

Chapter Nine

Relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims

This concept is also misunderstood by many Muslims, as well as by non-Muslims. Some view this relationship based on enmity and hatred, a conflict of ideology, and a clash of civilizations, while others view this relationship based on kindness and justice and peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

We will discuss the following concepts:

- 1-What does the Qur'an say about non-Muslims and how should they be treated
- 2- What does the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) say and how did he interact with both Jews and Christians
- 3- Lessons to be learned from the Qur'an and Sunnah
- 4- What did earlier Muslim scholars say about non-Muslims and how did Muslims in the past treat non-Muslims
- 5- The view of modern Muslim scholars living in the West since Muslims live as a minority among a non-Muslim majority
- 6- Misconceptions propagated in the news media:
 - The views of extremist Muslims

- The views of Fundamentalist Christians
- The views of Jews living in America

Qur'anic guidelines

Kindness and justice

The Qur'an explains that the basic rules governing the relationship between people, regardless of their faith or conviction, is that of kindness and justice. Kindness means being good to others and not harboring enmity or hatred. Justice means treating others with fairness and not wronging them or cheating them.

﴿ لَا يَنْهَىٰكُمْ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ تُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴾

Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just.

Al-Mumtahina 60 : 8

The next verse explains that this guideline does not apply to those who are open enemies. As explained in this verse enmity here involves three spheres:

- Fighting Muslims because of their faith and convictions
- Expelling them from their homes
- Helping others and collaborating with them in expelling Muslims from their homes

﴿ إِنَّمَا يَنْهَىٰكُمْ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ قَاتَلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَأَخْرَجُواكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ وَظَاهَرُوا عَلَىٰ إِخْرَاجِكُمْ أَنْ تَوَلَّوهُمْ ۗ وَمَنْ يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ ﴾

Allah only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for (your) Faith, and drive you out, of your homes, and support (others) in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances), that do wrong.

Al-Mumtahina 60 : 9

Some Muslims may be tempted to turn to those who are powerful as guardians and protectors, believing that their power and might will help them and shield them. Such behavior means that they do not understand that God is the only one who can protect us and He is our master and that no one can protect us against God. Turning to wrong-doers will not help, for God may give them temporary powers, but He can surely destroy them as He did destroy previous civilizations that transgressed and were disobedient and arrogant. The Qur'an explains this concept so that we may learn and not repeat the mistakes of those who lived before us:

﴿ فَتَرَى الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ يُسْرِعُونَ فِيهِمْ يَقُولُونَ نَخْشَى أَنْ تُصِيبَنَا دَائِرَةٌ ۚ فَعَسَى اللَّهُ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ بِالْفَتْحِ أَوْ أَمْرٍ مِنْ عِنْدِهِ فَيُصْبِحُوا عَلَىٰ مَا أَسْرُوا فِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ تَدْمِينًا ﴾

Those in whose hearts is a disease, thou seest how eagerly they run about amongst them, saying: "We do fear lest a change of fortune bring us disaster." Ah! Perhaps Allah will give (thee) victory, or a decision according to His Will. Then will they repent of the thoughts which they secretly harbored in their hearts.

Al-Maeda 5 : 52

Talk to non-Muslims in a good way

Another important guideline in the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is the way we talk to those who do not share our faith. We talk to them in a good way and we say only those things that are best:

﴿ وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ وَقُولُوا ءَامَنَّا بِالَّذِي أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَأُنزِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَإِلَهُنَا وَإِلَهُكُمْ وَاحِدٌ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ ﴾

And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury); but say, "We believe in the Revelation

which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is One; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)."

Al-Ankabut 29 : 46

The way we talk to each other does matter. If we are threatening or arrogant we let others turn away and have a bad impression. They do not want to associate with us or even listen to what we have to say. That is why the Qur'an explains that good words are useful, and bad words can cause only harm:

﴿ وَقُلْ لِعِبَادِي يَقُولُوا الَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ يَنْزِعُ بَيْنَهُمْ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ كَانَتْ لِلإِنْسَانِ عَدُوًّا مُّبِينًا ﴾

Say to My servants that they should (only) say those things that are best: for Satan doth sow dissensions among them: for Satan is to man an avowed enemy.

