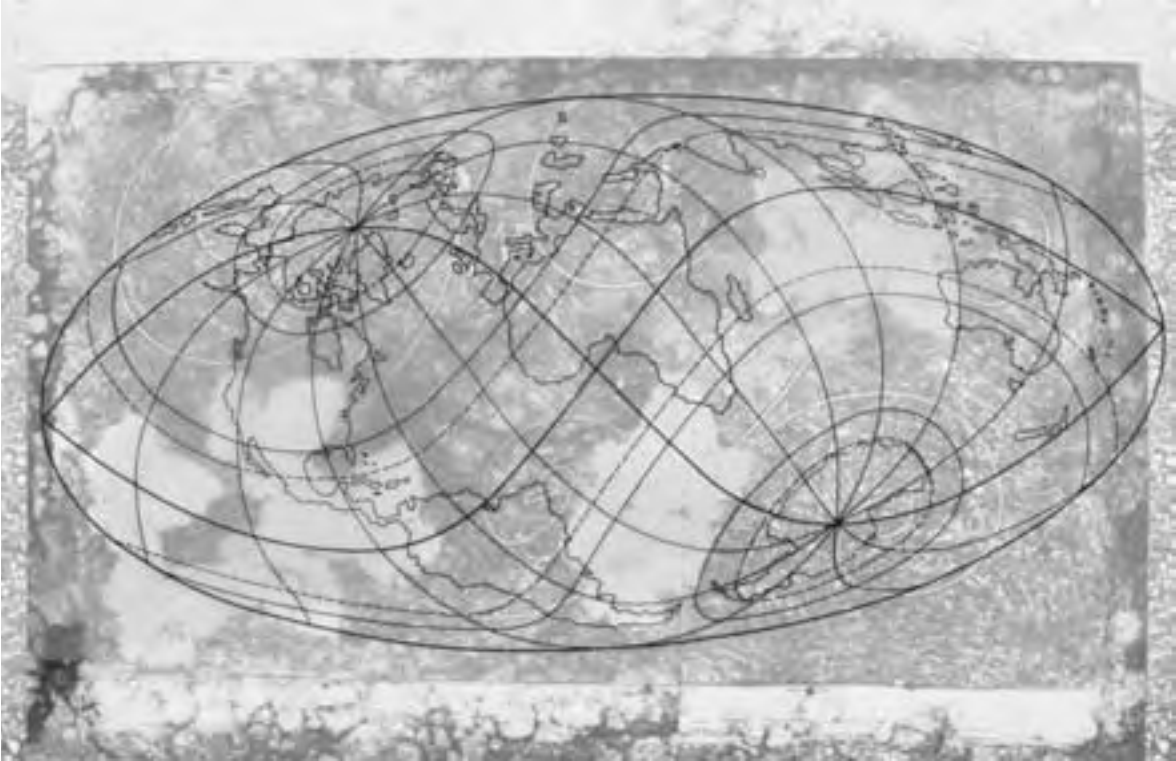


Interfaith Engagement

qur'anic perception

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Global; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

ISLAM'S IMAGE

Islam is a global religion. In many countries Muslims are in the majority, while in many others, including Europe and the United States, they are in sizeable minorities. In religious terms, this worldwide Muslim population is called the *Ummah*.

The Muslim *Ummah* consists of various races, cultures and nationalities. In today's global community they are interacting with people of divergent faiths, creeds and cultures. Sometimes such interactions result in bloody conflicts. This is perhaps due to the clash of their socioreligious and political interests in general,

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coupled with their differences regarding the interpretations of religious faiths and practices. Islam as a religion has always

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been monotheistic and therefore a great source of unity among Muslims. But today's world media (electronic as well as print media) projects Islam as an intolerant faith. An analysis of many current inter-cultural conflicts and events will reveal that the Western media and a few

The projected clash is basically the clash of American interests with those of Middle Eastern and other developing countries and not a clash between civilizations as such.

literary works of Orientalists are playing a crucial role in shaping the image of Islam as an intolerant faith. In this context, the following words of M. Lepidus are relevant:

To many Westerners Islam represents the East – the outside civilization to their own. For the West Islam is always problematic. It is often looked upon with curiosity, concern, contempt, or fear. Islam is a competitor. And it has been a focus of conflict and was, from the Arab conquest of the seventh century through the crusades and

*the Ottoman Turkish invasions of Europe, down to Islamic terrorism today.*¹

The widely discussed and highly controversial hypothesis of Samuel P. Huntington, propounded in his book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*², is also important. The projected clash is basically the clash of American interests with those of Middle Eastern and other developing countries and not a clash between civilizations as such. Moreover, the reactionary attitudes of some sections of the Muslim Ummah towards modernity are equally responsible for painting the image of Islam as an intolerant faith.

