

A Very Rough Draft

*Teaching Interfaith Initiatives:
Jews and Christians in Muslim Educational Institutions*

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Introduction

When we consider Islam's teachings, we see that Muslims have a rich and a long history of living in multi-religious and multi-cultural neighborhoods and societies. Islam recognizes a plurality of religions and asks Muslims to respect other religions and followers of those religions.

The Qur'an could be rightly called a book of dialogue, a dialogue between Abrahamic faiths. The Qur'an not only recognized the essence of Judaism and Christianity, but also used the word *Ahl al Kitab* (people of the book), and laid down the rules of dialogue with respect and tolerance for all. Jews and Christians rejected each other before Islam. The Qur'an's unique contribution to world civilization is the recognition of the presence of other religions and its emphasis on the need to live in peace with religious freedom. This recognition is not a courtesy but an acknowledgement of their religious truth as Isma'il R. al Faruqi would say.

Muhammad (peace be upon him) claimed himself from the heirs of Abraham and a prophet from the Biblical line. He called other prophets as brothers in the same faith. He grieved with Christians when the Zoroastrian Persians defeated the Byzantine Christians. When he migrated to Madina, he signed a treaty with its Jewish tribes, a pledge to live together in peace and cooperation. The Jewish tribes were called an *Ummah* (a religious community) as the same word was applied to Muslim community. Muhammad had some good Jewish friends till his death and whenever he needed financial help he turned towards them.

But something has seriously gone wrong to Muslim communities around the world. Today, Muslims are far behind in intra and interfaith dialogue to the extent that the "Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims" could be considered as the first Muslim publication in the field of modern interfaith dialogue. Muslims in Europe and America have made some headway in intra and interfaith dialogue, but many in Muslim countries are held up in bitterness, anger, hatred, and intolerance towards fellow Muslims and others as well.

The Qur'anic stance on interfaith dialogue, appreciation of pluralistic society and freedom of religious belief and expression has become questionable today. Muslims are divided over the interpretation of some of its verses. There are some who have taken an

extreme view of interpretation and there are many who listen to them. Listening to pro-al Qaeda taps, many in the West today believe that Islam is not a religion of Salam (peace).

Most of the Al Qaeda type of attitude is a by-product of Afghan Jihad during USSR occupation. The Iraq war and the continuing Israel-Palestine conflict fuel the anger. Most of the literature preaching Muslim exclusivism and hatred against others was produced during this period from 1970-2000. It does not mean that there were no classical texts where such interpretations were there, but those texts had lost their significance to Muslims.

With support from the West, many religious seminaries were encouraged and consequently joined in the Afghan war. They not only taught and trained their young students in Jihadist atmosphere but also sent many to war.

Education plays a key role in molding a human character. What we teach to the next generation and how we train them have a deep impact on them and on their character. This paper is to examine Muslim controversy over interfaith dialogue, discuss some of those controversial verses of the Qur'an relating to interfaith dialogue as they are taught in some Muslim traditional (Madrassah) and modern educational institutions. The paper will focus particularly on the Qur'anic use of Ahl al Kitab, and the word Kufur (disbelief or hiding the truth) and the word Wali (friend/master) including the concept of religious exclusivity.

Muslim controversy over interfaith dialogue

What is interfaith dialogue and to what extent Muslim can participate in the dialogue? Muslims living in different cities in Europe and America are divided on this issue, even to the extent that some masajid (plural of masjid, mosque) refuse to conduct *shura* (mutual consultation) with those masajid that practice interfaith dialogue. In New York, one masjid imam refused to conduct *shura* with those masajid in the area that were participating in interfaith dialogue. Those imams who oppose this work call it "*bid'ah*," an innovation in Islam not practiced by the Prophet (SAAS). Whether participating in modern interfaith dialogue is *bid'ah* or is actually required by Islam is an issue that Muslims need to address in their intra-faith conversation.

Those who object on the interfaith dialogue, they say:

- That interfaith dialogue is part of ecumenism and ecumenism is Christian
- That the purpose of interfaith dialogue is to create one religion for all
- That to say "Your faith is mine and there is no difference" is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam
- That interfaith dialogue is committed to creating new, blended, diluted worship services common to all and that Muslims are already participating in these worship services

Those Muslims who oppose interfaith dialogue commonly quote the following verse from the Qur'an¹.

Never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with thee unless thou follow their form of religion. Say: "The Guidance of Allah that is the (only) Guidance. Wert thou to follow their desires after the knowledge which hath reached thee, then wouldst thou find neither Protector nor helper against Allah."(2:120)

While some Muslims understand this verse as condemning any dialogue with Jews or Christians, a scientific, historical approach to this verse reveals that it refers to the controversy that emerged after the Prophet (SAAS), was asked to change the Qibla (worship direction) from Jerusalem towards Ka`bah at Makkah. The Jews were certainly unhappy with the decision. The Prophet (SAAS) did his best to explain his position on the change of *Qibla* and to maintain his good relations with the Jews. It is in this context that the Prophet was told that the Jews and Christians of that time would not be pleased with him in spite of his utmost efforts until he followed the teachings of their religions with respect to the centrality of Jerusalem. The verse did not ask him to break his relation with Jews and Christians but was telling him that total satisfaction was impossible.²

Note that absolutist arguments can be attributed to Muslims as well. The Verse above could be interpreted to mean that Muslims would not be satisfied with Jews or Christians or others until they come to Islam. Take the case of a Christian in one of the cities in New York who learned the Qur'an and spoke well about Islam, presenting it fairly. One could hear several Muslims saying that unless he accepted Islam they would not be satisfied with him. Some had even stopped talking to him.

