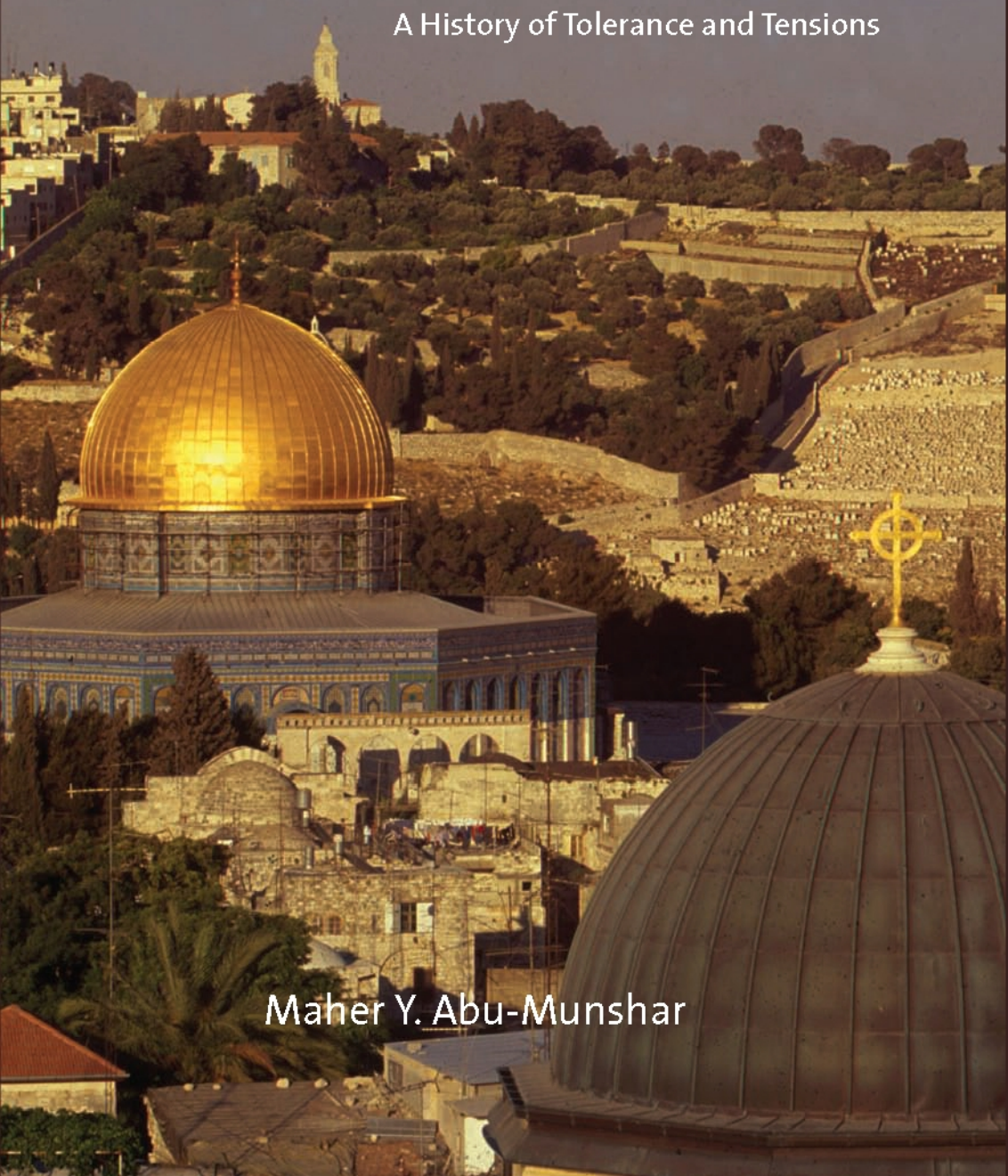# Islamic Jerusalem and its Christians

## A History of Tolerance and Tensions

Maher Y. Abu-Munshar

# ISLAMIC JERUSALEM
# AND ITS CHRISTIANS

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MAHER Y. ABU-MUNSHAR

*To my beloved wife Alla*

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# INTRODUCTION

Islamic Jerusalem (*Bayt al-Maqdis*) is no ordinary place: its significance reaches far beyond its physical stones. During its turbulent history, the followers of all three monotheistic religions made strenuous efforts to conquer the city by any means and at any cost. The era of Muslim rule in Islamic Jerusalem is long compared to some other periods in the city's history. It embraces two distinct phases, the first and principal one being the Muslim conquest under the leadership of Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab (d. 24 AH[1]/ 644 CE). The second Muslim conquest of Islamic Jerusalem was led by Sultan Salah al-Din (d. 589 AH/ 1193 CE).

These two periods witnessed a history of both tolerance and tension towards non-Muslims, and especially Christians. Caliph 'Umar liberated the Christians from the domination and persecution of Byzantine rule, and allowed Jews to return to the city after being expelled for nearly five hundred years. The second conquest freed Muslims, Eastern Orthodox Christians and Jews from the domination of the Latin Crusaders.

The main aim of this book is to discuss the Muslim treatment of Christians in Islamic Jerusalem and the surrounding Muslim state, focussing on the attitudes and policies of 'Umar and Salah al-Din. These two rulers created a model atmosphere of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among the followers of different religions, and enabled Christians and Jews to live side by side peacefully after centuries of tension. The book's objective has been achieved, first, by identifying the Muslim

conquerors' unique vision of Islamic Jerusalem towards non-Muslims, based on information from Islamic primary sources. Second, by a detailed study of the reigns of 'Umar and Salah al-Din, and providing a better understanding of certain historical events in regard to Christians. Third, by conducting a comparative study of these two periods, presenting new data and contributing to the academic debate on the subject. Together these three methods set out principles by which Muslims should deal with Christians.

Those that do take an academic approach discuss only This book comes under the umbrella of Islamicjerusalem studies, a new and intellectually stimulating field of inquiry that attempts to deal with the region of Islamicjerusalem using interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Islamicjerusalem is the name given to a region of about fifteen thousand square kilometres that encompassed not only the walled city of Aelia Capitolina (the Roman name for Jerusalem), but also the towns of Jenin in the north, Jericho in the east, Karak (in modern Jordan) and Zoar in the south and Jaffa in the west including the areas in between (see Fig. 1).[2]

