

DIVERSITY IN MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIP- VIEWS OF QUR'AN AND SUNNAH

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No one can be forced to accept Islam as there is no compulsion in the religion of Islam. The Qur'an and Sunnah are clear on the ruling to have good, fair and just relations with non-Muslims and that they cannot be attacked unless there is a war, enmity or threat from them against Muslims. Teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah encourage Muslims to develop good relations with the Christians on bases of Da'wah and not on the bases of enmity. This is obvious from the fact that Qur'an asks us to have a meaningful dialogue with them, calls them with a respectable title and allows having close social relations with them. As for as theological criticism is concerned this is to save them in the life hereafter and not to show the enmity.

Key Words: Muslim-Christian Relations, Muslim-non-Muslim relations, Christianity and Islam, people of the Book. Christians in the Qur'an.

Introduction

“Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians”. These are the beginning words of the Common Word Document, the biggest movement for Christian Muslim relations in the recent history. There has been misunderstanding about the true nature of Muslims’ relationship with non-Muslims especially in the midst of recent wars. It is important to clarify the true nature of Muslims relation with non-Muslim especially with Christians as per Qur’an and Sunnah.

What kind of relations Islam wants its followers to have with non-Muslims in normal circumstances when there is no war, enmity, threat or a dispute between them. Our references in this regard will be the primary sources of Islamic teachings which are the Qur'an and the Sunnah followed by the actions of rightly guided caliphs, consensus of jurists and analogical regulations.

There is no compulsion in the religion of Islam.

To start with, no one can be forced to accept Islam. It has to be done with Da’wah and not with gun.

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لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالطَّاغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدِ اسْتَمْسَكَ بِالْعُرْوَةِ الْوُثْقَىٰ لَا انْفِصَامَ لَهَا وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿البقرة: 256﴾

There is no compulsion in religion. True guidance has been made clearly distinct from error. Therefore, whoever renounces ‘Tāghūt’ (*forces of Shaitān*) and believes in Allah has grasped the firm hand-hold that will never break. Allah, *Whose hand-hold you have grasped*, hears all and knows all (2:256)

This verse makes a basic rule in Islam very clear that no one can be forced in matters of faith and religion. All the exegetes classical and modern agree that non-Muslims cannot be forced to accept Islam even if they are at war with Muslims, not to speak of those who are not fighting against Islam and Muslims. Accepting Islamic faith is an inner function of the heart and mind. Force can only be used to make someone do a physical act and not the spiritual one.¹ Accepting Islam or not is a test of the humans for the Day of Judgment. Applying force will kill the whole concept of test² and make the accountability meaningless. This test requires freedom of choice for every human being to accept Islam or reject it as clarified in the following verse:

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ (الكهف: 19)

This is the Truth from your Rabb, Now let him who will, believe in it and let him who will, deny it.³

It is further clarified in,

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَأَمَنَّ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلَّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرَهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ (يونس: 99)

"If it had been the will of your Rabb that all the people of the world should be believers, all the people of the earth would have believed! Would you then compel mankind against their will to believe?"⁴

Although exegetes do mention a few incidents as as-sabaab an-nuzool (causes of revelation) of this verse but its application is general as clarified by Imam Tabari⁵ and others. The same has been the ground realities. Omar ibn Khattab the second and most powerful caliph when invited his slave Ashaq to accept Islam he refused. The only response that Omar gave was his comment "there is no compulsion in Islam"⁶.

