

CHAPTER IV

TREATING NON-MUSLIMS IN THE LIGHT OF THE PROPHET'S SĪRAH AND MUSLIM HISTORY

THE Qur'an, the hadiths, Islamic tradition, and history itself provide us with many examples of peaceful interfaith relations. Whether they were the minority or the majority community, Muslims have always reached out to other religious groups. This section explores a selected number of cases to illustrate the richness and depth of Islam's call for interfaith dialogue and peaceful relations. The Prophet's life is full of examples of tolerance and nonviolent ways of politely communicating Allah's word to the non-believers, even when Islam was in its early stages. Obviously, a brief section can only provide a few of these many examples.

First of all, it is important to emphasize the power of the Prophet's own example as a person who always favored dialogue. This power derived from his unexampled authority. The following account testifies to that authority. 'A'ishah, one of his wives, was once asked about her husband's spiritual and moral standing. She asked: "Do you not read the Qur'an?" They replied: "Yes." She then said: "The Prophet is the living Qur'an."¹ In other words, he is a perfect embodiment of the Qur'an's teachings.

The Qur'an extols the Prophet as a messenger of mercy and blessing to all in the worlds (21:107) and a lamp that spreads light (33:46). It asks people to use his way of life as their model (33:21). When 'A'ishah was asked about his moral conduct, she replied: "He was not a lecherous person nor uproarious in the market. He would not return evil for evil; rather, he would respectfully tolerate and forgive."² Many of his other qualities are narrated in the same hadith.

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The Makkans, indifferent to or perhaps frightened by his exemplary personal qualities, persecuted him and his followers and eventually imposed a total socioeconomic boycott upon them, thereby forcing them to live in seclusion and poverty. But later, when a severe famine afflicted the Makkans and many were dying of hunger, his staunch enemy Abu Sufyan approached him, saying, “Muhammad, pray for the Makkans. They are dying.” Muhammad raised his hands in prayer, and Allah sent a heavy rain, through His mercy, to end the famine.³ From the very beginning of his mission, the Prophet did his best to maintain a peaceful coexistence with his enemies and respect their religions and beliefs. He promoted freedom of thought and free expression in preaching.⁴ Thus, his life is a great model for Muslims, imams, and everyone else to follow in their efforts to develop mutual good relations among themselves and with non-Muslims. By modeling themselves upon Muhammad, Muslims become a people of forbearance, wisdom, caring, and justice. Muslims stand with suffering humanity, for justice and for the welfare of everyone, regardless of race, gender, color, and religion. This is real *da‘wah* and the way of the Prophet and of all prophets. It should be the way of all Muslims as well.

Prophet Muhammad’s Interactions with the Makkans

Persecution and Muhammad’s response: The Makkans’ persecution of the Muslims increased to the extent that the Muslims faced a total socioeconomic boycott in the form of an unjust pact designed to isolate them from all aid and comfort. The Muslims and their supporters were forced to take shelter with Abu Talib for security reasons. The pact remained in effect for three years, during which they were forced to eat leaves from trees and the skins of dead animals. The cries of starving children could be heard even from a distance. Many Muslim women and children died of hunger. In spite of such barbaric treatment, however, Muhammad never prayed for the Makkans’ destruction.⁵

On another occasion during this period, Muhammad went to Ta’if, a prosperous town near Makkah, and invited its people to Islam. But contrary to his hopes and expectations, he encountered great hostility. He managed to meet with some of his relatives and their friends and

present Islam to them, but even after a few days the people's initial hostility had not decreased. So he decided to leave. As if to hasten his departure, the people of Ta'if hooted him through the alleyways, pelted him with stones, and pursued him for two or three miles. Bloody from wounds to his head, the Prophet became very weak and took shelter against the wall of a vineyard. He prayed to his Lord, telling Him what had happened and asked for His mercy upon him. In response, Allah sent angel Gabriel along with the angel of the mountains. They asked the Prophet's permission to destroy both Ta'if and Makkah. He pleaded with them not to do so, saying, "I would rather have someone from their loins who will worship Allah, the Almighty, who has no associate."⁶

