

“They Are Not All Alike” (The Quran 3:113)

Muhammad Haniff Hassan
Research Fellow
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
www.haniff.sg

(This article is extracted with slight modification from my book *Unlicensed to Kill: Countering Imam Samudra’s Justification of Bali Bombing*, Peace Matters, 2006, pp. 57-64. The book can be downloaded from <http://counterideology2.wordpress.com/2009/10/21/my-book-unlicensed-to-kill-free-online-version-in-pdf-format/>)

Another important idea that contributes in shaping attitude towards non-Muslims is the view that all non-Muslims are the same in their attitude towards Islam and Muslims. They will never be pleased unless all Muslims abandon their religion and follow the non-Muslim’s way of life. All non-Muslims share a common hate towards Islam and will never cease conspiring against it. This view could be found in Imam Samudra’s book “*Aku Melawan Teroris*”¹ and various speeches made by Usamah bin Laden.

To support such view, its proponent would cite the following verses:

“..... [Your enemies] will not cease to fight against you till they have turned you away from your faith, if they can.” (The Quran, 2:217)

“For never will the Jews be pleased with thee, nor yet the Christians, unless thou follow their own creeds....” (The Quran, 2:120)

Sayyid Qutb also share similar inclination by emphasising that the nature of relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim community is conflict due to the fundamental differences between both communities; the former is based on full submission (*ubudiyah*) to Allah only and the other is based on submission (*ubudiyah*) to fellow humans or false gods from the Islamic perspective. It is therefore certain that man-made beliefs and ideologies will see Islam as the main threat. Thus, they will always strive to undermine Islam and Muslims.² To support the above two verses, he highlighted the conspiracy between the Arab pagans and the Jews, against the Prophet even though in Islam the Jews were accorded a special status as People of the Book. The respect shown to them does not prevent them from committing treason that goes against the Madina

¹ Imam Samudra, *Aku Melawan Teroris*, Jazeera, Solo, 2004, pp. 70-1, 89-96.

² Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal Al-Quran*, Dar Al-Syuruq, Beirut, 1985, vol. 3, pp. 1586-7. See also Sayyid Qutb commentary on offensive *jihad* in the same book at page 1431-52.

Charter they have agreed upon previously. Sayyid Qutb also viewed contemporary cases of cooperation between communists, polytheist and Christians against Muslims in Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Albania, India and Kashmir in the same light.³

The fundamental problem in such view is that it generalises all non-Muslims as one monolithic group. Reading the two verses in isolation of other verses has contributed to this over-generalisation. As a result the conclusion drawn from the above verses becomes inconsistent with the position taken by the Quran towards non-Muslims.

In reality, the Quran acknowledges that non-Muslims are not one monolithic group. It is in this light that the Quran advises the Muslims on the proper mode of interaction with various types of non-Muslims. The two verses previously cited if read in conjunction with other verses of a similar theme would provide a more accurate picture of Islam's attitude towards non-Muslims. For example, the Quran says:

“As for such [of the unbelievers] as do not fight against you on account of [your] faith, and neither drive you forth from your homelands, God does not forbid you to show them kindness and to behave towards them with full equity: For, verily, God loves those who act equitably. God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards such as those who fight against you because of [your] faith, and drive you forth from your homelands, or aid [others] in driving you forth: And as for those [from among you] who turn towards them in friendship, it is they, they who are the wrongdoers!” (The Quran, 60:8-9)

The Quran also recognizes that among non-Muslims some are followers of revealed scriptures. In view of this, God referred to them as “*Ahl Al-Kitab*” (People of the Book) and makes provision for special laws which govern the interaction between Muslims and them. When God declares that the meat (of animals) slaughtered by them as *halal* (permissible) and that it is also *halal* (permissible) to marry their women, one cannot but conclude that God intended the Muslims and “*Ahl Al-Kitab*” to co-exist peacefully side by side:

“Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. And the food of those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime (*ahl al-kitab*) is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them. And [lawful to you are], in wedlock, women from among those who believe [in divine writ], and in wedlock, women from among those who have been vouchsafed revelation before your time – provided that you give them their dowers, taking them in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as secret love-companions...” (The Quran 5:5)

