

CHAPTER FIVE

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND NON-MUSLIMS

Muslim scholars have discussed and written about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. The latter in traditional writings were called *Zhimmi* or those who had a covenant with Muslim. They were Jews or Christians who lived among Muslims. They were a minority and were under the protection of the Muslim state. They were not forced to become Muslims against their will, but were afforded their freedom and civil liberties. Their life was protected, as well as their possessions and freedom to worship in their own tradition. Actually Jews and Christians enjoyed a lot of freedom under Muslim rule. Such freedom was subsequently violated in Spain when Christians came to power after the overthrow of the Muslims in Andalusia. Both Jews and Muslims were persecuted at the time of the Spanish inquisition, and many fled Spain to northern Europe or to Morocco or other countries where they had better freedom and a chance to live their life according to their religious tradition. What was expected of non-Muslims under Muslim rule was to have allegiance to the country they live in and not collaborate with its enemies. In lieu of protection, and because non-Muslims do not serve in the army, they were obligated to pay a special tax or levy called *Jizia*. This tax was a miniscule amount much less than what Muslims paid in obligatory charity. Such a tax was not levied against the poor or elderly or women among the non-Muslims. Only the males who could afford it were asked to pay. If Muslims were unable to provide protection, then they returned this *Jizia* to the inhabitants. Since Jews and Christians enjoyed significant freedom, they were able to

contribute to the civilizations they were an integral part of as witnessed by the great contribution of non-Muslim scholars at the time.

The situation of Muslims living in the West these days is quite different from what Muslim scholars wrote about centuries ago. Muslims nowadays in America and in Europe live as a minority among a non-Muslim Christian majority. Fortunately in America freedom of religion is guaranteed in the constitution since there is the principle of separation of church and state, and the Christian majority cannot enforce its own religious doctrine on non-Christians. Therefore Muslims and Jews, as well as people of different convictions enjoy the freedom to worship as they wish and observe their religious or ethnic traditions. This freedom to worship as well as the freedom of free speech and expression allowed Islam to spread rapidly in America, and to become the second or third minority religion.

MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES

Many Muslims who came as immigrants to America from Muslim countries like India or Pakistan or from Arab countries came with their own prejudices and bias. They had their own fixed ideas about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Such ideas focused on Islam as being God's true religion, and that other religions are no longer legitimate since prophet Muhammad (PBUH) came as the last messenger of God and the Qur'an came down as the last divine revelation. In their own mind, there can only be one religion, and that religion must be Islam. They had the notion that the whole world must accept God's religion and become Muslims. The idea that other religions can coexist with Islam was only tenable for a time when Muslims were weak or unable to spread God's religion.

These Muslims with such a fixed view point were unable to reconcile their own convictions by living as a minority among a non-Muslim majority. They were afraid of losing their identity as Muslims, or apprehensive about being assimilated along with their children in American society. They saw a tradition and a way of life different from their own, and felt a great danger. Therefore, some isolated themselves

living in a small circle, associating only with people who shared their own beliefs and way of life. This isolated way of life gave them the security they needed and demanded. They were afraid of interacting or reaching out to the larger community. They knew people who spoke the same language and had a culture and tradition similar to their own. They did not allow their children to learn Western morals or ideology, fearful of losing them or being corrupted by Western decadence and free way of life. So they lived secluded from outside influences. They were living in America, but actually lived as if they never had left their own homeland. To them America meant danger and evil. It is difficult to change the behavior of people and it usually takes two to three generations to change a way of thinking and a way of life.

Other Muslims saw the danger of such an attitude, and made a conscious effort to expose themselves and their families to the larger society they live in. Some rejected anything to do with Islam in their attempt to integrate and to be welcomed into American society. Others understood the importance of keeping their religious and ethnic identity, but also realized that this country is now their home and the home of their children. Therefore, they reached out and made friends with their neighbors and colleagues at work and encouraged their children to have American friends. They sent their children to schools and learned quickly American history and culture. They saw the goodness of the American ideal and embraced the American dream of a good life for themselves and their children. They worked hard at integration and to establish a good life for their families.