Al-Isra'a 17 : 53

Improve your relationship

Taking positive steps to improve the relationship between ourselves and those who are not friendly to us may turn such enmity into friendship:

﴿ وَلَا تَسْتَوِى الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ ادْفَعْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِي بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِيٌّ حَمِيمٌ ﴾

Nor can Goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as if were thy friend and intimate!

Fusselat 41 : 34

Such behavior is not confined to individuals. It applies equally well to nations. When nations respect each other, and do not take advantage and are on good terms they cooperate and work together. In contrast, nations that are hostile towards others, and refuse to talk and threaten other nations or take pre-emptive action only saw hatred and enmity.

Muslims are allowed to eat from the animals slaughtered by Jews and Christians, and Muslim men are allowed to marry Jewish or Christian women:

﴿ الْيَوْمَ أُحِلَّ لَكُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتُ ۚ وَطَعَامُ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ حِلٌّ لَكُمْ وَطَعَامُكُمْ حِلٌّ لَهُمْ ۚ وَالْحَصَنَاتُ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْحَصَنَاتُ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ إِذَا آتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ مُحْصِنِينَ غَيْرَ مُسْفِحِينَ وَلَا مَتَّخِذِي أَحْدَانٍ ۚ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالْإِيمَانِ فَقَدْ حَبِطَ عَمَلُهُ ۚ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَسِرِينَ ۚ ﴾

This day are (all) things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them. (Lawful unto you in marriage) are (not only) chaste women who are Believers, but chaste women among the People of the Book, revealed before your time, when ye give them their due dowers, and desire chastity, not lewdness, nor secret intrigues. If any one rejects faith, fruitless is his work, and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good).

Al-Maeda 5 : 5

We can therefore summarize the Qur'anic guidelines that govern the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims as:

- 1- Kindness
- 2- Justice
- 3- Talking to others in a good way
- 4- Reaching out and trying to improve the relationship between different groups

On the other hand, such guidelines do not apply to those who have shown through their actions that indeed they are enemies intent on harming Muslims. To such individuals or nations we cannot turn to them in friendship, nor take them as guardians or protectors. To do so means lack of faith and misplaced trust, for their goal is to harm and take advantage of innocent Muslims. To turn to them after they have repeatedly demonstrated their disdain and enmity towards

Muslims shows not only wrong judgment, but also lack of faith. The Qur'an states:

﴿لَا تَجِدُ قَوْمًا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ يُوَادُّونَ مَنْ حَادَّ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَوْ كَانُوا آبَاءَهُمْ أَوْ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ أَوْ إِخْوَانَهُمْ أَوْ عَشِيرَتَهُمْ أُولَئِكَ كَتَبَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الْإِيمَانَ وَأَيَّدَهُمْ بِرُوحٍ مِّنْهُ وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ أُولَئِكَ حِزْبُ اللَّهِ أَلَا إِنَّ حِزْبَ اللَّهِ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾﴾

Thou wilt not find any people who believe in Allah and the Last Day, loving those who resist Allah and His Messenger, even though they were their fathers or their sons, or their brothers, or their kindred. For such He has written Faith in their hearts, and strengthened them with a spirit from Himself. And He will admit them to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow, to dwell therein (forever). Allah will be well pleased with them, and they with Him. They are the Party of Allah. Truly it is the Party of Allah that will achieve Felicity.

Al-Mujadalah 58 : 22

The tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

We will explore this subject by examining:

- The sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)
- His behavior towards the Jews and Christians that he interacted with
- And by drawing some conclusions about how we can apply these concepts in our interaction as Muslims today living with Jews and Christians

The sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

The Prophet (PBUH) emphasized justice in treating everyone. He was just even with his enemies. He said:

(Whoever wrongs a non-Muslim who have a covenant with Muslims, I will be contending with him on the Day of Judgment)

Tabarani.

Non-Muslims living among a Muslim majority have certain rights that should be respected and safeguarded. These rights include safeguarding their lives, possessions, freedom of worship and the safety of their families. No one should face oppression and everyone should be treated with fairness and not forced to become a Muslim against his will.

