

Salaam

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Quarterly to Promote Understanding



**A Month in Lahore
A Sufi view of Purity**

**Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Contemporary France
Islam, Peace, and Interfaith & Christian-Muslim Relations
Hospitality and Dialogue**

ISLAMIC STUDIES ASSOCIATION

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ISLAM, PEACE, AND INTERFAITH & CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, noted New Delhi-based Islamic scholar and head of the Centre for Peace and Spirituality interviewed by Victor Edwin, a Jesuit scholar who teaches Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at the Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi, one of India's leading Jesuit centres for higher religious learning.

VE: Many Muslims are accustomed to see Christians as rivals. Does the Qur'an teach Muslims to engage with Christians as their rivals?

MWK: Muslims have viewed Christians as their rivals instead of looking at them as partners. This was a big mistake that they made. For long, I used to think about why the Quran advises Muslims to help God just as the disciples of Jesus said that they would be God's helpers. The verse in the Quran which mentions this is in the chapter called *As-Saff*:

"Believers, be God's helpers, as Jesus, son of Mary, said to the disciples, 'Who will be my helpers in the cause of God?' The disciples said, 'We shall be God's helpers.' Some of the Children of Israel believed in him and some denied the truth; We supported the believers against their enemies and they triumphed over them." (61:14)

On the basis of this verse, I have developed a theme—and that is that Muslims, throughout history, considered Christians as rivals, but, instead, they should have taken them as partners. This is the message given to Muslims by this Quranic verse.

Every people have a psyche or mindset. Muslims also have a mindset. You cannot change the Muslim mindset unless you explain to them that your point of view has been derived from the Quran. Any other kind of argument is not going to appeal to them. If you want to develop rethinking in Muslims regarding any particular attitude of theirs, you will have to give a message from the Quran which makes them realize that they had deviated from their scripture.

VE: What is this pattern of the Christians that in this verse God has asked Muslims to follow?

MWK: It should be noted that Islam began and developed in circumstances very different from that of Christianity. Europe became the centre for the development of Christianity after Constantine accepted the Christian faith. Before this, Jerusalem had been the centre of Christianity. However, the centre of Islam never changed: it remained in Arabia.

God knew that the development of Islam would happen in Arabia in tribal traditions, while Christianity's later development would happen in Europe amid scientific traditions. Thus, God advised Muslims to follow the pattern of the Christians, because He knew that the Christians would be scientific in their method. According to me, God had known that the Muslim mindset would be based on and influenced by their centre, while the Christian mindset would be based depending on the place which became the centre for their faith. God knew beforehand that Europe would become the centre of scientific discoveries. On the other hand, the centre of Islam was in Arabia, a place which was in the midst of tribal age in the seventh century, and, more or less, still continues to be so. On the other hand, the change of geographical centre for Christianity changed the mindset of the Christians in that they developed scientific thinking. This change in mindset along scientific lines could not be brought about among Muslims, however.

By science, I mean the exact sciences. The study of science brings in realistic thinking. God knew that the best pattern, in terms of methodology, would be developed by the Christians, owing to the scientific education and awareness among them, which began after the Renaissance.

The Christians flourished in an environment different from that of the Arabs, who developed in the tribal traditions of Arabia. As a result, scientific thinking could not be fostered in Muslims as it did among the Christians. The above-quoted Quranic verse tells Muslims to adopt the pattern of Christians. In this sense, the verse advises Muslims to make Christians their partners in order to learn from them. On the other hand, if you make someone your rival, you will not be able to learn from him or her. But that is what the Muslims unfortunately did.

I will give some examples to illustrate my point.

First, the Crusades occurred between the Muslims and the Christians, in which the latter suffered a humiliating defeat. The Christians then made plans of what they should do, and decided to choose a second option. Life is about choosing a second option when the first option does not work. The Crusades led to the Christians' defeat, which made them opt for the second option—of leaving the battlefield and choosing to study and investigate into nature. As a result of this endeavour, which was initiated mainly after the Crusades, modern civilization came into existence.

In this way, although the Christians had lost the Crusades, in retrospect they emerged as winners, in that they built a whole new civilization. The Crusades' defeat was not the end for Christians.

