⁵⁰ Abu Sulayman, A. H. 'Al-dhimmah and related concepts in historical perspective.' p. vi

⁵¹ Swidler, L., ed. *Muslim in Dialogue*, p. vi

Scholars of every religion have to deal with contemporary issues in an enlightened manner. For the Muslims, the real religious issues of the day are not the theological differences they have with the Jews and the Christians as mentioned in the Qur'an. God has given the Jews and the Christians the freedom of belief and they are responsible for their choice. The real issue is probably how to face and overcome the decline of religiosity, namely, the rise of atheism and extreme materialism, which are likely to become "the new religion" in the modern world.

It is true that there are several practical issues the Muslims have to address in their relationships with the Jews and the Christians. One of these issues pertains to interpretations of verses of the Qur'an that apparently urge them to fight those who do not want to embrace Islam. Important to be noted here is that such verses had a certain "historical" background, namely "the causes of revelation" (*asbab al-nuzul*), which is accepted as one of the most important principles in the classical interpretations of the Qur'an. Respected interpreters over the centuries have always maintained that the order to fight was only to defend the faith and legally established Muslim lands. Muslims are not allowed to launch unpremeditated attacks or wars against others. Non-Muslims have similar rights to the Muslims before the law (*wa ma lahu wa ma 'alaihi*) so as to enjoy their life and religious freedom. The peace and freedom that the Jews and the Christians and others enjoyed during the time of the Prophet best illustrates the Muslim answer to the question of the real Islamic attitude toward the non-Muslims.

Islam values highly one's relationship with God and the individual's sincerity in accepting the truth. Without sincerity, truth can hardly be established and instead, hostility and enmity would take place. Practically speaking, we can say that the religious spirit always serves as a foundation for dialogue. As God says in the Qur'an, "The righteous among my servants shall inherit the earth." (21:105) We can arrive through religious education at similarities that may serve as the basis of mutual agreements and also compromise on points of dispute. This is what religiosity is supposed to mean for all human beings on the earth.

The world today seems to be less secure due to the growing

problems in Iraq and Palestine. The September 11, 2001 tragedy has led to a war in Afghanistan and subsequently in Iraq. All these conflicts and wars involve the Muslim *ummah*. Implicated is Islam, which has been accused of preaching *jihad*. Certainly, there has been a lot of misunderstanding of the religion of Islam in the West. Many Westerners believe it is Islam that has blessed the kind of terrorism associated with the September 11 tragedy in the name of *jihad* against the West. Muslim scholars have a duty to clear the good name of Islam. Inter-religious dialogues would be one of the best means for them to do this and to try to solve problems peacefully and honestly.

As Muslims, we should be guided in our search for better relations with the non-Muslims by the following verses in the Qur'an: "...Let not your hatred for other men lead you into sin deviating from justice. Deal justly (with all people), for justice is closest to God-consciousness. And fear God, for God is well acquainted with all that you do." (5:9) "And had your Lord so willed, all those on earth would have believed in Him. So would you then force men to be believers?"

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