After Islam had established its foothold in Madinah, 'Abd Ya'lil, the leader of Ta'if who had instigated the children to throw stones at him, came there to worship. Seeing him enter the Prophet's Mosque, the Prophet stood up to welcome him and asked him to sit at his side so that he might honor him. The Prophet said nothing about the bad treatment he had received at Ta'if. Yet when 'A'ishah later on asked the Prophet which incident had most affected him, he referred to Ta'if. This high level of forgiveness and generosity toward a former enemy and many others who made him suffer is hard to find today, even among very religious Muslims.⁷

Muhammad Prays for the Byzantines' Victory over the Persians

In the political conflict between the Byzantine and Persian empires, the young Muslim community was sympathetic to the Christian Byzantines while the pagan Makkans prayed for the Zoroastrian Persians' victory. After the Persians defeated the Byzantines, who lost Syria and Palestine, which represented most of their Middle Eastern territories, the Makkans ridiculed Muhammad and his followers: "We should get rid of you, like the Persians got rid of the Byzantines." Undeterred and undiscouraged, Muhammad prayed for the Byzantines' victory. Allah then revealed the following verses: "Defeated have been the Byzantines in the lands close-by; yet it is they who, notwithstanding this their defeat, shall be victorious within a few years: [for] with

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God rests all power of decision, first and last. And on that day will the believers [too, have cause to] rejoice” (30:2-4). The revelation proved true a few years later, when the Byzantines regained control of their lost territories.

This incident shows how the Prophet always did his best to identify those faiths that were closer to Islam and then initiate better relations with them. While it is essential to build good relations with everyone, it is, of course, easier to build them with some rather than others. Muslims living in the West can take full advantage of the Prophet’s methodology of building interfaith relations.

The Christian King of Ethiopia Welcomes the Muslim Refugees

This is another example of Prophet Muhammad’s initiatives to build bridges with Christians. Responding to the worsening conditions in Makkah, he sought ways to lessen his followers’ suffering. When the Prophet learned the negus (king) of Ethiopia was a righteous Christian, he permitted his followers to seek asylum there hoping that he would protect them.

A group of sixteen Muslims left Makkah during the night. When the pagans learned of their departure, they were very upset, for they did not want the Muslims to find a safe haven. So, they dispatched a group of young men to intercept the Muslims before they could reach Ethiopia. However, the Muslims arrived safely. Then, the Makkans sent a delegation to the negus bearing precious gifts and requested that he send these “rebels” to Makkah. They told him that these “rebels,” puffed with pride in their Islam, had insulted not only the Makkans’ own ancestral beliefs, but the beliefs of Christians as well.

The negus, a just man, called the Muslims to his palace and asked them to explain themselves. Ja’far ibn Abu Talib stood up to testify to his new faith. When asked to recite from the Qur’an, he recited from *surah Maryam*. The Ethiopian ruler, listening to the recitation, wept so profusely that his beard became wet. Recovering himself, he told the Makkans that this revelation, and that given to Jesus, came from the same source. Thus, he refused to hand over the Muslims and returned the Makkans’ gifts. As a last resort, the Makkans told him that these

Muslims considered Jesus to be only a servant of God, not his Son, and that Muslims rejected the Trinity. When asked about this, Ja'far recited: "He (Jesus) is God's servant and Messenger; a spirit and a word from God that He bestowed on the Virgin Mary." [He said this in reference to Qur'an 19:16-36]. Hearing this, the Negus said, "Even so do we believe! Blessed be you and your Master." He asked the delegation to leave and told the Muslims to live in his country with security as long as they liked.⁸

These examples show how strong interfaith relations enabled Christians and Muslims to help each other in times of need. The early Muslims grieved with the Christians for their loss to the Zoroastrians and prayed for their victory. Then, when the early Muslims needed a refuge, the Christian ruler of Ethiopia provided them with one. In general, healthy interfaith relations not only facilitate understanding, but also nurture community connections and support during crises. Many Muslims living in the West after 9/11 were glad to discover they enjoyed such support. It was no accident that they did so, for their prior commitment to interfaith dialogue had built strong bridges that served them well during their time of need.