This teaches us the lesson that if one field of work closes down, there still are many more options left to explore. The example set by Christians was that if the first option does not

work, take the second option instead of sticking to the first option if it yields no results.

Consider another example in this regard. Germany and Japan incurred losses in the Second World War. Later, they abandoned the violent course they had adopted and devoted themselves to scientific education and developing their nations along modern lines. Hence, they are today developed nations and have gained far more than what they had lost in the War.

Here the model given by Christians to Muslims is: come to the field of peace from the field of war. If the first option does not work, take the second option. Muslims, however, have not been able to take this second option and are still continuing with their violence. They must learn from the Christians.

Another example set by Christians is in the context of colonialism. Whereas Muslims derived pride from their empires, Christians took it as an opportunity. When they spread out in the world, they organized their missionary activities on a grand scale. Muslims did not perform work for their mission in such organized manner. The Christians availed of the peace that resulted during the age of colonialism and began expeditiously organizing their missionary activity. In this pattern, the lesson to be learnt by Muslims is one of organized *dawah* ('calling people to God'). Organized *dawah* work of the kind done by Christians is still absent among Muslims.

God was aware that a time would come when Muslims would engage in futile violence while Christians would engage in organized missionary activity. Thus, in verse 61:14 of the Quran, when God says that Muslims should follow the example of the Christians, it means that Muslims should adopt the pattern of mission adopted by the Christians.

The third example established by Christians is, I believe, not known elsewhere in the entire history of humankind. I call this 'Vaticanization'. There was a time when the Pope was the uncrowned king of Europe. The Pope's blessings were sought by kings for establishing their legitimacy. But a time came when it was not possible to continue with this immense power wielded by the Pope. So, Christians became ready for 'Vaticanization': that is, they decided that the Pope should remain in a small area, the Vatican, and that instead of having sway over an entire political empire spanning several countries of Europe, the Pope should make a spiritual kingdom in the area assigned to him.

Muslims did not accept such a proposal for the Caliph. Ataturk gave the Muslim Caliph the offer of relinquishing political control over the Ottoman Empire and having a small place for himself, just as the Pope had the Vatican. But Muslims were not ready to accept that the Caliph should retire to a small corner. Because of the Muslims' refusal to accept this offer, the Caliphate was itself abolished. Thus the title of the 'Caliph' was lost forever. Had Muslims agreed to a Vatican for their Caliph, they would have retained the title of Caliph just as the Christians could retain the title of Pope. It is the title that has importance and not the geographical location or a piece of land. The titles of 'Pope' and 'Caliph' have a whole history behind them. Thus these titles alone hold a lot of importance.

In the twenty-first century, for the first time in history, a United Nations covering the entire world has been formed, which has accorded religious freedom as an undeniable right of every human being. In today's age, all opportunities of various kinds have been opened up for all. But because Muslims have made Christians their rivals, they could not develop the thinking required to use these opportunities in the present age of peace.

VE: Thanks for those insightful comments on Christian-Muslim Relations. Moving to a discussion on Quranic hermeneutics, let me ask you, what methodology do you use to interpret the Quran in the context of modernity, democracy and secularism?

MWK: I follow the principle of *ijtihad*. It means to reapply the teachings of Islam to a new situation. We have an example of this in the life of the Prophet. Once, the Prophet sent a group of his Companions to the tribe of Banu Qurayzah. Before sending them off, he advised them: "Do not offer the Asr prayer until you have reached Banu Qurayzah." (*Sahih Bukhari*, Hadith no. 946) Asr is the afternoon daily prayer, the time for which ends at the beginning of sunset. The group of Companions had not yet reached Banu Qurayzah when the sun began to set. Some of the Companions said that they should offer prayer as the time for Asr prayer would end by the time they would reach Banu Qurayzah. Certain other Companions said that they would strictly follow the Prophet's advice and would not pray until they reached the Banu Qurayzah. The former group of Companions explained to the latter that the Prophet's words should not be taken literally, as he had actually required them to travel fast so that they could reach the destination before the time of the Asr prayer ended. The Prophet did not mean that they should offer the Asr prayer after having reached the destination, come what may.

