

The Islamic Perspective on Ahle Kitab (People of the Book)

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Citation format: Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri, "The Islamic Perspective on Ahle Kitab (People of the Book)", CIFIA Global Journal, Vol 8, January 2024

Abstract

This article delves into the Islamic understanding of 'Ahle Kitab' (People of the Book), a term traditionally encompassing Jews and Christians. Contrary to the general perception, the Islamic perspective identifies 'Ahle Kitab' more specifically as the original followers of Prophets Musa (Moses) (عليه السلام) and Prophet Isa (Jesus) (عليه السلام) who adhered to monotheistic teachings of Islamic principles. The article explores the Quranic revelations, the historical context of the Constitution of Medina, and the Prophet Muhammad's (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) approach to delineating the identity and rights of 'Ahle Kitab'. It further examines the theological and doctrinal evolutions in Christianity and Judaism, highlighting their divergence from the original messages of the prophets. This exploration reveals significant implications for contemporary interfaith relations, emphasizing the importance of understanding the historical and theological nuances of 'Ahle Kitab' for informed and respectful dialogue in the modern world. The article concludes by reinforcing the Islamic commitment to principles of justice, coexistence, and mutual respect in the context of diverse religious identities.

Keywords – Ahle Kitab, Islamic Theology, Interfaith Dialogue, Quranic Studies, Constitutional Governance

Introduction

In the discourse of Islamic theology, the term '*Ahle Kitab*' emerges as a pivotal concept, traditionally translated as 'People of the Book'. Commonly, this designation is understood to encompass Jews and Christians. However, a deeper delve into the Islamic viewpoint reveals a more discerning and specific interpretation. From the Quranic perspective and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم), '*Ahle Kitab*' is attributed particularly to the original followers of Prophets Isa (Jesus) (عليه السلام) and Musa (Moses) (عليه السلام). These followers are recognized as those who adhered to the pristine teachings and practices that were in consonance

with the foundational principles of Islam which were taught by all prophets sent by Allah.

This article endeavours to articulate this Islamic standpoint, illuminating how the contemporary manifestations of Christianity and Judaism have branched off significantly from these archetypal doctrines. The evolution of these faiths over centuries has led to theological and practical shifts, which, from an Islamic lens, places them at a remove from the original '*Ahle Kitab*'. Understanding this divergence is not merely an academic exercise but a crucial element in grasping the full spectrum of the Islamic interpretation of Ahle Kitab.

This exploration is vital for comprehending the historical and doctrinal underpinnings that shape the relationship between Islam and these two traditions. It also sheds light on the Islamic ethos of religious tolerance and the historical context of coexistence and dialogue. Through this examination, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the term '*Ahle Kitab*', as seen through the prism of Islamic teachings, and its implications for interfaith relations in the contemporary world.

Historical Context and Origin of the Term '*Ahle Kitab*'

The term '*Ahle Kitab*' originates from the Quran, the sacred scripture of Islam, and holds profound significance in Islamic teachings. To comprehend its full meaning, one must delve into the historical backdrop of its revelation and the context in which it was introduced by Allah to Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم).

The Quranic Revelation

The Quran, revealed to Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) over a period of approximately 23 years, addresses various aspects of faith, law, and guidance for humanity. Within its verses, the term 'Ahle Kitab' is recurrently mentioned, primarily in contexts discussing theological and social interactions between Muslims and the People of the Book.

The Contextual Background

During the time of Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم), Arabia was a place of diverse religious beliefs and practices. Among these were the followers of monotheistic faiths, notably Christians and Jews, who were regarded with respect due to their possession of earlier revelations - the Injeel (Gospel) given to Isa (Jesus) (عليه السلام) and the Tawrat (Torah) given to Musa (Moses) (عليه السلام). These communities were collectively referred to as 'Ahle Kitab', acknowledging their connection to these divinely revealed scriptures.

The Quranic Perspective

In the Quran, 'Ahle Kitab' is not merely a label for religious identification but a term laden with theological implications. It signifies those who were entrusted with the divine messages prior to the advent of Islam. Importantly, the Quran distinguishes between the original followers of these prophets, who upheld the true monotheistic teachings, and those who later deviated from them.