Relations with non-Muslims in general

لَا يَجْعَلُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقْبَلُوا فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُواكَ مِنْ دِينِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسَطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنْ اللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسَطِينَ إِنَّمَا يَنْهَى اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ قَتَلُوا فِي الدِّينِ

وَأَخْرَجُوا مِّنْ دِيَارِكُمْ وَظَهَرُوا عَلَىٰ إِخْرَاجِكُمْ أَن تَوَلَّوهُمْ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ
الظَّالِمُونَ (الممتحنة: 8-9)

Allah does not forbid you to be kind and equitable to those who had neither fought against your faith nor driven you out of your homes. In fact Allah loves the equitable. Allah only forbids you to make friendship with those who fought you on account of your faith and drove you out of your homes and backed up others in your expulsion. Those who will take them for friends are indeed the wrongdoers (60:8-9)

As-Sabaab-an-nuzool (cause of revelation) of this verse was the question asked by Asma, the daughter of Abu-Bakr Assiddique, may Allah be pleased with them, if she could treat kindly and serve her mother Qutaila, who was a polytheist.

وعن أسماء بنت أبي بكر الصديق رضي الله عنهما قالت : قدمت على أمي وهي
مشاركة في عهد رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ، فاستفتيت رسول الله صلى الله عليه
وسلم قلت : قدمت على أمي وهي راغبة ، أفأصل أمي ؟ قال نعم صلي أمك ⁷

Asma bint Abu Bakr said: ‘My mother came to me and she was a polytheist at the time of the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, I asked the Messenger of Allah : ‘My mother has come to me, desiring good relations, should I keep good relations with my mother?’

The Messenger of Allah said: ‘yes keep good relations with her.’

On this occasion this verse was revealed stating that if non-Muslims have not done any wrong, it is not forbidden to treat them nicely and justly. This actually encourages Muslims to do justice and good treatment to non-Muslims. Mufti Muhammad Shafee', in his well-known Urdu tafseer "Maarif-ul-Qur'an" says that the word justice means righteousness and perfect care, as simple justice is required with everyone any way, even if one is fighting against Muslims.⁸ He is also of the opinion that on the basis of this verse the Muslims are allowed to give charity to non-Muslims as well and they would get reward for this from Allah.⁹ Syed Mawdudi says that the comparison of these two verses 8 and 9 shows us the cause of enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims, is not their “Kufr” but the aggression on their part.¹⁰ According to Tafseer-i-Maajidy this verse allows Muslims to accept gifts from non-Muslims.¹¹ Qurtubi has quoted Ibni-Arabi saying that the word "qist" in this verse means giving your money to the non-Muslims for the sake of good relations as the justice is required with every one fighting against Muslims or not.¹² Chief Justice Ismail bin

Ishaq gave a lot of respect to a non-Muslim in his court and when someone objected to it he recited this verse to support his action.¹³

عن عبد الله بن عمرو؛ أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: "إن المقسطين في الدنيا على منابر من لؤلؤ بين يدي الرحمن، بما أقسطوا في الدنيا"¹⁴

Those who practice "qist" will be on the pulpits of light on right side of the Divine Throne.

Qatadah and ibni-Zaid's opinion about the abrogation of this verse by the verse of qital has been strongly refuted by Tabari and Qurtubi. Tabari says:

لا ينهاكم الله عن الذين لم يقاتلوكم في الدين، من جميع أصناف الملل والأديان أن تبرؤوهم وتصلوهم، وتقسطوا إليهم،¹⁵

This verse includes people of all faiths and religions.

He further says that the idea of abrogation of this verse does not make any sense.¹⁶ Qurtubi makes it clear that to majority of the exegetes this verse stands un-abrogated.¹⁷ This makes it very clear without any ambiguity that Islam teaches us to have peaceful relations with non-Muslims in normal circumstances.

عن عائشة رضي الله عنها قالت توفي رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ودرعه مرهونة عند يهودي بثلاثين صاعا من شعير¹⁸

Narrated by Aisha, Allah's Messenger, peace be upon him, died while his armor was mortgaged to a Jew for thirty 'Sa's' of barley.