The differences among the *Ahl Al-Kitab* are highlighted further in the following verse:

“Thou wilt surely find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe [in his divine writ] are the Jews as well as those who are bent on

³ Ibid, 1593.

ascribing divinity to aught beside God; and thou wilt surely find that, of all people, they who say, ‘Behold, we are Christians,’ come closest to feeling affection for those who believe [in this divine writ]: This is because there are priests and monks among them, and because these are not given to arrogance. For, when they come to understand what has been bestowed from on high upon this Apostle, thou canst see their eyes overflow with tears, because they recognize something of its truth; [and] they say: “O our Sustainer! We do believe; make us one, then with all who bear witness to the truth.” (The Quran 5:82-83)

The above verses not only provide distinction between the Christians and the Jews in relation with Muslims but also contain positive remarks about the Christians and there are many other similar verses that can be found in the Quran:

“For verily, those who attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.” (The Quran, 5:69)

“Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.” (The Quran, 2:62)

In the above verses, Allah mentions the Jews and the Christians as separate entities from the believers (Muslims) in a positive tone. There are two possible interpretations for the verses. Firstly, those who are praised among the Jews, the Christians and Sabians are those who have already embraced Islam, the final revelation to prophet Muhammad, and not those who still remain with their faith. Secondly, the Jews, the Christians and the Sabians are praised because of their potential to become true believers and followers of the last and final revelation to Muhammad, in view of the commonalities that they have with Islam.

Both interpretations are highly plausible. As for the Sabians that were mentioned in both verses, the scholars differed on their exact beliefs. They were reported to have lived in Iraq, at a time during which Islam had not spread into their homeland. Some scholars were of the opinion that the Sabians were those whom the Prophet’s message had not reached.⁴ Therefore, the praises mentioned in the verses are not restricted to those who have embraced Islam brought by prophet Muhammad.

Similar perspective can also be found in the following verse:

“For, if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, [all] monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques – [all of] which

⁴ Ismail bin Katsir, *Tafsir Ibn Katsir*, vol. 1, pp. 99-100.

God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed [ere now]. And God will most certainly succour him who succours His cause: For, verily, God is most powerful, almighty.” (The Quran, 22:40)

In this verse, despite the fundamental differences between Islam, Christianity and Judaism, God mentions monasteries, churches and synagogues positively as places “in which God's name is abundantly extolled”. This surely does not refer to Muslims performing their prayer in those houses of worship because their place of worship is in the mosque.⁵

Although one can cite examples of the persecution of the Muslims by the Meccan people, the betrayal of the Jews of Medina and the collaboration between the Jews and the Meccans against the Prophet to demonstrate the deep hatred the non-Muslims had, it is also noteworthy to highlight examples of good relationships between the Prophet and non-Muslims. In fact, there were historical instances that showed non-Muslims assistance and support towards the Prophet and Muslims. The following are some of the examples:

1. The Prophet was constantly protected by his uncle Abu Talib who was not Muslim, by popular historical account, until his death.⁶
2. Under intense persecution by the Meccan people, the Prophet commanded his followers to seek refuge in Abyssinia, which was under the rule of a Christian king. He commended the King as a fair ruler who would not wrong any of his subjects.⁷
3. Once the Prophet went to city of Taif to seek support for his message but was rejected. He could not reenter Mecca safely until Al-Mut'im bin `Adiy, a notable figure in Mecca who was not a Muslim, put him under his protection.⁸ Abu Bakr, a companion of the Prophet, also received protection from a non-Muslim leader in Mecca.⁹
4. After migration to Medina, the Prophet entered into peaceful agreement with various non-Muslim Arab tribes. The Prophet maintained his commitment to the agreement until his death.¹⁰
5. The Prophet launched a big punitive military operation against the Meccan, which led to the fall of Mecca into the hands of the Muslims for attacking his ally, an Arab non-Muslim tribe. It was a blatant violation of the agreement of Hudaibiyah that was concluded voluntarily and contain clauses, which favour the Meccan pagans. Amongst the content of the agreement was that both parties would cease attacking each other and this included their respective allies as well for a period of ten years.¹¹

⁵ Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami' Al-Bayan 'An Takwil Ayi Al-Quran*, vol. 6, part 10, pp. 175-8.

