



**Viewing the Other: From Hostility to  
Hospitality**  
**World Religions Share their Wisdom**  
**Study Unit 4: Islam**

**The Elijah Interfaith Institute**

*Where Is Wisdom Found*

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## PART I

### SOURCES FOR DISCUSSION

Below are three clusters of texts taken from the Islamic tradition. Each cluster addresses some aspect of the attitude to the other, and of the tensions of hostility and hospitality in relation to the other. Depending on time and interest, choose one or more of the following topics for group study and discussion. The questions for discussion following each cluster of texts are helpful suggestions, but they need not limit the direction your discussion takes.

#### **Theme One: Recognizing Religious Diversity**

*And if thy Lord willed, all who are in the earth would have believed together.*

1. For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made you one community. But that He may try you by that which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye will all return, and He will then inform you that wherein ye differ  
- 5:48
2. And if thy Lord willed, all who are in the earth would have believed together. Wouldst thou (Muhammad) compel men until they are believers?  
-10:99
3. O mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is knower, Aware  
-49:13
4. There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error. And he who rejecteth false deities and believeth in Allah hath grasped a firm handhold which will never break. Allah is Hearer, Knower

-2:257

5. Had Allah willed, they had not been idolatrous. We have not set thee as a keeper over them, nor art thou responsible for them. Revile not those unto whom they pray beside Allah lest they wrongfully revile Allah through ignorance. Thus unto every nation have We made their deed seem fair. Then unto their Lord is their return, and He will tell them what they used to do

-6:107-108

6. Say: O disbelievers: I worship not that which ye worship; nor worship ye that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion

-109:1-6

7. Lo! Those who believe (in that which is revealed unto thee, Muhammad), and those who are Jews, and Christians and Sabaeans – whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right – surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve



*Joseph and His Brothers, Persian Painting*

-2:62

8. Jews said: the Christians are not in the truth, and Christians said: The Jews are not in the truth, while they read the Scripture. The ones who don't believe express the same words. And God will judge between them on the day of resurrection about what they were disputing

-2:113

15. To each one an orientation toward which he turns his face. Compete with one another in good works

-2:148

### **For Discussion:**

The above quotes from the Quran demonstrate the central concern it had with accommodating other religions, coming to terms with their existence, and developing the appropriate strategies for living alongside them. What arguments are put forth in favor of religious tolerance and acceptance of the other? Are there limits to such acceptance? Consider the arguments put forth in your tradition and their limits.

God, his design and knowledge play a crucial role in the above texts. God is shown as the global framework that makes creation whole. Consider how thinking from God's perspective changes our view of the other. How is this expressed in the texts above? Compare with the final part of the presentation on Judaism. Compare with your own tradition.

What are the appropriate relations between believers, as depicted in these texts? How can they serve as models for today?

### **Theme two: Between Exclusiveness and Hostility**

10. Religion (dîn), in the eyes of God, is in truth Islam

-3,19

11. Whoso desires another religion (dîn) than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him ;  
in the next world he shall be among the losers

-3,85

12. Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Lo! Allah loveth not aggressors. And slay them [the disbelievers] wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter

-2:190-191

13. They long that ye should disbelieve even as they disbelieve, that ye may be upon a level (with them). So choose not friends from them till they forsake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back (to enmity) then take them and kill them wherever y find them, and choose no friend or helper from among them

-4:89

14. And if two parties of believers fall to fighting, then make peace between them. And if one party of them doeth wrong to the other, fight ye that which doeth wrong till it return unto the ordinance of Allah; then, if it return, make peace between them

justly, and act equitably. Lo! Allah loveth the equitable

-49:9

15. Fight against those such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the Religion of Truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low

-9:29

### For Discussion

This set of texts sounds a very different note than the first set. How are we to account for this difference? What additional factors have entered the picture? What values, in these texts, account for and justify violence? Is there a limit to theological acceptance of the other, and what should its limits (or the values that limit it) be?

3,19 is understood by some to teach that Islam is the only true religion. Others learn from it that the performance of one's duty (dîn) toward God, in any religion, is a true act of surrender to God, and that is true Islam. This text opens up two distinct views of what true Islam is. Explore the differences. How would the Quran's presentation of Abraham as a Muslim be understood according to the different views? How could this text be best reconciled with the texts above?

*Whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him; in the next world he shall be among the losers.*

What is the relationship between religious exclusiveness and violence? Can exclusiveness be sustained without becoming violent?

To what extent was your prior knowledge and impression of Islam informed by texts similar to those cited in theme one, or by texts cited in theme two? How would you account for this?

