

Religious Pluralism in Islamic Theology of Religions

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Abstract

Modern theory of religious pluralism, which emerged initially in the thoughts of liberal Christian theologians, becomes more important after world wide recognition of diversities of cultures, belief systems, and standards of morality. The pluralistic quality of truth affirms that truth is always relational. Among the contemporary Muslims there are those who, on the base of Islamic theology, are also thinking that Islam is not the only way of salvation. Muslims can go to paradise by following Islam; the adherent of other faiths may also attain God's grace by following their own faith. Unity of essence, in faiths is the base of religious pluralism. Al-Qur'an is also inviting toward 'unity of faith' where wisdom and fair dialogue bring together the communities of different religions and cultures into a harmony of faith and purpose. Exclusivism, inclusivism, parallelism and pluralism are dialogical attitudes but pluralism is most appropriate for dialogue.

Sound basis of religious Pluralism is found in Islamic theology. It believes that submission to God in the light of divine guidance is the core of the messages of all the prophets and messengers. All prophets were Muslims (submitters to God), and Islam is not merely the religion preached by Muhammad but was also the religion of all the true prophets of God such as Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus and their followers. Muslim recognition of legitimate religions is not limited to Christianity and Judaism only, but it extends to almost all major pre-Islamic religions including Hinduism and Buddhism. Religious pluralism in Islam is based on the acknowledgement of the non-believer on three distinct levels: The first is that of humanism. Its second level is 'universalism of revelation'. The third level of religious pluralism in Islam is its identification with historical revelation of Judaism and Christianity. The Freedom of choice of faith is the ultimate result and thus aftermath of the religious pluralism. Islam also considers it as the basic ingredient of conversion because conversion by force, coercion or interference is null and void. It is need of time that scholars of Islamic Studies should work hard for exploring the further pluralistic dimensions of Islam.

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Existentially, human beings are willingly moving toward a world in which aloofness, estrangement and alienation are not desirable. The shell of isolation, which had provided a large measure of insulation to different religious communities in the past, has been shattered, perhaps for good. Such is the predicament of the contemporary human beings, in the words of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'to be a Christian in modern world, or a Jew or an Agnostic, is to be so in a society in which other men, intelligent, devout, and righteous, are Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus.'¹In such a circumstance, the need for communication among people of different convictions on the basis of religious pluralism is obvious. If some people are not inclined to see the need for it on purely theoretical and altruistic grounds, they will presumably agree that prudence and enlightened expediency, occasioned by the shrinkage of our world, demand that human beings should strive for a better mutual understanding with their neighbors through dialogue based on plurality. Culture of appreciation of others' loyalties, ideals and values can also be developed only through recognition of pluralism.

Like followers of other religions, Muslims are also waking up to the necessity of continuing communication with adherent of other convictions and persuasions on plural grounds. In so doing, they are not only responding to an important need of the hour, but they are also engaging in a task which seems to be manifestly in keeping with the spirit of their religious traditions. What is religious pluralism? Why do we need it? How can it contribute in dialogue? What is its place in Muslim theology of other religions? How does Islam look upon religious diversity? What are levels of religious pluralism on which Islam deals with other religions? Freedom of choice is essence of pluralism. How does Islam look upon it? These are the questions that are before us in this paper.

My presentation will proceed from a brief description of religious pluralism. Following this, I would like to discuss briefly about the importance of religious pluralism in interfaith dialogue. Then the Muslim theology of religions has been elaborated. In this regards arguments from al-Qur'ân and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad have been presented. The levels of religious pluralism in Islam have been identified in fourth part of this study. The fifth part of the study deals with freedom of choice of faith in Islamic tradition. Appropriate strategies of Muslims in interfaith interactions and their possible effective role in plural world have been suggested in the conclusion.

