

Religious Pluralism in Modernity and Islam: A Contrast of Two Models

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Abstract

The paper attempts to present the context of contemporary discourse on Religious Pluralism along with a short description of Religious Pluralism, its historical development and its types. It particularly sheds light on Islamic teachings on issues related to Religious Pluralism. A contrast of two models thus emerging from the principles and implications of Religious Pluralism as propagated by modernists and that of Islam helps us to appreciate the superiority and soundness of Islamic proposition. In the conclusion Islamic Model is presented as the one which ensures the ways of harmonious relations among adherents of different religions without subjecting religions to any sort of mutilations as is the case now.

Introduction

There can be two contexts to the discourse on religious Pluralism, one that is specific to the development of religious thought in Christianity and another which is a part of current onslaught on Islam and Muslims. Let us examine first the nature of the context which is specific to Islam and the Muslims:

a) In the post 11 September world, in the name of War on Terror, a new impetus has been given to the discourse on Religious Pluralism with special reference to Islam, earlier Samuel

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Huntington's "Clash of Civilization" had accentuated the feelings among non-Muslim intellectuals in particular and the common people in general that Islam remained the only religion with its belief systems, cultural values and civilisational direction which is diametrically opposite to that of modernity. The current propaganda fosters the view that all religions with the exception of Islam support modernity and the ways of mutual harmonious relations. Day-in and day-out a lot of material in media comes out, mostly produced by non-Muslims which try to portray Islam and Muslims as the ones who are not only misfits in the so-called progressive world, but form a big hurdle in the creation of harmonious social relations and fostering of inter-religious understandings and human progress. While there are many Muslim countries and lands with foreign-European American, non-Muslim, military forces influencing political, economic, social and intellectual landscapes of the individual countries and the Muslim world in general; there are number of institutions and paraphernalia created to effect an intellectual and cultural change among the Muslims in general. The nature of change and the strategies being employed for effecting the change on varied and somewhere subtle and somewhere very crude, overt and covert oppressions are being conducted to achieve the goals. So a combination of military, economic, political, diplomatic, cultural and intellectual forces is organized for the purpose.

In this background a particular intellectual discourse has been emerging. The main participants in this discourse happen to be the Orientalists-the non-Muslim so-called experts of Islam who do not subscribe to the core belief system of Islam, and the Westernized Muslim intellectuals who are projected to be the harbingers of the intending change among the Muslims. There is the minimal participation of those who happen to be the loyal and authorized spokesmen of the tradition. This way an asymmetrical

picture emerges of the discourse relating to Islam. Regarding Religious Pluralism it is assumed that to ensure a harmonious social inter-relationship of different inter-religious communities, there is a need for religious communities in general to shun and modify some of their religious teachings to adapt to the needs of the modern era. Islam is set apart as the one which is most intolerant of others and is accused of being jingoistic and aggressive in its attitude and behavior towards others. And The Muslims as the Conservatives, The Fundamentalists and many other epithets are associated with them which all bear negative connotations with the likely effect of creating and terrorized intellectual discourse where it becomes fashionable to be called progressive, moderate and accommodative, which in this context have a different connotation from their literal meanings and confirm and uphold the particular agenda of the Powerful Secular Forces.

b) The other context to the current discourse on Religious Pluralism is historically embedded in Christianity, its belief systems, its view and treatment to others and its claims to be the only truth and the only channel to salvation. It is being rightly said that one of the major motivations of Christian Religious Pluralism has been an effort in the way of mitigating the excesses committed by the Church against those who differed from them in their religion or religious denomination. History bears witness to the horrible tale of persecution and intolerance exhibited by Christian Europeans to the Native American peoples and also to others. It is not surprising to find that with increased awareness of this history, and of the beliefs and customs of others, among sincere Christians, there also comes compassion, regret, for what has been done in the past, and a resolve to prevent its recurrence.¹