Here is another verse, in *Surat Al-Saff*, which some Muslims say condemns dialogue with those of other faiths:

It is He Who has sent His Messenger with Guidance and the Religion of Truth, that he may proclaim it over all religions, even though the Pagans may detest (it). (61:9)

Analyzing this verse within a wider Islamic context, we realize that, first, Islam is the message of Truth and that Muslims have to do their best to spread the message throughout the world. Second, that when the truth spreads, there always be resistance. And third, that Muslims must be ready to face the consequences of this resistance and discover positive solutions to it. For we remember that truth cannot be spread in hostility, but rather with graciousness and patience. One has to do his/her best to create a peaceful environment of trust. The Prophet (SAAS) provided us with a model of peaceful behavior in situations of hostility when he signed the agreement of Hudaibiya with those who opposed him and had expelled him and his followers from his hometown, Makkah. He could see that that the treaty would lead to peace and that by his signing it Muslims would be able to move freely in a peaceful atmosphere to spread the message of Islam.

¹ For detail see: www.muttaqun.com in reference to interfaith dialogue to understand their point of view.

² For detail commentary on this verse, see *Tafsir Ma`arif Al-Qur'an* of Mawlana Mufti Muhammad Shafi` , Karachi: Idara Ma`arif, 1997, or other ones that present the background of the verse.

This verse demands that Muslims build good relations with others for the service of Islam.

Another verse susceptible to misinterpretation:

Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah. If only the People of the Book had faith, it were best for them: among them are some who have faith, but most of them are perverted transgressors. (3:110)

The Religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will): Nor did the People of the Book dissent there from except through envy of each other, after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the Signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling to account. (3:19)

There is no doubt that the Qur'an calls for Muslims or the community of Islam to become the best community through the application and practice of Islam and that Muslims must take part in organized and direct efforts of da'wah around the world to spread the message of Islam. For Muslims, Islam is the true religion of Allah; any doubt on that score would be a sign of a weak *iman* (faith). Accordingly, many Muslims who use this verse to argue against dialogue with the "other" claim that interfaith dialogue undermine the possibility of becoming the "best of the Ummah." Yet they fail to remember that the Prophet himself engaged with other religions by bringing them to dialogue and in some cases, to Islam.

Another example:

Already has He sent you Word in the Book, that when ye hear the signs of Allah held in defiance and ridicule, ye are not to sit with them unless they turn to a different theme: if ye did, ye would be like them. For Allah will collect the hypocrites and those who defy faith – all in Hell (4:140).

The same type of verse is also repeated in *Surat Al-An'aam*, 6:68. Muslims should not sit with scorners or attend meetings where people make mockery of the Qur'an and Islam. They should gently pass by such people. But attending interfaith dialogue is different. Those engaged in interfaith dialogue respect you and your religion. It is against the spirit of interfaith dialogue to look down or pass negative comments about any faith or followers of the faith.

Another:

If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter He will be in the ranks of those who have lost (All spiritual good). (3:85)

It is Islam alone that is acceptable to Allah. No other religion is accepted. But this and other verse above do not mean that Muslims should not build good relations with others. Building good relations is the command of Allah in the Qur'an as will be explained in later chapters.

As for the Hadith often quoted by those opposing interfaith dialogue, the following may serve as an example: “Everyone will be with those on the Day of Judgment whom he loves”.³

Those Muslims who oppose interfaith dialogue quote this Hadith frequently. Once here was a Jewish-Muslim dialogue. After the dialogue was over, the next day a Muslim who opposed dialogue with Jews was quoting this Hadith and was saying to others, “Those who favor dialogue with Jews would be with Jews on the Day of Judgment because dialoguing with them is to love them”. Yet interfaith dialogue is not about loving the “other” in the sense of becoming “one” with him. It is about respecting the “other’s” views and by that means paving the way for a peaceful society. Yet many of those who oppose dialogue take this and other Hadith out of context and use them to frighten those Muslims who participate in dialogue by accusing them of having thereby committed a sin. The dialogical process itself forces Muslims to examine and reconfirm their own religion and identity. It causes them to strengthen their own *iman* (faith) while respecting the “others” with patience, tolerance, and good *adab*. In fact, this particular Hadith does not pertain to dialogue or bridge building at all; it actually calls on Muslims to love Allah and His Messenger, to stand firmly behind Muslim causes, and not to mix Islamic beliefs and practices with other faiths, keeping their *iman* in its authentic form.

Generalizing mistakenly from verse and Hadith like those above, Muslims who oppose interfaith dialogue claim such interaction is actually designed to:

- Expand the Western political, military, economic, and cultural influence
- Westernize Muslims and Muslim countries
- Make Muslims lose political, economic and cultural independence
- Eradicate Islam and the Islamic way of life from the world
- Convert all people to Christianity

We acknowledge these fears; however, progressive post-colonial societies have developed the capacity to address such concerns and issues openly, with equality and with respect. Fear of interfaith dialogue actually reveals a lack of faith, of confidence and of spiritual endurance. These deficiencies lead to the loss of the opportunity to introduce Islam to a diversity of people.