This specialized field of study developed when Professor Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi,[3] from his work in the United Kingdom, became painfully aware of the lack of serious academic research on Jerusalem from an Arab and Muslim point of view, since most research has been undertaken by orientalist, western or Israeli writers. Hence, the history of the region under Muslim rule has been subject to much alteration and distortion.[4]

Although there is a vast literature by Arab and Muslim writers dealing with the issue of Palestine in general and Jerusalem in particular, the majority of these studies are of poor quality, as they address the subject either emotionally or politically. Those that do take an academic approach discuss only contemporary Jerusalem, as a city with east and west parts.[5] As indicated, a central difference between Islamicjerusalem studies and Jerusalem studies is that the former does not confine itself to Jerusalem as a city, but considers it as a region, as El-Awaisi explains:

Islamicjerusalem studies can be fairly eventually characterized and defined as a new branch of human knowledge based on interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. It aims to investigate all matters related to the Islamicjerusalem region, explore and examine its various aspects, and to provide a critical analytic understanding of the new frame of reference; in order to identify the nature of Islamicjerusalem and to understand the uniqueness of this region and its effects on the rest of the world in both historical and contemporary context.[6]

This new field is developing rapidly. I was one of the first students to complete a Ph.D in Islamicjerusalem studies, and became the first teaching fellow and later lecturer in this subject at the Al-Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Dundee, Scotland. The concept of Islamicjerusalem has been further defined by El-Awaisi as:

A new terminology for a new concept, which may be translated into the Arabic language as *Bayt al-Maqdis*. It can be fairly and eventually characterized and defined as a unique region laden with a rich historical background, religious significances, cultural attachments, competing political and religious claims, international interests and various aspects that affect the rest of the world in both historical and contemporary contexts. It has a central frame of reference and a vital nature with three principal intertwined elements: its geographical location (land and boundaries), its people (population), and its unique and creative inclusive vision, to administrate that land and its people, as a model for multiculturalism.[7]

This vision of Islamicjerusalem is inclusive and accepts diversity. It is therefore of crucial significance to investigate the Muslim treatment of Christians in Islamicjerusalem in previous periods of Muslim rule.

