



## Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue: Prophet Muḥammad's Covenants, Dialogues, and Correspondence with Non-Muslims

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**Abstract:** The need for interfaith dialogue has become an undeniable reality of modern life, thanks to the technological advancements that have brought people and communities of different religions closer to each other than ever. Religion still plays a vital role in formulating its followers' attitudes towards and relations with the people of other faiths. Islam is one of the world's major religions. Its followers commonly live in multi-cultural and multi-religious societies. The sayings and practices of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) hold a much-respected place among Muslims. The Prophet's life presents a very successful model of dialogue with the people of other faiths. He frequently signed agreements with different tribal and religious communities and wrote letters to religious and political leaders of his time. These covenants, dialogues, and epistles, both in their content and form, are unexplored mines for what guidance they provide for dialogue with the people of other faiths. The paper begins with a brief history of the interfaith dialogue during the twentieth century, especially after 1970. Then it proceeds to introduce the covenants, dialogues, and correspondence of the Prophet with his contemporary non-Muslims. This is followed by a discussion of guidelines derived from the Prophet's covenants, dialogues, and correspondence with non-Muslims. The paper concludes that the *sīrah* of the Prophet provides detailed guidelines for dialogue with other religions and that interfaith dialogue can prove an effective means of Islamic call in the contemporary period in which traditional methods are gradually losing their influence. This study recommends that Muslims engaged in dialogue with other religions must carefully study the Prophet's *sīrah* to seek guidance.

Keywords: *interfaith dialogue, multi-religious societies, Islamic call, sīrah, ḥiwār.*

### Introduction

Many Individual scholars and organizations have defined “interfaith dialogue” in different ways, expressing their diverse backgrounds and approaches. A dictionary defines “dialogue” as “a formal discussion between two groups or countries, especially

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when they are trying to solve a problem, end a disagreement, etc.”<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the word “dialogue” inherently implies purposeful communication between two or more individuals or groups to resolve a problem or dispute. Technically “interfaith dialogue” may be defined as a “process wherein people with diverse faith backgrounds come together and recognizing each other’s confessional identity and integrity, join hands in equality and respect to resolve a common and mutually perceived threat to all.”<sup>2</sup> In Arabic, “*hiwār*” is used for “dialogue” and defined as a “conversation among two individuals or groups about a specific topic, holding particular views, to reach the reality or the maximum reconciliation of opinions, avoiding disputation and bigotry, and applying rational and academic methods with the readiness of both sides to accept the truth whatever it may be.”<sup>3</sup>

Motives for the interfaith dialogue may be traced to the early nineteenth-century Christian, especially Protestant missionary and ecumenical movements. It was the desire to foster unity and communication among the diverse Christian congregations throughout the world that eventually led the church to concrete steps towards dialogue with non-Christian faiths.<sup>4</sup> In 1806, William Carey (1761-1834), a Baptist missionary, proposed calling a meeting of all Christian denominations. Though this proposal could not be materialized in his life, in 1846, an international ecumenical conference was held in London, which hosted about eight hundred delegates, representing over fifty denominations.<sup>5</sup> Another missionary conference was held in 1910 in Edinburgh, with 1200 participants representing 160 Christian bodies. The major theme of this conference was the evangelization of non-Christians and the unity of Christians.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 8th ed., s.v. “dialogue.”

<sup>2</sup> Corrie Jonn Block, *The Qur’an in Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Historical and Modern Interpretations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 178.

<sup>3</sup> Bassām Dāwūd ‘Ajak, *al-Ḥiwār al-Islāmī ‘l-Masīhī: Al-Mabādī’, al-Ta’rīkh, al-Mawḍū‘āt, al-Ahdāf* (Damascus: Dār Qutaybah li ‘l-Ṭibā‘ah wa ‘l-Nashr wa ‘l-Tawzī‘, 1418/1998), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Charles D. Fletcher, *Muslim-Christian Engagement in the Twentieth Century: The Principles of Interfaith Dialogue and the Work of Isma‘il al-Faruqi* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 60.

