

Interfaith Coexistence in the Quran and Hadith

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Abstract

The issue of interfaith coexistence is both timeless and timely. In an age where religious tension tends to dominate headlines, the Qur'an and Hadith provide a rich alternative based on mutual respect, justice, and peaceful interaction. This article delves into the Islamic sources for interfaith relations, considering major Qur'anic verses and Prophetic sayings that emphasize tolerance, dialogue, and common values. Through classical understandings and contemporary reflections, we explore how Islamic teachings encourage coexistence with non-Muslims—not as a concession, but as a divine mandate. From history and theology, the study underscores that Islam's initial message was one of inclusivity and balance, not seclusion or aggression. The findings urge a renewed commitment to these sources as models for constructing more peaceful, plural societies today.

Keywords: Interfaith Dialogue, Islam And Coexistence, Qur'anic Tolerance, Hadith And Non-Muslims, Religious Pluralism, Islam And Peace, Interreligious Harmony, Theology Of Islam, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, Islamic Ethics

Introduction

In a world where religious differences so frequently are the cause of tension and division, the imperative of true coexistence has never been more pressing. And yet, well before the contemporary notion of interfaith dialogue, the Islamic tradition had already established guidelines for respectful and peaceful engagement of individuals of different faiths. Both the Qur'an and the Hadith are replete with teachings that promote understanding, cooperation, and justice in dealing with non-Muslims.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ did not instruct a homogeneous congregation. He lived and reigned in a multicultural environment where Jews, Christians, polytheists, and others were a part of everyday life. His encounter with these communities is a priceless lesson in how Islam imagines a pluralistic society. The Qur'an also acknowledges religious diversity not as a flaw to eliminate, but as a part of divine wisdom.

Sadly, recent accounts tend to ignore such inclusive origins. Political aims, social tensions, and selective interpretations have led to caricatured presentations of Islam as intolerant or anti-difference. Conversely, this article aims to reclaim the ethical and theological origins of Islamic thought on living together as believers with non-believers and others. It contends that Islam, when read according to its primary sources, provides a rich matrix for living harmoniously with others despite differing beliefs.

This study is not theoretical. It has real-world implications on how Muslims today deal with members of other religions—either in Muslim states or as minorities elsewhere. Through a look at both scripture-based writings and historical tradition, the article tries to present a balanced, optimistic image of

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Islam's reaction to religious diversity. In doing so, it hopes to be part of a larger discourse on how religion can be a bridge, and not a barrier, in a world of diversity.

Qur'anic Principles for Interfaith Harmony

The Qur'an gives a richly textured account of interfaith relations. It sees religious difference as a principle not of hostility, but of God's will for human beings. The Qur'an repeatedly instructs Muslims to treat others of other faiths with justice and compassion, and it reminds Muslims, Jews, and Christians of their shared spiritual heritage.

Diversity as Divine Will

One of the strongest messages in the Qur'an regarding religious diversity is in Surah Al-Ma'idah:

**"To you all we have given a way and a law. If Allah had pleased, He would have made you one people [ummah]; but [He willed] to test you in that which He has given you. So compete with one another in good works."
(Qur'an 5:48)**

This verse puts on record that differences in religious law and belief are not accidental but deliberate. It calls for competition in ethics—not in theology, but righteousness and virtue. The aim is not conformity, but excellence of a moral nature.

Justice and Mercy to Non-Muslims

Another important verse for cohabitation is in Surah Al-Mumtahanah:

"Allah does not make it impermissible for you to treat in a righteous manner those who do not fight you for your religion and do not drive you out from your homes—from being

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**righteous towards them and just. Indeed, Allah loves those who
are just."
(Qur'an 60:8)**

This verse assures us that harmonious existence is not only possible, but normal. Muslims are taught to be led by justice and benevolence in treating friendly non-Muslims. The verse calls for moral reciprocity and not suspicion or enmity.

Common Ground with the People of the Book

The Qur'an calls both Jews and Christians "Ahl al-Kitab" (People of the Book), as the Qur'an acknowledges the shared Abrahamic heritage of these nations. The Qur'an commands in Surah Al-'Ankabut:

**Do not dispute with the People of the Book except in the most
favorable manner—except with those among them who are
wicked—and utter: 'We believe in that which has been
revealed unto us and unto you. Our God and yours is one, and
to Him we submit.'
(Qur'an 29:46)**

This mandate promotes respect-based conversation and theological humility. It acknowledges that despite differences in beliefs, mutual respect for God and divine revelation can provide a basis for meaningful relations.