There is a saying of the Prophet (PBUH) which is misunderstood by many Muslims and forms the basis for their enmity towards non-Muslims. Ibn Omar related that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: (I have been commanded to fight An-Nas (the people) until they bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and that I am God's messenger. When they do that, they safeguard their lives and possessions from me)

Narrated by Muslim.

Does this saying mean that Muslims are ordered to fight everyone among mankind, till they accept the religion of Islam? This means that Muslims must be in a constant state of war until they have subdued all of mankind who do not accept Islam as God's true religion! Is this concept logical or possible?

Or is there another explanation to this Hadeeth? The word "An- Nas" in this Hadeeth does it refer to all mankind or does it refer to a certain group who at the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were open enemies intent on destroying the Muslim state in Madina! If we refer to the historical context in which this saying occurred we can understand that the Prophet (PBUH) was merely referring to the tribe of Quraish who fought the Muslims several times and had made the political decision to destroy the Muslim state in Madinah at any cost. The Qur'an gives credence to this explanation:

﴿ الَّذِينَ قَالَ لَهُمُ النَّاسُ إِنَّ النَّاسَ قَدْ جَمَعُوا لَكُمْ فَاخْشَوْهُمْ فَزَادَهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَقَالُوا
حَسْبُنَا اللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ ﴾

Men said to them: "A great army is gathering against you, so fear them": but it (only) increased their Faith; they said: "For us Allah sufficeth, and He is the best disposer of affairs."

Al-Imran 3 : 173

This Hadeeth, further illustrates the danger of taking the Prophet's sayings literally, and out of context, for it leads to wrong conclusions that can be dangerous in its implication. To wrongly conclude that the Prophet of mercy is advocating fighting all non-Muslims till they accept the religion of Islam and that this order is valid at all times, is dangerous and false. The Qur'an clearly states that every person is free to believe or reject faith, and that no one is to be forced to accept Islam against his will. Such freedom is guaranteed by God:

﴿ وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ ۗ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفِرْ ۗ ﴾

Say, "The Truth is from your Lord": Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it)

Al-Kahf 18 : 29

﴿ وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَأَمَنَّ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلَّهُمْ جَمِيعًا ۚ أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرِهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ ۗ ﴾

If it had been thy Lord's Will, they would all have believed, all who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!

Yunus 10 : 99

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

Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects Evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the

most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things.

Al-Baqara 2 : 256

Therefore, the concept that Muslims must fight others to ensure that everyone on earth accepts Islam is wrong. Accountability implies freedom of choice. If we are forced to believe against our will, then we have been denied our freedom to make this decision and we are not responsible, nor accountable.

The Prophet's behavior towards Jews and Christians

When Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) came to Madinah, he made a pact of non-aggression with the three Jewish tribes living there. In this treaty the lives, possessions and civil liberties of the Jews were respected and safeguarded. They were treated as equal partners to the Muslims of Madina. Both groups were citizens of the Muslim state and pledged to safeguard and protect the state against its enemies.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) respected the Jewish Holiday of Ashura (passover) commemorating the victory that God granted to Moses as he took the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, and asked Muslims to fast that day. For more than a year he and the Muslims prayed in the direction of Jerusalem till the Divine order came ordering Muslims to change the direction of prayer to Macca. He visited the Jews and traded with them.

This truce and peace agreement was respected until the Jews violated the terms of this treaty in several ways: by trying to kill Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and by collaborating with the Muslim enemies. Two Jewish tribes were expelled, and the third was fought.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also respected the Christian delegation that came to Madina. He allowed them to pray in his mosque and made a treaty with them safeguarding their rights and allowing them to continue to worship as they please. He did not force anyone to accept Islam against his will

Lessons that we learn from the Qur'an and Sunnah

It is clear that the relationship between Muslims, Christians and Jews should be one of friendship, kindness and justice, and not that of enmity, hatred or fighting.

The Qur'an tells Muslims that the Jews and Christians were given a Book or Divine revelation from God, and that the teachings in the Torah and the Gospel are similar to the teachings in the Qur'an, since all these Divine revelations came from the same God, the One and only God.