But even more positively, interaction with the West and its pluralistic society through dialogue can directly and indirectly expand non-Muslims’ knowledge and understanding of Islam. Fear can be replaced with confidence in one’s Islamic faith and used for positive understanding of Islam through networking and involvement with others on common projects. Muslims engaging in such interaction have a golden opportunity of representing Islam as what it actually is: the truthful and peaceful religion given in the Qur’an. Numerous people who have not met a Muslim or come in contact with Islam on an interpersonal level desire the opportunity to do so. By offering this opportunity with good intentions rather than keeping closed in on ourselves in fear, Muslims encourage

³ Bukhari, *Kitab Al-Adab*, hadith number 6169.

their dialogue partners to their good experience may bring others to seek similar encouraging interaction.

Muslims have other fears about interfaith dialogue. One is that the non-Muslim participants are actually missionaries looking for additional information and insight to better aid their evangelization and conversion of Muslims. While this motive may characterize some missionaries, it can backfire. There is an instance where a missionary, having gained an in-depth knowledge of Islam and then having ventured forth to convert Muslims to Christianity, soon found that he himself was the one converted to Islam!

Does interfaith dialogue aim to create a civil religion?

Still another fear of interfaith dialogue is that emerging from it will be a new, diluted “Abrahamic” religion, something resembling Akbar’s *Dini-Ilahi* (Divine Faith). Akbar (1542-1605) was the third Mughal emperor of India (1556-1605).⁴ To create unity and reach out to many religions, he created a new faith, the *Dini-Ilahi* (Divine Faith), which was a combination of Islam, Brahmanism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Though Akbar had strong relationships with scholars of all faiths, this new religion failed to establish itself with the people. This fear of creating Akbar’s type of *Dini-Ilahi* is why some Muslims, especially Muslims from South Asia, sincerely oppose interfaith work. They support building good and friendly relations with people of other faiths without being involved in interfaith dialogue.

Often when Muslims get together to talk about interfaith dialogue, they find themselves locked in controversy. At a Muslim community meeting in a Masjid in New York State called to evaluate the intra-Muslim and inter-religious programs of the Muslim community, one brother objected to the interfaith program saying that it gave an opportunity for Christians to learn Islam and use it to convert Muslims to Christianity. Some said such programs should not be held in the Masjid campus/Islamic Center; they should be held in the churches. Yet many others said it was important to have such meetings at the Muslim venue to educate and influence people of other faiths about Islam or at least remove their misunderstandings about Islam.

The controversy took a specific form when a Christian missionary school in New York State sent their students to visit the Islamic class at the Masjid. Some people, very opposed to the school’s presence at the Masjid, argued that these students were missionaries and they were coming to improve their missionary skills. Yet others

⁴ “As the son of Emperor Humayun, he was born in Umarkot, Sind (now in Pakistan), and succeeded to the throne at the age of 13. He first ruled under a regent, Bairam Khan, who recaptured for the young emperor much of the territory usurped at the death of his father. In 1560, however, Akbar took the government into his own hands. Realizing that Hindu acceptance and cooperation were essential to the successful rule of any Indian empire worthy of that name, he won the allegiance of the Rajputs, the most belligerent Hindus, by a shrewd blend of tolerance, generosity, and force; he himself married two Rajput princesses. Having thus secured the Hindus, he further enlarged his realm by conquest until it extended from Afghanistan to the Bay of Bengal and from the Himalayas to the Godavari River. Akbar's supreme achievement, however, was the establishment of an efficient administrative system that held the empire together and stimulated trade and economic development.” (For reference see: "Akbar," Microsoft(R) Encarta(R) 97 Encyclopedia. (c) 1993-1996 Microsoft Corporation).

believed that it was good that they were coming, so that they could receive accurate information about Islam. No one ever knows, they said, whose heart would be changed.

The division of opinion breaks down as follows: Supporters of interfaith dialogue call it the command of Allah in the Qur'an while the opposers call it an act of *kufur*. Opposition can be intimidating. Once when a program for interfaith dialogue was announced in one Masjid in Chicago, some brothers were heard crying out, "*kufur, and kufur!*" Reactions like these keep many imams silent and unwilling to participate in dialogue with other faiths.

This has an unfortunate result, since it creates an imbalance at dialogic gatherings. Their imams being absent, lay Muslims are left to participate in interfaith work while their partners from the Christian and Jewish sides are highly educated rabbis, ministers, and priests. But without the imams' participation the dialogue resulting cannot command trust from either side. Other religious leaders actually welcome the participation of imams. In fact, in those cities where the imams are part of the dialogue, interfaith work is more effective and honored.

A final reason used to oppose interfaith dialogue is that it encourages the blurring or blending of worship practices. Yet this fear is easily dealt with if it is stated clearly at the outset of an interfaith gathering that the members are to be observers of and not participants in the other faith's worship. Just as people of other faiths are welcome to watch Muslims in worship, Muslims should be welcomed to observe but not participate in Christian and Jewish worship. When Muslims raised this concern in Rochester, their dialogue partners readily agreed to the principle of separate worship. As a result, the imams were able to participate in interfaith dialogue with a good conscience, thus assuring that the dialogue's diverse peace-building activities would be more productive and beneficial to Muslims interests.

The key point is that interfaith dialogue does not aim to unify the religions. Muslim participants need to be aware of this. When the Prophet (SAAS) was approached by the Makkans to let them worship their gods for a year and then worship his God the next year, Qur'an in Surat AlKafirun rejected their request. The Qur'an told Muhammad to tell the Makkans, (Meccans): "...for you is your religion and for me is my religion." (109:6). The Qur'an stands for freedom of religion and religious worship and rejects compromise on idol worship.