The Islamic Recognition

From an Islamic viewpoint, 'Ahle Kitab' are recognized as recipients of God's guidance through earlier prophets. This acknowledgment comes with a call for respectful dialogue and coexistence, as well as a reminder of the shared theological roots in the belief in One God. However, the Quran also critically engages with the alterations and deviations that crept into these faiths over time, differentiating the original teachings from the altered doctrines.

The Significance in Islamic Jurisprudence

The term also bears legal and social significance in Islamic jurisprudence. It governed the interactions between Muslim communities and the People of the Book, particularly in matters of marriage, dietary laws, and religious debates. This classification was instrumental in establishing a framework of coexistence and mutual respect during the early Islamic period and beyond.

Theological Foundations in Islam

The concept of 'Ahle Kitab' in Islam is deeply rooted in the religion's theological foundations.

Prophetic Lineage and Unity of Message

Islam recognizes a continuous lineage of prophets, all delivering a consistent message of monotheism and submission to the one true God, Allah. Prophets Musa (عليه السلام) and Isa (عليه السلام) are revered as important figures in this lineage. Their teachings, as originally revealed, are seen as harmonious with the principles encapsulated in the Quran.

The Original Scriptures: Injeel and Tawrat

The Injeel (Gospel) and Tawrat (Torah) are recognized in Islam as original revelations granted to Isa (عليه السلام) and Musa (عليه السلام) respectively. These scriptures are esteemed as divine guidance, albeit with the caveat that their pristine forms have been altered over time. The Quran asserts that the original messages in these scriptures were in line with the fundamental Islamic doctrine of Tawheed (the Oneness of God).

Islamic View on Alterations in Scriptures

Islamic theology holds that over the centuries, the original teachings of Isa (عليه السلام) and Musa (عليه السلام) underwent alterations and corruptions. This view posits that what is found in contemporary Christian and Jewish scriptures may contain elements that deviate from these original revelations. The Quran frequently addresses these alterations, emphasizing the need to return to the unadulterated monotheistic message.

The Role of the Quran in Contextualizing 'Ahle Kitab'

The Quran plays a pivotal role in contextualizing the concept of 'Ahle Kitab'. It acknowledges the commonalities with earlier revelations while also critiquing the deviations that have crept into Jewish and Christian practices and beliefs. The Quran's approach is one of correction and clarification, seeking to restore the essence of the messages conveyed by Prophets Musa (عليه السلام) and Isa (عليه السلام).

The Continuity of the Divine Message

A fundamental aspect of Islamic belief is the continuity and consistency of the divine message throughout history of mankind. The Quran is seen not as a repudiation of the earlier scriptures but as a final, preserved testament that confirms and completes the divine guidance for humanity.

Divergence of Modern Christianity and Judaism from Original Teachings

In the Islamic perspective, the contemporary forms of Christianity and Judaism represent a significant departure from the original teachings of Prophets Isa (عليه السلام) and Musa (عليه السلام). This divergence is crucial in understanding the Islamic definition of 'Ahle Kitab' and its implications.

Evolution of Christian Doctrine

The Trinitarian Doctrine: One of the most notable divergences in Christianity, from an Islamic viewpoint, is the concept of the Trinity. The Quranic teachings assert the Oneness of God (Tawheed), a concept that is seen as being in stark contrast to the Trinitarian doctrine, which developed over centuries after Isa (عليه السلام).

Divinity of Jesus: The Islamic narrative maintains that Isa (عليه السلام) was a revered prophet, not divine. The elevation of Isa (Jesus) (عليه السلام) to a status of divinity in mainstream Christian theology is viewed as a significant deviation from his original message.

Original Sin and Atonement: The concept of original sin and the subsequent doctrine of

atonement through the crucifixion of Isa (Jesus) (عليه السلام) are not aligned with Islamic teachings, which advocate individual accountability and direct repentance to God for forgiveness.

Transformation in Jewish Beliefs and Practices

Concept of the Chosen People: While Islam acknowledges the special status of the Children of Israel in receiving divine guidance, it critiques the notion of an unconditionally chosen people, advocating instead for righteousness and piety as the basis of God's favour.

Interpretations of the Torah: Islam contends that over time, interpretations and rabbinical traditions in Judaism have overshadowed the original teachings of the Torah. This is seen as a departure from the monotheistic purity that was taught by Musa (عليه السلام).

