

## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN ISLAM

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is aimed at enumeration of some of the Quranic principles to suggest an account of 'Islamic pluralism'. The Quran accepts plurality as a natural phenomenon. Allah *SWT* states in the Quran: "O Humankind! Verily we have created you of a male and female; and we have distributed you in nations and tribes that you might know one another and recognise that, in the sight of God the most honourable of you is the most pious. Verily God is wise and all knowing" (49:13). The aim of Islam is to integrate such diversity into unity through the sacred principles of the Quran; it explains the reason and purpose for such racial and religious multiplicity.

After arriving in Medina, the Holy Prophet *SAW* introduced a new structure and value system which was connected through religion and citizenship instead of tribal links. He formed the constitution of Medina which stated the terms of relationships with Jews of Medina. The Prophet *SAW* extended the act of citizenship and co-operation to the Christians of Najran. The paper glances through Islamic history in order to identify a common official attitude of Muslim authority towards non-Muslim subjects.

**Key words:** Pluralism, Religious, Quran, Proposition, Medina

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In this paper, I would like to first enumerate some of the Quranic principles with regard to the issue of religious pluralism as propositions, with the aim to give an account of 'Islamic pluralism'. I will formulate these propositions on the basis of Quranic verses which suggest a pluralistic attitude as against argument to those which suggest an inclusivist attitude. At the end of this presentation, I will offer an evaluation of these propositions and consider them the guidelines of an 'Islamic pluralistic account.

Proposition I: *The universality as well as the diversity of God's revelation to humankind is affirmed.*

Islam explicitly endorses the universality of God's revelation which plays a significant part in the Islamic understanding of other religions. The God of the Quran is not only the God of the Muslim people but the God of all humanity. The Quran illustrates this point by stating: 'Unto Allah belong the East and West, and whithersoever you turn, there is Allah's countenance. For Allah is All-Embracing, All-knowing'.<sup>1</sup>

The implication of seeing history as a ground upon which the heavenly messages are revealed is that all religions in one way or another are inter-related and therefore share a common purpose. Islam in this respect is the name of the latest version of the message which has been displayed throughout history. That is to say, one heavenly religion cannot be but an ally of another heavenly religion. Therefore, in Islam the notion of the universality of God's revelations has always played a key role in constituting an Islamic theology of religions. Hence, as a result of adopting such a

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<sup>1</sup> Al Quran, 2:115.

belief, Muslims are able to participate in the essence and the 'religious proximity' of other traditions.

God of all mankind did not leave any nation in the dark, rather He illuminated them by sending messengers.<sup>2</sup> The logic of sending every nation a messenger is that people should not justify the rejection of the faith in God by arguing that they did not receive any message.<sup>3</sup> A logical consequence of such a line of thinking is that if a nation or community did not receive a messenger, they would not be held responsible and therefore would have to be exempted from punishment.<sup>4</sup> Although God sent a messenger to every nation, He did not mention all of them in the Quran.<sup>5</sup> Therefore Muslims received a Quranic sanction which enables them to expand an Islamic account of prophecy in such a manner that it could include those messengers who are not mentioned in the Quran, including Gautama the Buddha, the avatars of the Hindus. Although all the messengers spoke about the same reality and conveyed the same truth, the messages they delivered were not identical in their theological forms. That is simply because the message was expressed in the specific forms which should accord and make sense for the culture it was sent to. Thus, a messenger is to speak within the cultural context of the community to which the message is revealed.<sup>6</sup>

Proposition II: *Multiplicity of races, colours, communities and religions are regarded as the signs of God's mercy and glory exhibited through his creatures.*

Plurality in this sense is accepted as a natural phenomenon. The Quran states: "O Humankind! Verily we have created you of a male and female; and we have distributed you in nations and tribes that you might know one another and recognise that, in the sight of God the most honourable of you is the most pious. Verily God is wise and all knowing."<sup>7</sup> But what Islam aims to do is to integrate such diversity into unity through the sacred principles of the Quran; it explains the reason and purpose for such racial and religious multiplicity. God created such religious racial and other forms of diversity in order to distinguish those who can appreciate the majesty of God and see His purpose from those who ignore the signs of God as such. Otherwise God could have created only one nation.<sup>8</sup>

One of the prime tasks of Islam is to eliminate discrimination based upon race or colour by proposing a single Islamic brotherhood which aims to unite all the different people under one faith. It has partly achieved this during its history. Beyond this, Islam even managed to establish a unity among all the subjects including the Christians and Jews that it governed. Furthermore, one might even claim that diversity, whether religious or racial, is considered in the Quran as the

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<sup>2</sup> The Quran states: "To every nation (was sent) a messenger (10:47); and verily we have raised in every nation a messenger, (proclaiming) serve Allah and shun false gods (16:36); there is not a nation but a warner had passed among them (35:24)".

