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ISLAM and PLURALISM

Does Quran Approve Religious Pluralism?

By

Ali İhsan Yitik

As for the relation between Islam and pluralism, it seems a little bit complicated. There are some verses in The Koran for pluralism and at the same time we have some verses against. Among the sayings of Prophet Muhammad like the some Koranic verses, we came across with something good and bad for non-Muslims in special contexts. By another saying, we find both positive and negative statements for Jews and Christians in different circumstances¹. Muslim scholars the complexity still exists. We find both positive and negative stances. So it is difficult to see a standard or official view on this issue². However, we should point out that Islam recognizes all the sacred (Semitic) books and their messages. It accepts all prophets of that traditions. It defines itself as the last and perfect religion of Semitic tradition and states that no other religion will be accepted from anybody else other than itself³. It criticizes both the Jews and Christians especially about their failure to uphold the Oneness of God, *tawhid*, and to preserve the authenticity of their scripture from interventions. This exclusivist aspect of Islam as many conservative scholars⁴ formed with putting together some evidences from the Koran is generally accepted by Muslims. For Islam, Muhammad is not different from other prophets in explaining the religion of Abraham⁵, but on the other hand, in addition to belief in

¹ The statements for pagans or atheists are absolutely negative. They are always criticized due to their battles with believers.

² Islam doesn't have a motto of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*; It has always been accepted the possibility of salvation outside its borders.

³ For instances, "Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted from him and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers" (The Koran, 3: 85); "The (true) religion in the sight of Allah is Islam" (The Koran, 3:19); "Today, I have perfected your religion for you, completed my grace on you and approved Islam as a religion for you (all humanity)" (The Koran, 5:3).

⁴ Hanifi Özcan, *Maturidi'de Dini Çoğulculuk, (Religious Pluralism in al-Maturidi)*, İstanbul:IFAV, 1995.

⁵ "The Apostle believes in what has been revealed to him by his Lord, and so do the faithful. They all believe in Allah and His angels, His scriptures, and His apostles. They say: We hear and obey. Grant us your forgiveness, Lord; to You we shall all return ..." (The Koran, 2:285-6)

other prophets everybody is expected to recognize him since, as the last prophet, he calls for the true religion of Abraham: Islam.

The problem of pluralism emerges not at socio-cultural level, but at the religious sphere. For instance it comes out as a problem when we talk about salvation. Long before the emergence of the problem of pluralism as a philosophical matter, Muslims had discussed this topic for centuries not only for Jews and Christians but also for anybody who had heard nothing about God and his messages. Beyond all, there is another discussion in Islam about the meaning of the word of Islam itself. Arabic word "Islam" can mean two things: first the term with a capital "I", refers to the institutionalized religion, i.e. Islam that is highly favored and vehemently supported by the exclusivist scholars. The second meaning is the literal meaning of the word "Islam" i.e. "submission to the Will of God" which is widely accepted by the advocates of inclusivism or pluralism. So, if we chose to accept the second meaning of Islam, it includes all monotheistic believers. That's the point. Only these discussions are good advantages and positive sides for pluralism on behalf of Islam.

As it's understood so far and will be shown below with some verses from The Koran, Islam at theological level is inclusive to all Semitic Religions with their Prophets and Abrahamic messages (with the stress upon the Oneness of God and His uniqueness beyond all material world). What Islam excludes (rejects) is paganism and disbelief of a Supreme Being at theoretical level. Despite this exclusivist approach to unbelievers, Islam proclaims peaceful coexistence with them and calls Muslims to have a good dialogue even during discussion: "Call thou to the way of the thy Lord with wisdom and good admonition, and dispute with them in the better way" (16:125). "Let him who will, believe, let him who will, reject (faith)" (18: 29). "Say: O unbelievers, I worship not what you worship and you are not worshiping what I worship nor am I worshiping what you have worshiped, neither are you worshiping what I worship. To you your religion and to me my religion". (The Koran, 109:1-6)