Muhammad at Madinah

When Muhammad and his Companions migrated to Madinah, he did his best to make Madinah a model city of peaceful coexistence. This was not an easy thing to do, for he had to reconcile three distinctive and often mutually hostile groups:

- The Muslims: The Qur'an calls these Muslim migrants the *Muhajirun* (Immigrants), and those who had accepted Islam and received them, the Ansar (Supporters). Yet the Ansar tribes were each other's enemies. The Prophet had to find a way to make peace between them while settling the *Muhajirun* among them.
- The Polytheistic Tribes: The 'Aws and Khazraj were among the many idol-worshipping tribes living in and around Madinah. Some were friendly; others were very hostile to these immigrants. Muhammad had to build relations with them to bring peace to Madinah.

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- The Jewish Tribes: Several Jewish tribes had migrated to Madinah, mostly from Syria following the Byzantine persecution campaigns. They had adopted Arab dress, spoke Arabic as their native language, and adopted other local customs. However, they had maintained their distinctive character by remaining true to their Jewish heritage. These tribes were rich and had a strong economic influence in Madinah. Well aware that the situation of the Muslims in Madinah was dangerously unsecure, Muhammad first established unity among them. Then, meeting with leaders of the various Jewish and polytheist tribes, he persuaded them to sign a treaty of mutual support and defense. Some of the provisions of the pact with the Jews stated:
- All Jews are one Ummah with the Muslims. The Jews shall profess their religion, and the Muslims shall profess theirs.
- The Jews shall be responsible for their expenditures, and the Muslims shall be responsible for theirs.
- If attacked by a third party, each shall come to the other's assistance.
- Each party shall consult with the other, mutual relations shall be founded on righteousness, and any wrong doing is totally excluded.
- Neither shall do any wrong doing to the prejudice of the other.
- The wronged party shall be helped.
- The Jews shall contribute to the cost of war so long as they are fighting alongside the Muslims.
- Madinah shall remain secure and inviolable for all those who sign this treaty.
- Should any disagreement arise between the signatories, Allah, the All High, and His Messenger shall settle it.
- The signatories shall boycott the Quraysh commercially and not help the tribe in any way.
- Each party shall contribute to Madinah's defense, in case of foreign aggression, in its respective area.
- This treaty shall not hinder either party from seeking lawful revenge.⁹

Abd al-Rahman Azzam, the Arab League's first secretary general and called by the New York Times as "one of the great statesmen of contemporary Islam," wrote that:

The pact [between the Muslims and the Jews] mounted to an agreement for peaceful coexistence, a defensive alliance for cooperation against aggression that sought to protect a group of small states, each enjoying under the provisions of the pact control over its own people and freedom to preach its own religion. The signatories guaranteed to aid one another and to protect each other's beliefs against anyone who wished to bring harm upon their lands and peoples. Thus, they guaranteed freedom of belief as well as freedom of preaching to members of the Pact, despite the diversity of their beliefs.¹⁰

Prophet Muhammad preferred building relations with Jews because of the religious teachings that bind the two religions together. This is why the Qur'an calls Jews, as well as Christians, the "People of the Book." Among the many things the three religions have in common is their belief in the One God. While Muslims should do their best to build interfaith relations with all religious groups, interfaith relations with Jews and Christians should be given priority.

The Christian Delegation from Najran

The people of Najran, lying to the south of Makkah on the way to Yemen, were mostly Christians. One day, a delegation of sixty Najrani political and religious leaders came to Madinah to meet with Prophet Muhammad. He and his companions welcomed them and let them stay in the Prophet's Mosque. Treated as special guests, some accounts state that they were allowed to worship in the mosque. They spoke with the Prophet about Jesus being the Son of God. In return, he recited Qur'an 3:36-64. The friendly dialogue continued for a second day, as both parties presented their arguments.

Since both parties stuck to their original positions, they decided to ask God to send a curse (*mubahilah*) upon the party who was mistaken. This was a common practice between religious groups or figures in that period; in reality, it was a way for God to "decide" an argument. So, both parties decided that the leaders of both groups would come forth with their families the following morning and invoke a curse upon the other group. The Prophet came out with his daughter Fatimah, his son-in-law 'Ali, and his two grandsons al-Hasan and al-Husayn. The Najrani delegation did not appear, but rather withdrew

from this event and signed a peace treaty instead.¹¹ A pillar in the Prophet's Mosque where the groups gathered and talked has been known ever since as *ustana al-wafud* (the pillar of delegates). While many such memorials have been erased from the mosque, this sign still remains.