At first the research for this book seemed straightforward, as the sources are abundant and readily available. However, progress was hampered in several ways. The shortcomings of the classical juristic and historical literature are that they tend to report historical events without critical analysis, and do not focus on the Muslim treatment of Christians during and after the first and second Muslim conquests of Islamic Jerusalem. In addition, differing versions of the key document, 'Umar's Assurance of Safety to the People of Aelia, have been reported by early historians, who, like others, have paid little attention to its importance. Early Muslim historians and jurists are also not in agreement about the origins of other significant documents, in particular the Pact of 'Umar and the peace treaty with the Christian Banu Taghlib tribe. Later, at the time of Salah al-Din, Muslim historians once again reported events merely in descriptive form, while in most cases non-Muslim historians have discussed the Crusader period rather than Muslim relations with Christians.

In general, the difficulties of studying the Muslim treatment of Christians are, first, that one has to refer to both juristic and historical literature. Second, most of the literature – especially the juristic books and those covering the first Muslim conquest – is in Arabic, with some sources in Italian and French. Third, the historical information, particularly from the period of 'Umar, was documented long after the actual events. The narratives do not agree, and the different versions of important documents and historical facts add to the problem of assessing their authenticity.

Fourth, the task was made more complex because of diverse opinions between followers of the schools of *fiqh* (Muslim jurisprudence). Among early Muslim jurists and scholars these differences were mainly on issues of how Muslims should treat non-Muslims, on the rights and obligations of *dhimmis* (non-Muslim citizens) and on aspects of the *jizyah* tax paid by *dhimmis* These were a natural consequence of divergent opinions on the interpretation of Qur'anic verses dealing with non-Muslims, which reflected the particular school of thought of the jurist or

scholar as well as the method of reasoning used. For example, the Hanafi and Maliki schools were quite lenient in their treatment of non-Muslims, while the Shafiʿi and Hanbali schools were more restrictive. For the purposes of this book, I have selected a number of juristic and Qur'anic interpretations and have avoided details of their disagreements except where absolutely necessary.

Among western historians, the history of Islamic Jerusalem during the two periods under discussion has suffered from falsification, and has been strongly attacked by a number of authors who consider that Muslim policies contained much oppression and aggression towards non-Muslims. Some of these writers, for example Abraham and Haddad, went further, asserting that the Muslim system classified non-Muslims as second- or even third-class citizens.[8] However, an analysis of their work shows that their conclusion was based not on scholarly investigation, but on arbitrarily selected information from a wide range of sources.

The best way to deal with such contradictory data is to examine the juristic principles involved, as is done in chapter one. This chapter reviews the evidence of the Qur'an and the Sunnah,[9] a careful reading of which sheds fresh light on the events under discussion. In particular, the tolerance and freedom of religion expressed in the Qur'an are made explicit, as well as the concept of human brotherhood. The purpose and meaning of the *dhimma* pact in Islam, of the *jizyah* tax and the reasons for imposing it, and the obligations and rights of the *dhimmi* are also explained. A brief overview of the concept of *jihad* is given, and its role in relation to non-Muslims.

However, it is not only a question of the framework that Muslim leaders followed, but of their personal attitudes, and a brief study is made of the backgrounds of ʿUmar Ibn al-Khattab and Salah al-Din. The second and fourth chapters focus on the treatment of Christians by these two leaders outside Islamic Jerusalem. When events in the years before and after the conquests are examined from the perspective of the two rulers, a clearer picture of their intentions and policies emerges.

