

Tolerance as the Basis of Religious Pluralism in Islam

Isa Muhammad Maishanu*

Introduction

The world of today is facing a lot of impending dangers. The numerous bloody conflicts going on in the different parts of the world, the oldest being the Palestinian hotspot that has not been resolved for more than fifty years now; the increasing stockpile of weapons of mass destruction that could consume all that exist in this world; the resultant arms race; the hegemonic tendencies of some nations; the newly coined preemptive war; the various sheds of individual and state terrorisms; the abject poverty of about a half of human population; the many killer diseases that plague humanity, all tell of the need for a general reflection of all humans to save themselves and the other creations living on the surface of the earth. On the level of human interaction and interdependence, even though the world is coming closer into a common humanity, there are some who advocate clash of civilizations. This coupled with the age-old mistrust, selfishness, intolerance of some human communities of others, especially with the modern rise of fundamentalisms in the diverse religions of the world; all these demand concerted efforts towards the search for ways of eliminating these acrimonies and dangers so as to have a world of peace, justice, fair – play and advancement.

The twentieth and indeed, the beginning of the twenty-first centuries have brought a lot of challenges to the traditional religions, especially Christianity. This is how one scholar puts it:

The twentieth century has brought forth unparalleled challenges to the historic Christian faith. During this century, Christianity's relevance and ultimate validity have been questioned as never before. This assault on the

*Senior, Lecturer, Department of Islamic Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

central truth claims of Christianity has come from two distinct fronts: atheistic secular humanism and the growing climate of religious pluralism.¹

The modern advocates of religious pluralism, notably John Hick in the Protestant world and Hossein Nasr in the Muslim world tend to downplay the importance of the religious creeds involved in articulating their theses on the truth and validity of 'all' religions, as well as the intensity of such beliefs in the minds of the adherents of many a world religion. It is the intention of this paper to point to some of these beliefs as they relate to Islam's view of other religions, and its well entrenched concept of religious pluralism on the basis of tolerance and acceptance of the realities on the ground, in order to further advance these discussions. The late Ismail al-Faruqi of blessed memory, one of the most outstanding Muslim students of religion, once described the wish and hope of uniting mankind on one set of beliefs, through 'religious pluralism' as 'wishful thinking'.² Allah Almighty queried His Messenger Muhammad due to his earnest desire and love for the guidance of others thus:

So, will you (O Muhammad) then compel mankind, until they became believers?³

Wish and desire are something and reality may be something else. Being realistic and candid demand the acceptance of reality as objectively as it appears, howsoever one wishes the contrary. It is however pertinent to quickly add here that the superficial resemblances in the religions emphasized by the proponents of Perennial Philosophy will not suffice in convincing the followers of the different religions of the validity of all religio-spiritual traditions of the world.⁴ We know the attitudes of the followers of any religion towards those who do not adhere to it.

This study wants to discuss the Islamic position against religious pluralism. Two earlier studies outlined the Christian, as well as the Jewish position on this matter.⁵ A convert to Islam, Legenhausen also studied religious pluralism from the perspective of the Shiites in *Al-Tawhid* journal of Iran.⁶ I shall discuss some of the well-known and accepted facts on this matter in Islamic traditional scholarship, which in our view truly represents the Islamic position that is highly respected by the majority of the *Ummah*. Those facts, in a way, will partly help one to understand the *Ummah*'s stand on religious pluralism and similar issues.

Secularism and Modern Revival of Religions

Secularism is one modern trend with serious implications on religion and religious life of man. It presents a major challenge to the outlined and envisaged role of religion in human societies. This is so, as secularism - an entirely modern phenomenon - aims at eliminating religion as a source of values and direction in human societies. In this way, social institutions have to operate away and independent of religious values and teachings.⁷

This trend, which emerged in the West as a reaction to the overall dominance of the Christian Church on the minds and actions of the Europeans throughout the Middle Ages, resulted in a general antagonistic attitude of the modern western intelligentsia in the first place, towards religion. As the modern age brought with it industrialization and mechanization of life, the modern European societies witnessed an increasing secularization, with man becoming more and more detached from religion and its perspectives and interpretations. This eventually led to the exclusion of religious concerns in everyday life. This process did not end with the European societies, but was extended to the Muslim and other societies through colonization, cultural exchange and education that culminated in globalization. The new secular worldview undermines the concept of absolute truth of revelation, which is no more seen by the Secularists as infallible.

