



Greeting Non-Muslims

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In an article called "Salam is a greeting for Non-Muslims" Sheikh Faysal b. Anwar Mawlawi discussed the hadith: "...Do not initiate the salaam with the Jews and Christians and when you meet them on the road, force them to go to the narrowest part of it..." [Muslim]. The Shaykh wrote:

".....this hadith relates to "a state of hostilities" which had erupted at that time against the Muslims. It was, in fact, at the time of the campaign against Banu Qurayzah. This is established by another authentic hadith where the Prophet [peace be upon him] said: "...We are going forth in the morning against a group of Jews, so do not initiate the greeting of Peace with them...." [Musnad Ahmad 26695 and Mu'jam al-Tabarani al-Kabir 22 / 291. See also Musnad Ahmad 16844 and 17584]. Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani relates the same from al-Bukhari's al-Adab al-Mufrad and from Sunan al-Nasa'i while discussing this topic in "Fath al-Bari" [11 / 39]...."

In response to this explanation a sincere Muslim brother emailed me and wrote:

"...I don't think it is really convincing. Because the Prophet peace be upon him also included Christians. In Sahih Muslim, Book 26, Number 5389 we read: ".....Abu Huraira reported Allah's Messenger [may peace be upon him] as saying: Do not greet the Jews and the Christians before they greet you and when you meet any one of them on the roads force him to go to the narrowest part of it. Also In Sunan Abu Dawud , Book 41, Number 5186 we read: "...Suhayl ibn Abu Salih said: I went out with my father to Syria. The people passed by the cloisters in which there were Christians and began to salute them. My father said: Do not give them salutation first, for Abu Hurayrah reported the Apostle of Allah as saying: Do not salute them [Jews and Christians] first , and when you meet them on the road, force them to go to the narrowest part of it....."

Response:

One should note that same the hadith is narrated by Imam Bukhari in his collection with a different wording. Bukhari's version of the hadith reads: ".....do not initiate salam with the People of the Book, force them to the narrowest part of the road..." [Al-Adab al-Mufrad Al-Bukhari, XDIII. The People of the Book, nr. 1103] . Notice that the version of the hadith narrated by Imam Bukhari

doesn't use the words: "Jews and Christians", unlike the version in Muslim's Sahih. It's important to point out that the Arabic version of the hadith narrated by Imam Bukhari uses the term "Ahl al-Kitâb" [People of the Book]. The hadith in question therefor reads: "do not initiate salam with the Ahl al- Kitâb". The term "Ahl al-Kitâb" can be used as a reference to: " Jews alone", "Christians alone", or "both Jews and Christians". In other words the Arabic term "Ahl al-Kitâb" can be interpreted or understood as a reference to both Jews and Christians. This could be the reason why some people decided to narrate the hadith with the wording "Jews and Christians" [as is the case in Muslim's Sahih] instead of "People of the Book". However the term "Ahl al-Kitâb" can also be used "only" in reference to the Jews [as is sometimes the case in the Holy Qur'an]. We are of the opinion that the hadith in question uses the term "Ahl al-Kitâb" only in reference to the Jews. Therefor we are of the opinion that the wording narrated by Imam Bukhari in his collection is the correct version of the hadith discussed in this paper . The next authentic hadith supports this view:

The Prophet [peace be upon him] said: "We are going forth in the morning against a group of Jews, so do not initiate the greeting of 'Peace' with them. 1

The above hadith confirms that the term "Ahl al-Kitâb" in Bukhari's version of the hadith [discussed in this paper] was "only" used in reference to the Jews. Further notice that the Prophet in the above hadith clearly gives us the reason why Muslims should not initiate the Salam with the Jews [because: "the Muslims were at war with them"]. In other words this narration confirms that the reason for the prophet's order was the fact that the Muslims were in a state of war with the Jews [the people of the book], i.e. a state of hostilities. Another authentic narration also confirms this view: "...narrated by Aisha: the Jews used to greet the Prophet by saying, "As-Samu Alaika" [death be on you]. I understood it and said to them, " alaykum as-sam wa al-lanah " [on you be death and curse]. The Prophet said: "Be gentle and calm, O Aisha, as Allah likes gentleness in all affairs." I said, "O Allah's Prophet ! Didn't you hear what they said ? " He said, " Didn't you hear me answering them back by saying, 'Alaikum' [the same be upon you]?..." [Sahih Bukhari 6401]

In Arabic "as-salâm" means "the peace" but "al-sâm" means "the death". Some of the Jews in Madinah came to the Prophet [saaws] and said "al-sâm alayk" [on you be death] but they tried to say this in a way that it would sound like "al-salâm alayk" [on you be peace]. These things were said by the Jews because they were in a state of war with the Muslims. The Prophet understood their trick and said in this context: "...do not initiate salam with the Ahl al-Kitâb, force them to the narrowest part of the road...." Dr. Ahmad Shafaat comments on this order of the Prophet [saaws] :

".....Phipps also quotes some ahadith to further support his view of the fanaticism of the Prophet. Here is one such hadith: "Do not greet Jews and Christians with salam before they greet you, and when you meet one of them on the road force him to go to the narrowest part of it.".....It reacts to the fact that some Jews wished death for Muslims and their Prophet. The logic here is that since we do not know whether the Jews mean salam or sam when they greet you, do not begin with the greeting. Wait until they say "salam" or "sam" and then simply say "wa alaykum". The idea is expressed in a completely different way in another tradition found in "Muwatta", "Bukhari" , and Muslim: "God's Messenger said, When the Jews greet you, they usually say, al-sam alaykum [death be on you] ; so you should say [in reply to them] , wa 'alaykum [and on you]." In the *original version* of the hadith quoted by Phipps *the Jews were called* ahl al-kitab [people of the book] and since Christians are also ahl al-kitab they were included in the rule as well. This analysis shows that any fanaticism in this hadith is a reaction to the hate and hostility that first started from the Jews towards Muslims....." 2