<sup>3</sup> Again it is stated: "(We sent) messengers of good cheer and warning that mankind might have no arguments against Allah after the messengers (4:165)".

<sup>4</sup> The Quran says: "We never punish until we sent a messenger (17:15)".

<sup>5</sup> It says: "Verily we sent messengers before you, among them those of whom we have told you, and some of whom we have not told you. (40:78)".

<sup>6</sup> The Quran endorses this view: "We sent not a messenger except in the language of his own people in order to make things clear to them (14:4)".

<sup>7</sup> Al Quran, 49:13.

<sup>8</sup> The Quran simply states this point: "If your Lord had so willed, he could have made mankind one nation: but they will not cease to dispute (11:118).

means to unity. In the *Sufi* strand of Islam, a unity in this sense has already been realised. Rumi illustrates a state of unity in which he saw himself:

What is to be done, O Muslims? for I do not recognise myself.  
 I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Muslim.  
 I am not of the East, nor of the West, not of the land, nor of the sea,  
 I am not of Nature's mint, nor of the circling heavens.  
 I am not of earth, nor of water, nor of air, nor of fire:  
 I am not of the empyrean, nor of the dust, nor of existence, nor of entity.  
 I am not of India, nor of China, nor of Bulgaria, nor of Saqsin:  
 I am not of the Kingdom of Iraq, nor of the country of Khorasan.  
 I am not of this world, nor of the next, nor of Paradise nor of Hell;  
 I am not of Adam, nor of Eve, nor of Eden and nor of Rizwan,  
 My place is Placeless, my trace is Traceless;  
 It is neither body nor soul, for I belong to the soul of the Beloved.  
 I have put duality away. I have seen that the two worlds are one;  
 One I seek, One I know, One I see, One I call.  
 He is the First, He is the Last, He is the Outward, He is the Inward.<sup>9</sup>

Proposition III: *Every revealed religion can be named as Islam, when it is seen as 'a state of submission to God' (literally Islam).*

Expanding the term *Islam* in a manner that could envelope all other revealed religions is not something produced in order to counter the quest for a pluralistic approach. It is a Quranic endeavour which aims to show all revelations as part and parcel of God's plan. Muslims believe that *Islam* is the name of the basic mission of all prophets throughout history. Hasan Askari illustrates the point:

*Islam* now was the quality of all those, irrespective of the religion they practice, who are humble before God's Transcendence and submit to him as their Creator and Lord. While Muslims judged others, they came under their own judgment, for now the word *Muslim* could be extended to any point in the past and any point in the future. This was the revolution which the Quran introduced into the religious history of humanity, and as such an universal revolution: now a Noah an *Abraham*, a *Moses*, a *Jesus*, a *Muhammed* are all 'Muslims'...[W]hoever among Jews and Christians and the people of other religions, surrenders to God, the One and only God, and does not explicitly and implicitly associate gods (race, religion and any other 'signs' and 'manifestations' of) with God, is a '*Muslim*'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Jalalu'ddin Rumi, *Divan-i Shamsi Tabriz*, trans. R. A. Nicholson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898), 125.

<sup>10</sup> Hasan Askari, "Within and Beyond the Experience of Religious Diversity," in *The Experience of Religious Diversity* ed. John Hick and Hasan Askari (Aldershot and Brookfield: Gower, 1985), 199.

The Quran itself promotes such a notion by stating: "Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in faith (*hanif*) and bowed his will to Allah's, (*Muslim*) and he joined not gods with Allah"<sup>11</sup>; [Abraham in his prayer says] Our Lord! make us *Muslims*, bowing to your (will) and of our progeny a people *Muslim*, bowing to your (will).<sup>12</sup>

According to the Quran, *Islam* is not a name only given to a system of faith or religion but it is also a name of an act of surrendering to the will of God. Any thing which bows to God's will voluntarily or even involuntarily is qualified as *Muslim*. Only human beings who have the freedom of faith can go against God's will and reject *Islam*, while all other creatures affirm it.<sup>13</sup>

Proposition IV: *There is no compulsion in religion.*

This is one of the unique principles of the Quran which was initiated in order to regulate freedom of religious belief in Islam. The Quran reads: "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects Evil and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never, breaks. And God hears and knows all things";<sup>14</sup> Say 'The Truth is from your Lord': let him who will, believe, let him who will, reject (it);<sup>15</sup> If it had been the Lord's Will, they would all have believed - All who are on earth! Will you then compel mankind against their will to believe!<sup>16</sup>

