
Plurality as the Will of God

An Islamic Theological Perspective

Ednan Aslan

Muslims, throughout their history, have developed diverse conceptions of how they should live together with representatives of other religions as well as concerning the position that minority religions should have in predominantly Muslim countries. The rights and obligations of Jews and Christians have been discussed in great detail in the most diverse theological works. In all of these books, attention is exclusively given to how the religious minorities should be handled, without a single thought being articulated concerning their participation in the wielding of power in an Islamic society. Apart from discussions in some Sufi literature, the special status of religious minorities and the status of their conceptions in comparison to institutionalized Islam were dealt with only from a theological perspective with regard to those aspects (Aydın 2005).

The conceptions of the status of religious minorities developed by Muslim scholars can no longer meet the challenges of people living in globalized, pluralistic societies. This is because the objective is no longer to determine how religions can tolerate one another, but rather to discover how we can increase the pluralizing capacity of religions in such a way that we can succeed in living together in peace without any particular religion or worldview claiming absolutism.

Just as Christians are questioning their theological history in the face of these more recent developments, Muslims living under these new global conditions are challenged to question their positions towards other religions and, in the spirit of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition, to expand their thinking.

In this process, the expectation of Muslims that they can recover solid, ready-made conceptions from their history can only lead to disappointment or isolation,

because the current situation of Muslims cannot be understood through the lens of their history, just as their history cannot be held responsible for the current situation.

We do not see our faith as something that is continually changing. We are constantly looking for solid conceptions such as the conception of Medina and that of Mecca. However both are overly simplistic: before the hijra and after the hijra. In the conception of Mecca we were the victims; in the conception of Medina we won and were the rulers. But neither is suitable for an open and pluralistic society, because there the attention is always on a give and take (Esack 2014).¹

If we observe the current research in Muslim countries, we discover that, unfortunately, very few Muslim scholars deal with the issue of the pluralizing capacity of Islam. Instead, scholars are still actively engaged in assessing the position of religious minorities from the viewpoint of an institutionalized Islam. This only results in more contradictions and conflicts, because that position does not presuppose the equivalence of the religions, but rather the devaluation of other religions. No pluralizing theological conceptions can arise from that attitude (Karaman, 2014).

Muslims living in Europe, who are constantly confronted with religious and cultural diversity, are faced with the task of rethinking their own theology from within the pluralistic conditions in Europe much more so than Muslims in Muslim majority countries, because the future of Islam in Europe depends decisively on the success of such a plural society. In this process, Muslims cannot allow themselves to be simply dependent on the performance of other religions, but instead they should reshape their own theology in active dialogue with other religions in the European context. In that way, Islam could serve as the basis for explaining the contradictions between Islam and a pluralistic society from the perspective of its own philosophical tradition and then such impulses could be transmitted to Muslim majority countries, as a kind of proof that a pluralistic society can be substantiated through a qur'anic approach.

In order to substantiate such an approach, an attempt will first be made to interpret and define the religious understanding of Muslims from the perspective of their new circumstances. Secondly, the consequences for Muslims of that interpretation and definition will be elucidated. Out of these two elements a conception of the pluralizing capacity of Islam will be constructed so that Muslims can substantiate and further develop their lived reality.

1 Farid Esack, (2014). "Deutsche Muslime sind nur Mitreisende" at <http://de.qantara.de/inhalt/interview-mit-dem-islamischen-theologen-farid-esack-deutsche-muslime-sind-nur-mitreisende>. (Retrieved: Oct. 4, 2015).

What is *Dīn* (Religion)?

*Dīn*² as a concept is described in the Qur'an more than 90 times and in four dimensions. In the first dimension *dīn* is described in relation to the lived context, such that *dīn* in this case defines the traditions and customs of a culture and society (Qur'an 7:51 *ittakhadhū dīnahum lahwān wa-lā'ban*). "They have made play and passing delight their religion (*dīn*)". Apart from this contextual reference, the term is understood to comprise the sustainability of a society, because it encompasses the orientation, not only of a society, but also of a person (Qur'an 6:1 *al-dīn al-ḥanīf, ṣirāṭin mustaqīmīn dīnan, shara'a lakumu 'l-dīna*). *Dīn* also embraces a human's reference to God, in that, through that term, the human can give expression to his relationship to and trust in God (Qur'an 30:30 *al-dīn al-qayyim*). Within society, in addition to the meanings elucidated above, the term can describe social and legal relationships (Qur'an 10:105 *yawm al-dīn, ahlū'l-dīn*).