1: Narrated in Musnad Ahmad 26695 and Mu'jam al-Tabarani al-Kabir 22 / 291

2: Journal of the Muslim Research Institute, January-June, 2001, Vol. 5, No.1

In the previous quote Dr. Ahmad Shafaat confirms that the original version of the hadith discussed in this paper, doesn't say or read: "do not initiate the greeting of Salam with the Jews and Christians" but: "do not initiate the greeting of Salam with the *ahl al-kitab*". Dr. Ahmad Shafaat in the Journal of the Muslim Research Institute also points out that the term *ahl al-kitab* was only used in reference to the Jews here. However [he later on points out] since Christian are also called ahl al-kitab, some scholars interpreted the hadith [under discussion in this paper] as a reference to both Jews and Christians, i.e. they included the Christians in this rule as well [and believed the hadith was a general command]. However earlier in this paper we pointed out with evidence from other hadith that *the term ahl al-kitab was only used in reference to the Jews here* [during a state of war].

Secondly one should realize that if a Muslim in this context would start to send peace blessings upon a Jew, it was very likely that he would receive a curse like "death be upon you" back. In this case moreover it would turn out that the Jew would have the last word since the Muslim initiated the greeting. Such incidents would off course hurt Muslims and bring them in a weak position [something that would be very undesirable in a state of war]. Therefor the order: "...do no initiate salam with the Ahl al-Kitâb..." was given in a *specific context* [it relates to a state of hostilities which had erupted at that time against the Muslims] to counter balance the attitude of certain hostile Jews. There is nothing wrong in initiating the greeting of Salam with peacefull Non-Muslims.

The hadith in Sunan Abu Dawud narrated by the brother in his email towards me does not disproof our opinion [and the fatwa by Sheikh Faysal b. Anwar Mawlawî] in any way. The father of Suhayl ibn Abu Salih simply interpreted to term "Ahl al-Kitâb" [in the hadith discussed in this paper] as a reference to both Jews and Christians. Perhaps the hadith: "...We are going forth in the morning against a group of Jews, so do not initiate the greeting of 'Peace' with them..." did not reach him, or he was perhaps unaware of Bukhari's "version" of the narration [Allah swt knows best] . Further we read that the father of Suhayl ibn Abu Salih interpreted the hadith of the Prophet [discussed in this paper] as a general command, i.e. he believed that Muslims were not allowed in general to initiate the Salam with the Non-Muslims. This opinion however contradicts some verses in the Qu'ran, as pointed out by Sheikh Muhammad Al-Mukhtar Al-Shinqiti here:

".....In addition, taking this hadith in general would contradict some verses in the Qur'an. One of the verses is the saying of prophet Ibrahim, peace be upon him, to his father, Salamun alaika, which mean peace be upon you. This is clear evidence in permitting the Salam between Muslims and non-Muslims. In Sahih Al-Bukhari we read that Prophet Muhammad [peace and blessings be upon him] passed by a gathering in which Abdullah bin Ubai bin Salul was present, and that had been before Abdullah embraced Islam. The gathering comprised of Muslims, polytheists, i.e. , idolators and Jews. 'Abdullah bin Rawaha was also present in that gathering. When dust raised by the donkey covered the gathering, Abdullah bin Ubai covered his nose with his upper garment and said, "Do not trouble us with dust." The Prophet greeted them, stopped and dismounted. Then he invited them to Allah [i.e., to embrace Islam] and recited to them some verses of the Qur'an. The above hadith clearly indicates that the Prophet [peace and blessings be upon him] greeted non-Muslims....." ³

Uthamah Ibn Zayd reports:

The Prophet [sws] once passed by a mixed gathering of Muslims and Jews and said Assalamu 'alaykum to them. ⁴

3: See, <http://www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/english/Browse.asp?hGuestID=co8rfn>

4: Tirmadhi: No. 2702

Allah says“ ...And when they hear idle talk they turn aside from it and say: We shall have our deeds and you shall have your deeds; *peace be on you*, we do not desire the ignorant..” [*Sûrah al-Qasas*: 55]

Commentary by Dr. Zohorul Hoque on the verse:

“....And when they [these righteous people] hear idle talk [or foolish arguments about things sacred], they [making their protest, 4:140; 6:68] turn aside [and leave politely] from it and say: for us are [the rewards of] our deeds, and to you are [the consequences of] your deeds ; - [we have no ill-will against you, rather we wish:] Salam [or Peace] be upon you’ [25:63, and invite you to the Religion of Peace, 16:125 ; 29:46] ! [After we have found this Light and Guidance, we cannot return to the Darkness of Ignorance, so] we do not follow the ignorant.....” ⁵

The commentary by Dr. Zohorul Hoque confirms that the verse in question describes how Muslims should respond against idle talk [or foolish arguments about things sacred] of the non-believers.

⁵: Dr. Zohorul Hoque, Translation and Commentary on the Holy Qur’an, [Holy Qur’an Publishing Project , 2000], p. 673