The Treaty of Hdaybiyyah

After the Battle of the Ditch, Madinah's political life finally became stable. The Arab tribes, afraid of Makkah's threats, made treaties of mutual support and cooperation with the Muslims. The following year, Muhammad wanted to perform *'umrah* (the lesser pilgrimage) in complete peace. Soon he announced his intention and asked people to join him. He told them that since there would be no fighting, everyone should keep his sword sheathed. Dressed in *ihram* (the pilgrim's garb), some 1,400 Muslims started moving toward Makkah. But when they reached Hdaybiyyah, they were told that the Makkans would not allow them to enter the city. The Prophet exhorted his people to use diplomacy to resolve the issue peacefully.

The two parties stood at extremes. The Makkans wanted to fight; Muhammad wanted to make peace. The Makkans tried to force a battle by making many hard proposals. Muhammad was ready to accept them, as long as he could see a sign of hope. The Muslims were furious when he signed a treaty they regarded as humiliating.¹² Yet this treaty is proof of Islam and the Prophet's desire for peaceful coexistence with people irrespective of their religion or cultural association. Suhayl ibn 'Amru signed it on the Makkans' behalf, and the Prophet signed it on the Muslims' behalf. Its articles are as follows:

1. There shall be no war between the parties for ten years.
2. During this period, every person belonging to the two parties shall be safe and secure, and none of them shall raise swords against the other.
3. If any Qurayshi goes to Madinah, he or she shall be returned; if any Muslim goes to Makkah, he or she shall not be sent back.
4. The tribes of Arabia shall be free to make a treaty with either party.

5. The Muslims shall return to Madinah without performing 'umrah. Next year, they can perform 'umrah and stay in Makkah for three days.
6. They shall not come with arms, swords shall remain in their scabbards, and the scabbards shall be kept in bags.¹³

This treaty shows that the Prophet preferred peace even at the cost of annoying some of his close followers. He knew that peaceful living would allow Muslims to dialogue with non-Muslims, move about freely, and build relations with other tribes. This treaty is an excellent example of going the extra mile with others to achieve peace.

The Abbasid Period and the Promotion of Interfaith Dialogue

Although awash with blood today, Baghdad was once the seat of a great civilization. During most of the Abbasid period (750–1258), its population was ethnically and religiously diverse and freedom of thought and expression were common. In his introduction to his *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule*, David Thomas writes:

Baghdad became a center of a civil society where members of different faiths mixed with confidence and freedom, intellectual and religious influences extended in all directions, and relations between scholars, professionals and many of the common populace flourished in ways that prohibit any over-simple account in which Muslims looked upon their client Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians.¹⁴

Thomas' account suggests that during this period, Christians felt free to debate and associate with their Muslim counterparts in public. Proof of this can be found in the following account in which a Christian leader named Bariha, along with other priests, came to see the Muslim theologian Hisham ibn al-Hakim. Hisham reports this event in one of his letters:

While I was seated in my shop at the Karakh gate with people around me reciting the Qur'an for me, suddenly there appeared a crowd of Christians, both priests and others, about a hundred men all in black with hooded cloaks. Among them was the chief Patriarch Bariha. They stopped at my shop, and

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my chair was offered to Bariha. He sat on it, and the bishop and the monks stood around leaning on their staffs, with their hooded cloaks over their heads.¹⁵

This incident is important, because it shows the respect that Muslims and Christians had for each other. Christians were free to move around and even to engage in polemics without fear. Even some caliphs became interested in these theological debates, for these events took place openly and equitably, without hypocrisy or arrogance, and sought only the truth. "The Christians were allowed full freedom to present their arguments and to say whatever they wanted, which they did without wishing to vex anyone in any way, as do the common people, the ignorant, and the insolent of our own religion in their discussions."¹⁶ The authorities would name a day and invite theologians from different religions to debate certain theological issues freely. The spirit of these undertakings provides a rich field of information about how Jews, Christians, and Muslims influenced each other during the early development of theology.

