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The inclusive Approach of Islam towards other Religions¹

Introduction

Since the success of any dialogue and achieving mutual understanding depends on the correct apprehension of the views and beliefs of the other side, therefore, the purpose of the following paper is to briefly present the views of Islam towards other religions. Obviously, providing such a paper about Christianity and other traditions (by advocates of those religions) facilitates such mutual understanding and provides the very basis of a positive, constructive, and useful dialogue.

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At this very stage, it seems appropriate to clarify two points:

- 1- Since, according to Islamic tenets, Qur'an is the prime and supreme source of Islamic beliefs and rituals, therefore, in the following discussions, all the references are cited solely from that Holy Book. Clearly, such references may well be cited from other sources, such as the traditions (Ahādith) of the holy Prophet (ص), as well as views expressed by great Islamic scholars, though such an endeavor is beyond the purpose of the present paper.
- 2- From the text of Qur'an -the sacred book of Muslims- it can well be concluded that in this Holy Book the term "Islam" has been used in two distinctively different senses, one "general" and the other "particular". Any mixing up of the two will result in great confusion and misunderstanding, so widely present in many critics and polemics about Islam.

The term "Islam" in it's general sense

Based on many verses of Qur'an, the term Islam, in it's general sense, denotes belief in all religious traditions starting from Adam (ع) and ending in the last Prophet (ص),² i.e. "khātām". Naturally, the supreme deity of such a comprehensive religion is the same God of all religious traditions and theistic beliefs, as well as that of all prophets.

Along this line, Qur'an, in surat Al-Baqarah, states that Abraham enjoined upon his sons "Oh my sons! Allah hath chosen The faith for you; then die not except in the state of submission"³ -i.e. Islam- and then asks, in a puzzling tone "were you witnesses when death appeared before Jacob and he said to his sons: what will you worship after me? They said: we shall worship thy God and the God of thy fathers Abraham, Isaac; the One (True) God; to Him do

². Qur'an 2.4.

³. Qur'an 2.132.

we submit"⁴. Anyhow, belief in the one common God⁵, and all Holy Books⁶, and divine prophets⁷, is the main characteristic of Islam - in it's general sense - in Qur'an. As in surat Al- Maidah we read: "those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians, any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve"⁸.

The term "Islam" in it's particular sense

The term "Islam", in it's particular application, includes belief in Prophet Mohammad (ص), as the last Messenger of God⁹, and in the holy Book of Qur'an as the last Divine Revelation¹⁰, though Qur'an itself makes the belief in previous sacred Books (i.e. the Torah and the Gospels) a prerequisite to the belief in Islam and prophet Mohammad (ص)¹¹. Thus, it can rightly be argued that, without full belief in Moses and Jesus, and Torah and Gospels, one is not truly a Muslim and his belief in Prophet Mohammad (ص), not being qualified by belief in preceding Prophets, is not considered a "perfect" (complete) belief.

In the light of these introductory comments, let us now examine the approach or Qur'an and Islam towards other religious faiths and beliefs.

General view of Qur'an viz-a-viz other religions

Perhaps one of the most sever blows to religiousness in the past history of "religion" has been caused by the uncompromising and

⁴. Qur'an 2.133.

⁵. Qur'an 29.46.

⁶. Qur'an 2.3.

⁷. Qur'an 4.253.

⁸. Qur'an 5.69.

⁹. Qur'an 33.40.

¹⁰. Qur'an 17.9.

¹¹. Qur'an 2.3.

rigid attitude of some religious zealots in different religious traditions. While a close look at Qur'an and the sacred books of other traditions, and the mode of conduct of great prophets, saints, and holy men, proves quite to the contrary.

Following we will briefly cite a few examples from Qur'an:

Religious belief is a matter of "personal choice"

In Qur'an we read: "we showed him the way, whether he be grateful or ungrateful"¹², meaning that religious belief is certainly a matter of personal choice and that no one can be forced to accept a "religion". Needless to say, any behavior to the contrary in Islamic world proves an unIslamic code of conduct or a misconception of genuine teachings of Islam.

