# ISLAM'S PHILOSOPHY OF PLURALISM

**By Moin Qazi**

There is no holy book, other than the Qur'an, that places so much emphasis on respecting the views and beliefs of others. It is, however, a tragedy that the pains by which the Prophet highlighted the common ground between Islam and the Abrahamic traditions have been lost by modern fundamentalists and orientalists

"There can be no compulsion in religion" (2:256) declares the Qur'an and highlights Islam's freedom of belief and conscience. "We believe in what has been revealed to us, just as we believe in what has been revealed to you [Jews and Christians]; our God and your God are the same, and it is to Him we submit" (29:46)

A unique concept in the human rights arena that Prophet Muhammad introduced was the denomination of "dhimmis" (protected people), whereby non-Muslims were granted full freedom and protection. They enjoy the same rights as Muslims while being free to practise their faith. It is incumbent upon an Islamic state to protect the life, property and honour of non-Muslims. Principles like these made the Jews seek refuge under Muslim rule in Spain in the middle ages. With the expansion of Muslim empires, in the aftermath of the death of the Prophet, Muslim scholars extended dhimmis (protected people) status to several non-Muslim religions, such as the Zoroastrians of Iran and Hindu sects of India, far from forcing people to convert as they fell within Muslim domains.

.The presence of churches, synagogues, temples and idols across the Muslim-controlled world is a tribute to Islam's respect for pluralism. It should be clearly understood that Muslim empires spread not because of the 'Islam and the sword' myth but in the same way as any political empire.

At their very core, all religions espouse peace, tolerance and compassion. One of the best ways of breaking down barriers we have erected between faiths is by building relationships and getting to know each other more intimately.

It's not just a platitude, although it is a verse from the Qur'an where the Lord says He made us different so we can get to know each other. Taking that verse to heart, getting to know other people, and coming together on common issues can synergize a new spirit of bonhomie. There is much in common among people, both in terms of ideas and the society they occupy. This continues to be ignored and yet needs to be explored. We need to be able to see the other and say, "We understand you are different, but we also understand the difference."

In today's globalized and polarised world, there is a dire need to understand Islamic teachings of pluralism to develop an environment of peaceful coexistence and harmony. The Qur'an calls for justice, fairness and kindness to non-Muslims. The Qur'an admonishes: "God allows you, about those who do not fight you because of your religion nor drive you out of your homes, to treat them with goodness and to be just to them. (Qur'an 60:8).

The teachings of the Quran are obvious in plurality in human society. The Prophet's life and teachings, too, provide the best examples of the pluralistic approach and practices in Islam. Historically, there are many instances where the Prophet showed exceeding tolerance and respect for the people of other faiths and dealt respectfully with his opponents.

For instance, when a prominent Christian delegation came from Najran to engage the Prophet in a theological debate in Madina, its members were not only invited to live in the Prophet's mosque but also allowed to perform their religious practices inside the mosque. Similarly, during the famous treaty of Hudaibiya, the Prophet showed a highly pluralistic approach while accepting the bitter demands of the Quraish without the latter's recognition of his prophethood.

After the conquest, he granted amnesty to the people of Makkah. He declared the house of his bitter opponent Abu Sufyan as a place of asylum and peace, regardless of who accepted Islam and didn't.

The Abbasids' Baghdad, the Fatimids' Cairo, not to forget the Umayyads' Cordoba, became centres of excellence by welcoming and nurturing the best minds from different regions, backgrounds, faiths, etc. Consequently, these dynasties, through their pluralistic mechanisms, developed powerful and vibrant civilizations.

Today, we live in a globalized world where modern communication technology has brought different nations closer; however, this process has also created tensions amongst countries and within their respective societies. This situation demands adhering to Islamic teachings and ideals, which helped set up pluralistic societies in the past.