The atmosphere of the Islamic state for instance, was one replete with respect and honor to religion, piety, and virtue, unlike the religious tolerance and general atmosphere of modern times in the West born out of skepticism regarding the truth of religious claims, and of cynicism and unconcern for religious values.⁸

This development, religious adherents believe, was to the detriment of the common human good. Human values, unlike Divine values are neither absolute nor infallible. It will be very vital for humanity to have a rethink on this issue of living a life devoid of religious direction and divine guidance. Islam, of all religions, claims finality and perfection. It came in the 'full light of history' after the two major monotheistic religions. It possesses a preserved Scripture and an authenticated record of its exposition and application in the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace be upon him). This is considered one of the outstanding contributions of Muslim scholarship to the history and general study of religion.⁹

One of the very evident phenomena of modern times, especially the last three decades is the return of millions of people to religion. This sometimes seems to suggest that the long drawn conflict between secularists and adherents of many religions is tilting towards those who believe that religion has a role to play in human lives and societies. 'Fundamentalism' is a recent phenomenon and is simply put: 'A desire to return to the pure and traditional truths or fundamentals of a particular religious tradition'. This is clearly seen as a natural reaction to the secularists' and modernists' campaign and desire to limit the influence of religion to the private sphere. There are series of works studying this unexpected and 'unwelcomed' phenomenon as some will say.¹⁰ The modern 'coming back' of religion to the sphere of influence contrary to the predictions of 18th and 19th centuries European Philosophers in a way supports the argument that religion is not outdated, acquired or without any future prospect. The reality of religious fundamentalism we are witnessing today will go along way in enriching the old debate on whether religion is an instinct and part of the human nature or not.

Religious Pluralism and Validity of Religions

People who argue that all religions are equally valid (i.e., metaphysically true) either know little about the various religions or have given up reasoning in a logical fashion. A cursory study of the world religions reveals the fundamental and irreconcilable differences that exist. For example, some religions affirm monotheism (one God); others affirm polytheism (many Gods); still others affirm pantheism (all is God). And this is just the beginning of the contradictory statements made about God. According to the most basic laws of logic (e.g., the law of non-contradiction), these different views about God cannot be ultimately true at the same time and in the same respect. Logically, the three world views could all be wrong, but they could not all be correct. Again, if we are persuaded that our religion is true, then we are faced with this uncomfortable state of exclusivity. But could there be another alternative?

Some have argued that applying logic to religion is false or misleading. They insist that ultimate truth comes only through intuition. Their argument betrays them, however, because they must first presuppose the laws of logic to even attempt a refutation of them (indeed, one must utilize them to even speak or think). This is self-contradictory. To divorce oneself from

these self-evident laws of thought is to resign oneself to irrationality. For most people, this price is too great to pay.

Could it be, however, that the contradictions among the world's religions are only apparent rather than real? Could we attribute the differences to man's inability to grasp the infinite reality of God? The Eastern analogy often used to illustrate this point is a group of blind men touching different parts of the same elephant. The point is argued that people experience the same reality differently because of their differing historical, cultural, or philosophical biases. This argument has much to commend it. However, Christian philosopher C. Stephen Evans, in his book *Philosophy of Religion*, points out two weaknesses. First, it seems to imply a radical skepticism concerning our knowledge of God — the point being that no one can really know God satisfactorily. Second, it does not account for the exclusive claims made by Jesus Christ (Matt. 7:13; John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Jesus claims to be the way, not a way. Christianity's belief in the Incarnation (God entering the world in the person of Jesus Christ) — a direct and historical revelation — is in an entirely different category than the speculative claims of other religions. Revealed religion is specific and understandable. If its claim to be from God and not man can be supported, then its teachings are authoritative and trustworthy.

It can be said without any fear of exaggeration that the modern discussions on 'Religious Pluralism' was a peculiarly Christian problem as we can see in the many works of one of the most vocal voices calling for it, i.e. John Hick.¹¹ He has written about a dozen of books advocating a kind of a paradigm shift from what he calls 'self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness' in all religions, on the claim that no religion can claim to have the exclusive possession of the truth and reality. In one of his books 'God has Many Names', Hick attempted to show that the Ultimate Reality, which is the ultimate concern of all religions is one in reality, but given different names and conceived differently.¹² In support of these conjectures we find today many who quote two Qur'anic verses, which are interpreted arbitrarily without recourse to other Qur'anic texts or their explanations as given by the Prophet (peace be upon him) himself. The two verses are:

In Surah al-Baqarah Allah says:

“Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians, and Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and do righteous

good deeds shall have their reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” (v. 62).

