

Muslim-Christian Relations: Towards a New Paradigm of Peaceful Co-existence

Mohd Yaseen Gada

Abstract

Muslim-Christian relationship is one of the hotly debated discourses in today's modern global community; both of the religious groups together constitute almost half of the world's population. From the seventh century, Muslims and Christians have been in constant interaction and cooperation. Although, the events of the Crusades, Western Imperialism, and 9/11, stand as obstacles in the midst of contemporary Christian-Muslim relationships, interaction and dialogue; have resulted in hatred and suspicion between the two religions and left an indelible scar in Muslim and Christian minds. Consequently, the level of mutual understanding between these two communities is often very low; indeed, it could be said that mutual ignorance is far more widespread than mutual understanding. Many argue that, if humanity wants to survive in the twenty-first century, understanding between religions, particularly positive relations between Muslims and Christians, are essential. In other words, global peace and stability will be possible through Muslim-Christian cooperation. This interaction and cooperation needs more understanding than ever, especially after the 9/11 event.

This paper is an attempt to understand and highlight the importance of the Muslim-Christian cooperation. First, it briefly discusses the Islamic view of the Christians. Second, this paper asks what the relationship between Muslims and Christians is.

Mohd. Yaseen Gada, is Research Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh (India)
Email ID: myyaseenm2@gmail.com

How is Muslim to act towards a Christian? Third, and importantly, the paper illustrates that the 'common universal core values' will lead to a peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christians. The paper concludes that Muslim-Christian relationship and cooperation can make a true 'peaceful global civilization' in the contemporary peace deficit global community.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, the pragmatic need for the better understanding and cooperation among adherents in the world's two largest communities of faith-Islam and Christianity is particularly more than ever, as together Christian and Muslims comprise almost half of the world's population; consequently, the way in which they relate is clearly to have profound impact for both communities and for the world.¹The level of mutual understanding between these two communities, however, is often very low; indeed, it could be said that mutual ignorance is far more widespread than mutual understanding.²Nonetheless, several developments in the nineteenth and twentieth century set the stage for contemporary mutually enriching friendships between Muslims and Christians in many parts of the world.³ Moreover, many scholars⁴ are of the view that if humanity wants to survive in the twenty-first century, understanding between religions, particularly positive relations between Muslims and Christians, are essential. In other words, global peace and stability will be possible through Muslim-Christian cooperation. Keeping in view the importance of the subject, the paper first will look into how the Qur'an speaks of the Christians, what sort of cooperation and friendship Islam allows the Muslims to have with the Christians. In the last section, universal common core values, on the basis of which the foundations of a true peaceful society can be formed, will be discussed.

¹Charles A Kimball, v.s, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*, ed., John L. Esposito, 181-187, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 181.

² Hugh Goddard, *Christians and Muslims: From Double Standards to Mutual Understanding*, Curzon Press, 1995, p. 1.

³, Willem A.Bijlefeld, "Christian-Muslim Relations: A Burdensome Past, a Challenging Future", *Word & World*, 16(2):117-128, 1996, p.122; Kimbal, op. cit., P. 183.

⁴ Mention may be made to the Turkish reformers, Bediuzzam Said Nursi (1877-1960) and his disciple FetullahGulen (b.1933)

People of the Book or *Ahl al-Kitab*

The Qur'an addresses the Christians as "*Ahl al-Kitab*" or "People of the Book", and the term "*Ahl al-Kitab*" occurs 32 times in the Qur'an. This term is used to name both Jews and Christians—collectively or separately—as believers in a revealed book.⁵ However, there are other terms in the Qur'an that relate to the Christians like the term *Injil*, the Qur'anic term corresponding to the Gospel, is used twelve times in the Qur'an; Jesus, *'Isa*, is mentioned more than 30 times and Mary is mentioned 34 times, more than any other woman.⁶ Generally speaking, the Qur'anic text has two main approaches to the People of the Book. On the one hand, it mentions the 'People of the Book' numerous times and defines to invite and deal with them in the best way (Qur'an 3:64–5; 29:46). Sometimes it presents negative aspects of the People of the Book, as well as criticizing them in some respects. It is worth noting that some Qur'anic verses, particularly those that relate to Muslim behaviour towards Jews and Christians, verse 5:51 is one significant example, require more analysis and a deeper approach.⁷ According to Saritoprak,⁸ the term 'People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitab*) has been a very controversial one throughout the history of Islam. The term occurs in the Qur'an in various contexts with different attributes. On the one hand, The People of the Book are said to be jealous (Qur'an 2:109); some of them are said to be *kuffar* (non-believers) (Qur'an 98:1,6); on the other hand, they are held to be a people of knowledge (*ahl al-dhikr*) to be consulted when Muslims "do not know" (Qur'an 21:7).