Many commentators cite some events in which the Prophet SAW himself implemented the requirements of verse 2:256 and prohibited his companions to compel people to accept Islam. For instance, Tabari mentions that when the two Jewish tribes of Qaynuqa and Nadir were expelled from Medina, they had in their charge children of the Ansar who had been placed with Jewish families. The biological parents asked the Prophet's permission to take their children back and raise them as a Muslims, but the Prophet SAW said 'there is no compulsion in religion'. Tabari mentions another event which indicates how this verse worked in practice. A Muslim named Al-Husayn had two sons, who having been influenced by Christian merchants, converted to Christianity and left Medina to go to Syria with these missionary merchants. Al-Husayn pleaded with the Prophet SAW to pursue the convoy and bring his sons back to Islam. But the Prophet SAW once again said 'there is no compulsion in religion', that is let them follow the religion of their choice, even though it is not Islam.<sup>17</sup>

This verse itself has functioned as a law by safeguarding the freedom of religious belief throughout Islamic history.<sup>18</sup> It was such Quranic injunctions which have provided a rationale for

<sup>11</sup> Al Quran, 3:67.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 2:128.

<sup>13</sup> The Quran simply states this point: "Do they seek for other than the Religion of Allah? while all creatures in the heavens and on earth have, willingly and unwillingly bowed to his will (accepted Islam) and to Him shall they all brought back (3:83).

<sup>14</sup> Al Quran, 2:256.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 18: 29.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10: 99.

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad bin Jarir al- Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan an Te'wil al-Quran* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1954), vol. 5, 407- 416.

<sup>18</sup> Vardit Rispler-Chaim compares the verse 2:256 with the other verses in the Quran that speak of the regulation of war and concludes that the verse that propagates religious tolerance was not intended in the first place. It was a *taqiyya* and initiated for a strategic purposes in order to establish the Islamic community. When the community was established it was not tolerance but military campaigns that decided the destiny of Islam. See "There is no compulsion in Religion (Quran 2,256); "Freedom of Religious Belief in the Qur'an" *The Bulletin of Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies*

the religious tolerance that has characterized Islamic history. As Lewis points out, religious persecution of the members of other faiths was almost absent; Jews and Christians under Muslim rule were not subject to exile, apostasy and death which were the choices offered to Muslims and Jews in re-conquered Spain. And also, Christians and Jews were not subject to any major territorial and occupational restrictions such as were the common lot of Jews in pre-modern Europe.<sup>19</sup>

It would, however, be wrong to say that Muslims consider Judaism and Christianity as authentic as Islam in leading to the truth. Like every religion and ideology, Islam considers itself superior to other religions when it presents the truth. But what makes Islam different from other religions and ideologies is that it tolerates the existence of other religions *while it is in power*. As a result of such a principle, although Islam ruled for some thousand years over Christians and Jews, it did not encourage a systematic 'islamization' of the adherents of these faiths.<sup>20</sup> Like any other religion, Islam aims to propagate its beliefs. But what makes it different from other religions is that it did not establish an organization or institution for its propagation. In its history, Islam did not have missionary societies or institution. The work of *da'wa* is always left to an individual effort.<sup>21</sup>

Proposition V: *The religion before God is Islam.*

Alongside those verses that indicate a form of 'Islamic pluralism', there are also some verses that indicate a form of Islamic exclusivism. In this context, the Quran states: "The religion before God is Islam (submission to His Will);<sup>22</sup> If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah) never will it be accepted of him; in the hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (All spiritual good).<sup>23</sup>

But the interesting thing here is that the verses that point to an exclusivist attitude in Islam are ambiguous and open to interpretation; they can be interpreted from the perspective of an 'Islamic pluralism' as well as that of an Islamic exclusivism. These verses can be interpreted as stating that Islam means *istislam*, i. e., submission to the Will of Allah; it is not meant to point to the specific Quranic revelation. For instance, Sheikh al-Maraghi interprets Islam in the first verse as *istislam* (surrender) or *ta'a* (obedience), hence equating Islam with *iman*, religious belief in general. He also goes on to say that a true 'Muslim' is anyone who is free from all traces of paganism and

11 (July-Dec., 1992): 19-32. In response to Rispler-Chaim, I argue that the mere existence of such a sacred injunction is sufficient to show the intention of the Quran. If Rispler-Chaim really wants to bring out the actual position of Islam with regard to religious tolerance, he must compare it with historical Christianity and Judaism. No Muslim, however, claims that Islam can satisfy the requirements of the liberal values of the secular culture. But, its own history proves that Islamic power has tolerated other religions within its own realm.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Thomas Walker Arnold, *In The Preaching of Islam: A History of Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1961); T. W. Arnold presents a historical account of the spread of Islam and concludes that Islam has expanded through persuasion and preaching rather than force and compulsion.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, the Quran lays down the principles of propagating Islam: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for your Lord knows best, who have strayed from His Path, and who received guidance" (16:125).