In Surah al-Ma'idah the same fact is stated with little differences:

“Surely, those who believe, those who are the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians, - whoever believed in Allah and the Last Day, and worked righteousness, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” (v.69)

In the Tafsir of Ibn Kathir, he said Ibn Abi Hatim reported that Salman al-Farisi mentioned the people of other religions and their prayers, fasting, before the Prophet (S.A.W.) and he said: “O' Salman they are of the people of (Hell) fire.”¹³

Then Allah revealed:

“Those who believe (in the Qur'an) and those who follow the Jewish (Scriptures) and the Christians and the Sabians
....”

Ibn Kathir explained that, the Jews have to believe in the Torah of Musa and the Prophethood of Jesus and Muhammad (S.A.W.). And the Christians have to believe in the Gospel of Isa and accept the Prophet Muhammad otherwise these two groups will be of the people of Hell-fire. And a clear Hadith to this effect has already been mentioned. If Allah had wanted to equate all religions, and had accepted their ways of devotion to Him, He would not have mentioned them by names after the revelation of that verse and then say that He is going to decide between them on the day of Judgement as is clear in Surah Hajj:

“Those who believe (in the Qur'an) those who follow the Jewish (scriptures) and the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians and the Polytheists, Allah will judge between them on the Day of Judgment: for Allah is witness of all things.(Hajj: 17).

The two verses in questing as is very clear, mention the main religious groups that are in the same line of prophethood, in accordance with the opinions that see the Sabians as followers of earlier Messengers of Allah that found mention in the Glorious Qur'an, such as Prophets Nuh, Idris and Yahya (peace be upon them) especially. The verses made mention

of belief in Allah and the Last Day and righteous deeds as the only conditions for being saved and successful in the next life. Does this mean that the verses are referring to the Jews of the time of the Prophet Musa (peace be upon him) or the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) and/or the Jews of our time or of all times? If the Qur'an is confirming them and their faith and actions in these verses, then what is the meaning of numerous other verses of the Glorious Qur'an, that accuse them and the Christians of disbelief, unfaithfulness, breach of their covenants with Allah and outright rejection of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)? The last two issues of the rejection of the claim of Muhammad being a true Prophet and Messenger of Allah and his claim of receiving revelation from Allah in the Qur'an are still bone of contention in this matter. What would have warranted the advent of the Messenger of Allah, and the sufferings he endured, or the Qur'anic revelation that addressed them directly? All these questions must be asked before any such novel interpretation is accepted. In these matters related to *aqidah*, one has to always be extra cautious as it can easily lead to the question of authority, since this is seen generally is Islamic scholarly tradition as the domain of the *Musharri'* (the law-giver). This is the creedal aspect of this issue as well as the position of the Ummah on it. It is the position of the Messenger of Allah, who is reported to have said in a Hadith reported by Muslim in his *Sahih* collection. It was narrated by Abu Hurairah (R), that Allah's messenger (S.A.W.) said:

“By Him in whose hand Muhammad's soul is, there is none from amongst the Jews and the Christians (of the present nations) who hears about me and then dies without believing in the message with which I have been sent, but he will be from the dwellers of the (Hell) fire.”¹⁴

The Prophet (S.A.W.) cannot be more categorical! He started with a solemn oath and then added that any of the Jews or Christians who hears of him but rejected him will definitely be of the people of Jehenna.

The second Hadith was narrated by Abu Burada's father and goes as follows: Allah's messenger (S.A.W.) said: “.... And if any man of the peoples of the Book believes in his own Prophet and then believes in me too, he will get double reward....”¹⁵

In addition to this, there is another Hadith of Bukhari, narrated by Anas

Bin Malik (R) in which he reported that Allah's Prophet (S.A.W.) said:

“A disbeliever will be asked: Suppose you had as much gold as to fill the earth, would you offer it to ransom yourself (from hell-fire)? He will reply, Yes! Then it will be said to him, “You were asked for something easier than that, to join none in worship with Allah (i.e. to accept Islam) but you refused.”¹⁶

There may be only few people today cut off completely from this world of cell phones, internet, satellites channels and print media that can claim not to have heard of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (peace be upon him) or the Qur'an that he claims to have received from Lord. This is the true position, but this will not rule out peaceful coexistence, as every one is free to tread the path he chooses for himself as “there is no compulsion in religion”. Man has been given the free will and power to choose and is therefore fully responsible for the consequences of his choice.