Freedom of Belief and Conscience

One of the most cited verses concerning freedom of religion are probably in Surah Al-Baqarah:

**"No force is there in religion. Truth stands clear of falsehood."
(Qur'an 2:256)**

This verse has been usually understood as an imperative expression of freedom of conscience. The Qur'anic teaching is unambiguous: faith has to be born of belief, not compulsion. This is a precondition of any vision of coexistence of religions.

The Qur'anic foundation of human relations across religions is not tolerance per se but active engagement out of the spirit of justice, shared values, and religious freedom. These are the values that make up the essence of Islamic teaching on living with religious diversity—peacefully, indeed, but above all, purposefully.

Prophetic Traditions regarding Coexistence

Whereas the Qur'an provides us with the divine model of coexistence, the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ shows us how those principles were implemented. His conduct with non-Muslim communities—whether their neighbors, ambassadors, or subjects—was marked by justice, diplomacy, and respect. Hadith literature and the early biographies (Sīrah) contain numerous examples where coexistence was not only possible, but positively pursued.

The Constitution of Medina

One of the finest achievements of Islamic political thought is the Medina Constitution (Ṣaḥīfat al-Madīnah), a written pact that was signed between the Prophet ﷺ and the various tribes of Yathrib (later Medina), including Jewish tribes and pagan Arabs. The charter made the city a plural society, with common laws and mutual obligations governing it.

Under this agreement:

- Non-Muslims were welcomed as equal members of society.
- All religious communities were allowed to practice their own religion.

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- The defense and stability of the city bound all signatories.

This structure did not eliminate religious distinctions but recognized and maintained them within a common social order. It was an unparalleled paradigm of coexistence in the history of the 7th-century Arab world and remains a strong paradigm today among Muslim theorists.

Respect for Religious Institutions and Leaders

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ showed respect for leaders of other religions on a personal level. On different occasions, he received Christian delegations, allowed them to pray in his mosque, and engaged in theological discussions without hostility. An example is when a Christian delegation from Najran once visited Medina and was hosted by the Prophet. When it was time for them to worship, he allowed them to pray inside the mosque, an action that speaks volumes of his respect for religious freedom.

Equal Treatment for Non-Muslim Citizens

The Prophet ﷺ always taught that non-Muslim citizens under Muslim protection (ahl al-dhimma) were to be given security and justice. One of the popular Hadiths in Sunan Abu Dawood reads as follows:

**He who kills a mu'āhad (treaty non-Muslim) will not receive the
scent of Paradise, though it smells at a distance of forty years.**

(Sunan Abi Dawood, 2760)

This firm declaration assures that to cause harm to a non-Muslim under Muslim protection is not only a violation of the law, but a grave moral offense in Islam.

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The Prophet's Personal Interactions

Throughout his life, the Prophet ﷺ was involved in business, diplomacy, and daily transactions with individuals of different religious backgrounds. He received gifts from Christians, negotiated treaties with Jewish tribes, and behaved with politeness to his polytheist neighbors, even towards the critics or the enemies. His legacy demonstrates that it is not only tolerating differences at arm's length that makes up interfaith living together; it involves real relationships, based on trust, goodness, and fairness.

The Prophet's example of coexistence is more than a historical precedent—nay, it's a living standard for how Muslims are called upon to relate to others. It's an expression of the Qur'an's message of peace and a translation of it into the realm of mundane social and political life.

Historical Models of Interfaith Coexistence in Islamic Civilization

The principles of interfaith coexistence in the Qur'an and Hadith were not set aside as idle theory. Islamic history has included various civilizations attempting—often successfully—to apply these ideals in real social, political, and cultural circumstances. These earlier models demonstrate that Muslim society has lived with religious diversity in inclusive, pragmatic, and in many cases, surprisingly advanced ways for their era.

Al-Andalus (Islamic Spain)

Perhaps one of the best-known examples of interreligious coexistence is Al-Andalus, the Muslim Spain from the 8th to the 15th century. During the height of its political and cultural power, especially under the Umayyads of Córdoba, Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together, and there was a flourishing of science, philosophy, literature, and medicine.

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Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides and Christian translators co-existed with Muslim thinkers in what has come to be called the *Convivencia*, or coexistence. Although tensions did occur and were at times politically exploited, the overall atmosphere was one of inclusion and intellectual cooperation, rather than forced assimilation.