<sup>5</sup> Ataulah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (London: MacMillan Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



The Edinburgh Conference (1910) gave birth to the following three organizations: the International Missionary Council (IMC), the Faith and Order Movement, and the Life and Work Movement. The latter two movements merged to form the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948, whereas the IMC eventually merged with the WCC in 1961 after having organized five major mission conferences in Jerusalem (1928), Tambaram (1938), Whitby (1947), Willingen (1952), and Accra (1958). WCC includes all the main denominations of the Eastern and Western worlds, except for the Roman Catholic Church and the Uniates.<sup>7</sup>

In many of its meetings, the WCC debated the nature of the relation of Christianity with other faiths. In general, the dialogue was understood in the framework of the mission.<sup>8</sup> Although the reforms of the Second Vatican Council had encouraged Catholics to view the people of other religions with esteem since, at least, the publication of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, the WCC had dragged its feet.<sup>9</sup> It organized the first Christian-Muslim dialogue in Cartigny on 2-6 March 1969, about twenty years after its inception. The participants agreed that both religions were facing the challenges of modernity. The Cartigny resolution affirmed the following aims of the dialogue:

- 1 Dialogue should lead both religions to greater mutual respect and better understanding of each other.
- 2 Dialogue should raise the questions that can lead each of the religions to a deepening and renewal of spirituality.
- 3 Dialogue should lead both Christians and Muslims to accept and fulfill common practical responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

The WCC also organized a multi-religious dialogue in 1970, hosting representatives from Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Next year, a sub-unit on “Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies” (DFI) was established

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Forward, *Inter-religious Dialogue: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 30-31.



within the WCC. This unit continued functioning until the early 1990s, when it merged with the Secretariat of the WCC due to financial restraints.<sup>11</sup>

The Second Vatican Council was held to open the church to the challenges of the modern world. It began on October 11, 1962, and ended on December 08, 1965. Several sessions were held at intervals. The views of the councillors about other religions were deeply influenced by many Catholic theologians, especially Louis Massignon (d. 1962), Jean Danielou (d. 1974), and Karl Rahner (d. 1984), who extensively wrote on the topic. At the end of the Council, the famous *Nostra Aetate* declaration was approved, which redefined the relations of Roman Catholic Christianity with all other religions, including Islam.<sup>12</sup> Section three of this document refers to the Muslims as follows:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>12</sup> Abdul Fareed Brohi, "Muslim Responses to the Christian Initiative of Interfaith Dialogue," *Hamdard Islamicus* 33:2 (2010), 27.

<sup>13</sup> "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christion Religions: *Nostra Aetate*," [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).



Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church established the “Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue” in 1964. The primary purpose of the Council was “to promote mutual understanding between men of different religions . . . [and] to acquire an objective knowledge of different spiritualities and of different ways the human mind expresses its approach to God.”<sup>14</sup> In 1969, the Council produced *Guidelines for a Dialogue between Muslims and Christians*. In 1981, its revised version was published in French and translated into English in 1990. Both documents provided the clergymen with the basic tools to engage in dialogue with Muslims and understand their civilization and doctrines.

## Prophet Muḥammad’s Covenants, Dialogues, and Correspondence with Non-Muslims

### *The Prophet’s Covenants with Non-Muslims*

Since Islam is a peaceful religion and the original state of Muslims’ relations with non-Muslims is peace, not war,<sup>15</sup> Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) concluded many peace agreements with non-Muslims in his life. Some of them are as follows:

When the Prophet migrated to Yathrib in 622 CE, he concluded a treaty between the believers of Quraysh and Yathrib and the Jews. It is the first written constitution in the world and is considered the cornerstone of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is a detailed document that consists of about forty-seven articles. Its primary significance was political since, through it, the Prophet sought to strengthen the socio-economic conditions of Muslims, consolidate his political authority, and protect the nascent Medinan state against the attacks of the pagans of Mecca and other hostile

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<sup>14</sup> Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 44-45.