From these portrayals it is possible to infer that the term *dīn* cannot be claimed to signify Islam as it was institutionalized and proclaimed by Prophet Muhammad as a religion, since the verse from the Qur'an "Unto you, your moral law, and unto me, mine" is to be understood such that the Qur'an also refers to the way of life and moral attitudes of non-Muslims in Mecca as "*dīn*".³

In the teachings of the Qur'an, all religions that invoke God are characterized in their essential core as *dīn*. The divergences that do not concern this essential core of religion are referred to, beyond the core essence, not as *dīn*, but rather as theological wishful thinking.

2 For more details see Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective on Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 128 and M. Asad, *The Message of The Quran*. Translated and explained by Muhammad Asad. (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980), footnote 249.

3 As impetus for the revelation of this *surah* al-Tabari reported the following from Ibn Abbas: "The Quraysh offered the Prophet Muhammad as much money and women as he desired, so that he would no longer be committed to the spread of Islam. After the Prophet rejected this offer, they came within another offer, that the Prophet worship the gods of Meccans, al-Lat and al-Uzza, but in return for this the Meccans wanted to worship the God of the Prophet Muhammad. This was the impetus for the revelation of the *surah*, that God set the limits of the various religions." (See Abū Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarīr al-Tabarī, *The commentary on the Qur'an: being an abridged translation of 'Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'an'*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), Sura 109.

And they claim, “None shall ever enter Paradise unless he be ‘a Jew’ – or, ‘a Christian’”. Such are their wishful beliefs! Say: “Produce an evidence for what you are claiming, if what you say is true!” (Qur’an 2:111)

Furthermore, the Jews assert, “The Christians have no valid ground for their beliefs”, while the Christians assert, “The Jews have no valid ground for their beliefs” and both quote the divine writ! Even thus, like unto what they say, have [always] spoken those who were devoid of knowledge; but it is God who will judge between them on Resurrection Day with regard to all on which they were wont to differ. (Qur’an 2:113)

In this regard, the Qur’an attempts to refute this claim using the very sources that Christians and Jews use so as to direct their attention to what is essential in a religion:

Yea, indeed: everyone who surrenders his whole being unto God, and is a doer of good withal, shall have his reward with his Sustainer; and all such need have no fear, and neither shall they grieve”. (Qur’an 2:112)

This verse makes it possible to avoid the generalization of religions and to point to the personal action and responsibility of the individual, since it is not the tribal or group affiliation of a person that is necessarily a sign of his or her goodness as a human being.⁴ Key are the individual works of a human being, which are inde-

4 The Qur’an avoids stressing the generalizing aspects of religious groups and points out the achievements of individuals in the various religions, regardless of their social rank and status. This applies to Muslims to the same extent as members of other religions. “[But] they are not all alike: among the followers of earlier revelation there are upright people, who recite God’s messages throughout the night, and prostrate themselves [before Him]. They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and vie with one another in doing good works: and these are among the righteous. And whatever good they do, they shall never be denied the reward thereof: for, God has full knowledge of those who are conscious of Him.” (Qur’an 3:113-115).

Noteworthy is the impetus for the revelation of the verse 3:113, that God forbids emphasis on other religions: “Ibn Mas’ud, who said, “The Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, delayed the time of the nightfall prayer. When he came out to lead the prayer, he found people waiting for the prayer. He said: ‘There is no one among the adherents of other religions who is remembering Allah, exalted is He, at this hour except you’. And Allah, exalted is He, revealed these verses (They are not all alike. Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of Allah in the night season...) up to His saying.” al-Wāhidī, ‘Alī ibn Ah-

pendent of his or her religious affiliation. To understand Islam as a religion (dīn) only through its institutionalized structures does not correspond to the essence of Islam.