Asghar Ali Engineer, a prolific writer and a well known Indian scholar of Islam, explains the matter as follows:

*If anything it is getting exacerbated in recent times and the 9/11 attack has further intensified it. The extremists among Muslims resort to violence in response to violence by the West in the Middle East and it has become a vicious circle. Strong prejudices have been created against Islam in this region. The Muslim extremists invoke the slogan of jihad (wrongly of course) to commit violence in western countries and this strengthens the stereotype that Islam is religion of violence and war and does not want to coexist with other religions, especially Christianity.*³

However, such a perception of Islam and the Muslim Ummah is not based on Qur'anic teachings, the most primary source of Islamic thought and tradition. They are based on the projections and explanations of certain selective sociopolitical events of past and present and that, too, out of context. In such a scenario, a study of the Qur'anic perception of interfaith understanding seems pertinent. Hopefully, it will serve as a guiding principle to Muslims of the world in particular and to non-Muslims in general for the resolution of intra-religious and inter-religious conflicts.

It is a well known fact that the Qur'an was revealed in two cities of Arabia, namely Makkah and Madinah, over a period of twenty three years. At that time Makkah was a famous centre of international trade. The inhabitants of Makkah, particularly the Quraysh tribe, were engaged in trade with the Roman Empire and the followers of Christianity.

There were Jews in Madinah and in some other parts of Arabia along with other Arabian tribes. Thus, Arabs were familiar with Judaism and Christianity before the Qur'anic revelation. But most of them did not accept Judaism and Christianity. However, a few Arab tribes living on the border areas had accepted Christianity in their own monotheistic way, which was different from the Roman Christian practices.

The Makkans by and large were pagans and were not following any prophetic revealed scripture. Poor Makkan people were trapped in many superstitions: they believed in various gods and

goddesses. The upper class merchants, by and large, were hedonists. They ridiculed the very idea of any revealed truth. The Qur'anic revelation called Makkans of that nature 'unbelievers' i.e. kafirs – literally those who hide or reject truth knowingly out of arrogance. The prophet Muhammad was born into the Quraysh tribe and also was brought up in this city, but the idol worship, which was a common practice

These verses reveal the fundamental principles of the Qur'anic perspective on interreligious relations, which emphasize that there is no compulsion in matters of faith.

among the inhabitants of Makkah, did not appeal to him. He began meditation in the cave Hira in search of truth. When he received the first revelation of the Qur'an, he proclaimed himself as Rasulallah – the messenger of Allah. As a result, he faced strong opposition not only from the people of his own tribe and other Makkans, but also from his own relatives.

ISLAM IS NOT INTOLERANT

Despite these difficulties, he continued to pursue his mission given the directions of the Qur'anic revelation. Consequently, he had to go through severe persecutions; and he bore them with remarkable perseverance. Instead of

confronting his opponents, he presented them with a formula of mutual understanding to cope with the situation:

There is no compulsion in religion: the right way clearly stands out from error, so whoever rejects Tagut or devil and believes in Allah, he indeed grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks (2:256).

The same is apparent from another Qur'anic verse revealed in Makkah:

For you is your faith and for me is mine (109:6). Thus from the very beginning the Qur'anic teachings obviously were not to be imposed upon anyone.

The Prophet adopted the same formula in Madinah, the first Islamic state, where Muhammad assumed political leadership.

These verses reveal the fundamental principles of the Qur'anic perspective on interreligious relations, which emphasize that there is no compulsion in matters



The Path, photo, Cetta Kenney

of faith. However, the Qur'anic revelation motivates us to adopt the right path instead of treading the wrong path and to be free from blemishes. Those who accept the right path are grasping the most trustworthy hand-hold that will never break. The inherent ideas in these two verses – "there is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) and "for you is your faith and for me is mine" (109:6) – make the Qur'anic perception of other faiths

The Qur'an also accepts all earlier prophets from Adam to Jesus as true prophets of God and makes it mandatory for Muslims to believe in all the prophets and forbids making any distinction between them

very clear; obviously, it is not intolerant as projected in the western media. From the very beginning the conscience of an individual was accorded prime importance in the decision about whether to accept or reject Islam.