I-Religious Pluralism: An introduction

Pluralism in which people of different faiths live together peacefully while practising their faiths, has become very important since 1970. This concept becomes more important after world wide recognition of modern world composed of diverse cultures, belief systems, and standards of morality. Due to unprecedented scientific, social, economic, scientific and political developments, culture of plurality seems an inescapable reality. The explosion of knowledge about various religious traditions contributed in the scientific study of religions. Tourism, trade, immigration and rapid growth of means of transport and communication enhanced personal contacts between

the adherents of different religious traditions.² Wilfred Cantwell Smith feels that the modern man lives his religious life in context of religious pluralism. Not only for mankind in general but also for the individuals the people of other persuasions are no longer at distant. They are our neighbours, our colleagues our competitors and our fellows. He points out ‘Confucians and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, are with us not only in the United Nations, but down the street. Increasingly, not only is our civilization’s destiny affected by their actions; but we drink coffee with them personally as well.’³

Religious pluralism means that those who attain God’s grace are saved by their own religious traditions independently from others.⁴ In this regard John Hick maintains that the major world religions, through their respective belief systems, scriptures, religious figures, forms of worships, laws and customs constitutes different human responses to the ultimate transcendent reality to which they all, in different ways, bear witness.⁵ From Islamic point of view Mahmut Aydin considered religious pluralism ‘as Muslims can go to paradise by following Islam, the adherent of other faiths may also attain God’s grace by following their own faith. In other words according to this definition paradise is not restricted to those who follow the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.’⁶

Pluralism does not mean a tower of Babel, where everyone speaks a different language with no possibility of communication with one another. Rather religious pluralism must be a unity of purpose and open dialogue.⁷ Religious pluralism as a postmodernism theory of interfaith dependence emerged initially in the thoughts of liberal Christian theologians. John Hick, a renowned British theologian, discovers that the close observation of the lives of followers of other religions reveals that these faiths are as beneficial as Christianity and their followers are ‘no less kindly, honest, and thoughtful for others, no less truthful, honourable, loving and compassionate than Christians’.⁸ He urged that it is time to shift from ‘a Ptolemaic (i.e. one’s –own-religion centred) to a Copernican (i.e. God-centred) view of religious life of mankind’.⁹ An American catholic theologian, Knitter has presented a concept of ‘unitive pluralism’, which is aimed at bringing the people of different faiths closer to each other. He defines ‘unitive pluralism is a unity in which each religion, although losing some of its individualism (its separate ego), will intensify its personality (its self awareness through relationship). Each religion will retain its own uniqueness, but this uniqueness will develop and take new depths by relating to other religions in mutual dependence.’¹⁰ Unity of essence, in faiths, which has been advocated by Knitter, is found in Islamic belief on the office of Prophet Hood. Al-Qur’ân is also inviting toward ‘unity of faith’ where wisdom and fair dialogue bring together the communities of different religions and cultures into a harmony of faith and purpose. From Qur’ânic point of view, this unity operates with in historical continuity of divine revelation, beginning with Adam and Ending with Muhammad. Although revelation ended with Al-Qur’ân, Divine guidance continues in the proper interpretation and implementation of sacred scriptures. This kind of Divine inspiration will continue till the end of time.¹¹

II-Importance of Pluralism in Dialogical Attitudes

Parallel to the scientific, economic and social developments, the intellectual and practicable response to the religious life of mankind is religious pluralism. Religious diversity of human being is gaining importance due to desire for unity of spiritual satisfaction. Modern theologians such as John Hick, W. Cantwell Smith, Paul F. Knitter and others are trying to search ways of salvation other than Christianity. The better knowledge of other religions, increasing dialogue, frequent contacts among the adherents of different religions and growing interest in other religious traditions are playing a significant role in the development of religious pluralism as an alternative of religious exclusivism and inclusivism.¹²

