**Principles of Tolerance and Nonviolence in Islam**

There are many misperceptions held by non-Muslims regarding Islam. When Islamic terrorists perpetrate violence, particularly when it appears indiscriminate, injuring innocent people, it is easy to assume that these acts are consistent with the principles of Islamic faith. The reality is that these are deeds perpetrated by people acting out of fear, anger, and a mindset of violence and retaliation. Their acts do not represent the authentic voice of Islam as reflected in the Koran (also Qur’an) and teachings of the prophet Muhammad. The reality is that mercy and compassion are foundational in Islam. Allah's compassion and mercy are mentioned 192 times in the Koran, as opposed to 17 references to Allah’s wrath and vengeance. Violent people can use selected extrapolation of scripture from the Koran to support their violence against others. One can find passages in the Koran that appear to justify violence against Jews and Christians. In Surah 9:29 we read "Fight those people of the Book who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day, who do not prohibit what Allah and his apostle have forbidden, nor accept divine law, until all of them pay protective tax in submission." You can see how this might be used to incite violence, but only if it is taken out of context. Within the context in which it was revealed and recorded, Muslims were being persecuted by non-Muslims, with their very existence being threatened.

Referring to particular verses of scripture, out of their original context, and treating them as representative is extremely dangerous and leads to erroneous perceptions of any faith. Within the Christian faith, selective extrapolation of scripture in this way has been used to support slavery, oppress women, and exclude divorced men and women in the past, much to the detriment and shame of society and the Christian church. Fortunately, a rejection of this legalistic interpretation in favor of a broader interpretation of scripture that relies on the central themes of Jesus's teachings and actions has led to a more just treatment of these issues, one based on love, grace, and acceptance.

Tolerance and respect of other religions is a persistent theme found within the Koran. In Surah 2:136-137 one reads "Say: We believe in Allah and what has been sent down to us, and what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their progeny, and that which was given to Moses and Christ, and to all other prophets by the Lord. We make no distinction among them, and we submit to him. And if they believe in the like of that which you believe, then they are rightly guided." This concept that all faithful people will be rewarded in the afterlife is repeated in Suruh 5:69 “All those who believe, and the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians, in fact anyone who believes in God and the Last Day, and performs good deeds, will have nothing to fear or regret.” These are just a couple of passages from the Koran that embrace its overall theme of respecting the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Gospels. Asma Gull Hasan states it this way in her book Why I Am a Muslim, "Muslims don't have a problem with Christians or Jews or other religions-at least not by Qur’anic standards. Christians and Jews are called the "People of the Book" in the Qur’an because of the great similarities between the Torah, the Gospels, and the Qur'an. Muslims actually call Christians and Jews "Brothers and Sisters of the Book." The title is a homage to Ishmael and Isaac. Just as they were brothers, Muslims, who are the descendents of Ishmael, feel that Christians and Jews, who are the descendents of Isaac, are their siblings.

Unlike Christian missionaries, who have historically pushed conversion, Islam does not promote proselytizing. In Surah 2:256 we read, "There is no compulsion in religion." As Islam spread, people of other faiths were not required to convert to Islam. In fact, Muhammad established protection for Jewish and Christian minorities. Christians and Jews were required to pay a tax, but this was because they were excluded from the Zakat, or “alms for the poor", a tithing that was required of all Muslims to support the poor. Perhaps the greatest example of tolerance can be seen in Moorish (Muslim) Spain where Muslims, Jews, and Christians all lived side-by-side for approximately 750 years. This ended in 1492 when southern Spain was re-conquered by the Christians. Less tolerant than their Muslim predecessors, Christians instituted the Inquisition and deported all Jews and Muslims who would not convert.

Many Christians and Jews would be surprised to discover that violence is not a central tenant of Islam. Christians and Jews tend to think that radical Muslims who proclaim a holy war, or Jihad, in the name of Allah, are reflecting a perspective established in the Koran. It is not true, any more than assuming that Christian Crusaders and Inquisitors accurately reflected the Gospel of Jesus. In reality, none of the monotheistic religions promotes violence. The Koran does allow violence within the context of defending oneself, but never without provocation. Surah 2:190 defines this, "Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Allah does not like aggressors." Early Muslims suffered from intense persecution intended to eliminate Islam. Within this context, Mohammed picked up the sword in defense of Islam, but it was never his intent to promote violence through Islam. His further military campaigns on the Arabian Peninsula were likewise defensive strategies against foes who had designs on eliminating Islam. While it is true that Muslim Caliphates (political leaders) and generals spread Islam by the sword, it was no more, and perhaps less than that perpetrated by Christian kings and Popes.

The Koran, similar to the Christian Gospels and the prophetic writings in Hebrew scripture promote the concept, or at least the possibility of loving one's enemies. We see this in Surah 60:7, "It may be that Allah will create love between you and your enemies. God is all-powerful, and God is forgiving, ever-merciful. Perhaps instead of bashing each other's religions, we ought to remind ourselves of the true nature of authentic religious principles found in all of the major religions, principles such as love, compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance. Our ability to live in harmony in a diverse world depends on it.

Koranic passages (Surahs) quoted from AL-QUR’A N, A Contemporary Translation by Ahmed Ali, Princeton University Pres