Have the factors driving the second set of texts eclipsed the ideals expressed in the first?

Is it a problem of religion or of representation in media? Is the juxtaposition of these sets of texts appropriate?

### Theme Three: Living with Religious Minorities

This text was sent by the second caliph Umar ibn al-Khattâb to the inhabitants of Jerusalem in 638 :

"In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate,. This is a written document from Umar b. al-Khattâb to the inhabitants of the Sacred House (Jerusalem). You are guaranteed your life, your goods and your churches which will be neither occupied nor destroyed as long as you do not initiate anything to endanger the general security". He also gave this general recommendation before his death : "I strongly recommend him (next caliph) to take care of those non Muslims that are under God's and His Prophet's protection (dhimma) in that he should remain faithful to them according to the covenant with them and fight on their behalf and not burden them beyond their capacities".

### **For Discussion**

This text points to the political realities in the history of Islam and to how it treated others. It brings together the theological worldview of Islam and its political power and understanding.

Do the political realities compromise the ideals of tolerance expressed above? Consider how political and theological dimensions interact in your own tradition. Does a text such as this assume that Islam must be in a situation of political domination? Can Islam treat other religions as full equals? Has your tradition ruled over others in the past, and does it consider such rulership ideal?

## **PART II**

### **ISLAM: THEOLOGICAL HOSTILITY AND THE PROBLEM OF DIFFERENCE**

#### **The Theoretical Issue**

Believers in the ultimate truth of a particular religion often find themselves unsettled by historical and other academic accounts of the religion, for such accounts can challenge (or be seen as challenging) those notions of ultimate truth by demonstrating the wide variety of truth claims held by others and how notions of the truth have been affected over time. The issue is a complex one, extending far beyond the scope of the present exercise; and it certainly is not the case that believers are unable to engage in the academic study of their own religions without compromising either their religious belief or their scholarly integrity. What is significant as a starting point for the present discussion is the tendency of voices within Islam — some radical, others much less so — to question or reject Western liberal democracy because it implies acceptance of religious and cultural pluralism and a critique of unitary notions of morality. For most Muslims, religious “hospitality” is a matter of etiquette, implying nothing more than inviting non-Muslims to one’s home and treating them graciously; by that standard, Islam may be the most hospitable of religions. “Hospitality” as a form of religious pluralism, however, is often seen as an unwelcome product of Western liberalism.

***Today’s competing versions of Islam constitute separate, mutually hostile systems.***

Relatedly, many Muslims would maintain that authentic Islam has solved the problem of xenophobia by offering the prospect of universal conversion to the brotherhood of the Islamic nation, or *ummah*. The concept of *tawhid* (oneness), formerly understood to refer only to divine unity, is now seen as providing a way in

which divine unity is replicated by universally applicable, Islamized versions of all aspects of human endeavor and thought. Adherents of this view would regard any efforts to transcend creedal boundaries — including the present project — as religiously inauthentic. These ideas are not limited to contemporary Islamist organizations; for many (though far from all) medieval as well as modern Muslim thinkers as well, the only “real” civilization and justice are Islamic civilization and justice.

### **The Contemporary Situation**

To state it differently, Islam has experienced ideological hostility to alien theological ideas and epistemologies, even within Islam, more than it has experienced cultural xenophobia toward outsiders.

There were, to be sure, exceptions — the ninth-century scholar Ibn Qutayba, for example, declared that “the ways to God are many and the doors to the good are wide”

*Islam has experienced ideological hostility to alien theological ideas and epistemologies.*

— but the contrary view has tended to dominate. Moreover, theology has been regarded as closely tied to morality, thereby reinforcing ideological hostility with fear of moral pollution and promoting inter-religious hostility.

That tendency has grown stronger in some contemporary streams of Islam, especially Sunni groups such as the Wahhabi sect in Arabia and the Salafi Muslim Brotherhood, which attribute the failure of secular regimes in the Muslim world to



their adoption of Western, un-Islamic values and ideas – a form of infidelity called *jahiliyyah* (ignorance or barbarity) Even many Muslims unaffiliated with those organizations tend, for similar reasons, to mistrust Western thought, especially in the humanities and social sciences. They nevertheless have embraced Western applied technology, leading them to regard the world as malleable to the human will – a view, ironically enough, at odds with the traditional perspective of the Qur’an. Overall, their view combines scientific empiricism with respect to the physical world, totalitarian perfectionism with regard to the sociopolitical world, and fundamentalist traditionalism with regard to the historical past; the result is a dangerous mix indeed.