Milko Youroukov has explored a particular aptitude for participating in dialogue. He names this aptitude as 'dialogical attitude'. He refers 'exclusivism,' 'inclusivism,' 'parallelism' and 'pluralism as dialogical attitudes. He derives these names from the Panikkar's classification of the variety of approaches that people disclose during the praxis of dialogue.¹³ These four dialogical attitudes show that extreme fundamentalism is incompatible with dialogue. The first attitude is that of exclusivists, adhering to the fundamental of their faith as those are revealed in the scriptures. Exclusivists, on the basis of 'God's exclusive language' in scripture, refute any thing that is different from their expression. By regarding other religions as 'diabolical' or at best at human aberrations, exclusivists carry this name because they exclude any way of salvation different from their own way. Youroukov feels that this attitude underestimates the importance of the fact that human interpretations are strongly subjective. Hence, their exclusion of others or other religions does not appear to be justified, even if God is assumed to speak an exclusive language. It is only by means of interpretation that we determine what God does and does not exclude. He finds that today most of the scholars in the field of religion considered exclusivism to be 'an uncritical attitude of an epistemological naiveté'.¹⁴ It is because of these two deficiencies, i.e., lack of mature epistemological reflection and lack of self criticism that the exclusivists are so inefficient in their effort to expand the limits of the religious horizon within which exclusivist ideas function. This limited horizon, in turn, affects the exclusivists' capability to participate in dialogue and renders their participation an exercise in proselytising, rather than a real dialogue. Nevertheless, the exclusivists desire to participate in dialogue in order to convert others.¹⁵

In contrast to exclusivists, he says that inclusivists hold to the fundamentals of their religion without excluding other religions, or the right of their followers to hold some other particular doctrinal fundamentals. As such, the inclusivists can also be classified under the title 'fundamentalists,' but not exclusively. He explains that inclusivists hold to the fundamentals of their faith, however, with the awareness of the importance of interpretation for understanding some difficult passage of the scriptures. This is why inclusivists manage to hold both to their religion and to consider positive and true values outside of its domain. However, they believe that their religion includes the whole truth, while other religions contain less truth or are corrupted.¹⁶

The third attitude, which Panikkar defines as ‘parallelist,’ envision religion running parallel without interfering with each other. In parallelism, the fundamentals of one’s own faith are as important as the fundamentals of others’ faiths, but still these fundamentals should be finally transcended. Youroukov considers the parallelist attitude as non-fundamentalist because; in contrast to the exclusivists’ and the inclusivists’, it does not consider any priority of holding to the fundamentals of one’s own religion before those of some other religions.¹⁷

Youroukov declares that pluralism is a perspective that recognizes the pluralistic quality of truth, affirming that truth is always relational. Accordingly, the pluralistic approach does not aim at finding a common truth, but rather the connection to truth in a given context. He distinguishes pluralism from the other three and considers it most appropriate for dialogue. He further elaborates that in pluralism question arises, as to what is truth and how do we relate to truth rather than whether or not the fundamentals of a certain religion are true? Pluralism emphasizes understanding and harmony.¹⁸ Dialogue from the pluralistic perspective, is never about winning over the other through argumentation and deputation. Instead of aiming at total agreement, pluralism annihilates that all problems are created by mutual ignorance and misunderstanding.¹⁹

From the summary of above it follows that in these four attitudes some kind of acceptance for dialogue exists but pluralism is a most necessary attitude required for the active participation in dialogue between civilizations. Exclusivists participate in dialogue for showing that they hold the only true path of salvation. Inclusivists recognize the possibility of truth in others but they consider them corrupted. Parallelists allow others to run parallel without interference. The most suitable attitude for dialogue is pluralism, which aims at proper understanding and search for common grounds of corporation and harmony among the followers of different religious traditions.

III- Muslim Theology of Religions

It is usually considered that Islam is an institutionalized religion of the Prophet Muhammad to be the final dispensation or sacred Law revealed by God to Prophet Muhammad the ‘Seal of the Prophets’. It is maintained that this final dispensation is meant for all the humanity and for all time until the day of Judgement. With this concept some scholars find it difficult to adjust Islamic theology in the frame work of pluralism²⁰ but the detailed study of Muslim theology reveals that it has given a position to other religions which can be useful in context of contemporary studies of religious pluralism. Muhammad was not the founder of Islam. Islam believes that the core of the messages of all the prophets and messengers was the submission to God in the light of guidance communicated by the prophets. All prophets were Muslims (submitters to God), and Islam is not merely the religion preached by Muhammad but was also the religion of all the true prophets of God such as Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus and their followers.²¹

Muslim recognition of legitimate religions is not limited to Christianity and Judaism only but it extends to almost all major pre-Islamic religions including Hinduism and