Development of Religious Pluralism

European religious intolerance, however, is intra-religious as well as interreligious. Indeed the development of political Pluralism in eighteenth century Europe was largely fueled by a rejection of the religious intolerance exhibited in the sectarian wars of the Reformation period.²

While liberalism was the political response to the diversity of beliefs within the Christian community, its tenets were extended to non-Christian beliefs only in the twentieth century...³

But the failure of religious intolerance was no more manifest than in the rise of anti-Semitism and its institutionalization by the fascists. Eventually, the fascists were defeated and the liberal tolerance of non-Christian beliefs was written into the Declaration of Human Rights, but within Catholic Churches around the world, the Jews continued to be Christ killers. It was only in the 1960's, with a Second Vatican council, that reference in the Mass to the "Perfidious Jews" was expunged. This background of religious intolerance and the rise of liberalism must be kept in mind in order to understand what has come to be called "Religious Pluralism".⁴

Religious Pluralism is the outcome of an attempt to provide a basis in Christian theology for tolerance of non-Christian religions; as such, it is an element in a kind of religious modernism or liberalism.⁵

Religious Pluralism in Modernity

John Hick⁶ an important authority on pluralism states; "different religions are legitimate responses to the same ultimate reality (the real?) And various religions are historically and culturally conditioned interpretation of this same reality, salvation is occurring roughly to the same extent within the major

religions". To him various religions therefore are to be affirmed as equally legitimate alternatives.⁷

Roger Boase argues that the concept of religious pluralism is the notion that no single religion can claim a monopoly of the truth. This has gained wide currency during the last two decades as people have become increasingly aware of the need to break down barriers of mutual prejudice by engaging in interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Now, however, as a result of recent political events, this concept and the interpretation of religion and culture that it presupposes is increasingly under assault. The language of dialogue is being eroded by the self-fulfilling prophecy of a "clash of civilization" and the nightmare of "total war".⁸

These modern liberal ideas have indeed first emerged in the West; but they are essentially secular ideas, which have been and are as much opposed as supported within the Christian Churches. Contemporary Marxist, humanist and feminist critiques of economic, racial and sexual oppression have become common currency in Western liberal thinking, and have evoked their echoes in liberation and black and feminist theologies. But it would be erroneous to conclude, from the fact that these ideas have affected Western Christianity first among the religions, that Christianity has a proprietary interest in them. Our contemporary Western liberal-democratic, politically, racially and sexually liberated form of Christianity represents a creative synthesis of the Christian tradition with secular liberalism; and analogous synthesis is beginning to emerge within the other tradition.

There is a good number of definitions of Religious Pluralism that Muhammad Lagenhausen has tried to sum up to avoid any confusions and came up with at least seven sorts of Pluralism to distinguish them from one another. They are as:

and that the particular differences in moral systems are unimportant.

6. The second sort of pluralism that arises in consideration of the practical aspect of religion pertains to specifically religious obligations instead of moral obligations. Is it possible to fulfill one's religious obligations equally through adherence to any of a plurality of religions? Those who reject deontological religious pluralism would give a negative answer. They hold that God has commanded all of humankind at the present time to accept a specific religion. Choice of religion is not a matter of personal preference because of the normative pluralistic claim that no one should impose any religion on any one. However, normative and deontological pluralism should not be confused. One may endorse normative pluralism while denying deontological pluralism; that is, one may affirm that people should make their religious commitments in accord with their own personal consciousness, and reject the notion that whatever they decide is in accord with the commands given by God through revelation. Indeed, I will argue that this sort of position is more consistent with a sound Islamic theology than a blanket acceptance of pluralism.
7. The sort of pluralism advanced by writers such as Ramakrishna (1834-86), Madame Blavatsky (1831-91), Rene Guenon (1886-1951) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-98) could be called **Hermetic Religious Pluralism**. According to this theory, despite their exoteric differences, all the major religions share a common esoteric core. Although the thesis of hermetic pluralism is characteristically left rather vague, it is generally presented as the claim that the major religions lead to the same goal, which is a perennial

wisdom comprising various metaphysical principles. A hermetic pluralist could claim that all the major religions are equally effective means for reaching this knowledge, or merely that the ultimate wisdom is the same, or that some essential portion of it is common to the esoteric traditions of the major religions.¹²

