

Twisting Islam to Enable an Interfaith Dialogue?

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A popular book for "interfaith dialogue" among Christians, Jews and Muslims is *Islam's Jesus* by Professor Zeki Saritoprak. Most of the book focused on the Islamic theological beliefs about Jesus's return to earth, with an extensive look at different approaches to, and theories about, understanding what the Koran and the teachings of Muhammad say about this event.

But throughout the book Saritoprak also stressed the idea of interfaith cooperation and dialogue, especially between Christians and Muslims. He hoped to use this book to further that idea by showing how much Christians and Muslims had in common in terms of Jesus. Saritoprak relied on what he called the "interpretive" approach to find this commonality. He stated that this approach is a "middle way to understanding" the texts of Islam that avoids the "extremism" of literalism and the "extremism" of "esoteric understandings" that can border on, or even become heretical (p. 122).

The reliance on the "interpretive" approach created significant problems for the book.

Jesus Returns

Saritoprak wrote that "Jesus's descent is one of the most significant events in Islamic eschatological literature" (p. 72). Saritoprak refers to the following *hadith* from Muhammad to explain this descent:

Imam Ahmad recorded that Abu Hurayrah said that the Prophet said...He [Jesus] will descend while wearing two long, light yellow garments. His head appears to be dripping water, even though no moisture touched it. He will break the cross, kill the pig, and banish the Jizyah and will call the people to Islam. During his time, Allah will destroy all religions except Islam...

Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Vol. 3, pp. 31-32

This *hadith* seems to be easily understood: Jesus will return to earth, destroy Christianity (break the cross), call non-Muslims to Islam (thus having no more need for the *Jizyah*), and Allah will destroy all religions except for Islam. But I am taking what Saritoprak calls the "literalist" approach to understanding this *hadith*.

Saritoprak uses the "interpretive" approach. With this approach, he is able to suggest that this *hadith* could mean, *inter alia*, that Jesus will return to "restore the messages of the Gospel and the Qur'an"; or there will be "a renewal of Christianity, allowing it to be freed of elements that have been added over the centuries and are not necessary or compatible with the core teachings of Jesus" (p. 124). Although the "interpretive" approach may seem somewhat vague and open-ended, in this instance it is certainly more conducive to promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims than is the "literalist" approach.

Saritoprak relies extensively on verses of the Koran. However, it is curious that he sometimes uses verses that have been abrogated, selectively quotes portions of verses, and even takes verses out of context:

Abrogation and Partial Quotes of Koran Verses

On pp. 52 and 140, Saritoprak writes about how the Koran ensures salvation not only to Muslims, but also to Christians and Jews. He refers especially to verses 2:62 and 5:69. Unfortunately for his premise, I have previously shown that both of these verses were abrogated by 3:85 (*Letting Islam Be Islam: Separating Truth From Myth*, pp. 159-162); 3:85 states that the only religion acceptable to Allah is Islam and those who follow another religion will go to Hell.

On p. 144 he writes that the Koran "praises Christians who are humble," and then he quotes the last portion of 5:82 which states that Christians are "closest in affection" to Muslims. It is interesting that he left out the beginning of 5:82:

Verily, you will find the strongest among men in enmity to the believers (Muslims) the Jews...

And in Endnote No. 44 on p. 200, he quotes only this portion of 9:30:

"The Jews say, 'Ezra is the son of God'; the Christians say, 'The Messiah is the son of God.' That is what they say with their mouths. They imitate the sayings of the disbelievers of old...

Here is what he left out: *Allah's Curse be on them, how they are deluded away from the truth. So Allah curses Christians for saying Jesus is the Son of God.*

Does the "interpretive" approach really allow the use of abrogated Koran verses and selective, partial quotes of other verses?

Koran Verses Taken Out of Context

On p. 48, Saritoprak wrote, "A general theological principle of the Islamic tradition is that Muslims are to make peace instead of war...The Qur'an says, 'Peace is Better' (4:128)."

In reality, this verse has nothing to do with peace between peoples or nations. 4:128 specifically addresses the relations between a man and wife:

And if a woman fears cruelty or desertion on her husband's part, there is no sin on them both if they make terms of peace between themselves; and making peace is better.

On p. 135, while discussing the theme of Muslim-Christian Cooperation, Saritoprak wrote,

The Holy Book of Islam instructs its audience to initiate dialogue with others by showing a way of greeting, the same way Jesus used to greet his disciples: "When you are greeted, respond with an equal or better greeting" (4:86).

Is this a proper understanding of Verse 4:86? We will turn to two sources to understand the meaning of this verse. The first source consists of authoritative Koran commentaries (*tafsirs*). Here we find that 4:86 pertains only to Muslims greeting each other, and non-Muslims are excluded (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Vol. 2, pp. 534-535; *Tafsir Al-Jalalayn*, p. 205; and *Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan*, Vol. 1, p. 492).

Our second source is the *hadith* collection in *Sahih Muslim*, which Saritoprak said was one of the two most reliable collections of the sayings of Muhammad (p. 66). Here is what Muhammad said about the idea of a Muslim greeting Jews and Christians:

Abu Huraira reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) had said: 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.

Sahih Muslim, No. 2167

So we can see that Christians are excluded from the message of 4:86; and Muhammad not only prohibits Muslims from being the first to greet Christians, he commands Muslims to force Christians to go to the narrowest part of the road. Yet Saritoprak uses 4:86 while discussing Muslim-Christian cooperation.