Messiah Concept: In Islamic theology, the concept of the Messiah differs significantly from Jewish interpretations. Islam recognizes Isa (عليه السلام) as the Messiah, whereas in Judaism, the arrival of the Messiah is a future event with differing expectations about his role and nature.

Implications of These Divergences

These theological divergences are pivotal in the Islamic understanding of 'Ahle Kitab'. While the Quran establishes a foundation of respect and dialogue with Christians and Jews, it also challenges and invites reflection on these differences. The Islamic perspective encourages returning to the core monotheistic principles that it argues were evident in the original teachings of Isa (عليه السلام) and Musa (عليه السلام).

Islamic Definition of Ahle Kitab and Its Implications

The Islamic definition of 'Ahle Kitab' goes beyond a mere identification of religious communities; it is a theological concept that carries significant implications for understanding interfaith relations and religious identity.

The Islamic Definition of 'Ahle Kitab'

In Islam, 'Ahle Kitab' specifically refers to those followers of Prophets Musa (Moses) (عليه السلام) and Isa (Jesus) (عليه السلام) who adhered to the original, unaltered teachings of these prophets. This definition underscores a commitment to monotheism and the rejection of doctrinal innovations that contradict the core messages of their respective prophets.

Distinction Between Original and Subsequent Followers

Adherence to Original Teachings: Islam distinguishes between the original followers, who maintained the purity of the monotheistic message, and later generations, whose practices and beliefs may have diverged due to various historical, theological, and socio-political factors.

Recognition of Prophetic Teachings: The Quran acknowledges the original revelations given to Musa (عليه السلام) and Isa (عليه السلام), but it also asserts that their messages have been altered over time. Therefore, contemporary followers of Judaism and Christianity are seen as different from the 'Ahle Kitab' in their original sense.

Implications for Interfaith Dialogue and Relations

Foundation for Dialogue: The concept of 'Ahle Kitab' provides a basis for respectful and informed interfaith dialogue. Understanding the shared heritage and differences is crucial for constructive engagement between Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Respect and Coexistence: The Islamic perspective encourages mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, recognizing the common spiritual ancestry while also acknowledging significant theological differences.

Call for Reflection and Reformation: The Quranic discourse invites followers of these faiths to reflect on their beliefs and practices, urging a return to the fundamental monotheistic principles that it posits were present in the original teachings of Musa (عليه السلام) and Isa (عليه السلام).

Legal and Social Considerations

In Islamic jurisprudence, the status of 'Ahle Kitab' has specific legal and social implications, particularly in the contexts of marriage, dietary laws, and the protection of religious rights under Islamic governance. This categorization historically facilitated a structured approach to intercommunity interactions in Muslim-majority societies.

Clarifying the Muslim Stance on Ahle Kitab with the Constitution of Medina

The Constitution of Medina, also known as دستور المدينة, was a foundational document for the early Islamic community, drafted by Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) following his Hijrah to Medina in 622 AD. This document established a multi-religious, multi-cultural community, including the immigrants (Muhajirun) from Makka and eight clans of Medina, collectively known as the Ansaar, as well as other groups in Medina, particularly the Jews.

The Constitution consisted of 47 articles, structured to define the relationships and responsibilities within this diverse community. It is critical to note that the document differentiated between Muslims and other religious groups. While it established a unified community or Ummah, this term was used in the broader sense of a diverse community, not specifically an Islamic Ummah (Umma-tul-Islamiyah).

Key Points of the Constitution of Medina

1. *The first article* emphasized the formation of one community, encompassing Muslims, Jews, and non-believers.
2. *Articles 25-30* acknowledged the existence of Muslim Ansaar and Jewish groups within tribes such as the Banu Awf, Banu Najjar, Banu Sa'idah, and others, emphasizing the coexistence of different religions under the concept of 'to Jews their religion and to Muslims their religion'.
3. *The Constitution* called for mutual support and defence among the community members, including the Jews, especially in times of war and conflict.

4. It stressed the importance of justice, honesty, and non-treachery among all community members, regardless of their religious affiliations.

The document refutes the claims made by Revisionists and Ammanis, who propose that Islam initially did not begin as a distinct religion but rather as a movement uniting believers in one God. Their theory suggests that early Muslim history aimed to unite people of different faiths under the banner of monotheism, and that distinct Islamic rituals and practices were later developments. This interpretation, however, is challenged by the clear distinctions made in the Constitution between Muslims and people of other faiths, affirming that Islam was indeed a distinct religion from its inception.