Behold, the only [true] religion in the sight of God is [man's] self-surrender unto Him; and those who were vouchsafed revelation aforetime took, out of mutual jealousy, to divergent views [on this point] only after knowledge [thereof] had come unto them. But as for him who denies the truth of God's messages – behold, God is swift in reckoning! (Qur'an 3:19)

In this verse, when the Qur'an speaks of the true religion, it is not necessarily referring to Islam as an institutionalized religion, but rather as the origin of all religions, which the Qur'an labels as Islam. What is being criticized here again is that the people diverge not from an institutionalized religion, but rather, as described in verse 2: 112, from the good deeds and works that are expected of them. Here again, Islam is to be understood not so much as a religion, but rather as a general designation for the good works of good people. However, the people who ignore their individual responsibility to God and to other people are abandoning not only a particular religion, but also their own natural predispositions (fiṭrah).

And so, set thy face steadfastly towards the [one ever -true] faith (hanif), turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition (fiṭrah) which God has instilled into man: [for,] not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created this is the [purpose of the one] ever-true faith; but most people know it not. (Qur'an 30:30)

And they say, "Be Jews" – or "Christians" – "and you shall be on the right path." Say: "Nay, but [ours is] the creed of Abraham, who turned away from all that is false, and was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God. (Qur'an 2:135)

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you that which He had enjoined upon Noah and into which We gave thee [O Muhammad] insight through revelation-as well as that which We had enjoined upon Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the [true] faith, and do not break up your unity therein. (Qur'an 42:13)

Essentially, what the Qur'an designates as "*dīn*" is a spiritual state of consciousness, which corresponds to the natural predisposition of the human being. This natural predisposition, which is represented in the Qur'an as *dīn*, has remained unchanged since the beginning of the history of humankind, even if the people in the different cultures have received different revelations under different circumstances in different languages. The revelation's plurality is found in its form, but not in the core message of the revelations.

"And unto thee [O Prophet] have We vouchsafed this divine writ, setting forth the truth, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains of earlier revelations and determining what is true therein. Judge, then, between the followers of earlier revelation in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high, and do not follow their errant views, forsaking the truth that has come unto thee. Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ". (Qur'an 5:48)

The various social rules that God prescribed in various cultures and languages are not necessarily to be regarded as a part of *dīn*, because humans' needs and expectations are understood to be in the process of transformation. However, the core of *dīn*, which is based on such values and principles as solidarity and justice, has always remained unchanged.

In the Prophetic Tradition, it was narrated that Muhammad considered his perspective that all religions in Medina should bear equal moral responsibility for the society to be the core of his message, and he appointed himself as judge of the observance of the moral rules. The Qur'an reports that the Prophet guided the Jews and Christians, not in accordance with the rules of Islam, but rather in accordance with their own moral and theological rules, and that he attached great importance to the idea that the Christians and Jews act according to their own morality (law).⁵

5 See the impetus for the revelation of verse 5:49: "Hence, judge between the followers of earlier revelation in accordance with what God has bestowed from on high, and do not follow their errant views; and beware of them, lest they tempt thee away from aught that God has bestowed from on high upon thee. And if they turn away [from His commandments], then know that it is but God's will [thus] to afflict them for some of their sins: for, behold, a great many people are iniquitous indeed. (5:50) Do they, perchance, desire [to be ruled by] the law of pagan ignorance? But for people who have inner certainty, who could be a better law-giver than God?"

The important theologian al-Matūrīdī did not view shari'a as a prerequisite for *dīn*. Instead, he regarded *dīn* and shari'a as separate from one another. According to him, *dīn* is immutable, while shari'a is subject to a dynamic societal process (Özcan, 2013). Muslim Modernist scholar, Muhammad Asad, considered *dīn* to be the moral imprint of a society, which is shaped by the ethical actions of the people.

The term *dīn* denotes both the contents of and the compliance with a morally binding law; consequently, it signifies “religion” 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”. The rendering of *dīn* as “religion”, “faith”, “religious law”, or “moral law” depends on the context in which this term is used. On the strength of the above categorical prohibition of coercion (ikrāh) in anything that pertains to faith or religion, all Islamic jurists (fuqahā'), 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 unbelievers the alternative of “conversion or the sword”.⁶

Against the backdrop of this albeit brief presentation of the term *dīn*, we will now investigate the term “Islam.”

What is Islam?

The fact that the term “Islam” is attributed to a particular religion and the term “Muslim” to its adherents is apparent not from the Qur'an, but instead from the theological history of Islam. The Qur'an defines these terms as “godly devotion” and as “those people who are conscious of God”, respectively. According to the Qur'an, godly devotion is not to be understood as blind obedience, but rather as a responsible God-human relationship. Evidence can be found in the example of Abraham who does not view responsible religious affiliation or meticulous obedience as godly devotion.