The need to examine and re-examine sources also looms large when the treatment of Christians in Islamic Jerusalem is discussed in chapters three and five. Their treatment under the first Muslim conquest is investigated with special reference to 'Umar's Assurance of Safety to the People of Aelia, and under the second conquest it is assessed in light of Salah al-Din's liberation of Islamic Jerusalem. The conclusion summarizes these findings, with some critical remarks and recommendations.

**Figure 1: The Region of Islamicjerusalem**
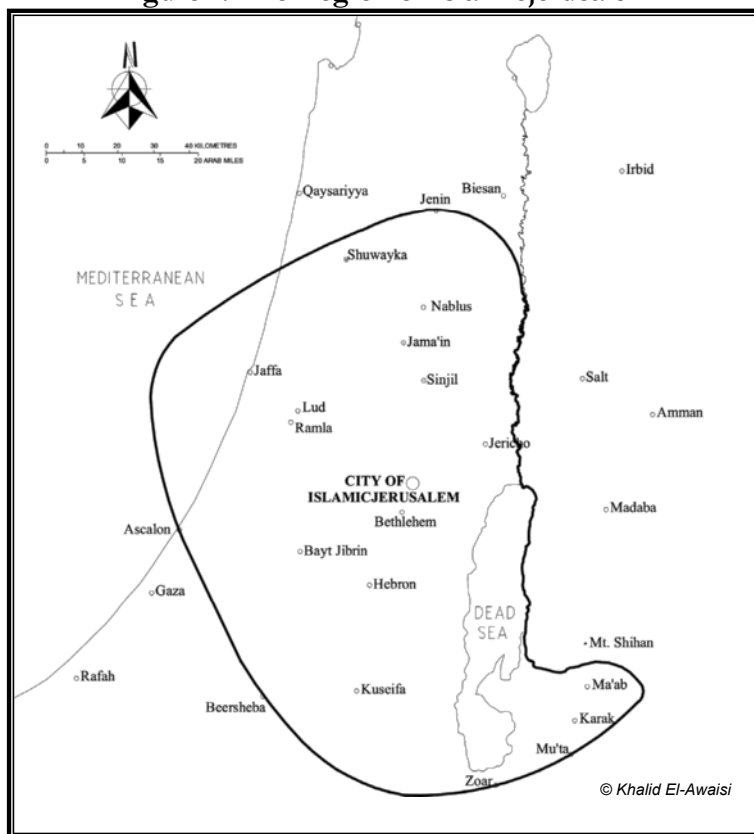


Source: El-Awaisi, K. 2006.

# 1

# ISLAMIC SOURCES AND THE TREATMENT OF NON-MUSLIMS

The attitude of Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and Sultan Salah al-Din towards non-Muslims did not arise out of a vacuum, but was inspired by religious injunctions and principles. Unfortunately, because Islam is based on a divine revelation, there is a misconception that it can neither live with, tolerate nor cooperate with the followers of other religions such as Judaism and Christianity. This view has caused prejudice against Islam as a religion that promotes violence, and against Muslims as inherently militant and irrational people. The intention of this chapter is not to tackle differences of belief between Muslims and non-Muslims, or to discuss the history of non-Muslims in Muslim states, except where particularly relevant. Its aim is to explain, from the point of view of the Qur'an and Sunnah point, the behaviour that should characterize Muslim dealings with non-Muslims in daily life and the rules that are applicable to non-Muslims.

There is no doubt that this subject has held a distinctive position in Muslim jurisprudence and historical literature. This can be seen in the Qur'an, in prophetic traditions, in *fatwas* and in the practical applications of caliphs and Muslim jurists.[1] The degree of concern expressed in Muslim law indicates the perceived role of Islam in building solid relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in a Muslim state. Its importance is

evident in the debates among Muslim jurists that have taken place in the past, and are taking place in the present.

During Muslim history, certain leaders – particularly the Fatamids[2] – have deviated from Islamic guidelines and committed Islamically unacceptable acts against non-Muslims. This was the result of their perversion and violation of Islamic precepts. In discussing Muslim treatment of non-Muslims, many authors have selected examples that are not derived from Islamic guidelines. In most cases, the conclusions they reached were that Muslims treated non-Muslims badly compared with the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

The Muslim view of tolerance and freedom of religion, and the concept of human brotherhood in the Qur'an and in prophetic traditions are discussed below. The *dhimma* pact in Islam and the *jizyah* tax are also examined, along with a brief overview of *jihad* and its relation to non-Muslims.