The whole Ummah of Islam claims to take the Qur'an and the Great Prophet as its guides and so should not be seen as taking a position different from the one expressed by them.

Allah Almighty says:

“It is not for a believer, man or woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decreed a matter that they should have any option in their decision. And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he has indeed strayed in a plain error.”¹⁷

Islam is the last ring in the long chain of Allah's contact with the world. It confirms all the previous Prophets and messengers of Allah who came with guidance to their people. Allah mentions on the tongues of true believers:

“...”We make no distinction (they say) between one and another of His Apostles.” ...”¹⁸

Religious Pluralism as Tolerance in Islam

When it comes to the practical guidance on this matter, it is well recorded in Islamic societies, beginning with the

Madinan community under the guidance and leadership of the Messenger of Allah, how they were truly pluralist and tolerant. In a Hadith confirming this, from Imam Bukhari narrated by Usama Bin Zaid who mentioned that he and the Prophet (S.A.W.) passed by an assembly of Madinans among them “were Muslims, polytheists (worshippers of idols) and Jews.”¹⁹ These were the only existing religions in Madinah at that time, but their adherents sat together freely and discussed issues of mutual concern. Which religious pluralism is greater than this? Where do we find any similar, talk less of better situation?

It was also recorded in history that some of the Jews that stayed in Khyber with the Muslims interacted freely and with tolerance till when they bet Abdullah Bin Umar and they dislocated his hands and legs then only they were sent out of it, as a result of their breach of the covenant between them and the Muslims.²⁰

The Qur’an is very clear on one of its golden rules, i.e. the non-compulsion in matters of religion. It is well-known that you cannot truly impose your religion on people as this will eventually lead to hypocrisy and insincerity.

Tyrant rulers cannot be denied to have existed in the Muslim world any more than in any other empire. Wherever they existed, Muslims suffered as well as non-Muslims. Nowhere in Islamic history, however, were non-Muslims singled out for prosecution or persecution. The constitution that protected them was taken by Muslims to be God-inspired, God-protected. The Prophet had already warned: “If anyone oppresses any *dhimmi*, I shall be his prosecutor on the Day of Judgment.” No other religion or societal system has ever regarded the religious minority in better light, integrated it into the stream of the majority with as little damage to either party, or treated it without injustice or unfairness as Islam did. Indeed, none could. Islam succeeded in a field where all other religions failed because of its unique theology, which recognized the true, one, and only religion of God to be innate in every person, the primordial base of all religions, identical with Sabianism, Judaism, and Christianity.

Evidently, far from being a national state, the Islamic polity is a world order in which numerous religious communities, national or transnational,

co-exist in peace. The universal Pax Islamica recognizes the legitimacy of every religious community, and grants it the right to order its life in accordance with its own religious genius. It is superior to the United Nations because, instead of national sovereignty as the principle of membership, it has taken the principle of religious identity. Its constitution is divine law, valid for all, and may be invoked in any Muslim court by anyone, be he a simple Muslim or non-Muslim individual or the chief of the largest religious community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth stating that Islam, more than any religion revealed or man-made, has the best to offer in response to the spiritual cravings of mankind, and as al-Amiri (d.381 A.H.) has said, it rightly deserves the claim of abrogating all other religions.²¹ This last revealed guidance from Almighty Allah was endorsed by Him with the confirmation of its perfection and culmination. In fact in one of the narrations, it was reported that one of the Jews at the time of Caliph Umar bn al-Khattab said that he knew a verse in the Qur'an, if it were revealed on them (the Jews) they would have taken that day as a day of celebration (eid). When he mentioned the following verse of the Qur'an, Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) said,

“By Allah I knew the day and the time, it was revealed on the Messenger of Allah, it was the eve of Arafat day on Friday...”²²

The verse in question is the statement of Allah:

“.....This day, those who disbelieved have given up all hope (of crushing) your religion, so fear them not, but fear Me. This day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.....”²³ Surah al-Ma'idah: 3

This is the Divine testimony on the inherent value and significance of this way of life chosen by God himself for the whole of humanity. This fact can be reaffirmed by the study of other religions. The more one studies Islam along with other religions and with an objective and unbiased mind the more he comes to affirm this reality.