Such relationship is based on mutual cooperation and helping each other and establishing justice and respect for everyone. This is evidenced by the teachings and behavior of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) towards Jews and Christians.

We further learn that no one is to be forced to become a Muslim against his will. Every human being is free to make a choice. Such freedom is guaranteed by God, otherwise there is no personal accountability. Muslims are ordered to respect and safeguard the rights and liberties of non-Muslims.

The notion that Islam is not compatible with other religions, and that Muslims must fight non-Muslims till they are subdued, has no basis in the Qur'an and Sunnah. It stems from the wrong understanding and twisted ideology of those who follow an extreme view point, and do not understand the religion of Islam as a peaceful, tolerant religion that is based on logic, kindness and justice.

The views of early Muslim scholars regarding non-Muslims and how non-Muslims were treated throughout history

Non-Muslims living under Muslim rule were treated with respect, and their liberties were safeguarded. Their lives, possessions and freedom were safeguarded. They were allowed to worship and practice their religion and traditions, and were not forced into Islam against their will. They were productive members of society. The best

example is Muslim Spain where Jews enjoyed great freedom and were an important part of Muslim culture and civilization. Muslim scholars emphasized that non-Muslims have a covenant with Muslims, and as such this covenant must be respected and safeguarded. In their writings they stressed such issues as the rights of non-Muslims to their places of worship, and that non-Muslims are allowed to have alcohol and eat as their faith tells them to do, though such practices are forbidden on Muslims. They also told Muslims to be just and fair in dealing with non-Muslims and not to wrong anyone.

Some misunderstand the issue of Jiziah and feel it is humiliating to non-Muslims. The Jiziah is a small tax collected from non-Muslims in exchange for living under Muslim rule and being protected by the Muslim state. Non-Muslims are not obligated to pay Zakat (obligatory charity) because Zakat is only ordained on Muslims. The Jiziah is significantly less than the Zakat which is 2.5 % of one's income. This Jiziah was collected only from those who can afford to pay it. Therefore, women, children, the elderly and the poor did not pay Jiziah. If the Muslims were not able to protect the non-Muslims, they gave back to them this tax because it was supposed to represent a service that the Muslims were not able to provide.

Does this mean that all non-Muslims were always treated with respect and fairly? The answer is no, because Muslims like all other human beings are fallible and make mistakes. They also have shortcomings, bias and prejudices. To cite one example often referred to by my Jewish colleagues is the requirement at one time for Jews to wear certain clothes to identify them as such. Obviously, if this is true, it is demeaning and an act of discrimination that is un-Islamic and cannot be accepted.

The views of Muslims living in the West as a minority among a Christian majority

American Muslims, particularly the younger generation, have their own opinion about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in a democratic plural society that advocates to safeguard human freedom and civil liberties.

American Muslims have no problem in associating with, or having Jews or Christians as friends. Religious concepts and faith is something personal that should not influence, or diminish personal relationship that developed and evolved through school, college, work or neighborhood or community activity. I feel that my children, and they are professionals, when they interact with their Jewish or Christian friends never think of their faith but cherish their friendship and strong ties based on personal contact and good morals.

The idea that American Muslims only interact or associate with other Muslims is no longer valid for our time or in our society. If we retreat and close our doors and fail to interact with non-Muslims, we do more harm and we foster suspicion and reinforce bias and prejudice. If we are open, proactive and reach out and work with and cooperate with other members in society, we prove that we are a part of this society willing and able to shoulder our responsibility. We offer new prospective and a different solutions to problems facing our community.

It is also important to safeguard our civil liberties and our freedom to worship and practice our faith. This can be accomplished by being vigil and alert in following activities, trends and legislation at the local and national level, as well as working with organizations that are keenly interested in safeguarding human liberties. The erosion of our freedom and the stereotyping of Muslims is only one example that we face today in America.

Dialogue with Jewish and Christian groups to further understanding and cooperation is essential as there is no substitute to personal contacts. The goal of such meetings and the discussions that ensue is not aimed at prosteolysing or showing that one faith is better than another, but in having a better understanding of different view points and in not being dogmatic or isolationist in our thinking or behavior. What has impressed me from attending these meeting for the past several years is how much it reinforces my faith and how clear religious concepts become. There are certainly differences among Muslims, Jews and Christians, but what we all have in common is far greater than our differences. When we discuss one common theme, our similarities and differences become apparent, but we

also learn from our different perspective and we learn to respect and appreciate different points of views. I believe this may explain why we are different, yet close. Our diversity should teach us to examine our convictions and not accept dogmas without analysis and critical thinking.

