

SECTION 2: IDENTITY AND NAMES

This section focuses on the identity of the People of Earlier Revelation and their continued existence.

1. Identity of *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of Earlier Revelation)

Some Muslims view only Jews and Christians as *Ahl al-Kitab* and therefore closer to Muslims than people of other faiths. Who are the *Ahl al-Kitab* referred to in the Qur'an and Hadith? How are they recognized, and do they include communities other than Jews and Christians?

According to the Qur'an (13:7), God has sent prophets and messengers to all communities of mankind before sending the last of his prophets – Muhammad (p).¹ These prophets were “submitters to the will and guidance of God” (referred to as “Muslims” in the Qur'an (22:78) and in Arabic).² Those who follow previous prophets instead of the prophet of the time are referred to as “*Ahl al-Kitab*” - meaning a “People of Scripture (or Book)” or “People of an Earlier Revelation”. This was the honorary name given to followers of previous prophets in the Qur'an and Sunnah, instead of referring to them as *Mushrikun*, meaning polytheists or

¹ Muhammad bin Tahir Ibn Ashur, *Al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* vol.7, p.417; Abul Fidai Ismail bn Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Quran al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al- Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.4. p.434; Abu Muhammad Alhusain bn Masud Al Bagawy, *Ma'alim al-Tanzil*, Dar Tayba li al- Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, vol.4. p.296; Abdrahman bin Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, p.414

² Muhammad bn Tahir Ibn Ashur, *Al-Tahrir wa Tanweer* vol. 9, p.402; Abul Fidai Ismail bn Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Quran al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al- Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.5, p.455; Abu Muhammad Alhusain bn Masud Al Bagawy, *Ma'alim al-Tanzil*, Dar Tayba li al- Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, vol.5, p.402; Abdrahman bn Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, p.546

polytheists. In the Qur'an, they are either referred to as Jews (*Yehud*)³, Christians (*Nasara*)⁴ or People of an Earlier Scripture (*Ahl al-Kitab*)⁵.

Because the Qur'an clearly identifies Jews and Christians as *Ahl al-Kitab* who were followers of Prophet Moses and Jesus respectively (peace be upon them both), the majority of Muslim scholars have identified these 2 communities as being the only groups that are certainly *Ahl al-Kitab*.⁶

Other scholars, however (such as Abu Hanifa,⁷ Imam Shafi'i⁸ and Ibn Hazm⁹) understood the term *Ahl al-Kitab* more literally as any people (*ahl*) with a scripture (*kitab*) before Muhammad (p). They regarded any religious group (*ahl*) that claims to be in possession of a divinely inspired scripture (*kitab*) and whose prophet existed before the last Prophet, Muhammad as also being among the *Ahl al-Kitab*. They, therefore, regarded Zoroastrians (*Majus*),¹⁰ Sabians¹¹ (*Sabi'un*) and others as being among them.¹²

³ Quran 2:113,120. 5:18, 51, 64, 82. 9:30.

⁴ Quran 2:113,120. 9:30

⁵ Quran: 2:105,109. 3:64,65,69,71,72,75.

⁶ *Al-Mawsu'at al-Fiqhiya*, Ministry of *Awqaf* and Religious Affairs, Kuwait, vol.7 p.140

⁷ *Al-Mawsu'at al-Fiqhiya*, Ministry of *Awqaf* and Religious Affairs, Kuwait, vol.7 p.140

⁸ Muhammad bn Idris al-Shafi'i, *al-Umm*, vol.4, p. 173 (cited in *Fiqh al-Aqaliyat al-Muslima* p.29)

⁹ Ali bn Ahmad bn Said Ibn Hazm, *Al-Muhalla bi al-Aataar*, Dar al-Fikr, vol.9, pp.12,17,18, and 144

¹⁰ *Al-Mawsu'at al-Fiqhiya*, Ministry of *Awqaf* and Religious Affairs, Kuwait, vol.7 p.140

¹¹ *Al-Mawsu'at al-Fiqhiya*, Ministry of *Awqaf* and Religious Affairs, Kuwait, vol.7 p.140

¹² Respected scholars such as Sheikh Rashid Rida regarded some among the Hindus and Buddhists as also belonging to the *Ahl al-Kitab*. Others remain uncertain about the status of these religious communities and therefore regard it as safer to "leave doubt for certainty" and thus consider only Jews and Christians as *Ahl al-Kitab* since these are explicitly identified as such in the Qur'an and Hadith. For further reading, see: Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tafsir al-Hakim: Tafsir al-Manar*, 9 vol., Beirut, Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d., 6:187-190, Cited in Muhammad Azizan Sabjan, *The People of the Book and The People of a Dubious Book in Islamic Tradition*, Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, 2010, p.55.