⁶ Safiur Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *Al-Raheeq Al-Makhtum*, pp. 123-4.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 99-100.

⁸ Ibid, p. 140.

⁹ Sa'id Hawwa, *Al-Asas Fi Al-Sunnah (Al-Sirah Al-Nabawiyah)*, vol. 3, p. 1563.

¹⁰ Safiur Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *Al-Raheeq Al-Makhtum*, p. 197-8.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 388-9.

One who studies the Quran carefully will realise that generalisation is not the way to view this world. The Quran also views Muslims in different shades. The Quran says:

“Behold, as for those who have attained to faith, and who have forsaken the domain of evil and are striving hard, with their possessions and their lives, in God’s cause, as well as those who shelter and succour [them] – these are [truly] the friends and protectors of one another. But as for those who have come to believe without having migrated [to your country] – you are in no wise responsible for their protection until such a time as they migrate [to you]. Yet, if they ask you for succour against religious persecution, it is your duty to give [them] this succour – except against a people between whom and yourselves there is a covenant: For God sees all that you do.” (The Quran, 8:72)

“And those who henceforth come to believe, and who forsake the domain of evil and strive hard [in God’s cause] together with you – these [too] shall belong to you; and they who are [thus] closely related have the highest claim on one another in [accordance with] God’s decree. Verily, God has full knowledge of everything.” (The Quran, 8:75)

“[And] so, We have bestowed this divine writ as a heritage unto such of Our servants as We chose: And among them are some who sin against themselves; and some who keep half-way [between right and wrong]; and some who, by God’s leave, are foremost in deeds of goodness: [and] this, indeed, is a merit most high!” (The Quran, 35:32)

“Such of the believers as remain passive – other than the disabled – cannot be deemed equal to those who strive hard in god’s cause with their possessions and their lives. God has exalted those who strive hard with their possession and their lives far above those who remain passive. Although God has promised the ultimate good unto all [believers], yet has God exalted those who strive hard above those who remain passive by [promising them] a mighty reward.” (The Quran, 4:95)

These verses show that God classifies the believers into different groups according to the good work they have done. To each He accords the proper status and ruling as He deemed fit. Failure to think along this line in preference to homogeneity would have resulted to an over simplification which put an individual in a position where he sees things in black or white only and in doing so ignores the various shades of grey that God in His wisdom acknowledges.

The Quran also calls Muslims to view the existence of non-Muslims as part of a pluralistic nature created by Allah.

“O men! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware (The Quran, 49:13)

This verse states that God created the different sexes and ethnic groups among mankind for positive reasons, not negative, to foster rather than to diminish their mutual desire to understand and appreciate the essential human oneness underlying their outward differentiations; and correspondingly, all racial, national or tribal prejudice is condemned – implicitly in the Quran.¹²

More pertinently, the Quran explains that religious diversity is intentional:

“And unto thee [O Prophet] have We vouchsafed this divine writ, setting forth the truth, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains of earlier revelations and determining what is true therein. Judge, then, between the followers of earlier revelation in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high, and not follow their errant views, forsaking the truth that has come unto thee. Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: But [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ.” (The Quran, 5:48)

The verse explains that God could have made mankind as a single community or nation. Instead, He created diversity, wherein every peoples has its own law and way of life, to test who among mankind is truly committed to peace and the common good¹³.

The Quran proclaims that differences among human beings will remain:

“And had thy Sustainer so willed, He would surely have made all mankind one single community: But [He willed it otherwise, and so] they continue to hold divergent views – [all of them,] save those upon whom thy Sustainer has bestowed His grace. And to this end has He created them [all]....” (The Quran, 11:118-119)

The Quran once again stresses that the unceasing differentiation in men’s views, ideas and preference of moral choices is not incidental but represents a god-willed, basic factor of human existence. Hence, it is neither possible for Muslims, nor are they commanded to make everyone believe in one faith. The Quran says:

¹² Muhammad Asad, *The Message of The Qur'an*, p. 794.