Abraham was neither a “Jew” nor a “Christian”, but was one who turned away from all that is false, having surrendered himself unto God; and he was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him. (Qur'an 3:67)

This term “Muslim” is used in the Qur'an for, along with Ibrahim (Abraham), the sons of Yaqub (Jacob) (Qur'an 2:133) and the apostles of Jesus. The Qur'an even

6 M. Asad. *Message*, footnote 249.

relates that Pharaoh, when he was close to drowning, described himself as being among those who are “Muslims” (Qur’an 10:90...*Wa-anā min al-muslimīn*).⁷

From this, it is apparent that the theological definitions of “Islam” and “Muslim” do not match the qur’anic descriptions of these two concepts. In the first attempt, the institutionalization of religion is of immediate importance, whereas in the Qur’an the promotion of religious God-consciousness as a universal identifying characteristic of godly devotion is the primary focus of attention.⁸ In this regard, the two terms “Islam” and “Muslim” acquire new meaning. They are understood not only in terms of a specific institutionalized religion (*sharī‘ah* Islam) and its adherents, but also in relation to the foundation of faith for all people who believe in God.⁹

In this regard, Okuyan and Öztürk (2001) criticize reducing being a Muslim to the implementation of certain religious rituals and they resist defining the terms “Islam” and “Muslim” only in terms of the religion that was proclaimed by Muhammad and its adherents:

...such *ayahs* from the Qur’an as “Islam is the only religion before God” or “God has ordained Islam for you as a religion” were based only on institutionalized Islam, while people who were outside of this institution were classified as “*kafir*”. From this generally exclusionary position the contents of the Qur’an that the heterodox praise were interpreted differently or reduced to the Jews and Christians from the time of the Prophet or such *ayahs* were declared abrogated. (ibid. 174-175)

- 7 Qur’an 10:90. “I have come to believe that there is no deity save Him in whom the children of Israel believe, and I am of those who surrender themselves unto Him!”
- 8 Muhammad Asad comments on the verse, “For, behold, it is the God-conscious [alone] whom gardens of bliss await with their Sustainer: or should We, perchance, treat those who surrender themselves unto Us as [We would treat] those who remain lost in sin?” (Qur’an 68:34-35), in which the term “Muslim” is used for the first time in the history of the Qur’an, as follows: “This is the earliest occurrence of the term *muslimūn* (sing. *muslim*) in the history of qur’anic revelation. Throughout this work, I have translated the terms *muslim* and *islam* in accordance with their original connotations, namely, “one who surrenders [or “has surrendered”] himself to God”, and “man’s self-surrender to God”; the same holds good of all forms of the verb *aslama* occurring in the Qur’an. It should be borne in mind that the “institutionalized” use of these terms – that is, their exclusive application to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad – represents a definitely post-qur’anic development and, hence, must be avoided in a translation of the Qur’an.”
- 9 Qur’an 3:19: “Behold, the only [true] religion in the sight of God is [man’s] self-surrender unto Him;” or Qur’an 3:85: “For, if one goes in search of a religion other than self-surrender unto God, it will never be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the lost.”

In the Qur'an, representing people in a generalized way without individual character traits is expressly avoided, because Islam replaced group and clan affiliation with individuality.

The pre-Islamic Arabs identified themselves by their tribal affiliation, the collective, to which they belonged. In Islam, a believer is indeed a member of the Islamic community, but through his or her responsible commitment to Islam he or she is also perceived as an individual whose identification extends beyond tribal belonging, which had previously allocated to him or her a permanent place. This new person is able, through his or her autonomy, to take the initiative to make decisions on topics about which he or she had never previously been asked, nor did he or she expect to be, unless he or she was the undisputed group leader.

By autonomy one must understand that special something of a person, the existence of his or her singularity. To declare that people are autonomous is to assert that there is no human prototype, no model, according to which all persons should be styled. Each has his or her own frame of reference, inexhaustible source of spontaneity and initiative. (Lahbabi 2011, 61)

In this way, Islamic education was faced with the task of qualifying people through education to assume this responsibility so that they could rid themselves of blind social subordination and be able to develop a critical loyalty in relation to their communities.

