



Do not Take Christians and Jews as Awliya

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Following the events of September 11th there is one verse of the Qur'an which has often been quoted by radio announcers, talk-show hosts, and "fundamentalists" in both the East and the West. Before we deal with the actual issue of warfare or military Jihad, it is necessary to say something about this verse which, if not understood correctly, can bias any further discussions. This verse appears in chapter 5, verse 51 of the Qur'an: "...O , you who believe [in the message of Muhammad] , do not take Jews and Christians as *awliya*. They are *awliya* to one another, and the one among you who turns tot hem is of them, Truly God does not guide wrongdoing folk...." The word "*awliya*" [sing. Wali] , which we left above in the original Arabic, has been commonly translated into English as "friends". ² Given this translation, the verse appears to be a very clear statement opposing that we might term "normative" or "kindly relations" between Muslims and non-Muslims; but when we look at the traditional Qur'anic commentaries of medieval times, which discuss the events surrounding the revelation of this verse, the modern translation becomes suspect. But before examining this issue in depth, it is necessary to clarify the importance of "verse context" in the Qur'an. Here a comparison between Biblical text and the Qur'an is helpful.

Comparing the Bible and the Qur'an, we can use certain images to illustrate some of the major stylistic differences between the two sacred scriptures. We could say, for example, that the Bible is like a "flowing stream" ; when one reads the text there is a constant contextualization of the various versesm stories, chapters, and books. One begins reading with the story of Genesis, the creation of the world and the first man and woman, and then proceeds on through time, moving into the stories of the early patriarchs, then the later Hebrew judges and prophets, the coming of Christ, the post - Jesus community of the Apostles, and finally the end of the world in the Book of Revelation. As one reads the Bible there is a historical context established for each of the major stories and events which enables the reader to situate what is being said within time and space, and indeed priority. The orientation of events as related to the chapters and verses is made explicit through the historical "flow" of the stories and, in the case of the New Testament, the eventual culmination of the text and all history.

In contrast, if we were to use an image to illustrate the Qur'anic revelation, it would be that of an individual standing upon a mountain at night as "lightning" flashes on him and in a valley below. ³ As this individual looks out upon the landscape shrouded in darkness, he would see

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- 1: Taken from: David Dakake: "The Myth of a Militant Islam" in : "Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayel of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars" [2004 World.Wisdom , Inc.] , pp. 5-9
 - 2: Although it is incorrect in this context, the six major translations of the Qur'an available in English, those of A.J. Arberry , Marmaduke Pickthall , N.J. Dawood, Yusuf Ali , Ahmad Ali , and El-Hilali / Khan , all translate the word *awliya* as "friends"
 - 3: We owe this image to Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

sudden flashes, sudden illuminations of different portions of the mountain and the valley, but there would not appear to be any “immediate” relationship between these “different” illuminated regions, surrounded as they are by vast shadows. Of course, a relationship does exist between the different areas illuminated by the lightning, but that relationship is not explicit. It is hidden amid the darkness. This is something like the situation that is faced by the reader upon first examining the Qur’an. One will often read sections of the text and wonder what is the relationship between the various pronouncements that one encounters, for the Qur’an does not tell “stories” as the Western reader is accustomed to from the Biblical tradition. In fact, there is only one “full-length” story in the Qur’anic text, in the chapter on the Prophet Joseph. The rest of the Qur’an is a series of verses grouped into chapters and sections, and often two verses right next to one another will actually refer to two completely different events in the life of the early Islamic community. It is for this reason that the Qur’anic commentary tradition [tafsir] deals so extensively with what is known in Arabic as *asbab al-nuzul* , or the occasions for God revealing particular verses. Without reference to these “occasions” of revelation most of the verses of the Qur’an would be susceptible to any and all forms of interpretation. This issue of the need for knowledge of the commentary tradition is, of course, further complicated – for those “unable” to read the “original” Arabic text – by translations, which often add yet another layer of difficulty for coming to terms with the meaning of the verses. When we examine verse 5:51, *we encounter both these problems of context and translation.*

The difficulties in understanding verse 5:51 begin with the translation of the Arabic word *awliya* , commonly rendered as “friends”. In the context of this verse, the word *awliya* does not mean “friends” at all, as we use the term in English, and we know this from examining the occasion for its revelation. While it is true that *awliya* can mean “friends” , it has additional meanings such as “guardians” , “protectors” , and even “legal guardians”. When we consult the traditional commentaries on the Qur’an, we are told that this verse was revealed at a particularly delicate moment in the life of the early Muslim community. To understand this verse it is thus necessary to explain the existential situation of the Muslims at this time in Arabia.

Before 5:51 was revealed, the Prophet of Islam and the Muslims had only recently migrated as a community from Makkat o Medina, some 400 kilometers to the north. They had done so, according to Islamic histories, due to the persecution to which they were subjected at the hands of their fellow tribesmen and relatives in Makka. Most Makkans worshipped many idols as “gods” and feared the rising interest in the message of Muhammad within the city, even though he was himself a son of Makka. The Makkans feared the growing presence of the Muslims amongst them because the Muslims claimed that there was only one true God, who had no physical image, and who required of men virtue, generosity, and fair and kind treatment of the weaker members of society. This simple message, in fact, threatened to overturn the order of Makkan society, based as it was upon the worship of multiple gods and the privilege of the strong and the wealthy. It also threatened to disrupt the economic benefits of this privilege, the annual pilgrimage season, when peoples from all over Arabia would come to worship their many idols/gods at the Ka’ba – a cubical structure which the Qur’an claims was originally built by Abraham and his son Ishmael as a temple to the one God, before the decadence of religion on Arabia. ⁴ The “message” of Islam threatened to replace the social and economic system of Makkan polytheism with the worship of the one God, Who – as in the stories of the Old Testament – would not allow that others be worshiped alongside Him. In this difficult environment the prophet of Islam preached peacefully the message of monotheism and virtue, but he and his small band of followers were eventually driven from the city by torture, embargo, threats of assassination, and various other forms of humiliation and abuse. The Muslims then migrated to Medina where the Prophet had been invited to come and live in safety with his followers and where the main Arab tribes of the city had willingly accepted this message and authority.