However, among the people of the book, those who are close in friendship with the Muslims are Christians rather the Jews, this is confirmed in the Qur'an:

⁵ HakanCoruh, "Friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book in the Qur'an with special reference to Q 5.51", in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23(4):505-513, 2012, p. 505, available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.712436>

⁶ ZekiSaritoprak, "Said Nursi's Teachings on the People of the Book: A case study of Islamic social policy in the early twentieth century", in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 11(3)2000: 321-332, p. 323, henceforth cited as Zeki.

⁷ Coruh, op. cit., ibid.

⁸ Saritoprak, ibid.

You will find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe [i.e. the Muslims] to be the Jews and the idolaters, and you will find the nearest in affection to those who believe to be those who say "We are Christians".⁹

The rest of the verse and the following verse elaborate on the reasons for this positive judgment on the Christians:

This is because there are priests and monks among them, and because they are not proud; when they hear what has been sent down to the Prophet, you see their eyes overflowing with tears as they recognize the truth, and they say: 'Lord, we believe; count us with those who witness.'¹⁰ Furthermore, Jane McAuliffe,¹¹ after conducting a detailed study of how Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an understand the Qur'anic references to Christians, suggests that there are seven Qur'anic texts which are generally recognized as referring positively towards at least some Christians: in addition to 5:82-3, which has been discussed above, they are:

Those who believe, and those who are Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does right, their reward is with their Lord; no fear will come upon them, neither will they grieve.¹²

When God said: 'O Jesus, I will take you and raise you to Me and cleanse you from those who disbelieve, and I will place those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection; then you [plural] will return to me and I will judge between you in what you differ over.'¹³

Among the People of the Book there are some who believe in God and what was sent down to you and what was sent down to them, humbling themselves before God, and not

⁹ Al-Qur'an, (Ma'idah:82)

¹⁰ Al-Qur'an, (Ma'idah: 82-83)

¹¹ Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, pp. 26-7

¹² Al-Qur'an, (Bakarah: 62)

¹³ Al-Qur'an, (Al 'Imran: 55)

*selling the verses [ayat] of God cheaply; their reward is with their Lord, who is swift to reckon.*¹⁴

*If they [the People of the Book] had observed the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have eaten from above them and from below their feet; among them are those who keep to the right path, but many of them do evil.*¹⁵

*[There are] those to whom We gave the Scripture beforehand who believe in it, and when it is recited to them they say: 'We believe in it; it is the truth from our Lord, and we have already submitted to it.' They will be given their reward twice, because they have been steadfast, they have repaid evil with good, and they have been generous with what we have provided them with; when they hear idle chatter they turn away from it and say: 'We have our works, and you have yours; peace be upon you; we do not seek ignorant people.'*¹⁶

*Then we caused Our messengers to follow in their [Noah and Abraham's] footsteps; We sent Jesus, the son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel, and We placed compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who followed him, but they invented monasticism; We did not prescribe it for them, seeking only God's pleasure, and they did not practise it properly, so We gave those of them who believed their reward, but many of them are evildoers.*¹⁷

This is not the only way the Qur'an speaks of the Christians, however, one finds that the attitude of certain late Medinan Qur'anic verses is quite severe on account of the high degree of tension that existed between Muslims and the People of the Book.¹⁸ sometimes the Qur'an presents negative image of the People of the Book, as well as criticizing them in some respects as discussed above. The Qur'anic verse (5:51) is one of the significant example. The verse reads as follows:

¹⁴ Al-Qur'an, (Al 'Imran: 199)

¹⁵ Al-Qur'an, (Ma'idah: 66)

¹⁶ Al-Qur'an, (Qasas: 52-55)

¹⁷ Al-Qur'an, (Hadid: 27)

¹⁸ Coruh, ibid.

You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them. God does not guide such wrongdoers.

