

Chapter 8: Religious Pluralism

Islamic Perspective

Argument

Mankind without religion is a pretty sorry lot. It has never been able to survive without faith. Yet, surprisingly agreement is never reached on such vital subject. Thus, they have their own zealots who attack the religions of others, the result of which is intolerance and contention.

Intergroup relations, especially when religion is also involved, are full of conflict and suffering. Martyrology feeds the myths, and prejudice adds bitterness to the legend. Political expediency and biased scholarship invest the legend with the status of history.

To this end, men have been suffering throughout the history from lack of toleration others' beliefs. With the cry *Deus vult!* 1 (God wills it) Rivers of blood have flowed as a result of religious intolerance. Crusades, Roman Inquisitions and Holy Offices established by the papacy in the Middle Ages, charged with seeking out, trying, and sentencing persons of heresy, 2 brutal massacres and inhumane torture of Spanish people, and Albigensians of southern France, leave the man of our age with no doubt that intolerance is very destructive activity.

Thus, in order for us all to survive on this planet it is important that we respect the religious beliefs of others and learn how to exercise a peaceful religious coexistence under the principle of 'the right to believe as one chooses'.

The present paper is a brief study of the religious coexistence from the Islamic point of view. From the inadequate material at my disposal, it is not easy to fully construct the issue as it supposes to be. Nevertheless, there is enough ground in Islam to call for *peaceful coexistence* .

Characteristically, Islam is usually classified as violent, intolerant, oppressive and obscurantist and opposed to enlightenment.

My objective in this paper is to clarify one of the dimensions of this biased opinion. I will, with the help of God, demonstrate the way Islam treats the *peaceful coexistence*. Does Islam respect and tolerate religions other than itself, and do their followers have the right to express and practice their own faiths in an Islamic state?

In a multicultural society where different cultures and religions are practised, should Muslims, from the Islamic perspective, integrate with, or segregate from, other parts of the society?

This study is also essentially based on the following material:

1. The Holy Quran, as the main source in Islam.
2. The Tradition of the Prophet of Islam and his pure progeny (peace be on them), as the role models of Islam.
3. At the end, however, I have suggested some further resources for in-depth study.

Islam and Religious Coexistence

Although the idea of religious liberty and tolerance is a new issue in the West initiated with philosophers of 18 century like John Locke and M. Voltaire³, it has been always a simple fact for Muslims, clearly declared in their religion.

A glance at the Islamic literature fully supports the idea of religious coexistence. Islam not only respects other divine religions and acknowledges their rights, but also prohibits any forms of contempt to them. Any Islamic state is also obliged by Shariah to provide welfare and support to the followers of other divine religions equal to the Muslims.

Islamic principles to Achieve Religious Coexistence

In order to establish a peaceful religious coexistence in society Islam has suggested four principles:

1. No compulsion in religion

No doubt, there are different factors involved in making people's opinions and faiths. The physical structure and the organic compounds, time, place, diet, education and so many other factors have inevitable effects on people's faiths. Thus, the healthy way to change their opinion is to encounter them from their origins. Utilising force and compulsion not only cannot change the heart of people, but it may in many instances increase hatred and animosity.

To this end, the Holy Quran clearly denounces the use of the force in terms of religion. It is ultimately the right of people to choose any religion they are happy with, and the duty of the Prophets is not more than educating people and reminding them of the right path. They have never been authorised to force people

to the Truth.

The following Ayat are the examples of many:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion; Truth stands clear from error.” [2:256]

“If it had been the Lord’s Will, all who are on earth would have believed. Will you then compel mankind against their will to believe?!” [10:99]

“Say, the Truth is from your Lord, let him who will believe, and let him who will reject.” [18:29]

“And you are not the one to overawe them. Therefore, remind with this Quran those who reverence My warnings.” [50:45]

“You shall remind, for you are the reminder. You are not one to manage (men’s) affairs” [88:21–22]

“Enlightenments have come to you from your Lord. As for those who can see, they do so for their own good, and those who turn blind, do so to their own detriment. I am not your guardian .” [6: 104]

“If they reject you, then say my work to me and yours to you. You are free from the responsibility of what I do and I for what you do.” [10:41]