2. Existence of *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of Earlier Revelation) Today

Some Muslims believe that modern-day Jews and Christians should not be regarded as "*Ahl al-Kitab* (People of Earlier Revelation)" because of the corruption of their scriptures and their belief in the Trinity, the sonship, divinity and crucifixion of Jesus, etc. If they are not the same communities referred to as *Ahl al-Kitab* in the Qur'an and Hadith, then it implies that the Jews and Christians of today are to be regarded as polytheists (*mushrikun*) and Muslims are not allowed to eat the animals they slaughter nor are they allowed to marry their women. As such, any such marriages are to be regarded as Islamically unacceptable!

Do the "People of the Earlier Revelation" (*Ahl al-Kitab*) still exist today? And should contemporary Jews and Christians be regarded as belonging to the *Ahl al-Kitab* referred to in the Qur'an and Hadith?

According to the majority of Muslim scholars and the major Schools of Islamic Jurisprudence, the Jews and Christians that existed after the time of the Prophet (p) and his Companions until the present day are still members of the religious community described or referred to in the Qur'an and Hadith as *Ahl al-Kitab*¹³, and should be honoured as such.

Some Muslim scholars, however, have tried to argue that the *Ahl al-Kitab* ("People of the Book", or "People of Earlier Revelation") referred to in the Qur'an and Hadith

¹³ Quran 2:105,109; 3:64,65,69,70,71,72,75,98,99,113,199; 4:123,153,159,171; 5:15,19,59,65,68,77; 29:46; 33:26; 59:2; 59:11; 6:98.

are no longer in existence. They also claim that present-day Christians and Jews - unlike those of the time of the Prophet Muhammad (p) - are not the same as those described in the Qur'an and Hadith as *Ahl al-Kitab*, because (among other reasons), they follow corrupted teachings of their scriptures and that their scriptures are no longer authentic.

However, other scholars argue that the Qur'an speaks of the Christians at the time of the Prophet (p) as having already believed in the Trinity (Qur'an 4:171, 5:73), the divine Sonship of Jesus (Qur'an 9:30)¹⁴, the crucifixion of Jesus (Qur'an 4:157)¹⁵, the belief that he and his mother (Mary) were divine or to be worshipped (Qur'an 5:116)¹⁶, etc. The Qur'an also states that some of the Arab Jews believed that *Uzair* (Ezra) was a son of God (Qur'an 9:30)¹⁷, and that some of the *Ahl al-Kitab* had corrupted their scriptures (Qur'an 2:79)¹⁸. These beliefs, though amounting to *shirk*

¹⁴ Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami'u al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, vol.10. p.481; Abu al-Fida' Ismail bin Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al-Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.3, p.157; Abdrahman bin Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, p.239.

¹⁵ Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami'u al-Bayan fi Tawili al-Quran*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, vol.10. p.367; Ibn Kathir, Abu al-Fida' Ismail bin Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al-Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.3, p.447; Abdrahman bin Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, p.213

¹⁶ Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami'u al-Bayan fi Tawili al-Quran*, Muassasatu Risala, 2000, vol.10. p.233; Ibn Kathir, Abu al-Fida' Ismail bin Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al-Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.3, p.232; Abdrahman bin Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Muassasatu Risala, 2000, p.243.

¹⁷ Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami'u al-Bayan fi Tawili al-Quran*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, vol.10. p.201; Abu al-Fida' Ismail bin Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al-Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.3, p.134; Abdrahman bin Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, p.334

¹⁸ Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami'u al-Bayan fi Tawili al-Quran*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, vol.10. p.267; Abu al-Fida' Ismail bin Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al-Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.3, p.310; Abdrahman bin Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, p.56

(associating partners with Allah) and *kufr* (disbelief), are therefore not new or recent teachings of Judaism or Christianity, but existed before and during the period of Muhammad's prophethood (p). In spite of all these, the Qur'an and the Prophet (p) still considered those Christians and Jews as *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of Earlier Revelations) and permitted conditional intermarriage and eating of what they slaughter, etc. (Qur'an 22:17; 5:5).