MISINTERPRETATION OF QUR'ANIC VERSES

Other factors that influence the way that Muslims look at and interact with non-Muslims is their perception of how the Qur'an talks about non-Muslims, and what conclusions they draw from these Qur'anic verses. Some Muslims take the verses in the Qur'an out of historical context and apply the statements made by the Qur'an to present day Jews or Christians regardless of time or place. Other Muslims realize that the Muslims in Madinah faced a lot of opposition from the Jewish tribes living there at the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) but do not put the

blame of their actions on current day Jews. To clarify these different points of views I will discuss some of the verses of the Qur'an that deals with the political situation in Madinah and also with the Prophet's plan to address these problems. Then I will discuss the general rules laid down by the Qur'an of how Muslims should deal with non-Muslims.

Muslims in Macca were few, weak and oppressed. The Qur'an came down to Prophet Muhammad exhorting patience and perseverance and strengthened the faith of those early pioneer Muslims. Then when Muslims migrated to Madinah and established their Muslim state they faced many dangers. There were external enemies from the Arab tribes that did not accept Islam and were vehement in their opposition to the Muslim state that they fought Muslims three times. There were also three Jewish tribes in Madinah that enjoyed economic domination. They saw the Muslim state as a danger to their power and influence. The Prophet (PBUH) made a treaty of non-aggression and coexistence between Muslims and the Jews in which the rights of each citizen in Madinah was safeguarded including religious rights, but ensured that all members of the community would work together to fight aggression against their city. Things worked well for two years but when the Jewish tribes plotted with the enemies of Islam they were forced out of Madinah. Subsequently Muslims fought the remaining Jews in Khaybar and expelled them from Arabia. The Qur'an was inspired to Prophet Muhammad throughout his life from age 40 when he first got the divine revelation till he died at age 63, and addressed the problems that faced the Muslims and gave direction and solution. Therefore, it was natural for the Qur'an to discuss the situation in Madinah and the Jews living there, and their collaboration with the hypocrites and their efforts to cause division among the Muslims and destruction of the Muslim state. So, when we read these Qur'anic verses it is important to relate them to the historical context and the environment they addressed, and not blame current day Jews for mistakes their predecessors made. Such a verse is in Surat Al-Ma'eda (chapter 5) Verse 82 in the Qur'an and states:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَّخِذُوا الْيَهُودَ وَالنَّصَارَىٰ أَوْلِيَاءَ ۚ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّهُمْ مِنكُمْ فَإِنَّهُ مِنَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٥١﴾﴾ [المائدة: ٥١]

"O you who believe take not the Jews and the Christians as your guardians, for they are guardians and protectors to each other;

anyone amongst you who takes them as guardians and protectors is of them, for God guides not the wrong-doers" (Al-Maeda 5 : 51)

Some misunderstand this verse and reach conclusions that are not correct. For example some Muslims believe that the Jews and Christians are enemies to the Muslims and cannot be trusted, and anyone who trusts them becomes like them. Others forget the historical context and extend the conclusions they reached to apply at all times and in all places. Therefore, they conclude that enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims is eternal and will only cease at the Day of Judgment when God will judge between them Himself.

Another verse in Surat Al-Maeda (Chapter 5) that also is misunderstood by some Muslims is:

﴿لَتَجِدَنَّ أَشَدَّ النَّاسِ عَدَاوَةً لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا الْيَهُودَ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا وَلَتَجِدَنَّ أَقْرَبَهُم مَّوَدَّةً لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّا نَصْرِي ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قِسِيْنَ وَرَهْبَانًا وَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ﴾ [المائدة: ٨٢]

"You will find those who are most severe in enmity towards the Muslims those who are Jews and the idolaters, and you will find those closest to the Muslims in kindness those who say, "we are Christians"; because among them are priests and scholars and because they are not arrogant" (Al-Maeda 5 : 82)

Some Muslims draw wrong conclusions from this verse as well such as:

- All Jews are open enemies and harbor hatred towards Muslims
- Christians are more close to Muslims

Obviously this verse does not apply to all Jews or to all Christians. It specifically addressed a group of Jews that were adverse enemies at the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). We cannot blame current day Jews or ascribe to them the burden or fault of their predecessors. We should treat every person according to his own deeds, and not prejudge him on the basis of his beliefs. Not all Christians are kind or loving as history has shown. Again we treat each according to his deeds and character, not on what his ancestors did or did not do.