Religious Pluralism and Islam:

A modest attempt is hereby made to have a theoretical formulation of Islam's Response to Pluralism based on the authoritative versions of Islamic faith. At the top is Al-*Qur'ân*, the revealed Book of Allah to His last Messenger Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him (570-632). *Qur'ân* continues to be held in the high esteem by the adherents of the faith. It is also considered to be the primary source of Islamic law and the moral code for the community to transact its relations within and without. Second to it is Hadith or Sunnah (Traditions and practices of the Prophet) who is the embodiment of the Ultimate Truth. *Qur'ân* attests to his position as the perfect model for the community to follow till Doomsday. The universality and the timelessness of his *صلى الله عليه وسلم* mission are special to him; he is the last Messenger in the chain of Allah's envoys. As part of His grand plan for the guidance of mankind, Allah sent the Prophet Muhammad *صلى الله عليه وسلم* down as the mercy for all the worlds abiding by his directive amounts to obeying Allah. The *Qur'ân* commands Muslims to obey him unquestionably.

And obey Allah and the Messenger, that you may obtain His mercy. (3:132)

He who obeys the Messenger, obeys Allah. (4:80)

You have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah. (33:21)

Islam considers all people of the world as God's family, in spite of their differences in faith, language and nationality. It recognizes the right of every man to form his own views and to choose his own way of life. No one is permitted to impose his opinion on others by force. Recognizing the human right to freedom of thought, the *Qur'ân* says: "there is no compulsion in religion". (2:256) So Islam does not allow persecution or discrimination on the ground of religion or color. Muslims are also ordained to cooperate with other peoples in good works and to dissociate themselves from evildoers. The *Qur'ân* exhorts all mankind to try to excel each other in good deeds. (2:148) Since all men are brothers and belong to one family, the service to man has been regarded as a noble work by the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم of Islam, who says: "All creatures are from the family of God, the most beloved in the sight of God is he who is the most beneficial to His creatures". He is also quoted as saying: "O God, bear witness that all men are truly brothers".¹⁶ Thus any system, which divides men into rival groups such as master and slaves and does not recognize people as brothers, is repugnant to Islam and to the noble idea of the universal brotherhood of mankind.

As long as people are conscious of the fact that they belong to God's family,¹⁷ they will refrain from doing wrong to their fellowmen. But the moment the idea of universal brotherhood disappears from their consciousness, they are no longer able to rise above the limitations that they have imposed on themselves in the name of nationalism, race, language or any erroneous concept of religious dogma. To satisfy their vanity they allow themselves to dominate and to exploit their own fellowmen. Consequently, they themselves destroy peace. Indeed it is the misfortune of nations that they have been divided into rival groups. Anyhow, the idea of brotherhood requires that more than anything else hatred and ill-will towards others should come to an end. Peace

with God, whose name is also the Peace (al-Salaam), can alone cure such inward diseases. At the same time, man in his social life should cease to live at the cost of his fellowmen, because man cannot enjoy divine bliss while he refuses to serve His family. Through their sincerity, humility and good example, Muslims can play an important role in the world and fulfill the Divine Will. Needless to say that the religious and moral duty of the Muslim nations is to be in the forefront against war, because to work for peace (*ifsha' al-salaam*) is one of those orders given by the Prophet صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم to his followers.¹⁸ Small nations can do so by first putting their own house in order (charity begins at home) in accordance with the concept of the brotherhood of man. It may be noted that noble ends can be achieved only through noble means. Military pacts and arms race will never secure peace. On the contrary, they are doomed to failure.¹⁹