## Muslim Jurisprudence and Non-Muslims

Muslim jurisprudence is based on four sources: first and foremost the Qur'an, followed by the Sunnah.[3] Islamic rules concerning belief, legislation (*shari'ah*) and morality are all based on these two sources. If the Qur'an and Sunnah texts are limited, their general principles can be used as criteria for similar and parallel situations. This helps to provide rules and principles for human behaviour until the Day of Judgement. Generations of learned Muslim scholars have elaborated on both these primary sources. They recognized the general principles and objectives of the rules, and followed the spirit of them in their judgements and *fatwas* for new situations. This led to the establishment of consensus (*ijma'*)[4] and analogy (*qiyas*).[5] The important point to remember is that only the Qur'an and Sunnah are considered as primary sources; the rest are secondary.

When the Prophet Muhammad and his companions migrated from Makkah to Madinah, the first Muslim state was established there under the Prophet's leadership. From the beginning, rules and regulations were required to govern relations between

Muslims and non-Muslims, both those who lived outside the state and those under Muslim rule. No Muslim state has ever been without non-Muslims, so such regulations were essential. Nor was the Muslim state ever perceived as a monopoly of Muslims, and it was intended that members of other religions should enjoy living in it. In some cases, for example after the first Muslim conquest of Islamic Jerusalem, the number of non-Muslims even exceeded that of Muslims.[6] Appropriate rules had to be created to cover their rights and obligations, as they were also citizens, so that they could live in peace and participate in public life. The regulations were intended to bring public prosperity and mutual understanding between the different religions, in place of conflict and hatred.

In general, the basis for the treatment of non-Muslims under Muslim rule was sought in the Qur'an and in the Prophet Muhammad's dealings with certain non-Muslim communities, and in the policies of his immediate successors in light of that guidance.

## The Qur'an and the People of the Book

The Qur'an divides non-Muslims into two main categories: the People of the Book and the idolaters. The title People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) is given to Jews and Christians. In Arabic, *al-kitab* means the book; and in Islamic terminology 'the Book' refers to Scripture. The People of the Book have a special position in the Qur'an, since their religions were originally based on revealed books such as the Torah and the Bible.[7] Compared to other religions, Jews and Christians are closer to Muslims than those who are unbelievers or atheists.

The beliefs and values that are common to Muslims and the People of the Book can be summarized in four basic principles.[8] First, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all believe in one Creator, who has created the entire universe and is omnipotent. Second, they believe in prophethood, that the Creator has sent messengers or prophets throughout history to guide humanity, to reconcile them to their Creator and to lead them into the path

of truth. Third, all three faiths believe in divine revelation, as shown in the Scriptures (holy books) that have been revealed to the prophets in order to guide humanity. There may be strongly felt differences as to which Scriptures are relatively more authentic and have not been changed. But the central concept of belief in Scripture is found in all three religions. Fourth, all of them believe in the law of divine punishment and in the hereafter, and that people in the hereafter will be rewarded or punished according to their beliefs and their compliance with the moral code expounded by the prophets throughout history. In that sense, regardless of the differences, the areas described above provide ground for commonality between Muslims on the one hand and Jews and Christians on the other. As a religion of peace, Islam sets out the following injunctions for Muslims to observe in their treatment of Jews and Christians (*ahl al-kitab*):

> Do not argue with the People of the Book unless in the best manner, save with those of them who do wrong: and say: We believe in what has been sent down to us and in what has been sent down to you.[9]

According to this verse, common ground should be found. Al-Qaradawi, a well-known Egyptian scholar, argues that Muslims are required to deal with *ahl al-Kitab* not only in a good way but in the best way.[10] He believes that the Qur'an granted them a special position by referring to them several times as *ahl al-kitab* rather than as Jews and Christians. The Qur'an signals friendship when it tells Muslims that they are allowed to eat the food of Christians and Jews, while forbidding them to eat the food of other groups such as Magians (*Majus*) and Sabians:

> This day are [all] things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the people of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them. [Lawful unto you in marriage] chaste women who are believers, but also chaste women among the People of the Book, revealed before your time.[11]

Consistent with the above, marriage is permitted with the People of the Book on the same terms that a Muslim man would marry a Muslim woman. This is not, however, applicable to others, such as pagans, Hindus, etc. In Islam, marriage is considered as a divine covenant, and mercy, respect and love should be outstanding characteristics of the husband/wife relationship. Even after marriage, the Qur'an permits a non-Muslim woman to observe her faith and celebrate her religious festivals without hindrance from the husband.[12] This shows the level of tolerance in Islam towards a woman from the People of the Book who will be the Muslim's partner throughout life, the mother of his children and the one with whom he shares his inmost thoughts. As the Qur'an says

They are your garments and ye are their garments.[13]

And:

Among His Signs is this that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your [hearts]. Verily in these are Signs for those who reflect.[14]

The significance of the People of the Book in Islam was clearly portrayed at the beginning of Muslim history when Muslims were a minority in Makkah. At that time there was a prolonged armed conflict between the two powerful northern neighbours of the Arabian peninsula, the Byzantine and Persian empires.[15] In 614 CE Parwez, a Persian leader, occupied Aelia and proclaimed victory over the Roman Empire. Muslims might have been expected to welcome this, as they are nearer geographically to Persia than to Rome. However, Persians were Zoroastrians, while Romans were People of the Book. The Makkans – who were pagan unbelievers – identified themselves with the Persians and were elated by Parwaz's victory, while the Muslims, who numbered only a few hundred at the time, sympathized with the Christians in Aelia. This was because the

Prophet had recognized Jesus as a true Prophet of God, the Bible as originally based on divine revelation and Aelia (Islamic Jerusalem) as a holy city. The Makkans insulted the Muslims because they were on the losing side. The Qur'an reacted to this and prophesied that the Christian defeat at the hands of the Persians and the pagan jubilation at those defeats would both be short-lived:

> The Romans [Byzantines] have been defeated in the land close by: but they, [even] after [this] defeat, will soon be victorious. Within a few years, To God will be the Command in the Past and in the Future: On that day with the help of God, shall the believers rejoice. He gives victory to whom He will, and He is exalted in Might, Most Merciful.[16]

There are a large number of verses in the Qur'an pertaining to Muslim treatment of non-Muslims, whether in or outside the Muslim state. The four main Qur'anic injunctions focus on:

- Human brotherhood
- Religious tolerance
- Justice and fair treatment
- Loyalty and alliance

*Human brotherhood*
Many verses in the Qur'an refer to humankind being one nation emanating from a single origin. The Qur'an emphasizes that all people were created from one person, Adam,[17] although they differ in size, race, language, nation, tribe, and whether they are believer or atheist, good or bad, constructive or destructive. These differences should not contradict the principle of unity. They are intended, rather, to serve as a medium for people to come together and not to enter into conflict or to despise one another.[18]

Consequently, the protection, rights and security of non-Muslims are derived from the principle of human brotherhood, since all mankind is the creation of God, the only God, without discrimination between Muslims and non-Muslims. Islam enjoins and promotes universal brotherhood, peace and unity. The only difference that the Qur'an recognizes is in piety towards God (*taqwa*):

> O mankind! We created you from a single [pair] of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other [i.e. not that ye may despise each other]. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is [he who is] the most righteous of you. And God has full Knowledge and is well acquainted [with all things].[19]

As this verse shows, Islam honours mankind, especially believers in God, and mankind should promote peace, unity and universal brotherhood.