To believe that there are no more *Ahl al-Kitab* existing today would also indirectly imply an abrogation or even irrelevance for all present and practical purposes, of all references in the Qur'an and Hadith to *Ahl al-Kitab* (Qur'an 3:64; 5:82; 22:17 etc.)! In fact, among the hadith literature on the Signs of the Last Day are some that indicate the continued presence of Jews and Christians.¹⁹

Similarly, all the major classical literature of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) that discuss issues related to the *Ahl al-Kitab* – such as eating their food²⁰, marriage to them²¹, etc. - have assumed their continued existence throughout Islamic history to this day.

¹⁹ Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Darul Jeel, Beirut, vol.8, p.188, hadith no. 7523; *Musnad Ahmad*, vol. 15, p.233, hadith no. 9398.

²⁰ Quran 5:5; Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami'u al-Bayan fi Tawili al-Quran*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, vol.10. p.581; Abu al-Fida' Ismail bin Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al-Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.3, p.39; Abdrahman bin Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, p.221; Ibn Qayyim, Muhammad bin Abi Bakr, *Ahkam ahl al-Dhimma*, vol.1 p.528.

²¹ Quran 5:5; Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami'u al-Bayan fi Tawili al-Quran*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, vol.10. p.581; Abu al-Fida' Ismail bin Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al-Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, 1999, vol.3, p.39; Abdrahman bin Nasir al-Sa'dy, *Taysir Karim al-Rahman*, Mu'assasat al-Risalah, Beirut, 2000, p.221; Muhammad bin Abi Bakr Ibn Qayyim, *Ahkam ahl al-Dhimma*, vol.1 p.528.

The Jews and Christians of today therefore, are still members of the religious community described in the Qur'an and Hadith as *Ahl al-Kitab*, and should be honoured as such, in recognition of their association with earlier divine revealed scriptures (or Books) and genuine prophets of Allah such as Musa and Isa (peace be upon them).

3. Addressing Non-Muslims with Insulting Terms – *Kafir*!

Some Muslims call Christians and other non-Muslims by names such as *Kafir* (in Arabic), *Arne* (in Hausa), *Kirdi* (in Kanuri), etc., which these people regard as insulting. Since Islam is interested in peaceful coexistence, should Muslims call people of other faiths by these terms and names which they hate and find derogatory?

There are several words used in the Qur'an and Hadith to describe actions and beliefs that Allah regards as wrong, misguided, blameworthy and unbecoming of anyone. These terms and those actions and attitudes associated with them, help guide us in knowing what to avoid in life and why. These terms are taught to us as descriptive of certain behaviours we should avoid, and not as names we should use when addressing people who may, in reality, be misguided wrongdoers. These words and phrases include *munafiq* (hypocrite), *fasiq* (wrong-doer), *mushrik* (polytheist), *dhalim* (unjust), *jahiliy* (ignoramus), *najas* (impure, dirty or immoral), *kafir* (ingrate, disbeliever), *As-hab al-Nar* ("People of the Fire"), etc.

In a particular context or usage, a word or term (such as *kafir*) may take on a purely descriptive meaning, referring to anyone who rejects or does not accept Islam. In this sense, every non-Muslim is a *Kafir*. In another sense, however, the same word

may be viewed or perceived as derogatory, insulting, or condemnatory and also as being regarded or categorized together with Atheists or Polytheists.

While it may be true that a person (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) is actually guilty of *fisq*, *nifaq*, *shirk*, *kufir*, etc., it is not proper to call people by names such as *Fasiq*, *Munafiq*, *Mushrik*, *Kafir*, etc., respectively, especially if these names are offensive or insulting to them. Similarly, just because it is true that a person is actually an illegitimate child, does not make it proper to address such a person as a bastard or any other similarly offensive name.