The Qur'anic perception of inter-faith understanding underlines the fact that humanity as a whole could not believe in any single faith. People will certainly differ in the matter of faith as per their own understanding of the world – physical and metaphysical. With regard to this the Qur'an even poses questions to the prophet Muhammad:

*If it had been thy Lord's will,
they would all have believed –*

*All who are on earth! Will thou
then force them till they are
believers? (10:99).*

The Qur'an expresses the same idea in a different way in another verse, which again raises questions on the missionary zeal of the Prophet:

*Thou wouldst only, per chance,
fret thyself to death, following
after them, in grief, if they
believe not in this message (18:6).*

AFFIRMING OTHER PROPHETS

However, Christians and Jews who possessed revealed scriptures were termed as *Ahl al-Kitab* i.e. people of the book; an appeal was made to them for mutual understanding and compromise on common points:

*O people of the book (let us)
rally to a common formula to be
binding on both of us that we
shall worship none but Allah,
and that we shall ascribe no
partners to him, and that none
of us shall take others as Lords
besides Allah. And if they turn
away, then say: Bear witness that
we are (Muslim) who have sur-
rendered to him (3:64).*

The Qur'an also accepts all earlier prophets from Adam to Jesus as true prophets of God and makes it mandatory for Muslims to believe in all the prophets and forbids making any distinction between them:

Surely those who disbelieve in Allah and His messengers, and seek to make distinction between Allah and his messengers, and say: we believe in some and disbelieve in others; and seek to choose a way in between – these are truly disbelievers and we have prepared for disbelievers an abasing Chastisement (4:150-51).

The same principle of not making any distinction between one prophet and the other is repeated time and again in different verses of the Qur'an.⁴ Moreover, the Qur'an mentions many earlier prophets by name in various chapters like "Al-Imran" – the family of al-Imran (3), "Yunus" – Jonah (10), "Ibrahim" – Abraham (14), "Al-Qasas" – the narrative (28), "Yusuf" – Joseph (12), "Ambia" – the prophets (21) and so on. Thus the Qur'an confirms the truth presented by these prophets in different periods as the truth brought by the messengers of Allah. Moreover, it relates previous revelation with its own and safeguards it:

And to you we have revealed the scripture with the truth, confirming whatever scripture was before it, and to safeguard it. So Judge between them by that which Allah has revealed, and follows not these desires away from the truth, which has come to you. For each we have given you a code of law and a traced out way. Had Allah wished he could have made you one com-

munity. But that he may try you by that which he has given you (He has made you as you are). So vie one with another in good deeds. To Allah you will all return, and he will then inform you of that wherein you differ. (5:48).

Here the Qur'an accepts that it is not possible for the whole of humanity to become a single religious community; differences are part and parcel of human nature.

But one should try to find out the truth instead of following one's own desires. The main purpose of the religions is to create a society in which ethical conduct prevails. So we should vie with one another in good deeds. It is also suggested in the foregoing (5:48) verse that divergent religious groups should postpone their differences regarding faiths and leave the final decision to God. The following verse of the Qur'an further clarifies the point:

Those who believe (this Qur'an) and those who are Jews, and the Sabaeans and the Christians and the Magians and the Polytheists – Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. No doubt Allah is witness over all things (22:17).

The same notion is expressed in another verse of the Qur'an in which Allah instructs Prophet Muhammad:

To each people we have given

sacred rites, which they are to perform; so let them not dispute with you of the matter, but do you invite them to your Lord. You indeed follow right guidance (22:67).

The same instruction is further repeated in another verse:

Each one has a goal or direction towards which he turns to express his faith, so vie with another in good works (2:148).

UNITY AND DIFFERENCES

From the foregoing discussion it is quite apparent that the Qur'an accepts the plurality of religions and instructs that different religious groups of humanity may continue to pursue their own faiths, and that it is more important is to excel each other in good deeds, as good deeds lead to the establishment of peace and moral order in society. Furthermore, Allah instructs Muslims to recognize unity as the essence of faiths:

Say (O Muslims): we believe in Allah and which is revealed to us and that which was revealed

to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the (other) prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered (2:136).

However, it will be an exaggeration to say that Islam does not differ from other faiths. It has many conceptual and practical differences with various faiths, especially, pagan Arabs, Jews and Christians. The pagan Arabs were polytheists. The Qur'an termed their polytheism as *shirk* – assigning associates to Allah. The Qur'an presents the concept of strict monotheism, termed as *tawhid*, and thus those accepting the idea were identified as *muwahid*, which means monotheist, similar to Muslim, the person who has complete surrender to Allah – God.