Why Prophet Muhammad pbuh borrowed food from a Jew in lieu of his armor while there were companions who could help and at that time whole Arabia had surrendered to the prophet. Imam Nuwawi says he did just to teach us to have good dealings with non-Muslims. Muslims scholars have agreed that keeping normal relations with non-Muslims are allowed.¹⁹

و عن أنس رضي الله عنه قال كان غلام يهودي يخدم النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم فمرض فأتاه النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم فقعده عند رأسه فقال له أسلم فنظر إلى أبيه وهو عنده فقال أطمع أبا القاسم فأسلم فخرج النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم وهو يقول "الحمد لله الذي أنقذه من النار".²⁰

Narrated by Anas A young Jewish boy used to serve the Prophet and he became sick. So the Prophet went to visit him. He sat near his head and asked him to embrace Islam. The boy looked at his father, who was sitting there; the latter told him to obey Abul-Qasim and the boy embraced Islam. The Prophet came out saying: "Praises be to Allah Who saved the boy from the Hell-fire."²¹

قال قيس بن سعد وسهل بن حنيف إن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم مرت به جنازة فقام فقيل له إنه يهودي فقال: "أليست نفساً"²²

Sahl bin Hunaif and Qais bin Sa'd said a funeral passed in front of the Prophet pbuh and he stood up. When he was told that it was a funeral of a Jew, he said, "Is it not he a human being"?

From the above texts of the Quran and the Sunnah and their interpretations by various classical and modern exegetes, the following principles regarding Muslims relations with non-Muslims can be derived:

1. No one can be forced to accept Islam.
2. Muslims are not allowed to wage war against other people except in self defense.
3. Any peace offer from enemies must be considered seriously.
4. Muslims should treat non-Muslims with kindness, justice and nice behavior.
5. Muslims can carry out normal business deals with non-Muslims.

In spite of the above verses of the Qur'an and Traditions of the Prophet pbuh many orientalist and anti-Islamic propagandists present verses of the Qur'an and traditions of Prophet Muhammad pbuh out of context in order to make Islam look like a violent religion which teaches its followers to kill and wage wars against all those who are not Muslims. We need to understand these verses in the right context.

Generally Misquoted Verses of the Qur'an

Some of the misunderstood verses of Quran about combating are as follows.

وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ وَأَقْتُلُوهُمْ حَيْثُ تَقْتُلُوهُمْ وَأُخْرِجُوهُمْ مِنْ حَيْثُ أُخْرِجُوا مِنْكُمْ وَأَقْتُلُوهُمْ عِنْدَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ حَيْثُ يَقْتُلُوكُمْ فِيهِ فَإِنْ قَتَلْتُمْ فَأَقْتُلُوهُمْ كَمَا كُفِّرْتُمْ كَذَلِكَ جَزَاءُ الْكَافِرِينَ فَإِنْ أَنْتَبَهُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ وَقَاتِلُوا حَتَّى لَا تَكُونَ فِتْنَةٌ وَيَكُونَ الدِّينُ لِلَّهِ فَإِنْ أَنْتَبَهُوا فَلَا عُدْوَانَ عَلَيَّ وَالظَّالِمِينَ أَلْسِنَةُ الْحَرَامِ بِالسَّيْفِ الْحَرَامِ وَالْحَرَامَاتُ قِصَاصٌ فَمَنْ أَعَدَّى عَلَيْكُمْ فَأَعْدُوا عَلَيْهِ بِمِثْلِ مَا أَعَدَّى عَلَيْكُمْ وَأَتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الْمُتَّقِينَ (البقرة : 194-190)

Fight in the cause of Allah with those who fight against you, but do not exceed the limits. Allah does not like transgressors. Kill them wherever they confront you in combat and drive them out of the places from which they have driven you. *Though killing is bad, creating mischief is worse than killing.* Do not fight them within the precincts of the Sacred Mosque unless they attack you there; but if they attack you, put them to the sword; that is the punishment for such unbelievers. If they cease hostility, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. Fight against them until there is no more disorder and Allah's supremacy is established. If they

desist, let there be no hostility except against the oppressors. The Sacred month, *in which fighting is prohibited* is to be respected if the same is respected by the enemy: sacred things too are subject to retaliation. Therefore, if anyone *transgresses a prohibition* and attacks you, retaliate with the same force. Fear Allah, and bear in mind that Allah is with the righteous ²³