At any rate, there is no doubt that Islam as a religion and Muslims as a community are more pluralistic at socio-cultural level than the Jews and Christians. And sometimes it's exclusivist as much as Judaism or Christianity due to some historical or political reasons. If we claim that Islam (or Muslims) is also more successful than others in dealing with cultural differences, we shouldn't exaggerate at all. This fact has been proved in some historical places like Istanbul, Jerusalem and Cairo and even in Christian Spain or in the Balkan Peninsula. Now we can see some roots of theological inclusivism or by another saying religious pluralism in Islam: In early and medieval Islam, we see that some Muslim scholars approached pluralism within the context of Islamic jurisprudence, for determining the status of non-Muslims. And also theologians tangled with this issue. From this approach, we know the existence of others is a real practical problem like an issue of faith. We know that some contemporary Muslim scholars, for example Prof. Süleyman Ateş in Turkey started the discussion of the Koranic verses for pluralism claiming "Nobody has monopoly over paradise".

Islam regards Judaism and Christianity, their founders and scriptures not only as a matter of culture or a problem of society but also as a matter of belief. Accepting their Abrahamic roots is not courtesy but acknowledgement of religious truth. Islam regards them in the world not as 'other views' that it has to tolerate, but as standing *de jure* as religions from the same God. A special place is reserved for them. The Banû Israel (Jews) and Nasâra (Christians) are grouped under the common name of the "People of the Book": *Ahl al-Kitâb*. Their legitimate status is neither sociopolitical, nor cultural or civilizational, but religious. In this situation, Islam seems very unique among great religions. As al-Farûki says that "there is no religion in the world has yet made belief in the truth of others religions a necessary condition of its own faith and witness"⁶. Beyond recognizing them, The Koran makes a great compliment to Christians: "And nearest among them in love to the Believers will thou find those who say: We are Christians, because amongst these are priests and monks, and they are not arrogant" (5:82)

⁶ İsmail 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.

As Süleyman Ateş points out⁷, in Islam there are three basic principles: If anybody believes in the absolute oneness of God, to worship none but Him, believes in the Hereafter without a doubt and does good deeds then deserves salvation theologically⁸. For him, “Allah is the god of Love, merciful and compassionate. Thus his “mercy embraces everything” (The Koran, 7:156) so according to him, we shouldn’t be narrowing down the Koranic message to our local and limited comprehension.

Islam recognizes old scriptures and prophets and simply states, “O ye who believe! Believe in God and His apostle, and the scripture, He hath sent to those before (him). Any who denieth God, His angels, His books, His apostles, and the Day of Judgment, hath gone far, far astray”. (The Koran 4: 136). “Those who believe (in the Koran), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians-any who believe in Allah and the Last Day and work righteousness- on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve” (The Koran, 5:59).

For Islam, the messages of the prophets throughout ages are one and the same. “Were you witnesses when death appeared before Jacob? Behold, he said to his sons: “What will you worship after me? “They said: “We shall worship your God and the God of your holy fathers- of Abraham, Ismail and Isaac, -the One (true) God, to Him we bow in Islam” (The Koran, 2:133).

For Islam nobody should be forced to convert or to adopt Islam by any means or under any circumstances. “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” (2: 256)⁹. Prophet Muhammad implemented the requirements of this verse and prohibited his companions from compelling people to accept Islam. Belief is valuable when freedom of choice is in place.

The Koran wants people to have a good relation with others. “O mankind! Verily we have created you of a male and female; and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware” (Koran 49: 13). From this verse we understand that God created people from a mother and a father, His wisdom decreed that they are made into tribes and nations, who despite their multitude and variety, descend from the same origin. While different in language, color, culture, homeland and means of power, they worship to the one God. No people can be Master of another, or a color superior to another, since they descend from the same origin and turn to the same God. People should know each other with setting up good relations and shouldn’t try to view one another with mutual suspicion, malice and hatred. Thus Islam eliminates the all kinds of discriminations from its racial and ethnological concept and establishes mutual acquaintance among people as it was shown in the early period of Islamic history at best level.

