

How To Build Bridges With People Of Other Religious Communities Without Compromising Our Belief?

This Article was written in response to the following question:

How to build bridges with people of other religious communities without compromising our belief?

All praise be to Allah, and may His peace and blessings be on the greatest messenger, Muhammad.

If a group of Muslims worked with Christians and Jews, or Hindus and atheists on cleaning their neighborhoods, saving the environment, protecting the oppressed, and standing for the poor, homeless, uninsured...etc, that would be a *hilf fuddol* (Virtuous Alliance, like the one the Prophet was part of before Islam and he said that he would be part of it in Islam).

How much of the efforts of Muslims should be spent on matters like saving the environment when the ummah is facing such enormous challenges would be a different discussion, but if some of us did this, it would be good even if that was their primary activity (given they fulfilled their obligations).

To have shared religious services or the like would be crossing the lines. Also, we do not need to sanction their religion to show friendliness, after all the Muslims in India will need to accept Hinduism as a way to salvation, and to be politically correct, you will also need to accept atheism as a respected doctrine. (In fact, many atheists and agnostics are better to us than many of the people of the book).

If Islam is from God, then it is natural that God has the right to define which way leads to him. This is not only in Islam, but in all religions of Divine origin.

Extra ecclesia nullum salus (no salvation outside the church)!

Allah says,

"وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ"
"And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers." (3:85)

And he says,

"إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَكْفُرُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَيُرِيدُونَ أَنْ يُفَرِّقُوا بَيْنَ اللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَيَقُولُونَ نُؤْمِنُ بِبَعْضٍ وَنَكْفُرُ بِبَعْضٍ وَيُرِيدُونَ أَنْ يَتَّخِذُوا بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ سَبِيلًا 151 أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ حَقًّا وَأَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابًا مُهِينًا 152 وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَلَمْ يُفَرِّقُوا بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ أُولَئِكَ سَوْفَ يُؤْتِيهِمْ أَجْرَهُمْ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا"

"Those who deny Allah and His apostles, and (those who) wish to separate Allah from His apostles, saying: "We believe in some but reject others": And (those who) wish to take a course midway* They are in truth (equally) unbelievers; and we have prepared for unbelievers a humiliating punishment. *To those who believe in Allah and His apostles and make no distinction between any of the apostles, we shall soon give their (due) rewards: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful." (4:150-152)

The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said,

"والذي نفسي بيده ، لا يسمع بي أحد من هذه الأمة : يهودي ولا نصرني ، ثم يموت ولم يؤمن بالذي أرسلت به إلا كان من أهل النار"

"By the One in Whose Hand is my soul, no one of this nation, Jew or Christian, will hear of me then die without believing in that with which I have been sent, but he will be one of the people of Hell." (Narrated by Muslim).

The notion of Abrahamic Faiths cannot be answered by any statement better than Allah's; He said,

"مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُسْلِمًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ"
"Ibrahim was not a Jew nor a Christian but he was (an) upright (man), a Muslim, and he was not one of the polytheists." (3:67)

There are two important points to mention in this regard:

- 1- No one will be held accountable for not being Muslim if they did not hear about the true message of Islam.
- 2- We can never say to an individual that he/she will enter heaven or hell, for we can never be sure of their end, even if we were standing by their bedside when they die. We only say that those who die as Muslims will enter Paradise.

It is important to understand that for a religious minority, the notions of "All religions are equal" or "Religions are different paths leading to the same end" are dangerous and their acceptance is a commitment of communal suicide. That is because there is always enormous pressure to assimilate into the mainstream.

Having said that, it is important to note that you don't have to accept someone's religion to treat them kindly. This whole concept is foreign to us, and in part stems from the severe intolerance shown by the Europeans of the middle ages to those of other religions or sects. One way to counter this was to raise doubts about religion in general, about one's ability to be certain of his own, and make the people at least believe that other religions are not worse than theirs.

We should not have this problem, for we can disagree with someone's religion or lifestyle and continue to be kind to them even if they were pagans. In fact, the following verse was in reference to the pagans,

"لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُفَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ"

Allah forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! Allah loveth the just dealers (al-Mumtahanah 8)

The Prophet said,

"من أذى ذميا فقد أذاني و من أذاني فقد أذى الله"

"He who harms a peaceful/contracted non-Muslim Harms me; and he who Harms me Harms Allah." [al-Tabarani, with a chain that is sound/hassan]

And he said,

"من أذى ذمياً فأنا خصيمه."

"He who Harms a peaceful/contracted non-Muslim, then I will be His opponent." [al-Khateeb, with a chain that is sound/hassan]

And said,

"من أمن رجلاً على دمه فقتله فأنا بريء من القاتل وإن كان المقتول كافراً." [رواه النسائي والبخاري في التاريخ وصححه الألباني في صحيح الجامع من حديث عمرو بن الحمق الخزاعي]

"If someone entrusts a person with his life and then that person killed him, then I am clear of the killer even if the victim is a disbeliever." [reported by an-Nasa'ey and al-Bukhari in his book at-Tareekh and authenticated by al-Albani in Saheeh al-Jami']

So, the "Kill the infidels" practice is not ours and it is completely foreign to Islam.