From all that has been said it is evident that imams should not hesitate to participate in interfaith dialogue. On the contrary, their participation will help their congregations overcome their fears and consider the advantages of contemporary interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is about freedom and respect for every religion. It is a bridge building movement to ease tension and hatred between followers of different religions. Religions are God's gift to bring peace to humanity, not hatred. Religions can live together in peace only through organized efforts of understanding, mutual appreciation, and the building of good relations.

The Concept of Kufr (disbelief): The Qur'an has used this word— generally translated in English as “disbelief”— to mean different things. Its basic meaning is being ungrateful, hiding or covering truth, rejecting truth and not believing in God; other meanings could also be derived. The meaning “being ungrateful” is clear from this example from the Qur'an: *Said one who had knowledge of the Book: "I will bring it to thee within the twinkling of an eye!" Then when (Solomon) saw it placed firmly before him, he said: "This is by the Grace of my Lord!- to test me whether I am grateful or ungrateful! and if any is grateful, truly his gratitude is (a gain) for his own soul; but if any is ungrateful, truly my Lord is Free of all Needs, Supreme in Honour !"* (27:40) Here the word Kufr is used in opposite to the word Shukr (grateful).

The meaning of the word Kufr depends on the historical context of its use. Note, for example, that in the following verse, Kufr is used of a specific situation where Allah asks the Jews to believe in the Qur'an as a revelation from God. *Allah says, And believe in what I reveal, confirming the revelation which is with you, and be not the first to reject Faith therein, nor sell My Signs for a small price; and fear Me, and Me alone.* (2:41). Here the word Kafir, derivative of Kufr, is used meaning rejection. It does not mean that the Jews in general are not believers in God, but is used for those Jews who were rejecting Muhammad (SAWS) and the Qur'an at that period.

Similarly are other verses of the Qur'an where the word Kufr in the Qur'an is used in reference to the Jews and the Christians (2:41 and also in other places the word Kafara or Kufr is used). The interpretation of those verses relating to Jews or Christians does not mean that Jews and Christians do not believe in God. The Qur'an makes it clear that the God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims is the One and same God (29:46).

Jews and Christians are not infidels, which means people who do not believe in God, but the Qur'an does ask Jews and Christians to believe in Muhammad and the Qur'an as the last revelation from God along with their belief in the Biblical prophets (peace be upon them) and the scriptures that were revealed to them. *The Qur'an says: But those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, and believe in the (Revelation) sent down to Muhammad - for it is the Truth from their Lord, - He will remove from them their ills and improve their condition.* (47:2).

Furthermore, the Qur'an asks Christians to give up their concept of the Trinity and adopt the true concept of Oneness of God.

The Qur'an uses the word Kafara (covering up, hiding the truth or even of committing disbelief) for calling Jesus the Son of God or for saying that Allah is one of three in a Trinity. The Qur'an asks Christians to reject these false concepts (5: 72, 73).⁵

When Isma`il R. Al Faruqi was asked this question whether Jews and Christians should be called ‘infidels’ in Islam, he explained that the term ‘infidel’ is applied to a person who does not recognize God at all. It should not, he said, be applied to the adherent of another

⁵ For more detail on this issue, see Jamal Badawi article on: “Muslim and Non-Muslim relations: Reflection on Some Qur'anic Texts”, www.islamonline.com

religion who believes in God. Al Faruqi further said that no Jews and Christian may be called 'infidel' a priori. However, if he or she denies God or God's unity and His transcendence, he/she may be called so.⁶

Discussions of such questions can and should be peaceable. For instance, in a recent dialogue on the topic "Christians and Muslims on the Trinity in Christianity and Transcendence and Unity of God in Islam," two speakers honestly explained their beliefs to an audience of 150 Muslims and Christians, including priests and imams. Afterwards, many questions were asked in a thoughtful, searching spirit. At the end, the audience appreciated the honesty and clarity with which both speakers explained their belief systems.

Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'an* has a good discussion on the word *kufur* and its derivatives in reference to Ayahs 2:6 and 74:10. He translates the word *Kafir* as generally meaning "denying the truth," with the exception of 57:20, where the word is used for farmers covering the seeds. He feels the translation of the word *kufur* as unbelievers and particularly "infidels" would generally be inappropriate.

It is helpful to explain that the Qur'an, carefully distinguishing among people's allegiances to God, divides humanity into five religious categories. They are:

1. ***Al Mu'minun wa al Muttaqun*** True believers and the righteous people. These are those who believe in One God, in all Biblical prophets (peace be upon them) including Muhammad (SAWS) as the seal of the prophets; on all revelations including the Qur'an as God's last revelation to humanity and the Day of Judgment. (Qur'an, 2:2-5).
2. ***The Kuffar*** (the disbelievers in God) or those who do not accept the existence of God. The frequent use of the word in the Qur'an is always precise. (The Qur'an, 2:6 & 7). Regrettably, however, the word *Kuffar* has been used as a blanket term of reproach and rejection of all those felt to be enemies. Such usage is incorrect and inapplicable to most people. It has been used as a term of insult against Christians and Jews, blocking rather than opening dialogue and the possibility of peaceful relations.
3. ***Al Munafiqun*** (the hypocrites): "Those who say that they believe in God but their actions do not confirm their belief," Qur'an, 2:8-18. When Muhammad (SAWS) migrated to Madina, some pretended to be Muslims, but in their hearts were not. The Qur'an has addressed these people almost in every Sura revealed in Madina.
4. ***Al Mushrikun*** (the Associationists, those who worship idols): These are Makkans before Islam who were idol worshippers. It is in reference to their idol worship that the Qur'an says: "Allah forgiveth not that partners should be set up with Him; But He forgiveth any thing else, to whom He pleaseth; to set up partners with Allah is to devise a sin most heinous indeed" (4:48 and also 4:116).