Another word used for monotheist is *hanif*. The Qur'an presents Prophet Abraham and his son Ismail (prophet himself) as the founders of *kabah* and as propagators of *tawhid*, the creed of monotheism. When the pagan Arabs of Makkah declined to accept *tawhid*,



Jewish, Christian, Muslim symbols; original art, Swami Tapasananda

Prophet Muhammad received instructions in the Qur'an not to surrender to any god except God – Allah (28:28). He was strictly forbidden to associate any god with Allah.

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

The Qur'an addressed the *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book) very amicably and intimately. Among them the Jews received *Tawrat* – the Old Testament through Moses and the Christians received *Injil* – the New Testament through Jesus. The Qur'an relates its own revelation, in continuation with them, as the words of God in human history to bless mankind. It invites *Ahl al-Kitab* to the submission of God by mentioning that it is the same message from the same God which earlier had been delivered to them through the earlier messengers, and Muhammad is also one of them (29:45). The Qur'an instructs Muhammad and his followers that if *Ahl al-Kitab* refused to accept the message then you make them witnesses of your faith in Allah (3:57).

The Qur'an acknowledges that some people of *Ahl al-Kitab* recognize the truth (new revelations) by accepting that they were already submitting to God prior to the Qur'an (28:52-53). In the period of Madinah, Prophet Muhammad allows his followers to offer *salat* – prayer in the direction of Jerusalem instead of Kabah. Similarly the Qur'an evaluates the Christians positively (57:27). The Qur'an praises certain positive traits of the Christians, but monastic life is mentioned as their self imposed practice

and is not prescribed by God. They are admonished for having long forgotten their covenants established with God through earlier prophets (5:15-22). The Qur'an further reproaches the Jews and the Christians for their opinions that “Uzair by the Jews and Jesus by the Christians” would have been the son of God. In the Qur'anic view these concepts of *Ahl al-Kitab* brought them close to polytheism and disgrace in relation to the pure faith in the uniqueness of God (9:31). The Qur'an said that Jesus (*al-masih*) was *Rubullah* – the spirit of God, but a created being and a prophet of God. The Jews tried to eliminate him with their plan of crucifixion but they were unsuccessful (4:152-157, 3:48). It is also noticeable that the Qur'anic revelations accused *Ahl al-Kitab*, particularly Jews, for the obscurity of the truth existing in their scriptures (3:64, 2:141). It recorded that they (*Ahl al-Kitab*) even claim a text to be revealed which is, in fact, has been fabricated in their scriptures by them (2:73).

The Qur'an claimed that the prophethood of Muhammad was announced (*a'laam*) by God in previous scriptures – *Tawrat* of Moses and *Injil* of Jesus (7:156). The Qur'an presents itself as a reminder of the same monotheistic faith and portrays Muhammad as a revival prophet of the same message which was preached by the earlier prophets. When the Qur'an was presenting these arguments to pagan Arabs and the *Ahl al-Kitab* it claimed for itself a pure faith (*dinulhaqq*) and the religion of Abraham – *millat-e-Ibrahim*. During this process of Qur'anic rev-

elation and prophetic efforts at reformation, the Muslim Ummah slowly and steadily evolved in distinction from pagan Arabs, Jews and Christians and the Qur'anic ideology was embedded in the socio-political fabric of the society of those times. Its natural outcome

the Qur'an advises its followers to develop understanding with the people of other faiths in a good manner, not in a way that leads to conflict.

was first locating differences, then confrontation, and ultimately war against arrogant and stubborn pagan Arabs and Jews who collaborated with each other against Muhammad and his followers at Madinah, particularly during the war of the Ditch (625 A.D.). The Muslims in a later period after the fall of Makkah (630 A.D.) engaged in war with the Christians also but the nature of this war with the Christians was generally political rather than religious as it has been with the pagan Arabs and the Jews.

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

In spite of all these religious differences and socio-political confrontations, the Qur'an advises its followers to develop understanding with the people of other faiths in a good manner, not in a way that leads to conflict. In this regard, a verse from the Qur'an relates to the specific context of Jews and Christians:

And argue not with the people of the Scripture unless it be in a way that is better (29:46).

The same verse further emphasizes the similarities among these religions to promote mutual understanding:

We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you; our God and your God is one, and we are committed to observe peace before Him (29:46).

The Qur'an strongly exhorts that its followers should never disgrace the belief systems of others, even those of polytheists:

Revile not those to whom they pray beside Allah lest they wrongfully revile Allah through ignorance (6:108).