<sup>15</sup> Wahbat al-Zuhaylī, *Āthār al-Ḥarb fī ‘l-Fiqh al-Islāmī: Dirāsah Muqāranah* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 113-120; al-Zuhaylī, *al-‘Alāqāt al-Duwaliyyah fī ‘l-Islām: Muqāranh bi ‘l-Qānūn Duwali al-Ḥadīth*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1407/1987). It is to note that Muslim jurists of the classical period generally held that the original state of Muslims’ relations with non-Muslims was war rather than peace. This opinion, however, reflects the circumstances of the jurists of that period when the existence of Muslims was continuously threatened by non-Muslims (see al-Zuhaylī, *Āthār al-Ḥarb*, 113-114; al-Zuhaylī, *al-‘Alāqāt al-Duwaliyyah*, 93).



tribes. However, it also includes some clauses that guide interfaith dialogue. For instance, it reads as follows:

To the Jews who follow us, belong help and equality. They shall not be wronged nor shall their enemies be aided. . . . The Jews shall contribute to the cost of war so long as they are fighting alongside the believers. . . . The Jews of the B. ‘Auf [as well as many other Jews of Medina] are one community with the believers (the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs), their freedmen and their persons except those who behave unjustly and sinfully, for they hurt but themselves and their families. . . . The close friends of the Jews are as themselves. . . . The Jews must bear their expenses and the Muslims their expenses. Each must help the other against anyone who attacks the people of this document. They must seek mutual advice and consultation, and loyalty is a protection against treachery. . . . The Jews must pay with the believers so long as war lasts. . . . If any dispute or controversy likely to cause trouble should arise, it must be referred to God and to Muhammad, the apostle of God.<sup>16</sup>

In 6 AH, the Prophet headed to Mecca along with about fourteen hundred Companions. The purpose was to perform *‘umrah*, not to lead any military expedition. However, when he reached Ḥudaybiyah, he was informed that the Quraysh of Mecca were determined to prevent him and his fellows from entering Mecca by fair means or foul. In response, he conveyed that his purpose was to perform *‘umrah* and not to fight and that he was willing to sign a truce with Quraysh. He also added, “By the Name of Him in Whose Hands my soul is, if they ask me anything which will respect the ordinances of Allah, I will grant it to them.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, he expressed his readiness to conclude a peace treaty with Quraysh under any permissible conditions. Eventually, he succeeded in materializing his objective despite all attempts of the Meccans to

<sup>16</sup> Muḥammad Ḥamīd Allāh, *Majmū‘at al-Wathā‘iq al-Siyāsiyyah li ‘l-‘Ahd al-Nabawī wa ‘l-Khilāfah al-Rāshidah*, 6th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā‘is, 1407/1987), 60-62. The translation with some modifications is of A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq’s Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955), 231-233.

<sup>17</sup> The Arabic text reads, “Wa ‘l-Ladhī nafsi biyadihi lā yas’alūnī khuṭṭah yu‘aẓẓimūn fihā ḥurumāt Allāh illā a‘ṭaytuhum iyyāhā.” Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, kitāb al-shurūṭ, bāb al-shurūṭ fī ‘l-jihād wa ‘l-muṣālahah ma’a ahl al-ḥarb wa kitābat al-shurūṭ. The translation is of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: The Translation of the Meanings of Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī; Arabic-English*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997), 3:528).



sabotage peace talks. For instance, they objected to beginning the covenant with *basmalah*, writing *rasūl al-Allāh* with his name, and his performing *‘umrah* the same year. Moreover, they insisted on including some unreasonable and humiliating conditions, such as that the Prophet would return to Quraysh whoever comes to him from them without the permission of their guardian(s) and that Quraysh would not return to the Prophet whoever comes to them from him without the permission of their guardian(s).<sup>18</sup> The treaty of Ḥudaybiyah reads as follows:

In Thy name, O God. This is the treaty which Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh made with Suhayl b. ‘Amr. They agreed to remove war from the people for ten years. During this time, the people are to be in security, and no one is to lay hands on another. Whoever of Quraysh comes to Muḥammad without permission of his protector (or guardian), Muḥammad is to send back to them; whoever of those with Muḥammad comes to Quraysh is not to be sent back to him. Between us evil is to be abstained from, and there is to be no raiding or spoliation; . . . You are to withdraw from us this year and not enter Mecca against us; and when next year comes, we shall go out in front of you, and you shall enter it (Mecca) with your companions and remain in it three days; you shall have the arms of the rider, swords in scabbards; you shall not enter it bearing anything else.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Prophet’s Dialogues with Non-Muslims***