<sup>22</sup> Al Quran, 3:19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 3:85.

devoted in his deeds, regardless of the religious community to which he belongs or the period in which he lives.<sup>24</sup> Yusuf Ali, however, favours a pluralistic interpretation of these verses:

The Muslim position is clear. The Muslim does not claim to have a religion peculiar to himself. Islam is not a sect or an ethnic religion. In its view all Religion is one, for the Truth is one. It was the religion preached by all the earlier prophets. It was the truth thought by all the inspired Books. In essence it amounts to a consciousness of the Will and Plan of Allah and a joyful submission to that Will and Plan. If anyone wants a religion other than that, he is false to his own nature, as he is false to Allah's Will and Plan. Such a one cannot expect guidance, for he has deliberately renounced guidance.<sup>25</sup>

Proposition VI: *Those who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteously (a'mila salihan) will be saved.*

An Islamic notion of salvation cannot be equated with Buddhist or Enlightenment liberation or Christian salvation. Nor can it correspond to Hick's notion of human transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. The Islamic notion of salvation is simple and uncomplicated. It believes that human beings were born into this world as a *tabula rasa*, sinless but with innate religiosity (*al-fitrah*). In addition to this, God made known His will through messengers. If one follows his or her innate religiosity and accepts the message, and works righteously, he or she will be saved in the hereafter. Anyone who did good or evil, will be rewarded or punished accordingly.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to what is assumed, Islam affirms that Jews, Christians and Sabians can also attain salvation. The Quran simply states: "Those who believe (in the Quran), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians, - any who believe in Allah and the Last Day and work righteously, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve;<sup>27</sup> Those who believe (in the Quran), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians - any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteously - on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve;<sup>28</sup> Whoever works righteously - man and woman, and has Faith, verily, to him We give a new life and life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on their reward according to the best of their actions."<sup>29</sup>

The question of the possibility of salvation of non-Muslims according to Islamic belief is a matter of crucial importance, not only because the Quranic eschaton might well be the only possible destiny of humankind but also because the answer to this question is the cause of the Muslim's attitude towards non-Muslims. As has become quite clear, Islam does not have a motto of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*; the exclusivism was not an official approach of Islam. It has always accepted the possibility of salvation outside its borders; it affirms the religious truth of Judaism and Christianity. Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi illustrates the point:

The honour with which Islam regards Judaism and Christianity, their founders and scriptures, is not courtesy but acknowledgement of religious truth. Islam sees them in the world not as "other

<sup>24</sup> Sheikh al-Maraghi, *Tafsir al-Maraghi* (Cairo: 1962), 119 quoted in Vardit Rispler-Chaim, "Freedom of Religious Belief", 24.

<sup>25</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Maryland: Amana Corporation, 1989), 150.

<sup>26</sup> The Quran says: "Then shall anyone who has done an atom's (*zarra*) weight of good see it. And anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it (99:7-8)."

<sup>27</sup> Al Quran, 2:62.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5:69.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 16:97.

views” that it has to tolerate, but as standing *de jure* as truly revealed religions from God. Moreover, their legitimate status is neither sociopolitical, nor cultural or civilizational, but religious. In this, Islam is unique. For no religion in the world has yet made belief in the truth of other religions a necessary condition of its own faith and witness.<sup>30</sup>

Although the Quran explicitly states that those Jews, Christians and Sabians who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteously will attain salvation, Muslim scholars generally have related salvation of the non-Muslims with the recognition of the Prophet by referring to the overall attitude of the Quran towards non-Muslims. Even if this might be the case, they still maintained that salvation has always remained possible outside the borders of Islam. Muhammad al-Ghazzali, a spokesman of Islamic orthodoxy in his *Faysal al-Tafriqa bayn al-Islam wa al-Zandaqa* states this:

The above concerns the Community of Muhammad - God's blessing and peace be upon him - in a special way. But I go on to say: The divine mercy will embrace many of the bygone nations, even though most of them will be exposed to the Fire either slightly, even for a moment or for an hour, or for a period of time, so that one may apply to them the expression of “the delegation of Fire”. Nay more! I would say: Most of the Christians among the Byzantines [Greeks] and Turks in this time of ours will be embraced by the [same] mercy, If God the Most High wills. I mean those who are among the remote Byzantines and Turks whom the Call [to Islam] has not reached.<sup>31</sup>