He continued this theme of cooperation on p. 139:

Likewise, the Qur'an praises the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] for their good deeds and faith in God: "As for those who believe in God and remain steadfast in their faith, God will enter them in His mercy and grace. He will lead them to the path of righteousness, the straight path" (4:175).

Again, authoritative Koran commentaries are important here. They explain to us that Verse 4:175 has nothing to do with Jews and Christians. The "straight path" is Islam (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Vol. 1, p. 84; *Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan*, Vol. 1, pp. 23-24, and *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, Vol. 1, p. 3), and this verse admonishes Muslims to believe in Allah, and to hold fast to the Koran and Islam (*Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Vol. 3, p. 63, *Tafsir Al-Jalalayn*, p. 233, and *Tafsir As-Sa'di*, Vol. 1, p. 466).

Does the "interpretive" approach really allow Koran verses to be taken out of context?

Saritoprak also makes some curious claims in his effort to promote Christian-Muslim dialogue:

A "Landmark" Event

While Muhammad was still in Mecca getting Islam started, the Meccan polytheists sent a request to the Negus, the Christian king of Abyssinia, to return a small group of Muslims who had sought refuge in his country. While the king was considering this request, one of those Muslims recited verses from the Koran, which brought tears to the eyes of the Negus and his court, and the Muslims were allowed to stay. After the Negus died, Muhammad performed a funeral prayer in Medina for him, setting "the precedent in Islamic law" for what would be called the "funeral prayer in absentia"; Saritoprak lauded this as a "land-mark in the history of Muslim-Christian cooperation" (p. 145).

But what Saritoprak left out was that the Negus had secretly converted to Islam shortly after the verses were recited to him, and when later questioned about this by his subjects, he had actually lied to them about his conversion. Muhammad was advised of this and later performed the funeral prayer simply because the Negus was a Muslim (Muhammad had referred to the Negus as a "brother" [in Islam] – *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Nos. 3877 and 3880). So this "land-mark" event of Muslim-Christian cooperation was actually an early incident of Muslim deception toward Christians!

Muhammad the Multiculturalist

Saritoprak wrote that Muhammad's family life and later marriages were "a good example of the multicultural environment in which the Qur'an was revealed" (p. 135). He mentioned Safiyya, a Jew, and Maria, a Coptic Christian.

Safiyyah was among the captives taken when the Muslims conquered Khaybar in May 628; her father was killed during the battle. Muhammad bought her from another Muslim warrior for the price of seven slaves. Muhammad married her after ordering the torture and beheading of her husband, Kinanah b. al-Rabi'.

Maria was not even a wife of Muhammad. She was a Coptic Christian given as a slave to Muhammad. She bore Muhammad a son named Ibrahim, who died as a young child.

If Safiyyah and Maria are to be examples of the "multicultural environment in which the Qur'an was revealed," then this environment consisted of slave trading, torture, beheading, and the violent conquest of non-Muslims.

The "Tender Tone" in the Koran

Saritoprak wrote that the Koran encourages "dialogue" and cooperation with non-Muslims, especially Jews and Christians (e.g. pp. 136, 137, 139, and 140). He pointed out that, "In the Qur'anic passages regarding the People of the Book in general and the Christians in particular, one often finds a tender tone" (p. 140).

Here are some examples of the dialogue and "tender tone" in the Koran: Allah states that he is angry with the Jews, and the Christians are misguided in their beliefs (1:7). Allah curses the Jews and Christians (9:30). He states that the Jews and Christians are among the worst of creatures who "will abide in the fire of Hell" (98:6). Allah commands Muslims to fight the Jews and Christians until those Jews and Christians pay the *jizyah* (protection tax), with willing submission and feeling themselves subdued (9:29). And Allah specifically states that the Jews are among the worst enemies of Islam (5:82).

Saritoprak wrote that, "Intentionally denying anything in the Qur'an drives an individual outside the pale of Islam" (p. 32). He is apparently not using the Koran I rely on, so what Koran is he

using to find that “tender tone” toward Jews and Christians?

Muslims, Jews and Christians Believe in the “Same God”

Saritoprak stated that Muslims, Jews and Christians all believe in the “same God” (p. 153). If this is the case, that means that Jews and Christians believe in and worship a God who hates and curses them, orders Muslims to fight them, and condemns them to Hell simply because they are not Muslims.

I have addressed this topic in more detail in [a previous article](#).

Conclusion

Saritoprak wanted his book to be used to enhance interfaith dialogue, especially between Christians and Muslims. But his “interpretive” approach appears to be based largely on personal opinion, great freedom in the selective use and personal interpretation of Koran verses, the making of some curious claims, and it tends toward the esoteric. Saritoprak said that Muhammad never spoke in vain, and whatever Muhammad spoke was a direct revelation from Allah or divinely inspired (p. 34). So when considering the use of the “interpretive” approach, one should probably heed these cautionary words of Muhammad:

Muhammad bin Jarir reported that Ibn 'Abbas said that the Prophet said, 'Whoever explains the Qur'an with his opinion or with what he has no knowledge of, then let him assume his seat in the Fire.'

Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Vol. 1, pp. 32-33

Dr. Stephen M. Kirby is the author of three books about Islam. His latest book is *Islam According to Muhammad, Not Your Neighbor*.

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