First of all according to Ibn-Abbas, who has been quoted by several Mufasssireen, such as Zamahsharee, Razee, Qurtubi, Rasheed Raza and Zuhaily, the whole set of these verses 190 to 194 were revealed in the following year of the Hudaibiyah Agreement when Muslims were proceeding for Umra to Makkah as per agreement. They were very suspicious about Makkans who may attack them breaching their agreement. Muslims did not want to fight for two reasons: firstly they were pilgrims who were not allowed to fight and secondly they were in the holy month in which fighting was not allowed. In this verse the word "قاتلوا" is used. That is from "مقاتلة" which means the fight is going on the other side has attacked the Muslims. Fight in the cause of Allah with those who fight against you" is a permission to fight back in case they attack Muslim pilgrims. Actually nothing happened as Makkans did not attack Muslims and Muslims did not have to fight. This background and context of the verses makes it clear that Islam is not encouraging Muslims to attack other people without any valid reason.

In case, the war breaks out the Muslims are required to chase them out from where they have chased Muslims out. Verse 193 makes the objectives of war clear. Muslims are allowed to fight back until two objectives are achieved. First objective is to eliminate the disorder. The word used for disorder in the Arabic text of Quran is "*Fitna*". The Egyptian scholar and author of exegesis "Al-Manar" Muhammad Abduhoo" disagrees with those interpreters like Al-Razi and Qurtubi who have translated the word "Fitna" as non-Islamic faith. General meaning of the word "*Fitna*" is disorder and disturbance. According to the exegesis "Al-Manar":

"(وَقَاتِلُوهُمْ حَتَّىٰ لَا تَكُونَ فِئْتَةً) عطف على (قَاتِلُوا) في الآية الأولى فتلك بينت بداية القتال وهذه بينت غايته وهي الا يوجد شىء من الفتنة في الدين. ولهذا قال الأستاذ الإمام :
 أى حتى لا تكون لهم قوة يفتنونكم بها ويؤذونكم لأجل الدين ويمنعونكم من اظهاره أو الدعوة اليه"²⁴

"And fight them until no *Fitna* is left" is next to the word "Fight" in the previous verse which was the reason to start the fight and

this one is the objective and that is to eliminate “Fitna” which means they do not have any more power and ability to create trouble in your faith and do not torture and stop you practicing your faith, expressing or preaching it.

“Fitna: in this context means that the non-Muslims do not allow Muslims to accept new faith. That is actually snatching the freedom of choice from believers. The meaning of verse 93 will be “fight against them so that they cannot disturb, tease or torture Muslims any more” Second objective is to establish the supremacy of Allah so that Muslims can have their own faith without any fear and trouble and they can practice and preach their religion with peace of mind and satisfaction.

فَإِذَا أَنْسَلَخَ الْأَشْهُرَ الْحُرْمَ فَاقْتُلُوا الْمُشْرِكِينَ حَيْثُ وَجَدْتُمُوهُمْ وَخُذُوهُمْ وَأَحْضُرُواهُمْ
وَأَعِدُوا لَهُمْ كُلَّ مَرْصَدٍ فَإِن تَابُوا وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَءَاتُوا الزَّكَاةَ فَخَلُّوا سَبِيلَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
عَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ (التوبة: 5)

When the forbidden months are over, then fight the mushrikīn wherever you find them, seize them, besiege them, and lie in ambush for them in every stratagem of war, but if they repent, establish Salah and pay Zakah, then let them go their way: surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.²⁵

The context of this verse and all the interpretations, classic or modern, makes it clear that this verse is not general. It applies to only those polytheists who violated the peace treaty with Muslims and waged war against them. Although they were the one who breached the treaty, still they were given four months to think carefully and decide whether they wanted to fight, accept Islam or leave the area²⁶. Even after all that, if they still asked for protection they should not be killed but protected. As the next verse clarifies it:

وَإِن أَحَدٌ مِّنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ اسْتَجَارَكَ فَأَجِرْهُ (التوبة: 6)