From an Islamic point of view, what is crucial for one's salvation is not one's formal affiliation to a religion but the personal inner decision when one has been confronted with the call of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. But the question is this: In what circumstances can one be considered as the person who received the call of Islam. Ghazzali argues that there are three conditions under which one can be considered as a person who *has* received the Call. He maintains one can only be regarded as an unbeliever and therefore exempted from salvation i) if one has heard the Prophet's SAW name and description in a manner such as the Muslim has received it (al-Ghazzali says if someone is given inaccurate portrayal of the Prophet SAW as being a liar and deceitful, and believes so, he or she is not obliged to believe in the Prophet SAW, and therefore can be saved even though he or she did not believe him); ii) if one has also seen 'the miracle manifested in his regard' and yet has deliberately refused to consider and reflect on the issue; iii) if one has suppressed a motive for inquiry that possibly could lead to truth in the matter, or the motive arose but was not pursued.<sup>32</sup>

One of the distinct qualities of the Quran is that it always refrains from making a general judgment about a particular group of people. For instance, it does not say that Muslims will be saved, Christians or Jews will not; rather it 'personalizes' and directs its criticism or praise to specifically qualified people. For instance, it says those who believe in so and so and do so and so will be saved and those who do not believe so and so and do so and so will be punished. From a Quranic perspective, it is quite clear that being a Muslim by no means guarantees salvation. In addition to having faith, one not only has to be vigilant in performing good deeds but also must seek the

<sup>30</sup> Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, "Towards a Critical World Theology," in *Towards Islamization of Disciplines*. ed. The International Institute of Islamic Thought, (Heindon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989), 435-436.

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali, *Freedom and Fulfilment*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarty (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 170.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

utmost to accomplish a perfect moral life. Even if a person has done his or her best to achieve salvation, he or she cannot and should not be certain about the end. The Prophet *SAW* himself did not behave as if he was totally confident that he would be saved. The ideal position for a Muslim in this respect is to adopt an attitude of placing himself between *khawf* (fear) and *raja* (hope). In other words, a Muslim should neither be absolutely optimistic nor be absolutely pessimistic about his or her own personal salvation. It is, I believe, this ambiguous position with regard to salvation that has been a strong motive behind the desire to accomplish a sound moral life. It was such a belief and commitment that functioned as an impulse for the desire for perfection (*kamāl*).

In classical Islamic literature, faith is defined as 'confession by tongue and assent by heart' (*al-iman iqrarun bil-lisan wa tasdiqun bil-qalb*), though confessing by tongue is not the condition of faith. This is a very interesting definition. According to this definition, it is possible to think that although a person declares that he or she is a Muslim and performs five daily prayers and all the other Islamic duties, there is still a possibility that he or she might not be Muslim in fact.<sup>33</sup> The opposite to this is also the case. For instance, a person because of the circumstances in which he or she lives, who declares that he or she is not Muslim and lives accordingly still has the possibility that he or she might be Muslim in his or her inner being. Vahiduddin explains what I have in mind:

...[W]hat counts at the deepest level in religion is the spirit of the faith not only formal affiliation. This means that even in Islam one may speak in a way of 'anonymous' Muslims in faiths other than the Islamic, of persons who breathe the spirit of Islam in truth, though officially belonging elsewhere.<sup>34</sup>

From an Islamic perspective, the resolution of the problem of salvation is easy and uncomplicated. Faith is an assent by the heart between God and the individual; it is *an inner act*, no one can have access to it except God. This means, at the end of the day, no one can really know who will be saved. This was the reason why the question of establishing an attitude towards other faiths has not arisen as a theological question, but a question of law, i. e., how Muslim authorities should deal with the affairs of non-Muslim subjects.

The argument I have offered so far supports the conclusion that from an Islamic point of view, it is possible to argue that those people who are outside the Islamic faith might possibly be saved if firstly they accomplish the ethical and religious requirements of their own traditions, and secondly, if when the truth is revealed to their inner being, they do not deliberately and consciously cover up –<sup>35</sup> that truth, because of the social and economic pressure of their environment. I also believe that it is possible to maintain such a conclusion if one takes 'the spirit of the Quran' into account.

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<sup>33</sup> In Islamic literature there is another category, called *munafiqun*. These people, although they were not Muslim in their heart, pretended to be Muslim in their daily affairs. In his time, the Prophet *SAW* himself was informed about these people by revelation. He did not publicly identify them, but made them known to some of his close friends.

<sup>34</sup> Syed Vahiduddin, "Islam and Diversity of Religions," *Islam Christian and Muslim Relations* 1 (No.1 1990): 9.

<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that *kafir* which is generally translated in English as infidel in Islamic literature, literally means the person who covers. *Kafir* means also farmer or peasant because he or she plants the seed and covers it with soil. In a sense it indicates that an infidel is a person who knows the truth but consciously covers it up.