When Prophet Muhammad first received the divine revelation, his wife Khadija took him to her relative Waraqa bin Nawfal, “who had some knowledge of the Bible and may have been a Christian”¹⁰. Waraqa reassured Muhammad that what he experienced was similar to what had happened to Moses and was a divine revelation; When the number of Muslims increased in Mecca and they were persecuted by the pagan Meccans, “the Negus of Abyssina –who ruled over a Nestorian Christian kingdom gave them refuge and accepted a group of emigrant Muslims into his country in 616 / 618 CE. Pagans applied to him for extradition of Muslims

⁷ Süleyman Ateş, “Cennet Kimsenin Tekelinde Değildir”, (“Nobody Has Monopoly over Paradise”), *İslami Araştırmalar*, (Journal of Islamic Research) 3, no. 1, 1989, p. 7

⁸ See for discussions, Rifat Atay, *Religious Pluralism and Islam: A Critical Examination of John Hick’s Pluralistic Hypothesis*, Phd. Thesis, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, UK, p. 27-54; Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism In Christian And Islamic Philosophy*, Curzon Press, Surrey 1998.

⁹ This verse was sent down for some people who just converted to Islam from Judaism or Christianity. Because, they asked for permission from Muhammad in order to push their sons to accept Islam and they were rejected. Prophet said: “no one should be forced to leave his Jewish or Christian faith”. El-Tameemi, “Pluralism and its Limits in the Holy Quran”, *Religious Pluralism: Proceedings of The 6th Muslim-Christian Consultation Held in Collaboration with the Orthodox Center*, Istanbul 1989, p. 39.

¹⁰ M. Watt, *A Short History of Islam*, Oxford 1996, s. p.13

on the grounds that Muslims neither liked Christians nor respected Christianity. But the king refused the deportation of Muslims after listening to what Muslims had to say about Jesus as a major prophet¹¹; When Prophet Muhammad arrived in Medine, he established a relation and value system which connects people through religion and citizenship. Immediately after he settled in Medine, The Prophet formed a constitution, a treaty which regulates the affairs of all the inhabitants of Medina, and signed a pact with the Jews: in article 25: “The Jews of Banu ‘Avf are a community (ummah) along with the believers. To the Jews their religion (din) and to the Muslims their religion...” In 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 honorable dealing, not treachery...”¹². Later, the Prophet extended the act of citizenship and co-operation to the Christians of Najran: “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, 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”¹³.

In Islamic culture, the term *al-dhimmah* is formed to define the status of such groups of people as the Jews and Christians who lived within the Islamic political domain. It means pact, trust, surety A Dhimmi is a party to covenant who has been given a promise to feel secure about his property, honor and religion. *Al-dhimmah* grants the Christians and Jews an equal status with Muslims in religious, economic and administrative domains. In return they are asked to pay, *jizyah*, the poll tax. Although the *al-dhimmah* status itself was initiated for Christians and Jews, it was also applied to Zoroastrians when Persia was conquered and to Hindus and Buddhists when India came under the rule of Islam¹⁴. The Prophet said that, “Feed the hungry, visit the sick and release the captive”¹⁵. This order was not only for Muslims or their people, but also it was a duty for Muslims to do for others as well as the Prophet did. He paid a visit to a young Jew who felt ill, which means that it is permissible to visit, compliment and entertain them.

The constitution of Medine, and other covenants of the Prophet with Jews and Christians, laid down the principles for building a multi-cultural and multi-religious community. These fundamental rules that the Prophet established have been practiced throughout Islamic history¹⁶. After prophet Muhammad, the caliphs and Muslims in general followed the same way: 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 property. It recognized rights of the Jews and Christians of Jerusalem freely to practice their religion; their churches and synagogues were respected and left intact¹⁷.