If anyone from the polytheist asks you for asylum, grant it to him.²⁷

قَاتِلُوا الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَلَا بِالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَلَا يُحَرِّمُونَ مَا حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَلَا
يَدِينُونَ دِينَ الْحَقِّ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ حَتَّى يُعْطُوا الْجِزْيَةَ عَن يَدٍ وَهُمْ صَاغِرُونَ
(التوبة: 29)

Fight those people of the Book (*Jews and Christians*) who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day, do not refrain from what has been prohibited by Allah and His Rasool and do not embrace the

religion of truth (*Al-Islam*), until they pay Jizya (*protection tax*) with their own hands and feel themselves subdued.²⁸

The reason to combat against people of the book in this verse is not because they are not Muslims as the purpose is not to make them Muslims. The punishment for not accepting Islam will be given in the life here after and Muslims are not to force people to embrace Islam. The purpose of fighting, in this verse, is to bring them under the control of the Islamic state so that they do not make conspiracies against Muslim State and do not pose a threat or danger. The nature of Jizya is more symbolic than financial as the amount is very insignificant which is only confirming they are under the state authority. According to the Quranic rules of combating against non-Muslims, if non-Muslims are not a threat and danger to the safety and security of Muslims, Islam or Islamic State they cannot be attacked by Muslim state. This verse cannot be interpreted in any other way against the overall rulings of the Quran.²⁹

The reason that this verse is asking Muslims to fight and bring them under Islamic state is because in 8 and 9 AH Christian Roman power had become a threat to the newly established Islamic state. All the exegetes, classical or modern, agree that Surah Toubah was revealed in 9AH and this particular verse was revealed when Prophet Muhammad pbuh and his companions were getting ready for the battle of Tabouk.³⁰ Tabouk expedition was initiated to counter and pre-empt the Roman army preparation to attack Madina.³¹ Many seerah authors termed this news of Roman preparation “a rumor” but Sayed Moududi proves it otherwise³² and William Muir states in his “The Life of Mahomet” that the Roman emperor did assemble his forces on the border on this occasion.³³ Because of this threat, Muslims in Madina were living under constant threat and tension. Omar ibn al-Khattab says when ever somebody knocked at his door he thought the Romans had attacked.³⁴ A Roman attack on Madina was the last thing the Prophet was expecting. This could cause the newly subdued Arab clans stand against Muslims, so he decided to immediately respond to the Roman threat before they reach Madina. A little knowledge of the back ground to this situation will help understand it better. After Hudabiyah truce in the 8th AH the Prophet pbuh sent his delegations to all the surrounding emperors and monarchs. A delegation of 15 people was killed at a place called Zat-u-Talah by

the Christians Arabs at the Syrian border who were living under the Roman influence.³⁵ Another ambassador of the Prophet Harith bin Umair was killed by the Christian governor of Basra who was working directly under Roman Caesar³⁶. Killing ambassadors was like declaring a war and a threat to the safety and security of Muslims, which made Muslims respond to it by sending an army of 3000 under the leadership of Zaid ibn Haritha to the Syrian border in 8AH which encountered an army of 100,000 of Roman soldiers under the leadership of Theodore, the brother of Caesar³⁷. This battle was fought at a place called M'utah, the name this battle is known in the history. This battle did not end up as decisive; none of the armies could achieve victory or defeat in the battle. Since number of Muslim army was only 3 percent of that of Romans, it was considered an achievement by Muslims. At this impressive show of power by Muslims against the superpower of that time, many Arab tribes on the border joined Muslims which made them look stronger. This included some of those chiefs who were very loyal to the Caesar like Farvah bin 'Amral Juzami, who was killed by Caesar later on. This made the Roman Emperor feel a threat to his power from Arabia and he planned to launch a big attack on Madinah. This was the threat that made nights of Muslims in Madina sleepless. When Prophet announced his going to fight against the Romans, it was very hot time of the year and the journey was long and hard. This was the situation the above verse, 9:29, was revealed to encourage Muslims get ready to fight the threatening enemy and bring that threatening powers under the authority of Muslim State so that Muslim were no more threatened and that they could live peacefully in their land. Let's look at the verse keeping this background in the mind, "Fight those people of the Book who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day, do not refrain from what has been prohibited by Allah and His Rasool and do not embrace the religion of truth until they pay Jizya with their own hands and feel themselves subdued".