Islamic sources mention two Christian delegations, which came to the Prophet from Najran. The first delegation came in about 6 BH and consisted of about twenty members. They visited the Prophet in Mecca and asked him many questions. The Prophet answered their questions, invited them to Islam, and recited the Qur’ān before them. Consequently, they embraced Islam. Upon hearing this, ‘Abū Jahl b. Hishām (d. 2/624) rebuked them.<sup>20</sup> However, their response has been recorded in the Qur’ān as follows:

Those to whom We sent the Book before this, they do believe in this (revelation).  
And when it is recited to them, they say: “We believe therein, for it is the Truth from

<sup>18</sup> Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-Umam wa ’l-Mulūk* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1997), 2:123.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. The translation is of W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 47-48.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Abd al-Malik b. Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1410/1990), 2:42.





our Lord. Indeed, we have been Muslims (bowing to Allah's Will) from before this." Twice will they be given their reward, for that they have persevered, that they avert Evil with Good, and that they spend (in charity) out of what We have given them. And when they hear vain talk, they turn away therefrom and say, "To us our deeds, and to you yours; peace be to you: we seek not the ignorant."<sup>21</sup>

The second delegation came in response to the Prophet's letter in which he invited them to Islam in the year of delegations. This delegation included sixty members; among them, fourteen were elite, whereas three were their leaders. They stayed in the mosque of the Prophet and performed therein their rituals. They argued with the Prophet about Jesus and claimed his divinity, divine sonship, and the Trinity. The Prophet turned to two priests among them and asked them to embrace Islam. They replied, "We have already embraced Islam." He said, "You haven't embraced Islam. So do it now." They replied, "We had embraced Islam before you embraced Islam." He said, "You lied. Declaring that Allah had a son, worshipping the Cross, and eating pork prevent you from accepting Islam." Then they asked him, "Who is His father?" Upon hearing this, the Prophet preferred to stop arguing with them since he realized that they were not sincere.<sup>22</sup> On this occasion, the first eighty and so verses of the Sūrat Āl 'Imrān were revealed, which also included the following ones:

The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him, "Be." And he was. The Truth (comes) from Allah alone; so be not of those who doubt. If anyone disputes in this matter with thee, now after (full) knowledge Hath come to thee, say: "Come! Let us gather together, our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves. Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie. . . ." Say: "O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you; that we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah." If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's Will)."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Qur'ān 28:52-55. All Qur'ānic translations in this paper are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's.

<sup>22</sup> Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah*, 2:217-18.

<sup>23</sup> Qur'ān 3:59-61, 64.





Among these verses were those in which the Prophet (peace be on him) was asked to invite the Christian delegation to the *mubāhalah*<sup>24</sup> (invoking God's curse upon the liar), if they would not stop disputing the truth. Therefore, the Prophet invited them to the *mubāhalah*, which they eventually decided not to participate in and preferred to conclude a peace agreement with him.

### ***The Prophet's Correspondence with Non-Muslims***

After the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyah in 6 AH, the Prophet started sending letters to different non-Muslim emperors, kings, rulers, and chieftains in and out of the Arabian Peninsula. He sent more than fifty letters.<sup>25</sup> For some scholars, the number mounts to sixty-two, of which the texts of twenty-nine letters are still preserved.<sup>26</sup> Through these letters, the Prophet invited and urged these rulers to embrace Islam or live peacefully. Some of them embraced Islam, others preferred not to accept his invitation, yet replied respectfully, and still others responded in a hostile manner.<sup>27</sup>

### **Guidelines for Interfaith Dialogue Derived from the Prophet's Covenants, Dialogues, and Correspondence with Non-Muslims**

The Prophet's (peace be on him) covenants, dialogues, and correspondence with non-Muslims hold normative status for Muslims and are binding on them. Therefore, they are among the primary Islamic sources of guidance for Muslims in their current inter-religious dialogue and relations. A careful study of the above-mentioned documents provides the following guidelines for Muslims engaged in interfaith activities.

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<sup>24</sup> *Mubāhalah* literally means to curse. The technical meaning is that when people dispute over something, they get together and collectively invoke God's curse upon the liars among them. See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, s.v. "b.h.l."

<sup>25</sup> 'Ajak, *al-Ḥiwār al-Islāmī*, 127.

<sup>26</sup> John Andrew Morrow, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2013), 34.

