**The bonds that connect us**

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Last year, and at the beginning of this year, when I exchanged Christmas and New Year greetings on Facebook, some fellow travellers were upset. “Sir, is it okay to greet Christians?” a bewildered Facebook ‘friend’ asked.

I chose to ignore him. But that was not the end of it. There were similar messages on many WhatsApp groups, warning the believers against “aping the West”. I was taken aback by the convoluted logic they offered for their questions.

Others questioned the exchange of New Year greetings, arguing it’s wrong to mark the beginning of the ‘Christian’ calendar. This they said even though much of the world, including Muslims, for all practical purposes follows the Gregorian calendar!

But it was the argument against Christmas greetings that really got my goat. It was not only steeped in ignorance about Islam’s strong affinity with Jesus, but it also betrays tolerance – a vital part of our faith.

How many of us know that there are as many as 71 verses in the Quran praising Jesus? Muslims believe in and love Jesus, just as they believe in Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joseph and all other prophets – in fact their belief is incomplete without the reaffirmation of all prophets who preceded the last Prophet (pbuh).

Muslims have a very special bond with Jesus. According to Islamic belief, Jesus was born to Virgin Mary (Maryam) and will return to earth to clear it of all evil including Dajjal (the anti-Christ) and restore justice before the end of the world.

Muslims believe in the virtue of Mary; an entire chapter in the Quran is devoted to her – the only chapter named after a female figure. The Quran also says that Jesus performed miracles such as giving sight to the blind and raising the dead. Moreover, since in the long line of Messengers, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was preceded by Jesus, the Prophet (pbuh) always had a special relationship with him, talking about him with great fondness.

In the early days of Islam, when the new faith and its followers faced great adversity in Arabia, the first country that the Prophet (pbuh) turned to for protection for his persecuted followers was Abyssinia, present-day Ethiopia, ruled then by King Negus (615 CE). He believed that as ‘people of the Book’ and fellow believers, the Abyssinians would help the Muslims. And they did do it by sheltering Muslims in the face of great odds. King Negus firmly stood with his guests, rejecting all entreaties by the Meccans to throw out the asylum seekers.

This was something the Prophet (pbuh) and Muslims never forgot. When Islam conquered the whole of Arabia and beyond, the Prophet (pbuh) in turn extended the same protection to Christians when a delegation from St Catherine’s Monastery in Egypt sought his help in 626 AD.

Located at the foot of Mount Sinai, St Catherine’s is the world’s oldest monastery. Home to a large collection of rare manuscripts, second only to the Vatican, it is a world heritage site and a treasure trove of Christian history that has remained safe for 14 centuries under Muslim protection.

In an extraordinary charter granted to St Catherine’s Monastery, the Prophet (pbuh) promised protection to all Christians and obligated all Muslims to observe it:

“This is a message from Muhammad ibn Abdullah as a covenant to those who adopt Christianity, near and far – we are with them. Verily I, the servants, the helpers, and my followers defend them because Christians are my citizens and by God, I hold out against anything that displeases them. No compulsion is to be on them. Neither are their judges to be removed from their jobs nor their monks from their monasteries.

“No one is to destroy a house of their religion, to damage it, or to carry anything from it to the Muslims’ houses. Should anyone take any of these, he would spoil God’s covenant and disobey His Prophet. Verily, they are my allies and have my secure charter against all that they hate. No one is to force them to travel or to oblige them to fight. The Muslims are to fight for them.

“If a female Christian is married to a Muslim, it is not to take place without her approval. She is not to be prevented from visiting her church to pray. Their churches are to be respected. They are neither to be prevented from repairing them nor [to disrespect] the sacredness of their covenants. No one [from] the nation (Muslims) is to disobey the covenant till the Last Day (end of the world).”

The extraordinary charter imposes no conditions on Christians. This is a charter of rights without any duties. Far ahead of its time, it clearly protects the right to property, freedom of faith, freedom of work and security of people.

In 1517 AD, Ottoman Emperor Sultan Selim I reaffirmed the charter but took the original letter for safekeeping in Constantinople after giving the monastery certified copies of the rare document, bearing the handprint of the Prophet (pbuh).

This was not an isolated example. The Prophet (pbuh) offered the same protection to the Christians of Najran in Yemen. When a 60-member delegation of Najran Christians – 45 of them scholars and priests – arrived in Medina in 631AD to meet the Prophet (pbuh), he not only hosted them and asked Muslims to pitch their tents, he invited them to pray inside Masjid Nabawi – the Prophet’s mosque, one of the three holiest mosques in the world.

As Craig Considine argues in The Huffington Post, this had been the very first example of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Although the Christian delegation left Medina choosing to follow their own path, they left with a written assurance from the Prophet (pbuh) that he would protect their lives, their homes, properties and above all, their right to practice their faith. And yes, they also requested him to send someone as his representative to adjudicate in their matters.

Considine, a Christian scholar, has repeatedly argued that unlike the modern concept of tolerance, the Prophet (pbuh) believed in genuine pluralism and practiced it in his interaction with all non-Muslims.

Dr John Andrew Morrow, in his book ‘The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World’ (Angelico Press, 2013) attaches a great deal of importance to the charter given to Saint Catherine’s Monastery, holding it as a model for both Muslims and Christians. I am sure the Prophet (pbuh) would have offered the same kind of protection to people of other religious beliefs.

Given this remarkable history, isn’t it odd that today even a harmless exchange of greetings with Christians, or for that matter with any community, is frowned upon?

Since when – and why – have we become so rigid and small-minded in our ways? Certainly Islam and its Prophet (pbuh) do not sanction such intolerance. Our faith cannot be so fragile and insecure that it feels threatened every time we exchange greetings with followers of other faiths.

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