Buddhism.²² This recognition is based on Islamic belief that there has been no nation, which had not been visited by a Warner²³ so that, the different religious traditions of the world presumably had an authentic starting point. Muslims are faith –based community: believing and belonging to the community (the Ummah) go hand in hand. By virtue of belief one belongs to and by virtue of belonging one believes in. Quran says: [And indeed we have honoured the children of Adam.]²⁴ Qur’ân says: [If your Lord so willed, He could have made mankind one people.]²⁵ ‘O mankind, we have created you from a single (pair) of male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other.’²⁶ Prophet Muhammad is the leader of this community and the Qur’ân is its constitutional framework. It is about human beings and is for human beings. Its objective is to establish a cohesive, human and just social order. The Qur’ân aims to create a society where the individuals and the society are under an obligation to ‘enjoin good and forbid evil’²⁷

The religious experience of Muhammad is in certain way distinct in the opinions of the Muslims but it was not essentially different from that of other prophets of God, for each has received authentic revelation from God. Some of them are mentioned in the Qur’ân while of others it says: [We have not narrated to you ...].²⁸ It is for this reason that God has repeatedly prohibited distinction among the Messengers of God,²⁹ and Muhammad disliked that he should be considered above Moses and other prophets of God.³⁰ Al-Qur’ân claims that, for every community God has sent messengers and people will be [Judged between them with Justice, and they will not be wronged.]³¹

Muslim scholars generally recognize that where as *Din* or essential religion remained the same, the *shari’ah* or religious prescriptions of the people, which are named in Christianity as *Hodos*, in Judaism as *Halakah* and in Chinese religion as *Tao*,³² are varied.³³ Zafar Ishaq Ansari observes that the evaluation of religious phenomena on an Islamic perspective shows that the religious life of humankind and encounter among humans being and God is genuine. This encounter is not limited to any particular race or territory. It embraces all humankind. All those who responded sincerely to God’s revelation and sought to obey God are respectable irrespective of when and where they lived or which religious leader they followed.³⁴ According to Islamic belief various human communities, which are following different path (*shir’ah*) and way (*minhaj*),³⁵ are encouraged to [compete with one another (as in race) in righteous deed. Wherever you are God will bring you all together].³⁶

IV-Levels of Religious Pluralism in Islam

The Holy Prophet said that the origin of religion before God is Islam i.e the true religion *hanif*.³⁷ In the same, in another Hadith, the Prophet explained that the fundamental principles are common in divine religions by pointing out that the prophets are brothers who have the same father.³⁸ It means that message of all Prophets is the same, that is submission to God. This Islamic concept is close to the modern ideal of religious pluralism on the base of God- centered view of religious life of mankind.³⁹ The unity of essence in world religions is behind Knitter’s idea of ‘unitive pluralism’, which

is aimed at bringing the people of different faiths closer to one another. Such reflections can also be found in Muslim theology of religions.

Religious pluralism in Islam is based on the acknowledgement of the non-believer on three distinct levels: The first is that of humanism. Islamic concept of *din al-fitrah* expresses that all human beings are endowed at birth by God with a true, genuine and all time valid for all time religions. Insofar as they are human beings, this claim would be true of them that they have a *sensus communis* by the free exercise of which they can arrive at the essence of all religious truth. There is no exception in the universalism of this aspect of Islam. Islamic doctrine of natural religion is the base for universal humanism.⁴⁰ All men are ontologically the creatures of God, and all of them are equal in their natural ability to recognize God and His law. Every human being is equipped at his birth with the knowledge that required knowing God. Islamic concept of *din al-fitrah* differentiates between natural religion and the religion of the history. The latter is either derivation from this most basic endowment; or it comes from other sources such as revelation or human passion, illusion and prejudice. If this kind of religion divides mankind, natural religion unites them all, and puts all their adherents on one level. As the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: ‘All men are born Muslims (in the sense of being endowed with *religio naturalis*). It is their parents (tradition, history, culture, natural as opposed to nature) that turn them into Christianity and Jews’.⁴¹ On the level of nature, Islam holds the believers and non-believers equal partakers of religion of God.