عن ابن عمر رضي الله تعالى عنهما أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قال : أمرت أن أقاتل الناس حتى يشهدوا أن لا إله إلا الله ، وأن محمدا رسول الله ، ويقيموا الصلاة ، ويؤتوا الزكاة ، فإذا فعلوا ذلك ، عصموا مني دماءهم وأموالهم ، إلا بحق الإسلام ، وحسابهم على الله تعالى رواه البخاري ومسلم

On the authority of Abdullah ibn Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: I have been ordered to fight against the people

until they testify that there is none worthy of worship except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and until they establish the salah and pay the zakat. And if they do that then they will have gained protection from me for their lives and property, unless [they commit acts that are punishable] in Islam, and their reckoning will be with Allah.³⁸

This Hadith cannot be taken in its literal meanings for the following reasons:

1. According to the Qur'an no one can be forced to accept Islam. "There is no compulsion in religion".³⁹
2. Prophet Muhammad pbuh never forced or fought any one to make him accept Islam, so this is against the practices of the Prophet.
3. According to the most popular explanations of Sahih Bukhari and Muslim the word "the people" in the text of this Hadith does not mean everyone on the face of this earth.⁴⁰
4. The authenticity of some of the narrators of this Hadith has some questions.⁴¹
5. Ibni Hajar Asqalani, a 15th century scholar, offers several interpretations of this Hadith in his well known work "Fath ul Bari".⁴²
 - a) This Hadith is abrogated by later commandments.
 - b) This Hadith is not general but is about certain specific people.
 - c) The Hadith is only about the polytheists of Makkah.
 - d) The meaning of testifying here is not adopting Islam as religion but to accept the authority of Islam or agreeing to live in peace with Muslims.
 - e) Fighting here means accepting anything like an agreement or Jizya.
 - f) Testifying means here they accept to live in peace with Muslims which eventually can bring them closer to Islam.

Relations with Christians

The Muslim perspective of Christian-Muslim relation is based on the teachings of Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad SAW.

The Title says it all:

First of all the title that Qur'an gives to the Christians and Jews, "People of the Book" (أهل الكتاب) tells us that relations should be good in general, as the title is positive. The prefix (أهل) has been used in the Qur'an at various places in a positive meanings i.e. أهل التقوى (pious people), أهل المغفرة (forgiven people), أهل البيت (household) etc.

All of the Exegetes and jurists (Fuqaha) agree that the title “people of the book” is for the Jews and the Christians.⁴³

The Qur’an loudly calls the people of the book to the common terms which is an expression of positive relations. Prophet Muhammad SAW when he wrote to Heraclius he used the title “people of the book” as well as addressed him “The Great of the Romans” which was not only positive but was a praise for him.

Imam Razi, a great exegete of Qur’an explains that “people of the Book” is one of the best titles and a perfect name as the Almighty considered them related to His scripture. Its example is like that of “حافظ القرآن” (the one who memorize the Qur’an) or “حامل القرآن” (a carrier of the Qur’an) or when we call an exegete “يا مفسر القرآن” (O the one who explains the meanings of Qur’an). Addressing someone with this kind of title means the caller is giving a lot of respect and he wants the heart of the addressee feel good. It is just like an honest and just person, who in spite of disagreements would be honest and just in calling upon someone.⁴⁴

The way Qur’an addresses Christians and Jews by calling them with a respectable title proves that the purpose is not to create enmity but friendship and develop close relations. This positive and friendly title has not been used once or twice but it has been continuously repeated in the Qur’an for more than sixty times.