The Ottoman Empire and the Millet System

In the Ottoman Empire, religious minorities were regulated under a system known as the *millet*, in which Jews, Christians, and others were tolerated as separate religious communities and were entitled to self-rule their internal affairs, such as family law, worship, and education.

While these groups contributed a special tax (*jizya*), otherwise they were shielded by the state and frequently achieved high positions in trade, administration, and diplomacy. The *millet* system was a system of legal pluralism, representing the Islamic principle of embracing diversity within a single social order.

The Indian Subcontinent during Muslim Dominance

The Mughal Empire in India, particularly the period of Emperor Akbar (1542–1605), provides another example of interreligious harmony. Akbar favored *Sulh-e-Kul*, or universal peace, policies, eliminated discriminatory taxes on non-Muslims, and even allowed interfaith dialogue at his court.

Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Jains experienced a level of social mobility and religious tolerance in a state that remained deeply Islamic in its identity. Even though subsequent emperors went in other directions, the Mughal period overall illustrates how Islamic rule could embrace immense religious diversity without sacrificing faith.

Morocco and Egypt in the Pre-modern Period

In North Africa, namely in Morocco and Egypt, there were Jewish and Christian minorities for centuries under Muslim rule, ruling themselves and contributing to economic and cultural life. There were Jewish communities in Cairo and Fez, with their own schools, synagogues, and courts, protected by Islamic law.

More often than not, Muslim leaders did not try to eradicate difference but to rule over it in justice and stability, a model that contemporary societies could find realistic and inspiring.

These past experiences are a reminder that interfaith living is not an experiment for Muslims. It belongs to a living tradition—sometimes maintained, sometimes tested—but always present in the legacy of Islamic civilization. Far from being a Western ideal foisted from the outside, peaceful religious pluralism has profound roots in Islamic thought and practice.

Theological and Ethical Insights into Religious Diversity

Islamic teaching on relations between different faiths transcends political accommodation and legal permission. More deeply, the Qur'an and Hadith speak of a moral and theological vision that embraces diversity as God's will. This religious foundation gives interfaith living a divine purpose—not merely as a mechanism for peace, but as an expression of divine justice, wisdom, and mercy.

Diversity as a Sign of God

The Qur'an not only accepts difference, but makes it something intentional and purposeful. In Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13), Allah declares:

"O people, We have created you from a single man and a single woman and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous."

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This is a theological basis for coexistence. Religion, language, and even ethnicity are not the basis of superiority or conflict, but of recognition and learning from the other. Righteousness, and not religious or social identity, is the true measure of worth in Islam.

Mercy as a Defining Feature

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is characterized in the Qur'an as:

**"mercy to the worlds" (rahmatan lil-'alameen)
(Qur'an 21:107)**

This merciful stance was applied to everyone—Muslims and non-Muslims alike. His was not a life of forced conversion or tribal bias, but of merciful interaction, even when faced with hostility. Islamic mercy is not a passive stance; it is an active one, as demonstrated by the manner in which one treats the "other."

Justice as a Moral Obligation

Justice ('adl is one of the most significant Islamic ethical concepts. Surah Al-Ma'idah (5:8) reminds the faithful:

**"Don't let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just.
Be just: that is nearer to piety."**

This is a principle that is essential in a plural society. It lays down that Muslims must be fair to all irrespective of creed. Justice in Islam is not a question of conditions; rather, it is an obligation before God, not a favor to others.

Freedom of Conscience

The Qur'an clearly states:

**"there is no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear
from error."
(Qur'an 2:256)**

This verse not only protects the right to believe but creates the moral freedom of all individuals. Islamic theology thus confirms that real faith cannot be enforced, and tolerance of different beliefs is a religious obligation.

Together, these theological and ethical principles form a strong case for religious coexistence across faiths. They remind us that Islam's response to religious diversity is not political or pragmatic alone. It is based on the very nature of divine revelation—a call to seek to understand, respects, and lives in peace with others, even if one disagrees.

Modern Challenges and Opportunities

While Islamic scripture and history provide a solid building block for interfaith coexistence, the contemporary world presents new complexities for realizing those ideals. Globalization, politics, and increasing extremism have made it harder for Muslims to engage in building bridges to religious otherness—both within majority-Muslim contexts and where Muslims are minorities. But within these complications also reside unique opportunities for re-discovering and re-translating Islam's inclusive principles into practice.