On the other hand, this universal attitude of Islam not only included Muslims, but rather it also calls on the heterodox to work with hope for the good of society. Qur'an 2:62 gives expression to this universal responsibility of all people in a remarkable way.

Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians—all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds—shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.”¹⁰

10 Tabātabā'ī comments on this verse as follows: “The verse says that Allah gives no importance to names like believers, the Jews, the Christian or the Sabaeans. One cannot get a reward from Allah, nor can he be saved from punishment, merely by giving oneself good titles, for example, the claim: no one will enter the Garden except he who was a Jew or Christian (2:111)” Muḥammad-Ḥosain Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Al-Mīzān*. V. 1. (Tehran: Wofis, 1983), 62.

A Companion of the Prophet Muhammad, who is known as Salman the Persian, reported about his Christian friends, with whom he lived together, prayed together, and had positive experiences for a long time. Some of them, according to the Prophetic Tradition, supposedly even advised him to visit the Prophet Muhammad.

After hearing his positive and friendly reports on these Christians, the Prophet said: “They are all in hell!” (Wahidi 2008, 22). This answer brought Salman to a serious crisis of conscience, as he could not imagine these people with their good deeds and sincere faith in hell. When the verse cited above, which even implicitly rebuked the Prophet Muhammad was revealed, it took Salman out of his sorrow and explained in a remarkably tolerant way that God made people’s salvation dependent on three conditions: belief in one God, belief in the Day of Judgment and righteous actions in life.¹¹

According to this verse, being a Muslim should be understood, beyond religious affiliation, as an expression of a just life, which forms a foundation of faith and righteous acts for all people. These righteous acts can manifest themselves in rituals, which are performed differently in diverse religions. Crucial, however, is what emerges from the rituals, or how the rituals elicit an effect. Linking faith to prescribed rituals enables its identification with a particular religious affiliation, but not with the desired impact on society that God requires of its adherents, as the following Qur’an chapter articulates:

Hast thou ever considered [the kind of man] who gives the lie to all moral law? Behold, it is this [kind of man] that thrusts the orphan away, and feels no urge to feed the needy. Woe, then, unto those praying ones whose hearts from their prayer are remote—those who want only to be seen and praised, and, withal, deny all assistance [to their fellowmen]! (Qur’an 107:1-7)

Muhammad Asad underscores this point in his comment on the first verse of this chapter:

who denies that there is any objective validity in religion as such and, thus, in the concept of moral law, which is one of the primary connotations of the term *dīn*. Some commentators are of the opinion that in the above context *dīn* signifies “judgment”, i.e., the Day of Judgment, and interpret this phrase as meaning “who calls the Day of Judgment a lie. (Asad 1980, 1297)

11 On this see also Asad 1980, 41.

Muslims are the ones who, beginning with the Prophet Adam, perform with godly devotion good works and champion justice. It is through this righteousness that the consequences of rituals can have an impact on society and can be visible. Without this righteousness, and its resulting impact and visibility, the universal foundation of faith cannot be attained.

The Bedouin say, "We have attained to faith." Say [unto them, O Muhammad]: "You have not [yet] attained to faith; you should [rather] say, 'We have [outwardly] surrendered' – for [true] faith has not yet entered your hearts. But if you [truly] pay heed unto God and His Apostle, He will not let the least of your deeds go to waste: for, behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (Qur'an 49:14)

Mahmut Aydin supplements this verse with the comment that Muslims should rethink their own position in relation to the heterodox and to the believers.

In addition to this general meaning, this verse gives expression to a current problem of Muslim communities in dealing with diversity and unity. In this regard, the question arises as to whether a school of law, theological explanation or an ideology can declare a Muslim an unbeliever? If we look for the answer to this question in the Qur'an, we find an impressive answer: "Do not say unto anyone who offers you the greeting of peace, Thou art not a believer." (4:94) Regardless of the commitment to religious pluralism on the basis of faith, Muslims are unfortunately not even able to admit the existence of diversity in their own society. (Aydin 2005, 119)

The Roots of Religious Pluralism in the Islamic Tradition and its Current Importance

In this section I would like to examine plurality from the Qur'anic and Prophetic traditions as a concept for society in Islam. This examination will not ignore opposing concepts, but instead it will point out the need for a new imprint of Islam under new social conditions, so that Muslims will thus be able to clarify the contradictions between lived religiosity and rigid theology.