⁶ Isma'il R. Al Faruqi, *Islam and other Faiths*, see Discussion on page 93.

5. **Ahl al Kitab** (people of the Book, Jews and Christians). These are believers in God, but disbelievers in Muhammad (SAWS) and the Qur'an as the last revelation of God, the Qur'an, 2:105, 3:64 and the word Ahl al Kitab is repeated in many places.

The Concept of Wali: Often people of other faiths ask Muslims why the Qur'an seems to have a hostile attitude towards non-Muslims. For— they say— doesn't the Qur'an warn Muslims not to take Jews and Christians as their friends? But this supposed warning is based on a misconception. It derives from some translations where the word "Wali" in the Qur'an is translated as "friend" without any explanation of the word's actual complexity. When people read the translation without any significant knowledge of Arabic, they take this meaning of "friend" as the only meaning and from that assumption claim that the Qur'an forbids Muslims from associating with Christians and Jews.

Actually, the word "Wali" in the Qur'an does not mean "friend" at all. It means guardian, protector, and provider. God is Wali (Guardian) of believers. For those who obey Satan Satan is their guardian. This usage frequently occurs in the Qur'an. The Qur'an says: *"Allah is the Protector of those who have faith: from the dept of the darkness He will lead them forth into light. Of those who reject faith, their patrons are the Evil ones (Taghut): from light they will lead them forth into the dept of darkness"* (2: 257).

Even when referring to human relationships Wali does not take the meaning of "friend." Rather, it refers to a relationship of guardianship or protection, especially in situations where it is vital to distinguish between those who are one's true supporters and those who aren't.

Take as an example the following verse: *"O ye who believe! take not for protectors your fathers and your brothers if they love infidelity above Faith: if any of you do so, they do wrong."* (9:23). This Verse refers to events at the battle of Badr, when the Makkans attacked the Muslims at Madina. Brothers stood against brothers, fathers against sons. It is in this context that the Qur'an asked for solidarity among the believers— that they not betray their fellow Muslims when faced with fighting against their own blood relations. According to today's political thinking, such betrayal would be considered treason and could be punished with death or life imprisonment. Modern states demand loyalty to the state itself above all personal loyalties.

Yet in other situations, ones that do not conflict with loyalty to other believers, the Qur'an obliges respect for personal loyalties, especially those owed to parents. The Qur'an says, for example:

And We have enjoined on man (to be good) to his parents: in travail upon travail did his mother bear him, and in years twain was his weaning: (hear the command), "Show gratitude to Me and to thy parents: to Me is (thy final) Goal. But if they strive to make thee join in worship with Me things of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not; yet bear them company in this life with justice (and consideration), and follow the way of

those who turn to me (in love): in the end the return of you all is to Me, and I will tell you the truth (and meaning) of all that ye did." (31:14-15).

Now we come to the verse that we referred to earlier, the one that seems to say that Muslims must not make friends with Jews or Christians. The verse in question says this: *"O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors"* (5:51). This translation is typical in using "friends" to translate Awliya, the plural form of Wali. Yet we know that Awliya means protectors and masters. So what is this verse actually saying?

One must understand the "occasion of revelation" or historical context to understand the usage of Awliya here. Mufti Shafi` in his Ma`arif al Qur'an explains that the verse refers to a special situation when a Jewish tribe at Madina committed treason against the young Muslim community, at that time fighting for its survival against the attack of the pagan Makkans. This attack, occurring in the fifth year of the Prophet's migration to Madina, is called both the Battle of the Ditch (Khandaq) as well as Al Ahzab (the Alliance of tribes of Makkah.) The Madinan Jewish tribe of the Banu Quraiza was obligated under the treaty and the constitution of Madina to join with the Muslim community in fighting against the attackers. Instead, the Banu Quraiza committed treason by secretly teaming with the Makkan enemy during the fight. After the battle was over, the Prophet (SAWS) called a meeting of a Shura (parliament in the modern sense) to decide what to do about the Banu Quraiza's disloyalty. But disloyalty bred disloyalty. Hypocrite Muslims backed the Banu Quraiza rather than the Prophet (SAWS). It was in the midst of this series of betrayals that the controversial verse above was revealed.⁷

But many other commentators do not refer to the incident. Maududi in his Tarjuman al Qur'an says that some hypocrites were keeping friendship with Jews and Christians to seek their protection if Muslims were defeated in Madina⁸. The Noble Qur'an commentary says that Muslim shall be friendly with those Christians and Jews who make mockery of Islam⁹. Even a moderate commentator like Yusuf Ali is misleading. He says that Muslims must not seek their help and comfort. Christians and Jews are most likely to combine their efforts against Muslims and that happened numerous times in Prophet's life. He who associates with them and shares their counsel must be counted as one of them¹⁰.