<sup>27</sup> For the text and detail of these letters, see Ḥamīd Allāh, *al-Wathā'iq al-Siyāsiyyah*, 100-104, 108-111, 126, 135, 138, 140-143, 156, 161-162; Ṣaḥīḥ 'l-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī, *al-Raḥīq al-Makhtūm: Baḥth fī 'l-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth, n.d.), 320-30.



### ***Introducing Islam***

The Prophet's dialogues and correspondence with non-Muslims teach that the primary objective of the Muslims who engaged in interfaith dialogue should be introducing Islam to non-Muslims, as the Prophet invited the priests of the Najrani delegation to embrace Islam and almost all of his letters to his contemporary non-Muslim rulers contain sentences like "I call you with the call of Allah/Islam"<sup>28</sup> and "Embrace Islam you will be at peace and safe."<sup>29</sup> This shows that whatever the strategy or format Muslims develop for the dialogue with the followers of other religions they must not forget that their foremost obligation is to present the teachings of Islam to their interlocutors in the best way as demanded by the Qur'ān itself: "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious."<sup>30</sup> It also implies that from the Islamic perspective, the *da'wah* is the end, whereas the interfaith dialogue (in the modern sense) is one of its means and strategies, which always evolve and may change with the march of time.

### ***Expressing Mutual Respect***

Mutual respect is a very important principle of the interfaith dialogue, which has been epitomized by the Prophet (peace be on him). One can find many examples of his respect for those non-Muslims with whom he engaged in dialogue. The Prophet (peace be on him) arranged the accommodation of the delegation of the polytheist Banū Thaḳīf in his own mosque,<sup>31</sup> a holy place. The Christian delegation of Najran was also respectably received in the same manner. Moreover, he allowed them to perform their rituals in the mosque to the astonishment of his Companions.<sup>32</sup> Another example is his dealing with 'Adī b. Ḥātim al-Ṭā'ī (d. 68/687), when the latter was still Christian. 'Adī narrates that when he visited the Prophet (peace be on him) in Medina and introduced himself to him, the Prophet asked him to accompany him to his home. When they reached the home, the Prophet offered 'Adī a leather cushion filled with fibre to be

<sup>28</sup> Ḥamīd Allāh, *al-Wathā'iq al-Siyāsiyyah*, 103.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Qur'ān 16:125.

<sup>31</sup> Muḥammad b. Yazīd b. Mājāh, *Sunan*, kitāb al-ṣiyām, bāb fī man aslama fī shahr Ramaḍān, <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:1760>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*, 2:216-17.



seated on, and he himself sat on the ground. Then he invited ‘Adī to Islam and answered his questions and misgivings about Islam. Subsequently, ‘Adī, who hated the Prophet most, embraced Islam.<sup>33</sup> The respect ‘Adī received from the Prophet played a vital role in removing his feelings of hatred towards the Prophet and Islam. Another example of the Prophet’s respect for non-Muslim addressees is his writing honorific titles with the names of the rulers to whom he sent letters, such as *Malik al-Ḥabashah*/*‘Aẓīm al-Ḥabashah*<sup>34</sup> (King of Abyssinia), *‘Aẓīm Fārs*<sup>35</sup> (King of Persia), and *‘Aẓīm al-Rūm/Ṣāhib al-Rūm* (King of the Romans), etc.<sup>36</sup> This is also in accordance with another Islamic social principle: “Treat the people according to their ranks.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Using Expressions Which Soften the Addressee*

The Prophet’s letters to non-Muslims also indicate that he frequently used statements and expressions that softened the hearts of his addressees and helped them to sincerely consider his call. For instance, when he wrote to the Bishops of Najran, he started his letter as follows: “In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”<sup>38</sup> It is important to note here that the Prophet avoided mentioning the name of Ishmael (peace be on him) along with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (peace be on them), although Ishmael was also mentioned as the son of Abraham in the Bible.<sup>39</sup> However, perhaps since he was the forefather of the Arabs and thus of the Prophet himself, and because he was considered a minor figure in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, the Prophet did not mention his name in the list, lest this would offend the Christians’ religious sensibility. Another example in this regard is the Prophet’s mentioning of Jesus (peace

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 4:222-23.