“The sole duty of the messenger is to deliver the message, and Allah knows everything you declare and everything you conceal.” [5:99]

“If they argue with you, then say I have simply submitted myself to God; I and those who follow me. And you shall proclaim to those who received the scripture as well as those who did not, ‘would you submit’? If they submit then they have been guided, but if they turn away, your sole mission is to deliver this message. God is Seer of all people.” [3:20]

“You shall obey God and you shall obey the messenger, and beware if you turn away , then know that the sole duty of our messenger is to deliver the message efficiently. ” [5:92]

The above Ayat utterly denounce the practice of inquisition and pressuring the followers of other religions in order to change their beliefs. Nevertheless, preaching and enlightening people is permitted and is the duty of the messengers in a logical manner.

2. Logical debate and discussion

Islam whilst respecting other religions and beliefs, may disagree with some of their teachings, finding them illogical, and hence invites their adherents to open discussion and debate in a peaceful and logical manner far from any type of fanaticism and prejudice.

The following Ayat are the examples of this approach:

“And dispute you not with the People of the Book except with means better (than mere disputation) unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong. But say, we believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you, our God and your God is One, and it is to Him we submit.” [29:46]

“Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious.” [16: 125]

“So announce the good news to My servants, those who listen to the word and follow the best of it. Those are the ones whom Allah has guided and those are the ones endued with understanding.” [39: 17–18]

“Say produce your proof if you are truthful.” [2:111, 21:24, 16:64]

3. Divine Religions, grades of one school

Judaism, Christianity and Islam have a great deal in common. They are all based on monotheism and are committed to increase justice in the world, and the accountability before God. Their historic roots go back to Prophet Abraham and, as such, they are often described as ‘Abrahamic Faith’. They are also the basis of great world civilisations.

Therefore, despite the followers of other religions who consider themselves the chosen nation and the only saved ones, Islam considers all of the divine religions, different grades of the one school. From the Islamic point of view each new divine religion has been the upgraded version of the previous one, prescribed to complete its teachings.

All of the Prophets are the teachers of one school, teaching different grades according to the requirements of the people of their age, and hence if hypothetically all of them descend to earth they were to live together peacefully and each will acknowledge his successor and the one who has come after him.

An old debate has gone around between the followers of different religions as to who will go to hell and who to heaven. The followers of each religion, with no hesitation claim the eternal life in heaven for themselves, and see hell as the place of all who oppose them. Islam, despite this fanaticism, suggests a very liberal idea. The following Ayat are vividly revealing this idea.

“They say: become Jews or Christians if you would be guided. Say, nay! (I would rather) the religion of Abraham, the True, and he joined no gods with Allah. Say we believe in God, and in what was sent down to us, and in what was sent down to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the Patriarchs; and in what was given to Moses and Jesus, and all the prophets from their Lord. We

make no distinction among any of them. To Him alone we are submitters.” [2: 135–136]

“The Religion before Allah is Submission to His Will. Nor did the people of the Book dissent therefrom except through envy of each other.” [3: 19]

“And they say: none shall enter Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. Those are their (vain) desires. Say produce your proof if you are truthful. Yes, whoever submits his whole self to Allah and is a doer of good, he will get his reward with his Lord, on such shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” [2: 111–112]

“Those who believe (in Islam) and those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures) and the Christians and the Sabians 4, any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” 5 [2:62]

4. The Principle of righteousness and Justice

The last suggestion prescribed by Islam, to achieve a *peaceful coexistence* among people of different cultures and religions, is that Islam has always advocated for the principle of justice and righteousness within humankind. Muslims are encouraged to deal kindly and justly with all people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike with the exception of those who are fighting Muslims. The Holy Quran revealing the above fact utters:

“Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for your faith, nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them, for Allah loves those who are just.” [60:8]

Religious Coexistence and the Prophetic Traditions

Following the Words of God, the Prophet of Islam (saww) has emphasised on the issue of religious coexistence with the followers of different divine religions. The following are some examples of the Prophetic treatment with them.