Another important lesson that we learn is to afford each person the opportunity to talk and express his/ her views. We learn to listen to opposing points of views and to have respect for others who do not share our values. We also learn not to hold current day Jews or Christians accountable for mistakes their predecessors made. Each person is responsible for his actions and does not carry the sins of another human being. This concept is clear in the Qur'an:

﴿ مَن أَهْتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ ۗ وَمَن ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا ۗ وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ۗ وَمَا كُنَّا مُعَذِّبِينَ حَتَّىٰ نَبْعَثَ رَسُولًا ۗ ﴾

Who receiveth guidance, receiveth it for his own benefit: who goeth astray doth so to his own loss: no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another: nor would We visit with Our Wrath until We had sent a Messenger (to give warning).

Al-Isra'a 17 : 15

We learn from this Qur'anic verse:

- We earn the good that we do and we incur the sin and mistakes that we commit
- No one else carries our burden. Each soul is only responsible for its actions
- God wants to guide us, but we have to make a choice: we can accept and follow Divine guidance, or we can ignore it and follow our own ways.

The same concept is discussed in other verses of the Qur'an:

﴿ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ رَهِينَةٌ ۗ ﴾

Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds.

Al-Muddathir 74 : 38

﴿ مَن عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَن أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۚ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾ ﴾

Whoever works righteousness benefits his own soul; whoever works evil, it is against his own soul: nor is thy Lord ever unjust (in the least) to His servants.

Fusselat 41 : 46

Some Muslims read Qur'anic verses relating to the behavior of some Jews at the time of prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and their opposition to the Muslim state, and do not consider the political circumstances and the historical context in which these verses were revealed in. They wrongly reach the conclusion that Jews are enemies to the Muslims and that the Qur'an is anti-Semitic. They ignore the verses of the Qur'an full of admiration and praise to Prophet Moses and the Children of Israel and God's bounties on them:

﴿ وَنُرِيدُ أَن نَّمُنَّ عَلَى الَّذِينَ اسْتَضَعُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً وَنَجْعَلَهُمُ الْوَارِثِينَ ﴿٥٠﴾ ﴾

And We wished to be gracious to those who were being depressed on the land, to make them leaders (in faith) and make them heirs,

Al-Qasas 28 : 5

﴿ وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْتَدُونَ ۚ بِأَمْرِنَا لَمَّا صَبَرُوا ۖ وَكَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٥١﴾ ﴾

And We appointed, from among them, Leaders, giving guidance under Our Command, so long as they persevered with patience and continued to have faith in Our Signs.

As-Sajda 32 : 24

﴿ يٰٓبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَأَنِّي فَضَّلْتُكُمْ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٧٤﴾ ﴾

O Children of Israel! Call to mind the (special) favour which I bestowed upon you, and that I preferred you to all others (for My Message).

Al-Baqara 2 : 47

We learn:

- To put these verses in historical perspective and not generalize our conclusions
- Not to hold current day Jews to mistakes their forefathers may have committed
- Civilizations change. At one time a community may be righteous and close to God. Then they may ignore God's message and become arrogant. Then they may correct their mistakes. We cannot label one community or a group of people and believe that they do not change or evolve.

American Muslims: strength and weakness

No one knows for sure how many Muslims live in America, since there is no reliable census. A figure of 6 million is frequently quoted. Muslims in America come from different parts of the world and are quite diverse in their ethnic background, the languages they speak and the views they hold. The majority are immigrants from Pakistan and India. Some come from the Middle East and Arab countries, while few come from Indonesia and Eastern Europe. There is an African American minority as well.

American Muslims were involved initially in building mosques and places of worship. There is hardly any town or community in the US today that does not have a mosque. The second phase involved building schools. The number of full time Islamic schools is still small, and some are accredited, but others are not accredited or recognized at the state level. Muslim schools face problems regarding adequate funding and the lack of human resources and qualified teachers since there are only a handful of Islamic centers of higher learning in America.