On the contrary there are many examples in the life of the Prophet that the Qur'anic verses like the above do not prohibit political, economic, and social dealings with non-Muslims. In this as in all things the Prophet (SAWS) himself provides the best example. He trusted Abdullah ibn al Uraiqit, a non-Muslim, as a guide during his secret migration (Hijrah) from Makkah to Madina even though the Makkans had offered a big reward to

⁷ Mufti Muhammad Shafi, Ma`arif al Qur'an, see his explanation to the verse: 5:51

⁸ Abu al A`la Maududi, Tafhim al Qur'an, Lahore: Idara Tarjuman al Qur'an, 1997, see reference to the verse:5:51.

⁹ Muhammad T. al Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, The Noble Qur'an, Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997, see reference to the verse:5:51

¹⁰ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an, Maryland: Amana Publication, 1998, see reference to the verse:5:51

anyone who would arrest Muhammad (SAWS).¹¹ On another occasion, the Prophet (SAWS) selected Ibn Abi Hadrad, a non-Muslim, to spy on the army of Thaqif— a highly sensitive mission in a critical situation.¹²

Other examples of the Prophet's (SAWS) accepting the protection of non-Muslims abound. Perhaps the most famous one is his living under the protection of his uncle Abu Talib till the uncle died. Then during the mission to Ta'if, where the Prophet was injured, it was the non-Muslim Mat'am bin `Adi and his sons who helped him return to Makkah safely. The Prophet (SAWS) was so grateful to him that he said, after the victory of Badr, if Mat'am were alive and had asked him to release the prisoners of war, he would have done so.¹³ In addition, the Prophet (SAWS) signed an agreement of cooperation with the Jews of Madina soon after his Hijra. He concluded the treaty of Hudaibiyah with the Makkans. The tribe of Banu Khuza`a made an alliance with the Muslims after the treaty and helped the Muslims during the conquest of Makkah.¹⁴

But good relations with non-Muslims weren't simply formed for expedience's sake. Forming those good relations with all people but especially with Jews and Christians has been encouraged in Islam as a universal practice. Yusuf al Qaradawi has cited examples from the Sirah of the Prophet and his companions of good treatment of non-Muslim neighbors and of people of other faiths. Some examples are:¹⁵

1. The Prophet sent gifts to be distributed among poor Makkans in spite of their hostility toward Islam;
2. The Prophet (SAWS) also sent gifts to the kings and accepted gifts from them;
3. The prophet assigned an annual charity for a Jewish family in Madina;
4. When Um al Harith ibn Rabi`ah, a Christian woman died, some of the companions attended her funeral;
5. When a sheep was slaughtered in one of the companions' home, the companion sent a portion of it to his Jewish neighbor;
6. Following the Prophet's way, caliph `Umar sent his non-Muslim brother a piece of garment as a gift.
7. The Prophet borrowed money from non-Muslims when needed.¹⁶
8. He honored non-Muslims while alive or dead. It was narrated that a funeral passed by the Prophet (SAWS), so he stood up in respect for it . His companions told him that it was the funeral of a Jew. The Prophet (SAWS) replied, "Isn't it a human soul" "17

¹¹ Haykal, *The liife of Muhammad*, translated by Isma`il R. Al Faruqi, American Trust publications, 1976, see the Chapter 10 on Al hijra.

¹² Dr. saeed Ismaeel, *Muslim and non Muslim relation*, P.24

¹³ Al Bukhari, *Kitab Fad al Khumas*, Chapter 16 On the Free Emancipation of Captives by the Prophet (SAWS) without taking the Khumas, Hadith number: 3139

¹⁴ Ismaeel, Saeed, *Muslim and Non-Muslim Relations*, Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Al-Attique International Islamic Publications, 2003, p.24. Also see, Haykal, *The Conquest of Makkah* Chapter 24, on the Prophet's (SAWS) fulfilling his promise to the Banu Khuza`a of not accepting Abu Sufyan's apology and attacking Makkah. PP.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.17 also see: Yusuf al Qardawi, *Halal and Haram*, Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, see chapter 5 on: The Relationship of Muslims with non-Muslims, pp. 336-343.

¹⁶ Narrated in the collection of Imam al-Bukhari, *Book of Selling*, Chapter on the Prophet (SAWS) Buying in Deferred Payment, hadith number: 1963.

The point of all these examples is that the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Sunna all emphasize Islam's respect for people's rights and for their humanity. Everyone from the companion to the wayfarer has the right to be respected, to be treated fairly, and to be protected from harm and indignity (4:36).

Will Christian and Jews end in Hell Fire? Another sensitive topic in interfaith dialogue is whether Muslims believe Jews and Christians will inevitably end up in hell. For example, in one recent public dialogue between Christians and Muslims, the first question was how Christians can possibly dialogue with Muslims since Muslims believe Christians are damned. In return, the Muslim speaker asked the Christian who had asked the question what he believed about Muslims' chances of escaping Hell. Didn't Christians believe that the way to heaven is through Jesus alone? The Muslim speaker asked, but the adding "We are not here to send people to heaven or hell, but to find ways of building good relations with each other and to serve the cause of suffering humanity."

Yet the question of who will end up in heaven or hell is a crucial issue in interfaith dialogue.

Every religion believes that their 'God' will place them in heaven ahead of others. Jews and Christians also believe this of themselves. No faith is ready to share the same place in heaven with another faith. Once during an interfaith session at Rochester's Islamic Center, two speakers, a Muslim and a Catholic Christian, were defining their faiths' respective understandings of hell and heaven. At the Q & A session, someone asked the Catholic speaker whether he believed non-Catholics would go to heaven. In reply, the speaker narrated a humorous story from his own tradition saying that the Catholics had already filled the empty spaces in heaven before others including Muslims and non-Catholic Christians had even arrived at heaven's gate. (His joke was based on the fact that Catholicism had a head start in time on the others.) The speaker's joke helped create a relaxed atmosphere because it suggested that none of us should be fighting over a question about which "only God knows best."