There should be no "compulsion" in religion

Along this same line, in Surat Al-Baqara, we read: "Let there be no compulsion in religion, Truth stands out clear from Error"¹³. Obviously, this open statement removes any possible ambiguities from the minds of religious men, be it clergies or non-clergies, that under any circumstances one can not be forced to confess a religious faith, however truthful that faith may be!

Everyone has his/her own religion

When you can not force people into confessing a belief, naturally different faiths and beliefs will blossom. That is why Qur'an says: "To each of you is a goal to which Allah turns him"¹⁴, a point also repeated in Surat Al-Maida: "To each among you we have prescribed a law and an open way"¹⁵. In Surat Bani Isra'il any

¹². Qur'an 76.3.

¹³. Qur'an 2.256.

¹⁴. Qur'an 2.148.

¹⁵. Qur'an 5.48.

Judgment regarding who is good or bad (right or wrong) in religious terms is left to the God Almighty and ordinary people are prohibited from making such unwisely Judgments: "say, everyone acts according to his own disposition; But your Lord knows best who is it that is best-guided on the way"¹⁶.

Plurality of religious rites

When religious beliefs are manifold, then the rites are diverse as well, a fact plainly recognized in Qur'an. As in Surat Al-Hajj we read: "to every people we have prescribed rites"¹⁷.

If God so wished, people were a single religious community

In view of different verses in Qur'an on religious beliefs and religious communities, it may well be concluded that differences In opinions, beliefs, and rites of human societies is based on God's Will to examine people and recognize those who strive their utmost in the way of God. Otherwise, as Qur'an says in surat Al-Maidah: "If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but (His Plan is) to test you in what he hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues"¹⁸.

Thus, we notice that Qur'an's general outlook as regards to different religious communities is that such divergent views and beliefs relate to the Will of God and that true & genuine religion near God is: "submission of one's whole self to Allah and doing good deeds"¹⁹ and that: "Righteousness is not that you turn your face towards East or West, but it is righteousness to believe in Allah, and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers, and to spend your substance out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who

¹⁶. Qur'an 17.84.

¹⁷. Qur'an 22.34 & 67.

¹⁸. Qur'an 5.48.

¹⁹. Qur'an 2.112.

ask, and for the ransom of slaves; To be steadfast in prayer, and give zakat, to fulfill the contracts which you have made; And to be firm and patient in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing"²⁰.

Obviously, this is a manifest for all those who believe in God, and anyone who submits to it and puts it into action, be it of any race or of any part of the globe, he/she will be viewed as a religious person whom will eventually be saved and liberated. And that, according to the teachings of Islam in Qur'an, unlike the mediaeval church and many extremists in all religious traditions, past and present, one should not judge the level of religiosity or righteousness of others on his/her own criteria.

Qur'an and the People of the Book

Qur'an considers the followers of the so-called "Abrahamic" or "Semitic"²¹ religions as "People of the Book" (Ahl Al-kitab) and so addresses them with this name in many verses²². Since both Jewish and Christian communities were present in Arabian Peninsula at the time of Prophet Mohammad (ﷺ)²³ and, generally speaking, were to some extent opposing his divine mission²⁴, therefore how Qur'an views and assesses them has been a matter of scholarly attention both inside and outside the Islamic society.

Qur'an's approach towards "People of the Book" -especially Jews and Christians- may be discussed under two separate headlines: First the general characteristics of Jews & Christians in the mirror of Qur'an, and second specific traits related to each of these communities. To save time, in the present article, the first subject

²⁰. Qur'an 2.177.

²¹. Descendants of Sam-ibn-Noah.

²². For example see: Qur'an 3.65, 5.59, etc.

²³. It should be noted that, in Qur'an, Sabena's and Zoroastrians are also considered people of the book. For example see: Qur'an 22.17 and elsewhere.

²⁴. Qur'an 3.71 elsewhere.

will be considered in more details and the latter will be touched upon rather briefly.

Qur'an's overall assessment of "the People of the Book" is somehow similar to its approach towards Muslims, meaning that it considers some of them true believers in Abraham -the grand father of all Abrahamic religions, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and their common source of inspiration and reverence- and some others as those who are obstacles to the way of that divine prophet²⁵. In other words, as reflected in Qur'an, some of the "People of the Book" are well-grounded in (divine) knowledge²⁶, and some others are "those who know not the Book, but (see there in their own) desires and they do nothing but conjecture"²⁷. Also, in another passage, it says some of the "People of the Book" are so pious and trust-worthy that you may entrust them with a huge amount of money and some are so untrustworthy that if you deposit single dollar with them it is hardly receivable²⁸. Therefore, from the point of view of Qur'an, some of the "People of the Book" are "true believers" in God and His Apostles and some are "perverted transgressors"²⁹, qualities repeatedly used for different groups of Muslim community as well.