## HISTORICAL APPLICATION OF THE “PLURALIST” PRINCIPLES

Having drawn up a theoretical framework for a plausible 'Islamic pluralism', I would like to offer a brief historical survey to exhibit the practical implementation of those theoretical propositions. Let me start with the time of the Holy Prophet SAW himself. When the Prophet SAW arrived in Medina, he demolished the current structure of that society and introduced a new structure. Instead of tribal relations and tribal values, he established a relation and value system which connects people through religion and citizenship. Immediately after he settled in Medina, the Prophet SAW formed a constitution, a treaty which regulated the affairs of all the inhabitants of Medina, including the Jews.<sup>36</sup> The document itself is a concrete example of how the principles of 'Islamic Pluralism' worked in practice. It begins with this introduction:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!

“This is a writing of Muhammad, the prophet between the believers and Muslims of the Quraysh and Yathrib and those who follow them and attached to them and who crusade (*jahadu*) along with them.”<sup>37</sup>

The document contains 47 articles. I will only cite those related to our topics. They are as follows:

Article I: They are a single community (*ummah*) distinct from (other) people.

Article 16: Whoever of the Jews follows us has the (same) help and support (*nasr, iswah*) (as the believers), so long as they are not wronged (by him) and he does not help (others) against them.

Article 25: The Jews of *Banu 'Awf* are a community (*ummah*) along with the believers. To the Jews their religion (*din*) and to the Muslims their religion. (This applies) both to their clients and to themselves, with the exception of anyone who has done wrong or acted treacherously; he brings evil on himself and on his household. [Articles 26 to 31 repeat this rule for six other Jewish tribes of Medina at that time.]

Article 37: It is for the Jews to bear their expenses and for the Muslims to bear their expenses. Between them (that is to one another) there is help (*nasr*) against whoever wars against the people of this document. *Between them is sincere friendship and honourable dealing, not treachery.* A man is not guilty of treachery through (the act of) his confederate. There is help for the person wronged.<sup>38</sup> (The italics are mine.)

The Prophet SAW extended the act of citizenship and co-operation to the Christians of Najran. His letter to the inhabitants of Najran can give us an idea about the relation between the Prophet of Islam and the Christians of that time. It reads:

“This is a letter from Muhammad the prophet, the Messenger of God, to the people of Najran. Najran and their followers have protection (*jiwar*) of God and the *dhimmah* of Muhammad the Prophet, the Messenger of God, for themselves, their community, their land, and their goods,

<sup>36</sup> This document as a whole is cited in Ibn Ishaq's *Sira al-Nabi* and translated by Muhammad Hamidullah into English. He published this document together with the Arabic text under the provocative title *The First Written Constitution in the World* (Lahore: Sh Muhammad Ashraf, 1968).

<sup>37</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1956], 1977), 221.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-124.

both those who are absent and those who are present, and for their churches and services (no bishop will be moved from his episcopate, and no monk from his monastic position, and no church-warden from his church-wardenship) and for all, great or little, that is under their hands.”<sup>39</sup>

In Islamic culture, the term *al-dhimma* defines the status of Jews and Christians who lived within the Islamic political domain. *Al-dhimma*, grants Christians and Jews an equal status with Muslims in religious, economic and administrative domains. In return, they are asked to pay *jizya*, poll-tax. Although the *al-dhimma* status itself was initiated for Christians and Jews, it was also applied to Zoroastrians when Persia was conquered and to Hinduism and Buddhism when India came under the rule of Islam.<sup>40</sup>

As Ahmad points out, the constitution of Medina and other covenants of the Prophet SAW with Jews and Christians laid down the principles for building a multi-cultural and multi-religious community. These fundamental rules that the Prophet SAW established have been practised throughout Islamic history. Islam has given *dhimmi*s of the Islamic community equal religious and cultural rights alongside Muslims. In other words, their autonomy, internal affairs and freedom to practise their religion were guaranteed by Muslim authority.<sup>41</sup>

The term *ummah*, contrary to its conventional usage by the Muslim so far, was historically used in a manner that includes *dhimmi*s who lived within the Islamic community. In the constitution of Medina, the Prophet SAW defined the Jews as *ummah*, thereby integrating them into the already formed Muslim community. Later, this term was applied to Christians. Now, it is possible that the term *ummah* can be applied to all the adherents of major traditions. One of the main aims of the constitution of Medina was to create a community spirit between different tribal and religious segments of the society. It was not only a formal treaty but also a code of practice which encourages sincere and honourable friendship between the various functions, as stated in article 37.<sup>42</sup>