The second level of religious pluralism in Islam is ‘universalism of revelation’. Islam holds that [There are no people but God has sent them a prophet or Warner].⁴² And that no prophet was sent but to convey the same divine message, namely, to teach that God is one and that man ought to serve him.⁴³ Islam teaches that the phenomenon of prophecy is universal. It has taken place throughout all space and time. ‘Every human’, according to Islamic belief ‘is responsible for his own personal deeds. On the Day of Judgment, record of such deeds will be produced publicly and reward will be as per these deeds. As the al-Qur’ân says: [Whoever is rightly guided is so to his own credit; whoever errs does so to his own discredit. There is no vicarious guilt; and we shall not condemn [i.e. we shall not Judge] until we had sent a prophet].⁴⁴

As Islam conceives of it, the divine system is one of perfect Justice. Universalism and absolute egalitarianism are constitutive of it. Hence not only the Phenomena of prophecy must be universally present, its content must absolutely be the same. If the divine law conveyed by the prophets to their people were different in each case, the universalism of the phenomenon would have little effect. Therefore, Islam teaches that the prophets of all time and places have taught one and the same lesson; that God has not differentiated between his messengers.⁴⁵ Allah says in al-Qur’ân: [And Verily, we have sent among every *Ummah*(community) a Messenger (Proclaiming) “Worship Allah (alone) and avoid (Or keep away from *Taghut*”].⁴⁶ Moreover all prophets were sent to convey the divine message to the people in the language that is understandable by the people. God said [we sent not an apostle except (to teach) in the language of His (own) people, In order to make (things) Clear to them. Now Allah leaves straying those

whom He pleases and guides whom He pleases: and He is Exalted In power, full of wisdom.]⁴⁷ With this reassurance, no human has any excuse for failing to acknowledge God, or to obey His law. [Messenger who gave good news as well As warning, that mankind, after (the coming) of the apostles, should have no plea against Allah, for Allah is Exalted In power, wise.]⁴⁸

These verses show that Islam has laid down grounds for a relation with all people, not only with Jews and Christians whose prophets are confirmed in al-Qur'ân. As having once been the recipients of revelation, and of revelation that is identical to them of Islam, the whole of mankind may be recognized by Muslims as equally honored, as they are, by virtue of revelation and also as equally responsible, as they are, to acknowledge God as the only God and to offer him worship, service and obedience to His eternal laws.⁴⁹

All followers of religious traditions, therefore are recognized as possessors of divine revelations, each fitting its context of history and language, but all identical in their essential religious content. Muslims and non-Muslims are equal in their experience of divine communication.⁵⁰ Islam considered adherence to different religious traditions legitimate. Islamic concept of universal revelation made possible a distinction between the revealed essence of a religion, which it shares with all other religions and the figurizations of that religion in history. A critique of the historical by the essential, and of the understanding of both by the natural, has become possible for the first time with this breakthrough of Islam.⁵¹

The third level of religious pluralism in Islam is its identification with historical revelation of Judaism and Christianity. It acknowledged the prophets of the two religions as genuine prophets of God, and accepted them as Islam's own. Muslims are being taught to honour their names and memories. With acceptance of the Jewish prophets and Jesus Christ, Islam reduced every difference between itself and these religions to a domestic variation, which may be due to human understanding and interpretation, rather than to God or the religion of God. By making difference among the Muslims and Jews and Christians internally it thus narrowed the gap between the adherents of these religions. This is why the Muslims declare: [Worthier of affiliation with Ibrâhîm (and by extension, all Hebrew prophets and Jesus Christ) are, rather those who follow his religion, this Prophet and the believers'.]⁵²

On the basis of unity in essence and diversity in expressions in these religions God commanded His prophet (Muhammad peace be upon him) to address them in these words: [O People of Books, let us rally together, around a noble principle common to both of us, namely, that we shall serve none but God; that we shall associate naught with Him, and shall not take one another as Lords beside God'.]⁵³

Islam initiated the culture of appreciation to others on their good deeds while saying: [Those who believe (The Muslims) and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabaeans-all those who believe in God and in the Day of Judgment and work righteousness, shall have their reward with God. They shall have no cause for fear nor grief.]⁵⁴