So in those circumstances one may ask what Muslim-Christian relations should be alike. Can a Muslim make friendship with a Christian? If yes, then to what extent; on the one hand, the Qur'an allow a Muslim man to marry with a Christian women, but on the other hand, there is a clear Qur'anic verse 'not to take the people of the book as your friends'(Quran 5: 51). This verse is probably one of the most debated verses in the study of Muslim-Christian relations. Many argue that this Qur'anic verse is a major hindrance to sincere relations and trust between Muslims and the People of the Book.¹⁹

The early commentators of the Qur'an understand this verse generally in the context of not trusting non-Muslims in religious matters. Others, who associate alliance or friendship with intimate confidence, explain the verse as enjoining Muslims not to give away the secrets of the Muslim state to Jews and Christians.²⁰ Thus, the Qur'an does not altogether reject friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book; had it been the case, then marriage with a Christian women would not have been allowed for a Muslim man, not only this there are other Qur'anic verses where Muslims are asked to held a dialogue with the Christians in the manner that is best, as the Qur'an says:

*Say: O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Let us come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for Lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered unto Him.*²¹

¹⁹Coruh, pp. 505-506

²⁰HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad et al, *War and Peace in Islam*, (MABDA)The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought: Jordan, 2013, p. 296

²¹ Al- Qur'an, (Al'Imran: 64)

In another verse, Qur'an says:

*And debate with the People of the Book in the way which is the best.*²²

At other place, Qur'an confirms:

*Argue only in the best way with the People of the Book.*²³

These verses, without any doubt, are a quest and encourage the Muslims for a sincere understanding of mutual differences. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, while explaining the verse 5:51, adopted a unique approach towards its interpretation, he says, "Just as not all of the characteristics of an individual Muslim necessarily reflect the teaching of Islam, so also, not all of the qualities of individual Jews or Christians reflect unbelief." He also asks the question: "Can a Muslim love a Christian or Jew?" After noting the marriage of a Muslim man to a woman of the People of the Book, he replies, "Of course, yes. He should love her."²⁴

Though there are different approaches of Muslim scholars toward the verse 5:51, still those approaches do not prevent them from appreciating the virtues and merits of the People of the Book.²⁵

Toward a New Paradigm of Peaceful Co-existence

To begin, it will be appropriate to look into the initiatives taken by the Muslim and Christian scholars, in the first decade of the 21st century. November 4, 2008 was a historic day, it marked a new chapter in the long and multifaceted relationship between Islam and Christianity. For the first time in the history of Muslim-Christian relations, a delegation of twenty-nine Catholic cardinals, bishops and scholars met with twenty-nine leading Muslim authorities and scholars representing some of the most established figures in the Sunni and Shi'ite worlds. After two day meeting of deliberations and discussions, they brought out a

²² Al-Qur'an, (Nahl: 125)

²³ Al-Qur'an, (Rum: 46)

²⁴ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Munazarat* (Istanbul: YeniAsya, 1993), p. 71, as quoted by Muhammad et al, in *War and peace in Islam*, *ibid*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

fifteen-point final declaration that included an appeal for the safeguard of religious minorities and a call for Muslims and Christians to work collectively in promoting peace the world over. The declaration read, "We profess that Catholics and Muslims are called to be instruments of love and harmony among believers, and for humanity as a whole, renouncing any oppression, aggressive violence and terrorism especially that committed in the name of religion and upholding the principle of justice for all."²⁶ In his comments at the final session, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that Muslims and Christians share moral values and should defend them together:

There is a great and vast field in which we can act together in defending and promoting the moral values which are part of our common heritage. We should thus work together in promoting genuine respect for the dignity of the human person and fundamental human rights, even though our anthropological visions and our theologies justify this in different ways.²⁷

In fact this historic milestone in Muslim-Christian exchange began in earnest on October 13, 2007, when a document entitled '*A Common Word Between Us and You*', described as 'An Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders' addressed to leaders of all the Christian churches of the world. The document was signed by 138 leading Muslim scholars and intellectuals from all sections of the Islamic world, Sunni and Shia, including the Grand Muftis of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Oman, Bosnia, Russia, Chad and Istanbul. More signatures added from prominent Muslims after publication have brought this number to about 300. Moreover, with more than 460 Islamic organizations and associations now endorsing it, and there are now over 500 signatories to "A Christian Response" in addition to dozens of additional Christian responses. In fact, it has become, in a short time, the world's leading initiative in interfaith dialogue and has led to numerous responses, conferences, theses and awards. The most public response was a letter initially signed by over 300 Christian leaders and scholars entitled "*Loving God and Neighbor Together: A Christian Response to A*