When Baghdad came under Muslim rule, Muslim and Christian leaders quickly joined forces and, as a result, benefited from each other's skills and accomplishments. Christian bishops as well as leaders of others religions enjoyed the caliphs' respect. Nestorian Patriarch Timothy declared: "I enjoyed direct access to the caliph's presence."¹⁷

The Muslims' appreciation of Christians during the Abbasid period is seen in the prominence of such Christian scholars as Hunayn ibn Ishaq, his son Ishaq, and their colleague Qusta ibn Luqa, all of whom were known for translating ancient texts into Arabic for the benefit of the caliph and the nobles. They and countless other less famous Christian translators were given proper respect and fair remuneration for their work. Similarly, Muslim philosophers were often the pupils of Christian scholars, as in the case of al-Farabi, Yuhanna ibn Haylan, and Abu Bishr Matti ibn Yunus. Even Muslim theologians were known to consult Christians occasionally, as in the case of 'Abdullah ibn Sa'id ibn Kullab and a certain Pethion, who met in a church cloister in Baghdad's *Dar al-Rum* quarter.¹⁸

The first generation of Arabic-speaking Christians, like Theodore Abu Qurrah, 'Ammar al-Basri, and Habib ibn Khidmah Abu Ra'ita,

were deeply involved in the then-current circles of Islamic theology. In fact, they borrowed techniques and concepts to help them articulate their understanding of the Trinity and the Incarnation. These theologians were known for their innovative arguments, the fruit of their training with their Muslim counterparts. On the other side, many Muslim theologians studied Christianity and the Bible. In some places, however, such study resulted in mistrust and controversy, and “dialogue” assumed the form of “diatribe.” Even though relations between theologians on both sides occasionally took this polemical cast, the overall interaction between them was peaceful.¹⁹

Throughout most of the Abbasid era, Christians enjoyed security and freedom. There were Christian physicians, financiers, and personal secretaries in the palaces of caliphs and governors. They wore the same clothes, played the same games, and enjoyed many of the same comforts that the Muslims did. Just as Muslims living in the West are increasingly becoming Western in lifestyle, even naming their children in the Western style, Christians living at the time of the Abbasids were influenced by the dominant Muslim culture. The influence extended to artistic culture. In her study of Abbasid artistry, Lucy-Anne Hunt shows how Islamic arts may have influenced the way Christians decorated their churches. There was always, as is to be expected, a minority of people who complained about the Christian influence over the caliphate; however, such complaints did not change government policy.²⁰

This interaction between Christian and Muslim theologians and nobles was not limited to matters of religion. They socialized together, dined together, and exchanged gifts. It was common in Baghdad for Muslim theologians and nobles to visit Christian monasteries on Christian holy days, participate in Christian celebrations, and sit at table together. Their Christian counterparts would make similar visits to mosques on Muslim holy days. Some caliphs would even visit monasteries and socialize with the monks. Caliphs Ma'mun and al-Mutawakkil spent much time in monasteries, and Ma'mun became an admirer of the Christian liturgies performed there.²¹

David Thomas, in his *Early Muslim Polemic against Christianity* explains the exchange between the Christians and Muslims:

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Christians participated in Islamic society as far as this benefited them, and they took advantage where they could get away with it. They enriched society with the intellectual heritage and talents that they brought, and ideas they could borrow and ways of thinking in which they saw advantage enriched them. There was a great deal of discussion and disputation over matters of faith, and there flourished a polemical literature in which the respective positions became set and developed in detail and sophistication.²²

Andalusia and Interfaith Dialogue

Muslims and Jews call Andalusia (Islamic Spain) their “golden era” of mutual understanding and interfaith cooperation. Spain became part of the Muslim world at the beginning of the eighth century. Muslims soon turned it into a center of interreligious and intercultural civilization. The result was the birth of Europe’s first true cosmopolitan culture. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students studied together and became friends. The graduates of schools in Cordoba and other cities translated classical Greek and Roman works into Arabic and Spanish. For example, they translated Aristotle’s work on physics and natural history into Arabic from Greek.

Andalusia developed three different literary traditions during Europe’s Middle Ages. Muslim philosophers and scientists developed knowledge in medicine, optics, algebra, chemistry, and other sciences. Jewish scholars gave shape to the Talmudic tradition, and Christian Europe sent its theologians to study philosophy and sciences under Muslim and Jewish scholars in Andalusia. The eleventh century saw Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Maimonides as towering philosophical figures searching for a solution to the seeming contradiction between religious and scientific truth.