This incident is an example of doing *ijtihad*, or reapplying a teaching of Islam in a changed situation. Similarly, the Quran says, "Call mankind to the Pilgrimage. They will come to you, on foot, and on every kind of lean camel." (22:27) This verse calls on all Muslims to perform the pilgrimage to Makkah on camelback. In today's times, this command cannot be followed literally, and is taken to mean: 'Use the available means of transportation for the pilgrimage.'

There was a Companion of the Prophet, Muadh ibn Jabal, whom the Prophet sent as an administrator in a city. Before sending him to carry out his responsibilities, the Prophet asked him how he would decide on matters. He replied that he would consult the Quran. The Prophet asked him what he would do if he did not find an answer in the Quran. Muadh replied that he would look for a solution in the Prophet's *sunnah*, or practice. When the Prophet asked what if he did not find an example there, he replied: *Ijtahaddurayi* (Sunan Abu Dawud, hadith no. 3592). It means: "I will decide on the basis of my own opinion."

Thus, in a changing situation, one should try to understand and find out the position of the Quran relevant to that new situation. *Ijtihad* means to discover the application of the Quran to a new situation.

VE: How relevant are the terms *Dar ul-Islam*, *Dar ul-Kufr* and *Darul-Harb* in today's world where people of all faith live together?

MWK: These terms are innovations. They were not used at the time of the Prophet. For example, in the early period of Islam, Makkah had not entered the fold of Islam, but the Prophet never referred to it as *Dar ul-Kufr*, or 'Abode of Disbelief'. Similarly, the Prophet never called Madinah *Dar ul-Islam* ('Abode of Islam') or 'Islami Jamhuriya Madinah' (The Islamic Republic of Madinah). This terminology was developed much later, after the death of the Prophet.

VE: Apostasy is punishable by death in some Muslim countries. Is not religion a personal choice?

MWK: Apostasy is completely permissible. A person has the freedom to make the choice of leaving Islam. Religious belief is one's personal choice. For example, during the early period of Islam, some Muslims migrated to Ethiopia. Among them was a Muslim, Ubaydullah ibn Jahsh, who left Islam and became a Christian. When the Prophet came to know, he did not direct his Companions to kill Ubaydullah for his having abandoned the religion of Islam.

Religion is a person's personal choice. One can follow the religion one likes. One who chooses another religion does not call his case one of 'apostasy'. Rather, he considers it a case of making another choice in the matter of religion. There is no verse in the Quran which says that apostasy is a crime punishable by death. All the Muslim books on apostasy which hold that an apostate should be awarded the death punishment (*yuqtaluhaddan*) are, in my opinion, wrong. The jurisprudence or *fiqh* compiled in the later period of Muslim history developed the idea of punishing apostasy with death. But I give precedence to the Quran and Hadith over *fiqh*.

A verse in the Quran (2:217) tells us that the case of one who leaves Islam for another religion is in God's hands. Apostasy is not a humanly punishable crime: it is upon God to deal with the person who changes his religion.

VE: What is your opinion on democracy with reference to the Quran?

MWK: Those Muslims who speak against democracy have not understood it properly. The origin of democracy can be found in the Quran. The Quran uses the word *shura*, which means mutual consultation (42:38). Present-day democracy is an organized form of the democracy mentioned in the Quran. I believe that when you establish a political system in a collectivity, you will have to decide by the consensus of the collectivity.

Government is a name for the administration of the affairs of a collectivity. In Islam, the purpose of a political system is only administration. Political system is not part of the belief system of religion. That is, those people who are selected by the consultation of members of the society will run the administration.

VE: How do Muslims understand Shariah? Is it divine or practical law?

MWK: Many Muslims regard the Shariah as all the rules of *fiqh* and consider these as eternal and sacred. However, this

is not correct. There is a principle in *fiqh* which says: *Tataghayyur al-ahkambi tataghayyur al-zamanwal-makan.* (*Tayseer Ilm-eUssul al-Fiqh*, Abdullah bin Yusuf al-Anzi, Beirut, 1997, p.214) This means that commands change with the change of time and place. Many *fiqh* rules depend upon the situation and can change according to the times. It is important to note that there is a difference between belief and *fiqh* rules. Belief is sacred, but the same cannot be said of the entire gamut of *fiqh* rules. Many social laws are not sacred. Rather, they can be decided according to the situation.