1. “Whoever annoys a Dhimmii then I am his enemy and whoever I am his enemy I will be his enemy in hereafter.”
2. “Whoever Muslim launches a charge against a chaste Dhimmi he will be punished in hereafter with a lash of fire.”
3. “Whoever Muslim acts unjustly with a *confederate* or diminishes his right or over burden him or takes away something from him out of his desire, then I will be his enemy in hereafter.”
4. Imam Ali (puh), the Caliph of Muslims after the Prophet, in his Document of Instruction written to his Governor in Egypt where around 15 million Christians were living, writes: “... *Accustom your heart to mercy for the subjects, and to affection and kindness for them. Do not stand over them like a greedy*

beast who feel it is enough to devour them, since they are of two kinds, either your brother in religion or one like you in creation.” 6

Historical Cases

1. The Time of the Prophet Muhammad (saww)

a. ***The Treaty of Sinai:*** In the year 2 A.H. the Prophet of Islam signed a treaty with the Christians of Sinai Land which was written by Imam Ali. A part of that treaty reads: “ *I (Prophet Mohammad) promise that I will not change their priests and monks nor do I expel them from their worshipping places. I do not prohibit their pilgrims from their travels, nor do I destroy their churches. I do not convert any churches to mosques and whichever Muslim does so has violated God's covenant... Muslims should not force them to anything. They must be kind to them and respect them all... Should their churches require any repair, Muslims should help them as much as they can and they should allow Christians practise their rituals...*”

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b. ***The Treaty of Najran:*** Najran was a village in the border of Yemen . The following treaty was signed between the Prophet and the Christians of Najran in the year 9 A.H. in a situation that Muslims with no doubt had an upper hand over the Christians, and yet the Prophet did not take advantage of their miserable situation.

A part of the treaty reads: “ *No priest or monk should be expelled from his church or its surroundings. No Muslim has the right to humiliate them. Our army shall not occupy their lands...*” 8

It is interesting to note that according to the authority of Halabi when the delegate of the Christians of Najran came to Madina to negotiate the treaty it was the time of their prayer. They asked the Prophet of Islam if they could pray beforehand. The Prophet gave them the permission to pray in the Mosque, where they all prayed in the Mosque facing the east. 9

Despite the sabotage and the mischief that many of the People of the Book were engaged in against Muslims in the beginning of Islam, the Prophet of Islam never deprive them of his blessing and merciful attitude. He attended their parties; escorted their dead; visited their sick, and borrowed from them and loaned to them. The Following story is an example of many:

c. ***Respecting a dead Jew:*** It is quoted from the authority of Jabir Ibn Abdullah that: A Jewish funeral was passing where we and the Prophet were sitting. The Prophet in respect of the dead body stood up. We surprisingly asked: O Messenger of Allah! Isn't he a Jew?! The prophet replied: 'Was he not a soul?!'

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2. After the Prophet Mohammad

a. ***People of the Book are included in the Social Security:*** As it mentioned in the Islamic

jurisprudence, it is the duty of the Islamic State to cover the basic expenditure of retired citizens irrespective of their cultures and faiths. Muslim jurists from the first century of Islam have opened a particular chapter in which they have approved that non-Muslims should enjoy equal right for Social Security, and it is the duty of the State to cover their basic expenditures from the Public Treasury if they are old or unable to work. The following story is one of their proofs:

Imam Ali (pbuh) was passing by a road. He saw an old beggar asking people for help. He asked his companions who the man was? "He is a Christian", replied the companions. Imam Ali while he looking upset said: ' You used him as much as he could work for you, and now that he is old and unable, have left him behind! Make sure you provide him a reasonable life from the treasury.'¹¹

b. **Justice for All:** As mentioned earlier in this paper, Islam is the religion of justice. According to the Holy Quran, the provision of social justice is one of the major purposes of the dispatch of the Prophets to humanity¹². The following story reveals the spirit of social justice in an Islamic society.