Friendly Criticism:

The verses which are critical to Christian theology and practices are very much toned in an advisory mode and not in the tone of enmity. Just like a father who is trying to make his son understand and says “O my son why you do wrong things, don’t do it”. It is the same tone when the Almighty addressed once Prophet Muhammad, who is the most beloved and highest ranking Prophet of Allah when He said,

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ لِمَ تُحَرِّمُ مَا أَحَلَّ اللَّهُ لَكَ⁴⁵.....

O Prophet, why do you ban (on yourself) something that Allah has made lawful for you.....

Now we compare this advisory tone used with the people of the Book:

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لِمَ تُحَاجُّونَ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ⁴⁶.....

O People of the Book why do you argue about Abraham.....

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لِمَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ⁴⁷.....

O People of the Book why do you deny the signs of Allah.....

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لِمَ تَلْبِسُونَ الْحَقَّ بِالْبَاطِلِ⁴⁸.....
 O People of the Book why do you confound the truth with
 falsehood
 قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لِمَ تُصَدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ⁴⁹.....
 O people of the book why do you obstruct believers from the
 divine path.....
 وَلَا تَقُولُوا ثَلَاثَةً إِنَّهُمْ لِحُكْمِ اللَّهِ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ⁵⁰.....
 Do not say “Three”. Stop it. That is good for you. Allah is the only
 One Allah.....

Criticism is for the betterment and not because of enmity

The verses in which Christian theology have been criticized and declared it a disbelief specially with respect to Trinity and Divinity of Jesus and are ending with an invitation to come back to Allah with pure belief and with a promise that Allah is Forgiving and Merciful. Let’s look for example the following set of verses from surah Al-Maidah,

لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْمَسِيحُ ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ وَقَالَ الْمَسِيحُ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ رَبِّي وَرَبَّكُمْ إِنَّهُ مَن يُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدْ حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ الْجَنَّةَ وَمَأْوَاهُ النَّارُ وَمَا لِلظَّالِمِينَ مِنْ أَنْصَارٍ لَقَدْ كَفَرَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ ثَلَاثٌ تَلْتِئَةٌ وَمَا مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِلَّا إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ وَإِن لَّمْ يَنْتَهُوا عَمَّا يَقُولُونَ لَيَمَسَّنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ أَفَلَا يَتُوبُونَ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ ت وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ⁵¹

They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary. The Messiah (himself) said: O Children of Israel worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Lo! Whoso ascribes partners unto Allah, for him Allah hath forbidden paradise. His abode is the Fire. For evil-doers there will be no helpers. They surely disbelieve who say: Lo! Allah is the third of three; when there is no Allah save the One Allah. If they desist not from so saying a painful doom will fall on those of them who disbelieve. Will they not rather turn unto Allah and seek forgiveness of Him? For Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.⁵²

After the criticism, the eventual purpose is not enmity but invitation by saying “will they not rather turn unto Allah and seek forgiveness of Him?” with a good hope by saying, “For Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” This is showing Allah’s love for them⁵³. Many exegetes mentioned that this verse is the verse of love.⁵⁴ We note here that even the criticism is not to destroy relations or curse them but to bring them closer to the right belief and to the Mercy of Allah.

Commonalities and not differences:

Besides this title, the Qur'an invites Christians to be on good terms with Muslims. Islam does not want good relations with Christians on its own terms but on common terms, which shows that even if the Christians are not converted, Islam still wants Muslims to find some common grounds to have good relations with Christians. Although the title "People of the Book" is for both Jews and Christians but this call to be together on common terms is especially for Christians. As majority of the exegetes agree that the following particular verse is regarding the Christian delegation of Najran as per context of this verse in Sura Ali-Imran.⁵⁵

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ⁵⁶

Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).