Yet at the same time the sense of exclusiveness that each faith brings to its understanding of heaven and hell gives believers energy and the motivation to do well in their own belief systems. It brings competition which the Qur'an calls *Liyabluwakum Ayyukum Ahsanu`Amala* (To try you who is best in deeds, 67:2). This belief resembles the concept of nationalism yet without nationalism's violence. For just as each nation-state today proclaims itself to be superior to all others, so too does each religion seek to outgain the others in converts and to become dominant, not only on earth but in heaven. But the Qur'an's concept of *Istabiqul Khairat* (excel and compete in doing well) reveals that this competition should be in the area of achieving works of peace, not of war. So while nothing is wrong with this competitive spirit, the most important thing is how to live in peace with others. It is not who wins or loses but "how the game is played." Islam

¹⁷ Narrated in the collection of Imam al-Bukhari, *Book of Burials*, Chapter on Standing for the Funeral of a Jew, hadith number: 1250; in the collection of Imam Muslim, *Book of Burials*, Chapter on Standing for Funerals, hadith number: 961.

instructs its believers to adopt Adab, compassion and respect towards all others whose religions have likewise told them to strive to do well.

Interfaith dialogue does not seek to send all people to heaven; its concern lies in encouraging people to avoid violence and hatred and to cultivate peace and solidarity with all humanity. Interfaith dialogue says that the positive claims each religion makes about itself should be made forthrightly without reliance on invidious comparisons. Consider the difference between the following two approaches. On the one hand, there is the imam who was giving a Khutba (sermon) on Friday and saying that Jews and Christians are bound to hell unless they accept Islam. On the other hand, there is the imam who says that Islam is the chosen path of Allah. That those who believe in Allah, the One and the only God, in the angels, in all the prophets (AS) including the Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) as seal of Prophets(AS), in all holy scriptures including the Qur'an as the last and final message of Allah to humanity, in the hereafter, in the resurrection, and in the day of judgment— that such as these Allah in His mercy and forgiveness will bless in heaven. Can you tell the difference in approach between these two imams? Which of these imams more truly represents the spirit of interfaith dialogue?

As Muslims would certainly oppose and reject when others are saying that Muslims are bound to hell or that Islam is an evil religion. The same way Muslims should avoid that Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists or others will end in hell. Allah has gifted people with intellect; they understand what is meant by saying God will reward Muslims. Direct criticism of other faith practices and beliefs is unhealthy in any setting, especially in a dialogical context. Such behavior may easily escalate into further animosity and even hatred.

As an example of destructive behavior in an interfaith setting, consider what happened in a recent dialogue when an imam presented the Muslim position on the afterlife clearly, as prescribed above. At the end, a Muslim raised his voice to say that while the imam had spoken rightly, he had neglected to tell the non-Muslims present they were all bound to hell unless they accepted Islam and accepted it right now. This type of language and approach creates a hostile atmosphere and must be avoided.

Yet it is true that Muslims are divided on the criteria for judging whether a person will go to heaven or to hell. Some assert that the criterion for entering is fairly inclusive. They say that the criterion consists in belief in one God along with belief in the Day of Judgment and in good deeds, as well as in the belief that the prophets and the Holy Scriptures were sent to guide people towards that goal. Authoritative works upholding this broad view include *Tafsir Tarjuman Al-Qur'an* by Abul Kalam Azad, *Al Manar* by Rashid Rida, *Al Mizan fi al Tafsir Al-Qur'an* by Muhammad Hussain Al Tabataba'i as well as certain writings influenced by Sufi writers. Fazlur Rahman in his *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Appendix II, expounds on this understanding of the criterion for entering heaven. Farid Esack in book *Qur'an: Liberation and Pluralism*, Oxford, 1998, develops F. Rahman's thesis, basing his conclusions on an elaborate study of the Qur'an's approach to other faiths. Among modern commentators, Maududi in his *Tafhim al Qur'an* in reference to verse 2:62 says that the Jews believed that they will enter alone to heaven

and the Qur'an rejected their concept of being chosen by saying that criteria for heaven is belief in one God, the Hereafter and good deeds and is open to all. Wahidudin Khan in his Tadhkir al Qur'an supports Maududi point of view on this verse¹⁸.

But the majority of Tafasir in both the classical and modern periods argue for a more exclusive criterion. These Tafasir, while listing belief in God, in the Day of Judgment, in good deeds, in all the prophets and in all the Holy Scriptures as essential, also include belief in Muhammad as the seal of Prophets and in the Qur'an as the last and perfect message of God to humanity. The majority of Muslims endorse this interpretation of the Qur'an.

The same Qur'anic verse can sometimes support both sides of the debate. Those Muslim scholars taking the inclusive position in support of religious pluralism and of the universality of Islamic values, have buttressed their belief that some Jews and Christians will go to heaven on verses like the following: *“Those who believe (in the Qur'an) and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians, and the Sabians, and who believe in Allah and the Last day, and work righteous, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve”* (2:62).