After Prophet Muhammad SAW, the four rightly guided caliphs and the rulers of Umayyads and Abbasids always maintained the rules and regulations established by the Quran and the *sunnah* of the Prophet SAW. For instance, when Jerusalem came under the rule of Islam, Omar the second caliph signed a pact with the inhabitants of Jerusalem, which granted security for them and their

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<sup>39</sup> Abu Yusuf, *Kitab al-Kharaj*, 44 (tr.108), quoted in Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 359-360.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Faruqi states: "Following the conquest of India by Muhammad bin Qasim in 91/711, the Muslims faced new religions which they had never known before, Buddhism and Hinduism. . . Muhammad bin Qasim sought instruction from the caliph in Damascus on how to treat Hindus and Buddhists. . . The judgment was that as long as Hindus and Buddhists did not fight the Islamic state, as long as they paid the *jizya* or tax due, they must be free to worship their gods as they please, to maintain their temples, and to determine their lives by the precepts of their faith. Thus the same status as that of the Jews and Christians was accorded to them". Al-Faruqi, "World Theology", 447.

<sup>41</sup> Barakat Ahmad, *Muhammad and the Jews: A Re-examination* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1979), 47.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Faruqi explains the importance and impact of this constitution to Jewish life: "For the first time in history since the Babylonian invasion of 586 B.C., and as citizens of the Islamic state, the Jew could model his life after the Torah, and so legitimately, supported by the public laws of the state where he resided. For the first time, a non-Jewish state put its executive power at the service of rabbinic court. For the first time, the state-institution assumed responsibility for the maintenance of Jewishness, and declared itself ready to use its power to defend the Jewishness of Jews against the enemies of Jewishness, be they Jews or non-Jews." Al-Faruqi, "World Theology", 445.

property. It recognized rights of the Jews and Christians of Jerusalem to practice their religion freely; their churches and synagogues were respected and left intact.<sup>43</sup>

Under Islamic rule, non-Muslims have always been encouraged to participate in and contribute to the intellectual and political life of the community. Christians and Jews were welcome to hold posts in public offices. Several of them became ministers, especially in the period of the Abbasids. For instance, most of the palace physicians in Baghdad were Christians, whereas the Jews were good at money exchanging, and they contributed to the welfare of society as tanners and gold and silver-smiths. During the Memluke era, a number of able Christians from the Copts of Egypt were appointed as state secretary.<sup>44</sup>

Such religious tolerance was well observed by the Muslim rulers of Christian Spain. At that time, in Spanish cities like Cordova, Seville and Toledo (the ancient capital of the Goths) Christians, Jews and Muslims lived in peaceful coexistence.<sup>45</sup> Christian communities had their own judges who settled their disputes in accordance with Gothic law. Those 'arabized' Spanish Christians played a remarkable role in transmitting Christian culture in the Islamic world, and also the Islamic civilization to the Christian world. Among them there were very distinguished scholars and philosophers, the most famous of whom was Moses Maimonides.<sup>46</sup>

During the middle ages, the Ottoman Sultans fully observed the right of the sizeable numbers of Christians and Jews as well as other non-Muslims who lived within the Ottoman provinces. For instance, when Spain was reconquered by Christians, in 1492, Sultan Bayezid II permitted and even encouraged a great number of Jews from Spain and Portugal who were expelled from their own

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<sup>43</sup> Historically this document played a very important role in safeguarding the rights of *dhimmi*s throughout Islamic history. It reads as follows: "This is what has been given by the servant of God, Omar ibn Al-Khattab to the people of Aelia. He gave them security for themselves, their property churches and crosses, the invalid and health and other co-religionists: that their churches shall not be inhabited nor destroyed nor damaged, nor their confines be encroached upon, nor their cross be molested, nor their property be infringed, nor shall they be forced to abandon their religion, nor shall anyone of them be hurt, nor shall Jews live with them in Aelia" Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wal-Muluk*, Vol. 3, 609, quoted in Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Khatib al-Tameemi "Pluralism and Its Limits in the Holy Quran" in *Proceedings of the 6th Muslim - Christian Consultation*, held in Istanbul 11-13 September, 1989, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Ahmad Sidqi al-Dajani, "Religious Pluralism and its Limits through History" in *Proceedings of the 6th Muslim - Christian Consultation*, held in Istanbul 11-13 September, 1989, 105.