The *Qur'ân* is replete with provisions, which enjoin peaceful coexistence with other religions. In the very outset, it stresses the principle that there is no compulsion in religion. All the prophets of God who delivered His (Allah's) message to the humanity before Muhammad صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم are recognized and accorded respect; and were not discriminated. According to the *Qur'ân*, all people were created from the same source and are inherently well disposed and equal.²⁰ Allah says:

Men have fear for your Lord, who created you from a single soul. From that soul He created its mate, and through them He bestowed the earth with countless men and women. (4:1)

And We bestowed upon him Isaac and Jacob, each of them We guided; and Noah did We guide aforetime; and of his seed (We guided) David, Solomon, and Job, Joseph, and Moses and Aaron. Thus do We regard them good. And Zakariah and John and Jesus and Elias. Each one (of them) was of righteous; And Ismael and Elisha and Jonah and Lot. Each one of them did We prefer above (our) creation. (6:84-87)

O ye who believe! Believe in Allah and His Messenger and the Scripture which He hath revealed unto His Messenger, and the Scripture which he revealed aforetime. Whoso disbelieveth in Allah and His Angels and His Scriptures and His Messengers and the Last Day, he verily hath wandered far astray. (4:136)

1. Non-Compulsion in Religion

The *Qur'ân* is very categorical about the issue of propagation of the faith. While it has made it abundantly clear that Islam is the last version of Divine Truth to be believed in and followed by the people till the end of time, yet it does not allow imposition of the faith on people. This is a very revolutionary step in the religious history of mankind and speaks volumes about the nature of Islamic methodology for propagation of faith. The *Qur'ân* says:

There is no compulsion in religion. (2:256)

Say, "The truth is from your Lord". Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it). (18:29)

2. 'Basis' of every significant religion is accepted:

Qur'ân considers every revealed religion has a common base. There are many verses in the Book. We speak of the commonality of the primary teachings of the messengers of God in different times and different places. It further explains that every nation was blessed with a divine guide.

Mankind was one single nation, and Allah sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in Truth, to judge people in matters wherein they differed... (2:213)

For there has not been a nation which has not had warner. ((35:24)

But you are truly a warner, and to every people a guide. (13:7)

To every people (was sent) a Messenger. (10:47)

We did aforetime send Messengers before you; of them there are some whose story We have related to you, and some whose story

We have not related to you. (40:78)

3. More stress is laid on fundamental teachings

While *Qur'ân* makes it mandatory on the believers to follow its teachings and commandments completely without any reservations, yet it explains the core beliefs and behaviors of true religiosity.

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfill the contracts which you have made; and to be firm and to be patient in pain (or sufferings) and adversity and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, those who fear Allah. (2:177)

To each is a goal to which Allah turns him; then strive together (as in a race) toward all that is good. Wheresoever you are, Allah will bring you together. For Allah has power over all things. (2:148)

For We assuredly sent amongst every people a Messenger, (with the Command), "Serve Allah, and eschew Evil": (16:36)

Not a Messenger did We send before you without this inspiration sent by Us to him: that there is no god but I; therefore worship and serve Me. (21:25)

4. Laying down principles for Cooperation and Non-cooperation

It is in this perspective that the *Qur'ân* commands the faithful to extend willing co-operation in the realization of goodness and piety and prevention of vice and tyranny.²¹ The *Qur'ân* says:

Help one another in acts of righteousness and piety, and do not help one another in sin and transgression. (5:2)

In a plural society, whoever struggles towards the attainment of equity and justice and removal of human

exploitation and denial of human rights deserves unreserved cooperation of the Muslims. In our society, inequality and repression is so widely spread, so strongly entrenched, and so domineering, that only a concerted collective effort, in which all irrespective of their religious or social persuasion take part can possibly contain it.