Plurality as an Islamic Conception of Society

In the early days of Islam, through the encounter with other cultures and religions, Muslims were challenged by their religious understanding to determine how the position of people who believe and think differently should be defined in theological terms.

Apart from the Qur'an, the first references to the status of Jews, Christians and the heterodox are furnished by the Constitution of Medina, which included the heterodox as a part of the Muslim community "ummah" and ensured them the same rights as Muslims.

"They are one community (ummah) to the exclusion of all men." (Guillaume 1955, 231-233)

This inclusion did not bind the heterodox to obedience to the Islamic way of life, but instead assured them of their right to a way of life in keeping with their own morality (moral laws). The Prophet Muhammed saw himself as the guardian not only of Islamic morality (law), but also of Jewish and Christian morality.¹²

Let, then, the followers of the Gospel judge in accordance with what God has revealed therein: for they who do not judge in the light of what God has bestowed from on high – it is they, they who are truly iniquitous! (Qur'an 5:47)

Furthermore, another verse from the Quran, which formed the foundation for the actions of the Prophet, confirms the social responsibility of Muslims to show their commitment to the public presence of religions, so that this religious diversity, which was seen as God's will, remained visible:

If God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, [all] monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques – in [all of] which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed [ere now]. (Qur'an 22:40)

That, in the history of Islamic theology, the heterodox were treated as belonging to an inferior religion with special laws is to be seen as a departure from the qur'anic tradition. In order to justify this discriminatory and polarizing theology, a large number of theologians removed a portion of the Qur'an, which they considered abrogated, from the lives of Muslims, so that they could divide the world into "good and evil."¹³ In this way, they actually took a civilizational step backwards, which

12 For more details see Alī ibn Ahmad al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*. Translated by Mokrane Guezzou. (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2008), 69.

13 As-Suyuti justified the abrogation of the verse (60:8) as follows: "As for such [of the unbelievers] as do not fight against you on account of [your] faith, and neither drive you forth from your homelands, God does not forbid you to show them kindness and to behave towards them with full equity: for, verily, God loves those who act equitably"

was quite contrary to the revolutionary liberation of humankind from its obligation to group, clan, and race or nation.

To regard the religious and cultural diversity intentionally created by God as the theological foundation for the division of the world leads to a misunderstanding of Islam. The Qur'an perceives this diversity as the foundation for living together and under no circumstances as a reason for societal division:

And [thus it is:] had thy Sustainer so willed, all those who live on earth would surely have attained to faith, all of them: dost thou, then, think that thou couldst compel people to believe, notwithstanding that no human being can ever attain to faith otherwise than by God's leave. (Qur'an 10:99)

This diversity, in spite of the outward differences, is a necessary human reality. The different societal imprints of humans through time depend on the linguistic and cultural context. What is crucial in this process of transformation is also the way humans fashioned their context with their spiritual maturity. This sociological reality is presented in a very understandable way in the Qur'an.

All mankind were once one single community; [then they began to differ -] whereupon God raised up the prophets as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, and through them bestowed revelation [wa anzala ma'ahumul-kitaba] from on high, setting forth the truth, so that it might decide between people with regard to all on which they had come to hold divergent views. Yet none other than the selfsame people who had been granted this [revelation] began, out of mutual jealousy, to disagree about its meaning

in the revelation of the so-called "sword verse" (9:5), "And so, when the sacred months are over, slay those who ascribe divinity to aught beside God wherever you may come upon them, and take them captive, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place! Yet if they repent, and take to prayer, and render the purifying dues, let them go their way: for, behold, God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace", as follows: "God does not forbid you in regard to those who did not wage war against you, from among the disbelievers, on account of religion and did not expel you from your homes, that you should treat them kindly ("an tabarrūhum" is an inclusive substitution for "alladhīna", "those who") and deal with them justly: this was [revealed] before the command to struggle against them. Assuredly God loves the just." J. al-Suyuti, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*. (Amman: Royal Aal-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 662.