Non-Muslims have always been encouraged to participate in and contribute to the intellectual and political life of the community under Islamic rules. The Christians and Jews were welcomed to hold posts in public offices. Some of them became ministers, especially in the periods of The Abbasids, Mamluks and Ottomans. Religious tolerance was well observed by the Muslim rulers of Christian Spain. At that time, in Spanish cities like Cordova, Seville and

¹¹ D.M., Hamidullah,, *Introduction to Islam*, Chicago:Kazi Publications, 1981, p. 171.

¹² W. M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, (1977), p. 221.

¹³ Abu Yusuf, *Kitab al-Kharaj*, 44 (tr. 108), quoted in Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, p. 359-360.

¹⁴ Al-Faruqi, “World Theology”, p. 447.

¹⁵ Narrated by Al-Bukhari, *Mishkat Al-Masabih*, hadith No 1523.

¹⁶ Islam has given dhimmis of the Islamic community equal religions and cultural rights alongside Muslims. In other words, their autonomy and their internal affairs and their freedom to practice, and their religion were guaranteed by Muslim authority.

¹⁷ Abu Ja’far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wal-Muluk*, Vol. 3, 609, quoted in Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Khatip 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, p. 40.

Toledo, Christians, Jews and Muslims lived in peaceful co-existence¹⁸ and many distinguished scholars and philosophers played a crucial role for exchanging cultures, the most famous of whom was Moses Maimonides.

In Islamic history, religious persecution of the members of other faiths was almost absent. The rule “Let there be no compulsion in religion” has banned Muslims from practicing what is called religious persecution against non-Muslims. Jews and Christians under Muslim rule were not subject to exile, apostasy or death, which was the choice offered to Muslims and Jews in re-conquered Spain. And Christians and Jews were not subject to any major territorial and occupational restrictions such as were the common lot of Jews in pre-modern Europe¹⁹.

We always think that the severe and some bad experiences humanity lived at past happened somehow and will never occur again in our times or in the future. But unfortunately this is a sweet illusion and only a good wishing. Humanity lives the same experience to some extent and unfortunately some of them are in a struggle with the bitter problems. If we want to do something really helpful in order to reach a pluralist society or to prevent conflicts at any level, we should first check and reform our social, cultural and religious acceptances (maybe prejudices) against others with eliminating our exclusive sides and bring humanistic values. Historical situations (esp. some religious and cultural conflicts in the Balkans, esp. in the last two hundred years) should be a good lesson for Balkan people for seeing their future better

It is very clear that the Old Testament for the Jews, the New Testament for Christians and the Koran for Muslims are above all religious messages. Despite that, Jews, Muslims and Christians aim at constituting a universal form of true unique monotheism²⁰. So there is no reason for not realizing an interactive dialogue and mutual understanding between them for a peaceful world esp. for a peaceful Middle East and world. They have to go beyond some dialogue meetings and reach at some points in which their children should learn that they are following same tradition and no reason to be distant from or aggressive against each other.

*Ali İhsan Yitik teaches Comparative Religion at the Dokuz Eylül University in Izmir, Turkey. His paper was presented at the *Inter-Cultural Symposium Religion and Society in German and Turkish Perspective* which took place at the Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main from 1.-3. July 2004.

¹⁸ Al-Faruqi, “World Theology”, p. 445-446.

¹⁹ Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.8

²⁰ Maurice Borrmans, “Pluralism and its Limits in the Koran and the Bible”, *Religious Pluralism: Proceedings of The 6th Muslim-Christian Consultation Held in Collaboration with the Orthodox Center*, Istanbul 1989, p.78-79. Father Borrmans raised and discussed many questions about the relation between three religions in his essay like “How are the others considered? How are the others called? How is their salvation envisaged? What attitude to have vis-à-vis them?”.