The privilege of Ahlal Al-Kitâb, granted by God in the Qur'ân to the Jews, Christians and Sabaeans, was extended by the Muslims to the Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists and adherents of other religions as they came into contact with them.⁵⁵ Therefore, Islam grants today all three religious privileges to adherents of all the religions of the world.⁵⁶

A Turkish scholar, Muhammad Feteullah Gülen also highlights such ecumenical aspects of Islam in his thoughts. He has very successfully traced theological foundations of these ecumenical aspects of Islam from al-Qur'ân and Sunnah of the Prophet (Peace be upon him). He is not only interested in communication with West on the basis of these foundations but also wants to convince the contemporary Muslims about the importance of inter faith dependence. He is saying that 'the attitude of the believers is determined according to the degree of faith. I believe that if the message is put across properly, then an environment conducive to dialogue will be able to emerge in our country and throughout the world.'⁵⁷ Thus, as in every matter, we should approach this issue as indicated in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). His point of view is that the religion of Islam, beyond accepting the formal origin of other religions and their prophets, requires Muslims to respect them as fundamental Islamic principles. A Muslim is a follower of Muhammad at the same time that he or she is follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and other Biblical prophets. From his perspective not to believe in the Biblical prophets mentioned in the Qur'ân is enough of a reason to place someone outside the circles of Islam.⁵⁸

Islamic concept of religious diversity provides sufficient integration which is required for the purpose of healthy dialogue among the followers of different religions. Islamic recognition of other religions as legitimate encourages the Muslims to interact with the followers of all religions. If some one asked for conversation while declaring him right in his selection of religion, he will definitely accept such invitation. The framework of interfaith dialogue devolved on Islamic concept of religious diversity will provide a point from which every one would like to start conversation.

V- Freedom of Choice of a Faith

In Muslim theology differences of belief are seen as part of God's plan. The abolition of such differences is neither the purpose of Islam, nor was the Prophet Muhammad sent for this purpose. It looks on religious diversity as natural phenomenon, as a concomitant of God's bestowal of free will and choice on human being. God could have compelled all people to follow the truth, but did not do so.⁵⁹ If God in infinite wisdom did not compel people to embrace the truth, how it can be permissible for human beings because there is no compulsion in religion.⁶⁰ In fact major justification for use of sword is to protect the religious freedom of all people. Qur'ân says: [And were God not to repel some people by others, cloisters and churches and synagogue and mosques in which God's name is much remembered would have been pulled down.]⁶¹ The mentioning of churches and synagogue along with mosques is perhaps significant for analyzing Islamic view regarding other religions.

A Muslim is obliged by his faith to present Islam to the non-Believers. But this obligation is to be performed with the condition of ‘no compulsion in choice of faith.’ No compulsion is the guarantee of the freedom to convince as well as to be convinced, of the truth. It implies that the converter non-Muslim is to make up his own mind regarding the merit or demerit of what is presented to him. The Qur’ân forbids in unequivocal terms any tempering whatever with the process. Repeatedly, God warned His Prophet not to press the matter once he had made his presentation, absolving him of all responsibility for the decision for or against, or indecision, of his audience. Above all: [There shall be no coercion in religion. The truth is now manifesting; and so is falsehood. Whoever rejects evil and believes in God has attached him to the most solid bonds.]⁶²

Allah asked the Prophet: [Call them unto the path of your Lord through wise arguments and fair preaching; and argue them (the non-believers) with arguments yet more fair, yet more becoming.]⁶³In another verse this has been further clarified as: [We have revealed to you the Qur’ân that you may convey it to the people. It is the truth. Whoever accepts it does so to his own credit. Whoever rejects it does so to his discredit. You are not responsible for their decisions. (In case people reject the revelation). Say, I am only a Warner to warn you.]⁶⁴

Like the presentation of any theory, the presentation of Islam to the non-believers can be with all evidences but it can do no more than to lay it down. To the over Zealous enthusiast who takes men’s rejection too much to heart, or who is tempted to go beyond presentation of the truth, the Qur’ân warned: [Had your Lord willed it, all the people of the earth would be believers (But He did not). Would you then compel the people to believe. O Men, the truth has come to you from your Lord. Whoever wills may be guided by it; whoever does not will, may not.]⁶⁵