Noteworthy in all these classic works is that under theological coercion interpreters exploited the Qur'an for justifying hostile actions without taking into account the contexts of revelations. In this process, they unconsciously undertook a fight against the Qur'an itself, in that they selected portions of the Qur'an and simply declared them to be invalid. (See also Remzi Kaya, "Kur'an-i Kerim'de neshi iddia edilen Ayetler" in *Uludağ Üniversitesi, İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* VII (7, 1998), 353-371.

after all evidence of the truth had come unto them. But God guided the believers unto the truth about which, by His leave, they had disagreed: for God guides onto a straight way him that wills [to be guided]. (Qur'an 2:213)

Based on this verse, Aydin points to a common origin of all holy books according to the Qur'an:

As we see here, regarding the diversity of the sacred books, the Qur'an speaks not of multiple 'books,' but instead of one heavenly 'book' as the origin of all holy books. Accordingly, all the sacred books are the earthly manifestations of a single source. (Aydin 2005, 104)

According to Nasr, truth is indeed absolute and irrefutable, however, the forms and languages in which it is revealed may differ and even exhibit inconsistencies. The words with which the truth is to be brought closer to human beings must build on their respective system of cultural norms – for that very reason, however, not unification, but instead pluralization, is a matter of course, corresponding even to the nature of creation, which is also developing in increasingly complex diversity (Nasr 1989, 250-254).

For Nasr, there is only one God who has revealed himself in different cultures on the occasion of different historical events in various ways. Furthermore, this unity cannot be destroyed by any external differences whatsoever (Aslan 2000, 17-30).

Plurality as an Ethical Principle

In the Qur'an, humankind's good works are referred to as '*ibādah*'. By means of '*ibādah*' a human being gives expression to his good deeds performed with a responsible conviction before God.

...the Sustainer of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them! Worship, then, Him alone, and remain steadfast in His worship! Dost thou know any whose name is worthy to be mentioned side by side with His? (Qur'an 19:65)

In this sense, the term "worship" must not be confused with the different ritual acts. Rituals are referred to in the Qur'an as *nusuk*.

Say: "Behold, my prayer, and [all] my acts of worship (wa-nusukī), and my living and my dying are for God [alone], the Sustainer of all the worlds". (Qur'an 6:162)

Unto every community have We appointed [different] ways of worship (a way of worship, *mansak*, which sometimes denotes also “an act of worship”) which they ought to observe. (Qur’an 22:67)

According to Islamic teaching, different peoples in different cultures have worshiped God in different ways. Actually, according to qur’anic doctrine, what is important is not how people worship God, but which good deeds arise for humankind from these *nusuk*. The results of *nusuk* (act of worship) are called ‘*ibādah*’.

For this reason, prayer, fasting, etc., are, as it were, acts of worship, which give birth to ‘*ibādah*’. It is even better to say that they are *manāsik* from which ‘*ibādah*’ arise. In the Arabic language *nusuk* /*manāsik* are used as follows: to fertilize the earth to get more crops (*nasaka’l-ard*), for a new rain, which the green-colored Earth (*al-ardu’n-nāsik*) ... (Eliacik 2014, 28).¹⁴

The ‘*ibādāt*’ form the ethical core of an ideal society. When the real purpose of religious rituals is not internalized, acts of worship are relegated to the status of unnecessary actions according to the Qur’an.

The word “*sālīhāt*” or “good works” is often mentioned in the Qur’an in connection with *īmān* (faith). It explains one of the most important forms of ethical expression of ‘*ibādah*’ (worship). An act of worship without “good works” cannot be considered true ‘*ibādah*’.

Whereas those who attain to faith and do righteous deeds—they are destined for paradise, therein to abide. (Qur’an 2:82)¹⁵

Say [O Prophet]: “I am but a mortal man like all of you. It has been revealed unto me that your God is the One and Only God. Hence, whoever looks forward [with hope and awe] to meeting his Sustainer [on Judgment Day], let him do righteous deeds (*ṣālīh*), and let him not ascribe unto anyone or anything a share in the worship due to his Sustainer! (Qur’an 18:110)

14 This topic is dealt with further below.

15 Qur’an 2:82. Regarding this Izutsu writes: “The word *ṣālīh* is most commonly translated in English ‘righteous’; one may as well translate by ‘good’. Whether the translation is right or not is a matter of only secondary importance. What is really important is to isolate the concrete descriptive content of this word in the qur’anic context”. Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an*. (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2002), 204.