²⁶Dr Joseph Lumbard, "The Uncommonality of 'A Common Word'", in *A Common Word between Us and You*, 5-Year Anniversary Edition, The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought: Amman, 2013, pp. 11-12

²⁷*Ibid.*

Common Word Between Us and You" that was organized by the Yale Center for Faith & Culture and the Yale Divinity School and published in the New York Times on November 17, 2007.²⁸

Now when the world has witnessed a great destruction; on the one hand primarily caused by greed, fear, enmity and on the other hand secularism, materialism, atheism have also destroyed the human soul from the right track. Let it be put another way, today man has lost his true moral values. Thus, when two civilisations—Islamic and Christian—come to a greater appreciation of the humanity and the concerns of one another, there is much less probability of misunderstandings, mistrust and the violence that can arise therefrom. At the very least, dialogue is better than indifference. At the very best, the collective moral voice of the world's two largest religious communities may help to prevent another Bosnia, another Iraq, or another Sudan.

This is corroborated by a prominent Iranian scholar of philosophy and comparative religion, Seyyed Hussein Nasr in his closing comments to the first seminar of the Catholic Muslim Forum:

Whether we are Christians or Muslims, we are beckoned by our religions to seek peace. As people of religion meeting here at the centre of Catholicism, let us dedicate ourselves to mutual understanding, not as diplomats, but as sincere religious scholars and authorities standing before God and responsible to him beyond all worldly authority.²⁹

In view of this common fate, Islam and Christianity are getting nearer to each other than ever before. Repulsion of materialism and the struggle against the general manifestation of disintegration are tasks to which both religions are equally bound. We are not saying that Islam and Christianity is similar; there are certain main doctrinal differences. The differences are as important as what is common to both the religions. In fact, they are

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13; Paul S. Fiddes, "The Root of Religious Freedom: Interpreting Some Muslim and Christian Sacred Texts", in *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, (2012), pp. 1–16, doi:10.1093/ojlr/rwr016, p. 2

²⁹ HRH Muhammad, *op. cit.*, p. 318

actually more important, precisely because these differences alone permit us to know the individuality of the one or the other side.³⁰ Moreover, one who deals with Islam "must possess a theological vein, an organ for transcendent terms and values. Only on the basis of humanity and core human values that Christianity and Islam, Occident and Orient, truly can come closer to each other."³¹

According to Said Nursi, "Believers should now unite, not only with their Muslim fellow-believers, but with truly religious and pious Christians, disregarding questions of dispute and not arguing over them, for absolute disbelief is on the attack".³²

Therefore, the preservation and promotion of unity was more important than disunity between Muslims and for Muslims in their contact with devout Christians—as well for Christians in their contact with devout Muslims. Right now, it is important, particularly at this time, to look deeply into each other's eyes. We have a great deal to tell each other, and if we refrain from doing so, we are all the more likely to lose one another.³³

The main challenge of today's globalised world to the Muslims and Christians that they have to cope up with is to formulate a new purifying paradigm based on common values like "hope", "faithfulness", "love", "unity", "dignity", "justice", "consultation" etc., this is so the real enemies that are considered obstacles in the way of cooperation and understanding between Muslims and Christians are not countries, peoples, or individuals, but are described as certain social, moral, and political diseases.

Conclusions

In summary, the first and the last section of the historical document "A Common Word Between Us And You" will suffice my conclusion what I have discussed above. "Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without

³⁰ Rudi Paret, "Islam and Christianity", in *Islamic Studies (Islamabad)*, 3(1)1964: 83-95

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Said Nursi, *Emirdağ Lāhikası*, Istanbul: Şahdamar Yayınları, 2009, p. 195, As quoted in Coruh, *op. cit.*, p. 511

³³ Vries, Marten de, "The Message of the Damascus Sermon for Muslim-Christian Relations", in *The Journal of Rotterdam Islamic and Social Sciences*, 3(1):1-16, 2012, p.6

peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. The basis for this peace and understanding already exists. It is part of the very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbour. These principles are found over and over again in the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity. The Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is thus the common ground between Islam and Christianity." In addition, "making the relationship between these two religious communities is the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world. If Muslims and Christians are not at peace, the world cannot be at peace. With the terrible weaponry of the modern world; with Muslims and Christians intertwined everywhere, as never before, no side can unilaterally win a conflict between more than half of the world's inhabitants. Thus, our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake."³⁴

³⁴Lamburd, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-9