Allah makes it categorically clear in the Qur'an that the Pharaoh - of the time of Prophet Musa (p) - was a *dhalim* and *kafir*,²² and that prophet Musa (p) was one of the greatest and most respected messengers of Allah (among the *Uwl al-'Azm*²³). Yet, Musa (p) was instructed when addressing Pharaoh to speak nicely, politely and softly to him, with the optimism that he may listen and take guidance, in spite of all his atrocities, arrogance and disbelief.

Allah says, "*And speak to him (Pharaoh) with gentle speech that perhaps he may be reminded or fear [Allah].*" (Qur'an 20:44)

Therefore, even if a person is as confirmed in his *kufir* by Allah Himself as Pharaoh was, he still deserves courtesy from a person of faith. How then can anyone who does not have the standing of Prophet Musa (p), justify their qualification to speak rudely or insultingly at anyone who is not even as bad as Pharaoh in their *Kufir*?

²² Qur'an 7:103, 8:54, 85:18, 8:52

²³ Qur'an 46:35, 42:13. See Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Dar Tayba li al-Nashr wa Tawzi', Medina, vol.7, p.305

Allah says in the Qur'an, *"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful exhortation. (Qur'an 16:125)*

Also, *"Do not argue with the People of the Book, except in a most kindly manner"* (Qur'an 29:46)

Someone once said to the Prophet (p), "Pray to Allah against the polytheists and curse them!" The Prophet (p) replied, *"I have not been sent as the invoker of curses; I have only been sent as a mercy."*²⁴ He also said, *"Do you know what is better than charity and fasting and prayer? It is keeping peace and good relations between people, as quarrels and bad feelings destroy mankind"*.²⁵ The Prophet (p) similarly said, *"A believer should not taunt, curse, abuse or talk indecently"*.²⁶

While the term *kufir* may be used to describe any wrong or unacceptable belief or ideology - such as the Trinity (Q5:17) or Sonship of Jesus (Q5:73) etc. - the Qur'an and Sunnah do not use the term '*kafir*' to refer to, call or address Christians or Jews (*Ahl al-Kitab*) or even Zoroastrians. These religious communities were addressed by the Qur'an and the Prophet (p) by the names they called themselves – "Jews" (*Yahud*), "Christians" (*Nasara*), "Zoroastrian" (*Majus*), etc. More frequently, however, they were referred to and addressed in the Qur'an and Hadith by the honourable term "*Ahl al-Kitab*" (People of the Book) in recognition of their association with earlier divine revealed scriptures (or Books) and genuine prophets of Allah such as Musa and Isa (peace be upon them).

²⁴ Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, hadith no. 1192 in *Alim 6.0*

²⁵ Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, hadith no. 2509

²⁶ *Tirmidhi*, hadith no. 544, in *Alim 6.0*

In more than 12 places, the Qur'an instructs the Prophet (p) and Muslims when addressing Jews and/or Christians, by the words: "*Say! O People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitab)...*". Allah Himself addresses them with the phrase "*O People of the Book!...*". In many other verses, they are referred to as "*Those who have been given Scriptures (before you)...*". These are beside the numerous instances where they are referred to as *Yahud* (Jews) or *Nasara* (Christians). In fact in the Qur'an, Allah describes the term "*Nasara*" (Christians) as a term that they use to describe themselves – "*Those who call themselves Christians*" (Qur'an 5:82) and "*And from among those who said, 'we are Nasara' (Christians)...*" (Qur'an 5:14).

Another concern is the fact that in many modern contexts and cultures, the terms *kafir* (in Arabic), *kirdi* (in Kanuri), or *Arne* (in Hausa), etc. are viewed as derogatory and insulting terms for addressing others, including non-Muslims. Unfortunately, some Muslims also deliberately use these terms with the intent to insult. Within such a context, it would be wrong and improper for a Muslim to use such terms to offend or insult others, especially when there are alternative, completely valid and even more appropriate names for describing the religious identities of non-Muslims.