In fact Islam enjoins the Muslims community to spearhead such endeavors, to be the front-runners in the noble pursuit of justice and equity, minimization of hunger and disease and eradication of vice and corruption. There is hardly any justification to hedge these endeavors within the parochial or cultural confines of one's own community. For as discussed above these ideals are universally valid for all human beings.

Those who prefer to stifle protest when injustice does not impinge on the rights of their own community and screech and wail only if it affects them directly betray Allah's command to show concern for all mankind. The religion of the oppressed should prove no bar to extend the arm of rescue.²²

5. Prohibition on Vilification of Other Religions

Muslim attitude to people of different faiths is defined by Islamic general view of humanity. Islam teaches its adherents to respect the religious sensitivities of people of other faiths. A clear injunction of the *Qur'ân* enjoins the Muslims not to abuse or vilify the gods worshipped by others.²³

Do not revile those whom they invoke other than Allah, because they will revile Allah in ignorance out of spite. (6:108)

But another vital aspect of this teaching has been scarcely emphasized. Islam believes in the essential goodness of man. Basic goodness of human nature, in its view, is not limited to Muslims only. People of other faiths, in particular those it calls People of the Book, may not all be devilish in disposition, wickedly

disobedient to their Lord, and tyrannical in their behaviour to mankind.²⁴

The *Qur'ân* emphasizes the humility and learning of a section of Christians in the following verse:

You will surely find that of all people they who say: "We are Christians" are closest to feeling affection for those who believe. This is because there are worshipful priests and monks among them and because they are not against. (5:82)

In another context describing Jesus, the Messenger of Allah the *Qur'ân* emphasizes the kindly character of his followers:

And we put in the hearts of those who followed him, compassion and mercy. (57:27)

6. Command to remain steadfast in upholding Justice

Qur'ân asks a true believer to uphold Justice even if the verdict goes against him or his kith and kin, or his tribesmen. It has made it clear that one of the Divine Missions of the Messengers of God has been to establish Justice. That is why Islam and nationalism; Islam and communalism, are irreconcilable.

Qur'ân says:

O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in upholding equity bearing witness to the truth for the sake of God, even though it be against your own selves or your parents and kinsfolk, whether the person concerned be rich or poor, God's claim takes precedence over (the claim of) either of them. Do not then, follow your own desires, lest you swerve from justice: for if you distort (the truth) behold, God is indeed aware of all that you do. (4:135)

O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you in to the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God; verily God is aware of all that you do. (5:8)

Moral and Socio-Political Implications of Two Models:

The Secular Model is not morally just. It asks rather mandates religions to give up some of their teachings. Some religions are subjected to very crude forms of mutilations and they lose some core beliefs and distinguishing features. The process creates place for misuse as a means of hegemonisation and subversion. It is based on the false presumption that religious and social harmony is endangered primarily by the presence of many religious belief systems.

Islamic Model is morally just. It gives no place for misuse as a means of hegemonisation and subversion. It protects the absolutist nature of religion by precluding any possible demand to give up a religious principle.

Conclusion

Secular formulations to the development of inter-relationship among different religions on particular patterns for particular goals have been a continuous process. Secularists and upholders of religious syncretism have failed to understand the viable and most appropriate framework for addressing the issue of religious pluralism. It is the need of the hour that new vistas of the discourse be explored. Opinions of authentic scholars of religions are explored so that the present discourse is freed from the clutches of the political and cultural propagandists of the West and its camp followers in traditional religions. In the case of Islam a particular care is needed to de-link the issue from the orientalist jargon. In this respect Khurram Murad's ²⁵ response titled "Christian/Muslim Reciprocity: Some Comments" to the document prepared by the Conference of European Churches and the Consilium Conferentiarum Episcopaliu Europeae²⁶ on the subject of Christian-Muslim Relationship must be taken full cognizance in the discourse for alternative models of religious

pluralism.²⁷ Islamic Model for creating harmonious relations among adherents of different religions must be seriously contemplated by those who sincerely want to have cordial relations among different religions without subjecting them to coercion and mutilations.