VE: What is your understanding of the mission of Islam?

MWK: I believe that mission work is part of religious freedom. According to me, debate is unlawful in Islam. Instead of debating, people should engage in scientific discussion with each other. Unfortunately, many Muslims think they have the right to do mission work while others do not. But I think that all religious communities have the right to do peaceful missionary work. Even if you preach that there is no God, you are allowed to do so if you remain peaceful. That is, your method should not increase intolerance for and hatred in others.

Muslims give an incorrect reference to prove that the Bible should not be used in Quranic exegesis. They cite an incident from the time of the Prophet, when his Companion Umar ibn al-Khattab had certain pages of the Bible which the Prophet discouraged him from collecting. (*Musnad Ahmad, hadithno. 15156*) This was because the Quran had not been compiled then and there was a possibility of mixing of the pages of the Quran and the Bible. Thus, what the Prophet advised Umar is applicable only to the time when the Quran was being revealed and had not been collected, compiled and preserved. But now since the Quran is completely preserved, the Bible can be read and referred to. At the time of the revelation of the Quran, the Prophet had asked his

Companions to not collect and write down his sayings. This, too, was for the same reason that he did not want verses of the Quran to be mixed with his own words; if this had happened, it would have later created confusion.

VE: How do you interpret verses of war in the Quran?

MWK: These verses are applicable only to wartime. Some special commandments are given at wartime and are not applicable in a peaceful situation. All Islamic scholars have a consensus that even in a genuine war, killing non-combatants is unlawful. Now, since we are living in an age of weapons of mass destruction, in which both combatants and non-combatants are inevitably killed, war has become a matter of the past. In such a situation, according to the consensus of scholars, there can be no war in Islam, because whenever you engage in war, you will inadvertently kill non-combatants, too.

Here are many verses of the Quran which cannot be followed today, for example travelling on camels to go for Hajj. Thus, such verses which are not followed are practically abrogated. I think it is better to say that they are not applicable or relevant to the present times. These verses shall continue to be recited, but will not be practically applicable. These verses are *mansukhul-hukm*, and not *mansukhut-tilawah*, that is, abrogated with regard to application, but not abrogated with regard to recitation.

There are already certain verses which have been practically abrogated, and this abrogation is accepted among scholars.

In Islam, there is a condition for war. That is, if you are in a position to yield a positive result, then you can engage in war, otherwise not. For example, the Prophet did not fight during the period when he was in Makkah, where he consistently adhered to patience. When he was urged on by his Companion Umar ibn al-Khattab to initiate war in response to the atrocities of the Makkans, he said: "O Umar, we are few in number." (*Al-Bidayah wan-Nihayah*, IbnKathir,

vol. 3, p. 42) This meant that fighting when the Muslims were in a weaker position would have led to a counterproductive result.

In Islam, there is no concept of fighting and laying down one's life. Rather, you should remain alive and do constructive work.

According to a tradition of the Prophet: "A time will come when you will advance to a place where there will be a fort with closed doors. You will not use swords or lances. Rather you will just say *La ilahailallah* and the doors will be opened up." (*Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 2920*) This means that the age of war will come to an end and the world will reach an age of peace, in which it would be one's ideology or argument that would hold the upper hand.

VE: How has your understanding of the Quran changed over time?

MWK: When I was born in the first half of the twentieth century, there used to be a lot of discussion about gaining freedom and razing down enemies. So, I had to rediscover Islam. I asked myself the question: Is Islam all about violence and defeating enemies? I studied Islam deeply, after which I have come to my present position. In my time, everybody used to say that fighting is the greatest thing, but after study I realized that the peaceful study of Islam is most important.

My ideology overtime has remained the same, only my organizational associations have changed. My earliest book was *Quran ka Matlub Insan (The Man the Quran Builds)*. This has the same thoughts which I have today.

The basic reason why I left the organizations I was earlier part of is because they adhered to a traditional understanding of Islam, while I was searching for an Islam that is relevant to the modern age.