Misinterpretation and Extremism

Perhaps the most urgent challenge is how extremist movements misuse Islamic teachings. These movements base themselves on selective readings of the scriptures, bereft of historical context and ethical complexity. They disregard the Prophet's ﷺ model of mercy and justice and substitute it with rigid, exclusionary visions of society.

These distortions not only harm non-Muslims but also misrepresent Islam to the rest of the world. They create a false dilemma between religious belief and peaceful coexistence—a dilemma that the Qur'an and Sunnah specifically reject.

Political Instrumentalization of Religion

Religion is exploited as a political tool to build authority or quash opposition in much of the world. Governments will turn to Islamic identity and enact policies excluding religious minorities or limiting interfaith debate. These actions are generally anti-thetical to the ideals they purport to protect.

The challenge in this case is to distinguish genuine religious teachings from state agendas, and to make Islamic ethics inform governance and not rationalize injustice.

Islamophobia and Interfaith Tensions

Western Muslim minorities are likely to experience Islamophobia through stereotype and misinformation. In other Muslim-majority nations, an increase in nationalism and paranoia about foreign influence has put pressure on relations with minority communities.

These dynamics point to the necessity for mutual education. When Muslims learn about their own religion's teaching on living together—and when others catch a glimpse of Islam's genuine message of peace—beneath the bridge-building efforts, it becomes simpler to decrease hostility.

Chances of Dialogue and Reformation

Despite these challenges, today's interconnected world also offers unprecedented opportunities for interfaith engagement:

- Leaders and scholars of Islam are engaging in international dialogue on religious freedom, human rights, and peacebuilding.
- Schools are rethinking curricula to incorporate the pluralistic heritage of Islamic civilization.
- Social media, if utilized properly, enables common citizens to post accounts of interfaith friendship and solidarity.

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These developments can re-ground Islamic discourse on its moral foundations and enable younger generations to lead with compassion, knowledge, and confidence.

The fate of interfaith harmony in the Muslim world will not be decided by what others think of Islam, but by what Muslims themselves realize the ideals of their own faith. The challenge exists—but so does the possibility of creating a society on the pattern of the Qur'an's vision of justice, compassion, and understanding.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Islam, in its scripture and living tradition, offers a deeply ethical vision for respectful and peaceful interfaith relations. From the Qur'an's repeated assertions of diversity and fairness to the Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ real-world encounters with non-Muslim communities, the message is clear: difference does not exclude dignity.

The examples of Islamic civilizations such as Al-Andalus, the Ottoman millet system, and Mughal India show that Muslims have been able to balance Islamic values with pluralistic governance for centuries. Islamic thought, in its best form, has not merely tolerated religious diversity—it has cultivated it, recognizing that religious diversity is part of God's design and creation.

However, the present globalized and polarized world carries with it problems and opportunities both. Misreading Islamic scriptures, political misuses of religious identity, and the rise of Islamophobia threaten the ideal of coexistence. However, these problems also challenge Muslims to reclaim their ethical heritage, promote proper understandings of Islam, and become active players in interfaith dialogue.

Policy Recommendations

In moving forward, the following actions are to be considered by scholars, educators, policymakers, and community leaders:

Revitalize Ethical Tafsir and Sirah Studies: Encourage curriculum reform that highlights Qur'anic verses and Prophetic sayings affirming peace, diversity, and justice.

Train Religious Leaders in Interfaith Engagement: Imams, educators, and young people's leaders must be equipped in interfaith conversation, not just to defend—but to construct positive relationships.

Support Faith-Based Peace Initiatives: Promote grassroot movements where Muslims and non-Muslims collaborate on mutual goals like education, poverty eradication, and combat against climate change.

Create Legal Safeguards for Religious Minorities: In Muslim-majority countries, laws must reflect Islamic teachings on justice by guaranteeing freedom of belief and equal citizenship for all.

Foster Positive Media Representation: Counter-narratives of harm through the amplification of genuine accounts of Muslim-led projects in coexistence, charity, and solidarity along religious lines.

In short, interfaith living is not a loss of Islamic identity—it is a manifestation of it. In the ever more connected world, the Islamic experience has ageless wisdom to share in how to live together in harmony with one another in regard. The future is not in re-inventing faith, but in re-discovering its best values.

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