Akbar S. Ahmed, in his *Islam Today*, quotes Washington Irving, an American diplomat and revered writer of the nineteenth century, on Andalusia:

As a consequence, their heroism was only equaled by their moderation, and in birth, for a time, they excelled the nations with whom they contended. Severed from their native homes, they loved the land given them as they supposed by Allah and strove to embellish it with everything that could

administer to the happiness of man. Laying the foundation of their power in a system of wise and equitable laws, diligently cultivating the arts and sciences, and promoting agriculture, manufactures and commerce, they gradually formed an empire unrivalled for its prosperity by any of the empires of Christendom... The cities of Arabian Spain became the resort of Christian artisans, to instruct themselves in the useful arts. The Universities of Toledo, Cordova, Seville, and Granada, were sought after by the pale student from other lands to acquaint himself with the sciences of the Arabs and the treasure lore of antiquity.²³

Many European scholars have confirmed Andalusia's rich literature and its wider influence. People living in Africa called it the "Lost Garden of Eden," as Roger Boase observes. "This is hardly surprising," Boase says, because in Muslim Spain Arab civilization reached a level of artistic and intellectual refinement unattained elsewhere. This refinement was best expressed in poetry that since pre-Islamic times had been the art in which Arabs had always excelled. The style of this poetry could be described as Baroque and elliptical, at times even precious, because it relies on the use of striking similes, metaphors and conceits within a contemporary strict metrical system and a traditional framework of themes. The poet was a jeweler with words, seeking the means of verbal images to fix and thereby eternalize a fleeting experience of joy or sadness or aesthetic delight, seeking also to pay homage to a patron, to lampoon an enemy or to make a humorous observation.²⁴

In conclusion, modern Western societies need to redefine themselves as communities of civil society. Previous periods of civility contrast strongly with the violence and scapegoating seen in modern times. Today, Western societies are faced with numerous problems, many of their own making. In their fight against external terrorism and its threat, they raise few challenges to the ways in which they themselves are undermining the very foundation of their own civil society. For example, do these societies look carefully enough at how well they are protecting the rights and freedom of their ethnic and religious minorities, especially their Muslims? Are they fulfilling their responsibility to uphold the freedom of worship and respect for religious pluralism? What will be the future of immigrants who, looking for a better life,

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come to the West? Many of them now live in anxiety and fear. Can Europe's notion of humanism be sustained in the face of populations that are neither European nor white?

Akbar S. Ahmed has raised these and other questions in order to turn Western scholars' attention to the example of Andalusia so that they might redefine the concept of civil society. Around a millennia ago, Andalusia stood for a civilized society that encouraged and supported religious and ethnic pluralism and free debate. Libraries and colleges were open to all, free education was linked with incentives for excellence, public baths and parks were plentiful, poetry and architecture flourished, and above all there existed a respect for humanity and human endeavor.²⁵

How did this civilization end? When King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella conquered Andalusia in early 1492, they immediately ordered the Jews to convert or leave the country. These orders were carried out by August of the same year, and thus Andalusia's Jewish culture ended. The same rule was applied to Muslims as well, with similar results. A quotation from Thomas Arnold regarding the contrasting status of Christian Arabs under Muslim rule captures, from an Islamic perspective, the message of interfaith dialogue and its necessity:

Had attempts been made to convert the Christians by force when they first came under Mohammedan rule, it would not have been possible for Christians to have survived among them up to the times of the Abbasid caliphs. From ... the toleration extended toward the Christian Arabs by the victorious Muslims of the first century of Hijrah and continued by succeeding generations, we may surely infer that those Christian tribes that embraced Islam did so of their own choice and free will. The Christian Arabs of the present day, dwelling in the midst of a Mohammedan population, are a living testimony of this toleration. The native Christians certainly preferred the rule of the Mohammedans to that of the crusaders, and when Jerusalem fell finally into the hands of the Muslims, the Christian population of Palestine seems to have welcomed their new masters and to have submitted quietly and contentedly to their rule.²⁶

The Crusades and Sultan Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin)