A believer guided to this religion must see that as the greatest favour done on him by his Lord and Nourisher. It has to be stated again that this understanding of the relationship between Islam and other religions, which is the mainstream belief of the overwhelming members of this Ummah, does not in anyway calls for disrespect or condemnation of other religions as they ways of lives chosen others who will be fully responsible for their choices. Islam despite all odds remains the fastest growing religion in the world, as it carries in it all the attractive and convincing features which man yearns for in his spiritual journey in this world.

Finally, Islamic concept of religious pluralism is an institution, not a mere theory that has been tested by fourteen centuries of continuous application, of success against tremendous odds. It alone among the religions and ideologies of the world was large enough in heart, in spirit as well as in letter, to give mankind the gift of a pluralism of laws with which to govern their lives under the aegis of its own meta-religious principles and laws. It alone acknowledged such plurality of laws as religiously and politically *de jure*, while it called their adherents with wisdom and fair argument to consider rationally, critically, and freely why they should not unite under the banner of the one religion that is the one and only meta-religion.

Notes and References

1. Samples, Kenneth R.,(art) 'The Challenge of Religious Pluralism' in *Christian Research Journal*, Summer 1990, California : Christian Research Institute, p.39
2. Al-Faruqi, I.R.,(art) "Meta-Religion: Towards A Critical World Religion" in *American Journal Of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 3 No. 1 1986. See also al-Faruqi, Ismail Raji, *Islam and Other Faiths* (ed.) Siddiqui, Atallah, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1998
3. Qur'an, Surah Yunus: 99.
4. Some Muslims associated with Perennial Philosophy and some Modernists advocate and insist on the validity of all religions due to their so-called unity of origins and goals mystically discerned, oblivious of whatever happened to the 'original messages and despite the irreconcilable differences that exist between them due to numerous human factors.
5. A Christian scholar, Kenneth R. Samples wrote on the 'Challenge of Religious Pluralism' in the *Christian Research Journal* of Summer 1990, published by Christian Research Institute, California and a Jewish scholar,

- Walter S. Wurzburger wrote on the same issue in 1981 on the net visited on 24/12/05
- 6 See the 13th and 14th issue of the journal.
- 7 For various definitions of 'secularism' see Hill, Michael, *A Sociology of Religion*, London: Heineman, 1973, Reprinted 1976, pp. 228ff.
- 8 Al-Faruqi, Ismail, *Islam and Other Faiths*, (ed) Siddiqui, A. (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1998, p.90.
- 9 See Hassan, M. Khalifa, *Tarikh al-Adyan*, No place of publication, 1996 pp. 27-30, see also my unpublished Ph.D thesis entitled "The Comparative Method in the Study of Religion: A Case Study of Al-Amiri and Al-Biruni and Some Selected Modern Western Approaches", IIUI, 1999.
- 10 See Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby's works on fundamentalism from the University of Chicago (1991-1995) in 5 Vols.
- 11 See Hick, John, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, (London: Macmillan, 1985), P-36-37 and Hick, John, 'Religious Pluralism' in Eliade, Mircea (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (New York: Macmillan, 1986) Vol. 12, Page 331
- 12 Hick, J., *God Has Many Names*, (London: Macmillan, 1980)
- 13 Mubarakpuri, *Misbah al-Munir Fi Tahdhib Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Riyadh: Dar al-Salam Publishers, 1420/1999 p.53-54
- 14 *Sahih Muslim*: Book of Iman, Ch. No. 240
- 15 *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol-7, Hadith No. 20
- 16 *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol-8, Hadith No. 546
- 17 Surah al-Ahzab :36
- 18 Qur'an. Surah al- Baqrah : 285
- 19 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Seeking Permission, Hadith No. 79
- 20 Bukhari reported it in 41:17 so also Muslim and Ahmad.
- 21 Al-Amiri, Abu al-Hasan, *Al-I 'lam bi Manaqib Al-Islam*, Ghurab, Abdul Hamid (ed.) Riyadh: Dar Al-Asalah, 1988, p.71.
- 22 Reported by Bukhari from al-Hasan bin al-Sabah in *Fath al-Bari* Vol.1, p.129, see also *Al-Misbah al-Munir*, op. cit., p.275.