*Religious tolerance*

Religious tolerance is an essential cornerstone for the peaceful coexistence of different religious groups in a community, and is an important right given by Islam to non-Muslims. The Qur'an frequently calls for tolerance and respect towards the People of the Book, who are entitled to freedom of belief, conscience and worship. Neither the Qur'an nor the sayings of the Prophet have ever encouraged the use of force, pressure or manipulation in regard to religious belief. The most obvious verse that emphasises freedom of religion is the following:

> Let there be no compulsion in religion …[20]

The reason is that faith, to be genuine, needs to be an absolutely free and voluntary act. Indeed, this verse was revealed to condemn the attitude of some Jews and Madinans – those newly converted to Islam in Madinah – who wished to convert their children to their new faith. [21] It is clearly stressed that faith is an

individual commitment and even parents must refrain from interfering. The very nature of faith, as emphasized in the basic text of Islam, is that it is a voluntary act born out of conviction and freedom.

Commenting on the above verse, Ibn Kathir[22] (d. 774 AH / 1372 CE) argues that Islam is very clear on this point and that no one must force anyone else to embrace Islam. He states that those who have been guided by God will embrace Islam. However, for those whose hearts God has blinded, it is of no use to accept Islam, because without good will they would not benefit from being forced.[23] Qutb[24] (d. 1386 AH /1966 CE), a well-known Egyptian thinker in the Muslim Brothers and a Qur'anic interpreter, highlights the central concept derived from the verse – freedom of creed and freedom of choice. He believes that this requires the honouring of the human being and respect for his thoughts, will and feelings, and for his choice either to believe, or to reject belief and accept the consequences. Qutb argues that freedom of belief is the most basic right that identifies man as a human being; to deny anyone this right is to deny his or her humanity.[25]

Muhammad Abu Zahra, a contemporary Egyptian jurist, comments that the Islamic rules governing human relations wholly respect freedom of creed and belief.[26] He adds that the Qur'an rejects compulsion to make people embrace a certain religion, and forbids Muslims to compel anyone to adopt a creed or belief. By the same token, 'Abdelati, another Egyptian scholar, says that Islam takes this position because religion depends upon faith, will and commitment.[27] He suggests that these three aspects are worth nothing if they have been induced by force and compulsion.

In addition, al-Mawdudi, a noted Pakistani scholar, say that the term religion in this verse signifies belief in God, and that the entire system of life as it should be led rests upon it. The verse's meaning, he says, is that the system of Islam, embracing moral beliefs and practical conduct, cannot be imposed by force.[28] Wahba al-Zuhaili, a leading contemporary Syrian jurist commenting on this verse, agrees that compulsion in religion is

prohibited. The Qur'an does not accept forcing non-Muslims to convert to Islam as a right approach.[29]

Malekian went further, positing a link between the concept of freedom in religion and the words of God, 'For persecution is worse than slaughter'.[30] He claims that this phrase attributes blame to those who persecute others for religious reasons. He emphasizes that interference in the matter of religion is prohibited by Muslim law, and that no one, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, should be forced to accept another religion or be persecuted by others on religious grounds.[31]

An example from the Umayyad period (661–750 CE) demonstrating freedom of religion is when Caliph al-Walid Ibn 'Abd al-Malik forcibly took possession of part of a Christian cathedral in Damascus and incorporated it into a mosque. No redress took place under his successor, Caliph Yazyd Ibn al-Walid Ibn 'Abd al-Malik, but when Caliph 'Umar Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz succeeded him, the Christians of Damascus reported this injustice. 'Umar wrote to the official in charge to pull down the portion of the mosque that had formerly belonged to the cathedral, and the land was handed back to the Christians.[32]

When 'Ammar Ibn Yasir, one of the Prophet's companions, was forced under torture to say that he was a non-believer and was made to curse God and the Prophet, a Qur'anic verse was revealed to declare that what 'Ammar had uttered was invalid, since he had spoken those words under duress:

> Anyone who, after accepting faith in God, declares himself unbeliever under compulsion is still a believer, his heart remaining firm in faith.[33]

Based on the example of 'Ammar, one can say that the concept of compulsion of anyone is not acceptable in Islam. Indeed, compulsion has never been an appropriate way of converting anyone to a religion. It is therefore logical to say that once the force is removed, the belief that was expressed under force will also go; thus compulsion is useless. Furthermore, if someone is forced to take an action under pressure, he will be pushed into