The Crusades, which lasted from 1095 to 1291, sought to free the Holy Land of Jerusalem from Muslims. The brutal and bloody Crusades did indeed “free” the Holy Land, but in the process they stained the streets of its cities with the blood of its Muslim, Jewish, and Christian inhabitants. This horrific oppression drove Sultan Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi to liberate Jerusalem. After he defeated the Crusaders, however, he made sure to treat them with kindness. One story tells how he postponed attack on a castle so that a planned wedding could first take place within its walls before it fell into Muslim hands. In return for this respectful consideration, the bride’s mother sent food and flowers to the Muslim army surrounding the castle as its share in the wedding celebration.²⁷

Although the Crusades were violent and bloody and Muslim-Christian relations worsened as a result, Muslims and Christians, having committed themselves to peaceful coexistence, did not give up their efforts. Even during these hard times, Sultan al-Nasir (1062-88), a Muslim ruler in North Africa, sent a priest from his realm to be ordained as a bishop so that the needs of the Christians in his domain would be met. Pope Gregory VII (1020-85) was greatly impressed by this act of generosity and wrote an amazed letter of thanks and appreciation.²⁸

The Ottoman Period

Following the Mamluk period, the Ottoman Empire controlled large parts of the Middle East, Eastern Europe and parts of central Asia and extended its authority over many ethnic, religious, and cultural communities. The sultans’ administration designed a complex system to manage and govern these different (and often conflicting) religious groups. The Ottomans continued the tradition of respectful tolerance and religious autonomy called as the Millet system in continuation to the concept of *ahl al-Dhimmah* in the Muslim tradition during the reign of Muhammad the Conqueror (1451-81) and after. The three leading non-Muslim religious communities – the Jews, the Greek Orthodox

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Church, and the Armenian Church – were established as recognized *dhimmi* communities (millets).

Millet is an Ottoman term for a religious minority living in the Ottoman Empire. Originally, it comes from the Arabic word *millah* (religious community). Each millet was led by its own religious dignitary: a chief rabbi for the Jews, and a patriarch for the Greek Orthodox and Armenian communities. Each community was responsible for collecting and allocating its own taxes, making educational arrangements, and handling such internal personal status legal matters as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In the pre-modern Middle East, identity was based largely on religion. This system functioned until the European concepts of nationalism and ethnicity filtered into the Ottoman Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century. At that time, due to the Tanzimat reforms, the term started to refer to a legally protected ethnic and religious minority group other than the ruling Sunni community. Such autonomy did not exist in the West at that time.

The Contemporary Period

In our own time, interfaith dialogue has grown and contacts between different religions have increased. The world is rapidly changing. Globalization has made it impossible for the believers of one religion to be indifferent to the believers of another. The so-called “New World Order” makes cross-religious and cross-cultural contacts practically unavoidable, for television, radio, film, books and the Internet continue to narrow the gulfs that once separated religions and cultures. It is becoming harder for any religious, ethnic, or racial group to remain unaware of the teachings and practices of other religions and cultures.

Despite the ongoing conflicts and violence, many Muslims communities and individuals live in peace and cooperation with non-Muslims. The media tend to ignore these stories and experiences and focus, instead, on violent clashes and events. Yet this indifference must not deter those who are committed to interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogues are perfect settings not only for nurturing positive and constructive Muslim and non-Muslim relations, but also for spreading

them abroad and allowing such relationships to be the guiding model for interaction.²⁹

One such model is based on an event in the life of St. Francis of Assisi. When St. Francis arrived in Damietta (Egypt) during the Fifth Crusade, he was agonized to see the destruction caused by the Crusaders. When he met later on with Sultan al-Kamil, a local Muslim ruler, he was amazed that the sultan received him courteously and treated him well. Ricoldo de Monte Croce from the Assisi Order spent some twenty years traveling through the Middle East and wrote a very impressive account of his good relations and friendly encounters with Muslims.³⁰

Soon after gaining their independence from their colonial masters, many Muslim countries sought better relations with the Christians living among them. Representatives of each country's religions met in conferences dedicated to interfaith dialogue. One such Christian-Muslim conference was held in Tripoli (Libya) on February 1-5, 1976. This event was organized in cooperation with the Libyan government and was co-sponsored by the Vatican. Christian and Muslim delegates from around the world participated and, at the end, issued a twenty-four point joint declaration. As a sign of good will, Benghazi's Catholic Church was reopened on December 8, 1977. Muslim and Christian scholars from Africa, the Middle East, and other areas were invited to the ceremony. This conference marked a great breakthrough in Muslim-Christian relations. Ministers of foreign affairs from the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) endorsed the declaration in their meeting in Istanbul on May 12-15, 1976.³¹