But Qur'an's approach towards the Jewish and Christian communities of early Islam is to first remind them of the common goals between all the faithful, i.e. not to worship but Allah and not to associate any partners with Him³⁰, and then to remind Muslims, i.e. the followers of Prophet Mohammad (ص), of the fact that not all "People of the Book" should be Judged alike, because "among them are some who stand (for the right), rehearse the signs of Allah all night long, and prostrate themselves in adoration of God"³¹. Along the same line, in Surat Al-Ankabut, Qur'an warns the Muslim community against not treating "People of the Book" in

²⁵. Qur'an 4.55.

²⁶. Qur'an 4.162.

²⁷. Qur'an 2.78.

²⁸. Qur'an 3.75.

²⁹. Qur'an 3.110.

³⁰ Qur'an 3.64.

³¹. Qur'an 3.113,4.

most respected manner and asks them not to argue or dispute "People of the Book" except in the best way³² and repeatedly advises the Islamic Ummah, as well as the Jewish and the Christian communities, to fear Allah³³ and states that it is not being a Muslim, Christian, or Jew to be saved but good deeds are the criterion³⁴.

As we know, the common practice of the two great Semitic traditions, Christianity and Judaism, is that the believers in each of them solely acknowledge the truthfulness of their own tradition and the preceding ones. Thus, Jews only believe in Moses, Abraham, and other "Israelite" prophets, but not in Jesus the Christ; and Christians only believe in Jesus & Moses, and Torah & Gospels, but not in Prophet Mohammad & Qur'an. That is why Qur'an addresses this issue and advises "People of the Book" to believe in prophet Mohammad's revelation³⁵ as it confirms what has been revealed to previous prophets³⁶. In the light of Qur'anic teachings, such an acknowledgement (of Qur'an) by "People of the Book" will be better for them³⁷ and will put them in right guidance³⁸, and so God Almighty will acquit them of their evil deeds and will admit them to Gardens of Bliss³⁹.

It should also be noted that, in the light of some unjustified attitude of "People of the Book" and especially the early Jewish community against Prophet of Islam and his followers, and at times the very hostile approach of Jews towards Muslims, Qur'an somehow holds a very critical stand against them and reminds them of their obviously wrong stance. In such instances, Qur'an first invites "People of the Book" to be good practioner of their own faith and asks Prophet Mohammad to tell them: "O People of the Book!

³². Qur'an 29.46.

³³. Qur'an 4.131.

³⁴. Qur'an 4.123,4.

³⁵. Qur'an 4.47.

³⁶. Qur'an 3.3.

³⁷. Qur'an 3.110.

³⁸. Qur'an 3.20.

³⁹. Qur'an 5.65.

You have no ground to stand upon unless you stand firm by the Torah & the Gospel"⁴⁰ and then declares that this Last Prophet (ص) is the Messenger of Allah to all People, including the "People of the Book" themselves⁴¹ and that he (Prophet Mohammad) is assigned to reveal much of the (preceding) Books hidden by these people⁴². So, now that this last Messenger of God has come after a break in (the series of) Our Messengers and is really pursuing the same path⁴³, then it is not appropriate that you (People of the Book) turn back to him and shun him⁴⁴ and, while you yourselves are witnessing his prophetic mission and God's revelation to him and well recognize the genuineness of his Book, reject him⁴⁵.

One last point before providing Qur'an's specific views about either of Jewish or Christian communities is that some of the criticisms Qur'an raises against these two traditions is by no means limited to them, but applies to many other living traditions as well; points such as committing excesses in one's religion⁴⁶, or calling Uzair a son of Allah by Jews and Christ the son of Allah by Christians⁴⁷, or the excessive claim of being God's beloved ones by both groups⁴⁸, and finally exaggerating about the status of priests and clergies and considering them as one's lords beside Allah⁴⁹.