Some Muslims with limited knowledge draw their own conclusions from such Qur'anic verses and form an opinion of what is the nature of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. Such an opinion is also influenced by their own perception of current events and the problem of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. To understand this conflict I will give two different prospective: that of a Muslim and that of a Jew. Muslims have high regards for the mosque of Al-Aqsa because this is where Prophet Muhammad got to in his night journey from Macca to Jerusalem, and where he prayed, and where he ascended to heaven. The Qur'an states:

﴿سُبْحَنَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ الْأَقْصَا الَّذِي بَارَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ ءَايَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ﴾ ﴿[الإسراء: ١]

"Glory be to God Who took His servant for a journey by night from the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our signs; for God hears and sees all things" (Al-Isra'a 17 : 1).

It is also the place where other prophets of God lived like Abraham and Jesus. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) stated in one of his sayings (Travel is allowed to visit three mosques: my mosque (in Madinah), and the sacred mosque (in Macca), and the farthest mosque (in Jerusalem) Bokhari & Muslim. The Qur'an stated that Palestine is a holy land that Allah has favored:

﴿وَجَعَلْنَاهُ وَلُوطًا إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا لِلْعَالَمِينَ﴾ ﴿[الأنبياء: ٧١]

"And We delivered him (Abraham) and Lut to the land which We have blessed for mankind" (Al-Anbia'a 21 : 71).

Palestine and the Masjid Al-Aqsa (the farthest mosque) has been under Muslim rule and control for 14 centuries. Muslims regained control over this land after the crusaders took control of it briefly. Therefore, Muslims regard this piece of God's earth as sacred and a Muslim land. It is not surprising that Jewish control of Jerusalem causes deep sorrow and evokes strong emotions from Muslims all over the world.

On the other hand, to a Jew Jerusalem and Israel represent something

unique and equally important and crucial. It not only ties Jews all over the world through religious ties, but also represents a sanctuary and an identity, and a place they can call their own. It represents a place of freedom from the long history of oppression and being forced out from different parts of the world. That is why Jews all over the world identify with Israel and feel that it is their solemn duty to support it and defend it.

RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRISTIANS & JEWS

It is also important to understand and draw conclusions from what the Qur'an is trying to teach us. The Qur'an talks in friendly terms in some of its verses about the people of the Book, referring to Jews and Christians and to illustrate that Jews, Christians and Muslims share one thing in common, which is each having a divine revelation sent to them from the One and only God. Obviously, the implication is that the message in these three divine revelations is the same, and emphasizes basic principles of belief in God and in being accountable to Him. As an example I will cite the following verse from the Qur'an:

﴿ تَزَلَّ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَأَنْزَلَ التَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ ﴾

[آل عمران: ٣]

"God sent down to you (O Muhammad) the Book, confirming what was sent down before it; and He sent down the Torah (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus), before this as a guidance to mankind"

(Al-Imran 3 : 3)

The Qur'an tells Muslims to talk to the people of the Book in a kind way" Argue not with the people of the Book except in the best way, unless it be those among them who do wrong, but say:

﴿ وَلَا تَجْدِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ وَقُولُوا ءَامَنَّا بِالَّذِي أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَأُنْزِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَإِلَهُنَا وَإِلَهُكُمْ وَاحِدٌ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ ﴾

[العنكبوت: ٤٦]

"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 Qur'an is very clear that the basic principles governing the relationship between Muslims and those with different faith are kindness and justice. The only exception are those who are open enemies to the Muslims or those who collaborate with Muslim enemies:

﴿لَا يَنْهَىٰكَ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ﴾ إِنَّمَا يَنْهَىٰكَ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ قَاتَلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَأَخْرَجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ وَظَاهَرُوا عَلَىٰ إِخْرَاجِكُمْ أَنْ تَوَلَّوهُمْ وَمَنْ يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ ﴿٩﴾ [الممتحنة: ٨-٩]

"Allah forbids you not regarding those who do not fight you because of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes, to deal with them with kindness and justice, for God loves those who are just. God only forbids you regarding those who fight you because of your faith, and drive you out of your homes, and collaborate with others in driving you out of your homes, to take them as guardians and protectors; anyone who takes them as guardians, they are wrong-doers" (Al-Mumtahina 60 : 8 & 9).

From the above Qur'anic verses, it is clear that the Qur'an does not advocate hatred towards Jews or Christians or people who have a different faith from Muslims. Nor does it advocate open warfare against non-Muslims. It advocates kindness and justice and urges Muslims to talk in the best way.

If we apply these guidelines to Muslims living in America with a Christian majority and with a Jewish minority, then there is nothing in the Qur'an that forbids us from reaching out and working with Jews and Christians. There is nothing that prevents us from having a relationship with them based on respect, kindness and justice. If we want them to respect our convictions and our right to our beliefs, then we too must respect their right to their own convictions and religious practices. A Muslim can and should develop friendship and relationship with his neighbors and colleagues at work and with others in his community who

do not necessarily share his own faith. Obviously, a Muslim will and should have closer ties and friendly relationship with his fellow Muslims. The Prophet (PBUH) emphasized that a Muslim has certain inherent rights on his fellow Muslims including the right to seek help and advice, and not to be harmed, but to be protected and supported.

When Muslims work with non-Muslims to solve common problems that face their community, they can add a Muslim prospective and offer solutions. Such work and collaboration should be done in the context of civic and religious organizations, as well as through individual effort. Working closely with people of different faith allows us as Muslims to have a better understanding of how others view their faith and how they put it into action. We can too relate to others how we apply our faith in helping others, and how we express our commitment, love and appreciation of God. We as Muslims should not feel nor express that we have a monopoly or that our way or our faith is the only way or only faith accepted by God. God bestows His blessing and guidance on every human being, some appreciate this blessing and use it properly, while others feel too mighty or arrogant to accept it or put it to good use. The only way to solve problems is through collaborative effort of many people. It is when we put our resources together, and when we use our diversity as a source of strength, that we can become successful and accomplish things.

If Muslims take the attitude that they are the only people guided by God now, and that the only divine Book to be trusted is the Qur'an, then it is easy to reach the conclusion that there is no way except the way of Muslims and Islam. Muslims, may then be tempted to look down at non-Muslims as not being guided and following a wrong way. If this happens, then Muslims may elect to go their own separate way. Such an attitude and such way of thinking is wrong and represent a tragic mistake and misunderstanding of the implication of the teaching of the Qur'an. Muslims who follow this arrogant attitude are destroying any chance of collaboration with non-Muslims, and are planting the seeds of suspicion, mistrust and hatred.

DIVERSITY OF MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

Muslims in America represent a broad spectrum of ideology and comprise diverse populations with different attitudes and points of view.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Muslims differ in their perception of how to deal with non-Muslims. Some with extreme hard line attitude, lump all non-Muslims together, and their view is that Islam is not compatible with other religions, and that Muslims should have nothing to do with non-Muslims at all. Others who are liberal, see nothing wrong, rather encourage reaching out and collaborating with non-Muslims. Others that may represent the majority of Muslims in America are "Silent". Either because they do not know what is the correct way; or silent because they are not ready or not willing to take a stand, therefore they delay their decision. Still others are silent because they cannot yet reconcile their long held beliefs with the conclusions they formulated living here in a western society. They know and wish to integrate and reach out, but there is something pulling them back.

I hope that our children and their children will have a more easy time trying to reconcile some of these concerns, and be able to face the issues directly and see a need to be active and contribute.