Building the social support structures that are necessary to serve the needs of Muslim communities have been another problem that many Islamic centers face and struggle with.

Getting involved in the political arena has been slow for American Muslims. Such organizations as CAIR and others promote Muslim involvement in politics, but continue to face problems in funding, staffing and raising awareness among Muslims.

Most American Muslims are well educated professionals who earn a good living and are well respected in their fields, whether doctors, Engineers, teachers etc. Some have vision and are active in their community and interact well with non-Muslims. Other Muslims, on the other hand still have hang ups and are afraid of Western culture. Therefore, they live in relative isolation and associate only with friends of similar background and mind set. Their children will have a hard time and develop a dichotomy, living at home with one set of values, but exhibiting other behavior when associating with their peers.

Misconceptions propagated in the news media

Islam is distorted in the news media and its principles and concepts are not correctly portrayed. Also Muslims are stereotyped and their diversity is not recognized. We will discuss the following concepts:

- The views of extremists are allowed to take a prominent place and the position of main stream Islam is not explained or contrasted to these extreme views
- Muslims are shown as backward people living in poor conditions and only intent on fighting others and not willing to live in peace with others who do not share their views
- The media portray Islam as a religion and an ideology that is not compatible with Western democracy

The views of extremists

What viewers see and listen to are the views of a minority who claim to be Muslims and who exhibit hatred towards Western culture and view that culture as decadent and consider non-Muslims as enemies. They vow to fight because they believe it is God's order to fight and subdue "Infidels" (unbelievers). These people live in far away places like Afghanistan and Pakistan and look primitive and different with long beards and dress differently and speak a foreign language. Americans cannot identify with them and are afraid of them and the harm they could inflict.

The danger is that these images are equated with Muslims, and their thinking and culture is equated with Islam. The implication is that Muslims are backward people and that Islam is a religion bent on hatred and not suitable for our time.

What the media fail to explain is that these extremists represent a minority among Muslims and that their extreme views are not shared by the majority of Muslims who are peaceful and tolerant and want to live in peace with everyone and have no desire to fight or force others to accept their faith. Muslims live all over the world and are diverse and heterogeneous and represent different views and different ideologies. Millions of Muslims live in America and Europe and many have integrated in Western society and are active in their community and contribute to its welfare. Western Muslims are different from Eastern Muslims, though they hold similar beliefs. Their loyalty is to the country they reside in and are citizens of. They are no different than Jews living in America or Christians living in Europe and their thinking and values are similar to their neighbors and fellow workers.

The media also do not explain why extremists hold such radical views and what can be done to correct their wrong ideology. Just focusing on fighting these extreme elements and hunting them down and killing them or imprisoning them is not the answer, because it will only breed future generations of extremists with similar if not worse behavior. The answer is in exposing their twisted views and wrong concepts and contrasting it to what true Islam teaches and advocates. It is only through this process of education and spreading correct knowledge that the tide of extreme ideology can be turned. Force will only drive extremists underground, where their wrong concepts fester and become even more polarized.

The reasons for extreme ideology and behavior are many. We will discuss few of these reasons. The most important cause is lack of proper knowledge, or wrong superficial knowledge that harms, more than it can help. Most extremists get their teaching from Sheikhs (religious scholars) whose knowledge of the religion is based on old values and old interpretation. These people believe in living as Muslims lived 14 centuries ago. Their teachings revolve around prayer and memorization of the Qur'an and blind obedience that does not allow for questions, criticism or critical thinking. Concepts are dogmas that must be followed as sacred. The teachings of old scholars that lived centuries ago are considered sacred and cannot be questioned though they lived in a time and place quite different from our time and our society. How can we argue with or have an intelligent conversation with people who are rigid and consider any teaching not their

own as wrong and sinful, and that their beliefs are Divinely inspired and that they have a mandate to carry on God's will as they desire?