Islam has consistently and universally promoted human rights and freedoms as the fundamental tenets of its religion. As a scripture, the Qur'an speaks to all of humanity. The Qur'an says: "O humanity! We have created you from a single (pair) of male and female and made you into nations and tribes where you may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) [Q49:13]."This single Qur'anic verse is a testament to Islam's foundation of diversity and pluralism. The Qur'an calls for justice, fairness and kindness to non-Muslims. "God does not forbid you, about those who do not fight you because of your religion nor drive you out of your homes, to treat them with goodness and to be just to them. (Q 60:8).

More importantly, those non-Muslims who live in a Muslim country are referred to as "protected people". They enjoy the same rights as Muslims while being free to practice their faith. It is incumbent upon an Islamic state to protect the life, property and honour of non-Muslims. Principles like these made the Jews seek refuge under Muslim rule in Spain in the middle ages.

The Qur'an does not directly and categorically deny the validity and truth of any religion. Instead, it is concerned with individuals and nations and their faith (*Imām*), or rejection of faith (*kufr*) in God, witnessing (*shahādah*) to His Oneness (*tawhīd*) and acceptance of humankind's accountability before Him on the Day of Judgment.

The Qur'an presents its view of religious pluralism in a somewhat progressive manner. A preliminary statement merely enumerates the religions known to the Prophet's audience and leaves the question of their truth for God to judge on the Day of Resurrection. It states: "Surely those who have accepted faith [that is, the Muslims], those who are Jews, the Sabaeans, the Christians, the Magians and those who have associated other gods with God, God will judge them on the Day of Resurrection. God is witness over all things(Q. 22:17)."

The Qur'an makes the belief in all the prophets—from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses to Jesus—incumbent upon Muslims. All those Prophets must be respected, and their followers must be treated with kindness. The Qur'an instructs, "Help one another in benevolence and piety and help not one another in sin and transgression (Q5:2)."

Islam embraces the entire human race irrespective of the victim or perpetrator's faith, gender, race, or economic status. The Qur'an instructs, "Help one another in benevolence and piety and help not one another in sin and transgression (Q5:2)." Muslims are prohibited from oppressing the adherents of other faith groups.

The Qur'an is very emphatic in matters of pluralism and interfaith harmony: "Let there be no compulsion in religion (Q2:256)" and "Will you then compel mankind, against their will, to believe (Q10:99)?" Neither the Qur'an nor the Prophetic tradition demands of Jews and Christians that they give up their religious identity and become Muslims unless they freely choose to do so. This is a definite command, not a mere statement.

The best example of Islamic pluralism is its policy concerning *dhimmis*. *Dhimmi* is a historical term referring to non-Muslim subjects of a Muslim state. The word means "One whose responsibility is taken." It refers to "people with whom a covenant or compact has been made." The concept implies that the groups who are non-Muslims but live in a Muslim state and abide by its system are provided security for their personal lives, property, and religious practice in return for a tax (the jizya). Historically, when empires won battles and wars, common people were subjugated, looted, and forced to work as labourers and serve in the military. Islam did away with such practices by extending to all non-Muslim subjects the special *dhimmi* status.

The past abundantly provides examples of glory and success that serve as models of how Islam set up pluralistic bonds. Islamic Spain lasted longer than the Roman Empire. It marked a period and a place where for hundreds of years, relative religious tolerance prevailed in medieval Europe. Muslim Spain is a model of authentic Islamic pluralism.

Islam has consistently and universally promoted human rights and freedoms as fundamental to the development of human society. Each individual has the freedom and autonomy to live according to the dictates of his conscience or the group or agglomeration to which he belongs. As a scripture, the Qur'an is meant to be universal and speaks to all of humanity—

"O humanity! We have created you from a single (pair) of male and female and made you into nations and tribes where you may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) (Q49:13)."This single Qur'anic verse is a testament to Islam's foundation of diversity and pluralism.

The cultures influenced Islam. It spread and underwent a cultural and intellectual transformation. Islam was also aided by the basic spirit of tolerance, despite its strong compulsion to proselytize among other religions. So Islam spread until it covered millions in Asia, Africa, and Europe, particularly Albania and Yugoslavia.