The Qur'an invites Christians to get closer on common points between the Quran and the Bible. Not worshipping anyone but One Allah is clear in the Bible both in Old and New Testaments:

"Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no Allah apart from me, a righteous Allah and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am Allah, and there is no other."⁵⁷

"I am the LORD your Allah, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other Allahs before Me"⁵⁸

"The Lord our Allah, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your Allah with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with your entire mind, and with all your strength"⁵⁹

These are the commonalities to which Qur'an invites Christians to have good relations with Muslims.

The Nearest of them in Affection

One characteristic of Christians in the Qur'an that has not been mentioned for any other non-Muslim group is that they are nearest to the Muslims in affection. The following verse is unique in this regard:

لَتَجِدَنَّ أُمَّةً أَنْتَ لِلنَّاسِ عَدَاوَةٌ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الْيَهُودَ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا وَلَتَجِدَنَّ أَقْرَبَهُمْ مَوَدَّةً لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّا نَصْرِي ذَلِكَ بَأَنَّ مَتَّحِمٌ فَسَيَسِينُ وَرُهْبَانًا وَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَجِيرُونَ⁶⁰

You will find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters. And you will find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those who say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant.⁶¹

Most of the exegetes mentioned that this verse was revealed about a group of Ethiopian Christians who came to visit Prophet Muhammad in Madina and when the Prophet recited a part of the Qur'an to them, which was Surah Yaseen, they cried and accepted Islam. Text of the verse does not mention this background so the meanings can be taken in general as well. Mufti Muhammad Shafee' makes it clear and says that,

“Majority of the exegetes agree that although these verses revealed in the context of Ethiopian King Negas and his delegation, but the text is general and applies on all the Christians who are like that Ethiopian group; fair and honest in their judgment.”⁶²

Well known classical exegete Zamahshari says this verse means that Christians are not stubborn like Jews. They have a soft corner and inclination to Islam.⁶³ Imam Razi explains the same verse saying that Christians, in general, do not prefer worldly glitters and power over the Allah's worship and hence they are not arrogant. Any one like that will not be jealous, enemy or dislike others but will be soft hearted and easy to deal with. Even thou Christians differ theologically with Muslims more than Jews, Almighty has blessed Christians with the title of “nearest in affection” just because of their kind heartedness and their inclination towards the day hereafter than worldly attractions.⁶⁴

This verse of the Qur'an plays important role in establishing good relations with Christians.

Only a Nice and Meaningful Dialogue

Holy Qur'an described the importance of dialogue with Christians and Jews. The dialogue has to be positive and not to humiliate and

repel them from Islam and Muslims. The following verse makes it clear:

وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ قَوْلُوا ءَأَمَّا بِالَّذِي أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَأَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَاللَّهُنَّ وَاللَّهُمَّ وَاحِدٌ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ (العنكبوت: 46)

Don't argue with the followers of earlier Revelation except in a better way, unless it is with those who had done wrong. Say to them "we believe in revelation that came down to us and also in what came down to you. Our Allah and your Allah are the same and we surrender to His will"⁶⁵

The Muslims are being commanded by Qur'an to make a useful and best possible dialogue with the Christians and the Jews. The Muslims are supposed to respond to a harsh attitude with a soft and reasonable reply. Anger should be responded with humility and ignorantly nonsense kind of objections about Islam should be responded with sober and evidently reasonable proofs and arguments.⁶⁶ "Those who have done wrong" means who unjustly waged a war against Muslims or have been unethical and stubborn.

⁶⁷ Although this meaningful dialogue has been ordered with the polytheist also, but Christians and Jews have more reasons to be closer to them. So Muslims have been asked to make Christians and Jews feel better and closer to Islam and Muslims to tell them that Muslims share with them the same Allah and same revelation from Him. So that there is no point of enmity left between Muslims and the people of the Book⁶⁸ The Almighty forbids Muslims to argue unnecessarily without a vision or objective. But have a dialogue with them only with best manners and most appropriate words so that they get attracted to the truth and not make them frustrated and run away. The purpose should not be to defeat or humiliate them but to pass on the Divine Message to them.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Muslims need to deal with Christians politely and respectfully. They should try to get close to them with the intention of Da'wah.

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