<sup>34</sup> Ḥamīd Allāh, *al-Wathā’iq al-Siyāsiyyah*, 100, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 140-43.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 109-10.

<sup>37</sup> Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān b. al-Ash‘ath, *Sunan*, kitāb al-adab, bāb fī tanzīl al-nās manāzilahum, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4842>.

<sup>38</sup> Ḥamīd Allāh, *al-Wathā’iq al-Siyāsiyyah*, 174. The complete letter reads as follows:

From Muḥammad, the Messenger of Allah, to the Bishops of Najran

In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

Following from that, I call you from the worship of human beings to the worship of Allah, and I call you from the sovereignty of human beings to the sovereignty of Allah. If you refuse, you will have to pay *jizyah* (poll tax). If you still refuse, I will declare war against you.

And that’s all.

<sup>39</sup> Adam Zeidan, “Ishmael,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 25, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ishmael-son-of-Abraham>.



be on him) and Mary (peace be on her) in a very honorific way in his letter to Negus,<sup>40</sup> in whose religion both held a very high status.

### ***Having Firm Belief in the Truth of Islam***

A person's firm belief in the truth and authenticity of their faith should not prevent them from engaging in meaningful dialogue with the adherents of other religions, because the Prophet did not doubt his mission, but he actively participated in dialogue with the followers of other faiths. Moreover, the following verse: "The Truth (comes) from Allah alone; so be not of those who doubt"<sup>41</sup> was revealed to the Prophet in the context of his dialogue with the Christian delegation of Najran. His firmness in his faith is also evident from the fact that when the Najrani delegation disappointed him, he invited them to the *mubāhalah* in accordance with the divine instructions.

### ***Identifying the Flaws***

The Prophet's example also shows that one may highlight the flaws and errors that crept into other faiths if the situation necessarily requires it, as the Prophet said to the Christian delegation of Najran while identifying reasons for their rejection of Islam, "Declaring a son for Allah, worshipping the cross, and eating pork prevent you from accepting Islam" and he emphasized in his letter to the Christian King of Abyssinia Negus that Allah had taken neither a wife nor a son. However, this should be done very wisely and cautiously, and only when the situation inevitably requires this, because more often than not, this turns out to be counterproductive and destroys mutual trust and respect, which are so necessary for a meaningful dialogue.

### ***Avoiding Meaningless Debate***

The practical examples of the Prophet (peace be on him) also indicate that when it becomes evident to the Muslim participants of the interfaith dialogue that the other side is no longer sincere in their talks, they should stop arguing any longer. The Prophet did the same when he sensed that the Najrani priests were not sincere in their quest for the truth. Perhaps the rationale behind this principle is that the dialogue fails to produce any constructive and meaningful results in such a situation, whereas Muslims are

<sup>40</sup> Ḥamīd Allāh, *al-Wathā'iq al-Siyāsiyyah*, 100.

<sup>41</sup> Qur'ān 3:60.



instructed not to involve themselves in useless activities. The Prophet once said, “It is the beauty of a person’s Islam that they leave what is of no use for them.”<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusions

The above discussion shows that although interfaith dialogue is a relatively new phenomenon that has been initiated by the Christian Churches, this may prove an effective means for Muslims to present the teachings of Islam to non-Muslims in a meaningful and attractive way. Since interfaith dialogue builds mutual trust, promotes mutual respect, and eliminates or minimizes hostility between the adherents of different religions, it provides opportunities for the followers of each faith to better understand the standpoint of other religions and to present their point of view more clearly. This better understanding, in turn, guarantees peaceful coexistence, which this pluralistic world needs most. The *sīrah* of the Prophet (peace be on him) shows that the sole purpose of his engagement in dialogue with the people of different faiths was to convey the message of Islam most effectively. He took every fair and legitimate measure to achieve this end. Though sometimes he drew the attention of his interlocutors to the fallacies found in their arguments and opinions, he did so very wisely without invoking in them negative feelings. He had a firm belief in his mission but gave his addressees their due respect. Therefore, his life and work provide meaningful guidelines for every Muslim who participates in the interfaith dialogue in the contemporary world.

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<sup>42</sup> Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmi’*, kitāb al-zuhd ‘an Rasūl Allah sālā Allāh ‘alayhi wa sallam, bāb, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2317>.



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