" Imam Ali, the Caliph of Muslims, was sitting at the Mosque of Kofa. Abdullah Ibn Qofl a Jewish man from the tribe of Tamim passed by holding an armour at hand. Imam Ali recognising the armour said to him where he had taken the armour from, for it had already been stolen from the treasury. The Jewish man, trusting Islamic justice agreed to follow the Imam to court. Shorayh, the judge of the court was the delegate of Imam Ali. Yet, the Imam asked the judge to ignore the background of both of the parties and issue a just verdict. Utilising the Islamic judicial methodology the Jewish man won the case against the Caliph of the Muslims and the man was not found guilty. Nevertheless, as soon as he left the court, his conscious smote him, and he was impressed by the Islamic justice. He then turned back to the court and confessed that he had found the armour somewhere on the way and was happy now to return it to the treasury. Upon his confession Imam Ali gave him a gift and the man converted to Islam."¹³

c. **Don't forget your neighbor:** One of the servants of Ibn Abbas, the companion of the Prophet, narrates: " One day we slaughter a sheep at home. Ibn Abbas told me to leave a share for our neighbor who happened to be a Jew. He repeated his statement several times until I asked him why he was so much concerned about that Jewish neighbor. He replied: The Prophet of Islam advised us so much about our neighbor that I'm afraid he may have a share in my inheritance."

d. **A grant Muslim clergy poetry eulogises a non Muslim clergy:** Sayyed Radi, the collector of Nahjul-Balagha and one of the greatest Muslim clergies of the fourth century of Islam wrote an elegy in memory of Abu Ishaq Assabi, one of his contemporary clergyman who was a Sabian. After being criticised by some narrow-minded Muslims, his answer was I eulogised his knowledge. ¹⁴

Georgi Zaydan after quoting several stories as above concludes: "Muslims of early Islam after conquering a new land, would not interfere in the internal affairs of the inhabitants of that place. Christians were all free to practice their own culture and rituals.

They even did not interfere with papal edicts of Constantine regarding Christians of Damascus ... Muslim

Caliphs would never force any non-Muslim to convert to Islam. They were even participating in some of their religious celebrations such as Christmas and Palm Sunday. If a school or hospital was built by the Islamic State Muslims and non Muslims would enjoy those facilities equally.” 15

Further Readings

1. Setton , K. M. 'A History of the Crusades' 5 vols.
2. James A. Brundage, 'The Crusades: A documentary Survey'.
3. Walsh, William, 'Characters of the Inquisition'.
4. Peter Edward M, 'Inquisition'. An examination of the European inquisition and its influence on the modern political arena.
5. Louis Cheikho, ' Christian Ministers & Secreteries in Islam (622–1517)'
6. Z. Korbani, 'Islam & Human Rights'.
7. Ann Elizabeth, 'Islam & Human Rights'
8. Barakat Ahmad, 'Mohammad & the Jews'
9. Ahmad Thomson, 'Blood on the Cross (Islam in Spain)'
10. Munawar A. Anees, 'Christian–Muslim Relations: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.

1. The slogan of Christians who launched the First Crusade against Muslims by the order of Pope Urban II in 1095.

2. Any religious doctrine opposed to the dogma of a particular church, especially a doctrine held by a person professing faith in the teachings of that church. The term originally meant a belief that one arrived at by oneself (Greek hairesis, “choosing for oneself”) and is used to denote sectarianism in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles of St. Paul. Soon after Christianity became established as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, heresy and heterodoxy became equivalent to treason.

3. The flavour of Voltaire's activities could be summarised in the phrase he often used: *écrasons l'infâme* (“let us crush the infamous one”). With this phrase, he referred to any form of religion that persecutes non adherents or that constitutes fanaticism.

4. Although the interpreters of the Holy Qur'an hold different opinion as who are the Sabians, it seems they are the followers of one of the previous divine religions, being the followers of Noah, Abraham or Christians of St. John.

5. This Aya has revealed a very controversial issue among Muslim theologians, and I have dealt with it, in a different paper.

6. Nahjul-Balagha, Letter 53

7. Gorgi Zaydan, the History of Arab and Islamic Civilisation, vol. 4 p.120

8. Al-Baladeri, Fotoohul-Boldan p.65

9. Al-Halabi, Assyrah Vol.3 p.239

10. Al-Bokhari, Assahih

11. Al-Aameli, Wasaelul-Shi'a, vol.11 p.49

12. See the Holy Qur'an 57:25
13. Al-Kolayni, Al-Kafi, vol.7, pp. 385,386
14. Gorgi Zaydan
15. Ibid, Vol.4, pp128,129

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