The freedom of choice in Islam is basic ingredient of conversion because conversion by force, coercion and interference is null and void to the subject, and a prosecutable crime for the da’iyah,⁶⁶ Muhammad Asad explains the terminology *dîn* and clarified : “The term *dîn* denotes both the contents of and compliance with a morally binding law; consequently, it signifies ‘religions in the widest sense of this term, extending over all that pertains to its doctrinal contents and their practical implications as well as to man’s attitude towards the object of his worship, thus comprising also the concept of faith “religious law’ or moral law .. depends on the context in which this term is used. On the strength of above categorical prohibition of coercion (*ikrâh*) in any thing that pertains to faith or religion, all Islamic Jurists (*fuqaha*) without any exception, hold that forcible conversion is under all circumstances null and void, and that any attempt at coercing a non-believer to accept the faith of Islam is a grievous sin: a verdict which disposes of the widespread fallacy that Islam places before the non-believers the alternative of “conversion or sword” .’⁶⁷

The earlier commentators of the Qur’ân provide the perceived historical circumstances in which the verse ‘no compulsion’⁶⁸ was revealed. They relate the

verse to a custom said to have been common among Arab women of Madina in the pre-Islamic period. Women whose children tended to die in infancy, or who bore only one child (*miqlât*)⁶⁹ used to vow that if a child is born to them and survives, they would make him a Jew and let him live among the Jews in order to ensure his long life. When Islam came into being, consequently, some of these children lived with the Jews. During the expulsion of Jews from Medina, the Ansâr attempted to prevent the expulsion of their offspring. They argued that in the Jâhiliyya they had caused their children to adopt Judaism because they thought that this religion was better than their heirs: now that Allah has honoured them with Islam, they wanted to force their sons to embrace the new faith, so that they be permitted to stay in Medina with their biological parents. When they communicated their intentions to the Prophet Muhammad, he did not respond at first: then the verse in question was revealed, giving a clear, and negative, response to the request. Therefore, when Banû Nadîr was expelled from Medina by the Prophet, these sons of Ansâr were given the choice to embrace Islam and stay, or to retain their adopted Jewish faith and leave the city with other Jews. No compulsion was practiced against those who chose the latter alternative. A similar tradition is related about Ansârî children who were suckled by the women of Banû Qurayza.⁷⁰

According to another tradition, the verse was revealed in connection with a certain Ansârî called Hasayn (or Abû al-Hasayn) whose two sons were converted to Christianity by Byzantine merchants who came to sell their goods in Medina.⁷¹ Their father asked the Prophet to pursue them and bring them back to Islam. On this occasion these verses were revealed. It is also reported that the verses were revealed when an Ansârî man became frustrated after the failure of his attempt to force his black slave to embrace Islam.⁷² Umer b. Khattâb is reported to have interpreted and implemented in a similar manner. He offered to his mamlûk (or mawlâ) Wasaq al-Rûmî to become his assistant in the administration after embracing Islam. He refused to embrace Islam and Umer left him alone, invoking these verses of Qur'ân. Similar was his reaction when an old Christian woman refused to convert to Islam at his behest.⁷³ A Tunisian scholar, Ibn ʿIshûr maintains that Jihâd with the purpose of conversion was enjoined only in the earliest period of Islam. In contradiction to the traditional commentaries, which consider that Qur'anic verse no.2:256 is abrogated, he maintains that this Qur'anic verse was revealed late. It was revealed in his view, after the conquest of Mecca. Consequently, it is not abrogated. On the contrary it is itself abrogating Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions according to which Jihâd was designed to bring about conversion. Since this revelation has changed the purpose of Jihad, its aim is now to expand the rule of Islam and induce the infidels to accept its dominion by the contracts of *dhimma*. He feels that the new situation is reflected in verse no. 9:29, where the non-believers are required to submit and pay Jizya, but not to embrace Islam. Ibn ʿIshûr also maintains, again in contradiction to the majority of the opinions, that verse no 9:29 abrogated verse no. 9:73 which does not mention the payment of jizya and could be understood as enjoining jihâd for the purpose of conversion.⁷⁴ A similar view is expressed by al-Qâsmî who reaches the conclusion the 'sword of jihad', which is legitimate in Islam, is not used to force people to embrace the (Islam) religion, but to protect the Da'wah and to