### **Another View of History**

The described above, though dominant today, is not the inevitable result of Muslim intellectual history. A critical view of that history can identify alternative positions – despite the efforts throughout the ages, and especially today’s efforts by the Wahhabis and Salafis, among others, to suppress those alternatives in the name of an Islamic orthodoxy that excludes all other ideas and seeks to re-establish the utopian period of the prophet Muhammad and his companions.

In fact, the Muslim tradition is far more complicated, and today’s Wahhabi and Salafi ideologues, though often referring to past Islamic glory, disregard the fact that the civilization they point to was built in large part on foundations they have rejected (for example, declaring Al-Ghazali a heretic or unbeliever). Moreover, while they attempt to “reform” Islamic societies by social engineering intended to restore

the lost utopia, they disregard the fact that pre-modern Islamic reform focused on the inculcation of inner moral and spiritual values. They deny much of Islamic history, to the point that the shared assumptions within Islam, whose existence should underlie ideological debate, have become hard to locate. Today's competing versions of Islam are so different from one another as to constitute separate, mutually hostile systems; things have reached the point that the Qur'anic statement "to you your religion and to me mine" (109:6), intended to be directed to unbelievers, has become something Muslims might say to each other.

In today's world, Islamic intellectual traditionalism — that is, a position reflecting the varied strains within the Muslim intellectual tradition — can be found primarily among Shi'ite scholars and the Sufis. Cultural traditionalism, in which local customs are treated as religious virtues, can be found primarily in rural areas; in some countries it is mixed with Salafi or Wahhabi ideology. The remainder of the Sunni Muslim world has forgotten the historical tradition of Islamic thought and thereby severed itself from its roots; what is needed, accordingly, is not a return to origins but a new Islamic theology of difference willing to engage in the kind of dialectic by which historical traditions evolve and that draws on the past while taking full account of the possibilities of the present.

### **Interpretive Space**

Traditional Islamic thought is far more complex and variegated than contemporary Wahhabi and Salafi ideologues are willing to acknowledge, and it

leaves room for different types of interpretations. One leading medieval scholar, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, identified five different levels on which all phenomena — including God’s statements in the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad — could be understood and interpreted. Not all interpretations are equally valid and some may be misguided or wrong, but even a flawed interpretation should not be regarded as heresy unless it denies the truth of a sacred text on all five levels of interpretation. This recognition of “the right to be wrong” preserves alternative voices, advances the dialectical process of interpretation, and opens the door to constructive inter-religious conversation.

One prominent voice within the Muslim tradition, largely silenced today, is that of the Sufis, who tended to interpret the Qur’an in a manner that dealt with religious differences from a more universalistic perspective. For example, the Iraqi Sufi `Abd al-Karim al-Jili (d. 1428) interpreted a passage in the Qur’an, in a manner consistent with al-Ghazali’s principles, to conclude that adherents of all religions include virtuous people who will be rewarded and wicked people who will be punished: “Each of these [ten] sects [previously identified; they include polytheists, Christians, and Jews] worships God as God desires to be worshipped, for He created them for Himself, not for themselves. Thus, they exist just as they were fashioned.” In effect, Jili suggests each religious tradition contains a portion of universal truth, to which people respond in their own ways — a fact whose recognition is a precondition to religious hospitality.

Muslim thought identifies two types of divine command: the Creative

Command, pertaining to all humanity, and the command of obligation, pertaining more specifically to Muslim believers. The Creative Command sees all of creation, including humanity, as a product of divine mercy, thereby expressing the Qur'an's basic message of theological and ontological oneness. The duty borne by a human in accordance with the Creative Command is to recognize that he or she has one God, one origin, one ancestor (Adam), one race, and shares with all other human beings the same nature, dignity, and religion (Islam, in the sense of recognizing and submitting to the one God). Humanity's covenant to acknowledge God predates the earthly creation of humanity, and that covenant also establishes the duty of mutual respect among humans and the right of all humans to life. Denying human dignity to non-Muslims or dissenters is thus a breach of the Creative Command.

The Command of Obligation forms the basis of Muslim law (Shari'ah) and is divided into rules regarding worship and rules regarding interpersonal behavior, including business transactions, criminal justice, and laws of nations. The resulting obligations are imposed on Muslims, either individually or collectively; there was debate — now largely suppressed — over whether they should be obeyed simply because they come from God or because they are inherently good. The natural duty governing the moral obligations under the Command of Obligation is that of justice, implying fairness or equity; the principle of justice is seen as “hard-wired” into the physical and social worlds occupied by humans. Justice, however, is a moral duty while the Command of Obligation imposes legal requirements, many people tend to focus largely or entirely on the latter, forgetting the logical priority of the former and

the frequent need to interpret seemingly unjust scriptural obligations in its light.