References and End Notes

- ¹ Muhammad Legenhausen, *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (London: Al-Hoda, 1999), p.1
- ² *Ibid.* p. 1.
- ³ *Idem*
- ⁴ *Ibid.* p. 2.
- ⁵ *Idem*
- ⁶ A proponent of Religious Pluralism, and author of, *A Christian Theology of Religions, An Interpretation of Religion (Human Responses to the Transcendent), The Fifth Dimension (An Exploration of the Spiritual Islam), Arguments for the Existence of God.*
- ⁷ John Hick, *An Introduction to Religion* (Netland-1998), p. 221.
- ⁸ Roger Boase, *Islam and Global Dialogue* (England, Ashgate, 2005), p. 1.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 53-54.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp.54-55.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 55.
- ¹² *Ibid.* pp. 55-56.
- ¹³ Adnan Aslan, "Islam and Religious Pluralism", *The Islamic Quarterly*, 1996, pp. 173-174.
- ¹⁴ Siyan Oyeweso, "The State and Religion in a Plural Society: the Nigerian Experience", *The Encyclopedic Survey of Islamic Culture*, vol. 2, ed. M. Tahir, (New Dehli: Anmol Publications, 1998), p. 257.
- ¹⁵ Mehmet S. Aydin, "Islam and the Challenges of Pluralism" in www.flwi.ugent.be/cie/maydinen1.htm
- ¹⁶ *Sunnan of Abu Dawud*, vol. 2, Kitabus Salat, ed. M. M. Abdul Hameed.
- ¹⁷ Prophet Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) has said: the whole creation is the family of Allah, so the most beloved person to Allah is he who does the greatest good to His family.
- ¹⁸ *Sahih al Bukhari*, Ch. of al-Nikah.
- ¹⁹ Rashid Ahmad Jallundhari, *Islam and the Current Issues*, (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1998), pp. 25-26.
- ²⁰ *The Encyclopedic Survey of Islamic Culture*, op. cit, pp. 256-257.
- ²¹ F. R. Faridi, *Living as a Muslim in a Plural Society*, (Chennai: Islamic Foundation Trust, 1998), pp. 79- 80.

²² *Ibid.* pp. 80-81.

²³ Faridi. *op. cit.*, pp. 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 91.

²⁵ Khurram Murad, (1932-96) was editor of the monthly *Tarjumanul-Qur'ân* (Lahore) and the Quarterly, *The Muslim World Book Review* (Leicester) and was Director General of the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, UK (1978-86). The document titled 'Christian/Muslim Reciprocity: Some Comments, was published in *Encounters: Journal of Inter-Cultural Perspectives*, 2:2 (September 1996), pp. 199-206.

²⁶ The document titled "Christian/Muslim Reciprocity: Considerations for the European Churches" (CEC, Protestant) was issued by the 'Islam in Europe Committee' a joint-Committee organized by the Conference of European Churches and the Consilium Conferentiarum Episcopaliū Europeā (CCEE, Roman Catholic). The Committee met in Geneva in October 1994 and March 1995 to discuss the issues, and produced this document. It was published in *Encounters: Journal of Inter-Cultural Perspectives*, 2:1 (March 1996), pp. 70-5.

²⁷ A booklet titled *Reciprocity and Beyond: A Muslim Response to the European Churches' Document on Islam* was published by Islamic Foundation, Leicester containing three important documents. The first being Churches document on Christian/Muslim Reciprocity, the second being Khurram Murad's response to it and the third one the modified position paper of the European Church titled *Beyond Reciprocity Towards Reconciliation*, admitting the flaws in the concept of Reciprocity produced by it earlier. Also admitting the validity of the comments of Khurram Murad. The process needs to be pursued with all seriousness and religious devotion and sincerity by the upholders of the religions.