ensure obedience to the just rule and government of Islam.⁷⁵ In explanation of this verse, Hasan al-Basrî says, ‘The people of the Book are not to be coerced in to Islam.’⁷⁶ In the light of this verse it can be concluded that the dhimmîs are not to be forced to embrace Islam if they agree to pay the Jizya or the Kharâj. If they choose to ignore the truth of Islam after it made clear to them, God will take care of their punishment in the hereafter, but no religious coercion is practiced against them on earth.⁷⁷ Muslim jurists have rejected the validity of forcible conversion to Islam. According to Abû Hanîfa, al-Shâfi and Ibn Qudâmah, if some one acts against this principle and illegitimately forces a dhimmî or a musta’min to embrace Islam, the latter’s conversion is not valid unless he remains a Muslim voluntarily after the coercive force ceased. This opinion has practical significance: if a person was forcibly converted to Islam and later reverted to his former religion, he is not considered an apostate and may not be killed. Imam Muhammad bin al-Hassan Al-Shaybânî, on the other hand, maintains that such a person is “outwardly” (fi al-zâhir) considered a Muslim and ought to be killed if he leaves Islam.⁷⁸ However, Ibn al-Arabî derives that the verse only forbids forcing people to believe in falsehood; to force them to believe in the truth is a legitimate part of religion.⁷⁹

Above discussion shows that ‘no compulsion in faith’ is an established Islamic rule that was practiced by the Muslims during their period of rise and power. Islamic tradition of no coercion in faith is essence of religious pluralism.

Conclusion

Religious pluralism is an inescapable reality of modern developed world. It is increasingly becoming life style of modern civilized global society and dichotomies among human beings based on ethnicity, religion; race and colure are taking the form of diversified contemporary human life. Islamic vision of unity of essence of faith and diversity in life styles is a way to handle religious as well as cultural differences. In contemporary world, in spite of pluralistic approaches conflicts are very quirkily taking religious dimensions. It is the need of hour that issues should be discussed and debated so that consensus will achieve without use of aggression and violence.

In modern multi faith world, Muslims are impelled by their belief to cooperate with Muslims and non-Muslims for securing peace and justice. The views expressed in this paper show that Muslims have enough theological resources to redefine their position in the contemporary pluralistic world. A pluralistic society can be built so those involved, Muslims or otherwise, can feel free to engage and participate fully in a society that they are living in. It is worth mentioning that the Qur’ân claims itself as the book of guidance. The prophet Muhammad has followed it and had shown the community what it means and how that should be practiced. If a clear direction is not found in al-Qur’ân Muslims are encouraged to look into the practices of the Prophet. If nothing is found there, the Muslim community – through its learned scholars – is encouraged to reach a consensus which is nearest to the spirit of Islam. In this process any attempt to freeze society in the norms of the past is not acceptable, nor is it tolerable because it will drag the society back to the past. What the era requires is not just to look back profoundly and

positively to keep the connection with the mainstream. It will enable us in establishing reconciliation among diverse cultures for the safe and peaceful future of the world. In this regard a keen eye is required to differentiate between what is central and what is peripheral. Today self centred attitude is felt by many Muslims. This attitude is not appropriate for modern world. It is felt that Muslims must come to other religions, which have been on earth for hundred and even thousands of years, with humility that seeks to learn what role they play in God's providence, in what way they manifest God to man, how they lead man toward salvation.

If the Muslims are to come to other religions in humility to learn something more of God and His will for man and the world, they must meet them with openness and come to dialogue. If Muslims are going to be receptive to the truth they must shut off no possible approach ;they must be open to truth(God) every where, and should follow it when it is found, even when it means modifying or abandoning of earlier presumably unchangeable positions. This will pave a way toward peace and reconciliation. The peace of world is dependent on the peace among world religions. The only tool for peace among religions is dialogue based on pluralistic approaches and attitudes. It is time for Muslims to take the lead in the process of healing through dialogue.

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