We can find several verses in the Qur'an on the basis of which one can presume that the Qur'an has serious differences with the Ahl-e-Kitab and is intolerant towards other faiths. Regarding this, scholars are of the view that such verses of the Qur'an should be understood within the particular context in which they were revealed and not in isolation. For example:

Strongest among men in enmity to the believers will you find the Jews and Pagans; and nearest among them in friendship to the believers will you find those who

say, "We are Christians": Because amongst these are men devoted to learning. And men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant (5:82).

In the above verse Jews and Pagans are singled out as more violent in enmity towards the believers i.e. Muslims, in comparison to the Christians. It appears that the enmity of Jews and Pagans with Muslims is not due to their faith but due to their socioeconomic and political clashes with Muslims in Madinah at that period of history.

MUTUAL RESPECT

The Qur'an teaches the followers to develop understanding with other faiths with a view that to accept or reject any faith is a matter of one's conscience.

People of different faiths have an equal right to worship in their own ways. They have the right to keep different worship places. Moreover, for the Qur'an, the human being is the supreme creation of God and is most respectable, irrespective of caste, tribe, color, creed and nationality. Thus the Qur'an declares:

We have honored the children of Adam. We carry them on the land and the sea, and have made provision of good things for them, and have preferred them above many of those whom we have created with a marked preference (17:70).

The Qur'an exhorts Muslims not to discriminate between people on the basis of race, color, languages, nationalities etc., as these are also signs of Allah's



Mutual Respect; photo, Cetta Kenney

presence and his greatness:

And of his signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variation of your languages and colors. Herein indeed are portents for men of knowledge (30:22).

Many more verses of the Qur'an could be cited in the context of interfaith understanding. However, the above quoted Qur'anic verses make it amply

Indeed Muslims need to respond to the situation, which they are facing, with wisdom

clear that the Qur'anic perspective for developing understanding with other faiths is based on mutual respect, tolerance and cooperation. The intra-religious conflicts between various sects of the Muslim Ummah, and interreligious conflicts between the Muslim Ummah and other religious communities, can be easily resolved if the teachings of the Qur'an are sincerely put into practice by the believers of the Qur'an.

Indeed Muslims need to respond to the situation, which they are facing, with wisdom as the Qur'an emphasizes the importance of wisdom and understanding. It says: "And whoever is given wisdom, he indeed is given great good" (2:269). All the more, the Qur'anic wisdom which is revealed by Allah is for the welfare of humanity. The scholars – Muslims or non-Muslims – should try to understand and explain it with-

out prejudice. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is a concluding prophetic revelation. If so, humanity needs to develop its understanding keeping in mind the changing situation of the world.

Therefore, Muslim *fiqh* i.e. jurisprudence, which governs Muslim daily life, but which was developed during the medieval period, seems less advisable in current circumstances. The need of the hour is to develop a new *fiqh* that suits democratic culture. It is also necessary that any new *fiqh* is thoroughly based

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on Qur'anic normative injunctions at the same time as it may be freed from the medieval outlook and the elements of feudal culture. For example, medieval Islamic *fiqh* lays significant stress on *jihad*. Although the concept is very significant, it nevertheless seems exaggerated in its medieval environs where things were mainly settled by the sword and in the absence of any socio-political concept of human rights. We do find certain examples when Muslim governing classes had misused *jihad* as a concept during the medieval period. The current understanding of the Qur'an and a new Islamic *fiqh* should lay stress on the ways and means of bringing peace in society and of safeguarding the basic human rights of each individual,

as peace is the central doctrine and very meaning of the word Islam.

The fundamental qur'anic values of Islam are: *salam*, *rehmah*, *hikmah* and *adl*, which mean peace, compassion, wisdom and justice respectively, and they are expressed several times in the Qur'an. Thus the Qur'an teaches its followers to lead their lives with the outlook of peace, compassion, wisdom and justice. It ought to lead to peaceful understanding with the people of other faiths. This might seem like an utopian idea to many, but if Islam is sincerely followed in its true sense by believers and understood without prejudices by others, it will definitely help in finding peaceful solutions to many complex problems in our modern globalized world.

NOTES

¹ M. Lapidus, Professor of History, University of California, Berkeley: 'Foreword', *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World* (Ed. Francis Robinson), New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. vii.

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Penguin Books, 1996.

³ Asghar Ali Engineer, "Islam and Interfaith Engagement", *Islam and the Modern Age*, August-September, 2007 (www.csss.isla.com), p. 8.

⁴ As an example, I refer to 2:136, 2:285 and 3: 86 verses of the Qur'an.

Gone with the Wind; original art, Setsuko Yoshida

