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Op-Ed: Jewish-Muslim coexistence through the Koran? Wishful thinking

One has to appreciate Dr. Salem's desire for peace between Jews and Muslims, but the Koran does not agree.

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In the January 7, 2016 edition of *Arutz Sheva*, Rebecca Abrahamson wrote an op-ed piece about Dr. Omer Salem, an Egyptian Muslim sheikh who was determined to pursue peace between Jews and Muslims. The basis for this peace was to be "scripture," and Salem was encouraging Jews "to deepen their attachment to the Torah and mitzvot." But to have any prospect for achieving such peace, more is required.



Dr. Stephen M. Kirby
The writer is the author of three books, and numerous articles and pamphlets...

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Jews are People of the Book

According to Abrahamson, Salem believed that

The closer Jews are to their book, he insists, the more they will be viewed as Ahlul Kitab – people of the book – by Muslims, and the more they will earn respect in the Muslim world.

But if the basis for this peace is to be "scripture," then we must also take into account what Islamic scripture has to say; for that we must look to the Koran and the *hadiths*, the teachings and example of Muhammad.

Here is some of what the Koran has to say about the People of the Book: Many of the People of the Book have enmity and hatred toward Muslims (2:109); the People of the Book mix truth with falsehood and conceal the truth (3:71); the People of the Book know that Islam is the true faith but they reject it anyway and hinder those seeking to follow Islam (3:98-99); Allah commands the People of the Book to believe in Islam and Muhammad, or he will "efface faces and turn them hindwards" (4:47); Muslims are commanded to fight the People of the Book until those People pay the *jizyah*, "with willing submission and feel themselves subdued" (9:29); and, if the People of the Book don't believe in Islam, then they are among the worst of creatures and they will abide in the Fires of Hell (98:6).

If Muslims truly believe that the Koran consists of the Words of Allah, then there is no support in the Koran for claiming that Jews will earn respect in the Muslim world by being viewed as People of the Book. And there are additional Koranic verses that also undermine the idea of Jews earning the respect of Muslims: the Jews are among the worst enemies of the Muslims (5:82); Muslims are forbidden from being friends with Jews (especially 5:51, and, e.g., 3:28, 5:57, and 60:13); and Allah curses the

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Jews (9:30).

Muslims and Jews are "Coreligionists"

According to Abrahamson, Salem claims Muslims and Jews are "coreligionists," and he uses two Koran verses to support this claim: 49:13 and 5:48.

Here is the portion of 49:13 quoted in the article:

O Mankind! We created you from a male and female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you might come to know each other.

It sounds like Allah is stating that all people are equal and calling for them to get along and get to know each other. However, the verse continues with this:

Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that who has At-Taqwa.

At-Taqwa is acting in obedience to the commands of Allah and following the teachings of Muhammad. So although this verse appears to begin with the idea of equality among people, it ends by stating that the most honorable among people are those who are devout Muslims.

According to Abrahamson, Salem regarded 5:48

as invoking multi-covenantism - Jewish law for the Jews, Islamic law for the Muslims - a teaching demanding more than mere tolerance, but actual acceptance of the other faith community.

Here is how that verse was quoted:

To each among you (Muslims and Jews) have We prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues.

The problem with how this verse was quoted is that it leaves out the first half of the verse. In the first half we find that Allah has sent the Koran to Muhammad, and Allah commands Muhammad to

judge among them by what Allah has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging away from the truth that has come to you.

For centuries authoritative Koran commentators have explained that this verse meant that Muhammad was to judge matters by the Koran, in which the truth is found, and which had abrogated the "vain desires" of the Jews and Christians as found in their respective scriptures (e.g. Tafsir Al-Jalalayn, p. 254; Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Vol. 3, pp. 195-202; Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan, Vol. 1, pp. 613-614; and Tafsir As-Sa'di, Vol. 1, pp. 509-511).

Unfortunately, Salem appears to be selecting only portions of verses and is engaging in his own personal interpretation of the Koran; and his interpretation is at odds with those of authoritative Koran commentators over the centuries. He is also ignoring a warning from 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

And with his claim that Jews and Muslims are "coreligionists," Salem is ignoring the clear message of 3:85 in the Koran:

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.

Greater Jihad versus Lesser Jihad

Dr. Salem emphasized the importance of jihad al nafs, the inner battle to make one's own self better, and claimed that this was a higher form of jihad than 'jihad al sayeef - the struggle of the sword.' Salem invited Muslims to favor this "higher and more difficult path." Unfortunately for Salem's claim, the idea that the "greater jihad" is an inner struggle, and fighting with the sword is the "lesser jihad" has no basis in Islamic Doctrine. That Muhammad supposedly made such a distinction between jihads is based largely on weak or fabricated hadiths and later commentary inserted into Reliance of the Traveller, a Shafi'i manual of Sharia Law, which has erroneously been considered part of the original manual. I cover this in more detail on pp. 115-123 of my book Islam According to Muhammad, Not Your Neighbor.

A History of Prospering Side by Side

Dr. Salem insisted "that both Jews and Muslims can prosper side by side," and he stated that, "Our ancestors prospered in parallel." Dr. Salem is ignoring the facts that his prophet Muhammad drove the Jewish tribes out of Medina, supervised the beheading of 600-900 captured Jewish males (combatants and non-combatants), and had this to say:

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Narrated Abu Hurairah: Allah's Messenger said, "The Hour will not be established until you fight against the Jews, and the stone behind which a Jew will be hiding will say, 'O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, so kill him.'"

Sahih Al-Bukhari, No. 2926

Here are some additional comments Muhammad made about the Jews:

It was narrated from 'Amr bin Shu'aib, from his father, from his grandfather, that the Messenger of Allah ruled that the blood money for the People of the Book is half of that of the blood money for the Muslims, and they are the Jews and Christians.

Sunan Ibn Majah, No. 2644

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

Abu Burda reported on the authority of his father that Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) said: No Muslim would die but Allah would admit instead of him a Jew or a Christian in Hell-Fire.

Sahih Muslim, No. 2767R1

And on his deathbed Muhammad gave one last command:

It has been narrated by 'Umar b. Al-Khattab that he heard the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) saying: I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslims.

Sahih Muslim, No. 1767

In spite of Dr. Salem's belief, his prophet Muhammad certainly did not believe that Jews and Muslims could "prosper side by side."

Conclusion

One has to appreciate Dr. Salem's desire for peace between Jews and Muslims. Unfortunately, with his primary focus currently being on encouraging Jews to deepen their attachment to their own scriptures, the prospects for success are minimal. To improve these prospects will require Salem to also turn a focus on the commands of Allah and the teachings of Muhammad that directly counter his peace efforts. Salem will have to decide if these commands and teachings are still relevant and applicable to today. He will then likely find that encouraging Jews to deepen their attachment to their own scriptures has been the easiest part of his quest.

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