The Prophet (p) said, "*Actions are judged by their intentions*".²⁷ Based on this and other similar statements in the Qur'an and hadith, Muslim jurists have derived a legal maxim (*Qa'idah al-Fiqhiyyah*) which states that "*Matters will be judged by the purposes they fulfil*" (*Al-umuru bi-maqasidiha*). They also conclude that "liability is decided on the basis of intention and meaning and not on the basis of words and

²⁷ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, hadith no. 1; *Sunan Abu Dawud*, hadith no. 2203; *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsat*, hadith no. 40; *Al-Sunan al-Sughra*, hadith no. 2

forms" or that "greater consideration is paid to the intent and not to the words".²⁸ Thus, what is meant by a statement or term matters more than the words used. If a word like *kafir* (or any other) is therefore used in a particular context with the intent to insult, abuse or denigrate another person, then it is wrong Islamically.

Besides the immorality of insults and abuse, there is also the concern for consequences and for reciprocation with insults and inappropriate language in response. The Qur'an and Hadith have in fact consistently prohibited Muslims from hurting or insulting others through harsh words and derogatory nicknames that would make others insult Muslims in return.

Allah instructs in the Qur'an, "*Do not call each other by offensive nicknames*" (Qur'an 49:11). Even though idols represent some of the greatest forms of sin against Allah - *shirk* (polytheism) – the Qur'an categorically prohibits Muslims from insulting those other than Allah who polytheists worship, as they may also respond with insults against Allah. Allah instructs, "*And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge...*" (Qur'an 6:108)

Regarding the concern for reciprocation, the Prophet (p) gave an example of how a person would indirectly be abusing his or her own parents. He said, "*Among the major sins, is for a person to abuse his parents*". A companion said, 'How would a man abuse (his parents)? The Prophet (p) said, "*(It would be) by him abusing someone, who will then (in return) abuse his parents.*"²⁹

²⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in*, vol.1, p.219; Muhammad Bakr Isma'il, *Al-Qawa'id al-Fiqhiyyah Bayn al-Asalah wa al-Tawjih*, Dar al-Manar, Cairo, 1997, p.35 – cited in Sharul Hussain, *A Treasury of Sacred Maxims: A Commentary on Islamic Legal Principles*, Kube Publishing, Markfield, UK, 2016, p.35.

²⁹ Imam al-Bukhari, *Adab al-Mufrad*, hadith no. 27

Abu Hurayra reported that the Messenger of God (p) said, *“He who believes in God and the Last Day, let him abstain from harming his neighbour; he who believes in God and the Last Day, let him honour his guest; and he who believes in God and the Last Day, let him say that which is good, or remain silent.”*³⁰

Abu Hurayra reported that the Messenger of God (p) said, *“The Muslim is he from whose tongue and hand all people are safe...”*³¹

Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal narrated in his *Musnad* from ‘Abd Allah bin ‘Amr bin al-‘As who reported that a man said, ‘O Messenger of God (p)! What [person’s] Islam is best?’ The Prophet (p) replied, *“The one from whose tongue and hand all people are safe.”*³²

Imam al-Tabarani has also narrated from ‘Abd Allāh bin ‘Amr who said that "A man asked the Prophet (p), ‘O Messenger of God! Whose Islam is best?’ The Prophet (p) replied, *‘The one from whose tongue and hand all people are safe’.*³³

Abdullah bin Umar narrated that a man asked the Prophet Muhammad (p), “What kind (or part) of Islam is best?” The Prophet (p) replied, “That you serve food and give the salutations of peace to the one whom you know, and the one whom you don’t know.”³⁴

³⁰ *Al-Bukhari*, hadith no. 5672; *Muslim*, hadith no. 74

³¹ *Al-Nasa’i*, hadith no. 4996; *Musnad Ahmad*, hadith no.7086

³² Ahmad bin Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, hadith no.7086

³³ Al-Tabarani, *al-Mu’jam al-Kabir*, hadith no. 1451

³⁴ Al-Bukhari, hadith no. 12; *Muslim*, hadith no. 63

The Prophet (p) said, “Make things easy (for people) and do not make things difficult (for them). Cheer people up and do not drive them away.”³⁵ In another version, the Prophet (p) said, “Make things easy (for people) and do not make things difficult (for them). Make people comfortable (or relaxed) and do not drive them away.”³⁶

³⁵ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, hadith no. 69.

³⁶ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, hadith no. 6125; Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, hadith no. 4626; Ahmad, *Musnad Ahmad*, hadith no. 12333.