Similar to “*ṣālīḥ*” is the word “*birr*” (piety), another qur’anic “moral term” that points out that religiousness depends not on the form of worship, but on its consequences for others.

[But as for you, O believers,] never shall you attain to true piety (*birr*) unless you spend on others out of what you cherish yourselves; and whatever you spend – verily, God has full knowledge thereof. (Qur’an 2:92)

Do you bid other people to be pious (*birr*), the while you forget your own selves -and yet you recite the divine writ? Will you not, then, use your reason? (Qur’an 2:44)

On the basis of these explanations it should have become clear that Muslims cannot be defined by the form of their worship, but rather by their “good works.” In these good works God makes no distinction among humans. Muslims cannot be proud of praying five times a day or making the pilgrimage to Mecca often, but instead of what arises from their prayers, pilgrimages and fasting for the good of society.

According to the ethical conception of the Qur’an, the ones who deserve God’s pleasure are those who are committed to the welfare of the people.

Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (Qur’an 2:62)¹⁶

16 Qur’an 2:62. “The above passage – which recurs in the Qur’an several times – lays down a fundamental doctrine of Islam. With a breadth of vision unparalleled in any other religious faith, the idea of “salvation” is here made conditional upon three elements only: belief in God, belief in the Day of Judgment, and righteous action in life. The statement of this doctrine at this juncture – that is, in the midst of an appeal to the children of Israel – is warranted by the false Jewish belief that their descent from Abraham entitles them to be regarded as “God’s chosen people.” M. Asad, *Message*. Surah 2: 62, footnote 50.

Al-Qushayrī wrote the following regarding this verse, “The diversity of [religious] paths in spite of the unity of the source does not prevent a goodly acceptance [for all]. For anyone who affirms the Real in His signs and believes in what He has told concerning His Truth and Attributes, the dissimilarity of [religious] laws and diversity occurring in name[s] is not a problem in considering who merits [God’s] good pleasure. Because of that He said, ‘Surely those who believe and those of Jewry.’ Then He said, ‘whoever believes’, meaning if they fear [God] in the different ways of knowing [Him], all of them will have a beautiful place of return and an ample reward. The believer (*mu’min*) is anyone who is in the protection (*amān*) of the Real. For anyone who is in His protection it is fitting that no fear shall befall them, neither shall they grieve.” Abū

...for, verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (Qur'an 5:69)

With this understanding, the Qur'an calls on people who appreciate the effect and importance of "good works" for society to show solidarity with one another.

Say: "O followers of earlier revelation! Come unto that tenet which we and you hold in common: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall not ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and that we shall not take human beings for our lords beside God." And if they turn away, then say: "Bear witness that it is we who have surrendered ourselves unto Him." (Qur'an 3:64)

If Christians and Jews are also addressed here, we can further expand that call, in accordance with the Qur'an, and invite other religions and philosophies, which were unknown in the context in which the Qur'an originated, to show commitment in solidarity to "good works" in society.

For, every community faces a direction of its own, of which He is the focal point. Vie, therefore, with one another in doing good works. Wherever you may be, God will gather you all unto Himself: for, verily, God has the power to will anything. (Qur'an 2:148)

The ethical principle of the Qur'an presupposes that plurality is, for the well-being of a society, a matter of course for humans, which is willed by God while pointing out the special responsibility of religions for social plurality.

Conclusion

An all-encompassing Muslim understanding of religion (*dīn*) and of the Qur'an, emerges from the above discussion which judges people not on the basis of their religious and ideological rituals, but rather on their effective actions which form the ethical foundation of society. The outward differences among religions are not only to be tolerated, but also to be protected as a sign of God. In order to legitimize

I-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *at-Tafsīr al-kabīr laṭā'if al-ishārāt bi-tafsīr al-Qur'ān (Laṭā'if al-ishārāt)*. vol. I. Amman: Royal Ahl al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 76.

violence in the name of God, the content of the Qur'an, which promotes plurality, was unfortunately repeatedly ignored by the various theological schools of thought, or even more regrettably overridden by fictional theories. Now, Muslims living in the West are faced with the challenge of reforming their understanding of the Qur'an and other Islamic sources, in keeping with the Qur'an's message, and of employing the contributions of these texts so as to facilitate the successful development of an all-inclusive and thriving plurality.

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