Those who oppose this inclusive interpretation argue that this verse and others like it refer to only to those Jews and Christians alive during the time of their respective prophets and before the appointment of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS). They point out that when Prophet Muhammad (SAWS) was asked what would be the fate of those who died before his Prophet-hood, he replied that they would be treated according to the standards of their own faith.¹⁹ The Noble Qur'an commentary quoting Al Tabari argues that this verse was abrogated by the verse 3:85, meaning whosoever seeks religion other than Islam is not acceptable²⁰. They argue that many other verses confirm that belief in Muhammad and the Qur'an is essential for people to enter heaven.²¹

But perhaps too much consideration of these questions is unproductive. After all, many Muslims do not ponder the criterion of who will enter heaven or hell issue too much. They say it is for Allah alone to make this judgment. And in interfaith dialogue, debating this criterion is not an issue either. The real issue of interfaith dialogue is how one expresses oneself and builds peaceful relationships while participating in dialogue. Islam is an earth bound religion. It is very concerned about peace on earth. While belief in the hereafter is a very significant part of the Islamic faith, this belief must not be disfigured by harsh, provocative language but should be explained gently and modestly. For the truth is that no one knows who will enter Heaven but Allah. Yes, the criteria for heaven and hell are given in the Qur'an, but they should be explained in a gentle tone. It would be best to say when finding oneself involved in such a discussion: *“I do not know what my fate will be in the hereafter. Allah knows best who will end in hell and heaven.”* The

¹⁸ Maulana Wahidudin Khan, Tadhkir al Qur'an, New Delhi: Maktaba al Risala, 2002.

¹⁹ (See Tafsir Al Zamakhshari, Tafsir Al Tabari and Tafsir Ibn Kathir in reference to the verse, 2:62).

²⁰ Al Hilali and Khan, The Noble Qur'an, see reference to the verse, 2:62

²¹ Those who believe that belief on Muhammad commonly quote these and many verses and Al-Qur'an is also essential for all people, they are: 3:19, 3:84, 85, 5:3, and 33:40.

Qur'an, describing the Judgment vividly, makes clear that to Allah alone belongs the criterion:

“And the trumpet is blown, and all who are in the heavens and the earth swoon away, save Him whom Allah willeth. Then it is blown a second time, and behold them standing waiting. And the earth shineth with the light of God, and the book is set up, and the prophets and the witnesses are brought, it is judged between them with truth, and they are not wronged. And each soul is paid in full for what it did. And He is best aware of what they do.” (39: 68-70)

Yet while it is important on certain occasions to adopt a more inclusive stance towards other religions, it would be a serious error to adopt this stance on all occasions. It is misleading for Muslim scholars sitting in a dialogic context to claim that a universal set of beliefs is valid for all religions or to claim that Islam includes all religions. Such an assumption of inclusiveness denies Islam its unique message. It also denies the specific historical and religious traditions that distinguish Islam and that make it appealing.

Of course, on the opposite side, there are those Muslims who believe that interfaith dialogue is Haram (forbidden). They wrathfully assert their belief in the damnation of non-Muslims. Muslim participation in interfaith dialogue calls for those on the extremes to adopt a middle way to avoid sharp divisions among Muslims and thus to preserve the Ummah's unity. This is particularly important for Muslim communities in Europe and America experiencing difficult times. Imams and the Muslim scholars of Islamic Studies should make joint efforts to guide the community toward moderation. By easing the pressure on them, they will enable them to follow the ways of the Prophet (SAWS) more faithfully.

Conclusion:

In their zeal for Jihad and with the support of oil rich countries and the Western powers, a lot of literature was published from 1970-2000 urging Muslim to fight against USSR. Most of the literatures carried the Salafi stamp of the Wahhabi branch. These books were printed in fine paper and were made available in all languages. Libraries were filled with it and distributed mostly free of cost in the market as anti-Islam and anti-Muslims literature is swamped into the Western markets today and mostly distributed free of cost.

The Afghan Taliban and the students in Pakistan Madaris had little connection with wahhabism before the war. Pro-Wahhabi people in Pakistan were known as Ahl al Hadith who were in confrontation with people of the Deoband School of Thought. Today Wahhabism influences many Madaris.

To reverse this process and restore moderation in Muslim thought, a lot of literature with moderate intellectual interpretation of the Islamic tradition would be desperately needed.

Religious extremism and fundamentalism cannot be controlled without a pluralistic approach of teaching to different Madhahib (school of thought, including the Shi`a) in the case of Islam for intra-faith understanding and world religions for interfaith

understanding. Most of the Sunni Madaris including the Madina Islamic University in Saudi Arabia, do teach the four schools of thought, but teaches it to prefer their one and reject the other with no or little appreciation. In some Madaris, the other schools of thought are even ridiculed (personal observation). The Shi`a are taught as Kafirs (disbelievers) in some Madaris. Teaching of world religions is mostly non-existent. It even receives little attention in the secular universities.

Some who fought the Afghan war were from the Middle East with great sympathy for the people of Palestine. Before his assassination, Abdullah Azam was heard frequently at Peshawar, Pakistan that they would fight against Israel after defeating the Russians. It would be hard to bring a positive change through curriculum and teaching alone without just and peaceful resolution of the Palestine and Israel conflict.

21st Century is the century of religious revival. Interfaith and intra-faith dialogue are the only ways to keep the revival on the moderation path. Supporting and promoting both intra and interfaith dialogue would be a religious duty, a sacred task to fulfill our obligation to God and humanity. Failing in dialogue would result in a big mess and all will suffer. So far, the Abrahamic faiths could be held responsible for most of the mess in our present world.

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