The Quran clarifies the concept of a Muslim (a follower of Islam) and a Momin (a believer in Allah and Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم). These terms are used interchangeably in the Quran, and both refer to individuals who have accepted Islam as their religion. Quranic verses also emphasize the unique identity of the Islamic Ummah, distinct from other nations or communities, underlining the exclusivity of the Islamic faith and its followers.

The Constitution of Medina established an early Islamic state based on principles of justice, mutual respect, and coexistence among diverse religious and cultural groups. It recognized the distinct identities of Muslims and other religious communities, setting a precedent for religious tolerance and pluralism within an Islamic framework. The Quranic emphasis on Islamic identity further corroborates this understanding, distinguishing Islam as a unique faith from its inception.

Contemporary Relevance and Implications for Ahle Kitab

The historical context of the Constitution of Medina and the Quranic clarifications about the identity of the Islamic Ummah have contemporary relevance, particularly in how Muslims perceive and interact with 'Ahle Kitab' today.

Revisiting the Concept of 'Ahle Kitab' in Modern Times

Historical Understanding in Contemporary Context: The distinct categorization of Muslims and Ahle Kitab in the Constitution of Medina serves as a historical precedent for understanding the unique theological positions of these groups. This understanding is essential in contemporary discussions about interfaith relations and religious identity.

Islamic Identity and Ahle Kitab: The Quranic distinction between Muslims, Believers (Momineen), and Hypocrites (Munafiqeen) is vital in delineating the identity of a true Muslim. This distinction is critical when engaging with Ahle Kitab, as it underscores the importance of maintaining the purity of Islamic beliefs while fostering respectful relations with other faiths.

Implications for Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding

Basis for Respectful Engagement: The principles of justice and mutual respect, exemplified in the Constitution of Medina, provide a basis for contemporary Muslims to engage respectfully with Jews and Christians. This engagement, however, should be rooted in a clear understanding of the theological distinctions between Islam and other faiths.

Educating about True Islamic Principles: The prevalent misconceptions about Islam and its stance on Ahle Kitab necessitate educating both Muslims and non-Muslims. Clarifying the original Islamic teachings about Ahle Kitab can enhance mutual understanding and dispel misconceptions.

Role of Islamic Scholarship and Leadership: Islamic scholars and leaders have a crucial role in guiding the Ummah towards accurate understandings of Quranic teachings and the Prophetic model, particularly regarding relations with Ahle Kitab. This guidance should reflect both the historical context and contemporary realities.

Navigating Contemporary Challenges

Balancing Identity and Coexistence: Muslims today face the challenge of maintaining their

distinct Islamic identity while coexisting peacefully with people of other faiths. Understanding the historical context of Ahle Kitab can help navigate this balance.

Addressing Modern-Day Revisionist Views: Confronting revisionist interpretations that blur the distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims is essential for preserving the integrity of Islamic teachings. Such interpretations, while promoting an inclusive view, may compromise key aspects of Islamic doctrine.

Conclusion

The exploration of the Islamic perspective on 'Ahle Kitab' (People of the Book) reveals a nuanced understanding that transcends mere religious labelling. From the Quranic revelations to the practical implementation in the Constitution of Medina, the term 'Ahle Kitab' encompasses theological, historical, and social dimensions.

The Quran provides a clear framework for understanding 'Ahle Kitab', identifying them as the original followers of Prophets Musa (عليه السلام) and Isa (عليه السلام) who adhered to monotheistic teachings. This understanding is pivotal in distinguishing between the true teachings of these prophets and the altered doctrines that emerged over time.

The Constitution of Medina, under Prophet Muhammad's (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) leadership, established a model of coexistence and mutual respect among diverse religious groups. This document emphasizes the distinct identities and responsibilities of Muslims and Ahle Kitab within a shared community, reflecting the Islamic principles of justice and equity.

In today's global context, the Islamic perspective on 'Ahle Kitab' holds significant implications for interfaith dialogue and understanding. The historical and theological insights into this term guide contemporary Muslims in navigating their interactions with Jewish and Christian communities, advocating for a balance between maintaining Islamic identity and fostering harmonious coexistence.

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, this perspective provides valuable insights for building bridges of understanding and cooperation among different religious communities.

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Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.