¹³ This “unity in diversity” is frequently stressed in other Quranic verses, see 2:148, 21: 92-93 and 23:52.

“And [thus it is:] had thy Sustainer so willed, all those who live on earth would surely have attained to faith, all of them: Dost thou, then think that thou couldst compel people to believe, notwithstanding that no human being can ever attain to faith otherwise than by God’s leave...(The Quran, 10:99-100)

In conclusion, embracing diversity is a deep-founded teaching of the Quran and diversity exists in all aspects of God’s creation. Diversity adds richness and variety to life and Islam requires Muslims to live with these differences and vie with one another in good deeds.

The views held by proponents of “conspiracy theory” towards all non-Muslims that they are inherently hostile and always conspire against Islam and the Muslims clearly are misfits within various testimonies of the Quran.

Similar to the principle in understanding verses of the Quran on *jihad*, the two verses (The Quran, 2:120 & 217) quoted by these Muslims in support of their opinion must not be interpreted, detached from other verses of the Quran and the practices of the Prophet in his history. The failure on their part to follow this accepted methodology had often led them to conclude in a manner that do little justice to Islam’s balanced and comprehensive view towards non-Muslims.

It is also important to understand both verses by looking at the context of its revelation. Al-Qurtubi and At-Tabari cited a view from Mujahid that the verse “[Your enemies] will not cease to fight against you ...”¹⁴ was revealed with regards to the Quraisy of Mecca extreme hostilities towards the Muslims.¹⁵ In other word, the verse is more appropriately attributed to the attitude of the Quraisy at that time towards the Muslims.

Some would argue that verse 120 of chapter 2 could be applied to all non-Muslims (other than the People of the Book) and verse 217 of the same chapter could be applied to all Jews and Christian because the words used in the verses are used in the general form (*lafz `aam*).¹⁶ In this respect, the principle “*Al-Ibrah bi umum al-lafz la bi khusus al-sabab*” (What must be considered is the generality of text wording, not the particularity of the cause of revelation) must be applied. This means when a text is expressed in a general form, it should be understood as so, although the context of the revelation is specific to a particular point in time.

¹⁴ The Quran, 2:217

¹⁵ Muhammad b. Ahmad Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami’ Li Ahkam Al-Quran*, vol. 3, part 3, p. 32; Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami’ Al-Bayan `An Takwil Ayi Al-Quran*, vol. 2, part 2, p. 354.

¹⁶ *Lafaz `Am* is defined as “a word, which applies to many things. Not limited in number, and includes everything to which it is applicable. An example is the word ‘*insan*’ (human being) in the verse “Verily, the human being is in loss.” (The Quran, 103:1)” In this example the word ‘*insan*’ (human being) includes every human being without any limitation. “‘*Am*” is basically a word that has a single meaning, but which applies to an unlimited number without any restriction.” See Mohammad Hasan Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, Ilmiah Publishers, Selangor, 1999, p. 104.

Since the Quran has not indicated in the verses that they refer to specific contexts only, both verses should be applied to all non-Muslims (other than the People of the Book) and all Jews and Christians.¹⁷

Here again, it is important to note that Muslim scholars usually do not accept *lafaz `am* (words with general meaning) as it is before making an exhaustive search for other verses that could qualify its interpretation.¹⁸

In applying the methodology of *takhsis* to the two verses cited by Imam Samudra using the various verses of the Quran, which mention the different categories of non-Muslims and peace as the principle basis of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, the scope of those verses now have been limited to the specific groups and contexts only. As a result both verses that were quoted (The Quran, 2:120, 217) could never be used as a general worldview of Muslims towards all non-Muslims.

¹⁷ Al-Syaukani, *Irsyad Al-Fuhul Ila Tahqiq Al-Haq Min Ilm Al-Usul*, vol. 1, pp. 446; Al-Ghazali, *Al-Mustasfa Min Ilm Al-Usul*, vol. 2, p. 36; Mohammad Hasan Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, p. 104, 111.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, vol. 1, p. 465.