<sup>45</sup> The principles of 'Islamic pluralism' have played a vital role in maintaining Jewish identity in history. Al-Faruqi explains the importance of such Islamic rules for Jewish survival: "After centuries of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine (Christian) oppression and persecution, the Jews of the Near East, of North Africa, of Spain, and Persia, looked upon the Islamic state as a liberator. Many of them readily helped its armies in their conquest and co-operated enthusiastically with the Islamic state administration. This co-operation was followed by acculturation into Arabic and Islamic culture, which produced a dazzling blossoming of Jewish arts, letters, sciences, and medicine. It brought affluence and prestige to the Jews, some of whom became ministers and advisors to the caliphs. Indeed, Judaism and its Hebrew language developed their "golden age" under the aegis of Islam. Hebrew acquired its first grammar, the Torah its most highly developed jurisprudence, Hebrew letters their lyrical poetry; and Hebrew philosophy found its first Aristotelian, Musa ibn Meymun (Maimonides), whose thirteen precepts, couched in Arabic first, defined the Jewish creed and identity. Judaism developed its first mystical thinker as well, Ibn Gabirol, whose 'Sufi' thought brought reconciliation and inner peace to Jews throughout Europe. Under 'Abd al-Rahman III in Cordoba, the Jewish prime minister, Hasdai ben Shapirut, managed to effect reconciliation between Christian monarchs whom even the Catholic Church could not bring together. All this was possible because of one Islamic principle on which it all rested, namely, the recognition of the Torah as revelation and of Judaism as God's religion, which the Quran attested and proclaimed". Al-Faruqi, "World Theology", 445 - 446.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Dajani, "Religious Pluralism", 103.

homelands to settle in the Ottoman realms to rebuild their lives.<sup>47</sup> Depending upon the Quranic and Prophetic injunction as well as the tradition which they received through their forefathers, the Ottomans developed a *millet* system through which the society was divided into estates each of which was expected to function according to a given position by tradition.<sup>48</sup>

Now, I would like to cite an Ottoman *ferman*, (decree) issued by Sultan Mehmed III, dated March 1602, which demonstrates a typical attitude of the Muslim rulers towards the non-Muslim subjects. It reads as follows:

Since, in accordance with what Almighty God, the Lord of the Universe, commanded in His Manifest Book concerning the communities of Jews and Christians, who are the people of the *dhimma*, their protection and preservation and the safeguarding of their lives and possessions are a perpetual and collective duty of the generality of Muslims and a necessary obligation incumbent on all the sovereigns of Islam and honorable rulers, Therefore it is necessary and important that my exalted and religiously inspired concern be directed to ensure that, in accordance with the noble Sharia, every one of these communities that pay tax to me, in the days of my imperial state and the period of my felicity-encompassed Caliphate, should live in tranquility and peace of mind and go about their business, that no one should prevent from this, nor anyone cause injury to their persons or their possessions, in violation of the command of God and in contravention of the Holy Law of the Prophet.<sup>49</sup>

My aim, however, here is not to enumerate the selected historical documents and practices, most of which support the argument which I am proposing, but it is to glance through Islamic history in order to identify a common official attitude of Muslim authority towards non-Muslim subjects. It is not, indeed, within the scope of our paper to present a well-documented or meticulously surveyed historical account of 'Islamic pluralism'. Nor do I intend to demonstrate that Islam both theoretically and practically can match the norms of liberalism of modern time; the concepts such as tolerance and equality as understood by the liberals of our time were not known. In a Muslim's eyes, undefined and purposeless tolerance was not virtue and vague intolerance was not a crime.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 50.

<sup>48</sup> Niyazi Berkes points out how unity was realized between different ethnic and religious groups during the Ottoman era: "Through the application of certain principles implied in this concept of society, a great degree of unity was realized over a long period of time. Disorder broke out only when the principles ceased to be applied or to be applicable and the various groups began to develop tendencies that were incompatible with these principles. . . Each [estate of the society] was recognized by the ruler and possessed privileges granted by his favor. In each there was some authority recognized as partial delegate of the supreme holder of power. For example, heads of the guilds or of Christian and Jewish millets had administrative and juridical rights and duties. (The Turkish system found a place for non-Muslim communities in its medieval structure, without segregating them into ghettos or resorting to expulsion or extermination, by according to right of jurisdiction to their respective ecclesiastical authorities a method which invited praise from Arnold J. Toynbee)". Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964), 11-12.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Lewis, *Jews of Islam*, 43-44.

<sup>50</sup> The concepts such as tolerance, intolerance are extremely ambiguous and culture specific concepts. One action or state of affairs can be seen as quite intolerant according to the norms of one culture, whereas appropriate according to others. The objective of the Muslim rulers throughout Islamic history was not achieve tolerance religious or otherwise, but order and unity of the subjects from different religions and races. They believed that like laws of God in the nature (*sunnatu-llah*), i. e. laws of nature in modern sense, there are the sacred laws issued by God in order to establish a unity in the society. They saw themselves as the ruler appointed by God to achieve such unity.

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