Moreover, we were commanded to avoid stereotypes, Allah says,

"وَمِنَ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مَنْ إِنْ تَأْمَنَهُ بِقِنطَارٍ يُؤَدُّهُ إِلَيْكَ وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ إِنْ تَأْمَنَهُ بدينارٍ لَا يُؤَدُّهُ إِلَيْكَ إِلَّا مَا دُمْتَ عَلَيْهِ قائماً ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا لَيْسَ عَلَيْنَا فِي الْأَمِينِينَ سبِيلٌ وَيَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكُذِبَ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ"

"Among the People of the Book are some who, if entrusted with a hoard of gold, will (readily) pay it back; others, who, if entrusted with a single silver coin, will not repay it unless thou constantly stoodest demanding, because, they say, "there is no call on us (to keep faith) with these ignorant (Pagans)." but they tell a lie against Allah, and (well) they know it." (3:75)

The Prophet –Peace be upon him- stated to the Christians of Najran "No man from among them may be held accountable for the violations of another of his fellows". (Al-Kharaj by Abu-Yusuf)

By agreement, The many verses in the Quran that talk about showing kindness to people, particularly the kin and neighbours are not limited to Muslims only.

"وَأَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَلَا تُشْرِكُوا بِهِ شَيْئاً وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا وَبِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَالْجَارِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْجَارِ الْجُنُبِ وَالصَّاحِبِ بِالْجَنبِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ وَمَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ مَنْ كَانَ مُخْتَالاً فَخُوراً."

"Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbour, the neighbour farther away, the companion at your side, the traveller, and those whom your right hands possess. Indeed Allah does not like those who are self-deluding and boastful." (An-Nisa': 36)

The Messenger of Allah showed us to respect the human soul when he stood during the funeral procession of a Jew until he was buried, and when he was alerted to it being the funeral of a Jew, he said,

"أَلَيْسَتْ نَفْسًا"

"Isn't it a soul?" [Reported by Al-Bukhari and Muslim].

In building bridges and having dialogue with others, we are taught to be "diplomatic" and non-offensive, Allah says,

"وَلَا تَسُبُّوا الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ فَيَسُبُّوا اللَّهَ عَدْوًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ كَذَلِكَ زَيَّنَّا لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ عَمَلَهُمْ
ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ مَرْجِعُهُمْ فَيُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ"

"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." (al-An'am 108)

We were told to be gentle even with those who are sly and impolite.

"عن عائشة رضي الله عنها قالت كان اليهود يسلمون على النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم يقولون السام عليك ففطنت عائشة إلى قولهم فقالت عليكم السام واللعنة فقال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم مهلاً يا عائشة إن الله يحب الرفق في الأمر كله فقالت يا نبي الله أو لم تسمع ما يقولون قال أو لم تسمعي اني أرد ذلك عليهم فأقول وعليكم." (ق)

It was reported that when a group of Jews approached the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) and greeted him with twisted pronunciation, and thus uttered "Assam `Alaykum, O Muhammad!" (meaning "death and destruction come upon you") instead of "As-salamu `Alaykum", `A'ishah heard them and responded by saying, 'Assamu `Alaykum also and the curse and wrath of Allah!' The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) rebuked `A'ishah for what she had said. She told him, "Did you not hear what they said?" He said, "I did, and I responded by saying, 'And upon you,'" (i.e., that death will come upon you as it will come upon me.) He went on to say, "O `A'ishah! Allah loves gentleness in all matters." (Reported by Al-Bukhari and Muslim)

In addition, if talking to them is futile, and they start to transgress, Allah teaches us to stay away from the ignorant and avoid altercation with them,

"خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجَاهِلِينَ."

"Hold to forgiveness; command what is right; but turn away from the ignorant". (7:199)

As for those who are kind to us, we should be more kind to them, and there are so many ways to build bridges with them without compromising our beliefs, such as:

- Having interfaith dialogues to show them the beauty of Islam and develop a platform to work together on issues of common interest to humanity. Credible learned Muslims must conduct such activities. Otherwise, they often turn into disasters.
- Working with them on the common good of humanity, such as the protection of the environment, and standing for the unfortunate.
- Being part of the civil society or serving on school or city boards may be more important than sending someone to the US congress.
- Visiting their churches and inviting them to our masjids, for Omar visited the church in Jerusalem and the Prophet hosted the delegation of the Najranite Christians in his masjid.
- Showing support to just cases worldwide, whether the involved parties are Muslim or non-Muslim.
- Inviting them to food and responding to their invitation.
- Exchanging home visits with them as long as our religious preferences are respected.
- Being good neighbors who look after their neighbors' interests, and good co-workers as well as classmates.
- Exchanging gifts.
- Charity. Opening our food shelves to all people. (that is what the Building Blocks plans to do); Having a drive to look after the homeless; Visiting shelters and passing out supplies to their residents; visiting senior homes and inviting all residents to food and socialization...etc.

There is so much that can be done to build such bridges and reach out to the non-Muslims who are good to us. After all, most of our ancestors converted to Islam because of the kind treatment they received from the Muslims.

Allah knows best.