Following is a partial list of the Muslim scholars who played key roles in promoting interfaith dialogue during the twentieth century: Isma'il R. al-Faruqi, Jamal Barzinji, Iqbal J. Unus, Muhammad Abdul Raouf, Naim Akbar (the United States); Sheikh Ahmad M. Zabara (Yemen); Ali Arslan Edin and Youssef Diaa (Turkey); Mahmoud Albaji (Tunisia); Sheikh Hasan Khattab (Syria); Soulainman Aboubakr (South Africa); Othman Shahin and Husein Muhammad Karibulla (Sudan); Ali Ahmad Hasan (Somalia); Ibrahim Kazem (Qatar); Khurshid Ahmad and Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Pakistan); Ahmad Shahati (Libya), Wahid Iddin Khan and Izziddin Ibrahim (the United Arab

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Emirates); Muhammad Ahmad Khalafalla and Mustafa Mahmoud (Egypt); Sibgatallah al-Mujaddidi (Afghanistan); Naquib al-Attas (Malaysia); and Jamal Badawi (Canada).

Muslim organizations and scholars throughout history have almost always supported interfaith dialogue. All major Muslim organization in the West do so as well, such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), the Muslim Mission of America (MMA), the Muslim American Society (MAS), and the Council of American and Muslim Relations (CAIR).

The twenty-first century poses new and difficult challenges for Muslims. On the one hand, many forces within the Western media are committed to labeling Muslims as terrorists and using their technical expertise to foment prejudice. On the other hand, the Muslim population is growing. Accordingly, Islam is emerging as a force in a society that has little exposure to religious diversity. The West is emerging as a region of many religions in which different ethnic and racial groups are trying to live together in peace. In response to this growing diversity, of which they themselves are a significant part, Muslims should become more proactive in urging interfaith dialogue. They should become its torchbearers, winning the hearts and minds of people as peacemakers. Imams, religious leaders, and scholars, all of them holding fast to Islamic principles of dialogue, should become leaders in building world peace. We hope that this guide will help them perceive how Islam is re-emerging on the world scene as a framework for peace, justice, and dialogue.

In the next chapter, we will present a case study of such peacebuilding from Rochester, New York, and will examine some of the efforts initiated by Muslims living in the United States to promote peaceful living and mutual understanding through interfaith dialogue.

Key Points of the Chapter

- Prophet Muhammad did all that he could to help and nurture his new community, reconcile differences among its members, and keep its trust despite the Makkans' opposition, torture, and abuse. Whenever Makkani leaders came to talk to him, he listened

attentively and respectfully and then made his point clear to them in a polite way.

- In Madinah, Prophet Muhammad functioned as the head of state. In this capacity, he built an interfaith confederation that included Jews, Christians, Muslims, and pagans. His goal was to find a way for everyone to live together in peace. He spared no effort to make agreements with neighboring tribes, even with those of Makkah, when a suitable opportunity arose.
- Muhammad always used the Islamic principles of forgiveness and mercy to reconcile differences between individuals, within families, and even between his own community and hostile tribes.
- Many Muslim rulers and imams played key roles in expanding interfaith dialogue from its origin among members of the Abrahamic faiths to the Hindus, Buddhists, and others who eventually came under Muslim rule.
- Many Muslims played key roles in promoting interfaith dialogue even during the Crusades and Western colonialism, the worst days in Muslim history. While always opposing political occupation, these Muslims never ceased to dialogue with people of other religions.
- Continuing these truly Islamic traditions, mainstream Muslim organizations in the West, as well as many Islamic organizations and political parties in the Muslim world, support interfaith and inter-religious dialogue.

Discussion Questions

1. Are you aware of any significant example of dialogue from the Prophet's life that has not been mentioned in this guide? If so, add it to your list.
2. Have you come across any significant writing during Islam's classical era on interfaith dialogue or any stories of such encounters that you think we should add as a reference?
3. In our very partial list of the many Muslim scholars who took part in interfaith dialogue during the twentieth century, did we miss any significant individuals?

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4. Are you familiar with the Bible's accounts of Jews and Christians that illustrate their beliefs about pluralism?

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