In this process of geographical expansion, Islam interacted with a multitude of cultures and underwent a process of integration between each other's unique traits, thus influencing others and, in turn, getting influenced

Most opponents of pluralism believe we should encourage the assimilation of populations and their culture so that we break down barriers that separate them. Pluralists argue that assimilation seeks to preserve the hegemony of those in power. It calls on people to give up their cultural identities and adopt the social, cultural and linguistic mores of society's elite and ruling classes. Pluralism acknowledges diversity is built into social and institutional groups. It assumes that social differences, such as gender, race, nationality, religious interpretations, etc., are crucial mechanisms for groups to organize themselves. In the process, however, hierarchies may be produced where particular groups are assigned superior or preferential status. This often happens when negative characteristics are naturalized to a specific group. In Western societies, for instance, it is often assumed that women are intellectually inferior to men. This supposition leads to the subordination of women in public as well as private spaces. Pluralists believe in transcending all cultural and social differences. Islam embraces the entire human commonality of race irrespective of faith, gender, race, or economic status. the whole idea is founded on the concept of humankind. Humans are a family whose diverse identities are bonded into a common humanity.  
The Qur'an instructs, "Help one another in benevolence and piety and help not one another in sin and transgression (Q5:2)."

Not until recent times has there been a level of pluralism and religious tolerance in Islamic Spain at its peak. Just as the vibrancy and creativity of America are rooted in the acceptance of diversity, so was it then.

The conquering Arab Muslims remained a minority for many years, but they were able to govern their Catholic and Jewish citizens with a policy of inclusiveness. Even as Islam slowly grew over the centuries to be the majority religion in Spain, this spirit remained large, even if not always perfectly maintained.

Though Abrahamic communities competed and fought, the spirit of pluralism continued. Indeed, it thrived as rival kings sought the best minds in the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish worlds for their courts. This was just as true in the Christian petty kingdoms as in the Muslim ones. Christian and Muslim armies even fought alongside each other against mutual rivals of both faiths.

What is the challenge that the Qur'an presents to us today? The challenge is that we all have faith in God and compete with one another in righteous works. This challenge shows that people of diverse faiths respect one another and believe in all of God's revelations.

Even Muslim rulers demonstrate many historical examples of this spirit of pluralism. A *dhimmi* assassinated Umar in 644 CE. Rather than lashing out against *dhimmis*, at his deathbed, Umar specifically ordered.

"I urge him (i.e. the new Caliph) to take care of those non-Muslims who are under the protection of Allah and His Messenger in that he should observe the convention agreed upon with them and fight on their behalf (to secure their safety) and he should not over-tax them beyond their capability."

There is constant talk of the individual's need for absolute freedom with the community's need for real social justice. The deal could be best achieved not through Marxism or liberalism but through Islam—that is, Islam in its original, uncorrupted form, in which women and people of other faiths were accorded equal status. Islam, unlike Marxism, continues to be deeply rooted and still present in everyday life and profoundly influences various societies and ideologies. Islam remains a system of values by which Muslims live. It is robust enough to survive the complexities that have buffeted world civilizations in the past and has the answer to even those potential threats hovering around in the social environment.

*An economist by training and a social worker by practice, Moin  Qazi is an author, researcher and development professional who has spent four decades in the development sector. He is a firm believer in learning from communities in their own environments.*

*He began his early career as a development journalist. While still at college, he began writing on issues relating to the plight of child labourers and leading efforts against it. His work ultimately received the attention of Indian courts, leading to a series of reforms for child labourers.*

*He worked for over three decades at the State Bank of India and has been associated with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, NITI Aayog and Tata Institute of Social Sciences. He has played a key role in the empowerment of women and education of girl children in rural areas, along with efforts to create affordable housing programmes for low-income individuals. He writes regularly for several newspapers and journals.*

*He holds  PhDs in English and Economics*