According to one of the “earliest” and most famous Qur’anic commentaries, al-Tabari [225 – 310 A.H. / 839-923 C.E.] , it was not long after this migration to Medina that verse 5:51 was revealed.

4: Qur’an 2:125-129

Specifically, al-Tabari tells us that this verse came down around the time of the battle of Badr [2 A.H. / 623 C.E.] or perhaps after the battle of Uhud [3. A.H. / 625 C.E.]. ⁵ In these early days the Muslim community constituted no more than a few hundred people and had already left the city of Makka; yet the Makkans continued to attempt to confront them “military” , and these two early battles, as well as others, were crucial events in the history of *the early Islamic community*. Militarily the Makkans were a far more powerful force than the Muslims and they had allies throughout Arabia. Given the small numbers of the Muslims, the Prophet and his fledgling community faced the real possibility of utter annihilation should they lose any of these early conflicts. Al-Tabari tells us that within this highly charged environment some members of the Muslim community wanted to make individual alliances with other non-Muslim tribes in the region. Within Medina there were Jewish tribes who constituted a powerful presence in the town and who were on Good terms with the Makkans, and to the north of the city there were also Christian Arab tribes. Some Muslims saw the possibility of making alliances with one or more of these groups as a way of guaranteeing their own survival should the Makkan armies ultimately triumph. This was the stark reality of Arabia at that time; it was only through the protection of one’s tribe or alliances with other tribes or clans that one’s individual security was insured.

From the perspective of Islam, however, the Prophet realized that a young community, faced with great peril, could not allow such “dissension” in the ranks of the faithful as would be created by various individuals making bonds of loyalty with other groups not committed to the Islamic message. Indeed, from the Islamic point of view such actions, had they been allowed, would have been a kind of communal suicide that would have seriously undermined muslim unity, broken the morale of the community [umma] , and perhaps caused the many individuals making such alliances to lack fortitude in the face of danger.

Bearing these historical issues in mind, *it becomes obvious* that the translation of *awliya* as ‘friends’ is incorrect. It should be rendered, in accord with another of its traditional Arabic meanings, as protectors or “*guardians*” in the *strict military sense* of these terms. The verse should be read as, “..Do not take Christians and Jews as your protectors. They are protectors to one another...” This is the true message of the verse, and the appropriateness of this understanding is supported by the fact that the Qur’an does not oppose simple kindness between peoples, as is clear from verse 60:8, to which we shall now turn.

To Deal Kindly and Justly

Verse 60:8 says, “...God does not forbid that you should deal kindly and justly with those who do not fight you for the sake of [your] religion or drive you out of your homes. Truly , God loves those who are just...” Al-Tabari tells us that this verse was revealed on the occasion of an incident involving the ‘half-sister’ of one of the Prophet’s wives. ⁶ According to him , Asma bin Abi Bakr, who was a Muslim living in Medina, received some gifts from her mother, Qutaylah, who lived in Makka. Qutaylah had refused to convert to Islam and continued to practice the idoltrous ways of the Makkans. Asma’said , upon receiving the gifts, that she would not accept them, given that they came from one who had rejected the message of Islam and indeed one who had chosen to live among the arch-enemies of the Muslims; but then the above Qur’anic verse was revealed to the Prophet , indicating that there was “no” need to be ungracious towards the one who gave these gifts, even *though she had rejected the message of the Prophet* and was living with the enemies of Islam.

5: Al-Tabari , Jami’ al-bayan ‘an ta’wil ay al-qur’an [Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995] , vol. 4 , pp. 372-373

6: Ibid, vol. 14, pp. 83-84

Al-Tabari goes even further in his analysis of the verse by criticizing those Muslims who say that 60:8 was later abrogated by another Qur'anic verse which says, "...Slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them..." [9:5] ⁷ Al-Tabari says that the most proper interpretation of verse 60:8 is that God commanded kindness and justice to be shown "amongst all of the kinds of communities and creeds" [min jami'asnaf al-milal wa 'l-adyan] and did not specify by His words some communities to the exclusion of others. Al-Tabari says that here God speaks in general of any group that does not openly fight against the Muslims or drive them out of their homes, and that the opinion that this kindness was abrogated by later Qur'anic statements makes no sense [la ma 'na li- qawl man qala dhalik mansukh] ⁸ This understanding may seem to be in contradiction with our previous statement that the Makkans were indeed at war with the Muslims; however, Qutaylah, being a woman, could not technically be considered a "combatant" according to Islamic law. Indeed, this shows the essential distinction between combatants and non-combatants in the rules of Muslim warfare. This distinction, as we see from the example of Qutaylah, is to be upheld even in the context of engagement with an actively hostile enemy, as were the Makkans. Therefore, Islam does not oppose friendship and kindness between peoples who are "not" at "war" with one another and, *even in the case of war*, clear distinctions are to be made between "those who fight" and "those who do not fight".

⁷: We will look more closely at verse 9:5 when we examine *the fatwa* of the *Word Islamic Front* later in this essay

⁸: Al-Tabari , vol. 14, p. 84