To correct this root cause of extreme ideology, we must show its fallacy and explain the true teaching of the Qur'an and Sunnah . If extremists base their views on their interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah, then these are the two references they may be willing to consider. Then our job is to show that their interpretation is wrong, and that in fact the Qur'an and the Sunnah respect and safeguard the belief of every human being, whether he is a Muslim or non-Muslim. We must show that the Qur'an and Sunnah are against forcing others to become Muslims against their will, and that fighting is only allowed for self-defense and not for aggression.

Another root cause of extreme ideology is the lack of democracy in many Muslim countries. Dissidents are not free to express their opinions, and many are jailed or even killed. Most Muslim countries are ruled by dictators who oppress freedom and have a monopoly on power.

America and the West must deal with government and sometimes turn a blind eye to the violations of human rights committed by their allies who rule Muslim countries. What the people of these countries see is an America ready to support a corrupt regime and oppress freedom to have power as long as its agents serve their interests. In the eyes of those Muslim masses the American government therefore is siding with their enemies.

Poverty and the lack of decent jobs to provide human dignity is another important reason for extreme ideology. It is easy to recruit young men who are hungry and desperate and to brain-wash those who are vulnerable, if you can provide for their families. The wealth of many Muslim countries is being usurped by corrupt dictators. Those surrounding them take bribes and use the money originally intended for projects to their own benefits. Bribery has become so rampant that it is not possible to conduct any business without bribing the officials whose red tape control any project.

Extremists do not associate with others who do not share their views. They consider them as non-believers, though they may be Muslims. If you do not share their principles and way of thinking, then you are against them. There is no room for discussion or dialogue. It is either their way or it is wrong. It

is useless to argue with them. They repeat lines that they were fed and memorized over and over again. Their views are not grounded in reason or logic, but hammered into their psyche through rigorous indoctrination and constant brain-washing. They cannot think for themselves. They are only instruments to do what they are ordered to do.

So how can we deal with these individuals and with their leaders and how can we change this trend and movement? Force will not work. Hunting them as criminals will only drive them underground and their wrong ideology will be carried out by others. The only way is by contrasting their wrong and twisted ideology to the truth as is clearly shown in the Qur'an and Sunnah. When their wrong concepts are explained and clearly compared and contrasted to true Islamic teachings and other factors that sustain their movements such as lack of democracy, corruption, poverty are addressed and solved, then we have a chance to get rid of extreme movements.

Muslims are portrayed as backward people living in the middle ages

The typical stereotype of a Muslim is an Arab with a beard who lives in the desert in a place and time that is completely out of touch with our way of life. This picture is flawed on several fronts:

- The majority of Muslims are non-Arabs. The most populous Arab country is Egypt which is only 80 million. Compare that to Indonesia whose population is more than 200 million, or Pakistan with a population of 150 million, or India where Muslims number more than 200 million, and we understand that Arabs represent a minority among Muslims
- Many Muslims are well educated professionals. In America there are at least one hundred thousand Muslim physicians. Many are engineers, teachers and business men and women. They are good loyal citizens of this country.
- Millions of Muslims live both in America and Europe. Many were educated and have second and third generations in Western countries.
- Many Muslim women are professionals respected in their fields
- The diversity of Muslims in America is astounding. All you need to do is attend a Friday prayer in any mosque in this

country and one can get an idea about the different background, culture and languages spoken.

American Muslims Are different from Muslims living in the Middle East. They are an integral part of this country and contribute to its diversity and culture, and offer new ideas and different prospective.

Islam is compatible with Western democracy

This idea of a clash of civilization is not correct. If we examine the basic principles of democracy we find that Islam calls for the same concepts: freedom, justice, equality of mankind and proper representation. It is people who corrupt Islamic concepts for their own personal agenda. In fact Islam is a religion that is based on rational thinking and respects and safeguards human liberties.

We have discussed these concepts before. The true test that will convince skeptics is when a truly moderate form of Islam evolves and is put to use and demonstrates that Islam in practice, not just in theory, is compatible with Western democracy. When such a society exists where people of all faiths are well respected and their freedom is safeguarded, and where women are treated as equals and their freedom is not curtailed, and where the desire of the people is to live in peace and to work hard to achieve their dreams, then we can demonstrate the applicability of Islam in Western society and its tolerant, peaceful nature.

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