Let us reiterate the fact that raising these excesses against "People of the Blook" should not be interpreted as if they are non-existent in Islamic societies today. Any quick survey of the Muslim world reveals the same, if not even a worse, situation⁵⁰.

⁴⁰. Qur'an 5.68.

⁴¹. Qur'an 7.158.

⁴². Qur'an 5.15.

⁴³. Qur'an 5.19.

⁴⁴. Qur'an 3.23.

⁴⁵. Qur'an 3.70.

⁴⁶. Qur'an 4.171.

⁴⁷. Qur'an 9.30.

⁴⁸. Qur'an 5.18.

⁴⁹. Qur'an 9.31.

⁵⁰. For more details please see "An Introduction to the History of Religions in Qur'an" by Dr. Abdolrahim Gavahi, published by "Daftar -e Nashr - e Farhang - e Eslaami", 1997, Tehran -Iran.

On Jewish community Qur'an, while confirming that some of the Jews are standing for the right and are rehearsing the signs of Allah all night long⁵¹ and that they do right⁵², declares that most Jews, along with Pagans and Unbelievers, demonstrate the highest level of enmity towards Muslims⁵³ and this, along with their similar enmity against Jesus the son of Mary⁵⁴, has caused this once chosen People of God⁵⁵ to be, but a little of them⁵⁶, cursed by Allah⁵⁷ and disgraced both in this world and In the Hereafter⁵⁸.

But on Christian community the situation is different. Qur'an, which near Muslims is the last Divine Revelation to mankind, not only does not employ the same harsh tone against Christians, but openly states that among "People of the Book" Christians are nearest in love to the Believers, i.e. Muslims⁵⁹, and that is because amongst them are many devoted men, and those who have renounced the world and are not arrogant⁶⁰. These People, Qur'an says, when they listen to the revelation received by Prophet Mohammad their eyes overflows with tears for they recognize the truth⁶¹.

Finally, one of the most astonishing passages of Qur'an about Jesus the Christ, the great prophet of Christianity, is that in Surat Al-Nisaa it says all People of the Book, including Jews, will believe in him before their death, and that on the Day of Judgment Jesus will be a witness against them all⁶².

⁵¹. Qur'an 3.112.

⁵². Qur'an 37.113.

⁵³. Qur'an 5.82.

⁵⁴. Qur'an 19.34, 4.156 & 157.

⁵⁵. Qur'an 7.140.

⁵⁶. Qur'an 2.88.

⁵⁷. Qur'an 4.52.

⁵⁸. Qur'an 5.41.

⁵⁹. Qur'an 5.82.

⁶⁰. Ibid.

⁶¹. Qur'an 5.83.

⁶². Qur'an 4.159.

Conclusion

In the light of the preceding citations from Qur'an it can fairly be stated that Islam and Qur'an consider all believers in God a single front or community, the ranks of which should only be separated from unbelievers and atheists. Also, according to Qur'an, anyone who believes in God and the Last Day and does good deeds, be it a Muslim, Christian or Jew, will be amongst those who have succeeded and will be saved. On the contrary, anyone who does not meet these conditions, even a so-called revolutionary or hard-liner in any of the above-mentioned traditions, since his/her deeds are not in accordance with divine commandments, he/she will be doomed to divine punishment and disgrace.

Furthermore, Qur'an recommends that a true believer's contact with others should be peaceful, graceful, and intended the other People guidance to the right path. Hence, any forceful, unfriendly, and uncompromising attitude is not to the consent of the God Almighty and so is not beneficial for our worldly or spiritual life.

Finally, while Qur'an instructs the Believers (Muslim) to be forgiving⁶³ and patient⁶⁴ against any possible pressure on Muslim community by "People of the Book", and rejects any hostile behavior in response⁶⁵, in a clear injunction which may well constitute the basis of foreign policy of Islamic societies advises all the Islamic communities to enter into kind, Just, and friendly relations with all those (People of the Book) who do not fight against the Muslims and do not want to drive the Muslims out of their homes⁶⁶.

⁶³. Qur'an 2.109.

⁶⁴. Qur'an 3.186.

⁶⁵. Qur'an 4.135.

⁶⁶. Qur'an 60.8.