## **A Qur’anic Theology of Hospitality**

The starting point for constructing a new theology of hospitality is the recognition that everything — including human cultural, intellectual, and religious diversity — happens ultimately because God wills it. This does not imply that all religions are equal; it does imply, however, that evil actions should be opposed in and of themselves and not as inescapable consequences of alternative religious perspectives. No religion that allows God to exist is bad *per se*; believers in other religions may not be excluded from the reach of justice and fairness; and characterizing Jews or Christians as enemies of Islam disregards the relationship between the Creative Command and the Command of Obligation as well as the meaning of the human being as God’s vice-regent on earth.

*Everything—including human cultural, intellectual and religious diversity—happens ultimately because God wills it.*

A Muslim who accepts religious differences would not thereby abandon their belief in Islam’s theological superiority; they would simply recognize the implications of the Creative Command, grounded in the Qur’an, and the Qur’an’s admonition that inter-religious rivalry should consist of efforts to outdo one another in good works. God’s will is not one-dimensional, nor is the interpretation of God’s word; the outer world of the Law must be interpreted in light of its inner spirit.

The Muslim conception of the human being as a unique combination of spirit

and matter and as God's vice-regent on earth suggests that, despite differences over sacred doctrines, sacred laws, and worldviews, all humans share the same transcendental nature and the vocabulary needed to communicate across religious divides. Humans are obliged to engage in that communication; God does *not* bestow the right not to understand each other. Islam frowns on ascribing "partners" to God — doing so compromises divine unity — but Muslims themselves do just that when they call not on God Himself but on their personal versions of Him, mediated through the narrow visions of their own egos. Doing so mistakes the contingent for the absolute, the secondary for the fundamental, and the particular for the universal; and it accounts for the hostility and evil that human beings can create in the name of religion. Avoiding that "assignment of partners to God" removes the greatest impediment to theological hospitality.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. The first part of the Study Unit highlighted the tension between the theological worldview of Islam and its political realities. To what extent can you identify these dynamics in the essay? Consider the tension between viewing Islam as a theology and as a social worldview. Consider the range of possible relations between the two dimensions, as well as how they are expressed within your own tradition.
2. How would you characterize the attitude(s) of Islam toward non-believers as described in the foregoing text? Compare it (them) with Christianity's attitude toward those not transformed by Christ and Judaism's attitude toward Gentiles, as described in the texts for the previous sessions. How are they similar? How do they differ?
3. Compare the Muslim idea of the Creative Command *vis à vis* the Command of Obligation with the Jewish idea of the seven Noachide commandments *vis à vis* the 613 commandments applicable to Jews.
4. The Protestant theologian Paul Tillich has defined "idolatry" as having any ultimate concern other than God. Compare this idea with the Muslim notion, alluded to in the text, of the impropriety of ascribing partners to God.
5. The foregoing text states that "it certainly is not the case that believers are unable to engage in the academic study of their own religions without compromising either their religious belief or their scholarly integrity." Do you agree with this statement? Doesn't scholarly integrity require accepting the results of one's research even if they contradict religious beliefs? Doesn't pure religious belief require rejecting contradictory scholarly conclusions reached on the basis of disinterested research?
6. The text described the willingness of many contemporary Muslims to pursue the study of advanced technology while rejecting study of the humanities, social sciences, and theoretical sciences. To what do you attribute this? Are you aware of analogous developments within other faith communities with which you may be familiar?
7. Might the more open Muslim intellectual tradition as described in the text be too esoteric to be easily understood and accepted by the rank and file? More generally, is there a risk that religious intolerance has an advantage over religious hospitality simply because it is an easier idea for the rank and file to grasp? Could that account for the success in much of the Muslim world of the

efforts to suppress those aspects of the Muslim tradition that are more hospitable to alien ideas?

8. As a practical matter, how can a faith community overcome a tendency among its rank and file to be hostile rather than hospitable to alien beliefs?

Study Unit created by the Elijah Interfaith Institute, based on papers authored by members of the Elijah Interfaith Academy Think Tank in preparation for the Meeting of World Religious Leaders, Seville 2003

The Essay Collection: "Religion, Society and the Other" is available at [www.elijah-interfaith.org](http://www.elijah-interfaith.org).

Paper presenting Muslim perspective "Islam: Theological Hostility and the Problem of Difference" authored by Vincent J. Cornell

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